

Benefits and Limitations of ChatGPT in the EFL Classroom: Students' Perspectives

Irmayanti¹, Dita Musfira Tihurua², Nurfitriah³

^{1,2}English Language Education, Universitas Negeri Makasar

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-04-11	<i>This qualitative descriptive study examined how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education used ChatGPT and how they perceived its benefits and limitations in academic learning. Twelve students with prior experience using ChatGPT for academic purposes were selected purposively. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Three themes were identified. First, participants used ChatGPT as an academic assistant for writing, comprehension, summarization, paraphrasing, and idea generation. Second, they perceived support for grammar, vocabulary, sentence organization, confidence, and motivation. These accounts represent self-reported experiences rather than objectively measured improvement in language performance. Third, participants raised concerns about the credibility and specificity of AI-generated information, the absence of reliable academic references, possible learner dependency, plagiarism, and access constraints. The findings indicate that the educational value of ChatGPT depends on students' capacity to evaluate its output, consult credible sources, and retain responsibility for academic decisions. In EFL higher education, ChatGPT should therefore be treated as a supplementary and teacher-guided resource rather than a substitute for independent reading, writing, and critical evaluation. The study contributes a process-oriented account of learner-AI interaction while acknowledging the limitations of a small, context-specific sample and self-reported data.</i>
Revised: 2026-06-13	
Accepted: 2026-07-13	
Keywords: ChatGPT; artificial intelligence in education; EFL learning; learner autonomy; student perceptions	
DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10122.	
Corresponding Author: Irmayanti irmayantibachtiar9@gmail.com	

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly visible in higher education, where it supports information access, content generation, feedback, and individualized learning activities. ChatGPT, a generative language model released publicly in 2022, can produce context-sensitive responses and perform tasks such as brainstorming, summarizing, paraphrasing, translating, and revising text

(OpenAI, 2022). These capabilities have generated particular interest in language education because students can interact with the system through natural-language prompts and receive immediate responses.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, students commonly require support in developing vocabulary, grammatical control, textual organization, and confidence in academic communication. Digital tools can expand opportunities for practice and feedback, especially when students have limited exposure to English outside formal instruction. Earlier work on technology in English teaching emphasized its potential to support inquiry, communication, and learner expression (Masruddin, 2014). More recent Indonesian studies have shown that technology-enhanced learning can offer flexible access to materials and repeated learning opportunities, although its value depends on design, access, and pedagogical guidance (Bani & Masruddin, 2021; Madehang et al., 2024; Masruddin et al., 2024). Needs analysis in teacher education likewise indicates that digital systems should be aligned with learners' actual conditions and institutional support (Salmilah & Munawir, 2024).

The present study interprets students' accounts primarily through learner autonomy, self-regulated learning, and sociocultural mediation. Learner autonomy concerns students' capacity to take informed responsibility for their learning decisions (Benson, 2011), while self-regulated learning involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning strategies (Reinders, 2010). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through interaction and tools that assist learners in performing tasks they may not yet manage independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Within these perspectives, ChatGPT may function as a digital mediational resource, but its educational value depends on how students formulate prompts, evaluate responses, revise their work, and consult other sources. It should not be assumed that access to an AI-generated answer automatically produces learning.

Research on generative AI has identified both educational opportunities and significant risks. Large language models may offer responsive explanations and feedback, but they can also generate inaccurate, biased, or unverifiable information (Kasneci et al., 2023). Academic-integrity concerns arise when students submit generated text without adequate understanding, attribution, or revision (Cotton et al., 2024). These concerns are especially important in academic writing, where credibility, authorship, and engagement with original scholarly sources are central. Studies of other digital environments also show that technologically mediated interaction can shape language behavior, reinforcing the need to consider not only access but also the quality and ethics of learners' engagement (Munawir, 2019).

The Indonesian literature further suggests that digital or interactive learning is most productive when technology is integrated with purposeful activity and human guidance. Contextualized language games can promote active vocabulary learning and collaborative participation (Masruddin & Munawir, 2022), while

flipped instruction can support engagement through repeated instruction and direct feedback (Masruddin et al., 2024). These studies do not examine ChatGPT, but they help position generative AI within a wider pedagogical principle: technology should facilitate meaningful learning processes rather than replace them.

Despite the rapid growth of literature on AI in education, much of the discussion has focused on institutional policy, general opportunities and risks, or task outcomes. Less attention has been given to process-oriented accounts of how EFL students actually use ChatGPT, what forms of support they perceive, how they evaluate its output, and where they recognize limitations. The gap is particularly relevant because perceived usefulness does not necessarily correspond to measurable improvement in language proficiency. A qualitative descriptive account can therefore clarify the roles that students assign to ChatGPT while preserving the distinction between reported experience and demonstrated learning outcomes.

Accordingly, this study addressed three questions: (1) How do EFL students use ChatGPT in their academic learning activities? (2) What benefits do they perceive when using ChatGPT for academic learning? and (3) What limitations do they perceive? The study aimed to describe students' uses, perceived benefits, and perceived limitations of ChatGPT in EFL higher education. Its contribution lies in documenting learner-AI interaction as a learning process, including the tension between immediate assistance and the need for independent, ethical, and source-based academic work.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine EFL students' reported uses and evaluations of ChatGPT in academic learning. Qualitative description was appropriate because the study sought a direct, organized account of participants' experiences without claiming a phenomenological, grounded-theory, or causal explanation (Sandelowski, 2000). The design was used to identify recurring patterns in how students used the tool, the support they perceived, and the concerns they encountered.

The study involved 12 EFL students enrolled in higher education. Participants were selected purposively according to three criteria: they were actively enrolled in EFL-related courses, had previously used ChatGPT for academic learning activities, particularly writing tasks, and were willing to describe their experiences. The sample was intended to provide information-rich accounts rather than statistical representation. To avoid misrepresenting the original study, the revised manuscript does not classify all participants as undergraduate or graduate students because the original participant description and one quotation are inconsistent on this point.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by the research questions and the concepts of learner autonomy and AI-supported

education (Benson, 2011; Kasneci et al., 2023). Open-ended questions addressed students' academic uses of ChatGPT, perceived linguistic and affective support, concerns about credibility and ethics, and the extent to which the tool influenced their engagement with learning tasks. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions while maintaining a common focus across participants.

Participants were permitted to respond verbally, in writing, or by typing, depending on their comfort. Verbal responses were audio-recorded with consent, whereas written and typed responses were documented systematically. The data were transcribed verbatim, and participants were represented by numbered labels (Participant 1 to Participant 12) in the findings. Because different response modes may produce different levels of elaboration, this variation is treated as a methodological limitation rather than assumed to be equivalent.

The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing candidate themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis began by reading the complete dataset and coding statements related to academic use, perceived support, and perceived difficulty. Related codes were then grouped and reviewed against the full dataset. The final thematic structure comprised ChatGPT as an academic learning assistant, perceived benefits for English learning, and challenges and limitations.

An audit trail of coding decisions and theme revisions was maintained, and the researchers sought consistency between the codes, supporting extracts, and thematic definitions. These procedures support transparency, but they should not be interpreted as evidence of inter-coder reliability because the original manuscript did not report the number of coders, independent coding, or a formal agreement procedure.

3. Results

Participants described ChatGPT as a supplementary resource for managing academic tasks. Their accounts included writing assistance, summarization, paraphrasing, translation, idea generation, and explanation of difficult material. Participant 10 connected use of the tool with courses that required extensive reading and writing:

"I mostly use ChatGPT in courses related to academic writing, research methodology, and thesis preparation because those subjects require a lot of reading, analysis, and writing." (Participant 10)

Writing support involved both text generation and revision. Participant 9 reported using the tool for essays, grammar checking, sentence improvement, summaries, paraphrases, research ideas, and translation:

"I use ChatGPT for writing essays, checking grammar, improving sentence structure, summarizing journal articles, paraphrasing academic texts, generating

research ideas, and sometimes translating complex academic terms.” (Participant 9)

Participants also used ChatGPT to make academic material more accessible. Participant 2 explained that difficult texts could be restated in simpler language, which helped the participant continue an assignment:

“Using ChatGPT helps me understand difficult materials more easily. Sometimes academic texts are hard to understand, so ChatGPT helps explain them in simpler language. It also helps me find ideas and complete assignments more efficiently.” (Participant 2)

Together, these accounts show that the tool was used at several stages of academic work: initiating ideas, interpreting source material, drafting language, and revising expression. The data do not show whether participants accepted every response unchanged or consistently verified it against original sources.

Participants associated ChatGPT with support for grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and academic expression. Participant 7 described the benefit as assistance with checking language and identifying clearer ways to communicate ideas:

“ChatGPT helps improve my English skills, especially in writing and grammar. It helps me check sentence structure, learn new vocabulary, and see clearer ways to express my ideas.” (Participant 7)

These statements are interpreted as perceived support rather than evidence of measured proficiency growth. The study did not compare writing samples, administer a language test, or track long-term development.

Participants also described affective support. Participant 1 linked the opportunity to check and revise sentences with greater confidence in expressing ideas:

“Yes, I think it increases my confidence. Sometimes I feel unsure when writing in English, but with ChatGPT I can check my sentences and improve them. That makes me feel more confident when expressing my ideas.” (Participant 1)

Immediate clarification and suggestions were similarly associated with confidence by Participant 8. These accounts indicate that low-stakes access to feedback may reduce uncertainty during task completion, although the interview data cannot determine whether confidence was sustained or transferred to unaided performance.

Participants did not treat ChatGPT as uniformly reliable. One concern was that responses could be general, insufficiently specific, or unsupported by academic references. Participant 3 stated:

“One limitation is that sometimes the information provided is too general or lacks academic references. As a graduate student, I often need more detailed explanations supported by credible sources.” (Participant 3)

Participant 7 similarly reported consulting journal articles and other sources when ChatGPT's explanations did not meet academic needs. These accounts show

that the tool was not considered an adequate substitute for engagement with original scholarship.

A second concern involved dependency. Participant 12 warned that students might complete assignments through ChatGPT without understanding the material:

"I think ChatGPT can make students too dependent if they rely on it too much without thinking critically. Some students may use ChatGPT to complete assignments without fully understanding the material." (Participant 12)

Ethical concerns were also explicit. Participant 8 identified plagiarism and the need to verify and cite information:

"One challenge is avoiding plagiarism, since using ChatGPT's text directly can be considered copying. Another is making sure the information is accurate and properly cited." (Participant 8)

Some participants briefly mentioned restricted access to premium features and technical limitations. Because these concerns were not developed in comparable detail, they are treated as secondary contextual issues rather than a separate main theme.

4. Discussion

The first theme indicates that participants used ChatGPT as a form of task-oriented digital scaffolding. The tool assisted them in moving from an unclear task or difficult text toward a draft, explanation, or revised sentence. From a sociocultural perspective, this role can be understood as tool-mediated support rather than as independent knowledge construction by the system itself (Vygotsky, 1978). The support becomes educationally meaningful when students use it to extend their participation in reading and writing, examine alternatives, and make informed revisions.

This interpretation is consistent with learner autonomy, which involves control, reflection, and responsibility rather than simply working without a teacher (Benson, 2011). ChatGPT can expand students' access to explanation and feedback, but autonomy is weakened when generated responses are accepted without evaluation. The participants' use of the tool for brainstorming, summarizing, and language revision therefore represents both an opportunity and a pedagogical condition: students need strategies for questioning output, comparing it with source texts, and deciding what to retain.

The finding also connects with Indonesian research on technology-enhanced learning. Masruddin (2014) emphasized technology's role in supporting communication and inquiry, while Madehang et al. (2024) documented both the flexibility and constraints of online English learning in Islamic higher education. Bani and Masruddin (2021) showed that mobile materials can support accessible learning when their content and usability are deliberately designed. In the present study, ChatGPT offered comparable accessibility at the level of explanation and text support, but its open-ended output introduced a stronger need for verification than

a curated instructional resource.

Participants associated ChatGPT with grammar checking, vocabulary development, sentence organization, and confidence. These perceptions are plausible because feedback can direct learners' attention to language forms and provide alternatives for revision (Hyland, 2019). The nonjudgmental and immediate nature of AI responses may also reduce hesitation during drafting. However, the study did not assess the accuracy of the feedback participants received or whether they could reproduce improved forms independently.

The distinction between assistance and learning is therefore essential. Repeated exposure to explanations and feedback may support engagement, as shown in flipped-learning research involving repeated instruction and direct feedback (Masruddin et al., 2024). Active, contextualized language tasks can likewise increase participation and support vocabulary learning (Masruddin & Munawir, 2022). Nevertheless, the present interviews cannot establish that ChatGPT caused language growth. A more defensible conclusion is that participants perceived the system as a readily available feedback resource that supported revision and reduced uncertainty while they worked.

The concerns reported by participants qualify the positive accounts. General explanations, absent references, and uncertain accuracy are consistent with wider warnings that large language models may generate fluent but unreliable output (Kasneci et al., 2023). In academic work, linguistic fluency can make weak evidence appear authoritative. Students therefore require source-evaluation skills and explicit guidance to separate AI-generated suggestions from verifiable scholarly evidence.

Dependency and plagiarism concerns also reveal a tension between efficiency and cognitive engagement. When ChatGPT is used to clarify a concept or compare revisions, it may extend learning activity. When it is used to replace reading, reasoning, or authorship, it can reduce engagement and compromise academic integrity (Cotton et al., 2024). Munawir's (2019) study of online interaction illustrates more broadly that digital environments can influence language behavior; the present findings extend this pedagogical concern by showing that students themselves recognize the need to manage how technologically generated language enters academic work.

These findings support an instructional approach centered on AI literacy. Students should be taught to verify factual claims, locate and read original sources, document the use of generative AI where required, and revise output in their own informed voice. Teachers can design tasks that require evidence trails, reflection on revisions, oral explanation of submitted work, or comparison between AI output and peer-reviewed sources. Institutional policies should clarify acceptable and unacceptable uses without assuming that all AI-supported activity is either inherently beneficial or inherently dishonest.

The study's contribution is a process-oriented description of learner-AI

interaction in EFL higher education. It identifies the roles students assigned to ChatGPT and the conditions under which they considered it useful or problematic. The study also shows that students' accounts contain an internal tension: the same immediacy that supports confidence and efficiency may encourage dependency or reduce engagement with original academic sources.

Several limitations restrict the interpretation. The study involved 12 participants in one academic context and relied on self-reported accounts. It did not measure writing quality, language proficiency, critical thinking, or long-term learning. Allowing verbal, written, and typed responses may have produced uneven depth across participants. In addition, the available manuscript does not fully document the research setting, interview duration, coding roles, or ethical approval. The findings should therefore be read as context-specific perceptions rather than generalizable evidence of ChatGPT's effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

This study described how 12 EFL students in higher education used ChatGPT and how they perceived its benefits and limitations. Participants used the tool for writing support, comprehension, summarization, paraphrasing, translation, and idea generation. They associated these uses with support for grammar, vocabulary, sentence organization, confidence, and motivation, but these accounts should not be interpreted as objectively measured improvement. Participants also identified limitations involving credibility, insufficient academic references, dependency, plagiarism, and access. The findings indicate that ChatGPT is most appropriately positioned as a supplementary resource whose value depends on source verification, learner responsibility, ethical practice, and teacher guidance. It should support, rather than replace, independent reading, writing, reasoning, and engagement with scholarly sources.

6. References

- Bani, M., & Masruddin, M. (2021). Development of an Android-based harmonic oscillation pocket book for senior high school students. *Journal of Technology and Science Education*, 11(1), 93-103. <https://doi.org/10.3926/jotse.1051>
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cotton, D. R. E., Cotton, P. A., & Shipway, J. R. (2024). Chatting and cheating: Ensuring academic integrity in the era of ChatGPT. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 61(2), 228-239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2190148>
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kasneci, E., Sessler, K., Küchemann, S., Bannert, M., Dementieva, D., Fischer, F,

- Gasser, U., Groh, G., Günnemann, S., Hüllermeier, E., Krusche, S., Kutyniok, G., Michaeli, T., Nerdel, C., Pfeffer, J., Poquet, O., Sailer, M., Schmidt, A., Seidel, T., ... Kasneci, G. (2023). ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103, Article 102274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2023.102274>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Madehang, M., Masruddin, M., & Iksan, M. (2024). Reflecting on the implementation of online English learning in Islamic higher education: Lecturers and students' perspectives. *International Journal of Asian Education*, 5(3), 183-197.
- Masruddin, M. (2014). The importance of using technology in English teaching and learning. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 2(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v2i2.36>
- Masruddin, M., Hartina, S., Arifin, M. A., & Langaji, A. (2024). Flipped learning: Facilitating student engagement through repeated instruction and direct feedback. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), Article 2412500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2412500>
- Masruddin, M., & Munawir, A. (2022). The efficacy of Treasure Hunt Game with Luwu local culture based in teaching English vocabulary and introducing cultures heritages of Luwu at SMPIT Al Hafidz Kota Palopo. *Kongres Internasional Masyarakat Linguistik Indonesia*, 204-208. <https://doi.org/10.51817/kimli.vi.51>
- Munawir, A. (2019). Online game and children's language behavior. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 7(2), 337-342. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v7i2.1050>
- Reinders, H. (2010). Towards a classroom pedagogy for learner autonomy: A framework of independent language learning skills. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(5), 40-55. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n5.4>
- Salmilah, S., & Munawir, A. (2024). Analysis of learning management system needs in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah teacher education study program. *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan*, 13(1), 211-218.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334-340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.