



The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Writing a Thesis by EFL Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

This research explores the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in thesis writing by four postgraduate students who are English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at an Indonesian university. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected over a two-month period through open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. The findings reveal that students utilized various AI tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, ChatGPT, Claude, Meta AI, and Perplexity, across different stages of their writing process, including brainstorming, paraphrasing, grammar correction, structural organization, and language refinement. Before adopting AI, participants encountered challenges in idea development, coherence, and linguistic accuracy. Following the integration of AI tools, they reported improvements in clarity, organization, and writing confidence. Most students expressed a strong willingness to continue using AI due to its perceived benefits in enhancing efficiency, precision, and learning outcomes. While limited to one university context in Indonesia, this study provides insights into the positive role of AI integration in supporting academic writing development among EFL postgraduate students.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), EFL Postgraduate Students, Thesis Writing.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology in the 21st century has significantly reshaped the landscape of education worldwide. In Indonesia, the role of digital innovation in education was emphasized during the 2022 G20 Summit, where the Ministry of Education promoted technology as a means of reducing inequalities in access and improving learning quality (Syahril, 2022). Within English language education, particularly in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, technological tools have become central to enhancing students' writing skills, especially in academic settings. Through digital platforms, EFL learners gain access

to a wide range of authentic resources that support language development, including grammar, coherence, organization, and citation practices (Huang & Chou, 2023; Audrain et al., 2022). Among the most transformative tools in this regard is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which offers advanced, real-time assistance to students engaged in academic writing (Ribeiro, 2021).

Recent research highlights the growing adoption of AI tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, ChatGPT, and citation managers like Zotero in academic writing (Lu, 2019; Fitria, 2023). These tools help students revise grammar, paraphrase content, improve clarity, and structure arguments more effectively. However, most existing studies focus on undergraduate students and simpler writing tasks, such as essays or reports (Elnadeef, 2023; Gayed et al., 2022). For example, Lestari (2020) found that undergraduate students struggled with paraphrasing, organizing ideas, and maintaining an academic tone, while Hajimaghsoodi and Maftoon (2020) reported that students appreciated AI tools primarily for simplifying sentence construction. These findings are important, but they do not fully reflect the more complex writing demands faced by postgraduate students, particularly those writing academic theses. Postgraduate students are expected to produce highly structured, coherent, and original arguments grounded in academic literature—skills that go beyond what is typically required at the undergraduate level.

In addition, most previous research isolates the function of one AI tool like Grammarly or Turnitin, without examining how multiple tools are strategically used in combination throughout the thesis writing process. This narrow lens limits our understanding of the broader potential of AI in supporting postgraduate academic writing. The integration of various AI tools, each with distinct features can provide more comprehensive support across all writing stages, including idea generation, drafting, revising, and final editing. Furthermore, studies such as Kurniati and Fithriani (2022) suggest that while postgraduate students find AI useful for surface-level issues like grammar, these tools often fall short in addressing deeper aspects of writing, such as argument development and academic analysis. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how AI tools are used collectively and meaningfully in postgraduate level academic writing.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is informed by the views of Kawinkoonlasate (2021), Andina et al. (2019), and Schcolnik (2018), who emphasize the role of digital tools in supporting students' self-regulated learning and writing development. These perspectives align with constructivist principles, suggesting that students construct knowledge through interaction with digital resources that scaffold their academic tasks. In the context of thesis writing, AI tools can serve as mediators that support critical thinking and linguistic development.

In addition to the pedagogical aspects, this study also acknowledges ethical considerations regarding AI use in academic writing. These include concerns related to authorship, originality, over-reliance on automated suggestions, and the need for academic integrity policies to guide responsible AI integration.

To address the existing gaps, this study investigates the use of AI tools in thesis writing by EFL postgraduate students in Indonesia. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question: What types of AI tools do postgraduate students use in writing a thesis and how do they utilize them in their writing?

The novelty of this study lies in its focused examination of how multiple AI tools are integrated across different stages of thesis development by master's level EFL learners. Unlike previous research that targets undergraduates or individual AI applications, this study provides in-depth insight into postgraduate students' real experiences and strategies in utilizing AI to navigate academic writing challenges.

Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The phenomenological method was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the lived experiences of individuals in understanding a particular phenomenon. In this research, the phenomenon under investigation was the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in writing a thesis. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how postgraduate students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) engaged with AI during the process of writing their master's theses. Rather than aiming for generalization, the study focused on capturing detailed and context-rich insights from the participants' experiences.

The research was carried out in Indonesia and involved postgraduate students enrolled in the English Education Master's Program at a State Islamic University. Four participants (two male and two female students) were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria required participants to be in their final semester and actively involved in thesis writing. This ensured that the participants had firsthand and relevant experiences regarding the integration of AI technologies into academic writing. Their engagement in the thesis writing process made them ideal informants for exploring how AI tools are utilized in real academic contexts.

To collect data, the researcher employed three qualitative techniques: open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The open-ended questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms and included 10 items, divided into two sections: the types of AI tools used and how that tools were utilized. These questionnaires enabled participants to freely express their thoughts. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the participants' responses more thoroughly and uncover deeper insights into their AI usage. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility and natural conversational flow. The researcher used the questionnaire responses to refine the interview questions. Documentation was also collected to support the findings.

This included screenshots, AI-generated feedback, and thesis drafts showing concrete evidence of participants' use of AI technologies. The triangulation of these three methods questionnaires, interviews, and documentation, helped enhance the credibility and richness of the data.

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which consists of four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/ verification. In the data condensation phase, data from questionnaires and interviews were coded and categorized into emerging themes. These themes were then organized and presented in a structured format. Finally, conclusions were drawn from these patterns and verified through triangulation across the different data sources.

To ensure trustworthiness, method triangulation was applied, allowing data from different sources to be cross-validated. The open-ended questionnaire results were first analyzed to identify key ideas, which were then explored further in interviews. The documentation served to confirm and illustrate findings derived from participants' verbal accounts. Ethical approval was obtained from the university, and participants gave informed consent before the study commenced.

Results

The study identified six AI tools that EFL postgraduate students drew on during their thesis writing process: QuillBot, Grammarly, Claude, ChatGPT, Meta AI, and Perplexity. QuillBot and Grammarly emerged as the most frequently used, each mentioned by two of the four participants. QuillBot was mainly used for paraphrasing and rephrasing sentences, allowing students to improve clarity and reduce potential plagiarism, whereas Grammarly was valued for its real-time grammar correction and stylistic feedback, often consulted during early drafting stages for sentence-level improvements.

Two students also reported using Claude, which they praised for refining sentence structure, reorganizing paragraphs, and enhancing overall clarity without distorting the original meaning. ChatGPT, Meta AI, and Perplexity were each used by one participant. ChatGPT helped overcome writer's block by generating ideas and offering alternative perspectives; Meta AI was consulted to summarize lengthy readings and adjust tone; and Perplexity was preferred for locating research-based content and identifying relevant references.

Students consistently described these tools as complementary rather than interchangeable. One participant explained:

"I always use QuillBot because it can help me to paraphrase and ask questions related to my research. It also gives me brilliant ideas." (P. 2).

Another emphasized Grammarly's versatility:

"I use AI tools from Grammarly; it helps me a lot. For example, Grammarly provides an outline for brainstorming topics and

gives me a clear direction for the writing task. And, it generates ideas and suggests improvements to my writing. Besides, it can correct grammar and provide explanations.” (P. 1).

In sum, while all participants leveraged AI for different purposes, the most common patterns were using QuillBot for paraphrasing and Grammarly for grammar and style. Less frequently used tools served more specialized roles, such as idea generation (ChatGPT), paragraph refinement (Claude), reference discovery (Perplexity), and text summarization (Meta AI). Collectively, these applications enabled students to address recurring challenges paraphrasing, grammatical accuracy, coherence, and idea development transforming rough drafts into more polished academic prose.

Table 1: The Types and Functions of AI Tools

AI Tools	Functions
QuillBot	Paraphrasing, sentence rephrasing, improving clarity
Grammarly	Grammar checking, punctuation, sentence structure suggestions
ChatGPT	Brainstorming ideas, developing arguments, generating examples
Claude	Organizing paragraphs, refining logic and flow without altering intent
Meta AI	Adjusting tone, summarizing texts, enhancing formal style
Perplexity	Providing academic-based answers with sources, summarizing content

The Thesis Writing Process in Using AI

Before using AI tools, most students encountered challenges such as confusion when starting their writing, difficulty organizing ideas, unclear argumentation, and frequent grammatical errors. One participant admitted,

“I often felt confused when starting my writing. I didn't know how to organize the paragraphs well.” (P. 4)

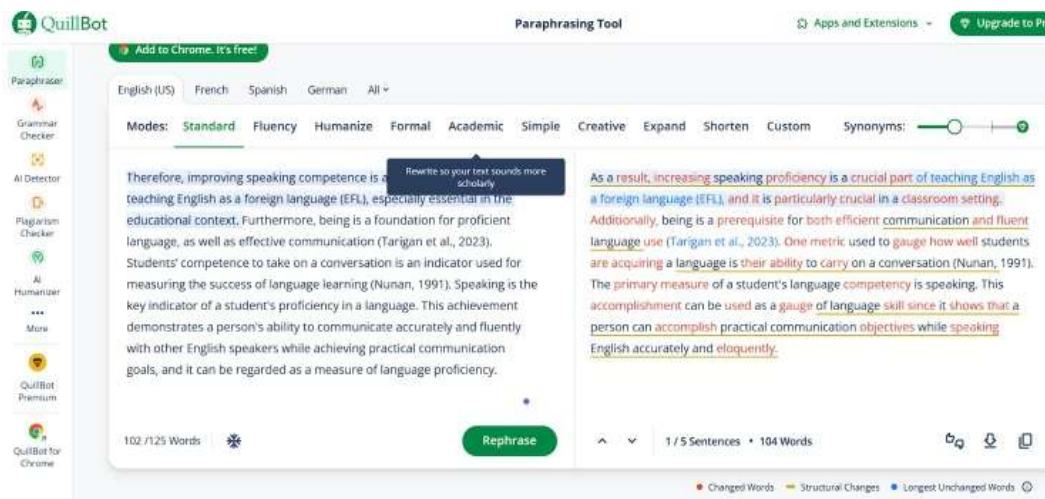
However, after integrating AI tools into their writing process, students experienced noticeable improvements in grammar, coherence, and writing fluency. AI tools provided real-time feedback, enabling them to revise and enhance their drafts more confidently.

EFL postgraduate students expressed that AI not only supported the mechanical aspects of writing but also influenced their cognitive process, such as generating ideas, developing arguments, and exploring multiple writing styles. The consistent use of AI helped them recognize errors more easily, internalize grammar rules, and improve sentence structure. As one student put it,

“AI tool helps me a lot to improve my writing. It provides clear suggestions and introduces new ways to express my ideas.”
(P. 1).

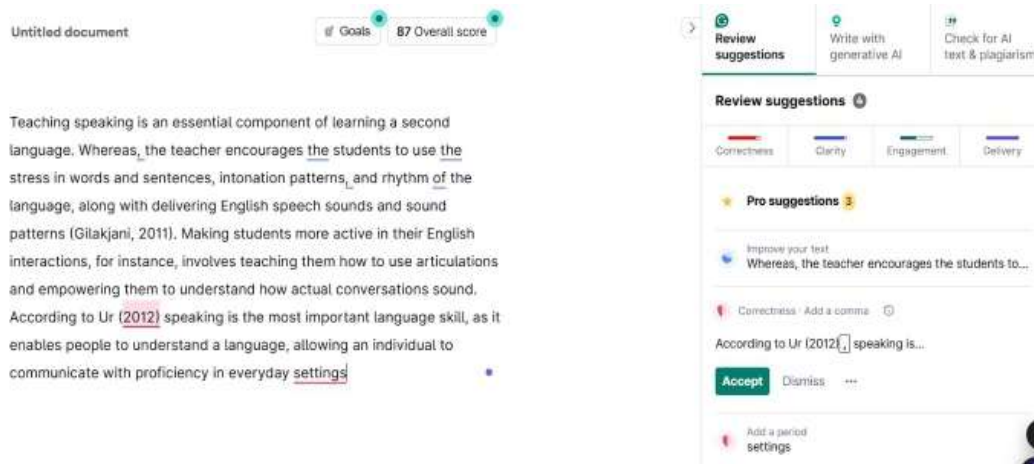
Overall, the integration of AI tools into the writing process contributed positively to the development of EFL postgraduate students' writing skills. Most EFL postgraduate students acknowledged that AI assistance not only improved the quality of their written work but also supported their learning by offering real-time feedback and exposure to alternative ways of expressing ideas.

Figure 1. QuillBot interface used for paraphrasing thesis sentences.



In this AI tool, EFL postgraduate students used QuillBot mainly for paraphrasing. It helped them rewrite sentences in a clearer and more formal way, which not only improved the quality of their thesis writing but also helped them avoid plagiarism.

Figure 2. Grammarly interface highlighting grammatical corrections.



In this AI tool, EFL postgraduate students used Grammarly to check and correct their grammar. The tool helped them identify mistakes and improve sentence structure, making their thesis writing clearer and more accurate.

The Intention to Continue Using AI

The study also revealed that EFL postgraduate students intended to continue using AI tools beyond thesis writing. They perceived these tools as efficient, accessible, and helpful for academic tasks. Students noted that AI provided practical assistance, improved writing productivity, and offered insights they had not considered before. For instance, one participant said,

"Keep using it because besides being useful for making writing, it makes it easier and saves time." (P. 1)

Another emphasized how AI tools stimulated their creativity and enhanced their ability to express thoughts effectively in English.

Overall, AI integration was seen as a valuable complement to students' writing efforts. Rather than replacing their skills, AI served as a supportive writing partner, especially in overcoming linguistic challenges and refining drafts.

Discussion

This study revealed that Grammarly and QuillBot were the most frequently used AI tools among EFL postgraduate students. Grammarly was mainly employed for real-time grammar correction and stylistic improvement, aligning with findings from Yousofi (2022) and Faisal & Carabella (2023), who highlighted its effectiveness in enhancing sentence-level accuracy. Similarly, QuillBot was widely used for paraphrasing and sentence restructuring, helping students refine clarity

and reduce plagiarism, consistent with Nurmayanti and Suryadi (2023).

The integration of Claude and ChatGPT into the writing process supported higher-order writing skills. Claude enabled students to refine their drafts while maintaining the original meaning, while ChatGPT facilitated idea generation and argument development, which supports Chen (2023) and Zhao (2022). These findings suggest that AI is increasingly being used not only as a technical support tool but also as a collaborative "thinking partner" in academic writing.

Students reported clear distinctions in their writing performance before and after AI tool usage. Initially, they struggled with organizing ideas, constructing logical arguments, and applying correct grammar. AI assistance led to increased coherence, sentence variety, and reduced grammatical errors, supporting the claims of Cardon et al. (2023). Moreover, these tools fostered learner autonomy as students engaged in self-editing and revision practices (Cheng, 2019; Aljafen, 2018), developing critical awareness of their language use.

Additionally, AI tools contributed to writing efficiency and motivation. Grammarly's real-time feedback and QuillBot's instant paraphrasing saved time and boosted confidence an effect previously noted by Fitria (2021a) and Kurniati & Fithriani (2022). Several participants indicated they planned to continue using these tools beyond their thesis, aligning with Alkaissi & McFarlane's (2023) notion of AI as a sustained academic partner.

Despite these benefits, the findings raise concerns about potential over-dependence on AI tools. While participants acknowledged improvements in language and structure, there is a risk that excessive reliance could limit the development of original thinking and academic independence. This aligns with arguments by Jia et al. (2022), who warned that prolonged use may hinder the development of internalized writing competence.

Moreover, the study did not overlook ethical considerations. The uncritical use of AI-generated content may challenge academic integrity, especially when students fail to differentiate between assistance and authorship. This issue underscores the importance of institutional guidelines and student training on responsible AI use.

Cost and accessibility also emerged as underlying issues. Not all students have equal access to premium AI features or fast internet connections, which may exacerbate the digital divide. Furthermore, cultural attitudes towards originality, technology, and language norms must be considered in the Indonesian context, as they shape how students interact with AI.

These findings suggest that educators and institutions should integrate AI literacy into academic writing instruction. Workshops or curriculum modules could help students use these tools ethically and strategically, without undermining their critical thinking skills. Institutions should also consider formulating clear policies regarding acceptable AI usage in academic writing to maintain academic standards and prevent misuse.

Future research should explore a broader sample across multiple institutions

and include a comparison group of students who do not use AI tools. Longitudinal studies could examine whether AI tool usage results in sustained improvement or hinders independent writing development over time. Additionally, qualitative insights into students' ethical reasoning when using AI would further enrich this field.

In summary, while AI tools offer clear benefits in improving EFL students' academic writing, they must be used critically, ethically, and in balance with pedagogical goals to foster both performance and academic integrity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that EFL postgraduate students actively integrate various Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into their thesis writing process, particularly QuillBot, Grammarly, ChatGPT, Claude, Meta AI, and Perplexity, each serving distinct functions ranging from paraphrasing and grammar correction to idea development and academic-style refinement. Among these, Grammarly and QuillBot emerged as the most commonly used due to their ability to provide automated feedback, correct grammatical errors, and offer suggestions that support sentence clarity and structure.

The students reported significant benefits after using AI tools, including improved writing fluency, enhanced organization of ideas, and increased confidence in academic writing, which also led to their intention to continue using these tools beyond the thesis writing stage. However, the effectiveness of AI tools depends largely on how critically and purposefully they are used; students who understood their writing process and engaged thoughtfully with AI assistance tended to experience greater improvements.

Despite these promising findings, this study was limited to a specific context Indonesian EFL postgraduate students in the final stage of thesis writing and may not fully represent broader educational or linguistic settings. Therefore, generalizations should be made cautiously. Future studies are encouraged to explore the long-term impact of AI on academic writing across different levels of education and disciplines, as well as to investigate how students balance technological support with the development of their own writing competence, particularly in maintaining academic integrity and independent thinking within increasingly AI integrated learning environments.

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