

COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF CHATGPT FOR ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING**Husni Mubarak¹, Sinta Dewi², Asep Suparman³**^{1, 2, 3} Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garute-mail: ¹husnigirud123@gmail.com, ²sintadewi@institutpendidikan.ac.id,³asep.suparman@institutpendidikan.ac.id

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ABSTRAK

Adopsi ChatGPT yang semakin pesat di kalangan pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (*English as a Foreign Language/EFL*) telah menimbulkan antusiasme sekaligus kekhawatiran pedagogis, khususnya dalam penulisan esai argumentatif yang menuntut penalaran mandiri dan penyusunan sudut pandang yang berimbang. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi persepsi dan pengalaman nyata mahasiswa EFL dalam memanfaatkan ChatGPT saat menyusun teks argumentatif, dengan fokus utama pada manfaat instrumental, tantangan praktis, serta implikasinya terhadap kemampuan berpikir kritis. Pendekatan penelitian yang diterapkan adalah studi kasus kualitatif dengan melibatkan empat mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di salah satu perguruan tinggi di Garut yang telah terjaring melalui kuesioner penyaring sebagai pengguna aktif ChatGPT. Pengumpulan data dilaksanakan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur mendalam yang selanjutnya dianalisis menggunakan prosedur analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa secara konsisten memanfaatkan ChatGPT untuk memfasilitasi pengembangan ide, koreksi tata bahasa, perluasan variasi kosakata, dan penyusunan kerangka argumen pro-kontra. Meskipun demikian, mahasiswa menghadapi kendala nyata berupa keluaran teks yang kaku (*robotic*), ketergantungan kualitas jawaban pada ketepatan *prompt*, pergeseran topik (*topic drift*), serta risiko ketergantungan yang mempersempit eksplorasi kreatif. Kemampuan berpikir kritis terbukti tidak tereduksi secara mutlak, melainkan bersifat kondisional di mana nalar kritis tetap terjaga saat mahasiswa aktif memverifikasi dan mengoreksi saran kecerdasan buatan, namun berisiko melemah jika keluaran diterima tanpa evaluasi reflektif. Oleh karena itu, ChatGPT lebih tepat diposisikan sebagai mitra penopang (*scaffolding partner*) daripada pembuat teks utama, yang menuntut penguatan regulasi metakognitif dan literasi *prompt* dalam pengajaran menulis akademik.

Kata Kunci: *berpikir kritis; ChatGPT; ketergantungan AI; pembelajar EFL; penulisan argumentatif*

ABSTRACT

The rapid adoption of ChatGPT among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has raised both pedagogical enthusiasm and concern, particularly in argumentative writing, a genre that depends heavily on independent reasoning and balanced argumentation. This study examines how EFL college students perceive and experience the use of ChatGPT when composing argumentative essays, with particular attention to its benefits, challenges, and influence on critical thinking. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving four English Education students at a college in Garut who had been screened through a preliminary questionnaire as active ChatGPT users. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. The findings show that participants

consistently used ChatGPT for idea development, grammar correction, vocabulary enrichment, and structuring pro-con arguments, and perceived clear improvements in coherence, cohesion, and lexical quality. However, participants also reported challenges such as generic or robotic output, prompt-dependent accuracy, occasional topic drift, and a growing sense of dependency that narrowed creative exploration for some users. Critical thinking was not perceived as uniformly weakened; rather, it was preserved or even strengthened when students actively verified, compared, and revised suggestions, but was put at risk when suggestions were accepted uncritically. The study concludes that ChatGPT functions less as an author and more as a scaffolding partner whose pedagogical value is contingent on students' metacognitive regulation and prompting literacy. These findings offer practical implications for EFL writing instruction, particularly the need to cultivate deliberate, reflective, and verification-based AI integration.

Keywords: *AI dependency; argumentative writing; ChatGPT; critical thinking; EFL learners*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence, particularly large language models like ChatGPT, has profoundly reshaped how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners approach academic tasks. Argumentative writing is recognized as a cognitively demanding genre requiring grammatical accuracy, dialectical reasoning, and robust evidence (Srinawati & Alwi, 2020). For Indonesian tertiary learners, these requirements are complicated by limited lexical repertoire, native syntax interference, and underdeveloped organizational strategies. ChatGPT has emerged as a versatile writing companion offering instantaneous brainstorming, structural outlining, and syntactic refinement (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Bin-Hady et al., 2023). Ideally, generative tools serve as instructional scaffolding within the zone of proximal development, fostering active metacognitive regulation and independent critical thinking (Su et al., 2023; Teng, 2024, 2025). This integration theoretically enables students to cultivate sophisticated argumentation skills while preserving personal authorial agency.

However, a marked discrepancy persists between idealized educational expectations and current classroom realities. While controlled interventions report substantial improvements in essay complexity and coherence (Khampusaen, 2025; Su et al., 2023), real-world educational contexts exhibit widespread unmonitored technology use. Many learners bypass essential cognitive struggles by accepting algorithmic recommendations uncritically, turning dynamic dialogue into passive text generation (Liu et al., 2024). This unchecked reliance compromises writing autonomy, encourages formulaic rhetoric, and weakens higher-order evaluative reasoning (Esmaeil et al., 2023; Steiss et al., 2024). Consequently, rather than functioning as reflective developmental scaffolds, conversational systems frequently operate as cognitive shortcuts. This tendency dilutes student voice and exacerbates existing difficulties in formulating nuanced dialectical arguments (Srinawati & Alwi, 2020). The tension between rapid drafting efficiency and profound intellectual engagement presents an ongoing instructional challenge across contemporary higher education.

Empirical inquiries examining generative technologies have proliferated, yet notable research gaps endure within second-language writing scholarship. Prior studies predominantly implement quantitative surveys or pre-experimental test designs, measuring aggregate score changes across formal intervention cycles (Bibi & Atta, 2024; Khampusaen, 2025; Su et al., 2023). Consequently, existing research leaves a distinct empirical gap concerning the qualitative, process-level negotiations students experience across actual drafting stages. Specifically, limited research examines how learners navigate the boundary between productive

scaffolding and cognitive dependency within unregulated settings (Teng, 2025). Furthermore, in-depth narratives reflecting the sociocultural realities of Indonesian higher education remain scarce, despite surging campus adoption. Without naturalistic qualitative inquiries exploring micro-level rhetorical decisions, pedagogical frameworks lack practical foundations for addressing how non-native writers experience conversational assistance during authentic composition tasks.

To address this gap, the primary novelty and innovation of this study lie in its qualitative case study design examining naturalistic, process-oriented student interactions with ChatGPT in an Indonesian tertiary context. Diverging from standardized experimental measurements, this research provides nuanced insights into how learners justify, utilize, and critically evaluate automated assistance across iterative drafting stages. The study uncovers underlying metacognitive negotiations, perceived rhetorical shifts, and personal boundary management strategies deployed during argumentative composing. By highlighting the subjective experiences of undergraduate writers, this investigation offers an innovative descriptive model capturing how automated suggestions intersect with emerging writer identity and authentic cognitive agency. These localized insights establish an empirical baseline illustrating how generative language models transform composition practices beyond formal instructional interventions.

The objective of this research is to investigate how EFL college students employ ChatGPT throughout the argumentative writing process, explore associated benefits and practical challenges, and examine perceived effects on critical thinking development. Theoretically, this study enriches sociocultural writing frameworks by explaining how conversational agents function as mediated learning artifacts. Methodologically, the inquiry demonstrates the value of qualitative case examinations in evaluating digital literacy practices. Practically, the findings offer vital guidance for tertiary educators, curriculum developers, and academic institutions striving to formulate balanced institutional policies. By elucidating how students navigate machine assistance, this investigation supports the integration of generative systems without eroding independent authorial voice, ensuring that digital writing technologies bolster intellectual autonomy and rigorous academic reasoning across higher education landscapes.

METHOD

This qualitative study employed an exploratory single-case study design to investigate tertiary learners' situated perceptions and cognitive experiences when integrating conversational generative artificial intelligence into academic writing assignments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Esmaeil et al., 2023). Conducted at a teacher training institution in Garut, West Java (Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut), the investigation focused on undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who routinely incorporated ChatGPT into their argumentative essay production. The research participants comprised 4 purposively sampled undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Department who were selected through a preliminary screening questionnaire. Inclusion criteria mandated that all 4 participants had accumulated at least 2 consecutive semesters of active, self-directed platform usage, ensuring sufficient experiential familiarity to provide substantive evaluative reflections on their essay drafting practices. Researchers acted as the primary analytical human instruments throughout data gathering and contextual interpretation. To protect personal confidentiality and institutional ethics, all 4 participants were anonymized using alphanumeric pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, and P4) throughout the narrative analysis.

Primary qualitative data were gathered through individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via an open-ended conversational protocol covering operational workflows, linguistic benefits, cognitive dependency, and critical thinking development. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to prevent communicative inhibition, audio-recorded with written consent, transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and verified through back-translation procedures to preserve semantic fidelity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data processing followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework consisting of transcript familiarization, inductive code generation, thematic grouping, theme candidate review, thematic designation, and analytical synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative descriptive metrics were limited to reporting individual-level theme frequencies across the 4 participants to highlight divergence patterns without asserting statistical population generalizability. Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation across participants, persistent peer auditing, and member-checking procedures to eliminate personal researcher bias and ensure analytical credibility across all findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profiles and Initial Adoption

A comprehensive overview of the participants' academic background, initial adoption timeframe, primary application focus, and evaluative posture toward ChatGPT is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles and Primary Application of ChatGPT

Participant	Academic Level at Onset	Primary Focus of Use in Argumentative Writing	Self-Reported Stance Toward ChatGPT	Evaluative
P1	Semester 3	Idea development, text drafting, and sentence paraphrasing	Highly reliant; acknowledges dependency and narrowed creative exploration	
P2	Early college years	Initial idea exploration, grammar checking, and diction refinement	Selective user; treats ChatGPT as a supportive tool rather than an author	
P3	Early 2023	Syntactic editing, structural review, and vocabulary enrichment	Cautious user; advocates consulting print books to prevent overreliance	
P4	Semester 3	Proofreading, pro-con brainstorming, and transition variation	Collaborative user; treats AI as a discussion partner and verifies all claims	

As indicated in Table 1, all four participants began utilizing ChatGPT during the initial years of their university studies, with three students first adopting the platform around their third semester. This adoption milestone coincided directly with academic coursework that demanded extensive, multi-source argumentative essay assignments. Participant P3 reported adopting the platform shortly after its global release in early 2023 and has maintained consistent use ever since. In contrast, P2 recalled initial skepticism and noted that adoption was driven by peer demonstration rather than personal enthusiasm. These developmental pathways suggest that student adoption of ChatGPT was an organically diffused practice prompted by academic workload pressures and peer modeling rather than formal pedagogical instruction, mirroring the adoption dynamics identified by Bibi and Atta (2024).

Procedural Workflows Across the Writing Process

The qualitative interview data revealed a pronounced dichotomy in how participants sequenced human effort and machine assistance across drafting stages. Participants P2, P3, and P4 adhered strictly to an independent drafting sequence in which they formulated their own thesis statements and paragraph arguments before consulting ChatGPT for grammatical and lexical editing. For these students, the platform functioned primarily as an automated post-hoc editor rather than a generative author. Conversely, P1 engaged in an integrated workflow, deploying ChatGPT concurrently for idea generation, paragraph drafting, and immediate paraphrasing. Participant P3 explicitly argued that conceptualization must remain an uncompromised human responsibility, emphasizing that AI should refine surface structure rather than dictate foundational logic. These contrasting approaches illustrate that undergraduate learners exercise widely differing degrees of authorial agency, reflecting diverse levels of metacognitive writing regulation.

Perceived Functional Benefits

All four participants identified four primary instructional benefits derived from their interaction with ChatGPT: conceptual brainstorming, grammatical correction, lexical enhancement, and rhetorical outlining. Participant P4 provided an illustrative account, explaining how prompt-driven outlining for an essay on educational technology helped establish a coherent trajectory from thesis formulation to concluding synthesis. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that querying ChatGPT frequently brought forward alternative counter-arguments that had escaped their initial brainstorming efforts. This functional affordance enabled them to develop more balanced treatments of opposing viewpoints, directly fulfilling the dialectical demands of argumentative writing (Su et al., 2023). Overall improvements in textual coherence, transitional fluidity, and mechanical accuracy were reported unanimously, corroborating the writing gains observed in previous empirical inquiries (Bibi & Atta, 2024; Khampusaen, 2025).

Perceived Challenges and Operational Constraints

Alongside functional benefits, the participants encountered recurring operational difficulties that complicated their writing process. Three participants (P2, P3, and P4) characterized AI-generated prose as occasionally formulaic, generic, and stylistically robotic, requiring substantial human editing before integration. Additionally, P2 and P3 noted that extended conversational threads often resulted in noticeable topic drift, where ChatGPT lost the central focus of the prompt—a problem colorfully described by P3 as the system "bluffing." Participant P1 faced system usage interruptions due to session capacity caps during peak writing periods. Crucially, all participants acknowledged that output quality was directly determined by prompt specificity; poorly phrased prompts generated superficial generalizations, whereas structured prompts produced nuanced arguments. This observation indicates that perceived output limitations are co-constructed by the user's prompting literacy, aligning with the evaluative findings of Steiss et al. (2024).

Dependency Dynamics and Creative Agency

Perceptions concerning technological dependency exhibited substantial divergence across the interview dataset. Participant P1 candidly acknowledged experiencing pronounced cognitive dependency, reporting that excessive reliance on automated drafting had progressively constrained independent idea formulation. To counter this dependency, P3 recommended deliberately consulting conventional printed literature and submitting short, modular prompts rather than requesting full-length paragraph outputs. Conversely, P2 and P4 maintained minimal dependency by treating the conversational agent strictly as an auxiliary

sounding board. Regarding creative agency, P1 felt that automated suggestions narrowed rhetorical experimentation, whereas P2 claimed that reviewing varied lexical options broadened creative expression. To summarize these divergent tendencies, the distribution of reported dependency levels is presented in Figure 1.

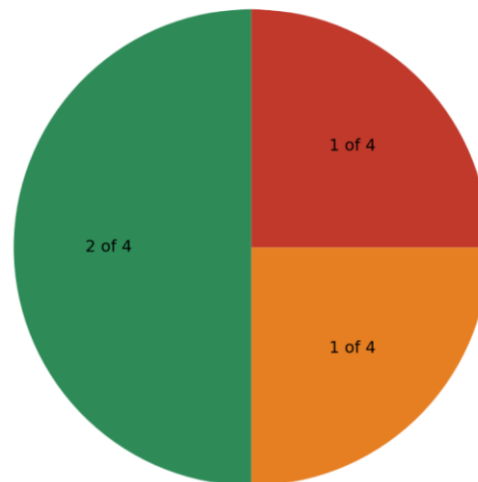


Figure 1. Distribution of Reported Dependency Levels on ChatGPT

The graphical data in Figure 1 illustrate that half of the participants (P2 and P4) reported minimal dependency, deliberately maintaining clear authorial boundaries throughout their writing tasks. In contrast, one participant experienced moderate dependency managed through self-imposed counter-strategies, and one participant exhibited pronounced dependency accompanied by a self-reported reduction in creative autonomy. These findings demonstrate that cognitive dependency is not an inevitable outcome of AI exposure, but rather arises from the interaction between usage intensity and self-regulatory discipline.

Perceptions of Critical Thinking Impact

The participants uniformly rejected the premise that ChatGPT inherently diminishes critical thinking, arguing instead that its cognitive impact depends on user intentionality. Participant P1 contended that critical engagement is primarily determined by individual learner disposition; for students committed to critical analysis, conversational AI serves as an analytical catalyst rather than a replacement for thinking. Participant P4 offered a compelling account of critical practice, describing a routine habit of evaluating AI claims for factual validity, ideological bias, and synthetic hallucination prior to incorporating them into essays. Participant P2 noted that comparing alternative viewpoints proposed by ChatGPT compelled more deliberate evaluations of argument strength. However, P3 cautioned that critical thinking is severely threatened when students use AI to bypass writing practice entirely, leaving them unprepared for unassisted writing environments. Taken together, these reflections show that ChatGPT amplifies whichever disposition—evaluative scrutiny or passive acceptance—the learner brings to the platform, corroborating Teng's (2025) conclusions regarding metacognitive mediation.

The distribution and comparative frequency of these qualitative themes across all four participants are visualized in Figure 2.

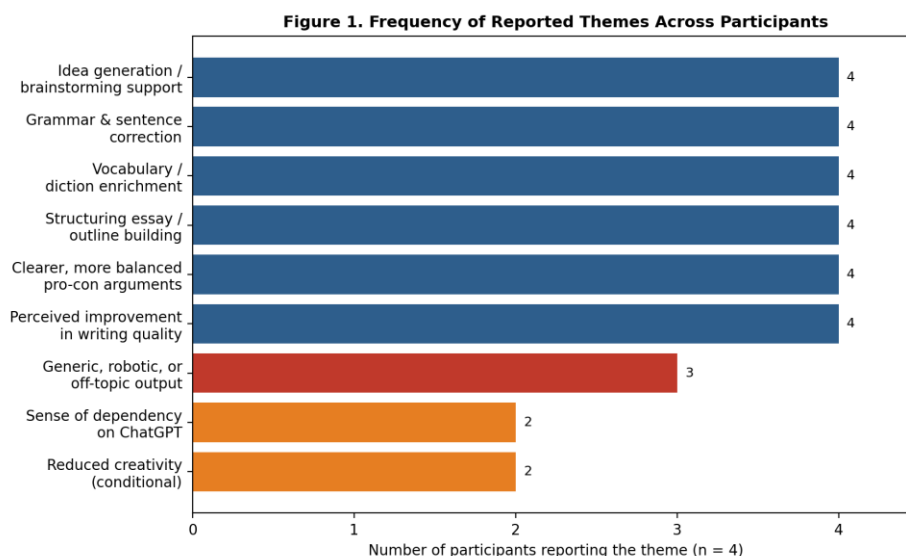


Figure 2. Frequency of Reported Themes Across Participants

As illustrated in Figure 2, core instrumental benefits—such as idea brainstorming, grammar diagnostics, vocabulary enrichment, structural outlining, balanced pro–con development, and overall quality gains—achieved unanimous consensus ($n = 4$). Conversely, operational drawbacks such as generic styling and topic drift were noted by three participants, while explicit dependency risks and creative constraints were reported by two participants. This descriptive distribution demonstrates that while the functional linguistic affordances of ChatGPT are consistently experienced, associated cognitive risks are mediated by individual writing habits. To contextualize these findings with direct narrative evidence, Table 2 presents representative participant statements across the core themes identified in the analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Qualitative Themes with Illustrative Interview Excerpts

Thematic Dimension	Translated and Paraphrased Interview Excerpt	Data Source
Idea Development	"ChatGPT's primary value lies in expanding initial ideas rather than drafting entire paragraphs from scratch."	P1
Rhetorical Outlining	"The system generated a logical structure covering the thesis, main claims, counter-arguments, and synthesis."	P4
Balanced Argumentation	"The depth of arguments depends on the prompt; one-sided prompts consistently yield one-sided justifications."	P1
Stylistic Limitations	"The generated text often feels overly rigid, repetitive, or robotic, remaining largely on the conceptual surface."	P4
Contextual Topic Drift	"When submitting multiple follow-up inquiries in a single session, the responses gradually wander away from the topic."	P2
Cognitive Dependency	"Consistent use over time has made me noticeably more reliant on automated suggestions during the drafting phase."	P1
Critical Verification	"I consistently cross-examine generated claims for logical coherence, factual validity, and AI hallucinations."	P4

The qualitative evidence organized in Table 2 illustrates the practical trade-offs undergraduate writers navigate when using generative AI. While the participants appreciated

the platform's capacity to organize complex ideas and suggest diverse viewpoints, they remained aware of its stylistic and contextual limitations. The excerpts demonstrate that the educational utility of ChatGPT depends not on automated text generation, but on the user's active, critical engagement with the generated content.

Synthesis and Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this investigation contribute to the computer-assisted language learning literature in three ways. First, while prior survey-based investigations (e.g., Bibi & Atta, 2024; Esmaeil et al., 2023) aggregate benefits and risks into generalized percentages, the present interview data demonstrate that these outcomes depend on how students sequence their drafting process. Participants who composed independent drafts before consulting AI tools (P2, P3, and P4) reported markedly lower dependency than the participant who used ChatGPT concurrently throughout drafting (P1). This suggests that the timing of AI integration—rather than simple usage frequency—is a primary determinant of cognitive dependency. Second, these findings underscore the necessity of cultivating "AI literacy," as the judgmental calls required during student-AI interactions serve as critical learning opportunities for fostering responsible, self-reflective writing practices. Finally, these results indicate that educators should actively incorporate AI-assisted writing tasks as a formal pedagogical tool to enhance the feedback cycle and improve student writing proficiency (Akiba & Garte, 2024; Ekizoğlu & Demir, 2025; Li & Collins, 2026; Magfirah, 2026; Tossell et al., 2024).

Second, the study enriches the critical thinking debate by demonstrating that EFL undergraduates can independently develop verification-oriented strategies to evaluate AI-generated text. Participants described habits of evaluating machine suggestions for bias, logical validity, and factual hallucination, mirroring the metacognitive scaffolding frameworks articulated by Steiss et al. (2024) and Teng (2025). This finding indicates that some tertiary learners develop critical AI literacy organically through extended academic practice. However, such autonomous development remains inconsistent across student populations, necessitating institutional policies that formalize AI literacy within the core curriculum to ensure equitable skill distribution (Ardiyansah & Batubara, 2026; Hossain et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Mashhadizadeh & Moradimanesh, 2026; Salhab & Aboushi, 2025; Zuo et al., 2026).

Third, the coping mechanisms articulated by the participants—such as alternating between AI platforms and printed literature or framing ChatGPT as a conversational peer—offer valuable models for writing pedagogy. Rather than enforcing broad prohibitions or permitting unguided use, writing instructors should design structured pedagogical interventions that scaffold deliberate, verification-centered AI engagement. For example, instructional tasks could require students to complete initial outlines and thesis formulations independently before using generative tools to identify counter-arguments and refine stylistic phrasing. Such process-oriented approaches encourage students to retain authorial agency, ensuring that generative technologies complement rather than supplant the development of independent critical writing skills (Hanifah et al., 2026; Hendradi & Dwinata, 2026; Hutapea & Kabatiah, 2025; Imro'atun & Chairudin, 2026; Lee & Feng, 2026; Riwayatiningsih et al., 2026; Siddiqui et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examined how Indonesian EFL college students perceive and experience the integration of ChatGPT in argumentative writing. The findings indicate that while ChatGPT provides functional support for idea generation, rhetorical outlining, vocabulary enrichment, and grammar diagnostics, it also presents challenges including robotic styling, contextual drift, and cognitive dependency. Crucially, the platform's impact on critical thinking

is not deterministic; rather, critical engagement is preserved when learners adopt a verification-oriented stance, but compromised when automated suggestions are accepted uncritically. Consequently, ChatGPT functions most effectively as a scaffolding partner rather than an authorial substitute, with its instructional value depending on the learner's metacognitive regulation and prompting literacy.

These conclusions point to clear implications for tertiary EFL writing pedagogy. Writing programs must move beyond reactive prohibition policies and actively integrate critical AI literacy into academic writing curricula. Explicit instruction should focus on prompt engineering, rhetorical verification, and ethical source attribution. Instructional activities should be structured so that students complete initial drafting phases independently before using AI tools for targeted feedback and revision. Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The investigation was conducted with a small, purposively selected sample of four undergraduate students within a single institution, and its conclusions rely primarily on retrospective self-report data. Future research would benefit from triangulating interview accounts with direct textual analyses of student drafts, detailed prompt-interaction logs, and longitudinal classroom interventions across diverse institutional contexts.

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