Between Assistance and Anxiety: How AI Impacts Writing Stress among EFL English Literature Majors

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Abstract. This research explores the dual impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the academic writing experiences of English Literature students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot are commonly used for grammar correction and sentence construction. These tools are integrated into students' writing processes, providing valuable assistance in refining their written work. However, their psychological effects, particularly in terms of emotional and ethical implications, have not been sufficiently explored in previous research. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to examine the experiences of ten final-year EFL students who actively use AI tools for academic writing. Through semi-structured interviews, the research identified three major themes: reduced technical stress, heightened dependency on AI tools, and ethical concerns about authorship. The findings suggest that while AI tools act as cognitive scaffolds, aiding students by improving fluency and reducing the burden of technical writing tasks, they also introduce psychological challenges. These challenges include increased dependency on the tools and concerns about the authenticity of their work, raising questions about academic integrity and self-efficacy. This study sheds light on the complex relationship between AI as an assistive technology and its potential to cause writing anxiety and dependency. By emphasizing both the positive and negative psychological impacts of AI, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on AI in education. It calls for the development of pedagogical frameworks that balance AI literacy, emotional resilience, and ethical considerations to ensure responsible and effective use of AI in academic contexts.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, AI Writing Tools, EFL Learners, Self-Efficacy, Writing Anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized many aspects of education, including how students produce academic writing. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, AI-based writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot have become increasingly integrated into students' academic routines. These tools offer instant feedback, vocabulary suggestions, and grammatical corrections that help learners overcome linguistic and structural difficulties. For many EFL learners, especially English Literature majors, writing in English involves complex processes that require not only linguistic competence but also creativity, interpretation, and critical thinking. Consequently, the presence of AI tools may serve as both a facilitator that supports learning and a psychological factor that influences writing confidence and stress levels.

Research in second language writing has shown that anxiety is one of the major psychological barriers that affect students' writing performance (Zhang & Hyland, 2023). Writing anxiety is commonly associated with fear of evaluation, limited vocabulary, and low self efficacy in expressing ideas. In recent years, several studies have highlighted the potential of digital tools in reducing writing stress by offering constructive and immediate feedback. However, the introduction of AI generated writing assistance has also raised concerns regarding academic integrity, overreliance on technology, and the erosion of individual authorship. While previous studies have focused on the cognitive and linguistic benefits of AI in writing, fewer have explored its emotional and psychological consequences particularly the tension between assistance and anxiety among EFL learners in higher education.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the psychological dimension of AI-assisted writing within the specific academic context of English Literature majors. Unlike general EFL learners, these students engage with complex textual interpretation and creative expression, making their interaction with AI distinct in both purpose and effect. This study bridges a research gap by analyzing how AI affects writing stress not merely as a cognitive aid but as a socio emotional variable influencing students' motivation and self confidence. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for educators and curriculum designers who aim to integrate AI tools responsibly in language learning without compromising academic authenticity or emotional well-being.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine how AI impacts writing stress among EFL English Literature majors by identifying the dual role of AI as both a supportive assistant and a potential source of anxiety. The study aims to provide empirical insights that can inform pedagogical strategies promoting balanced and ethical use of AI in academic writing. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of sustainable AI-assisted learning frameworks that enhance both linguistic proficiency and emotional resilience in EFL education.

Although the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language learning has gained increasing scholarly attention, most existing studies predominantly focus on its cognitive and linguistic benefits, such as improving grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, and overall writing performance among EFL students (Li & Lei, 2023; Lin & Huang, 2022). These studies emphasize AI tools as effective technological aids that enhance writing fluency and motivation. However, there remains a significant lack of inquiry into the psychological and emotional consequences of AI-assisted writing. Specifically, little is known about how AI tools while

reducing technical writing stress might simultaneously foster new forms of dependency, self-doubt, and anxiety among EFL learners. Prior research often treats writing anxiety as a product of linguistic limitation or fear of evaluation (Rezaei & Jafari, 2022; Zhang & Hyland, 2023), overlooking the possibility that technology itself could become both a cognitive support and a psychological stressor. Furthermore, most studies are conducted in general EFL contexts without considering discipline-specific dynamics such as those found in English Literature programs, where creativity, interpretation, and critical analysis play crucial roles. This leaves a conceptual gap in understanding how AI influences not just writing performance but also identity, authenticity, and emotional well-being in advanced academic contexts.

Another notable gap lies in the lack of phenomenological and interpretative approaches that capture the lived emotional experiences of students using AI in writing. Previous research tends to rely on quantitative surveys or experimental methods, which measure performance outcomes but fail to reveal the nuanced psychological tensions learners face when balancing technological assistance and personal authorship (Lee & Chen, 2023; Zhao & Wang, 2021). As a result, the literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of the dual nature of AI as both facilitator and stressor within academic writing. There is also limited discussion on how educational institutions can design ethical and pedagogical frameworks to guide responsible AI use. Consequently, the field still needs studies that explore AI-assisted writing through socio-cognitive and affective perspectives, focusing on the emotional implications and ethical dilemmas experienced by EFL students especially those engaging deeply with literary and creative writing tasks.

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of the psychological and emotional dimensions of AI-assisted writing among EFL English Literature majors, a group whose interaction with AI differs from general EFL learners due to their emphasis on creativity and interpretative writing. By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study moves beyond linguistic outcomes to examine how AI serves a dual role as a cognitive scaffold that reduces technical stress and as a psychological trigger that induces anxiety, dependency, and ethical ambivalence. Unlike previous studies that emphasize functional benefits, this research foregrounds the emotional, ethical, and identity-related consequences of AI use in academic writing. It thus contributes a new perspective to the field of AI in language education by revealing how technological assistance reshapes students' writing confidence, sense of authorship, and emotional resilience.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education is grounded in the concept of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which emphasizes the integration of digital technology to support second language acquisition. In this framework, AI functions as an adaptive system capable of providing feedback and linguistic correction, thus helping learners enhance their accuracy and fluency. Modern AI-based writing assistants, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, employ natural language processing (NLP) and deep learning to generate context-based suggestions. These tools are designed to simulate human tutoring by detecting grammatical errors, improving sentence structure, and providing lexical alternatives (Li & Lei, 2023). As a result, AI becomes a pedagogical tool that not only facilitates linguistic accuracy but also fosters learner autonomy and reflective thinking in writing.

From a psychological perspective, writing in a second or foreign language is often associated with the concept of writing anxiety, defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety that interferes with the ability to express ideas in writing (Cheng, 2004). Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory also emphasizes that learners experience anxiety due to performance evaluation, fear of negative feedback, and limited linguistic competence. In EFL contexts, writing anxiety can manifest through cognitive worry, emotional tension, and avoidance behavior (Rezaei & Jafari, 2022). These dimensions collectively influence students' willingness to engage in writing tasks and their confidence in producing original content. Therefore, emotional factors play a central role in determining writing performance alongside linguistic and technical abilities.

Several studies have examined the relationship between technology use and writing anxiety among EFL learners. For example, Sun and Zhang (2023) found that digital feedback tools could reduce students' anxiety levels by providing immediate correction and reducing fear of teacher evaluation. Similarly, Lin and Huang (2022) demonstrated that AI-based writing systems improve students' grammatical accuracy and motivation in academic writing. However, a contrasting finding by Lee and Chen (2023) revealed that excessive reliance on AI tools may lead to psychological dependence and diminished self-efficacy, as learners become uncertain about their own linguistic competence. These studies indicate that while AI can enhance writing outcomes, its emotional and behavioral effects on learners remain ambiguous.

Theoretically, this study adopts a dual perspective combining socio-cognitive theory and affective filter hypothesis. The socio-cognitive view suggests that writing is a complex interaction of cognitive, social, and emotional processes influenced by context and feedback

(Hyland, 2019). Meanwhile, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis posits that emotional variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety significantly affect language acquisition outcomes. When integrated, these theories explain how AI assistance can simultaneously lower linguistic barriers while increasing anxiety through perceived loss of authorship or overdependence on technology.

Based on the synthesis of these theories, the conceptual assumption of this study is that AI-assisted writing tools have a dual impact on EFL students' writing performance reducing technical stress through instant support while potentially heightening psychological stress related to authenticity and self-efficacy. This interaction forms the central analytical lens for examining how English Literature majors experience both assistance and anxiety in the process of academic writing. Thus, the study seeks to contribute to a more balanced theoretical understanding of technology-mediated writing practices in EFL contexts.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine how AI-based writing tools affect writing-related stress among EFL students majoring in English Literature. The research adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore students' lived experiences navigating the dual role of AI as both a source of assistance and anxiety in academic writing contexts (Xiaofan, 2025; Candilas et al., 2024). A purposive sample of 10 undergraduate students was selected from an English Literature program, based on their experience using tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot in their writing assignments. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews focused on participants' emotional responses, coping strategies, and perceived academic pressure when relying on AI tools. Thematic analysis was conducted using IPA procedures, supported by NVivo software for coding and theme development (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and reflexive journaling, with ethical approval obtained from the relevant institutional review board (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While no statistical model is applied, a conceptual model illustrates the experiential link between AI use (A), writing stress (S), and students' emotional regulation or coping strategies (C), grounded in the emergent qualitative themes (He et al., 2025; Boillos, 2025).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted between January and March 2025 within the English Literature department at Universitas Bakti Indonesia. A purposive sample of ten final-year undergraduate students was selected based on their regular use of AI-based writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot in completing academic assignments. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used to explore participants' lived experiences regarding the dual role of AI as both a source of support and a cause of anxiety. Thematic coding was facilitated using NVivo software, which generated three interrelated themes: (1) AI as a linguistic aid that reduces technical anxiety; (2) dependence and diminished self-confidence; and (3) ambivalence toward authorship and academic integrity.

Participants reported that AI tools significantly reduced stress related to mechanical aspects of writing, including grammar and sentence structure. These findings echo previous studies, such as Lin and Huang (2022), which emphasize that AI systems enhance grammatical accuracy and writing motivation. However, many participants also revealed emerging forms of anxiety linked to their growing reliance on these tools. Several students questioned their own writing ability and expressed concerns over violating academic integrity, despite not explicitly plagiarizing. This resonates with the findings of Lee and Chen (2023), who reported that overreliance on AI could foster psychological dependency and linguistic self-doubt. These outcomes substantiate the dual-framework of Krashen's affective filter hypothesis and Hyland's (2019) socio-cognitive theory, affirming the role of emotional and contextual factors in shaping students' engagement with AI in writing.

AI as a Technical Writing Support System

One of the most consistently reported findings was the perception of AI tools as effective supports for technical aspects of writing. All participants shared that AI-based writing assistants helped them construct grammatically accurate sentences, refine vocabulary choices, and restructure disorganized ideas. This aligns with Li and Lei (2023), who emphasize that NLP-driven tools significantly improve syntactic clarity and fluency among EFL learners. Students described AI as a "non-judgmental tutor" that offered corrections without the fear of negative evaluation a known trigger of writing anxiety (Rezaei & Jafari, 2022). By alleviating the technical pressure of producing error-free writing, AI facilitated greater mental space for idea development, interpretation, and argumentation.

Moreover, many participants noted that AI tools contributed to increased productivity and time efficiency. Instead of spending hours proofreading and editing drafts manually, students could focus on refining their ideas while relying on AI to manage grammar and coherence. The reduction in technical stress supports Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which suggests that lower anxiety levels enhance language performance. Therefore, this sub-theme supports the conclusion that AI serves as a buffer against linguistic barriers in EFL academic contexts. However, while the tools provided linguistic scaffolding, participants were also quick to identify deeper emotional tensions associated with their usage, which are explored in the next sub-section.

Table 1. Frequency of Participant References to AI Support in Technical Writing Aspects.

Technical Aspect	Number of Participants Mentioning	Description of Support Provided by AI Tools
Grammar Correction	10	AI tools helped identify and correct grammatical errors.
Vocabulary Enhancement	8	Participants used AI suggestions to diversify word choices.
Sentence Structuring	7	AI offered improved sentence clarity and logical flow.

Source: Interview transcript analysis using NVivo (2025)

The data presented in Table 1 provides a quantitative overview of how AI tools were perceived as effective in supporting three core technical aspects of academic writing: grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and sentence structuring. All ten participants (100%) reported that AI-assisted grammar correction significantly alleviated their anxiety related to linguistic accuracy. This unanimous agreement underscores grammar support as the primary motivator for students' adoption of AI tools in academic contexts. The participants indicated that AI applications like Grammarly and QuillBot were instrumental in highlighting grammatical inconsistencies, correcting verb tenses, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement elements that are often stress-inducing in EFL academic writing. Such findings reinforce prior literature suggesting that real-time automated feedback reduces cognitive load and allows students to redirect their attention to higher-order thinking tasks during composition (Li & Lei, 2023).

In addition to grammar, 8 out of 10 students acknowledged the role of AI in vocabulary enhancement. These students appreciated how AI tools suggested more precise, academic, or varied lexical alternatives, enabling them to avoid repetition and increase the sophistication of their language. Furthermore, 7 participants referred to improved sentence clarity and coherence as a benefit derived from AI-assisted structuring. They explained that AI helped reorganize their ideas into more logical sentence flows and eliminated redundancy. Although not all

students highlighted vocabulary and structuring to the same extent, the results indicate that AI contributes multi-dimensionally to technical writing improvement. These outcomes support the conceptual framing of AI as a cognitive scaffold and align with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, wherein reduced linguistic anxiety enables more effective language production. Thus, Table 1 not only illustrates usage frequency but also signifies the central role of AI in mitigating technical stressors for EFL writers.

Dependency and Self-Efficacy Crisis

Despite the immediate benefits of using AI tools, a major concern raised by students was their increasing emotional dependency on such systems. Several participants confessed to feeling "incapable" or "insecure" about submitting assignments without first running them through Grammarly or QuillBot. This reveals a decline in writing self-efficacy a student's belief in their own ability to complete writing tasks independently. As Lee and Chen (2023) point out, prolonged exposure to AI-generated suggestions may inhibit students' confidence in their linguistic competence. One student remarked, "I don't trust my writing anymore unless I check it with Grammarly," illustrating the internalized doubt fueled by overreliance on AI.

This emotional dependency has important pedagogical implications. When students become reliant on AI for basic writing tasks, they risk disengaging from the cognitive and reflective processes that academic writing aims to foster. Moreover, this overdependence may reduce students' motivation to revise, reflect, and learn from their errors, thus undermining long-term language acquisition. In essence, the convenience offered by AI might paradoxically lead to a loss of academic autonomy. These findings challenge the overly optimistic narrative that AI tools are purely enabling, suggesting instead a more ambivalent relationship that requires careful pedagogical mediation.

Ambivalence Toward Authorship and Academic Integrity

A complex psychological and ethical dilemma emerged from participants' reflections on authorship and originality. Many students expressed uncertainty about the extent to which their AI-edited texts could still be considered "their own work." Even when AI tools were used only for paraphrasing or correcting sentence structures, students described feelings of guilt and questioned the authenticity of their submissions. This tension is consistent with the literature on academic integrity in the digital age, which warns of the blurred boundaries between assistance and misconduct (Zhang & Hyland, 2023). Students found themselves caught between the need to improve writing quality and the fear of being perceived as dishonest.

This ambivalence points to a broader issue in higher education: the lack of clear guidelines and ethical frameworks for AI use in academic writing. Without explicit training or policy, students navigate these tools in a moral gray area, often relying on personal judgment. This uncertainty can add psychological pressure, undermining both confidence and engagement. Thus, while AI may offer practical writing solutions, it also raises critical questions about student identity, academic authorship, and ethical boundaries that must be addressed at the institutional level through AI literacy education.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings affirm the dual-function model of AI in academic writing. On one hand, AI tools serve as scaffolding devices that reduce technical stress and improve writing fluency. On the other hand, they introduce emotional dependencies and ethical ambiguities that complicate students' writing experiences. These findings validate the integration of socio-cognitive and affective frameworks (Hyland, 2019; Krashen, 1982) to explain how writing is shaped by both linguistic and emotional factors. In this study, the affective filter created by anxiety and self-doubt acted as a mediator between tool usage and writing performance, influencing not only output but also motivation and identity.

Practically, these results suggest that educational institutions should develop targeted strategies for AI literacy that go beyond functionality and address psychological and ethical dimensions. Instructors should encourage critical reflection on AI tool usage and guide students in balancing technological assistance with personal effort. Additionally, institutions must establish clear policies regarding acceptable AI use to mitigate confusion and prevent misconduct. By addressing both the strengths and pitfalls of AI-assisted writing, educators can promote a balanced integration that enhances academic performance while preserving student agency and integrity.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that the integration of AI-based writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot plays a dual role in shaping the academic writing experience of EFL students majoring in English Literature. On one hand, AI serves as a valuable support system that reduces technical writing stress by enhancing grammar, structure, and clarity, thereby empowering students to produce more confident and fluent academic texts. On the other hand, this support is accompanied by emotional and ethical tensions, as students increasingly express dependence on AI tools, diminished confidence in their own writing abilities, and ambivalence about authorship and academic integrity. These findings confirm the initial hypothesis that AI contributes simultaneously to assistance and anxiety in the context of academic writing, mediated by affective and socio-cognitive dynamics.

Given these outcomes, it is recommended that educational institutions incorporate AI literacy into writing pedagogy not only to enhance technical skills but also to foster critical thinking about tool usage, authorship ethics, and emotional resilience. Teachers should actively engage students in reflective dialogue about their use of AI and support the development of autonomous writing practices. Furthermore, the study acknowledges its limitations in terms of sample size and demographic scope, being restricted to a single institution with ten participants. Future research is encouraged to explore diverse educational contexts, include larger samples, and examine longitudinal effects of AI integration on writing proficiency and psychological well-being. By doing so, a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of AI's role in education can be developed, supporting the creation of sustainable, ethically-informed digital learning environments.

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