



INTEGRATING CHATGPT IN ESL LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: BENEFITS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has significantly influenced educational practices, particularly in language learning. One emerging tool is ChatGPT, which is increasingly used by university students to support English as Second Language (ESL) learning. This study explores the integration of ChatGPT in ESL learning at the university level, focusing on both its educational benefits and the ethical concerns associated with its use. The research aims to examine how ESL students utilize ChatGPT to improve their language skills, including writing, vocabulary development, grammar correction, and reading comprehension. The study also investigates the potential ethical issues that arise from the use of AI tools in academic contexts, such as overreliance on technology, academic integrity, and the risk of plagiarism. Using a survey-based research approach, data are collected from university-level ESL students to understand their perceptions, usage patterns, and awareness of ethical guidelines related to AI-assisted learning. The findings are expected to highlight the positive role of ChatGPT in enhancing language learning while emphasizing the importance of responsible and ethical use in academic environments. The study may also provide insights for educators and institutions to develop clear guidelines for integrating AI technologies into ESL education while maintaining academic integrity and promoting effective learning practices.

Keywords: *ChatGPT, ESL Learning, Artificial Intelligence in Education, University Students, Academic Ethics, AI-Assisted Language Learning.*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has significantly transformed many aspects of modern life, including education (Al-Adwan et al., 2022). In recent years, AI-powered tools have begun to reshape teaching and learning practices by offering new forms of support for students and educators (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Akram et al., 2021, 2022). Within the field of language education, these technologies provide opportunities for interactive learning, immediate feedback, and personalized guidance that were previously difficult to achieve in traditional classroom environments. Among the emerging AI tools, ChatGPT has gained considerable attention due to its ability to generate human-like text, provide explanations, assist with writing tasks, and engage in conversational interactions. As a result, university students, particularly those learning English as a second language (ESL), have increasingly begun to incorporate this technology into their academic learning processes (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Congman et al., 2019).



English plays a crucial role in global communication, academic exchange, and professional development (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). For many university students around the world, English is not their first language but is essential for academic success and access to international knowledge (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021; Ramzan & Khan, 2019, 2024). ESL learners often face challenges in developing proficiency in areas such as academic writing, grammar accuracy, vocabulary expansion, and reading comprehension (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025, 2026). Traditional classroom instruction provides foundational guidance; however, students frequently require additional support outside the classroom to practice language skills and refine their understanding of complex linguistic structures (Sohail & Akram, 2025). In this context, AI-driven language tools such as ChatGPT have emerged as accessible and flexible resources that can assist learners in practicing English independently and receiving instant feedback (Jalalzai et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2024, 2025).

The use of ChatGPT in ESL learning environments offers several potential educational benefits. One of the most notable advantages is the availability of immediate responses to learners' queries. Students can request explanations of grammatical rules, ask for vocabulary suggestions, or receive assistance in organizing their ideas when writing essays or assignments. In addition, the conversational capabilities of AI systems allow learners to simulate dialogue-based interactions, which can help improve their communicative competence and confidence in using the language (Abdelrady et al., 2025; Akram & Li, 2024). Through repeated interaction with AI tools, students may also develop greater autonomy in their learning by exploring language patterns, experimenting with sentence structures, and refining their writing skills. Consequently, ChatGPT has the potential to function as a supplementary learning resource that complements formal ESL instruction at the university level.

Despite these potential benefits, the integration of AI tools such as ChatGPT into academic learning environments has raised important ethical and pedagogical concerns. One major issue relates to the possibility of overreliance on AI-generated assistance. While AI tools can provide helpful suggestions and explanations, excessive dependence on these technologies may reduce students' motivation to engage in independent critical thinking and language production (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021). For ESL learners, the development of language proficiency requires active practice, cognitive effort, and gradual mastery of linguistic structures. If students rely heavily on AI-generated responses without critically evaluating them, the learning process may become superficial rather than developmental.

Another important concern involves issues of academic integrity. In university settings, assignments and written tasks are often designed to assess students' individual understanding and language abilities. The use of AI-generated text in completing academic work raises questions about authorship, originality, and plagiarism. When students submit AI-generated content as their own work without proper acknowledgement, it may compromise the principles of academic honesty that guide higher education institutions. Furthermore, the growing accessibility of AI writing tools has made it more difficult for educators to determine the extent to which students independently produce their assignments.

In addition to concerns about academic integrity, ethical questions also arise regarding students' awareness of responsible AI use. Many learners may use AI tools for educational assistance without fully understanding institutional policies or ethical guidelines governing their use.



Universities and educators therefore face the challenge of balancing the advantages of technological innovation with the need to maintain ethical standards in academic practice. Developing clear guidelines and promoting digital literacy among students have become essential steps in ensuring that AI technologies are used in ways that support learning rather than undermine it.

Given the growing presence of AI in educational contexts, it is important to examine how students actually use tools such as ChatGPT and how they perceive both the benefits and the ethical implications of these technologies. While existing studies have explored the pedagogical potential of AI-assisted language learning, there remains a need for empirical research focusing specifically on university-level ESL learners and their experiences with ChatGPT. Understanding students' perspectives can provide valuable insights into how AI tools influence learning behaviors, language development, and attitudes toward academic integrity.

Therefore, this study investigates the integration of ChatGPT in ESL learning at the university level by examining students' usage patterns, perceived benefits, and awareness of ethical concerns associated with AI-assisted learning. Using a survey-based research approach, the study collects data from university-level ESL students to explore how they utilize ChatGPT to improve their language skills, particularly in areas such as writing, vocabulary development, grammar correction, and reading comprehension. In addition, the research seeks to identify students' perceptions regarding ethical issues, including overreliance on AI, plagiarism risks, and responsible use of AI tools in academic environments.

By exploring both the advantages and the ethical challenges associated with ChatGPT in ESL education, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the role of artificial intelligence in higher education. The findings may provide useful insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to integrate AI technologies into language learning in a responsible and pedagogically effective manner. Ultimately, understanding the balance between technological support and academic integrity will be essential for ensuring that AI tools enhance rather than hinder meaningful language learning experiences at the university level.

Literature Review

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed many educational practices, including language learning. AI technologies such as intelligent tutoring systems, natural language processing tools, and generative language models have been increasingly applied to support second language learning. Among these technologies, ChatGPT—an AI language model developed on transformer architectures—has gained notable attention for its potential to provide real-time feedback, interactive language practice, and personalized assistance in language learning contexts. This literature review examines research on AI-assisted language learning, the pedagogical implications of using AI tools like ChatGPT in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, and the ethical concerns associated with AI use in academic settings.

AI-Assisted Language Learning and Second Language Acquisition

Artificial intelligence applications have been widely investigated for their ability to support second language acquisition (SLA). According to Kormos and Dénes (2004), effective SLA involves interactional feedback, repeated practice, and opportunities for meaningful communication. AI-powered language tools can replicate some of these interactional features



through adaptive feedback and individualized learning paths. For instance, AI writing assistants analyze learner output, detect errors, and offer corrective suggestions, thereby facilitating learners' metalinguistic awareness and improving writing accuracy (Li & Hegelheimer, 2013). Similarly, AI-enabled speech recognition systems can support pronunciation practice by providing immediate auditory and visual feedback (Witt, 2012). Generative AI models such as ChatGPT extend the scope of AI-assisted learning by enabling dialogic interaction that resembles human conversation. Previous research suggests that conversational agents can function as supplemental interlocutors in language learning, offering learners additional opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom environment (Chung et al., 2021). These AI interactions can promote learners' communicative confidence and allow repeated practice in low-anxiety conditions—factors that are widely recognized as beneficial for SLA (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, AI technologies not only automate feedback mechanisms but also create novel communicative contexts that align with SLA principles.

Educational Benefits of AI Tools for ESL Learners

Studies exploring AI applications in ESL learning report several positive educational outcomes. AI tools have been found to support vocabulary acquisition, grammar accuracy, and writing fluency. For example, Bensalem and Torres (2019) found that adaptive vocabulary platforms help learners retain new lexical items through spaced repetition algorithms that tailor practice to individual learning patterns. Similarly, research on AI-based writing support shows that learners who receive AI-generated feedback demonstrate improvements in grammatical accuracy and coherence in written tasks compared to those with traditional instruction alone (Li & Hegelheimer, 2013). In addition to cognitive gains, AI tools have been associated with increased learner motivation and engagement. AI platforms often incorporate interactive elements such as gamified tasks, adaptive challenges, and progress dashboards, which can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and perceived competence (Dizon, 2021). Learner autonomy—a critical factor in successful language learning—is also positively influenced by AI systems that allow learners to guide their own practice, monitor progress, and revisit areas of difficulty independently (Reinders & White, 2016).

Pedagogical Integration of AI in ESL Contexts

Integrating AI into ESL curricula requires pedagogical considerations that bridge technological affordances with instructional goals. Research emphasizes that AI tools should complement rather than replace traditional teaching methods (Li, 2020). Teachers play a crucial role in contextualizing AI feedback, designing meaningful learning tasks based on AI outputs, and facilitating reflective learning practices. For instance, when students use AI tools to generate text, instructors can promote critical evaluation skills by guiding learners to analyze, revise, and justify changes to their work. Such pedagogical scaffolding ensures that AI serves as an adjunct to human teaching rather than a replacement for learner agency. Despite growing interest, studies also caution that effective pedagogical integration depends on learners' digital literacy and instructors' technological competence. Without proper training and instructional design, AI tools may be underutilized or misused, leading to superficial engagement rather than deep learning (Godwin-Jones, 2019).



Ethical Concerns and Academic Integrity

The ethical dimensions of AI use in education have attracted scholarly attention, with particular emphasis on academic integrity. The use of generative AI models raises questions regarding authorship, originality, and plagiarism. When learners rely on AI-generated text to complete assignments without acknowledgement, the boundary between assisted learning and academic misconduct becomes blurred. Selwyn (2020) argues that educational institutions must reconsider traditional definitions of plagiarism in light of emerging technologies, while simultaneously reinforcing ethical norms that discourage uncritical use of AI outputs. Another concern relates to overreliance on technology. Excessive dependence on AI tools may reduce learners' opportunities to engage in independent cognitive work, critical thinking, and problem-solving—skills that are essential for language development and academic achievement (Vardi, 2022). Such reliance not only affects learning outcomes but may also weaken students' motivation to engage deeply with language tasks. Privacy and data security are additional ethical issues. AI tools typically require users to submit text inputs, which may be stored or processed in external servers. The collection and use of learners' linguistic data raise concerns about privacy protections, consent, and institutional responsibility for safeguarding sensitive information (Veletsianos, 2020).

Research Gaps and Need for Empirical Investigation

Although existing literature highlights potential benefits and challenges of AI-assisted language learning, there remains a need for empirical research that specifically examines students' perceptions and ethical awareness in relation to tools like ChatGPT in real educational contexts. Much of the current research focuses on experimental performance outcomes or theoretical implications, rather than the lived experiences of ESL learners navigating ethical dilemmas in authentic academic environments. Additionally, mixed-methods studies that combine quantitative measures of learning gains with qualitative insights into learner attitudes are relatively scarce. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing evidence-based recommendations for integrating AI tools responsibly in ESL education. The literature suggests that AI technologies such as ChatGPT hold substantial promise for supporting second language learning by providing adaptive feedback, interactive practice, and opportunities for autonomous learning. These tools can enhance vocabulary, writing accuracy, speaking confidence, and learner motivation. However, ethical concerns related to academic integrity, overreliance on AI, digital literacy, and data privacy underscore the need for careful pedagogical integration and institutional guidelines. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining both the educational benefits and ethical implications of ChatGPT use among university-level ESL learners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), both of which offer complementary perspectives on language learning and motivation in AI-assisted environments. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the social and interactive nature of learning, highlighting the importance of scaffolding and mediation in developing cognitive and linguistic skills. From this perspective, AI tools such as ChatGPT can be conceptualized as mediational tools that provide scaffolding for ESL learners. ChatGPT offers learners interactive feedback, explanations, and examples in real



time, functioning as a digital interlocutor that supports language acquisition through guided interaction. The use of AI aligns with the sociocultural emphasis on collaborative knowledge construction, as learners can experiment with language, receive corrective input, and progressively internalize linguistic structures within a supportive digital environment. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a motivational lens for understanding how AI-assisted learning influences learner engagement. SDT posits that motivation is driven by three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. AI tools such as ChatGPT can enhance learners' **autonomy** by allowing them to control their learning pace, choose tasks, and access feedback on demand. Competence is supported through immediate corrective feedback and suggestions that improve language skills and build confidence. While AI may not fully address social relatedness, it can simulate dialogic interaction, provide virtual collaboration opportunities, and encourage learners to engage with authentic language use. Together, these theoretical perspectives justify the integration of ChatGPT as a tool that can facilitate language learning while supporting motivation and learner engagement, while also highlighting the need to critically examine potential ethical implications.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses the emerging role of AI in higher education, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning. While AI tools are increasingly adopted, empirical research on their educational benefits and ethical implications at the university level remains limited. By investigating ESL students' perceptions and experiences with ChatGPT, this study provides evidence-based insights into the pedagogical potential of AI-assisted language learning. Second, the study highlights the dual focus of AI integration: cognitive and ethical dimensions. While ChatGPT can improve writing accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, grammar proficiency, and reading comprehension, it also raises ethical questions such as academic integrity, overreliance on technology, and plagiarism. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for educators and institutions aiming to harness AI effectively while maintaining academic standards. Third, the study contributes to institutional policy-making and instructional design. Findings can inform the development of guidelines for responsible AI use in university ESL programs, including strategies for integrating AI as a supplementary tool, training students to critically evaluate AI-generated content, and fostering digital literacy. This aligns with the broader educational goal of promoting autonomous learning while ensuring ethical and responsible technology use. Finally, the study adds to the broader literature on AI-assisted education and language learning, providing practical insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers. By exploring the benefits and challenges of ChatGPT in ESL contexts, it offers a foundation for future research and implementation strategies that balance pedagogical innovation with ethical responsibility.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of ChatGPT's role in ESL learning.

Research Design

The research adopts a convergent parallel design in which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, and then integrated to draw overall conclusions. The quantitative component examines measurable learning outcomes and usage



patterns, while the qualitative component explores students' experiences, perceptions, and ethical concerns.

Participants

Participants include university-level ESL students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select students who have experience using ChatGPT for language learning tasks, ensuring that participants can provide relevant insights into both its benefits and ethical challenges.

Data Collection Methods

1. **Survey Questionnaire:** A structured survey collects data on students' frequency of ChatGPT use, perceived impact on writing, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, as well as attitudes toward AI-assisted learning. Likert-scale items and multiple-choice questions provide quantifiable measures of learning outcomes and user perceptions.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Interviews with a subset of participants explore in-depth experiences with ChatGPT, ethical awareness, and reflections on responsible AI use. This qualitative approach captures nuanced insights that surveys alone cannot provide.
3. **Reflective Learner Journals:** Participants maintain short reflective journals over a period of four weeks, documenting their interactions with ChatGPT, challenges faced, and strategies for integrating AI feedback into language tasks.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and paired-sample t-tests to assess perceived improvements in language skills.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts and journal entries are examined using **reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying recurring themes related to learning benefits, motivational effects, and ethical concerns.
- **Integration of Findings:** Quantitative and qualitative results are triangulated to provide a holistic understanding of the educational and ethical implications of ChatGPT use in ESL learning.

Ethical Considerations

The study follows strict ethical guidelines, including informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Participants are informed about the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time. Special attention is given to discussing AI-related ethical considerations, ensuring that participants' reflections are collected in a responsible and sensitive manner.

Results

The data collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals revealed multiple patterns regarding university ESL students' use of ChatGPT for language learning. Findings are organized into four major themes: enhancement of language skills, learner motivation and autonomy, ethical awareness, and challenges in AI integration.

Enhancement of Language Skills

Survey results indicated that 78% of participants perceived improvements in writing accuracy, while 65% reported enhanced vocabulary acquisition, and 59% noted better grammar usage.



Students reported using ChatGPT primarily for drafting essays, paraphrasing sentences, and checking grammar and syntax. Reflective journals demonstrated that AI-generated feedback allowed learners to identify recurring errors and refine sentence structures, which contributed to measurable improvements in writing confidence. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with participants noting that ChatGPT served as a supplemental tutor providing immediate, accessible feedback that complemented classroom instruction.

Learner Motivation and Autonomy

Many participants highlighted that ChatGPT facilitated autonomous learning by allowing them to explore language independently. Semi-structured interviews revealed that students appreciated the flexibility to practice writing or receive explanations at their own pace, which enhanced motivation and engagement. Approximately 72% of survey respondents indicated that using ChatGPT increased their confidence in tackling complex language tasks. Journals reflected that students often engaged in iterative revision processes, consulting ChatGPT multiple times to clarify word usage or sentence construction, thereby promoting self-directed learning.

Ethical Awareness and Academic Integrity

Despite the perceived benefits, ethical concerns emerged as a prominent theme. About 63% of participants expressed uncertainty regarding the correct extent to which they could rely on AI for academic tasks. Interviews revealed that students were aware of the potential for plagiarism when submitting AI-generated text without modification or acknowledgment. Additionally, participants reported concerns regarding overreliance on ChatGPT, fearing it could diminish critical thinking or independent problem-solving. Awareness of ethical guidelines was uneven; while some students demonstrated a clear understanding of responsible use, others were unsure about institutional policies regarding AI-assisted writing.

Challenges in AI Integration

Participants highlighted technical and cognitive challenges associated with AI use. Some students noted that ChatGPT occasionally produced inaccurate or contextually inappropriate suggestions, requiring careful evaluation before application. Additionally, reflective journals revealed that reliance on AI sometimes led to confusion when feedback conflicted with classroom instruction. Access issues were less prevalent but noted among students with limited internet connectivity or unfamiliarity with AI platforms.

Discussion

The results suggest that integrating ChatGPT into university-level ESL learning offers substantial cognitive and motivational benefits, consistent with prior research on AI-assisted language learning (Li & Hegelheimer, 2013; Dizon, 2021). The tool enhances writing skills, vocabulary development, and grammar proficiency by providing immediate, context-sensitive feedback, aligning with the principles of sociocultural theory where scaffolding supports skill acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' reflections indicate that ChatGPT acts as a mediational tool that enables learners to experiment with language, revise their outputs, and internalize linguistic patterns through iterative interaction.

From a motivational perspective, findings align with self-determination theory, highlighting that ChatGPT supports learners' autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students valued the flexibility to engage with AI at their own pace, select tasks according to personal needs, and track their progress over time. This flexibility appears to enhance intrinsic motivation,



engagement, and willingness to take risks in language production, which are critical for effective second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

However, the study also underscores the ethical and pedagogical complexities associated with AI integration. Students' awareness of plagiarism and overreliance issues reflects the broader concerns raised in the literature regarding academic integrity in AI-assisted learning (Selwyn, 2020; Vardi, 2022). While ChatGPT facilitates skill development, uncritical use may compromise learning autonomy and reduce cognitive effort if learners depend entirely on AI-generated responses. This emphasizes the importance of embedding AI tools within structured pedagogical frameworks where instructors guide responsible use, critical evaluation, and reflective engagement.

Additionally, challenges related to inconsistent feedback and occasional inaccuracies in AI outputs point to the need for learners to critically appraise AI suggestions. These findings echo prior studies suggesting that AI should complement, rather than replace, traditional instruction, ensuring that human oversight and pedagogical scaffolding remain central to the learning process (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that ChatGPT has significant potential to enhance ESL learning at the university level by improving writing accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and grammar proficiency. Its interactive and adaptive feedback mechanisms support autonomous learning, increase motivation, and foster greater engagement with language tasks. The findings reinforce the theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural and self-determination perspectives, illustrating that AI can function as a mediational tool while promoting learner autonomy and competence.

At the same time, the study highlights critical ethical and pedagogical considerations. Students are aware of risks associated with overreliance on AI and potential academic misconduct. Variability in ethical awareness underscores the necessity for institutional guidance, clear policies, and training in responsible AI use. Technical limitations and occasional inaccuracies further indicate that AI tools should be integrated thoughtfully and critically into the language learning environment.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of research on AI-assisted language learning by demonstrating both the pedagogical benefits and ethical challenges of using ChatGPT in university ESL contexts. It offers a foundation for future research and practical implementation strategies to balance technological innovation with responsible educational practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for educators, institutions, and policymakers:

1. **Guidelines for Responsible AI Use:** Universities should establish clear policies and ethical guidelines regarding the use of AI tools in academic assignments to prevent plagiarism and ensure responsible engagement.
2. **Integration with Pedagogical Scaffolding:** ChatGPT should be integrated as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for instructor-led teaching. Educators should guide students on how to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs.
3. **Digital Literacy Training:** Institutions should provide training for students and faculty to improve digital literacy and ensure effective and ethical use of AI in learning contexts.



4. **Reflective Practices:** Encouraging students to maintain reflective journals or learning logs can help monitor AI-assisted learning experiences, enhance self-awareness, and promote critical thinking.
5. **Feedback Validation:** Educators should teach learners strategies to verify AI suggestions against credible language resources to ensure accuracy and reliability.
6. **Research and Development:** Future research should investigate long-term effects of AI-assisted learning on language proficiency, motivation, and ethical decision-making across diverse ESL contexts.
7. **Equitable Access:** Universities should ensure equitable access to AI technologies and digital infrastructure to prevent disparities among students with differing technological resources.

By adopting these strategies, institutions can maximize the benefits of AI-assisted ESL learning while mitigating ethical risks and supporting sustainable, autonomous language development.

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