



Students' Perceptions of Generative AI Use in Academic Writing

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Abstract

ChatGPT and other generative AI models are projected to transform the educational landscape. One common conclusion is that ChatGPT will gain prominence as a powerful educational tool, enabling language learners to study more independently and efficiently than ever before. While many educators have begun to integrate ChatGPT into their teaching practices with these benefits in view, others have expressed concern and rejected its use. This resistance arises largely from teachers' apprehension that students will use ChatGPT for dishonest purposes, for example submitting AI-generated writing as their own. For these educators, the tool raises critical concerns about academic honesty and integrity. But what do the students themselves think? This study will identify the perspectives of 56 English language learners at a university in Ecuador, using data gathered from a survey on the role of generative AI in academic writing. The results will inform teachers and educational institutions about how students perceive the overall influence of AI on academic integrity within the scope of academic writing, including reasons why students might rely on AI tools for dishonest purposes and how they view the detection of AI-based dishonesty.

Keywords: *Generative AI; L2 writing; student perceptions; academic dishonesty; English as a foreign language*

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that technology is a great facilitator to the language learning and teaching process. However, as many experienced language teachers have no doubt noticed, technology can complicate that process. A familiar example for many language educators will be machine translation (MT). While MT provides many benefits in aiding understanding and expression in a foreign language at efficient speed, students can use it to feign language skills that they do not possess, particularly in writing. Ducar and Schocket (2018) go as far as to suggest that teachers may view foreign language "students' reliance on MT [as] an absolute evil," though they rightly admonish teachers learn to work within the reality of MT's existence since it is unlikely to disappear (p. 780). Similarly, the recent advent of chat-based generative AI technology such as ChatGPT provides many benefits to language learners, for example as a low-cost virtual tutor, but educators are concerned about its impact on academic honesty, since students' misuse of it may interfere with learning and assessment.

Since ChatGPT was made public in November of 2022, it "quickly went viral on social media as users shared examples of what it could do[:]...everything from travel planning to writing fables to cod[ing] computer programs" (Marr, 2023, para. 6). ChatGPT is "a powerful text-generating dialogue system" that "generates humanlike responses to inputs from users" (Mehta, 2023 p. 3).

ChatGPT of course has many benefits that can support student learning. It can provide a personalized education experience that is often impossible to achieve in the traditional classroom setting and that may be too expensive for many (Xiao and Zhi, 2023). For example, it can act as a personal tutor or mentor that can answer questions and give easy-to-understand explanations of difficult concepts, and engage students in conversations on various educational topics (George & George, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). And the independent learning opportunities that ChatGPT and others provide may be superior to the kind of independent learning that students have already been doing with the internet for years. For example, according to AIAfnan et al. (2023) the answers to questions that are put to GPT are obtained quicker and more succinctly than from search engines, "[which] provide billions of results that, at times, lack accuracy and/or relevance", (p. 65). This speed and succinctness allow students to save time and energy (Zhao et al., 2024, p. 7). Specific to the language classroom, AI chatbots can be used as conversational partners that can correct students' mistakes.



1.2 Academic Dishonesty

Despite these benefits, AI chatbots have contributed to academic dishonesty. Kibler (1993) defined academic dishonesty as “...forms of cheating and plagiarism that involve students giving or receiving unauthorized assistance in an academic exercise or receiving credit for work that is not their own” (p. 3). Some examples include “lying, cheating on exams, copying or using other people’s work without permission, altering or forging documents, buying papers, plagiarism, purposely not following the rules, altering research results, providing false excuses for missed tests and assignments, making up sources, and so on” (Lambert et al., 2003, para. 6). Academic dishonesty is such a grave issue because it ultimately “defrauds those who may eventually depend upon [graduates’ supposed] knowledge and integrity” (Pavela, 1997, p. 9).

Joyjit Chatterjee and Nina Dethlefs (2023) state that the main source of academic dishonesty with generative AI comes from its ability to “write an entire essay or a research paper in a humanly manner, making it virtually impossible to detect whether the piece was actually written by an AI model or a human[,]” which of course introduces the potential for plagiarism that may be undetectable (p.2). In the past, teachers may have tried to respond to plagiarism by making assignments harder to plagiarize, for example, by requiring aspects that are more specific and personal and thus harder to copy and present as one’s own work, but even these attempts at prevention can be overcome by current AI capabilities. Henry (2023) suggested that ChatGPT can “even generate authentic-sounding personal reflections on a given scenario” (p. 4).

Furthermore, students may use ChatGPT and similar technologies during exams without teachers’ knowledge, which Stokel-Walker (2022) likens to “... allowing the student to [have] a friend with an average academic competence...take the exam for her”, which is concerning given that it could damage the validity of grades, certifications, and degrees that are supposed to prove that a student possesses a certain level of skill and knowledge (p.21). Clearly, as Lo (2023) has stated “Despite its success, ChatGPT has introduced new challenges and threats to education...leading to concerns about AI-assisted cheating” (p.2).

1.3 Detecting AI-generated Content

Teachers and students may be familiar with tools such as Turnitin® that detect copy-and-paste type plagiarism from texts that are available on the web, and they may believe that similar tools exist to detect AI-generated texts that students may submit as their own work. Unfortunately, detecting artificial intelligence-generated content is not that simple, and there is disagreement about the reliability of existing AI detectors, which are programs that are designed to identify whether a text was likely generated by AI. Alexander et al. (2023) stated, “that currently there seems to be no fully reliable way of establishing whether a text was written by a human or generated by an AI. Neither humans nor AI detectors proved able to detect AI efficiently and reliably” (p. 40). Other researchers have stated that “AI-detectors are able to identify AI-generated text with high accuracy” with the qualification that “human writing, especially scientific writing, can still trigger AI-generated content probability if it follows a predictable pattern” (Ladha, Yadav, & Rathore, 2023, p. 3438). Clearly, there is some ethical concern with the use of AI detectors when there is disagreement about how accurate they really are (Uzun, 2023). Also, dependence on AI detectors to catch cheating is flawed because they can be bypassed, for example, by “using AI to rewrite its generated text with more syntactical change, randomized sentence length, and even inserted typos” in order to “thwart the AI detectors on the market” (Gorichanaz, 2023, p. 15).

2. Literature Review

Teachers who have first-hand experience with students’ using generative AI in academically dishonest ways are already familiar with their own opinions and concerns about it, but they may be less familiar with what students think. A crucial first step to beginning any kind of productive response to the misuse of



artificial intelligence in academic settings requires educators to understand students' perspectives about it. This is crucial for educators and policymakers to create guidelines that help maximize the benefits of AI tools while mitigating their risks. Developing comprehensive ethical frameworks and pedagogical strategies is essential to ensure that students use ChatGPT responsibly without compromising their intellectual growth and academic standards.

The use of ChatGPT in education has received mixed reactions among students across different regions and educational contexts as evidenced by various studies that surveyed students on their opinions about ChatGPT. Several studies highlight the perceived advantages of ChatGPT, with students appreciating its ability to save time, provide personalized feedback, and offer a wide range of information, making it a useful tool for learning (Ngo, 2023; Valova et al., 2024). For instance, Ngo (2023) found that university students in Vietnam valued ChatGPT for improving learning efficiency and providing individualized tutoring. Similarly, Farhi et al. (2023) reported that students in the United Arab Emirates thought they benefited from ChatGPT as a virtual tutor, language practice partner, and writing support system.

However, alongside these advantages, significant concerns have arisen regarding the ethical implications of using ChatGPT. The potential for academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, is an important issue. Studies by Das and J.V. (2024) and Valova et al. (2024) showed that students might rely too much on the tool, which could reduce their ability to think critically and be creative. Additionally, students often expressed that ChatGPT's inability to replicate human interaction and mentorship poses challenges, particularly in fostering academic growth and emotional support (Sila et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2022).

Moreover, specific technical limitations of ChatGPT have been noted, such as difficulties in generating accurate or detailed information on complex topics and its limited capacity to handle certain academic tasks effectively, like complex mathematical expressions (Ngo, 2023). These drawbacks have raised concerns about the ethical use of ChatGPT, with students and educators alike debating its role in promoting or hindering genuine academic development (Farhi et al., 2023; Bonsu & Baffour-Koduah, 2023).

While various studies have implemented a survey model to collect information on students' perspectives on various aspects of the benefits and drawbacks of chat-based generative-AI use in education, few studies at the time of this literature review were found to focus on the students' perceptions of AI-based academic dishonesty in L2 writing.

2.1 Aim of Research

The present study employs a multiple-choice survey to explore Ecuadorian EFL students' perceptions of AI chatbots such as ChatGPT in the creation and improvement of their writing in English, with a specific focus on academic dishonesty. The survey explores how students define cheating, why they believe students use ChatGPT to cheat, the impact of these technologies on cheating rates, and what their opinions are on the detection, consequences, and prevention of cheating with AI. Additionally, it examines how students think these technologies can support student writing and whether they should be used for this purpose at all.

The specific research questions were:

RQ1: This research question and its sub-questions deal with general aspects of students' perception of the use of generative AI dishonestly in L2 writing, including how they define it, whether they think it is negative, and what they believe motivates students to use it:

RQ1.1: What definition and examples do students give for academic dishonesty in L2 writing with ChatGPT?



RQ1.2: What negative consequence of using AI dishonestly in their L2 writing can students identify?

RQ1.3: What do students believe their motivations for using AI dishonestly in their L2 writing are?

RQ2: What do students believe about how easy it is to detect AI generated textual content?

RQ3: What do students think teachers and institutions should do about AI-based academic dishonesty in writing in terms of response to and prevention of dishonesty?

RQ4: Do students think it is acceptable to use ChatGPT and similar technologies in their academic writing and what reasons do they give for using it?

RQ5: How do students think tools like ChatGPT have already affected academic integrity in writing and what predictions do they make about future generative AI use in writing?

3. Methods

3.1 Research Participants and Setting

The 56 participants who responded to the survey were B1-level EFL students enrolled in a university in Ecuador. These undergraduate students had undeclared majors at the time of this study, but all had the intention to declare STEM majors, as their university exclusively offers this type of major to undergraduates. The students belonged to two sections of one of the author's B1 level, communicative EFL course, which was a required course for students. Demographic information was collected from students and is illustrated in Figure 1. Thirty-one self-reported as male, 24 as female, and 1 as other. Age information revealed that 29 students were 18 years old, 19 students were 19 years old, and 4 students were 23 or older.

3.2 Data Collection

An anonymous, multiple-choice Microsoft Forms questionnaire was created and delivered to students. It was written in English and included 24 items including questions about age and gender. Questions attempted to assess students' opinions of what might constitute academic dishonesty with generative AI applied to writing and what constituted appropriate use. All questions included the option "other," and students who chose this option were asked to provide an explanation in the subsequent question. The instrument was written by one of the researchers and piloted by the other two, who gave feedback to clarify the language of the survey. The survey questions were written in English, which was not the students' native language (Spanish). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university affiliated with the three authors and, all the survey questions were recorded with the participants' consent.

The questionnaire was applied in the two classes that one of the researchers was assigned to teach. These students were given information about the topic of the study three days before the survey was given to them. The researcher noted that the students seemed to feel enthusiastic about being a part of the study. At this time, the students were also notified that their answers to the survey would be anonymous. The survey was applied the following Monday during the first hour of each class after students had signed a consent form. The survey was accessed via a link passed through a chat application. The researcher monitored students during the survey and helped them with questions. The average time to complete the survey was 35:07, which included outliers who completed the survey in as



little as 2-3 minutes and one who completed it in 108 minutes. The time needed to complete the questionnaire was estimated to be 11 minutes. The questionnaire return rate was 100%.

4. Results

The major findings of this survey study suggest that students understand what constitutes academic dishonesty while they tend to disagree about whether detection of AI generated content is accurate. Finally, they show a variety of perspectives about how teachers should respond to AI-based dishonesty and how ChatGPT affects them.

4.1 RQ1: Students General Perceptions of Generative AI

The survey questions related to this research question dealt with students' general perceptions of academic dishonesty as it related to the use of ChatGPT and similar technologies in the production of academic writing. The questions were:

Q3: How do you define academic dishonesty involving AI technologies like ChatGPT in the context of your writing production?

Q5: What specific examples can you provide for using AI technologies dishonestly in your writing?

Q7: What are the main reasons someone might use AI technologies dishonestly in your writing production?

Q9: What do you believe are the consequences of using AI dishonestly in your writing?

For Question 3, students had to choose how they defined the dishonest use of ChatGPT in their academic writing, choosing from (A) copying and using exact texts without proper citation (13 students chose this option), (B) submitting AI-generated essays as my own work (14), (C) using a translator to put your Spanish version into English (9), (D), all of the above (19), or (E) Other (1). The explanation for the "other" response was "I rarely use ChatGPT."

While a majority of students successfully identified academic dishonesty in this question, only 1/3 of the participants (19 out of 56—33.92%) answered "all of the above", which is the correct answer according to the researchers. This shows some disagreement between student and teacher perceptions of what constitutes academic dishonesty.

For Question 5, students had to identify examples of using AI technologies dishonestly in their writing, choosing from (A) Using AI to write entire essays or assignments (14 students chose this option), (B) Copying AI-generated text without paraphrasing (11), (C) using AI to improve my work without acknowledging the help (12), (D), all of the above (16), or (E) Other (3). In the explanation for the "other" response one student stated that they do not use ChatGPT for writing and the other offered the example of using various machine translators to translate something he or she had written in Spanish into English and then comparing the output.



Like Question 3, most of the students successfully identified at least one example of a use of AI technology dishonestly in their writing; however, they failed to identify all the examples of dishonesty that the question presented and did not coincide with what the researchers would consider to be the “correct” answer for this question: Option D.

For Question 7, students had to think about reasons someone might use AI for dishonest reasons, choosing from: (A) pressure to achieve high academic results (23 students chose this option), (B) Lack of confidence in my writing skills (14), (C) Belief that AI use is not easily detectable (12), (D) over-reliance on technology for convenience (10), and (E) other (1). The explanation for the “other” response was not given.

For Question 9, students had to choose what they believed to be the consequences for using AI in a dishonest manner in their writing, choosing from: (A) Risk of being caught and facing academic penalties (11 students chose this option), (B) Hindering the development of my own writing skills (13), (C) creating a false sense of achievement (7), (D) all of the above (24), and (E) Other (1). The explanation to the other response explained that the student would like to have chosen both A and C.

4.2 RQ2: What Do Students Believe About AI Text Detection?

The survey question related to this research question dealt with students’ beliefs about the detection of AI generated content. The question was:

Q11: How do you perceive the detection of AI-based academic dishonesty in your writing?

For this question, students had to choose from the options (A) Easily detectable with current technology (26 students selected this answer), (B) Difficult to detect unless closely reviewed (15), (C) Only detectable if the work is inconsistent with my previous submissions (11), (D) Not detectable at all (3), and (E) other (1). No explanation was given for the “other” response.

The distribution of opinions seems to point significant disagreement about how difficult it is to detect a text written by AI.

4.3 RQ3: How Should Authorities Respond to AI-Based Academic Dishonesty?

The survey questions related to this research question dealt with students’ opinions on what teachers and institutional authorities should do when they encounter AI-based academic dishonesty in student writing and what they should do to prevent it from occurring. The questions were:

Q13: How do you believe teachers or institutions should respond to AI-based academic dishonesty in writing?

For Question 13, students had to give their opinion on what actions teachers and institutions should take in response to this type of academic dishonesty, choosing from (A) educating students on academic integrity and AI use (21 students chose this option), (B) Implementing stricter penalties for dishonesty (16), (C) using AI-based plagiarism detectors (15), (D) Ignoring or overlooking minor instances (4), or (E) other (0).

Q15: What measures do you believe could effectively prevent AI-based academic dishonesty in writing?

For Question 15, students had to express what they thought teachers and institutions should do to prevent AI-based dishonesty in writing, choosing from (A) raising awareness about the importance of original work (11 students chose this option), (B) providing better support and resources for writing skills (26), (C) Implementing strict monitoring and detection tools (12), (D) encouraging a culture of academic honesty (6),



or (E) other (1). The explanation for the option other was that the student thought that teachers should either do option D or give handwritten exams.

4.4 RQ4: Reasons for Typical and Acceptable Use of ChatGPT

The survey questions related to this research question sought to understand the effect of generative-AI technologies on students' writing habits and their motivations for using it:

Q19: How do you perceive the use of AI tools like ChatGPT as a support for your writing tasks?

Q21: In your opinion, is it correct to use AI tools like ChatGPT in your writing?

Students responded to Question 19 by answering whether ChatGPT and similar technologies were (A) a helpful tool to improve the quality of my writing (18 students chose this option), (B) a way to save time on writing assignments (8), (C) a source of ideas and inspiration (19), (D) and easy way to bypass difficult parts of writing (4), (E) a potential risk for becoming dependent on AI (5), or (F) other (2). The two explanations for the "other" response were "B and C" and "AI is not good enough."

For Question 21, students had to decide whether they thought the use of AI tools was acceptable in their writing, choosing from the options (A) Yes, it is completely acceptable (1 student chose this answer), (B) Yes, but only if properly cited (11), (C) It depends on the context or extent of use (37), (D) No, it is not acceptable (7), or (E) other (0).

4.5 RQ5: Generative AI Effects on Academic Integrity and Writing Now and in the Future.

The survey questions related to this research question indented to determine how students perceived the AI's impact on academic integrity in writing in the present and how it might impact writing in the future. The questions were:

Q17: In your opinion, how has the arrival of AI technologies like ChatGPT impacted academic integrity in your writing production?

Q23: How do you predict the use of AI tools like ChatGPT for writing will change in the near future?"

For Question 17, participants had to choose the option that represented their view on the impact of generative AI technologies on academic integrity within academic writing. They had to choose from the options (A) significantly increased instances of academic dishonesty (22 students chose this option), (B) moderately increased instances of academic dishonesty (19), (C) No significant impact (10), (D) Decreased instances of academic dishonesty due to better detection tools (5), or (E) other (0).

For Question 23, students had to make predictions about how the use of AI tools like ChatGPT for writing will change in the near future. They had to choose between the options (A) it will become more common and widely accepted (13 students chose this option), (B) it will become more strictly regulated by educational institutions (21), (C) it will remain similar to current usage patterns (12), (D) it will decline due to ethical concerns and detection technologies, or (E) other.

The response for option E, "other" was lengthy. The student wrote:

My opinion about AI is that it helps you do long jobs and that you are too lazy to do since it is not useful for the career you want to study, but I also use it to learn new things that make me curious, such as genetic mutations in humans. or about how to find good forums on the deep web and apart from this, the AI helps you to understand with simple words about the topic you want, for example, if you are going to have an osmosis test and you don't know anything, the AI gives you the best



summary of the world in a few seconds and you can learn it, based on the question if it will increase the use of AI in the majority of people since Intel is manufacturing the new range of its CPUs incorporating AI in the CPU for which it helps in many things to computers and sooner or later this will reach phones.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study designed and applied a multiple-choice survey in order to answer the previously stated research questions about the impact of generative AI technologies such as ChatGPT on students' L2 writing and their perspectives about it. Data from 56 students were collected, which meets Hatch and Lazaraton's (1991) assertion that a sample size of 30+ participants is necessary to achieve a normal distribution (as cited in Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012). The response rate was 100%, which suggests a low "chance of significant response bias" (Babbie, 2023, p. 288).

Our participants' perspectives might reflect the views of other students in Ecuador; however, perceptions of generative AI might differ across other bordering countries in South America, such as Colombia and Peru. Interestingly, the students did not believe that translating their text from Spanish to English was a problem. This matches the attitudes of participants in Murtisari et al.'s (2019) study, in which the researchers discussed students' perspectives on the use of Google Translate in academic writing by saying, "Although it was shown to be useful in language learning, especially to enrich students' vocabulary, it was revealed that the tool may encourage target language avoidance among EFL learners by using GT for translating longer texts" (p. 984).

One notable discovery is that students believe that ChatGPT written works are easily detectable and that schools and institutions should incorporate plagiarism detectors. The participants believed that writing and turning in a paper written by ChatGPT was academic dishonesty, but fewer believed that translating a work written in Spanish and turning it into English was dishonest. 23.2% of the participants (13 out of 56) chose the option "hindering the development of my own writing skills" when asked about the consequences of using AI dishonestly in their own writing. This was higher than the "risk of being caught and facing academic penalties" (19.6%; 11 out of 56 participants). This coincides with participants stating that it depends on how they use ChatGPT in their writing. For this reason, many scholars have reported that schools and institutions should educate students on academic integrity and the importance of original works. The results of this survey provide insights into the perspectives of students from a university in Ecuador about generative AI; however, researchers need to collect more samples from different populations.

A solution for teachers who want to avoid academic dishonesty in their classrooms is to locate problematic areas in the areas of academic writing in English. By giving students more opportunities for writing practice and providing more support in areas in which students are weak, teachers can help students be more confident and less likely to commit academic dishonesty in writing. In contrast, students like to use ChatGPT for brainstorming and self-study, which shows that AI can be a good tool for language learning if it is used appropriately. Teachers and institutions need to set more specific rules and punishments for the use of ChatGPT in academic work and teach students about what plagiarism consists of and how to avoid it.

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