

AI Use And Academic Integrity In EFL Writing: Students' Practices, Motivations, And Perceptions In A Pesantren-Based College

Ibnu Syarofi, Durratul Hikmah

English Education Department, Universitas Nurul Jadid, Paiton, Probolinggo, Indonesia

Email: ibnubld@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed students' approaches to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing by providing assistance in language production, idea development, and text revision. However, the use of AI in academic writing also raises concerns about academic integrity, particularly in educational contexts where academic learning is closely connected with moral and religious values. This study explores students' practices, motivations, and perceptions regarding AI use in EFL writing in a pesantren-based higher education context in Indonesia. A qualitative case study design was employed involving six undergraduate students from the English Education Department at Universitas Nurul Jadid. Participants were selected purposively based on their experience with AI-assisted writing. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews in July 2026 and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The findings indicate three major patterns of AI use: language support, idea development, and text refinement. ChatGPT was the most frequently mentioned tool, followed by Grammarly, DeepL, Gemini, and QuillBot. Students' motivations were primarily associated with time efficiency and academic pressure, while linguistic limitations, writing confidence, and the desire to improve writing quality also influenced their use. Regarding academic integrity, students generally viewed AI as acceptable when used as a supporting tool rather than as a substitute for their own thinking. Nevertheless, uncertainty remained concerning the boundary between assistance and replacement. Pesantren values such as *shidq*, *amanah*, and *barakah* contributed to students' ethical reflection and created tension when intensive AI use conflicted with their understanding of academic honesty. The study suggests that responsible AI integration requires clear institutional guidelines, AI literacy education, process-oriented writing assessment, and the integration of pesantren values into academic integrity education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; EFL Writing; Academic Integrity; Pesantren Values; Student Perceptions; AI Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly become part of contemporary higher education, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and academic writing. AI-based applications can provide students with support in grammar correction, vocabulary selection, translation, sentence construction, idea generation, paraphrasing, and text refinement. These functions make AI attractive to students who experience linguistic difficulties or face demanding academic workloads. At the same time, the growing availability of generative AI has raised questions concerning authorship, originality, academic responsibility, and the ethical boundaries of technology-assisted writing.

Academic writing is particularly demanding for EFL students because it requires not only knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to organize ideas, construct arguments, maintain coherence, and follow academic conventions. Students may therefore use technological tools to compensate for linguistic limitations and to increase confidence in producing academic texts. The present study similarly found that students used AI to address grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, idea development, and revision difficulties.

However, the use of AI in academic writing cannot be understood only as a technological or pedagogical issue. Academic integrity has become an increasingly important concern because AI can produce and transform text in ways that blur the distinction between student-generated work and machine-assisted work. Academic integrity emphasizes honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and accountability in

academic activities. In the context of AI-assisted writing, the central question is therefore not simply whether students use AI, but **how, why, and to what extent they use it**.

The ethical issue becomes more complex in a pesantren-based higher education context. Students in such environments participate simultaneously in academic and religious learning. Their academic behavior is therefore situated within moral values such as *shidq* (honesty), *amanah* (trustworthiness and responsibility), *akhlak* (moral conduct), and *barakah* (blessing). The use of AI can consequently create a tension between academic convenience and moral responsibility. The findings of the present study indicate that students sometimes reflect on whether academic outcomes obtained through intensive AI assistance are consistent with the values they have learned in the pesantren environment.

Previous discussions of AI adoption have often emphasized usefulness, efficiency, language improvement, and technological acceptance. The present study extends this discussion by examining AI use within a specific cultural and educational context. Rather than treating AI use as a uniform behavior, this study investigates how students negotiate AI according to their writing needs, academic pressures, individual confidence, and ethical understanding.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What forms of AI are used by university students in EFL writing assignments?
2. Why do students use AI tools in completing their EFL writing tasks?
3. How do students perceive AI use in relation to pesantren values such as honesty and the blessing of knowledge?

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the forms of AI use, investigate the motivations underlying students' use of AI, and explore how students interpret AI-assisted writing in relation to academic integrity and pesantren values. The study contributes a context-specific understanding of AI-assisted EFL writing by showing that students' technological decisions are influenced not only by perceived usefulness and academic needs but also by moral and cultural considerations.

METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a **qualitative case study** design. The design was selected because the research focused on understanding students' experiences, practices, motivations, and perceptions within a specific educational context. The case was bounded by the context of EFL writing among students in a pesantren-based higher education institution.

A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because the purpose was not to measure the effectiveness of AI statistically but to understand how students experienced and interpreted AI-assisted writing. The study therefore emphasized patterns of meaning and variations across participants rather than numerical generalization.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The research was conducted at a pesantren-based college in Indonesia, where students engage in both academic and religious learning. Six undergraduate students from the English Education Department at Universitas Nurul Jadid participated in the study.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria were that participants were active university students, had completed an academic writing course, lived in a boarding or pesantren environment, and had experience using AI in their writing activities. These criteria ensured that participants had direct experience with the phenomenon being investigated.

Because this was a qualitative study, the six participants were selected to provide in-depth information rather than to represent a statistically generalizable population.

2.3 Data Collection

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in July 2026. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to use predetermined questions while also asking follow-up questions when participants provided relevant experiences or explanations.

The interview guide addressed three major areas corresponding to the research questions: AI use patterns, motivations for AI use, and perceptions of AI use in relation to academic integrity and pesantren values. Questions explored the stages of writing in which AI was used, the types of tools employed, the extent

and purposes of AI use, academic pressures, linguistic difficulties, perceptions of cheating, and the relationship between AI use and values such as *shidq*.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The interview recordings were transcribed, and the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Meaningful statements were then coded manually.

The analytical process followed the sequence:

Interview data → Initial codes → Categories → Emerging themes

Codes concerning grammar correction, vocabulary improvement, and idea generation were grouped under AI-assisted writing practices. Codes related to time saving and efficiency were categorized as practical motivations, while statements concerning responsible use and self-control were developed into the theme of negotiating AI use with academic integrity.

The final themes were organized according to the three research questions: (1) AI-assisted writing practices, (2) motivations for AI use, and (3) perceptions of AI use, academic integrity, and pesantren values.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews were conducted, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent. Participants' identities and responses were treated confidentially. Participant codes such as P1–P6 were used instead of names to protect their identities.

RESULTS

3.1 Forms of AI Use in EFL Writing

The first finding concerns the different ways students integrated AI into their EFL writing processes. The participants demonstrated different patterns of AI use depending on their writing needs, confidence, and task difficulty.

Participant	Main AI Tools	Main Purpose	Level of Use
P1	ChatGPT, Grammarly	Grammar correction and sentence improvement	Moderate
P2	ChatGPT	Idea generation and paraphrasing	Moderate
P3	Grammarly, DeepL	Translation and grammar	Low–Moderate
P4	ChatGPT	Idea and structure development	Moderate
P5	ChatGPT, QuillBot	Paraphrasing and rewriting	High
P6	ChatGPT, DeepL	Academic wording and refinement	Moderate

The participants therefore did not use AI in exactly the same way. P1 primarily used AI during the revision stage, while P2 used it for idea generation and paraphrasing. P3 showed a more limited pattern, focusing on translation and grammar. P4 used AI when experiencing difficulty in developing ideas, whereas P5 demonstrated a higher level of dependence through drafting, paraphrasing, and rewriting. P6 mainly used AI for academic wording and polishing.

Three major functions emerged from these patterns.

3.1.1 AI as Language Support

The first function was language support. Students used AI to check grammar, improve vocabulary, correct sentence structures, and address difficulties in expressing ideas in English.

This function was particularly evident among participants who were less confident about the accuracy of their English. AI therefore operated as a compensatory resource that helped students identify and correct linguistic problems.

The use of AI for language support was generally perceived as relatively acceptable because students considered the tool to be assisting their own writing rather than completely replacing their contribution.

3.1.2 AI for Idea Development and Writing Support

The second function involved idea development. Some participants turned to AI when they experienced difficulty beginning a writing task, organizing ideas, or continuing a draft.

This finding indicates that AI was used not only as an editing tool but also as cognitive support during the writing process. Students could use AI to generate possible ideas or structures before developing the final text themselves.

However, the level of dependence differed. While some students used AI only to overcome temporary difficulties, others relied on AI for a larger portion of the writing process.

3.1.3 AI for Paraphrasing and Text Refinement

The third function was text refinement. Students used tools such as ChatGPT and QuillBot to paraphrase, rewrite, polish, and improve the academic quality of their writing.

This practice demonstrates that AI was integrated into several stages of writing rather than being restricted to grammar checking. The difference in intensity was particularly important. Most participants demonstrated moderate use, whereas P5 showed a higher level of dependency by using AI during drafting, paraphrasing, and rewriting.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that AI use was dynamic and context-dependent. Students adjusted their reliance on AI according to writing difficulty, personal confidence, and situational demands.

3.2 Motivations for Using AI

The second major finding concerns students' motivations. The data indicate that students' use of AI was influenced by both practical academic needs and personal learning needs.

3.2.1 Time Efficiency and Academic Pressure

Time efficiency emerged as the strongest motivation. Students used AI when they needed to complete writing tasks more quickly, particularly when facing deadlines and multiple academic responsibilities.

This was particularly relevant in the pesantren-based setting because students had to manage academic tasks alongside pesantren activities. AI therefore functioned as a strategy for managing limited time.

The findings show that AI use increased under time pressure. P2 used AI for rapid idea generation when time was limited, P4 used it to continue writing when facing difficulty under pressure, P5 relied more heavily on AI for text generation and rewriting when deadlines were tight, and P6 used AI to accelerate language refinement.

This finding suggests that the intensity of AI use was not fixed. Students who generally used AI moderately could become more dependent when faced with urgent academic demands.

3.2.2 Overcoming Linguistic Limitations

Another motivation was the need to overcome limitations in English proficiency. Students used AI to clarify language structures, improve vocabulary, correct grammar, and construct sentences.

This finding is consistent with the participants' different writing practices. For some students, AI served as a linguistic support mechanism that allowed them to continue writing when they were uncertain about English expressions.

Thus, AI use was not motivated solely by a desire to avoid writing. In several cases, it reflected students' attempts to compensate for linguistic difficulties and produce academically acceptable English

3.2.3 Building Writing Confidence

AI also played a psychological role by increasing students' confidence in their writing. Students who were uncertain about their grammar, vocabulary, or sentence construction could use AI to obtain feedback and reassurance before submitting assignments.

The thesis identifies AI as a confidence-support tool and notes that this function helped students feel more secure about their academic writing.

This suggests that AI use should not be interpreted solely through the lens of efficiency. For some students, it also served as a form of confidence support.

3.2.4 Improving Writing Quality

Students also reported using AI because they wanted to improve the quality of their writing. Grammar correction, vocabulary improvement, sentence refinement, and paraphrasing were perceived as ways to make academic texts clearer and more appropriate.

P1, for example, associated AI use with both saving time and improving grammar and vocabulary, while P3 emphasized completing writing tasks efficiently.

The motivations therefore combined extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions: external pressures encouraged efficiency, while internal needs included self-improvement and increased confidence.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AI AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

4.1 AI as Assistance Rather Than Cheating

The third major finding concerns students' perceptions of whether AI-assisted writing constitutes cheating. In general, participants did not automatically classify AI use as cheating.

Most participants considered grammar checking, vocabulary enhancement, and idea generation acceptable when AI remained a supporting tool and the students retained responsibility for the final text. This distinction can be summarized as:

AI assistance → acceptable when students remain intellectually involved

AI replacement → ethically problematic when AI substitutes for students' own thinking

The distinction was particularly important because students did not interpret all forms of AI use equally. Limited assistance during revision was generally perceived as acceptable, whereas extensive AI involvement in idea generation, sentence construction, drafting, or rewriting raised greater ethical concerns.

4.2 The Grey Area Between Assistance and Replacement

Although students generally recognized the distinction between assistance and replacement, they were uncertain about where the exact boundary should be placed.

Students demonstrated uncertainty when AI became substantially involved in developing ideas or constructing sentences. This suggests that the ethical boundary of AI use was not always clearly internalized. Instead, students negotiated the boundary according to their needs, academic pressure, and personal judgment.

This finding is significant because it shows that academic integrity in the AI era cannot be addressed simply through a binary distinction between "using AI" and "not using AI." The more important issue is the **extent, purpose, and transparency of AI involvement**.

4.3 Moral Disengagement and Ethical Justification

Some participants experienced internal tension when their AI use became intensive. The study identified expressions indicating that students did not always feel completely honest when relying heavily on AI.

This tension can be interpreted through Bandura's concept of moral disengagement. Students may justify their behavior by emphasizing the benefits of AI, such as efficiency, improved writing quality, or the pressure of academic deadlines.

In this sense, AI use can create a conflict between two priorities:

academic efficiency versus personal and academic integrity.

Students may recognize that excessive AI use can challenge their ethical standards while simultaneously viewing the practice as understandable because of academic demands.

PESANTREN VALUES AND AI USE

One of the distinctive findings of this study is the role of pesantren values in shaping students' perceptions of AI-assisted writing.

The values of *shidq* and *amanah* encourage students to take responsibility for their academic work. Students therefore did not evaluate AI only in terms of whether it produced better English. They also considered whether the resulting academic achievement genuinely represented their own effort.

The concept of *barakah* added another dimension to students' ethical reflection. Some participants expressed uncertainty about whether academic achievements obtained through excessive reliance on AI would be accompanied by the blessing associated with meaningful learning.

This indicates that the pesantren context contributes a moral dimension to students' technological decisions.

The findings suggest that:

AI literacy in a pesantren-based institution needs to include not only technical competence but also ethical and moral reflection.

Students may know how to use AI effectively, but responsible use requires them to consider whether AI supports or replaces their own learning process.

DISCUSSION

6.1 AI as a Scaffolding Tool in EFL Writing

The findings demonstrate that AI can function as a form of scaffolding for EFL writing. Students use AI to overcome temporary linguistic and cognitive difficulties, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, idea generation, and revision.

This supports the view of writing as a complex process involving multiple stages rather than a single act of producing a final text. AI becomes useful when it provides assistance at particular points in the process while students retain control over their ideas and decisions.

The variation among participants is therefore important. P3 demonstrated relatively limited use, while P5 demonstrated substantially higher dependence. Most participants remained at a moderate level, indicating that AI was generally treated as a supporting tool rather than the primary source of writing.

This finding also supports the concept of learner autonomy. Students exercised different levels of control over AI depending on their needs, confidence, and circumstances.

6.2 AI Adoption Between Usefulness and Academic Pressure

The findings support the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by showing that students perceive AI as useful and accessible. However, the findings suggest that usefulness alone does not fully explain AI adoption.

Students used AI because it was useful, but the perceived usefulness was strongly connected to specific circumstances: deadlines, workload, linguistic difficulties, and the need to complete academic assignments.

Thus, AI adoption in this context can be understood as the interaction of:

perceived usefulness + academic pressure + linguistic needs + individual confidence.

The findings therefore extend a purely technological interpretation of AI adoption by highlighting the importance of contextual and cultural factors.

6.3 Academic Integrity as a Negotiated Practice

The findings indicate that students do not possess a single, fixed understanding of ethical AI use. Instead, they negotiate the boundaries of acceptable use.

Students generally accept AI when it supports grammar checking, vocabulary improvement, or revision. However, uncertainty emerges when AI begins to generate ideas, structure content, construct sentences, or produce substantial portions of the final text.

This finding supports the argument that AI has created a new “grey area” in academic integrity. The ethical question is no longer simply whether a student has used an external tool, but whether the tool has replaced the student’s intellectual contribution.

The students’ responses also show that academic integrity involves moral reasoning. Students may understand the ethical principle of honesty while still finding ways to justify intensive AI use when under pressure.

6.4 Pesantren Values as an Ethical Framework

The pesantren context provides an important contribution to understanding AI-assisted writing. Values such as *shidq*, *amanah*, and *barakah* provide students with an additional framework for evaluating their behavior.

Rather than viewing academic integrity only as compliance with institutional rules, students can interpret it as a moral responsibility. This is particularly important because the study found that all participants expressed readiness to comply with institutional rules, while some also recognized the practical difficulty of completely banning basic AI functions such as grammar checking.

Therefore, a complete prohibition may not adequately address the underlying issue. A more context-sensitive approach would teach students how to use AI responsibly while maintaining honesty, responsibility, and meaningful learning.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have several practical implications for pesantren-based higher education.

First, institutions need to develop **clear AI policies** that distinguish acceptable AI assistance from unacceptable AI substitution. Students need concrete examples rather than general instructions about whether AI is “allowed” or “not allowed.”

Second, institutions should provide **AI literacy education**. Students need to understand not only how to operate AI tools but also how to evaluate AI-generated information, recognize ethical boundaries, and maintain responsibility for their own academic work.

Third, **pesantren values should be integrated into academic integrity education**. The values of *shidq*, *amanah*, and *barakah* can provide a culturally meaningful framework for discussing responsible AI use.

Fourth, lecturers should design writing assignments that emphasize **the writing process rather than only the final product**. Drafts, revisions, reflections, and explanations of writing decisions can make students' learning processes more visible.

Finally, institutions should provide alternatives such as writing centers, academic writing workshops, and additional language-learning resources so that students do not become excessively dependent on AI simply because they lack other forms of writing support.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it involved only six participants from one pesantren-based higher education context; therefore, the findings are context-specific and should not be generalized to broader populations.

Second, the study relied primarily on students' interview accounts and did not include direct classroom observation or systematic examination of students' writing histories. Consequently, the study describes students' reported practices rather than independently verifying every instance of AI use.

Third, the study did not quantitatively measure whether AI improved students' writing quality. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of a statistically measured improvement in writing achievement.

Fourth, the study focused on students' perspectives and did not include lecturers' or pesantren administrators' perspectives. Finally, the data were collected within a relatively short period, meaning that the study could not capture changes in students' AI-use behavior over a longer period.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' practices, motivations, and perceptions regarding AI use in EFL writing within a pesantren-based higher education context. The findings demonstrate that AI has become a practical component of students' writing processes, but its use varies considerably across individuals.

Three major forms of AI use were identified: language support, idea development, and text refinement. ChatGPT was the most frequently mentioned AI tool, while Grammarly, DeepL, Gemini, and QuillBot were also used for particular writing functions. Most students demonstrated moderate AI use, although P5 showed a higher level of dependence, while P3 used AI more selectively.

Students' motivations were primarily related to time efficiency and academic pressure. Linguistic difficulties, writing confidence, and the desire to improve writing quality also influenced AI use. The findings indicate that AI use becomes more intensive when students face deadlines or difficulties in completing writing tasks.

Regarding academic integrity, students generally viewed AI as acceptable when it functioned as a supporting tool rather than a substitute for their own thinking. Nevertheless, uncertainty remained concerning the boundary between assistance and replacement. Intensive AI use could create ethical tension, particularly when students prioritized efficiency and task completion over their own writing process.

Most importantly, the pesantren context shaped students' ethical reflection. Values such as *shidq*, *amanah*, and *barakah* encouraged students to consider whether AI-assisted academic achievements genuinely represented their own learning and effort.

The study therefore concludes that responsible AI integration in EFL writing should not rely exclusively on prohibition. Instead, higher education institutions, particularly pesantren-based institutions, should develop clear AI-use policies, strengthen AI literacy, integrate moral and religious values into academic integrity education, and design writing assessments that emphasize students' thinking and writing processes.

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