

The Experience of English Education Undergraduate Students in Writing a Thesis in the Age of AI

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Abstract

The rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen-AI) has transformed the way undergraduate students complete academic writing, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. While previous studies have mainly examined the effectiveness and challenges of AI, limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences throughout the thesis-writing process. This study aimed to explore the experiences of English Education undergraduate alumni in writing their undergraduate theses in the age of Artificial Intelligence. A qualitative study with a phenomenological design was employed. Six alumni of the English Education Department at Universitas Nurul Jadid, who graduated in 2024 and 2025, were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using Google Forms and follow-up interviews via Telegram and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings revealed three major themes: (1) students integrated AI into the pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages primarily for brainstorming, language improvement, and proofreading; (2) they encountered challenges related to linguistic limitations, overreliance on AI, and concerns about academic integrity; and (3) they developed various strategies, including critical evaluation of AI-generated content, consultation with supervisors, and responsible AI use to maintain originality. The study concludes that AI functions as a valuable writing assistant rather than a replacement for students' academic thinking when it is used critically and ethically.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, English Education, Phenomenology, Thesis Writing, Undergraduate Students.

Abstrak

Perkembangan pesat Kecerdasan Buatan Generatif (Gen-AI) telah mengubah cara mahasiswa sarjana menyelesaikan penulisan akademis, terutama dalam konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya sebagian besar mengkaji efektivitas dan tantangan AI, perhatian terhadap pengalaman nyata mahasiswa selama proses penulisan skripsi masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman alumni Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris dalam menulis skripsi sarjana di era Kecerdasan Buatan. Penelitian kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Enam alumni Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Nurul Jadid, yang lulus pada tahun 2024 dan 2025, dipilih secara purposif sebagai peserta. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur menggunakan Google Forms dan wawancara lanjutan melalui Telegram, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan Analisis Fenomenologis Interpretatif (IPA). Temuan penelitian mengungkap tiga tema utama: (1) mahasiswa mengintegrasikan AI ke dalam tahap pra-penulisan, penulisan, dan pasca-penulisan terutama untuk brainstorming, peningkatan bahasa, dan proofreading; (2) mereka menghadapi tantangan terkait keterbatasan linguistik, ketergantungan berlebihan pada AI, dan kekhawatiran mengenai integritas akademik; serta (3) mereka mengembangkan berbagai strategi, termasuk evaluasi kritis terhadap konten yang dihasilkan AI, konsultasi dengan pembimbing, dan penggunaan AI yang bertanggung jawab untuk menjaga orisinalitas. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa AI berfungsi sebagai asisten penulisan yang berharga, bukan sebagai pengganti pemikiran akademis para mahasiswa, asalkan digunakan secara kritis dan etis.

Kata Kunci: Kecerdasan Buatan, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Fenomenologi, Penulisan Tesis, Mahasiswa Sarjana.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing an undergraduate thesis is recognized as the highest form of academic work at the

undergraduate level because it requires students to integrate research knowledge, academic writing skills, and critical thinking into a single scholarly work (Diokno, 2023). Beyond serving as a graduation requirement, an undergraduate thesis also represents students' intellectual development and contributes to the advancement of knowledge within their academic discipline (Bramantya et al., 2022). In English Language Education (ELE) programs, the demands of thesis writing become even more complex because students are expected to demonstrate competence in both research methodology and academic writing in English. Consequently, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students frequently encounter linguistic and psychological challenges during the thesis-writing process (Fithriani et al., 2022).

Previous studies have reported that EFL students experience various difficulties when completing their undergraduate theses. Yulia Rahayu et al. (2025) found that students often struggle to maintain coherent arguments, use appropriate academic vocabulary, and comply with institutional writing conventions. Similarly, Rasool et al. (2023) reported that writing anxiety and low confidence frequently hinder students from expressing their ideas effectively. In addition, Dzormeku et al. (2024) explained that many EFL students experience difficulties in transforming conceptual ideas into grammatically accurate and academically appropriate English, creating a gap between what they intend to express and what they are able to write.

The rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen-AI) has transformed academic writing practices in higher education. Large language models such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot are increasingly utilized to support students in generating ideas, improving grammar, paraphrasing texts, summarizing information, and revising academic writing (Watermeyer et al., 2024). Research has shown that AI tools are widely used throughout the writing process, including brainstorming research topics, organizing ideas, improving language quality, and proofreading academic manuscripts (Wang, 2025; Fitria, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Furthermore, AI-assisted feedback has been reported to improve students' self-assessment during the revision stage, particularly among EFL learners (Al-Raimi et al., 2024).

Despite these advantages, the integration of AI into academic writing also raises important concerns. Hikmah et al. (2024) argued that AI can support students' critical thinking when its outputs are evaluated critically rather than accepted without reflection. However, excessive reliance on AI may reduce students' engagement in the writing process and weaken the development of independent academic writing skills (Adams & Chuah, 2022). Moreover, the widespread use of AI has generated growing concerns regarding academic integrity, originality, and responsible authorship in higher education (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023; Chan, 2025). These concerns are further reinforced by Jaya et al. (2025), who found that while students generally perceived AI positively, lecturers remained concerned about the authenticity of students' academic work.

Several previous studies have investigated AI in academic writing from different perspectives. Hikmah et al. (2024) examined the role of ChatGPT in enhancing students' critical thinking, while Jaya et al. (2025) explored the perspectives of EFL students and lecturers regarding the use of generative AI

in thesis writing. Febrian (2025) focused on the challenges encountered by undergraduate students when using AI writing tools, whereas Silachi et al. (2026) investigated the impact of AI on research quality, originality, and academic integrity. In addition, Shofiah et al. (2023) reviewed the opportunities and challenges of AI integration in academic writing. Although these studies have contributed significantly to the literature, most of them emphasize AI effectiveness, benefits, or challenges rather than exploring students' lived experiences throughout the thesis-writing process.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of English Education undergraduate alumni in writing their undergraduate theses in the age of Artificial Intelligence. Specifically, the study investigates the activities carried out during the pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages, the challenges encountered while using AI, and the strategies employed to use AI responsibly throughout the thesis-writing process.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of English Education undergraduate alumni in writing their undergraduate theses in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating individuals' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of a particular phenomenon in its natural setting. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that qualitative research aims to understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems through detailed data collection in natural settings. A phenomenological design was selected because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The participants of this study were six alumni of the English Education Department at Universitas Nurul Jadid who graduated in 2024 and 2025. They were selected through purposive sampling because they met the predetermined inclusion criteria: (1) they had completed their undergraduate thesis, (2) they had experience using one or more Artificial Intelligence tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, or Perplexity, during the thesis-writing process, and (3) they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The relatively small number of participants is consistent with phenomenological research, which emphasizes an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences rather than statistical generalization (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Initially, open-ended interview questions were distributed through Google Forms, allowing participants sufficient time to reflect on and describe their experiences. Subsequently, follow-up interviews were conducted via Telegram chat to clarify participants' responses and obtain richer descriptions of their experiences. Documentation, including participants' written responses, Telegram conversations, and interview transcripts, was also utilized to support the credibility of the data. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), documentation serves as an important supplementary source that strengthens qualitative data obtained through interviews.

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proposed by Smith and Nizza (2022). The analysis involved six stages: reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, conducting initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections among themes, analyzing each participant individually, and identifying patterns across cases. These analytical procedures enabled the researcher to interpret how participants made meaning of their experiences while writing their undergraduate theses with the support of Artificial Intelligence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Activities Throughout the Thesis-Writing Process

The findings revealed that all participants integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) into different stages of their undergraduate thesis-writing process. However, AI was not used as a substitute for their own academic work but rather as a supporting tool to facilitate idea development, language improvement, and manuscript revision. The participants consistently emphasized that they remained responsible for generating research ideas, evaluating AI-generated responses, and making final decisions throughout the writing process.

During the pre-writing stage, participants mainly used AI to generate research ideas, identify potential topics, develop chapter outlines, and explore preliminary references. Rather than relying entirely on AI, they first developed their own ideas before using AI to refine or evaluate them. For example, Participant P1 explained, "At first, I came up with a few titles on my own and then used AI to determine which one was the most suitable. Only then did I outline the chapters." Likewise, Participant P3 stated that she prepared her own outline before asking ChatGPT to review its organization, while Participants P5 and P6 used AI primarily to brainstorm research ideas. These findings indicate that AI functioned as a cognitive support tool during the planning stage instead of replacing participants' own thinking. This finding is consistent with Wang (2025), who reported that AI is widely utilized during the pre-writing stage to support brainstorming and topic exploration.

During the writing stage, participants employed AI primarily to improve the linguistic quality of their academic writing. ChatGPT, QuillBot, Grammarly, and Perplexity were commonly used to translate ideas from Indonesian into English, paraphrase sentences, improve grammatical accuracy, and organize academic writing. Participant P5 stated, "I use AI to translate concepts from Indonesian into English, rephrase sentences to make them more formal, and correct grammar." Similarly, Participant P4 explained that AI helped translate sentences and improve grammar, while Participant P2 mainly used AI to reorganize her own writing through rephrasing. These findings demonstrate that participants positioned themselves as the primary authors of their theses while AI functioned as a language-support tool. This result supports the findings of Fitria (2023) and Zhou et al. (2024), who reported that AI is commonly used to improve academic language quality rather than generate complete academic texts.

The participants also continued using AI during the post-writing stage, although its function shifted toward proofreading and manuscript refinement. AI was mainly utilized to improve the final

quality of the thesis through grammar checking, bibliography organization, proofreading, and reducing text similarity before submission. Participant P5 explained, “I used AI to lower the similarity score to meet the faculty's Turnitin threshold,” whereas Participant P6 reported using AI to organize references. In contrast, Participant P1 preferred to complete proofreading and reference checking manually because he considered these tasks part of his academic responsibility. These findings indicate that AI served as a complementary tool during the final stage of thesis writing rather than replacing students' own evaluation of their work. Similar findings were reported by Al-Raimi et al. (2024), who concluded that AI-assisted feedback effectively supports students during the revision process by improving self-assessment and manuscript quality.

Overall, the findings suggest that AI was integrated throughout the thesis-writing process, from pre-writing to post-writing, while participants maintained their role as active decision-makers. Instead of replacing students' academic thinking, AI functioned as a supportive technology that facilitated brainstorming, language improvement, and manuscript revision. These findings support Watermeyer et al. (2024), who argued that Generative AI has transformed academic writing practices by assisting students in completing complex writing tasks while still requiring critical evaluation and responsible use.

Challenges Encountered When Using AI

Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) provided substantial support throughout the thesis-writing process, the participants also encountered several challenges that influenced how they utilized the technology. Based on the interview data, three major challenges emerged: difficulties in evaluating the accuracy of AI-generated information, concerns about academic integrity and originality, and the risk of becoming overly dependent on AI during academic writing.

One of the most frequently reported challenges was the uncertainty regarding the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated responses. Participants acknowledged that AI could generate convincing answers; however, they realized that the information was not always accurate or supported by credible academic sources. Consequently, they considered it necessary to verify AI-generated content by consulting journal articles, books, or other reliable references before incorporating it into their theses. As Participant P2 explained, “Sometimes the information provided by AI is not completely accurate, so I have to check it again using journal articles.” Similarly, Participant P3 stated that AI occasionally produced responses that did not match the context of the research topic, requiring additional evaluation before they could be used. These findings suggest that participants recognized the limitations of AI and did not immediately accept its output without critical verification. This finding supports Chan (2025), who argued that students need critical judgment to distinguish between appropriate AI assistance and unreliable AI-generated content.

Another challenge concerned academic integrity and the originality of academic writing. Several participants expressed concerns that excessive use of AI might reduce the originality of their work or create ethical problems if AI-generated text was copied directly. Therefore, they intentionally used AI

only to assist with brainstorming, language improvement, paraphrasing, or proofreading, while ensuring that the ideas and final decisions remained their own. Participant P1 emphasized, “AI only helps me improve my writing. The ideas and content still come from myself.” Likewise, Participant P5 explained that AI was used only to support revision rather than to generate complete sections of the thesis. These findings indicate that participants were aware of the importance of maintaining academic integrity despite the availability of AI technologies. Similar concerns were highlighted by Weber-Wulff et al. (2023), who noted that AI-generated writing has complicated traditional concepts of academic integrity, and by Silachi et al. (2026), who found that although AI improves writing quality, it also raises questions regarding originality and authentic scholarly contribution.

The participants also reported the risk of becoming overly dependent on AI, particularly when completing linguistically demanding writing tasks. Some acknowledged that AI made writing faster and easier, yet they were concerned that relying too heavily on AI might reduce their opportunity to develop independent writing skills and critical thinking. As Participant P6 stated, “If we rely too much on AI, we might become less confident in writing by ourselves.” This finding demonstrates that participants were aware of the balance required between utilizing technological assistance and maintaining their own academic competence. Adams and Chuah (2022) similarly argued that although AI reduces the cognitive burden associated with academic writing, excessive dependence may limit students' opportunities to develop higher-order writing skills. Likewise, Jaya et al. (2025) reported that lecturers expressed concerns regarding students' increasing dependence on AI and its potential impact on authentic academic learning.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants perceived AI not only as a useful technological resource but also as a source of academic and ethical challenges. Rather than rejecting AI, they attempted to use it critically by verifying information, maintaining originality, and avoiding excessive dependence. These findings demonstrate that responsible AI use requires not only technological competence but also critical thinking and ethical awareness throughout the thesis-writing process.

Strategies for Responsible AI Use

The findings revealed that the participants developed various strategies to maximize the benefits of Artificial Intelligence (AI) while minimizing its potential risks during the thesis-writing process. Rather than relying on AI uncritically, the participants demonstrated responsible and reflective practices by verifying AI-generated information, maintaining ownership of their academic work, and seeking guidance from their supervisors whenever necessary. These strategies enabled them to utilize AI as a learning aid without compromising the quality and originality of their theses.

One strategy commonly employed by the participants was verifying AI-generated information using credible academic sources. Although AI facilitated idea generation and language improvement, participants recognized that its responses were not always accurate or supported by reliable references. Consequently, they cross-checked AI-generated content with journal articles, books, and other scholarly sources before incorporating it into their writing. Participant P2 explained, “I always compare the

information from AI with journal articles before using it in my thesis.” Likewise, Participant P3 reported that AI was mainly used to generate initial ideas, while the supporting evidence and references were obtained from academic literature. These findings indicate that participants viewed AI as a complementary tool rather than an authoritative source of knowledge. This practice reflects AI literacy, which emphasizes users’ ability to evaluate and verify AI-generated information critically before applying it in academic contexts (Huang et al., 2025).

Another important strategy involved maintaining personal authorship throughout the writing process. The participants consistently emphasized that AI was used to improve language quality, paraphrase sentences, and organize ideas instead of producing complete sections of the thesis. They remained responsible for developing research ideas, interpreting findings, and making final decisions regarding the content of their work. Participant P1 stated, “AI only helps improve my writing, but the ideas and analysis are still my own.” This finding demonstrates participants’ awareness of preserving originality and academic responsibility despite the availability of AI technologies. Similar findings were reported by Chan (2025), who emphasized that responsible AI use requires students to distinguish between acceptable academic assistance and inappropriate dependence on AI-generated content.

The participants also highlighted the importance of consultation with thesis supervisors as a strategy for ensuring responsible AI use. Although AI provided immediate feedback and language support, participants continued to rely on their supervisors for academic guidance, validation of research ideas, and evaluation of their writing. Several participants explained that suggestions generated by AI were not implemented directly but were first discussed with their supervisors to ensure their appropriateness within the research context. This finding indicates that AI did not replace the supervisory process but instead complemented it by supporting students during different stages of thesis writing. Jaya et al. (2025) similarly reported that effective AI integration in thesis writing requires continuous interaction between students and supervisors to maintain academic quality and integrity.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that participants adopted responsible strategies that balanced the advantages of AI with the principles of academic integrity. By critically evaluating AI-generated content, maintaining ownership of their academic work, and continuously consulting with their supervisors, the participants were able to integrate AI into the thesis-writing process without diminishing their role as independent researchers. These findings reinforce the argument of Silachi et al. (2026) that the educational value of AI depends not merely on the availability of the technology but on students’ ability to use it ethically, critically, and responsibly.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of English Education undergraduate alumni in writing their undergraduate theses in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The findings revealed that AI was integrated throughout the thesis-writing process, including the pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages. Participants primarily used AI as a supporting tool for brainstorming research ideas, improving

language quality, paraphrasing, proofreading, and organizing academic writing. Despite these benefits, they also encountered several challenges, particularly in verifying the accuracy of AI-generated information, maintaining academic integrity, and avoiding excessive dependence on AI. To address these challenges, the participants adopted responsible strategies by critically evaluating AI-generated content, consulting credible academic sources, preserving ownership of their academic work, and seeking guidance from their thesis supervisors.

These findings suggest that AI should be viewed as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for students' academic thinking and writing. The effectiveness of AI in thesis writing depends on students' ability to use the technology critically, ethically, and responsibly while maintaining originality and independent judgment. This study contributes to the growing literature on AI-assisted academic writing by providing a phenomenological understanding of how English Education students experience AI integration throughout the thesis-writing process. Future research is recommended to involve participants from different universities and disciplines to obtain a broader understanding of students' experiences and responsible AI use in higher education.

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