



AI AS ACADEMIC ASSISTANT? INVESTIGATING CHATGPT RELIANCE AMONG PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS IN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the reliance of pre-service English teachers on ChatGPT as an academic support tool within university settings. Using a phenomenological approach, the research investigates how students describe their dependence on ChatGPT, how they perceive its benefits and limitations, how it is integrated into their academic practices, and what experiences shape their use of the tool. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that ChatGPT is widely used for drafting, idea generation, translation, and organizing academic writing. While students appreciate its efficiency and language support, concerns emerged over declining autonomy, critical thinking, and academic integrity. ChatGPT is viewed both as a personal assistant and an emergency solution, creating a dual perception of support and dependency. The study concludes with a call for guided and reflective AI use in educational contexts to ensure sustainable learning and responsible digital engagement among future educators.

Keywords: ChatGPT; EFL learners; Learning autonomy; Pre-service English teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly influenced the landscape of education, particularly with the emergence of large language models such as ChatGPT. Developed by OpenAI, ChatGPT has demonstrated capabilities in natural language processing that allow users to generate coherent texts, translate content, summarize readings, and assist in academic writing (Munaye et al., 2025). Its rapid adoption—reaching over 100 million users within two months of launch—has made it one of the fastest-growing digital tools in history (Sidiropoulos & Anagnostopoulos, 2024). In higher education, students frequently use ChatGPT to complete various academic tasks, especially in the domains of language learning and composition. For pre-service English teachers, the potential of ChatGPT as an academic assistant is particularly pronounced due to its support in generating lesson materials, drafting essays, and improving language accuracy (Nyaaba et al., 2024).

However, alongside these affordances, there is a growing body of literature raising concerns about the pedagogical and ethical implications of relying on generative AI tools in academic contexts. Scholars have noted that excessive dependence on AI tools may negatively affect students' learning autonomy, critical thinking, and integrity in academic writing (Khasawneh, 2024; Li et al., 2023). ChatGPT's instant and seemingly authoritative responses may undermine students' capacity to evaluate, synthesize, and reflect upon information independently. Additionally, issues surrounding plagiarism, authorship, and misuse of AI-generated content continue to surface in educational discourse. As Sidiropoulos and Anagnostopoulos (2024) emphasized, "The integration of

AI in education necessitates a balance between leveraging technological benefits and preserving the human elements of learning, such as reasoning and originality” (p. 6).

Despite the increasing prevalence of AI-assisted learning tools, empirical studies focusing on how pre-service teachers specifically engage with ChatGPT in academic settings remain limited. Much of the existing research has relied on quantitative surveys or opinion-based approaches, with relatively little attention given to in-depth, qualitative investigations of students’ lived experiences. For instance, while Khasawneh (2024) established a statistical relationship between academic integrity values and ChatGPT usage among EFL pre-service teachers, the study did not explore the nuanced meanings or ethical tensions embedded in their usage practices. Similarly, Nyaaba et al. (2024) offered insights into the perceived usefulness of AI among teacher trainees but lacked a phenomenological depth in understanding the emotional and cognitive experiences of the users.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how pre-service English teachers experience, perceive, and assign meaning to their use of ChatGPT as an academic support tool. Drawing on a phenomenological approach, this research aims to uncover how these future educators describe their reliance on ChatGPT, what benefits and limitations they associate with it, and how they reconcile its use with their academic responsibilities and integrity. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing pedagogical guidelines and ethical frameworks for responsible AI use in teacher education. By capturing the dual perceptions of ChatGPT—as both a helpful assistant and a source of potential dependency—this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role AI plays in shaping the academic behavior and values of pre-service teachers in the digital age.

Research questions:

1. How do pre-service English teachers describe their reliance on ChatGPT in completing academic tasks?
2. In what ways do pre-service English teachers perceive ChatGPT as a helpful or limiting tool in their academic work?
3. How is ChatGPT integrated into the academic practices of pre-service English teachers, and what meanings do they assign to this reliance?
4. What are the experiences of pre-service English teachers in using ChatGPT as a support tool for their academic learning?

METHOD

1. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of pre-service English teachers regarding their reliance on ChatGPT in academic settings. The qualitative paradigm was deemed appropriate because it facilitates the exploration of subjective meanings, contextual interpretations, and the nuanced ways in which individuals assign value to their actions and tools in learning environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central focus was to uncover how these future educators perceive the usefulness and implications of ChatGPT within the framework of their academic responsibilities and personal development.

2. Research Design



A phenomenological research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of participants. This design was chosen to understand the essence and meaning behind the participants' reliance on ChatGPT in university-based academic tasks. Phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), aims to identify the core structures of experience through rich descriptions provided by those who have directly encountered a particular phenomenon—in this case, the integration of ChatGPT into academic life. By focusing on what and how participants experienced ChatGPT use, the study sought to elucidate the underlying perceptions and values shaping their behavior.

3. Participants

The participants in this study were pre-service English teachers enrolled in English education programs at Universitas Nias Raya. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that all participants had relevant experiences with using ChatGPT in their academic work. Inclusion criteria required that participants had utilized ChatGPT at least once for academic tasks and were willing to reflect on and share their experiences. The study involved 12 participants, a sample size considered adequate to achieve data saturation in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013).

4. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for open-ended exploration of the participants' experiences while also ensuring that key research questions were addressed. The interviews focused on how participants described their use of ChatGPT, their perceived benefits and challenges, ethical considerations, and its impact on their academic autonomy and performance. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes and clarify ambiguous responses. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were considered as a potential supplementary method to validate individual narratives through collective insights.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts,
2. Generating initial codes from meaningful data segments,
3. Searching for patterns and overarching themes,
4. Reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence,
5. Defining and naming each theme,
6. Producing a narrative account that interweaves participant quotes with analytical commentary.

The goal was to identify recurrent themes that reflected how participants used and conceptualized ChatGPT as part of their academic practices, and how such reliance affected their educational values and behaviors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-service English Teachers' Reliance on ChatGPT in Completing Academic Tasks

Participants consistently described ChatGPT as a primary and dependable academic tool, particularly when they encountered obstacles such as time constraints,

unclear assignment instructions, or difficulty initiating academic writing. A recurring theme identified from their responses was “functional reliance under pressure”, where ChatGPT served as a practical solution in high-stress academic situations. Rather than approaching academic writing through conventional means such as reviewing notes or consulting peers, students often turned to ChatGPT as their first response to academic demands. This was especially common when deadlines were approaching, or when the task required language precision and organization, areas where students felt less confident.

Several participants noted that they frequently used ChatGPT to generate first drafts of essays, translate ideas from Bahasa Indonesia into English, and restructure or rephrase their academic writing to improve coherence and flow. One participant shared, “Sometimes I don’t know where to start. I just type my idea into ChatGPT and get a sample to work with.” This kind of engagement reflects a growing psychological dependency on the tool. As students increasingly relied on ChatGPT to overcome initial academic hurdles, many admitted that they felt less capable of starting or completing assignments independently. For these pre-service teachers, ChatGPT has shifted from being an optional writing assistant to a central component of their academic workflow—functioning not just as a support system, but often as a necessary starting point in their academic routines.

Perceived Benefits and Limitations of ChatGPT in Academic Work

Participants expressed a dual perception of ChatGPT, recognizing both its strengths and shortcomings in supporting their academic work. On the one hand, many students acknowledged that ChatGPT was highly beneficial, particularly in improving the linguistic quality of their writing. They used it to enhance grammar, expand vocabulary, and increase fluency, which was especially helpful for non-native English speakers. Additionally, ChatGPT was praised for its ability to support idea generation, allowing students to overcome writer’s block and initiate writing more confidently. The tool also offered a sense of efficiency and convenience, enabling users to save time and reduce academic stress, especially during exam periods or when dealing with tight assignment deadlines. One participant remarked, “It helps me write faster and more clearly. Sometimes I just need to get ideas quickly,” reflecting a common sentiment about the tool’s practical utility.

On the other hand, students also identified notable limitations in their use of ChatGPT. Several participants expressed concern over the quality of the content produced, stating that responses were often overgeneralized or lacked the academic depth required for university-level assignments. Some users questioned the factual accuracy of the information provided, highlighting instances where ChatGPT’s outputs were either incorrect or misleading. Beyond content issues, students reported that frequent reliance on the tool had negatively impacted their own academic behaviors—particularly in terms of critical engagement and self-editing. They admitted to becoming less inclined to revise or reflect on their writing, instead depending on ChatGPT’s suggestions. Furthermore, a few participants acknowledged that they sometimes used AI-generated content without proper verification, which posed risks to the credibility and authenticity of their academic work. Underlying these concerns was a deeper fear that overdependence on ChatGPT could weaken essential academic skills, such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and independent writing—skills that are especially vital for their development as future educators.



Integration of ChatGPT into Academic Practices and Its Perceived Meaning

The findings revealed that ChatGPT has become deeply embedded in the academic routines of pre-service English teachers. Students reported using the tool for a variety of tasks, such as writing essays, summarizing reading materials, translating or rephrasing responses, and preparing presentation scripts. Its consistent presence in their study habits reflected a normalization of AI-supported learning. Many participants referred to ChatGPT as a “personal academic assistant” or an “emergency helper,” underscoring both its everyday functionality and its role in critical moments—such as when students were pressed for time or mentally fatigued. One participant shared, “When I’m confused or tired, I ask ChatGPT first before trying to do it alone,” illustrating how the tool often served as a first resort for academic problem-solving.

Despite its utility, some students expressed ethical concerns about their reliance on ChatGPT, particularly regarding academic honesty. There were instances where participants questioned whether using AI-generated responses—especially when copied or minimally edited—might constitute academic misconduct. This unease led to the emergence of a recurring theme labeled “ethics versus efficiency.” Students found themselves navigating a complex space between the convenience and productivity offered by ChatGPT and their personal and institutional standards for integrity. The dilemma highlighted in their narratives suggests that while ChatGPT enables greater academic efficiency, it also challenges traditional conceptions of authorship, originality, and responsible learning practices.

Pre-service English Teachers’ Experiences Using ChatGPT as an Academic Support Tool

Participants generally described their experiences with ChatGPT as practically beneficial but emotionally conflicted. On a functional level, the tool was appreciated for its ability to simplify complex academic concepts, support understanding of challenging topics, and ease the stress associated with academic tasks. Many students felt that ChatGPT helped them feel more prepared and less anxious, particularly when dealing with difficult assignments or unfamiliar material. The immediate feedback and structured responses provided by the tool gave them a sense of clarity and direction, which was especially valuable in time-sensitive academic situations.

However, this positive experience was accompanied by deeper concerns regarding the long-term impact on their learning autonomy. Several participants expressed worry that continued use of ChatGPT might lead to an overdependence that would ultimately weaken their independent thinking and problem-solving abilities. A few students shared that they had begun to rely on the tool for tasks that were originally intended to be completed using personal effort and reflection. This reliance led to feelings of guilt and self-doubt. One student stated, “I know it helps me, but sometimes I feel like I’m not learning enough. I just follow what the machine gives.” Such comments reflect a broader sense of ambivalence among the participants. While they acknowledged the tool's practical advantages, they were also aware of the risks it posed to their academic development and the cultivation of essential competencies required for their future roles as educators. This duality illustrates the complex relationship that students are beginning to form with generative AI in higher education—where convenience and capability coexist with questions of ethics, identity, and intellectual growth.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how pre-service English teachers rely on ChatGPT as an academic support tool in university settings. Consistent with prior literature (e.g., Dwivedi et al., 2023; Zhai, 2022), this research confirms that ChatGPT plays a significant role in helping students manage academic demands. However, it also highlights a growing tension between the perceived usefulness of AI tools and the emerging risks associated with overreliance, particularly in areas related to learning autonomy, critical thinking, and academic integrity.

One of the most salient findings was that ChatGPT is widely used by pre-service teachers to generate first drafts, translate ideas from Bahasa Indonesia to English, and organize academic content. This reflects what the literature describes as the “scaffolding function” of generative AI (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Participants turned to ChatGPT not only to enhance the quality of their writing but also to initiate and structure it, particularly under time constraints. This echoes Munaye et al. (2025), who found that students increasingly view ChatGPT as a first response to academic challenges. However, the depth of reliance observed in this study extends these earlier findings by revealing that for some participants, ChatGPT has become more than just a supplementary tool—it has evolved into an essential component of their academic workflow.

At the same time, participants expressed a dual perception of ChatGPT, acknowledging both its benefits and limitations. The tool was appreciated for improving efficiency, reducing stress, and supporting language use—particularly among EFL learners, as also reported by Khasawneh (2024). However, the participants’ concerns about vague or inaccurate outputs, reduced self-editing, and the erosion of critical thinking reflect a growing academic discourse cautioning against the deskilling effects of AI (Li et al., 2023). Several students admitted to using ChatGPT without validating its content, raising concerns about the quality and credibility of their academic work. These findings support Zhai’s (2022) observation that excessive dependence on AI may lead to superficial engagement with learning content and hinder the development of metacognitive skills.

Another key insight from this study is the ethical tension experienced by pre-service teachers in using ChatGPT. While students described the tool as a “personal academic assistant,” several expressed discomfort with how their usage aligned—or conflicted—with institutional standards of academic honesty. This aligns with the findings of Cotton et al. (2023), who emphasized that AI-generated content challenges traditional definitions of authorship and originality. The theme of “ethics versus efficiency” emerged strongly in the data, revealing that students are aware of the moral ambiguity involved in using AI, especially when its output is used without significant revision. These concerns are particularly pressing in teacher education programs, where future educators are expected to model ethical academic behavior (Kebritchi, 2022).

Additionally, the participants’ emotional responses toward ChatGPT use ranged from appreciation to anxiety and guilt. While they found the tool helpful for understanding complex topics and preparing assignments, many also expressed worry about losing their academic independence. The tension between convenience and learning autonomy was evident, reflecting Benson’s (2011) argument that true autonomy requires learners to take control of their educational process. Several students feared that habitual reliance on AI could weaken their ability to think critically, problem-solve, and engage deeply with content—all of which are essential competencies for future teachers.



In contrast to much of the existing literature, which tends to be conceptual or quantitative in nature, this study offers a phenomenological account of how pre-service English teachers experience ChatGPT in their academic lives. The richness of participants' reflections reveals that while ChatGPT offers clear advantages, it also introduces new challenges that must be addressed through pedagogical strategies and institutional policies. The results underscore the importance of fostering digital literacy, reflective thinking, and ethical awareness among students—not to discourage the use of AI, but to ensure that its use remains aligned with educational values and goals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences, perceptions, and meanings that pre-service English teachers assign to their use of ChatGPT in university academic settings. Through a phenomenological lens, the findings revealed that ChatGPT is widely perceived as a functional and supportive tool, particularly in the context of academic writing, translation, idea generation, and task completion. Many students reported that ChatGPT helped them reduce anxiety, enhance writing fluency, and manage workload, especially during time-constrained situations.

However, the study also uncovered a growing psychological and functional dependency on the tool. Students increasingly viewed ChatGPT not merely as a support system, but as a necessary component of their academic workflow. While its benefits were widely acknowledged, concerns emerged regarding the overuse of ChatGPT and its implications for academic integrity, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Participants reported emotional ambivalence—appreciation for its usefulness, yet guilt and concern over ethical boundaries and long-term academic skill development.

The findings point to a clear tension between the efficiency offered by generative AI and the values of independent learning and academic honesty. ChatGPT offers substantial pedagogical affordances, but its integration into learning practices requires intentional guidance. Without reflective frameworks, overdependence on AI risks eroding essential competencies that are vital for teacher identity and professional integrity.

This study highlights the need for higher education institutions, especially teacher education programs, to promote responsible and reflective use of AI tools like ChatGPT. First, AI literacy should be integrated into curricula to equip pre-service teachers with critical skills to evaluate, use, and question AI-generated content. Second, academic integrity policies must clearly define acceptable AI use and emphasize ethical considerations such as authorship, originality, and citation. Third, faculty members should guide students in balancing AI assistance with independent effort through structured reflection and feedback. Fourth, to preserve learning autonomy, programs should reinforce practices that develop critical thinking and self-regulation, such as inquiry-based tasks and peer collaboration. Lastly, as future educators, pre-service teachers must be prepared not only as users but also as role models of ethical AI use in classrooms. These implications call for a pedagogical shift toward integrating AI tools without compromising educational values.

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