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## Can ChatGPT Scaffold Postgraduate Students' Thesis Proposals? Voices of EFL Teachers and Students

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**Abstract.** Studies on ChatGPT and academic writing often adopt a single-perspective approach, and lack sufficiently articulated theoretical and methodological grounding. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of instructors and graduate students of English as a foreign language in relation to using ChatGPT as a scaffold to create thesis proposals. As part of a mixed-methods design to elicit both positive and negative responses, 120 postgraduate students completed an integrated questionnaire based on the moves analysis framework and the technology acceptance model. To learn more about the perceived advantages and challenges of ChatGPT integration, interviews were conducted with 24 postgraduate students and 12 thesis writing instructors. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyze quantitative data and determine how students' and teachers' perspectives differed. Although students had generally positive opinions of ChatGPT, teachers were concerned about its limitations in helping students identify research gaps, synthesize previous studies, and effectively plan methodologies. These quantitative findings reveal significant differences in perspectives. According to the qualitative results, most students relied too heavily on generic artificial intelligence outputs and they applied little critical thinking or contextual adaptation. Patterns in topic development, research gap formulation, literature synthesis, theoretical framing, and

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methodological planning were identified through a five-phase thematic analysis.

**Keywords:** gap identification; research conceptualization; literature engagement; methodological planning; thesis writing

## 1. Introduction

Research on educational technology has established that rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping teaching, learning, and e-learning practices across disciplines. In higher education, large language models such as ChatGPT have attracted attention for their capacity to support text generation, concept clarification, and executing academic tasks, thereby positioning AI as a potentially transformative learning tool (Alqahtani et al., 2023; Suryanti et al., 2020; Zhao, 2025).

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, academic writing – particularly at the graduate level – has long been recognized as one of the most challenging skills to develop, because it requires not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking and familiarity with disciplinary research conventions (Buripakdi, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024). Writing a thesis proposal, therefore, represents a complex academic practice that requires students to integrate language competence, research literacy, and scholarly argumentation, which makes it a critical site for examining how emerging AI tools could influence the development of academic writing (Arifani et al., 2021; Levine et al., 2025).

In the context of Indonesian EFL postgraduate programs, in particular, thesis writing is a mandatory course that guides students to commit to independent research by exploring the basic ingredients of academic inquiry, such as defining research problems, reviewing relevant literature, structuring a theoretical framework, and selecting appropriate research methods (Arifani et al., 2021; Muhalim & Utami, 2025). If ChatGPT is considered as scaffolding that could assist with language and brainstorming revisions (Meniado et al., 2024; Steiss et al., 2024), it could also suggest resources for both students and educators, and support interactive and independent learning (Shi et al., 2025; Shin & Lee, 2024).

While more and more students want to use ChatGPT to guide them to craft thesis proposals, research has raised theoretical and methodological issues relating to this practice. However, a number of these studies lack a strong theoretical underpinning. Typically, research examines ChatGPT in relation to its technical affordances and does not draw on writing development theories (Perkins et al., 2024; Swales, 2004) – a shortcoming that obscures how ChatGPT could affect instruction. Second, several studies have disproportionately emphasized technical efficiency, and have conceptualized grammar and originality as static and mechanistic constructs, thereby overlooking the complex cognitive processes and developmental trajectories inherent in academic writing (Arifani et al., 2021; Muhalim & Utami, 2025). Third, modern studies are sometimes based on one-sided datasets (e.g., student feedback), which results in biased interpretations and

a failure to provide an accurate picture of how humans interact with AI (Arifani et al., 2021).

The researchers of the current study employed move analysis as presented by Swales (2004) and Moreno and Swales (2018), which is a technique used for composing thesis proposals, to examine the structure and intent of academic writing, particularly research proposals. The approach involves generating research ideas, examining a literature evaluation, and devising methodologies (Moreno & Swales, 2018; Swales, 2004). This study aimed to elicit the perspectives of EFL teachers and postgraduate students in Indonesia concerning the practices, benefits, and challenges of using ChatGPT as a scaffold to create thesis proposals. This study contributes to EFL/ESL (English as a second language) writing research by offering a theory-informed, multi-perspective examination of using ChatGPT as a scaffold for postgraduate thesis proposal writing in the Indonesian EFL context.

By foregrounding perspectives of both teachers and students, it moves beyond single-voice studies to reveal convergences and tensions in perceived practices, benefits, and challenges of AI-assisted academic writing. The study, furthermore, advances the field by situating ChatGPT at key stages of academic writing development—research conceptualization, literature engagement, and methodological planning—thereby clarifying its pedagogical affordances and limitations. These insights provide an empirical basis for more responsible, context-sensitive integration of generative AI in postgraduate EFL academic writing instruction.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Move Analysis, Technology Acceptance Model, and ChatGPT Feedback: Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that drew on sociocultural theory, move analysis, the technology acceptance model (TAM), and feedback literacy to explain how ChatGPT mediates postgraduate EFL students' thesis proposal writing. A sociocultural perspective views learning as a socially mediated process in which cognitive development occurs through interaction with more capable others or cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, ChatGPT was conceptualized as a mediational artifact that functions as an expert-like scaffold that supports students' academic writing development through dialogic interaction.

By providing prompts, explanations, and iterative feedback, ChatGPT can help students operate within their zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), particularly for complex tasks such as research conceptualization, argument development, and methodological reasoning (Muhaimin & Utami, 2025). This perspective is directly relevant to the research problem because it explains how AI tools can extend students' cognitive capacities rather than merely automating writing tasks.

To capture the disciplinary and rhetorical dimensions of thesis proposal writing, the study also drew on move analysis (Moreno & Swales, 2018; Swales, 2004). Move analysis conceptualizes academic writing as a goal-oriented, socially situated practice in which texts are structured through recurring rhetorical moves that serve specific communicative purposes, such as establishing a research territory, identifying gaps, and justifying methodological choices. In the context of this study, move analysis provided an analytical lens to examine how students used ChatGPT to support key stages of thesis proposal development, including research conceptualization, literature engagement, and methodological planning.

By aligning ChatGPT-supported writing practices with established rhetorical expectations, the framework enables a more principled understanding of whether AI feedback supports or constrains students' ability to construct discipline-appropriate academic texts. This theoretical grounding informs the research questions of the study by focusing attention on the way AI assistance intersects with the higher-order rhetorical and epistemic demands of postgraduate writing.

The TAM, furthermore, informed this study by explaining why and how students and teachers adopted ChatGPT as a learning tool (Perkins et al., 2024). The TAM posits that users' acceptance of technology is primarily shaped by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, which, in turn, influence attitudes and actual usage. In the present research, the TAM helps explain variations in students' and educators' engagement with ChatGPT at different stages of thesis proposal writing. For example, students may perceive ChatGPT as highly useful for literature synthesis or methodological outlining, while teachers may remain skeptical of its value for critical evaluation and originality. Integrating TAM in the framework enabled the study to connect perceptions of AI usefulness with actual writing practices, thereby helping to predict patterns of adoption, reliance, and resistance observed in the data.

Finally, the study is informed by feedback literacy theory, which emphasizes students' capacity to interpret, evaluate, and act on feedback to improve their work (Kim & Lu, 2024; Pratama et al., 2025). ChatGPT provides immediate, iterative feedback that can enhance students' awareness of academic conventions, argument quality, and coherence. From this perspective, ChatGPT is not merely a feedback provider but a catalyst for developing students' feedback literacy, by encouraging reflection, revision, and critical engagement with AI-generated suggestions.

When combined with sociocultural theory and move analysis, feedback literacy helps explain how students negotiate AI feedback rather than passively accepting it. At the same time, the TAM clarifies the conditions under which such engagement is likely to occur. Collectively, these theories position ChatGPT as a sociocultural mediator and collaborator and offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how generative AI supports or challenges students' development of thesis proposals for EFL in higher education.

## 2.2 Literature Review Aspect

Despite the growing body of research on ChatGPT in academic writing, a clear theoretical gap remains, because many studies lack integration with established writing, learning, and technology adoption frameworks, which results in limited explanations of how AI-mediated feedback supports higher-order academic writing development. Methodologically, the literature is often constrained by single-perspective designs and perception-based data, and offers little insight into how students and teachers engage differentially with ChatGPT at distinct stages of thesis proposal writing.

From the perspective of analytical assessments, Bucol and Sangkawong (2025) claim that ChatGPT is useful for academic writing because it helps advance ideas, improve wording, and organize writing. ChatGPT can improve the accuracy of research work in terms of grammar, clarity of ideas, and consistency of writing. However, most research analyzes AI efficiency in terms of technicalities, without considering operations at the meta-level of the student who is writing, such as cognitive engagement, critical thinking, and metacognition (Buripakdi, 2024; Krumsvik, 2024; Zhao, 2025). This overly simplistic approach limits understanding of writing to purely technical challenges rather than the deeper, more complex ideas involved.

Although some scholars acknowledge ChatGPT's role in scaffolding to enhance students' writing development, very few establish a correlation between these interactions and autonomy in learning, feedback awareness, or advanced-level thinking (Bucol & Sangkawong, 2025; Levine et al., 2025). This absence of theoretical structure impedes the ability of researchers and educators to conceptualize AI as a transformative pedagogical mediator in writing development, rather than as a peripheral corrective instrument limited to surface-level error detection (Case et al., 2025).

An additional limitation of previous studies is their reliance on a single source of data, which reflects only one perspective. This narrow focus limits a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of human-AI interaction in academic writing (Gozali et al., 2024; Heriyawati & Romadhon, 2025). Some studies analyze only the perspectives of either students or teachers (Buripakdi, 2024; Chen et al., 2025), which adds to generalizability issues and overlooks the particularities of AI-informed learning pedagogy.

To address omissions in the literature, this research aimed to explore the views of EFL teachers and postgraduate students on ChatGPT as a writing tool for developing thesis proposals. This study discusses the influence of generative AI on academic writing by providing a comprehensive analysis of the contributions of ChatGPT to pedagogical practices and the ethical dimensions of scholarly composition. As a result of the limitations identified in the literature, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the perceptions of EFL teachers and students regarding the use of ChatGPT for writing thesis proposals?

2. According to EFL teachers and students, what are the positive and negative aspects of using ChatGPT as a resource for writing thesis proposals?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Determining EFL teachers' and students' perspectives on integrating ChatGPT in support of students' thesis proposal writing, and the benefits and challenges of ChatGPT as a scaffold for thesis proposal writing, were addressed using a mixed-methods approach that involved a quantitative survey and a qualitative interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Combining surveys and interviews could minimize biased interpretations by capturing both broad trends and in-depth individual perspectives. Applying a mixed-methods approach enabled researchers to validate findings across data sources, and enhance the reliability and richness of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

#### **3.2 Participants and Setting**

The quantitative phase of the study involved 120 postgraduate EFL students and 60 teachers at the English Education Departments of four provincial universities in East Java, Indonesia, who had been selected using criterion-based purposive sampling. This sampling method was justified because the study sought participants who shared specific academic characteristics relevant to the research problem, namely, enrollment in a third-semester thesis writing course prior to formal thesis supervision. At this stage, students are actively engaged in conceptualizing research, conducting literature reviews, and planning research methods, which made them particularly suited for an examination of the pedagogical integration of ChatGPT in thesis proposal writing. Including participants from multiple institutions and with varying academic backgrounds enhanced the diversity of perspectives and strengthened the contextual relevance of the findings.

To enable in-depth exploration of experiences with ChatGPT in the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to select 30 postgraduate students and 12 thesis writing instructors from the same institutions. Student participants were selected because of their regular, active use of ChatGPT during the thesis writing course and their ability to articulate reflective accounts of its role in their writing development. To ensure informed and pedagogically grounded perspectives, instructor participants were selected if they had been teaching thesis writing for at least three years and demonstrated familiarity with AI-assisted academic writing tools. This targeted sampling strategy was appropriate for capturing rich, information-dense data and facilitating triangulation between student and teacher voices regarding the practices, benefits, and challenges of ChatGPT in postgraduate EFL academic writing.

#### **3.3 Research Instruments**

The questionnaire was developed to examine how students interacted with ChatGPT when they wrote their research proposals, and focused on three core constructs: research conceptualization, literature engagement, and methodological planning (Moreno & Swales, 2018). These constructs are aligned

with the AI assessment frameworks of Perkins et al. (2024), which emphasize ChatGPT integration, content and ideas with AI support, language use, writing quality, AI tool integration, and academic integrity. A total of 15 items were designed to capture students' experiences at different stages of the proposal-writing process; each is mapped to relevant domains of the AI framework, to ensure theoretical alignment. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts in educational technology, academic writing, and research methodology. These experts evaluated each item for clarity, relevance, and alignment with both the research constructs and the AI assessment framework. Based on their feedback, revisions were made to improve item wording, eliminate redundancy, and ensure comprehensive coverage of each construct. Items were rephrased to ensure neutrality and to avoid leading questions, thereby enhancing the validity of responses.

After expert validation, the instrument was piloted with a group of 20 postgraduate students who had recently completed a research proposal writing course. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and provide feedback on the clarity and relevance of each item. The pilot responses were analyzed for consistency and item-total correlations, and minor adjustments were made to improve item coherence and to eliminate ambiguity. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The overall alpha coefficient for the 15-item questionnaire was .87, which indicates high internal consistency. Subscale alphas were also acceptable: .82 for research conceptualization, .85 for literature engagement, and .83 for methodological planning. These results demonstrate that the instrument is both valid and reliable for measuring the way students use ChatGPT to develop academic research proposals, which makes it suitable for broader implementation in research on AI-assisted learning.

Similarly, the development of the interview questions followed a parallel validation process that involved expert review to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study constructs. To improve the coherence and focus of the questions, revisions were made based on feedback. The interview questions consist of six items that focus on students' experiences of and challenges with ChatGPT in supporting their thesis proposal writing during research conceptualization, literature engagement, and methodological development.

The interview questions were derived from the three main areas of the research framework: research conceptualization, literature engagement, and methodological development. Doing so ensured that the interviews captured participants' experiences and perspectives at all critical stages of thesis writing undertaken with the support of ChatGPT. The interview questions were piloted with 5 teachers and 15 postgraduate students who were not part of the research sample. This preliminary testing helped refine the questions for clarity and relevance before the main data collection.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was carried out in two phases: First, the questionnaire was administered to 120 postgraduate EFL students and 60 thesis writing teachers. The questionnaire was distributed at the end of the students' third semester, after students had completed the thesis writing course that had integrated ChatGPT as a scaffold to support the development of their research proposals. The purpose of the survey was to gather broad insights into how both students and teachers perceived and interacted with ChatGPT throughout the research writing process. Participants completed the questionnaire online, and responses were collected and organized for quantitative analysis.

Second, after the survey had been administered, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 EFL postgraduate students and 12 thesis writing teachers. Each participant was interviewed twice to allow for clarification, elaboration, and triangulation of responses gathered from the questionnaire. The interviews aimed to explore participants' experiences in greater detail, including how they used ChatGPT, the types of support it provided, and any concerns or challenges they encountered. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to capture recurring patterns and deeper insights into the pedagogical and ethical implications of using AI in academic writing.

Quantitative data obtained from teacher and student participants were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including using means, standard deviations, and percentages to summarize the data. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was employed to examine potential differences in perceptions between the two groups of participants. This approach enabled a clear comparison of responses and helped identify statistically significant differences in how teachers and students viewed the subject under investigation.

Finally, the results of interviews with teachers and students were thematically analyzed to explore students' experiences and challenges in using ChatGPT to support their thesis proposal writing. The analysis focused on key stages of the research process, including research conceptualization, engagement with literature, and methodological development (Moreno & Swales, 2018). Themes were identified to capture both the benefits and the difficulties students encountered when they integrated ChatGPT in their academic work. To ensure the credibility of the findings and to minimize subjective interpretation, triangulation was employed by comparing perspectives of teachers and students throughout the analysis process.

### 3.5 Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical research protocols to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the four universities involved, and all participants were informed of the study purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained from both students and teachers, and they were assured that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning codes to participants and removing any identifiable information from questionnaires, interview transcripts, and reports. Data were used solely for research purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. Given the involvement of ChatGPT, particular attention was paid to issues of academic integrity and responsible AI use; participants were clearly informed that the study examined perceptions and practices and would not evaluate individual academic performance.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

#### 4.1.1 EFL Teachers' and Students' Perspectives on Using ChatGPT to Support Students' Thesis Proposal Writing

We used the Mann-Whitney U test to analyze differences in perception between teachers and students regarding the use of ChatGPT for thesis proposal writing. This approach was taken because the data did not meet the assumptions of a parametric test, such as the t-test, particularly the assumption of normality. The Mann-Whitney U test helped assess whether there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions between the two groups without assuming the data followed a normal distribution. The test output included the *U*-statistic, *Z*-score, and *p*-value, which enabled us to determine whether the differences in perceptions of teachers and students were significant. A *p*-value less than .05 would indicate that the differences in their perceptions are statistically significant.

A complex picture regarding the influence of ChatGPT on students' writing development emerged from the examination of teacher and student opinions regarding integrating ChatGPT as a scaffold for students' thesis proposal writing. Table 1 displays the analysis results for the means, standard deviations, and percentages of positive and negative responses.

**Table 1: Participants' Views of ChatGPT for Research Conceptualization: Identifying Topic, Gaps, Novelty, and Significance**

Items	Mean		SD		Positive response (%)		Negative response (%)		Mann-Whitney U test	<i>p</i>
	S	T	S	T	S	T	S	T		
1. ChatGPT helps me identify and refine a research topic	4.3	4.2	0.65	0.68	70.3	70.1	15.5	16.7	2339.0	.570
2. ChatGPT helps me identify gaps in previous studies	4.5	2.7	0.57	1.32	63.7	19.6	21.2	72.5	2337.0	.000
3. ChatGPT helps me in formulating a novel research idea	4.1	3.2	0.91	0.80	74.5	52.2	12.8	30.1	2880.5	.216

4. ChatGPT helps me articulate the significance of the proposed study more clearly	3.6	3.4	0.89	0.85	54.5	45.5	12.1	30.4	3312.0	.322
5. ChatGPT helps me in selecting or developing a theoretical framework	4.1	3.9	0.91	0.81	74.3	65.8	19.1	28.8	3565.0	.324

The data from the survey were used to compare teachers' (T) and students' (S) perceptions of the effectiveness of ChatGPT regarding research conceptualization, and are presented across five key dimensions in Table 1. The data show a consistent pattern: students gave ChatGPT a more positive evaluation than the teachers did for every item on the survey. The largest discrepancy related to identifying research gaps and limitations (Item 2), about which teachers were more skeptical (mean 2.7, 19.6% positive responses, 72.5% negative) than students, who expressed greater dissatisfaction (mean 4.5, 63.7% positive responses).

Teachers consistently displayed more reserved attitudes, as indicated by lower means and higher negative response rates across all dimensions; in contrast, students expressed generally positive attitudes toward the ability of ChatGPT to assist with topic identification and refinement (Item 1: 70.3% positive), formulating novel research ideas (Item 3: 74.5% positive), and theoretical framework development (Item 5: 74.3% positive). Students' perceptions of the role of ChatGPT in academic research processes differed fundamentally from those of teachers, as evidenced by the smallest difference between the two groups for articulating the study significance (Item 4), though, even here, students were more optimistic.

**Table 2: Participant Voices Regarding ChatGPT for Literature Engagement: Synthesis of Previous Studies and Critical Reflection on Theoretical Framework**

Items	Mean		SD		Positive response (%)		Negative response (%)		Mann-Whitney U test	p
	S	T	S	T	S	T	S	T		
1. ChatGPT assists in summarizing and synthesizing findings from previous relevant studies	4.2	4.1	0.66	0.69	74.2	71.4	17.8	15.4	2610.0	.324
2. ChatGPT helps me to evaluate the findings of previous research critically	4.7	2.9	0.51	1.29	68.4	17.7	20.2	70.5	1592.0	.000

3. ChatGPT influences my understanding of the existing body of literature	3.8	3.2	0.93	0.80	76.5	71.2	13.6	15.9	2180.5	.216
4. ChatGPT affects the originality of my literature synthesis	3.8	2.6	0.93	1.37	74.5	20.5	12.1	70.4	3365.0	.000
5. ChatGPT impacts on the clarity and coherence of the review of related literature	4.1	3.8	0.91	0.83	74.8	64.4	18.5	19.7	3311.0	.324

Table 2 presents feedback on the use of ChatGPT to scaffold and support the writing of literature reviews. Using ChatGPT as a tool to assess literature elicited a range of opinions. Using ChatGPT to summarize and synthesize research received the highest mean scores of 4.2 from students and 4.1 from teachers, with positive response rates of 74.2% and 71.4%, respectively. For example, in AI-assisted academic writing, predicting the qualitative effect of ChatGPT on the critical evaluation of research findings requires examining whether its use strengthens or weakens students' ability to critically assess methods, question assumptions, and develop independent arguments. Perceptions regarding the usefulness of ChatGPT to critically evaluate the findings of research varied, as demonstrated by students' predominantly positive scores (mean 4.7, 68.4% positive) and teachers' predominantly negative scores (mean 2.9, only 17.7% positive, 70.5% negative).

This division also reflects in teachers' perception of the effect of ChatGPT on originality (mean 2.6; 70.4% negative responses), while students were mostly positive about the effect of ChatGPT on originality (mean 3.8; 74.5% positive responses). A degree of optimism about the ability of ChatGPT to understand research design was evident among the study participants. While the tool could, to some degree, be effective in enhancing linguistic accuracy, a depressing absence of original thought and critical reflection is documented in the literature review written by the students.

**Table 3: Participants' Views on Pedagogy Review Methodology of ChatGPT Regarding Designing, Sampling, Instrumentation, Data Assembly, and Synthesis**

Items	Mean		SD		Positive response (%)		Negative response (%)		Mann-Whitney U test	<i>p</i>
	S	T	S	T	S	T	S	T		
1. ChatGPT helps me choose an appropriate research design	4.3	4.0	0.65	0.69	71.3	69.7	13.5	14.7	3331.0	.570
2. ChatGPT assists in developing a sampling strategy or defining a participant group	4.1	3.9	0.91	0.81	86.3	75.8	12.1	28.8	3192.0	.621
3. ChatGPT assists in constructing or refining research instruments (e.g., interview guides, questionnaires)	4.0	3.8	0.94	0.62	75.5	70.3	12.8	15.1	2299.5	.621
4. ChatGPT helps suggest appropriate data collection procedures	3.9	3.7	0.87	0.83	64.9	62.5	12.1	20.4	3418.0	.570
5. ChatGPT assists in understanding suitable data analysis	4.4	2.6	0.53	1.22	73.7	17.6	17.4	72.5	2007.0	.001

Table 3 shows that, despite a few discrepancies between teacher and student opinions, views on the usefulness of ChatGPT for methodological planning are skewed positively. Regarding ChatGPT assisting students and teachers to select appropriate research designs, students were more positive (mean 4.1, 86.3% positive) than teachers (mean 3.9, 75.8% positive). Research tool and data collection method recommendations received the same level of agreement.

Regarding data analysis comprehension, teachers expressed very negative opinions (mean 2.6, 17.6% positive, 72.5% negative), whereas students were very positive (4.4 mean, 73.7% positive). This may indicate that, regarding views on the efficacy of ChatGPT in higher-level analytical research, especially in research methodology, teachers were skeptical. This research suggests that ChatGPT is assumed to be helpful for simpler methodological work, such as selecting a research design and developing research instruments.

## 4.2 Qualitative Findings

### 4.2.1 EFL Instructors and Students' Perspectives on the Benefits and Challenges of Utilizing ChatGPT as a Thesis Proposal Writing Scaffold

From the thematic analysis of the data collected through interviews of students and teachers, four predominant themes associated with the benefits of ChatGPT as a supportive tool for writing thesis proposals were identified: (1) Theoretical and conceptual scaffolding; (2) Enhancement of academic writing quality; (3) Methodological assistance; and (4) Issues in integrating ChatGPT.

#### 4.2.1.1 Theme 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Scaffolding

In the research conceptualization stage (n = 28), students reported that they used ChatGPT to collaborate and to brainstorm and refine research questions and to outline appropriate conceptual frameworks. Through mental support provided by ChatGPT, students were able to identify theoretical gaps and examine the issues. The students reported as follows:

*I was able to generate research ideas with the help of ChatGPT. When I was trying to narrow down my topic, ChatGPT was really helpful in presenting perspectives that I hadn't considered. (S2)*

*ChatGPT was really helpful to me in the sense that, if I was struggling to get a theoretical framework of a topic, I could get it to break down the theory to me in simple terms. (S4)*

*ChatGPT really helped me brainstorm research ideas. When I was unsure about how to narrow down my topic, it guided me by suggesting different perspectives I hadn't considered before. (S25)*

These views align with teachers' comments, which indicate that ChatGPT helped students learn some concepts. The teachers explained as follows:

*I remember how my student struggled initially with writing the theoretical framework on ZPD, but after learning how to use ChatGPT, his understanding and articulation improved significantly. He wrote it much more clearly and effectively, integrating the concept with the research context better. (T1)*

*ChatGPT was able to explain complex terms and concepts that students often struggle to grasp. (T9)*

*My students initially struggled to understand the difference between the theoretical and conceptual frameworks despite my explanations. However, after using ChatGPT, they were able to clearly differentiate the two concepts and apply them correctly in their thesis proposals. (T12)*

#### 4.2.1.2 Theme 2: Enhanced Academic Writing Quality

Another theme revolved around the role of ChatGPT that could assist the students in summarizing key arguments. Reportedly, ChatGPT aided students' learning and critical thinking on the literature. By summarizing and synthesizing journal

articles, ChatGPT aided some students (n = 27), through its prompts, to write in an analytical rather than a descriptive manner. Several students reported their experiences as follows:

*ChatGPT summarized key arguments, and it saved me time in identifying how various studies related to my research question. (S7)*

*ChatGPT's prompts focused on critically comparing sources rather than just citing them, and it was the reason my literature review was viewed as analytical and not just descriptive. (S10)*

*ChatGPT saved me time by summarizing key arguments from journal articles I uploaded or described. That made it easier to see how different studies connected to my research question. (S29)*

*ChatGPT really helped me brainstorm research ideas. When I was unsure about how to narrow down my topic, it guided me by suggesting different perspectives I did not consider before. (S19)*

ChatGPT was reported to be a significant tool for improving language skills. Participants reported that it helped students master both its use and academic presentation in English. Some teachers highlighted its effectiveness in helping students refine their writing, structure arguments, and enhance the clarity of academic presentations. By providing real-time feedback, suggestions for improvement, and examples of better language use, ChatGPT helped students develop more precise, academically appropriate language skills. This, in turn, contributed to improved overall proficiency of both written and spoken English in academic contexts. The teachers claimed:

*ChatGPT helped them to reword their ideas in order to achieve greater clarity as well as to communicate them in a more academic and professional manner. (T6)*

*ChatGPT has proven to be an invaluable tool in helping students refine their writing, allowing them to express themselves more clearly and with greater academic precision. (T1)*

*By providing real-time feedback and suggesting improvements, ChatGPT has assisted my students in structuring their arguments more effectively, which has greatly enhanced their academic presentations. (T4)*

*I have noticed a significant improvement in my students' language skills. ChatGPT helps them master both the technical aspects and the academic presentation of English, which ultimately boosts their overall proficiency. (T12)*

#### 4.2.1.3 Theme 3: Methodological Assistance

The last of the thematic data items concerns assistance provided by ChatGPT for students' methodological planning. The majority of students (n = 22) reported

that the tool helped them align their research design and problem, and almost all (n = 29) reported that it helped them develop their research instruments. Students reported as follows:

*ChatGPT listed a number of approaches that could be used along with their pros and cons when I was unsure as to what methodology was appropriate for my research problem. (S14)*

*It helped me to shape my methodology chapter in a very practical way when I asked it to generate sample interview questions and items for a questionnaire. (S22)*

*When I was not sure which methodology would fit my research problem, ChatGPT outlined possible approaches along with their strengths and weaknesses. That gave me confidence in choosing the right design. (S14)*

*I asked it to generate sample interview questions and questionnaire items, which really helped me shape my methodology chapter in a practical way. (S22)*

These advantages were also acknowledged by the teachers, who reported that ChatGPT provided students with structured, relevant, and purposeful items for their data gathering instruments. Some teachers responded as follows:

*ChatGPT has the potential to help my students build research instruments by generating questions or indicators that are clear, pertinent, well organized, and aligned to their research objectives. (T10)*

*ChatGPT can assist my students in formulating research instruments by suggesting clear, relevant, and well-structured questions or indicators that align with their research objectives. (T10)*

*ChatGPT is helpful in generating research instrument items, like interview questions and surveys, that are well organized and closely tied to the research objectives, making the process smoother for my students. (T6)*

#### 4.2.1.4 Theme 4: Issues with the Integration of ChatGPT

The findings of this study also reported the disadvantages of using ChatGPT in academic writing. The majority of participants recognized the following as the most pertinent issues and problems: (1) Issues related to referencing; (2) Issues regarding integrity; and (3) Issues relating to critical thinking and over-reliance.

#### 4.2.2 Issues Related to Referencing

Of the 30 students, the majority reported the main issue to be the unreliability of the sources ChatGPT provided. Some references could be verified, but the summaries ChatGPT produced included sources that could not be verified. Students said:

*We use ChatGPT for literature reviews, the tool can provide summaries that sound convincing, but the references are not always accurate or verifiable. (S8)*

*ChatGPT sometimes gives references that look valid, but when I tried to check them, I couldn't find the sources anywhere. I had to do more work to find real references from Google Scholar. (S13)*

*The references provided by ChatGPT sound great, but they often don't match the original sources, which makes me question the credibility of the information. (S15)*

*Yes, there are some references, but are they necessarily correct or accurate? (S12)*

*Yes, we ought to do the work of finding out real references and make sure that they could be found in the Google Scholar. (S29)*

#### 4.2.3 Issues Regarding Integrity

Regarding academic integrity, most teachers were concerned about whether students' work was truly original or involved plagiarism. When students' writing involved plagiarism, teachers perceived it as a serious violation of academic standards that undermined both the credibility of the assessment process and the development of students' independent critical thinking skills.

Concerns about plagiarism and the authenticity of work also raised alarms for educators. They recognized that over-reliance on AI-generated content may disincentivize students to engage in original work. Teachers claimed that such over-reliance could contribute to academic dishonesty and the attainment of empty credentials.

*Students often treat ChatGPT as an authoritative source, accepting its outputs without question, which diminishes their critical thinking and investigative skills. (T6)*

*Students sometimes take ChatGPT's responses as final and unquestionable, which discourages them from engaging in deeper research or challenging its outputs, limiting their learning process. (T8)*

*As students use ChatGPT to draft thesis proposal, students lose the ability to write. It takes away students' voice in the writing. (T11)*

*Instead of using ChatGPT as a tool to support their inquiry, students see it as a final authority, relying on it too much and neglecting to further explore or validate the information themselves. (T10)*

#### 4.2.4 Issues Relating to Critical Thinking and Over-Reliance on AI

Students' reliance and unquestioning acceptance of ChatGPT-generated text was seen as a problem. Teachers explained that students see ChatGPT as an

authoritative source of information, instead of a tool to aid inquiry. Teachers stated the following:

*Students sometimes take the suggestions at face value without critically narrowing them down into a feasible research problem. It risks encouraging dependency rather than helping them learn the process of refining their own concepts. (T6)*

*Students sometimes just take the suggestions and do not critically look at it to narrow it down to a workable research problem. This may be encouraging dependence rather than teaching the process of evolution of their ideas. (T7)*

*The thesis proposals written with the help of ChatGPT do not truly reflect the students' own writing abilities. It is very harmful to replace their ideas with AI-generated content, which makes the work highly vulnerable to issues of academic integrity. (T10)*

*There is a tendency for my students to over-rely on ChatGPT's suggestions without questioning or analyzing them critically, which prevents them from developing essential research skills and reflective thinking. (T12)*

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Perceptions of EFL Teachers and Students Regarding Using ChatGPT for Writing Thesis Proposals**

The findings reveal notable differences in the ways students and teachers interact with ChatGPT for thesis proposal writing, which are driven by their distinct epistemic positions and the perceived dissonance in their academic roles. Students tend to see ChatGPT as an assistive tool that enhances their cognitive abilities and facilitates higher-order academic writing, particularly in topic definition, gap articulation, and methodological planning (Arifani et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2025; Zheng & Stewart, 2024). ChatGPT enables students, especially those new to research, to mitigate cognitive overload and engage with academic writing at a higher level, which aligns with Vygotsky's ZPD. This view underscores the potential of AI tools as semiotic instruments that extend students' capacities beyond what they are able to achieve independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

In contrast, teachers express more caution, particularly regarding the reliability and evaluative accuracy of AI-generated suggestions. Teachers were concerned that, even though ChatGPT could enhance procedural aspects of research writing, it lacks the human judgment necessary to validate its suggestions, which poses risks for epistemic integrity. Teachers also expressed concern about students relying too heavily on AI, which could undermine critical thinking and independent analysis (Shi et al., 2025; Steiss et al., 2024). This study found that participants' perceptions of the value of ChatGPT diverged: Students viewed it as a productivity-enhancing tool, while teachers referred to its limitations regarding higher-order thinking and lack of epistemic reliability.

The findings reflect a complex dynamic between students' enthusiasm for using AI as a productivity-enhancing tool and teachers' more cautious approach, which centers on preserving academic rigor and critical thinking. Students' use of ChatGPT for research design and writing aligns with constructivist pedagogical approaches, according to which digital tools scaffold students' learning experiences to help them progress to more sophisticated levels of academic work (Vygotsky, 1978). This view is consistent with an understanding that AI can serve as a cognitive partner that can offer procedural support and reduce cognitive load. However, teachers' concerns about the epistemic validity of the suggestions of AI highlight the importance of human oversight, which is needed to maintain the integrity of the research process. The contrasting perceptions found by this study underscore a need to balance the benefits of AI-driven efficiency with the preservation of critical thinking and academic integrity.

These findings have several significant implications for both teaching practices and the integration of AI in academic contexts. First, the findings highlight the importance of developing AI literacy in both students and educators. While AI tools such as ChatGPT can offer procedural support and enhance productivity, they should not replace the critical thinking and epistemic validation that human instructors provide. Educators should foster a balanced view of AI as a tool that complements, rather than supplants, traditional academic practices. The study calls for a pedagogical framework that encourages critical engagement with AI-generated content, such as structured reflection, peer review, and annotated feedback exercises. These practices can mitigate the risk of plagiarism and help students develop a deeper understanding of the research process, rather than merely relying on AI for convenience.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the need to reconsider feedback literacy models, which would require a shift from traditional evaluative feedback toward more comprehensive, formative approaches that encourage learning through critical reflection and peer review. This can help prevent that students unquestioningly accept AI suggestions and could foster a more responsible, ethical approach to using AI in academic writing.

## **5.2 Benefits and Challenges Facing the Pedagogical and Ethical Integration of ChatGPT**

The study highlights significant benefits of integrating ChatGPT in academic settings. Both students and teachers reported that AI was useful during various stages of project work, from brainstorming and literature review to document completion. Students found the tool particularly effective for refining language and organizing content; teachers observed improvements in language clarity and procedural support. These findings align with sociocultural and constructivist learning theories, which emphasize guided participation and collaborative learning in a knowledge domain. Specifically, ChatGPT supported students' ability to engage with complex academic tasks, such as critical synthesis and methodological reasoning, while also enhancing more surface-level tasks, such as summarizing and organizing content. These results support the idea that AI, when integrated effectively, can serve as a pedagogical tool that fosters student learning and improves academic outcomes.

The findings suggest that ChatGPT could serve as a supportive tool for students' academic development. It can provide both cognitive and procedural support, to enable students to engage in deep-structure learning, especially in complex areas such as synthesis and methodology. The tool could also aid surface-structure tasks, such as summarizing, language refinement, and document organization, and reinforce the notion that AI can enhance academic writing quality and support project management. From a theoretical perspective, the results are consistent with constructivist principles, which hold that knowledge is co-constructed through collaboration and interaction. By facilitating critical thinking and clarity of language, ChatGPT may facilitate the development of students' cognitive and academic skills, which may ultimately improve academic performance.

These results contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of AI in education, particularly in academic writing and research development. The integration of ChatGPT as a pedagogical partner has implications for improving student engagement and supporting diverse learning activities, from literature review to critical synthesis. By helping students refine their academic language and methodology, ChatGPT could enhance the quality of student work and support reflection practices. However, as expressed by scholars such as Steiss et al. (2024), integrating AI should be carefully managed to ensure academic integrity. One significant concern is the potential for ChatGPT to generate hallucinated references and citations, thereby compromising the academic rigor and credibility of student work. These AI-generated references may appear legitimate, but, upon closer inspection, they may turn out to be inaccurate or fabricated. Educators must be vigilant and teach students to engage with AI-generated content critically, and to cross-check sources and verify citation accuracy to prevent misuse of AI.

While the study demonstrates the potential of ChatGPT to enhance academic work, it also reveals challenges related to AI's epistemic nature, including unverified citations and AI hallucinations. These challenges pose risks to academic integrity and the authenticity of student work, especially when fake references are used. If these fake references are presented as legitimate academic sources, it could cause confusion about the credibility of the information. However, the findings of this study remain valid, because they provide practical recommendations for mitigating these risks. Educators should encourage students to cross-check AI-generated sources against reputable databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus, and to reflect on the accuracy and relevance of content. Additionally, students should be trained to paraphrase AI-generated passages and engage in ethical attribution. It is also crucial for students to critically assess AI-generated citations to ensure their legitimacy and avoid the use of fake references in academic work.

The study identifies four key areas in which ChatGPT has a significant impact on students' academic work: (1) Theoretical and conceptual scaffolding; (2) Enhancement of academic writing quality; (3) Methodological assistance; and (4) Challenges in integrating ChatGPT effectively in the learning process. On the one hand, ChatGPT offers substantial potential to assist students' academic

growth, such as improving writing clarity, aiding brainstorming, and helping students organize their thoughts and ideas. On the other hand, the ethical and epistemic challenges, such as inaccurate AI-generated references, hallucinations, and the risk of plagiarism, highlight the need for ongoing pedagogical interventions. The integration of fake references into students' work raises significant concerns about academic integrity, because these fabricated citations may mislead both students and educators about the reliability of sources. By integrating reflection practices, such as AI-based rubrics and hands-on learning experiences, educators can transform ChatGPT from a writing tool into a pedagogical partner that could enhance students' critical thinking, methodological reasoning, and academic integrity.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper addresses the integration of ChatGPT in academic practices by focusing on its potential benefits and challenges, particularly in enhancing academic writing, supporting methodological reasoning, and addressing concerns about fake references and academic integrity. The research explored how both students and educators interact with AI and use it as a tool to improve academic tasks such as project development, literature reviews, and document organization.

The findings reveal that ChatGPT could significantly enhance students' academic experiences by providing support in cognitive and procedural tasks. It could refine language, organize content, and help students engage with complex academic concepts. However, it also presents challenges, particularly the generation of fake references and the potential erosion of academic integrity. These findings underscore the need for a balanced approach to AI integration, with educators playing a pivotal role in guiding students toward ethical AI use and ensuring the validity of AI-generated content.

The key takeaway of this paper is the importance of integrating AI responsibly in educational frameworks. Educators must implement reflection practices, encourage critical engagement with AI outputs, and teach students how to verify sources and avoid the pitfalls of fake references. Future research should explore how AI tools can be refined to improve accuracy and support academic integrity, with a focus on developing ethical guidelines for AI in academic settings. As AI continues to evolve, fostering an environment in which students can use AI as a pedagogical partner will be essential in shaping a more dynamic and ethical learning landscape.

## **7. Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the publication of this article.

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