



AI-Assisted Writing Practices of First-Year EFL Students in the Essay Writing Process

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Abstract. Generative text AI is becoming more common in students' writing, including in EFL classrooms. This study explored how generative text AI tools shaped the essay writing practices of first-year EFL students across planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The study used qualitative case study design with three first year students and one lecturer as a contextual informant. Data were collected through a screening questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, students' essay documents, and a lecturer interview. The data were analyzed descriptively and thematically, and source triangulation was used to support the trustworthiness of the findings. The results show that AI had already become part of the students' writing process, although each student used it in a different way. AI was most often used for language-related support, especially grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and clarity. Still, it was not used only for editing. The students also used it to generate ideas, organize points, and improve the flow of their writing. The study further found that AI-assisted writing was not a single, fixed practice. Some students uses AI mainly as support, while others depended on it more directly when shaping their drafts. However, the findings also show an important tension. AI made writing easier in some ways, but it also raised concerns about dependence, originality, and the development of students' own voice. In the end, this study suggests that generative text AI does not only affect the final text, but also changes how students move through the writing process itself.

Keywords: EFL Writing; Essay Writing; First-Year Students; Generative Text AI; Writing Practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it helps students express ideas, develop arguments, and communicate in a more organized way. In EFL context, writing is usually understood as a process, not something that happens in one step only. Students normally go through several stages, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Harmer, 2015). In those stages, they do not only write ideas down. They also rethink, adjust, and improve what they want to say based on the purpose, context, and audience of the text (Hyland, 2003). For first-year university students, this process is often still difficult because they are learning how academic writing works while also adapting to a new academic environment. At the same time, digital technology has started to change the way students write, and one of the clearest examples today is the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI). In this study, generative text AI refers to AI-based tools that can generate written responses from prompts, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and DOLA. These tools are now used quite widely in writing, and not only for one small purpose. Students may use them to get ideas, improve wording, or help them move forward when they get stuck. Previous studies also show that AI can support writing in different ways.

In some cases, it has been reported to improve writing quality, especially in vocabulary, language accuracy, organization, and content development (Tsai et al., 2024). Other studies also show that AI can be used in different parts of writing, including pre-writing, idea development, and content refinement (Lee et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025; Wang, 2025). Because of that, AI is becoming a visible part of students' writing experience, especially in classroom tasks.

This situation is closely related to the idea of writing practices. Writing practices do not only refer to the final written product. They also include the habits, strategies, and actions that writers use while writing (Bazerman, 2015; Ivanič, 2004). In AI-assisted writing, those practices may include asking AI for ideas, using it to improve wording, checking grammar, or revising parts of a draft. So, the question is not only whether AI helps students produce better writing. What also matter is how it changes the way they go through the writing process itself. In this sense, generative AI is not simply added at the end of writing. It can become part of the process. Wang (2025) for example, shows that students may use AI for brainstorming, organizing ideas, revising, and editing, while Lee et al. (2025) show that students often use AI as a support tool, especially for idea generation and content refinement.

Even though studies on AI and writing have grown quite quickly, many of them still focus more on students' perceptions, attitudes, or the possible benefits of AI for writing in general. There are also studies that look at AI use in more specific parts of the writing process. Nguyen et al. (2025), for instance, focus on the pre-writing stage. Lee et al. (2025) discuss students' strategies and perceptions in AI-assisted EFL writing, while Wang (2025) looks more closely at how students use generative AI across different parts of the writing process. Even so, there is still not much discussion about how first-year EFL students actually use generative text AI tools across the whole writing process in real classroom contexts. This issue matter because first-year EFL students can still be seen as novice academic writers. They are still developing writing strategies and are still learning how academic writing works (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Wingate, 2012). At this stage, generative text AI may affect not only the final text, but also the way students go through the writing process. In the classroom context of this study, students in the writing course were asked to write English essays based on their experience of attending National Seminar on Education at Universitas Subang (SENDINUSA) and English Language Education Webinar at Universitas Subang (WEBINUS).

Early observations showed that some of them were already using generative text AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and DOLA when completing these assignments, sometimes with only limited revision of the AI output. This means that AI had already started to become part of their classroom writing practices.

Based on that situation, this study asks on one main question: how do generative text AI tools shape students' essay writing practices? Therefore, the study aims to explore how generative text AI tools shape first-year EFL students' essay writing practices across planning, drafting, revising, and editing. It is hoped that the findings can contribute to the discussion of AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts and also give useful insight for writing lecturers who now face the growing presence of AI in students' writing processes.

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. It was chosen because the study aimed to explore in depth how generative text AI tools shaped first-year EFL students' essay writing practices across planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The study was not intended to measure the effectiveness of AI or to test cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, it focused on looking closely at what students actually did when they used AI in writing in one particular classroom setting. The case examined here was the use of generative text AI tools in essay writing among first-year students in one writing class at the English Education Study Program, Universitas Subang.

The participants were first-year students taking the writing course. At the beginning of the study, a screening questionnaire was distributed to the students in the class. It was used to identify whether students used generative text AI tools in essay writing, what tools they used, how often they used them, at what stages of writing they used them, and what their final writing grade was in the first semester. Based on the questionnaire results, course grades, and students' willingness to participate, three students were purposively selected to represent relatively different levels of writing achievement within the available participant pool. These three students were then interviewed in depth. In addition, the course lecturer was also involved as a contextual informant to provide information about the classroom setting, the essay assignments, and general observations of students' writing practices. The instruments used here were a screening questionnaire, semi-structured interview guides, and document analysis sheets. The screening questionnaire was used to map students' AI use and support participant selection.

The semi-structured interview guide for students was designed to explore how they used AI tools in planning, drafting, revising, and editing, how they responded to AI-generated output, and how AI shaped their writing practices. The interview guide for the lecturer was used to gather contextual information about the writing class, the essay tasks, and the lecturer's general views on students' use of AI in writing. Document analysis sheets were used to examine students' essay in order to identify writing patterns, forms of revision, and textual features that could later be interpreted together with the interview data.

The data were collected through three techniques. First, the screening questionnaire was distributed as an initial step to identify students who reported using generative text AI tools and were willing to continue to the next stage of the study. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three selected students to gain deeper information about their experiences and practices in using AI during essay writing. The lecturer was also interviewed to provide contextual understanding of the teaching and learning situation. Third, students' essay documents were collected and analyzed to support the interpretation of their reported writing practices. The documents were not used to prove AI use directly. Instead, they were treated as supporting evidence that could be read together with the interview data.

The data were analyzed in two stages. First, the questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to map students' AI use and to support participant selection. Second, the main data, which consisted of interview transcripts and essay documents, were analyzed thematically. The analysis began by organizing the data and reading them several times to gain a general understanding of the participants' writing practices. After that, the data were coded based on the stages of the writing process, namely planning, drafting, revising, and editing, while still allowing other themes to emerge from the data. The codes were then grouped into broader themes that showed how AI shaped students' essay writing practices. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was used by comparing information from the questionnaire, student interviews, lecturer interview, and essay documents.

This study also paid attention to research ethics. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Their identities were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms or participant codes in the reporting of the findings. The data collected from the questionnaire, interviews, and essay documents were used only for research purposes and did not affect the students' academic evaluation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the screening questionnaire, student interviews, students' essay documents, and the lecturer interview. Since the purpose of the study is to examine how generative text AI shapes students' writing practices, the results are discussed as patterns of practice rather than as a mere inventory of tools. The interview excerpts referred to in this section are translated from Indonesian.

Screening Results and Participant Selection

The screening questionnaire provided an initial picture of AI use in the class. All six students reported that they had used generative text AI tools when completing English essay assignments. Gemini was the most frequently mentioned tool, followed by ChatGPT. In terms of function, the clearest pattern appeared in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence-structure checking. Brainstorming and revising content were also reported, although less consistently. Taken together, these early results suggest that AI had become part of the students' writing routine, especially as a tool for language support.

Table 1. Summary of Screening Questionnaire Results.

Aspect	Main result
Reported use of AI	6 of 6 students (100%) reported using generative text AI tools
Most frequently used tools	Gemini (83.3%), ChatGPT (66.7%)
Frequency of use	Occasionally (50%), often (33.3%), very often (16.7%)
Most common stage of use	Grammar, vocabulary, and sentence-structure checking (100%)
Other common stages	Brainstorming (66.7%), revising content (50%)
Common way of using AI output	Editing part of the output or using AI mainly for ideas or correction

The questionnaire was not treated as the main source of interpretation. Its role was preliminary. It was used to map general patterns of AI use and to support participant selection. From the students who reported using AI and were willing to continue, three were selected purposively for in-depth interviews. These cases represent relatively different levels of writing achievement within the available participant pool. Therefore, M1, M2, M3 are used here as case labels rather than as fixed rankings of the whole class.

Theme 1: AI Use Across the Writing Process

The interview data show that AI appeared across the students' writing process, from planning to editing, although the way it was used differed from one case to another. M1 described AI as "an assistant or companion" that helped her understand the topic, generate ideas, develop sentences, and polish language. M2 used AI more as a discussion partner. He turned to it when he wanted to test whether his argument had blind spots or when he needed more academic alternatives to his own wording. M3 relied on AI more directly when expressing ideas in English became difficult, especially during drafting and editing.

Even with those differences, one point remained clear. Editing was the most visible and consistent stage of AI use. All three participants referred to grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, or language polishing as the areas in which AI was most helpful. This finding is in line with earlier studies showing that AI can support language accuracy and writing improvement in EFL contexts (Tsai et al., 2024). Still, the present data add a more process-based view. AI was not simply helping students produce a cleaner final text. It was also changing how they checked their writing. Editing was no longer done only by rereading the draft alone. Students increasingly checked wording, grammar, and sentence quality with AI.

The lecturer's account helps explain why this pattern appeared so strongly. He described the writing tasks in this course as reflective and closely related to students' own experience. The main difficulty, then, was not generating entirely new content, but expressing familiar material in acceptable English. In that context, AI was often used to sharpen ideas, organize notes, build an outline, and improve linguistic form. So, in this classroom, AI did not mainly fill an idea gap. More often, it helped students manage and express material they already had.

Theme 2: AI as Organizational and Linguistic Support

A closer reading of the data shows that AI shaped students' writing practices in at least two ways. The first was organizational. Planning was no longer done entirely alone. M1 used AI to brainstorm and explore relevant issues before preparing her own outline. M2 used it to check for missing points and possible blind spots in his argument. M3 used it to find ideas and build a simple framework. One of the clearest examples came from M2, who explained that he entered his rough webinar notes into AI and asked it to reorganize the main points more systematically. In this sense, planning was no longer fully done in the student's head. Some of the early organizing work was handed over to AI.

The second was linguistic. AI supported students while they were shaping the text itself. M1 used it to improve academic sentences and develop paragraphs more effectively. M2 usually wrote his own version first, then asked AI for more academic alternatives that still kept the intended meaning. M3 relied on AI more directly when she struggled to turn ideas into English sentences and paragraphs. Across the three cases, the strongest role of AI was not creating content from nothing, but helping students phrase, refine, and polish what they wanted to say. This is why AI in here is better understood as a linguistic scaffold than as a replacement writer. That interpretation is also consistent with the idea that writing practices involve not only the final product, but the strategies and actions writers take while composing (Bazerman, 2015; Ivanič, 2004), a perspective that remains relevant in recent discussions of AI-assisted writing.

What matters here is that AI did not enter the writing process at one isolated point. It supported both the early structuring of ideas and the later shaping of language. So, the role of AI in these students' writing was double: it helped them organize what they wanted to say, and it helped them say it in more acceptable English.

The essay documents help make these reported practices more visible, although they should still be read with caution. Here, the documents were not used to prove AI use directly. Their function was supportive. They were analyzed to see whether the final texts showed patterns that were consistent with what the students described in the interviews. The distinction is important because a neat structure or polished language alone cannot be treated as proof of AI-generated writing. Some of that neatness may also come from the assignment genre, lecturer guidance, or the students' own revision effort.

Even so, the documents reveal clear variation across the three cases. M1's essays were the most developed in terms of synthesis and reflection. They moved beyond retelling seminar or webinar content and showed more effort to connect ideas across speakers, interpret key points, and add a personal response. M2's essays were also well organized, but they retained a stronger personal voice. The writing sounded firmer and more openly argumentative, even when the structure remained quite neat. M3's essays, by contrast, were more descriptive and more report-like. The overall structure was still clear, but reflection was thinner and the language often relied on safer, more familiar phrasing. These differences should not be read as proof that one student used AI better than the others. Rather, they suggest that AI-supported writing did not take one single form. It shifted according to how each student used the tool during the composing process.

Table 2. Cross-Case Pattern of AI-Supported Writing Practices.

Participant	Dominant role of AI	How the writing practice shifted	Pattern visible in documents
M1	Assistant for idea exploration, sentence shaping, coherence checking, and editing	Planning became more exploratory; drafting and editing became highly assisted	Essays appeared more polished, synthesized, and reflective
M2	Discussion partner and refining tool	Planning involved checking blind spots; drafting remained student-led; editing supported linguistic precision	Essays remained organized but retained stronger personal voice
M3	Scaffold for structure and language support	AI supported idea generation, outline building, drafting, and grammar checking more directly	Essays were clear and orderly, but more descriptive and formulaic

One point needs to be stated clearly. Unlike M1 and M2, who submitted separate WEBINUS reports across sessions, M3 submitted one combined WEBINUS review. Because of that, the document evidence for M3 is less detailed. The general tendency can still be seen, but any interpretation of M3's document pattern has to remain a little more careful.

The lecturer's comments also help keep the interpretation balanced. He noted that, among beginner writers, a text that looks very neat and somewhat template-like may suggest AI involvement. At the same time, he did not treat that as final proof. He described it as an impression that still needed confirmation. That point fits well with the methodological position of this study. The documents are strongest when they are read together with the interviews, not when they are asked to function as an AI detector.

Theme 3: Negotiating AI Output and Authorial Control

Another clear pattern in the data is that students did not describe AI use as passive acceptance. Their interaction with AI was more selective than that. M1 explained that she usually read the output first, understood it, and then edited it to match her own style and the task context. M2 was even more explicit. He said that he did not simply copy and paste AI output, but used it as a reference or comparison, especially when he needed more academic wording. M3 also stated that the output had to be revised again so it would fit the way she wanted to write. In all three cases, AI was involved, but it did not automatically determine the final version of the text.

This selective use also appeared in what students chose to reject. M1 said that she sometimes ignored AI output when it felt too general or did not reflect her own opinion. M2 rejected suggestions that sounded irrelevant, too wordy, or inconsistent with the lecturer's instructions. M3 also mentioned not using AI responses when they felt too stiff or did not suit the context. These examples matter because they show that students were still making decisions about their writing.

They were not simply receiving a finished text from AI and submitting it as it was. At least in these three cases, AI worked more as an assistant, a discussion partner, or a scaffold than as a full substitute for student authorship. This point is important in relation to writing practices. If writing is understood as a set of choices, strategies, and actions rather than only as a final product (Bazerman, 2015; Ivanič, 2004), then one of the practices revealed in these three cases is the negotiation of AI output itself. Students did not only write. They also selected, adjusted, and sometimes resisted the language suggested by AI. In that sense, authorial control was not lost completely. It was being exercised in a different place, namely in the decision-making process after AI had already entered the writing task.

At the same time, the degree of control was not identical across the cases. M2 showed the strongest tendency to keep the draft under his own control and to use AI mainly for refining and checking. M1 also retained control, but her account suggests that this control could weaken under pressure.

M3 still revised AI output, yet her writing pattern points to a stronger dependence on AI for structural and linguistic support. These differences are better read as variations in practice than as fixed categories of “strong” or “weak” writers. What the data show is not a single model of AI use, but different ways of managing the balance between assistance and authorship.

Theme 4: Between Support and Dependence

A final tension also emerges from the data. AI clearly supported students in practical ways. It helped them generate ideas, organize their thoughts, improve vocabulary, and reduce some of the linguistic difficulty of writing in English. For first-year EFL students who were still building confidence, this kind of support is not surprising. It also reflects previous findings that AI can be useful for vocabulary, organization, and language accuracy in EFL writing (Tsai et al., 2024). In three cases, however, the support was never entirely free from risk.

The lecturer expressed this concern most clearly. In his view, AI can be useful for brainstorming and editing, but overreliance may weaken originality, delay the development of students’ idiosyncratic voice, and reduce the habit of reading, even though reading is closely tied to writing development. This concern is especially relevant because the participants in this classroom context were still first-year students. As novice academic writers, they were still learning how to organize ideas, express them appropriately in English, and gradually develop their own way of writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Wingate, 2012). At this stage, AI can help. But if students lean on it too heavily, the tool may begin to replace parts of the struggle that are actually necessary for growth.

What makes this issue more complex is that the students themselves were not unaware of the danger. M1 and M2 both warned against becoming too dependent on AI, even while continuing to use it. M1’s admission that she might rely more heavily on AI when she was under time pressure is particularly revealing. It shows that responsible use is not only a matter of knowing the right principle. The real difficulty appears when students are in a hurry, unsure of their language, or trying to meet classroom expectations quickly. Under those conditions, the line between support and dependence becomes easier to cross.

Seen this way, the findings do not support either extreme position. They do not show that AI simply harms students’ writing, but they also do not support the idea that AI is only beneficial. What appears instead is a more unstable situation. AI helps students write, but at the same time it can make it easier for them to avoid some of the effort through which writing ability usually develops.

That is why the issue here is not whether AI should be accepted or rejected in simple terms. The more important question is how it should be used without weakening students' independence as writers. Taken together, the findings indicate that generative text AI shaped the students' essay writing practices not by replacing writing altogether, but by shifting parts of the process. Idea development became more assisted. Drafting became more interactive. Revising and editing became less solitary. At the same time, students had to negotiate relevance, voice, and the boundary between help and dependence. In this classroom context, AI was no longer outside the writing process. It had already become part of how writing was being done.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how generative text AI tools shape first-year EFL students' essay writing practices across planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The findings show that AI had already become part of the students' writing process, especially in language-related work such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and clarity. However, its role was not limited to editing. AI was also used to help students generate ideas, organize points, and improve the flow of their writing.

The study also found that AI-assisted writing was not practiced in one fixed way. Some students used mainly as support, while others relied on it more directly in shaping their drafts. Even so, the students generally did not position themselves as passive users. They still selected, revised, and sometimes rejected AI output when it did not fit their purpose or writing style.

At the same time, the findings also reveal a clear tension. AI made writing easier in some ways, but it also raised concerns about dependence, originality, and the development of students' own voice. For first-year EFL students who are still learning how to write academically, this become an important issue.

Overall, this study suggests that generative text AI tools do not simply help students write better. More than that, they change how students go through the writing process itself. Because of that, the main issue is not only whether students use AI, but how they use it and what that means for their development as writers.

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