


Chapter 13


ESL Academic Writing in Higher Education: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

The application of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education could offer benefits for research and learning but also raises ethical concerns about authorship and academic dishonesty. This pilot study explores the impact of AI on ESL academic writing, particularly their potential to enhance students' reading and writing skills while mitigating unethical practices. 15 sophomores completed two writing tasks—one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester—after receiving training on the responsible use of AI tools. The findings indicate a notable decrease in cases of plagiarism and academic fraud, alongside improvements in the global scores, organization, content quality, grammar and orthography. Additionally, students reported a general positive perception of AI tools, particularly in the drafting and revision stages and recognized their role as supportive rather than substitutive. These results suggest proper AI integration can promote academic integrity and enhance ESL students' writing proficiency in higher education.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-3678-7.ch013

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications in higher education in recent years has led to numerous opportunities both for educators and students. Tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot have been shown to provide additional support to teachers' feedback in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms among university students, and therefore, help to enhance their ESL competencies. However, the implementation of these tools has also ushered in a significant challenge: the increased difficulty in detecting plagiarism and academic dishonesty. To uphold academic integrity, universities and educators must take steps to prevent the misuse of these applications. Therefore, educating students on the proper use of these tools is of vital importance.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that proper education on the ethical and effective use of AI applications in higher education can mitigate plagiarism and enhance ESL reading and writing proficiencies. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve two key objectives: (a) to instruct university students on the importance of academic integrity by providing them with strategies to avoid plagiarism and unethical use of AI, and (b) to improve ESL reading and writing competencies by integrating AI-assisted tools as supportive learning aids within academic contexts. These objectives will be assessed through a pilot study involving 15 sophomore students enrolled in an Academic English course at a Spanish university.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 addresses some key concepts in ESL academic writing and provides a review of previous works on the application of AI in this field, including its regulation and the different perspectives from students and educators on the use of AI tools in the ESL classroom. Section 3 presents the methodology which includes the research questions that guide this investigation, the participants' profile, the activities that were developed during the project and the description of the data elicitation procedures. The results and discussion of the data analysis are presented in section 4. Section 5 offers suggestions for further work and section 6 concludes the study.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 ESL Academic Writing in Higher Education

English has become the global language of communication, especially in academia, where the vast majority of research and educational activities are conducted in this language. As a result, universities worldwide have acknowledged the importance of equipping their students with proficient oral and written English communication

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