

Perceptions of L2 Writing Support Through Generative AI: Reflections From First-Year Education Students

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ABSTRACT

The integration of generative AI into L2 writing raises pedagogical questions, especially in teacher education, where students learn to write while forming beliefs about writing instruction. While prior studies report positive attitudes toward ChatGPT, little is known about how future teachers experience such tools across tasks. This study examines first-year education students' perceptions of ChatGPT in L2 writing. Seventy-eight undergraduates (49 Early Childhood; 29 Primary) completed two in-class writing tasks using ChatGPT and pre/post-task questionnaires on confidence, motivation, autonomy, and AI attitudes. Results show a significant increase in confidence after the second task, especially among students who viewed AI as useful in daily life. No significant changes were found in motivation, metalinguistic awareness, or revision behaviour. Regression analyses confirmed that concrete beliefs about AI usefulness—not abstract expectations of societal impact—predicted tool acceptance. Findings highlight the need for scaffolded, reflective AI use in teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of generative AI in educational settings has brought renewed attention to the teaching and learning of second language (L2) writing. Within this domain, process-oriented pedagogies have long emphasised drafting, revision, and reflection as key elements in the development of learner agency (Hyland, 2003). Yet many first-year university students, particularly those in teacher education degrees, still approach writing in L2 as an anxiety-inducing task - one that exposes their linguistic limitations and undermines their confidence. These difficulties often translate into avoidance, minimal engagement, or reliance on formulaic structures. The consequences are not only academic. Such behavior can be partly understood through the lens of mindset theory: students with a fixed mindset may view their language ability as static and thus avoid challenging writing tasks, whereas a growth mindset encourages them

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to see writing difficulties as opportunities to improve (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Similarly, the trait of grit - sustained perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals - has been linked to greater persistence in language learning despite setbacks (Duckworth et al., 2007), complementing the positive effects of a growth-oriented outlook. Since these students are preparing to become teachers, their early experiences with L2 writing - and the tools they adopt - can shape their beliefs about writing instruction and their future classroom practices.

Against this backdrop, generative AI has entered the L2 writing classroom with unprecedented visibility. Earlier forms of digital assistance, such as automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools, offered surface-level feedback on grammar and vocabulary (Grimes & Warschauer, 2010; Wilson & Roscoe, 2020), but had little to offer in terms of idea generation or content support. ChatGPT introduced a different kind of interaction. Its capacity to hold conversations, generate examples, and adapt to learner prompts positions it less as a corrector and more as a collaborative presence in the writing process. In this sense, it can support multiple phases of writing, from planning to formulation and revision - particularly for students who struggle to begin or sustain their writing. This potential, however, also brings pedagogical tension. While some learners engage with the tool actively and strategically, others may turn to it as a shortcut or simply replicate its suggestions without reflection. This uncritical use highlights broader ethical and pedagogical concerns. Educators have cautioned that over-reliance on generative AI could impede the development of independent writing skills and even raise issues of academic integrity (e.g., plagiarism or “AI-giarism”) (Chan, 2023). In fact, recent studies warn that heavy dependence on tools like ChatGPT may lead to declines in students’ writing quality and critical thinking if not properly guided (Kasneci et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). This study considers these important perspectives and places itself within the ongoing debate about both the benefits and the possible drawbacks of using AI in education.

Most recent studies on generative AI and L2 writing have documented improvements in fluency, lexical variety, or perceived ease of writing. Some studies have reported positive learner attitudes, including reduced anxiety and increased persistence (Mun, 2024; Song & Song, 2023). Yet these findings often rely on final texts or general impressions, and say little about how students actually experience the tool across multiple tasks. There is also limited attention to how initial beliefs about AI shape student engagement, or how these beliefs evolve through use. Moreover, key constructs such as *motivation* and *autonomy* are rarely defined or theorised in these studies, despite being central to learner engagement in L2 writing. Following Dörnyei (1998), we understand motivation as the learner’s willingness, effort, and interest in engaging with writing tasks, while autonomy is defined, in line with Holec (1981), as the ability to take responsibility for and self-direct one’s learning process. These distinctions are critical to avoid conflating perceptions of ease or enjoyment with deeper dimensions of agency and self-regulation.

The absence of empirical work in early teacher education contexts is particularly notable. These are settings where learners are not only developing as writers, but also beginning to construct pedagogical judgement. Understanding how AI support intersects with their beliefs about writing, their sense of control, and their willingness to engage is therefore not only relevant for L2 pedagogy, but also for their future identity as educators.

The present study addresses these gaps through an examination of how first-year education students interpreted the role of ChatGPT in two L2 writing tasks embedded in regular coursework. Rather than focusing on language gains, the study explores how students perceived the tool’s influence on their writing confidence, motivation, and autonomy. These three constructs are analysed as distinct dimensions of learner experience, both to preserve conceptual clarity and to assess potential divergences in their development. Particular attention is paid to how initial attitudes toward AI were reflected in later evaluations of

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