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Negotiating Student Agency in AI-Mediated EFL Academic Writing: Perceptions of Teachers and Master's Students at the University of Constantine 1

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Abstract:
The growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and QuillBot is reshaping academic writing in higher education and raising questions of control, authorship and ownership. This study explores how student agency is negotiated in AI-mediated EFL academic writing at the Department of English, University of Constantine 1 – Frères Mentouri. Drawing on student agency theory, sociocultural theory, activity theory and posthumanist views of writing, it adopts a mixed-methods design combining questionnaires administered to a purposive sample of teachers and Master 2 students with a text analysis of AI-assisted student writing samples. The findings show that AI tools offer clear linguistic and organisational support, improving grammar, vocabulary, idea generation and students' confidence. However, teachers expressed concern about over-dependence and plagiarism, students were divided over who the author of an AI-assisted text is, and some samples displayed generic AI language and a weak personal voice. Student agency was thus neither simply lost nor preserved, but negotiated according to how critically students revised AI output. The study recommends positioning AI as an aid rather than a replacement, process-oriented writing instruction, critical AI literacy and the protection of student voice.

Keywords:
Artificial intelligence;
Student agency;
EFL academic writing;
Authorship;
Critical AI literacy;

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I. Introduction

The current trend of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into learning and teaching practices in higher education has emphasized opportunities and challenges for writing and communication. AI-enabled tools like ChatGPT and Quillbot, for instance, have helped numerous students in EFL contexts by improving their motivation to writing, writing skills, and revision processes, and enhancing their own critical thinking and writing. However, students' reliance on AI usage has raised issues over authorship, originality, and student agency. So far, little work has explored the connection between AI usage and agency to writing in Algeria. Thus, this study aimed to investigate EFL students' perceptions of AI usage to writing and its impact on their sense of control, ownership, and authorship. The findings indicated that AI usage in the writing task had positive consequences on students' writing, especially enhancing their confidence in both linguistic aspects of their texts and themselves. It also raised questions about whether students are in control of their texts and selves. Many students expressed that they had no confidence in writing without an AI-based chatbot and their work, consequently raising doubts about the amount of help that students can receive from AI. On the other hand, students did voice that they are on their own agenda in negotiating with AI or its role in the writing process. This study used data from an interview-based questionnaire and a survey to investigate how Algerian EFL university students' sense of agency when using AI to write an academic paper. Therefore, the findings will contribute to the literature on the ethical use of AI in educational settings.

1. Research Objectives

This investigation attempts to:

- Explore students' cognitions on AI usage in EFL academic writing.
- Assess AI tools' impact on student agency and autonomy in writing.
- Investigate students' views on authorship and ownership in AI-assisted writing.
- Analyze perceived benefits and challenges of AI, focusing on agency and dependence.
- Examine negotiation and reconfiguration of student agency with AI tools in EFL writing.

2. Research Questions

This research aims at addressing the following research question:

1. How do Algerian EFL university students describe their perceptions towards the use of AI tools during the academic writing process?
2. How much sense of agency/control do students have during writing with the help of AI technologies?
3. How do students perceive the issues of authorship, ownership and agency when using AI tools for academic writing in the EFL context?
4. How do students experience the paradox of AI-assisted technologies as both a helpful tool and a sourse of challenges to their learning experience?
5. How do students navigate their sense of agency when faced with AI-assisted academic writing?

II. Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that is largely based on student agency theory, sociocultural theory, and posthumanist conceptions of writing and technology. These interrelated theoretical paradigms serve as frameworks to view the ways in which agency is negotiated in AI-mediated EFL writing practices. While writing is often conceptualized as a cognitive process, this theoretical framework understands writing as a socially embedded, tool-mediated, and relationally living activity that includes interactions with technological systems, institutional practices, and linguistic contexts .

1. Student Agency Theory

Student agency is the relevant theoretical construct for this article. Agency is generally defined as a person's ability to consciously act, make decisions and influence the outcome of events. In an educational context, student agency refers to learners' capacity to control and direct their own learning, make choices, set learning goals and take ownership of their learned knowledge (Bandura, 2001). Agency in writing involves choice in ideas, organization, and revision. Overreliance on AI may weaken students' agency, as they must decide whether to accept AI suggestions based on personal judgment.

2. Sociocultural Theory and Mediation

The current study also draws upon sociocultural theory (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) that holds development to be socially mediated, and involved with the use of cultural tools and language. AI writing assistants can thus be conceptualized as mediational technological tools that allow students to accomplish writing tasks beyond their independent competence. It is not now understood how AI will influence students' writing agency. The need to better understand such questions is especially crucial in light of the potential, volitional use of AI by English writers (Bai et al., 2021; Li, 2021). Thus, The degree to which university students used

an AI writing assistant to help them write argumentative essays as an investigation into its effects on students' motivation and agency, and future directions in writing development research.

EFL students face challenges in writing for grammatical errors, lack of vocabulary, coherence problems, and a lack of knowledge of the rhetorical language. Technologies offer promises to address these concerns, but deploying technologies within the learning process is a complex problem. In this study, we build upon AI as a scaffold and hypothesized that it offers immediate feedback, language corrections, and input on improving language learning.

This way, AI tools can contribute to EFL writing according to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, whereby people can do better when assisted than when alone (Vygotsky, 1978). However, according to the sociocultural theory, most tools can shape human activity and may not always be beneficial for learning.

3. Activity Theory

To explain the complexity of using AI in academic writing, this study takes activity theory, specifically Engeström's (1987) extended framework of human activity systems, as its conceptual framework. Writing and academic work in higher education involve students as participants in a social system governed by academic integrity, a community of teachers and peers, tools like AI platforms, and a division of labor between human and machine. Conflicting expectations arise, as students are encouraged to utilize AI for enhancing writing quality but cautioned against over-reliance. This tension highlights the need to comprehend the tools' role and agency within institutional structures, as indicated by activity theory.

4. Posthuman Perspectives on Authorship and Writing

The dominant conception of writing is based on the autonomous human author. Posthumanism dismantles the assumption that one can only bestow agency upon humans. Digital writing theorists argue that an increasing amount of text is co-created by dense networks of humans, machines, algorithms, and platforms (Paveau, 2017). Choices about the lexicon, text, structure, tone, and content of AI writing tools are influenced by these technologies. Who writes is no longer the main question, and instead we ask about the process of production. Students may question their authorship, but agency exists in the way they prompted and edited the AI.

5. Conceptual Model for the Present Study

Student agency is a key topic in educational research, facing debates due to varied definitions, including administrative, political, sociocultural, and

individual perspectives. This research integrates views of agency and explores its conceptualization in AI-mediated EFL writing in higher education. Adopting a constructivist approach, it argues that student agency is shaped through interactions with AI tools and instructors, particularly in Algeria. The study identifies three dimensions of agency: perceived control relating to text creation with AI support, authorship concerned with text ownership, and strategic mediation, emphasizing the dynamic nature of student agency in this context. "selectively and critically using the AI tools to respond to the demands the texts requires in a given context of production, from writing a text to writing itself" (Zhang, 2022; p. 150).

The dimensions that constitute student agency in AI-mediated EFL writing will thus be explored in relation to other contextual variables such as language proficiency, digital literacy, academic expectations, achievement goals, and institutional norms in higher education. In the Algerian context, where multiple languages are in use such as Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English, many of the students are in the process of mastering academic English language acquisition. AI technologies may assist them in their learning needs and also bring new challenges and sensations of alienation, especially when these technologies are "overdesigned" or "overused" (Zhang, 2022; p. 150).

III. Methodology

1. Research Design

This mixed-methods study involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the negotiation of student agency in AI-mediated English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing practices at the university level. The mixed-methods design was undertaken in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis, which included gathering numerical information through questionnaires and qualitative data from texts. The use of a mixed-methods design was chosen in order to contrast and complement the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A quantitative phase comprised questionnaires for participants, which sought to investigate their views regarding the use of AI in their writing, their perceptions of control and authorship, and their attitudes towards AI. The qualitative phase involved the analysis of texts written by students with AI assistance in order to better understand how the use of these tools affected their writing, the revision process and what they considered to be their texts. The research was held at the Department of English at Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University. The reason for selecting this setting was an increase in the use of AI writing tools by EFL students, especially at the postgraduate level where research writing assignments, and writing dissertations are required.

2. Participants and Sample

The sample comprised seven participants selected using purposive sampling because of their relevance to the objectives of the study. Three teachers of English working at Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University participated in this study. They were selected because of their advanced academic knowledge coupled with an understanding of the academic writing process. These teachers taught academic writing, supervised and evaluated student written research projects, essays, reports and dissertations. Four students enrolled in Master 2, Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University participated in the study. Students were selected as students may use these writing tools. Master's students are expected to produce a highly demanding academic text such as a dissertation or a report. This affects their use of the AI writing tools in a meaningful way. Purposive sampling method was adopted for this study (Etikan et al., 2016) because participants had experience and knowledge regarding the research context since they were engaged in university-level EFL writing and they may have already explored the use of AI writing technologies.

3. Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data:

a. Questionnaire

This study presented a new questionnaire designed to collect data from students and teachers. The questionnaire used a closed-ended format (Likert type response scale) with a few open-ended questions. The questionnaire was used to investigate the use and attitudes towards AI tools in academic writing, the benefits of AI in EFL writing tasks, the students' preferences and their control and autonomy in using AI tools, students' attitudes towards ownership, autonomy, and authorship of AI-created writing, ethical considerations and concerns, including dependency and plagiarism, teachers' and students' beliefs about the impact of AI tools on the future of teaching academic writing. Drawing on the questionnaires used in previous research and adapting them to the context of a university in Algeria, the questionnaires were given to eight participants in both electronic and hard copy form, after ensuring the questionnaire was anonymous and explaining the purpose of the study.

b. Text Analysis

A text analysis instrument assessed the quality and originality of selected student writing samples to triangulate questionnaire data. Four Master 2 students provided texts featuring AI assistance and specified the software used (ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quill-bot). They identified how AI helped them. The analysis focused on linguistic accuracy, revision personalization, similarity of AI

structures, student voice, and the balance between AI support and student contribution, correlating findings with questionnaire responses.

IV. Results

The study results are arranged based on the three data sources: teachers' questionnaire, students' questionnaire, and text analysis. The study aimed at exploring student agency negotiation in AI-mediated EFL writing at the university level.

1. Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire

When asked about their views on students' AI use in academic writing, all four teachers (100%) reported that they knew that students use various AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and paraphrasing applications in their writing tasks. Almost all of them, 75% reported that AI can have advantages for students' writing when used properly. The main ones were:

- They improve students' sentence structures and basic grammar.
- They facilitate generating writing ideas.
- They expand students' vocabulary.
- They help with drafting and revising.

One teacher (25%) was concerned about the relevant condition that AI can be advantageous. He said the advantage of using AI tools depends on students' level of critical thinking.

All teachers (100%) shared concerns about students' potential over-dependence on AI, thinking that it may weaken students' independent thinking and writing skills development. The majority of them (75%) also expressed concern about plagiarism and difficulty in determining to what extent the submitted texts were fully written by students.

However, when asked whether students are still in control of using AI, two teachers (50%) agreed with the view that students are still in control when they use AI as a support tool. The two other teachers (50%) agreed with the view that many students give up control when they accept the AI-made output without making changes. Thus, there was an equal division of perspective on the degree of student autonomy when using AI to compose. Moreover, all the teachers (100%) called for clear policies and pedagogical guidance by universities to facilitate ethical use of AI in academic writing.

2. Results of the Students' Questionnaire

Three Master 2 students were asked on their use of AI tools in academic writing assignments. All the three students (100%) agreed that they used AI tools for the purpose of writing, particularly for: correcting grammar, generating ideas, rephrasing sentences, organizing paragraphs. All the students (100%) labeled AI

as helpful and efficient. Enhancement of the confidence of writing in English was reported by the students, especially in the case where vocabulary and grammatical challenges were involved. Two students (66.7%) said that they had less anxiety in writing because they could obtain immediate assistance.

Concerning the sense of control over the writing process: two students (66.7%) responded that they were in control because they selected, revised and edited the AI suggestions. One student (33.3%) acknowledged his/her own dependence on AI outputs, especially under time pressure. Therefore, this suggests that students' sense of agency varied depending on their writing habits.

When asked about who is the 'author' of an AI-assisted text: two students (66.7%) answered that the final text was theirs because they revised the text. One student (33.3%) said that the text was produced jointly by the student and AI. This reveals ambiguity about the meaning of authorship. In addition to that, two students (66.7%) recognized that frequent use of AI may lead to a dependence on it and diminish their motivation to write independently.

3. Results of the Text Analysis of Students' Writing Samples

Three writing samples (produced with the help of AI were analyzed.

- ***Linguistic Accuracy:*** All three texts (100%) exhibited obvious grammatical accuracy, correct spelling and sentence construction. This is an indication that all the students benefited from AI's linguistic assistance.
- ***Organization and Coherence:*** All the texts (100%) exhibited acceptable paragraph organization and logical sequencing of information.
- ***Evidence of Generic AI Language:*** Both of these texts (66.7%) contained redundant language, predictable transition words and overly formal language that are typical of AI-generated writing. Sample excerpts include:

  "In today's modern world…"
  "It is worth noting that…"
  "There are advantages and disadvantages to…the"

- ***Student Voice and Personalization:*** Both samples (66.7%) displayed a poor student voice with limited original expression. One sample (33.3%) included more personalized language and examples and appeared to have undergone some editing.
- ***Evidence of Student Revision:*** Both texts (66.7%) featured local edits, paraphrasing and additional details that appeared to be the work of a student. One text (33.3%) closely adhered to the AI-generated structure but with little evidence of revision.

V. Discussion of the Findings

The findings from questionnaires and text analysis indicate that AI tools provide clear linguistic and organizational support for EFL students. Both teachers and students recognized benefits such as improved grammar, idea generation, and confidence. However, concerns emerged regarding dependency, originality, and authorship. While some students actively revised AI outputs and maintained agency, others relied more passively on generated content. Therefore, student agency was not simply lost or preserved, but negotiated differently according to students' choices, digital literacy, and writing practices. The findings of the present study reveal that AI has become an increasingly visible component of academic writing practices among EFL students at the university level. Results from teachers' interviews, students' interviews, and text analysis indicate that AI tools are perceived as both supportive and problematic. These findings confirm that AI-mediated writing should not be understood through a simplistic positive-versus-negative perspective, but rather as a complex pedagogical space in which student agency is continuously negotiated.

Overall, the findings of the study revealed that the majority of teachers and students were ready to use AI tools in the writing classrooms. Some teachers positively acknowledged that AI tools provide a new domain for improving writing quality, especially in the grammar correction, vocabulary expansion, text organization, and idea generation aspects. In this regard, previous studies were in line with these findings. For instance, Ishaq et al. (2023), Mekheimer (2025), and Zhang et al. (2024) reported that AI-based writing assistants can reduce the language and confidence barriers in writing faced by EFL learners. Moreover, in most Algerian universities, students had to write their papers in English as an additional language, coming after Arabic and French. In this sense, AI tools have the potential to be used to provide the students with some sort of scaffolding to overcome their L1 and L2 language constraints in order to succeed in academic writing tasks. However, some participants expressed some concerns. For instance, the most teachers feared AI tools' overuse as it may lead to a decrease in students' independent thinking and writing abilities. Some students also reported they used AI heavily on their writing, especially when under time constraints. With regard to the various learning theories mentioned, the main theory that offers a solution to these issues is the socio-cultural theory. As recently argued by Vygotsky (1978) and in line with the present findings is that tools can facilitate or hurt learning if not used in the right way. If AI is used in a strategic way, it can contribute to the learning process, while only if students rely on it passively, they may experience a decrease in self-regulation and the learning of a specific skill.

The results also highlighted a long-standing problem for AI-assisted writing: authorship and ownership. While students in the study could produce well-structured texts with fewer errors with the help of AI, they struggled to claim authorship of such work, especially when it came to originality of content. Students were unsure whether AI-generated content belongs solely to the student or whether it's shared with the AI, and whether the AI "read" or "saw" the student's instructions. These findings align with the global, posthuman question of whether there is an "authentic writer" left with legislative and pedagogical implications (Paveau, 2017). Finally, in a posthuman age where writing is increasingly acting as a collaboration between humans and autonomous machines (Paveau, 2017), EFL teachers may have to shift their focus towards helping students think critically and develop their own voice in their writing, the discussion of which is now moving beyond writing-oriented universities.

VI. Pedagogical Implications

The current study, therefore, aims to outline four essential implications for the writing instruction in Algerian universities. Namely, (1) the position of AI as an educational aid instead of its replacement; (2) process-oriented writing instruction; (3) critical AI literacy; and (4) the safeguarding of the students' voice and authorship. AI is already a major part of the students' EFL writing practices; therefore, the role of AI needs to be clarified by universities. Writing instruction uses drafting, revising, reflecting, and peer-reviewing as a means that supports student agency in the writing process. Critical AI literacy involves skills like scrutinizing AI's suggestions, spotting its errors and biases, revising AI content for user control over the writing output, and balancing AI support with independent writing. Such skills are essential for EFL students to maintain their agency when confronted with AI. To sum up, the findings of the current study underscore the importance of applying these implications to the university writing instruction in Algeria.

VII. Limitations of the Study

This preliminary study presents some possible limitations inherent in the research. First of all, the small non-probabilistic sample of only four teachers and three students enrolled in Master 2 of the University of Science and Technology Houari Boumediene constituted a limit for this study. Indeed, if such findings could be considered as a sign of the students' agency in their EFL writing practices where AI is used as a digital writing tool, they are context-sensitive, used by a limited sample. Indeed, it is possible that the use of AI, attitudes towards them, and accessibility to them differ across institutions due to differences in institutional culture and availability of technology. Secondly, the quantitative data

collected through the questionnaires are self-reported and recall biases should be considered. Secondly, it is possible that social desirability bias and the reluctance of some participants to talk on the more controversial dimension of the AI usage have led to inconvenient issues. Thirdly, advances in AI could change participants' experience of AI, and it could be required to undertake further research to map out the long-term effects of AI on students' writing ability. In addition, the research was conducted only at one moment and could not provide understandings of how students' experiences with AI may change over time. Finally, three writing samples are not sufficient for researchers to identify patterns in voice, originality, or towards the revision process in relationship to the use of AI.

VIII. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies on AI-mediated English as a foreign language (EFL) writing should seek to determine students' and teachers' perceptions of AI by investigating a larger sample of participants from different Algerian universities as well as teachers and students from other disciplines such as science. Longitudinal research can aim to investigate how the use of AI affects students' writing development and especially how writing competencies change across the course of study. Classroom experiments can investigate the effectiveness of teaching writing using AI methods. Future studies ought to investigate the digital literacy of teachers in order to draft robust policies. Considering the ethical aspects of the use of AI and plagiarism in academic settings, it is necessary also to investigate these issues. Future studies should also investigate the impact of AI on the voice and identity of students by employing qualitative methods, using computational and discourse analysis for analyzing emergent linguistic patterns within AI-assisted writing. In sum, further empirical endeavor should continue to build knowledge about the role of AI in environmental contexts to change the perception of authorship and the teaching and learning of writing.

IX. Conclusion

AI is not a threat to student writing, yet it is in the process of changing it. The major question higher education must confront is how the adoption of technology enhances rather than diminish students' ability to think independently, write critically and generate their own academic voice. Thus, it is crucial that future educational efforts work to align the applications of AI in a way that both serves novel academic purposes and still preserves the importance of student agency in the EFL writing classroom.

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