

Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (SIJ)

Vol. VII, January 2026

(A Peer Reviewed Open Access Research Journal)

ISSN: 2645-8381

Published by Research Management Cell, Siddhajyoti Education Campus, Sindhuli, Nepal

Article History: Received: 30 June 2025; **Reviewed:** 30 November 2025; **Accepted:** 01 December 2025

Using ChatGPT to Overcome Writer's Block: A Study of Non-native English Students

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sij.v7i7.92559>

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the effectiveness of ChatGPT to overcome writer's block among English language researchers, focusing on how it enhances academic writing when it is used ethically. The research was conducted among three university-level students and researchers. The researcher adopted a purposeful sampling technique. The research participants shared their insights through online unstructured interviews. The findings revealed that the latest emerged AI tool has definitely provided a wide range of support and benefits, unblocking the ideas among non-native English students. Participants showed their regard for AI's support by providing immediate feedback; however, excessive reliance on AI tools not only destroys the creativity and critical thinking of researchers but also the originality of writing. Participants also expressed concerns about the potential of replacing human beings with AI. This study highlighted the need for a balanced approach to integrating AI and offering professional training for educators and learners on the ethical application of AI tools.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Integration, effectiveness, challenges

Introduction

Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT), which was released by OpenAI (San Francisco, California) in 2018, is a type of Large Language Model (LLM) that aims to replicate human language processing capabilities (Casella et al., 2023). The rapid progression of technology is reshaping traditional language teaching methods (Qureshi et al., 2021). OpenAI released the ChatGPT-3.5 language model family in November 2022 and, subsequently, the ChatGPT-4 family in March 2023 (Skavronskaya et al., 2023). AI technologies provide unique opportunities to enhance various aspects of teaching. This includes personalized instruction, adaptive learning, and immediate feedback (Kem, 2022). The utilization of ChatGPT in higher education warrants contemplation about its capacity for advancing self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning is a student-centered methodology that focuses on individual freedom, decision, and contemplation in the learning process (Matsuyama et al., 2019; Michalsky, 2020; Wang, 2021). ChatGPT has become particularly popular due to its language processing capabilities and ability

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Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (Peer reviewed), Volume 7, January, 2026

to generate human-like responses (Baskara, 2023). These qualities permit for a more piloted and responsive language learning experience, catering to the learners' needs and the pace of each individual student. The integration of AI in ELT shows a paradigm shift in pedagogy. It allows us space for innovation, creating education more personalized, efficient, and effective. Fahimirad and Kotamjani (in Prastiwi, 2019) state that educational technology changes the learning system in the world of education. This happened because of Artificial Intelligence as a part of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) defines the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era as digitization or full-scale automation, emerging technologies advancements in IoT, big data and data analytics, robotics, autonomous systems, sensors and automation, and production methods, such as 3D printing (UNIDO, 2017). Therefore, it becomes necessity for the educational world to take part in bringing changes in its learning strategies to enhance the competitiveness of graduates in competing to equip them with the skill to analyze critically, creatively, and collaboratively.

However, the integration of AI in ELT does not remain without its challenges. There are also pressing concerns related to data privacy, security, and the ethical implications associated with the use of AI technologies in educational settings (Remian, 2019). Similarly, ensuring equitable access to AI-driven educational resources is a key consideration, especially in underserved communities or regions with limited technological infrastructure (Sikder, 2023). In addition, it is important for teachers to receive thorough training and professional development to effectively utilize AI tools in their teaching practices and maximize their potential benefits (Chen et al., 2020). Despite having many challenges, most users of AI systems in the industrial era 4.0 are Generation Y, Z, and Alpha (Gazali, 2018). Therefore, the growing interest of youth in using AI demands innovative and transformative AI integration in education. In view of these observations, the study aimed at exploring the effectiveness of ChatGPT as a tool for diminishing writer's block among English language learners, especially for academic writing.

The integration of AI tools in language education has gained significant attention in recent years, with a particular focus on their potential to enhance writing instruction. Among these tools, ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI, has emerged as a promising resource for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence language model that can generate human-like responses based on input (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Pavlik, 2023; Shen et al., 2023). This language model can process natural language and provide personalized responses to learners based on their individual needs and preferences (Chowdhury, 2023; Gilson et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Qadir (2022) found that learners may become overly reliant on ChatGPT for feedback and resources, which could impede their ability to take ownership of their learning. The study found that both the advantages and challenges of using ChatGPT provide to the students and instructors of communication, business writing, and composition courses. For opportunities, it found that ChatGPT provides a platform for students to seek answers. For challenges, if it is used unethically, it may lead to human unintelligence and unlearning (AlAfnan et al., 2023). Lingard (2023) highlighted the utility of ChatGPT in enhancing brainstorming and ideation processes for writers and learners. ChatGPT is particularly effective in generating titles, outlines, and counterarguments, making it a valuable resource for structuring written work. However, the importance of double-checking the tool's output is especial when users are exploring topics outside their domain of expertise. Similarly, Levine et al. (2024) conducted research and the findings indicate that students used ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas during planning

and drafting, build their arguments, and edit their work, similar to tools like Grammarly. ChatGPT became a helpful tool in the writing process, supporting planning, drafting, and reviewing without replacing the need for critical thinking and creativity. Likewise, Baskara (2023) highlighted the findings that ChatGPT holds significant potential for enhancing EFL writing instruction by providing personalized feedback, generating ideas, and offering practice opportunities. However, challenges exist in its implementation, including issues of accuracy in language generation, dependence on the tool, and concerns about academic integrity. Teachers and learners must carefully manage these aspects to ensure effective integration into the classroom.

In summary, the literature suggests that ChatGPT holds considerable promise as a tool for enhancing EFL writing instruction. The ability of the model to offer personalized feedback, facilitate idea generation, and engage students in interactive learning experiences has been widely recognized. However, concerns regarding its accuracy, the potential for over-reliance, and ethical issues such as plagiarism highlight the need for careful implementation and oversight by educators. Further empirical research is necessary to fully understand the long-term impact of ChatGPT on EFL learners' writing development. The objective of my research paper is to identify the role of ChatGPT in overcoming writer's block among non-native students, with a focus on its effectiveness and potential as a writing aid.

Methods and Procedures

This study utilized phenomenology, which is a qualitative form of inquiry into lived experiences of human existence, and it aims to understand those experiences from the participant's perspectives (Van Manen, 2007, 2017). This design is ingrained in early 20th-century European philosophy, which comprises the use of thick descriptions of close inquiry into lived experience to understand how meaning is created through personified insights and perceptions (Sokolowski, 2000). It is essential to appropriately select research phenomena and participants and formulate research questions for a phenomenological study (Barton, 2020; Duffy & Mhuirthile, 2024) to capture the essence of the participants' shared experiences and construct meaning from their experiences. The phenomenological approach captures the complexity of participants' experiences, providing insights into teachers' interactions with AI technologies (Wilson & Taylor, 2022; Rodriguez & Garcia, 2022). Interpretive phenomenology, which focuses on the interpretation of subjective experience, was chosen as a research methodology strategy (Laverty, 2003).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

I selected three students who were pursuing higher academic degrees at the same university. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling to gather different views on AI for academic writing. The participants were from diverse age groups, genders, and experiences. I gave them pseudonyms as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3) to follow the ethics of research. P1 is originally from Lumbini province, practising as a teacher at the secondary level and pursuing an MPhil degree. Likewise, P2 is from Bagmati province, contributing as a university-level lecturer in a remote part of Nepal, currently studying MPhil. Similarly, P3 is from the Madhesh community, Madhesh province, and is a female participant, practising as a secondary-level English teacher, and has recently joined MPhil. Before the study, the participants were given detailed information, and their consent to participate was obtained, and recruitment occurred through direct contact.

Data Collection Techniques and Tools

For this study, data were collected through unstructured interviews conducted via smartphones with each participant, and the interviews lasted for 45 minutes to one hour. I recorded the interviews and took the important points with the help of pen and paper. The interview times were arranged based on the participants' availability. The interviews involved a wide range of questions regarding AI integration in English language teaching, encouraging the participants to express their thoughts and experiences in detail.

Data Analysis

Audio recording of the interviews was transcribed verbatim, ensuring that the participants' expressions and perspectives were accurately captured. The data was analyzed using manual coding. I read each interview transcript thoroughly multiple times to identify significant statements and recurring themes related to the use of ChatGPT in unblocking writers' ideas. After thoroughly reading the transcripts, I assigned codes to different sections of the data that represented key ideas or concepts.

Ethical Consideration

I fully followed ethical standards to protect participants' right and well-being. I gave them pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and all data was securely stored. Participants were informed to withdraw from the study at any time they want providing informed consent. Identifiable information was excluded from the final analysis, ensuring anonymity. Ethical principles were carefully followed throughout the research process. In qualitative research with human participants, ethical considerations like informed consent and confidentiality are crucial (Bryman, 2012).

Results and Discussion

In this section, I presented university-level students' experiences and perceptions of using ChatGPT, including both pros and cons, based on the lived experiences of research participants. The findings led to the development of three different themes derived from the participants' narratives.

Opportunities and Enhancements in Academic Writing

The findings of the study revealed that the integration of ChatGPT into academic writing practices has opened up tremendous opportunities for not only students but also teachers, especially in the area of English language teaching. Most participants acknowledged the assistance of ChatGPT for unblocking the ideas and maintaining the flow in writing. It provided immediate feedback and significantly improved academic writing.

One participant (P1) remarked, "ChatGPT has become my companion when I am structuring academic papers. It enhances the standard of my writing in ways I did not anticipate." Another participant (P2) shared the sentiment that ChatGPT has become a wonderful tool for correcting grammar, paraphrasing, and creating preliminary drafts. It is useful for refining any academic work. Participants who juggle dual duties like full-time teachers and online students, ChatGPT specifically proved to be helpful. P1 shared, When I have a hectic schedule, ChatGPT helps me organize my thoughts and format my research papers, completing my tasks without compromising the quality before meeting the deadline. Additionally, P2 also admired ChatGPT for its ability to serve different writing styles and needs, assisting users in piloting their write-up to particular academic suggestions such as APA format, references, and citations. Moreover, P3 added, "I use it whenever I don't understand the concept delivered by my teacher. ChatGPT

promptly answers me with a clear understanding, which increases my comprehension ability, and as a result, I become a role model student in my class. P3, belonging to the Madhesi community, reported that English functions as her third language, which creates additional linguistic challenges in her academic journey. She highlighted that the influence of her mother tongue and second language often obstructs her fluency and accuracy while speaking English. Although she possesses a clear conceptual understanding of subject matter in her first language, she struggles to articulate these ideas in written English due to limited vocabulary resources. Consequently, English itself becomes a major barrier that restricts her ability to express her creative and critical thoughts effectively. To overcome these challenges, she reported using ChatGPT as a linguistic support tool, particularly for finding appropriate vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, and translating Nepali text into English. Moreover, she stated that she frequently composes simple sentences on her own and later refines them through ChatGPT to achieve a more standard, native-like academic style. The finding was consistent with the outcome of previous research that Students can reflect on their language learning progress through interactions with ChatGPT and receive feedback on their performance, which can help them better understand their language learning strengths and weaknesses (Leng & Yew, 2020). ChatGPT can provide immediate feedback on its performance, allowing students to learn from mistakes and make necessary adjustments in real-time. This instant feedback can help students develop a sense of control over their learning process and take ownership of their learning (Chen & Wang, 2019). The development of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT has the potential to change how students approach their academic fields. Related literature has shown how AI technology can assist and enhance learning (Patil & Abraham, 2010)

Challenges and Ethical Concerns

Despite having multiple advantages, the participants raised several issues regarding its challenges and ethical concerns regarding ChatGPT. One problem was excessive dependency on AI tools, which could impede creative writing and critical thinking skills. As P1 observed:

while it eases writing, I hesitate to put effort into my work, which ultimately destroys my writing skills. I used to do my work myself and submit assignments to the professor, but he did not appreciate my creativity. My professor inspired my colleagues' writings, who are the main users of the AI tool, which produces high-quality outputs. I asked, "Are we unintentionally promoting academic dishonesty?"

P2 and P3 had the same voice regarding the accessibility of ChatGPT. They remarked that ChatGPT is not universal; students and teachers in remote or underserved areas may not have internet access to benefit from AI tools and technological infrastructures, which can widen the gap between privileged and underprivileged learners. P3 further remarked, "There is a fear that if we heavily rely on AI, the human aspects of learning from the teacher could diminish". Data policy and algorithmic biases were also focused. Participants also highlighted questions regarding how the data given to ChatGPT is stored and used, so it needs transparency and authenticity. P1 shared, "I sometimes think who manages the algorithms. What happens to the data we provide the ChatGPT? These are significant questions that need to be addressed. Participant 2 shared his experience of using ChatGPT to develop presentation slides for a course in Applied Linguistics. He recounted that the AI-generated slides included a statement claiming that the British Empire had colonized Nepal. Unaware of the inaccuracy, he presented the slides before an audience of twenty-five MPhil scholars and his professor. During the presentation, when he mentioned that

Nepal was colonized by the British, his colleagues appeared surprised, and his professor immediately asked him to specify the date of colonization. Unable to respond, he realized that ChatGPT had provided incorrect information. This incident made him aware of the potential unreliability of AI-generated content and the necessity of cross-checking and verifying information before using it in academic contexts. Participant 3 expressed that although ChatGPT helps generate ideas and draft academic texts, it often lacks contextual sensitivity, particularly in addressing culturally and locally grounded issues. She shared an instance where she asked ChatGPT to write an example related to classroom practices in Nepal, but the response reflected Western classroom norms such as the use of advanced digital tools and small student groups, which did not match the realities of Nepali schools. She realized that ChatGPT's responses are often influenced by global or Western contexts rather than local educational practices. This experience made her cautious about depending entirely on AI-generated content, emphasizing the need to adapt and contextualize information according to the Nepali educational and sociocultural environment. The finding is in line with the previous research (Smith et al., 2020; Johnson & Lee, 2019), which shows the importance of balance between leveraging AI's potential benefits and addressing its challenges within language education. Collaborative efforts between stakeholders, including teachers, policymakers, and technology developers, are essential for designing and implementing inclusive AI integration strategies that prioritize equity and access in language education (Garcia & Lopez, 2022; Miller & Smith, 2020).

Balancing Technology with Traditional Pedagogy

Participants highlighted the importance of ChatGPT in the modern era; however, students should use it ethically. They acknowledged the benefit of ChatGPT, but at the same time, they appreciate the significant role of their teachers in helping them use the tool effectively and ethically. Participant 3 remarked:

ChatGPT is beneficial for brainstorming ideas, but it can't replace the support and creative thinking skills that our teachers provide. Teachers have the unique ability to connect with students on a personal level as they understand our struggles, emotions and they motivate us.

Participants suggested using ChatGPT in practical ways, combining with traditional teaching. For example, the teacher asked students to use ChatGPT to gather ideas and improve drafts but also made them think about and explain the changes they made. It helped students remain active in their writing process and improve their critical thinking. P1 explained, he often used ChatGPT to improve his writing, but his teacher encouraged him to think about why he made specific changes. It keeps him involved in the learning process and assists him learn deeply. Furthermore, Participants highlighted that in the context of Nepal, many teachers were unaware of the use of ChatGPT. It meant there was limited understanding regarding ChatGPT among teachers, so that they couldn't differentiate original writing and AI-generated writing. Participant 1 argued:

One day I was in a rush, my deadline was approaching, and I could not focus on my studies as my son was severely ill. I asked for help with my friend, he suggested that me to copy down from ChatGPT. I did not know about the ethical use of such AI. I found the answers that exactly matched what I was thinking of writing.

He further added that his assignments were written coherently, and the language was in such standard form that he was fascinated by the words, grammar, and structures. He also realized that he couldn't produce such high-standard work despite his several attempts. When he submitted that

works, his teacher did not make further inquiry, instead appreciated his work. Later on, he knew his teacher also did not know these kinds of AI tools. After listening to his narratives, it is found that It is important to offer training for teachers regarding AI tools, and such training programs can help teachers to understand AI-assisted work, understand its advantages and shortcomings. By integrating AI tools while maintaining a balance between technological advancements and human-centered learning approaches, we can develop an ideal learning environment that enhances both efficiency and personal engagement. The evidence supported by the previous research (Garcia & Martinez, 2020) which showed that the need for a cautious approach towards AI integration, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balanced approach wherein AI serves as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for human instructors (Lee & Smith, 2017). By understanding and addressing the perceptions of ELT practitioners, the successful implementation of AI technology in language teaching contexts can be achieved (Walker & Garcia, 2021). In addition, proactive measures such as ongoing professional development for teachers are essential to navigate these complexities (Roberts & Johnson, 2022).

Conclusion

AI tools such as ChatGPT have revolutionized teaching and learning methods in recent years. The data from the participants revealed that participants had diverse perspectives regarding the use of ChatGPT. On one hand, AI has become supportive for students and teachers to enhance learning by offering immediate support, providing in-depth explanations of complex thoughts, and enabling students to receive information at any time. On the other hand, issues had been raised over excessive reliance on AI tools, which hindered students' ability to think critically and creatively. They lack problem-solving ability as well. Many participants expressed how ChatGPT assisted them in understanding complex academic concepts, such as grammatical rules and complex theories. It was seen as a tireless tool that offered explanations without time constraints. It is particularly helpful for those who have a busy schedule and lack immediate feedbacks from teachers. As second language learners in ELT my participants sometimes found it complicated to unblock their thought clearly even though they had clear concepts while writing academic research. At that time, ChatGPT became an invaluable source for students whose first language is not English. It supports them in developing language proficiency by providing instant feedback, vocabulary suggestions, and grammatical corrections. The tool also helps them express complex ideas more accurately and confidently in English, which can otherwise be challenging for non-native speakers. Moreover, it serves as a flexible learning companion that allows students to practice and improve their academic writing skills at their own pace.

Despite its benefits, no one denied the truth that excessive reliance on these AI tools like ChatGPT had brought a negative impact on humans' ability to think creatively and critically. Such AI tools offered prompt responses; therefore, students bypassed the habit of engaging their minds to find solutions, ultimately shadowing problem-solving skills, which decreased the confidence level of students later on. Some students became habituated to AI tools; they simply copied and pasted from AI-generated content and submitted it as assignments and homework. Such unethical use of AI promotes plagiarism. This habit could diminish students' skills to develop original ideas or engage deeply with the subject matter. Moreover, it could lead to a knowledge crisis. Another critical issue was that the unequal access to AI tools could promote educational inequalities among students. Particularly, marginalized students who didn't have internet access and could not afford digital devices reinforced existing social and economic inequalities. The lack of access to

technological tools prevents students from utilizing AI as a learning aid which depriving them of the same opportunities that privileged students enjoy. Sometimes, ChatGPT may provide incorrect information, so it is important to cross-check and verify the content before using it. In addition, the tool often overlooks specific local contexts and tends to generate responses based on global perspectives. As a result, its information may not always fit the cultural, educational, or social realities of a particular region, such as Nepal.

Despite this concern, if the students used AI ethically, it could have been a valuable source for learning. The key to leveraging the benefits of AI is to use it incorporating with traditional methods, which could enhance writing skills rather than replacing them completely. AI can improve the learning experience by offering additional resources, detailed explanations, and support. However, it should not take away the importance of independent research, critical thinking, and active engagement with the materials. It is essential to offer training for both teachers and students regarding the ethical uses of AI tools. There might be the risk that AI can replace the role of teachers if we continue to use them without proper trainings and understanding. This study advocated an integrated approach, highlighting collaboration among stakeholders to address systemic hindrances, encourage innovation, and ensure ethical use of AI in language education.

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