

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES USING CHATGPT AS A LEARNING RESOURCE IN ENGLISH CLASS AT SMA NEGERI 1 PEMATANGSIANTAR

Trinita Ivana Rumapea¹, Sanggam Siahaan², Bernieke A.R Damanik³

¹ Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar; trinitarumapea@gmail.com

² Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar; sanggam.siahaan@uhnp.ac.id

³ Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar; bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2026-06-18

Revised 2026-06-27

Accepted 2026-07-12

ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of Grade XI students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar in using ChatGPT as a learning resource in English writing classes. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from 36 students through open-ended questionnaires, essay writing tasks, and classroom observations. The findings show that ChatGPT improved students' grammar, vocabulary, idea generation, and writing confidence. However, challenges such as over-reliance, stylistic mismatch, and limited internet access were also identified. Students who used ChatGPT critically and reflectively produced better writing than those who relied on it passively. The study concludes that ChatGPT can effectively support EFL writing when accompanied by active student engagement and appropriate teacher guidance.

Keyword: ChatGPT; EFL writing; phenomenological study; scaffolding; self-regulated learning.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY](#) license.



Corresponding Author:

Trinita Ivana Rumapea

Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar; trinitarumapea@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital technology has changed students' learning styles especially in the context of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning in the 21st century. Generative artificial intelligence (AI), especially from OpenAI, is one of the recent technological innovations, and it has become remarkably popular among students all over the world since its release in November 2022 (OpenAI, 2022). ChatGPT is an AI tool that can answer questions, correct grammar, explain vocabulary and simulate language practice making it an attractive resource for EFL learners who want to have support outside the classroom (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023).

There are some problems that Indonesian senior high school students have in English writing, including lack of vocabulary, grammatical problems, and no exposure to the authentic

English (Richards, 2017). ChatGPT appears to address these issues by offering immediate and personalised feedback, drawing upon principles of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2015). As per Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), ChatGPT can act as a more knowledgeable other and provide scaffolding to students to arrive at writing outcomes which they cannot do independently.

But when it comes to ChatGPT, there is a wide gap between the expected and the actual usage. According to research, the majority of students use AI tools superficially, aiming for quick assignment completion rather than improving their language skills (Ayanwale et al., 2025; Baskara & Mukarto, 2023). Most of the existing research have been done in the university level or outside the Indonesian context, thus there is a big empirical gap on the experiences of Indonesian senior high school EFL students.

This research fills three research gaps. First, there is a theoretical gap as there are no qualitative phenomenological studies on ChatGPT in EFL settings. Second, there is an empirical gap due to the unavailability of research on Indonesian senior high school students. Third, there is a phenomenological gap as there are no studies on students' lived experience of ChatGPT. This research investigates (a) the advantages and disadvantages of the students in using ChatGPT for writing in English; (b) the students' engagement with ChatGPT in terms of scaffolding in Vygotsky's ZPD framework, and (c) the students' lived experiences with ChatGPT as a learning resource in English writing class at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar Grade XI students. The analytical writing rubric developed by Jacobs et al. (1981) was also used to assess essay quality, to triangulate experiential data with written production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ChatGPT as a Learning Resource in EFL Contexts

ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer) is a conversational AI tool developed by OpenAI that produces human-like responses based on the context (Firat, 2023). It does not work like normal search engines but produces answers tailored to individual requests on the fly. Kasneci et al. (2023) describe ChatGPT as a disruptive tool in education providing customised support that is often missing in the conventional classroom environment. Students' use of ChatGPT in EFL writing has been reported in the areas of brainstorming, grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and paragraph organisation (Baskara & Mukarto, 2023; Putri et al., 2025).

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is based on five theoretical frames. First, Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological theory is the philosophical basis for an investigation of students' lived experiences. Phenomenology aims to reveal the essence of human experience from the perspective of the participants themselves and requires researchers to engage in *epoche*, a conscious suspension of assumptions (Husserl, 1970). Second, the Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) theory by Zimmerman (2015) offers a perspective to explore if ChatGPT is helpful or harmful to students' autonomous learning in the three phases of SRL; *forethought*,

performance, and self-reflection. Thirdly, the difference between what the learner can do by themselves and what they could do with the help of an expert is described in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of proximal development (ZPD). Fourth the Scaffolding Theory of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) elaborates on the ZPD by emphasising that effective support must be contingent and gradually faded as the learner becomes independent. Fifth, the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981) offers an analytical framework to assess five writing components; Content, Organisation, Vocabulary, Language Use and Mechanics, and it is employed as a descriptive lens to evaluate students' written essays in this research.

2. METHOD

The research design used in this research is a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach referring to Moustakas (1994). Qualitative research is best suited for exploring complex lived phenomenon that cannot be sufficiently understood by numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach provides a way to deeply analyse the subjective meanings that students construct from their experiences with ChatGPT. This research was conducted in SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar, North Sumatera, Indonesia in March-April 2026. The subjects of the study were 36 students of grade XI, from one class which was purposely selected. ChatGPT had been used by the students for their English learning.

Data were collected using three instruments. The first was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 10 questions, divided into three sections. Section A (items 1-4) on benefits and challenges, Section B (items 5-7) on the role of ChatGPT as scaffolding, and Section C (items 8-10) on lived experiences. The second instrument was an essay writing task, in which the students were allowed to use ChatGPT to write about their holiday experience in about 500 words. Four short reflection questions were attached to capture self-reported use. The third was classroom observation using a 15-indicator behavioural checklist and open-ended field-notes.

The ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981) was also employed as a descriptive analytical lens to analyse the quality of the 36 recount essays in five writing components, namely, Content, Organisation, Vocabulary, Language Use and Mechanics. The framework was not employed as a scoring tool, but as a systematic descriptive framework to probe writing quality in relation to students' patterns of ChatGPT use.

The qualitative data from the questionnaire and classroom observation were analysed based on the six-phase thematic analysis approach by Braun & Clarke (2006). The six phases are (1) familiarisation, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Essay data were analysed descriptively within the framework of Jacobs et al. (1981). To increase credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability, data triangulation, member checking and reflexivity were used to meet the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Trinita Ivana Rumapea, Sanggam Siahaan, Bernieke A.R Damanik/ Students' Experiences Using Chatgpt As A Learning Resource In English Class At Sma Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar

Benefits and Challenges of Using ChatGPT in English Writing Learning

Analysis of sections the responses to the questionnaire revealed four major themes of benefits and three themes of challenges that were interpreted using Zimmerman's (2015) SRL framework.

Benefits the first theme was sentence improvement and grammar correction. Most students routinely used ChatGPT to check grammar and improve sentence quality. One student, Ferdinand Marbun, said: "I used ChatGPT to correct my sentences, explain grammar or give me ideas." This is consistent with the self-monitoring phase of SRL, where students actively sought feedback about their writing performance (Zimmerman, 2015). The second theme was the organisation of ideas and the essay itself. Students described ChatGPT as a useful brainstorming collaborator. Juan Mario Hutajulu said he would "request for topic suggestions, outlines or examples" before writing, mirroring the SRL forethought phase. The third theme was the expansion of vocabulary and awareness of language. Kristlin Rumapea said they have learned to write better sentences and increase their vocabulary, adding that talking to ChatGPT helped them learn new vocabulary and write more natural sentences. The fourth theme was greater confidence in writing. Many participants reported less anxiety and increased confidence. "It makes me feel more confident in writing English and I now see mistakes as part of learning," Michelle Simanjuntak said.

Three themes of challenge were found. The most common was over-reliance and dependency. Sevania Siahaan confessed, "I have given up thinking or looking for synonyms myself," and Shteven Alesandro said, "I always need ChatGPT in writing because I do not understand the English subject well." These responses suggest passive engagement which is not consistent with SRL principles (Baskara & Mukarto, 2023). The second challenge was a style mismatch between ChatGPT output and students' own writing voice. "Sometimes, the answer from ChatGPT is too formal or not exactly what I mean," Glen Arfy Purba said. The third challenge was limited internet access that limited the equitable use of ChatGPT and raised concerns about technology-based learning equity in Indonesia.

ChatGPT as Scaffolding within Vygotsky's ZPD Framework

The analysis of the Section B responses included an analysis of the students' interaction with ChatGPT using Wood et al.'s (1976) attributes of scaffolding, contingency, fading and transfer of responsibility. As for the help requested by the students, they consistently requested grammar correction, sentence improvement, vocabulary suggestions, paragraph structuring, situating ChatGPT within the functional space of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). These intentional prompts like "Can you check my paragraph and give me ideas?" (Ferdinand Marbun) and "Please fix my paragraph and explain the mistakes" (Binsar Naibaho) are analogous to goal-oriented, scaffolded engagement as suggested by Wood et al. (1976).

Students were divided on the quality of engagement with feedback. Most said they read, understood and compared the AI suggestions with their own original writing. "I read the corrections and compare them to what I wrote originally so that I can learn and not make the

same mistakes next time,” said Michelle Simanjuntak. A few reported passive copy-paste behaviour, avoiding the cognitive involvement necessary for real scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976).

As for the temporary or permanent nature of scaffolding, most of the students viewed the support from ChatGPT as temporary. “I think Chat GPT is just a temporary help,” said Ferdinand Marbun. But some of them showed permanent dependence, as Shieven Alesandro’s answer demonstrates. These cases echo the fear of Baidoo-Anu and Owusu Ansah (2023) that AI may become a permanent crutch, not a useful scaffold.

Students’ Lived Experiences Using ChatGPT

Analysis of the responses in Section C and essay reflections using Moustakas’s (1994) framework revealed three invariant experiential themes. The first theme was empowerment and decreased writing anxiety. The most significant experience was a positive affective change from fear of making mistakes to confidence and readiness to participate in English writing. Juan Hutajulu thought, “ChatGPT makes me feel more confident and helps me think more clearly and organise my ideas better.” This is in line with the phenomenological notion of technological mediation as empowerment (Moustakas, 1994).

A second theme was memorable experiences of Overcoming Writing Challenges. The most important reported moments were when ChatGPT helped students solve writing problems that could not be solved before. Bernike Pasaribu shared how she used to not know how to start an essay, but with the help of “It made me feel proud,” she said. The third theme was awareness of AI dependency and need for balance. Most experiences were positive, but several students noted awareness of dependency risks. “I feel it really helped me somehow, but in another mind, I think using the chat makes me want instant way every time,” Mutiara Siagian said. One student reported that they got a perfect score without really studying, by using ChatGPT, and this has raised concerns about academic integrity.

Essay Quality Analysis Using Jacobs et al. (1981) Rubric

Quality Analysis Report for Essay Jacobs et al. (1981) Rubric was used. Analysis of the 36 recount essays using the five-component framework of Jacobs et al. (1981) yielded the following results: Content: Based on personal experience, students who used the writing assistance of ChatGPT selectively wrote richer, more substantive essays. Students’ essays with high reliance on ideas generated by ChatGPT had more generic and formulaic descriptions, confirming the concern by Baidoo-Anu and Owusu Ansah (2023) about superficial outputs from passive use of AI.

Organisation: Most essays had acceptable chronological structure typical of recount genre, with clear orientation, sequence of events and re-orientation. Students such as Juan Mario Hutajulu who used the tool to outline produced essays with a more coherent organisational flow.

Vocabulary: Students who asked for vocabulary suggestions from ChatGPT, such as Bernike Pasaribu and Grace Sitorus, used a much broader vocabulary that was contextually

appropriate. Naomi Siahaan's essay was an example of this with her lush descriptive language about a beach setting. Language Use: Generally adequate grammar with consistent use of past tense by most students. Ferdinand Marbun and the other students who used ChatGPT to check their grammar were more consistent in grammar throughout their essays.

Mechanics: Mechanics of most essays were adequate with minor, non-impeding errors. Overall, students who used ChatGPT to proofread had fewer mechanical errors in their essays. As a general rule, the essays scored highest in Organisation and Language Use, the two aspects most immediately enhanced by the structural and grammatical correction functions of the chatgpt. Crucially, students who engaged reflectively with the AI produced better quality writing across all five components than passive users, confirming that the quality of engagement not mere use is the determinant of the educational value of the AI.

Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observation was applied to validate the patterns reported in the questionnaire. Most students actively participated in the writing task, opening up ChatGPT and typing in original prompts, instead of passively engaging. The more thoughtful users of ChatGPT were fewer, but more strategic. One student finished the essay without the help of ChatGPT. Several students were seen to repeatedly follow up on ChatGPT in an active, dialogic way of interacting that fits with scaffolded learning (Wood et al., 1976).

Tabel 1. Summary of ChatGPT Use Patterns and Essay Quality

ChatGPT Use Pattern	Dominant Behavior	Essay Quality (Jacobs et al., 19
Reflective use (read, compare, apply)	Own writing + selective AI support	Higher across all 5 components
Passive use (copy-paste without review)	Heavy reliance on AI-generated content	Surface-adequate but limited depth

Discussion

The results of this research extend several unique aspects to the emerging literature on ChatGPT use in EFL education. First, this research provides empirical data from a context that is not found in the seven reviewed studies, namely Grade XI students of an Indonesian public senior high school (SMA Negeri). This research is different from the research conducted by Baskara and Mukarto (2023) and Putri et al. (2025) who investigated students in Indonesian universities and Zahran et al. (2025) and Xiao and Zhi (2023) who investigated tertiary contexts outside Indonesia. It provides data from a population with different curricular needs, levels of proficiency and profiles of digital literacy.

Second, the use of Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to guide this research differs from previous research that were mainly perception questionnaires (Putri et al., 2025) or multi-method but not phenomenological approaches (Tram et al., 2024). The phenomenological analysis made it possible for the researcher to make visible the essential

subjective structure of the students' experiences including affective dimensions such as writing anxiety, empowerment, and the tension between autonomy and dependency that are not fully accessible to quantitative or descriptive methods.

Third, triangulating experiential data (questionnaire), behavioural data (observation) and textual data (essay analysis using the rubric by Jacobs et al. (1981)) offers a more holistic understanding of the impact of ChatGPT on the writing process and written product. None of the seven research reviewed used a standardised writing rubric, in combination with experiential and behavioural data, to assess students' actual writing performance. This combination of three data layers is a methodological contribution for the area.

Fourth, the theoretical multi-framework design based on SRL theory, ZPD, scaffolding and phenomenology to explore different research problems offers a more nuanced interpretation than research that adopt a single theoretical lens (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). This division allowed for a fine-grained analytical distinction between benefits and challenges (SRL), scaffolding quality (ZPD and Wood et al.), and subjective experience (phenomenology).

This research also has limitations. The 36 students sample at one site provides phenomenological depth but limits transferability. The cross sectional design of this research does not allow for a longitudinal assessment of writing development. Academic integrity was a concern but it was not studied in a systematic way. Future research should address these limitations by using multi-site longitudinal designs with ethical instruments and pre-post writing across different types of texts .

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experience of grade XI students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar in using ChatGPT as a learning resource in English writing class. Results indicate that ChatGPT provided significant advantages for grammar correction, idea generation, vocabulary development and writing confidence, which is in line with Zimmerman's (2015) SRL framework, but risks of over-reliance, stylistic mismatch, and inequitable access were identified. Analysis was based on Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and Wood et al.'s (1976) scaffolding theory. Results showed that for most ChatGPT was an effective, temporary scaffolding, however, a minority demonstrated dependency patterns that inhibit long-term writing development. The phenomenological analysis revealed that the students' main lived experience was one of empowerment and decreased anxiety, though with a nuanced awareness of dependency. The essay analysis using Jacobs et al.'s (1981) rubric confirmed that reflective engagement with ChatGPT led to higher quality writing across all five components than passive use. This research concludes that the educational value of ChatGPT in EFL writing is contingent upon the quality of student engagement and the provision of explicit pedagogical guidance. Indonesia's teachers, curriculum developers and

policy makers should ponder the integration of AI literacy in EFL pedagogy by designing tasks that foster reflective, purposeful and ethically responsible use of AI writing tools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express deepest gratitude to all individuals and institutions who have given invaluable support in the completion of this research. The author are very thankful to Prof. Dr. Sanggam Siahaan, M.Pd., as the first supervisor and Dr. Bernieke A.R. Damanik, S.Pd., M.Hum., as the second supervisor for their continuous guidance, insightful feedback, and encouragement in the whole research process. The writer also would like to give a big thanks to SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar, especially the principal, English teacher and the students of class XI-2 for the warm welcome and valuable cooperation during the research process. The support and participation of the researcher helped and assisted them a lot in making observations and collecting data effectively. This work would not have been possible without the academic and moral support of all those who have contributed directly or indirectly to its success.

REFERENCES

- Ayanwale, M. A., et al. (2025). Cognitive engagement patterns with AI tools in higher education: A systematic review. *Journal of Educational Technology Research*, 18(1), 45–68.
- Baidoo-Anu, D., & Owusu Ansah, L. (2023). Education in the era of generative artificial intelligence (AI): Understanding the potential benefits of ChatGPT in promoting teaching and learning. *Journal of AI*, 7(1), 52–62.
- Baskara, R., & Mukarto. (2023). Exploring the implications of ChatGPT for language learning in higher education. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 343–358.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Firat, M. (2023). What ChatGPT means for universities: Perceptions of scholars and students. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 6(1), 1–9.
- Harmer, J. (2004). *How to teach writing*. Pearson Longman.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press.
- Jacobs, H. L., Zinkgraf, S. A., Wormuth, D. R., Hartfiel, V. F., & Hughey, J. B. (1981). *Testing ESL composition: A practical approach*. Newbury House.
- Kasneci, E., et al. (2023). ChatGPT for good? Opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103, 102274.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.

- OpenAI. (2022). Introducing ChatGPT. <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>
- Pintrich, P. R. (2004). A conceptual framework for assessing motivation and self-regulated learning in college students. *Educational Psychology Review*, 16(4), 385–407.
- Putri, R., Setiawan, A., & Wahyudin, D. (2025). Students' perceptions of ChatGPT in EFL classroom contexts. *TEFLIN Journal*, 36(1), 88–107.
- Qadir, J. (2023). Engineering education in the era of ChatGPT: Promise and pitfalls of generative AI for education. *IEEE Access*, 11, 65780–65795.
- Richards, J. C. (2017). Teaching English through English: Proficiency, pedagogy and performance. *RELC Journal*, 48(1), 7–22.
- Rudolph, J., Tan, S., & Tan, S. (2023). ChatGPT: Bullshit spewer or the end of traditional assessments in higher education? *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 6(1), 342–363.
- Tram, T. T., Nguyen, N. T., & Tran, T. T. (2024). ChatGPT as a self-learning tool for EFL learners: A multi-method study. *System*, 121, 103234.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17(2), 89–100.
- Xiao, Y., & Zhi, Y. (2023). An exploratory study of EFL learners' use of ChatGPT for language learning tasks. *CALL-EJ*, 24(2), 14–39.
- Zahran, D., Al-Khatib, H., & Alhadrami, A. (2025). EFL students' use of ChatGPT for writing tasks: Benefits, challenges, and academic integrity. *Arab World English Journal*, 16(1), 78–95.
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2015). Self-regulated learning. In *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 541–546). Elsevier.