

“It’s like a teacher”: undergraduate students’ experiences of using ChatGPT as a writing support tool in an ESL classroom

Beauty B. Ntereke ; Boitumelo T. Ramoroka; Brigid G. Conteh

University of Botswana

nterekeb@ub.ac.bw
ramorokab@ub.ac.bw
contehb@ub.ac.bw

Abstract

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) such as ChatGPT into teaching and learning has become a significant area of interest in higher education as it has significantly reshaped students writing practices. Studies suggest that it has the potential to dismantle language barriers and foster multilingualism and linguistic inclusivity in multilingual writing classrooms (Malik et al., 2023). However, while the use of AI has been proven to be a significant tool in enhancing students’ communicative competence (Hasanein and Sobaih, 2023), particularly for students from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, there are widespread concerns among the academic community that AI tools may negatively impact academic integrity, creativity, and critical thinking skills in academic writing (Neumann et al., 2023). To address these concerns, instead of discouraging the use of AI, we conducted a 12-week intervention academic writing course where we integrated ChatGPT in the course. The purpose of the study was to explore its use as a writing support tool as well as a strategy to foster students’ responsible use of the tool. At the end of the course, focus group interviews were carried out with students to explore their experiences with the use of ChatGPT as a writing support tool. The findings of the focus group interviews gave us pedagogical insights into how educators can leverage the affordances of AI in the teaching of academic writing and how AI can be used to enhance equality and level writing expectations for students who come from non- native English-speaking backgrounds

Key words: ChatGPT, multilingual, academic literacy, linguistic diversity, academic writing

Introduction

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into teaching and learning has become a significant area of interest in higher education among scholars in the last decade and it is significantly reshaping educational paradigms, particularly in second language academic writing (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Huang et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023; De La Vall & Araya, 2023; Guo & Wang, 2024). This interest is motivated by the potential benefits of AI powered writing tools within the language classroom, as highlighted by a growing number of studies exploring how AI influences students' writing practices (Barrot, 2023; Chan & Hu, 2023; Malik et al., 2023).

Studies also indicate that generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly offer valuable support for the different aspects of academic writing such as spelling and grammar check, style checking and proof reading (Zhao et al, 2024; Mazuik et al., 2023; Yang & Li, 2024). These tools facilitate better sentence structures and vocabulary choices, enhancing writing quality. The transformative impact of generative AI on education and language acquisition is evident in its potential to dismantle language barriers and foster 'multilingualism and linguistic inclusivity' (Malik et al., 2023:1).

The introduction of ChatGPT into language education has further revolutionised the field of AI by establishing itself as a necessary tool for higher education students due to its numerous benefits and educational affordances (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Baskara & Mukarto, 2023; Cai et al., 2024; Hong, 2023; Yan & Zhang, 2024; 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023). ChatGPT provides dynamic and interactive learning environments, offers language instruction, creates content, provides immediate feedback, helps learners refine their language proficiency and rectify language errors (Li et al., 2024; Yan, 2024; Vera, 2023). It significantly supports students' academic writing practices and enhances their communicative competence (Zadorozhnyy & Lai

2023). Thus, it is not surprising that many learners already use ChatGPT at different stages of their writing process compared to their teachers.

However, despite these benefits, concerns exist within the academic community. There are worries about students overdependence on AI tools which may diminish their creativity and critical thinking skills (Marzuki et al., 2023, Neumann et al., 2023), leading to a lack of originality in academic writing and independent learning skills. Additionally, academic integrity is a critical concern, as AI tools can facilitate academic dishonesty and plagiarism if not used ethically (Barret et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024; Yan, 2024).

This study, therefore, explores the potential of AI, particularly ChatGPT, in supporting L2 writers within a social constructivist framework. By examining how ChatGPT can create interactive learning environments that imitate collaborative experiences, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on AI's role in enhancing academic writing in L2 contexts. It also aims to provide insights into how AI can foster a collaborative and inclusive learning environment that enhances students' language and writing skills while promoting ethical academic practices.

Motivation for the study

Academic writing is a complex task that requires proficiency in language use, creativity, critical thinking, and both linguistic and content knowledge (Hyland, 2003). However, students in ESL contexts, such as in Botswana, often struggle with structuring academic papers and expressing ideas coherently. One of the biggest challenges in addressing these difficulties is the inability to provide meaningful and timely individualized feedback due to large class sizes and limited instructional resources (Barkaoui, 2007; Woodworth & Barkaoui, 2020; Yan & Zhang, 2024).

Given these challenges, we sought an intervention that could provide students with more accessible, individualized writing support. We integrated ChatGPT into our

writing classrooms as a tool to offer real-time linguistic resources, suggestions, and feedback, aiming to bridge the support gap that traditional feedback mechanisms fail to address. While AI tools, like ChatGPT, have demonstrated potential in academic writing support, most research has focused on Western and Asian contexts, with little attention to African higher education settings like Botswana. This study examines students' experiences with ChatGPT as a writing support tool and its impact on their academic writing skills. By exploring how ChatGPT can mitigate the limitations of large class sizes and one-on-one feedback, the study contributes both regionally relevant insights and globally applicable knowledge on AI-supported academic writing pedagogy.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do students' experience the use of ChatGPT as a writing support tool in their academic writing process?
- What are students' perceptions of ChatGPT's effectiveness in enhancing their academic writing skills?

Social Constructivism and the role of scaffolding in the writing process

This research adopts Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist framework to examine ChatGPT's role as a writing support tool for ESL learners in academic literacy writing classes. Social constructivism views learning as an active process where knowledge is co-constructed through collaboration, meaningful interaction, and critical engagement (Jonassen et al., 1995). It emphasizes the creation of learning environments that provide relevant tools, content, and resources to foster critical thinking and knowledge construction (Kim & Adlof, 2023).

While traditional social constructivism centres on human interaction, this study extends the perspective to explore how AI tools like ChatGPT can simulate interactive and

collaborative learning experiences. The study explores how ChatGPT can support ESL writers by offering immediate feedback, linguistic resources, and writing suggestions, imitating peer assistance, and promoting self-directed learning (Song & Song, 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023).

Within this framework, ChatGPT functions as both a mediational and collaborative tool, providing scaffolding that enables ESL writers to perform tasks they might otherwise find challenging. This aligns with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners achieve more with the guidance of a "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO) (Jingxin & Razali, 2020). By modeling advanced language use and offering tailored feedback, ChatGPT helps students refine ideas, detect errors, and gradually develop independence in writing (Li et al., 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Moreover, ChatGPT's personalized support can address common L2 writing challenges, including grammar, coherence, and vocabulary (Hinkel, 2011). Its ability to provide instant feedback and engage learners in iterative revision processes enhances writing proficiency and confidence. Such AI-assisted scaffolding can help bridge linguistic inequalities perpetuated by monolingual instructional practices, empowering ESL writers to make informed decisions and express their ideas more clearly (Barrot, 2023; Huang & Tan, 2023).

In essence, writing from a sociocultural perspective is a dialogic process that benefits from collaboration, feedback, and co-construction of knowledge. By situating ChatGPT within a social constructivist framework, this research demonstrates its potential to foster supportive learning environments where ESL students can overcome language barriers and develop as confident, independent academic writers.

Methodology

Research Design

In order to gain a deeper understanding of ESL students' experiences and perceptions of using ChatGPT as a writing support tool in their writing process, a descriptive qualitative research design was employed (Cohen et al., 2018, Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative inquiry has been used widely in L2 writing research to learn about the complexities and particularities of writers' attitudes, practices, and texts (Casanave, 2018). It also helps to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Context

This study was conducted during the second semester (January to May 2024) at a public university in Botswana in a 14- week, three (3) credit Academic Literacy course. This course is a compulsory course for all first year Humanities enrolled at the university. These students, who are primarily ESL, obtained a minimum Grade C or better in the Botswana General Education Secondary Certificate (BGCSE), which is equivalent to the Cambridge O' levels.

The primary aim of this academic literacy course is to provide first-year Humanities students with a foundation in academic essay writing. The course, therefore, is designed to develop students' general academic writing skills focusing on the common language forms and functions that enable students to produce clear, coherent, and academically appropriate texts. In addition, the course is aimed at developing students' process-oriented writing skills, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, and providing feedback on writing. Therefore, this semester-long course required students to complete various writing activities as well as a long academic essay in order to enhance their writing abilities.

The intervention

One hundred and five (105) students were enrolled in this course during the second semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. Students were required to work in pairs to write a 1000 to 1200 words expository essay over ten weeks. The purpose of the assignment was twofold: First, to support students as they progressed through the stages of the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading. Second, to help students develop critical thinking skills needed to work with emerging AI technologies. Upon completion of each writing stage, students were expected to submit drafts to their lecturer for discussion and feedback.

Stage 1 - The pre-writing stage

At this stage, the students were asked to choose a topic from the broad topics provided, narrow the topic, do topic analysis, activate existing knowledge and arrange their ideas into a preliminary outline. Then they were required to collaborate with ChatGPT-3 tool. For students to effectively collaborate, the lecturer first introduced them to the tool by explaining what ChatGPT is, how it works, and the ethical implications for its use, before they were individually asked to register for a free account. Students were then asked to input the topic they had worked with into ChatGPT to generate a preliminary outline. They compared their original outline with that of ChatGPT, identify similarities and differences, and incorporate useful ideas from ChatGPT into their outlines. At the end of this stage, pairs submitted their original outline, the outline from ChatGPT and the integrated outline.

The next step was to search the university library databases for scholarly sources. Then they were to input their topic on ChatGPT and ask it to provide citations on the topic they were investigating. They, then, conducted research on the databases and scholar google to check if they would find the same sources listed by ChatGPT. They evaluated

the accuracy and reliability of ChatGPT's citations using specific criteria (e.g., relevance, credibility, and consistency). Finally, they created a detailed outline based on their research.

Stage 2: Writing the draft

At this stage, students were required to write a draft of their essay, with the expectation that they integrate evidence from the different sources they had read. After writing the draft, they were required to input their detailed outline on ChatGPT and request it to provide a draft essay based on the detailed outline. Pairs would then compare their draft with that generated by ChatGPT and then incorporate any useful ideas from the ChatGPT essay draft into their essay.

Stage 3: Revision and Review

This stage involved guided revision and peer review. The peer review process is critical in essay writing because it helps students to assess and provide constructive feedback to their peers as well as equip them with skills to self-assess and improve their own work (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Students were required to do an in-depth examination of their peers' draft essay. To facilitate this process, guiding questions were provided to ensure students focused on content, organization, and clarity. Pairs then exchanged their drafts for peer review and had to revise and reorganise ideas as needed. After incorporating peer feedback, students proofread their essays before submitting the final version.

Data collection

Participants

Out of the one hundred and five (105) students enrolled in the course, a total of 12 students from Media Studies, Digital Media, Environmental Science and Public Administration participated in the study. Convenience sampling was employed, as participants were readily available and accessible to the researcher (Cresswell, 2012).

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were used because of their interactive nature and their ability to produce rich data. The less threatening environment enabled participants to freely share their ideas with the researchers and other group participants (Hyland, 2016). Two focus groups, each consisting of six students, participated in the interviews. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and share personal insights into their interactions with ChatGPT. The interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim, with each session lasting approximately 45 to 50 minutes. To maintain trustworthiness and credibility of the data, the interviews were conducted by two researchers who did not teach the students. This approach helped to ensure that the data collection process was rigorous and unbiased.

Analysis

The analysis of the focus group interviews involved a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where transcripts were examined for recurring themes and patterns related to participants' experiences and perceptions of using ChatGPT. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of how students perceived the tool's impact on their overall academic writing experiences. The analysis was conducted by both researchers to ensure inter-rater reliability and to validate the findings through a consensus. The researchers individually read the transcripts for the two focus group interviews to become familiar with the data. They then reread and continuously analysed the data until no significant themes emerged to ensure comprehensive theme development within the two focus group transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They searched for similar themes from the focus groups, coded and created summaries of their data and searched for interrelationships between codes, and then for themes and subthemes. To identify discrepancies and ensure consistent coding, the researchers made comparisons of the individual initial data analysis to remove any preconceptions from the coding

and discussed the descriptive data. They reached a consensus on the major themes that specifically addressed the research questions.

Presentation of findings

The results are presented according to the research questions and the themes that emerged from the discussions. The first question sought to explore students' experiences with the use of ChatGPT as a writing support tool while the second question explored students' perceptions on the role of ChatGPT in enhancing their academic writing skills. Six (6) major themes were developed during the analysis with themes 1-3 providing insights into research question 1, and themes 4 to 6 providing insights into research question 2.

RQ 1: How do students' experiences with the use of ChatGPT as a writing support tool?

Discussions under research question 1 generated the following themes: reactions to the integration of ChatGPT into the academic writing environment, concerns regarding potential overreliance on ChatGPT, and concerns regarding the potential for ChatGPT to promote academic dishonesty.

1. Reactions to the integration of ChatGPT into the academic writing environment

When participants were asked to describe their initial reactions to the introduction of ChatGPT in class, they described mixed emotions of the integration into an academic writing class. Most participants expressed 'shock', 'surprise', 'disbelief' in how ChatGPT would be incorporated into academic writing. They were apprehensive as they felt that the introduction of ChatGPT was 'like a shortcut in the writing processes' and 'being fed with information that we are supposed to find ourselves'. They indicated that they did not expect their lecturer to even incorporate it into teaching because other lecturers often discouraged them from using it. One participant made this observation;

“some lecturers had mentioned that don’t use ChatGPT, I guess that is where we got it being a negative thing”.

However, a few participants expressed ‘excitement’ and ‘relief’. For instance, one participant indicated that she felt excited as this was going to make life easy for them. However, they lamented that their lecturers’ perceptions on the use of ChatGPT for academic writing is negative and as a result, they discourage them from using the tool. One participant indicated that lecturers “*are very strict and they tell us not to use it.*” Students felt that instead of lecturers barring them from using the tool, they could at least teach them how to use it so that they use it responsibly. They said;

I feel like lecturers shouldn’t really emphasize that ‘Don’t use ChatGPT’, at least they should acknowledge that it helps us. They should teach us how to use it. They should at the start of the course say, ‘I don’t mind you using it but here are the limits’.

We should first start with being taught before we can use AI tools, learn the basics, then when we kind of understand then you can use them.

Furthermore, other participants expressed disappointment that some lecturers are even sceptical of students’ work and believe that if a student submits quality work, they might have copied from ChatGPT. One participant said; *Lecturers are now more sceptical of students’ quality of work if you submit quality work they wonder if you really came up with that.*

Interestingly, contrary to our expectations, participants indicated that they had never used ChatGPT for school related activities but had rather used it to get opinions like asking it to help write a birthday message for a friend and engaging with it for conversations on general topics. Surprisingly, other participants did not even know about ChatGPT despite the perception that these students are digital natives. One participant made this comment;

I did not know what ChatGPT was, and I thought it would be interesting to work with it in an academic environment. It was also an eye opener for me.

Another participant echoed the same sentiment saying, *'I never had a personal account. I did not know anything about ChatGPT.'*

2. Concerns regarding potential overreliance on ChatGPT

Most participants expressed concerns about the use of ChatGPT for academic writing because they believed that relying on ChatGPT would make their work feel inauthentic and that they will not feel as fulfilled as when they put in some work, particularly that they are in the creative field. Most of the participants felt that dependence on the use of ChatGPT for writing had the potential to kill their creativity, innovation and critical thinking skills. Some participants made the following observations;

Every academic writing you can have different ways of approaching it, if you are creative, whereas if you depend on AI you are going to be a robot.

I do not want to be too dependent on it. for you to be creative, your work has to be authentic, your work has to connect to people . . .

It will box us in the same thought process, and we are all following what ChatGPT is giving us, and we think it is better. We are not going to think outside the box."

I feel like it makes me take less pride in my work. You feel you are being replaced. You want to say – You know what, I actually did this, it's me.

3. Concerns regarding the potential for ChatGPT to promote academic dishonesty.

Some participants were concerned that the use of ChatGPT had the potential to encourage students to plagiarise and use inaccurate and outdated information. For

instance, one participant lamented that using ChatGPT *'can promote plagiarism for someone not willing to look at other sources and to bring it their own thoughts to work'*.

While another participant initially believed that using ChatGPT was a form of academic dishonesty because one would be, *'copying and presenting something as your own'*; her perspective subsequently evolved, and she recognised that its effective use depends on both the individual utilising it and the manner in which it is employed. She pointed out that, *'if you are mindful, if you care about what you are writing about, it becomes an enhancement versus something that you embody as your own'*.

Furthermore, some participants observed that sometimes ChatGPT gave them inaccurate and outdated information. One participant said, *'It will give examples, but it is likely that those will not be recent'*. Another participant also mentioned that when he prompted the tool to provide citations for him, he realised that although some sources were correct, others were non-existent.

I asked AI to provide citations for me, the first one was credible, the second one was completely made up and the rest, though they looked real, they were false.

Most of the participants who had had the same experience echoed similar sentiments that they had to go an extra mile to cross-check information. For instance, one participant said, *'sometimes references do not exist. If I do not put in the work of finding references, then I am going to have incorrect references'*. Another participant reiterated, *'That is why I say you read through . . . I remember when I was doing an assignment, and when I read through and compared to what I had, they were not making sense, so some information is made up.'*

RQ 2: What are students' perceptions of ChatGPT's effectiveness in enhancing their academic writing skills?

The second research question explored students' perceptions on the role of ChatGPT in enhancing their academic writing skills and the following themes were generated:

perceived improvements in level of confidence in academic writing, boosting of linguistic confidence and academic vocabulary, and influence of ChatGPT on students' approach to academic writing.

1. Perceived improvements in the level of confidence in academic writing

Generally, participants indicated that the integration of ChatGPT into the writing class improved their level of confidence in writing. For most participants, ChatGPT served as a yardstick that they could use to check their writing performance and as a source of inspiration for ideas to use in their writing. For instance, one of the participants made the following observation:

For me, it gave me the confidence that the ideas I was thinking about do exist. The ideas that I have, when they come out on ChatGPT, I say oh okay.

Furthermore, another participant indicated that the tool helped them to understand concepts that they were writing about and subsequently boosted their confidence. The participants indicated that they used ChatGPT to clarify concepts when doing research and did not understand specific concepts. The following observation was made:

'It improved my confidence, particularly if I did not understand a concept when I write my essays... I will copy a certain section of the article I want to use in my writing and bring it to ChatGPT and ask it to explain, and it will give me responses that help me to better understand and be confident in what the paper is saying. So, when I write, I will be writing from a point of really understanding what I am talking about'.

In a similar vein, one participant made this comment:

If I didn't know what to discuss in my essay, I will create my own outline, ask ChatGPT to also generate an outline and will analyse the responses that I get and pick those that are relevant. So, it helped me broaden my thinking and boost my confidence in what I am writing about.

2. Boosting linguistic competence and academic vocabulary.

Participants indicated that ChatGPT provided them with valuable support and served as a useful language resource. For example, participants indicated that the tool boosted their competence in finding ways they could improve their language use. These included learning or acquiring new vocabulary, spelling, restructuring sentences in a concise manner, grammar, and punctuation check. Participants made the following observations:

ChatGPT helped me to learn words, academic words that I would not normally use in my writing, like use in more efficient ways.

You can also use it to teach you things your lecturer would not teach. For example, I would ask if it can you give me a list of transitional words and how they are used and examples". In this case AI becomes your teacher, where you ask questions and get answers and information and write your own notes.

It's like a teacher, I can instruct it to check for me this sentence, tell me where I should correct... restructure sentences in a concise manner or vary my vocabulary

3. Influence of ChatGPT on students' approach to academic writing

Participants indicated that the tool helped them to better approach their writing by generating essay outline, restructuring essay drafts, and co-creation of ideas. They observed that:

If I did not know what to discuss in my essay, I created my own outline, ask ChatGPT to also create an outline and I analysed the responses and picked those that were relevant. It therefore helped broaden my thinking in terms of content.

I remember that I needed to restructure a paragraph in a more concise manner, I put it in ChatGPT and it gave me its own version of what I was trying to say. I feel

like this is whereas a student you come in and re-write it with the guidance of ChatGPT into the version you want.

... In that way it helped them to write in a more concise and well-structured manner and “more academically ... the quality of our work is better.

Discussion of the findings

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the potential of AI tools in enhancing students' writing skills in L2 contexts. Specifically, the study highlighted the benefits derived from utilising ChatGPT to augment and support the teaching of academic writing in L2 contexts. The findings seem to suggest that the tool enhanced students' overall writing quality, helped shape their approach to essay writing, helped refine their writing and boosted their writing confidence. The analysis of students' responses highlighted ChatGPT's role as a valuable linguistic resource that contributed to the enhancement of students' academic vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, thus helping them overcome language barriers and better express their ideas. They reported that this enhanced their writing proficiency. This aligns with the constructivist notion that scaffolding enables learners to gradually take control of their learning process, moving from reliance on external support to independent writing (Vygotsky, 1978). This is also consistent with evidence from other studies which found that ESL students using ChatGPT demonstrated improved writing quality, increased confidence, and greater engagement in the writing process (Huang & Tan, 2023; Yan, 2024; Yan & Zhang, 2023; Guo, & Wang, 2023).

Further, the analysis suggests that ChatGPT functioned as a scaffold within students' ZPD, that provided continuous feedback and guidance that allowed them to perform within their ZPD. The students reported that the tool's ability to rectify language errors such as grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as suggest improvements for better

sentence structure, provided incremental support, helping them transition from assisted writing to independent self-editing. This finding confirms other studies (e.g. Kohnke, 2024; Wang, 2024) which reported that ChatGPT can function as a scaffold since it gives a sense of collaboration and active engagement with learners and help them gradually internalize writing skills and move from assisted to independent writers.

Further, it can be seen to have helped alleviate some of the challenges associated with providing individualised support and instant feedback in L2 instruction. The findings align with the ZPD notion of a “more knowledgeable other” providing continuous instant guidance and suggestions to enhance students writing skills, allowing them to gradually move from being assisted to self-directed writers who can perform beyond their current capabilities (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019 ; Song & Song, 2023; Jingxin & Razali, 2020; Li et al, 2024). Therefore, in this study, the tool acted as a “more knowledgeable other” guiding students towards being autonomous writers. This gradual release of responsibility is a key characteristic of constructivist scaffolding, where learners are empowered to take ownership of their skills through guided engagement (Vygotsky, 1978; Li et al., 2024).

The respondents also recognised the value of ChatGPT in facilitating the co-creation of ideas and content as well as in aiding the restructuring of their essays and as such enhanced clarity of writing. They indicated that the tool supported them at various stages of the writing process, including outlining, revision and enhancing structural coherence. Reinforcing Augustini’s (2023) argument, the respondents felt empowered and confident in making informed decisions regarding their writing, as the tool offered personalised and continuous guidance throughout. The interactive nature of ChatGPT made it an effective tool which enabled students to ask specific questions and receive tailored responses. The interactive nature of ChatGPT made it an effective constructivist scaffold, as it encouraged students to actively engage in the learning process rather than passively receiving feedback. By allowing students to ask specific questions and receive tailored responses, ChatGPT facilitated a co-constructive

learning experience, reinforcing constructivist principles of active engagement and self-directed learning. This aligns with research that views scaffolding as a dynamic, interactive process where learners build knowledge through continuous interaction and feedback (Abdullayeva & Musayeva, 2023; Li et al., 2024; Lingard, 2023).

Although students generally responded positively to the integration of ChatGPT as a writing support tool, their initial reactions of shock and apprehension suggest a misalignment between their prior learning experiences and the new scaffolded support system. According to constructivist learning theory, effective scaffolding requires adjusting the level of support based on learners' existing knowledge and familiarity with a tool. The initial hesitation could be attributed to a lack of prior exposure, highlighting the need for gradual scaffolding and structured training on AI-assisted writing (Song & Song, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Beyond unfamiliarity with the tool, students also expressed concerns about how ChatGPT would fit into their writing process. Two key factors may explain these reactions, aligning with common concerns among educators and scholars. Firstly, students appeared unaware of ChatGPT's full potential and how to use it effectively. Secondly, they reported receiving warnings from lecturers against using such tools. These uncertainties stemmed from an academic culture in which AI tools are often viewed negatively due to ethical concerns.

The tension between embracing technological innovations and maintaining academic integrity was evident, particularly regarding fears that ChatGPT could facilitate plagiarism—concerns widely discussed in existing research (e.g., Yan, 2024). However, some students challenged this perception, arguing that when used responsibly, ChatGPT could enhance academic writing without compromising integrity. They emphasized that proper use requires a critical approach, where students actively engage with the tool rather than passively accepting its outputs. In fact, they contended that ChatGPT encouraged rather than hindered critical thinking, as it

required them to evaluate, refine, and selectively incorporate its suggestions rather than simply copying them.

The concern regarding overdependence on ChatGPT highlights a fundamental challenge in scaffolding, emphasizing the necessity for a gradual withdrawal of external support to foster learner autonomy. Since constructivist pedagogy asserts that scaffolding should be a temporary measure, which should be systematically reduced as learners develop confidence and competence in a given task, persistent reliance on ChatGPT without the development of self-regulation strategies may indicate a breakdown in the scaffolding process. Consequently, AI integration should be structured to promote metacognitive awareness and facilitate the gradual transfer of responsibility from the tool to the learner (Marzuki et al., 2023; Neumann et al., 2023).

Additionally, students expressed concerns that the use of ChatGPT might encourage overdependence, potentially stifling creativity and originality. They feared that the tool could compromise the authenticity of their writing and diminish their sense of personal achievement due to excessive reliance. These concerns align with findings from existing studies, such as Marzuki et al. (2023) and Neumann et al. (2023).

Pedagogical Implications of the study

This study highlights the pivotal role that educators need to play to provide constructive guidance to the students in line with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and the Zone of Proximal Development. The focus of scaffolding should be on interactions that stimulate active participation of the learners to internalise information rather than passively use information from ChatGPT. Thus, there is a pressing need for writing educators to provide clear guidelines on how to use AI tools responsibly in academic writing. This will address concerns about plagiarism, academic dishonesty and overreliance on AI tools. Furthermore, educators need to highlight that while ChatGPT

is a powerful tool that can assist students to improve their writing skills, it should not be used as a substitute for creative thinking and writing, but rather as a resource tool that can be used to support their writing.

There is also need to intentionally and carefully create meaningful learning activities that require learners to actively and meaningfully interact with ChatGPT to promote deeper understanding, skill development, critical thinking and knowledge development. Further, educators could use ChatGPT to tailor support that would aid learners deepen their understanding and not just acquire information without “reflecting on their learning experiences, critically analyzing their progress, and articulating their thoughts” (Kim & Adlof, 2023: p.43). ChatGPT scaffolding could promote cognitive and metacognitive skills that would help the L2 writer to gradually move from assisted to independent writing. Thus, the focus of ChatGPT scaffolding should be on structured activities that stimulate the active participation of the learners in a way that allows them to interact with ChatGPT to extract meaningful and informative ideas. For example, scaffolding in L2 writing instruction could involve the educator providing structured support through various stages of the writing process, from brainstorming and drafting to revising and editing (Hyland, 2003). Such scaffolding would emphasise the central role of the learner as the writer, but it would also stress the role of the educator whose help is indispensable for the learner to complete the task. Therefore, educators should view ChatGPT as a tool that not only assist students to develop their writing skills, but also assist those (educators) in the teaching of academic writing. Therefore, educators need to engage in continuous professional development to understand the many potentials of the ever-changing AI tools in teaching and learning, rather than discouraging their use.

The integration of social constructivist principles and ChatGPT scaffolding in instructional pedagogy is vital for supporting L2 writers. The use of ChatGPT as a scaffolding tool offers a promising approach to address the unique challenges faced by L2 learners in academic writing. Incorporating key components of social constructivist

principles which emphasise the importance of instant assistance and feedback might reduce frustration and promote confidence among L2 writers.

Conclusion and future research

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of first year L2 students' use of ChatGPT as a scaffolding tool to address the unique challenges faced by L2 learners in academic writing. The findings indicate that the students perceive ChatGPT as a valuable linguistic resource that significantly enhance writing proficiency as indicated by research (Huang & Tan, 2023; Yan, 2024; Yan & Zhang, 2023; Guo, & Wang, 2023). However, the study also reveals that students share similar concerns with educators and researchers by recognising ChatGPT's limitations, including its potential to stifle creativity and critical thinking, foster overreliance, and raise ethical issues (Marzuki et al. 2023; Neumann et al. (2023). This underscores the need for academic literacy instructors to explicitly teach AI literacy, equipping students with the skills to critically engage with these tools rather than perceiving them as mere shortcuts.

Although the study provides valuable insights, the sample was limited to first year students in the Faculty of Humanities in Botswana's public university, who may not represent L2 students in other contexts. To increase the generalisability of the findings, future research could include more diverse sample from all the faculties and different levels and could also include the perspectives of the writing instructors which might offer a more thorough insight into students' quality of writing. Further, the study relied on students' self-reports which may be biased. Future research may use self-reports along with analysing students' texts to mitigate bias and provide a more accurate assessment of the students writing quality after using ChatGPT as a support tool. Despite these limitations, the findings enhance the growing research on ChatGPT's role in L2 writing and offer valuable insights for instructors, researchers and policy makers.

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