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Arabic–Speaking Undergraduate Students' Interactions with ChatGPT for Academic Writing: Attitudes, Perceptions, and Outcomes in a Gulf EFL Context

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في اتجاهات وتصورات الطلاب الجامعيين الناطقين بالعربية نحو استخدام أداة ChatGPT في الكتابة الأكاديمية، وذلك من خلال مسح مختلط المنهج شمل 105 طلاب جامعيين في جامعة خاصة في الكويت تُدرَّس باللغة الإنجليزية، حيث شكّل الناطقون بالعربية كلغة أولى 95.2% من العينة. تُظهر النتائج الكمية أن الطلاب يبلغون عن ثقة منخفضة إلى متوسطة في الكتابة الأكاديمية (م = 2.50–2.91 عبر أربعة أبعاد)، في حين يحملون تصورات إيجابية بقوة تجاه ChatGPT بوصفه أداة كتابة، ولا سيما في تنظيم الأفكار (م = 3.98) وتقليل التوتر المرتبط بالكتابة (م = 3.91) وتحسين جودة الكتابة (م = 3.83). وأفادت الغالبية (81.9%) بأن ChatGPT حسّن مهاراتهم في الكتابة الأكاديمية. وكشف التحليل الكيفي للاستجابات المفتوحة عن أربعة أنماط تفاعل رئيسية: استخدام ChatGPT لتصحيح القواعد والإملاء، وتوليد الأفكار وتنظيمها، وكفاءة الوقت وتحسين الدرجات، ومخاوف تتعلق بالدقة والنزاهة الأكاديمية والاعتماد المفرط. تسهم النتائج في تأسيس فهم تجريبي للتفاعل الفعّال بين الإنسان والذكاء الاصطناعي التوليدي في التعليم العالي، وتحمل دلالات عملية للتربية وتصميم المناهج والسياسات المؤسسية في سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الخليج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ChatGPT، الكتابة الأكاديمية، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، المتعلمون الناطقون بالعربية، التعليم العالي، الذكاء الاصطناعي التوليدي.

Abstract:
The rapid integration of generative AI into higher education has prompted growing interest in how students interact with these systems, yet empirical research among Arabic-speaking learners in the Gulf remains limited. This study examines the attitudes, perceptions, and self-reported outcomes of 105 undergraduate students at a private English-medium university in Kuwait, 95.2% of whom are Arabic first-language speakers, regarding ChatGPT use for academic writing. Quantitative findings reveal low-to-moderate writing confidence (M = 2.50-2.91 across four dimensions) alongside strongly positive perceptions of ChatGPT, particularly for organizing ideas (M = 3.98), reducing writing-related stress (M = 3.91), and improving writing quality (M = 3.83); 81.9% report that ChatGPT improved their academic writing. Qualitative analysis identifies four dominant interaction patterns: grammar and spelling correction, idea generation and organization, time efficiency and grade improvement, and concerns about accuracy, integrity, and over-reliance. The findings contribute empirical grounding to discussions of effective human-GenAI interaction and carry implications for pedagogy, curriculum design, and institutional policy in Gulf EFL contexts.

Keywords : ChatGPT, academic writing, EFL, Arabic-speaking learners, higher education, generative AI.

Introduction

When a student opens a blank document to begin an academic essay, the moment of confronting an empty page has long been understood as a site of cognitive and affective complexity. For students writing in a foreign language, this challenge is compounded by unfamiliar discourse conventions, limited vocabulary, and uncertainty about academic register. It is in this context that generative AI tools like ChatGPT have entered higher education, transforming the conditions of academic writing in ways neither educators nor researchers have fully mapped.

Since its 2022 release, ChatGPT has attracted enormous attention across educational contexts worldwide. Within months, surveys documented widespread student adoption for academic purposes, and institutions began grappling with academic integrity, pedagogical adaptation, and curriculum redesign [3]. Adoption has been particularly striking among students writing in a language other than their first, for whom AI tools that generate, correct, and organize English text represent a potentially significant resource.

Yet the literature on student-ChatGPT interaction has developed unevenly, focusing largely on Western contexts. Empirical research on Arabic-speaking learners — a demographically significant population — and their interactions with generative AI remains notably sparse. Arabic-speaking students in English-medium institutions face a distinctive set of challenges: the considerable distance between Arabic and English academic discourse conventions, AI tools trained predominantly on English-language data, and institutional contexts that vary in readiness to engage with generative AI pedagogically [1].

Understanding how these students interact with ChatGPT — what they use it for, what they perceive it to do well, and what concerns they bring — is therefore both academically and practically important. Drawing on a survey of 105 undergraduate students at a private English-medium university in Kuwait, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How do Arabic-speaking EFL undergraduates interact with ChatGPT in academic writing? (2) What are their perceptions of its effectiveness across cognitive, affective, and process-related dimensions? (3) What concerns do they bring to these interactions?

Literature Review

The integration of generative AI into academic writing has generated a rapidly expanding body of research. Early studies documented widespread student adoption within months of ChatGPT's release [13] [6]. Research on cognitive outcomes has produced broadly consistent findings: students using AI writing tools report improved fluency, reduced cognitive load, and enhanced idea organization [15] [12]. Learners who engaged with AI writing assistance produced texts with greater lexical diversity and organization [7], and AI-driven feedback produces stronger gains in writing quality when students engage actively with it rather than passively accepting output [10]. These findings suggest that effective human-GenAI interaction is shaped substantially by the quality of student engagement rather than by the mere presence of AI tools.

The affective dimensions of AI-assisted writing have received less attention but are increasingly recognized as significant. Gulf-region EFL students report predominantly positive perceptions of AI tools' impact on their writing skills, alongside continued interest in how such tools reduce the burden of academic writing tasks [2]; students describe AI tools as reducing the cognitive and emotional burden of getting started with a written task [14]. Concerns about generative AI are equally well-documented: that AI-generated text may displace genuine writing development [8], concerns about reliability [11], and the risk that AI use becomes a form of academic dishonesty difficult to detect [14]. Empirical evidence nonetheless suggests student AI use is more varied and nuanced than the most alarmist accounts imply.

The structural and rhetorical distance between Arabic and English academic writing is considerable — a more elaborate, parallel rhetorical structure and a different relationship between writer and reader than the linear, thesis-driven structure of Anglo-American writing [1]. Arabic's root-and-pattern morphology, unlike English's largely linear morphology, generates systematic difficulties around article use, preposition selection, verb tense and aspect, and word order [5]. In Gulf contexts specifically, English-medium instruction is widespread, but the transition from Arabic-medium secondary education is frequently abrupt and under-supported, and foundation programs vary considerably in quality [5].

Research on human-ChatGPT interaction identifies three dominant patterns: using it as a drafting aid, an editing assistant, and an idea generator [12], each carrying different implications for writing development. Students who engage critically and selectively with AI output, treating it as a starting point rather than a final product, show stronger development of writing competence than those adopting AI-generated text wholesale [16] — consistent with the broader finding that the value of feedback is conditional on the learner's active engagement with it [9]. A related dependency question concerns whether regular AI use reduces students' development of independent competence; [16] finds that heavy reliance on ChatGPT for conversational practice reduced tolerance for the productive ambiguity that genuine communicative interaction involves — a concern this study directly addresses through its analysis of student-reported concerns.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid, largely unregulated adoption of ChatGPT among university students, empirical evidence on how Arabic-speaking EFL learners specifically interact with it for academic writing — and what they themselves perceive its benefits and risks to be — remains scarce. Existing literature has been shaped predominantly by Western, English-first-language contexts, leaving Gulf EFL institutions without an empirical basis for shaping policy or pedagogy around a tool their students are already using extensively. This study addresses that gap directly.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods survey design, combining quantitative Likert-scale items with open-ended qualitative questions, to characterize both the breadth of student attitudes and the depth of their described interactions with ChatGPT. The qualitative component was analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach [4]: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Participants were 105 undergraduate students (103 undergraduate, 2 graduate) at a private English-medium university in Kuwait, surveyed in 2024. Ages ranged 18-44, with 57.1% aged 18 and 41.0% aged 19-24. Engineering and Technology students formed the largest group (66.7%), followed by accounting (12.4%), Business Administration (7.6%), Arts and Humanities (6.7%), and Social Sciences (1.0%). Critically, 95.2% (n = 100) identified Arabic

as their first language, with the remainder identifying English (n = 3) or Chinese (n = 1). All participants studied entirely through English-medium instruction. Writing frequency varied: 22.9% wrote very frequently (weekly+), 21.0% frequently (monthly), 30.5% occasionally, and 25.7% rarely.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 105)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18	60	57.1%
	19–24	43	41.0%
	35–44	2	1.9%
Academic Level	Undergraduate	103	98.1%
	Graduate	2	1.9%
Field of Study	Engineering & Technology	70	66.7%
	Accounting	13	12.4%
	Business Administration	8	7.6%
	Arts & Humanities	7	6.7%
	Social Sciences	1	1.0%
First Language	Arabic	100	95.2%
	English	3	2.9%
	Chinese	1	1.0%

Data were collected using an 18-item instrument administered via Google Forms during class sessions, covering demographics, writing background, prior AI tool experience, and four writing-confidence dimensions (organizing ideas, academic language, developing arguments, editing/proofreading; 1 = Not confident to 5 = Very confident), followed by three ChatGPT perception items (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) and four open-ended questions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with written informed consent obtained from all participants. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively; 98 usable open-ended responses were retained after excluding non-genuine entries.

Results

Nearly half of participants rated their writing ability as average (44.8%), followed by good (27.6%), poor (16.2%), very poor (4.8%), and excellent (2.9%) — 66.7% rated themselves average or below. Prior AI tool use was widespread (77.1%), with ChatGPT the dominant tool (84.0% of AI users), followed by Grammarly (17 participants) and QuillBot (2). ChatGPT familiarity was moderate (M = 2.75, SD = 1.30).

For academic purposes specifically, ChatGPT use was: rarely (41.0%), occasionally (30.5%), never (17.1%), and frequently (11.4%) — suggesting supplementary rather than routine use for most students.

Table 2: Summary of Key Quantitative Results

Measure	M	SD	n
Writing Confidence: Organizing ideas	2.91	1.36	105
Writing Confidence: Academic language	2.56	1.26	105
Writing Confidence: Developing arguments	2.50	1.29	105
Writing Confidence: Editing/proofreading	2.51	1.29	105
ChatGPT Familiarity (1–5)	2.75	1.30	105
ChatGPT helps organize ideas	3.98	1.13	102
ChatGPT makes writing less stressful	3.91	1.18	103
ChatGPT improves writing quality	3.83	1.12	99
ChatGPT improved writing skills (% Yes)	81.9%	—	105

Writing confidence was consistently low-to-moderate across all four dimensions (M = 2.50-2.91), with no single dimension notably stronger than the others — suggesting a broad, pervasive sense of limited writing competence. By contrast, perceptions of ChatGPT were strongly positive: 90.2% agreed it helps organize ideas (M = 3.98), with similarly high agreement that it reduces stress (M = 3.91) and improves writing quality (M = 3.83). When asked directly, 81.9% said ChatGPT had improved their academic writing skills.

Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis of the open-ended items produced four dominant themes.

Theme 1: ChatGPT as a Grammar and Language Scaffold. The most consistently identified use was for grammar correction, spelling, and language enhancement, reflecting Arabic-speaking students' well-documented linguistic vulnerabilities in English. Representative responses: “It helps me in grammar and spelling”; “It corrected and organized my vocabulary, ideas and my whole writing style.” Students who cited weak language as their primary writing barrier — “My language is weak”; “I can't find what to write about in English, no vocabulary” — described ChatGPT as bridging the gap between their ideas and their ability to express them in grammatically appropriate English.

Theme 2: ChatGPT as an Idea Generator and Organizer. Students described using ChatGPT to overcome the initial barrier of starting a task and to develop ideas already in progress: “It helps me figure out more ideas and their details”; “ChatGPT has helped me organize my ideas better and improve sentence clarity. It provides useful suggestions, but I still review and adjust them.” This last response is notable for its reflexive, evaluative engagement —

consistent with what the literature identifies as the most productive mode of human-GenAI interaction [16].

Theme 3: Time Efficiency and Grade Improvement. A pragmatic theme emerged around saving time and improving grades: “If I use ChatGPT instead of taking hours on finding the answer it takes 5 seconds”; “Made me take high grades.” While self-reported and unverified, these responses point to a tension some students recognize between short-term grade gains and longer-term writing development.

Theme 4: Concerns About Accuracy, Integrity, and Over-Reliance. Despite predominantly positive perceptions, students raised genuine concerns across three sub-themes: accuracy (“In ChatGPT there is a lot of mistakes and the source is so poor”); academic integrity (“It is plagiarism to use a linguistic model for writing tasks”); and, most pedagogically significant, over-reliance — “If you continue doing it, it may cause you to lose your ability to write”; “When I go to the exam I can't write well.” This last observation directly connects AI dependency to performance in unassisted assessment contexts.

Discussion

The most striking finding is the contrast between students' low-moderate writing confidence and their strongly positive perceptions of ChatGPT. Students who rate their writing ability as average or poor — reflecting genuine structural challenges for Arabic-speaking learners in English-medium programs — report that ChatGPT helps them organize ideas, reduces writing anxiety, and improves writing quality. This suggests ChatGPT functions as a compensatory tool, bridging the gap between current writing competence and program demands. The consistently low confidence scores alongside the high ChatGPT perception scores together constitute a coherent narrative: these are students who feel ill-equipped for the writing demands placed on them and who have found in ChatGPT a resource that alleviates both the cognitive difficulty and affective discomfort of academic writing in English, directly supporting prior findings of reduced language anxiety among Gulf EFL learners using AI tools [2].

The dominant interaction patterns identified here — grammar scaffolding, idea generation, and time efficiency — map onto relatively productive modes of human-GenAI interaction described in the literature [12] [16]. Students are largely describing targeted, purposive interactions addressing specific writing difficulties rather than wholesale reliance on ChatGPT-generated text — much as a previous generation might have used a dictionary or writing tutor. At the same time, the over-reliance theme deserves serious pedagogical attention: if ChatGPT routinely compensates for deficiencies in grammar, vocabulary, and idea organization, there is a real question about whether extensive reliance reduces the productive struggle through which those competencies are typically developed. The student observation “when I go to the exam I can't write well” makes this dynamic concrete.

The accuracy concerns raised by a significant minority, and their described strategies for managing this risk (verifying content, reviewing and adjusting suggestions), suggest that at

least some students have developed a degree of AI critical literacy through practical use. Notably, the academic integrity theme was less dominant than the over-reliance theme, suggesting students are more concerned about becoming dependent on ChatGPT than about being caught using it — a distinction with implications for how institutions frame AI policy.

Conclusion

This study examined how Arabic-speaking undergraduate students at a private English-medium university in Kuwait interact with ChatGPT for academic writing, finding that a population with low-moderate writing confidence holds strongly positive perceptions of ChatGPT and largely reports improvement in their writing as a result. Four dominant interaction patterns were identified — grammar and language scaffolding, idea generation and organization, time efficiency and grade improvement, and concerns about accuracy, integrity, and over-reliance — broadly consistent with productive modes of human-GenAI engagement identified in the wider literature, while pointing to genuine developmental risks that deserve sustained pedagogical attention.

The study makes three contributions: one of the first mixed-methods accounts of student-ChatGPT interaction among Arabic-speaking learners in a Gulf university context; documentation of the stress-reducing, affective dimension of human-GenAI interaction for linguistically vulnerable learners; and a nuanced student perspective combining pragmatic endorsement of ChatGPT's utility with genuine awareness of its limitations and risks.

Limitations include reliance on self-reported rather than performance-based data, a single-institution design that limits generalizability, and a cross-sectional design that captures a snapshot rather than longitudinal development. Future research should pursue multi-institutional designs, pre-post writing assessment comparing AI-assisted and unassisted writing, and longitudinal follow-up tracking the developmental implications of ChatGPT use for EFL writing competence.

Recommendations

Three recommendations follow from these findings. First, writing instruction in Gulf EFL contexts should acknowledge and engage with the reality of widespread ChatGPT use rather than treating it primarily as a compliance problem; instructors who prohibit its use are not eliminating it but forfeiting the opportunity to shape how students use it. Second, pedagogical approaches should explicitly teach students to interact productively with ChatGPT — using it for targeted support, engaging critically with its output, and maintaining awareness of its limitations — rather than defaulting to either wholesale prohibition or uncritical endorsement. Third, assessment design should attend to the gap between AI-assisted and unassisted performance that students themselves identify as concerning; in-class writing tasks, process-based assessment, and portfolio approaches that make the writing process visible may offer more valid measures of writing competence in the current AI environment than take-home assignments alone.

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