Students' Perspectives on AI-Assisted Tools in Learning Narrative Writing (A Study on Indonesian Islamic Higher Education)

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The integration of AI-assisted tools in language education has gained attention, yet their specific impact on narrative writing among EFL students remains underexplored. This study aims to address this gap by examining EFL students' perceptions of using AI-assisted tools for narrative writing at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu. This study employs a descriptive qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students to gather insights into their perceptions and experiences. Findings reveal that while EFL students at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu generally view AI-assisted tools as valuable resources, there are also challenges and potential drawbacks. The use of these tools can promote efficiency, facilitate idea development and language accuracy, concerns about about over-reliance, reduced creativity, and issues related to technical access also emerged. The study concludes that while AI-assisted tools can facilitate the writing process, a balanced approach is essential to ensure that students develop their independent writing skills alongside their use of technology. Students' perceptions of AI tools play a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of these technologies in narrative writing.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, digital technological advancement has rapidly shifted and transformed almost all aspects of the world, including education. In Indonesia, post-covid 19, various learning activities conducted in formal or non-formal educational institutions have been shifted to either online, blended, or flipped (Gruber, 2021; Kurniawati & Rachmawati, 2022) which involves the use of mobile digital technologies such as tablets, laptops, and smartphones in the process. This transformation brings benefits in various ways, making it easier for the teacher to develop instructional materials and allowing students to learn and collaborate in many ways. Independent access to countless sources of knowledge becomes more open which then promotes autonomous learning among students (Baker, 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2023). The availability of learning sources and environment online has as well revolutionized the way EFL students interact with information and learn languages (Zhang, 2021).

Smartphone, as one of the most widely used handheld devices, offers a myriad of possibilities for language learners. It provides learners with considerable potential such as portability, ubiquity, and availability, to help them in learning, assist them to learn autonomously, and arrange their own self-paced learning (Huang & Chen, 2022) by offering countless learning materials and applications that they can access independently anywhere and anytime with internet connection. This enables them to learn whenever they feel like it according to their personal needs and connect with other learners across the globe (Mulyana & Hidayah, 2021).

Most recently, the rise of AI, such as ChatGPT and its integration (AI) in educational practices has gained significant attention (Li & Zhang, 2023), particularly within language learning and writing instruction. AI assisted tools including grammar checkers, vocabulary enhancers, and writing suggestion software, have become increasingly accessible and user-friendly for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These tools provide learners with real-time feedback on language use, offering suggestions on grammar, style, and vocabulary that may otherwise require instructor intervention. With narrative writing being a complex skill involving creativity, structure, and linguistic proficiency, AI-assisted tools hold potential to support EFL students in overcoming common challenges associated with writing in a non-native language (García-Sánchez, 2023).

Despite this growing trend, limited research has examined the specific effects of AI tools on narrative writing skills in the EFL context. While numerous studies have addressed how AI tools impact overall writing skills (Shay & Zhang, 2022), few have focused on the narrative genre, which demands unique cognitive and linguistic resources, including plot development, character building, and cultural nuances (Tan, 2023). By investigating how AI-assisted tools influence EFL students' narrative writing, this study aims to address a gap in the literature and provide insights into how these tools may support learners' creative expression and linguistic growth within storytelling contexts.

Understanding the impact of AI-assisted tools on narrative writing is critical for educators seeking effective ways to enhance students' writing abilities (Alhassan & Almazroi, 2023). Given that narrative skills contribute not only to language acquisition but also to self-expression and cultural engagement, exploring the role of AI in this area is valuable. Findings from this research could guide teachers in integrating AI technology more effectively and equipping EFL students with strategies to maximize the potential of these tools. Additionally, as AI continues to evolve, insights into its specific impact on narrative writing may influence future developments in educational technology tailored to language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Narrative Writing in EFL Contexts

Narrative writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has been studied through multiple theoretical perspectives, each offering insights into how learners acquire and develop writing skills.

One key framework is Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning. According to Vygotsky, language acquisition and development occur not in isolation but through collaborative experiences, where learners engage in social interactions that facilitate knowledge construction. This perspective implies that narrative writing can be enhanced through activities like collaborative story-building or peer review, where learners share ideas, receive feedback, and build on each other's contributions. The concept of "scaffolding," introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) and grounded in Vygotsky's theory, further supports the idea that teachers and

more capable peers play a crucial role in helping learners bridge gaps in their writing skills. Scaffolding in narrative writing might include strategies like providing story prompts, vocabulary lists, or structured templates that guide learners as they develop their stories.

Additionally, Halliday's (1978) functional approach to language deepens the understanding of narrative writing by focusing on language's purpose and its role in expressing personal experiences and emotions. Halliday argued that language functions as a tool to convey meaning, shaping how learners perceive and interact with the world around them. In narrative writing, this functional perspective highlights that storytelling is more than an exercise in grammar or vocabulary; it enables learners to share personal narratives, express emotions, and relate to others' experiences, which are crucial components in their linguistic and cognitive development. This approach supports a view of narrative writing as a holistic activity that goes beyond language mechanics and contributes to learners' broader communicative competence, cultural awareness, and cognitive growth.

Both Vygotsky's and Halliday's theories underscore the importance of engaging EFL learners in meaningful writing tasks that are both socially interactive and contextually rich. Together, they suggest that narrative writing should be framed as a communicative act that encourages learners to interact with peers, teachers, and even the target language community, facilitating language acquisition in a more authentic and integrated way. Research by Swain (2000) on the output hypothesis aligns with these perspectives, as it suggests that producing language—such as through writing narratives—forces learners to process language more deeply, thereby reinforcing their understanding and control over linguistic forms and structures.

2.2. Challenges in Narrative Writing for EFL Learners

While narrative writing offers numerous cognitive and linguistic benefits, it also presents specific challenges for EFL learners. One of the primary difficulties is the limited vocabulary that many learners possess, which can restrict their ability to express ideas fully and creatively. As Nation (2009) highlights, vocabulary knowledge is critical for language fluency, yet many EFL learners often lack the lexical depth and variety needed to craft detailed and vivid narratives. Without a sufficient range of words, learners may struggle to describe events, characters, and emotions effectively, which can make their writing appear simplistic or repetitive.

In addition to vocabulary limitations, syntactic difficulties are common among EFL learners. Writing in a second language requires familiarity with sentence structures and grammatical rules that may differ significantly from their native language. This can lead to errors in word order, tense usage, and sentence complexity, impacting the clarity and coherence of their narratives. As Reid (1993) discusses, EFL students often find it challenging to produce well-organized texts that flow logically, an issue closely linked to their understanding of syntax and structure. These syntactic challenges can make it difficult for learners to achieve a narrative style that feels fluid and engaging to readers.

Furthermore, cultural nuances in storytelling pose another barrier for EFL learners. Storytelling conventions, themes, and character archetypes vary across cultures, and what may be considered a compelling or appropriate narrative structure in one culture might not translate well in another. For example, some cultures prioritize linear storytelling with a clear beginning, middle, and end, while others may allow for more circular or fragmented structures. This can create confusion for EFL learners when trying to write narratives that feel coherent and relevant to English-speaking audiences. The ability to incorporate culturally appropriate themes and expressions is essential for producing narratives that resonate with English-speaking audiences, but understanding these cultural dimensions can be challenging for those unfamiliar with the target culture's storytelling norms. A recent study by Zhang and Kim (2023) explored this issue, demonstrating that culturally relevant examples of storytelling significantly help EFL learners understand and adopt more culturally appropriate structures in their writing.

Lastly, research shows that EFL learners often face difficulties with coherence and cohesion in their writing. Coherence refers to the logical flow of ideas, while cohesion involves using linguistic devices (such as conjunctions, pronouns, and transition words) to link sentences and paragraphs smoothly. According to studies by Grabe and Kaplan (1996) and Hyland (2004), EFL learners frequently struggle with these aspects, leading to narratives that can feel unclear. Matsumoto and Yu (2022) also observed that EFL students frequently produce disjointed texts due to underuse or misuse of cohesive devices, which hinders the overall readability of their narratives. The use of cohesive devices is often less intuitive for non-native speakers, and achieving coherence requires a higher level of language proficiency that many learners are still developing. As a result, these

challenges can hinder EFL learners' ability to create narratives that are not only grammatically correct but also engaging, well-organized, and contextually appropriate.

2.3. AI-Assisted Tools in EFL Learning: Opportunities and Challenges

Recent advancements in educational technology have introduced AI-assisted tools, such as Grammarly, ChatGPT, and automated feedback systems, which have the potential to transform narrative writing instruction (Pérez-Paredes, 2021). These tools offer EFL learners immediate, personalized feedback, allowing them to identify and correct grammatical errors, expand their vocabulary, and improve sentence structure, which are critical components in narrative writing. By providing suggestions for linguistic accuracy and refinement, AI-assisted tools can support learners in writing more polished and cohesive narratives. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) highlight that such tools effectively complement traditional instruction, facilitating a more interactive and responsive learning environment that encourages learners to engage actively with their writing.

The integration of AI-assisted tools aligns with Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding, where learners receive the necessary assistance needed to perform tasks they might not achieve independently. AI tools serve as a form of digital scaffolding, guiding learners through complex aspects of narrative writing, such as plot structure and thematic development, and offering real-time support that can foster learners' confidence and motivation. Recent studies, such as those by Figueroa and Martínez (2022), have shown that AI-assisted tools can reduce anxiety among EFL learners by providing low-stakes practice environments where they can explore language structures and vocabulary without fear of immediate judgment or failure.

However, while AI-assisted tools can facilitate the writing process, they also present challenges that educators and learners must address. Concerns include over-reliance on technology, which may hinder the development of autonomous writing skills (Ruan & Warden, 2020). Moreover, biases inherent in AI algorithms can affect the quality and inclusivity of feedback provided to EFL learners. Bender et al. (2021) discuss how AI models trained on predominantly English-native datasets may not fully understand or appreciate non-native linguistic patterns, sometimes leading to inappropriate or culturally insensitive feedback. These biases can negatively impact learners, especially those from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, by reinforcing standardized norms of "correct" English that may not align with the learners' own linguistic identities. As a result, EFL learners might feel discouraged or pressured to conform to native speaker norms rather than developing a unique narrative voice.

2.4. Recent Studies on AI and EFL Narrative Writing

Contemporary research has highlighted both positive and negative impacts of AI-assisted tools on narrative writing. For instance, Lin and Yu (2022) found that EFL learners who used AI-based writing tools reported increased confidence and reduced anxiety when writing in English. This effect can be attributed to the immediate, low-stakes feedback that AI tools provide, which allows students to experiment with language without the fear of judgment that might come from a teacher or peer. The instant correction of grammar and vocabulary errors, along with suggestions for improved sentence structure, gives learners more control over their writing process. This sense of control, according to Lin and Yu, fosters a positive learning environment where students feel more comfortable taking creative risks in their narrative writing. Conversely, Zhang and Liu (2023) noted that while AI tools improved surface-level errors, deeper narrative skills such as plot development and emotional engagement often required human intervention and teaching.

An emerging area of interest is how EFL students perceive these tools' benefits and challenges. Studies have suggested that students appreciate the immediate feedback but remain concerned about becoming overly dependent on technology for language learning (Chun et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to explore EFL students' perceptions and experiences of AI-assisted tools in learning narrative writing at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu. This design was chosen to provide a comprehensive description and understanding of students' subjective experiences, attitudes, and challenges associated with using AI tools for narrative writing (Sandelowski, 2000). By adopting this approach, the study aims to capture the diversity in students' perceptions and interactions with AI tools as well as the impact on their narrative writing skills.

The sample consists of eight students enrolled in undergraduate program of English Department Study Program (TBI) of State Islamic University Datokarama palu. All participants have experience using AI-assisted tools for narrative writing in their coursework. To capture a broad range of perspectives, purposive sampling was employed to select students across different levels of language proficiency, allowing for an in-depth look at how these tools are perceived and utilized across varying skill levels. Purposive sampling ensures that the participants are both relevant to the research focus and knowledgeable about the subject, increasing the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. It provides flexibility to probe deeper into students' perceptions of the use of AI-assisted tools, allowing them to express their thoughts freely while ensuring that key topics are covered consistently across interviews.

The data collection procedures are organized into systematic steps to ensure consistency and reliability:
    1)   Participant Selection
Participants were selected based on predetermined characteristics, specifically their experience with AI-assisted tools in narrative writing. This process ensured that selected students had relevant insights to contribute.
    2)   Scheduling and Setting
Individual interview times were scheduled in advance to accommodate students' availability. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private setting on campus to minimize distractions and create a comfortable atmosphere where participants could speak openly.
    3)   Interview Process
Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, enabling the researcher to observe non-verbal cues and establish rapport.
    4)   Recording and consent
With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcription and data retention. This step was critical in preserving the integrity of participants' words for analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen for its ability to provide a detailed yet flexible approach to analyzing complex qualitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Students' General Perceptions of AI-Assisted Tools

The analysis of interview responses indicates that EFL students generally perceive AI-assisted tools like ChatGPT and DeepL positively, especially in terms of how these tools facilitate various aspects of narrative writing. Many students highlighted that these tools help address challenges in writing, such as vocabulary limitations and idea generation, both common obstacles in narrative writing. One participant stated, "My biggest problem in Narrative Writing was vocabulary. However, since we have ChatGPT and DeepL, it is no longer a problem." This view aligns with studies by García-Sánchez (2023) and Li & Zhang (2023), which emphasize that AI tools are effective in supporting language learners by expanding their lexical repertoire and offering alternative word choices.

They also highlighted that these tools' ability to provide immediate feedback on grammar and language structure is helpful and enhances their writing confidence. A recurring sentiment was that the AI tools were described as "silent tutors" who offered non-judgmental support whenever needed. This aspect of immediate feedback aligns with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, allowing students to identify and correct mistakes independently while improving their language accuracy. Students further noted that using tools like Grammarly or ChatGPT allowed them to identify and correct mistakes, thus improving their overall language accuracy. "I feel more confident submitting my writing now because the AI tools help me see errors I might miss." This reflects a sense of empowerment that comes from receiving constructive feedback in real-time.

4.2. Perceived Benefits of AI-Assisted Tools

The researcher found several advantages of using AI-assisted tools perceived by students. Firstly, these tools were praised for helping them generate ideas and develop stories. One student noted, "I have many ideas for stories, ChatGPT helps me

develop the idea and gives me other alternative stories I can choose from." This reflects the tools' ability to stimulate creativity and assist in brainstorming, which are essential components of narrative writing (Huang & Chen, 2022).

Another significant benefit mentioned was the increased efficiency in completing assignments. One participant said, "I can do Narrative Writing assignments in a matter of minutes. Chat GPT has all the answers without having to spend more time looking at the books." This suggests that AI-assisted tools reduce the time spent on research and drafting, making the writing process more manageable for students. These findings echo Shay & Zhang (2022), who reported that AI writing tools contribute to enhanced time management for students in academic tasks.

Moreover, students highlighted the role of AI-assisted tools in editing and revising their work. One student shared, "I remember when the lecturer told me to recheck the grammar and the flow of my story. I went to ChatGPT and the lecturer approved my story after." This experience reflects the usefulness of AI-assisted tools in providing real-time feedback on grammatical and structural aspects of writing. Reseach by Alhassan & Almazroi (2023) corroborates this, showing that AI can be an effective tool during the revision phase of writing, helping students produce better work.

4.3. Challenges in Using AI Tools

Despite the benefits mentioned above, the researcher also revealed that the students' use of AI-assisted tools is not without challenges. One major issue was the need for a stable internet connection, which could limit access to these tools. One student explained, "The network connection in the class sometimes doesn't work. That will be a big trouble because that means Chat GPT is inaccessible. I sometimes can't get my assignment done because of that." This technical challenge has also been discussed by Gruber (2021), who highlighted that the reliability of digital tools depends heavily on internet access, which can be a barrier for students in regions with limited connectivity.

Another notable challenge was the potential for errors when using translation tools like DeepL, particularly with cultural nuances. A student recounted, "I once translated my story using DeepL, when the result was out, I saw the name of the character which was supposed to be 'Agung' became 'The Great'." This example highlights issues of cultural context in translation, as discussed by Tan (2023), underscoring that AI tools may misinterpret culturally specific terms or names. Such errors can disrupt the intended narrative and create misunderstandings in storytelling.

4.4. Impact on Writing Skills

The findings by the researcher also reveal a mixed perception on the long-term impact of AI-assisted tools on students' narrative writing skills. While many participants acknowledged the ease and support these tools provide, some expressed concerns about over-reliance and reduced creativity. One student stated, "I feel like I become less creative and lazy to think more about the idea of the story, ChatGPT can help me do that in a second." This aligns with the literature on the potential negative effects of excessive AI use, which can lead to decreased engagement in critical thinking and originality (Alhassan & Almazroi, 2023).

Similarly, another student questioned the effectiveness of AI tools in improving writing skills, expressing doubts about the improvement of writing skills due to habitual dependence on AI tools: "I saw lots of my friends directly access ChatGPT or Gemini right after the lecturer gave the task. I don't think they can improve their writing skill if they do that every time." This suggests that while AI tools are helpful for immediate results and enhance productivity, they may inhibit genuine skill development if overused. Shay & Zhang (2022) also argue that reliance on AI tools may hinder independent writing practice, which is critical for skill advancement. When learners become overly dependent on automated feedback, they may fail to internalize essential writing skills, such as self-editing and critical evaluation, potentially resulting in a superficial understanding of language structures. This reliance on AI could limit learners' ability to apply their skills independently, especially in exam settings or situations where AI assistance is unavailable.

On a positive note, some students mentioned that AI tools like Gemini assisted them in detecting errors and improving their writing mechanics, especially in areas like grammar. One student said: "Gemini can help me detect the errors in my writing." This finding supports García-Sánchez's (2023) findings on the capability of AI tools to enhance writing accuracy and contribute to learning through corrective feedback, reinforcing positive writing habits.

According to Wang and Tang (2023), EFL learners often view AI tools as supportive but are also cautious about becoming overly reliant on them. This ambivalence reflects an awareness of both the tools' benefits and their limitations, which can influence how actively learners engage with AI-based feedback. Educators can play a pivotal role here by guiding students to use AI as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional learning methods and by fostering an environment where learners can critically evaluate AI feedback.

5. Conclusion

Learners' perceptions of AI tools play a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of these technologies in narrative writing. The findings of this research reveal that while EFL students at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu generally view AI-assisted tools as valuable resources for enhancing various aspects of narrative writing, there are also challenges and potential drawbacks. The use of these tools can promote efficiency, facilitate idea development and language accuracy, yet there are concerns about over-reliance, reduced creativity, and issues related to technical access. These results underscore the importance of balanced integration of AI-assisted tools in teaching practices. Integrating these tools effectively involves not only providing access to AI-based resources but also encouraging learners to engage with these tools critically and to recognize their role as aids rather than substitutes for independent language development. That way, students can benefit from AI assistance while maintaining opportunities for independent writing skill development.

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