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Research Article

SCAFFOLDED AI INTEGRATION IN THE SECONDARY ESL WRITING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms has sparked intense debate, threatening to collapse the hard-won gains of process-oriented writing methodologies back into automated product compliance. This qualitative phenomenological case study investigates how secondary ESL students experience a pedagogically scaffolded GenAI writing framework designed to act as a digital "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO) within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Moving away from traditional quantitative measures of structural accuracy, this study examines the lived experiences of twenty (20) Grade 10 ESL students over an eight-week academic writing unit. Data collection comprised student reflection journals, classroom observation logs, and semi-structured focus group discussions. Inductive thematic analysis revealed three primary dimensions of the student experience: the mitigation of affective writing barriers, an ongoing negotiation of authorial ownership, and the development of critical digital agency. The findings suggest that when GenAI is strictly bounded as a cognitive scaffold rather than a text generator, it preserves the non-linear, recursive journey of composition while fostering heightened metacognitive awareness and linguistic autonomy.

Keywords: *Authorial Identity; Phenomenological Case Study; Process-Oriented Writing; Scaffolded AI Integration; Zone of Proximal Development*

Introduction

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and second language (L2) literacy development has undergone continuous transformation, shaped by evolving pedagogical paradigms that influence how writing is conceptualized, taught, and assessed (Arnold, 2020). Traditionally, writing instruction has emphasized the recursive and cognitive nature of composition, viewing writing as a process through which learners construct meaning, develop critical thinking skills, and express their identities. However, contemporary educational contexts are increasingly challenged by rapid technological advancements that are reshaping long-established approaches to language learning and literacy instruction.

Among the most significant of these developments is the emergence and widespread accessibility of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) and Large Language Models (LLMs). These technologies have introduced unprecedented opportunities for language learning while simultaneously raising fundamental questions about the nature of writing and authorship. Unlike previous educational technologies, GenAI tools can generate coherent, contextually appropriate texts almost instantaneously, effectively compressing the traditionally iterative process of writing into an automated output (Zheng & Yu, 2025). This capability has generated both enthusiasm and concern among educators, as it challenges conventional assumptions regarding student creativity, ownership, and the development of writing proficiency.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on measuring the effects of AI-assisted writing in language classrooms, often emphasizing quantifiable outcomes such as grammatical accuracy, lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, and overall writing performance. While these studies provide valuable insights into the measurable benefits and limitations of AI integration, they frequently overlook the subjective dimensions of learners' experiences (Zheng & Yu, 2025). Such a focus reflects an important epistemological gap, as writing extends beyond the mechanical production of text. Writing is also a deeply personal and social act through which individuals negotiate identity, voice, agency, and self-expression.

The integration of GenAI into secondary ESL writing instruction therefore raises critical questions that cannot be adequately addressed through quantitative measures alone. As students engage with AI-supported writing tasks, how do they perceive their role as authors? In what ways do they negotiate ownership of texts that are co-constructed with intelligent systems? Does the presence of an automated linguistic partner diminish learners' confidence and pride in their writing, or does it enhance their capacity for creative expression and linguistic experimentation? Furthermore, how do students develop critical digital literacy and exercise agency in environments where the boundaries between human-generated and machine-generated texts are increasingly blurred (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

To address these questions and contribute to the emerging body of research on AI-assisted language learning, this qualitative phenomenological case study explores the lived experiences of secondary English language learners participating in a purposefully scaffolded AI-integrated writing unit. Drawing on multiple sources of data—including student reflection journals, teacher-researcher classroom observations, and semi-structured focus group discussions—the study seeks to uncover the ways in which learners experience, interpret, and negotiate the use of GenAI in their writing practices. Specifically, it aims to identify thematic patterns related to student autonomy, authorial voice, identity construction, and digital agency within the increasingly AI-mediated ESL classroom. By foregrounding learners' perspectives, this study offers a deeper understanding of how emerging technologies are transforming not only writing outcomes but also the human experiences that underpin language learning and literacy development.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological case study design to explore the lived experiences of secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) learners engaging with scaffolded Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in writing instruction. The study was conducted over an eight-week period in a Grade 10 advanced English class at a public secondary school in the Philippines during the 2024–2025 academic year. Twenty purposively selected students (9 males and 11 females), aged 15–16 years and possessing intermediate English proficiency, participated in the study. Data were collected through three complementary sources: student reflection journals completed after each writing session, teacher-researcher observation logs recorded during classroom activities, and semi-structured focus group discussions conducted at the end of the

intervention. These data sources enabled methodological triangulation and provided a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with AI-assisted writing. The collected qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase inductive thematic analysis framework, involving data familiarization, open coding, theme generation, theme review, refinement, and interpretation. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking and consensus coding with an external qualitative reviewer were conducted. Ethical standards were strictly observed through institutional approval, informed parental consent, student assent, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, pseudonymization of participant identities, and secure storage of all research data.

Results and Discussions

Analysis of the reflection journals, classroom observations, and focus group discussions revealed three interrelated themes that characterized students' experiences with scaffolded Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in ESL writing: (1) mitigation of writing anxiety through affective support, (2) negotiation of authorial ownership and linguistic voice, and (3) development of algorithmic skepticism and digital agency. Together, these themes illustrate how carefully structured AI integration can influence not only writing performance but also the psychological, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of second-language composition.

Theme 1: Mitigation of "Blank Page" Anxiety Through Affective Support

The most immediate and consistently reported effect of the AI-assisted writing intervention was the reduction of writing anxiety during the pre-writing stage. Many participants described experiencing difficulty initiating academic writing tasks due to fear of grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, and concerns about negative evaluation. These experiences are consistent with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that anxiety and self-consciousness can impede language acquisition by restricting learners' willingness to engage with language production tasks.

For many students, the Socratic AI interface transformed writing from a solitary and evaluative activity into a low-stakes conversational process. As P4 explained:

> **"***Ma'am, usually when I look at a blank document, my mind goes completely blank too. I spend almost an hour just thinking about the first sentence because I am so afraid that my grammar is wrong or my ideas are cheap. But with the AI chatbot, I typed my thoughts in raw Taglish, and it did not judge me. It just asked me questions that made me realize what I actually wanted to say. Nawala yung kaba ko [My nervousness disappeared] because I knew I was just talking to a machine."*

Similarly, P12 described the AI environment as a "safe space" where mistakes were viewed as part of the learning process rather than evidence of failure:

> *"The best part is that the AI does not give me grades. When I write for my teacher, I feel like every word is a trap. When I talk to the AI about my outline, I can make mistakes. It feels like a safe space to practice my English before the actual writing starts."*

These perceptions were supported by classroom observations. During the first week of implementation, students frequently hesitated before beginning to write, often seeking reassurance from peers or the teacher. By Week 4, however, students engaged more readily in brainstorming and drafting activities. The average delay between opening a writing task and beginning active composition noticeably decreased, suggesting increased confidence and cognitive engagement. Rather than eliminating the cognitive demands of writing, the AI reduced the emotional barriers that often prevent learners from engaging with those demands.

This finding supports emerging research suggesting that AI-assisted writing environments can reduce language anxiety and increase learner confidence when used as supportive scaffolds rather than automated writing tools (Kasneci et al., 2023). The results further suggest that GenAI may serve as an affective mediator, helping learners move beyond initial apprehension and engage more productively with the writing process.

Theme 2: Negotiating Authorial Ownership and Linguistic Voice

Although participants reported positive experiences with AI-assisted brainstorming, they also described a

persistent tension between utilizing AI-generated suggestions and maintaining ownership of their writing. This tension emerged as the most significant identity-related theme throughout the intervention.

Students frequently viewed AI-generated language as sophisticated, polished, and academically desirable; however, they simultaneously recognized that such language did not always reflect their authentic voice. This finding resonates with concerns raised in recent AI literacy scholarship regarding authorship, authenticity, and the preservation of individual expression in AI-mediated writing environments (Zheng & Yu, 2025).

P7 articulated this struggle:

> "*The AI suggested this very beautiful, poetic sentence to connect my paragraphs. It looked perfect, like something from a textbook. But when I read it out loud, it did not sound like me at all. It sounded like a foreigner was writing my paper. I felt like if my teacher read it, she would see a ghost in my essay. So, I deleted it and wrote a simpler version. It was worse grammatically, but it belonged to me."*

This quotation illustrates a critical aspect of AI-assisted writing: students did not automatically accept machine-generated suggestions. Instead, they engaged in deliberate rhetorical decision-making, weighing linguistic sophistication against personal authenticity. The participants' responses suggest that ownership was not determined solely by who generated the words but by who made the final rhetorical choices.

This process is particularly evident in P15's reflection:

> *"I liked the word 'alleviate' that the AI used when we were discussing poverty topics. I didn't let the AI write the sentence, but I took that specific word and fit it into my own sentence structure. In that way, I am still the owner of the essay, but the AI helped me upgrade my vocabulary."*

Such accounts indicate that students viewed AI not as a replacement for authorship but as a linguistic resource that could be selectively incorporated into their own writing. From a sociocultural perspective, the AI functioned as a digital More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) that mediated learning through dialogue and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). However, unlike traditional instructional support, students retained agency by choosing when and how to accept AI recommendations.

The findings therefore challenge assumptions that AI inevitably erodes originality. Instead, they suggest that carefully scaffolded AI use may actually strengthen learners' awareness of voice, audience, and rhetorical identity by forcing them to consciously evaluate what constitutes "their own" writing.

Theme 3: The Emergence of Algorithmic Skepticism and Digital Agency

The final theme reflects a developmental shift in how students perceived the authority of GenAI. At the beginning of the intervention, many participants regarded the AI system as a superior linguistic authority whose suggestions should rarely be questioned. However, prolonged engagement gradually transformed this perception, leading students to recognize the limitations, biases, and contextual weaknesses of AI-generated language.

P19 described this evolution:

> *"In the beginning, I thought the AI was perfect and I was the one who was stupid. If it questioned my argument, I changed it immediately. But by Week 6, I noticed it was repeating the same fancy words like 'plethora,' 'foster,' and 'testament' in almost every prompt. It became predictable and a bit robotic. I actually told the chatbot, 'No, that word does not fit the context of Filipino culture.' That was the moment I realized I was the boss of the computer, not the other way around."*

Likewise, P2 observed:

> *"The AI is a good helper, but it does not have a soul. It can give me five synonyms for a word, but it does not know which one carries the exact emotion I want my readers to feel. I have to make that choice."*

These reflections reveal a significant shift from technological dependence toward critical technological engagement. Rather than treating AI outputs as objective truths, students increasingly evaluated suggestions

according to contextual appropriateness, cultural relevance, and communicative intent. Classroom observations further confirmed this trend, as participants were frequently observed questioning AI recommendations, refining prompts to limit stylistic interference, and consulting peers to verify the appropriateness of suggested vocabulary. This progression represents an important dimension of digital literacy. According to Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010), digital literacy extends beyond technical competence to include the critical evaluation of digital information and technologies. In the present study, students developed what may be described as algorithmic skepticism—the capacity to recognize that AI-generated outputs are neither neutral nor infallible. Such skepticism reflects a higher-order form of digital agency in which learners actively manage, critique, and regulate technological assistance rather than passively accepting it.

These findings suggest that scaffolded AI integration can foster not only writing development but also critical AI literacy. By learning to question, negotiate, and selectively utilize AI-generated language, students developed a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between human judgment and machine intelligence. This finding is particularly significant in contemporary educational contexts, where the ability to critically evaluate algorithmic outputs is becoming an essential component of twenty-first-century literacy (Warner, 2024). Rather than diminishing human agency, the structured use of GenAI encouraged students to become more reflective, discerning, and intentional writers—qualities that remain central to effective language learning and authentic communication.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the educational impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in secondary ESL writing instruction is determined not by the technology itself but by the pedagogical frameworks that govern its use. The findings reveal that when GenAI is implemented as a scaffolded, dialogic learning partner rather than an automated text generator, it can support language development, strengthen learner autonomy, and foster deeper engagement with the writing process. Rather than diminishing students' authorial identity, structured interactions with AI prompted participants to critically examine their linguistic choices, negotiate ownership of ideas, and consciously preserve their unique voices. These experiences suggest that AI-assisted writing can serve as a catalyst for metacognitive reflection, digital agency, and identity formation among adolescent second-language learners. Consequently, the study challenges prevailing narratives that position AI solely as a threat to academic integrity and instead highlights its potential as a transformative educational tool when guided by sound pedagogical principles. The findings carry significant implications for curriculum development, teacher preparation, and educational policy, particularly in the Philippine context, where schools are increasingly confronted with decisions regarding AI integration. Moving forward, English language education must shift from a paradigm of restriction toward one of critical engagement by embedding AI literacy, prompt literacy, and ethical co-composition practices into mainstream instruction.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that secondary English language educators adopt structured and pedagogically guided approaches to Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) integration rather than implementing outright bans or unrestricted use. Schools should develop instructional frameworks that position AI as a scaffold for brainstorming, reflection, and language development while preserving students' responsibility for idea generation, critical thinking, and final composition decisions. Curriculum developers and policymakers should incorporate AI literacy, prompt literacy, and ethical co-composition practices into English language instruction to help learners critically evaluate and manage AI-generated outputs. Professional development programs should also be provided to teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to design AI-supported learning activities that promote student autonomy, authorial voice, and digital agency. Furthermore, educational institutions should establish clear guidelines for responsible AI use that balance academic integrity with innovation in teaching and learning. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal and mixed-method studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups to further examine the long-term effects of AI-assisted writing on language proficiency, writing identity, critical digital literacy, and learner agency across different educational contexts.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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