

USING AI WRITING TOOLS TO ENGAGE IN SELF-REGULATED WRITING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how EFL students use AI writing tools to engage in self-regulated writing (SRW) across three key phases: forethought, performance, and self-evaluation, in the context of completing their undergraduate thesis. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved two participants from an English Education program at a private university in Malang, Indonesia. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that both students used various AI tools, including Chatbots, Grammar Checker, Citation Manager, and Plagiarism checker in different SRW phases. In the forethought phase, students used Chat GPT, Perplexity AI, and Mendeley for topic exploration, identifying research gaps, and managing references. They find a challenge while using AI in this phase, which is a lack of knowledge about AI use. They usually directly watch a tutorial video on YouTube and ask their friends who know more about how AI works. In the performance phase, AI tools include Grammarly, DeepL, and Mendeley. They were employed to support the writing process. They find two challenges. The first challenge is feeling object to the cost of AI, usually they face this challenge with sharing the payment of AI with their friends. The second challenge they are forbidden from using AI, especially Mendeley and Grammarly, for their thesis writing it is no strategies are mentioned because they follow the advice from their lecturer. Finally, the last phase of SRW is the self-evaluation phase, students used Turnitin as a plagiarism checker. They do not find any challenges because they did not use the plagiarism checker by themselves. They ordered and directly got the results.

Keywords: AI writing tools, self-regulated writing, thesis writing

INTRODUCTION

In this digital era, technology has developed faster, and everything has become easier. According to Tseng et al. (2022), TPACK theory discusses how technology is used in education and how technology can make things easier with good implementation. Theoretical Pedagogical Content Knowledge, or TPACK, is a platform that helps teachers teach students efficiently. Besides, in this digital era, many kinds of technologies can help students and teachers in education, for the example, that become a current issue is Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI has an intelligence quotient (IQ) equal to that of humans and is designed to assist with tasks (Fetzer, 2023). Since AI is a human aid, particularly in education, it is typically utilized in all aspects of life (Knox, 2020). AI is developing more quickly in the twenty-first century and assists teachers and students in resolving any issue that arises in the classroom (Roll & Wylie, 2016).

In education there will always be a problem, teachers and students can consult AI for assistance in fixing it. AI provides numerous solutions for any problem. There are many kinds of Artificial intelligence (AI) in education especially in English learning. There are four skills that usually learned by students, there are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This study will focus on the writing where this study will explain about AI writing tools. Writing is a complex skill (Sari et al., 2023), which is why AI writing tools are available (Marzuki and colleagues, 2023). There are several categories of AI writing tools, including grammar checks, chatbots, citations, and paraphrasing tools. the kind of artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools that assist students with their tasks. Additionally, according to Yilmaz and Karaoglan Yilmaz (2023), AI writing tools improve students' writing performance. AI is the driving force behind students' increased motivation to begin self-management and develop their writing abilities. Both teachers and students can profit greatly from AI writing. The use of AI in writing can support students in enhancing their self-regulated learning strategies three phases of self-regulated learning (Marzuki et al., 2023). The ability of students to control their learning in terms of metacognition, motivation, and behavior is known as self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2008). In addition, the essential elements of self-regulated learning include time management awareness, the actual thought behind the learning strategies employed, attitudes and beliefs that affect learning engagement, and the action taken on learning (Winne & Marzouk, 2019).

Self-regulated learning, or SRL, which has the same phases and process as self-regulated writing, is crucial for students since it is strongly associated with their academic success (Zimmerman, 1986). According to Zimmerman's (2002) theory, self-regulated writing can be divided into three stages: forethought phase, performance phase, and self-evaluation phase. In this research context, the forethought phase is where the students need their preparation on their undergraduate thesis, the performance phase is the process of students' undergraduate thesis writing, and the last is self-evaluation, where the students need to evaluate their writing. Implementing self-regulated strategies plays a crucial role in enhancing students' success in developing their writing skills (Umamah et al., 2022).

This research has some connections to earlier studies, the first publication by Aksela et al. (2024). The researchers focused on secondary school students and discovered that students' writing assignments benefit from self-regulated learning of the research. They also learned how to help students develop their usage of digital devices responsibly. The researcher employs a mixed-method approach while concentrating on self-regulated writing and general technology in education. Alobaid (2021) conducted the second earlier study, which used ICT to improve ESL (English as a Second Language) writing accuracy. In his research, the researcher finds that ICT improved their writing processes. It is really effective to gain motivation for students in writing process.

The third study from Elkot and Ali (2020) used a mixed-methods design to examine a writing device. The researchers found that the device was beneficial for increasing students' motivation to write and for fostering their interest in completing their writing assignments. According to the fourth study by Yilong et al. (2024), which used a quantitative approach and concentrated on Grammarly as a grammar checker in writing against students' self-efficacy in self-regulated learning. They found that Grammarly improved students' psychological well-being. Students were also developed through the use of language learning software. According to the

findings of the most recent study conducted by Umamah and Cahyono (2022), Students' engagement with various online resources such as communication platforms, assessment applications, the internet, social media, and management tools supported them throughout the three phases of self-regulated writing.

This previous study has studied general online resources. According to the five studies mentioned above, there is not a substantial amount of AI that is often utilized in writing, and there aren't many studies that examine this topic. Since AI is one of the most pressing challenges in education right now, there is still a need for more in-depth research to fully explore the use of AI in writing. In the five previous studies, the focus was on students in the English second language, and also on writing in general. It is different from this research, which the researcher focused on university students' level and undergraduate thesis writing by following the process of three phases of self-regulated writing. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students use AI writing tools to engage in three phases (forethought, performance, self-reflection) of self-regulated writing practices in writing under graduate thesis?
2. What challenges do students face when using AI writing tools for the three self-regulated writing phases (forethought, performance, self-reflection) in writing an undergraduate thesis?
3. How do students face the challenges in using AI writing tools in the three self-regulated writing phases (forethought, performance, self-reflection) in writing an undergraduate thesis?

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach to answer the three research questions. A single case study design was used to explore the case in depth (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), as the study focuses on one specific case without comparison. The study was conducted in the English Education Department of a private university in Malang. To be eligible for an undergraduate thesis, students must complete around 120 credits with a minimum GPA of 2.00. The participants were two students from the 2020 cohort who had completed their thesis using AI tools, received an A score, and finished faster than average. These students were selected through purposive sampling, based on specific criteria (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants, referred to as Olivia and Delisa (pseudonyms), graduated in September 2023, completing their studies in just 3.6 years.

The instruments used are interviews and documentation. The interview questions were adapted from Umamah and Cahyono (2022) and focus on how students use AI writing tools and handle the challenges. The questions are based on the three phases of self-regulated writing: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. There are nine main questions and three background questions to help participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. The interview is done in Indonesian to avoid misunderstanding. To make sure the questions are valid and reliable, they were checked by two experts: one in self-regulated writing and one in ICT. For documentation, the researcher collects materials showing how students use AI in each of the three writing phases.

To collect the data, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with two participants, each lasting around 30–60 minutes. To ensure the validity and consistency of the responses, the

interviews were done three times over three weeks. This repeated process helped the researcher confirm that the participants' answers were stable and truly reflected their experiences. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006), which included several steps: familiarizing with the data, coding, theming, and interpreting. In the coding stage, deductive coding was used based on the three phases of self-regulated learning. Yellow was used for the forethought phase, green for the performance phase, and red for the self-reflection phase. After coding, themes were created from the participants' responses, and then interpretation was done to see which phases were mostly used, referring to the theory. To support the credibility of the findings, member checking was also used, allowing participants to review the results and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

FINDINGS

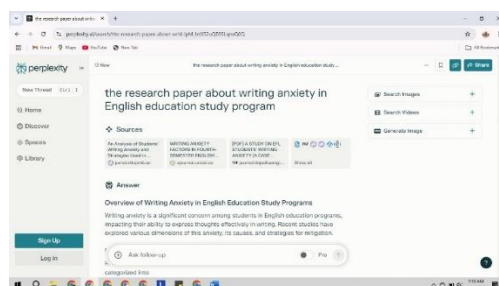
This study explores how undergraduate students integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools throughout their self-regulated writing (SRW) process during the completion of their thesis. Based on semi-structured interviews, two participants, Olivia and Delisa, shared their personal experiences and reflections while using AI tools at each stage of SRW: *forethought*, *performance*, and *self-reflection*. Each phase presents a unique purpose and sets of tools, shaped by the students' preferences, challenges, and strategies.

Olivia's Experience

1. Forethought

Forethought is the first phase of self-regulated writing, where students prepare everything, they need to start writing their thesis. In this phase, they usually choose a topic, identify the research gap, and find articles for their theoretical foundation. Based on the interview, students often use AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, and Mendeley to help them find information and articles.

One participant shared that she used three kinds of AI during this phase:



Picture. Perplexity AI

“There are three AIs that I used in the first phase of writing my undergraduate thesis, where I prepared everything, from the research gap, theory, and topic — they are ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, and Mendeley.”

She explained that these tools helped her collect recent studies to create a research matrix and find grounded theory based on her topic of interest.

When asked how she used each AI tool, she said:

“I used each AI based on its function. I used ChatGPT to get ideas and theory-related

articles. I also used Perplexity AI if I couldn't find related articles with ChatGPT. For Mendeley, I used it as a citation and reference manager because doing it manually was difficult."

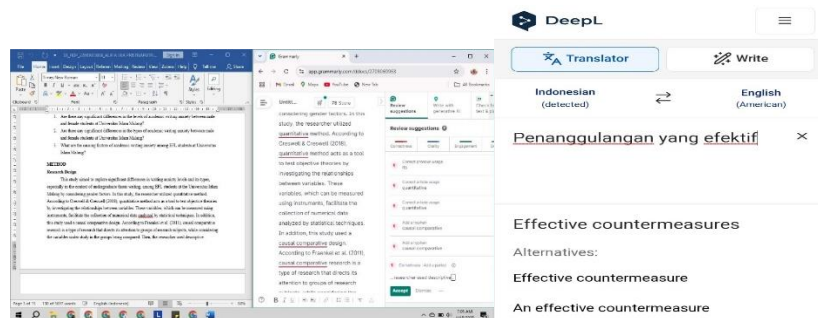
Finally, when asked about challenges and strategies in this phase, she said:

"I didn't face any challenges in this preparation phase. Everything went smoothly."

So, she didn't mention any specific strategies since she didn't experience major difficulties during the forethought phase.

2. Performance

The performance phase is when students begin writing the main chapters of their undergraduate thesis, covering the introduction, theoretical framework, research methods, data analysis, and conclusion. In this phase, Olivia added three AI tools to assist her writing process: DeepL, Grammarly, and Quillbot.



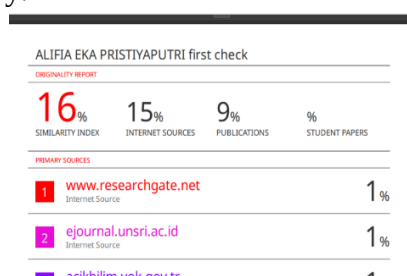
Picture. Grammarly

Picture. DeepL

She explained that each AI was used according to its function. DeepL was used as both a translator and grammar checker, especially when she wanted to write ideas or theories in proper English. She also used DeepL to find synonyms or paraphrase unfamiliar words. Grammarly helped her check grammar instantly and gave direct feedback in her writing to avoid grammatical errors. Although she also used Quillbot, she mentioned that she only used it a few times because she was afraid of AI plagiarism and therefore did not document its use further. Regarding challenges, Olivia said she did not face any major difficulties in using AI tools during the performance phase. However, she did express concern about the cost of Grammarly, as the premium version required a monthly subscription to unlock all features. To solve this problem, she shared the payment with a friend since Grammarly could be accessed on two devices, which helped reduce her expenses.

3. Self-reflection

The third phase of self-regulated writing is self-reflection. In this phase, students have finished writing their undergraduate thesis but still need to revise and consult with their lecturers to ensure everything is done correctly.



Picture. Turnitin

They also usually check for plagiarism using tools like Turnitin. Olivia mentioned that in this phase, she used Turnitin as a plagiarism checker to make sure her thesis met the required standard—specifically, a similarity index below 20%, with her personal target being under 15% to gain approval from her lecturer.

“I added Turnitin in the self-reflection phase, where I always make sure that my writing doesn’t get more than 20% plagiarism. If it’s more, I revise it,” Olivia explained. However, she didn’t use Turnitin directly. Instead, she ordered the service through an online platform, where the seller provided the Turnitin report. Although she was aware of Turnitin’s general function, she didn’t engage with the tool herself, simply reviewing the results sent back to her.

Olivia also shared that she didn’t face any major challenges in this phase, similar to her previous experiences. The only issue she highlighted was the cost. *“Actually, I don’t have any specific challenge with AI, but the same as before—I object to the cost of using Turnitin. If I want better results, I have to pay for every check. So, I usually choose the cheaper and trusted ones on e-commerce or Twitter,”* she said. While the cost per check was relatively small (around IDR 2,000), having to pay it every time she consulted her lecturer became burdensome. Her strategy to manage this was simply choosing more affordable and reliable Turnitin services available online.

Delisa’s Experience

1. Forethought

The first phase of self-regulated writing is forethought, where students prepare everything they need before starting to write their undergraduate thesis. In this stage, students usually focus on selecting a research topic, identifying research gaps, and collecting relevant articles for their theoretical framework. To support this process, they may use AI tools for assistance. Delisa, for instance, mentioned that she did not use any specific AI tools apart from commonly known ones such as DeepL, Grammarly, and Mendeley. *“I use DeepL as a translator and to make sure my statements have good grammar. I translate any strange words to avoid misunderstanding. I also use Grammarly to re-check my grammar and Mendeley as a reference manager and citation tool,”* she explained.

DeepL helped her both in translation and grammar checking, while Grammarly provided instant feedback on her writing. Meanwhile, Mendeley helped her organize citations and manage references, especially when dealing with recent studies and building the research gap. Delisa admitted that she didn’t face significant challenges when using AI tools in this phase, but she sometimes felt unfamiliar and confused due to her limited knowledge about AI.

“Sometimes I feel kind of strange and clueless when using AI because I haven’t explored many tools,” she said. To overcome this, she watched tutorial videos on YouTube and asked friends who were more experienced with AI to better understand each tool’s function and how to use them effectively.

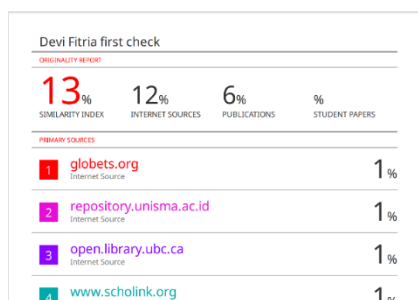
2. Performance

The second phase of self-regulated writing is performance, where students begin writing their undergraduate thesis. This stage typically involves developing the five main chapters: Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, research questions, objectives, significance, scope, limitations, and key terms. Chapter 2 provides a literature review focusing on relevant

theories and identifying research gaps. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology, including the design, participants, data sources, data collection methods, analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents the findings and discussion, followed by Chapter 5, which offers conclusions and suggestions. During this phase, Delisa mentioned that she did not add any new AI tools to her writing process. She continued using the same tools as before DeepL and Grammarly but decided to stop using Mendeley. *“I stopped using Mendeley because I got revised many times, and my lecturer didn’t accept my references. I ended up doing it manually,”* she said. Delisa explained that her lecturer believed Mendeley and similar citation tools like Zotero didn’t align with the citation format required by the university’s thesis guidelines. Although she found AI tools helpful, Delisa admitted that her limited knowledge made her less confident in exploring new tools. *“Just like I said before, I have a knowledge limitation on AI use. I try to do my undergraduate thesis manually,”* she added. She also expressed that doing citations manually was time-consuming, but it helped her complete her thesis more smoothly, especially when dealing with her lecturer’s strict requirements. Despite the added workload, Delisa proved that she could adapt and finish her writing without heavily depending on AI citation tools.

3. Self-reflection

The final stage of self-regulated writing is self-reflection. In this phase, students have completed their undergraduate thesis but still need to review and consult with their lecturer to ensure the research meets the required standards. This is also the stage where students typically begin editing, revising, and checking the originality of their work using plagiarism detection tools like Turnitin. Delisa stated that she continued using the same AI tools from the previous phases, but in this final stage, she added one more tool Turnitin, to ensure her thesis was free from plagiarism.



Picture Turnitin

“It’s the same as before, but in this phase, I added Turnitin to make sure that my undergraduate thesis has no plagiarism at all,” she said.

Although Delisa used Turnitin in this stage, she did not operate it herself. Instead, she relied on online services that provided Turnitin checks.

“I don’t use Turnitin by myself. I just order the service online and directly get the result,” she explained. This means Delisa did not interact directly with the tool but depended on others to generate the plagiarism reports.

In terms of challenges, Delisa noted that she did not face new obstacles in this phase. However, she did express concern about the **cost** of using Turnitin.

“There’s no new challenge, but I object to paying the Turnitin fee. I check it almost every week,

so I usually choose the cheapest and most trusted service,” she added.

Just like in the earlier phases, Delisa’s main challenges were her limited knowledge of AI tools and the financial burden of accessing them. As a strategy, she carefully selected affordable and reliable Turnitin services through online platforms to manage her expenses while still ensuring the quality and originality of her thesis.

To provide a clearer comparison of the participants’ experiences during each phase of self-regulated writing using AI tools, the following table summarizes the key points related to their use of AI, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they applied. The table is organized based on the three phases of self-regulated writing Forethought, Performance, and Self-evaluation and highlights the similarities and differences between Participant 1 and Participant 2 in each stage.

Three phases of SRW	Participants 1	Participants 2
Forethought	• Use: looking for a theories and recent research as the gap. • Challenges: no challenges. • Strategies: no strategies mentioned.	• Use: looking for theories and recent research as the gap. • Challenges: Lack of knowledge on ai use • Strategies: Watching YouTube tutorial and asked to her friends.
Performance	• Use: grammar checker, citation and references. • Challenges: Objected on cost of AI • Strategies: Sharing with her friends	• Use: Grammar checker • Challenges: The lecturer forbid her on using a reference manager • Strategies: No strategies mentioned
Self-evaluation	• Use: plagiarism checker. • Challenges: no specific challenges mentioned • Strategies: no specific strategies mentioned	• Use: plagiarism checker. • Challenges: no specific challenges mentioned • Strategies: no specific strategies mentioned

DISCUSSION

This research discusses how EFL students applied AI tools during each phase of self-regulated writing (SRW): forethought, performance, and self-evaluation. The findings not only reaffirm Zimmerman’s (2002) SRW model but also expand on how technology, especially AI supports or challenges students in regulating their writing processes.

4.2.1 Forethought: Planning and Preparation with AI

In the forethought phase, students demonstrated their preparation by gathering sources, identifying research gaps, and understanding key concepts. AI tools—such as ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, Google Translate, and reference managers—played a pivotal role in scaffolding this early stage. Both participants reported that AI was helpful in searching for basic theories and recent studies. This aligns with Alobaid (2021) and Yilong et al. (2024), who argue that AI enhances student writing preparation by providing access to updated knowledge. The convenience of open-access

article search through AI also meant that students rarely lacked resources. This represents a shift from traditional dependence on library or manual database searches. However, the discussion would be incomplete without acknowledging the challenges. One participant, Delisa, highlighted a lack of familiarity with AI tools, leading to irrelevant or unhelpful results. This echoes Wu (2024), who found that students without prior AI training may misuse or misinterpret AI outputs. This suggests that forethought quality is not only dependent on tool availability, but also digital literacy. Interestingly, while AI helped students "look smarter" in terms of initial content gathering, it may also risk creating surface-level understanding if over-relied upon. Educators must therefore ensure that students combine AI with critical reading and evaluation strategies, not just content collection.

4.2.2 Performance: AI in the Writing Process

In the performance phase, students began drafting and structuring their undergraduate theses. Tools such as paraphrasers and grammar checkers (especially Grammarly) were used to enhance writing quality. These tools improved sentence construction, coherence, and language appropriateness, consistent with Alammam & Amin (2023), who observed AI's contribution to linguistic accuracy. Nonetheless, overdependence raises concerns. One participant noted that constant use of paraphrasing tools "kills creativity," which implies that AI may weaken students' ability to express original thought. This finding supports critical views in Alammam & Amin's (2023) research, which warn against passive AI use that discourages skill development. Another key issue involved cost. Olivia shared the Grammarly premium cost with friends to access full features highlighting economic barriers in accessing optimal AI support. While AI offers solutions, financial and institutional support remains crucial in ensuring equity.

Moreover, institutional rules may conflict with AI use. Delisa was restricted by her lecturer from using AI-based reference managers, forcing her to revert to manual citation. This experience complicates claims made by Sumakul et al. (2022), who reported faster thesis completion due to AI; in contrast, this study found that despite less AI support, Delisa completed her thesis at the same time as Olivia. This suggests that SRW plays a greater role than AI alone in determining writing success.

4.2.3 Self-Evaluation: Checking and Revising with AI Tools

The self-evaluation phase involved plagiarism checking using Turnitin. Participants reported checking similarity scores multiple times via online services, aiming for less than 20% plagiarism. Although Turnitin was widely used, students did not directly engage with it, outsourcing this task instead. While this reflects students' awareness of academic integrity, it also reveals detachment from self-reflection processes, which Zimmerman (2002) emphasized as central to SRW. The absence of direct Turnitin interaction indicates that self-evaluation becomes more of a compliance step than a reflective one. Moreover, outsourcing plagiarism checks may undermine students' ownership of revision decisions. Challenges remained consistent across phases—namely limited AI knowledge, financial constraints, and institutional restrictions. These barriers reiterate Wu's (2024) point that teachers must introduce AI tools early and train students in digital literacy to maximize the benefits.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study highlights the significant role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in supporting students'

self-regulated writing (SRW) during their undergraduate thesis process. AI tools were used across three SRW phases: (1) forethought, where students used chatbots and reference managers for topic exploration and citation; (2) performance, where grammar checkers, paraphrasing, and translation tools assisted during writing; and (3) self-evaluation, where plagiarism checkers were used to ensure originality. While AI tools offered practical support, challenges emerged such as limited knowledge, access costs, and institutional restrictions.

Based on these findings, several suggestions are proposed. Students should improve their digital literacy to make effective use of AI tools. Teachers are encouraged to introduce and support the responsible use of AI in academic settings. For future researchers, it is recommended to explore more diverse student experiences, especially regarding motivation, gender, and the impact of lecturer attitudes on AI usage in academic writing.

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