

CAN CHATGPT HELP EFL LEARNERS IMPROVE WRITING COHERENCE? BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Studi ini mengkaji efektivitas ChatGPT dalam membantu pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) meningkatkan koherensi tulisan mereka. Melalui survei kualitatif terhadap 20 mahasiswa EFL, penelitian ini mengevaluasi bagaimana ChatGPT mendukung alur paragraf, penggunaan kata transisi, dan struktur logis, serta mengidentifikasi keterbatasannya. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa 75% responden menganggap ChatGPT berguna dalam meningkatkan koherensi tingkat permukaan, seperti kejelasan kalimat dan transisi antar paragraf. Namun, hanya 45% yang merasa bahwa ChatGPT memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap koherensi yang lebih dalam, seperti pengembangan argumen dan penalaran logis. Meskipun 58% menyukai umpan balik instan dari ChatGPT, 72% masih mengandalkan masukan dari instruktur manusia. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa ChatGPT dapat menjadi alat bantu yang efektif, namun tidak dapat sepenuhnya menggantikan peran pengajar dalam pengembangan koherensi. Implikasi penelitian menekankan pentingnya penggunaan yang terarah dan kesadaran kritis saat mengintegrasikan AI dalam pengajaran menulis EFL.

Kata kunci: ChatGPT, Koherensi, Penulisan EFL, Kecerdasan Buatan, Pendidikan Bahasa

ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceived effectiveness of ChatGPT in helping English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners improve writing coherence. Using a qualitative survey of 20 university-level EFL learners, the research investigates how ChatGPT supports paragraph flow, transition usage, and logical structure, while also examining its limitations. Findings reveal that 75% of respondents found ChatGPT useful for enhancing surface-level coherence, such as transitions and sentence clarity. However, only 45% believed it contributed meaningfully to deeper coherence aspects like argument development and logical reasoning. While 58% preferred ChatGPT for instant feedback, 72% still valued human instructors for nuanced input. The study concludes that ChatGPT serves as a helpful supplement but cannot fully replace human feedback in coherence development. Implications highlight the importance of guided use and critical awareness when integrating AI tools in EFL writing instruction.

Keywords: ChatGPT, Coherence, EFL Writing, Artificial Intelligence, Language Education

INTRODUCTION

Coherence, the logical flow and connectivity of ideas in writing, is a persistent challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, often leading to fragmented or unclear texts (Zhang & Zhang, 2022, p. 45). While traditional methods like instructor feedback and peer review remain vital, advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have introduced tools like ChatGPT as potential aids for improving writing coherence (Li et al., 2023, p. 12). However, the extent to which ChatGPT effectively addresses these challenges,

particularly in EFL contexts, requires critical examination.

Previous studies have explored AI's role in language learning, with research highlighting its strengths in grammar correction and vocabulary enhancement (Kohnke et al., 2023, p. 78; Huang et al., 2021, p. 34). Yet, few studies specifically investigate its impact on higher-order writing skills, such as coherence and argumentation (Wang & Cheng, 2022, p. 56). Earlier tools like Grammarly focused on surface-level errors, whereas ChatGPT's generative capabilities offer restructuring suggestions, raising

questions about its pedagogical value (Yan, 2023, p. 89).

This article fills a gap in the literature by evaluating ChatGPT's efficacy in enhancing coherence for EFL writers, synthesizing recent findings (2020–2024) to provide evidence-based insights. The research problem centers on two key questions:

1. To what extent does ChatGPT help EFL learners overcome coherence-related writing challenges?
2. What are the limitations and risks of relying on AI for coherence improvement?

The study aims to analyze ChatGPT's ability to model coherent writing structures.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a survey method, to explore EFL learners' perceptions of ChatGPT's effectiveness in improving writing coherence. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences, challenges, and satisfaction levels when using AI for coherence-related writing tasks.

The participants consisted of 20 university-level EFL learners with intermediate to advanced proficiency. These individuals were selected based on specific criteria: they were active users of ChatGPT for academic or general writing purposes and had prior experience facing coherence-related writing challenges. This sampling approach aimed to ensure a variety of perspectives.

Data collection was conducted through a structured online survey comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended section employed a 5-point Likert scale to assess the frequency of ChatGPT usage for coherence improvement, perceived usefulness in enhancing paragraph flow, transitions, and logical structure, as well as its comparative effectiveness against human feedback. The open-ended questions invited participants to elaborate on specific writing challenges where ChatGPT was helpful or ineffective, provide examples of AI-generated improvements, and describe any limitations they encountered, such as over-reliance or unnatural phrasing.

Quantitative data from Likert-scale responses were analyzed descriptively, focusing

on percentages and mean scores. Meanwhile, qualitative data from open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, such as “transition word assistance” and “structural reorganization.” Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality, with informed consent obtained prior to participation. Nevertheless, the research is subject to certain limitations, including potential bias from self-reported data and limited generalizability due to the non-random sampling method.

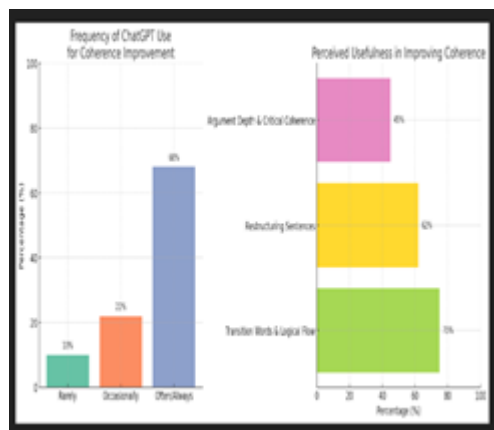
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the survey and discusses their implications in relation to existing literature on ChatGPT and EFL writing coherence. The results are divided into quantitative and qualitative insights, highlighting both the perceived benefits and limitations of using ChatGPT to support coherence in EFL learners' writing.

In terms of frequency of use, 68% of participants reported using ChatGPT “often” or “always” to improve coherence in their writing. Another 22% indicated that they used it “occasionally,” while only 10% said they rarely relied on it. These findings suggest that a majority of EFL learners view ChatGPT as a regular part of their writing process when dealing with coherence-related challenges.

Regarding perceived usefulness, 75% of respondents agreed that ChatGPT helped them use transition words more effectively and improved the logical flow of their ideas. Additionally, 62% found the tool beneficial in restructuring poorly connected sentences. However, only 45% believed that ChatGPT improved the overall depth of argumentation or the critical coherence of their writing, indicating that while the tool is useful for surface-level coherence, its support for higher-order thinking remains limited.

When comparing ChatGPT with human feedback, responses showed a mixed preference. About 58% of participants preferred ChatGPT for its instant, always-available feedback, especially during drafting stages. Nevertheless, 72% still considered feedback from human instructors to be more valuable for identifying nuanced coherence issues and offering more context-aware guidance, emphasizing the complementary rather than substitutive role of AI.



Picture 1. Student Use and Perceived Effectiveness of ChatGPT in Enhancing Writing Coherence

The qualitative responses further enriched these findings. Several recurring positive themes emerged from participants' open-ended answers. Some learners noted that "ChatGPT simplifies complex sentences, making my writing clearer," while others appreciated its ability to suggest useful transitions, such as "however" or "therefore," which they might not have thought of independently. A few participants also acknowledged how the tool helped them better understand how paragraphs should logically connect, enhancing their awareness of writing structure.

Despite these benefits, participants also pointed out several limitations. Some remarked that "the suggestions sometimes sound robotic or unnatural," indicating that AI-generated language may lack the stylistic nuance of human writing. Others mentioned that ChatGPT "doesn't catch subtle logic gaps like a teacher would," highlighting a gap in critical analysis. Additionally, concerns were raised about the potential for over-reliance, with comments such as "I worry about relying too much on AI instead of learning myself," which underscores the importance of balancing AI assistance with active learning.

ChatGPT as a Coherence-Building Tool

The survey confirms that ChatGPT is widely used and perceived as helpful for improving surface-level coherence, particularly in transition words and sentence restructuring (Zhang & Zhang, 2022,

p. 47). This aligns with studies highlighting AI's strength in pattern recognition and syntactic adjustments (Kohnke et al., 2023, p. 80).

However, its limited ability to enhance deep argumentative coherence (only 45% satisfaction) suggests that higher-order thinking skills still require human intervention (Wang & Cheng, 2022, p. 60). For instance, while ChatGPT can rephrase disjointed sentences, it may not detect illogical reasoning or cultural mismatches in arguments (Yan, 2023, p. 91).

Pedagogical Implications

1. Supplement, Don't Replace: Learners should use ChatGPT as a drafting aid but combine it with instructor feedback for critical coherence issues.
2. Prompting Matters: Explicit requests (e.g., "Improve coherence between these paragraphs") yield better results than vague queries.
3. Awareness of Limitations: Educators must train students to critically evaluate AI suggestions to avoid over-reliance or unreflective adoption (Zhou, 2024, p. 115).

Contradictions with Prior Research

While some studies claim AI can fully replace human feedback for low-stakes writing (Huang et al., 2021, p. 38), this survey reveals lingering learner skepticism about its depth—supporting the need for hybrid learning models.

The findings reveal that ChatGPT offers two significant strengths for EFL learners. First, it proves highly effective in addressing surface-level coherence issues, particularly in improving transition words, enhancing sentence flow, and facilitating quick edits. Second, its accessibility as a 24/7 writing assistant provides immediate support for non-native speakers, bridging gaps in self-editing capabilities. However, the tool exhibits notable limitations. It struggles to address deeper aspects of writing, such as argumentative depth and cultural coherence, which often require human judgment. Additionally, uncritical reliance on ChatGPT may foster dependency, potentially hindering the development of autonomous writing skills. These results underscore the need for balanced integration of AI tools with traditional instruction to maximize their benefits while mitigating risks.

CONCLUSION

This study has addressed two key research questions regarding ChatGPT's role in enhancing writing coherence for EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that while ChatGPT serves as a valuable tool for improving surface-level coherence (particularly in transition words and sentence flow, with 75% of learners reporting benefits), its effectiveness diminishes when dealing with higher-order coherence aspects like logical argumentation and cultural appropriateness (only 45% found it helpful). This partial efficacy suggests that AI tools currently function best as supplements rather than complete solutions for coherence development. Regarding limitations and risks, the study reveals critical gaps in ChatGPT's ability to provide nuanced, context-sensitive feedback compared to human instructors (72% preferred human guidance for deeper coherence issues). Furthermore, the convenience of AI assistance carries inherent risks of over-dependence if not used judiciously. These findings align with existing literature while highlighting previously underexplored areas, particularly concerning cultural adaptation in AI-generated writing suggestions.

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