Jurnal Edulanguage:
Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa
Vol. 12, No. 1, April 2026

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON STUDENTS' ETHICAL STRATEGIES IN RESEARCH PROPOSAL WRITING

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Article History
Received: 2026/02/11 *Revised: 2026/04/09* *Accepted: 2026/04/25*

Abstract

The present study aims to investigate strategies employed by students to uphold academic integrity and demonstrate responsibility when utilizing AI tools in research proposal writing process. A descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation was utilized in this research to investigate the lived experiences of participants. The subjects of this study were three intentionally chosen undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at a university in Toraja. They were engaged in the preparation of research proposals utilizing AI support. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and direct observations. The analysis was conducted through iterative qualitative techniques such as data reduction, coding, theme categorization, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification. The findings reveal ongoing issues related to academic integrity and transparency, particularly regarding the inconsistent citation of sources produced by AI and differing approaches to paraphrasing. The findings show that the participants exhibited ethical behavior by paraphrasing and verifying outputs. On the other hand, they also relied heavily on tools without adequate critical assessment, prompting inquiries into accountability for content accuracy. The findings indicate that the ethical application of AI in scholarly writing necessitates a combination of ethical understanding and technical proficiency.

Keywords: *Academic integrity, artificial intelligence, digital, research proposal writing*

INTRODUCTION

The swift advancement of artificial intelligence technologies is significantly transforming higher education practices. This happens especially in academic writing. These technologies provide generative models and intelligent tools that aid students in drafting, organizing, and refining texts. Thereby, they enhance personalized learning and enable learners to concentrate on higher-order thinking (Luckin et al., 2016). The increasing availability and advancement of these tools have led to their widespread use by students. The uses are in research proposal writing, enhancing efficiency, and idea generation. However, this rapid adoption prompts important ethical

considerations. The consideration regards originality, transparency, accountability, and potential bias in AI-generated content. Advocates contend that AI ought to serve as a tool to enhance human cognition instead of supplanting critical thinking, whereas critics warn that unregulated application could undermine academic standards and the independent reasoning of students (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2023). Empirical studies illustrate a dual impact: students value the support and efficiency provided by AI, while simultaneously expressing concerns regarding dependence, diminished clarity of authorship, and emerging misconduct that complicates traditional definitions of plagiarism and contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2018). Research conducted in Indonesia aligns with global trends, indicating that technology can enhance language learning while simultaneously creating a dependency that diminishes student effort. This underscores the necessity of balancing the advantages of AI with strategies that maintain authenticity and intellectual property (Siumarlata et al., 2024).

Notwithstanding this foundational research, a significant vacuum persists about students' genuine lived experiences and ethical approaches in AI-assisted writing. Most current research emphasizes the viewpoints of educators or institutions, rather than the intricate understanding of how students utilize AI tools ethically, especially concerning academic integrity, paraphrasing, and transparency. Concerns regarding plagiarism and excessive reliance on writing aids continue (Bretag et al., 2018) although there is less research that explicitly investigates students' methods for properly incorporating AI-generated information into academic works.

Moreover, transparency concerns emerge as students frequently neglect to regularly reveal AI's participation, thereby obscuring authorship and eroding confidence (Floridi et al., 2018). Research indicates a deficiency in awareness concerning data protection and ethical reference management in the utilization of digital tools for academic purposes, which exacerbates the challenges of AI integration in education (Zimmer, 2010).

This study attempts to fill these gaps by utilizing a phenomenological methodology to investigate the lived experiences of English Education students at a university in Toraja who are actively employing AI for research proposal writing. The emphasis is on ethical factors like academic integrity, openness, accountability, bias recognition, and privacy. This research is innovative due to its empirical emphasis on student viewpoints and behaviors, offering significant

insights that extend beyond theoretical or policy discourse. By disclosing both adherence and obstacles, it provides significant evidence to the dialogue on AI ethics in higher education. The results can guide curriculum development and policy creation to promote ethical AI utilization while preserving academic integrity.

This research aims to examine how students employ ethical tactics in the use of AI tools for academic writing and how they balance technological aid with academic integrity. This work advances the expanding domain of AI ethics in education by furnishing empirical evidence to support improved ethical instruction and transparent institutional rules.

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological approach – a way of understanding a phenomenon by examining individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences. The design was utilized to investigate how English Education students maintain academic integrity and take responsibility when utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) tools for research proposal writing. A phenomenological approach was chosen, as it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences and their subjective interpretations of a phenomenon in its natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was suitable for this study. That is because the study sought to explore how students form ethical judgments and navigate responsibility when engaging with AI in their proposal-writing process.

Participants

The study participants included three undergraduate students. They enrolled in the English Education Study Program at UKI Toraja, Indonesia. Participants were intentionally chosen according to three primary criteria: (1) active involvement in research proposal writing during the study period, (2) previous utilization of AI-based writing tools such as ChatGPT or Grammarly, and (3) readiness to reflect on and openly discuss their experiences. In phenomenological research, a limited participant pool is warranted as the focus is on depth rather than generalizability. Smith et al. (2009) assert that phenomenological inquiry aims to obtain comprehensive accounts from a

limited number of participants to elucidate the essence of a collective experience. Guest et al. (2006) observe that thematic saturation frequently arises after a limited number of interviews, particularly when participants possess a relatively uniform background and focus.

Data Collection

The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews enable participants to express their viewpoints as the researcher seeks elucidation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, occurred in a comfortable campus environment. Students were inquired about academic integrity, AI-assisted proposal composition, and the ethics of verifying and attributing AI-generated content. Non-participant observations also documented students' writing techniques, particularly their utilization of AI in research proposals. The field notes from these observations corroborated the interview results.

Data Analysis

The analysis employed iterative qualitative methods, including data reduction, coding, theme categorization, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification (Miles et al., 2014). Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed multiple times to extract pertinent segments, which were subsequently coded and organized into overarching thematic categories, including honesty, transparency, and responsibility. Data reduction aims to remove redundant information while preserving the consistency of meaning. The categorized data were organized into displays, including tables and narrative matrices, to illustrate relationships among themes. Verification and validation were accomplished via member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 2008). The use of data triangulation through interviews and observations enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of data from three English Education students at UKI Toraja uncovered complicated patterns. The patterns show how the participants navigated academic integrity while employing artificial intelligence (AI) technologies for research proposal composition. Data obtained from semi-structured interviews and direct classroom observations were analyzed with

iterative qualitative methods, including data reduction, coding, theme categorization, data display, and verification (Miles et al., 2014). Three interrelated topics surfaced: (1) awareness of integrity and transparency, (2) ethical yet inconsistent citation and paraphrasing practices, and (3) dependency on AI with limited critical evaluation.

Theme 1: Awareness of Academic Integrity

All three participants exhibited an understanding of plagiarism and ethical writing norms. They acknowledged that AI technologies ought to function as writing aids rather than replacements for human cognition or authoring. Two out of three of the participants expressly indicated that they validated AI-generated information before its incorporation into their drafts. Observational evidence corroborated this assertion, indicating that participants generally compared AI outputs with their own paraphrased renditions.

Table 1. Theme 1 Awareness of academic integrity

Indicator of Integrity Awareness	Frequency (out of 3)	Observed Practice
Awareness of plagiarism risk	3	Avoided full AI text inclusion
Checking AI output accuracy	2	Verified content meaning with other sources
Citation of AI-generated ideas	1	Mentioned AI output as “assistance,” not source

Theme 2: Responsible Use of AI Tools

Although participants predominantly engaged in ethical behavior by paraphrasing and validating AI results, their citation practices exhibited inconsistency. Only one participant specifically referenced concepts impacted by AI-generated suggestions, while the rest regarded AI as a "non-author" and so not necessitating acknowledgment.

Table 2. Theme 2 Responsible use of AI tools

Practice Type	Observed Among Participants	Description
Paraphrasing AI outputs	3	Used AI-generated ideas with modified phrasing
Verification of AI accuracy	3	Compared AI results with academic sources
Citation of AI as a contributor	1	Added AI mention in methodology notes

Theme 3: Dependency on AI and Limited Critical Evaluation

All participants indicated dependence on AI tools, mainly ChatGPT and Grammarly, to improve their academic writing. The utilization of AI varied from 2 to 4 instances weekly, primarily for idea development and grammar correction. Nevertheless, findings indicated few occurrences of rigorous evaluation regarding AI's factual accuracy or bias. Two individuals

admitted that they believe in AI-generated content "as long as it appears academic," indicating a superficial level of participation.

Table 3. Theme 3 Dependency on AI and limited critical evaluation

AI Tool	Purpose	Average Weekly Use	Critical Verification Evidence
ChatGPT	Idea generation	2–3	Partial (language only)
Grammarly	Grammar correction	3–4	Limited (no content verification)
Google Translate	Meaning check	1–2	Full (semantic verification)

DISCUSSION

This study explores how English Education students at UKI Toraja navigate the conflicts between academic integrity and the advantages of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in formulating their research projects. The findings indicate a complex situation. Although students exhibit emerging ethical awareness (e.g., validating AI output, paraphrasing), there are ongoing inconsistencies in citation standards and inadequate critical engagement with AI-generated work.

Integrity Awareness vs. Citation Transparency

All participants exhibited an understanding of plagiarism and fundamental principles of ethical writing. This occurs in conjunction with the main topic of understanding academic integrity. Two out of three explicitly acknowledged the habit of checking AI output prior to its incorporation into their own writing, and observational data indicate that they frequently cross-compare AI proposals with their own paraphrased versions. Only one participant expressly recognized AI as a contribution through citation. The other two regarded AI as a "non-author" instrument that required no formal acknowledgment. This disparity exemplifies a contradiction. The contradiction is that an ethical purpose does not invariably manifest in transparent academic conduct.

The difference reflects apprehensions in the wider literature. The swift incorporation of AI into higher education has surpassed the establishment of institutional standards regarding AI attribution, resulting in student ambiguity about the citation of AI contributions (Bahadur & Karki, 2023; Soelistiono & Tanjung, 2025; Tan & Maravilla, 2024) The outcome is a realm of uncertainty where students' informal "ethics of use" may clash with established academic standards.

In the field of AI ethics in education, researchers assert that transparency, accountability, and fairness must be integral to the design and implementation of AI systems (Porayska-Pomsta et al., 2023). The absence of explicit rules for recognizing AI contributions compromises transparency and could diminish trust in academic discourse (Holmes, Iniesto, et al., 2023). Some ethicists contend that revealing the degree and kind of AI engagement is essential for responsible usage. The academic and ethical communities progressively underscore the significance of transparency in AI use to uphold confidence, promote responsible usage, and guarantee integrity in scholarly discourse (Soliha, 2024; Mensah, 2023).

All participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of plagiarism and ethical writing standards. Perceiving AI technology as a tool rather than a replacement for cognitive or writing processes, their practices exhibited contradictions between ethical intentions and transparent actions. Two of the three participants actively validated AI-generated content against their own paraphrases. One of them explicitly credited AI contributions through citations. The findings reveal a disparity between personal ethics and formal academic practice, possibly worsened by the lack of explicit institutional restrictions on AI attribution; hence, a grey area has arisen where students' "ethics of use" may conflict with academic standards. Consequently, rigorous institutional norms and education in AI literacy are essential, encompassing verification protocols and citation regulations, to ensure that the incorporation of AI in academic writing is responsible, transparent, and accountable.

Integrating Ethical Understanding and Technical Proficiency

The study indicates that ethical AI integration in academic writing. The ethical AI integration necessitates not only proficiency with tools but also reflective agency from students and institutional structural support. Participants in the sample demonstrated engagement in effective practices, such as verifying AI output and responsible paraphrasing. However, their inconsistent citation practices indicate a lack of internalization of formal academic norms regarding attribution.

Educational institutions ought to incorporate modules on critical AI literacy into academic writing instruction, particularly within teacher education programs. A promising approach involves designing a micro-curriculum focused on critical AI literacy, based on self-regulated

learning theory. This framework aids learners in scaffolding goal setting, monitoring, evaluation, and reflection within AI-mediated writing (Chalmers, 2025; Li & Wilson, 2025; Moore, 2024). Institutions should enhance pedagogical initiatives by implementing formal guidelines and codes of practice for the use of AI in research and writing. The AI ethical Framework asserts that its principles of transparency, accountability, and acknowledgment of AI contributions align with several AI ethical frameworks issued by various organizations, including the European Commission. These principles are frequently addressed in the pertinent literature (Europeans Commission, 2019; Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2025; SDAI, 2023; Virgiany et al., 2024; Holmes et al., 2021).

Participants exhibited ethical practices in AI utilization by paraphrasing and validating AI outputs before application. However, their citation practices were inconsistent, with only one acknowledging AI contributions. This suggests a failure to internalize academic attribution norms. The findings indicate that the responsible integration of AI necessitates more than mere technical proficiency; it also requires reflective agency from students and structural support from institutions. This includes the development of AI literacy micro-curricula informed by learning theory, which should encompass objectives, monitoring, evaluation, and reflection, alongside formal guidelines and ethical codes for AI usage. Such measures are essential to ensure the consistent application of principles such as transparency, accountability, and recognition of AI contributions, in accordance with international AI ethical frameworks, within academic writing.

Dependence on AI and Weak Critical Engagement

The third theme identified in the findings, that is, reliance on AI with insufficient critical assessment, is particularly troubling. All participants admitted to regular use of AI tools (ChatGPT, Grammarly). They use the AI tools for certain purposes, such as ideation, grammar correction, or semantic checks. This occurs two to four times per week. Nonetheless, there was only infrequent and cursory verification of factual accuracy observed. Others acknowledged that their acceptance of AI-generated outputs depended on the appearance of academic rigor, indicating a superficial level of epistemic trust in AI.

This pattern highlights a deficiency in critical AI literacy. The critical AI litteracy is defined as the capacity to evaluate AI outputs for bias, inaccuracy, or epistemic unsoundness (Long &

Magerko, 2020). The dependence on AI for content creation, absent thorough examination, indicates that students are interacting with AI at a technical or superficial level rather than engaging in a more profound evaluative process.

Recent studies corroborate this interpretation. Shi et al. (2025) demonstrate that AI literacy, when integrated with self-regulated learning (SRL), serves as a predictor for writing performance and digital well-being. Students exhibiting low AI literacy frequently misuse AI or exhibit excessive trust in its outputs. A qualitative systematic review on AI-empowered self-regulation indicates that inadequate AI literacy may impede the effective integration of AI in higher education and potentially jeopardize academic integrity (Lan & Zhou, 2025).

All participants utilized AI tools, particularly ChatGPT and Grammarly, regularly (approximately 2-4 times per week) for idea development and grammar correction. However, their engagement in verifying factual accuracy and bias was limited and superficial; two participants even indicated a tendency to accept AI output during "academic looks," reflecting a shallow level of epistemic confidence. This pattern suggests insufficient critical AI literacy, defined as the capacity to assess biases, errors, and epistemic foundations of AI outputs, resulting in student interactions with AI being predominantly technical rather than reflective. Educational institutions must integrate AI literacy education that focuses on critical evaluation, verification mechanisms, and the cultivation of self-regulation skills. This approach aims to enhance writing performance while maintaining academic integrity and promoting a healthy digital environment.

Relevance to ELT and Academic Identity

The significance of writing in English Language Teaching (ELT) underscores the relevance of your findings. AI tools provide capabilities for enhancing grammar, producing lexical alternatives, and elaborating on concepts. However, Siau and Wang contend that trust in AI should consistently be moderated by human oversight and ethical accountability, although this specific citation may not directly align with your context. The students at UKI Toraja exemplify the challenges encountered by EFL learners in optimizing the linguistic advantages of AI while maintaining their intellectual ownership.

Therefore, educators in English Language Teaching and writing courses ought to demonstrate and support reflective AI utilization—assigning tasks that necessitate students to

record their AI usage, evaluate its outputs, and rationalize the instances and methods of integrating AI-derived concepts. Assessment rubrics must incorporate criteria for AI verification, citation, and critical evaluation.

Self-Regulated Learning, Artificial Intelligence Literacy, and Human–AI Integration

The findings offer empirical evidence for the connection between self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2010) and AI literacy within the realm of academic writing. The validation, revision, and monitoring of AI output demonstrate metacognitive oversight inherent to self-regulated learning. Students who do not engage critically reduce their regulatory control over the writing process.

Recent conceptual developments support the integration of self-regulated learning and artificial intelligence literacy within hybrid competency models. The article "Synergizing Self-Regulation and Artificial-Intelligence Literacy" illustrates that the integrated development of self-regulation and AI literacy fosters sustainable, human-centered learning in AI contexts. It also cautions against the dangers of excessive dependence on AI among learners with low self-regulation skills (Naseer et al., 2025; Hedrih, 2024). Frameworks that focus on FATE (Fairness, Accountability, Transparency, Ethics) in higher education highlight the necessity of integrating transparency into all phases of AI design and application (Chaudhry et al., 2022; Bourne, 2025; Sebastião & Dias, 2025).

Concluding Statement of the Discussion

This study confirms that the integration of AI in higher education does not inherently undermine academic integrity, as long as students utilize these tools with critical awareness and receive appropriate institutional guidance. The findings from UKI Toraja indicate that students demonstrate emerging ethical practices, including verification and paraphrasing. However, their inconsistent citation habits and partial dependence on AI outputs highlight deficiencies in their academic responsibility. The limited sample size of three participants and the singular institutional context restrict the generalizability of these findings. Future research should utilize larger, cross-institutional samples and engage multiple stakeholders, including students, lecturers, and policymakers, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the negotiation of academic integrity in AI-assisted learning environments. The integration of textual analysis of draft versions

or AI usage logs may yield empirical evidence regarding AI's role in students' writing processes. Additionally, experimental or quasi-experimental designs could evaluate the efficacy of critical AI literacy interventions. A further area of investigation involves analyzing the impact of institutional policies, including AI usage guidelines and codes of conduct, on students' ethical reasoning and attribution behaviors. Longitudinal research would be beneficial for examining the evolution of learners' attitudes and practices as AI becomes more integrated into academic culture. Embedding critical AI literacy, explicit attribution standards, and reflective pedagogy into teacher education and academic writing curricula is essential for preserving authorship accountability and fostering responsible scholarship in an AI-mediated academic era.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes that the ethical application of artificial intelligence in academic writing is contingent upon the critical and responsible engagement of students, rather than the technology itself. The experiences of undergraduate students at UKI Toraja illustrate that AI can function as a catalyst for learning. Besides that, it simultaneously poses challenges to academic integrity, contingent upon user awareness and institutional support. Their methods of verification, paraphrasing, and self-reflection demonstrate an emerging sense of responsibility. However, inconsistencies in attribution highlight the necessity for more defined pedagogical and policy frameworks. This research is significant for its contribution to understanding the cultivation of critical AI literacy as a foundation for academic integrity in the digital era. This study situates AI use within ethical reflection and institutional frameworks, prompting educators, policymakers, and students to reconceptualize authorship and accountability in AI-mediated learning environments. Fostering critical engagement with AI is not only an academic issue but also a moral necessity for maintaining trust, authenticity, and integrity in higher education.

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