

Exploring Generative AI Assisted Thesis Writing Behaviors Among EFL Students in Pesantren-Based Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate undergraduate EFL students' writing behaviors and ethical considerations in using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) during undergraduate thesis writing. The study focuses on how students use GenAI as an assistive tool in planning, drafting, and revising their theses, as well as how they maintain academic integrity in processing AI-generated outputs. This research employed a qualitative multiple case study design involving three undergraduate students at STIT Misbahudin Ahmad Blitar, a pesantren-based Islamic higher education institution in East Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The findings show that students used GenAI to explore topics, refine research titles, identify research gaps, formulate research questions, transform ideas into academic text, improve sentence clarity, correct grammar, and revise paragraph organization. However, they did not use GenAI passively. Students verified information, checked citations, paraphrased AI-generated text, compared suggestions with supervisor feedback, and adjusted outputs based on their research context. Ethical awareness also shaped their AI use, as students viewed GenAI as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for their own academic work. The study implies that GenAI can support thesis writing when guided by critical awareness, academic responsibility, and Islamic values. Therefore, institutions and supervisors should provide clear guidelines for ethical and responsible GenAI-assisted academic writing.

Keywords: Writing Behavior, Undergraduate Thesis, Generative AI, Islamic University Students

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INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has undergone remarkable advancements since its emergence in computer science and has significantly transformed educational practices, particularly in supporting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in completing final writing projects in higher education. According to Wang (2023), GenAI such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Claude, QuillBot, and Google Gemini has widely used due to its potential to accelerate teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, Triayomi & Murwanto (2025) reported that ChatGPT is the most dominant and strategically used GenAI-based digital assistant, with an adoption rate of 85.0%. In addition, Ramadhan & Rienovita (2026) demonstrated that GenAI enhances efficiency and productivity in academic research and scholarly writing, highlighting its growing role in supporting students' academic performance.

Writing is widely regarded as the most complex language skill because it requires learners to integrate linguistic accuracy, coherence, organization, and critical thinking (Hyland,

2016). Academic writing is also a reflective and recursive process that involves planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, beginning with topic exploration, audience analysis, and goal setting before ideas are developed into coherent paragraphs and evidence-based arguments (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Swales & Feak, 2012; Hyland, 2019; Maryono et al., 2022). Effective academic writing requires critical thinking, source synthesis, ethical referencing, and accurate citation (Siregar & Prasasti, 2026). Revision is therefore an essential stage, as it focuses not only on correcting language errors but also on improving content, argumentation, organization, and overall clarity through critical evaluation and supervisor feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Maryono et al., 2022).

In undergraduate thesis writing among English Foreign Language (EFL) students, the academic process is challenging because students must manage both the conceptual demands of research and the linguistic requirements of academic writing. They often face common difficulties include weaknesses in grammar, idea development, paragraph organization, academic vocabulary, and argumentative skills (Aminah et al., 2025). These challenges are compounded by limited exposure to English academic environments and difficulties in academic writing, research design, and scholarly source selection (Hendrita et al., 2022). Therefore, undergraduate thesis writing is not merely a linguistic activity but also a complex cognitive and research-oriented process that requires strong academic support and scaffolding.

The challenges and difficulties aforementioned have contributed to the growing use of various GenAI platforms as forms of digital assistant that assist students in developing their academic writing. (Zhao et al., 2024) pointed out explosive growing of collaborative writing between writer and AI as user-friendly tool which can generate any text based on the user's prompt. The integration of GenAI into EFL education has transformed learning by encouraging students to actively and strategically engage with GenAI rather than relying on it passively. They independently adapt their use of GenAI to address their specific learning needs and vary their dependence on the tool according to different writing tasks.

GenAI supports academic writing by facilitating idea generation, drafting, text organization, language improvement, and timely feedback, thereby enhancing writing efficiency, motivation, and quality while helping students overcome writer's block (Ramadhan & Rienovita, 2026; Pratolo, 2025; Werdiningsih et al., 2024). On the other hand, excessive reliance on GenAI may lead to dependency, diminished critical thinking skills, reduced originality of written work, and concerns regarding academic integrity and ethics (Deep & Chen, 2025). In line with this, Michel et al. (2026) added that Generative AI can indeed make the learning process faster and more efficient, however, excessive reliance on GenAI may lead students to perceive that they have understood the material simply because they are able to generate answers with the assistance of AI. This strategic utilization prompts instructors to redesign curricula that integrate AI-assisted activities while promoting learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and support for diverse cognitive and learning preferences (Tlili et al., 2023).

Previous studies indicate that although some students use GenAI only to a limited extent, many employ it throughout the writing process (Zhao et al., 2024). GenAI is perceived as a supportive tool for various writing stages, including understanding complex concepts, interpreting assignment instructions, synthesizing readings, developing outlines, generating

initial drafts, paraphrasing, and correcting grammar ([Fajaryani et al., 2025](#)). In undergraduate thesis writing, GenAI helps students manage complex academic and its user friendly features then shift thesis writing from an individual process into a collaborative human AI process that supports students across different stages of writing.

This issue is significant in pesantren-based Islamic Higher Education Institutions, where academic responsibilities are closely linked to religious values, ethical awareness, and moral character. Pesantren culture fosters sincerity, responsibility, discipline, humility, independence, tolerance, honesty, empathy, and perseverance through structured routines, religious practices, communal living, and exemplary leadership ([Hariyanto et al., 2026](#)). Therefore, students are expected not only to show intellectual competence but also to uphold Islamic principles such as honesty, trustworthiness, accountability, and integrity in academic work.

Although GenAI is increasingly used in higher education, most studies focus on its impact on writing quality and academic outcomes rather than how students use it during the writing process, including their writing habits, and decision making related to the ethical considerations. This gap is more evident in Islamic higher education, where academic writing is closely connected to religious values and academic honesty. Limited research examined how Islamic university students use GenAI for undergraduate thesis writing. Given these circumstances, studying how Islamic university students use GenAI while working on their undergraduate theses is important for understanding both their strategies and ethical considerations.

To address these issues, this paper first reviews the writing behavior of EFL undergraduate thesis writing using of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in academic writing and ethical consideration of students in using GenAI as assistive tool, then presents the research methodology, reports the findings and discussion, and concludes with the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

To investigate undergraduate students' writing behaviors while composing their theses using GenAI, this study employed a qualitative multiple case study design. Qualitative research was chosen to understand participants' experiences, writing processes, and decision making in using GenAI as an assistive tool. The multiple case study design examined three individual cases, with each participant representing a distinct case of GenAI use during thesis development, allowing the researcher to explore each participant's uniqueness and gain a comprehensive understanding. The study was conducted at STIT Misbahudin Ahmad Blitar, located in Blitar Regency, East Java, Indonesia.

Participants were selected based on two criteria: they were the students of English Education Department actively writing their theses and had experience using GenAI during thesis development. The study involved three participants who were active eighth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Program at STIT Misbahudin Ahmad Blitar and were currently writing their undergraduate theses. Participants were selected purposively based on the inclusion criteria of being actively engaged in thesis writing and having experience using GenAI in the thesis writing process. The sample size was not predetermined, rather, all three

students who met the inclusion criteria constituted the entire accessible population relevant to the study at the time of data collection. Therefore, all eligible participants were included to provide comprehensive insights into the use of GenAI in academic writing within this specific context.

The researcher served as the primary research instrument by directly collecting data in the field through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The researcher is a lecturer in the English Education Program at STIT Misbahudin Ahmad Blitar, the same institution in which the participants were enrolled. This positionality provided the researcher with contextual understanding of the academic environment and the participants' thesis-writing practices, while also creating a potential power dynamic between the researcher as a lecturer and the participants as students. To minimize potential pressure and social desirability bias, participants were informed that their responses would be treated confidentially and would be used solely for research purposes. They were encouraged to provide honest accounts of their experiences, including their actual practices and considerations when using GenAI.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' experiences, while observation sheets and field notes supported the observation process. The research was conducted for approximately two months, beginning with participant recruitment, followed by data collection and analysis using the interactive qualitative data analysis model by [Miles et al. \(2020\)](#), which includes data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification, followed by cross-case synthesis.

Furthermore, the trustworthiness or validity of the data adopted the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)). Credibility was ensured through data triangulation and method triangulation, as the data were collected from three participants using semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Peer debriefing with colleagues was also conducted to support the credibility and consistency of the data interpretation. However, member checking was not conducted to confirm the transcripts or interpretations with the participants. Future studies are therefore encouraged to incorporate member checking to further strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of participant characteristics and the GenAI-based thesis writing process. Dependability was attained by conducting the research systematically, including participant selection, interview protocols, observation guidelines, document analysis procedures, coding processes, and analysis decisions. The researcher also held briefings with a supervisor and an experienced colleague in qualitative research. Finally, confirmability was maintained through objective conclusions based on evidence found in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The findings of this study are organized into two major sections. The first section comes up with the description of the students' writing behavior focuses on the strategies adopted by EFL students in utilizing AI to enhance their thesis writing starting from pre writing, drafting,

and revising. Secondly, students' ethical consideration in processing the output of the GenAI answers.

Students Writing Behavior Using Generative Ai

Pre-Writing

The findings indicate that all three participants demonstrated different strategies used GenAI tools during the initial process. They particularly used ChatGPT to support topic exploration, refinement of research title development, identify research gap, and formulate research questions. Rather than relying on AI for idea generation, participants first conducted independent brainstorming and then consulted AI to obtain feedback and suggestions. This writing behavior reflects their intention to maintain ownership and authenticity of their original ideas while using AI as a digital assistance tool to strengthen and validate their thinking.

P1 used ChatGPT to explore the topic of interest and then consulted it to the GenAI for topic exploration and references finding for finally narrowed the topic for the thesis. In contrast, P2 primarily employed the AI suggestions to find research gap. After independently collecting several journal articles, the participant consulted AI to synthesize previous studies and identify unexplored issues that could be developed into a research topic. Meanwhile, P3 used AI to refine the research title and formulate research questions. Rather than generating the topic itself, the participant relied on AI to improve the clarity, specificity, and academic quality of the title and research questions so that they were able to construct the title and research questions which meet the standard.

Excerpts.

"I usually begin by picking a topic that interests me. Then, I ask ChatGPT for possible research directions and some recommended references. I look at the suggestions, compare them, and pick the one that matches my interests and works for my thesis." (P1)

"I don't use AI to come up with a research topic from nothing. First, I read several journal articles on my own. After that, I use ChatGPT to summarize the studies and help me find research gaps that haven't been explored much." (P2)

"Once I have a research idea, I use ChatGPT to help improve my title and research questions. It makes my title more specific and academic, and my research questions become clearer and better match my research goals." (P3)

Drafting

The findings indicate that in the drafting process, GenAI functions as a tool to help students transform ideas into coherent academic text. In this process, students focus on producing the first version of the thesis chapters. The students independently develop their first draft and also demonstrate critical engagement with AI-generated outputs by verifying factual information and checking all citations against original scholarly sources to ensure academic accuracy and credibility. Furthermore, they also paraphrased the AI generated text extensively to maintain ownership of the intellectual content.

Excerpts.

"I never asked ChatGPT to write my chapter from the beginning. Usually, I already had an outline and several points that I wanted to explain. Then I asked it to help arrange my ideas into a more academic paragraph. After that, I rewrote many sentences using my own words because I wanted the writing to reflect my understanding, not the AI's." (P1)

"I don't immediately trust what AI gives me. If there is a definition or research finding, I compare it with journal articles that I downloaded. Sometimes AI summarizes correctly, but sometimes it mixes information, so I always verify it before using it." (P2)

"I think AI is only a helper. Before submitting my chapter to my supervisor, I checked every quotation and citation in the original journal. I also paraphrased the AI-generated text because I wanted the thesis to represent my own work and understanding." (P3)

Revising

During the revision stage, the research findings indicate that the students use GenAI as a supportive tool to improve sentence clarity, selecting proper dictions, and correcting grammatical mistakes. In addition, GenAI helps students identify sections that require further improvement, such as inappropriate explanations, repetitive wording, or underdeveloped arguments. They carefully review and adapt the recommendations to ensure they align with the feedback provided by their supervisors. As a result, while GenAI facilitates the revision process by offering valuable linguistic and structural support, the responsibility for evaluating, revising, and finalizing the text ultimately remains with the students.

Excerpts.

" During the revision stage, I used AI mainly to improve my sentences and make my explanation clearer. Sometimes, I already had the ideas, but the way I wrote them was still confusing or not academic enough. AI helped me check whether the sentences were clear, whether the paragraphs were connected, and whether there were grammar mistakes. However, I did not directly copy all the suggestions. I still compared the result with my original meaning and my supervisor's feedback. If the suggestion changed the meaning of my research, I revised it again by myself." (P1)

"AI helped me revise the organization of my paragraphs. Sometimes my ideas were repeated, or the explanation was too general. AI gave suggestions to make the paragraph more focused and logical. It also helped me identify sentences that were too long or unclear." (P2)

"I did not fully depend on GenAI. I used it as a support tool to see my weakness especially for grammar correction, and academic vocabulary. However, I still had to evaluate the suggestions carefully. Sometimes it gave sentences that sounded good, but they were not accurate for my study and I don't really understand to the meaning. Therefore, I adjusted, paraphrased, and finalized the revision by myself so that the writing still represented my own understanding and followed supervisor's feedback." (P3)

Students' Ethical Consideration in Processing the Output of the Genai

The findings revealed that the participants viewed GenAI as a supportive learning tool rather than a replacement for their own academic work. Across the three cases, participants emphasized personal responsibility for verifying information, avoiding plagiarism, and ensuring that the final thesis genuinely represented their own understanding.

Excerpts.

"Using AI as an assistive tool only, not as a replacement for the researcher. I study the answer, verify the information, and rewrite it based on my own understanding" (P1)

"Although there was no specific rule about AI use, the campus emphasizes academic honesty and anti-plagiarism so before writing in English, I usually make a draft in Indonesian first. " (P2)

"Technological development should be followed as long as it does not contradict Islamic teachings, it made me more careful not to copy AI results directly and not to claim something as my own if I do not understand it." (P3)

The findings also revealed that all three participants generally viewed GenAI as a supportive learning tool rather than a replacement for their own academic work. Observational data further showed that the researcher did not identify any instances of direct copy and paste use of AI generated text in the participants' thesis writing activities. However, the three participants demonstrated different approaches to evaluating and using GenAI outputs, particularly in terms of verification and paraphrasing.

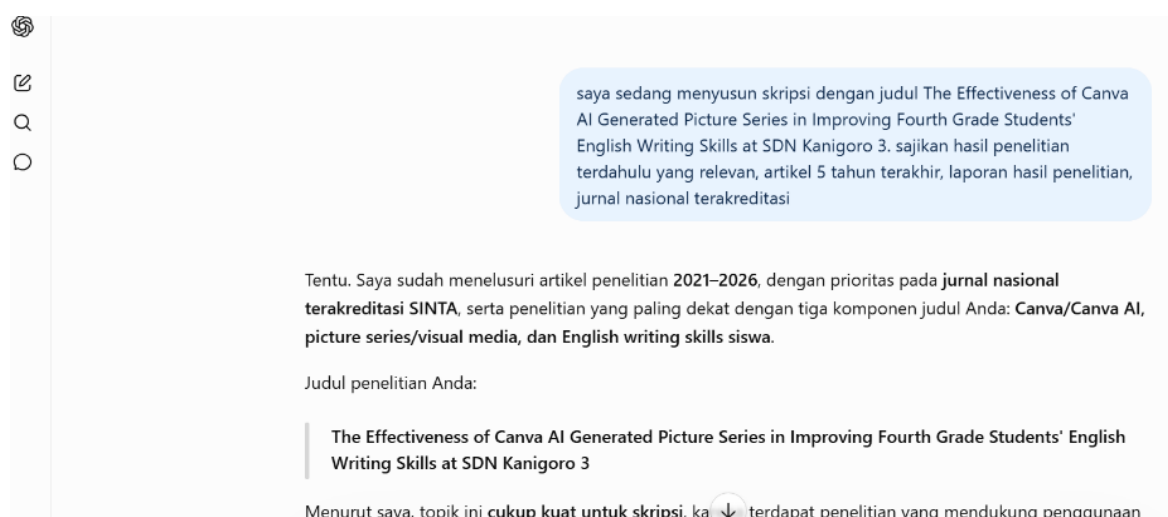


Figure 1 Ai Generated Output of P1 Prompt

Participant 1 demonstrated the most cautious approach to verification. In using GenAI, the participant did not immediately accept the information provided by the AI but checked the accuracy of the information through Google searches and, on some occasions, used another AI tool to cross-check the initial AI generated output. This practice indicated an awareness that AI generated information could contain inaccuracies and therefore required independent verification.

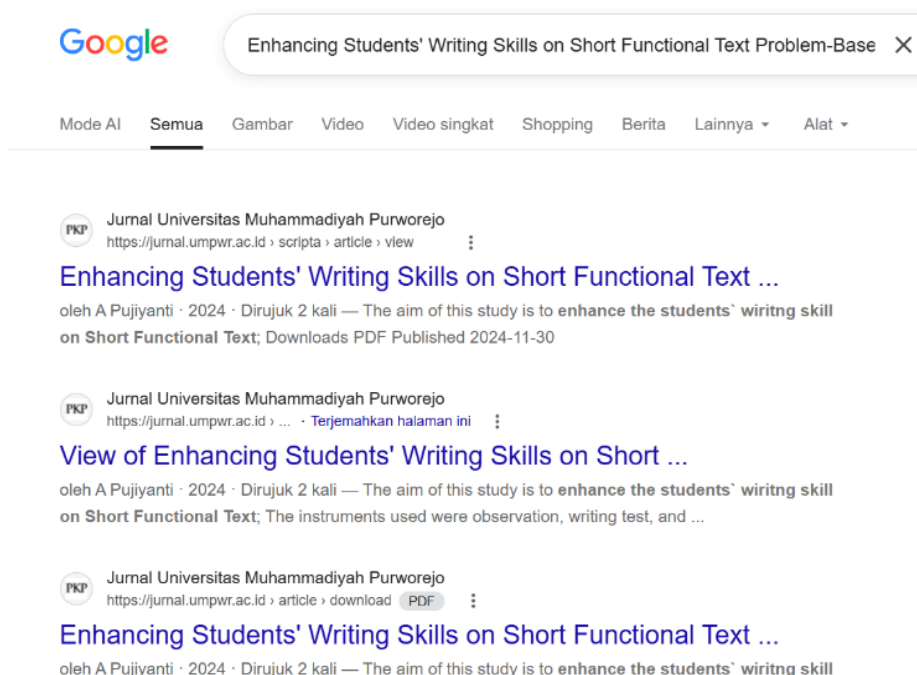


Figure 2 P1'S Ai Generated Output Verification

Participant 2 demonstrated a relatively more relaxed approach to verification. Rather than extensively checking the factual accuracy of every AI generated response, the participant primarily focused on avoiding direct copying by paraphrasing the AI generated content and reconstructing it using their own words and writing style. This practice suggests that the participant's ethical concern was more strongly associated with maintaining originality and avoiding direct reproduction of AI generated text than with extensive factual verification.

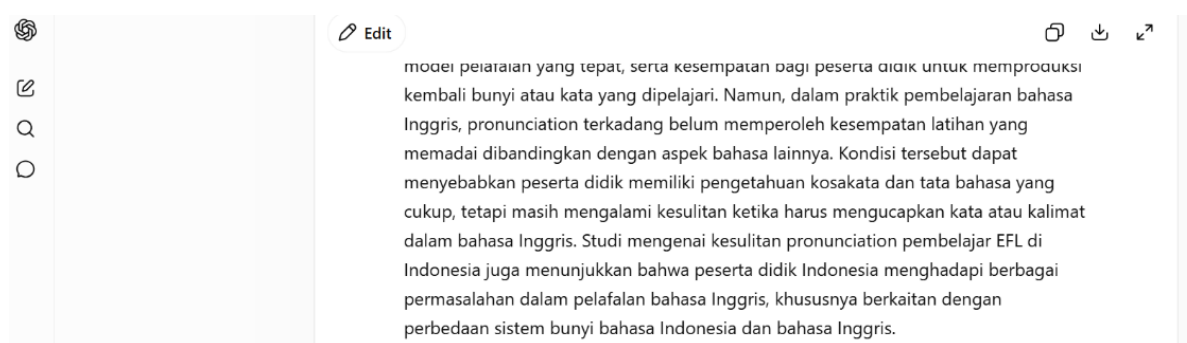


Figure 3 P2'S Ai Generated Text

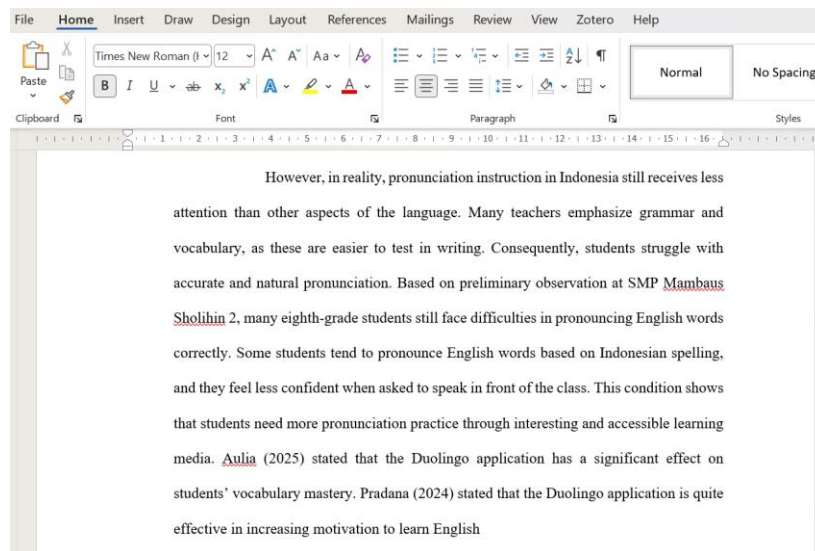


Figure 4 P2'S Paraphrased Text

Participant 3 combined both verification and paraphrasing practices. The participant checked the accuracy and relevance of AI generated information before incorporating it into the thesis and subsequently paraphrased the relevant content to construct the ideas in their own words. Compared with Participant 2, this approach reflected a more balanced emphasis on both the reliability of AI generated information and the originality of the final academic text.

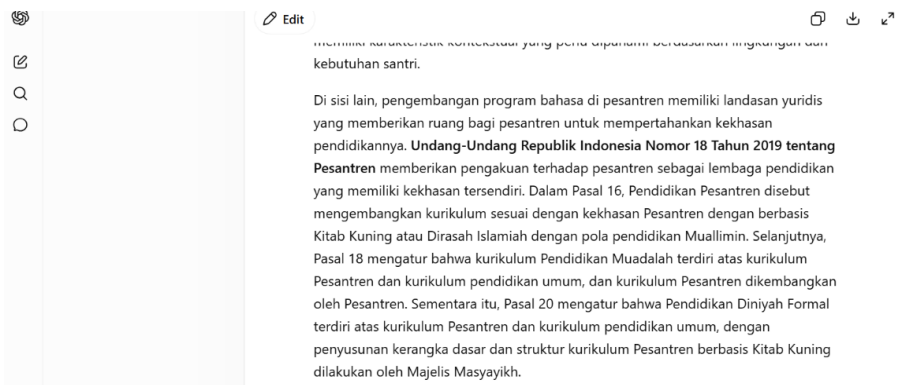


Figure 5 P3'S Ai Generated Text

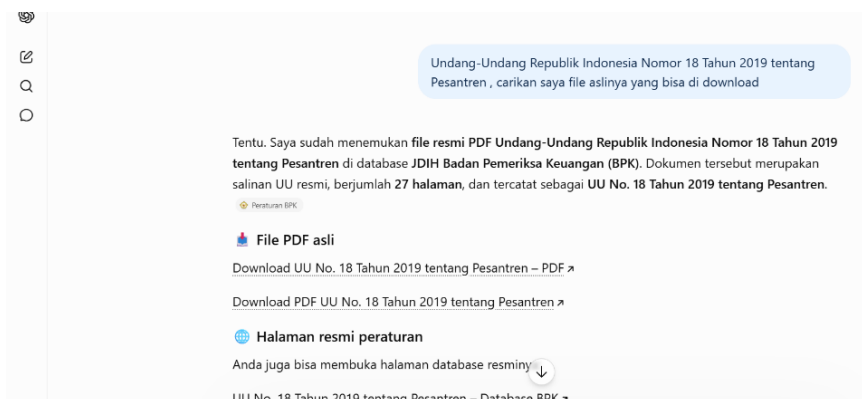


Figure 6 P3'S Ai Output Verification Activity

These observed differences demonstrate that the participants' ethical awareness and GenAI practices were not entirely uniform, despite their shared understanding of GenAI as a supportive tool. Across the three cases, a common pattern was evident: none of the participants were observed directly copying and pasting AI generated text into their thesis, while each demonstrated some form of effort to maintain ownership of the final academic work. Nevertheless, the depth and focus of their ethical practices varied, ranging from factual verification using external sources and other AI tools to primarily paraphrasing AI generated content.

The participants also recognized that GenAI use could become problematic when it replaced their own academic work, encouraged excessive dependence, or involved the uncritical use of AI generated information. Their ethical considerations were situated within the pesantren based university environment, where values such as honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and the pursuit of beneficial knowledge were relevant to their understanding of appropriate academic conduct.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that GenAI was used by undergraduate EFL students as a digital assistant in several stages of thesis writing, including understanding materials, generating ideas, drafting, revising, paraphrasing, improving grammar, and organizing academic text. This supports the assumption that GenAI functions not only as a text generator but also as a writing support tool. For EFL students, they need to develop arguments, organize ideas, use appropriate vocabulary, and express their thoughts clearly in scholarly language. Therefore, students' use of GenAI can be understood as a practical response to the linguistic and cognitive demands of thesis writing. This finding is in line with [Hyland \(2016\)](#), who states that writing requires linguistic accuracy, coherence, organization, and critical thinking. It also supports [Aminah et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Hendrita et al. \(2022\)](#), who found that EFL students often face difficulties in grammar, idea development, academic vocabulary, research background writing, methodology, and data interpretation.

The findings also confirm that thesis writing is a recursive process rather than a simple linear activity. Students used GenAI based on their needs across planning, drafting, and revising stages. This supports Flower & Hayes' (1981) writing process theory, which views writing as a process of planning, translating ideas into text, reviewing, and revising. GenAI helped students move from initial ideas into more organized academic writing, but the process still required their own judgment. Students had to decide whether AI-generated outputs were relevant, accurate, and suitable for their research context. This is also consistent with [Swales & Feak \(2012\)](#), who emphasize that academic writing requires rhetorical awareness, argument development, and proper use of scholarly sources.

During drafting, GenAI helped students transform ideas into more coherent academic text. This supports [Fajaryani et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Werdiningsih et al. \(2024\)](#), who found that GenAI can assist students in developing outlines, generating initial drafts, synthesizing readings, and overcoming writer's block. However, the students did not treat GenAI as the main author of their thesis. They still developed their own ideas, checked the relevance of AI-generated content, and revised the output based on their understanding. In the revision stage, GenAI

supported students in improving clarity, coherence, grammar, paragraph organization, and academic style. This finding aligns with [Maryono et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Siregar & Prasasti \(2026\)](#), who explain that revision involves improving both language and content. However, students did not accept AI suggestions automatically. They compared the suggestions with supervisor feedback, research objectives, and academic conventions.

Another important finding is that students understood ethical GenAI use as using AI as an assistive tool, not as a replacement for their own academic work. They considered AI use ethical when it helped them understand materials, develop ideas, improve writing, and organize their thesis. However, they viewed AI use as unethical when it replaced their work, encouraged copy-paste practices, or was used without reading and verifying the information. This supports [Deep & Chen \(2025\)](#), who warn that excessive reliance on AI may reduce originality, weaken critical thinking, and create academic integrity concerns. Nevertheless, this study shows that students were aware of these risks and tried to maintain ownership through verification, paraphrasing, plagiarism checking, and rewriting. This also supports [Zhao et al. \(2024\)](#), who argue that writing is increasingly becoming a collaborative process between humans and AI, but this collaboration must remain guided by student control and academic responsibility.

The pesantren-based Islamic higher education context also shaped students' ethical awareness. Students connected responsible AI use with Islamic values such as honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and the pursuit of beneficial knowledge. This supports [Hariyanto et al. \(2026\)](#), who explain that pesantren culture develops character values such as honesty, discipline, independence, responsibility, and perseverance. In this study, Islamic values did not make students reject technology. Instead, these values helped them define moral boundaries in using AI. Students believed that AI use is acceptable as long as it brings benefit, does not lead to plagiarism, and does not contradict Islamic teachings.

Overall, this study suggests that GenAI can support undergraduate thesis writing when it is used as a scaffold for learning, not as a shortcut to replace academic work. This confirms previous studies showing that GenAI can improve writing efficiency, motivation, and academic productivity ([Pratolo, 2025](#); [Ramadhan & Rienovita, 2026](#)), while also supporting concerns about dependency and academic integrity when AI is used without critical control ([Deep & Chen, 2025](#)). Since institutional rules on AI use were still limited, lecturers and institutions need to provide clearer guidance on acceptable AI use, paraphrasing, source verification, citation practices, and ethical boundaries. Future research may involve more participants from different Islamic higher education institutions, compare rural and urban contexts, and examine students' drafts, AI prompts, revision histories, and supervisor feedback to better understand how GenAI shapes academic writing development over time.

CONCLUSIONS

At the point of writing, GenAI has become an important digital assistant in higher education, especially for EFL students who face linguistic and academic challenges in undergraduate thesis writing. This study concludes that GenAI is not merely used as a text generating tool, but as a supportive writing tool that helps students understand topic, generate ideas, draft academic text, revise sentences, paraphrase ideas, improve grammar, and organize

thesis text. The findings show that students used GenAI mainly in planning, drafting, and revising, but they did not accept AI generated outputs passively. They verified information, checked citations, paraphrased the text, compared suggestions with supervisor feedback, and adjusted the outputs to their research context. Therefore, GenAI can support thesis writing effectively when students remain critically involved and maintain responsibility for selecting, evaluating, revising, and finalizing their own academic work.

Another key conclusion is that students' ethical awareness shaped how they used GenAI. They considered AI use ethical when it supported learning, idea development, and language improvement, but unethical when it replaced students' own work, encouraged copy paste practices, or was used without reading, understanding, and verification. In the pesantren-based Islamic higher education context, this ethical awareness was closely related to Islamic values such as honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, accountability, and the pursuit of beneficial knowledge. Based on these findings, this study recommends that students use GenAI only as a supporting tool, supervisors and institutions should also provide clear guidance on acceptable AI use.

This study has several limitations. First, it involved only three participants from a single Islamic higher education institution and was conducted over approximately two months, limiting its transferability and long term understanding of the findings. Second, member checking was not conducted to confirm the interpretations with participants. Then, future research may involve more participants from different Islamic higher education institutions, compare rural and urban contexts, and incorporate member checking to further strengthen the credibility and transferability of the findings and to better understand how GenAI shapes academic writing over time.

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