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Developing Critical AI Literacy in Academic Writing Classrooms

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Abstract

The growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the dynamics of academic writing, providing students with new linguistic resources but also posing serious questions about the validity, authorship, and credibility of academic writing. In this study, we explore how critical AI literacy can be meaningfully incorporated within academic writing classes and explore the linguistic, cognitive, and ethical aspects of students' engagement with AI technology. Employing a mixed-method study that included 50 undergraduates from the Uzhhorod national university, we explore the participants' initial attitudes and practices, explore key challenges faced in their engagement with AI-produced texts, and examine their abilities to interpret and verify the validity of AI-produced texts. A set of educational interventions, such as text comparison, bias detection, genre-specific validation, and reflective writing exercises, were conducted to enable students to develop critical AI literacy. Results show that students seriously lacked discernment in verifying the authenticity of AI-produced content but immensely improved their abilities after engaging in the educational interventions. The study concludes that critical AI literacy can be effectively included within academic writing classes, teaching students to use AI tools appropriately without undermining the credibility and authenticity of academic writing. Findings also indicate that serious consideration is needed for universities to address the opportunities and challenges posed by AI tools in higher educational contexts.

Keywords: Academic integrity, academic writing, artificial intelligence in education, critical artificial intelligence literacy, ethical use of artificial intelligence, evaluative skills, generative artificial intelligence, higher education, language education, student writing practices

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has drastically changed the face of academic writing. Large language model-based tools now participate in brainstorming, linguistic refinement, and text organisation, subtly influencing students' communicative practices. Even as these technologies expand learners' linguistic and cognitive resources, concerns also arise about overreliance, diminished authorial agency, and weakened critical engagement with texts (Strochenko et al., 2025). Within this context, the development of critical AI literacy becomes an integral part of academic writing instruction. It allows students to assess the credibility of AI-generated content, acknowledge its limitations, and make responsible ethical decisions about its pedagogical use.

Linguistically, AI-generated texts may appear fluent and structurally coherent. However, they often mask errors, reproduce biases inscribed in training data, and lack the disciplinary substance of more genuine academic prose (Bekdaş, 2025). For too many students, the slick surface of such texts serves as a proxy for epistemic credibility, leading to an uncritical acceptance of AI recommendations. Thus, academic writing pedagogy cannot be content with instruction in genre conventions alone but should deliberately foreground attention to how AI technologies shape meaning-making, rhetorical decision-making, and scholarly identification.

This article explores how critical AI literacy can be integrated into academic writing classes at university level. It examines the linguistic, cognitive, and ethical skills students need to use generative AI responsibly (Kasneci et al., 2023). The study also considers how students use AI for planning, drafting, and revising texts. While AI tools can improve writing quality, they may reduce independent thinking if used uncritically (Ahmad et al., 2023). The article therefore highlights teaching practices that support critical evaluation, academic integrity, and ethical decision-making in AI-assisted writing (AlMarwani, 2020; Thesify, 2024).

This article aims to find effective ways of developing critical AI literacy in academic writing courses and to identify pedagogical strategies that support the responsible and informed use of generative AI tools. In empirical terms, this research is based on the data obtained from 50 students of Uzhhorod National University who participated in the study.

The tasks included in this study are as follows: to identify the principal linguistic, cognitive, and ethical components of critical AI literacy; to analyze students' current perceptions and practices regarding generative AI use in academic writing; to identify typical problems that students face in their work with AI tools; to assess students' skills of critical interpretation and verification of AI-generated texts; to develop, implement, and test a set of activities aimed at developing students' critical AI literacy; to examine the effectiveness of the suggested pedagogical approaches according to the responses of 50 participating students; to provide practical recommendations for introducing critical AI literacy into higher education academic writing curricula. This research is aimed at exploring the following research questions: (1) What are the linguistic, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of critical AI literacy for students learning academic writing? (2) How are university students applying generative AI in the different stages of the

academic writing process? (3) Which teaching methods are helpful for students critically assess AI-authored texts? (4) What are the teaching challenges and ethics involved when generative AI is used in academic writing instruction?

Literature Review

However, over the past five years, research on the incorporation of artificial intelligence into language learning and educational writing has increased significantly because of the challenges that generative forms of artificial intelligence present. On initial views, researchers cited the educational importance of using artificial intelligence in writing. However, such beneficial applications are also accompanied by their negative aspects in relation to voice in educational institutions, critical thinking, and over-reliance. AlsMarwani (2020) describes several issues in educational writing that are only concealed, not overturned, by artificial intelligence. The latest literature on artificial intelligence in higher education suggests that the trend in student use of AI applications is widespread yet pedagogically problematic. On a macroscopic level, research by Chu et al. (2022), and later by Crompton & Burke (2023), suggests that the literature is largely technology-centric, focusing on system-level delivery, analysis, and issues of efficiency in instruction, whereas student-related aspects such as educational engagement, awareness, and critical use of artificial intelligence are yet unexplored thoroughly.

Empirical research at the student level indicates regular patterns of usage. Al Mashagbeh et al. (2025) and Granström & Oppi (2025) alike have identified large percentages of student uptake of AI use, especially regarding instrumental and optimization tasks like homework help, paraphrasing, and idea generation. Contrary to expectations, however, both investigations have suggested that regular usage does not lead automatically to greater conceptual learning, identifying challenges of surface learning and cheating. Granström & Oppi (2025) have further clarified that there exists a gap in the implementation of AI-the learning methods of the students with respect to using AI progress more quickly than the curriculum and learning frameworks.

Going beyond mere usage frequency, Delcker et al. (2024) show that AI competence is a strong predictor of meaningful AI tool use. Students with higher AI competence use AI more strategically, indicating that uncritical or superficial use may be due not to overuse per se but rather to inadequate conceptual and evaluative understanding of AI.

Domain-specific research supports this finding. Situated in the EFL setting, Chen et al. (2020) establish that AI assistants have the potential to enhance learner motivation, autonomy, and engagement, but their pedagogical value remains limited by issues of accuracy and contextual sensitivity. This speaks to a broader consensus that AI tools function optimally as supportive learning aids rather than substitutes for guided instruction. The same concern arises in Thesify (2024), which establishes conditions under which the use of AI becomes plagiaristic and insists on the need for institutional guidelines. Kasneci et al. (2023) broaden this discussion, arguing that AI linguistic fluency creates an illusion of correctness, making students less likely to recognize inaccuracies or bias. Cooper (2023) similarly observes related tendencies in science education,

when learners tend to take at face value AI-generated explanations without any attempt at verification. He believes that "science educators, who prioritise evidence-based explanations in their own teaching, may find the current design of ChatGPT problematic" (Cooper 2023, p. 450).

Ethical and cognitive implications of AI use in education have also garnered the attention of scholars. Ahmad et al. (2023) raise concerns regarding decision-making complacency and cognitive "laziness" when over-relying on AI threatens independent reasoning: "When the usage and dependency of AI are increased, this will automatically limit the human brain's thinking capacity. This, as a result, rapidly decreases the thinking capacity of humans. This removes intelligence capacities from humans and makes them more artificial" (p. 4). Tran et al. (2024) note that MA students consider AI as convenient but struggle with issues of reliability, discipline-specific accuracy, and acceptable limits of use. These findings emphasize explicit training in AI literacy rather than a passive adoption of it.

Meanwhile, the growing availability of AI writing platforms continues to reshape academic writing practices. Yomu (2024) enumerates several tools in wide usage that are intended to enhance clarity, coherence, and academic style, while emphasizing their ease and increasing presence in student workflows. Such tools underscore the urgency of preparing learners to evaluate AI-generated text critically, not merely to use it efficiently.

Taken together, these studies paint a multifaceted picture of AI as, at the same time, a potent linguistic resource and potential source of epistemic and ethical risk. The literature consistently points to the necessity of developing critical AI literacy – an approach that equips students to interrogate AI output, recognize its limitations, and maintain academic integrity. The present study further adds to this emergent field of work by investigating students' perceptions, challenges, evaluative capabilities, and responses to pedagogical interventions in cultivating critical, ethical, and informed use of AI in academic writing contexts.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-method design that combined the qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively explore how critical AI literacy can be effectively developed within academic writing instruction. This research was conducted for one semester and involved 50 undergraduate students from Uzhhorod National University taking an academic writing course. The participation was on a volunteer basis, with all respondents giving informed consent.

The materials used in the study included: a diagnostic questionnaire to capture initial perceptions and habits of the students towards the use of generative AI in academic writing (the whole questionnaire is presented in Appendix A), the writing tasks to carry out using and not using AI assistance, examples of written products generated by AI produced by ChatGPT and other publicly available LLMs, and instruction activities designed specifically to enhance critical AI literacy through tasks such as text comparison tasks and reflection writing.

There were a number of methodological approaches undertaken to tackle the research problems. First, there was a pre-test or initial survey to determine the initial level of awareness and

usage of the students on AI. Secondly, the students were required to carry out a number of academic writing activities that required the usage of the generative AI tool in a controlled setting. This enabled the observation of the choices and approaches taken by the students, as well as where the problems or difficulties lie. Lastly, there were class activities that required the teaching of AI literacy skills.

Quantitative data included Likert-scale questionnaires and task-based performance measures, while qualitative data came from open-ended survey responses, classroom reflections, and students' commentary on AI-generated outputs. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, thematic coding, and comparative student performance before and after the interventions. These methods allowed for assessing changes in critical engagement of students with the given AI tools, identifying recurrent challenges, and gauging the overall effectiveness of the instructional model.

The structured instructional materials, carefully controlled writing tasks, and mixed-method data collection combine to ensure a valid and contextually grounded investigation of how critical AI literacy can be meaningfully integrated into the academic writing classroom.

Results

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data analyses present a consistent pattern in the students' usage of the generative AI and in their development of critical AI literacy through the course of the instructional intervention. At the inception of this study, generative AI tools had already gained ground as an integral component in the academic writing repertoire of students. However, their use was broadly instrumental and convenience-driven, it was little reflective or evaluative.

Table 1. *Students' self-reported uses of generative AI in academic writing (N = 50)*

AI use category	Percentage of students
Grammar correction and proofreading	76%
Sentence simplification and rephrasing	68%
Idea generation and outlining	54%
Drafting sections of texts	42%
Verification of academic sources	28%

Note. Percentages exceed 100% because students could select multiple options.

As we can see in Table 1, most of the participants reported using AI primarily for surface-level linguistic support, such as grammar correction and proofreading (76%) and sentence simplification or rewording (68%). Over half of the students used AI for generating ideas and outlining (54%); fewer students depended on it to draft whole sections of texts (42%). Only 28% reported that they often checked information produced by AI with academic sources. Together, these findings indicate that students tended to view AI as a reliable linguistic authority, placing a high degree of trust in its output, rather than recognizing it as a probabilistic system whose responses require systematic verification and critical scrutiny.

Qualitative data in the form of open-ended questionnaire responses and observations from the classroom further a comilluminated this dependence pattern. For example, many students described AI as "faster", "more convenient", or "clearer" than traditional reference tools and openly admitted to trusting its output without questioning its accuracy, completeness, or disciplinary appropriateness. This uncritical acceptance was also matched by several other recurring issues that were observed during task performance. Among the most significant of these was difficulty in finding factual inaccuracies. When students were asked to review AI-generated disciplinary content, large numbers failed to identify things like incorrect dates, theoretical contributions attributed to the wrong person, or overly generalized claims. Genre awareness was another clear problem, in that students often did not recognize how AI-generated texts violated academic genre conventions, for example, by including interpretations or references to the literature in sections labeled as "Results". Reflective responses also indicated uncertainty over authorial voice, with several students noting that texts composed with AI assistance no longer felt personally authored or that it was hard to distinguish their own ideas from those suggested by the tool.

A comparison of the pre- and post-performance of these students clearly revealed that their skills at critical interpretation and evaluation did improve. At the start of the class, these individuals were making their assessments of text quality almost entirely according to surface-level criteria: grammatical accuracy, lexical variety, and stylistic unity. Thus, when these learners were placed side by side with a text created by an AI program and another text composed by their schoolmate, for instance, 41 of these 50 learners chose their own text over that of the AI program merely because it appeared more polished and rhetorically fluent.

This is evident from Table 2, which indicates significant increases in students' ability to identify problems in AI-generated texts.

Table 2. *Students' ability to detect problems in AI-generated texts before and after instruction*

Type of problem detected	Before intervention (n)	After intervention (n)
Factual inaccuracies	16	35
Fabricated references	9	38
Genre violations	18	33
Biased or stereotypical language	12	31

The number of students identifying factual inaccuracies increased from 16 to 35, while those who identified fabricated references rose from nine to 38. The recognition of genre violations and biased or stereotypical language also showed similar improvements.

Qualitative evidence supports these quantitative trends. In later stages of the course, students more frequently identified unsupported claims, vague formulations, and inappropriate tone in AI-generated texts, demonstrating a growing sensitivity to issues beyond linguistic correctness. For instance, in bias detection tasks, students noted stereotypical assumptions in AI descriptions of social groups that had largely gone unnoticed at the outset of the study. By the end of the intervention, more than 60% of the participants were able to articulate explicit and

multifaceted criteria for assessing AI output, including the appropriateness of terminology, disciplinary relevance, logical coherence, agreement with genre conventions, and the need for verification of sources.

These findings have been integrated into a range of practical recommendations regarding the integration of critical AI literacy education across the curriculum of academic writing. Writing classes ought to involve regular engagement with AI-produced texts. This ought to happen simultaneously with assessment activities. It ought to be made explicit to address the limitations of generative AI technology. Such limitations ought to include hallucinations and bias. This ought to happen across the curriculum of teaching source criticism. It ought to include differences between AI-written and actual sample academic writing. Such differences ought to include substandard hedging and substandard methodological explanation. This ought to help advance student genre knowledge. Finally, writing classes ought to involve reflection. Such reflection ought to allow the student to articulate their personal views regarding the use of AI. It ought to help settle an ethical foundation regarding AI-mediated writing practice.

Taken together, these results show that a critical literacy competence in AI can be effectively promoted through iterative, analysis-driven, and reflective teaching strategies. Students are, in particular, more discerning, autonomous, and ethically aware academic writers when encouraged to critically examine rather than accept at face value texts produced by means of AI.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that students actively use generative AI tools in their academic writing practices but tend to do so instrumentally, rather than critically, when engaging with them for the first time. This echoes the work of Bekdaş (2025), who similarly reports that learners use AI to address superficial issues, like augmenting vocabulary or restructuring sentences, without considering deeper concerns related to veracity, bias, and discipline-specific acceptability. Both studies report how early student engagement with AI was developed through the perceived linguistic authority of the tool, often eclipsing the necessity to corroborate output through human verification.

However, the problems identified in this research-particularly students' inability to recognize factual inaccuracies and to sustain academic voice-find their correlates in more general concerns voiced in the literature. Kasneci et al. (2023) stressed that the fluent nature of AI-generated texts creates an "illusion of correctness," which might make learners overlook logical fallacies or invented information. The behavior of Uzhhorod National University students follows this very trend: the participants initially judged the quality of text practically exclusively based on grammatical accuracy, rather than argumentative structure or source reliability. The results of this study consequently bolster Kasneci et al.'s claim that educational contexts need to explicitly teach students to question AI output beyond its linguistic surface features. The improvement observed after pedagogical interventions further corroborates previous studies on AI-assisted writing instruction. During activities in this current study-such as comparing AI-generated abstracts with

authentic models and recognizing fabricated citations-students demonstrated significantly stronger evaluative skills. Evidence supporting the incorporation of metacognitive and genre-awareness strategies in AI literacy instructions is the fact that 38 students correctly identified fabricated references in the final task, whereas only nine had done so at the beginning.

These findings simultaneously underscore the importance of addressing ethical dimensions of AI-mediated writing, an area of growing emphasis in recent scholarship (Ahmad et al., 2023). AI use creates new risks to academic integrity, particularly when students adopt the AI-generated content uncritically or fail to understand the boundary between assistance and authorship. The reflections assembled in this study echo similar concerns: several participants who used AI noted subsequently that “the text no longer sounds like me”, whereas others were more broadly unsure about which ideas were their own. In doing so, this reflects ongoing debates within the academic integrity literature, where the dividing line between legitimate support and inappropriate delegation is said to remain fluid for many learners. As such, there is a clear need for explicit ethical guidance.

The current study also resonates with the study conducted by Tran et al. (2024), which indicated that the participants identified the convenience presented by the advent of AI but remained uncertain about its application within academic settings. Like the MA participants within the Tran et al. study, the Ukrainian participants appeared to be ambivalent about the role of the potential benefits of the application to their field and remained concerned about its ability to scaffold language. Importantly, the current study’s interventions appear to mitigate some of the concerns expressed within the study conducted by Tran et al.

These results contrast with the positive trend observed in other studies such as that by Strochenko et al. (2025), where there was a significant improvement in the EFL students’ writing skills assisted by AI. Even though our study confirms that there is indeed a positive contribution of AI to the polish of the language, it emphasizes the inadequacy of the usage of AI by relying solely on it for higher cognitive or epistemic functions. Unlike other studies that concentrate on the improvement of performance, our result emphasizes the need for critical literacy instead of mere proficiency. The implications of this shift are very important in the sense that it not only frames AI as a tool for enhancing the quality of writing but also as a subject that demands proper handling.

Therefore, the above outcomes of the research presented in the paper contribute to the ever-growing literature that promotes a structured, reflective, and ethics-based integration of AI tools in in-class writing tutorials. It is clear that the need to learn critical AI literacy skills emerges as a crucial process for navigating the complexities of AI discourse, adhering to academic integrity, and owning the process of writing.

Conclusion

This study has shown that even though generative AI tools have become a regular part of students' academic writing, their practical and ethical use needs explicit pedagogical scaffolding.

The first results showed that students mostly tend to approach AI output uncritically, prioritizing linguistic fluency over accuracy, disciplinary fit, and epistemic reliability. In contrast, targeted instructional interventions rooted in comparative analysis, bias detection, genre awareness, and reflective evaluation significantly strengthened their stance toward interrogating AI-generated texts and recognizing their limitations.

By the end of the course, students demonstrated significant gains in metacognitive awareness, confidence, and responsibility related to their use of AI tools. They became much more skillful at recognizing fabricated references, inappropriate stylistic choices, and logically unsupported claims and better equipped to discern the line between acceptable assistance and academically inappropriate reliance. These improvements illuminate some valuable implications for incorporating critical AI literacy into the teaching of academic writing.

Overall, the findings confirm that AI can support academic writing development only when embedded within a critical, ethically informed framework. Higher education institutions must therefore prioritize the cultivation of critical AI literacy as a core component of writing curricula, making sure that students profit not only from the affordances of AI but also understand its risks, constraints, and implications for authorship and academic integrity. There are some limitations to the current study. It was not possible to generalize the results of the study, as it was limited to 50 students of an undergraduate course at one university. Moreover, it was only one semester, and it is not possible to say that critical AI literacy is retained for the long term by using the AI systems developed for this study. These issues should be attended to in future studies. Future research should also test various other systems instead of general-purpose systems only. It should study various other disciplines as well.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authenticity

This manuscript is an original work

Artificial Intelligence Statement: The authors confirm that all AI-generated content was carefully reviewed, edited, and integrated to ensure academic integrity, originality, and compliance with scholarly standards. After using ChatGPT for translating, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed, and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire on the Use of Generative AI in Academic Writing

Instructions: Please answer the following questions honestly. All responses are anonymous and used for research purposes only.

Section 1. Background Information

1. Have you used generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) for academic writing?
   Yes / No
2. How often do you use AI tools for writing assignments?
   Never
   Rarely
   Sometimes

Often
Very often

Section 2. Purposes of AI Use

3. For which purposes do you use AI in academic writing? (Select all that apply.)
   Grammar correction
   Vocabulary improvement
   Sentence rephrasing
   Idea generation
   Drafting whole sections
   Other (please specify): _____

Section 3. Evaluation and Verification

4. I usually verify AI-generated information using academic sources.
   Strongly disagree
   Disagree
   Neutral
   Agree
   Strongly agree
5. I trust AI output more than traditional reference tools (dictionaries, manuals).
   Strongly disagree
   Disagree
   Neutral
   Agree
   Strongly agree

Section 4. Critical Awareness

6. AI-generated texts may contain factual inaccuracies.
   Strongly disagree
   Disagree
   Neutral
   Agree
   Strongly agree
7. AI-generated texts may reflect bias or stereotypes.
   Strongly disagree
   Disagree
   Neutral
   Agree
   Strongly agree

Section 5. Open-Ended Questions

8. What difficulties do you experience when using AI for academic writing?
   (Open response)

9. How do you decide whether to accept or reject AI suggestions?
   (Open response)
10. In your opinion, what are the ethical limits of using AI in academic writing?
    (Open response)