Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Artificial Intelligence, No. 3. 2026. Pp.55-72
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/AI3.4

The Brat Brain: ChatGPT and the Crisis of Intellectual Effort in Language Education

Masuda Wardak
Department of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Khorfakkan, Sharjah, UAE
Email: Masuda.wardak@ukf.ac.ae

Received:10/05/2025 Accepted:01/01/2026 Published:01/24/2026

Abstract
The rapid integration of ChatGPT into English language classrooms has introduced a troubling pedagogical shift in which learners increasingly outsource cognitive effort to artificial intelligence, bypassing processes of intellectual struggle, retention, and independent language development. This article critically examines how generative artificial intelligence, while often celebrated for accessibility and linguistic support, can foster learner dependency and undermine the development of sustained cognitive engagement. Drawing on extended classroom observations and reflective teaching practice within a United Arab Emirates higher education context, the study identifies recurring patterns of disengagement, superficial linguistic understanding, and a growing reluctance to grapple with language complexity. These behaviors are conceptualized through the notion of the *Brat Brain*, a metaphor used to describe a learner mindset that resists effort and critical thinking, demands instant solutions, and privileges convenience over intellectual growth. Rather than asking how to improve their writing or speaking, students increasingly question why such effort is necessary when artificial intelligence can produce faster and seemingly superior outputs. Reframing artificial intelligence use through the good, the bad, and the (educationally) evil, the article offers a critical lens for evaluating both the affordances and the unintended consequences of artificial fluency in language education. The study's significance lies in its contribution to current debates on artificial intelligence in education by highlighting the pedagogical risks of uncritical adoption and arguing for a recalibration of instructional practices grounded in critical digital literacy, intellectual responsibility, and human-centered learning.
Keywords: ChatGPT, critical thinking, generative artificial intelligence, machine learning, prompts
How to cite: Wardak, M. (2026). The Brat Brain: ChatGPT and the Crisis of Intellectual Effort in Language Education. *Arab World English Journal, Special Issue on Artificial Intelligence,* (3): 55-72. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/AI3.4

Introduction

The global discourse surrounding Artificial Intelligence (AI) has intensified in recent years, with ChatGPT emerging at the center of debates across education, industry, and daily life. From university lecture halls to school corridors and policy roundtables, the tool has been described in extremes, either as a revolutionary breakthrough or an existential threat to learning. Within educational circles in particular, its use has provoked urgent questions: Will students stop thinking for themselves? Will writing skills atrophy? Can authentic learning survive when instant, polished responses are just a prompt away?

A growing body of literature has responded to these concerns by categorizing the impact of ChatGPT into what may be labeled as *the good, the bad, and the evil*. Researchers in favor highlight its potential to enrich differentiated instruction, support diverse learners, and elevate engagement through personalized assistance. Researchers against it, on the other hand, emphasize its misuse: promoting plagiarism, weakening critical thinking, and encouraging academic passivity. Meanwhile, more extreme critics call for its outright ban, citing threats to academic integrity and institutional credibility. As a result, the field has become saturated with polarized views, often leaving educators uncertain about how to proceed.

Despite the expanding literature on artificial intelligence in education, much of the existing discourse remains theoretical, speculative, or technologically driven, often overlooking sustained classroom realities. What is frequently absent is a grounded examination of how students actually behave when artificial intelligence becomes readily available in day-to-day learning environments. In particular, there is limited attention to the cognitive and motivational shifts that occur when learners begin to outsource intellectual effort rather than engage in productive struggle. This gap is especially pronounced in English language classrooms, where learning depends heavily on active construction, practice, and retention rather than mere access to information.

Rather than adding to the binary discourse of utopian promise or dystopian peril, this study seeks a reframing. Drawing on thirty-two weeks of classroom observation and reflective teaching practice within a UAE-based higher education institution, the aim here is to offer a grounded perspective, one that neither glorifies nor vilifies the tool. Instead, the study compares the arrival of ChatGPT to other technological advancements that were once controversial but are now seen as essential: the calculator and the Google search engine. These tools did not dismantle mathematics or academic research; they transformed how we approach them.

Indeed, calculators simplified arithmetic but did not eliminate the need for math instruction. Similarly, Google once provoked fears among educators for providing answers at users' fingertips. Social media posts even joked about earning PhDs thanks to Google's search results. Yet, instead of undermining academia, Google expanded access to knowledge and eventually developed Google Scholar, a dedicated academic platform where ethical research practices, including proper citations and plagiarism checks, remain firmly in place. Students still learn to paraphrase, quote, and reference appropriately. Copy-pasting without attribution remains unethical, and ChatGPT should be treated similarly. Its presence does not absolve learners of responsibility; it should be seen as a tool to enhance, not replace, learning processes.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to artificial intelligence in education research by foregrounding the unintended pedagogical and cognitive consequences of uncritical ChatGPT adoption. By situating artificial intelligence use within observed classroom practices rather than abstract theoretical claims, the study offers educators and policymakers a more nuanced understanding of how artificial fluency can both support and undermine learning. The introduction

of the *Brat Brain* concept further provides a critical lens for examining learner attitudes toward effort, responsibility, and intellectual engagement in technology-mediated environments.

The central question, therefore, is not whether ChatGPT should be banned or allowed in classrooms, but how it should be used. When guided by intentional teaching strategies and informed digital literacy, ChatGPT can support scaffolding, brainstorming, language modeling, and differentiated instruction. But this integration must be monitored and ethically grounded. Much like restrictions around phone usage or Google Search in classrooms, ChatGPT should be used with clearly defined boundaries. It should complement, not compromise, the foundational practices of learning: inquiry, memorization, critical thinking, and knowledge retention.

True learning, after all, stems not from immediate access to information, but from the ability to *search*, *analyze*, *note*, *memorize*, *recall*, and *apply*. ChatGPT can assist in these processes, much like a satellite navigation system assists a driver. But the learner must still *drive*, and that includes navigating ambiguity, developing intellectual stamina, and engaging in original thought. If learners treat ChatGPT as a tool embedded in their thinking, an extension of their learning process, it can be transformative. But if they outsource thinking altogether, they risk diminishing their educational capacity. The difference lies not in the tool itself, but in the *mindset* with which it is used. This study, therefore, positions ChatGPT not as an educational villain, but as a modern tool that, like any other, requires thoughtful integration, clear pedagogical purpose, and ethical guardrails. It is time to move the conversation beyond panic and embrace a critical, nuanced exploration of how AI can serve learning without undermining it.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine patterns of student engagement and disengagement associated with ChatGPT use in English language classrooms.
2. To analyze how reliance on artificial intelligence influences learners' cognitive effort, language development, and problem-solving behaviors.
3. To conceptualize and illustrate the *Brat Brain* as an emergent learner mindset shaped by immediate access to generative artificial intelligence.
4. To propose pedagogical strategies that integrate ChatGPT ethically and productively without compromising core learning principles.

In line with the methodological orientation of this study, the inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1. *The Good:* To what extent can ChatGPT be integrated into English language classrooms as a supportive and guilt-free tool that enhances student learning outcomes and pedagogical efficiency?
2. *The Bad:* What challenges and contradictions arise from the classroom use of ChatGPT in relation to learner autonomy, retention, academic integrity, and critical thinking?
3. *The Evil:* Why do some educational institutions and stakeholders adopt an absolute rejection of ChatGPT, and what ideological or practical beliefs underpin this 'ban culture'?

Following this introduction, the paper reviews relevant literature on artificial intelligence in education, with particular attention to language learning and cognitive engagement. The methodology section outlines the observational and reflective framework guiding the study. The findings section presents key classroom observations illustrating patterns of ChatGPT use and learner behavior. These findings are then discussed in relation to existing scholarship, highlighting pedagogical implications. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for ethical integration, critical digital literacy, and future research directions.

Literature Review

Framing the Debate; The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

To examine the pedagogical implications of ChatGPT in English language education, this literature review is organized around a tripartite framework: the Good, the Bad, and the Evil. This structure reflects the current polarizing discourse on the integration of AI tools into classrooms. *The Good* represents scholarly and professional sources that advocate for the use of ChatGPT as a supportive and transformative educational tool. *The Bad* includes critical works that acknowledge ChatGPT's potential but raise substantial concerns about its effects on cognitive development, academic integrity, and learner autonomy. *The Evil* refers to extreme viewpoints that reject, ban, or forbid the use of ChatGPT entirely, often viewing it as a threat to the integrity of education.

To ensure a balanced and representative selection, thirty-one recent sources were identified through systematic searches across multiple platforms. Each source was reviewed and classified based on its stance: advocacy, caution, or rejection. While many studies fall along a spectrum, those selected here represent distinct positions that clearly align with one of the three thematic categories. This framework not only clarifies the divergent arguments in the current discourse but also serves as the basis for later comparison and analysis in the findings and discussion sections of this study.

The Good: Advocating for ChatGPT in Education

The integration of ChatGPT into educational environments has been widely applauded for its capacity to personalize instruction, provide timely feedback, and enhance overall learning engagement. Empirical research has consistently shown that when properly guided, ChatGPT can function as a valuable pedagogical tool. Mahapatra (2024) found that students using ChatGPT demonstrated improved academic writing performance and reported more relevant feedback on their tasks. Similarly, Aljohani (2024) observed that undergraduate EFL students in Saudi Arabia viewed ChatGPT as a "valuable language-learning tool," supporting vocabulary acquisition, grammar usage, writing assistance, and conversation practice. A broader meta-analysis by Deng et al. (2024) concluded that ChatGPT improves academic performance, boosts motivation, and supports higher-order thinking skills while also reducing cognitive effort. Likewise, Bekdaş (2025) reports that ChatGPT-based classroom activities can positively influence student motivation, while noting some limitations. These findings were corroborated by Wang and Fan (2025), who suggested the tool acts as an "intelligent tutor," enhancing learning outcomes significantly.

Beyond these measurable gains, ChatGPT also plays a pivotal role in promoting educational equity and accessibility. Research indicates that the tool can support learners with special needs by adapting content to individual requirements and offering alternative modes of engagement (Rakap, 2024; Levine, 2023). Its ability to create personalized content is particularly valuable in remote learning scenarios and for students with physical or cognitive limitations (Zhu et al., 2023). García-López et al. (2025) further argue that the availability of synthesized information via ChatGPT enables students to write academic papers and summaries more efficiently, signifying an evolution in how learners access and process knowledge. This aligns with the emerging literature suggesting that AI can help students organize their thoughts and reduce linguistic strain, especially for non-native English speakers (Levine, 2023).

Equally important is the role of human supervision in maximizing the educational benefits of ChatGPT. According to Lo et al. (2024), teacher intervention is essential for maintaining accuracy, guiding interpretation, and ensuring that AI-generated responses align with pedagogical

goals. Aler Tubella et al. (2024) emphasize that this demands continuous professional development, where educators are trained not only in how to use these technologies but also in how to foster ethical, effective, and sustainable integration strategies. Such support structures are vital in ensuring that the implementation of AI in classrooms remains learner-centered, purposeful, and grounded in educational integrity. Complementing these studies, Mai et al. (2024) conducted a SWOT-based systematic review, which identified ChatGPT's key strengths: delivering personalized learning, generating ideas, automating feedback, and reducing teacher workload. Their findings reveal a generally optimistic attitude among educators and learners toward ChatGPT, suggesting it can serve as an effective supplement in English language classrooms.

The Bad: Criticisms and Concerns Regarding ChatGPT

Despite its promising features, ChatGPT raises serious pedagogical concerns, particularly related to academic integrity, critical thinking, and overreliance on automation. Mahfouz and AbdelMohsen (2025) report broadly positive student attitudes toward usefulness and ease of use, yet also document concerns about ethical appropriateness and potential effects on higher-order thinking. Radeva (2024) also warns that students using ChatGPT may bypass foundational academic processes such as inquiry, synthesis, and argumentation, instead depending on the AI to generate complete answers. This concern is echoed by Hasanein and Sobaih (2023), who found that stakeholders believed ChatGPT diminished students' capacity for independent learning, particularly in the absence of regulatory guidance. Scott (2023) described an emerging "educational crisis" in which students defer to ChatGPT for nearly all academic tasks, leaving little room for intellectual struggle or creativity. Wang and Fan (2025) added that this mechanization of writing undermines the very process of thinking, thereby weakening students' cognitive stamina.

Academic integrity is at the forefront of these concerns. ChatGPT enables the production of essays, summaries, and even exam responses, which can easily pass through standard plagiarism checks. Scholars such as Holmes et al. (2022), Xu and Ouyang (2022), and Lo (2023) argue that institutions must urgently adopt clear guidelines for the ethical use of AI in education. These guidelines should define acceptable practices, outline consequences of misuse, and include advanced AI-detection tools that recognize machine-generated patterns (Alexander et al., 2023; Jarrah et al., 2023). Institutions are also urged to integrate these safeguards into their LMS platforms and promote digital ethics education that instills a culture of responsibility (Gulati et al., 2024; Aler Tubella et al., 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Moreover, researchers note that reliance on ChatGPT may harm students' long-term skill development. García-López et al. (2025) observed that AI-generated responses often reduce the quality of student submissions, complicating evaluation and weakening task relevance. Castro et al. (2024) identified several risks: excessive copy-pasting, diminished inquiry and analysis skills, and degradation of critical thinking. Mohamed (2024) similarly cautioned that AI might reinforce misinformation and cognitive passivity if not critically scrutinized. These risks are compounded by the absence of meaningful human oversight and institutional preparedness, two elements identified as crucial by Aler Tubella et al. (2024) and Lo et al. (2024) for safeguarding educational value in AI-integrated classrooms.

The Evil: Complete Rejection and Ban of ChatGPT

While some institutions explore cautious integration, others have responded to ChatGPT's rise with outright bans, citing threats to educational integrity, fairness, and authenticity. One of the

first large-scale examples was the New York City Department of Education's decision to ban ChatGPT from school devices and networks (Yang, 2023). Officials expressed fears that the tool would encourage academic dishonesty and undermine students' ability to develop essential cognitive skills. Similarly, Sciences Po, a leading academic institution in France implemented a strict prohibition on the use of ChatGPT in academic work, warning that misuse could result in disciplinary action, including expulsion (De Clercq and Kao, 2023). Castillo (2023) compiled a list of major U.S. and international school districts, including Los Angeles and Anchorage, that had instituted similar bans, with many citing the tool's potential to erode traditional learning values.

Australia also followed this path, with most public schools enacting bans by mid-2023 in response to cheating concerns (Duffy, 2023). Though some of these policies were later revised, the initial reflex was restrictive. As Ta and West (2023) noted, schools adopted one of three responses: integration, cautious review, or prohibition. The bans, they argue, represent "band-aid solutions" that avoid deeper pedagogical reform. These blanket restrictions may also exacerbate inequalities, denying students in under-resourced public systems access to tools increasingly used in private and higher education contexts.

Such reactions often stem from institutional resistance to change, as Adarkwah et al. (2023) point out. Successful AI integration requires not only technical infrastructure but also cultural acceptance and strategic leadership. Without these, bans tend to be reactive rather than reflective. The broader academic discourse suggests that, while concerns about AI are valid, wholesale rejection of ChatGPT may hinder innovation and exacerbate the very problems it seeks to avoid, particularly when students turn to unregulated use outside institutional purview. To conclude, these institutional rejections, framed here as "The Ugly," reflect not just pedagogical skepticism but an ideological resistance to delegating cognitive labor to machines.

Although the literature is expanding rapidly, two gaps remain salient. First, much empirical research emphasizes outcomes (performance, motivation, perceptions) rather than the *classroom-visible behavioral shift* in how learners approach effort, struggle, and responsibility when generative artificial intelligence becomes readily available (Mahfouz & AbdelMohsen, 2025). Second, there is limited longitudinal, practice-based evidence from higher education English language classrooms in the United Arab Emirates that documents how reliance develops over time and how it reshapes learner participation during real classroom tasks. Addressing these gaps, the present study draws on thirty-two weeks of classroom observation and reflective teaching practice to examine how ChatGPT use intersects with learner engagement and intellectual effort. It introduces the concept of the Brat Brain as a classroom-grounded lens to describe an emergent mindset characterized by expectation of instant solutions, resistance to cognitive struggle, and over-reliance on machine-generated language. In doing so, the study reframes generative artificial intelligence in language education through the good, the bad, and the (educationally) evil, not as a rhetorical device, but as an analytic structure for interpreting pedagogical affordances, misuses, and cognitive consequences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods exploratory design, in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected in parallel over the same thirty-two-week instructional period and integrated during the interpretation stage. The purpose of this design is not to test causal

relationships, but to develop a nuanced understanding of how ChatGPT is used, experienced, and perceived in English language classrooms when viewed through the analytic lens of *the good, the bad, and the (educationally) evil*.

Quantitative data consist of descriptive measures derived from student questionnaires and usage-related indicators, providing an overview of frequency, patterns, and self-reported perceptions of ChatGPT use. Qualitative data are drawn from sustained classroom observations, reflective teaching notes, and documented classroom incidents that capture learner behavior, engagement, and responses to instructional tasks involving or affected by generative artificial intelligence. Collecting both data strands concurrently allows the study to examine not only what students report about their use of ChatGPT, but also how that use manifests in actual classroom practices.

Triangulation occurs at the interpretive level, where quantitative patterns are systematically compared with qualitative observations and reflections. For example, reported benefits such as increased efficiency or confidence are examined alongside observed behaviors related to task engagement, effort, and reliance on artificial intelligence. Similarly, concerns reported in questionnaire data are cross-checked against classroom evidence of disengagement, dependency, or reduced cognitive struggle. This convergence of data sources strengthens the credibility of the findings by allowing claims to be supported through multiple forms of evidence rather than a single data stream. By employing a convergent mixed-methods exploratory design, the study ensures methodological rigor while remaining aligned with its practice-based, reflective orientation. The design supports a holistic examination of generative artificial intelligence in language education, foregrounding both measurable patterns and lived classroom realities without imposing experimental constraints.

Participants and Context

The participants were sixty-five undergraduate students (thirty-five males and thirty females) enrolled in compulsory English language courses at a higher education institute in the United Arab Emirates. All participants were native Arabic speakers with English proficiency ranging from elementary to upper-intermediate, as determined by institutional placement procedures. Instruction was delivered primarily through face-to-face classes, supported by digital tools and generative artificial intelligence applications integrated into regular coursework. Class sizes typically ranged from twenty to twenty-five students per section, and data were collected over two academic terms spanning a total of thirty-two weeks. Inclusion criteria comprised students officially enrolled in the courses, attending classes regularly, and providing informed consent, while exclusion criteria included students with partial-term enrollment, prolonged absences, or those who declined participation. All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, with participation being voluntary and withdrawal permitted at any stage without consequence.

Research Instruments

Questionnaires

At the end of each term (16 weeks per term), students completed structured questionnaires designed to measure their use of and attitudes toward ChatGPT. Each questionnaire included both closed-ended items (e.g., Likert-scale ratings) and open-ended prompts that allowed students to elaborate on their responses. These instruments aimed to capture the nuanced perceptions of

students regarding the advantages, drawbacks, and institutional acceptability of using AI tools in language learning.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted over a thirty-two-week period using a structured observational protocol designed to document patterns of ChatGPT use, learner engagement, and instructional responses during regular class activities. The protocol focused on predefined categories, including frequency and timing of ChatGPT access, types of tasks in which it was used, observable levels of cognitive effort and engagement, and teacher interventions related to artificial intelligence use. Observations were non-intrusive and embedded within everyday classroom practice, with the researcher adopting an insider-practitioner role. Field notes were recorded after each session using a consistent template that captured descriptive accounts of student behavior and reflective analytic observations, ensuring systematic documentation while maintaining the authenticity of the classroom context.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from closed-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively (frequencies, percentages, and trend comparisons across the two terms).

Qualitative data from open-ended responses and observation notes were coded thematically using a grounded analysis approach. Emerging themes were classified according to the conceptual categories of *The Good* (supportive integration), *The Bad* (pedagogical challenges), and *The Evil* (complete rejection or misuse), thereby aligning with the three guiding research questions.

Findings

This section presents the findings derived from end-of-term questionnaires completed by sixty-five undergraduate students and from structured classroom observation logs collected over a thirty-two-week period. The results are reported descriptively and organized into thematic subsections reflecting students' artificial intelligence literacy perceptions and the observed impact of ChatGPT use on cognitive and learning-related processes. Quantitative results are presented alongside illustrative qualitative excerpts, without evaluative interpretation, which is reserved for the Discussion section.

Artificial Intelligence Literacy and Usage Perceptions

Questionnaire data indicated that ChatGPT was widely integrated into students' English language learning routines. All participants (100%) reported using ChatGPT on a regular basis for English-related tasks. Observational records corroborated this self-reported usage, showing frequent access to ChatGPT during classroom activities, group work, and written assignments.

Students reported varying perceptions of the accuracy of ChatGPT-generated responses. Forty percent indicated that responses were "always accurate," while an additional forty percent selected "mostly accurate" or "sometimes accurate." Twenty percent reported frequent inaccuracies. Qualitative questionnaire responses reflected high levels of trust in ChatGPT outputs, particularly for language accuracy, although some students noted occasions where incorrect information or fabricated references were encountered.

Classroom observations further indicated that students with higher English proficiency tended to generate more precise prompts, while lower-proficiency students often relied on peers to

formulate questions for ChatGPT. These patterns were consistently recorded across multiple observation sessions.

Impact of ChatGPT Use on Cognitive Processes and Learning Behaviors

Questionnaire responses related to cognitive engagement showed mixed perceptions. Twenty percent of students reported that ChatGPT enhanced both creativity and critical thinking, while another twenty percent indicated benefits primarily for creativity. Fifty percent reported a perceived reduction in their critical thinking when using ChatGPT.

Observation logs documented that many students accessed ChatGPT as an initial response to tasks, often before attempting independent problem-solving or drafting. This behavior was observed across proficiency levels and task types, including writing activities and comprehension exercises. In several instances, students photographed task sheets and uploaded them directly to ChatGPT for immediate output.

Regarding learning performance, seventy percent of students described ChatGPT as "very useful" for participation and task completion, and forty percent believed it had "greatly improved" their academic performance. However, thirty-five percent reported no noticeable improvement in learning outcomes despite frequent use. Observational data indicated that ChatGPT use often increased students' confidence in participation, particularly among lower-proficiency learners.

Motivation, Assessment Attitudes, and Classroom Dynamics

More than two-thirds of students reported reduced motivation to engage in independent learning when ChatGPT was readily available. Questionnaire responses suggested that ease of access influenced study habits and attitudes toward effort. Observations also noted changes in classroom interaction patterns, including increased participation by some students and expressions of concern from others regarding fairness and assessment practices.

Students' responses regarding ethical responsibility showed varied awareness. Seventy percent indicated that students themselves should exercise caution when using ChatGPT, while ten percent identified teachers as primarily responsible. Observational notes suggested that many students did not consistently differentiate between acceptable assistance and inappropriate substitution unless explicitly guided.

Seventy-five percent of participants indicated that they believed ChatGPT would significantly transform English language education within the next five years. Students anticipated expanded roles for artificial intelligence in instruction, assessment, and feedback. Qualitative responses reflected a general expectation that artificial intelligence would become an increasingly normalized component of educational systems.

Table 1. *Summary of findings*

Aspect Examined	Response Category	Percentage(%)
Frequency of ChatGPT use	*Regular use*	100
Perceived accuracy	*Always accurate*	40
	Mostly / sometimes accurate	40
	Frequently inaccurate	20
Perceived impact on critical thinking	*Enhances*	20
	Enhances creativity only	20
	Reduces critical thinking	50
Perceived usefulness	*Very useful*	70

Perceived performance improvement	*Greatly improved*	40
	No noticeable improvement	35
Motivation to learn independently	*Reduced motivation*	>66
Future impact on education	*Major transformation expected*	75

Discussion

This discussion connects the study's findings to the research questions and links them directly to the Good/Bad/Evil analytical lens developed in the literature review. The results confirm that ChatGPT can support participation, reduce linguistic strain, and scaffold learning for lower-proficiency students when used with pedagogical guidance, reflecting previously reported benefits in motivation and accessibility. At the same time, the findings also substantiate concerns highlighted in the "Bad" and "Evil" strands of the literature, including reduced cognitive effort, avoidance of intellectual struggle, academic integrity risks, and institutional uncertainty regarding policy and practice. Overall, the study shows how these affordances and risks intersect in practice, illustrating the emergence of the "Brat Brain" mindset and reinforcing the need for ethically guided, teacher-mediated integration instead of either unrestricted adoption or complete institutional bans.

Addressing the Research Questions

Research Question 1 (The Good): *To what extent can ChatGPT function as a supportive learning tool in English language classrooms?*

The findings suggest that ChatGPT can operate as a learning companion that supports confidence, participation, and linguistic expression, particularly for lower-proficiency learners. Students' remarks such as "I can give answers and not feel stupid in the class" indicate that ChatGPT reduces affective barriers and supports classroom inclusion. This aligns with the literature reviewed earlier, which positions ChatGPT as a form of cognitive and emotional scaffolding when used to assist idea formulation and language production rather than replace them. Observations that weaker students participated more actively support claims that artificial intelligence can enhance equity and engagement when embedded within guided instructional practices.

Research Question 2 (The Bad): *How does ChatGPT use influence cognitive effort and critical thinking?*

At the same time, the findings reveal a significant tension between support and overreliance. The tendency for students to use ChatGPT as an immediate response mechanism, often before attempting to read instructions or draft independently, suggests a shift toward cognitive offloading. Statements such as "my brain is more lazy because no need to think" and "why think when it already knows better than me?" illustrate how reliance on artificial intelligence can reduce tolerance for intellectual struggle. These behaviors echo concerns in the literature about surface-level learning and the erosion of critical thinking when generative artificial intelligence replaces, rather than supplements, cognitive effort. The discrepancy between perceived improvement and actual understanding, particularly when students could not explain or pronounce vocabulary generated by ChatGPT, further supports concerns about illusions of competence discussed in prior studies.

Research Question 3 (The Ugly): *How do institutional and cultural responses shape perceptions of ChatGPT use?*

The findings also reveal a growing dissonance between student normalization of ChatGPT and institutional discomfort. Students' belief that "even my teacher uses it" reflects blurred ethical boundaries and contributes to a sense of justified dependence. At the same time, student comments anticipating the full automation of education, such as "ChatGPT will teach us, mark our exams and pass and fail us", highlight a form of technological determinism that contrasts sharply with institutional fears driving restrictive policies. This tension mirrors arguments in the literature that resistance to artificial intelligence is often rooted in deeper concerns about effort, authenticity, and the role of struggle in learning rather than technology alone.

Interpreting Emergent Patterns

Taken together, these findings suggest that ChatGPT simultaneously democratizes participation and reshapes learner attitudes toward effort and responsibility. The emergence of behaviors such as photographing tasks for immediate upload, deliberate "AI masking," and expectations of artificial intelligence use in exams indicate that students are not merely adopting a tool, but adapting their learning strategies around it. The *Brat Brain* concept helps interpret this shift as a mindset characterized by immediacy, low tolerance for difficulty, and preference for machine-generated fluency over human effort. Importantly, student-generated metaphors such as comparing ChatGPT to a "cooking gadget" versus "ready-made food" demonstrate that learners themselves recognize the difference between assistance and substitution, even if practice does not always reflect this awareness.

Relevance and Contribution of the Study

The relevance of this study lies in its classroom-grounded examination of how generative artificial intelligence reshapes learning behaviors over time. By documenting not only perceptions but observable practices, the study contributes empirical insight into ongoing debates about artificial intelligence in education. It moves beyond binary narratives of benefit versus harm and instead highlights the conditions under which ChatGPT supports learning and the points at which it risks undermining intellectual effort. The introduction of the *Brat Brain* as an interpretive lens provides educators with a practical framework for understanding emerging learner mindsets and underscores the need for explicit instruction in ethical use, cognitive responsibility, and critical digital literacy.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to critically examine how the integration of ChatGPT reshapes learner behavior, cognitive effort, and pedagogical practice in English language classrooms, using the framing of *the good, the bad, and the (educationally) ugly*. Drawing on thirty-two weeks of classroom observation and student questionnaire data, the study sought to move beyond polarized debates by offering a grounded, practice-based perspective.

The findings indicate that ChatGPT can function as a supportive learning tool, particularly for lower-proficiency learners, by enhancing confidence, participation, and access to linguistic resources. At the same time, the study identified patterns of overreliance, reduced cognitive effort, and surface-level engagement, suggesting that unregulated use may undermine critical thinking

and long-term learning. Finally, the findings revealed a growing disconnect between student normalization of artificial intelligence and institutional responses characterized by restriction or outright bans, highlighting deeper tensions around effort, authenticity, and educational values.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional context and focused on English language courses, which may limit generalizability to other disciplines or educational settings. In addition, the exploratory and observational nature of the design does not allow for causal claims regarding learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the longitudinal, classroom-embedded approach provides valuable insight into how generative artificial intelligence is actually used and experienced over time.

The implications of this study are both pedagogical and institutional. For educators, the findings underscore the need to explicitly teach critical digital literacy, clarify the boundaries between assistance and substitution, and design tasks that require intellectual engagement beyond AI-generated output. For institutions, the results suggest that reactionary bans may be insufficient and potentially counterproductive, and that clear policies, ethical guidelines, and staff development are essential to align practice with student realities.

This study calls on educators, administrators, and policymakers to move beyond fear-driven responses and toward intentional, human-centered integration of artificial intelligence. ChatGPT should neither replace thinking nor be excluded from learning spaces; instead, it must be positioned as a tool that supports effort, reflection, and responsibility. The future of education depends not on whether artificial intelligence is present, but on how thoughtfully and ethically it is used.

Funding: This research is not funded.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work

Artificial Intelligence Statement: During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT on very few occasions in order to summarize certain parts of the text, when word-count exceeded. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

About the Author:

Dr. Masuda Wardak is an Assistant Professor and English language educator with experience across ESL, EFL, ESOL, and EAP. She serves as Head of the English Language Division at the University of Khorfakkan. Her research focuses on technology integration, teacher identity, and bilingual education in higher-education contexts. She has published and presented on innovative pedagogies and the impact of generative AI and ChatGPT on EFL instruction.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0262-6942

References

Adarkwah, M. A. et al. (2023). Awareness and acceptance of ChatGPT as a generative conversational AI for transforming education by Ghanaian academics: A two-phase study. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, *6*(2), 78-93. https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.2.26

Aler Tubella, A., Mora-Cantallops, M., & Nieves, J. C. (2024). How to teach responsible AI in Higher Education: challenges and opportunities. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *26*(3). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-023-09733-7

Alexander, K., Savvidou, C., & Alexander, C. (2023). Who wrote this essay? Detecting AI-generated writing in second language education in higher education. *Teaching English with Technology*, *23*(2), 25-43. https://doi.org/10.56297/BUKA4060/XHLD5365

Aljohani, W. (2024). ChatGPT for EFL: Usage and Perceptions among BA and MA Students. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, *14*(6), 1119-1139. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2024.146059

Bekdaş, M. (2025). The Pros and Cons of ChatGPT in Foreign Language Teaching and Its Impact on Student Motivation. *Arab World English Journal*, *16*. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/AI.8

Castillo, E. (2023, March). *These schools have banned ChatGPT and similar AI tools: Bestcolleges*.

Castro, R. A. G., Cachicatari, N. A. M., Aste, W. M. B., & Medina, M. P. L. (2024). Exploration of ChatGPT in Basic Education: Advantages, Disadvantages, and Its Impact on School Tasks. *Contemporary educational technology*, *16*(3). https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/14615

De Clercq, G., & Kao, J. (2023). *Top French university bans use of ChatGPT to prevent plagiarism. Reuters*.

Deng, R., Jiang, M., Yu, X., Lu, Y., & Liu, S. (2024). Does ChatGPT enhance student learning? A systematic review and meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Computers & Education*, 227. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105224

Duffy, C. (2023). Public school bans on AI tools like ChatGPT raise fears private school kids are gaining an unfair edge and widening a digital divide. *ABC News Australia*, *26*.

Dwivedi, Y. K. et al. (2023). Opinion Paper: "So what if ChatGPT wrote it?" Multidisciplinary perspectives on opportunities, challenges and implications of generative conversational AI for research, practice and policy. *International journal of information management*, *71*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2023.102642

García-López, I. M., González, C. S. G., Ramírez-Montoya, M. S., & Molina-Espinosa, J. M. (2025). Challenges of implementing ChatGPT on education: Systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100401

Gulati, A., Saini, H., Singh, S., & Kumar, V. (2024). Enhancing learning potential: investigating marketing students' behavioral intentions to adopt ChatGPT. *Marketing Education Review*, *34*(3), 201-234. https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2023.2300139

Hasanein, A. M., & Sobaih, A. E. E. (2023). Drivers and consequences of ChatGPT use in higher education: Key stakeholder perspectives. *European journal of investigation in health, psychology and education*, *13*(11), 2599-2614. https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13110181

Holmes, W., Porayska-Pomsta, K., Holstein, K., Sutherland, E., Baker, T., Shum, S. B., Koedinger, K. R. (2022). Ethics of AI in education: Towards a community-wide framework. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40593-021-00239-1

Jarrah, A. M., Wardat, Y., & Fidalgo, P. (2023). Using ChatGPT in academic writing is (not) a form of plagiarism: What does the literature say. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, *13*(4). DOI: 10.30935/ojcmt/13572

Levine, S. (2023). *Stanford faculty weigh in on ChatGPT's shake-up in education*.

Lo, C. K. (2023). What is the impact of ChatGPT on education? A rapid review of the literature. *Education sciences*, *13*(4), 410. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13040410

Lo, C. K., Hew, K. F., & Jong, M. S. Y. (2024). The influence of ChatGPT on student engagement: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Computers & Education*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105100

Mahapatra, S. (2024). Impact of ChatGPT on ESL students' academic writing skills: A mixed methods intervention study. *Smart Learning Environments*, *11*(9). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00295-9

Mahfouz, I. M., & AbdelMohsen, M. M. Investigating College Students' Attitudes and Perceptions of Using ChatGPT in Writing Language Essays. *Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Artificial Intelligence*, 21-39. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/AI.2

Mai, D. T. T., Da, C. V., & Hanh, N. V. (2024, February). The use of ChatGPT in teaching and learning: a systematic review through SWOT analysis approach. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 9, p. 1328769). Frontiers Media SA. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1328769

Mohamed, A. M. (2024). Exploring the potential of an AI-based Chatbot (ChatGPT) in enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching: perceptions of EFL Faculty Members. *Education and Information Technologies*, *29*(3), 3195-3217. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11917-z

Rakap, S. (2024). Chatting with GPT: Enhancing individualized education program goal development for novice special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, *39*(3), 339-348. https://doi.org/10.1177/01626434231211

Radeva, M. (2024). Guest Post: The Benefits and Risks of Chatgpt for Education. *The Learning Scientists, February*, *15*.

Scott, I. (2023). Yes, we are in a (ChatGPT) crisis. *Inside Higher Ed*.

Ta, R., & West, D. M. (2023). Should schools ban or integrate generative AI in the classroom?

Wang, J., & Fan, W. (2025). The effect of ChatGPT on students' learning performance, learning perception, and higher-order thinking: insights from a meta-analysis. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04787-y

Xu, W., & Ouyang, F. (2022). A systematic review of AI role in the educational system based on a proposed conceptual framework. *Education and Information Technologies*, *27*(3), 4195-4223. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10774-y

Yang, M. (2023). New York City schools ban AI chatbot that writes essays and answers prompts. *The Guardian*, *6*.

Zhu, C., Sun, M., Luo, J., Li, T., & Wang, M. (2023). How to Harness the Potential of ChatGPT in Education?. *Knowledge Management & E-Learning*, *15*(2), 133-152. https://doi.org/10.34105/j.kmel.2023.15.008

Appendices

Appendix A

Table 2: Weekly Observation Notes

Weekly Observation Log		
Week #	Male/Female st	Notes/Comments
1	Male	Answers posted on the discussion board of LMS are answered immediately with screenshots from mobile phones and ChatGPT generated responses.
2	Male	High achieving students have now learned how to humanize their text generated by ChatGPT by removing the dashes un-bolding the bold fonts and intentionally including spelling errors and wrong grammar.
3	Female	Student's quote: *"My teacher uses ChatGPT for quizzes and exam questions I use it for revision and some of those questions come in exam and I already have answers to them so my teacher and I we use it like you play tennis and throw the ball from one person to another."*
4	Female	Student's quote: *"Everyone is using it in their jobs and whatever jobs they have so I feel there is no need to learn anything or put pressure on your brain."*
5	Male	Student's quote: *"I will always trust ChatGPT more than my own answers especially the correct language."*
6	Male	Student's quote: *"If all class puts same question to the ChatGPT box they all get the same answer and that's when the teacher can tell that we use ChatGPT."*
7	Male	Student's quote: *"It's the easiest way to get answers, before Google now ChatGPT."*
8	Male	Student's quote: *"I drive Tesla I gave order to Siri on my phone ChatGPT is not a new thing in my life and I will continue using it."*
9	Female	Most students not only copy and paste from ChatGPT but produce words and lexical items that they are unable to pronounce or know the meanings of.
10	Male	If you bar the use of ChatGPT everyone relies on the strongest student in the classroom for answers.
11	Female	Student's quote: *"Sometimes I have the answer but don't know how to say it but ChatGPT knows how to write it for me that's why I'm using it."*
12	Male	Student's quote: *"We grew up with memorizing texts from our textbooks in the schools and pasting that onto the exam paper what's so different now? ChatGPT can give me the answers and I will memorize in the same way."*
13		NA
14	Male	While most upper level students have already mastered prompt engineering, some lower level students usually resort to taking an image of the task, uploading the image and getting the answers from ChatGPT
15	Female	Most students are more confident in participating in tasks and instead of relying on stronger students for answers, they have the same answers at the palm of their hands. Stronger students however don't like this.
16	Female	Students have even disputed teachers' answers by comparing it with ChatGPT and that the teachers answer might be inaccurate while this is positive for critical thinking, students are unaware that ChatGPT's responses are based on the prompt that might include spelling and typo errors and therefore result in a different response.

17		NA
18	Female	Impeded motivation for task completion for stronger students who come up with the answers by themselves whereas low achievers have had ChatGPT to help them.
19	Male	Some students are unaware of the use of uncredited materials they assume that this act is perfectly acceptable.
20	Male	Student's quote: *"If I'm allowed to use ChatGPT in the classroom why not allow me to use it in exam two if using it in the classroom is not cheating while using it in exam is cheating."*
21	Male and Female	The lesson ends sooner and lasts a short time because of the immediate availability of answers by ChatGPT instead of students' own answers that could have taken a considerable amount of time to produce.
22	Male	Student's quote: *"Give me easy question I will think about the answer and not use ChatGPT but sometimes I don't understand the question so how I can give answers."*
23	Female	Student's quote: *"We have too many exams and homework of course I cannot do all by myself but ask ChatGPT for help with some of them."*
24	Male	Student's quote: *"ChatGPT is the same as Wikipedia wrong information."*
25	Male and Female	The use of ChatGPT not new or considered an academic misconduct as the students are already used to accessing their devices and resorting to translators in almost every English lesson.
26		NA
27	Male and Female	It's never hard or impossible for a teacher to distinguish the work produced by their students or by ChatGPT. We can always tell the difference and detect.
28	Female	A quote from an advanced level students who says: *"ChatGPT should be used as a kitchen appliance and cooking gadget to make life easier but used with care and proper instructions. While we salute cooks in the past for their hard work and efforts in preparing delicious food, there is no doubt that the best chefs are usually provided with the most advanced kitchen tools. But a ready-made sauce, tinned food or microwaved meals are the examples of those who use ChatGPT and you can feel and taste the difference immediately."*
29	Male	Student's quote: *"I will always use ChatGPT no one can stop me but it's better to teach me how to use it in a good way and learn from it."*
30	Female	A student's phone usage shows 6 hours of screen time for ChatGPT in one day. Over reliance!
31		NA
32	Male and Female	Most students cannot and will not function without resorting to ChatGPT even for mini tasks and simple question.

Appendix B

Table 3: Students Questionnaire Responses

Participant Questionnaire: ChatGPT in English Language Learning (% of 65 respondents)

1. **How frequently do you use ChatGPT for your English language learning?**
   - Always 100%
   - Often
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - Never

Follow-up: What are the main reasons behind your frequency of use? "*To find answers."*

2. **How accurate do you find ChatGPT's responses when it comes to English language tasks (e.g., grammar, writing, vocabulary)?**
    - Always accurate 40%
    - Mostly accurate 20%
    - Sometimes accurate 20%
    - Rarely accurate 10%
    - Never accurate 10%

Follow-up: Can you give an example of a time when the answer was very helpful or completely wrong.

- *"The answers are better than what I know or can think of."*
- *"Sometimes they don't understand our questions and keep giving us wrong answers.*
- *"It gave me wrong information about a website and a number about something."*

3. **What are the top three tasks you use ChatGPT for in your English studies?**
   (Open-ended)
   (e.g., writing essays, correcting grammar, generating ideas, vocabulary practice, translation, etc.)
    - *"Generating answers and completing tasks"*
    - *"Help with classwork and homework"*
    - *"Help with writing emails"*
    - *"Generating ideas"*
4. **To what extent has ChatGPT improved your performance or confidence in English?**
    - Greatly improved 40%
    - Somewhat improved 25%
    - Not improved at all 35%

Follow-up: In what specific ways has it helped or not helped?

- *"I can give answers and not feel stupid in the class."*
- *"Chatgpt is not my maid, I want the teacher to teach me not Chatgpt."*
- *"I just copy and paste and that's what everyone is doing."*

5. **How would you describe the impact of ChatGPT on your critical thinking and creativity as a student?**
    - It enhances both 20%
    - It helps only with creativity 20%
    - It reduces critical thinking 50%
    - It has no real impact 10%

Follow-up: Please explain how and why you feel this way.

- *"What help it gives me everything in seconds and I trust it straight away even if wrong."*
- *"My brain more lazy because no need to think and try alhamdulillah."*
- *"I have the idea but it helps to put my idea in a better way on paper."*
- *"Sometimes it helps to correct my mistakes."*

6. **Overall, how useful do you think ChatGPT is in your learning process?**
    - Very useful 70%
    - Somewhat useful 20%
    - Not useful 10%

Follow-up: What makes it useful or not useful for your learning?

- *"I don't think we can live without it even if not allowed we will use it secretly."*
- *"I can't be bothered thinking so yeah my favorite tool."*
- *"Of course useful the world talks about it and everyone uses it."*

7. **Since the introduction of ChatGPT, how do you feel teaching and learning in your English classes has changed?**
    - Changed a lot 40%
    - Changed a little 40%
    - Not changed at all 20%

Follow-up: What changes have you noticed in class activities, assignments, or teacher approaches?

- *"How does my teacher always know this answer is not mine but copied from ChatGPT?"*
- *'Everyone uses it even the teachers but nobody admits it."*
- *"Students have this idea in their head that no need to focus or learn because they can use ChatGPT for activities."*
- *"I always copy answers from ChatGPT then add more from myself."*
- *"Even my teacher uses it for quiz and the exam questions then I think for marking too so why not me?"*

8. **Do you believe students will become less motivated to think and learn for themselves because of ChatGPT?**
    - Strongly agree 40%
    - Agree 30%
    - Disagree 20%
    - Strongly disagree 10%

Follow-up: Why do you agree or disagree with this statement?

- *"No one wants to put pressure on their brain and make their head tired."*
- *"Good students will always try harder because they know that in the exam there is no ChatGPT or mobile phones."*
- *"We should put AI in our brain not put our brain in AI."*

9. **In your opinion, who should use ChatGPT with caution or avoid it altogether?**
    - Students 70%
    - Teachers 10%
    - Others (Admins and publishers) 20%
    - No one, it should be used freely 0%

Follow-up: Why do you think that?

- *"If our teachers already know and can teach us well, there is no need for them to use ChatGPT."*
- *"Once you've learned and mastered everything and have graduated from the university then use it to make life easy for you same as calculator."*
- *"Students should not use until they learn everything. After learning they can use it to ask for ideas but not for cheating."*

10. **Do you believe ChatGPT will completely transform the way we learn and teach English in the next 5 years?**

- Yes 75%
- Maybe 5%
- No 20%

Follow-up: What kind of changes do you expect or fear?

- *"Everything will change think about learning now and 100 years ago same after 100 years it will be completely different maybe our learning not inside our head but inside our machines same like babies are now inside machines too not inside mother's stomach."*
- *"I think ChatGPT will even be allowed in the exams."*
- *"ChatGPT will teach us, mark our exams and pass and fail us even."*
- *"I'm not scared for anything but happy and can't wait for easy learning and easy exams."*