

Ethical Source Use in the Age of AI: Challenges Faced by Advanced English Learners in Academic Writing

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed academic writing while creating new challenges for ethical source use, academic integrity, and responsible engagement with scholarly sources. This qualitative descriptive study explored the challenges advanced English learners face in using sources ethically and avoiding plagiarism in AI-mediated academic writing. Data were collected from 75 multilingual learners enrolled in an advanced academic writing course across three consecutive semesters. Multiple sources of evidence, including essays, writing drafts, reflection papers, instructor feedback, and classroom observations, were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings revealed five interconnected challenges related to citation practices, authorship identification, source verification, AI-generated references, and ethical decision-making. Together, these findings suggest that ethical source use extends beyond citation accuracy and requires the integration of academic, information, digital, and AI literacies. The study further proposes epistemic responsibility as a conceptual lens for understanding ethical source use in AI-mediated writing and offers pedagogical implications for fostering responsible AI-assisted writing, critical source evaluation, and informed scholarly decision-making among multilingual learners.

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become one of the most influential developments shaping language education over the past decade. What began as the use of automated writing evaluation systems and natural language processing (NLP) tools to support

grammar correction, and language practice has evolved into sophisticated generative AI applications capable of participating in nearly every stage of the writing process. This progression reflects more than technological advancement; it represents a shift in how multilingual learners interact with information, construct knowledge, and develop academic writing skills. As AI systems become increasingly embedded in educational contexts, researchers have moved beyond evaluating their technical capabilities to examining their pedagogical, ethical, and disciplinary implications (Al-khresheh, 2024; Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024). Rather than asking whether AI should be used in language education, recent scholarships have increasingly focused on how it can be integrated responsibly while preserving meaningful learning and academic integrity.

The research trajectory over the past decade illustrates this changing landscape. Earlier studies largely examined AI-supported language learning through automated writing evaluation, intelligent tutoring systems, NLP-based feedback, and digital writing assistants that provided targeted support for grammar, vocabulary, and language accuracy. These technologies primarily functioned as supplementary instructional tools designed to improve linguistic performance. The emergence of large language models and generative AI has expanded this role considerably. Contemporary tools such as ChatGPT now assist learners with brainstorming, drafting, revising, paraphrasing, summarizing, and responding to written feedback, fundamentally changing the relationship between writers and digital technologies (Barrot, 2024; Seo, 2024). This shift has generated new opportunities for personalized learning while simultaneously raising questions concerning authorship, transparency, source verification, and responsible AI use (Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026; Pitychoutis & Spathopoulou, 2026).

As a result, AI in language education has developed into a broad and interconnected area of inquiry. Recent research no longer treats AI merely as a writing aid but examines its influence on writing pedagogy, corrective feedback, learner engagement, AI literacy, assessment, academic integrity, and ethical decision-making. These interconnected research streams provide the context for understanding how multilingual writers negotiate academic writing in increasingly AI-mediated environments and establish the broader scholarly territory within which the present study is situated.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the development of AI-mediated academic writing and the emerging challenges surrounding ethical source use among multilingual learners. It first traces the evolution of AI-supported writing technologies before synthesizing current research on AI-assisted writing, AI-mediated feedback, AI literacy, academic integrity, and ethical source use in second language writing. By bringing these interconnected strands of scholarship together, the review identifies an important gap in understanding how advanced English learners negotiate ethical source-use

decisions in authentic AI-mediated writing contexts, providing the rationale for the present study.

From CALL to Generative AI: The Evolution of AI-Supported Writing

The current interest in generative AI did not emerge in isolation. It builds on a longer history of technology-enhanced language learning in which digital tools gradually assumed more active roles in supporting language development. Earlier AI-supported writing technologies, including automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems, NLP-based applications, intelligent tutoring systems, and grammar assistance platforms, were primarily designed to improve linguistic accuracy by providing immediate feedback on grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and mechanics. Although these systems offered useful support for lower-order writing concerns, their feedback generally remained rule-based and limited in responding to rhetorical purpose, disciplinary conventions, or writers' intentions.

During the years immediately preceding the emergence of large language models, AI-assisted writing expanded beyond error correction. Digital writing assistants increasingly supported revision, organization, paraphrasing, vocabulary development, and language refinement, allowing learners to revise their writing more independently while receiving immediate feedback. This period also witnessed growing interest in digital literacy and learner autonomy as researchers considered how technology could complement classroom instruction rather than simply automate correction (Alkhresheh, 2024). Nevertheless, these technologies typically functioned within narrowly defined tasks and offered limited opportunities for extended dialogue or adaptive interaction.

The introduction of ChatGPT and related generative AI systems marked a substantial shift in this trajectory. Unlike earlier AI applications, large language models generate context-sensitive responses, engage in conversational interactions, and provide assistance throughout the entire writing process. Students now use AI not only to revise language but also to generate ideas, organize arguments, summarize information, explain concepts, and respond to instructor feedback (Barrot, 2024; Seo, 2024). This expanded functionality has prompted researchers to reconsider long-standing assumptions about writing instruction, learner agency, and teacher feedback.

Yet this transition has also revealed tensions that extend beyond writing quality. Across recent studies, scholars increasingly question how AI influences critical thinking, learner engagement, academic integrity, authorship, and ethical source use (Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026; Pitychoutis & Spathopoulou, 2026). Rather than replacing earlier concerns about language development, generative AI has broadened them. The field has therefore shifted from evaluating whether AI improves writing performance to examining how multilingual learners can use these technologies responsibly while maintaining disciplinary standards for evidence, citation, and knowledge construction. This broader perspective provides the

foundation for the present study's focus on ethical source use in AI-mediated academic writing.

Current Research Streams in AI-Mediated Language Education

As generative AI has become increasingly integrated into language education, research has expanded beyond questions of technological capability to examine how AI reshapes writing instruction, feedback practices, learner development, and academic integrity. Rather than forming a single line of inquiry, recent scholarship has evolved into several interconnected research streams that collectively define the current landscape of AI in language education.

One prominent research stream examines AI-assisted writing, where generative AI is increasingly viewed as a pedagogical resource that supports learners throughout the writing process rather than simply correcting language errors. Contemporary AI tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, Bing Copilot, and automated writing evaluation systems, assist writers with brainstorming, drafting, editing, paraphrasing, summarizing, improving coherence, refining grammatical accuracy, and expanding vocabulary, making writing support more immediate and accessible than in previous generations of educational technologies (Escalante et al., 2023; Mahapatra, 2024; Noor & Islam, 2025; Selim, 2024; Subedi & Nyamasvisva, 2024). Across diverse instructional contexts, studies consistently report that these technologies can improve writing fluency, language accuracy, revision practices, and learner engagement while reducing some of the linguistic barriers multilingual writers encounter during academic writing (Al-khresheh, 2024; Barrot, 2024; Seo, 2024). Yet the literature also suggests that these benefits are not inherent to AI itself. Writing development appears to depend on how learners interact with AI-generated suggestions, evaluate their appropriateness, and integrate them into their own thinking. In this sense, AI is most productive when it serves as a collaborative writing partner that supports reflection and revision rather than replacing independent reasoning or scholarly decision-making (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024).

A second research stream focuses on AI-mediated feedback. Building on earlier work in written corrective feedback, recent studies argue that large language models have changed feedback from a one-way instructional practice into an interactive dialogue in which learners' question, revise, and negotiate AI-generated suggestions (Dong, 2024; Dong, 2026; Pitychoutis & Spathopoulou, 2026). This shift has renewed interest in learner engagement, feedback literacy, and the continuing role of teachers in helping students interpret and evaluate AI-generated feedback rather than simply accepting it.

AI Literacy and Responsible AI Use

Alongside advances in AI-assisted writing, another rapidly expanding research stream examines AI literacy, and the knowledge, skills, and judgment learners need to use generative AI responsibly. Researchers increasingly argue that effective AI use extends

well beyond technical proficiency. Students must learn how to formulate purposeful prompts, recognize the limitations of large language models, evaluate AI-generated responses critically, verify information against credible sources, and determine when AI assistance supports rather than compromises learning (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). This perspective reflects a shift in the field from teaching students *how to use* AI to help them decide *when, why, and under what conditions* AI should be incorporated into academic work. AI literacy therefore encompasses not only operational skills but also critical judgment, reflective decision-making, and responsible participation in increasingly AI-mediated learning environments.

Academic Integrity and Ethical AI Use

Closely connected to AI literacy is a growing body of scholarship examining academic integrity in the era of generative AI. Although AI-powered writing tools offer personalized and flexible support for multilingual writers, they also complicate long-standing questions surrounding ethical source use, plagiarism, authorship, transparency, authorship ambiguity, AI literacy, and responsible technology use, and scholarly responsibility (Kasneci et al., 2023; Mollick, 2024; Pack & Maloney, 2024; Schwartz & Diliberti, 2026; Zhai, 2022). More recent studies extend these concerns by drawing attention to fabricated or hallucinated references, inappropriate reliance on AI-generated content, responsible AI disclosure, and the need for explicit guidance on ethical AI use in academic writing (Al-khresheh, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). Taken together, this literature suggests that maintaining academic integrity in AI-mediated writing requires more than preventing plagiarism. Students must develop the capacity to evaluate AI-generated information critically, verify sources before incorporating them into their writing, and assume responsibility for the intellectual claims presented in their work. These issues move ethical source use beyond citation mechanics and position it as a central component of academic literacy in the age of generative AI.

Researchers have also turned their attention to teacher education and multilingual writers. Recent studies suggest that instructors require new forms of AI literacy to design ethical learning activities, guide students' use of AI, and integrate technology without diminishing opportunities for critical thinking or disciplinary learning (Al-khresheh, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). At the same time, multilingual writers have emerged as a particularly important population because they often rely on AI to address linguistic challenges while simultaneously navigating complex expectations regarding citation, source integration, and academic authorship. Collectively, these research streams demonstrate that AI-mediated writing is no longer viewed solely as a technological innovation but as a pedagogical, ethical, and literacy issue requiring interdisciplinary investigation.

Ethical Source Use in L2 Writing: From Academic Literacies to AI-Mediated Writing

Long before the emergence of generative AI, ethical source use represented one of the most challenging aspects of second language academic writing. Learning to write from sources involves far more than mastering citation rules. Students must identify credible evidence, interpret authors' ideas accurately, synthesize multiple perspectives, and acknowledge intellectual contributions while constructing their own arguments. Howard (1993) demonstrated that many developing writers rely on patchwriting as they negotiate unfamiliar academic discourse, suggesting that source misuse often reflects developmental learning rather than deliberate plagiarism. Hyland (2005) similarly argues that academic writing requires participation in disciplinary communities, where citation practices function not merely as technical conventions but as rhetorical resources for constructing knowledge and establishing scholarly credibility. Pecorari's (2008) work on plagiarism and source use further illustrates that multilingual writers frequently struggle with attribution, paraphrasing, and source integration because these practices involve complex linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural knowledge rather than mechanical application of citation styles.

These perspectives are consistent with the Academic Literacies framework, which conceptualizes writing as a socially situated practice through which learners negotiate meaning, identity, and participation in academic communities rather than simply applying writing rules. From this perspective, ethical source use reflects the development of disciplinary literacy, critical reading, and scholarly judgment as much as technical citation accuracy.

Generative AI adds a new layer of complexity to long-standing challenges surrounding ethical source use in second language writing. In addition to negotiating traditional issues of paraphrasing, attribution, and source integration, multilingual writers must now evaluate AI-generated summaries, verify the authenticity of references, identify hallucinated citations, and make informed decisions about authorship, transparency, and appropriate AI use (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). These emerging demands suggest that responsible academic writing increasingly depends on learners' ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content rather than simply incorporate it into their work. At the same time, researchers caution that excessive reliance on AI may contribute to cognitive dependency by reducing opportunities for learners to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information independently (Starominski-Uehara, 2026; Zhai, 2022). Consequently, ethical source use can no longer be viewed solely as a matter of avoiding plagiarism or following citation conventions. Instead, it requires the integration of academic literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, and AI literacy, enabling students to verify evidence, evaluate the credibility of AI-generated information, and exercise informed scholarly judgment throughout the writing process. Although recent scholarships have begun to recognize these emerging challenges, most studies have focused on AI-assisted writing, learner perceptions, writing quality, or academic integrity at a conceptual

level. Comparatively little qualitative research has examined how advanced English learners negotiate ethical source-use decisions while composing source-based academic texts in authentic AI-mediated classroom contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the following research question:

RQ₁: What challenges do advanced English learners face in using sources ethically and avoiding plagiarism in academic writing in the age of AI?

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Academic Literacies framework (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) to examine how advanced English learners develop ethical source-use practices in AI-mediated academic writing. Academic Literacies conceptualizes writing as a socially situated practice in which students construct knowledge, negotiate authorship, and participate in disciplinary communities rather than simply applying citation rules or writing conventions. From this perspective, ethical source use involves critical evaluation, responsible source integration, and informed scholarly decision-making. Sociocultural Theory complements this view by explaining how these practices develop through mediation, scaffolding, and interaction with instructors, peers, and cultural tools, including generative AI. Together, these frameworks position ethical sources are used as a developmental process shaped by social participation, guided support, and learners' growing academic, digital, information, and AI literacies.

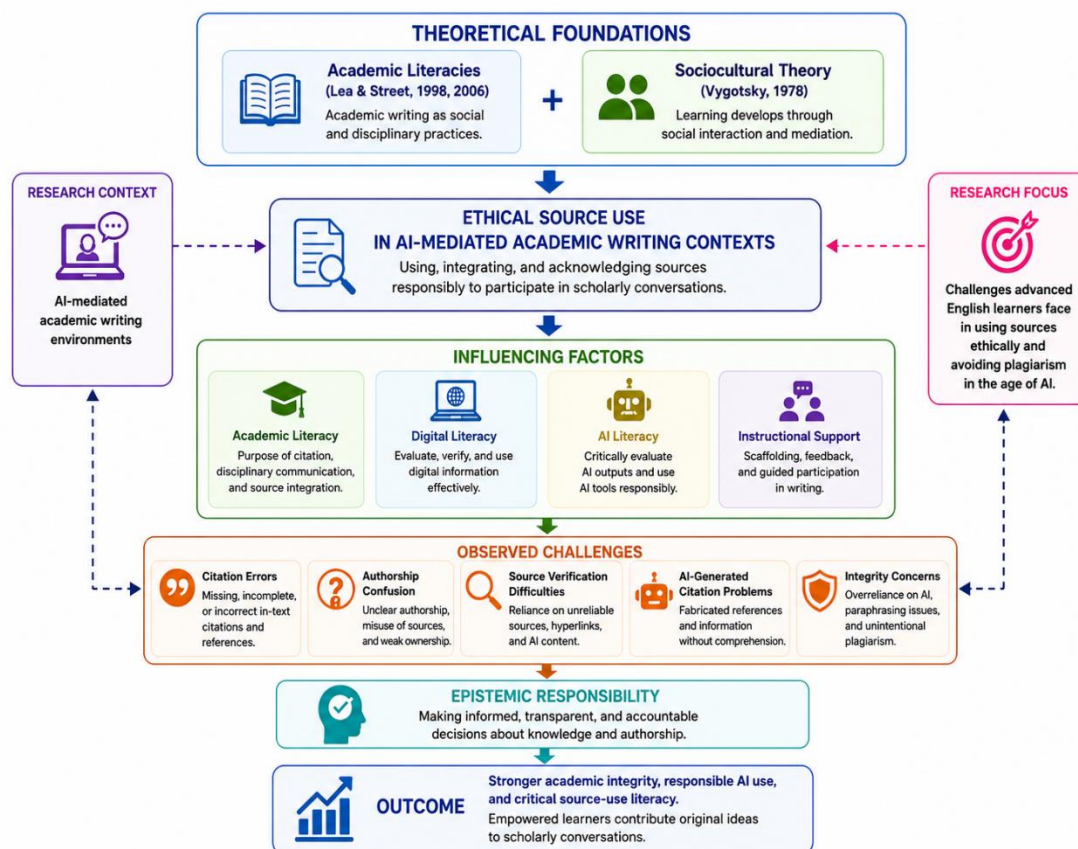
This study is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates the Academic Literacies framework (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain how advanced English learners develop ethical source-use practices in AI-mediated academic writing. Academic Literacies conceptualizes writing as a socially situated practice through which learners construct knowledge, negotiate authorship, and participate in disciplinary communities rather than simply master technical writing conventions. From this perspective, citation, paraphrasing, and source integration are not isolated procedural skills but disciplinary practices that require learners to interpret, evaluate, and responsibly represent knowledge. Sociocultural Theory complements this perspective by viewing learning as a mediated process in which knowledge develops through interaction, feedback, and instructional scaffolding. Within AI-supported writing environments, instructors, peers, citation conventions, digital resources, and generative AI function as mediational tools that shape learners' decisions about source use and academic authorship.

Building on these perspectives, the framework proposes that ethical source use develops through the dynamic interaction of academic literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, AI literacy, and instructional support. Academic literacy enables learners to understand disciplinary expectations for evidence and attribution, information and digital literacies support the identification, evaluation, and verification of credible sources, and AI literacy prepares students to critically interpret

AI-generated outputs, recognize their limitations, and use them responsibly. Instructional support provides the guidance necessary to integrate these literacies through feedback, modeling, and reflective practice. When one or more of these areas remains underdeveloped, learners may struggle with source verification, citation accuracy, authorship, or excessive reliance on AI-generated content. The framework therefore conceptualizes ethical source use as a developmental process of epistemic responsibility, in which responsible academic writing emerges from learners' ability to make informed, transparent, and accountable decisions about knowledge construction, evidence use, and AI-assisted authorship rather than mastering citation conventions alone.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Ethical Source Use Among Advanced English Learners in AI-Mediated Academic Writing Contexts



Note. The figure presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, integrating the Academic Literacies framework (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to conceptualize ethical source use as a socially situated and mediated practice in AI-mediated academic writing. It illustrates how academic, information, digital, and AI literacies, together with instructional support, shape advanced English learners' ethical source-use practices and contribute to the development of epistemic responsibility and responsible AI-assisted academic writing.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010) to explore the challenges advanced English learners face in using sources

ethically and avoiding plagiarism in AI-mediated academic writing contexts. Using qualitative content analysis, the study identified recurring patterns related to citation practices, source verification, AI-generated references, and academic integrity, providing a comprehensive description of students' source-use challenges in contemporary writing environments.

Participants, Study Context, and Procedures

This qualitative descriptive study was conducted across three consecutive semesters (2025–2026) in a fully online, three-credit advanced academic writing course at a public community college in the United States. The 16-week course was designed for multilingual English learners preparing for university-level writing. Students enrolled after meeting the institution's placement requirements for advanced English proficiency (CEFR C1–C2). Although they demonstrated advanced language skills, none had received prior formal instruction in APA 7th edition citation and referencing.

The participants were 75 undergraduate English learners (70% female, 30% male) ranging in age from 18 to 54 years ($M = 23$). They represented diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Brazil, Venezuela, Morocco, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Cambodia, and China. Only students who completed all major assignments, drafts, and reflection papers were included in the analysis.

The course emphasized academic writing, ethical source use, and responsible AI-assisted writing. During the first two weeks, students received explicit instruction on APA 7th edition, paraphrasing, summarizing, source integration, and academic integrity through lectures, guided practice, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.), Purdue OWL, and supplementary resources. Generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, were permitted as learning supports under the course AI policy, which required students to verify AI-generated information and remain accountable for the accuracy of their work.

Students completed three source-based essays, multiple drafts, and reflection papers while receiving instructor feedback and revision opportunities throughout the semester (Table 1). Data consisted of essays, drafts, reflection papers, instructor feedback, and weekly classroom observation notes collected after each major assignment. All materials were anonymized before analysis. Although participants shared advanced English proficiency, they differed in educational backgrounds, digital literacy, prior university experience, and familiarity with AI. None had received prior formal instruction in APA style, yet their previous university experiences and exposure to AI varied considerably. These differences were not treated as variables to be controlled; instead, they formed part of the educational context within which students developed ethical source-use practices. Acknowledging these contextual influences aligns with the goals of qualitative descriptive research, which seeks to understand

participants' experiences within authentic instructional settings rather than isolate them from the environments in which learning occurs.

The following table summarizes the instructional sequence and corresponding data collection.

Table 1

Instructional Timeline and Data Collection Procedures

Week(s)	Instructional Activities	Data Collected
1–2	Instruction on APA 7th edition, citation practices, paraphrasing, summarizing, academic integrity, and the course AI policy	Classroom observation notes
3–5	Source integration activities and development of Essay 1	Essay 1, first draft, Reflection Paper 1
6	Individual instructor feedback and revision of Essay 1	Revised Essay 1 and instructor feedback records
7–10	Development of Essay 2 and guided AI-supported writing activities	Essay 2, Reflection Paper 2
11–14	Development of Essay 3 with emphasis on source verification and ethical AI use	Essay 3, Reflection Paper 3
15–16	Final revisions, course completion, and review of academic writing practices	Final drafts, weekly observation notes, instructional records

Note. The table summarizes the instructional sequence and corresponding data collected throughout the 16-week course across three consecutive semesters.

Data was collected after each major writing assignment throughout the semester. Following each submission, students received written instructor feedback, revised their work, and completed a reflective paper before beginning the next assignment. This sequence was repeated across all three semesters. Examining these materials across three semesters allowed patterns to be identified across different cohorts rather than within a single class. Before analysis, all documents were anonymized and assigned participant codes to protect confidentiality.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of multiple data sources, including students' essays, drafts, reflection papers, instructor feedback, and weekly classroom observations collected across three semesters. Rich descriptions of the instructional context, participants, and research procedures enable readers to judge the transferability of the findings to similar educational settings. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail and reflexive memos that documented methodological decisions and analytic interpretations throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2023). Consistent with RTA, analysis was viewed as an iterative and interpretive process in which themes were actively developed through the researcher's engagement with the data rather than discovered within them. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2023) six recursive phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Throughout the process, reflexive memo writing supported ongoing examination of analytic decisions, assumptions, and interpretations. Codes and themes were repeatedly refined through movement between individual data extracts, the complete dataset, and the study's theoretical framework. Because the study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, the analysis remained close to participants' experiences while also developing conceptually meaningful interpretations relevant to ethical source use in AI-mediated academic writing.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines throughout all phases of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Participation was voluntary, and student work was used exclusively for research purposes. Before analysis, all writing samples, reflection papers, feedback records, and observation notes were anonymized, and any identifying information was removed to protect participants' confidentiality.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher also served as the course instructor, providing sustained engagement with students' writing development across three consecutive semesters. This insider position offered contextual insight into students' evolving source-use practices while also shaping the interpretive process. Consistent with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a 2023), reflexive memo writing was maintained throughout the study to document analytic decisions, evolving interpretations, and the influence of the researcher's assumptions and experiences. Analysis involved recursive movement between the dataset, coded extracts, and reflexive notes. Consistent with qualitative description, the interpretation remained closely connected to participants' experiences while acknowledging that qualitative knowledge is necessarily situated and researcher-mediated (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010).

Findings

This study examined the challenges advanced English learners encountered when using sources ethically and avoiding plagiarism in AI-mediated academic writing. Analysis of students' writing assignments, reflection papers, instructor feedback, and classroom observation notes identified five interconnected themes: (a) attribution and citation challenges, (b) source identification and authorship confusion, (c) digital literacy and source verification difficulties, (d) AI-related citation and reference challenges, and (e) academic integrity and ethical source-use concerns. Although these

themes represent distinct aspects of students' writing experiences, they frequently overlapped in practice and often reinforced one another. Across the dataset, a consistent pattern emerged: many students approached citation primarily as a formatting requirement rather than as an academic practice that involves understanding, evaluating, and ethically acknowledging the ideas of others. This perspective appeared to shape many of the source-use difficulties discussed in the following sections.

Theme I: Attribution and Citation Challenges

Attribution and in-text citation emerged as the most persistent challenge across students' writing. Most participants recognized that academic writing required the use of sources, yet many had difficulty connecting borrowed ideas to the original authors within the body of their essays. A recurring pattern involved students including complete reference entries while omitting the corresponding in-text citations. In several essays, research findings and supporting evidence were discussed in detail, but no attribution identified where those ideas originated. During classroom reflections and individual conferences, many students explained that they believed listing a source in the reference section was sufficient acknowledgment. These responses suggest that citation was often viewed as a final formatting requirement rather than an ongoing process of recognizing intellectual ownership throughout a text.

Difficulties also extended to the consistent application of APA 7th edition conventions. Students frequently alternated between correct and incorrect author-date formats within the same paper, indicating that their understanding was still developing. Similar inconsistencies appeared in the use of signal phrases and parenthetical citations. The use of 'et al.' was particularly problematic. Even after receiving instruction and written feedback, many students continued citing all authors throughout the paper, for example, (Keles et al., 2020), instead of following APA guidelines.

However, these patterns point to a broader issue than unfamiliarity with citation rules alone. Students generally knew that sources had to be acknowledged, but many had not yet connected citation practices with the ethical purpose of attributing ideas and participating in scholarly conversations. This distinction helps explain why citation errors persist despite repeated instruction and suggests that mastering citation involves developing conceptual understanding alongside procedural knowledge.

Theme II: Source Identification and Authorship Confusion

Students' difficulties extended beyond citation formatting to a more fundamental challenge: determining who should receive intellectual credit for information presented in different kinds of sources. Across writing assignments, classroom discussions, and individual conferences, many participants appeared uncertain about how authorship operates within academic and digital texts. Rather than identifying the creator of the ideas being cited, students often selected the most visible name on a

webpage, article, or book. This recurring pattern suggests that source evaluation and source attribution were not yet integrated into their understanding of academic writing.

One manifestation of this challenge involved confusion between original authors and secondary contributors. For example, some students attributed ideas to the author of a book even when the source they consulted was a book review written by another scholar. In one assignment, a student credited Twenge for interpretations that were presented in a review authored by Williams (2019). Similar patterns emerged when students cited editors, organizations, publishers, or website titles instead of the individuals responsible for producing the content. Although these errors appeared in different contexts, they reflected the same underlying difficulty: students often focused on locating information rather than identifying whose knowledge they were actually using.

Classroom observations reinforced this interpretation. When students searched for citation information, many looked for the first visible name in a source instead of examining the publication details more critically. Institutional authorship created similar uncertainty. Several students treated universities, government agencies, or organizations as authors without determining whether those institutions had actually produced the material or were simply hosting it online. In practice, this led to inaccurate author attribution and inconsistent citation decisions across assignments.

Publication information introduced another layer of uncertainty. Some students assigned publication years that did not appear in the original source, while others selected webpage update dates instead of publication dates. In several cases, publication years were included even when no date was available. These decisions suggest that students were not merely overlooking APA conventions; they were attempting to interpret metadata without a clear understanding of what different publication details represented.

In sum, these findings suggest that source identification is an interpretive process rather than a mechanical citation task. Before students can apply APA guidelines accurately, they must learn to evaluate how knowledge is produced, attributed, and presented across different genres and digital environments. From this perspective, many citation errors originated not from carelessness but from incomplete understanding of authorship, source structure, and intellectual ownership. This broader pattern helps explain why students continue to experience attribution difficulties even after receiving explicit instruction on citation mechanics.

Theme III: Digital Literacy and Source Verification Difficulties

Students' citation practices revealed broader challenges in navigating digital information environments. Across assignments and classroom interactions, many participants appeared confident in locating information online but less confident in

evaluating, verifying, and documenting that information according to academic expectations. Rather than viewing citation as part of a broader process of source evaluation, students often treated it as a final formatting task completed after information had already been gathered. This pattern suggests that citation difficulties were closely intertwined with digital literacy rather than existing as isolated APA errors.

One recurring example involved the substitution of hyperlinks or website names for formal citations. Instead of providing author-date citations, students frequently inserted URLs or referred only to the hosting website, producing statements such as "According to Emory University" without identifying the individual or institutional author responsible for the information. These responses reflected communication habits commonly associated with everyday online environments, where sharing links is often sufficient to establish information sources. Within academic writing, however, these practices obscured authorship and made it difficult to trace intellectual ownership. The contrast suggests that many students were transferring familiar digital communication practices into contexts governed by different scholarly conventions.

The same pattern emerged during source verification. Reference lists often contain broken hyperlinks, links directing readers only to a website's homepage, or URLs leading to unrelated pages. In several cases, the cited source could not be located despite repeated verification attempts. Students appeared to assume that including any web address demonstrated adequate documentation without considering whether the link actually allowed readers to identify and retrieve the cited source. These examples point to a limited understanding of references as tools for transparency and verification rather than simple evidence that an online source had been consulted.

Incomplete bibliographic information further illustrates this broader issue. Journal articles were frequently listed without available DOIs, even when those identifiers were readily accessible. Although the omission of a DOI might seem relatively minor in isolation, it reflected a wider tendency to view references as completed once the basic citation elements were assembled. Source completeness received considerably less attention than locating information itself.

Classroom discussions reinforced these observations. Many students evaluated online sources primarily by their visual appearance or institutional affiliation, assuming that professionally designed websites were inherently trustworthy. Comparatively few reported checking authorship, publication dates, evidence supporting claims, or the credibility of the publisher before incorporating information into their writing. Their decisions suggest that source selection was often guided by accessibility and presentation rather than critical evaluation.

Overall, these findings indicate that effective source use depends on more than mastery of citation rules. Students also need opportunities to develop digital

information literacy, including habits of source verification, critical evaluation, and evidence-based decision making. From this perspective, many citation errors originated upstream, during the processes of locating and evaluating information, rather than downstream when students attempted to format references according to APA guidelines. This broader interpretation helps explain why citation instruction alone did not consistently eliminate referencing errors across assignments.

Theme IV: AI, Epistemic Responsibility, and Source Verification

The growing availability of generative AI introduced a new layer of complexity to students' source-use practices. Unlike the citation difficulties described in earlier themes, these challenges were not limited to misunderstandings of APA conventions or digital literacy. Instead, they reflected changes in how students interacted with knowledge itself. Across assignments, classroom observations, and individual conferences, many students appeared to transfer part of the responsibility for locating, documenting, and even evaluating sources to AI systems. As a result, the central issue was often not whether students could produce citations, but whether they had independently verified and understood the sources those citations represented.

One recurring pattern involved references that appeared academically credible yet could not be verified. Several reference lists contained journal articles, books, or reports that could not be located through library databases, publisher websites, or broader internet searches. In other cases, citations included incorrect author names, inaccurate publication years, or incomplete bibliographic information that prevented retrieval of the original source. During classroom discussions, some students acknowledged using AI tools to generate reference lists or citations and assumed that the generated information was accurate without checking it against the original publication. These observations suggest that AI-generated output was frequently treated as authoritative rather than provisional, despite the possibility of fabricated or inaccurate references.

A related pattern was what emerged as citation without comprehension. Students were often able to reproduce sophisticated-looking references generated by AI, yet many struggled to explain the central arguments of the cited works or describe how those sources contributed to their papers. During individual conferences, several students were unable to locate the original articles they had cited, while others admitted that they had incorporated AI-generated summaries without reading the complete source themselves. In these cases, citations functioned more as evidence of task completion than as indicators of meaningful engagement with scholarly literature. The issue, therefore, extended beyond inaccurate referencing to a weakening of the intellectual relationship between writer and source.

AI also appeared to reshape students' writing processes by encouraging earlier reliance on automated assistance. Rather than beginning with careful reading and source evaluation, some students reported asking AI to summarize articles, generate

paraphrases, or produce citations before consulting the original texts. Although these tools often reduced the time required to complete assignments, they also appeared to shift students' attention away from evaluating evidence independently. The convenience of AI sometimes replaced the slower but essential processes of questioning, comparing, and verifying information that underpin academic inquiry.

In general, these findings suggest that generative AI introduces challenges extending beyond citation accuracy. The broader concern involves epistemic responsibility—students' responsibility for knowing where information originates, determining whether it is trustworthy, and understanding the evidence they present as their own academic work. From this perspective, fabricated references, unverifiable citations, and superficial engagement with sources represent different manifestations of the same underlying issue: students increasingly relied on AI to make scholarly judgments that traditionally belonged to the writer. Citation instruction alone is therefore unlikely to address these emerging challenges. Students also need explicit guidance in verifying AI-generated information, critically evaluating automated outputs, and maintaining responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the sources they choose to incorporate into academic writing.

Theme V: From Citation Compliance to Ethical Scholarly Practice

Across the data, students' citation practices suggested that many viewed referencing primarily as a procedural requirement rather than an ethical responsibility associated with scholarly writing. While citation errors varied in form, they collectively pointed to a broader challenge in how students understood authorship, attribution, and responsibility for knowledge claims. Rather than intentionally violating academic integrity, many students appeared to equate successful citation by producing correctly formatted references, even when the underlying sources had not been carefully read, verified, or critically evaluated.

Evidence from assignments, classroom observations, and instructor feedback indicated that most citation-related problems stemmed from misunderstanding rather than deliberate misconduct. Students generally demonstrated genuine efforts to include references and acknowledge outside sources. Reference lists were frequently present, and many students attempted to integrate evidence into their writing. Nevertheless, inaccuracies in citation, incomplete attribution, and inappropriate source integration often weakened the credibility of those efforts. These findings suggest that the presence of citations alone should not be interpreted as evidence of meaningful engagement with scholarly literature.

The boundary between error and misconduct also became increasingly difficult to distinguish. Unverifiable references, fabricated publication details, inaccurate authorship information, and incomplete citations created situations in which instructors could not confidently determine whether students had consulted the original sources. Although classroom interactions provided little indication of

intentional deception, these practices nevertheless raised important questions regarding academic responsibility because the resulting work represented knowledge that students could not always substantiate.

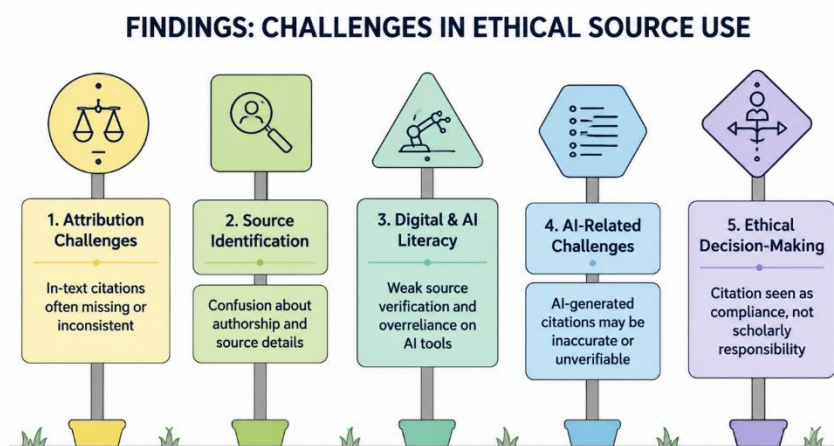
Students also demonstrated difficulties integrating sources ethically into their own writing. Some altered article titles, modified publication details, or paraphrased passages while changing only surface-level wording. Others incorporated information generated through AI tools without independently consulting the original publication. These practices appeared to reflect uncertainty about what responsible source use requires rather than an intention to plagiarize. In many cases, students seemed unaware that ethical citation involves not only acknowledging a source but also accurately representing its ideas and ensuring the reliability of the evidence presented.

Instructor feedback suggested that explicit guidance improved students' performance over time, yet recurring errors across multiple assignments indicated that learning citation rules alone was insufficient. Students also needed opportunities to develop broader scholarly habits, including evaluating source credibility, verifying AI-generated information, interpreting evidence critically, and reflecting on their responsibilities as academic writers.

In general, these findings suggest that academic integrity in AI-mediated writing environments extends well beyond compliance with citation conventions. Ethical source use appears to depend on students developing a conception of citation as an act of scholarly responsibility rather than a formatting exercise. From this perspective, academic literacy, digital literacy, and AI literacy become closely interconnected because each contributes to students' capacity to evaluate evidence, attribute ideas accurately, and accept responsibility for the knowledge they communicate. Citation instruction, therefore, is most effective when it supports not only technical accuracy but also the development of ethical judgment and informed scholarly practice.

Figure 2

Conceptual Representation of Key Challenges in Ethical Source Use Among Advanced English Learners



Note. The figure summarizes the five interconnected themes identified through thematic analysis. Collectively, the findings indicate that students often viewed citation as a technical requirement rather than an ethical scholarly practice, highlighting the need to integrate academic, digital, and AI literacy into source-use instruction.

Discussion

Although the participants in this study had advanced English proficiency and prior experience with academic writing, the findings suggest that ethical source use involves far more than mastering citation conventions. Across the five themes, students' difficulties consistently pointed to a broader challenge: understanding how academic knowledge is produced, evaluated, attributed, and communicated within increasingly AI-mediated learning environments. Citation errors, authorship confusion, limited source verification, and uncritical reliance on AI-generated references were not isolated problems but interconnected expressions of developing academic, digital, and AI literacies. These findings indicate that ethical source use should be understood as a process of scholarly decision-making rather than procedural compliance. From this perspective, responsible academic writing depends not only on following citation rules but also on exercising informed judgment, critical evaluation, and intellectual accountability throughout the writing process.

Citation is an Academic Literacy Practice—not a Formatting Skill

The findings indicate that participants' citation difficulties arose less from unfamiliarity with APA conventions than from an incomplete understanding of the intellectual purposes that citation serves in academic writing. Across Themes I and V, many students treated citation as a technical requirement, concentrating on formatting while paying comparatively little attention to source verification, authorship, or the transparent representation of evidence. This pattern suggests that their difficulties were conceptual rather than procedural. From an Academic Literacies perspective, citation is not merely a writing convention but a disciplinary practice through which learners construct knowledge, position their voices in relation to existing scholarship, and establish credibility within academic communities (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). Hyland (2005) similarly argues that academic writing reflects participation in disciplinary discourse, while Pecorari (2008) contends that responsible source use requires meaningful engagement with ideas rather than mechanical referencing. The emergence of generative AI complicates these long-standing expectations. Writers must now determine whether AI-generated information is accurate, verify the authenticity of references, distinguish credible evidence from hallucinated citations, and make transparent decisions about how AI has contributed to their work (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). Viewed in this way, ethical citation extends beyond compliance with formatting rules; it becomes an exercise in epistemic responsibility, requiring learners to justify the knowledge they present and the evidence on which it is based. These findings suggest that instruction should move beyond teaching citation style to helping

students develop the academic, information, and AI literacies needed to make informed and accountable scholarly decisions.

Ethical Source Use Depends on Epistemic Responsibility

The findings suggest that ethical source use cannot be reduced to accurate citation alone. Across Themes II, III, IV, and V, participants struggled to evaluate authorship, verify the credibility of sources, distinguish authentic references from AI-generated or fabricated citations, and assume responsibility for decisions made during AI-assisted writing. Many appeared more concerned with *how* to cite information than with *whether* the information was trustworthy or appropriate for scholarly use. This pattern suggests that the primary challenge lies in epistemic judgment rather than technical citation skills. From an Academic Literacies perspective, responsible source use reflects participation in disciplinary knowledge-making and informed scholarly decision-making rather than compliance with citation conventions (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006).

Recent scholarship indicates that these expectations have become more demanding in AI-mediated writing environments, where learners must critically evaluate AI-generated content, verify references, recognize the limitations of large language models, and disclose AI use transparently (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). Researchers likewise argue that responsible AI use depends on developing AI literacy, ethical engagement, and critical evaluation skills rather than technical proficiency alone (Al-khresheh, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that ethical source use emerges through the integration of academic, information, digital, and AI literacies, culminating in epistemic responsibility—the capacity to make informed, transparent, and accountable decisions about evidence, authorship, and knowledge construction in increasingly AI-mediated academic writing.

Generative AI Changes the Nature of Ethical Source Use

The findings suggest that generative AI is reshaping ethical source use in ways that extend beyond traditional concerns about plagiarism. Across Theme IV, participants frequently relied on AI-generated citations, summaries, and reference lists without independently verifying their accuracy. Some incorporated fabricated references cited sources they had not consulted, or accepted AI-generated evidence with minimal critical evaluation. These patterns point not only to the limitations of generative AI but also to a shift in learners' decision-making, where the ease of automation may discourage careful verification of evidence. Recent scholarship similarly argues that AI-assisted writing requires learners to understand how knowledge is produced, critically evaluate AI outputs, develop the capacity to question information sources, recognize the limitations of large language models, and remain accountable for how AI contributes to academic work (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026; Veldhuis et al., 2025).

While earlier discussions of plagiarism focused primarily on unattributed borrowing or patchwriting (Howard, 1993; Pecorari, 2008), AI-mediated writing introduces a broader concern: the delegation of source selection, evidence evaluation, and citation practices to intelligent systems. This shift reframes academic integrity as a question of epistemic ownership rather than textual ownership alone. As other scholars have argued, responsible AI use depends on AI literacy, ethical engagement, and transparent scholarly judgment, not simply the ability to generate technically correct text (Al-khresheh, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). These findings suggest that the central challenge for writing instruction is helping students remain intellectually responsible for the knowledge claims they present, even when AI assists the writing process.

Academic Integrity as Development Rather Than Compliance

The findings suggest that many of the source-use difficulties observed in this study are better understood as developmental challenges than as evidence of intentional academic misconduct. Although participants generally attempted to acknowledge sources, follow APA conventions, and meet course expectations, they frequently struggled with source verification, authorship, attribution, and the responsible use of AI-generated content. These patterns indicate that compliance with citation rules does not necessarily reflect an understanding of how evidence is evaluated, integrated, and represented within scholarly communication. Howard (1993) argued that patchwriting often reflects a developmental stage in learning academic discourse rather than deliberate plagiarism, while Pecorari (2008) showed that multilingual writers may experience persistent difficulties with source integration despite genuine efforts to write ethically.

The present findings extend this perspective to AI-mediated writing, where students must also evaluate AI-generated information, recognize the limitations of large language models, and make transparent decisions about AI use (Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Kostka & McMartin-Miller, 2026). Recent studies likewise suggest that responsible AI use depends on developing AI literacy and ethical engagement rather than technical proficiency alone (Al-khresheh, 2024; Seo, 2024). Viewed through a sociocultural lens, academic integrity develops through guided participation, formative feedback, and reflection rather than punishment alone (Vygotsky, 1978). In AI-supported writing environments, cultivating ethical writers therefore depends on helping students develop the academic, information, and AI literacies needed to exercise informed and accountable scholarly judgment.

Toward an Integrated Model of Ethical Source Use in AI-Mediated Writing

Although the five themes are presented separately for analytical purposes, the findings suggest that they represent an interconnected developmental process rather than isolated challenges. Ethical source use appears to emerge through the interaction of multiple literacies that collectively shape how learners evaluate evidence, construct knowledge, and make scholarly decisions in AI-mediated writing. Academic literacy

provides the foundation for understanding disciplinary expectations surrounding citation, attribution, and participation in scholarly conversations (Hyland, 2005; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). Yet these competencies alone are no longer sufficient. Students must also develop information and digital literacies to identify credible sources, verify authorship, and evaluate the reliability of online information before incorporating it into their writing.

As generative AI becomes embedded throughout the writing process, these literacies must be complemented by AI literacy, which enables learners to critically interpret AI-generated content, recognize fabricated references, understand the limitations of large language models, and make transparent decisions about AI use (Al-khresheh, 2024; Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). The findings suggest that weaknesses in any one of these areas may result in writing that appears technically accurate but lacks genuine engagement with evidence. This integrated perspective culminates in epistemic responsibility—the capacity to make informed, transparent, and accountable decisions about knowledge, evidence, and authorship. The proposed framework therefore positions ethical source use as a socially mediated literacy practice that develops through the interaction of multiple literacies, instructional scaffolding, and responsible scholarly judgment in increasingly AI-mediated academic environments.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that ethical source-use instruction should move beyond teaching APA conventions to developing students' academic, information, digital, and AI literacies. Rather than focusing primarily on citation mechanics, instructors should create opportunities for learners to verify sources, evaluate AI-generated outputs, distinguish authentic from fabricated references, and reflect on authorship and evidence before incorporating information into their writing. Recent scholarship similarly argues that responsible AI use depends on explicit instruction in AI literacy, ethical engagement, and critical evaluation rather than technical proficiency alone (Al-khresheh, 2024; Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). Such instructional practices may strengthen epistemic responsibility, enabling multilingual writers to make informed, transparent, and accountable scholarly decisions in AI-mediated academic writing.

Contributions to TESOL Research

This study contributes to TESOL scholarship by extending current discussions of AI-assisted writing beyond writing quality, learner perceptions, and AI literacy to examine how advanced English learners negotiate ethical source use in authentic classroom contexts (Al-khresheh, 2024; Barrot, 2024; Dong, 2024; Seo, 2024). The findings suggest that citation difficulties often reflect developmental challenges in evaluating evidence, verifying sources, and exercising scholarly judgment rather than intentional misconduct. Building on Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006), the study proposes epistemic responsibility as a complementary conceptual lens that

explains how academic, information, digital, and AI literacies interact to support transparent knowledge construction, responsible authorship, and ethical decision-making in AI-mediated academic writing.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The findings were drawn from one fully online advanced academic writing course at a single community college, which may limit their transferability to other educational settings, learner populations, or proficiency levels. In addition, the study focused on students' written artifacts, reflections, and classroom observations rather than interviews exploring their decision-making processes. Future research could examine ethical source use across diverse institutional contexts, proficiency levels, and disciplinary writing courses. Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insight into how academic literacy, digital literacy, AI literacy, and epistemic responsibility develop over time as students engage with AI-supported writing practices.

Conclusion

As generative AI reshapes academic writing, ethical source use increasingly depends on more than accurate citation or compliance with academic integrity policies. The findings suggest that advanced English learners must develop the capacity to evaluate evidence critically, verify AI-generated information, make transparent authorship decisions, and remain accountable for the knowledge they present. By integrating Academic Literacies with emerging perspectives on AI literacy, this study positions epistemic responsibility as a conceptual lens for understanding ethical source use in AI-mediated writing. Preparing multilingual writers for this evolving landscape will require instruction that develops informed scholarly judgment alongside linguistic proficiency.

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Laila Noor: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization

Generative AI Use Disclosure Statement

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used only for language editing (e.g., improving grammar, clarity, organization, and readability) and for creating figures. It was not used to develop the study's ideas, theoretical framework, methodology, literature synthesis, data analysis, interpretation, or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for all scholarly content.

Ethics Declarations

World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study involved classroom-based educational research with advanced English learners and writing instructors in a U.S. higher education context. Participation and the use of classroom-generated data were conducted with appropriate attention to participant privacy, confidentiality, and ethical research practices. All data used for research purposes were anonymized to protect participants' identities. The study did not involve medical research, clinical intervention, or experimentation and therefore did not involve the types of medical procedures addressed by the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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