

Article

Network of Discourses: Resistance and Negotiation within Chinese Students' AI-Assisted EFL Writing

Hongqin Li

Lin Pan*

Beijing Normal University, China

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Abstract

This study investigates how English major students collaborate with generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing assignments. Employing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and critical discourse analysis, this research focuses on a symmetrical treatment of both human and nonhuman aspects of students' diverging digital literacy practices. Data were collected from 12 participants through writing drafts, ChatGPT chat logs, screen recordings, and stimulated recall interviews at a university in China. In producing students' AI-assisted writing networks, the analysis illustrated how the authenticity of ChatGPT's output was established, stabilized and contested with students' shifting understandings towards an idealized native-like resemblance in AI's language norms and its 'illusory' objective stance. As students continuously negotiate authority between native-like authenticity and their original voices, this study highlights how their strategic decision-making in this process is conflated with academic and occupational pressure towards competitive advantages. The study thus reveals how students' engagement with ChatGPT is not merely a technical process but also a complex network of language ideologies, academic expectations, and personal identities. The need to cultivate critical AI literacy among students is discussed, and this study also calls for reconsidering EFL writing instructions and assessment criteria in the era of generative AI.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, English writing, actor network theory, critical discourse analysis

1 Introduction

The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has dramatically transformed the educational landscape, particularly in language teaching and learning. AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, with their enhanced natural language understanding, improved efficiency in query responses, and increased adaptability, present both opportunities and challenges for students and teachers (Kasneci et al., 2023). Godwin-Jones (2024) emphasized the necessity for both learners and educators to examine shared

*Corresponding author. Email: linpan@bnu.edu.cn

agency within the AI-learner-teacher relationship, given the rapid integration of AI into educational settings. The power and versatility of AI, if not thoughtfully integrated, can lead to undesirable sociocultural consequences by fostering unbalanced human–AI power dynamics. The text generated by AI, potentially containing biases and stereotypes shaped by and hidden in the vast amounts of text used to train AI models, is not inherently neutral or objective. AI-generated output remains dialectically related to social reality (Fairclough, 2010), as it internalizes the cultural values, beliefs, and preferences of the training data and human trainers and shapes established perceptions and discourses. The uncritical adoption of AI tools, sometimes culminating in an AI frenzy, may consequently lead to the normalization of stereotypical and monolingual language use (Wang et al., 2021) and the potential exclusion of those without access to AI tools.

English as a foreign language (EFL) writing has been a predominant yet debated domain in which the research and practices of applying generative AI tools have rapidly evolved (Teng, 2024b). While many studies have focused on revealing learners' perceptions and identifying AI affordances in EFL writing, there is a dearth of research highlighting how the agentic capacity of generative AI, reciprocal to but not necessarily symmetrical with human agency (Dattathrani & De', 2023), enables these perceptions and affordances. In response to the call to reconsider a joint framing of human–tool agency in the era of generative AI, the present study adopts Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 1984; Latour, 1987; Law, 1994) to investigate how English major students at a Chinese university negotiate language and information in their EFL writing assignments while collaborating with ChatGPT as a primary generative AI tool. To contextualize the material and discursive aspects of AI-assisted writing, the following sections briefly review the ethical issues identified in the current literature and then discuss how these challenges and affordances might relate to AI chatbots' mechanisms and users' digital literacy practices. The networks of students' EFL writing are then presented and explained, with implications for both writing pedagogies and broader social phenomena.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research on AI-assisted writing

Generative AI chatbots, with ChatGPT being one of the most prevalent, have been widely adopted as tools for proofreading, editing, generating feedback, and assessment in EFL writing. Numerous studies have highlighted learners' positive preferences for and perceptions of ChatGPT. For instance, Allen and Mizumoto (2024) reported that Japanese EFL learners favour using ChatGPT for editing and proofreading, noting improvements in clarity and cohesion in their writing. Boudouaia et al. (2024) investigated the use and acceptance of ChatGPT-4 in EFL writing classes and reported that it not only enhanced writing performance but also positively influenced students' attitudes and intentions regarding its use. Similarly, Teng (2024a) reported that AI assistance significantly increased writing motivation and self-efficacy among Chinese students. These studies suggest that integrating ChatGPT with writing can promote students' higher performance, with affective and cognitive benefits throughout the process.

Despite the desirable outcomes of AI integration, many stakeholders have expressed concerns regarding ethical issues, with academic dishonesty being the primary concern. Cotton et al. (2023) argued that overreliance on ChatGPT's responses could contribute to a new form of academic dishonesty by hindering the development of critical thinking skills. Teng (2023) noted that ChatGPT introduces additional risks for cheating when AI-produced work becomes difficult to differentiate from human-authored work. The risk of a new form of plagiarism resulting from an overreliance on AI is closely linked to another problem of authenticity and stereotypical language. For example, Kushmar et al. (2022) reported that students feared losing authentic learning experiences with native speakers, and a substantial majority expressed concerns about being assessed by AI for factors such as pronunciation, accent, speaking style, and emotions. These ethical concerns indicate potential incongruences between

how learners view themselves and how they are shaped and positioned by the ways in which AI chatbots are used in their writing process. Therefore, further research should be conducted to explore how learners use AI in their EFL writing and what factors associated with using AI might affect learners' learning opportunities and perceptions.

2.2 Materiality and discourse in AI-assisted writing

Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) invoked the epistemology of ignorance to caution against the risks of being unaware of how algorithms guide choices and shape experiences in students' digital literacy practices. They advocated that when technology becomes integrated into teaching, students must "be supported in developing a critical awareness of how power operates in online spaces, and how ways of thinking and being are culturally produced and reproduced, and sponsored" (p. 315). In recent years, posthumanism and new materialism have led scholars to adopt a relational, nonbinary approach to human and nonhuman entities in educational contexts (Canagarajah, 2018; Pennycook, 2018). From this perspective, generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT are more than tools; they represent a natural or even supernatural form of distributed agency (Floridi, 2023) that mediates the human–AI writing process alongside other entities, such as digital interfaces and algorithms. The human writer and AI model intra-act in this process, co-constituting the final text and blurring traditional boundaries between the author and instrument. The knowledge production in writing becomes indeterminate, with each interaction opening new possibilities and rendering the final outcome unpredictable.

Several studies have addressed the 'ignored' aspects highlighted by Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) in knowledge production by ChatGPT by examining the intrinsic bias in training data and algorithms. Research has shown a partial representation of values in GPT-3's generated content that typically aligns with dominant U.S. values (Johnson et al., 2022). The prevalence of English in training data (93% for GPT-3; Brown et al., 2020) and the potential inability to capture cultural nuances in language use when conducting translation tasks (Ducar & Schocket, 2018) further complicate these issues. Rather than being just a series of programmed steps, integrating AI with writing instruction and practices may reflect ideologies about legitimate language varieties and cultural representations that serve the values negotiated by human and AI language models.

Fisher (2010) argues that the discourse of technology in higher education "is not simply a reflection of the centrality of technology in the operation of modern societies; instead, it plays a constitutive role in their operation, and enables precisely that centrality" (p. 231). In light of this view, technological innovations such as ChatGPT could represent a normalized use of themselves with their promoted linguacultural representations and potentially circulate these practices of knowledge construction in a way that produces and reproduces them. A study by Jakesch et al. (2023) revealed that working with opinionated AI chatbots influences what users write and think. Moreover, Liang et al.'s study (2023) suggested that GPT detectors may misclassify nonnative English writing as AI-generated, paradoxically pushing these writers to use GPT to improve vocabulary and grammatical complexity to sound more 'native-like'. The information and language presented as facts may contain hidden biases that sometimes stem from colonial influences and agendas. This knowledge, shaped by selective training data, can obscure its complex historical and political origins within the context of globalization and the international exchange of ideas. Therefore, this study conceptualizes AI-assisted writing not only as a language practice but also as a window for semiotic ways of construing aspects of society that unfold in students' choices regarding what information and language to credit, appropriate or problematize.

2.3 Actor Network Theory

To analyse both social and material elements in students' AI-assisted writing, including human and nonhuman actors, this study employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as its theoretical framework

(Callon, 1984; Latour, 1987; Law, 1994). ANT invites researchers to focus on how various actors, such as humans, inanimate objects and intangible beliefs and discourses, come to be understood as they form connections to constitute actor networks.

For an actor network to take shape, transformation must occur—by specific interests and boundaries being built around a network and heterogeneous actors being rallied to form alliances. Callon (1984) suggested four overlapping dimensions of how different elements relate and connect through (inter) actions by which transformation occurs: problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilization. The actor network will be stabilized as multiple actors/allies form connections and undergo persistent changes with the growth and closure of controversy. The relationships among the actors are dynamic and constantly changing, shaping their activities and themselves. This process is underscored by a symmetrical approach that treats nonhuman actors no differently from human actors with distributed agency and equally acts upon each other in networks. The production of AI-assisted writing as an actor network can thus be seen as a mapping of the material–semiotic relations that constitute it to be able to see their effects.

Many educational studies employing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a theory-method have focused on children’s literacy practices, where they interact and create with people, objects, and practices. These studies highlight the multiple sites and specific local manifestations of literacy practices. Within this literature, the role of technology has become a prominent focus within actor networks. For instance, Degenais et al. (2013) investigated video-making with English as an additional language (EAL) learners and illustrated how particular affordances and constraints are created through interactions among children, peers, and video-making equipment. These scholarly inquiries indicate the need to chart new directions, focusing more on educational tools as technologies themselves rather than solely on the social interactions among users. This approach enables the examination of how affordances emerge and how particular types or components of technology enable specific classroom interactions. In recent years, another growing body of ANT literature has focused on the dynamic construct of bilingualism (Leonard, 2019; Martín-Bylund, 2017) and identity formation (Lee, 2023) within a particular local site. ANT-informed design in this body of literature provides a critical entry point for understanding the transformation of human actors’ subjectivities by showcasing the impartial roles of discourses and beliefs entangled in material–semiotic relations. Grounded in the sensibilities of ANT, this study aims to uncover how networks emerge in students’ AI-assisted writing process, with a particular focus on how they negotiate the authenticity of information and language in this process. To this end, this research focuses on the following two research questions:

1. What actor network emerges when students coordinate information and language in their AI-assisted EFL writing?
2. How are students’ practices and values negotiated and shaped through their AI-assisted EFL writing process?

3 Methodology

3.1 Research context and participants

This study was conducted at a university in southern China. The participants recruited in this study were sophomore English majors. They were primarily enrolled by the focal university through targeted teacher training and free preservice teacher education programs, with a small number of them outside these programs. Students within these programmes are required to work as English teachers in their hometowns after graduation. Therefore, most students position themselves as prospective teachers and tend to consider pedagogical insights in their course learning.

For this study, all the participants were recruited from the Academic Writing course in Fall 2023 where one of the researchers served as a teaching assistant. This course focused mainly on the genre and

skills needed to accomplish summary, expository, and argumentative writing, with assignments allowing the transparent use of AI chatbots for draft revision. While strategies for AI collaboration were not explicitly taught in this course, the prerequisite course introduced students to ChatGPT and discussed its merits and limitations. Students were thus initially informed of an imperfect AI model when they began to implement it in their writing assignments.

After final grades were posted, the authors asked students enrolled in the class to join this study and grant us access to their writing drafts and their chatlogs. 12 participants out of 90 students in two parallel classes were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their regular use of various AI tools in their learning experiences. All the participants used ChatGPT 3.5 ethically in this course, with two students using version 4.0 (S10, S11). The participants employed AI chatbots to search for information, brainstorm, polish language, and request content-based feedback across multiple courses. Detailed participant information is presented in Table 1. The participants are referred to anonymously in this paper. As the table shows, three male students audited or minored in computer science, which echoes the trend of interdisciplinary learning at the focal university. This would potentially influence how they address the roles of ChatGPT in their AI-assisted writing process.

Table 1

Information about the Participants

No.	Gender	Programmes	Additional Information	Screen Recording
	F=Female	T= Targeted teacher training		
	M=Male	F= Free preservice teacher education programme		
		N= English major not included in the above programmes		
1	F	T	/	Y
2	F	T	/	N
3	F	N	/	N
4	F	F	/	Y
5	F	T	/	Y
6	F	T	/	N
7	F	F	/	Y
8	F	F	/	Y
9	M	T	Minor in computer science (CS)	Y
10	M	T	Minor in CS	Y
11	M	F	Audit courses in CS	Y
12	M	F	/	N

3.2 Data collection

At the beginning of our investigation, the primary data sources were students' expository and argumentative writing drafts through the academic writing course and their ChatGPT chat logs. Throughout this course, participants maintained weekly journals as an additional assignment, in which they occasionally reflected on their writing experiences. Screen recordings were employed as a data

collection method to gain deeper insights into participants' habits of using ChatGPT in writing beyond self-reporting. The participants were invited to voluntarily record their screens during one writing assignment after they finished the course, with no restrictions on time and space for recording. The reason for choosing a subsequent task was to reduce the interference of the first writer's positionality as a teaching assistant during the instructional period, in which students might report inauthentic AI use to avoid judgement of their academic integrity and higher expectations for performance. To allow students to perform naturally, the recorded assignment was chosen by students from either the task in another literacy course or their preparation for the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4). Both researchers and students verified the requirements and designs of these tasks as the same as those they accomplished in the focal course. Additionally, students reported consistent habits and strategies of using ChatGPT in these assignments, as they did in the previous course. The recordings captured how they interacted with ChatGPT and utilized other websites and tools in their writing process. Each recording lasted from 40 minutes to approximately 1 hour.

Based on the collected drafts, chat logs, and recordings, the researcher conducted interviews with the participants to decode the meaning of the traces of their writing process. The interviews were carried out face to face in Chinese and were divided into two sections. The first section started with semi-structured interviews debriefing the participants' habitual use of ChatGPT in writing (Appendix 1). After completing the first section, we moved to stimulated recall interviews during which the participants were presented with their initial drafts, final versions, and chat logs. When available, relevant sections from screen recordings were used to highlight specific decision-making moments that represented recurring patterns or specific choices in prompting or addressing ChatGPT's feedback. The interview questions in this section focused on why they made specific choices to appropriate or resist the information or language, as shown in their writing and recordings. Each round of interview including two sections altogether lasted approximately 40 minutes and was transcribed verbatim by Xunfei.

3.3 Data analysis

Callon (1984, 1991) emphasized the importance of using a consistent vocabulary for all potential actors in a network analysis. This approach ensures equal treatment of all the elements and prevents the imposition of preexisting hierarchies. In our study, we adopted Callon's (1984) suggested terminologies—problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization—to describe and analyse the formation of networks in AI-assisted writing.

The process of transformation demonstrated by these vocabularies begins with problematization, where an actor identifies and defines a problem along with a potential solution (e.g., polish the essay to make it more authentic to native speakers—have the chatbot provide linguistic elements). This stage was followed by interessement, through which an actor attempts to assign specific roles to other elements, aligning them with the proposed solution (e.g., the chatbot to provide the authentic language, define the chatbot as representative of a native speaker). Then, enrolment occurs when an element is successfully integrated into the network through multilateral negotiations and becomes an actor supporting the specific problematization (e.g., evaluating the linguistic items from multiple aspects to validate them). The final phase is mobilization, with widespread enrolment of allies who accept and validate actors as representatives of a larger group (e.g., linguistics and algorithmic knowledge are used to confirm ChatGPT's output). Throughout this process, controversy may occur in mobilizing the actors, and the closure of the controversy can lead to transforming the existing networks.

Before applying the suggested terms, researchers were required to decide what to include and exclude in their inquiry to 'cut the network' (Latour 1987). In this study, we traced students' trajectories to examine how the network of AI-assisted writing emerged. In producing actor networks, data analysis follows the principle of a 'looking down approach' (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011, 124), which includes inductive coding (Charmaz, 2014) and elements of rhizoanalysis (Strom, 2015; Waterhouse,

2011). We started with descriptive codes that described what students were doing with ChatGPT in their writing (e.g., brainstorming and polishing the language). At the next level, drawing on Callon's terms (1984), we traced the human actors to identify major elements that were enrolled and mobilized in this process. On the basis of the coding results, we performed rhizomatic mapping. The software Scapple was used to map the relationships and interactions among actors by entering them into individual bubbles. These bubbles were then grouped and connected with lines in ways that revealed how they have become indispensable and displaced relationally and contingently. On the basis of this mapping, the recurring patterns of problematization-mobilization are identified as themes to present in the findings.

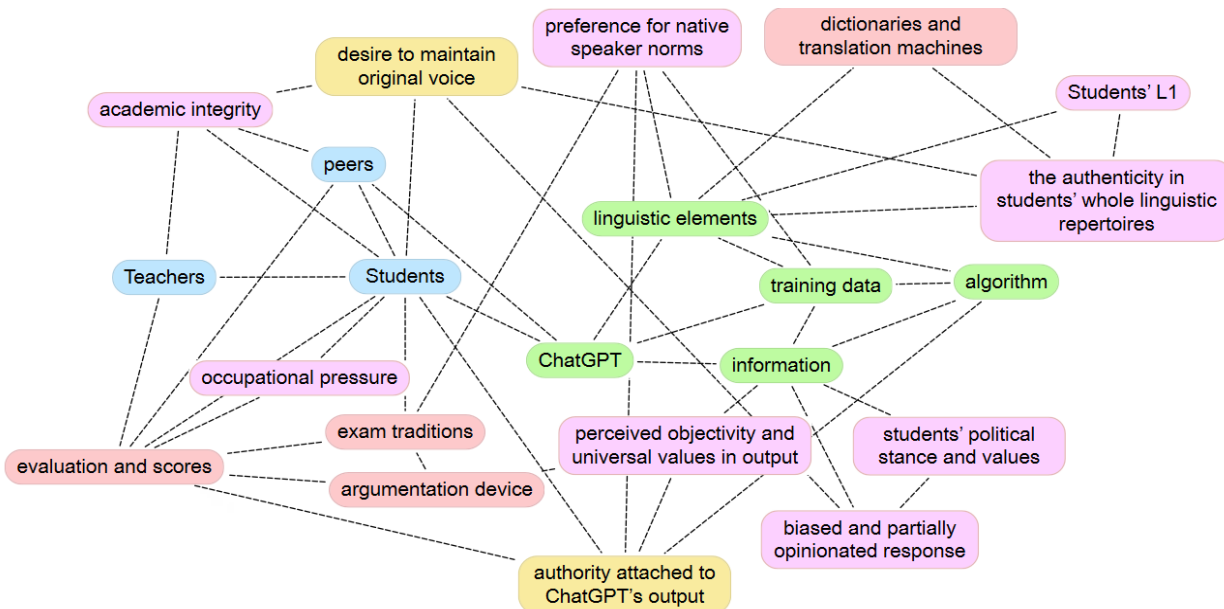
The emerging network serves as a semiotic point of entry to examine how participants' decision-making towards language and information was featured with particular discourses. The specific data extracted from participants' interviews and writing drafts were analysed with a dialectical-relation approach of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; O'Regan and Betzel, 2016). The discursively significant linguistic features, such as vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical devices, were analysed as interdiscursive cues that could reveal how ways of believing, acting (i.e., mainly writing in this study) and taking up identities are combined and articulated. Next, we compared and contrasted the discourses identified in the previous studies of (language) education and applications of generative AI to interpret what discourses were (re)produced in the focal context and how they might have come about. In this way, we also attempted to hypothesize the social and pedagogical consequences they might have for conducting and instructing EFL writing with generative AI chatbots. Pedagogical implications regarding how the dominant discourses can be contested and destabilized are then discussed in the final section. The critical discourse analysis was carried out concurrently and iteratively with other analytic processes to reveal how discourse was noticed and negotiated to inform and contribute to the emerging actor network.

4 Findings and discussion

In the following sections, based on the rhizomatic mapping we developed for students' AI-assisted EFL writing (Figure 1), we generated and discussed four themes regarding the trajectories of problematization-mobilization to illustrate the transformation of actornetwork in response to RQ1. These themes demonstrated how various human (students, peers, teacher) and non-human actors (ChatGPT, translation machines, preference for native norms, etc.) interacted and formed alliances in the writing process.

Figure 1

A Rhizomatic Mapping of Students' AI-assisted Writing



For RQ2, we specifically traced and highlighted students' decision-making process mediated through technological tools and discursive practices in these themes. This process was described with detailed linguistic and social analysis of typical extracts that revealed how students' literary practices and subjective stances and positionings became shaped and contested.

4.1 Problematizing authentic native speakers

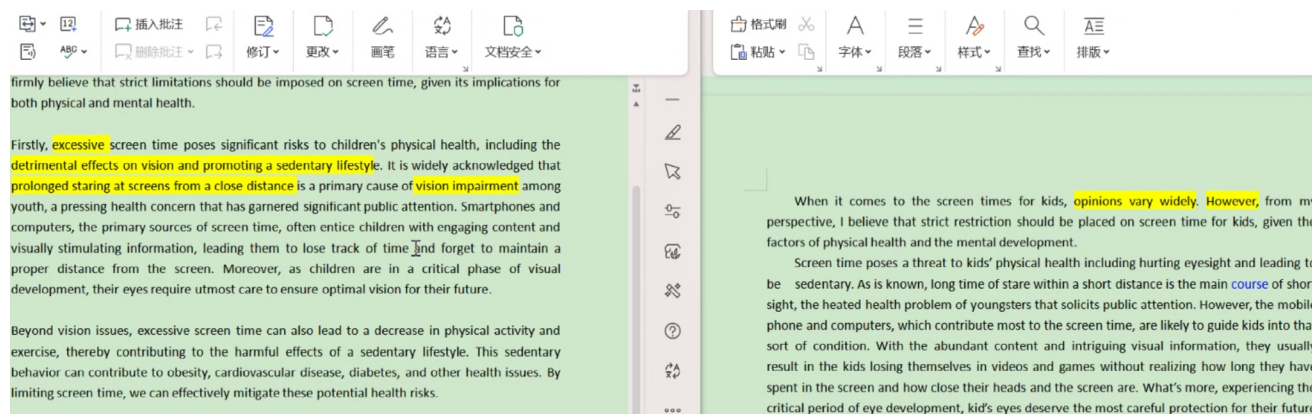
Many students turned to ChatGPT (S1, S4, S9, S10) with the primary purpose of polishing and producing authentic or native-like essays. This space of problematization is characterized by students' explicit prompts to chatbots, such as "You are a domestic British. Please polish the given essay to make it more coherent, natural and engaging..." (S9) "润色该文章使其更加地道 (Polish the essay and make it more native-like)" (S4). The nationality imposed on ChatGPT, with reference to 'domestic British' and 'native-like', illustrates how students pursue the authenticity of language by affirming that a "speech variety must be very much 'from somewhere'" to have value (Woolard, 2016, p. 22). However, the essays polished upon request, typically featuring more academic language and complex syntactic structures as perceived by students, were not included without consideration. For example, S4 demonstrated a critical approach to the AI-generated content:

Actually, I was dubious about some substituted vocabularies that were made too abstract and professional. I hardly ever saw these vocabularies or some collocation of the familiar words in my previous experience, but I'm not sure whether I was not competent enough or was just inappropriate. After all, this was not the language that I would and can use. However, due to my lack of professional knowledge compared to ChatGPT, I would compromise on it.

S4 makes explicit references to pragmatic appropriateness, particularly with respect to vocabulary in ChatGPT's output (Figure 2). However, she nonetheless complied with it, attributing her misgivings to her lack of 'professional knowledge'. The authenticity of ChatGPT has been questioned from metalinguistic aspects yet reaffirmed due to the perceived asymmetry in knowledge enabled by its extensive training data (OpenAI, 2022). In this case, when students construed ChatGPT as an authoritative native speaker, they positioned themselves as incompetent bilinguals by stabilizing ChatGPT's envisioned native-like norms as orthodoxy. This deference may be reiterative of the discursive conflation of linguistic authenticity with native speaker norms, which is closely linked with enhanced lexical and syntactical complexity in AI-polished text (Lowe & Pinner, 2016; Liang et al., 2023).

Figure 2

S9 compared and highlighted the phrases she was confused about in the polished essay (left document) with original essay (right document)



S10, who minored in computational science, showed more trust in having ChatGPT as a native speaker ally with his knowledge of the algorithmic logic of generative AI. Drawing on his knowledge, S10 referred to the mechanism of preprocessing and the native-speaker-based training data, explaining how it would use the semantic prosody from authentic natives' output to produce reasonable language and information as needed. As he reported, this trust was further consolidated in several successful experiences of S10's prompt to ChatGPT, mobilizing extensive linguistic elements, algorithmic logic and students' relevant knowledge. For example, S10 once wrote an argumentative essay about protecting heritage languages, and ChatGPT provided feedback on language improvement and some authentic information on language policy to make the essay more enriched and objective. In this context, ChatGPT incorporated and recontextualized the dialogues of academic discourse and policy documents on language policy from its text corpora. The intertextual nature of its response, coupled with S10's understanding of the underlying algorithm, established ChatGPT as a representative "knowledgeable, proficient English native" (S10) in the student's perception.

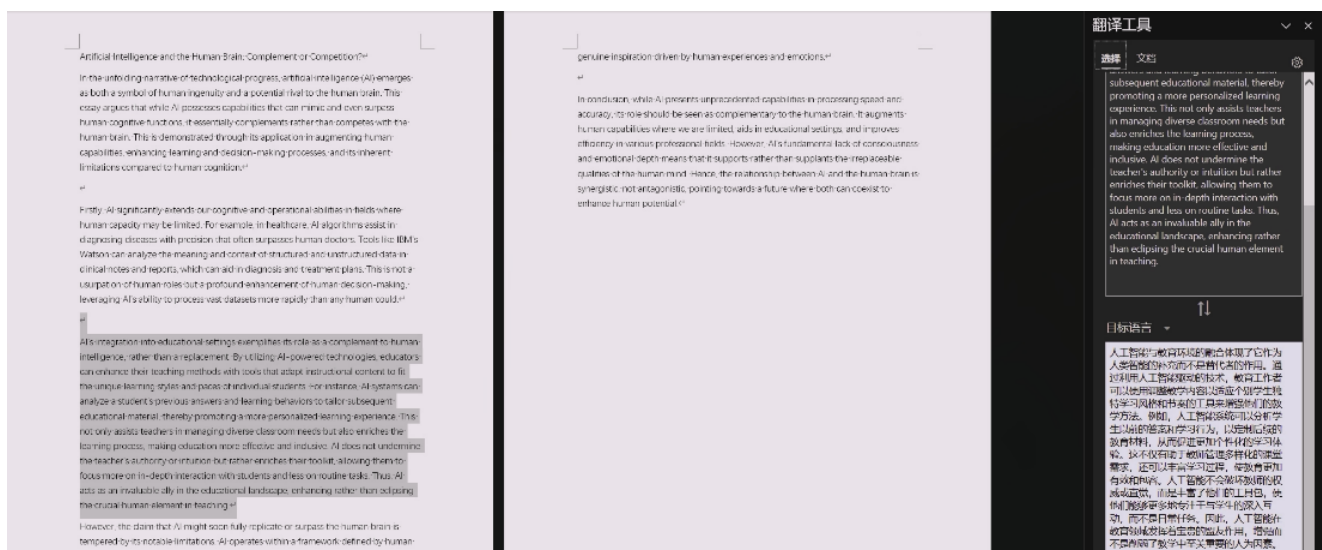
S10's mobilization of the algorithm, alongside the linguistic and informational items produced by ChatGPT, can be interpreted as an ideological rendering that seeks to reaffirm native speaker idealization. While S10 demonstrated an awareness of ChatGPT's underlying algorithmic logic, there was a notable absence of critical awareness of how power operates in this process. Adhering to native speaker norms could lead to the ritualization of these practices (Bhatt & MacKenzie, 2019). Consequently, students might follow a stereotyped and repetitive writing trajectory, with their perceived performance standards continually revolving around native norms.

4.2 Coordinating bilingual resources and translanguaging thinking

In the previous theme, the space of problematization was still filled with tension, as shown in the case of S4, where the student must reconcile the benefits of following ChatGPT's language at the price of abandoning nuanced expressions. To confront this challenge, some students chose to enrol linguistic resources other than ChatGPT's output to strategically appropriate its suggested edits. In S11's case, his solution was to employ translation machines to translate the text exported by ChatGPT into Chinese and then re-examine the meaning and expression in the translation (Figure 3).

Figure 3

S4 Applied Translator to Examine the Meaning of Polished Essay



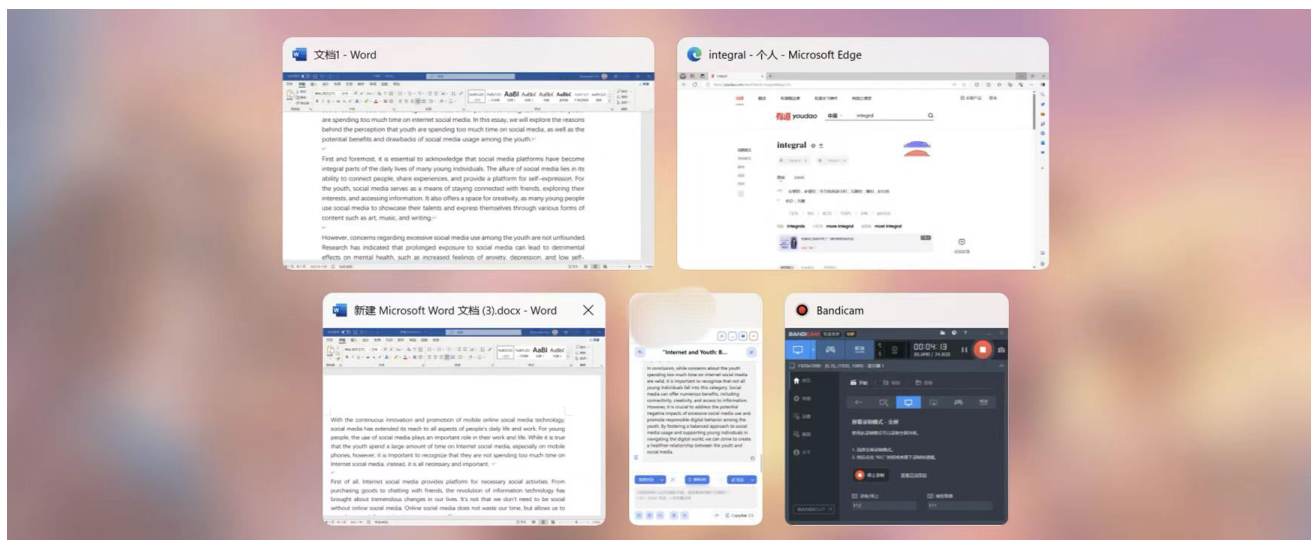
By doing so, the translation tool was transformed from a mere utility into an active ally in the writing process, enabling him to “explicitly see the nuanced difference between these texts” (S11). This strategy also allows S11 to note the “overtly explicit and paralleled cohesive devices and structures, and abstract academic words”, which he found potentially awkward when overused by AI. Similarly, S11 also displayed his metalinguistic awareness when evaluating the semantic structure and vocabulary use of ChatGPT. While S4 dichotomized between L1 and English in a way that positioned herself as an incompetent language learner, S11 made references to the shared features in both languages and legitimized how they could be mobilized as an asset to discern the linguistic differences (Li, 2018). The transgression of linguistic boundaries in this process emancipated S11’s agency to resist the unbalanced power dynamics that rested in ChatGPT’s native-like proficiency.

Extract 1: S11’s essay polished by ChatGPT

First and foremost, it is essential to acknowledge that social media platforms have become integral parts of the daily lives of many young individuals. The allure of social media lies in its ability to connect people, share experiences and provide a platform for self-expression.

Figure 4

S11’s screenshot (Websites from left to right: polished essay, online bilingual dictionaries, original essay, a conversational chatbot app based on ChatGPT API, screen recorder)



In addition to translation machines, the enrolment of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries further illustrates the complex actor network at play. In Extract 1, “integral” was provided by ChatGPT to replace the word “essential” in the original draft, and “allure” was also suggested to metaphorically summarize the potential risk of social media. S11 consulted bilingual dictionaries (Figure 4) for these words and made his decision to reject the modifications, as he thought “they were correct and more professional, but they neither shared a necessary difference in meaning that would hinder understanding (integral and essential) nor had been too literary to fit in the existing style (allure)”. Faced with similar situations, S6 subsequently turned to bilingual and English dictionaries, finally rejecting ChatGPT’s edits. She explained:

When ChatGPT presented language use that is not familiar to me, I would check it in Chinese first and then further verify it in English. This is to align with how I initially composed the writing in Chinese as I always did. However, in such a case, the content of my original essay was

almost as perfect as I think, and I do not need to become a translation expert to bother with these modifications.

For these students, the writing process no longer revolved around the native speaker norms but featured a translanguaging flow on how they navigated the bilingual differences and stylistic terrain in this process (Li, 2018). As S6 considered that she ‘does not need to become a translation expert’, she asserted her right to determine what constituted ‘perfect’ language use in EFL writing. This empowered her as an active and discerning user of language who was able to challenge the assumed superiority of ChatGPT’s output. The instinct to move beyond language boundaries and resolve gaps between meanings other than linguistic forms only (Li, 2018) has driven S9 to make a more critical decision to disassociate these linguistic elements from the network.

Extract 2: S9’s original essay

Besides that, long screen time may lead to kids’ dependency, locking up the energy and interest on a small screen that should originally be allocated to interpersonal interaction.

Extract 3: S9’s essay edited by ChatGPT

Furthermore, excessive screen time can foster a reliance on screens, redirecting energy and interest that should be devoted to interpersonal relationships.

In extracts 2 and 3, owing to S9’s “persistence in Chinese ways of expression”, she chose to maintain the “likeness in spirit (神似)” reflected in the original text. She admitted, “ChatGPT’s language was more concise, clearer and academic. However, I just want to deliver the image of how energy is restricted in a metaphorical space even if my expressions are not appropriate.” In S9’s comparison between her expressions and ChatGPT’s output, the exported language was perceived as falling short of capturing the nuances of language use when S9 insisted on the authenticity derived from her L1 repertoire. Nevertheless, she unconsciously established ChatGPT’s language as a potential standard, as its language was coined ‘more concise, clearer and academic’. This tension was emblematic of a monolingual tradition in China’s language education, which promoted immersive and exclusive use of the target language (Li & Shen, 2021). The intensive focus on proficiency in the target language functions to separate students’ linguistic repertoires across certain varieties of languages. In this way, they could be disciplined to always envision and adhere to an essentialized and pure linguistic standard, as evidenced in their conceptions of ChatGPT, despite their instinct to resolve and manipulate the linguistic inconsistencies and discrepancies for strategic gains.

4.3 Conflicting interests in ChatGPT’s ‘illusionary’ neutrality

The image of ChatGPT as a considerate and knowledgeable English native was constructed by students such as S10, who emphasized its vast training data and algorithmic logic. Conversely, this role was problematized and reconfigured by students concerned about the risk of disrupting their stance-taking in writing. This has also encouraged some students to move towards maintaining their own voice instead of pursuing native-like language. For example, S2 recalled how the suggestions and information provided by ChatGPT seemed counterproductive for her argumentation:

When I was writing the argumentative essay on the female dress code, ChatGPT advised me to add a counterargument and list some dangers of activist attitudes towards women’s freedom of dress that led to social disorder (Figure 5). However, it seemed to mediate the differences at the sacrifice of principle, and I didn’t take the advice.

Figure 5

ChatGPT's feedback to S2's argumentation on female dress code

3. Refine the "Overexposure" Argument to Avoid Extremism

The part where you suggest that "coquettish" dressing or overexposure inevitably leads to temptation risks reinforcing victim-blaming narratives. To avoid this, you could reframe this as a *societal issue* where norms need to evolve, rather than suggesting women should limit their choices because of potential negative reactions. For instance:

Original Argument: "Dressing in a coquettish manner means dressing to highlight sexual features and inevitably be seductive to the opposite sex... you have been disturbing lots of people."

Revised Argument: "Society's tendency to objectify women based on their clothing choices must be challenged, as it unfairly places the burden on women to dress conservatively rather than educating society to respect personal autonomy. While some may find revealing clothing provocative, this reflects a need for social change, not restrictions on individual freedom."

4. Engage with Counterarguments

Address counterarguments more directly to strengthen your case. For instance, many would argue that a woman should be free to dress however she wants without fearing for her safety. Acknowledge this perspective but argue why societal structures currently necessitate caution.

Example: "While some argue for total freedom of dress without restrictions, society's current climate still poses risks to women. Until we reach a point where sexual harassment and violence are eradicated, it is pragmatic to balance personal freedom with a degree of caution. However, the ultimate goal must be to change societal attitudes, not to place the burden on women."

In this example, S2 failed to stabilize ChatGPT as an actor to strengthen her argumentation in the existing network. Instead, ChatGPT was redefined as a neutral arbiter whose objective stance indicates curtaining problems. In this case, she did not accept ChatGPT's suggestion, but took its views as a bullet point for problematizing with additional information from the local KOL and a news report she selected later. Elsewhere, when prompting ChatGPT to polish and review an essay on nuclear water release, S7 was dissatisfied with how the writing style was altered so drastically that his passionate and critical stance was totally diluted. He particularly mentioned the devices of syntactical and lexical hedges; while he acknowledged they were indicative of native speakers' language use (Hinkel, 2002), these linguistic devices were added to inhibit the original voice in this context.

While ChatGPT may exhibit biased behaviour, many students are only impressed that it automatically refuses sensitive questions and usually provides plausible-sounding and objective responses (OpenAI, 2022). This has contributed to a supposedly unmarked, anonymous and universally acceptable tone of its output. For S2, this neutral perspective, usually regarded as considerate by other students, potentially obscured a suppressing voice that 'mediates the differences at the sacrifice of principle'. In this context, the pragmatic fit in language that iconized itself as a native speaker operated as an enabling device that inhibited S7's individual opinion as a Chinese language learner and observer in the discussed case.

In these examples, students' rejection of the preestablished authority of ChatGPT reflected how a language model such as ChatGPT could constitute an opinionated speaker with U.S. values in its view of feminism, equality (Johnson et al., 2022) and political bias (Motoki et al., 2024). As Woolard (2016) suggested that the authority of languages can thrive on "sounding from nowhere", the seemingly

common public discourse generated by ChatGPT supposedly represented the anonymous mass to become universally available and acceptable while maintaining its linguistic authenticity to an envisioned genuine Anglophone community. If not addressed with a resolute individual stance, this could lead to an uncritical appropriation of some public discourse, as shown in the case of S9.

Extract 4: S9's essay edited by ChatGPT

Additionally, employers strongly respect multilingualism as a result of globalization's growing significance in the corporate sector. Children who learn English may potentially have an advantage over others in the future.

S9 was accustomed to prompting ChatGPT to provide feedback on her essay's content and language. Usually, ChatGPT would suggest counterargumentation when her views were too activist or partial. When ChatGPT left no comments, such as in extract 4, it was thus recognized as appropriate by S9. Initially, she justified the social justice orientation of her argument, as it focused on how learning English would facilitate real-life communication and career prospects. This utilitarian conception of language learning, rooted in the traditions of examination culture in China, has been prevalent among many language learners and teachers against the backdrop of globalization (Pan, 2015) but has been deemphasized by the national curriculum in recent years. This framing of English-language learning was also indicative of Flores's caution (2013) about multilingualism as complicit with neoliberalism's global vision. While ChatGPT's muted validation in this context was included in an established network, it became controversial when S9 suddenly realized her overemphasis on the instrumental value of language learning in the stimulated recall interview. This contrasts with the representativity of ChatGPT, which alluded to a set of universally accepted values close to those of S9, reconsidering the veracity and neutrality of its output.

Jakesch et al. (2023) reported that many users are persuaded or unintentionally influenced by a large language model in the cowriting process. The persuasive power of ChatGPT in these examples was evidenced in the anonymous reference to universal values and the pragmatic features of authoritative native forms. Both characteristics have contributed to constructing a vision of truth by forming a transcended and disembodied public discourse delivered with an essentialized linguistic standard as perceived by students. Without criticality towards how the given knowledge has been mediated, students might become incapable of discerning the information presented by AI chatbots.

4.4 Reconfiguring writing towards occupational pressure and academic integrity

The shifting problematization phase, moving between the native-like language and students' own voices and expressions, was permeated with another common interest: optimizing the scores of students' essays within an increasingly competitive academic environment. In the interviews, all but one participant (S6) mentioned that their teachers' evaluation of their essays edited with ChatGPT would influence their decision-making in the writing process. S7's statement about the cumulative nature of grades in writing or literacy courses alongside her concern towards competitive scholarships exemplified this displacement of problematization and interestment:

I do not think using ChatGPT is necessary for my writing, but I will always try to use it. Especially in writing courses, the grades accumulate essay by essay. If you don't use it, your classmates will still use it and get better grades through it ... Everyone around me has been so hardworking and brilliant across many courses. Sometimes ... you lose one point, and you can consequently drop in the ranks and miss the scholarships. And this is what many employers would value for prospective teachers.

To 'get better grades through it (ChatGPT)', in addition to various prompts such as polishing, editing and brainstorming, many students (S2, S7, S8, S10) invite ChatGPT to score their essays according to the rubrics given by the course instructor (e.g., Figure 7). Usually, the score of the ChatGPT-revised version

was higher, promoting students' use of its feedback to achieve higher scores. This pervasive attribution of ChatGPT's role as an authoritative grader indicates how students have potentially normalized ChatGPT's output as a standard for language. Such normalization might entrench how students perceive their individual work as largely polished by AI and increase the difficulty of how teachers distinguish ChatGPT-produced text, which constitutes the premise of academic dishonesty (Cotton, et al., 2023).

To coordinate the interest of higher grades while moving the actor network towards the respective problematization, the same devices of interest shown previously took different pathways. For S11, when he received AI's suggestion to add a counterargument to address the disadvantages of screen time for kids, whereas his position was completely positive in the essay, he rejected it, as he thought "in exam-oriented writings, a clear stance is one of the criteria for an excellent argumentative essay". This view aligns with the long-standing washback influence of high-stakes tests in China, where significance is always attached to clear argumentation in both criteria and traditional instructions (Liu & Stapleton, 2014). In addition, maintaining academic integrity has become a major concern for students engaging with ChatGPT, especially with respect to polishing language. S2 said:

When you add the prompt, ChatGPT will produce irresistible language for you. However, I would not accept it because I observed that the characteristics of such expressions were observed in many of my classmates who had used AI. Teachers must have been alerted to that.

To resist the 'irresistible language' that gave rise to a paradoxical situation when students appreciate the idea and language of AI, they might still choose to counterenrol these ideas and linguistic elements to avoid an overqualified and hegemonized language style to indicate their academic integrity. S2's concern was also related to the emerging form of academic dishonesty associated with both students' overdependence on ChatGPT and the lack of access to the model (Cotton, et al., 2023). The unfairness stemming from the ambiguous parameter of using ChatGPT in their assignments consequently drives them to become dependent users.

All the examples mentioned above echo Wang's interpretation of the self-positioning of middle school Chinese students (2020) who push and pull between various positions, including the exam-oriented self and the enterprising self. AI-assisted writing was framed as a value-laden task in which the access to and manipulation of technology were considered competitive advantages. The students in this study, thus, attributed their decision-making in the writing assignments to the tensions in their precarious educational and occupational futures.

One exception to such tension was how S6 insisted on using her own original expressions and opinions. While she was aware of the risk of being disadvantaged by not following ChatGPT's suggestions, she destabilized the conflation of writing assignments with the consequent academic and occupational concerns of evaluation. An important contextual prompt was the targeted teacher training programme in which she was enrolled. Based on the programme's requirement, she would be assigned to the schools in her hometown county, but these schools were limited in number and had friendly employment standards. Therefore, she commented, "No matter how well I did in my writing, the consequent scores and scholarships make no difference to my occupational opportunities. So I can just write what I want." In this case, with the writing assignment decontextualized from academic pressure, she was also able to 'write what I want' by moving away from the discursive construal of ChatGPT's techno-linguistic authority, the characteristics of which were constantly asserted with values in the exam-oriented evaluations.

5 Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study highlight the dynamic and contested nature of the actor network that emerged from students' engagement with ChatGPT in EFL writing. Informed by ANT theory, this study revealed how students grappled with two major compelling interests: pursuing native-like authenticity and

maintaining an original voice while coping with academic and occupational pressure. The emerging networks demonstrated four interconnected themes in which the problematization–mobilization process was permeated with a continuous negotiation of shifting authority and agency that could transform yet reiterate the prevailing discourse of monolingualism and an orientation towards competitive academic advantages and plagiarism.

One key implication is the need to cultivate students' critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992) or critical digital literacy (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Dooly & Darvin, 2022). While the study revealed students' general ability to evaluate the metalinguistic aspects of the chatbot's output in terms of how its pragmatic, syntactic and lexical use aligns with that of authentic native speakers, it also suggested the importance of developing more in-depth critical engagement to evaluate the social and ideological roots underpinning the linguistic and informational items. Godwin–Jones (2024) argued that it is necessary to equip learners with an understanding of the digital structures and cultures of generative AI and the power dynamics its use represents. In the context of students' EFL writing, this could include familiarizing them with what constituted the AI chatbot's training data and how their interactions with it could privilege certain cultural representations and linguistic norms and appropriate normalized opinions and behaviours on and offline (Darvin, 2017).

Moreover, this study highlights the need to reconsider the criteria for instructing and assessing EFL writing in the era of generative AI. This could involve underscoring students' critical thinking (Hao et al., 2024) as reflected in how they analyze, evaluate and apply the information and linguistic knowledge in innovative ways. The traditional emphasis on complex syntactic structures and lexical choices may inadvertently reinforce the privileging of certain linguistic norms over others. In this study, many students aligned an idealized native speaker model with ChatGPT's generic output, resulting in either faithful obedience to or guilty deviation from the given linguistic norms. This conception, despite being temporarily disrupted by their translanguaging instinct, still remained rigidly stabilized and led to students' constrained agency to challenge the authority of ChatGPT. Language teachers should, therefore, explore instructional assessment approaches that value students' entire linguistic repertoires and emphasize communicative effectiveness beyond grammatical accuracy and complexity.

Finally, as the students constantly displaced the goals and interest of EFL writing within a competitive academic environment and occupational future, the writing task transformed into what linguistics and technological resources they could access and how well they could mitigate them to showcase competitive value while maintaining academic integrity. In this case, we encourage teachers to clearly delimit the use of generative AI and assist those inaccessible to AI tools if generative AI is to be legitimized in literacy courses. This can possibly prevent the marginalization of certain groups of students and exacerbate students' speculative use of generative AI with the consequent technological stratification of academic performance.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview protocol (translated from Chinese)

1. How do you use ChatGPT to facilitate your writing process in EFL writing generally?
2. What benefits of using ChatGPT do you perceive through your EFL writing assignments in this course?
3. What challenges or disadvantages of using ChatGPT do you perceive through your EFL writing assignments in this course?
4. How do you evaluate the output or suggestions of ChatGPT in your EFL writing? What aspects will you consider?
5. How does integrating ChatGPT to assist your EFL writing influence your perceptions and practices of language choices? What about the logic and views? Does integrating ChatGPT influence other aspects in your EFL writing?

6. What suggestions or solutions can you envision to facilitate the process of AI-assisted writing in the future?

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Hongqin Li is a Master’s student in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Beijing Normal University, where he also received his BA in English. His research interest lies in multilingualism and language teacher education. His co-authored paper with Dr Lin Pan, Dr Philip Seargeant and Professor David Block was recently published in *TESOL Quarterly*.

Lin Pan is associate professor, vice-chair of English Department at Beijing Normal University (BNU), China. Before joining BNU, she was Coordinator for Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) and John Adams Research Fellow at UCL Institute of Education. She was associate professor at Beijing Language and Culture University and programme officer at the Chinese Ministry of Education. Her research interests are language ideologies, sociolinguistics and language education. She is the book author for *English as a global language in China: deconstructing the ideological discourse of English in language education* published by Springer International in 2015. She also co-edited *Mandarin Chinese Teacher Education: Issues and Solution* by UCL IOE press in 2018.

ORCID: 0000-0002-1673-4661