



Exploring Students' Critical Awareness of AI-Assisted Writing in EFL Contexts: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing has significantly transformed students' writing practices, particularly through the use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. This article critically discusses recent literature concerning students' critical awareness in AI-assisted EFL writing contexts, focusing on studies published between 2022 and 2026. The discussion reveals that AI technologies provide various pedagogical benefits, including improvements in writing performance, learner autonomy, motivation, and accessibility. However, these advantages do not automatically develop students' critical awareness in evaluating AI-generated content. The literature indicates that many students continue to rely on AI outputs without sufficient reflection regarding accuracy, relevance, ethical implications, and academic integrity. In addition, excessive

dependence on AI may limit the development of higher-order thinking skills and reflective learning. The article also emphasizes the important role of pedagogical intervention in fostering critical digital literacy and responsible AI use in EFL writing instruction. Overall, the discussion suggests that critical awareness should become a central component of AI integration to ensure that AI functions as a supportive tool for meaningful, ethical, and sustainable learning.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 16 June 2026

Revised 17 June 2026

Accepted 19 June 2026

Keywords

AI-Assisted Writing, Critical Awareness, EFL Writing, Generative AI, AI Literacy

Mawarni, M., Rizkyta, A. C., Rado., & Wahyuni, S. (2026). Exploring students' critical awareness of AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts: A literature review. *TRANSFORM: Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 15(3), 119-133. <https://doi.org/10.24114/tj.v15i3.74926>

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly following the public release of generative tools such as ChatGPT in late 2022, has fundamentally reshaped educational practices, including the teaching and learning of writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. AI-assisted writing technologies provide learners with immediate feedback, linguistic support, and content generation capabilities, thereby

transforming how writing is conceptualized, produced, and evaluated (Song & Song, 2023; Tahir et al, 2025). This development indicates that AI is no longer positioned merely as an additional technological resource, but has become increasingly integrated into students' writing practices. In EFL learning environments, the accessibility and responsiveness of AI tools enable students to receive support more efficiently, particularly in areas related to grammar, vocabulary, and idea development.

Within this evolving landscape, AI has shifted from a supplementary instructional aid to an active agent in the writing process, influencing not only linguistic performance but also learners' cognitive and metacognitive engagement (Teng & Shen, 2025; Tran, 2026). This shift has also changed the nature of writing instruction itself. Students are not only expected to produce texts, but are increasingly required to evaluate, interpret, and respond critically to AI-generated suggestions. Consequently, the integration of AI demands the development of reflective and analytical thinking skills within EFL writing contexts.

In EFL contexts, where learners frequently encounter constraints related to limited linguistic input and exposure, AI-assisted tools have been extensively documented as facilitating improvements in writing performance, learner autonomy, and motivation (Alangari, 2025; Ghorbani & Kianifard, 2025). These findings suggest that AI technologies may function as supportive learning tools that help students overcome linguistic barriers commonly experienced in EFL classrooms. The availability of immediate assistance allows learners to participate more actively in the writing process and may increase their confidence in composing texts in English.

A growing body of empirical and review-based research indicates that AI supports key aspects of writing development, including idea generation, grammatical accuracy, and textual organization, thereby enhancing overall writing quality (Song & Song, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). Such improvements demonstrate that AI can contribute positively to students' surface-level writing performance. However, the ability to produce grammatically accurate and well-organized texts does not necessarily reflect deeper understanding, creativity, or critical engagement with the writing process itself.

Moreover, the integration of AI has been associated with increased learner independence, as students are able to access on-demand feedback and iteratively refine their texts without continuous teacher mediation (Arif & Naeem, 2025; Pham, 2025). This

condition highlights the growing role of AI in promoting autonomous learning. Students are increasingly able to revise and improve their writing independently, which may reduce dependence on direct teacher feedback. Nevertheless, greater autonomy also requires stronger evaluative abilities to ensure that AI-generated suggestions are used appropriately and critically.

Despite these documented benefits, the expanding reliance on AI-assisted writing tools has generated substantial concerns regarding the depth of student learning and their capacity for critical engagement with AI-generated content. Existing studies suggest that while students frequently utilize AI tools, their understanding of the underlying mechanisms and their ability to critically evaluate the accuracy, bias, and appropriateness of AI outputs remain insufficient (Hartono & Wahyuni, 2025; Srithep, 2025). This condition reflects a significant gap between technological usage and critical awareness. Although students may appear technologically proficient, they do not always demonstrate the evaluative skills necessary to assess the reliability and relevance of AI-generated information. As a result, students may accept AI outputs uncritically, potentially limiting the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Within this context, critical awareness in AI-assisted writing can be conceptualized as learners' capacity to critically evaluate, question, and responsibly integrate AI-generated outputs into their writing processes. This encompasses the ability to recognize the limitations of AI systems, detect inaccuracies, uphold academic integrity, and maintain authorial voice (Amoush & Alhosban, 2025; Mali, 2025). The concept of critical awareness is particularly important because AI-generated content is not always accurate, neutral, or contextually appropriate. Students therefore need to engage actively with AI outputs rather than simply accepting automated suggestions. Critical awareness enables learners to position AI as a supportive tool while maintaining their own intellectual responsibility throughout the writing process.

The literature increasingly emphasizes that insufficient critical awareness may lead to overdependence on AI, diminished originality, and heightened ethical risks, including plagiarism and the misrepresentation of authorship (Hossain & Al Younus, 2025). These concerns indicate that the integration of AI in academic writing involves not only technological issues but also ethical and pedagogical challenges. Excessive dependence

on AI may reduce students' opportunities to develop independent reasoning, creativity, and authentic authorial expression.

Furthermore, the current body of scholarship reveals a growing tension between the pedagogical affordances and the potential risks associated with AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts. While AI technologies offer opportunities for personalized learning, immediate feedback, and skill enhancement, they simultaneously introduce challenges related to ethical use, assessment validity, and the potential erosion of critical thinking (Mali, 2025; Tran, 2026). This tension suggests that AI should not be viewed as inherently beneficial or harmful. Instead, its educational impact largely depends on how students and educators engage with these technologies within specific learning contexts. Therefore, a balanced and critical approach to AI integration is necessary to maximize its pedagogical value while minimizing its potential risks.

Notwithstanding the increasing volume of studies investigating the effectiveness of AI in improving EFL writing performance, there remains a significant lack of systematic and theory-informed examination of students' critical awareness as a central construct. The existing literature predominantly prioritizes performance outcomes, often overlooking the cognitive and evaluative processes underlying learners' interaction with AI-generated texts (Feng et al., 2025; Amoush & Alhosban, 2025). This limitation indicates that current discussions surrounding AI-assisted writing tend to emphasize technological effectiveness more than students' critical engagement. Consequently, deeper understanding regarding how learners interpret, evaluate, and respond to AI-generated information remains relatively underexplored.

Therefore, this article aims to provide a critical discussion of recent literature concerning students' critical awareness in AI-assisted EFL writing contexts, particularly recent studies published between 2022 and 2026. Specifically, it explores key issues related to the benefits, challenges, opportunities, and pedagogical implications of AI integration, with particular emphasis on learners' critical engagement with AI tools. By presenting a critical discussion of existing literature, this article contributes to a more nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of AI's role in EFL writing, while offering practical insights for fostering more critical, ethical, and effective use of AI in language education.

METHOD

This study employed a literature review method to critically examine recent research on students' critical awareness of AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts. The review focused on studies published between 2022 and 2026, particularly research discussing the use of generative AI tools in EFL writing, students' writing performance, critical awareness, learner autonomy, cognitive engagement, academic integrity, and the pedagogical role of teachers.

The literature was identified from relevant academic publications addressing AI-assisted writing and EFL learning. The selection focused on studies that were directly related to the research topic and provided empirical findings, systematic reviews, or theoretical discussions concerning the use of AI in EFL writing. Studies that did not directly address AI-assisted writing or students' engagement with AI-generated content were not prioritized.

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes across the studies. The analysis focused on several major themes, including AI-assisted writing performance, students' critical awareness, learning behavior, advantages and opportunities, challenges, and the pedagogical role of teachers. The findings from the selected studies were then compared and synthesized to identify common patterns, differences, and gaps in the existing literature.

Through this approach, the study aimed to develop a critical understanding of how AI-assisted writing influences EFL students' learning and writing practices, particularly regarding their ability to evaluate and use AI-generated content responsibly. The analysis also examined the need for pedagogical intervention to support critical digital literacy, academic integrity, and reflective learning in AI-assisted EFL writing.

RESULTS

AI-Assisted Writing and Students' Writing Performance

AI-assisted writing has become an integral component of EFL learning, particularly following the emergence of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that AI technologies contribute significantly to students' writing performance. These tools support various stages of the writing process, including idea generation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary development, and text organization,

leading to improvements in overall writing quality (Song & Song, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). This indicates that AI-assisted technologies provide practical support for students during the writing process. In EFL contexts, where learners often face linguistic limitations, AI tools can function as accessible learning assistants that help students organize ideas and improve language accuracy more efficiently. As a result, students may feel more confident and supported when completing writing tasks.

Furthermore, AI-assisted writing promotes learner autonomy by enabling students to independently access immediate feedback and revise their texts without continuous teacher intervention (Arif & Naeem, 2025; Pham, 2025). Increased motivation and engagement are also frequently reported, particularly among learners who experience difficulties in writing tasks (Alangari, 2025; Ghorbani & Kianifard, 2025). These findings suggest that AI not only supports technical aspects of writing but also encourages more independent learning behaviors. Students become more active in revising and improving their work because AI tools provide instant responses that are easily accessible at any time. This flexibility can increase students' motivation and participation in writing activities.

However, these improvements should be interpreted critically. Most reported gains are limited to surface-level aspects such as grammar and organization, which may not fully reflect students' actual writing competence. In some cases, improved performance may indicate reliance on AI tools rather than genuine skill development. Consequently, students may produce well-structured texts without fully understanding the underlying linguistic and rhetorical processes. This suggests that performance enhancement should not be directly equated with deeper learning outcomes (Feng et al., 2025). This condition shows that writing improvement through AI assistance does not always represent authentic learning progress. Although students may generate better texts, they may still lack deeper understanding of writing concepts and critical reasoning. Therefore, educators need to ensure that AI is used as a supportive learning tool rather than as a substitute for students' own thinking processes.

Students' Critical Awareness in Using AI

Despite the widespread adoption of AI tools, students' critical awareness remains relatively underdeveloped. Critical awareness refers to learners' ability to evaluate,

question, and responsibly integrate AI-generated outputs into their writing processes. The literature indicates that many students tend to accept AI-generated content without sufficiently examining its accuracy, relevance, or potential bias (Srithep, 2025; Amoush & Alhosban, 2025). This suggests that many students still position AI as an unquestionable source of information. Instead of critically evaluating AI-generated responses, students often use the outputs directly to complete tasks. Such practices may reduce opportunities for reflective thinking and weaken students' analytical engagement during the writing process.

This condition reflects a significant gap between technological usage and cognitive engagement. While students demonstrate high levels of interaction with AI tools, their ability to critically assess the reliability and appropriateness of AI-generated information remains limited. As a result, AI is often used as a tool for task completion rather than as a medium for reflective learning. Without adequate critical awareness, students' independent thinking and higher-order cognitive skills may not develop optimally (Feng et al., 2025). The findings indicate that technological familiarity does not automatically lead to critical competence. Students may frequently interact with AI tools but still lack the ability to evaluate the credibility and quality of the information produced. Consequently, the educational benefits of AI may become limited if students are unable to engage with the technology critically and reflectively.

Moreover, frequent use of AI should not be automatically interpreted as digital competence. Students may appear technologically proficient while lacking evaluative judgment. This indicates a form of superficial digital literacy, where operational skills dominate over critical reflection. Such conditions may lead to uncritical acceptance of information, ultimately weakening analytical capacity and academic responsibility. This phenomenon highlights the importance of distinguishing between technical ability and critical literacy. Although students may know how to operate AI tools effectively, they still require guidance in understanding the ethical, cognitive, and academic implications of AI-generated content. Therefore, critical awareness should become an essential component of digital literacy development in EFL education.

Impacts of AI on Students' Learning Behavior

The integration of AI-assisted writing extends beyond improving textual outcomes and also influences students' learning behavior. On the positive side, AI tools enhance efficiency, reduce writing anxiety, and support independent learning. Immediate feedback allows students to revise their work continuously, which can increase confidence and encourage more frequent writing practice. These benefits demonstrate that AI can create a more supportive learning environment for EFL students. The availability of instant assistance may help students feel less pressured during writing activities, especially those who struggle with language accuracy or idea development. Consequently, students may become more willing to practice writing regularly.

However, the literature also highlights potential negative impacts, particularly the emergence of cognitive dependency. When students rely excessively on AI-generated suggestions, they may reduce their own effort in analyzing, evaluating, and revising texts. This shift can transform students from active learners into passive users of information, thereby limiting the development of critical thinking skills (Mali, 2025; Tahir et al., 2025). This condition indicates that excessive dependence on AI may weaken students' cognitive engagement in the learning process. Instead of actively constructing ideas and solving problems independently, students may become accustomed to depending on automated responses. As a result, opportunities to develop analytical and reflective thinking skills may gradually decrease.

From a cognitive perspective, the availability of instant responses may also decrease students' persistence in problem-solving. Writing, which inherently requires effort, reflection, and revision, may become a more superficial activity. If not used reflectively, AI tools risk diminishing the depth of students' engagement with the learning process. This suggests that the convenience provided by AI can unintentionally reduce students' willingness to struggle productively during learning. In the long term, students may prioritize efficiency over understanding, which can affect the quality of cognitive development in academic writing activities.

Advantages and Opportunities of AI in Writing

AI-assisted writing offers several advantages that contribute positively to EFL learning. These tools provide fast, accessible, and personalized feedback, enabling

students to improve their writing more efficiently. In contexts where teacher feedback is limited, AI can serve as an additional support system that enhances learning accessibility and flexibility. This demonstrates that AI has the potential to reduce limitations commonly experienced in EFL classrooms, particularly those related to time and instructional support. Students can access writing assistance independently, allowing them to practice and revise their work more frequently outside the classroom environment.

In addition to these advantages, AI also creates important opportunities for developing students' AI literacy and independent learning skills. Through guided use, students can learn to explore ideas, revise texts, and reflect on their language use. This supports the development of metacognitive awareness, which is essential for long-term learning. These opportunities indicate that AI can contribute not only to language improvement but also to broader cognitive development. When students use AI reflectively, they may become more aware of their own learning strategies and writing processes, which can strengthen their autonomy as language learners.

Nevertheless, these opportunities can only be realized when students are encouraged to engage with AI tools critically. Without proper guidance, the convenience offered by AI may lead to overreliance rather than meaningful learning. Therefore, the potential of AI lies not only in its technological capabilities but also in how it is integrated into pedagogical practices. This means that the effectiveness of AI integration largely depends on instructional approaches used by educators. AI should be positioned as a learning partner that supports reflection and critical engagement rather than as a shortcut for completing academic tasks.

Challenges in AI-Assisted Writing

Despite its benefits, AI-assisted writing presents several challenges that must be addressed. One major issue is students' overdependence on AI tools, which may reduce opportunities for independent thinking and critical engagement (Mali, 2025; Tahir et al., 2025). This overreliance can limit students' ability to develop their own ideas and writing strategies. This condition reflects the risk of decreasing student autonomy in the cognitive aspect of writing. Although AI can assist the writing process, excessive reliance may weaken students' confidence and ability to construct arguments independently.

Ethical concerns also play a significant role. Issues such as plagiarism, authorship ambiguity, and the misuse of AI-generated content highlight the need for greater awareness of academic integrity (Hossain & Al Younus, 2025). These challenges indicate that students may not fully understand the ethical implications of using AI in academic writing. This suggests that ethical literacy has become increasingly important in AI-assisted learning environments. Students need to understand that responsible AI use involves transparency, originality, and accountability in academic work.

Another critical challenge involves the reliability of AI-generated content. Although AI outputs often appear coherent, they may contain inaccuracies or lack contextual relevance. Students who do not critically evaluate such information may unknowingly incorporate incorrect content into their writing (Hartono & Wahyuni, 2025; Tran, 2026). This issue highlights the importance of verification and evaluative skills in AI-assisted writing practices. Students should not automatically assume that AI-generated information is accurate simply because it appears convincing or well-structured.

More broadly, these challenges suggest a shift in how knowledge is constructed in AI-assisted environments. When students rely heavily on AI, learning may move from active knowledge construction to passive consumption. This shift has important implications for the development of critical thinking and meaningful learning. Therefore, the integration of AI should be balanced carefully to ensure that students remain actively engaged in the learning process. Without critical engagement, AI may reduce opportunities for intellectual exploration and reflective learning.

Pedagogical Role in Developing Critical Awareness

The findings emphasize that critical awareness does not develop automatically through exposure to AI tools. Instead, it requires intentional pedagogical intervention. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding students to use AI technologies in a reflective, responsible, and critical manner (Hossain & Al Younus, 2025; Arif & Naeem, 2025). This indicates that educators remain central figures in AI-integrated learning environments. Although AI technologies can provide assistance, teachers are still needed to facilitate critical discussion, ethical understanding, and reflective learning practices.

Effective instructional strategies include promoting critical digital literacy, encouraging students to evaluate and verify AI-generated content, and integrating ethical

considerations into writing instruction (Tran, 2026; Tahir et al., 2025). These approaches help students develop the necessary skills to engage critically with AI. Such strategies demonstrate that AI literacy should not focus solely on technical usage but also on evaluative and ethical dimensions. Students need structured opportunities to question, analyze, and reflect on AI-generated information critically.

At the same time, there is a need for a more systematic integration of AI literacy into the curriculum. Students should not only learn how to use AI tools but also understand their limitations and implications. Without structured pedagogical frameworks, efforts to develop critical awareness may remain inconsistent and less effective. This suggests that educational institutions should develop clearer guidelines and learning frameworks regarding AI integration. A systematic approach can help ensure that AI supports meaningful learning while maintaining academic integrity and critical thinking development.

Balancing Opportunities and Risks of AI Integration

The integration of AI in EFL writing presents a balance between opportunities and risks. While AI enhances learning efficiency, accessibility, and personalization, it also raises concerns regarding reduced originality, cognitive dependency, and ethical misuse. This dual nature demonstrates that AI integration cannot be viewed simplistically. The same technology that supports learning efficiency may also create challenges if students use it without critical awareness and proper guidance.

This duality highlights the importance of adopting a balanced and critical approach to AI integration. AI should not be viewed as inherently beneficial or harmful, but rather as a tool whose impact depends on how it is used within specific pedagogical contexts (Mali, 2025; Tran, 2026). Therefore, the success of AI implementation in EFL writing depends largely on the interaction between technology, pedagogy, and students' critical engagement. Effective integration requires both technological accessibility and educational strategies that prioritize reflective learning.

Overall, the integration of AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts reflects a complex interplay between its pedagogical benefits and potential risks. While AI technologies enhance writing performance, learner autonomy, and accessibility, these advantages do not inherently foster students' critical awareness. A persistent gap remains between

students' frequent use of AI tools and their ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content. Therefore, fostering critical awareness should be positioned as a central objective in AI-assisted writing instruction, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for meaningful learning rather than a shortcut for task completion.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicate that AI-assisted writing provides meaningful support for EFL students' writing development. AI tools can assist students in generating ideas, improving grammatical accuracy, developing vocabulary, and organizing texts. These benefits are also associated with increased learner autonomy and motivation because students can access immediate feedback during the writing process (Song & Song, 2023; Arif & Naeem, 2025; Pham, 2025). However, improved writing performance should not be interpreted as evidence of deeper learning. Students may produce better-written texts while still having limited understanding of the linguistic and rhetorical processes behind them (Feng et al., 2025). Therefore, AI-assisted improvement needs to be accompanied by students' active engagement with the writing process.

A central issue emerging from the literature is the gap between students' frequent use of AI and their critical awareness of AI-generated content. Students may interact with AI effectively but still have difficulty evaluating the accuracy, relevance, bias, and appropriateness of its outputs (Srithep, 2025; Amoush & Alhosban, 2025). This suggests that technical familiarity with AI does not automatically develop critical digital literacy. Critical awareness requires students to question AI-generated information, verify its reliability, and make informed decisions about whether and how the information should be incorporated into their writing.

The findings also suggest that the influence of AI extends to students' learning behavior. Immediate feedback and easy access to assistance can reduce writing anxiety and encourage students to practice and revise more frequently. However, excessive reliance on AI may reduce students' cognitive engagement by limiting their effort to generate ideas, analyze information, and solve writing problems independently (Mali, 2025; Tahir et al., 2025). Thus, the convenience of AI creates a pedagogical tension: it can support independent learning while simultaneously creating the possibility of cognitive dependency when students use it primarily for task completion.

Another important implication concerns academic integrity and responsible AI use. The literature identifies plagiarism, authorship ambiguity, and the incorporation of inaccurate AI-generated information as important challenges in AI-assisted writing (Hossain & Al Younus, 2025; Hartono & Wahyuni, 2025). These issues demonstrate that students need more than technical knowledge of how to operate AI tools. They also need ethical and evaluative skills to understand the limitations of AI and remain responsible for the content they submit. In this context, maintaining students' authorial voice and accountability becomes an important part of AI-assisted writing instruction.

The discussion further emphasizes the importance of teachers and pedagogical intervention. Critical awareness does not develop automatically through students' exposure to AI; it needs to be intentionally developed through instructional activities that encourage students to evaluate, verify, question, and reflect on AI-generated content (Arif & Naeem, 2025; Tran, 2026). Teachers can therefore position AI as a learning partner rather than a substitute for students' thinking. Integrating critical digital literacy, ethical considerations, and verification activities into EFL writing instruction can help students gain the benefits of AI while maintaining active cognitive engagement and academic responsibility.

Overall, the literature suggests that the educational value of AI-assisted writing depends largely on how the technology is integrated into the learning process. AI can improve writing performance, autonomy, motivation, and accessibility, but these benefits do not automatically lead to critical awareness. The persistent gap between AI use and critical evaluation indicates that future EFL writing instruction should place greater emphasis on reflective, ethical, and critical engagement with AI-generated content. In this way, AI can function as a supportive learning tool while students remain active participants in constructing and evaluating their own knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion of recent literature demonstrates that AI-assisted writing has significantly transformed EFL writing practices, particularly through the increasing use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. AI technologies provide various pedagogical benefits, including improvements in writing performance, learner autonomy, motivation, and accessibility in the writing process. However, these advantages do not automatically

foster students' critical awareness in using AI-generated content.

The literature also highlights a persistent gap between students' frequent use of AI tools and their ability to critically evaluate the accuracy, relevance, and ethical implications of AI-generated information. In many cases, students tend to rely on AI outputs without sufficient reflection, which may limit the development of higher-order thinking skills and raise concerns regarding academic integrity, originality, and authorship.

In addition, the discussion emphasizes that critical awareness should become a central component of AI integration in EFL writing instruction. The role of teachers remains essential in guiding students to use AI tools responsibly, reflectively, and ethically. Through the development of critical digital literacy and reflective learning practices, students can be encouraged to engage more critically with AI-generated content rather than using AI merely as a tool for task completion.

Overall, AI should not be viewed solely as a technological innovation, but as a pedagogical tool whose effectiveness depends on how it is integrated into educational contexts. Therefore, balanced and critical approaches to AI-assisted writing are necessary to ensure that the use of AI contributes to meaningful, ethical, and sustainable learning in EFL education.

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