



AI as a writing feedback companion: Student beliefs

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Generative AI tools like ChatGPT and Grammarly may have a significant impact on second-language learners' perceptions of feedback in academic writing. Conducted with second-year university students in Japan, the study aimed to understand how exposure to AI influences beliefs about its role as a feedback companion. Surveys before and after AI-based tasks showed that students increasingly viewed AI as helpful for English mechanics and surface-level corrections but continued to prefer feedback from teachers and peers for higher-order tasks. While 51.7% of the students expressed interest in continuing to use AI for feedback, others remained uncertain. The results suggest that AI can serve as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for traditional feedback sources and that more education is needed to maximize its potential in enhancing writing development. Understanding students' evolving perceptions of AI is necessary for continued integration into L2 writing classrooms.

Keywords: AI companion, writing, corrective feedback, student beliefs, sources of feedback

Introduction

As generative AI tools like ChatGPT and Grammarly evolve, their uses in L2 writing education need to be considered. While Generative AI can offer both assistance and convenience in various situations where writing is required, one of its features that could best support second-language learners is its ability to offer writing feedback.

Encouraging students to seek AI-generated feedback promotes greater autonomy, which creates personalized learning experiences for students, boosting motivation and regulation of learning by the students (Wei, 2023). By exploring AI's role in guiding writing development, students can develop self-revision skills that are essential for their academic growth. Ruegg (2020) stresses the importance of helping students determine the feedback they most require. AI's capacity to provide instant, objective feedback aligns with this view. To fully harness AI's potential in second-language

writing, it is critical to first understand students' beliefs about AI and how their perceptions shift with exposure, which will allow for the identification of the best methods for integrating AI into L2 education.

The study focuses on these questions:

1. What do students believe about using AI for writing feedback?
2. How does that compare to their beliefs about other sources of feedback?

The benefits of feedback

One of the major goals of formative feedback in the writing classroom is for the students to develop learner autonomy (Lee, 2017). Forms of feedback generally include the following: teacher, peer, resources (textbook, internet), and the feedback given can be direct (marking the exact issue and offering a change) or indirect (marking the issue without giving correction). Research by Zhang and Hyland suggests that “different sources of formative assessment have great potential in facilitating student involvement in writing tasks” (2018, pg. 90). Moreover, excessive corrections delivered by the teacher may ultimately result in students surrendering the ownership of their work, showing that teacher feedback is not always a benefit (Hyland, 2000; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) and tends to be used for short-term rather than long-term gain (Glover & Brown, 2006). Therefore, training students to seek specific feedback from diverse sources independently rather than providing it unconditionally might allow students to make more informed decisions about their writing.

One way to move away from the teacher-centered classroom and give learners more agency in their writing is peer review (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). While attitudes towards peers as feedback source are mixed (Zong et al., 2021), the efficacy of this method has been proven (Reitbauer et al., 2013) and is widely used in writing classes. However, peer feedback, much like teacher feedback, is not always available during the writing process.

The growing body of research on the uses of AI in education demonstrates that AI could be a possible alternative feedback source, but student feelings on using AI for feedback and its efficacy are still unclear. Possible uses of AI-powered writing evaluation tools are being explored (Selimova, 2024; Teng, 2024a), and some of the research focuses not only on providing corrective feedback, but also on using Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT as an interlocutor or a feedback companion. Research suggests that students favorably evaluate their experience with AI as a writing assistant and show a positive impact on “writing motivation, self-efficacy, engagement, and collaborative writing tendency.” (Teng, 2024b, pg. 9) In addition, students who learn to see the feedback they need and ask specific questions about it are more likely to improve their writing (Lee, 2016), which is a function of generative AI.

Method

Second-year academic writing students' beliefs about using AI for writing feedback at a private Japanese university were gauged through two surveys. The first survey was answered by 59 students at the beginning of the semester, focused on assessing



their initial knowledge of AI, their beliefs about AI in educational settings, and their perceptions of the value and accuracy of AI-generated feedback. The surveys were administered in English, but for open-ended questions, the participants were allowed to reply in Japanese. For example, students were asked, “How good is the feedback given by AI on written work such as essays?” and “Where do you believe the best feedback comes from?” Students were also asked to imagine how AI might be useful in their writing process.

Following the initial survey, students participated in a workshop that introduced them to using AI for feedback, where they developed questions to ask AI, evaluated the feedback they received, and applied it to their writing. Students then sought AI feedback on three assignments: a research proposal and the first and second drafts of a research paper.

At the end of the semester, a follow-up survey, answered by the same group of 59 students, assessed changes in beliefs about AI and its value for providing feedback. This survey questioned “How often are AI responses accurate?” and “Do you think you will continue using AI to help you with your writing?” The responses were analyzed to examine shifts in students’ beliefs after hands-on experience with AI.

Results

In terms of prior exposure to AI, the survey found that 40.7% of the 59 students had had some experience with AI in class, 23.7% had limited exposure, and 35.6% had no previous experience with AI.

In the first survey, 22 students identified AI as helpful for English usage, rising to 29 in the second. Feedback – originally mentioned by only 8 students – was cited by 17 in the second survey, indicating a growing recognition of AI’s strength in that area. Mentions of AI for generating ideas remained stable (19 vs. 18), while other uses such as simplification/summarization (6 to 3), translation (5 to 2), information search (8 to 4), and specific task assistance (8 to 3) declined.

The participants of the surveys were also asked to evaluate the quality of the feedback provided by the AI on written work such as essays. Their responses can be seen in Table 1. Initially, 1.7% rated AI feedback as ‘perfect’, 1.7% as ‘poor’, 39% as ‘good’, and 42.4% as ‘sometimes good’. 15.3% chose ‘I don’t know’ as their answer. By the second survey, 62.7% rated it ‘good’, 30.5% ‘sometimes good’, 3.4% ‘poor’, 1.7% ‘perfect’, and 1.7% ‘I don’t know’.

Table 1. AI feedback quality according to writing students pre and post AI intervention

Response Option	Survey 1 (%)	Survey 2 (%)
Perfect	1.69	1.69
Good	38.98	62.71
Sometimes good	42.37	30.51
Poor	1.69	3.39
I don’t know	15.25	1.69

Note. Survey 1 was pre-intervention, and Survey 2 was conducted after three interventions of AI use.

When asked to select preferred feedback sources, traditional sources of feedback remained the most highly valued. In the survey, students were allowed to select all response options that they personally prefer. As can be seen in Table 2, teachers were consistently the most preferred (57 students in Survey 1; 58 in Survey 2), while preference for peer feedback increased slightly from 24 to 27. In contrast, preference for AI dropped from 22 to 15 students, suggesting that while students found AI useful, it was not viewed as a replacement for human feedback. Tutors remained constant (17 in both surveys), textbook use rose modestly (14 to 16), and the Internet declined (12 to 9).

Table 2. Preferred sources of feedback pre and post AI intervention experience

Feedback Source	Survey 1 (n)	Survey 2 (n)
Teacher	57	58
Peers	24	27
AI	22	15
Tutors	17	17
Internet	12	9
Textbooks	14	16

Note. Students could select multiple responses.

Finally, 51.7% of respondents said that they would continue using AI for feedback in a similar manner, 24.1% expressed interest in using it differently, and 20.7% stated that they were unsure, but might continue using it. Only 3.4% had no intention to continue its use.

Discussion

The rise in the number of students who view AI as helpful for correcting English mechanics suggests that students can utilize AI's ability to assist with surface-level feedback: grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. With 51.7% of students indicating they would continue using AI for feedback in the same way, the study reveals students' openness to incorporating AI tools into their writing process. However, the 24.1% interested in using AI differently suggests a need for further study on how to utilize AI for higher-order writing skills if they are to see it as a fully capable writing companion. As with any form of feedback, longitudinal studies will still need to assess if students develop accuracy over time (Liu & Brown, 2015). That students doubt AI's ability to handle complex writing tasks implies that further in-classroom education and research on AI's broader applications are necessary in L2 writing.

AI is a supplement, not a replacement. The drop in those favoring AI shows that students continued to prefer feedback from teachers and peers over AI. While students found AI useful, they still trust human feedback more for content, ideas, and organization-related feedback. AI, therefore, works well as a supplemental tool rather than as a replacement for writing instruction. This suggests that while AI is increasingly

recognized as a useful supplementary tool, students still place greater trust in human input, particularly for more complex or higher-order aspects of writing.



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2024 JALTCALL
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Future explorations

How students could balance human and AI-based feedback, as well as how students' prior experience with AI affects their usage could offer greater insight into how to best implement AI in the writing classroom.

Conclusion

As the role of AI in writing education continues to evolve, its uses offer both benefits and challenges. While structured exposure to AI can enhance its perceived value, it is not without criticisms. Given that some students were unsure or uninterested in continuing to use AI (24.1%) and considering the increase in preference for peer and teacher feedback, it can be said that teacher and peer feedback remain the most highly valued among students. The integration of AI into the writing classroom, therefore, may assist students as a feedback companion when their preferred forms of feedback are not available. Since students generally perceive AI feedback as good but not perfect, learning how to use it effectively may reduce the temptation to misuse it for cheating. Instead, it can encourage responsible and purposeful use, helping AI support learning rather than undermine it.

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