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The Use of AI Tools in Business English Writing: A Survey of Current Practices from a Critical Digital Literacy Perspective

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Abstract: This study investigates the paradox of generative AI adoption in Business English writing instruction. While tools like ChatGPT and Doubao enhance efficiency, they may simultaneously inhibit the development of independent writing skills and critical judgment. Through a mixed-methods design, the study analyzed 107 usable text segments from open-ended survey responses of 80 Chinese undergraduates, capturing authentic descriptions of AI use cases and primary concerns. Findings reveal a consistent efficiency-critique gap. Students proficiently employ AI for rapid, surface-level text optimization using simple commands (e.g., "formalize this email"), yet over 60% express acute anxiety about dependency, skill atrophy, and loss of authentic voice. Their instrumental use aligns with the "identity–ideology–capital" framework, where AI becomes the dominant agent in meaning-making, displacing student agency. While students recognize risks of homogenized output and contextual misalignment, they lack structured practices for critically interrogating AI suggestions. The study concludes that current pedagogical models insufficiently bridge functional tool proficiency and critical digital literacy. The study argues for intentional instructional design that transforms AI from a crutch into a cognitive scaffold—compelling students to slow down the "optimize-submit" cycle, deconstruct algorithmic choices, and actively rewrite outputs for specific rhetorical contexts. By foregrounding students' own fragmented yet candid voices, this research grounds the AI-in-education debate in empirical learner practices and points toward pedagogical frameworks that reconcile instrumental efficiency with value rationality.

Keywords: Generative AI; Business English writing; Critical digital literacy; Learner agency; Efficiency-critique gap

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1. Introduction

Generative AI tools like ChatGPT and domestic equivalents (e.g., Doubao) are increasingly common in Business English classrooms. Students report using them to assist with various tasks, from polishing grammar to drafting emails. In many ways, these tools have become a standard part of the writing process.

However, there are lurking cognitive concerns beneath the convenience of technology. Just as Birhane said in *The Incomputable Classroom: The Limits and Dangers of AI in Education*: "In the long term, generative AI is likely to inhibit children's cognitive, social, and critical thinking development and skills" [1]. Teachers also have the following concerns regarding business English writing: Does this reliance on AI for "optimization" and "correction" change how students approach writing? When they habitually accept an AI-suggested "more formal" or "more professional" version, what happens to their own judgment about tone, style, and cultural appropriateness in business communication?

This study investigates these questions by looking closely at students' own descriptions of their AI use. The study surveyed 80 students and asked them to describe a specific successful case and their main concern. Their answers, as the study will show, were often brief and fragmented. By analyzing these real, unpolished responses, the study aims to ground the discussion of AI in language learning in the actual, sometimes messy, practices of learners.

2. Literature review

2.1. AI in writing: Efficiency vs. depth

Multiple international studies indicate that users employ ChatGPT for various purposes, with writing assistance being one of the most common applications [2]. This is largely due to ChatGPT's ability to instantly generate texts that are linguistically appropriate and stylistically standardized [3–5]. In other words, what attracts users is not only the quality of the text but also the time saved. Experimental data from Al-Alami similarly show that as many as 98% of students agree that "using ChatGPT to complete assignments saves me the time I would typically spend on writing" [6]. Domestic research also confirms that students "can upload sentences or paragraphs they are unsatisfied with from their initial drafts to ChatGPT for language polishing, where spelling, word choice, grammar, structure, and stylistic tone can usually be improved... making the paper more logical and concise" [7]. "ChatGPT can identify language errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc., and can also generate revised texts based on students' essays, tailored to individual needs" [8]. This data resonates with my personal teaching observations—students often remark, "Using it to edit/write emails gets the job done in just one minute." However, when excessive attention is given to "speed and accuracy", the cognitive process of carefully choosing words and deliberating over expressive styles is easily ignored.

While affirming the effectiveness of the human-computer collaboration model, Liu Yingliang et al. point out the main shortcomings of the current AI writing assistance tool iWrite: its feedback primarily focuses on correcting linguistic forms (most errors identified by the system are at the lexical level), while its role in deepening content and enhancing critical thinking remains limited [9]. Moreover, the feedback lacks contextual sensitivity (students have reported that "revision suggestions are often disconnected from the specific context"). If students resort to AI-generated texts whenever they encounter writing difficulties, they risk losing crucial opportunities to independently analyze issues, construct arguments, and engage in creative expression, which is highly detrimental to cultivating higher-order thinking and academic independence [10]. Research by Xu Linlin indicates that when students use AI to refine language, a typical behavioral pattern is direct adoption—namely, "copying and pasting" the language optimized by AI, reflecting an AI-dominated assistance model [11]. In interviews, all 20 respondents stated that they "would not" or "rarely would" reconsider the suggestions provided by AI, largely remaining in a state of "copy-paste, ready-to-use."

2.2. Critical digital literacy

The term "digital literacy" was first systematically elaborated by Paul Gilster in his 1997 book *Digital Literacy*, where it was defined as the ability to understand and use complex information presented by computers. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of thinking, arguing that the key to digital literacy lies in mastering ideas rather than mere operational skills [12]. In the following decades, digital literacy was often equated with measurable skills such as "computer literacy" and "information retrieval." With the rise of Web 2.0, the EU's DigComp framework broadly defines digital competence as the comprehensive ability to confidently, critically, and creatively use information and communication technologies for work, learning, social participation, and full digital inclusion, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes [13].

Recently, UNESCO listed digital skills as one of the "prerequisite skills" for AI education in its *AI Competency Framework for Students*, highlighting the foundational role of digital literacy in cultivating AI competencies. The first principle of this framework is "fostering a critical approach to AI", which requires students to first become "conscious decision-makers" capable of judging when AI should or should not be used. Moreover, before collaborating with AI, it is essential to understand its operational mechanisms and ethical boundaries based on principles of human agency, accountability, and transparency [14]. In my view, this requirement precisely addresses a weakness in current teaching practices: educators have taught students how to "invoke AI", but have rarely trained them systematically to "question AI"—when should it be used? Why might the suggestions here be inappropriate? This lack of critical awareness is precisely the cognitive risk hidden behind today's "efficient collaboration."

Scholars in China also hold similar views. The convenience of AIGC technology may easily lead students into "technological dependence", where they over-rely on technology to generate content while neglecting the integration of personal thinking and creativity. Furthermore, due to limitations in their databases, large language models may present issues such as content authenticity bias. Therefore, students need to strengthen their critical thinking to rationally analyze information and distinguish truth from falsehood [15]. This implies that merely learning to "use tools" is far from sufficient; students must develop critical thinking to rationally examine information and discern authenticity.

As Xie Jian pointed out, in the age of artificial intelligence, programming has become an accessible tool, and everyone can use AI technology to produce knowledge. However, at the same time, false information and synthetic content in digital spaces are increasingly proliferating and becoming difficult to identify. This requires people to possess discernment and ethical boundaries, to soberly recognize the risks of digital technology, and to break free from the constraints and control of digital power. Such critical competence is especially urgent in the AI era [16].

2.3. The "identity–ideology–capital" three-dimensional model

As UNESCO (2024) emphasizes critical AI literacy, Xie offers a more granular framework for analyzing digital power dynamics through three interlocking dimensions: identity, ideology, and capital.

In the context of Business English writing: Identity refers to students' self-positioning as writers, shaped by habitus—the internalized system through which they perceive their competence and agency.

Ideology denotes the dominant logic of efficiency that AI tools embed, creating hegemonic practices where "rapid optimization" becomes the unquestioned norm.

Capital represents the symbolic value of linguistic and rhetorical resources; students must convert their existing writing capital into AI-legible inputs while risking devaluation of their own compositional skills [16].

This framework reveals that the real risk is not merely skill atrophy, but the displacement of student agency as AI becomes the primary meaning-maker.

3. Research methods

3.1. Design and participants

This study employed a mixed-methods design, centering on the analysis of qualitative responses from a larger survey. Participants were 80 undergraduate students majoring in English and International Trade at a Chinese university. A questionnaire was distributed through course channels, and all participation was anonymous and voluntary.

3.2. Data collection and the core qualitative data

The questionnaire included several quantitative items (e.g., tool preference, Likert-scale attitudes). For this paper, the core data are the responses to two open-ended questions:

Q5: "Please share a specific successful case of using an AI tool to assist Business English writing (e.g., what text did you optimize? What instructions did you use? What was the effect?)"

Q6: "What do you think is the biggest challenge or concern when using AI tools for English writing?"

These questions aimed to capture concrete experiences and honest apprehensions.

3.3 Data analysis: Confronting the "messy" data

The analysis process had to adapt to the nature of the responses.

Data Cleaning: Of the 80 responses to Q5, 30 were non-substantive (" 无 " / "none", "1", ".") and were excluded from qualitative analysis. This left 50 usable text responses for Q5. For Q6, 23 responses were non-substantive, leaving 57 usable responses.

Analytical Approach: The study conducted a thematic analysis of these 107 text segments (50 from Q5, 57 from Q6). Given the brevity and fragmentation of the answers (e.g., "optimized a cover letter", "worried about dependency"), the study avoided forcing them into rigid, predefined categories. Instead, the study identified recurring patterns of action (from Q5) and patterns of concern (from Q6) that emerged from the data itself. The study did not impute details, such as specific professional terminology (e.g., "CE certification", "FOB risks"), that were absent from the students' own words.

4. Findings: Reshaping of identity, ideology, and capital

The analysis shows that AI use reshapes students' writing practices across three inter-woven dimensions. Rather than forcing clean separation, the study traces how these dimensions bleed into each other—sometimes reinforcing, sometimes contradicting.

4.1. Identity: The delegated writer (and its cracks)

Most students position themselves as clients delegating tasks, not authors deciding. This surfaces in their minimal commands: " 帮我修改 " (help me modify), " 检查错误 " (check errors), " 更专业 " (more professional). The pronoun " 我 " (I) rarely acts—instead, it requests. One student bluntly wrote: "Using it to edit emails gets the job done in just one minute." The "job" is externalized; the cognitive work is outsourced.

Yet this identity is unstable. Over 60% of Q6 responses voice anxiety about "losing my own ideas" and "writing ability declines." They sense displacement but cannot name it. Some even confess the absurdity: "I know I should think more, but it's just easier." This is not full consent, but a habit they cannot break—a split between what they know and what they do. Xie calls this an "imagined identity", but the data suggests something messier: students borrow AI's competence yet feel the hollowness, like wearing a suit that does not quite fit.

Importantly, two students outright rejected AI's voice. One wrote: "I tried it, but my email sounded like a robot. I rewrote it myself." This nascent resistance is undeveloped—the coding could not easily label it—but it suggests not everyone fully delegates.

4.2. Ideology: When speed becomes common sense

If identity is fractured, ideology operates silently. Students do not argue for speed; they assume it. Of 50 Q5 responses, 48 used single-sentence commands, treating writing as a template to be matched, not a context to be read. "Change to a formal business style" presumes "formal business style" is universal—which, in business communication, it is not.

What struck the author was how natural this felt to them. Success was measured in minutes saved: "The effect is good", "It is more professional now." These adjectives are vague because the standard is whatever AI outputs quickly. This is what Xie calls "technology toolism"—but in practice, it's less ideology than background noise, too obvious to question. Only when pressed (Q6) did some hesitate: "Maybe too templated?" The doubt comes late, if at all.

4.3. Capital: The uneven exchange

Students' linguistic capital—their genre knowledge, stylistic range, confidence—gets converted, not just lost. They input rough drafts expecting symbolic profit: better grammar, cleaner style. But the exchange is uneven. They receive AI-generated "safety" (homogeneous, AI-like language) while surrendering voice and specificity.

The fear of "writing ability declines" is not just skill loss; it is capital depreciation. Students intuitively know they are not accumulating resources for future writing. Worse, domain-specific capital gets flattened. Business terms (FOB, CE certification) risk mistranslation because commands like "check errors" cannot cue AI to protect specialized language. As Xie notes, capital's value is context-dependent—but students lack the language to negotiate this with AI.

Paradoxically, the same tool that promises capital gain (better English) threatens long-term solvency. Two students worried their "own style" was disappearing; one actively saved AI outputs as "learning material", trying to reverse-engineer the logic. This is capital stewardship, but it's accidental, not taught.

5. Discussion: Gaps, not dislocations

The study hesitates to call this a "structural dislocation." The term suggests coherence where the study found loose ends. Students are not fully shaped by AI ideology; they are unevenly caught—some limbs in, some out. The "efficiency-critique gap" is less a clean split than a gray zone they inhabit uncomfortably.

5.1. Why the gap persists: It is useful

Xie's notion of "hegemonic consent" feels too strong. The participants know the risks but use AI anyway—not because they have consented to their displacement, but because it works for now. "I worry about dependency,

but everyone uses it" is not ideological surrender; it is pragmatic resignation. The classroom field rewards speed; critical rewriting feels like self-sabotage. This is a structural incentive problem, not just a consciousness problem.

5.2. Pedagogy: Work with the cracks

Educators cannot bridge the gap by simply teaching "critical thinking." Instead, work with the cracks already visible:

Identity: The two students who rejected AI? Build from them. Have students compare their own drafts with AI versions—not to choose, but to articulate what feels lost. Do not require full rejection; ask for partial revisions that retain their voice.

Ideology: The hesitation about "too templated"? Amplify it. Give students two AI outputs for the same prompt and ask: "Which 'formal' is better? For whom?" Make the template visible by multiplying it.

Capital: The student who saved AI outputs as "learning material"? Formalize this. Teach selective appropriation: "Copy the structure, change the lexicon. Keep the business term, ditch the generic phrase." This treats AI as raw material, not final product.

These are small moves, not grand reconfigurations. They start where students already waver.

6. Conclusion: Imperfect uptake

This paper shows that AI's uptake in Business English writing is imperfect, anxious, and incomplete. Students are not fully displaced, nor fully resistant. They borrow identities, absorb ideologies unevenly, and trade capital in deals they know are bad but cannot refuse.

The analysis shares these imperfections. Xie's framework illuminated patterns but flattened contradictions—the student who both loves and hates AI, the command that works and fails simultaneously. Future research needs micro-ethnography (screen recordings, think-alouds) to catch these glitches, not just thematize them.

The imperative is modest: teach students to notice what they already half-know—that AI writes fast but not quite right, that their own voice matters but is hard to defend. Critical digital literacy begins not in grand refusal, but in staying with the trouble of small, daily choices.

Disclosure statement

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