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"CheatGPT" or Learning Tool?: Unpacking Student Motivations and Policy Influence in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of generative AI in academia forces a critical question. Is the technology a "CheatGPT" or a genuine learning tool? This mixed-methods study investigated the perceptions of Japanese university students in English writing courses (n_1 = 99, n_2 = 96) regarding AI usage by analyzing their motivations, rationale for restraint (ethics), and understanding of institutional policy. Findings indicate an overwhelming majority of participants reported instrumental use of AI but do not feel comfortable doing so. Many reported guilt, and roughly half reported the fear of self-sabotaging their learning skills. Moral ambiguity was common when students were questioned about AI, with participants giving various explanations of what constitutes cheating. The results highlight a strong student demand for clear guidance and suggest that teacher permission is a primary determinant of usage. The study concludes that the lack of universally agreed-upon ethical definitions poses a critical barrier to policy implementation, necessitating immediate, clear, and contextual guidance from instructors and institutions.

Keywords: Generative AI, Academic Integrity, Educational Technology, Plagiarism, Cheating

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Introduction

The researchers, prior to the conception of this paper, met and informally discussed issues they have had in their English writing courses in Japan. One brought up an experience of a student turning in a paper with a reference section in which several sources listed indicated the wrong authors. When the teacher questioned the student about this error, the student replied, "This is what ChatGPT said." This apparent lack of comprehension regarding the origin, verification, and authorship of the content sparked the curiosity that led to this study.

The rapid adoption of generative AI (GenAI) challenges not only traditional concepts of academic integrity but also the fundamental nature of student-teacher dynamics. Academic integrity has long been a foundational concern, but the current accessibility of tools like ChatGPT requires a fundamental reassessment of what constitutes original work and cheating. This challenge is particularly acute in international English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where, apart from evolving policies, students already navigate a complex linguistic and cultural landscape.

Existing literature confirms the high prevalence of AI use but often fails to integrate internal dilemmas (guilt, self-sabotage) and external factors (teacher policy, institutional influence) that govern student usage decisions. To address this gap, the present study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate three central themes influencing student behavior in a Japanese university setting: motivation and efficacy, the rationale for restraint, and teacher/institutional influence. These emergent themes are explored through the organizing questions: "Why?", "Why Not?", and "Where's the Line?". Following this introduction, the paper summarizes relevant literature, details the mixed-methods survey, presents the quantitative and qualitative findings, and discusses the implications for policy and pedagogy in the age of AI.

Literature Review

Academic misconduct has long been a concern in education. Carlson (2021) points out that historically, a considerable number of students have engaged in acts of dishonesty, including copying, failure to properly cite borrowed work, and patchwork plagiarism, which is defined as "taking text portions from several different sources, combining them, and presenting the resulting text as one's own work" (Šupak Smolčić & Bilić-Zulle, 2013, p. 17). More recent studies suggest that basic forms of academic misconduct, such as copying, submitting someone else's work, and using "cheat sheets" during tests, have remained essentially the same even as technology has advanced (Carlson, 2021; Gettings & Hughes, 2014; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Wheeler, 2009). However, emerging technologies such as GenAI introduce a different kind of challenge, one that is less about deception and more about redefining authorship and originality. Cavazos et al. (2024), citing Firat's (2023) study examining the opinions of both educators and students on ChatGPT, suggested that "its mere presence is impactful enough to restructure traditional roles in educational systems" (p. 358).

Evolving Perceptions of Cheating in the Digital Age

Generative AI and Student Ethics

Digital tools can serve as legitimate educational support or convenient ways for creating shortcuts to educational goals that may undercut the benefits of learning and problem-solving (Mok, 2024). Conventional understandings of "cheating," traditionally associated with negative intent, are increasingly complicated by the emergence of AI-assisted academic work. Technology and cultural norms change through generations, resulting in varying perceptions of ethics regarding the use of certain tools in academics; especially when students have had different learning experiences than their teachers (Dawson et al., 2024).

Remote Learning and the COVID-19 Context

When many face-to-face classes were cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic, online courses became critical for providing students with ongoing education. This resulted in a new normal for the use of digital tools in education (Costa et al., 2021; Koh & Daniel, 2022; Li, 2022). Extended periods of remote learning, where direct supervision was limited, made reliance on digital tools commonplace. This increased students' comfort with online work, establishing a foundation for contemporary attitudes toward the broader use of GenAI for academic purposes (Costa et al., 2021; Graf, 2024; Li, 2022). The prevalence of online education that a generation of students faced during the COVID pandemic is important to consider when developing an understanding of their current perspectives on the proper utilization of AI for academic purposes.

Adoption of GenAI Among Japanese University Students

In the first year of ChatGPT's release, surveys indicated that nearly half of Japanese university students had used GenAI with schoolwork for help summarizing texts, writing or correcting assignments, and assistance with homework (Data Scientist Society, 2025; Mok, 2024; Ohmori et al., 2023). By early 2024, Japan was one of the top five countries using ChatGPT, with an increasing number of those users being of university age (National Federation of University Co-operative Associations, 2024; Price, 2024). In a recent study by Pew Research Center (2025), 77% of young people in Japan aged 18–34 reported a high level of awareness about GenAI, the highest rate among the 25 countries surveyed.

Teacher and Institutional Influences

EFL teachers in Japan (as well as other countries) generally come from diverse cultural backgrounds and are likely to have differing views on the ethical and practical uses of AI in the classroom (Neff et al., 2024b). Students tend to look to teachers for cues on the acceptance of AI usage. Teachers' attitudes towards technology, whether implied or explicit, often shape the students' understanding of AI acceptance on a class-by-class basis. (Luo, 2025; Mah et al., 2024; Neff, et al., 2024b).

Over the last few years, GenAI has swiftly become an undeniable element in educational environments. AI-based tools have become increasingly embedded in everyday digital environments, such as Microsoft 365, Grammarly, and Google Docs, making bans almost impossible to enforce, which underscores the need for clear discussion between educators and students regarding ethical use (Mah et al., 2024; Neff et al., 2024a). For teachers in Japan to meaningfully develop consolidated educational approaches that are both fair and pedagogically effective, it is imperative to understand contemporary student perceptions of proper and improper uses of AI, particularly given the widespread adoption of GenAI among Japanese university students and the new digital norms shaped by recent educational experiences.

Motivation, Ethics, and Policy in Academic Integrity

The following discussion revisits the three guiding themes previously introduced: "Why?", "Why Not?", and "Where's the Line?". We will explore existing literature focusing on how student perspectives on GenAI use intersect with motivation, ethics, and policy.

Why?

There are several theories as to why a student would cheat on academic work. The basic underlying motive might be the fear of academic failure. This is of particular relevance to our study because, according to Diekhoff et al. (1999), Japanese students have a higher degree of expectations than some other cultures to succeed in school, and as such, "experience more pressure to cheat" (p. 351). Wheeler (2014) points out that in the context of EFL classes in Japan, plagiarism can be

motivated by "fear of failure due to struggles with a foreign language" (p. 44). The motivation to cheat can be multifaceted. Yu et al. (2017) found that students with little time for schoolwork due to over-involvement with extracurricular activities tend to engage in "academic misconduct." This should be considered in the case of Japanese students, as a survey by the National Federation of University Co-operative Associations (2025) found that in 2024, 63.8% of Japanese university students took part in club activities, with 80% of first-year students reporting involvement.

Graf (2024) mentions several reasons that cheating through various means, including plagiarism or having a GenAI program write an assignment, might be seen as a useful endeavor for students. One reason is laziness or procrastination, which can create a high-pressure situation. Another motivation being finances, based on the cost/benefit choice of failing a class versus passing and not having to spend money to repeat it. Other students in Graf's (2024) study refer to frustration with working so hard to do well, when it is apparent that other students are cheating and getting similar grades with less effort. Several studies cited by Cavazos et al. (2024), including McCabe et al. (2001) and Rettinger and Kramer (2009), concur that if cheating is normalized in a student's educational environment, then a non-cheater feels disadvantaged.

In a study of students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Mok (2024) relays that the most prevalent reasons for using GenAI are for saving time, double-checking facts, as well as to "create content and even write graded assignments" (p.32). If students are going to cheat, GenAI is an optimized means of doing so. Students' motivations to cheat can stem from many factors, including pressure to succeed, limited time, and frustration with an unfair system. Ultimately, such behavior often reflects an attempt to manage overwhelming expectations or to find a more efficient path to success rather than a deliberate intent to deceive (Mok, 2024). These motivations, combined with technological familiarity, directly influence students' reasoning as to why they would use AI assistance with their work.

Why Not?

As GenAI becomes more commonplace, students face novel challenges to the question of ethics in regard to authorship and originality, as well as the possibility of self-sabotaging their educational goals. Students often rationalize AI use pragmatically, citing heavy workloads, using it to help them understand lessons, or simply adapting to an increasingly technological learning environment (Graf, 2024; Dawson et al., 2024). However, several studies and institutional reports highlight a growing awareness among both students and educators that overreliance on GenAI may diminish critical thinking and writing development. Mok (2024) found that Japanese university students themselves recognized that "AI is doing most of the thinking," negatively affecting their cognitive engagement.

Similarly, university guidelines across Japan, such as those issued by the University of Tokyo and Okayama University, warn that the convenience of AI-generated content risks depriving students of meaningful learning experiences, reinforcing the perception that excessive dependence on AI can hinder intellectual growth (Abir & Zhou, 2025).

Research shows that students have some ability to judge what constitutes ethical AI usage (Graf, 2024; Mok, 2024; Neff et al., 2024b). Their ethical judgments on AI use are often tied to the perceived fairness, individual effort, and resulting feelings of moral wrongdoing (guilt) concerning the work's authorship and adherence to teacher expectations concerning the extent to which they should (or should not) use AI assistance (Cavazos et al., 2024; Golding et al., 2025; Welding, 2023). If the teachers aren't clear about their expectations regarding AI use, the students can treat the ambiguity as indirect permission to use it in ways that may cross ethical boundaries (Graf, 2024). Because many students were educated in online environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, practices such as copying and pasting material for assignments may not carry the same sense of wrongdoing that traditional plagiarism once did (Dawson et al., 2024; Graf, 2024).

Most students represented in studies appear ready and willing to use AI responsibly when clear academic standards are provided, understanding that using AI-generated work without attribution is improper (Cavazos et al., 2024; Chan, 2024). Certain utilizations, such as citation generators, generating paraphrases or summaries, and generally integrating AI output into their own writing, are seen by students as gray areas between legitimate support and possible misconduct (Graf, 2024; Mok, 2024). These findings suggest that students are weighing convenience against academic norms in the context of the assignment and teacher expectations (Mok, 2024; Neff et al., 2024b; Welding, 2023).

Historically, plagiarism among Asian students has been misattributed to cultural norms, but recent research shows that Japanese students typically understand what constitutes plagiarism, and that the issue lies instead with a lack of training in citation and referencing norms in foreign-language academic writing (Liu, 2005; Pecorari, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005). Japanese schooling emphasizes accuracy and reproduction, with a strong focus on preparing for national entrance examinations that rarely require citation in essays. Consequently, explicit instruction in proper referencing, paraphrasing, and summarizing is often limited before university, leaving many students with only basic experience in integrating sources (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Sadoshima, 2014; Teeter, 2014). This context helps explain why Japanese students may struggle with citation methods and academic writing standards, especially when using English, even though they seem to exhibit ethical awareness regarding plagiarism.

Adding to the issues of EFL students working with academic writing in English, the incorporation of GenAI complicates ethical scholarship by blurring the line between assistance, authorship, and misconduct (Graf, 2024; Dawson et al., 2024). This technological shift has created practical challenges for educators, as recent research shows that AI-detection tools often produce inconsistent results, leaving human judgment as the more reliable means of assessment (Price & Sakellarios, 2025). In this context, EFL instructors vary in their approach. Some treat situations that arise, such as inadequate citation, as an ethical violation, while others use it as an opportunity to provide targeted guidance on academic writing standards (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Teeter, 2014). These variations in instructor approach highlight the broader role that classroom practices and institutional policies play in shaping how students understand and navigate the boundaries of acceptable GenAI use.

Where's the line?

Institutional and instructor policies strongly shape how students interpret academic integrity in the age of AI. In Japan, policy development around GenAI has so far followed a more decentralized and pedagogically oriented path. Rather than imposing uniform prohibitions, Japanese universities tend to emphasize process-oriented learning and student responsibility over punitive enforcement (Abir & Zhou, 2025; Mack & Byanjankar, 2025). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) issued general guidance in 2023, allowing universities to determine their own approaches based on educational context (MEXT, 2024). As a result, roughly three-quarters of leading institutions have implemented GenAI policies, many of which delegate interpretive authority to individual instructors (Abir & Zhou, 2025; Saito, 2024).

Universities such as the University of Tokyo, University of Tsukuba, Yokohama National University, and Keio University clearly connect their GenAI guidelines to learning objectives, cautioning that over-dependence on AI may undermine students' critical thinking and responsibility of authorship (Keio University, 2023; University of Tokyo, 2023; University of Tsukuba, 2023; Yokohama National University, 2023). This autonomy-driven model perhaps reflects a broader Japanese cultural preference for contextual ethics, in which instructors are entrusted to balance an openness for technological innovation with academic integrity within their own classrooms.

Even with clearly articulated institutional policies, the real test of academic integrity occurs in the classroom, where instructor attitudes and practices determine how such policies are understood in practice. Research shows that students often take cues from their professors' behavior and

expectations. When instructors emphasize the educational purposes behind integrity policies, students are less likely to view misconduct as acceptable (Graf, 2024; Hutton, 2006; Vandehey et al., 2007). Graf (2024) refers to this as the classroom "vibe," a combination of clear rules, instructor involvement, seriousness, and apparent dedication, which signals whether shortcuts or unethical practices are tolerated. As Neff et al. (2024b) observed in Japanese EFL settings, teachers' cultural and ethical frameworks strongly influence their interpretations of AI-assisted writing. Consequently, student perceptions of "cheating" often depend as much on instructor guidance, the classroom "vibe," and contextual expectations as on institutional policy. This interplay between institutional autonomy and classroom-level discretion highlights the complexity of developing coherent academic integrity practices in Japan's rapidly evolving educational environment.

Methods

To better understand student motivations to use AI, their reasons to abstain from AI use, and student understanding of teacher and institutional policies, two questionnaires were utilized to elicit a range of qualitative and quantitative data from Japanese university EFL student participants, who were either studying academic writing or taking courses that involved writing at a scholarly level. This methodology, which intentionally combines numerical data with textual responses, constitutes a mixed-methods approach.

The first questionnaire had 20 items regarding AI student use and incorporated a 10-point Likert scale. The items were categorized based on three themes: 1. Why? (motivation to use AI), 2. Why not? (reasons to abstain), and 3. Where's the line? (students' understandings of teacher and institutional policies). The researchers categorized questionnaire items based on their initial research question: Is the technology a "CheatGPT" or a genuine learning tool? Essentially, the researchers strived to understand the extent and limiting boundaries self-applied by students utilizing GenAI in an academic setting.

The questions were then randomized and copied into a Google Forms site. Japanese translations were written under the English questions to mitigate misunderstandings due to language barriers. A QR code linking student participants to the questionnaire was distributed to 612 university students across 6 Japanese universities.

Despite conventional wisdom suggesting that a 10-point scale creates high response effort and perhaps higher non-response rates, Coelho and Esteves (2007) found, perhaps counterintuitively, higher non-response rates in five-point scales. Additionally, Pearse (2011) recommends that researchers offer respondents finer granularity when designing questionnaires. The researchers of the present study felt that a 10-point scale would offer respondents finer granularity when responding to questions regarding nuanced concepts of academic honesty.

Additionally, a second open-ended questionnaire was given to triangulate data from the Likert-type survey and supply deeper qualitative insights to either support or counter quantitative findings. The same participants were given both questionnaires at the same time. The second questionnaire had two open-ended items with Japanese translations under them. The participants were advised to answer either in English or Japanese. These questions were as follows:

1.) In your opinion, where is the line between getting help and cheating when using digital tools like ChatGPT or online translators for academic work?

2.) Do you believe AI tools will improve or weaken student learning over time? Support your opinion with examples from your experience.

A separate Google Form was used for this second questionnaire, and student participants were given corresponding QR codes and asked to complete both questionnaires in the same time period.

Results

In this section, we will discuss the results of the 20-item 10-point Likert questionnaire. This section will be divided into three parts: 1. Why? (Prevalence and Motivation), 2. Why Not? (Reasons to Abstain from AI Usage), and 3. Where's the Line? (Teacher and Institutional Policies). The response rate to the first questionnaire was 16.1% ($n_1 = 99$). Qualitative data from the second questionnaire will also be used to elucidate data garnered from the closed-ended first questionnaire.

The response rate to the second open-ended questionnaire was 15.6% ($n_2 = 96$). Essentially, three participants who completed the Likert-style questionnaire did not complete the second questionnaire. This section will be followed by a brief discussion unpacking the researchers' views of the results.

Why?: Prevalence and Motivation; Perceived Efficacy and the Future of Use

When participants were presented with the question, "Have you ever used ChatGPT or a similar AI tool to help with an English writing assignment?", it was interesting to discover that 92% of respondents had used it on some level. The main reasons for using AI were "improving grammar" (46.9%) and "getting ideas" (40.6%), with "saving time" less common (12.5%). This aligns with Mok (2024), who found that students used AI tools instrumentally rather than deceptively. As Mok (2024) states, "When used for learning purposes, students used it mostly to deepen their understanding of subject matter" (p. 32). It is still alarming that 12% of participants use AI simply to save time. This may imply that learning is not a primary objective of their AI use. This time-saving motivation may connect with the Yu et al. (2017) finding that Japanese students' time was compromised due to heavy engagement in extracurricular school activities.

Instrumental use of AI as a learning tool was supported by the data in the open-ended questionnaire. As one participant states, "I think that using it to look up English expressions or the meanings of terms can improve time efficiency and lead to improved learning" (translated from Japanese). Another participant adds, "If you think carefully yourself and only use AI tools when you absolutely have to, I think it will lead to improved learning" (translated from Japanese). Conversely, there was a response that indicated selective academic dishonesty rather than benign motivations. As the participant suggests:

> I often leave everything to AI for classes I'm not interested in but must take, or for reports that are completely useless to me. However, for classes that I think are beneficial to me (such as English and French), I only use AI tools for things I don't understand or questions I have, and I use my own knowledge for the rest (translated from Japanese).

Another participant adds, "In my own case, using AI has saved me time, so I've been able to devote that extra time to other self-study" (translated from Japanese). The same participant also warns, "[…] since AI makes the process more efficient and reduces the overall study time, students may feel less sense of accomplishment, which could negatively affect their motivation to learn" (translated from Japanese). One participant expresses the time benefits of AI by stating, "Translation can be done immediately without the need to use other electronic devices or dictionaries on your smartphone, making it time efficient" (translated from Japanese).

When presented with the question "Do you feel AI tools make learning English easier or harder?" the median score was 7, indicating a strong agreement with the premise that AI makes learning easier. In fact, 72.8% of participants answered with 6 or above, indicating a general belief in the efficacy of AI tools in facilitating learning. This quantitative finding was also reflected in the open-ended survey data. For instance, one participant explained the utility, stating, "It gives you many ideas when you input a command" (translated from Japanese). However, the same participant also highlighted a key drawback: "[…] sometimes you mistakenly think those ideas [ones garnered from AI] are your own," suggesting an awareness of the challenge of accurately crediting intellectual

property. Another participant similarly pointed to the need for self-regulation when using these tools: "Some people have self-control and can use it appropriately, while others are easily swayed by the easier option of not thinking for themselves at all" (translated from Japanese). This participant went on to suggest that long-term exposure to AI may help students understand appropriate boundaries, writing, "I also think that by being exposed to AI from an early age, people can learn how to use it effectively" (translated from Japanese).

Additionally, when presented with the question "In the future, how often do you think students will use AI for academic writing assignments?", 89.8% answered with a score of 6 or above, indicating general agreement. This suggests that the participants not only feel AI is useful but expect its usage to be increasingly prevalent in academia in the future.

Additionally, there was a sense among many participants that students in the future would become overly dependent on AI. As one participant writes, "I worry that we might become overly reliant on AI tools in the future" (translated from Japanese). Another participant cautions, "[…] over-reliance [on AI] will eliminate opportunities to develop independent thinking" (translated from Japanese).

Why Not?: Reasons to Abstain; The Role of Moral Ambiguity, Guilt, and Self-Sabotage

The participants questioned do seem to possess a moral compass about the ethics of cheating, with 90.1% agreeing to the statement "Cheating is always wrong" (quantified as answers 6 or above). However, the line regarding what qualifies as cheating becomes blurred with AI. When asked what they considered to be cheating, only 62.6% of respondents agreed that "Using ChatGPT to write an essay" constituted cheating. This suggests some moral ambiguity regarding using AI to write essays. Indeed, this might suggest that the remaining 37.4% of respondents do not see AI-generated writing as cheating. It is worth noting that the question was stated as "Using AI to *write* an essay", rather than using it to help with understanding or as a tool for inspiration. Neff (2024b) suggests there might be a dichotomous understanding of the ethical use of AI harbored by teachers versus students. As Neff (2024b) states, "students considered using AI to complete an assignment as acceptable, but their EFL teachers thought this was unfair and unethical because they expected students to complete homework without using AI" (p. 61).

This ethical uncertainty or potential confusion was reflected in answers on the open-ended survey. Some participants seemed to feel that using it from the onset was problematic, but introducing it later was acceptable. As one participant expresses, "I believe that using them [AI tools] from the start, without thinking for myself, is cheating" (translated from Japanese). As another participant echoes, "Using it from the start is cheating" (translated from Japanese). Another participant posits, "Using it [AI], despite a notice that it is not allowed, is cheating" (translated from Japanese), suggesting it is acceptable until told otherwise. These answers suggest unclear rationales or guidelines for what constitutes cheating.

A question regarding guilt, worded as "How guilty would you feel if you submitted an AI-written essay as your own work", may offer a glimpse as to why some students refrain from AI usage. Most, or 75.5%, of respondents report they would feel some level of guilt (with scores of 6 or above). There was some connection, in the minds of participants, to using AI and academic dishonestly; but the point at which it became dishonest varied between participants. As one put it, "I think the boundary lies in whether you copy and paste directly or not. Copying and using it directly is cheating" (translated from Japanese). Another participant writes, "I think it's cheating to use content created by AI for an assignment without coming up with the ideas yourself*"* (translated from Japanese), again indicating that ideas can be the intellectual property of AI or those AI is referencing. As stated above, participants sometimes felt it was only cheating to use AI at the beginning, as reflected in this comment, "Having AI think from the ground up is cheating" (translated from Japanese). This overall finding demonstrates that despite high moral standards, the exact line between a helpful learning tool

and cheating remains blurred. This ambiguity suggests that students lack the clear, universal ethical framework necessary to self-regulate usage, underscoring the necessity of external guidance.

The question "Do you think using AI tools prevents you from improving your own writing skills?" adds nuance to the question of guilt. 50.6% suggested it could impede their writing progress. 35.4% agreed somewhat strongly (indicated by answers 8 or above). This suggests perhaps guilt may not be simply rule-based but also mixed with feelings of self-sabotage. In other words, participants may feel they are depriving themselves of an opportunity to better their academic skills, effectively hindering their growth as students.

This was reflected in answers to the open-ended survey. As one participant writes, "In the long term, I think it hinders learning improvement. Once you use AI, you realize how easy it is, and you become reliant on it." (translated from Japanese). This participant goes on to say, "As a result [of using AI], you have fewer opportunities to think for yourself, which I think hinders learning improvement" (translated from Japanese). Another participant adds to this idea by stating, "Although it's very convenient, I think it prevents you from developing your own thinking skills" (translated from Japanese). Yet another echoes this warning, "Because we are using AI, we are not thinking for ourselves." (translated from Japanese). There were indeed many participants who reported concerns that AI would hinder human thinking through over-reliance. Collectively, these answers strongly suggest that the perceived detrimental effect of AI on personal growth serves as a powerful motivator for student restraint.

Where's the Line?: The Demand for Teacher Guidance and the Influence of Institutional Permission

When presented with the question "How comfortable are you discussing AI tools like ChatGPT with your teacher?", 67.8% indicated agreement with scores 6 and above. This indicates, on the part of the student, a willingness to discuss usage and perhaps have parameters set regarding proper use. A surprisingly large number of participants, 25 (25.3%), answered with a "10", perhaps indicating a high interest in having these discussions. This is echoed in one participant's response, who states, "[…]appropriate guidance from teachers to students is necessary when using it [AI] in education*"* (translated from Japanese).

The participants express a desire to receive explicit instruction, with 76.7% agreeing to the statement "Would you like to receive instruction on how to use AI tools ethically for academic purposes?" One participant expresses a concern for proper guidance by stating, "I don't think there's a definitive rule [regarding AI usage] that should always be followed*"* (translated from Japanese), supporting the idea that perhaps moral ambiguity exists when determining AI cheating.

Finally, when participants were presented with the question "If your teacher allows you to use AI tools, would you be more likely to use them?", 59.5% indicated agreement (answers 6 or above). One participant expresses a necessity to use AI based on human limitations, stating, "As a human being, it's impossible to know everything, and I feel it's impossible to read all the books and literature in a short period of time" (translated from Japanese). This participant also warns, "However, there's a possibility that the information isn't accurate, and the information is often incorrect." This indicates that while participants are willing to follow teacher permission, their use remains tempered by their own critical assessment of the tool's inherent limitations regarding factual accuracy.

It was unclear where the exact line between a learning tool and cheating should be drawn. This lack of a universally accepted understanding of what constitutes cheating may make it difficult to implement guidelines institutionally. More research is needed regarding universally agreed-upon definitions of AI cheating.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that students are already widely using AI tools in the classroom. An overwhelming majority reported using or having used AI for assignments. Predominantly, usage was instrumental in purpose, aimed at deepening understanding or generating ideas rather than for outright deception. It is important to note that generating ideas can still be a moral gray area, as ideas can be considered intellectual property. It is not, to the authors' awareness, fully understood how ideas can be "owned" or credited to AI. There was some understanding, on the part of participants, that direct quotation, using AI from the onset, or stealing ideas from AI constituted cheating. This new horizon of AI-generated writing seems to provide more questions than answers regarding idea ownership in the realm of machine intelligence, and more research on this topic is needed.

A clear finding from the data presented in this paper is the participants' demand for guidance in how to properly use AI tools. We find there is both a lack of explicit instruction and a clear understanding on the part of students as to where the line of cheating exists. Providing this guidance could help alleviate feelings of guilt among students who wish to use AI ethically. Since the results suggest most participants are already using AI instrumentally rather than deceptively, it is arguably in everyone's best interest to create clear guidelines for proper usage. If institutions and teachers provided these guidelines, students could use AI somewhat guilt-free to enrich their learning experience. The participants clearly articulated a caveat: the risk of over-reliance on AI and the potential for lazy thinking or hindering critical thinking skills. The ideal goal of AI usage, we feel, should be the enrichment of learning rather than cheating or academic trickery.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive picture of Japanese university EFL students' complex relationship with GenAI, confirming that usage is widespread and driven by instrumental motivations (such as checking grammar and generating ideas) rather than purely deceptive intent. The central tension revealed across the data lies in the ethical ambiguity students face. While most participants report feeling guilt for submitting AI-written work, a significant portion do not define using AI to generate an essay as cheating. This complexity is reinforced by a reported fear of self-sabotage, with participants expressing concern that using AI impedes the improvement of their own writing skills. This fear acts as a powerful internal restraint, leading some students to restrict usage to avoid diminishing their own cognitive and linguistic development.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The lack of universally agreed-upon ethical boundaries is one of the most significant takeaways from this research. The high student demand for explicit instruction and the strong influence of teacher permission on usage strongly suggest that decentralized institutional policies are insufficient without clear, classroom-level guidance. The instructor, therefore, becomes the primary determinant of ethical behavior in practice. Teachers must move beyond simply policing AI to defining ethical, pedagogical utilization. We recommend institutions prioritize training teachers to provide pedagogical guidance on authorship, originality, and citation methods, thereby mitigating student guilt and reducing the risk of self-sabotage.

Additionally, each university should require teachers to detail explicit policy regarding the use of AI in the syllabus contextually for each course. This removes the current widespread moral ambiguity. It is our recommendation that the focus shift from punitive enforcement to encouraging critical engagement with the tool. By setting clear parameters, educators can mitigate student guilt and facilitate responsible academic growth.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's generalizability is limited by its specific focus on EFL students in Japanese universities and its necessary reliance on self-reported data. While the findings provide rich, contextual insights into the motivations and ethical conflicts of this student population, they may not translate directly to different academic or cultural environments. Furthermore, the findings are cross-sectional, capturing perceptions at a single point in time, which means they cannot account for how policies or technological changes might alter student behavior over the course of an academic year. Future research should expand upon these findings in several ways. Comparative studies across different Asian or Western university systems could validate the moral ambiguity and self-sabotage concerns observed here. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the long-term effects of GenAI use, specifically measuring the actual impact of over-reliance on students' linguistic and critical thinking skills. Finally, a corresponding qualitative study examining teacher perceptions of cheating, policy enforcement, and guidance effectiveness would complete the picture of the student-teacher dynamic. Ultimately, the development of effective, non-punitive guidelines hinges on further research that establishes a clear, working definition of "idea ownership" in the era of machine intelligence.

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