Tutors' Column: Generative AI and Linguistic Equity for EL Writers Across Disciplines

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With the rise of AI tools, my university's Writing Center has heard a shared sentiment expressed among EL (English learning) students: "I know what I want to say. I just want ChatGPT to help me say it." Whether we are for or against this use, students are intrigued and experimenting with AI's capabilities to assist in their writing process. With informed and cultivated practice, I see potential for AI tools to promote linguistic equity in college writing for EL students. However, this same potential may tempt struggling students to disengage from their writing process or forego critical thinking altogether in favor of a chatbot response. Writing center tutors are now faced with helping students distinguish between uses of AI that promote academic development and those that do not.

Recent studies have identified benefits and pitfalls of GenAI for student writers. For example, Santosh Mahapatra's mixed-methods study found that ChatGPT, when used as a feedback tool, significantly improves undergraduate EL students' academic writing skills, with participants reporting enhanced clarity, vocabulary, and structural organization (12). A systematic review of twenty one studies on GenAI integration in L2 writing classrooms affirmed these benefits, finding that GenAI improves grammar and lexicogrammar, boosts confidence, and promotes genre awareness (Wang). While GenAI can be helpful for EL students, Mahapatra found that these users worried about loss of originality if they were not provided with proper guidance about AI use (12). Further, Hui Wang's review found engagement with GenAI tools can promote overreliance, diminish critical thinking, and homogenize student voice. While it is important to recognize and mitigate dangers to academic integrity and development that arise with GenAI, I think it is similarly important to acknowledge its potential for equitable support.

My university serves a large cohort of international non-native English speakers. Many of these students face disproportionate challenges when attempting to understand and respond to professors' expectations. This makes AI assistance an attractive proposition. When deciding how they will handle these students' questions about AI, writing tutors often must contend with ambiguous ethical frameworks, lack of consistent policy, and unclear expectations for student use. These factors make it difficult for tutors to respond to questions such as: Is there an appropriate use of AI that serves linguistic equity? How might tutors engage in a useful and ethical way? Can training and non-directive tutoring invite critical engagement with AI tools? I found myself grappling with these questions during an appointment with an EL student.

The student, who was a biology major, arrived for an appointment with a handwritten draft of their essay. Though the sentences were difficult to read and the student struggled with grammar conventions and rhetorical effectiveness, they seemed to have a grasp on the course content and were able to express that understanding verbally. They asked for permission from me, a writing

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center tutor, to input their draft in a generative AI chatbot and reconstruct the essay through a series of prompts. In response, I asked whether the professor's assignment, rubric, or syllabus provided any guidance or hint of an AI policy. They said no. I advised them to contact the professor and ask whether this use of GenAI would be appropriate. Lacking any institutional or professor policy, I relied on our center's principles to advise them: our center maintains that tutors should (1) not write for students, (2) respect the policies of the institution and professors, and (3) help students to develop academically. In previous consultations, GenAI for pre-writing activities had been encouraged, but not for revising drafts. Consequently, I counseled the student to limit AI use to idea development until they received explicit permission from their instructor.

Since we couldn't expect to hear from the professor immediately, I had to figure out how to approach the consultation in the moment. I decided to help the student navigate GenAI in a limited capacity. I suggested that we work on a separate document and refrain from submitting AI-enhanced work until their professor responded. We typed the draft into ChatGPT and engaged in dialogic prompting, exploring its ability to revise and reorganize the paper based on ideas outlined in the original draft. With this AI-enhanced draft, we spent the remaining time comparing the output against the rubric for the assignment. I asked the student to explain how expectations were or were not met and we ended the appointment with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the output and, broadly, writing with AI tools. In other words, I tried to engage the student in critical thinking that would support their development as a writer.

After the appointment, I reflected on the implicit assumptions I relied upon by engaging AI in this way. I realized I implicitly supported the idea that biology curriculum prioritizes content knowledge over writing ability by focusing more on refining the final product than on practicing writing skills, although I did try to mitigate this by encouraging the student to reflect on their own and AI's abilities. I also assumed that AI could function as a tool for synthesizing and refining ideas while still upholding the student's original contributions. The final text, even if it had not been wholly constructed by the student, was a derivation of the original contribution. The final work included appropriate citations to the generative AI model and provided a roadmap for their work from unedited contribution to final draft. I am unaware but curious as to whether the student submitted this work or discussed future use with the professor. As a writing center tutor, I'm cautious to deem a use of AI as appropriate or inappropriate without established guidelines or policies.

Some students turn to AI to avoid work in its entirety. But I don't think this was the goal of the student in my appointment. This student arrived with a draft that showed engagement with the material and an attempt to synthesize their understanding into an essay. The roadblock, here, seemed to be a struggle with formal English writing conventions, including grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorically-effective sentence structure. I worry that denying EL students use of a tool that can make writing in a foreign language easier may perpetuate racist practices that writing centers have tried to disband. This perspective reflects Ellen Cushman's push for EL students' agency in negotiating their linguistic and rhetorical choices (236). Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe, in "The Politics of the Interface," argue that technologies shape and are shaped by power dynamics, creating inequities in access and perceptions of legitimacy (481). Inequities can be reflected, and even encouraged by how professors and students engage GenAI, particularly for EL students who may rely on AI tools to overcome linguistic barriers. Nathan Lindberg's 2025 essay argues that embracing GenAI in writing centers can promote linguistic equity for EL students, advocating for structured training and policy frameworks to ensure ethical, effective use. Insight from instructors

and researchers in EL student writing will be invaluable to this discussion and the development of culturally informed, antiracist pedagogical practices in the age of AI.

AI's presence in the writing center isn't limited to EL students. And it certainly isn't limited to the disciplines of English or biology. In 2010, David Sheridan and James Inman argued that writing centers must adapt to support multiliteracies, including digital literacies, across diverse fields (23). Most every discipline relies on writing as a tool to synthesize, communicate, and internalize understanding of content, even if writing instruction isn't directly written into course objectives or curriculum. With this in mind, addressing and accounting for generative AI's role in the writing process for students, and EL students especially, requires an understanding of faculty objectives, evolving employer/professional writing practices, and culturally competent tutoring. As we move into a world of AI-enhanced writing, I urge writing tutors to consider linguistic equity arguments for EL students and how we might facilitate easier and effective integration of AI into teaching the writing process.

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