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STRATEGIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF EFL STUDENT CITATION IN ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES

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Abstravt: This study explores the complex interplay between generative AI tools and citation practices among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in academic writing contexts. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research investigates students' conceptual understanding, technical challenges, emotional struggles, and institutional constraints in managing citation tasks. Data from 15 participants reveal a range of issues—from confusion about when and how to cite, overreliance on AI-generated references, to anxiety over paraphrasing and plagiarism. While tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Mendeley offer assistance, the absence of proper guidance often leads to misuse and ethical ambiguity. The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated citation instruction, AI literacy, and ethical training in higher education. The study concludes with student-driven recommendations for improving citation education through hands-on workshops, consistent policies, and increased access to credible academic resources.

Keywords: *EFL students, citation practices, academic writing, generative AI, ChatGPT, paraphrasing, plagiarism, academic integrity, digital literacy, qualitative research.*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of university education, particularly for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Beyond merely organizing ideas into structured paragraphs, academic writing demands adherence to conventions that reflect scholarly responsibility. Among these conventions, citation stands out as both an intellectual and ethical practice. It is more than a technical requirement it represents a student's respect for source credibility, scholarly transparency, and academic integrity (Al Fadda, 2012; Jomaa & Bidin, 2017).

However, many EFL learners do not enter academia equipped with this awareness. In fact, citation often emerges as one of the most misunderstood aspects of academic writing. Rather than being taught as a communicative act of linking knowledge and building arguments, citation is frequently reduced to a formatting exercise something to memorize rather than internalize. This superficial understanding is reflected in multiple studies showing how EFL students struggle to distinguish their own voice from borrowed ideas, and often hesitate when paraphrasing, quoting, or determining when citation is required (Liao & Tseng, 2010; Liu & Wu, 2020). These struggles are exacerbated by anxiety around plagiarism detection, further distancing learners from a critical understanding of citation ethics (Fazilatfar et al., 2018; Ho, 2024). Citation is not just about avoiding plagiarism, it is about constructing knowledge responsibly. To cite effectively, students must evaluate the credibility of sources, determine their relevance to the topic, and synthesize multiple perspectives without distorting meaning. These are advanced academic skills that take time and instruction to develop. Unfortunately, in many EFL classrooms, students receive limited scaffolding in mastering these abilities. Their writing often

lacks depth not due to laziness, but due to a lack of explicit instruction in citation as a rhetorical and cognitive process (Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2022; Escobar & Fernández, 2018).

In recent years, the educational landscape has been transformed by generative artificial intelligence (AI). Tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot now offer instantaneous support for summarizing texts, generating paraphrases, and even suggesting citations. On the surface, these tools appear to solve longstanding problems in EFL academic writing. Yet, while they enhance efficiency, they also raise profound questions about academic authenticity and authorship. Students who lean too heavily on such tools may find themselves submitting well structured texts that they do not fully understand (Cheng et al., 2025; Hernández et al., 2024). What is even more alarming is the increasing prevalence of fabricated citations also known as AI hallucinations. These occur when generative AI tools generate references that look real but are in fact non-existent. In contexts where students lack the training or time to verify sources, these hallucinations can easily find their way into final assignments, misleading readers and corrupting the academic record (Kim

& Jeong, 2023; Tang & Xing, 2023). The issue is not only technical but epistemological: when citation becomes automated and unchecked, the chain of evidence that supports academic inquiry begins to dissolve.

This raises a deeper concern: are students using AI to support their learning or to escape from it? In environments where instruction is insufficient and academic pressure is high, it is not surprising that AI becomes a shortcut rather than a tool for growth. Instead of serving as aids for idea development or clarity, these technologies risk enabling superficial engagement with content. Without critical thinking and ethical reflection, students may unknowingly cross the line into academic dishonesty not out of intent, but out of confusion (Hosseini et al., 2023; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2022).

Complicating matters further is the lack of institutional policy regarding AI usage and citation in academic writing. While citation styles such as APA 7 or MLA are widely taught, few institutions have clarified how these should be applied to AI-generated content. Likewise, although tools like Mendeley and Zotero are widely recommended, students often receive minimal instruction on how to use them effectively. As a result, learners are left to rely on online tutorials or peer advice, which vary in quality and consistency (Bui et al., 2023; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2022).

Educators and researchers alike have emphasized the urgent need for structured instruction in citation strategies and digital tool literacy. This includes hands-on practice with citation software, critical engagement with AI-generated outputs, and reflective discussions on source credibility and academic honesty. When well-designed, such instruction can foster not only technical competence but also ethical awareness among students (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Fadhly, 2023). Embedding these elements into academic writing pedagogy is essential if we are to cultivate responsible, critical, and self-aware scholars. Adding to the complexity is the digital divide. While many assume that today's students are "digitally native," this does not automatically translate into academic digital literacy. In reality, many EFL students are unfamiliar with verifying DOIs, detecting fake citations, or understanding when and how to cite multimedia or AI content. Even those who attempt to use reference managers like Mendeley or EndNote often do so incorrectly, failing to input complete metadata or apply consistent style formatting (Liu & Deng, 2019; Rezeki, 2021).

Given these overlapping challenges, cognitive, technical, institutional, and ethical, this study aims to explore how EFL students experience citation in academic writing. It draws on qualitative data to understand their strategies, frustrations, and coping mechanisms, particularly in the age of AI. The ultimate goal is to provide grounded insight into the barriers learners face and propose pedagogical interventions that align with the realities of 21st-century academic writing.

The field of academic writing among EFL learners has been widely explored, with particular attention paid to the challenges of citation and source integration. Al Fadda (2012) highlighted that postgraduate students in Saudi Arabia struggled with academic writing due to inadequate knowledge of citation techniques and fear of plagiarism. This challenge persists across various EFL contexts, suggesting that citation remains a pervasive concern even among advanced learners. A recurring issue in the literature is the lack of formal instruction in citation ethics and strategies. Studies have shown that EFL students often lack the metacognitive awareness needed to navigate citation requirements effectively (Fazilatfar et al., 2018; Ho, 2024). Without explicit guidance, students are more likely to

rely on imitation, risking patchwriting or unintentional plagiarism. Other researchers have focused on the functional role of citation in shaping academic identity and critical voice. Citation practices reflect more than technical skill they reveal how students perceive their position within academic discourse (Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2022). The use of reporting verbs, hedging, and stance markers in student writing illustrates how learners negotiate credibility and authority (Escobar & Fernández, 2018).

In addition to these linguistic strategies, technological interventions have also become increasingly relevant. Writing strategy instruction that incorporates tools like Mendeley and Zotero can significantly enhance students' confidence and accuracy in citation (Fadhly, 2023; Bui et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these tools require user training, and their misuse can result in over-reliance or misattribution if students do not understand the underlying principles. The integration of generative AI tools into academic writing has prompted new debates. Tools such as ChatGPT are capable of generating paraphrased texts and bibliographies; however, they frequently produce hallucinated references citations that are fabricated or unverifiable (Cheng et al., 2025; Kim & Jeong, 2023). This is particularly dangerous for EFL learners who lack experience in verifying academic sources.

Scholars have called for institutions to develop clear disclosure frameworks regarding the use of AI in academic writing. Hosseini et al. (2023) emphasize that ethical use of AI requires not only transparency but also updated guidelines on how AI-generated contributions should be cited. In the same vein, Dinçer (2024) proposes incorporating digital ethics education into university curricula, particularly for EFL learners.

In the Indonesian context, digital literacy remains uneven. Rezeki (2021) found that students in West Kalimantan were often unaware of how to validate DOIs or access peer-reviewed sources, leading to improper or missing citations. Similar challenges were observed among Chinese postgraduate students, as noted by Liu and Deng (2019), who described a lack of clarity around citation conventions and source credibility. While some scholars advocate for the responsible use of AI in academic writing, others express concern over its unregulated adoption. Marchandot et al. (2023) describe generative AI as a "Pandora's box," suggesting that while the technology is powerful, it poses significant ethical risks if left unchecked. As a result, educational institutions must adopt a critical yet constructive stance toward AI literacy.

Collectively, these studies converge on the argument that effective citation instruction must go beyond teaching style manuals. It should integrate digital literacy, critical source evaluation, and ethical reasoning. For EFL learners, especially those navigating multiple academic cultures and languages, this holistic approach is not just helpful it is necessary (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Fadhly, 2023). This present study contributes to the growing discussion by examining the lived experiences of EFL students in applying citation strategies amidst the rise of AI tools. It offers a grounded perspective on how learners confront real challenges in citation, and what pedagogical innovations might close the gap between ethical ideals and academic practice.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the real-life experiences, perceptions, and challenges of EFL students regarding citation practices in academic writing. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed for in-depth investigation into participants' subjective views, especially in relation to citation strategies and the use of AI tools in writing.

Participants consisted of 15 respondents**,** including undergraduate students from English education, as well as several postgraduate students. All respondents had prior experience in academic writing and were familiar with basic citation practices, either through formal instruction or self-learning. Selection was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, targeting individuals who had experience in using citations and academic writing tools.

Data were collected using a Google Form **c**ontaining 15 open-ended questions designed to capture both factual and reflective responses. The questionnaire included prompts related to: (1) Understanding of citation functions. (2) Experience using citation tools, including AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quillbot) (3) Challenges faced during citation (e.g., paraphrasing, choosing citation styles) (4) Confidence in using citation standards such as APA 7. (5) Habits, preferences, and ethical concerns related to AI-generated content

This instrument enabled participants to provide detailed answers in their own language (Bahasa Indonesia or English), giving a more

authentic perspective.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis**,** following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining/naming them. Responses were manually coded, categorized, and synthesized into five major themes: (1) Conceptual confusion about citation and AI tools. (2) Technical challenges and accuracy of references (3) Paraphrasing anxiety and plagiarism fears (4) Institutional policy gaps and lack of support (5) Student-recommended solutions for improvement

Each theme was supported by direct participant quotations and linked to relevant literature, ensuring that the interpretation aligned with both empirical data and academic frameworks (Jomaa & Bidin, 2019; Liu & Deng, 2019).

Ethical approval was secured informally since the research was conducted for academic coursework. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymized to protect student privacy. No identifying data were collected, and participants were informed that their responses would be used strictly for research purposes.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was applied by discussing preliminary interpretations with peer reviewers. Triangulation was also applied by comparing student responses with existing literature and institutional practices, strengthening the dependability and confirmability of the data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding how EFL students experience citation in academic writing requires listening to their real voices and unpacking the meaning behind their struggles and preferences. Based on qualitative responses from 15 students, this study identifies five interconnected themes: conceptual confusion about citation and AI tools**,** technical challenges**,** paraphrasing anxiety**,** institutional gaps**,** and student-recommended solutions**.**

Conceptual confusion about citation and the role of AI

The majority of students acknowledged the convenience and usefulness of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot in academic writing. Many emphasized how these technologies provided a starting point for structuring references, identifying relevant journal articles, or improving the clarity of ideas. As one participant stated, “It’s very helpful to me because I also need the idea from AI, for example, making the paragraph longer.” This demonstrates that AI is not only seen as a citation tool but also as a generative assistant that supports broader writing tasks.

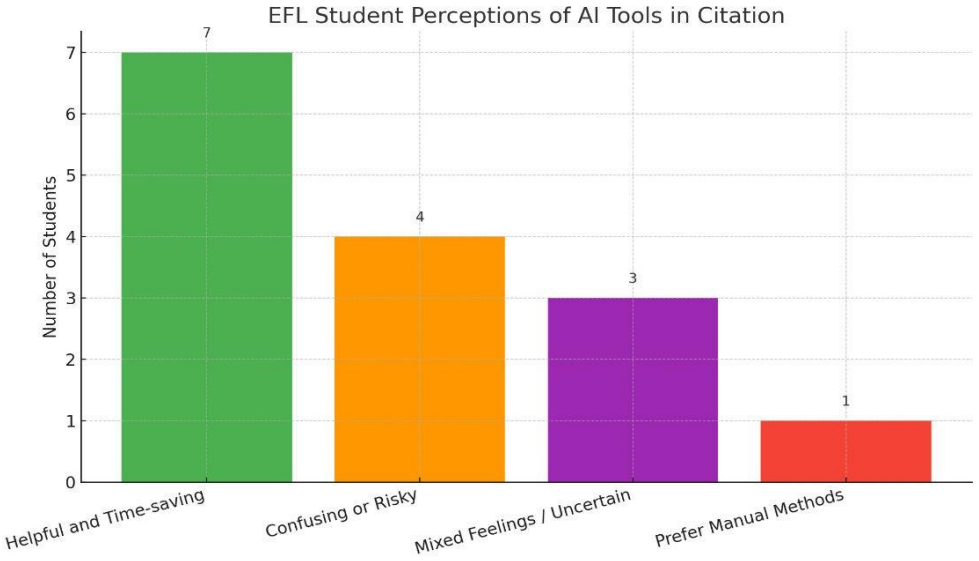


Figure 1. *EFL student perceptions of AI tools in citation*

Despite these advantages, students’ responses revealed a persistent confusion regarding the ethical boundaries of using AI. While some used AI to cross-check citation formats, others avoided it entirely due to past experiences of encountering hallucinated or fake references. For instance, one student remarked, “I don’t use AI tools for bibliography because GPT and other AIs often make big mistakes like wrong page numbers and fake journals.” This illustrates a

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growing awareness of the limitations of generative AI and its potential risks to academic credibility.

Several students reflected a passive reliance on AI tools without fully understanding the citation principles. Some admitted using AI-generated references without checking their validity or aligning them with specific citation styles such as APA 7. This kind of usage underscores a critical problem: while AI enhances efficiency, it can also amplify academic shortcuts when students are unaware of their responsibilities in verifying and formatting scholarly sources properly.

The duality of perception between AI as a supportive guide and AI as a misleading crutch highlights the lack of conceptual clarity among EFL learners. AI tools are being embraced pragmatically, but not always responsibly. This tension requires educators to revisit how digital tools are introduced in writing pedagogy and how ethical considerations are scaffolded alongside technical functions.

Technical challenges in citation practices

Technical difficulty emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned issues in students' responses. Many participants mentioned they were unsure about the correct formatting for different types of sources—books, websites, journals, and even videos. One wrote, "Sometimes I'm not sure how to cite different types of sources, like websites or journal articles." This demonstrates a gap in practical understanding of source classification and citation conventions.

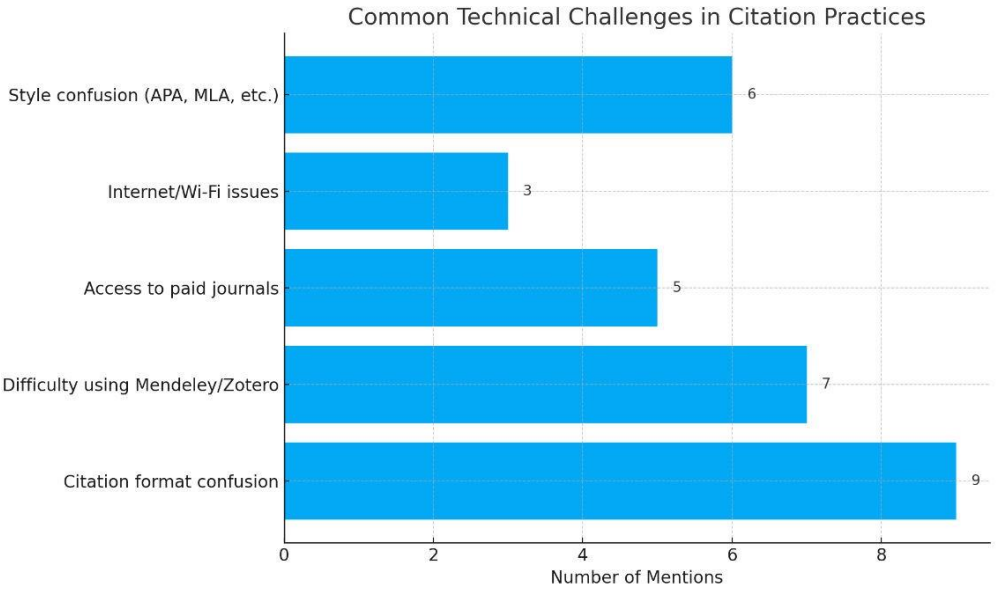


Figure 2. *Common technical challenges in citation practices*

Students also pointed out specific challenges with using citation management tools like Mendeley. While these tools are intended to simplify citation processes, learners found them confusing or inaccessible due to inadequate instruction. One student shared that they often resorted to YouTube tutorials to figure out how to use these platforms, stating, "I hardly understand the app like Mendeley. I learn about citation from YouTube." This reliance on informal learning sources can lead to inconsistent citation practices and heightened stress.

In addition, several participants noted that limited access to scholarly articles created further barriers. Journals that required subscriptions or paywalls forced students to rely on AI or surface- level search results, often compromising the quality of the sources used. This creates an inequitable academic environment where citation accuracy is shaped not only by skill but also by access.

The technical nature of citation, requiring attention to detail, digital proficiency, and familiarity with diverse formats, is overwhelming for many EFL students. Inadequate training, coupled with external limitations like weak internet or limited access to digital libraries, adds to their burden. This calls for institutionally supported training that goes beyond theory, offering regular workshops and integrated citation tasks across courses.

Paraphrasing anxiety and fear of plagiarism

A significant number of students expressed emotional distress when paraphrasing academic texts. Paraphrasing, though a core academic

skill, was reported to be confusing, stressful, and often approached with fear. As one participant reflected, "I'm afraid to make a mistake and worried it might be detected as plagiarism." This kind of anxiety reflects a lack of confidence in their linguistic competence and conceptual understanding.

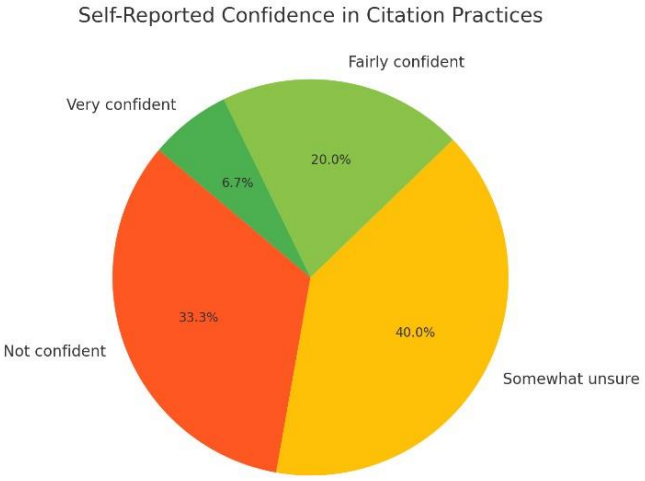


Figure 3. *Self-reported confidence in citation practices*

Interestingly, some students conflated paraphrasing with summarizing or quoting, suggesting an incomplete understanding of how to maintain academic integrity while reformulating others' ideas. One student explained, "Yes, I often get confused about when to use direct quotations or paraphrasing. I follow my instincts or ask ChatGPT." This example highlights the blurred lines that students navigate without structured guidance. The difficulty with paraphrasing is not merely a language issue but a cognitive and ethical one. Students must comprehend the source, reinterpret it in their own words, and ensure that the meaning remains intact, all while applying appropriate citation. The complexity of this process is rarely addressed in classrooms beyond basic examples, leaving learners to experiment without sufficient support.

Moreover, the fear of accidental plagiarism intensifies pressure on EFL students. Even when their intentions are honest, their skills may not yet be adequate to meet academic standards. This emotional dimension, fear of failure, uncertainty, and doubt, adds to the technical difficulties already mentioned. Therefore, a more compassionate and scaffolded approach to teaching paraphrasing is urgently needed.

Institutional policy gaps and lack of formal support

Multiple responses pointed to a lack of institutional guidance on how to cite properly or how to ethically use AI in writing. Students reported learning through peer recommendations or online videos rather than structured classroom instruction. One respondent noted, "Honestly, I don't really understand APA style. I just ask my friends or follow YouTube tutorials." This self-guided learning, while resourceful, highlights a systemic shortcoming. Others mentioned that institutional resources such as citation manuals, software access, or digital libraries were either insufficient or underutilized. There were no clear guidelines about AI use in academic writing, which led to uncertainty and inconsistent practices. Without a formal stance from the university, students were unsure whether using AI tools was acceptable or punishable.

In several cases, students did not use available tools like Mendeley, not because they rejected them, but because they were never taught how to use them. This reflects a broader institutional failure to integrate digital tools meaningfully into academic programs. As digital literacy becomes essential in the age of AI, institutions cannot afford to leave this responsibility to students alone.

Overall, these gaps in institutional support show a disconnect between student needs and curricular delivery. It is no longer sufficient to expect students to "figure out" citations through trial and error. Educational institutions must offer more than just access they must provide structured, reflective, and continuous learning opportunities that focus on academic writing integrity and digital ethics.

Student-recommended solutions for better citation support

While students described a range of difficulties, they also offered constructive solutions based on their personal learning experiences. Several

called for more interactive workshops that would allow them to practice citation in real time, using tools like Mendeley or Zotero with teacher guidance. Others asked for visual aids—such as flowcharts or checklists that could help them decide when to quote, paraphrase, or summarize. Another recurring suggestion was the integration of citation instruction throughout the curriculum, not only in writing classes but in all subjects that require research. For instance, one student proposed, "If all lecturers gave the same rules about citation, it would be easier to understand and apply." This points to the need for institutional coherence and alignment. Moreover, some students emphasized the importance of ethical training, not just knowing how to cite, but understanding *why* citation matters. Discussions around academic honesty, the dangers of AI hallucinations, and the importance of verifying sources were seen as necessary to build responsible habits.

Finally, access to quality sources was highlighted as a structural issue. Students requested institutional subscriptions to scholarly databases and repositories, allowing them to engage with credible literature rather than relying on free, often outdated, open-access materials. Bridging this access gap would directly improve citation quality and academic integrity.

Ultimately, the challenges and strategies revealed in this study underscore the need for a more holistic and student-centered approach to teaching citation in EFL academic writing. The findings emphasize that citation is not merely a matter of technical formatting but involves ethical decision- making, digital literacy, emotional resilience, and institutional support. By amplifying student voices and understanding their lived experiences, this research highlights the urgency for educators and institutions to redesign writing instruction—integrating not only practical tools and guidelines but also empathy, accessibility, and ethical awareness. In doing so, we can foster a learning environment where students are empowered to write with confidence, accuracy, and integrity in an increasingly AI-mediated academic world.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that citation practices among EFL students are influenced by a mix of cognitive, technical, ethical, and institutional factors. While most students recognize the importance of citing accurately, many struggle with understanding citation conventions and applying them correctly, especially when integrating AI-generated content. The tension between using AI tools for support versus dependency reflects a lack of pedagogical grounding in citation ethics. Technological tools like ChatGPT, Mendeley, and Zotero offer support in the citation process, yet improper use due to insufficient training often results in errors, including fabricated references. The emotional toll such as paraphrasing anxiety and fear of plagiarism also contributes to poor citation quality. These challenges indicate that citation is not simply a mechanical task but a multidimensional skill that requires continuous instruction and ethical reflection.

Institutional gaps remain a significant barrier, as many students report learning about citation through informal sources like YouTube or peers. The absence of clear policies on AI usage in writing, inconsistent instructional practices, and limited access to academic resources exacerbate these difficulties. Educational institutions must respond proactively by integrating comprehensive citation instruction, digital tool training, and AI ethics discussions into the academic curriculum. To improve citation practices among EFL learners, this study recommends a holistic, student- centered approach that includes hands-on workshops, consistent policy frameworks, and ethical guidance. Emphasizing critical thinking, source verification, and academic integrity will not only enhance technical competence but also foster responsible scholarly behavior. Future research should further explore how to align AI literacy with academic values in multilingual educational contexts.

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