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Designing EFL Writing Assessment in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract

Generative AI has rapidly reshaped how writing is taught and assessed in EFL contexts, raising concerns about assessment validity, student learning, and the limits of detection-based responses. In Japanese university settings, where pressure for grammatical accuracy is common, unregulated AI use risks reducing opportunities for language development. This paper argues that these challenges are better addressed through assessment design than through prohibition or surveillance. Drawing on recent institutional guidelines and principles for ethical AI integration, it proposes a policy-aligned, process-focused writing framework that differentiates permitted AI use across stages of the writing process. The framework combines AI-free in-class writing with clearly defined, learning-oriented AI use during revision, supported by transparent submission procedures.

Keywords

EFL writing, generative AI, assessment design, academic integrity

1. Introduction

The rapid diffusion of generative AI tools has fundamentally altered the conditions under which EFL writing is taught and assessed in higher education (Perkins et al., 2024). For many learners, particularly those working in a second language with a large linguistic distance from their first language, generative AI has quickly become a readily available means of translating, reformulating, or stylistically enhancing written work. While such tools can support learning when used in carefully defined ways, their unregulated use raises questions about assessment validity and the extent to which submitted texts reflect students' actual language ability.

In Japanese university EFL contexts, these concerns are especially pronounced. Students often experience strong pressure to submit grammatically accurate English, and writing is frequently associated with formal evaluation rather than experimentation or risk-taking (Hyland, 2019). Under these conditions, generative AI may appear to offer an efficient solution to perceived expectations for accuracy and naturalness. However, when AI is used to generate or translate substantial portions of assessed writing,

opportunities for language learning may be diminished, as core processes such as lexical choice, syntactic construction, and discourse organization are bypassed.

In response to these developments, instructors have adopted a range of strategies, including prohibiting AI use or attempting to detect AI-generated text. Both approaches present limitations: outright bans are difficult to enforce in environments where AI is ubiquitous, while detection technologies are widely acknowledged to be unreliable and potentially damaging to trust between instructors and students (Perkins et al., 2024). Recent institutional guidance has therefore emphasized the need to reconsider assessment design rather than relying on detection or prohibition alone.

Against this background, the present paper argues that the challenges posed by generative AI in EFL writing can be addressed through policy-aligned assessment design. Drawing on classroom practice in Japanese university EFL courses and recent institutional guidelines on generative AI use, the paper proposes a process-focused writing framework that combines AI-free, in-class writing with clearly delimited opportunities for AI-assisted learning outside class. Rather than attempting to eliminate AI from students' learning environments, the framework assumes its presence and seeks to restore conditions under which language learning can occur.

2. Policy Context: Generative AI Use at Ritsumeikan University

In December 2025, Ritsumeikan University released Guidelines for Conducting Classes in the Age of Generative AI, outlining principles for teaching and assessment in contexts where generative AI is widely available (Ritsumeikan University, 2025). Importantly, the guidelines do not impose a single institution-wide rule regarding AI use. Instead, instructors are expected to establish and clearly communicate course-specific policies that align with learning objectives and assessment purposes.

Central to the guidelines is a five-level framework describing permissible uses of generative AI in writing. At Level 1, AI use is prohibited at all stages of the writing process, including planning, drafting, and proofreading; all writing must be produced solely by the student. Level 2 permits AI use for idea generation and organization at the planning stage, provided that AI-generated content is not included in the submitted work. Level 3 allows AI use for proofreading and revising text, such as correcting grammatical errors or adjusting wording, on the strict condition that no new substantive content is added; disclosure of AI use is required, and submission of a pre-revision version is recommended. Levels 4 and 5 permit progressively broader and more creative

uses of generative AI, including collaboration with AI in content generation (Perkins et al., 2024).

A critical point emphasized in the guidelines is that AI use is not permitted by default. The level of allowable use depends on the policy explicitly adopted for a given course. The guidelines also caution that even when AI use is prohibited, it is unrealistic to assume students will never encounter or use generative AI, and they advise against reliance on AI-detection tools due to the risk of false positives and erosion of trust. Instead, instructors are encouraged to design assessments that assume the presence of generative AI and emphasize in-person performance, process evidence, and staged writing tasks. The framework proposed in this paper operationalizes this guidance by adopting Level 1 for in-class writing tasks and Level 3 for limited revision outside class. The proposed framework reflects several principles identified by Perkins et al. (2024), including differentiated AI use, transparency, and assessment design that prioritizes learning over detection (see Appendix A).

3. The EFL Writing Challenge in the Age of Generative AI

In EFL contexts, writing is frequently experienced as a high-stakes activity in which grammatical accuracy and lexical appropriateness are prioritized (Hyland, 2019). In Japanese university settings, where opportunities for English use outside the classroom may be limited, written assignments often carry particular weight as indicators of proficiency. As a result, students commonly approach writing with anxiety about error and a strong desire to meet perceived expectations for correctness.

Within this context, translation tools have long functioned as coping strategies. Generative AI extends this practice by offering not only translation but also reformulation and stylistic enhancement. From the learner's perspective, such tools may appear to reduce risk and improve performance. However, this shift also changes the nature of the writing task, moving it away from productive language use toward text substitution.

When generative AI is used to generate or translate substantial portions of assessed writing, the resulting text may no longer reflect the learner's developing interlanguage. Processes central to language learning including, lexical search, syntactic decisionmaking, and discourse construction, are partially or entirely bypassed (Ellis, 2008). While the final product may appear fluent, opportunities for learning through formulation and revision are reduced. From an assessment perspective, this creates

challenges of interpretation, as feedback and scores may no longer reliably indicate student progress.

Attempts to address these challenges through detection-based approaches present further difficulties. AI-detection tools are widely recognized as unreliable, particularly in EFL contexts where learner language naturally varies in sophistication (Perkins et al., 2024). Recent guidance has therefore emphasized a shift away from post-hoc detection toward assessment design that anticipates AI use. This perspective reframes the issue from one of enforcement to one of pedagogy and motivates the process-focused approach outlined below. The following subsection explains why these challenges are particularly pronounced in EFL writing contexts and why differentiated AI policies are pedagogically necessary.

3.1 Why EFL Writing Requires Differentiated AI Policies

Much of the emerging discussion surrounding generative AI in higher education has focused on first-language or English-medium instruction contexts, where students already possess high levels of linguistic control. In such settings, concerns often centre on authorship, originality, and academic integrity. While these concerns are also relevant in EFL contexts, they do not fully capture the pedagogical implications of generative AI for second-language writing.

In EFL writing classrooms, the primary instructional goal is not the production of sophisticated academic prose, but the development of learners' linguistic resources through repeated engagement with language. When generative AI is used to generate or translate extended portions of text, learners may meet surface-level assessment requirements without engaging in the processes necessary for language development. This distinction highlights the need for differentiated AI policies that account for the developmental nature of second-language writing.

Furthermore, EFL learners often operate under greater affective pressure than their L1 counterparts, particularly with respect to grammatical accuracy. Generative AI can therefore function as an anxiety-reducing tool, but also as a barrier to productive struggle. Differentiated policies that restrict AI use during language production while permitting carefully defined use during revision acknowledge both the learning needs of EFL students and the realities of contemporary learning environments.

4. A Policy-Aligned Writing Framework for EFL Contexts

The framework described here represents one possible operationalization of institutional guidance rather than a prescriptive model. It distinguishes stages of the writing process

and aligns each with a clearly specified level of permitted AI use. Level 1 applies to inclass, timed writing tasks in which generative AI use is prohibited at all stages. These tasks prioritize originality, reveal students' actual language ability, and reduce reliance on translation or reformulation.

Table 1 summarizes how generative AI use is differentiated across stages of the writing process in the proposed framework.

Table 1.
 Writing Stages and Permitted Use of Generative AI in an EFL Writing Course

Writing stage	AI use level	Permitted use	Not permitted	Pedagogical purpose
In-class writing (draft)	Level 1	None	Any AI use at planning, drafting, or proofreading stages	Ensure originality and reveal actual writing ability
Teacher feedback	N/A	—	—	Support noticing and guided revision
Revision and proofreading	Level 3	Grammar checking; wording clarification; surface-level revision without adding new content	Adding new ideas; translation from L1; restructuring content	Support learning-oriented revision
Final submission	Level 3 (declared)	As above, with disclosure	Undeclared AI use; substantive content changes	Maintain transparency and accountability
Communication oriented writing e.g. presentations specified)	Level 3 (higher if specified)	Clarity checks; simplification for comprehensibility	Misrepresentation of authorship	Prioritize comprehensibility over assessment

Following in-class writing, students receive focused teacher feedback and engage in guided reflection. At the revision stage, conducted outside class, the framework adopts Level 3, permitting generative AI use for proofreading and wording adjustments under strict conditions. Students are informed that AI may be used only to correct surface-level

errors or clarify phrasing and that no new ideas or content may be added. Disclosure of AI use is required, and submission of both the original in-class draft and the revised version is encouraged.

Although the institutional framework also permits Level 2 use of generative AI for idea generation at the planning stage, this level was not adopted in the present framework due to the risk of overlap between planning support and language production in EFL writing contexts.

For communication-oriented tasks such as presentation scripts, greater flexibility may be permitted when the instructional goal is clarity rather than assessment of writing ability. Across all stages, explicit labeling of tasks using the Level 1–Level 3 framework ensures transparency and aligns classroom practice with institutional policy while preserving opportunities for language learning.

Sample Tasks and Student-Facing Instructions

To illustrate how the proposed framework can be implemented in practice, this subsection provides examples of writing tasks and instructions aligned with institutional AI use levels.

Example 1: Timed In-Class Writing Task (Level 1)

Students are given a short academic prompt, such as:

Identify one problem university students face and explain two reasons why it is difficult. Students write for 20 minutes under supervised conditions. Dictionaries, translation tools, and generative AI are not permitted. The emphasis is placed on clarity of ideas and paragraph organization rather than grammatical accuracy. Student instruction:

This is a Level 1 writing task. Generative AI and translation tools must not be used at any stage. The purpose of this task is to practise expressing ideas using your own English.

Example 2: Revision Task with Limited AI Use (Level 3)

Following teacher feedback, students revise their in-class draft outside class.

- Permitted AI use includes:
- checking grammar and spelling
 - identifying unclear expressions
 - suggesting alternative wording
- Not permitted:
- adding new ideas
 - replacing large sections of text
 - translating from Japanese into English
- Student instruction:

This is a Level 3 revision task. You may use generative AI for proofreading only. Do not add new content. Please submit both your original in-class draft and the revised version, and state whether AI was used.

Submission checklist:

- Original in-class draft
- Revised version
- AI use declaration (yes/no; tool used)

To support transparency and accountability, students are required, within the proposed framework, to submit both drafts along with a short AI use declaration (see Appendix B). These task examples demonstrate how AI policy can be embedded directly into assessment design, reducing ambiguity while maintaining alignment with institutional guidelines.

As the institutional guidelines informing this framework were released shortly before the time of writing, the reflections in the following section focus on intended pedagogical effects rather than reported outcomes.

5. Teacher Reflections on the Proposed Framework

The reflections presented in this section are design-based and anticipatory, rather than reports of completed classroom implementation. They are informed by prior teaching experience in Japanese university EFL contexts and by the pedagogical principles underlying the proposed framework, but they do not represent empirical findings or postintervention outcomes.

5.1 Anticipated Effects on Student Engagement with Writing

Within the proposed framework, Level 1 in-class writing tasks are intended to encourage students to engage directly with writing using their existing linguistic resources. Writing conducted under timed, AI-free conditions is expected to shift students' attention from surface-level accuracy toward meaning and organization, reducing pressure to produce polished text. Errors, in this context, are treated as indicators of developmental stage rather than failure.

Such in-class writing is also intended to provide instructors with clearer insight into students' actual writing ability, supporting more focused feedback and reducing uncertainty regarding the origins of submitted language.

5.2 Expected Benefits of Explicit AI Use Policies

Explicitly framing writing tasks using the Level 1–Level 3 classification is expected to reduce ambiguity surrounding acceptable AI use. Rather than perceiving generative AI

as either categorically prohibited or implicitly required, students are positioned to understand AI use as task-dependent and purpose-specific.

Allowing limited AI use at the revision stage under Level 3 conditions is intended to legitimize AI as a learning support rather than a shortcut, encouraging engagement with feedback while maintaining clear boundaries around content generation.

5.3 Implications for Assessment Design and Classroom Trust

From an instructional perspective, the proposed framework is designed to shift attention away from detection and enforcement toward transparency and assessment design. By embedding AI restrictions into task conditions and requiring evidence of the writing process, concerns related to academic integrity are addressed pedagogically rather than through surveillance.

In principle, this approach supports a classroom environment grounded in clarity and trust, aligning with institutional guidance that emphasizes design-based responses to generative AI rather than post-hoc detection.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This paper has argued that the challenges posed by generative AI in EFL writing are best addressed through policy-aligned assessment design rather than detection-based or prohibitive approaches. Drawing on recent institutional guidance and reflective classroom practice, it has proposed a process-focused framework that differentiates writing stages and specifies permitted AI use accordingly.

A central implication is that clarity and transparency are critical. Explicitly adopting and communicating distinct AI use levels—such as Level 1 for in-class writing and Level 3 for limited revision—can reduce uncertainty, support learning-oriented AI use, and preserve assessment validity. For instructors in EFL contexts, particularly those involving lower-to-mid proficiency learners, in-class writing retains a key role in revealing actual language ability, while constrained AI use at later stages acknowledges contemporary learning realities.

While modest in its claims, the framework provides a foundation for future empirical research into policy-aligned writing assessment in the age of generative AI. Future classroom-based research will be needed to examine how the proposed framework functions once implemented, particularly with respect to student engagement, writing development, and perceptions of transparency around AI use. As AI tools and institutional policies continue to evolve, the challenge for EFL educators will not be to

eliminate AI from learning environments, but to design writing tasks that ensure learning remains central.

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Appendix A. Alignment Between Perkins et al. (2024) and the Proposed Writing Framework

Perkins et al. (2024): Key Principle	Interpretation for EFL Writing	Application in the Present Framework
Differentiated AI use depending on learning objective	AI permissions vary Level 1 for in-class writing; Level 3 for revision	by task
Transparency of AI use	Students should understand at and declare AI use	AI use declaration required submission
Design over detection	Assessment should reduce on detection tools	In-class writing and process reliance evidence
Learning-oriented AI integration	AI should support, not replace, learning	AI permitted only for surface-level revision
Instructor autonomy	AI policies should be context-aligned sensitive with institutional guidelines	Course-specific policy

Appendix B. Writing Assignment Submission Checklist

Please submit the following:

- ☐ Original in-class draft (Level 1 task)
- ☐ Revised version
- ☐ AI use declaration
 - AI used: Yes / No
 - Tool(s) used (if yes): _____
 - Purpose of AI use (e.g. grammar check, wording clarification): _____