

AI-Based Writing Feedback in ESP: Leveraging ChatGPT for Writing Business Cover Letters Among Korean University Students

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Abstract

This study explores the use of ChatGPT as a feedback tool for English cover letter writing among Korean university students in Business English courses. Fifty-one students participated in writing activities where they received feedback from ChatGPT 3.5. Survey and interview data indicate that while students were generally satisfied with the feedback process, its impact on developing higher-order cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and self-directed learning, was limited. Benefits identified include enhanced language refinement, personalized learning, and increased efficiency, but challenges such as lack of originality and potential over-reliance on AI were noted. These findings suggest that while ChatGPT can provide valuable feedback in the writing process, careful implementation is necessary to maximize educational benefits and promote autonomous learning. Future research should address these challenges and investigate the long-term effects of AI-assisted feedback on students' writing development.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), AI-assisted feedback, Business English, Process-oriented writing

Background

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focuses on specialized communication tailored to professional needs (Swales, 1990). Business English is vital in international contexts, combining job-specific content with general communication skills and reflecting cultural perspectives (Seidlhofer, 2004; Ellis & Johnson,

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1994; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Within this context, cover letters are regarded as a promotional genre in business settings, necessitating persuasive and pragmatically successful writing (Bhatia, 1993). Despite the importance of genre-based writing, research on English cover letters among Korean students is scarce, highlighting a need for further investigation.

To address this gap, AI-based tools like ChatGPT have shown promise in enhancing writing skills but also present challenges (Cao & Zhong, 2023; Schmidt-Fajlik, 2023; Fang et al., 2023). Research in Korea suggests that while ChatGPT provides basic feedback effectively, it lacks depth in enhancing learning (Kim et al., 2023; Lee, 2023). Process-oriented writing, with its focus on stages and detailed feedback, may benefit from AI integration, particularly in cover letter writing (Brown, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The research questions for this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of using ChatGPT for cover letter writing among Korean university students?

Research Question 2: How do Korean university students describe their experience of using ChatGPT for cover letter writing?

Methodology

The study involved 51 Korean university students enrolled in Business English courses during the fall semester of 2023 (26 students) and the spring semester of 2024 (25 students). To uphold ethical standards, all participants engaged in cover letter writing activities that incorporated ChatGPT-based feedback as part of their regular coursework. The cover letter writing process adhered to a process-oriented approach, with feedback provided through the free version of ChatGPT 3.5.

To ensure consistency in research outcomes, standardized input guidelines were provided for all participants using ChatGPT 3.5 for cover letter feedback. After drafting their letters, participants used these guidelines to receive and selectively apply feedback, which they documented in learning logs. Following the writing activities, participants completed a questionnaire and participated in semi-structured interviews to share their experiences. The interview data were qualitatively analyzed to identify key themes and insights into their perceptions.

Representative Results

First, investigation was conducted to determine whether students had experience utilizing ChatGPT for English learning and for composing cover letters

Table 1. Student survey results on using chatGPT for english cover letter writing

	Questions	M	SD
1	Writing skill improvement	4.24	.798
2	Cognitive and learning development	3.77	1.206
3	Affective factors	4.19	1.452
4	Overall experiences	4.70	2.262

in English. The findings reveal that most students had not employed ChatGPT for English learning purposes, and only a small proportion reported having used it for crafting English cover letters.

Second, the post-activity survey consisted of 18 items using a 5-point Likert scale. The items were categorized into three domains: writing skill improvement (items 1–8), cognitive and learning development (items 9–14), and affective factors (items 15–17). The final item (18) evaluated overall experience. Results indicated a high level of satisfaction toward overall experiences with the ChatGPT-assisted English cover letter writing activity, with an average score of 4.70 out of 5.

Notably, the cognitive and learning development category showed a lower average score of $M = 3.77$ compared to other categories. This can be attributed to the relatively low scores in the subcategories of critical thinking skills ($M = 3.59$) and creative thinking skills ($M = 3.54$). Additionally, the self-directed learning attitude item also scored relatively low ($M = 3.72$). These findings suggest that while students reported high overall satisfaction with the activity, they perceived its impact on developing higher-order cognitive skills such as self-directed learning, critical thinking, and creativity to be somewhat limited.

For a deeper investigation of the survey results, student interviews were conducted, transcribed, and subjected to content analysis. The findings were categorized tabulated with the following subcategories: perceived benefits of ChatGPT use (language improvement, personalized learning, efficiency, etc.), limitations of ChatGPT use (lack of originality, reliability issues, overreliance, etc.), strategies for improvement (critical thinking, language proficiency, iterative process, etc.), overall experience (technological awareness, educational value, ethical considerations, etc.), and additional insights (educational potential, user suggestions, self-reflection etc.) (See in Table 1).

Conclusion and Discussion

RQ1. Korean university students perceived several benefits of using ChatGPT for cover letter writing, including language improvement, personalized

learning, and increased efficiency. However, challenges such as lack of originality, reliability issues, and risk of over-reliance were also identified. These findings highlight both the potential and the need for careful implementation of AI-assisted writing in EFL contexts.

RQ2. Students described ChatGPT as a comprehensive writing support tool, aiding in language refinement, idea expansion, and providing supporting materials for arguments. This suggests the potential of ChatGPT to offer holistic support in the writing process, beyond simple language correction. However, effective use requires appropriate teacher guidance and students' critical thinking skills.

These findings contribute to the understanding of AI-assisted language learning in EFL contexts. Future research should explore strategies to overcome challenges and investigate long-term effects on students' autonomous writing abilities.

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