

AI as a Thinking Partner? Exploring International Students' Use of GenAI to Support their Academic English Needs

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Abstract

Despite meeting university English proficiency requirements, international students who speak English as a second language often encounter difficulties with academic writing, reading, presentations, class participation and oral comprehension. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT can be particularly useful in addressing the academic language challenges of this student cohort, serving as a 'thinking partner' and helping them fulfil the expectations to communicate proficiently in academic English. However, despite GenAI's potential and growing research in education, little is known about how international students have used this technology for academic reading, writing, listening and speaking. In addition, while self-regulated learning (SRL) is pivotal for academic success, no research has examined this cohort's use of GenAI through this lens - an emerging theoretical perspective within SLA and L2 studies. This mixed-methods study aims to explore how international undergraduate students with varying English proficiency levels at an Australian university utilise GenAI for academic language support. Results from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews show that the participants frequently use GenAI to support their academic reading and writing, primarily due to their low confidence in their English skills and drive to meet academic expectations. Less frequent uses include preparing presentations and summarising audio content. While participants employ GenAI to monitor and complete academic tasks (SRL monitoring

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and control), they use it less for planning and reflection (SRL forethought and reaction/reflection). These findings suggest that international students need more scaffolded support and clearer policies on GenAI use to better self-regulate their academic language needs and maximise their capabilities and academic success. This study contributes to discussions on inclusive CALL, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in integrating GenAI into higher education.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence, International Students, Academic English Needs, Self-regulated Learning

Background

The growing influx of international students reshaped higher education (HE), particularly in anglophone countries such as Australia (Cho et al., 2021). Yet, many English as an additional language (EAL) international students continue to experience academic language challenges despite meeting English proficiency requirements (Clark & Yu, 2021). Challenges span academic reading, writing, listening and speaking, often due to limited discipline and academic vocabulary (Crosthwaite & Cheung, 2019), unfamiliar academic conventions (Kukatlapalli et al., 2020) and barriers to understanding educators and peers (Park, 2022).

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT appear to have broadened and democratised language support for EAL international students. While not originally designed for education, these tools may aid in interpreting assignment tasks in multiple languages (Sterling et al., 2025) and providing feedback similar to interacting with peers or educators (Teng, 2024). In many cases, GenAI became a ‘thinking partner’, helping international students fulfil academic English expectations (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023).

However, research suggests that the use of GenAI for continuous learning and language development depends on self-regulated learning (SRL) (Mirriahi et al., 2025). SRL is considered pivotal for academic success, involving students’ ability to plan (strategising for tasks), monitor (implementing strategies and sustaining effort) and reflect on their learning (evaluating the effectiveness of strategies) (Zimmerman, 2000). Yet, scant research explores EAL international students’ use of GenAI through this theoretical lens, with existing studies focusing on EFL contexts (Teng, 2024) and centred on GenAI’s role in L2 writing (Sterling et al., 2025). This study addresses these gaps by investigating the role of GenAI in supporting the academic English needs of EAL international students in HE, guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do EAL international students use GenAI to address their academic English reading, writing, listening and speaking needs?
- RQ2. What motivates EAL international students to use GenAI to support their academic English needs?

Methodology

Following institutional ethics approval (ref: 2024/HE001084), 170 international students (Female = 109, Male = 60, Undisclosed = 1), aged between 18 to 46 years old and from 17 countries, participated. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate or master's by coursework programs across 6 disciplines at an Australian university.

A mixed-methods design was adopted to answer the RQs on how and why students use GenAI to support their academic English needs. An online Qualtrics survey collected demographic information and measured:

1. GenAI use for academic reading, writing, listening and speaking (to answer RQ1), using 5-point Likert scale questions based on prior research on academic English difficulties (Rahman & Watanobe, 2023); and
2. SRL-guided strategies (to answer RQ1) and motivations for GenAI use (to answer RQ2), using 5-point Likert scale items adapted from the SRL-O questionnaire for online learning (Broadbent et al., 2023).

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to explore general patterns (see Appendix A for the descriptive and internal consistency reliability statistics).

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom (approximately 45 minutes each) and explored students' GenAI uses and motivations qualitatively to triangulate the survey responses and provide more in-depth insights for each RQ. Zoom-generated transcripts were edited for accuracy against the recordings (Crosthwaite et al., 2025), and then analysed thematically (Saldaña, 2021).

Results

RQ1 focused on understanding how international students used GenAI. Survey responses (Figure 1) showed that participants used GenAI for all four academic English skills, most frequently for reading and writing. Interviews revealed that GenAI helped students understand complex vocabulary and sentence structures when reading. For writing, it supported appropriate tone,

grammar and lexical choices. Speaking and listening were perceived as more collaborative and less challenging, though students used GenAI to summarise or translate lectures, particularly when unfamiliar English varieties were spoken.

Survey responses (Figure 2) further demonstrated how students used GenAI by indicating that SRL strategies related to Monitoring and Reflection were more common than Planning. Interviews revealed that students monitored their learning by generating original ideas rather than over-relying on GenAI.

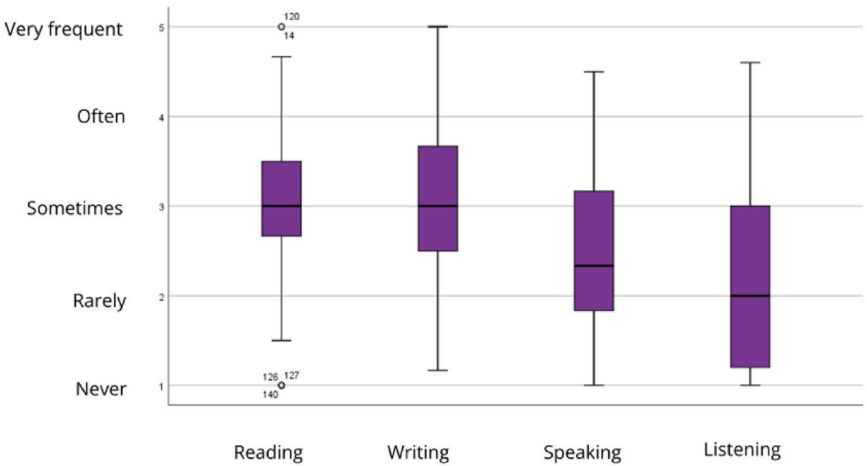


Figure 1. Box plots of academic language needs & GenAI use
<https://figshare.com/s/1d2becfac8099a623cbc>

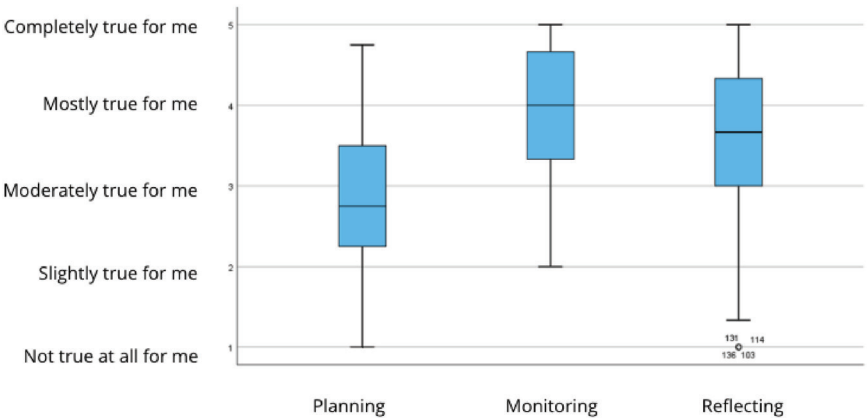


Figure 2. Box Plots of SRL-guided Strategies for Using GenAI
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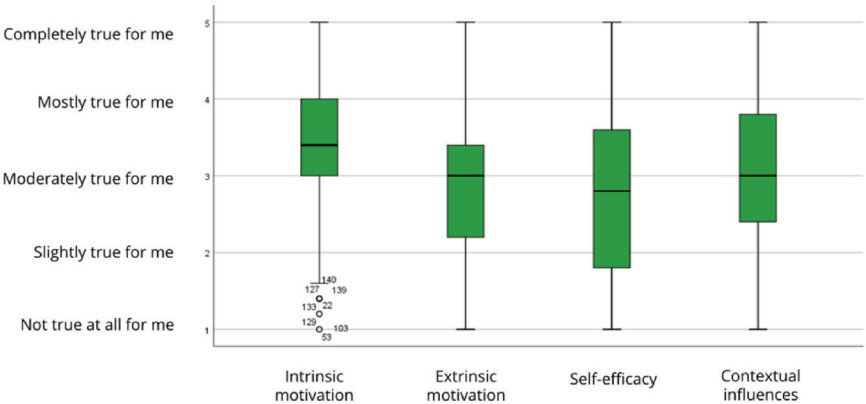


Figure 3. Box Plots of SRL-guided Motivations for Using GenAI
<https://figshare.com/s/1d2becfac8099a623cbc>

For reflection, some critically assessed GenAI language suggestions and reflected on their impact on learning, while others modified GenAI outputs primarily to meet academic integrity requirements. Planning included using GenAI to outline study plans and manage workloads, though some admitted to using it for summaries to expedite tasks.

RQ2 focused on understanding international students’ motivations for using GenAI. Survey responses showed that their reasons spanned across Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Self-Efficacy and Contextual Influences (Figure 3), with Intrinsic Motivation as the strongest driver. Students described enjoying the technology and viewing it as essential for improving academic English. Peer and tutor recommendations (Extrinsic Motivation, Contextual Influences) also shaped use. Low self-efficacy, such as fear of language errors affecting grades, further motivated engagement with GenAI.

Discussion

Findings related to RQ1 highlight GenAI’s greater use for reading and writing, reflecting its utility for text-based tasks and still-developing voice features (Vo & Nguyen, 2024). Students’ perception of oral tasks as less demanding and more interactive may also explain lower GenAI use for speaking and listening, consistent with research showing that international students apply various strategies to overcome communication barriers (Park, 2022). Nonetheless, students noted GenAI’s support for pre- and post-listening/speaking tasks, suggesting its growing potential beyond writing-focused applications.

Monitoring was the most reported SRL strategy, consistent with research on technology-enhanced language learning, where students monitored their learning during tasks but engaged less in planning or reflection (Yang et al., 2023). EAL learners may favour GenAI for immediate understanding and feedback (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023) over long-term learning strategies such as planning and reflection, especially if they lack the language proficiency to articulate goals or evaluate GenAI language suggestions (Teng, 2025). The findings suggest their underdeveloped SRL skills, which are further showcased when some described their reflection phase as simply modifying GenAI outputs to avoid academic misconduct rather than engaging in critical evaluation (Tran & Crosthwaite, 2025).

Findings for RQ2 show that all four SRL motivation dimensions influenced participants' use of GenAI. This suggests that students' use of the technology to support their academic English needs is shaped by the interplay between their personal attributes and environmental conditions (Wang, 2024). However, participants reported intrinsic motivation as the strongest motivator, indicating that EAL students who enjoy learning are more likely to value GenAI and use it meaningfully (Mirriahi et al., 2025).

The study offers important implications. While GenAI helps address academic language challenges for EAL students, their engagement with SRL was inconsistent. Echoing previous research (Sterling et al., 2025; Wang, 2024), the findings highlight the need to develop SRL skills, not only technical AI know-how. Despite limitations, including reliance on self-reporting and a potentially engaged sample, the study advances understanding of SRL-guided GenAI use in HE and contributes to inclusive CALL research by identifying opportunities and challenges in supporting EAL learners.

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ChatGPT 4o was used to edit this article for clarity, and Grammarly was consulted for grammatical and lexical errors.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Descriptive and Internal Consistency Reliability Statistics for Survey Items

<https://figshare.com/s/e926c2edf99635881e66>