



# Generative AI tools and empowerment in L2 academic writing

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## ABSTRACT

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) developments have ignited interest in how they will impact L2 writers' agency over their academic writing processes. At the same time, higher education (HE) institutions have responded to GenAI by devising policies on their use. Recognizing that L2 writers' processes can be shaped by GenAI, as well as their institutions and instructors' policies, there is a need to understand how L2 writers engage with GenAI tools and negotiate agency as they transition into their studies and find themselves within the boundaries of their HE institution's policies. Through the lens of critical digital literacies (CDL), agency and empowerment, this qualitative study adopted in-depth focus group interviews with a preference selection task to explore how twenty-one post-graduate L2 writers position themselves in relation to GenAI tools and how they and GenAI have been positioned by their instructors. Data were collected within the first month of their post-graduate studies. The findings show that the L2 writers have integrated GenAI into various aspects of their academic writing processes. Their responses suggest that the L2 writers believe the tools empower them and augment their writing abilities. Yet, from a CDL perspective, this may be false empowerment, as the writers showed little critical awareness of how the tools work. At the same time, tensions exist between their perceptions of agency and some of their instructors' GenAI policies. The L2 writers prefer GenAI policies that give them the autonomy to use GenAI flexibly. However, they recognize the need to be accountable for their academic writing and transparent in their GenAI use. Bans on GenAI use were perceived as unfair, restricted agency, and not reflective of GenAI affordances. The findings can inform academic writing training and instructors' policies.

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of ChatGPT and the plethora of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools that followed have disrupted existing academic writing processes within higher education (HE). HE institutions worldwide have drafted guidelines and policies in response to the ability of GenAI tools to generate coherent texts in various genres (Wang et al., 2024). Much of the guidance focuses on the threats they pose to academic integrity and offer advice to students on the appropriate and inappropriate use of these tools in their academic writing (Moorhouse, Yeo, & Wan, 2023). At the same time, instructors have their own stances on GenAI use, which are

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translated into course-level policies, assessment guidance, and conversations with their students. Ideologies are emerging about the use of GenAI in L2 academic writing that position GenAI as either empowering or disempowering the writer. These ideologies can co-exist within the same institution, as institutional guidelines may vary from department to department, and course guidelines may vary from instructor to instructor. Inconsistent and contrasting ideologies on GenAI use in processes of academic writing can present L2 writers of English with a confusing terrain to navigate as they transition into HE institutions, which is made more complex by the fact that a mistake can lead to sanctions for breach of principles of academic honesty (Dabis & Csáki, 2024). At the same time, academic writing and maintaining academic integrity are seen as some of the most significant challenges and concerns for L2 writers of English (Khoo & Kang, 2022).

The study reported here aimed to understand, through the lenses of agency, empowerment, and critical digital literacies (CDL), how post-graduate L2 writers position themselves in relation to GenAI tools and how GenAI tools have been positioned by their instructors during their transition into an HE institution. The study focused on post-graduate L2 writers as they transition into HE (the first month of their post-graduate studies). It is during this period that they need to negotiate their ideologies with those of their new institution and instructors (Tobbell et al., 2010), which may differ from their undergraduate institution. In addition, post-graduate L2 writers are worthy group to study for several reasons; they come from diverse undergraduates programmes often taught in their L1 (as is the case in this study), they may have had limited experiences with GenAI in their previous educational contexts (due to the rapid development of the technology), and they often receive less preparation during formal university orientation events, than their undergraduate peers (at least in the context of this study) (Moorhouse & Wan, 2023). Furthermore, the experience and perceptions of post-graduate students are underrepresented in the research literature (Coneyworth et al., 2019). Specifically, the study explores how L2 writers make sense of the environment they find themselves in, whether they perceive GenAI tools as empowering or disempowering, and whether they can exercise agency as they engage with GenAI tools. The study was framed by the following research questions (RQs).

1. How do L2 writers perceive the use of GenAI in their academic writing?
2. How do L2 writers make sense of and react to their instructors' policies pertaining to the use of GenAI in their academic writing?

The findings have significance for reforming GenAI policies and assessment guidance and practices, as well as how institutions can support L2 writers in making sense of the role of GenAI in their academic writing practices and assist them in developing their critical digital literacy practices.

## 2. Agency, empowerment, and critical digital literacies in L2 writing with GenAI

The study is situated at the intersection of CDL, agency, ideology, and L2 writing with GenAI. To make sense of these complex (often debated), interrelated concepts, we propose a conceptual framework that conceptualizes the ways L2 writers engage with GenAI tools through the lens of distributed agency (Jones, 2022; Godwin-Jones, 2024), empowerment, and CDL (Darvin & Hafner, 2022), contextualized within institutional policies and digital practices that are inherently ideological (Weninger, 2023).

### 2.1. Distributed agency

Ahearn (2001) conceptualizes agency as “the sociocultural mediated capacity to act” (p.112). This sociocultural view of agency sees it as not just an individual trait that exists in isolation but is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Ahearn definition suggests that agency emerges from the interplay between individuals and their sociocultural environment. While individuals have the capacity to act, how they understand their options and what they consider possible are all mediated by their social and cultural context. In the context of L2 writing and AI use, this sociocultural view suggests that learners' agency is influenced by a set of complex social forces, relationships, cultures, and norms, expected social behaviours, technological affordances, and institutional policies, that combined shape their thoughts, actions, experiences, and choices regarding GenAI (Han & Reinhardt, 2022). These forces will likely change and may differ between cultures and contexts.

The emergence of digital tools, including GenAI, has led scholars to consider the evolving relationship between an individual's agency and the technologies themselves. Scholars such as Jones (2022) and Godwin-Jones (2024) argue that agency is not solely in the individual but distributed across users, technologies, and institutions (e.g., universities, governments, and technology companies). This concept of distributed agency sees agency as a capacity that resides not only in humans but also in objects, such as digital tools (Godwin-Jones, 2024). Therefore, when L2 writers engage with GenAI tools, they are, in effect, sharing agency with the tools (Godwin-Jones, 2024). The tools, or the algorithms that control the tool's processes, are collaborating with the writer in a process where meaning and agency are negotiated, and any text produced is “inherently collaborative, involving multiple agents—both human and machine” (Godwin-Jones, 2024, p. 18). Indeed, Jiang et al. (2024), in a study exploring five undergraduate university students' AI writing practices, found that students see AI as a writing collaborator, seeing both human and machine inputs as central to the writing process. Warschauer et al. (2023) identified similar findings. However, the kinds of agency distribution between the user and the GenAI tool will depend on how the user engages with the tool (Tsao & Nogues, 2024).

### 2.2. Empowerment and critical digital literacies

The concept of empowerment is central to any discussion on L2 writers' use of GenAI. We understand empowerment, in relation to GenAI tools and writing, as the sense of control an L2 writer has over their use of these tools and whether they can utilize these tools in

their own best interests (Fanni et al., 2023; Darvin, 2025). We believe that while L2 writers may feel empowered by GenAI tools, as they can assist them in achieving specific academic tasks (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Moorhouse et al., 2024), without critical digital literacies, these tools may, in fact, be disempowering them (Darvin, 2025), by being the dominant agent in their writing process. Technology companies and popular media have portrayed GenAI as a tool that can help automate ‘mundane’ and ‘unimportant’ processes (e.g., write e-mails), feeding into the idea that these tools can empower individuals as they will have more time for high-order thinking or leisure pursuits (Filiciak & Piwowar, 2025). Yet, the promoted uses of AI may instead disempower the user. By giving over drafting and summarizing tasks to GenAI, the user may lose their agency over the writing processes.

To be empowered when using GenAI tools, L2 writers need the ability to evaluate, question, and strategically engage with these tools (Darvin, 2025; Kalantzis & Cope, 2025; Moorhouse & Wong, 2025). For example, L2 writers should understand that GenAI tools are governed by algorithms that can prioritize certain information that represents certain viewpoints and ideologies, undermining users’ privacy, or including inherent biases and presenting language in certain privileged styles and varieties, such as Standard American English or Standard British English (Kuteeva & Andersson, 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

CDL provides a conceptual lens to examine the “specific ideologies are embedded in the design and sociotechnical structures of different platforms, and how these platforms can be used to promote specific interests of users, software developers, and technology companies.” (Darvin & Hafner, 2022, p.869). In other words, CDL helps users become aware that GenAI tools are not neutral but are inherently biased toward certain values, language varieties, and ideologies – that represent and reinforce those in positions of power. CDL recognizes that engaging with AI is fundamentally a matter of literacy and a context-specific social practice (Darvin, 2025). As Darvin (2025) argues, L2 writers need to understand the ways GenAI tools work, as well as the underlying power and privilege inherent in the training data and algorithms, so they can be better positioned to engage with these tools within their L2 writing processes. CDL would suggest that while L2 writers may feel empowered, this could, in some sense, be ‘false empowerment’ unless they truly understand the ideology and power embedded in the tools.

### 2.3. Ideologies and institutional mediation

While ideology has been touched on above, it warrants its own attention, given that ideologies are central to the way instructors and institutions are framing perceptions and policies regarding the use of GenAI in L2 writing (Moorhouse, Yeo, & Wan, 2023). Similar to Weninger (2023), we believe digital literacy practices, including the use of GenAI, are primarily ideological. People in positions of authority within HEs will likely have their own perceptions of these tools as valuable (or not) for L2 writing, and this can shape the institutional response to their use. This can be seen in HEs worldwide where ideologies are shaping institutions’ and instructors’ responses to technological developments, including GenAI (Moorhouse, Yeo, & Wan, 2023). A dominant ideology is that GenAI disempowers L2 writers by denying them the opportunity to develop their writing style and preventing them from improving their academic writing abilities (Creely, 2024; Toncelli & Kostka, 2024). The concern is that students will use the tools to generate or translate content, which they will copy and paste into their assignments (Barrett & Pack, 2023). Other concerns include increased risk of cheating and plagiarism (Chan, 2024; Chan & Lee, 2023; Yeo, 2023), learner dependence (Zhang et al., 2024), and that the use of the tools could lead to superficial learning. Such beliefs can lead instructors to have a negative view toward learners who use GenAI as part of their academic writing practices (Tan et al., 2025).

To address these concerns, some institutions and instructors prohibit using GenAI tools in assignments. To enforce these bans, instructors mandate students conduct assessments in proctored conditions or threaten sanctions if GenAI use is detected. Reinforcing this ideology has been the development of AI detection tools designed to detect written work generated by LLMs (Elkhatat et al., 2023). Although marketed as highly reliable, most studies exploring their effectiveness have found them unreliable, particularly for non-native writers, or have found that simple edits to GenAI-generated texts can significantly influence the accuracy of the results provided by the detection tools (Liang et al., 2024; Perkins et al., 2024).

At the other end of the debate is an ideology that proposes the use of GenAI tools can empower L2 writers by giving them access to a powerful personalized assistive technology that can support their writing development and enhance their writing abilities (Godwin-Jones, 2024). This ideology assumes that GenAI has a place in L2 writing development and, therefore, should be integrated into writing instruction and assessment (Barrot, 2023). This requires a more nuanced approach where assignments are adapted to provide space for learners to use GenAI when engaging with the tasks (Moorhouse et al., 2024).

Complicating the matter is that different ideologies may coexist within the same institution. Different departments and instructors can view the use of GenAI tools differently and adapt different guidelines and policies (Wang et al., 2024). Similarly, the ideologies adopted by instructors might counter students’ own ideologies around AI use and existing practices (Chan & Lee, 2023; Gonsalves, 2024). Post-graduate L2 writers must navigate these ideologies and their own; this could lead to several outcomes. For example, students may use GenAI in ways that conform to their institutional ideologies but contradict their own beliefs, or possibly students defying institutional ideologies and using GenAI deceptively.

### 3. Integration: a framework for analysis

We propose a framework that views L2 writers’ engagement with GenAI through the lens of distributed agency, empowerment, and CDL. This framework enables us to analyze how L2 writers position themselves in relation to GenAI tools and how they navigate institutional and instructors’ ideologies during their transition into higher education.

The framework suggests that L2 writers’ agency emerges from the interaction of

1. Their critical awareness of how GenAI tools work
2. Their ability to strategically negotiate their agency across the human-AI system
3. Their development of empowerment through critical digital literacy practices
4. Their navigation of institutional and instructors' ideologies regarding GenAI

This integrated conceptual approach guides our analysis of how L2 writers perceive the use of GenAI in their academic writing and how they make sense of and react to their instructors' policies.

Read the following policies and choose the policy **you prefer the most** and the policy **you prefer the least**.

- 1) The teacher explicitly states you **cannot** use AI tools at any point during the assessment. If any use is identified, there will be a penalty.
- 2) The teacher explicitly states you **cannot** use AI tools at any point during the assessment, and all assessments will be checked using an AI detection tool with the possibility of a penalty.
- 3) The teacher explicitly states you **cannot** use AI tools at any point during the assessment, but there is no way to detect whether you use them.
- 4) The teacher says AI **can be used** in the assessment in the preparation stage, such as brainstorming, creating structures, and generating ideas, but no AI content is allowed in the final submission. If any use is identified in the final submission, there will be a penalty. You **do not need** to declare the use of AI.
- 5) The teacher says AI **can be used** in the assessment in the preparation stage, such as brainstorming, creating structures, and generating ideas, but no AI content is allowed in the final submission. If any use is identified in the final submission, there will be a penalty. You **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 6) The teacher says AI can **only** be used to polish the language, accuracy and suitability. You **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 7) The teacher says AI can **only** be used to polish the language accuracy and suitability. The original work with no AI content **must be** provided in the appendix. You **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 8) The teacher says you **have to use** AI in completing your assessment and critique AI-generated content. You **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 9) The teacher says you **have to use** AI in completing your assessment and critique AI-generated content and reflect on your use of AI in the assignment. You **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 10) The teacher says you **can use** AI tools any way you want, but you **need to** declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.
- 11) The teacher says you **can use** AI tools any way you want, and you **do not need to** declare their use at all.

You prefer the most \_\_\_\_\_ You prefer the least \_\_\_\_\_

Fig. 1. Preference indication task: AI Assessment Policy Preferences.

## 4. Methodology

This qualitative study adopted in-depth group interviews with a preference selection task to provide insights into how L2 writers engage with GenAI through the lens of distributed agency, empowerment, and CDL and position themselves in relation to GenAI tools and how students and GenAI have been positioned by their instructors during their transition into an HE institution.

### 4.1. Demographics and context

Participants included twenty-one full-time postgraduate students from Mainland China studying in a one-year Master of Education program at an English-medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling. We recognize this could affect the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). The participants included five male and sixteen female students. This ratio reflected the actual gender proportion of the program. The participants spoke Mandarin as their L1 and obtained an overall IELTS test score of 7. Although many had English or related first degrees, they indicated a lack of confidence and competence in using English for academic writing. This is consistent with findings of other studies in EMI contexts at the post-graduate level (e.g., Moorhouse & Wan, 2023). The students were in their first semester of the program and were enrolled in an average of four courses. The university policy, while encouraging instructors to integrate GenAI into courses, gave course instructors overall discretion to develop their course-level policies for GenAI use in teaching, learning and assessment based on their professional judgment and the intended learning outcomes of the course. Instructors were required to make their policies transparent through statements in the course outlines or verbally during the first sessions of the courses. They could require students to complete an AI declaration form to be submitted with assignments, which included a requirement for students to declare what AI tools they used, how they used them, and why they used them. Such declarations are common in HE contexts (Gonsalves, 2024). Ethical approval was obtained from the university's human ethics research committee. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave active written consent to participate. In the study, they are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### 4.2. Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured focus group interviews that included a preference selection task.

### 4.3. Preference indication task

The preference indication task was done individually before the interviews. The participants were presented with possible policies about using GenAI in assessment tasks and asked to select their most and least preferred policies. The preference indication task was developed for the study. First, we reviewed the AI assessment scale (AIAS; Perkins et al., 2024). The AIAS is designed to guide educators on the appropriate level and policies of AI usage in their assessments based on their learning outcomes. It includes five levels: (1) No AI; (2) AI-assisted idea generation and structuring; (3) AI-assisted editing; (4) AI task completion, human evaluation; (5) Full AI. This provided a good guide to the possible policies instructors might adopt in assessment tasks (Furze et al., 2024). We then brainstormed policies that could illustrate the five levels and different interpretations of the AI declaration approach adopted in HEs. Nine policies were drafted. We then discussed and reviewed the policies, collected feedback from three experts in the field of AI and language education, and piloted the task with three post-graduate students before refining the policies. Based on the feedback, we added two policies that take into account the existence of AI detection tools. The finalised preference identification task had eleven policies aligned with the AIAS levels and various declaration requirements reflecting potential AI policies (Fig. 1 shows the task; Table 1 shows the alignment of the policies to the AIAS levels). The task was designed to gain insights into the participants' preference for human agency or institutional control in using GenAI. The participants' preferences also acted as a catalyst for the interviews.

### 4.4. Interviews

The interviews were conducted in late September 2024 after the students had received three to four weeks of instruction. The time point was chosen as the transition to HE can be challenging, and often when conceptions and ideologies about their institutions, instructors, and academic selves are formed. At the same time, the participants will likely be familiar with their instructor's GenAI policies. Participants were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were chosen because participant interaction can stimulate ideas and generate richer data (Krueger, 2014). They can also reduce the power imbalance between the

**Table 1**  
Alignment of the policies with the AIAS levels.

AIAS level	policies
No AI	1, 2, 3
AI-assisted idea generation and structuring	4, 5
AI-assisted editing	6, 7
AI task completion, human evaluation	8, 9
Full AI	10,11

interviewer and participants (Carey & Asbury, 2016). Due to their varying availability, we ended up having seven groups, each consisting of 2–3 participants. Additionally, we conducted three individual interviews as some participants were not able to join any of the groups. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese (the participants' L1) and lasted between 21 and 65 min. They were audio-recorded for transcription and translation purposes. The transcriptions were translated verbatim for analysis. To minimise the possible impact of the first author, who was an instructor on the MEd, the interviews were conducted by the second, third, and fourth authors of this article. They were PhD students under the supervision of the first author. The three interviewers had no direct relationship with the interviewees. Yet, we acknowledge that even an indirect relationship could influence our findings.

An interview protocol was developed for the study to address the research questions (see Appendix 1). It included three sections: (1) Previous experiences with GenAI Tools; (2) Institutional and Instructor Ideologies; (3) Positioning and Agency. The questions were designed to provide a deep understanding of their experiences with GenAI in their L2 academic writing, their familiarity and views towards their institutions and instructors' policies on GenAI use, and their positionality in relation to GenAI tools. It was translated into Mandarin Chinese. Like the preference task, the interview protocol was piloted with three post-graduate students. After analysing their responses to the questions, it was deemed to be fit for purpose.

## 5. Data analysis

The preference identification task was analysed using descriptive statistics with the frequency and the percentage of participants who indicated each policy preference calculated. We then categorised the policies using the AIAS levels and preference for policies that required AI declarations or not. This could provide us with a more holistic understanding of the participants' AI policy preferences. For the interview data, after we translated and transcribed them (using machine translation and transcribing tools with human oversight, cross-checking, and verification), we split the data into two groups, with each group including data that addressed RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. For data pertaining to RQ1, we analysed the data as a coherent whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For data pertaining to RQ2, we further categorised the data based on the participants' responses to the preference identification task (e.g., data from participants who had selected Scenario 10 as their preferred policy were grouped together). This kind of data grouping allowed us to see patterns and themes that might be specific to students with certain GenAI policy preferences (Miles et al., 2014) (e.g., why certain policies were preferred). The grouping and categorising of the data was checked by three researchers to ensure no data were mis-categorised. To analyze the grouped data, we used inductive thematic analysis following the processes developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involves identifying themes and sub-themes using a five-stage iterative coding process, including data familiarisation, initial code generation, code reviewing and organisation, theme finalisation, and extraction of data that illustrates the codes (Table 2 shows the final themes for the human coding of Scenario 10 as a preferred policy).

After the human coding stage, we utilized GPT4. o-128k (developed by openAI.com and available through poe.com) to code the data pertaining to RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. This stage was added to provide for additional cross-checking of the identified codes and ensure completeness of the coding process. Human interpretation was prioritised (Morgan, 2023). GPT4. o-128k was chosen as it has a large context window and could manage long interview transcripts. The tool's privacy policy also specifies that data would not be shared with the developer nor be used for training purposes. Even so, we anonymised the data (used pseudonyms). We developed prompts based on the RQs of the study and trialled them with one of the interview transcripts. We further fine-tuned the prompts. For example, the initial prompt for RQ1 neglected to ask the LLM to label the extracts with the respondents' pseudonyms, so the prompt was modified to request this information (see Fig. 2 for the final RQ1 prompt). The extracts allowed us to check the analysis aligned with the data and did not include any fabrications. After checking the original source, we found that all the extracts GPT.4o-128k quoted were accurate; however, sometimes, it extracted quotes from the interviewer and not the participants. This highlights the need for human oversight and verification processes.

After the AI-coding stage, the lead researcher compared the themes identified by GPT4. o-128k with the human coding. GPT identified an additional theme in the interview data sets regarding their need for more guidance and training on AI (e.g., desire for guidance and training on how to use AI in academic writing), which was not identified in the human coding. We then revisited the data and established the theme to be salient, and it was added. This was the main change; while using different terminology, other themes

**Table 2**

An example of one theme from the grouped data responses to the preference identification task.

Scenario	Theme (sub-themes)	Example Data Extracts
10) AI can be used in any way; declaration required (N = 8, 38.10 %)	Flexible Use (Don't have to use/learner autonomy)	Because I think it has a very good point, which you also highlighted in bold, the use of "have to" and "can" is very well done. I don't want to say that AI is something you must use; rather, students are not required to use it ... (G1/Wen) Because it's allowed to use it. Like 8 and 9, you have to use the AI. 10 just gives me that autonomy and I just like that style of teacher. (G2/Anqi) ...
	Fairness in Evaluations (Standardised/Respect others)	I thought about this (declaration issue), so I chose 10. To standardize it, there should be some rules. If I indeed use it, declaring it is okay. (G6/Shan) That's because I think there are some original ideas and other information that I found on the Internet are different. I think there should be a distinction, and indeed other people's thoughts should be declared, um, it's also a respect for their achievements (G8/Qin). ...

I'm conducting a study exploring university students' perceptions towards the use of AI in academic writing. The students are L2 writers who have been learning English as a second language. The research question is: How do L2 writers perceive the use of GenAI in their academic writing in terms of agency? Please can you code the data from a group interview of two students and identify themes and sub-themes within the data that address the research question. Include extracts from the data that illustrate the themes with participants' names. Present your analysis in a table.

Fig. 2. Final prompt used to code the interview data pertaining to RQ1 using GPT.4o-128k via [Poe.com](#).

were consistent across the two stages.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. L2 writers, GenAI and agency

#### 6.1.1. GenAI and Human's roles in academic writing

The participants' responses suggest that they see GenAI tools as supplementary or assistive technologies that they have control over and can use as they want when they are engaged in the academic writing process. Central to their thinking is that the ideas they write about are theirs, and they are responsible and accountable for the final output. As Yu stated, "We are after all the ones who write the paper, so the final research direction should be decided by us. AI is only here to help." This line of thinking was evident across the interviews. Juan stated, "People play a leading role, because writing itself is a ... Mental work, so I think it is different from AI ... The article is written by me, it may still be me." Yang mentioned, "I think AI gives you inspiration in the early stages of a paper ... but I think the content generated by AI is, hmm, AI's idea, not your idea." Their beliefs seem to be linked to the participants' sense of ownership over their writing process and product and the need for them to generate their own ideas. Two participants have developed processes that reflect this. Yu and Qin both articulated that they engage in thinking and focus on personal creativity first, before seeking assistance from AI. In this way, they can prioritize their own ideas and contribute to the task. Another, Wen, emphasized the need for human judgement to be prioritised. She said, "you must have the judgment ability to determine whether its output truly serves your needs." The participants seem to position themselves as users or "leaders" (Juan) of AI with AI taking a supporting role that could serve certain pragmatic functions that add efficiency to their academic writing process.

#### 6.1.2. Usefulness of GenAI tools

All participants shared that they have integrated the use of GenAI into their academic writing processes. The tools enhance their sense of empowerment by providing linguistic support, explaining difficult concepts, summarizing literature, polishing language and correcting errors, and generating structure and templates for writing. Having access to tools that can engage in a multitude of tasks quickly and efficiently gave them access to a useful resource that can support various aspects of their writing. For example, Ying described how he used ChatGPT to understand difficult concepts. He said, "AI can help me explain a lot of things ... if I have missed a class, I can ask ChatGPT to explain some definitions and help me achieve a better understanding." Other participants mentioned how they use it to summarize articles, helping them efficiently see the main points and the relevance of the article to their assignments. Yu saw ChatGPT's ability to summarize texts as a particular strength. The main uses of GenAI seem to be for linguistic support, polishing language and correcting errors. The participants expressed concern about their own grammatical accuracy and found AI can help them "double-check" their language accuracy. However, they also use it to "embellish the grammar" and increase the complexity of the sentence patterns and vocabulary used. Xue shared how it helps her to structure her writing, "I would give it a few keywords and let it generate some subheadings for me." This, they find, helps them learn more academic language and organizational structure but also, gives them more confidence in the quality of their final submission.

#### 6.1.3. Scepticism about the accuracy of GenAI tools

Although the students had integrated AI into their academic writing processes, there were some participants who were sceptical about the usefulness of GenAI, or only saw limited potential to use it in their academic writing processes. These students had experiences using the tools that had led them to question their accuracy. For instance, Shan was particularly sceptical of GenAI tools as she had found the responses generated to be "nonsense," and when it created references, the "references it generates are all made up; there's no source to be found." Bo had similar experiences of an AI tool giving "false references". Some of the accuracy issues they noted were due to the specialist nature of their query. Yang when talking about a popular LLM developed in China that she used, commented that, "because my major is English Education ... the domestic database might have fewer documents compared to ChatGPT. So sometimes I still need to review the literature myself". These experiences have led the students to view the content generated by these tools critically, maintaining the need for their oversight of the use of AI. Qin's belief sums-up this scepticism when

she said, “I trust the human brain more [than AI].”

#### 6.1.4. Risks of becoming over-reliant on GenAI tools

In addition to the idea that using GenAI strategically could empower students, there was a sense in the data that if the participants asked GenAI to write for them or give them ideas to write about, this could disempower them. Wen described it as a kind of “inertia” where it could lead to a lack of “desire to think”. Similarly, Si stated that “If I let AI generate my answer for me, then I may become lazy and stop thinking on my own afterwards.” These kinds of concerns led Jiang to actively not learn about AI as he feared it could negatively affect his motivation and ability. He reflected, “I don’t want to learn too much about AI ... I’m afraid I’ll give myself an opportunity, and I’ll procrastinate in my homework and want to finish it by AI in the end.” It seemed at the point of the interviews that there was no evidence from their responses that students had become over-reliant on the use of GenAI. Indeed, their ability to problematize the risks GenAI poses to their agency, could actually be evidence of their criticality. Jiang’s avoidance of learning more about GenAI could be a coping strategy. At the same time, these concerns could prevent them from using GenAI in ways that assist them. The findings show that there are tensions between some students’ individual agency and AI reliance.

#### 6.2. L2 writers, GenAI and institution and course instructors’ policies

As stated in the methodology section, the participants were given a preference identification task where they needed to select their most preferred and least preferred policy for using AI in assignments. Tables 3 and 4 show the percentage and number of participants who selected each policy. The students were asked to explain their choices during the interviews. The students’ preferences provide insights into the amount of agency and control they want in utilizing GenAI in their assessments. They show that no students prefer the most restricted options, or ‘No AI’ policies, while the three variations of the ‘No AI’ policies were the least preferred by 85.68 % of the participants (policies 1, 2, and 3). They also show that almost half (47.62 %) prefer the least restricted options (policies 10, 11), or ‘Full AI’, with most of these students preferring policy 10, which provided students with the freedom to use GenAI tools any way they want, but with the need to declare what tools they used, how you used them and why, and sign a declaration. For the specific use options, AI-assisted idea generation and structuring (policies 4 and 5) was preferred by 38.09 % of students. While only one student selected one of the ‘AI-assisted editing’ options (policy 7). Two students preferred policy 9, which mandated the use of AI in assessments with the need for a declaration. Of the policies that required a declaration of AI use and those that did not, there is a significant preference for declaring.

For the participants who preferred policy 10 (38.10 %), ‘AI can be used in any way; declaration required’, their responses suggested that this option allowed for flexible use with accountability, ensured fairness, and could help them supplement their abilities. For example, Jin stated that this option provides space for her to “use it [GenAI] as a tool, but you have to indicate where it came from or how it was used.” While Xing mentioned that “It saves you effort and helps AI progress so it can better serve us.” Wen emphasized the flexibility it provided to use or not use AI, she stated, “Because I think it has a very good point, which you highlighted in bold, the use of ‘have to’ and ‘can’ is very well done. I don’t want to say that AI is something you must use; rather, students are not required to use it”. The participants who selected policies 4 and 5 indicated that these options meant they could get assistance from AI during the initial challenges of writing. As Xue states, “Writing an article is always the hardest at the beginning, if you clarify the whole structure, the rest will be a bit easier.”

The participants reported experiencing teachers who took a more open view towards the use of GenAI and had policies that aligned with their preferences. These teachers took a supportive and encouraging stance towards their use of GenAI. The students described two particularly supportive teachers. Jin described how one teacher “encourages us to use it” and integrates GenAI into the class activities by encouraging students to consult ChatGPT for answers or find relevant material. The teacher also provided training on the use of GenAI. Nan stated that “this training is useful and necessary,” as they need to know “how to use it in the assignments.” Another teacher invited the librarian to come and teach them how to use AI as a resource when engaging with library resources. Anqi commented that they liked these kinds of teachers as they “give you autonomy.”

**Table 3**  
Most preferred GenAI assessment policies.

GenAI Assessment Policy	Percentage (N)
10) The teacher says you can use AI tools any way you want, but you need to declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.	38.10 % (8)
11) The teachers say you can use AI tools any way you want, and you do not need to declare their use at all.	9.52 % (2)
9) The teacher says you have to use AI in completing your assessment and critique AI-generated content and reflect on your use of AI in the assignment. You need to declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.	9.52 % (2)
5) The teacher says AI can be used in the assessment in the preparation stage, such as brainstorming, creating structures, and generating ideas, but no AI content is allowed in the final submission. If any use is identified in the final submission, there will be a penalty. You need to declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration	28.57 % (6)
4) The teacher says AI can be used in the assessment in the preparation stage, such as brainstorming, creating structures, and generating ideas, but no AI content is allowed in the final submission. If any use is identified in the final submission, there will be a penalty. You don’t need to declare the use of AI.	9.52 % (2)
7) The teacher says AI can only be used to polish the language accuracy and suitability. The original work with no AI content must be provided in the appendix. You need to declare in writing, what tools, how you used and why, and sign the declaration.	4.76 % (1)

**Table 4**  
Least preferred GenAI assessment policies.

GenAI Assessment Policy	Percentage (N)
1) The teacher explicitly states you <b>cannot</b> use AI tools at any point during the assessment. If any use is identified, there will be a penalty.	71.4 % (15)
2) The teacher explicitly states you <b>cannot</b> use AI tools at any point during the assessment, and all assessments will be checked using an AI detection tool with the possibility of a penalty.	4.76 % (1)
3) The teacher explicitly states you <b>cannot</b> use AI tools at any point during the assessment, but there is no way to detect whether you use them.	9.52 % (2)
11) The teachers say you <b>can use</b> AI tools any way you want, and you <b>do not</b> need to declare their use at all.	14.28 % (3)

The ‘No AI’ policies which represent a ban on AI were the least preferred. Responses suggest that students see the policy as overly rigid, neglectful of the benefits of AI, and may lead to unfair evaluations. Wen mentioned that the policy is a “bit radical,” while Kuan called it an “imposition,” and Yu said it was “unreasonable”. A participant mentioned the practice of an instructor who adopted this restrictive approach and warned students that “if AI is detected, he will deduct 20 % of the score” (Shan). Other students mentioned that these teachers discouraged the use of AI in coursework. They attributed this to the teachers’ lack of knowledge of how the tools work, as well as their teacher’s concerns about the negative effect the tools could have on students’ critical thinking and the reliability of the information provided by the tools. The participants largely disagreed with these concerns and stated that they neglected to consider the benefits GenAI affords in academic writing, such as assisting with idea generation and proofreading.

Several of the students’ instructors had adopted the ‘No AI’ policy. These instructors deterred students’ use of AI, and some expressed to students that “it is easy to detect AI writing.” There was evidence of resistance to these policies within the students’ responses. For example, Anqi said, “AI is good for helping us to prepare sometimes. If he won’t let us use it, I will.” Bei argued, “If you say it’s not allowed, but I still use it, how can you detect it? How do you identify it?” Interestingly, they were most concerned about fairness, as banning AI requires the ability to effectively detect GenAI. Some students (e.g., Juan and Yu) believed that AI detection tools (e.g., GPTzero and Turnitin) were unreliable. Juan stated, “If there’s no way to detect it, then banning it is meaningless and doesn’t maintain fairness.” Similarly, Yu said, “Detection tools are not mature ... some students were falsely accused of using AI.”

The near-universal preference for policies that require the declaration of AI use indicates a strong sense of accountability and integrity amongst the students and the need to be transparent in their GenAI practices. The students seem to recognize that agency requires transparency in their use of AI. Jin’s comment illustrates this point when he was asked to explain why he chose the declaration policy: “It adheres to academic honesty ... it gives you the freedom to use it, whereas you have to declare that.” Students also commented that declaring would also ensure their work is evaluated fairly by their teachers. Jiang stated, “Declaring is important because it creates an unfair competition if the teacher doesn’t know AI was used.” However, there were some counterarguments to the need to declare with some participants questioning which uses of AI should be declared and which should not. For example, Bei said, “Declaring everything is tiring ... it’s very troublesome to declare.”

Finally, there was a desire from participants for there to be more training and guidance on how GenAI tools could be used as part of their academic writing processes. Yang said, “How to search for and obtain these AI tools is something I think we need to understand ... and also how to use them correctly”. Similarly, Qin indicated that she would like training on how to use GenAI tools for different kinds of writing tasks and learn about tools other than ChatGPT. There seems to be a need, at least, for these students, for more input on the way GenAI can assist them, so they can further develop their AI literacy practices.

## 7. Discussion

This study set out to understand how L2 writers engage with GenAI through the lens of distributed agency, empowerment, and CDL and how they position themselves in relation to GenAI tools and how they and the tools have been positioned by their institution and instructors as they transition into post-graduate studies. Below, we discuss the findings in relation to the aspects of our conceptual framework: distributed agency, empowerment and CDL, as well as, ideology.

### 7.1. Distributed agency

The findings show that the L2 writers have adopted GenAI tools into their academic writing processes. This finding is not unique and has been found in other studies in other contexts and levels of education (e.g., Warschauer et al., 2023; Kim, Yu, Detrick, & Li, 2025). Similar to Warschauer et al. (2023) found in their study, our participants also used GenAI to receive linguistic support, explain difficult concepts, summarize the literature, polish language, and correct errors, and generate structures and templates for academic texts. However, the findings add to this understanding as it can be seen that the L2 writers delineate their roles and the roles of the GenAI tools within the writing process. It seemed essential to the participants that they were in the leading position when they engaged with GenAI and that the tools only assisted them with certain pragmatic functions that added to the efficiency of the writing process. Indeed, some participants developed systems and procedures that recognized their desire to maintain control over their writing process. For example, engaging in independent brainstorming and personal creativity before consulting AI tools. This suggests that they see these tools as powerful and potentially a risk to their agency if they engage with them uncritically.

The study shows that while the L2 writers are collaborating with the AI tools, this is not an equal relationship; rather, they have strategically negotiated/asserted control over the use of GenAI in the writing process, thus echoing Godwin-Jones’s (2024) claims that

agencies are distributed across the human-AI system. Awareness of these uses and the identified desires of L2 writers are important findings with implications for language teaching practices. Instead of possible concerns that learners may become dependent on AI tools and hand over their agency to the machine (Ulla et al., 2023), language teachers should guide L2 writers towards processes that allow them to strategically and pragmatically engage with GenAI tools. This can help them to distribute agency in ways that make them feel comfortable and in control. AI tools are incredibly powerful and can complete many tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence, but this does not mean that L2 writers do not see the value of learning from the process of academic writing nor that their ideas do not have value. However, it does mean that language teachers need to adapt their writing instruction to reflect AI developments. As the study suggests, this could be considered as to which stage to bring AI tools into the writing process and when the learners should rely on their own abilities.

### 7.2. Empowerment and CDL

Although the findings suggest the participants view GenAI tools as empowering, we wish to critique this view from the perspective of CDL. As the section above shows, the desire to maintain control seems paramount to the L2 writers' utility of GenAI tools. Yet, whether they are truly 'empowered' by AI tools or in a sense, they are experiencing 'false empowerment' may not be fully evident in the findings.

There was evidence of some critical engagement with the tools. The participants' concerns primarily focused on issues of AI content accuracy and the risk of dependence on AI. These are not new concerns. Indeed, they have been identified extensively in the literature (e.g., Barrett & Pack, 2023; Moorhouse et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). However, it is good to see that multiple studies have found that L2 writers are sceptical of GenAI and have reservations about the use of GenAI. This suggests that L2 writers do not see these tools as omnipotent but fallible. Yet, this could also give them a false sense of empowerment, as their critical engagement may stop at the point of information accuracy and not go deeper into the inner workings of these tools and the subtle ways they may be influencing the users' thoughts and language use (Kuteeva & Andersson, 2024).

These findings support arguments for the need for L2 writers to develop CDL and adopt critical AI literacy practices (Darvin, 2025). L2 writers are only truly empowered if they have a critical awareness of how GenAI tools work (Darvin, 2025). When L2 writers understand how these tools work, they can go beyond the issues of accuracy and critique more carefully the hidden worldviews and subtle ways the tools may be influencing their text construction processes (Godwin-Jones, 2024). At the same time, they may see how these tools value specific varieties and forms of language over others (Kuteeva & Andersson, 2024). They can be more mindful of the ways their interactions with the tools shape the responses they receive (Jones & Hafner, 2021).

The participants of this study were new to the HE institution and may have had limited instruction on using GenAI. Their perceptions and uses likely drew on their previous experiences, media engagement, and the few early classes they had taken as part of their MEd. As instructors and students, we are conscious that they are unlikely to engage in deep discussions about the ideologies, inequities and other issues of power inherent in these tools during their post-graduate studies. Instead, our institutions' current focus has been on AI's pedagogical utility and safeguarding against plagiarism (Chan, 2024; Chan & Lee, 2023; Yeo, 2023). Adding to the calls from Darvin (2025), our study further highlights the need for L2 writing instruction to focus on helping learners understand how these systems work from an ideological perspective. Our study suggests that space needs to be found for CDL development at the post-graduate level, with instruction tailored to the level and literacy of the learners.

### 7.3. Ideologies and institutional mediation

Similar to digital tools, institutions, and instructors are also not neutral. They hold implicit biases and perspectives that may support or challenge specific worldviews and power structures. L2 writers need to navigate the ideologies that exist within their educational environment. Students may feel their use of AI is constrained or liberated by university policy, or at the same time, they are forced to adopt AI into their academic processes in response to instructors' beliefs and practices. We utilized the *preference identification task* to better understand how the L2 writers in this study navigated these complexities. Their responses provide novel insights into their own ideologies regarding the use of AI in academic writing.

The findings show that 'No-AI' policies are seen as constraining and prevent L2 writers from exercising control over their use of AI. Similarly, the 'compulsory use of AI' was only preferred by one student. L2 writers see both options as extreme, as they reduce their agency to use AI. The 'No-AI' policies also challenge their conceptions of fairness. As students pointed out, banning AI requires the ability to detect GenAI efficiently. However, some students were aware AI detection tools are unreliable, a view supported by experimental studies (e.g., Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Perkins et al., 2024), and therefore, they see banning AI as unfair as some students may still use it - giving the students who use it nefariously advantage. The clear preference for 'full AI', in contrast, was seen as fair as the choice and accountability lay with the students. There was also an overwhelming preference for the transparent use of GenAI. The preference for more open policies but with the need to declare aligns with the way the L2 writers position AI within their writing processes - as an assistive tool - but also sheds light on their concerns regarding the fairness of assessment practices, as well as, their sense of ethical and moral duty that declaring their use of AI is the right thing to according to the principles of academic integrity. It seems that for 'Full AI' to work in practice, students need to feel comfortable that they will not be judged negatively for honest declarations. This may require a shift in current ideologies and approaches in L2 academic writing policies, and HE practice more generally which seem to have created reluctance by students (and teachers) to share openly their uses of AI (Barnes & Tour, 2025; Gonsalves, 2024; Tan et al., 2025).

The L2 writers' responses suggested there were competing ideologies regarding the use of AI in their institutions, with some

instructors taking a supportive and encouraging stance, while others were more rigid and opposed to the use of GenAI. While it is understandable that there are different views towards GenAI use and L2 writing (Tan et al., 2025), such competing views do create a challenge for new postgraduate L2 students as they may need to adapt their AI use to meet the needs and beliefs of their instructors. At the same time, they may reject certain policies that they disagree with. This could potentially influence the student/instructor relationship (Barnes & Tour, 2025).

This study suggests that there is a need to revisit the way GenAI tools and their use in academic writing are positioned by some instructors so they better reflect the role they can play in L2 writers' academic writing processes. We believe that by taking a more open stance, e.g. 'Full AI', instructors and students can have more honest discussions about the 'what, why, and how of using GenAI in L2 academic writing'. At the same time, academic writing policies and practices will better reflect the development of AI tools, where the focus shifts to helping learners integrate them critically and strategically into writing processes. We believe activities such as the use of the *preference identification task* could provide important insights into the underlying ideologies language teachers and students hold towards GenAI. We encourage others to utilize it.

## 8. Conclusion

The study revealed how postgraduate L2 writers strategically negotiated/asserted control over the use of GenAI in the writing process. It showed that L2 writers believe they can maintain control of their interactions with GenAI tools and are empowered by them. Essentially, AI tools assist them in outperforming their own academic writing abilities. Yet, when analysed through the lens of CDL, it can be argued that this in fact a sense of 'false empowerment' where the tools give L2 writers the sense of empowerment, but, instead, due to the way the tools are constructed and operate, they can subtly influence the L2 writers' processes. Therefore, for L2 writers to be truly empowered, there needs to be a focus on CDL development within their postgraduate training (Darvin, 2025; Godwin-Jones, 2024). Indeed, postgraduate students are likely to have developed their own ideologies pertaining to AI tools before they begin their programmes through their own use of these tools or media engagement. While postgraduate L2 learners often get neglected in HES and receive limited academic writing training (Moorhouse & Wan, 2023), the advent of GenAI means critical academic writing training is now paramount and should be part of their programme orientations. The study also suggests that instructors need to explore ways to design assessment policies that provide L2 writers with the agency to choose to use AI tools or not without fear of negative judgment. Such policies may better reflect authentic AI use by L2 writers while providing greater space for critical discussions on the empowering and disempowering nature of GenAI.

The study was limited in scale and conducted in Hong Kong, a high-resource context where students have access to AI models through their institutions. This affects its transferability to other contexts. However, it acts as a useful starting point in understanding L2 writers' use of GenAI and, specifically, their views toward AI policies. There is a pressing need for similar studies to be conducted in different contexts to assist with our transition to an AI-augmented reality.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Benjamin Luke Moorhouse:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yuwei Wan:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Chenze Wu:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Meixin Wu:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Tsz Ying Ho:** Writing – original draft, Visualization.

## Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Grammarly in order to receive suggestions on language and style, in addition, GPT4. o was used to cross-check the coding of the interview data. We detail how the tool was used in the Methods section of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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## Declaration of competing interest

We have nothing to declare.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103779>.

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