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Article

Generative AI in L2 English Academic Writing: University Students' Perspectives on Autonomy and Human–AI Interaction

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Abstract
Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools are widely reported to improve writing quality and efficiency, yet their implications for autonomy, defined here as volitional, informed, and self-endorsed decision-making, remain underexplored. Drawing on an integrated Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Sociocultural Theory (SCT) framework, this study interviewed twenty second-language (L2) English learners in Hong Kong universities about how they perceive and report their interaction practices when using GenAI in L2 academic writing. Hybrid inductive/deductive thematic analysis of the interview data yielded six themes: selective and strategic deployment of GenAI; concerns about dependency; preservation of authorial voice; perceived benefits; critical evaluation of outputs; and awareness of institutional expectations. Learners described balancing efficiency against authentic authorship, editing or reframing AI-generated text to protect their voice, and treating GenAI as a peripheral rather than primary agent. From these reported practices we derived a heuristic of seven roles that learners ascribed to GenAI: text analyst, consultant, literature search/review instrument, tutor, creative aid, adversary, and conversational partner. Implications are drawn for pedagogy that treats GenAI as a mediational tool whose contributions must be subordinated to the writer's own intellectual agenda.

Keywords
English, Generative AI, university students, academic writing, L2 writing, learner autonomy

1 Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools, most notably ChatGPT, have been heralded as offering unprecedented opportunities for second language (L2) writing. They provide learners with real-time

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feedback on grammar, style, and content, improving textual quality and fluency (Wang, 2025). Do these gains extend beyond *writing* outcomes to foster *writer* outcomes or capacities that underpin sustainable competence?

Research on GenAI-assisted L2 writing has leaned heavily on textual quality, largely because it is easy to quantify and fits established assessment norms. By contrast, writer outcomes are harder to capture, hinging on internal processes of judgement and self-regulation that defy straightforward measurement. Prior work acknowledges GenAI's dual potential to reshape writing processes and redistribute creative control (Hysaj et al., 2025). GenAI supports brainstorming, drafting, and revision, but risks producing formulaic styles and diluting authorial voice (Wang, 2025). Writing is inherently dialogical, requiring negotiation between self, text, and audience (Prior, 2006). GenAI complicates this dialogical space by introducing a non-human interlocutor that may constrain independent judgement.

What remains unclear are the conditions under which GenAI is perceived to catalyse versus inhibit autonomy, defined in this study as learners' capacity to make volitional, informed, and self-endorsed decisions in planning, evaluating, and revising in L2 academic writing (Tanyeli Zeki & Kuter, 2018). Although autonomy is widely recognised as crucial for L2 development, it has received limited attention in studies of GenAI-assisted L2 writing. Existing work has generalised across skills (Tajmirriahi & Rezvani, 2021), examined related constructs such as empowerment (Moorhouse et al., 2025), ownership (Altalib, 2026), and self-regulated learning (Francis et al., 2025), or focused on earlier technologies, such as peer feedback systems (Shen et al., 2020) and automated error correction tools (Sánchez Calderón & da Cunha Fanego, 2023), which lack GenAI's capacity to generate extended, adaptive text on demand.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigated how L2 English learners perceive and report patterns of Human–AI interaction in GenAI-assisted L2 academic writing. We emphasise reported perceptions and practices because the study relies entirely on retrospective interviews. University students constitute a suitable cohort: positioned at the developmental stage marked by openness to experimenting with new technologies, they regularly face high-stakes academic writing tasks demanding adherence to disciplinary conventions, critical engagement, and argumentation skills. Their technological fluency and adaptability make them well-placed to engage meaningfully with GenAI.

2 Literature Review

2.1 GenAI tools and reconfiguration of academic writing practices

In academic contexts, where writing entails argument construction, source integration, and disciplinary conventions, GenAI supports drafting, bibliographic management, and summarisation. These affordances function as cognitive offloading, reducing routine burdens, extending access to resources, and enabling rapid iteration (Kohnke & Zou, 2026b). However, over-reliance risks eroding authorship, diminishing writing engagement, and undermining integrity (Niloy et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). Such concerns intensify in learning environments, where writing is not only a product but also a developmental practice. Through writing, learners cultivate higher-order skills (e.g. critical thinking, analysis, and decision-making) and construct authorial identity (Tajmirriahi & Rezvani, 2021). Outsourcing ideation and revision may weaken these formative benefits.

Research shows interactions with GenAI range from superficial, one-off use to iterative, strategic application (Kohnke & Zou, 2026a). Some learners rely on initial AI outputs with minimal critical engagement or revision, producing homogenised texts and blurred authorship (Doshi & Hauser, 2024). Others adopt iterative practices, refining prompts, critically evaluating outputs, and integrating content selectively. They demonstrate advanced prompt engineering by employing contextually rich, explicit prompts and engaging in multi-stage querying to elicit accurate responses (Lee & Palmer, 2025). Treating GenAI as collaborator, they engage in metacognitive practices: planning, self-monitoring, and

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negotiating meaning (Kim et al., 2026), which are associated with self-regulation and greater control over the writing process (Francis et al., 2025). Learners report increased confidence, self-efficacy, and independence, particularly when GenAI is deployed for iterative feedback and adaptive learning; self-regulated learning strategies correlate positively with effective GenAI use, improving the quality and efficiency of writing (Jin et al., 2025).

The actualisation of empowerment is mediated by AI literacy: learners with robust AI literacy engage critically, whereas those with limited literacy use tools more superficially (Kim et al., 2026). Institutional climate, manifested in policies, assessment practices, and instructor discourse, further shapes how learners navigate GenAI's affordances and constraints. In collaborative settings, GenAI facilitates deliberation and joint revision, enhancing functional adequacy of writing and critical engagement (Moorhouse et al., 2025).

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study integrates Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT; Vygotsky, 1978) into a unified framework. We adopt this dual framework because autonomy in GenAI-assisted writing cannot be adequately accounted for by exclusively psychological or exclusively sociocultural explanations; rather, it arises from the interaction of individual motivational processes and socially mediated practices.

From an SDT perspective, autonomy is one of three basic psychological needs (alongside competence and relatedness) that underpin intrinsic motivation and effective self-regulation. As applied to L2 writing, autonomy refers to acting with self-endorsement: setting personally meaningful goals, choosing aligned strategies, and regulating one's engagement. Competence refers to the felt sense of effectiveness in meeting writing demands; relatedness refers to feeling connected to, cared for by, and significant within one's learning community. These three needs function interdependently: autonomy is bolstered when learners feel capable (competence) and experience validation and connection (relatedness), and is weakened when learners feel ineffective or socially disconnected (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SCT perspective complements SDT by emphasising the socially mediated and culturally situated nature of writing. Autonomy develops through participation in collaborative meaning-making, guided participation, and engagement with cultural tools and discourse practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Prior, 2006). As a new mediational resource (Swain et al., 2015), GenAI influences how learners construct prompts, interpret and critique AI-generated text, and negotiate authorship and agency. In this integrated view, SDT supplies the motivational mechanism (why a learner endorses or resists a particular use of GenAI), while SCT supplies the mediational mechanism (how disciplinary norms, institutional discourses, and the material affordances of the tool shape the possibilities for that endorsement or resistance). Autonomy is therefore conceptualised not as a fixed individual trait but as a dynamic, context-sensitive property of the person–tool–context system.

This integration generates three analytic sensitising concepts that guided both data collection and interpretation: (1) volitional regulation – learners' reported sense of choice and self-endorsement when deciding whether, when, and how to use GenAI; (2) mediational positioning – how learners position GenAI relative to themselves, their disciplinary community, and institutional authority; and (3) need-supportive or need-thwarting conditions – features of the writing situation that learners experience as supporting or undermining autonomy, competence, or relatedness.

3 The Present Study

The study was guided by two research questions:

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1. How do university students perceive their sense of autonomy in GenAI-assisted L2 academic writing?
2. What patterns of Human–AI interaction do they report while using GenAI tools in L2 academic writing?

To address these questions, we employed a qualitative design informed by hybrid inductive/deductive thematic analysis (Proudfoot, 2023). This analytic strategy foregrounded participants' voices while situating their accounts within the integrated SDT–SCT framework, thereby enabling both theory-informed and theory-generative insights. Because the data consist solely of retrospective interviews, all findings are framed as perceptions and reported practices; they do not constitute observational evidence of actual enactment during writing.

3.1 Participants and context

Purposive sampling was applied using three inclusion criteria: (1) L2 English learners, (2) upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency, and (3) some familiarity with GenAI tools. These thresholds ensured competence in academic writing and focused reflections on GenAI use rather than language limitations, consistent with prior L2 writing research (Li & Yu, 2024).

Twenty participants (15 females), aged 18–35, were recruited via email and poster invitations across government-funded and self-financed universities in Hong Kong, China. As seen in Appendix A, they represented diverse programmes, offering perspectives from multiple disciplines within the same sociolinguistic milieu. All were enrolled in degree programmes requiring English academic writing, though with varying scope and intensity. Their first languages (L1) were primarily Mandarin or Cantonese, with two Urdu speakers. All had completed secondary education where English was taught as L2 or foreign language, and met entry requirements through standardised tests, which reliably indicate L2 writing competence. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. The sample's heterogeneity is treated as a resource for exploratory insight rather than a basis for systematic subgroup comparison.

3.2 Instrument

Consistent with qualitative traditions, interviews elicit emic perspectives, emphasising meanings, beliefs, and practices salient to the studied group (Greene, 2014). A semi-structured bilingual protocol (Appendix B) was designed to capture learners' views on autonomy during GenAI-assisted (notably ChatGPT) L2 academic writing and was externally validated by two applied linguistics experts. The protocol was constructed to operationalise the dimensions of autonomy derived from the integrated SDT–SCT framework. Questions 1–3 probe motivational orientations and histories of tool adoption (SDT autonomy and relatedness; SCT mediation). Questions 4–6 elicit concrete decision points about when and how to use GenAI, the learner's role relative to the tool, and the reasons for those choices (volitional regulation; mediational positioning). Questions 7–9 focus on critical evaluation and the balance between GenAI input and the learner's own thinking (competence as felt effectiveness; autonomy as self-endorsed reasoning). Questions 9–10 address concerns, limitations, and adaptive responses (need-thwarting conditions and regulatory strategies). Question 11 invites holistic reflection on influence, allowing synthesis across the three needs and the broader sociocultural ecology. Following interview guidelines (Roulston & Choi, 2018), content validity was expert-reviewed, with minor revisions made for clarity and precision. Face validity was tested via pilot interviews, informing adjustments to wording and sequencing. Reliability was supported by interviewer training and calibration while retaining a semi-structured flexibility.

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3.3 Data collection

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, The Education University of Hong Kong before data collection. All participants provided written informed consent. Data were collected through individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews via Zoom, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Chinese (predominantly Mandarin) (n=17) or English (n=3), according to participant preference. Some participants code-switched. After data collection, each participant received a supermarket coupon worth HK$200 as compensation.

3.4 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed using Zoom's automated transcription. Non-English transcripts (n=17) were translated into English by the second author, a native bilingual speaker (Chinese and English), who had conducted the interviews. Translation therefore constituted a major analytic step: to safeguard conceptual equivalence, the second author retained the original-language transcripts and consulted them whenever culturally or linguistically nuanced expressions, such as terms related to "voice," "laziness," or "being caught" appeared ambiguous in English.

NVivo 14 was used to organise and code the dataset. A hybrid thematic analysis (Proudfoot, 2023) combined inductive and deductive approaches. The analytic sequence started with familiarisation, wherein the first author immersed herself in iterative reading of all English transcripts and produced reflective memos on emerging tensions (e.g., efficiency versus self-reliance). Then, during inductive open coding, the first author coded the full English dataset line-by-line, generating descriptive codes grounded in participants' language (e.g., "afraid of becoming lazy," "add my own flavours"). Ambiguous segments were resolved by returning to the surrounding conversational context and the original-language transcript (in discussion with the second author). In deductive sensitising, codes were then mapped onto the three sensitising concepts derived from the SDT–SCT framework (volitional regulation, mediational positioning, need supportive/thwarting conditions). This mapping was iterative: some codes fit cleanly; others required refinement of the sensitising concepts themselves. Finally, during theme development and cross-case integration, the first and fourth authors independently reviewed the code-to-theme mapping for a subset of six transcripts, discussed divergences, and jointly refined the six superordinate themes. The remaining transcripts were then coded by the first author using the agreed framework; the fourth author audited a further random 25% of coded extracts. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. The coding framework itself evolved: two early provisional themes were collapsed and one new theme ("Awareness of institutional expectations") was elevated after the second round of cross-case comparison. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing memo-writing about the researchers' own assumptions concerning GenAI, authorship and autonomy.

4 Findings

The analysis yielded six recurring themes. Themes were developed through the hybrid process described above; prevalence is noted illustratively rather than as a quantitative threshold. Excerpts were selected for their capacity to illuminate the range of reported experiences and for their theoretical resonance with the SDT–SCT framework.

4.1 Selective and strategic deployment of GenAI

The first theme encapsulates participants' selective, context-dependent use of GenAI, negotiating efficiency with authentic authorship. Rationales vary across individuals and situations. Elsa (computer

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science) is unequivocal: "You can use AI to polish something but not translate… You can use it to add lustre to your homework, but you cannot let it directly generate your homework and then submit it." Her emphasis on polishing signals a disciplinary valuation of originality. GenAI assists her in debugging and idea generation but remains peripheral, reinforcing her self-concept as autonomous problem-solver. For Myron (biomedical sciences), selectivity is circumstantial: he uses GenAI as a grammar check and when "deep stuff" is not possible. Claudia (occupational therapy) turns to ChatGPT when "time is really tight" or when she "can't think of anything," using it to obtain structures before polishing with Grammarly. Both accounts reveal pragmatic orientations under time scarcity or fatigue. Melissa (early childhood education) frames use as quality assurance: "Everything I do should be perfect, so I need to show Poe what I wrote to feel relieved."

Nina (psychology) situates GenAI as an on-demand resource: "If I forget what growth mindset means during writing, I will ask [Poe]: "What are the top journals on this topic?" Then it lists some for me to use." She consolidates theoretical knowledge through consulting authoritative sources found by GenAI. Similarly, Amelia (supply chain management) integrates GenAI strategically, combining "definitions with what I learned from the textbook and put them directly into my paper." GenAI serves as a conceptual scaffold, but interpretative control remains with her, synthesising AI definitions with authoritative course materials. Sandra (language studies) adopts a principled, knowledge-contingent stance, using GenAI "if I am completely unfamiliar with the topic." She positions herself as a critically engaged writer whose legitimacy rests on her own command of subject matter.

Selective deployment of GenAI thus functions as identity negotiation, where learners balance autonomy, efficiency, and disciplinary legitimacy. From an SDT perspective, these reported practices represent volitional regulation, or self-endorsed decisions about when and how to integrate GenAI. SCT clarifies that autonomy is mediated by disciplinary norms and technological affordances, distributed across learners, peers, and GenAI as a cultural tool.

4.2 Concerns about GenAI dependency and overuse

Participants' accounts reveal a persistent ambivalence toward GenAI. While recognising its efficiency and linguistic precision, they fear habitual reliance could erode the valued skills and dispositions as learners, writers, professionals, and thinkers. William, a global business major, finds ChatGPT's ability to "explain something and insert some long and difficult sentences" attractive, yet worries "there is no process of diligent thinking" when using it.

Penny (language studies) echoes this concern differently. She acknowledges that tools like ChatGPT and Perplexity "can somewhat decrease my reading ability" because "if you read less, your reading ability would naturally decline." Yet she accepts the trade-off: "But the time saved can allow me to focus on other tasks, which I think is still acceptable, although my ability might decline a little." William emphasises reasoning, while Penny focuses on maintaining literacy; both are engaged in a cost-benefit calculus.

Elsa adds an ethical dimension. Fearing becoming "dependent" or "lazy," she initially avoided GenAI for several months but later used it for an ethics and intellectual property assignment: "I just found an English-medium article, uploaded it to ChatGPT and then combined it with my own similar ideas in Chinese. Then, I used the editing software to make some modifications." Elsa's account also reveals a professional identity under threat, where dependency is not only a cognitive concern but a potential career vulnerability: "If GPT will stop working one day, I would be finished."

Linda (early childhood education) calls ChatGPT a "double-edged sword." While helpful for ideas, vocabulary, and grammar, it "wears away your creativity, imagination, and logical ability." Charlotte (education) cautions that if humans believe AI's ideas are "so powerful" and "so much better than us," we risk "giving AI the privilege and the upper hand," leading to "AI replacing our critical thinking."

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These accounts reveal a shared pattern: participants weigh convenience against integrity, efficiency against self-reliance. Concerns extend beyond classrooms into employability, credibility, and sustainability of expertise, entangled with values (creativity, diligence), roles (industry professional, academic writer), and contexts (academic pressures, industry exposure). Importantly, the fears they voice are perceptions, as the interview data cannot establish whether reading ability, creativity, or critical thinking actually declined. The theme is therefore presented as evidence of perceived threat to autonomy and competence rather than evidence of skill erosion.

4.3 Preservation of authorial voice

Another theme is the preservation of authorial voice and originality amid GenAI's prevalence. Charlotte frames GenAI as a responsive interlocutor rather than a creative originator, insisting: "I do not let AI replace my original ideas… I will rather give AI my own ideas, and prompt it: These are my ideas. Look if they sound right or not." For her, authorship means idea generation, whereas GenAI serves as evaluator. Amelia shares this stance but enacts it differently, "forc[ing] [her]self to write a first draft" before involving GenAI. This ensures that "the whole thing" is not built by AI and reflects a process-oriented conception of authorship, where the first draft is a protected cognitive space for self-expression.

Sandra fears her work may become indistinguishable from others' if heavily AI-mediated. Her cyclical phrasing reflects anxiety and the fragile process of consolidating academic voice during undergraduate years: "I am afraid that what I write is the same what others write. […] I hope it is more unique. […] So, I am worried that I don't have my own elements… what ChatGPT generates will not be own thing."

Yvonne (economics and finance) highlights collective risks, imagining peers inputting "the same question" into identical tools (e.g. Poe), producing textual convergence. She insists on altering AI-generated output to "add my own flavours… that would make it my work rather than AI's." Claudia similarly refuses to cede intellectual ground: "I won't ask it [ChatGPT] to give me something about a certain topic. Instead, I will just give it my opinion on that topic, so it [ChatGPT] will not affect my ideas."

Fiona (sociology and community studies) sees GenAI's role in extracting ideas "instead of taking the whole paragraph" but reworks outputs in different words, condemning uncritical adoption as academically risky. Violet (occupational therapy) treats GenAI as one interlocutor among many, paralleling humans and GenAI as sources of viewpoints: "I might ask it [GenAI] what it thinks. But after asking people, I won't have the same understanding as them, because I think my understanding of articles or reading and interpretation is different from others."

Preserving authorial voice emerges as a lived commitment tied to identity as emerging academic writers: some protect fragile voices amid waves of anxiety and reassurance, while others, speaking from relative security, position GenAI as a benign interlocutor. Within the integrated framework this practice enacts both volitional regulation (choosing to protect one's own ideation) and mediational positioning (treating GenAI as evaluator or interlocutor rather than originator).

4.4 Perceived benefits of GenAI tools

Participants describe how GenAI enhances efficiency and confidence in L2 academic writing. For Amelia, it aids concept definition, stylistic polish, and argument analysis. She uses ChatGPT to "see if the context of the whole paper is correct" and to "hand in the assignment with confidence," likening outputs to shipments requiring verification before release. Her sensitivity to "passive voice" and "cumbersome" phrasing reflects a professional ethos of clarity and concision, positioning GenAI as a refinement tool that reinforces her identity as a competent, detail-oriented writer.

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William (global business) values decisive communication under time pressure. His view that ChatGPT "gives me what I want 80% to 90% of the time" reflects a satisficing threshold: near-fit outputs restore progress, with refinement left to him. George (nursing) similarly emphasises efficiency, noting the "definitely accelerated English writing," positioning productivity and tempo as key metrics.

Jessica (global development and sustainability) frames GenAI as a pedagogical model, offering "glimpses of ways of writing" she can emulate. Unlike Amelia's retrospective quality control, Jessica uses outputs prospectively to internalise discourse conventions: "[…] first, to state the point of view, then give examples, and then quote what others say, and finally summarise."

Ben (Chinese language education) employs ChatGPT "sometimes… when it comes to matters related to teaching methods." He uses it to review lengthy English documents. Comparing search engines that return "hundreds of things with low relevance" to ChatGPT's "several detailed categories," he positions GenAI as a noise-reducing filter to focus on interpretive and pedagogical decisions.

Yvonne describes GenAI as transformative. Recalling Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)-driven learning, she notes, "you had to memorise a lot of, like, vocabs because you have to write a lot of sentence structures, like the formats." In contrast, university study is experienced as liberation, with GenAI described as a "hope device." Her account is suffused with empowerment and relief, signalling a shift from compliance to active participation: "Ask question, you get it [the answer] immediately… You can ask AI to give you a sample or the structure, and it gives you answers directly."

Participants highlight GenAI's negotiated benefits: efficiency under constraint, cutting through informational noise to streamline the writing process, liberation from rote tasks, scaffolding and modelling of discourse, and restoration of momentum. These reported benefits are interpreted as experiences of need support: GenAI was perceived to facilitate competence (felt effectiveness under constraint) and, for some, autonomy (greater control over pace and resource selection).

4.5 Critical evaluation of AI-generated outputs

Across participants' accounts, critical evaluation of AI-generated content emerges not simply as a safeguard but as a performance of competence in academic writing. By interrogating, cross-referencing, and verifying outputs, participants enact technical skill and epistemic confidence in judging credibility and relevance.

For Ronald (social and public policy), "battling" with AI reflects argumentative rigour and wariness of shortcuts. His insistence on interrogating "each part" positions engagement as adversarial, echoing disciplinary emphasis on debate, "I would start to pretend to have problems with it and start to battle with it." He warns that GenAI's fabricated sources "waste a lot of time" and privileges integrity over efficiency.

Yvonne recalls disillusionment after encountering "fake… made up references." Once open to GenAI, she now treats it with suspicion: "You have to be very careful… especially if you're going to cite something." Her account underscores belief that credibility is earned through personal labour, not delegated, positioning GenAI as a liability to academic reputation.

Nancy (mathematics) approaches verification through precision, triangulating outputs with Google search results and traditional reading: "I should have an understanding of those concepts and be able to tell whether it is actually relevant or just nonsense." Her stance reflects autonomy grounded in knowledge mastery. Nina locates authority externally, treating Google Scholar as arbiter and gatekeeper of scholarly authority: if references appear, they are "real"; if not, "fake." Claudia adopts an investigative approach: "I will ask it [ChatGPT] to give me the original link… I would click on the link to take a look." Unlike Nancy, she does not appeal to mastery, nor does she presume databases are infallible. Instead, she demonstrates cautious curiosity ("show me the source, and I will look"), a modest yet empowered discretion.

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Across cases, critical evaluation functions as meaning-making practice: protecting identity and enacting disciplinary epistemologies. Participants refuse to accept GenAI outputs at face value, reflecting a shared assertion of autonomy in the face of algorithmic opacity. Competence is enacted through confrontation, recovery, mastery, institutional trust, or adaptive discretion. Within the SDT–SCT framework, critical evaluation enacts competence as felt effectiveness in judging credibility, and autonomy as self-endorsed refusal to accept algorithmic output at face value. It also illustrates mediational positioning: learners recruit additional cultural tools (search engines, scholarly databases, personal knowledge) to regulate GenAI's contribution.

4.6 Awareness of institutional expectations and academic standards

Participants reveal acute awareness of institutional expectations, particularly regarding academic integrity and plagiarism, underscoring their sense of belonging to the academic community.

Elsa recalls AI policy enforcement in her course: "Our teacher detected that some of students had an AI rate of 6%, or less than 10%." Her account illustrates sensitivity to surveillance and faculty authority, where even minimal traces provoke dispute. She also questions contradictions in permissible tools: "[T] ools like Grammarly are also AI tools… can we use AI or not, after all?" This ambiguity creates a liminal space where students exploit policy gaps: "I took advantage of the fact that the school had not yet banned the use of GPT… many of my friends and I also took advantage of this loophole." Such actions reveal students negotiating dual identities, namely compliant learners and resourceful writers, asserting agency during regulatory uncertainty.

Stephanie (nursing) frames her use of GenAI as minimal ("about 30 words" in a paragraph of "more than 1,000 words"), defending proportionality as moral justification. Yet her account is suffused with anxiety: "I was worried that the professor would say that I was plagiarising, and whether my AI [rate] would be very high or not." Yvonne similarly foregrounds the risk of "being caught." Her academic writing practice is directed toward not an abstract reader but institutional actors, such as course instructors, programme leaders, or university administrators, who have sanctioning authority. She describes detection scores and GenAI's stylistic "tells" ("weirder vocab," "big vocab"), which she mitigates with "more human language." Her account suggests a micro-culture of shared strategies, where learners navigate thresholds to comply with institutional policy.

George's reflection emphasises his major's norms: "We cannot copy the entire content written by ChatGPT. We still have to add a lot of what we have learned and understood in lecture." His reflection conveys a field-specific ethic of synthesis and mastery, tempered by awareness that stricter enforcement exists elsewhere ("other colleges and universities have more such situations").

These accounts show that awareness of institutional expectations is dynamic, shaped by disciplinary contexts and emotional registers. Integrity remains non-negotiable, yet orientations diverge, from exploiting policy ambiguity to proportionate tool use and vigilant self-monitoring. Within the integrated framework, institutional discourses function as mediational means that shape the possibilities for autonomous action; anxiety about surveillance is not treated as evidence of relatedness (which concerns feeling connected and valued) but as a need-thwarting condition that learners actively regulate.

5 Discussion

5.1 Perceptions of autonomy (RQ1)

Learners perceive GenAI as a facilitator of autonomy at the outset of L2 writing tasks, enabling them to set self-initiated goals, choose resources, and regulate pace. They value its capacity to surface diverse perspectives and clarifications, which helps them decide what to pursue and how to proceed. Rather

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than viewing GenAI as directive, learners experience greater control over task definition and strategy selection. They also report that GenAI enhances L2 academic writing efficiency and quality in bounded ways, such as clarifying complex concepts, generating ideas, providing examples, paraphrasing, and correcting grammar. These findings align with prior research highlighting GenAI's affordances in L2 writing, including real-time feedback, language-related suggestions, and content generation (Wang, 2025; Kim et al., 2026). Learners use GenAI selectively, positioning it as a peripheral collaborator rather than a primary author, reflecting a volitional, self-determined approach consistent with SDT's emphasis on intentional engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

At the same time, learners raise apprehensions that GenAI's instant solutions risk curtailing autonomy by discouraging sustained inquiry and eroding essential cognitive skills. They acknowledge that convenience fosters dependency and poses professional risks, potentially undermining credibility and employability. Some deliberately prioritise efficiency over skill maintenance, while others recognise potential negative consequences (e.g. gradual atrophy of reading skills) but downplay them (Saluja et al., 2025). These fears are important perceptions, though the interview data cannot establish whether the skills actually deteriorated.

In response, learners report autonomy-preserving strategies. Some emphasise that their ideas and ways of thinking are distinctively human, rooted in lived experience and personal insight. To protect their voice, they draft independently before turning to GenAI for revision-oriented support (Wang, 2025), selectively incorporating feedback while rephrasing AI-generated content to align with their stance and style. Others feed opinions into GenAI to gather supporting evidence while dodging counterarguments that might disrupt their thinking. They attempt to engage in substantial reworking to ensure linguistic and conceptual ownership, even when integrating AI-generated material. These practices reveal autonomy as a curatorial process of resistance and reassertion, wherein learners safeguard their intellectual agency. Similar patterns appear in broader tertiary contexts, where students often input pre-formed opinions and request supporting references but rarely solicit counterarguments unless guided (Kim et al., 2026).

Institutional policies and perceived surveillance further shape reported autonomy. Learners are apprehensive about AI-detection software and the risk of being flagged for inauthentic work. They attribute elevated AI scores to lexical and syntactic features of AI-generated outputs and replace sophisticated vocabulary with simpler alternatives to appear more human-written. They also report a perceived double standard: tools like Grammarly, which include generative features, are permitted, while GenAI tools per se are explicitly prohibited. This ambiguity prompts cautious use, with some learners following tacit rules of synthesising lecture content and relying on their own thinking rather than copy-pasting outputs. Extant research demonstrates that policy ambiguity is endemic in higher education, often couched in vague terms or left open to instructor discretion, creating a fragmented landscape students must navigate (Gonsalves, 2025).

In sum, perceived autonomy in GenAI-assisted L2 academic writing is fluid and situational, expanding and contracting depending on how learners position GenAI. Some experience heightened control over goal-setting, resource selection, and workflow management, using GenAI to accelerate idea generation, clarify concepts, and refine linguistic accuracy. Others' autonomy is tempered by awareness of dependency risks, fears of skill erosion, and homogenising tendencies of AI prose. Learners recognise that the same affordances that streamline work can also short-circuit deeper engagement and narrow opportunities for critical thinking. Autonomy is framed as a vulnerable state requiring active protection against technological comfort. Learners adopt autonomy-preserving strategies: drafting independently before consulting GenAI, rephrasing outputs to maintain authorial voice, and critically interrogating AI-generated content for accuracy, relevance, and stylistic fit. These practices reveal autonomy as an active process of curation and resistance, where learners assert ownership over ideas and language. Institutional contexts further mediate these strategies, with policy ambiguities and detection threats compelling learners to balance compliance with creativity, cautiously leveraging GenAI while aligning with expectations.

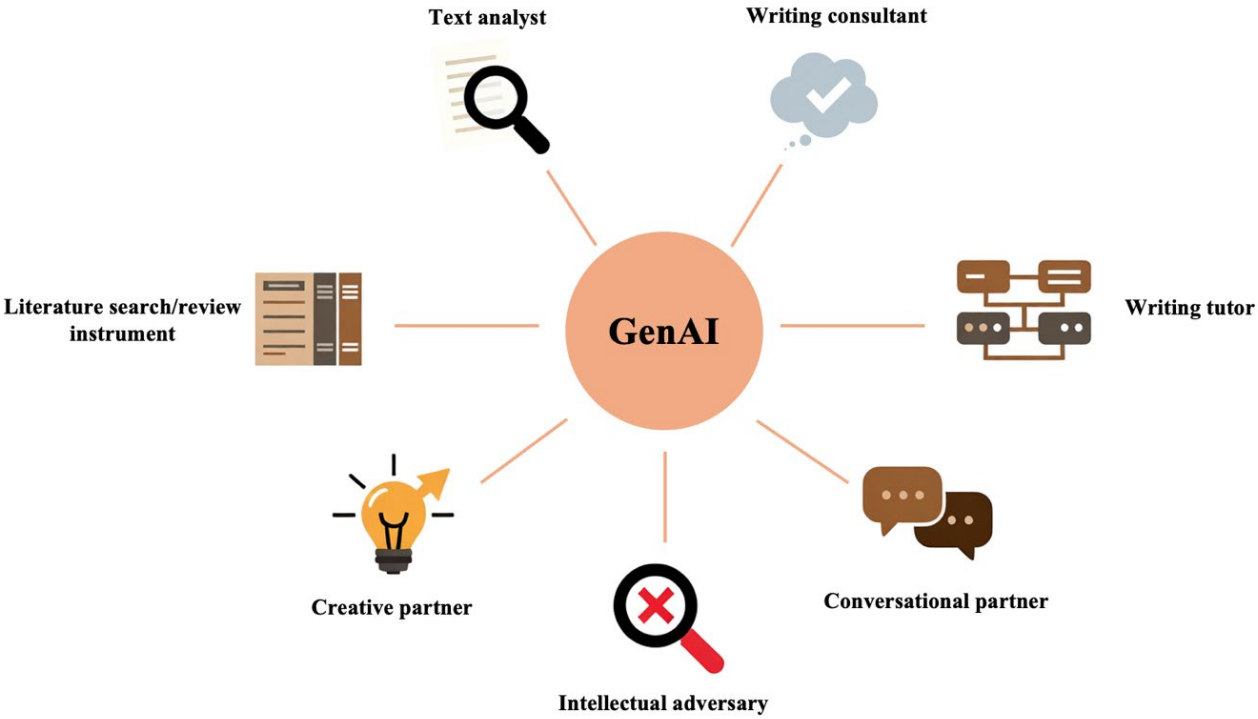
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These patterns also illustrate the analytic value of the integrated SDT–SCT framework. SDT accounts for the motivational dynamics of endorsement and resistance, while SCT accounts for the mediational conditions (disciplinary norms, institutional discourses and tool affordances) that make particular forms of endorsement possible or costly. The three sensitising concepts (volitional regulation, mediational positioning and need-supportive/thwarting conditions) bridge the two theories and link research questions, codes, themes and claims.

5.2 Reported patterns of Human–AI interaction (RQ2)

Several patterns of Human–AI interaction emerge in L2 academic writing. Learners' reliance on GenAI and the type of support sought, ranging from analytical processing and idea generation to structural guidance, literature search, and critical debate, reflect a negotiation between efficiency and compliance with academic standards of authorship. From these reported practices we derived a heuristic of seven roles that learners ascribed to GenAI. The heuristic is not proposed as a formal taxonomy with mutually exclusive, exhaustive categories; rather, it is an organising device that captures the multifunctional ways learners described positioning the tool (Figure 1). Boundaries between roles are porous: a conversational partner may simultaneously function as consultant or adversary. The classification principle is the learners' reported communicative or functional stance toward the tool.

Figure 1
Heuristic of Reported GenAI Roles in L2 Academic Writing



One prominent pattern involves learners strategically integrating GenAI into the pre-writing stage. Here, GenAI functions as a text analyst, breaking down complex ideas into digestible pieces and clarifying readings (Hasebe & Lee, 2025). In individual cases this practice appeared in second- or third-year L2 learners in majors with heavy conceptual demands, where rapid clarity is essential before writing begins; given the sample composition, such patterning is noted illustratively rather than as a systematic developmental claim. Another pattern centres on idea refinement. Learners with more advanced L2

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academic writing experience reported drafting essays first, then prompting GenAI to brainstorm additional concepts. They weighed whether to incorporate these suggestions, balancing originality with institutional expectations. Thus, GenAI acts as a writing consultant prompted to refine or expand ideas. In research-based assignments, this sequence reverses: GenAI functions as a literature search/review instrument. Learners locate or upload articles for summarisation and integrate their own reflections. Yet students recognise limitations: references may be inaccurate, and outputs are treated as provisional leads subject to verification in academic databases. Experienced writers cross-check AI suggestions against authoritative sources or internalised conceptual frameworks.

Structural guidance constitutes another common use. Early-year learners, adept at generating ideas but less confident in organisation, consult GenAI to refine thoughts and ensure adherence to disciplinary conventions. Here, GenAI acts as a writing tutor, modelling genre expectations and signalling argument progression. It also serves as a creative partner, helping overcome impasses and sustain momentum in academic writing (Niloy et al., 2024). Some learners, however, position GenAI as an intellectual adversary, challenging its outputs through cross-referencing (e.g. Google Search, Google Scholar) as well as personal judgment. Disciplinary training shapes this scrutiny in individual accounts: learners in debate-oriented fields probe for argumentative weaknesses, while those in precision-driven disciplines verify definitions, data, and references.

Finally, GenAI is anthropomorphised as conversational partner. Learners "ask what AI thinks," treating it as an interlocutor shaping discussions and perspectives, even if its contributions are later disregarded (Liu et al., 2024). This tendency is pronounced in accounts from applied fields, where training emphasises empathy and collaborative problem-solving. Dialoguing with GenAI was described as supporting the development of professional identities grounded in perspective-taking and interaction.

These roles map onto the six themes as follows. Selective deployment (Theme 1) is enacted through the consultant, tutor, and creative-aid roles. Dependency concerns (Theme 2) arise especially when the tool is positioned as primary rather than peripheral. Authorial-voice preservation (Theme 3) is achieved by subordinating the consultant and creative-aid roles to the writer's own ideation. Perceived benefits (Theme 4) correspond to the analyst, tutor, and literature search/review instrument roles. Critical evaluation (Theme 5) is the hallmark of the adversary role. Institutional awareness (Theme 6) constrains all roles by requiring learners to keep GenAI's contribution within policy boundaries. Disciplinary background and year of study appeared to colour reported practices in individual cases, but the sample size and composition do not support systematic claims about developmental or disciplinary variation. Such patterning is noted illustratively and awaits confirmation in larger, purposively stratified designs.

6 Conclusion

This study contributes a situated, learner-centred account of how university L2 English learners in Hong Kong perceive autonomy and report their interaction practices when navigating GenAI within and across the stages of academic writing. Rather than treating autonomy as a fixed individual trait, our findings recast it as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct, one that is continuously negotiated as learners orchestrate human and technological resources. GenAI, in this framing, is a multifunctional mediational agent whose epistemic, linguistic, and affective roles fluctuate across writing stages, disciplinary expectations, institutional constraints, and learners' evolving expertise.

A particularly striking finding is the epistemic shift learners report in their relationship with information processing and knowledge acquisition. Participants construct a clear before-and-after narrative around the arrival of ChatGPT: L2 English learning, once characterised by rote memorisation and prescribed materials, is now experienced as more exploratory and self-directed. Learners describe turning to GenAI on demand, often in lieu of assigned materials, to access diverse perspectives, deepen understanding, and integrate broader disciplinary insights into their writing. This shift carries significant

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implications for what it means to learn to write in a second language when the boundaries between sourcing, synthesising, and generating information are increasingly porous. Because the design is cross-sectional and relies on retrospective self-report, the narrative is treated as a perception of change rather than as evidence of measured developmental transformation.

In individual cases, more experienced learners demonstrated heightened criticality in evaluating, adapting, and sometimes rejecting AI-generated content, suggesting that the capacity for principled GenAI use is itself a form of academic maturation. This observation challenges deficit-oriented framings of GenAI reliance and instead points to the importance of scaffolded, discipline-sensitive pedagogies that cultivate discernment over time. Given the sample composition, however, such patterning remains illustrative.

Pedagogically, the findings call for interventions that position GenAI explicitly as a peripheral collaborator, whose contributions must be interrogated, negotiated, and subordinated to the writer's own intellectual agenda. Structured drafting protocols that require independent ideation prior to GenAI consultation can help preserve authorial voice, while reflective tasks that prompt learners to document their decision-making around AI-generated content can make visible the selective adoption, adaptation, and rejection processes that underpin critical use. In this sense, critical GenAI literacy emerges not as an add-on to existing digital literacies, but as an academic skill on par with information literacy, requiring the same rigour of interrogation regarding provenance, reliability, and bias. Given the disciplinary and developmental variation observed in learners' GenAI practices, such interventions should not be generic. Discipline-specific scaffolding that exposes learners to the evaluative criteria of their own fields, including what counts as acceptable evidence, appropriate hedging, or legitimate source use, can sharpen their capacity to judge AI-generated content against situated standards rather than surface fluency alone.

While the study offers novel insights into perceived autonomy and reported practices in L2 academic writing, it is not without limitations. Reliance on self-reported data inevitably invites the risk of social desirability bias and selective recall; interviews cannot establish how autonomy is actually enacted during writing or identify interaction patterns with behavioural validity. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions and practices at one point, constraining developmental inferences. To address these gaps, future research should continue to move toward longitudinal and multimodal methodologies, such as keystroke logging, screen-capture analysis, think-aloud protocols, and analysis of prompt–output sequences, that can trace how autonomy-preserving strategies in GenAI-assisted L2 writing emerge, consolidate, or erode over time. While promising work in this direction is already beginning to appear, much of it has paid limited attention to autonomy as a construct in its own right. Sustained, larger-scale adoption of such approaches, with autonomy as an explicit analytical focus, would yield a more granular understanding of the real-time cognitive and linguistic processes that self-report data alone cannot reveal, and would help bridge the gap between what learners say they do and what they actually do when writing with GenAI.

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Ethics and Consent

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, The Education University of Hong Kong (Ref. no. 2024-2025-0539). All participants provided written informed consent prior to involvement in the study.

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Appendix A. Demographics of the Participants of the Study

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	English proficiency test(s), score(s)	Year	Major	L1	L2	L3
Melissa	24	F	IELTS, 6	4	Early childhood education	Cantonese	Mandarin	English
Nina	35	F	IELTS, 6.5	1	Educational psychology	Mandarin	English	-
Ben	19	M	Gaokao, 121	2	Chinese language education	Mandarin	Cantonese	English
Linda	21	F	IELTS, 7	5	Early childhood education	Mandarin	English	Cantonese
Fiona	22	F	IELTS, 7	4	Sociology and community studies	Cantonese	Mandarin / English	Mandarin / English
Nancy	23	F	IELTS, 6.5	5	Math	Mandarin	English	Cantonese
Penny	21	F	IELTS, 6; HKDSE, 3	4	Language studies	Cantonese	Mandarin	English
Violet	18	F	HKDSE, 5	1	Occupational therapy	Mandarin	English	-
George	18	M	HKDSE, 4	1	Nursing	Cantonese	English	Mandarin
Claudia	20	F	HKDSE, 4	2	Occupational therapy	Cantonese	English	-
Stephanie	19	F	IELTS, 7; HKDSE, 4	1	Nursing	Cantonese	Mandarin	English
Ronald	19	M	HKDSE, 3	1	Social and public policy studies	Cantonese	English	-
Elsa	21	F	Gaokao, 136	4	Computer science	Mandarin	English	-
William	23	M	IELTS, 7.5	3	Global business	Cantonese	English	Korean
Jessica	19	F	Password Test, 6.5	1	Global development and sustainability	Mandarin	English	Cantonese
Charlotte	23	F	HKDSE, 5	4	Education	Urdu	English	Chinese
Yvonne	19	F	HKDSE, 5*	1	Economics and finance	Urdu	English	Cantonese
Amelia	23	F	IELTS, 6.5	4	Supply chain management	Chinese	English	-
Sandra	23	F	IELTS, 7.5; HKDSE, 4	5	Language studies	Cantonese	English	Mandarin
Myron	20	M	IELTS, 7.5; HKDSE, 5*	3	Biomedical sciences	Cantonese	English	Mandarin

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Appendix B. Bilingual Interview Protocol of the Study

No.	Question in English	Question in Simplified Chinese	Theoretical rationale
1.	On average, how long do you spend on ChatGPT?	你平均每天在 ChatGPT 上花费多长时间？	Probe volitional engagement (SDT autonomy), perceived capability (competence), and social influences on adoption (relatedness), and tool mediation (SCT).
2.	When and how did you start using ChatGPT?	你是在什么时候以及如何开始使用 ChatGPT 的？	
3.	What motivates you to use ChatGPT?	你使用 ChatGPT 的动机是什么？	
4.	Which features of ChatGPT do you use often? What are the features that you like or dislike? Why?	你经常使用 ChatGPT 的哪些功能？你喜欢或不喜欢的功能是什么？为什么？	Operationalise autonomy as strategic control over the writing process; elicit mediational positioning (how the learner divides labour between self and GenAI); capture reported decision points.
5.	When writing English essays (completing assignments in English), how do you decide when and how to use ChatGPT to assist with your assignments? What factors influence this decision-making process?	在完成英文作业或写作的时候，你是如何决定什么时候以及如何使用 ChatGPT 的？有哪些因素影响你的决策过程？	
6.	Can you give specific examples of using ChatGPT to help with your English academic writing? How did ChatGPT help you, and what was your role in the process? Why did you do it that way?	你能举出具体的例子，说明你如何使用 ChatGPT 来辅助你进行英文学术写作的吗？ ChatGPT 如何帮助你，以及你在这个过程中的作用或者扮演的角色是什么？为什么选择这样做？	
7.	When using ChatGPT to assist with your academic writing, how do you evaluate the reliability or accuracy of the outputs generated by ChatGPT? Do you cross-reference the information or seek additional sources to verify the results, and how?	当你使用 ChatGPT 来辅助你的学术写作时，你如何评估 ChatGPT 生成的内容是否可靠或准确？你是否会交叉参考信息或寻求其他来源来验证 ChatGPT 生成的结果，具体是如何做的？	Target competence as metacognitive monitoring and felt effectiveness; autonomy as self-endorsed reasoning; SCT mediation by examining integration of AI outputs with other resources.
8.	Do you think ChatGPT enhances or hinders your ability to critically evaluate the literature? Why? How do you balance the use of ChatGPT with your own critical thinking in academic writing?	你觉得 ChatGPT 增强还是阻碍了你用批判性思维去阅读文献的能力？为什么？你如何在使用 ChatGPT 辅助学术写作的过程中去平衡 ChatGPT 输出的内容和你自己的批判性思考？	

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No.	Question in English	Question in Simplified Chinese	Theoretical rationale
9.	Are there any concerns that arise when using ChatGPT to assist with your academic writing? How do you address these concerns in your usage?	在使用 ChatGPT 来辅助你的学术写作时，你会有什么顾虑吗？你如何在使用过程中应对这些顾虑呢？	Address need-thwarting conditions (dependency fears, skill-erosion worries, surveillance anxiety) and regulatory strategies learners deploy in response.
10.	Have you ever encountered any limitations or challenges when using ChatGPT to assist with your academic writing? How did you overcome them? Did it affect your decision to use the tool in future situations?	在使用 ChatGPT 辅助学术写作时，你是否遇到过任何限制或挑战？你是如何克服它们的？这有没有影响你在未来情况下决定是否继续使用该工具？	
11.	Overall, how do you think ChatGPT has influenced your academic writing process?	总的来说，你认为 ChatGPT 对你学术写作的过程有怎样的影响？	Invite holistic reflection permitting synthesis across the three psychological needs and the sociocultural ecology of writing.

Appendix C. Coding Matrix of the Study

Participant quote (example)	Initial codes	Emergent subtheme	Superordinate theme	SDT–SCT sensitising concept
"I only use ChatGPT for polishing, and I won't use it to do the whole homework." (Amelia)	Selective AI use; Maintaining authorship	Controlled integration of AI	Selective and strategic deployment of GenAI	Volitional regulation (autonomy)
"I was afraid of becoming dependent on it… afraid of becoming lazy." (Elsa)	Fear of over-reliance; Self-regulation	Managing dependency risk	Concerns about dependency	Need-thwarting condition (autonomy and competence)
"I will adapt the sentence according to my own understanding, or not use the grammar, and then express it in my own words." (William)	Paraphrasing AI output; Personalisation	Modification for personal style	Preservation of authorial voice	Volitional regulation and mediational positioning
"I may ask GPT some questions based on the knowledge from my lectures. And so therefore, how I know the answer is incorrect is I checked with my notes." (Myron)	Cross-checking AI output; Accuracy verification	Quality control in AI use	Critical evaluation of outputs	Competence (felt effectiveness) and mediational positioning

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Participant quote (example)	Initial codes	Emergent subtheme	Superordinate theme	SDT–SCT sensitising concept
"I will let GPT help me analyze the content of the class, and then I will make a mind map myself." (Ronald)	Analytical scaffold; Personal follow-up	Strategic scaffolding	Perceived benefits of GenAI	Competence support and mediational tool use
"The university later said that there is a monitoring AI thing… so I will also spend time to rephrase it." (Fiona)	Monitoring threat; Rephrasing requirement	Surveillance awareness	Awareness of institutional expectations	Mediational condition (SCT) that may thwart autonomy

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