

Reclaiming Voice: Student Ownership in AI-Assisted Academic Writing in an EMI Context

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Abstract

As generative AI tools become more common in student writing, teachers in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts are facing new questions about authorship and ownership. While AI can produce writing that appears academically appropriate, it is not clear how students understand their role when working with AI-generated text. This study examines how multilingual undergraduate students define and assert ownership when comparing and revising AI output. The data come from a four-day mini-term course in China where students compared their own writing with AI versions, revised AI sentences, and reflected on what authorship means in AI-assisted writing. Using Ivanič and Camps' (2001) framework of textual, ideational, and interpersonal positioning, the study analyzes how students' revision choices align with their written reflections on ownership. The findings show that students most often define ownership as making deliberate rhetorical decisions, particularly about tone and intention. Revisions related to audience and stance were the clearest indicators of ownership. The study suggests that structured comparison and revision tasks can help students develop a stronger sense of voice and agency when using AI.

Keywords: AI-assisted writing, authorial voice, student ownership, EMI, rhetorical positioning

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Introduction

Generative AI tools are now widely used in student writing. Many students rely on AI to generate drafts, improve language, or help them meet academic expectations. While these tools can support writing development, they also raise important questions about authorship and ownership. This is particularly relevant in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts, where multilingual students are writing in a second or additional language while also developing their academic identities.

Research in second language writing has long argued that voice is not simply personal expression but develops through the rhetorical choices writers make in their texts (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Writers represent themselves through style, ideas, and stance toward readers. In EMI contexts, students must often balance institutional academic norms with their own linguistic and cultural identities (Tardy, 2012). When AI produces text, it becomes important to ask how students understand their own role in shaping that text.

Research Questions

This study examines how students evaluate AI-generated writing and how they define authorship when revising AI-assisted text. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students assert ownership of AI-assisted writing when comparing their own writing with AI-generated text?
2. What factors influence how students express their individual voice (such as tone, ideas, and stance toward readers) when revising AI-generated writing?

This study explores these questions by examining how multilingual undergraduate students define and assert ownership when comparing and revising AI-generated writing. Rather than assuming that AI reduces student voice, the study examines how students decide when an AI-assisted text becomes their own.

Literature Review

Ivanič and Camps (2001) describe voice as self-representation in writing, shaped through three forms of positioning; textual, ideational, and interpersonal. *Textual positioning* refers to how writers present themselves through stylistic and structural choices. *Ideational positioning* involves alignment with ideas, beliefs, or lived experience. *Interpersonal positioning* concerns how writers manage stance and their relationship with readers. This framework emphasizes that voice emerges through rhetorical choices writers make in response to context rather than as a fixed personal quality.

This understanding of voice as socially constructed has been reinforced in later research on second language writing. Studies show that voice develops through rhetorical choices shaped by genre, disciplinary expectations, and awareness of audience (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007). Later work has further emphasized how voice is constructed and interpreted within academic contexts (Tardy, 2012). Rather than being a purely personal trait, voice reflects how writers position themselves within particular writing situations. In EMI settings, multilingual writers often negotiate tensions between sounding “academic” and sounding authentic (Canagarajah, 2015). Writing therefore becomes a space where identity, authority, and institutional expectations intersect.

These tensions have become particularly visible with the emergence of generative AI tools in writing. With the rise of Gen-AI capable of producing coherent academic texts, new debates have emerged about authorship, agency, and originality. Some research argues that AI complicates traditional understandings of originality because it can generate fluent text that resembles academic writing (Kasneji et al., 2023). However, comparison and revision tasks may encourage students to critically evaluate and reshape generated text rather than accept it uncritically. Research on AI-supported writing has also suggested that interacting with AI-generated text can prompt students to reflect more carefully on their own rhetorical choices during revision (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

Recent discussions have suggested that authorship in AI-assisted writing may depend on how writers evaluate and revise AI-generated text rather than simply accepting it (Mollick & Mollick, 2023). However, empirical research examining how students themselves define ownership when working with AI remains limited. In particular, little research has examined whether students' stated definitions of authorship align with the revision choices they make when comparing their own writing with AI-generated text. This study contributes to this discussion by analyzing how students define authorship and whether those definitions correspond with the revision decisions they make when evaluating AI-generated writing.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a four-day mini-term course¹ titled *Discovering Your Voice with AI* at a Sino-American university in China operating under an English-medium instruction (EMI) model. Sixteen multilingual undergraduate students participated, the majority of whom were Chinese L1 speakers. The course was designed to encourage critical engagement with AI through structured comparison, revision, and reflection activities.

The data consist of three written classroom tasks. In Lesson 1, students wrote a descriptive paragraph and then generated an AI version using the same prompt. They completed a structured comparison identifying similarities and differences between the two texts. In Lesson 2, students selected AI-generated sentences and explained what they would keep, change, or reject, providing written reasons for their decisions. In Lesson 4, students wrote short reflections defining authorship and ownership in AI-assisted writing. All data were written responses produced during class.

The analysis used deductive (eg. Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) coding based on Ivanič and Camps' (2001) framework of textual, ideational, and interpersonal positioning. Students' written explanations of their revision decisions were treated as the primary unit of analysis and coded according to these three categories. Coding focused on how students explained the choices they made when comparing their own writing with AI-generated text. Ownership was not defined in advance by the researcher; instead, students' Lesson 4 reflections were analyzed to understand how they conceptualized authorship.

Comparing these reflections with the revision explanations from Lessons 1 and 2 allowed for triangulation between students' stated definitions of ownership and their revision practices when evaluating AI-generated writing.

¹ Mini-terms at Duke Kunshan University are short, intensive courses held between regular semesters, typically lasting four days; undergraduate students are required to complete a mini-term at some point during their degree.

Results

Across tasks, students most frequently described ownership in terms of the revision choices they made rather than who produced the first version of the text. The analysis below shows how these revision decisions appeared across textual, ideational, and interpersonal positioning.

Defining Ownership

Students' revision explanations were analyzed using the three positioning categories proposed by Ivanič and Camps (2001); textual, ideational, and interpersonal. Most students defined ownership as having control over the final version of the text. They described authorship as deciding what to keep, what to change, and how the writing should sound. Ownership was rarely described as simply correcting grammar. Instead, students emphasized intention, tone, and meaning. These definitions indicate that students viewed authorship as an active process of shaping the text rather than solely producing the initial version.

Textual Positioning

In the Lesson 1 comparison task, students frequently evaluated stylistic features of the AI-generated text. Some students rejected descriptions that sounded “like a greeting card,” suggesting that the phrasing did not match how they wanted the experience to be represented. In other cases, students commented that although certain phrases were appealing, much of the generated text “did not sound right.” These responses reflect textual positioning because students were evaluating tone, phrasing, and stylistic appropriateness.

Ideational Positioning

Students sometimes rejected AI content because it did not accurately represent the meaning they intended to express. For example, one student noted that a sentence “captures the return feeling” and reflects the sense of “same routines.” Comments such as these suggest that students evaluated whether the ideas in the AI-generated text aligned with their own experiences or intended message. When students added details or clarified meaning, they were asserting ideational positioning by aligning the ideas in the text with their own perspectives.

Interpersonal Positioning

Interpersonal positioning appeared when students revised AI-generated sentences to better reflect how they wanted to present themselves to readers. In the Lesson 2 revision task, students sometimes modified wording that felt overly expressive or did not match the tone they wanted to convey. These revisions involved adjusting stance and reader engagement rather than simply changing individual words or sentences.

Alignment Between Ownership Definitions and Revision Practices

When compared with Lesson 4 reflections, students who defined ownership in terms of expressing their own intention or meaning were also those who most consistently made tone-related revisions in earlier tasks. This pattern suggests a connection between how students conceptualized authorship and the types of revision decisions they made when evaluating AI-generated writing.

Together, these findings indicate that students often viewed authorship not as producing the initial draft but as actively shaping the final version of the text through revision decisions involving style, meaning, and audience awareness.

Discussion

The findings suggest that students mainly understood ownership as having control over how the final text is shaped rather than as writing completely independently from AI. This supports Ivanič and Camps' (2001) argument that voice develops through the ways writers position themselves in their texts. In this study, students did not define authorship as producing writing without AI assistance. Instead, they described ownership as making choices about tone, meaning, and intention; specifically, the idea that voice is not removed when external discourse (e.g. Gen-AI assisted writing) is present. Rather, voice appears in how writers respond to and revise that discourse.

Textual positioning showed that students were highly aware of stylistic differences between their own writing and AI output. For example, some students focused on specific wording choices, noting that the AI version used "better word choices," while others preferred their own phrasing when the AI wording seemed unclear or overly complex. One student rejected a phrase such as "inexpensively acquired," commenting that it would be clearer to simply say "cheap." These comments suggest that students were evaluating how language choices affected clarity and tone. This reflects Matsuda and Tardy's (2007) argument that voice develops in relation to expectations about academic discourse. Students were not simply accepting AI wording but were actively evaluating whether it fit their intended style and meaning. This negotiation of language choice is consistent with research showing that writers construct voice through rhetorical decisions that shape how their identity is interpreted within academic contexts (Canagarajah, 2015; Tardy, 2012).

Ideational positioning appeared when students evaluated whether the ideas expressed in the AI-generated text aligned with what they intended to communicate. Some students commented that the AI description was "too generalized," suggesting that the content lacked the specificity they wanted to convey. Others rejected AI suggestions when they felt the meaning was inaccurate. For example, one student rejected a phrase such as "untouched football field," explaining that it was "inaccurate." These revisions show that ownership involved deciding what ideas were appropriate to include, not only how they were expressed.

Interpersonal positioning appeared when students considered how the text represented their feelings or stance toward the topic. Some students preferred AI phrasing when it better captured emotional tone. For instance, one student commented that the phrase "all my worries just fade away" felt "genuine and warm." In these moments, students were evaluating how the text positioned the writer in relation to the reader and the experience being described. This reflects Hyland's (2002) description of writing as involving stance-taking and audience awareness.

The findings also contribute to current discussions about AI and authorship. Rather than replacing student voice, the data suggest that structured comparison tasks can help students become more aware of their rhetorical choices. Mollick and Mollick (2023) suggest that authorship in AI-assisted writing may depend less on who produces the first version of a text and more on the choices writers make when revising it. The students in this study described ownership in very similar terms.

The EMI context may make this process even more noticeable. Students writing in a second language are already negotiating what counts as “academic” writing. AI-generated text that appears polished or expressive may initially seem authoritative, but comparison tasks encourage students to question that authority. When students explain why they revise AI sentences, they often articulate their own understanding of what academic voice should sound like.

Overall, these findings show that Ivanič and Camps’ (2001) framework remains useful for understanding authorship in AI-assisted writing contexts. Even when AI generates part of the text, voice still develops through the rhetorical choices writers make. Ownership, in this sense, lies in how writers shape and revise the text rather than in who produced the first draft.

Pedagogical Implications

The tasks analyzed as part of this study suggest practical ways instructors can incorporate AI into writing instruction without reducing students’ sense of authorship. In the first task, students wrote their own descriptive paragraph and then generated an AI version using the same prompt. Comparing the two texts helped students identify differences in tone, detail, and structure. This type of comparison encourages students to notice how voice emerges through rhetorical choices, which aligns with research showing that voice develops through stylistic and positional decisions rather than simply personal expression (Ivanič & Camps, 2001).

The second task required students to select AI-generated sentences and explain whether they would keep, change, or reject them. Requiring written justification encouraged students to reflect on why certain sentences did or did not represent their intended meaning. These types of revision decisions highlight students’ agency in shaping the final text. Recent work on AI-assisted writing has suggested that AI can support learning when students critically evaluate and revise generated content rather than simply accepting it (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

The final reflection task asked students to define authorship and ownership when working with AI. Many students described ownership as the ability to decide what the final text should say and how it should sound. Asking students to articulate this definition appeared to strengthen their awareness of their role in shaping the text. Reflection tasks have long been used in writing instruction to support metacognitive awareness of writing choices.

In EMI contexts, activities that combine comparison, revision, and reflection may therefore help students understand that academic voice develops through the choices writers make when responding to disciplinary expectations and communicating with readers. Using AI output as a text to evaluate and revise, rather than simply accept, may help students become more aware of tone, meaning, and audience in their writing.

Conclusion

This study examined how multilingual undergraduate students in an EMI context define and assert ownership when working with AI-generated text. Using Ivanič and Camps’ (2001) framework of textual, ideational, and interpersonal positioning, the analysis showed that students most often understood ownership as the choices they made when revising AI output. Rather than focusing on who produced the first version of the text, students emphasized their role in deciding what to keep, change, or reject.

Across the dataset, interpersonal positioning, particularly decisions about tone and how the writer relates to the reader, appeared most closely connected to students' definitions of authorship. Students who described ownership as expressing their intention or meaning were also those who most often revised tone and stance in the AI-generated sentences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students may view authorship less as producing text independently and more as having control over how a final text represents their ideas and voice. In AI-assisted writing contexts, ownership therefore appears to emerge through revision decisions rather than through the absence of AI input.

As generative AI becomes more common in academic writing, teaching approaches that emphasize comparison, revision, and reflection may help students better understand their role in shaping a text. Structured engagement with AI may therefore provide opportunities for students to think more carefully about tone, meaning, and audience in their writing.

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