



INVESTIGATING EFL STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF PERPLEXITY AI FOR ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

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ABSTRAK

Kehadiran kecerdasan buatan (*Artificial Intelligence/AI*) seperti Perplexity AI telah membawa perubahan dalam pembelajaran bahasa, khususnya dalam cara mahasiswa memperoleh informasi akademik secara cepat dan interaktif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis persepsi mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris (EFL) terhadap penggunaan Perplexity AI dalam penyusunan tulisan argumentatif, terutama pada aspek fungsionalitas, kemudahan akses, dan tingkat kepercayaan terhadap sumber informasi yang dihasilkan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan pengumpulan data melalui kuesioner dan wawancara terhadap mahasiswa yang aktif menggunakan Perplexity AI dalam kegiatan menulis akademik. Data dianalisis melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan untuk memperoleh gambaran mengenai pengalaman mahasiswa dalam memanfaatkan teknologi AI tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Perplexity AI membantu mahasiswa menemukan referensi secara lebih cepat, mempermudah pengembangan ide argumentatif, serta meningkatkan efisiensi proses penulisan. Namun, penelitian ini juga menemukan adanya kekhawatiran terkait potensi ketergantungan teknologi dan menurunnya kemampuan berpikir kritis apabila penggunaan AI tidak disertai kontrol akademik yang tepat. Dengan demikian, penggunaan Perplexity AI dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris perlu disertai arahan pedagogis dan penguatan etika akademik agar teknologi dapat dimanfaatkan secara kritis, bertanggung jawab, dan tetap mendukung orisinalitas karya mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: *Perplexity AI, Menulis Argumentatif, Persepsi Mahasiswa, Pembelajaran EFL, Kecerdasan Buatan.*

ABSTRACT

The presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies such as Perplexity AI has transformed language learning, particularly in the way students access academic information quickly and interactively. This study aims to analyze English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of the use of Perplexity AI in argumentative writing, particularly in terms of functionality, accessibility, and trust in the information sources generated by the platform. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through questionnaires and interviews involving students who actively used Perplexity AI in academic writing activities. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in utilizing the AI technology. The findings revealed that Perplexity AI helped students obtain references more quickly, facilitated the development of argumentative ideas, and improved the efficiency of the writing process. However, the study also identified concerns regarding the potential for technological dependency and the decline of critical thinking skills when AI is used without appropriate academic supervision. Therefore, the use of Perplexity AI in English language



learning should be accompanied by pedagogical guidance and the strengthening of academic ethics so that the technology can be utilized critically, responsibly, and in ways that maintain the originality of students' work.

Keywords: *Perplexity AI, Argumentative Writing, Student Perception, EFL Learning, Artificial Intelligence.*

INTRODUCTION

Argumentative writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding competencies for EFL students in higher education because it requires the integration of linguistic knowledge, critical thinking, logical reasoning, and evidence-based argumentation. According to contemporary writing theory, effective argumentative writing involves constructing claims, evaluating alternative perspectives, synthesizing information from multiple sources, and supporting arguments with credible evidence. Recent evidence further suggests that successful argumentation depends on the adequacy of supporting evidence, the quality of reasoning, and the ability to present arguments in a tactful and persuasive manner (Liu & Wu, 2026). These requirements demand that students simultaneously manage language production and higher-order cognitive processes. Consequently, argumentative writing often places substantial cognitive demands on EFL learners, particularly when they must coordinate content development, source integration, and rhetorical organization within a single writing task. Wang and Said (2024) explain that such simultaneous demands frequently create cognitive overload that may hinder students' writing performance and argument quality.

The challenges become even more complex in academic environments where students are expected to produce research-informed argumentative texts supported by valid and up-to-date references. From a socio-cognitive perspective of writing, the quality of an argument is closely associated with the writer's ability to locate, evaluate, and integrate reliable information into a coherent line of reasoning. However, many EFL students still experience difficulties in identifying trustworthy references, synthesizing information from different sources, and distinguishing credible evidence from unreliable online content. Consequently, students often struggle to construct well-supported arguments despite having adequate knowledge of the topic being discussed. Previous studies have demonstrated that inadequate access to reliable references may negatively affect argument quality, coherence, and students' confidence in academic writing tasks (Peltzer et al., 2026).

These challenges are particularly relevant in the Indonesian EFL context, where students increasingly rely on digital resources to complete academic writing assignments. The rapid expansion of online information has provided broader access to learning materials, yet it has also intensified the difficulty of evaluating information credibility and selecting appropriate academic references. Indonesian university students frequently encounter information overload when searching for sources online, especially when academic databases are inaccessible or unfamiliar to them. As a result, many students depend on easily accessible web-based materials that may not always meet academic standards. This situation highlights the need for technological support that can facilitate evidence-based writing practices while simultaneously encouraging students to engage critically with information sources.

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed writing practices in language education. Recent studies reveal that AI-powered platforms can support idea generation, language refinement, and writing efficiency in academic contexts (Lee et al., 2025; Chanpradit, 2025). Among the emerging AI tools, Perplexity AI has attracted increasing attention because it combines generative AI capabilities with real-time



information retrieval and citation-based responses. Unlike many conventional generative AI systems that may generate unverifiable or fabricated references, Perplexity AI provides users with direct access to cited sources that can be examined and verified independently (Kim et al., 2025). From an educational perspective, this characteristic is particularly relevant to argumentative writing because source credibility and evidence evaluation constitute essential components of effective argument construction. The importance of evidence-supported reasoning is also emphasized by Liu and Wu (2026), who argue that the strength of an argument is closely linked to the relevance and sufficiency of supporting evidence.

Despite the growing integration of AI technologies into language learning, existing studies have predominantly focused on grammar correction, language enhancement, writing fluency, or general writing assistance (Alzubi, 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023). More recent investigations have examined AI-assisted argumentative writing and its relationship with critical thinking, metacognitive development, learner autonomy, and argument quality (Hao et al., 2026; Ren, 2026; Stofiana et al., 2025; Liu & Wu, 2026). Other studies have highlighted concerns regarding AI dependency and the potential decline of students' independent reasoning abilities when AI-generated content is used excessively (Arif & Naeem, 2025; Suminar & Asari, 2026). However, empirical discussions specifically examining students' perceptions of Perplexity AI as a citation-based reference retrieval tool during argumentative writing remain limited, particularly within Indonesian higher education settings. This indicates that although AI-assisted writing has received considerable scholarly attention, the pedagogical role of citation-supported AI tools in facilitating evidence-based argumentation remains underexplored.

Recent findings indicate that students demonstrate varied responses toward AI-assisted writing technologies depending on their AI literacy, academic objectives, and writing strategies (Kim et al., 2025; Woo et al., 2023). Hatmanto et al. (2026) found that Perplexity AI facilitated access to academic references and supported idea development in EFL writing assignments. Similarly, Asmara et al. (2025) reported that students viewed Perplexity AI positively for information retrieval while simultaneously expressing concerns regarding overreliance and ethical issues. Studies by Woo et al. (2025, 2026) and Susanto et al. (2026) further demonstrated that AI tools can reshape students' writing processes, revision behaviors, and learning interactions. Nevertheless, these studies primarily investigated AI-assisted writing in a general sense and did not specifically focus on how students perceive the credibility, usability, and pedagogical value of Perplexity AI when constructing evidence-based argumentative texts. Therefore, a gap remains in understanding how EFL learners interpret and utilize Perplexity AI as a tool for locating references, developing arguments, and supporting critical thinking during argumentative writing activities.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate EFL students' perceptions of Perplexity AI in argumentative writing, with particular emphasis on its usability, trustworthiness, and integration into the writing process. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Perplexity AI as a citation-based reference retrieval tool rather than as a general writing assistant. While previous studies have mainly examined AI for grammar correction, language improvement, idea generation, overall writing support, and argument quality (Alzubi, 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023; Hao et al., 2026; Liu & Wu, 2026), this research specifically explores how students perceive the role of Perplexity AI in locating credible sources, developing evidence-based arguments, and maintaining critical engagement with information. Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on AI-assisted writing by extending current understanding of how citation-supported AI tools influence students'



perceptions of argumentative writing processes and evidence-based argument construction (Liu & Wu, 2026). Methodologically, the study is informed by contemporary qualitative inquiry that emphasizes the importance of systematically interpreting participants' experiences and meaning-making processes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Practically, the findings are expected to provide guidance for EFL educators and curriculum developers in integrating AI technologies into academic writing instruction while preserving students' independent reasoning, source evaluation skills, and critical thinking abilities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore EFL students' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of Perplexity AI in argumentative writing activities. The research was conducted during the 2025/2026 academic year at a private university in Indonesia involving undergraduate students from the English Education program. The participants consisted of ten EFL students selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria, including active use of Perplexity AI for at least one semester, frequent utilization of the platform in argumentative writing assignments, and willingness to participate voluntarily in the research process. These criteria were applied to ensure that all participants possessed adequate experience and understanding regarding AI-assisted academic writing tools. The research instruments consisted of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study and a review of relevant literature on AI-assisted writing and students' perceptions of educational technology. Prior to data collection, both instruments were reviewed by experts in English language education to evaluate the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the items. Revisions were subsequently made based on the experts' feedback to improve the quality and comprehensibility of the instruments.

Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire aimed to identify students' general perceptions concerning the functionality, accessibility, usefulness, and credibility of information generated by Perplexity AI, while the interviews were conducted individually for approximately 5–10 minutes to obtain more in-depth information regarding students' experiences, challenges, and responses toward AI integration in argumentative writing activities. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. The questionnaire items were designed to capture students' perceptions regarding usability, trustworthiness, and the contribution of Perplexity AI to argumentative writing, whereas the interview questions were intended to explore participants' experiences and viewpoints in greater depth. The data analysis process involved data organization, transcript reading, initial coding, theme categorization, data reduction, and interpretation of findings. To ensure the credibility of the study, source triangulation and member checking were applied by asking participants to review summarized interview results and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

DICUSSION AND RESULT

Result

The interview analysis involving ten EFL students revealed diverse patterns in the utilization of Perplexity AI during argumentative writing activities. In general, participants perceived the platform as a supportive academic tool that facilitated idea exploration, reference retrieval, and argument development. Students also demonstrated different strategies and preferences in integrating AI assistance into their writing practices. These findings indicate that

the use of Perplexity AI extends beyond technical writing support and involves cognitive, psychological, and ethical dimensions in EFL argumentative writing.

Table 1 summarizes the major themes identified from the interview data. The table presents the dominant patterns of Perplexity AI utilization, students' perceptions of its benefits and limitations, and their awareness of ethical academic practices. The findings demonstrate that students used the platform selectively depending on their writing needs and personal learning preferences. In addition, the themes illustrate how AI-assisted writing technologies influenced students' confidence, critical thinking, and independent learning behavior during the argumentative writing process.

Table 1. Major Themes of EFL Students' Perceptions of Perplexity AI in Argumentative Writing

No.	Major Themes	Main Findings	Respondents
1	Brainstorming and Outlining	Students used Perplexity AI to generate ideas, explore topics, and create essay outlines before drafting	R1, R5, R10
2	Time Efficiency and Multiple Perspectives	The platform reduced reading time and provided various perspectives for developing arguments and counterarguments	R4, R6, R8
3	Grammar and Vocabulary Assistance	Some students used the AI to improve grammar, sentence structure, and academic vocabulary	R3, R4, R7
4	Psychological Impacts	AI increased students' confidence but also created concerns regarding dependency and reduced independent learning	R2, R5, R7, R9
5	Technical and Informational Limitations	Participants reported vague information, repetitive references, prompt dependency, and technical barriers	R1, R6, R8, R10
6	Academic Integrity Awareness	Students verified sources, paraphrased information, and consulted lecturers regarding ethical AI use	R1, R4, R6, R8, R9, R10

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that students primarily positioned Perplexity AI as a supporting instrument rather than a substitute for their own writing abilities. Most participants emphasized the usefulness of the platform during the pre-writing and information-gathering stages instead of relying on it to generate complete essays. Furthermore, the interview data revealed that students remained aware of the importance of evaluating AI-generated information critically. This suggests that the integration of AI into argumentative writing practices still requires active cognitive engagement from learners to maintain academic quality and originality.

In addition to the thematic findings, the study also identified the distribution of Perplexity AI utilization across different stages of argumentative writing. Students tended to employ the platform more intensively during idea generation and literature exploration compared with grammar correction or final editing activities. This pattern reflects students' perception of Perplexity AI as a research-support and brainstorming tool rather than a comprehensive writing application. The visual representation of AI utilization across writing stages is presented in Figure 1.

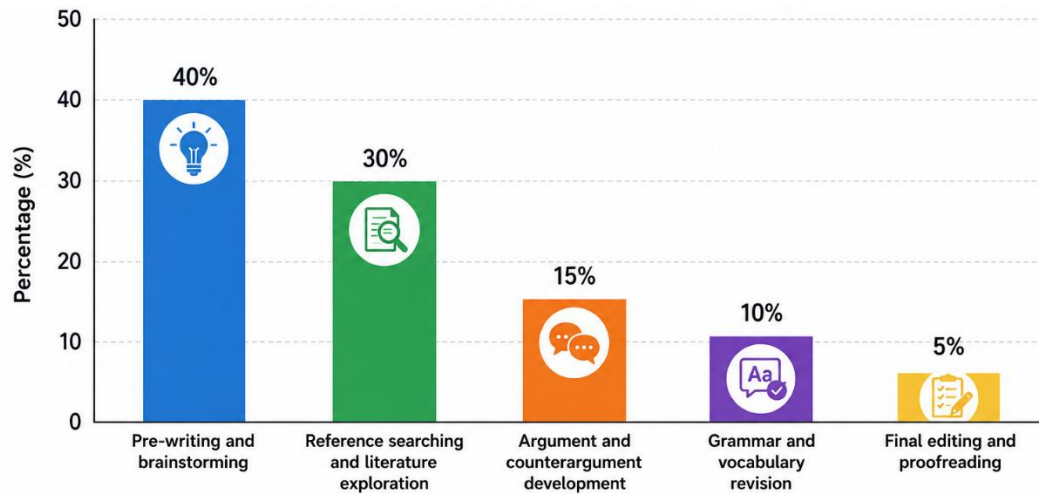


Figure 1. Distribution of Perplexity AI Utilization Across Argumentative Writing Phases

Figure 1 demonstrates that the highest proportion of Perplexity AI usage occurred during the pre-writing stage, particularly for brainstorming and reference exploration activities. This finding confirms that students perceived the platform as highly beneficial for reducing cognitive burden when initiating argumentative essays. Meanwhile, lower usage percentages in grammar correction and proofreading suggest that students still relied on alternative tools or personal editing strategies for language accuracy. Overall, the figure highlights that Perplexity AI was predominantly integrated into the conceptual and organizational stages of argumentative writing rather than the final linguistic refinement process.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide deeper insight into how EFL students interact with Perplexity AI during argumentative writing activities. Most participants reported using the platform primarily during the pre-writing stage, particularly for brainstorming, topic exploration, and literature searching. Rather than functioning as an automatic writing tool, Perplexity AI was perceived as a resource that facilitated idea generation and helped students organize arguments before drafting. This finding suggests that students positioned AI as a cognitive support mechanism that assisted them in overcoming initial writing barriers. Similar findings were reported by Lee et al. (2025), who found that university students tended to use generative AI strategically for idea generation and information exploration rather than for producing complete essays.

From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, Perplexity AI appeared to function as a cognitive scaffold that reduced students' extraneous cognitive load during argumentative writing. EFL argumentative writing requires learners to manage multiple demands simultaneously, including language accuracy, rhetorical organization, evidence integration, and critical reasoning, which may place considerable pressure on working memory (Wang & Said, 2024). The participants indicated that AI-assisted information retrieval enabled them to access relevant references and alternative viewpoints more efficiently, thereby reducing the time and effort required during the initial stages of writing. As a result, students were able to devote greater attention to evaluating evidence and constructing coherent arguments. This interpretation aligns with Kasneci et al. (2023), who argued that generative AI can support



learning when used as a supplementary cognitive aid rather than a replacement for independent thinking.

The findings also revealed that Perplexity AI contributed to students' critical thinking development during argumentative writing. Exposure to multiple perspectives encouraged students to compare viewpoints, evaluate the strength of competing claims, and formulate more balanced arguments. Rather than accepting AI-generated information uncritically, participants demonstrated a tendency to examine the relevance and credibility of the information before incorporating it into their essays. Such behavior reflects constructivist learning principles, in which knowledge is actively constructed through interpretation, reflection, and engagement with information sources. Similar conclusions were reported by Arif and Naeem (2025), who found that generative AI could stimulate learner autonomy and critical thinking when students critically interacted with AI-generated responses instead of relying on them uncritically. Related findings were also identified by Ren (2026), who reported that AI-supported argumentative writing encouraged reflective reasoning and higher-order thinking development among EFL learners.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also uncovered concerns regarding AI dependency and long-term academic independence. Several participants acknowledged that the convenience of AI-assisted information retrieval reduced their tendency to conduct manual literature searches. Although this efficiency benefited the writing process, excessive reliance on AI may discourage deeper engagement with primary academic sources and weaken students' independent research habits over time. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing the risks of excessive AI reliance in language education (Alzubi, 2024; Chanpradit, 2025). Similar concerns were identified by Suminar and Asari (2026), who reported that overdependence on AI tools could reduce students' initiative to engage in independent learning and critical source evaluation. Furthermore, Susanto et al. (2026) explained that prolonged reliance on large language models may influence students' originality and decrease autonomous writing behavior if instructional guidance is insufficient.

Another important finding concerns students' awareness of academic ethics and AI literacy. The participants generally demonstrated responsible practices when using Perplexity AI, including source verification, paraphrasing, and cross-checking information with original references. These behaviors indicate the emergence of critical AI literacy, where students recognize both the benefits and limitations of AI-generated information. This finding is consistent with Kim et al. (2025), who emphasized that students with stronger AI literacy tend to evaluate AI outputs more critically and use prompts more strategically. Likewise, Alzubi (2024) highlighted that ethical AI usage in EFL writing requires source verification skills, paraphrasing competence, and awareness of academic integrity principles. Similar findings were reported by Asmara et al. (2025), who found that Indonesian EFL students remained aware of the ethical risks and potential misuse of AI-assisted writing technologies.

An important distinction between the present study and previous AI-assisted writing research lies in the specific role assigned to Perplexity AI during argumentative writing. Earlier studies largely examined AI as a tool for grammar correction, language enhancement, writing fluency, or general content generation (Alzubi, 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023; Hao et al., 2026). In contrast, the participants in this study primarily utilized Perplexity AI as a citation-supported information retrieval and argument-development tool. This finding suggests that the educational value of AI in argumentative writing extends beyond linguistic assistance and includes support for evidence gathering, source evaluation, and argument construction. The



result broadens current understanding of AI-assisted writing by highlighting the importance of AI systems that provide transparent and verifiable references rather than merely generating text.

The novelty and contribution of this study are reflected in its focus on students' perceptions of Perplexity AI as a citation-based academic support tool within the context of EFL argumentative writing. Unlike previous studies that concentrated on writing quality, language improvement, or general AI adoption, this research demonstrates how students integrate AI-supported reference retrieval into their cognitive and argumentative processes. The findings contribute theoretically to the growing body of knowledge on AI-assisted argumentative writing by illustrating how AI can function simultaneously as a cognitive scaffold, a source exploration tool, and a catalyst for reflective reasoning. These findings also extend discussions on Cognitive Load Theory and constructivist learning by showing that AI-assisted reference retrieval may reduce cognitive burden while encouraging active evaluation of evidence and competing viewpoints. Practically, the results provide evidence that effective AI integration in EFL writing instruction should emphasize AI literacy, ethical source use, and critical engagement with information rather than simple dependence on AI-generated outputs.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated EFL students' perceptions of Perplexity AI in argumentative writing, focusing on its usability, trustworthiness, and integration into the writing process. The findings reveal that students generally perceived Perplexity AI as a useful tool for brainstorming, exploring ideas, retrieving references, and developing arguments. The study also found that students used Perplexity AI not only to access information more efficiently but also to compare perspectives, evaluate evidence, and support the construction of more organized arguments. These findings indicate that Perplexity AI can support the cognitive processes involved in argumentative writing when it is used as a complementary learning tool rather than as a substitute for students' own thinking.

At the same time, the findings highlight the importance of responsible AI use in academic writing. Although students reported several benefits from using Perplexity AI, concerns related to dependency and reduced engagement with independent information searching were also identified. Therefore, the effective integration of Perplexity AI in EFL writing instruction should be accompanied by the development of AI literacy, particularly in source verification, critical evaluation of information, and ethical academic practices. Overall, the study suggests that Perplexity AI has the potential to enhance argumentative writing processes while still requiring students to maintain active critical engagement throughout the writing task.

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