Behind my Students' Cover Email: the Role of ChatGPT in Homework Writing Tasks

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of ChatGPT in academic writing by investigating the benefits and limitations of using AI tools in higher education language learning. Specifically, it compares students' initial expectations with their post-task perceptions following the use of ChatGPT to draft a cover email. A mixed-methods approach was adopted with 101 students enrolled in a professional communication course at a Spanish university. Participants used ChatGPT to write a 250-word cover email, which was evaluated through peer assessment. Data were collected via pre- and post-task surveys and a focus group, and analysed using descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, and thematic analysis. Results showed that students' post-task perceptions slightly exceeded their initial expectations, particularly in areas such as grammar and vocabulary. However, concerns persisted regarding ChatGPT's limitations in personalisation and creativity. Most found the tool efficient for organisation and drafting but highlighted the need for personal input to ensure originality. Students recognise that ChatGPT enhances technical aspects of writing but cannot replace human creativity or authenticity, especially in competitive academic tasks. The findings support previous studies on the need for balanced AI integration and teacher guidance to foster originality in students' writing.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, ChatGPT, writing, academic language.

Introduction

The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is transforming educational practices, prompting a rethinking of how knowledge is taught, assessed, and produced. In language education, GenAI tools are reshaping instructional strategies, student engagement, and the standards of academic integrity. According to Callanan (2024):

> Artificial intelligence (AI) at its basic level is the capacity of machines to go beyond the ability to merely carry out programmed instructions, but rather independently choose information from the external environment –including vast data sets– and integrate

> those resources to achieve desired outcomes. (p. 2)

AI's capacity to imitate human cognition to a certain extent has brought about not only curiosity but also concerns and challenges in education (Callanan, 2024). Planning lessons, assigning homework, assessing, and guaranteeing authenticity represent a small portion of the challenges that AI entails (Rangelov, 2024). Academic integrity is, indeed, one of the most demanding issues for teachers and educators. For this reason, it is more important than ever to integrate AI within our teaching practices and make both teachers and students feel at ease while using it. In line with this, Liu et al. (2024) suggest using a 'menu' approach instead of banning AI use in the classroom. This means encouraging the use of those AI tools that may be relevant for the task to be carried out, as opposed to using AI to do everything for us (in the same way we would not consume everything on a restaurant menu).

Within GenAI, one of the most used tools is undoubtedly ChatGPT, which was released in November 2022 by OpenAI LP and is based on the generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) (Law, 2024). According to Deng and Lin (2023) "It is designed to generate human-like conversations by understanding the context of a conversation and generating appropriate responses. ChatGPT is based on a deep learning model called GPT-3, which is trained on a large dataset of conversations" (p. 82). Owing to these features, OpenAI's chatbot has raised several questions and triggered research in education and language learning.

Answering the call for further research in specific language skills such as writing made by Law (2024), this paper presents an intervention carried out in a higher education context adopting a mixed-methods approach with a broad sample size as suggested by Werdiningsiha et al. (2024a). The main goal of this study is to understand how learners perceive the usefulness of ChatGPT in writing tasks and if learners' expectations of the use of ChatGPT to produce a specific written text in English align with their perceptions after having completed the task. Although different studies have analysed students' perceptions of ChatGPT in language learning contexts (e.g., Salwa & Tyas, 2024) and other areas (e.g., Sajawal & Kittur, 2024; Yilmaz et al., 2023), learners' previous expectations about the use of this AI remain under-explored. Therefore, this study intends to cover the existing gap in the literature by comparing language learners' predictions regarding the use of ChatGPT for completing a specific course writing task with their final perceptions after using it. In particular, the writing task consisted of writing a cover email to apply for a specific job position.

Participants in the present study were students of English for Professional and Academic Communication from a Spanish Polytechnic University. Thus, the English course was focused on developing learners' professional skills and, in particular, communication in their foreign language. The task of writing a cover email is particularly significant in this study as it not only requires students to demonstrate their writing proficiency but also to convincingly present themselves as suitable candidates for a job position. This extra requirement adds a degree of complexity, challenging students to balance technical writing skills with creative or persuasive communication. Furthermore, this task employs a peer assessment methodology, which introduces an additional competitive element. Students' cover emails were evaluated by their peers, and they needed to stand out to be selected and therefore, to receive a higher mark in the task. This aspect of peer assessment emphasises the importance of originality and personal

involvement claimed by Barrot (2023), thereby challenging the notion of relying solely on ChatGPT to complete the task. By incorporating these elements, the study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of how AI tools like ChatGPT can be effectively integrated into language learning and professional communication tasks.

Based on these presumptions, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Will language learners' previous expectations on the use of ChatGPT to carry out a specific English written task (writing a cover email) align with their perceptions about the usefulness of the tool after making use of it?

RQ2: What benefits and drawbacks do students identify after using ChatGPT for writing a cover email in English?

Literature review

Benefits and challenges of ChatGPT in language teaching

Researchers such as Baskara and Mukarto (2023) and Deng and Lin (2023) have identified several benefits and challenges that ChatGPT entails. Within the limitations and challenges of this tool, those authors mention ChatGPT's difficulty in dealing with complex or abstract ideas, as well as the fact that it may produce biased or offensive output since the texts on which it is based may entail stereotypes. Additionally, Atlas (2023) suggests that ChatGPT "may not be able to understand certain cultural references or idiomatic expressions" (p. 68), which is key in language learning. In line with this, Feng Ten's (2024) systematic review on the use of ChatGPT in EFL writing emphasises the importance of developing students' critical thinking skills when using the chatbot for carrying out writing tasks.

Regarding the potential benefits, ChatGPT can serve as a supplemental learning tool. Deng and Lin (2023) mention the chatbot's ability to produce responses in real-time, which enables users to have conversations with it, while Baskara and Mukarto (2023) and Çobanoğulları (2023) highlight its potential to offer personalised learning experiences providing interactive and engaging practice opportunities, as well as creating authentic language materials and providing different writing prompts (Feng Teng, 2024). In general, these studies advocate for integrating ChatGPT into education, emphasizing the need for teacher guidance, critical evaluation, and ethical awareness to balance its benefits with potential pitfalls.

Concerning writing skills, Woo et al. (2024) focus on the collaboration between students and AI tools, suggesting that while competent writers effectively integrate AI-generated text, less skilled writers require additional support. Barrot (2023) recommends integrating ChatGPT into L2 writing instruction purposefully and systematically while addressing its limitations. Teachers should focus on emphasising the writing process, such as topic selection, outlining, and revision, to encourage creativity and personal voice, which ChatGPT cannot replicate. They should allow ChatGPT to assist with specific tasks like feedback on drafts and editing for grammar and style, but discourage reliance on it for content creation. Moreover, teachers should incorporate contemporary and localised topics to challenge ChatGPT's limitations and provide hands-on training for ethical and effective usage. Collaboration among educators and ongoing

support for students is also essential to maximise its potential while fostering critical thinking and originality in writing.

Zhu and Wang's (2025) systematic review on the use of AI in language education analyses studies published between 2013 and 2023, revealing the frequent use of AI assistance in learning writing and, in particular, an increasing use of ChatGPT since its launch in 2022. Their systematic review also shows the lack of qualitative research on AI for language education, a gap that the present study intends to cover.

Students' perceptions of ChatGPT

Despite being low in number and not focusing specifically on writing, some studies have concentrated on learners' perceptions of the use of ChatGPT in education. An example is Sajawal and Kittur's (2024) study on engineering students' beliefs about this tool. Through a questionnaire, the authors collected the responses of 269 graduate and undergraduate students and analysed them qualitatively. The results show that participants' opinions varied, being some of them optimistic regarding the role of ChatGPT in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while others tended to be reluctant by acknowledging its potential limitations to real intellectual development. What is more, concerns emerged about ethical issues related to privacy, academic integrity, and fair access.

AbuSa'aleek and Aleinizi's (2024) research also focused on learners' perceptions of ChatGPT in higher education. In this quantitative study, 51 postgraduate students filled in a questionnaire focused on their attitudes towards using the chatbot as a learning tool. The findings suggest that students' opinions were positive, although learners seem to worry about ChatGPT's trustworthiness and some showed a certain degree of anxiety when they are not able to use the tool. Finally, despite not being the focus of the study, the results reveal "that ChatGPT enhances the learning experience for learners, especially in refining their writing abilities" (AbuSa'aleek & Alenizi, 2024, p. 11).

In line with this, Salwa and Tyas' (2024) quantitative study analysed the responses of 150 students to a questionnaire which inquired about learning motivation, ease of access, and learning outcomes when using ChatGPT to complete English writing tasks. Of these 150 participants, 36 were subsequently interviewed to better understand the perceived benefits and challenges of using ChatGPT in higher education. The findings seem to indicate that ChatGPT can increase learners' motivation, is a manageable tool, and assists students' performance when writing in English.

Following the same line of research, Levine et al.'s (2024) study researched the use of ChatGPT to carry out writing tasks in a high school context. In particular, they focused on planning, translation, and revision during the writing process by analysing students' input and what they took from ChatGPT's output. The results showed that participants mainly used the chatbot to plan, while they seldom copied and pasted its responses into their writing tasks. What is more, occasionally, students used ChatGPT for translation or reviewing their texts in terms of grammar and coherence. Finally, findings would seem to indicate that students demonstrated a preference for preserving their individual writing style.

In conclusion, while much of the current literature acknowledges the potential of ChatGPT to

enhance language learning, it also emphasises the need for critical, ethical, and pedagogically informed use. The following section shall review the methodology followed to carry out the study.

Methods

This section presents the methodology employed to carry out this mixed-methods study, which lasted two weeks. All students were informed about the objectives of the study in class and through the questionnaires they had to complete. In what follows, the setting and participants are introduced. Then, the procedure followed and the instruments used in the intervention are explained. Finally, the data gathering and analysis procedure are described.

Setting & Participants

Participants of the study were 101 students enrolled in the course English for Professional and Academic Communication, which is compulsory and worth 6 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). All these students were from the Polytechnic University of Madrid, and they were studying different degrees in Telecommunications, namely, Telecommunication Systems Engineering (25), Sound and Image Engineering (20), Communications Electronics Engineering (16), Telematics (30), double degree in Electronics and Telematics (7), Wireless Communication (1), and Master's Degree in Communication and Informatics (1). The English level of the subject is B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL).

Learners were aged between 20 and 32, being the average 21.56, while in terms of gender 70 were male, 29 were female, and 3 preferred not to say. Although the course is supposed to be a 4th-year module offered both in the first and second semester, 3 students were from the 3rd year, while 1 was a postgraduate student. In terms of origins, 1 student was from Argentina, 1 was from Bolivia, 1 from Bulgaria, 1 from Chile, 5 from China, 1 from Colombia, 1 from Czech Republic, 1 from Dominican Republic, 2 from Ecuador, 1 from Hungary, 1 from Peru, 1 from Romania, and 1 from Tunisia, while the rest were all from Spain.

Instruments & Materials

The instructors created an infographic (see Appendix 1) which included all the steps students had to follow. Another infographic (see Appendix 2) was created with the structure of a basic cover email based on the volume Successful writing upper-intermediate (Evans, 2008). The activities carried out in class, instead, were taken from the volume Cambridge English for Job-hunting (Downes, 2008). ChatGPT was the AI tool students were required to use to carry out the task of writing a cover email.

Moodle (version 4.1) was the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) used to share all the materials and questionnaires with the students. A workshop task was created for them to upload their cover email and facilitate peer assessment. Pre- and post-survey will be reviewed in the section Data gathering and analysis procedure.

Procedure

Learners were first explained in a face-to-face class that they would write a cover email with the aid of ChatGPT. After that, they completed the pre-survey in class and received explicit class paper-based instruction on how to write a cover email. The rhetorical moves of the email, in particular a covering or application email, the adequate register, structure and typical content of each section were presented and discussed in a two-hour class. Students also completed activities connected with all these key aspects that must be considered when writing a cover email (Camps, 2022; Mackey, 2004).

Participants were given three to five days to complete their written assignment: a 250-word email responding to a mock job offer. The task was designed to appeal to the students and was tailored to their current undergraduate situation. After completing their assignments, students submitted them to the workshop activity created by the instructors on Moodle. The Moodle workshop was configured for peer evaluation, a key part of the assessment process, as, rather than assigning marks or grades, students were asked to select the best email from a set of five. Each email would be ranked by five different students to ensure a balanced and more reliable peer evaluation. Although the assessment process is not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that students were informed about it beforehand, as it could influence their email-writing process and decisions, particularly regarding their strategy for using ChatGPT, if any. This is considered highly probable as the goal was not simply to perform well but to be ranked higher than their peers, which may condition participants' initial expectations or final perceptions regarding the use of ChatGPT. After submitting their cover emails and before beginning the peer-assessment process, participants completed the post-survey also in class.

Data collection & analysis

Data was gathered through a pre- and a post-survey, which were administered online. Both the pre- and post-survey were composed of 20 questions in English and were divided into three main sections. The first, aimed at collecting demographic information, the second about the use of AI and ChatGPT in general, and the third about the expectations (in the case of the pre-survey) and perceptions (in the case of the post-survey) about the use of ChatGPT.

In particular, the first section contained 5 questions inquiring about learners' age, gender, origin, and education. The second section, instead, included 3 questions about AI and ChatGPT, while the third section was composed of 10 questions on a 5-point Likert scale and 2 open-ended questions about the use of ChatGPT for writing in English. The two questionnaires were structured the same way to allow for a comparison between pre- and post-survey results.

In addition to the surveys, a focus group with six students who were randomly chosen was carried out in a videoconference meeting through Microsoft Teams. Here, students were asked three questions about the process of using ChatGPT to write their cover emails and the ranking procedure during the peer assessment task. They were encouraged to share their views and interact with peers to gain deeper insights into how they used AI and their opinions on the outcomes. The meeting was then transcribed for its subsequent analysis.

By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Descriptive statistics of the results obtained through pre- and post-survey were calculated to compare the responses obtained in the 5-point Likert scale questions. With this

purpose in mind, the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD) were calculated. On the other hand, a thematic analysis was conducted for the open-ended questions with the assistance of ChatGPT. To determine whether the differences between pre-test and post-test means for the items were statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was used. This test is typically used when comparing means of the same group measured under two conditions (pre-test and post-test) and helps determine if the observed differences are due to chance.

ChatGPT was used as a tool to assist the qualitative data analysis of students' responses, which were classified based on their content. For greater clarity, the data were manually organised into six tables, summarizing the students' responses to the three open-ended survey questions (numbers 8, 19, and 20) for both the pre-test and post-test. Lastly, the focus group responses were also manually analysed using a qualitative approach.

Ethical approval

Participants were all informed that their data would be kept anonymous and used only for research purposes.

Results

Questions 6 and 7 from the post-test asked students if they had used any kind of AI tool before, and if they had previously used ChatGPT. The findings revealed that 96.1% had already used some AI tools, and 97.1% had employed ChatGPT earlier. Bearing this in mind, the following section shall discuss the results of the quantitative analysis.

Quantitative Analysis

Despite not being statistically significant, the descriptive statistics of the 5-point Likert scale reveal a slight tendency for increases in the mean score from pre- to post-test, which suggests that students' perceptions of ChatGPT after using it tend to exceed their initial expectations. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation).

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-test (Author's own data, 2025)

Item		M	SD
Item 9	Pre-test	3.65	1.22
	Post-test	3.66	1.11
Item 10	Pre-test	4.18	0.94
	Post-test	4.36	0.79
Item 11	Pre-test	4.21	0.93
	Post-test	4.38	0.85
Item 12	Pre-test	3.57	1.27
	Post-test	3.69	1.20
Item 13	Pre-test	3.92	1.05
	Post-test	4.00	1.02
Item 14	Pre-test	3.70	1.11
	Post-test	3.72	1.12
Item 15	Pre-test	3.81	1.00

	Post-test	3.76	0.98
Item 16	Pre-test	1.50	0.77
	Post-test	1.42	0.69
Item 17	Pre-test	1.44	0.71
	Post-test	1.36	0.74

Regarding the t-test, the Null Hypothesis (H_0) for the test is that there is no significant difference between the means for each item, while the (H_1) is that there is a significant difference between means. Using a significance level of $p<0.05$, results showed that all items had similar t-statistics (-1.47), and the p-value is identical across all items (0.175). Since the p-value is greater than the significance threshold ($p<0.05$), the differences between the pre-test and post-test means are not statistically significant. This suggests that any observed changes in the mean scores could be due to random chance rather than a real effect. In statistical terms, the null hypothesis (no difference) is retained.

Despite that, a thorough analysis of the M and SD in items 10-12, which focused on grammar, vocabulary, and content, showed small increases in mean scores from pre- to post-test (e.g., Item 10 *I think ChatGPT can help me improve my cover email in terms of grammar*, rose from 4.18 to 4.36). This means that after using the AI tool to write a cover email, students felt that it helped them checking grammar mistakes more than expected at the beginning. Since the SD are 0.94 and 0.79 respectively, most of the students answered the same in both the pre- and the post-test. Similar findings are obtained in item 11, *I think ChatGPT can help me improve my cover email in terms of vocabulary*. Standard deviation remained below 1 for grammar and vocabulary, indicating consistent responses, whereas item 12, which inquired about improvements in terms of content, showed higher variability, suggesting that learners' responses were more heterogeneous than those given to the previous items.

Turning to items 13 and 14, *I think ChatGPT can help me improve my cover email in terms of organisation* and *I think ChatGPT helped me improving my cover letter in terms of style*, they reveal almost no difference from pre- to post-test. Item 15, instead, which inquired about the usefulness of ChatGPT to improve cover emails in terms of register, showed a slight decrease in both the M and the SD. Notably, the instructors reported that while completing the pre-test in class some students inquired about the meaning of the concept "register". This might suggest that due to their lack of understanding of this concept, learners failed to offer a reliable judgment about the possible advantages of using ChatGPT to improve it.

Items 16 and 17 uncover that the chatbot was more useful than expected, as the item in the pre-test was, *I think ChatGPT will NOT be of any help to write or improve my cover email* and item 17 inquired about the level of difficulty of ChatGPT. Therefore, the results reveal that students found ChatGPT easier to use and more helpful than expected. Finally, item 18 suggested a slight increase in motivation thanks to the AI tool.

Thematic Analysis

The responses to open-ended questions were analysed independently from the quantitative data discussed in the previous section. The aim of this analysis is to examine students' answers to this set of questions. To achieve this, the responses from both the pre-test and post-test were

classified according to their content with the help of ChatGPT. Organising these responses in tables manually facilitated their analysis in the discussion section, particularly in comparison with the quantitative data presented earlier. Table 2 presents students' responses to pre-test Question 8, which explored the general ways in which they had previously used ChatGPT.

Table 2.
Question 8 pre-test "If so, what have you used ChatGPT for?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Aim	Description	Includes
Academic support	Aid in learning and completing academic tasks across subjects.	Information searches, study assistance, homework help, concept clarification, exercise explanations, and topic summaries.
Programming and technical support	Assist with technical (hard) skills, especially for programming and other technical subjects.	Coding help, debugging, technical documentation, troubleshooting, and understanding programming concepts.
Problem-solving and research	Tackle specific questions or challenges, often by guiding students through problem-solving or research processes.	Problem resolution, conceptual understanding, brainstorming ideas, direct question-answering, and comparative analysis.
Writing and communication assistance	Enhance writing clarity, structure, and formality for academic, professional, and personal contexts.	Writing and text improvement, formal writing (reports, essays, CVs), translations, language practice, and idea generation.
Personal development and everyday use	Support broader personal growth and day-to-day activities beyond academics.	Professional development (CVs, interview prep), task planning, personal tasks (e.g., gym routines), and entertainment.

From academic life to personal day-to-day activities, all students report using ChatGPT for their studies, particularly to complete more transversal or technical tasks and as a resource for clarifying concepts or solving problems. To a similar extent, they also use AI to enhance their writing, which is their primary means of communication with their teachers in academic tasks and exams. Finally, there is a personal category mentioned by a few students that includes routines, personal planning, time management, and, interestingly, entertainment.

To compare the results obtained before and after the activity, Table 3 presents the responses to post-test Question 8, which asked students who had not used ChatGPT in the pre-task whether they felt they took greater advantage of it during the assignment and, if so, why.

Table 3.
Question 8 post-test, "If you answered 'no' to the previous question, do you think you took more advantage of it this time? If so, why?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Advantage	Explanation	Example from answers
Increased understanding of functionality	Students who leveraged ChatGPT more effectively by understanding its strengths and limitations.	"Yes, because I learned in which ways it may be useful and when it's of no use."
Greater specificity in	Students who consider they	"Yes, I made better use of the

instructions	provided more precise prompts for improved results.	time; I knew how to structure the question, and I knew how to give the right information to get a better answer."
Task-specific adaptability	Students who adjusted their use of ChatGPT based on the unique requirements of the task.	"I think I did take more advantage of it because a cover email has a very clear structure, so it allowed me to be more specific with what I wanted."
Efficiency or timesaving	Students who valued ChatGPT for making the process faster and simpler.	"Yes, because it helps to avoid making too many mistakes and to save time."

As was noted in the quantitative analysis opening paragraph, for many students, this is not their first time using ChatGPT. Based on their responses, most importantly, they acknowledge the tool's possible limitations. Their experience with the tool has given them deeper insights into how to improve or adapt their questions or instructions (the prompts) depending on different contexts or tasks, as well as a clearer understanding of its potential usefulness. Timesaving is repeatedly highlighted as a key advantage of its use.

Regarding motivational aspects, Table 4 presents students' responses to pre-test Question 19, which asked those who anticipated increased motivation from using ChatGPT to explain their reasoning.

Table 4.
Question 19 pre-test, "If you think you will be more motivated thanks to ChatGPT, why do you think so?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Motivation	Examples from answers
Enhanced learning and understanding	"Because it makes it easier to learn in any kind of subject." "Because it explains the concepts better."
Task assistance and efficiency	"I think I will be more motivated because I can focus on the important things (the content) without having to worry about presentation." "It is really useful for repetitive or boring tasks and leaves you time for doing the interesting things."
Problem solving and guidance	"It gives people a place to start, which is usually the hardest." "Because if I am stuck on a problem, I think ChatGPT could be a strong resource to solve it."
Writing and improvement	"I think so because ChatGPT can correct my mistakes and improve my writing skills." "Because it could help me to correct grammar mistakes."
Perception of AI as a tool	"It is interesting to see how the chat is going to answer." "Because it is nice to use AI to achieve better results in your activities."

For many students, motivation to use ChatGPT could stem from its capacity to improve their learning experience and simplify their tasks. Based on their responses, they predict that the tool will help explain complex concepts, support problem-solving by offering a starting point, and allow them to focus on meaningful content while handling repetitive or less engaging tasks. Additionally, students value ChatGPT's potential ability to enhance their writing by correcting grammar and refining their work. They also view it as an intriguing and efficient AI tool,

recognising its potential to produce better outcomes in their academic activities.

Students' post-test responses to Question 19, which explored whether and why they felt more motivated after using ChatGPT are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.
Question 19 post-test, "If you felt more motivated thanks to ChatGPT, why do you think so?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Motivation	Examples
Efficiency and convenience	"Because I saved a lot of time and got a better cover email." "It avoids boring tasks and helps with grammar correction or text organization."
Structural and creative support	"It gave me a first draft of what to write, so it was easier to finish." "ChatGPT gave me more creative ideas to complete my cover email."
Skill development and learning opportunities	"Because it provides me with new words that I don't know, which motivates me to learn." "It helps to learn how to use AI to your advantage in today's world."
Confidence and self-improvement	"ChatGPT's friendly attitude and the quality of generated content boost self-confidence." "Seeing my work improved gave a sign of my own potential."
Real-world relevance and practical application	"Because it's useful to experience a real use case of a tool that's important today." "This was an opportunity to gain experience using ChatGPT for writing compositions."

The responses in the post-test (see Table 5) reflect how the tool saves time, simplifies tasks, and improves final drafts of cover emails by means of grammar corrections and offering better organisation. The answers in the post-test provide new insights beyond task completion, as skill development is also mentioned. Moreover, students refer to the tool's supportive nature, which increases their confidence. Finally, its possible application to real-world scenarios, as the one presented in this task, is recognised as an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in the use of this AI tool.

The following questions address the competitive factor of the task, considering that the peer assessment is based on a ranking format. Table 6 presents students' pre-test responses to Question 20, which asked whether they believed ChatGPT could help them stand out in a competitive writing task.

Table 6.
Question 20 pre-test, "In this task (writing a cover email), you are expected to stand out from the rest of your colleagues in order to be selected for a job position. Can ChatGPT help you achieve this aim? If so, how?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Expectations	Students' views
Language improvement (grammar, vocabulary, formality)	Students recognise ChatGPT's strength in improving the linguistic quality of their writing. They see it as helpful for correcting grammar, enriching vocabulary, and ensuring an appropriate level of formality.
Structural and organisational support	This group includes students who see ChatGPT as useful for organizing their ideas, structuring the email effectively, and setting a reliable base for their writing.
Idea generation and content	Students value ChatGPT's role in providing ideas or helping

inspiration	them brainstorm, especially when they feel stuck or need suggestions to write or improve their cover email content.
Efficiency and convenience	These responses highlight ChatGPT as a time-saving tool that makes the cover email-writing process faster or easier by providing quick edits, first drafts, or initial structures.
Conditional usefulness (depends on user input)	Students note that ChatGPT's effectiveness mostly depends on the quality of the prompts, or the clarity of the information provided by the user.
Concerns about uniqueness and authenticity	Many students worry that using ChatGPT might make their cover emails too like others, or that it could eliminate their personal touch and make their writing sound less personal. Includes concerns that ChatGPT-generated text might be "robotic," lack originality, or fail to demonstrate the individual's qualities.

Students view ChatGPT as a valuable tool for improving the quality of their cover emails, particularly in improving grammar, vocabulary, and formality while offering structural support and content inspiration. Many appreciate its efficiency, noting that it simplifies the writing process. However, there are concerns about the authenticity of ChatGPT-generated text, with some fearing it may feel impersonal, lack originality, or fail to demonstrate individual qualities. Ultimately, students acknowledge that ChatGPT's effectiveness depends on clear, well-structured and expressed thoughtful user input to achieve meaningful results.

Regarding the post-test responses, Table 7 presents students' answers to Question 20, which explored whether they felt ChatGPT actually had helped them stand out in their cover email task.

Table 7.
Question 20 post-test, "In this task (writing a cover email), you were expected to stand out from the rest of your colleagues in order to be selected for a job position. Do you think ChatGPT helped you achieve this aim? If so, how?" (Author's own data, 2025)

Perceptions	Students' views
Assistance with grammar, vocabulary, and structure	ChatGPT is appreciated for its ability to improve grammar, vocabulary, and organisation in the cover emails. It helped polish the language, making the writing sound more professional, clear, and correct.
Limited help with personalisation and creativity	ChatGPT was useful for technical aspects, although it failed to capture students distinguishing personalities or creativity. Adding a "personal touch" was still essential for standing out.
Concerns about similarity and generic content	There are concerns that using ChatGPT led to cover emails that were too similar to others. AI-generated suggestions lacked originality and might result in many peers submitting emails that sounded alike.
Role as a supplement, not a substitute	ChatGPT is seen as a tool to refine students' ideas rather than replace them. It is helpful for refining language and structure but still, their own content and ideas were essential to make their email stand out.
Dependence on personal input for uniqueness	How effectively ChatGPT could help students stand out depended on how much personal information and customisation they provided. With sufficient input, ChatGPT could make their emails more unique.
Doubts about effectiveness in a	There is some uncertainty about ChatGPT's effectiveness in

competitive context	helping them stand out because students knew their classmates were using the same tool. Therefore, ChatGPT alone wouldn't be enough to have an advantage in a competitive job search.

After completing the task, students persist in seeing ChatGPT as a helpful tool for improving grammar, vocabulary, and structure, making their cover emails more polished and professional. However, the weight of the possible limitations is more noticeable than in the pre-test. They find it limited in capturing personal individuality, emphasising the need for a "personal touch" to stand out. Concerns about generic content and similarity to others' emails are common, particularly in a competitive context like this, where all of them use the same tool. While students see ChatGPT as a valuable supplement for refining ideas and language, they stress that its effectiveness depends on providing unique, personalised input and cannot replace their own personal work.

Focus Group

The first aspect to be highlighted in this section is that, in the focus group, ChatGPT was sometimes referred to as "him", indicating personification by at least two students. This perception aligns with a comment made by one student in response to question 19 in the post-test when referring to "ChatGPT's friendly attitude". The consideration of ChatGPT as a human may reflect the ease of interaction with the machine and the familiar relation they have when engaging with the AI. María (fictitious name), for example, says: "I wrote a cover email by myself… and then I sent it to ChatGPT and asked him to correct [it]." Here, María explicitly assigns the male pronoun, suggesting a view of ChatGPT as an active participant or as a human editor. Also, Víctor (fictitious name) explains: "I sent him the two PDFs of the model…" This further consolidates the human image of ChatGPT, treating it as a recipient of documents. The students naturally personified AI, reinforcing its perceived role as a colleague or helper in a professional context.

Regarding its content, the focus group discussion highlights diverse approaches to using ChatGPT for writing cover emails. Participants like María and Fernando (fictitious names) used ChatGPT primarily for grammatical and stylistic corrections, valuing the human touch in their emails: "I think it's important that you wrote some yourself and the machine just corrects mistakes and modifies some things". In contrast, Víctor and Alejandro (fictitious names) used ChatGPT to generate full cover emails from data they provided, highlighting its efficiency and clarity: "My way of doing this email is faster. I sent my CV and instructions to ChatGPT, and it gave me a structured cover email".

A balance between automation and personalisation was emphasised during the conversation, where participants recognised the benefits of AI in enhancing their work while highlighting the importance of personal input to convey individuality or authenticity. This perception meets the comment made by one student to question 8 in the post-test: "This approach may result in a competitive disadvantage due to the generation of numerous similar responses."

The data presented across Tables 2 to 7, together with the focus group results, provide an overview of students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT for academic writing, particularly in the context of writing a professional cover email. The results reveal both interest and reservations regarding the AI tool's role. In the following section, these findings will be

critically discussed in relation to the existing literature.

Discussion

The data suggest an evolution of students adapting to ChatGPT as a tool, with an initial appreciation of its strengths (i.e., efficiency, grammar, and structure) evolving into a subtle acknowledgement of its limitations or weaknesses (i.e., creativity or personalisation). Statistical increases in mean scores from pre- to post-tests (e.g., Item 10 rising from 4.18 to 4.36), though not statistically significant, align with qualitative feedback showing increased familiarity and strategic usage.

In comparing the responses from the pre-test and post-test regarding students' motivation and perceptions of ChatGPT, similarities and differences emerge. Both pre-test and post-test responses highlight ChatGPT's role in saving time and simplifying tasks, an aspect which was also mentioned by learners in Nugroho et al.'s (2024) or in Deng and Lin's (2023) study. Firstly, in the pre-test, students noted its usefulness for repetitive or "boring" tasks, while in the post-test, they specifically appreciated how it made tasks like drafting a cover email more efficient. Secondly, in both tests, students recognised ChatGPT's potential to aid learning. The pre-test responses focused on understanding concepts and correcting grammar, while the post-test responses extended this to learning new words and the use of AI for practical applications. Finally, the idea of ChatGPT providing a starting point for tasks remains consistent. These results seem to align with those of Arfin et al. (2024) and Werdiningsiha et al. (2024a), as their participants also found ChatGPT useful to improve their essay writing in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and accuracy, among others. Based on previous research, lexicon would appear to be one of the most benefited skills in AI-aided writing tasks, as it is also mentioned by Werdiningsiha et al. (2024b) and Nugroho et al. (2024). In Arfin et al. (2024), outlining was also perceived by the students as one of the potential benefits.

Pre-test responses showed curiosity and interest in ChatGPT as an innovative tool, while post-test responses addressed it as a positive opportunity to develop skills for real-world scenarios and to gain practical familiarity with AI. Post-test responses introduced an emphasis on those practical and real-world applications of ChatGPT and highlighted the importance of experiencing how AI can be used in today's world, an aspect not mentioned in the pre-test. Also, the post-test responses refer to an increase in self-confidence and recognition of personal potential using ChatGPT. As for motivation, students' observations suggest that after the post-test, they not only maintained their initial appreciation for ChatGPT's usefulness but also developed a deeper understanding of its potential for skill development, confidence-building, and real-world applications. These findings would seem to align with previous research by Liu and Reinders (2024) since their results revealed students' increased motivation after using GenAI, and ChatGPT in particular (Behforouz & Al Ghaithi, 2024; Rahimi et al., 2024).

The comments from students collected during the focus group session reinforce many of the claims stated in the survey and are summarised in Tables 1 to 7 in the results section. Moreover, they added some insights about the different strategies for using ChatGPT in their cover email writing process. Some of them expressed a preference for human-AI collaboration, as some

participants valued ChatGPT's role in refining self-written drafts for authenticity. A different approach was a more automated one, where they asked the AI to generate complete emails from the data they provided. This approach was also adopted by participants in Kusumaningrum et al.'s (2024) study, which is considered "alarming" by the authors (p. 55). Overall, most of the students in the present study emphasised the need to balance AI's strengths with some personal input to maintain individuality and avoid generic outputs. In line with this, Werdiningsiha et al. (2024b) stressed the importance of teacher guidance in helping students achieve originality in their writing tasks.

In response to the research questions posed, from our data we can answer the following:

RQ1: Will language learners' previous expectations on the use of ChatGPT to carry out a specific English written task (writing a cover email) align with their perceptions about the usefulness of the tool after making use of it?

The study found that overall, students' previous expectations aligned with their final perceptions after using ChatGPT. The descriptive statistical analysis showed an increase in the mean scores from pre- to post-test, indicating that students' perceptions of ChatGPT after using it tended to exceed their initial expectations. This suggests that students found ChatGPT more helpful than they initially expected, particularly from their answers in areas like grammar and vocabulary. The thematic analysis of open-ended questions revealed that students appreciated ChatGPT's ability to improve the linguistic quality of their writing. However, some students expressed concerns about the lack of personalisation and creativity in the AI-generated content. Despite these concerns, the overall perception is positive, with students recognising the tool's efficiency and usefulness in organising and structuring their cover emails.

RQ2: What benefits and drawbacks do students identify after using ChatGPT for writing an English cover email?

Students' perceptions of the final drafts produced with the help of ChatGPT were mixed but leaned towards the positive. While many students appreciated the improvements in grammar, vocabulary, and structure, there were concerns about the similarity and generic nature of the AI-generated content. Some students felt that the cover emails lacked a personal touch and were too similar to those of their peers. Nevertheless, the tool was seen as a valuable supplement for refining ideas and language, though not a complete substitute for personal input and creativity. Therefore, as previous research (e.g., Rahimi et al., 2024) suggests, ChatGPT can be used as an extra aid outside the foreign language classroom, rather than only a cheating tool.

Conclusion

Writing a cover email requires a balance between professional, academic writing skills, and persuasive communication. In this task, students had not only to demonstrate their writing proficiency but also effectively present themselves as ideal candidates for a job. The peer assessment methodology used in this study adds a competitive dimension, placing particular emphasis on originality and personal engagement. This context challenged students to move beyond a reliance on AI tools, making them consider the importance of a personal touch and

unique content to distinguish themselves from their peers.

The descriptive analysis of students' answers highlights the evolution of ChatGPT perception after usage. Although they maintained their initial appreciation for ChatGPT's ability to improve technical aspects of writing, they became more aware of its limitations in personalisation after practical use. Their post-test views highlight the tool's role as a complement rather than a substitute for their own contributions, especially in contexts requiring individuality and originality. While they recognise technical and efficiency advantages, students do not rely so much on AI creativity or personalisation, which limits its impact in competitive or creative tasks like writing cover emails.

As an encouraging conclusion in teaching-learning contexts, students generally acknowledged that, for optimal outcomes, ChatGPT should be understood as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for human work. The students' reports on their experiences and personal reflections in the focus group confirm these views and perceptions. Finally, this specific writing task is found to be a good example of possible homework activities that promote the students' need to apply higher-order skills rather than using ChatGPT to simply do the job for them. Therefore, it is meant to exemplify an effective integration of ChatGPT in the teaching-learning process.

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Biodata

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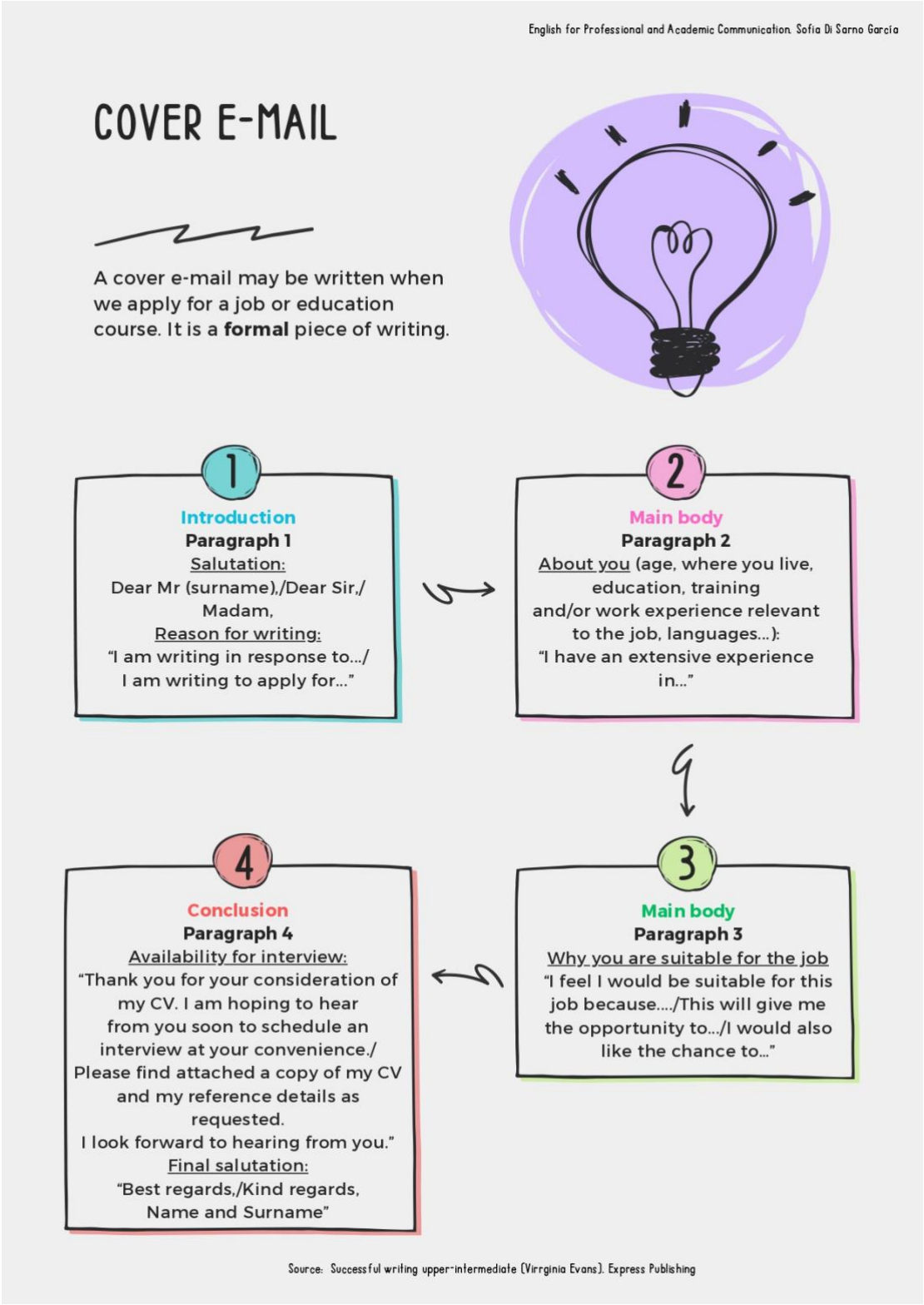
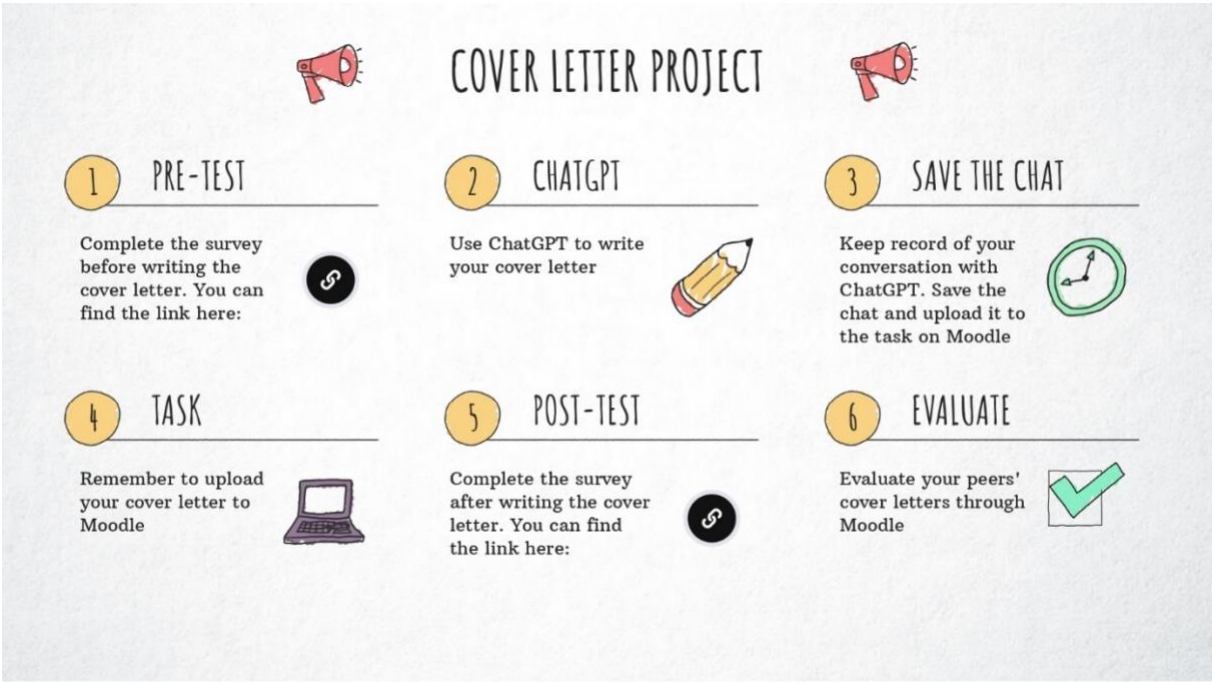
Appendix 1


English for Professional and Academic Communication. Sofia Di Sarno Garcia
COVER E-MAIL
A cover e-mail may be written when we apply for a job or education course. It is a **formal** piece of writing.
1
Introduction
Paragraph 1
Salutation:
Dear Mr (surname),/Dear Sir,/ Madam,
Reason for writing:
"I am writing in response to.../ I am writing to apply for..."
2
Main body
Paragraph 2
About you (age, where you live, education, training and/or work experience relevant to the job, languages...):
"I have an extensive experience in..."
3
Main body
Paragraph 3
Why you are suitable for the job
"I feel I would be suitable for this job because..../This will give me the opportunity to.../I would also like the chance to..."
4
Conclusion
Paragraph 4
Availability for interview:
"Thank you for your consideration of my CV. I am hoping to hear from you soon to schedule an interview at your convenience./ Please find attached a copy of my CV and my reference details as requested.
I look forward to hearing from you."
Final salutation:
"Best regards,/Kind regards,
Name and Surname"
Source: Successful writing upper-intermediate (Virrginia Evans). Express Publishing

Appendix 2


COVER LETTER PROJECT
1 PRE-TEST
Complete the survey before writing the cover letter. You can find the link here:
2 CHATGPT
Use ChatGPT to write your cover letter
3 SAVE THE CHAT
Keep record of your conversation with ChatGPT. Save the chat and upload it to the task on Moodle
4 TASK
Remember to upload your cover letter to Moodle
5 POST-TEST
Complete the survey after writing the cover letter. You can find the link here:
6 EVALUATE
Evaluate your peers' cover letters through Moodle