

FOURTH-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHATGPT IN WRITING: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract:

Academic writing instruction and English language learning have undergone significant changes since the introduction of ChatGPT and other generative AI tools. Previous studies have suggested that AI tools can improve learners' writing fluency, provide timely feedback, and support learner autonomy; however, they also raise many pedagogical and ethical issues (Li & Warschauer, 2023; Kessler, 2024). This study examines how fourth-year English majors at Dong Nai Technology University perceive the use of ChatGPT in academic English writing and self-study, as well as the challenges they encounter and the solutions they propose. The two research questions are: What are the benefits and limitations of using ChatGPT in academic English writing, from the learners' perspective? What ways do students suggest for using ChatGPT effectively and responsibly? Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals of 40 student participants. The analysis revealed three main groups of findings. First, students perceived ChatGPT as useful for improving writing efficiency, language accuracy, and confidence. Second, they reported limitations related to overdependence, information verification, plagiarism, and reduced critical thinking. Third, they suggested instructional workshops, lecturer modeling, and institutional guidelines for responsible AI use. The paper also emphasizes the importance of developing critical thinking and AI literacy among English majors to promote the effective, sustainable, and responsible use of ChatGPT in Vietnamese higher education.

Keywords: Academic writing; AI literacy; ChatGPT; English majors' perceptions; Vietnamese tertiary education.

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Nhận thức của sinh viên năm thứ tư ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh về việc sử dụng ChatGPT trong kỹ năng viết: Cơ hội, thách thức và các hàm ý sư phạm

Tóm tắt:

Việc giảng dạy kỹ năng viết học thuật và học tiếng Anh đã có những thay đổi đáng kể kể từ khi ChatGPT và các công cụ AI tạo sinh khác ra đời. Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu cách sinh viên năm tư chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh tại Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai nhìn nhận việc sử dụng ChatGPT trong viết học thuật bằng tiếng Anh và tự học, đồng thời khám phá những khó khăn mà họ gặp phải cũng như các giải pháp mà họ đề xuất. Kết quả phân tích chỉ ra ba nhóm phát hiện chính. Thứ nhất, sinh viên cho rằng ChatGPT hữu ích trong việc nâng cao hiệu quả viết, cải thiện độ chính xác ngôn ngữ và tăng sự tự tin. Thứ hai, họ nhận thấy những hạn chế liên quan đến sự phụ thuộc quá mức, việc kiểm chứng thông tin, nguy cơ đạo văn và sự suy giảm tư duy phản biện. Thứ ba, sinh viên đề xuất tổ chức các hội thảo hướng dẫn, giảng viên làm mẫu cách sử dụng AI, và xây dựng các hướng dẫn cấp cơ sở đào tạo nhằm thúc đẩy việc sử dụng AI một cách có trách nhiệm. Nghiên cứu cũng nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc phát triển tư duy phản biện và năng lực hiểu biết về AI (AI literacy) cho sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, nhằm thúc đẩy việc sử dụng ChatGPT một cách hiệu quả, bền vững và có trách nhiệm trong giáo dục đại học Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Viết học thuật; Năng lực hiểu biết về AI; ChatGPT; Nhận thức của sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh; Giáo dục đại học Việt Nam.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational context, artificial intelligence (AI) is profoundly changing the global educational landscape, particularly in the field of language teaching and learning. The emergence of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT has created new opportunities for personalized learning, automated feedback, and academic skill development. According to Li and Warschauer (2023), AI technology can serve as an "academic assistant" to support learners in developing writing skills, improving language accuracy, and fostering autonomy in learning. However, despite its tremendous potential, the use of AI in an academic

context also presents numerous pedagogical and ethical challenges. Additionally, Kessler (2024) highlights that the implementation of AI tools in foreign language learning raises concerns about the responsibility of teachers and learners, particularly in maintaining academic integrity, protecting intellectual property rights, and fostering critical thinking skills. In fact, when learners rely too heavily on AI's automated responses, they risk compromising their creativity and independent thinking, which are essential to university-level academics.

For English language learners, academic writing in English is one of the most challenging skills, requiring a combination of language ability, critical thinking, and academic cultural understanding. In this context, ChatGPT is considered a tool that can help students overcome language and psychological barriers in writing, while also assisting in organizing ideas, editing grammar, and expanding vocabulary (Li & Warschauer, 2023). However, the lack of proper guidance on how to use it can lead to AI dependence, copying content without citation, and a decline in academic thinking ability.

In Vietnam, the use of ChatGPT in English teaching and learning is relatively new and has not been systematically guided. Most students learn how to use this tool through social networks or personal experience, while university policies on academic ethics

regarding AI are still being developed. This leads to differences in learners' awareness, behavior, and attitude when approaching ChatGPT in learning.

Although international research on students' perceptions of ChatGPT in academic writing has grown rapidly in recent times (Lund et al., 2023; Zou & Xie, 2024), empirical evidence in the context of Vietnamese higher education remains very limited, especially in local universities where digital readiness is low and policies on academic ethics and AI are not yet fully developed (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Available papers are often studied in resource-rich environments or focus on broad groups of learners, without focusing on English majors, who have high requirements for academic writing competence (Yuan, 2023; Song & Song, 2023). At the same time, very few studies have examined the experiences of final-year students, a group that is transitioning to the professional environment and has an urgent need to use AI effectively and ethically (Zou & Xie, 2024; Alharbi, 2024). Therefore, this study contributes contextual evidence from Dong Nai Technology University to supplement international discussions on integrating AI in foreign language education.

Based on the above reality, this study was conducted to:

(1) explore the awareness, opportunities, and challenges of fourth-year English major students at Dong Nai

Technology University in using ChatGPT for academic writing

(2) propose pedagogical solutions and ethical guidelines for the effective and responsible use of AI in Vietnamese higher education.

This research contributes empirical evidence on the use of AI in English language teaching, and clarifies the role of AI literacy - as an essential academic skill in the 21st century (Kessler, 2024; Li & Warschauer, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Artificial Intelligence in Language Education

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has ushered in a new era in computer-assisted language learning (CALL). According to Li and Warschauer (2023), AI is shifting the role of technology from a technical support tool to an interactive pedagogical partner. AI helps students write more fluently, expand their vocabulary, and develop language skills through automated feedback and contextual learning suggestions. Additionally, AI tools like ChatGPT are capable of simulating natural language, enabling students to practice dialogue and writing in an informal setting (Yuan, 2023). Integrating ChatGPT into academic writing enables learners to experiment with argument structure, assess the coherence of their writing, and refine their academic style (Dwivedi et al., 2023). However, Kessler (2024) states that AI intervention in foreign language

learning must be controlled by “teacher agency”, the ability of teachers to guide proactively, to prevent ethical risks, technological dependence, and loss of critical thinking.

2.2. AI Literacy - The ability to use AI responsibly

The concept of AI literacy refers to the ability to comprehend how AI works, evaluate its output, and use it ethically and effectively (Nguyen et al., 2021). In the context of higher education, this competency includes three components:

- (1) Understanding how AI generates language
- (2) Critical evaluation
- (3) Ethical application.

Recent studies emphasize that students need to be trained in reading and analyzing AI output to avoid the phenomenon of “blind trust” (Kasneci et al., 2023). In foreign language education, when students possess good AI literacy, they will utilize ChatGPT as a reflective tool, rather than a substitute for personal thinking (Zou & Xie, 2024).

2.3. Learning autonomy and critical thinking

A central aspect of learning academic writing is learner autonomy - the ability to self-direct and self-evaluate the learning process. According to Benson (2013), learning autonomy encompasses not only the ability to control learning time but also the responsibility to assess academic

quality and ethics. In the AI environment, learning autonomy is associated with the ability to control and criticize ChatGPT output, rather than copying content. Yuan (2023) states that students' use of ChatGPT to check for grammatical and structural errors is generally positive; however, relying solely on full-text suggestions hinders their ability to form individual arguments. In addition, critical thinking - a core element of academic writing - is being "eroded" if learners are not trained to recognize AI hallucinations (Kasneci et al., 2023).

2.4. Academic Ethics in the AI Era

The use of ChatGPT in academic writing raises concerns about unintentional plagiarism and the weakening of critical thinking. According to Kessler (2024), the line between "support" and "replacement" in academic writing becomes blurred when AI is involved. Educational institutions must establish transparent policies and implement AI writing detection tools to maintain academic integrity and ensure the integrity of their academic work. Many scholars also argue that academic ethics should be integrated into AI ethics education in foreign language training programs, rather than merely focusing on technical rules (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2023).

2.5. Pedagogical environment and the role of the instructor

Instructors play the role of facilitators and validators in the use of

ChatGPT. According to Kessler (2024), when instructors model the conscious use of AI - for example, using ChatGPT for brainstorming, not for writing - students learn how to interact responsibly. Alharbi's (2024) study of EFL students in Saudi Arabia found that, with clear guidance, ChatGPT improved learners' argumentation and accuracy in writing; however, without supervision, it led to the copying of structure and tone.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

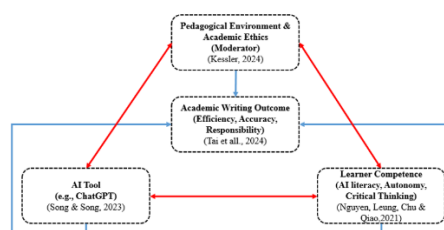


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of AI-assisted English academic writing

Source: Author's synthesis based on Song and Song (2023), Nguyen et al. (2021), Kessler (2024), and Tai et al. (2024).

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework to explore the use of ChatGPT in academic English writing among English Language majors. The framework emphasizes the interactive relationship between AI tools, learner competence, and the pedagogical and ethical environment, thereby influencing academic writing outcomes.

Within this framework, ChatGPT is considered a learning support tool with the potential to improve writing effectiveness, particularly in aspects

such as idea development, language editing, argument organization, and vocabulary expansion (Song & Song, 2023). However, ChatGPT does not automatically improve writing quality without proper control and guidance during its use.

Learner competence plays a vital role in determining the effectiveness of AI tools. This competence includes AI literacy, learning autonomy, and critical thinking (Nguyen et al., 2021). When learners are able to understand and evaluate AI output, they can use ChatGPT as a tool to support critical thinking, rather than passively relying on or copying content, thereby maintaining their individual academic voice and academic integrity.

Furthermore, the pedagogical environment and academic ethics are identified as moderating factors in the relationship between AI tools, learner competence, and writing outcomes. According to Kessler (2024), the active role of instructors, clear pedagogical guidelines, and a transparent academic ethics framework are necessary conditions to ensure the educational and responsible use of AI.

The interaction among these three elements shapes academic writing outcomes, as demonstrated by effectiveness, accuracy, and academic responsibility (Tai et al., 2024). This theoretical framework shows that the effectiveness of ChatGPT in academic writing depends not only on technology but also on the learners' abilities and the

pedagogical orientation of the educational institution.

2.7. Research Gap

Although many international studies have addressed students' use of ChatGPT in academic writing, most of these works were conducted in institutions with good technological infrastructure and students with high digital literacy (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Therefore, the findings of these studies do not fully reflect the reality at local universities in Vietnam, where AI adoption is limited, and there is a lack of clear pedagogical guidance. This context is especially true in Dong Nai province, where students often work while studying, with little access to formal digital literacy training programs.

English major students at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU) primarily employ ChatGPT spontaneously, while academic ethics policies related to AI are still in development (Kessler, 2024; Cotton et al., 2023). Notably, senior students - a group under pressure to write advanced academic papers - have not been studied in depth, despite their risk of tool dependence and impaired critical thinking (Yuan, 2023; Zou & Xie, 2024).

Therefore, this study provides contextualized evidence from a local university and contributes to the current literature on ChatGPT use in Vietnamese EFL higher education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative design was used to investigate how fourth-year English Language students at Dong Nai Technology University perceived and experienced the use of ChatGPT in academic writing and self-study of English.

The qualitative method is suitable for exploring the depth of the phenomenon, rather than measuring its quantity. The researcher relied on the guidelines of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) on designing qualitative research in education to ensure systematicity and reliability. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized to ensure ethical compliance.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The research subjects comprised 40 fourth-year English Language students at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU), who had taken the Advanced Writing courses and had experience using ChatGPT in their studies. Convenience sampling was used to ensure accessibility and suitability for the qualitative research objectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Although the sample size was small, the participating group represented the entire cohort of final-year English Language students at DNTU, thus aligning with the qualitative research objective, which emphasizes depth of experience rather than generalizability.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Two main tools were used to collect data:

Semi-structured interviews:

- Each student was interviewed for approximately 20-30 minutes, in either English or Vietnamese, depending on their preference.

- Questions focused on students' perceptions, experiences, difficulties, and suggestions regarding the use of ChatGPT for academic writing.

- All interviews were audio-recorded (with the consent of the participants) and then transcribed in full.

Reflective journals:

- Each student wrote a 400-600-word reflection, describing their personal experiences, benefits, and risks when using ChatGPT. This method enables the comparison of data between spoken and written responses, thereby increasing reliability through data triangulation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

3.4. Research process

The research process consisted of three stages:

Preparation: Design of interview questions and reflective journal writing instructions; conduct a small test to adjust language and structure.

Data collection: Interviews were conducted and reflective journals were collected over two months (September - October 2025).

Data analysis: Transcribe, code, classify, and identify themes according

to Braun & Clarke's (2019) six-step process.

3.5. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis, a widely recognized method in qualitative research. The process consisted of six steps:

Getting familiar with the data: Carefully read the interview transcripts and reflective journals to identify initial patterns and ideas.

Coding the data: Generating codes for passages that expressed perceptions, feelings, or actions related to using ChatGPT (e.g., motivation, AI dependency, ethical concern).

Finding themes: Grouping codes into preliminary themes such as opportunities, limitations, and solutions.

Reviewing themes: Comparing the two data sources (interviews and journals) to check for consistency and validity (triangulation).

Naming and describing: Defining each theme, citing illustrative quotes directly from the data.

Reporting: Writing a report describing the themes, linking them to the theoretical frameworks of AI literacy (Nguyen et al., 2021) and autonomous learning (Song & Song, 2023).

To increase objectivity, the researcher used NVivo 14 software to support coding and theme frequency statistics (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher compared interview transcripts and reflective journals through data triangulation. The coding process was conducted in several rounds, and emerging themes were repeatedly checked against the original transcripts and journals to ensure consistency. However, formal inter-coder agreement was not calculated, which is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings indicate that fourth-year English majors at Dong Nai Technology University held mixed perceptions of ChatGPT use in academic English writing. Overall, the participants perceived ChatGPT as a useful tool for supporting writing fluency, language accuracy, idea development, and confidence. However, they also expressed concerns about dependence, information verification, academic ethics, and the possible weakening of critical thinking. Based on thematic coding of the interview transcripts and reflective journals, three major themes were identified: opportunities for academic writing support, challenges related to dependence and academic ethics, and students' suggestions for responsible ChatGPT use.

The first theme concerned the benefits of ChatGPT for academic writing support. Most participants reported that ChatGPT helped them improve their academic writing process. They stated that the tool helped them

develop ideas, expand vocabulary, revise grammar, and check coherence more efficiently. Many participants also indicated that ChatGPT increased their confidence when drafting and revising English academic texts.

Viewed through the lens of AI literacy, this finding suggests that students were beginning to recognize ChatGPT as a writing support tool rather than merely a shortcut for completing assignments (Nguyen et al., 2021). However, this benefit contributed to learner autonomy only when students remained active decision-makers in the writing process. In other words, ChatGPT supported autonomy when students evaluated, revised, and adapted AI-generated suggestions instead of accepting them passively. Therefore, the positive value of ChatGPT does not lie in replacing students' writing ability, but in helping them make more informed choices during academic writing.

The second theme involved the limitations and risks of using ChatGPT. Many participants acknowledged that they sometimes relied too heavily on AI-generated content. Some students reported that when ChatGPT produced complete paragraphs or essays, they felt less motivated to develop their own ideas. This finding indicates that ChatGPT may weaken learner autonomy if it is used as a substitute for independent thinking rather than as a support tool.

Information verification was another major concern. Several participants reported difficulty checking the accuracy and reliability of ChatGPT responses. They noted that ChatGPT sometimes generated ideas that appeared convincing but lacked clear sources or academic evidence. From the perspective of AI literacy, this suggests that knowing how to use ChatGPT technically is not sufficient. Students also need the ability to question, verify, and adapt AI-generated content according to academic standards.

Academic ethics also emerged as an important issue. Some participants expressed concerns about plagiarism, inappropriate copying of AI-generated text, and the possible loss of individual academic voice. These concerns show that ethical AI use is closely connected to both AI literacy and learner autonomy. When students lack the ability to evaluate and transform AI output, they may unintentionally violate academic integrity. Similarly, when they depend too strongly on AI-generated language, their writing may no longer reflect their own reasoning, style, or academic identity. This finding supports the view that the boundary between academic support and replacement becomes unclear when AI tools are used without sufficient guidance (Kessler, 2024).

The third theme focused on students' suggestions for using ChatGPT effectively and responsibly. Most participants suggested that universities

should organize workshops on how to use ChatGPT for academic purposes. They wanted practical guidance on prompt writing, information verification, grammar revision, idea development, and the ethical use of AI-generated content. Several participants recommended that lecturers model responsible AI use in writing classes. They suggested that lecturers could demonstrate how to use ChatGPT for brainstorming, outlining, grammar checking, and revising, while also showing students how to evaluate and modify AI-generated output.

Nearly half of the participants suggested that the university should develop clear policies on AI use in learning and assessment. These policies should clarify when ChatGPT use is acceptable, how AI-assisted writing should be acknowledged, and what forms of AI use may be considered academic misconduct. This finding indicates that responsible ChatGPT use requires support at both individual and institutional levels. Workshops can help develop students' AI literacy, lecturer modeling can support learner autonomy, and institutional guidelines can clarify ethical boundaries.

Overall, the findings show that ChatGPT use in academic writing should be understood as a relationship among tool use, learner control, and ethical responsibility. AI literacy enables students to understand, evaluate, and adapt ChatGPT output. Learner autonomy allows them to

remain active and responsible in the writing process. Academic ethics guides them to use AI-generated content transparently and appropriately. These three elements are closely connected. Without AI literacy, students may trust inaccurate or unsupported AI output. Without learner autonomy, they may allow ChatGPT to replace their own thinking. Without academic ethics, they may misuse AI-generated text in ways that threaten academic integrity.

In the context of higher education in Dong Nai, where students' use of ChatGPT is still largely based on personal experience and institutional AI policies are still developing, these findings have important pedagogical implications. The university and lecturers should move beyond simply warning students about the risks of AI. Instead, they should provide systematic guidance on how ChatGPT can be used critically, responsibly, and ethically in academic writing. In this way, ChatGPT can be integrated into English writing instruction not as a replacement for students' thinking, but as a tool for reflective, controlled, and responsible learning.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of the study demonstrate that ChatGPT has significant potential for supporting university students' English academic writing proficiency, particularly in writing productivity, language accuracy, and confidence in expressing ideas. Most students found that

ChatGPT helped them overcome language barriers, improve writing structure, and develop more logical thinking in the process of academic argumentation. The tool also supports instant feedback and diverse vocabulary suggestions, thereby enhancing learning autonomy and motivation. However, when the use of ChatGPT is not clearly guided by pedagogical principles or academic ethics, learners may face several risks, including dependence on technology, reduced critical thinking, loss of creativity, and violations of academic integrity. These results suggest that the effectiveness of AI in learning depends not only on technological capability but also on how learners and teachers use the tool within a responsible pedagogical environment (Ateeq, 2024).

In terms of pedagogical implications, university institutions should develop specific and transparent policies and regulations on the use of AI tools in academia, to maintain a balance between technological innovation and traditional academic values. These policies should include clear guidelines on the ethical use of AI, including the citation of AI-generated content, protection of intellectual property rights, and ensuring fairness in learning assessments. Kasneci et al. (2023) emphasizes that AI integration into education is only truly sustainable when accompanied by teaching strategies that develop critical thinking, academic integrity, and digital ethical awareness. Accordingly, lecturers play the role not

only of controllers but also of facilitators - people who help students understand the value of reflection, analysis, and creativity when using AI tools. Guiding students to integrate ChatGPT as a critical learning tool will help them learn how to analyze, verify, and reinterpret information, rather than passively copying it.

Overall, this study provides empirical insights from a local university in Dong Nai, where digital readiness and AI policy are still in development. These contextualized findings contribute to the international literature and provide practical directions for policy formulation, AI capacity development, and the teaching of academic writing at similar educational institutions.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 40 fourth-year English majors at one local university; therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all Vietnamese EFL learners. Second, the study relied on interview and reflective journal data, which mainly reflected students' perceptions rather than their actual writing performance. Third, formal inter-coder agreement was not calculated, which may limit the robustness of the coding process. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples, compare learners from different institutions, and combine perception data with actual writing

samples to examine how ChatGPT affects writing quality over time.

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