

THE IMPACT OF CHATGPT-ASSISTED WRITING ON ESSAY WRITING SKILLS OF THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT HONG DUC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This study examines the impact of ChatGPT-assisted writing on the English essay writing skills of third-year students majoring in English at Hong Duc University. A mixed-methods design was employed, including a survey of 201 students, an eight-week experimental intervention with 30 English majors, and post-intervention interviews. ChatGPT was used with guidance from the researchers to support idea generation, organization, and revision in EFL writing. The results show that quality of students' essays improved, particularly in task achievement, grammar, and organization. The findings suggest that ChatGPT-assisted writing can be effective when used with appropriate guidance and active student engagement.*

Keywords: *ChatGPT-assisted writing; academic essay writing; EFL students; higher education; mixed-methods research.*

1. Introduction

In the context of digital transformation, artificial intelligence is exerting a profound influence on higher education, and ChatGPT has become increasingly popular among students as a tool to support English essay writing. However, its adoption appears to be advancing faster than institutional policy. UNESCO (2023) [10] reports that fewer than 10% of higher education institutions worldwide have issued formal policies or guidelines for AI use in teaching and learning. Recent studies suggest that ChatGPT can facilitate improvements in English writing performance [6], while also raising concerns that overreliance may weaken students' critical thinking and creativity. Moreover, the effectiveness of ChatGPT-generated feedback is contingent upon learners' self-evaluation ability and their understanding of writing processes [9]. At Hong Duc University, third-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages use ChatGPT relatively frequently, yet there is little empirical evidence regarding its impact on the essay-writing process and essay quality. Therefore, this study is conducted to provide experimental proof for guiding the responsible and effective use of ChatGPT in developing students' English essay writing skills.

1.1. ChatGPT in Essay Writing

ChatGPT is a large language model developed by OpenAI based on Generative Pre-trained Transformer architecture. It is trained on extensive textual data and refined through

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human feedback, enabling it to generate coherent and contextually appropriate responses in human-like language. In educational contexts, ChatGPT is commonly viewed as a support tool that helps learners access information, organize ideas, and improve written expression. In English essay writing, it can assist across the writing process, including idea generation and outlining before writing, language support and coherence during drafting, and error detection and style refinement during revision [1].

Because it operates by identifying statistical regularities in human discourse, ChatGPT can produce text rapidly with minimal human contribution - sometimes as little as 10% - particularly when acting as a ghostwriter by generating an entire essay from a single prompt. Therefore, ChatGPT should be used with guidance and ethical awareness as a supplementary tool, alongside clear assessment criteria and instructor feedback, to ensure academic standards and prevent overreliance.

Recent studies on the use of ChatGPT in essay writing reflect increasing attention from scholars in both Vietnamese and international contexts. In Vietnam, research has mainly focused on students' perceptions and usage practices. Findings from Nguyen Thi Khanh Ly and Trinh Hong Linh's study [6] indicate that ChatGPT supports vocabulary development, sentence structure, and text organization when used with appropriate guidance. Similarly, Nguyen Le Tuong Phuong's study [7] highlights that students are aware of ethical issues such as plagiarism and overreliance on AI. In international contexts, experimental and mixed-methods studies provide strong empirical evidence that ChatGPT-assisted writing and feedback improve grammatical accuracy, discourse coherence, argumentative quality, learner motivation, and writing confidence [1]; [9]; [10]. However, scholars in both contexts consistently warn of risks associated with excessive use of AI; these include threats to academic integrity, diminished critical thinking, and reduced learner autonomy when pedagogical frameworks are lacking [4]. Overall, while the literature confirms ChatGPT's pedagogical potential as a supportive writing tool, the dearth of empirical studies in Vietnam underscores the need for further investigation.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The integration of ChatGPT into English essay writing instruction reflects the growing role of technology and AI in mediating learning processes. From the sociocultural perspective [11], learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others and the use of supporting tools. In this study, students do not directly use ChatGPT. Instead, the researcher, acting as more knowledgeable others, uses structured prompts to interact with ChatGPT and provides feedback and guidance to students. These prompts function as scaffolding, helping students generate ideas, improve language use, and organize their writing within their Zone of Proximal Development.

At the same time, self-regulated learning theory [12] explains how students actively manage their writing process and remain the principal creator of their essays. In the early stage of the intervention, learners receive explicit guidance, particularly in planning and idea generation. As the intervention progresses, students gradually take greater responsibility for their writing. During the performance phase, they write their essays independently before receiving feedback generated through researcher-mediated use of ChatGPT. In the self-reflection phase, they review and revise their work based on this feedback.

This study therefore proposes an integrated framework in which self-regulated learning represents the core learning process, while sociocultural support is provided through researcher-mediated use of ChatGPT. Importantly, the level of support is gradually reduced over time, allowing learners to move from guided learning toward greater autonomy. This process of internalization contributes to improvements in students' essay writing performance.

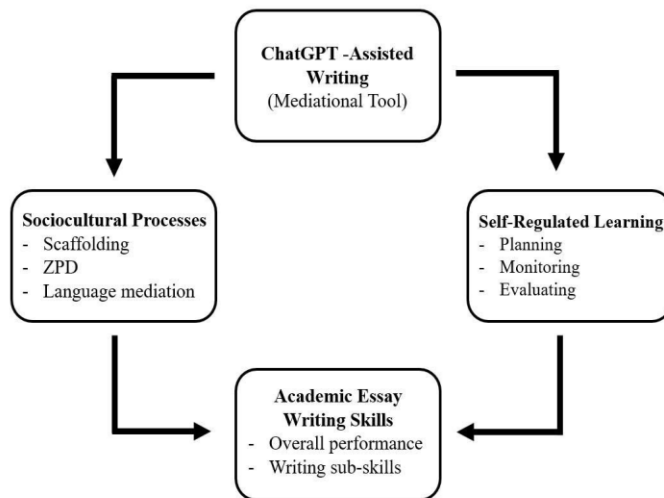


Figure 1. Integrated framework

2. Research methods

2.1. Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hong Duc University, where English essay writing is a core component of the integrated reading and writing module. It adopted a two-part design comprising a survey and an experimental intervention. For the survey, a cohort of 201 third-year students was asked about their current use of ChatGPT in English essay writing, including prevalence, frequency, purposes, and usage patterns. The intervention was conducted with 30 junior students from the English Teacher Education and English Linguistics programs, selected through voluntary convenience [3] sampling, to examine the impact of using ChatGPT as a guided support tool for developing English essay writing skills. The intervention group completed a pre-test, a series of scheduled writing tasks, and a post-test, followed by semi-structured interviews focusing on their writing experiences and use of ChatGPT. Participants were assigned codes from P1 to P30 to ensure confidentiality. Incomplete cases were excluded, and all data were anonymized.

2.2. Research procedure

The intervention lasted eight weeks, focusing on essay writing activities that closely aligned with the content of Reading and Writing 5. During the intervention, ChatGPT was utilized using prompts designed by the researchers to assist students in different stages of the writing process.

In the first week, a pre-test was conducted to assess students' writing ability. Additionally, students were instructed on how to use prompts to get assistance from ChatGPT. From week 2 to week 7, students went through the process of drafting, writing, and revising their essays with the assistance of ChatGPT, completing one essay each week. In week 8, a post-test was conducted. All students' essays, including the pre-test and post-test, were collected and marked every week based on four criteria: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, grammar, and lexical resource.

2.3. Research instrument

Three research instruments were employed in this study: a questionnaire, writing tests, and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to examine the current state of third-year EFL students' essay writing and their awareness and use of ChatGPT prior to the experiment. Writing tests, in the form of opinion essays, including a pre-test in Week 1 and a post-test in Week 8, were conducted to measure changes in students' essay writing performance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the experimental intervention to gain deeper insights into students' learning experiences and perceptions.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

Data collection followed a sequential mixed-methods design. The questionnaire was initially administered to collect information on students' essay writing and their awareness and use of ChatGPT. Based on the survey findings, an eight-week experimental intervention was implemented, with a pre-test administered in Week 1, and a post-test in Week 8. Following the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights into students' learning experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and pre-test/post-test comparisons, while qualitative interview data were coded and analyzed thematically [2].

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The Gap Between Technology Use and Pedagogical Challenges

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that 185 students (92%) have been using ChatGPT regularly throughout the writing process. However, this use has largely occurred in the absence of formal and systematic pedagogical guidance, resulting in several notable limitations in how the tool is utilized. Specifically, nearly 30% of students (60 students) reported consistently copying the essay prompt verbatim into ChatGPT to generate content. Additionally, 85 respondents (42.3%) indicated that they accept and use AI-generated essays without further refinement, relying on ChatGPT outputs without fully engaging in critical evaluation or verification. Meanwhile, 104 surveyed students (51.7%) reported that they only sometimes check ChatGPT-generated outputs. This suggests that ChatGPT is often used as the primary writer with minimal quality control exercised by students. Ultimately, these findings reveal a clear gap between the widespread adoption of ChatGPT and students' capacity to use the tool effectively, purposefully, and responsibly.

3.2. Improvements in Students' Essay Writing Performance and Skills

3.2.1. Overall Writing Performance

Students' overall essay writing performance improved after the eight-week ChatGPT-assisted writing intervention. As shown in Figure 2, the mean score of the 30 participants increased from 5.92 in the pre-test to 7.47 in the post-test (on a 10 points scale). This increase of 1.55 points indicates a noticeable improvement in students' writing performance, suggesting that the intervention had a positive effect on their essay writing skills

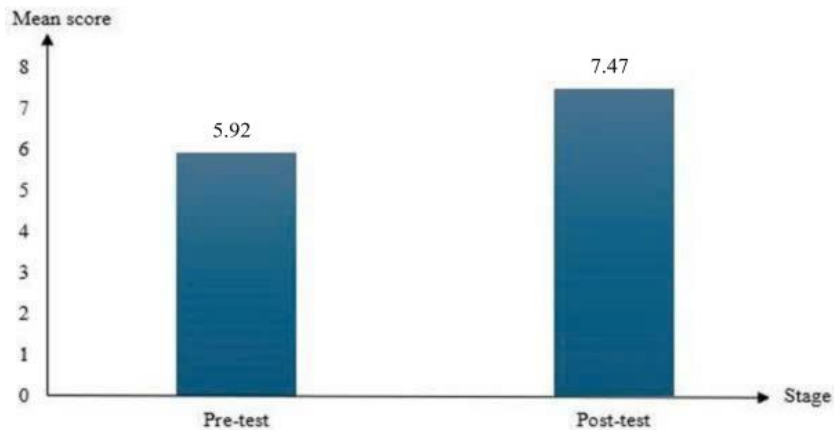


Figure 2. Overall Writing Performance in Pre-test and Post-test

The improvement was not limited to the final test results. Analysis of students' weekly writing scores further reveals a consistent upward trend throughout the intervention period. As illustrated in Figure 3, mean scores increased gradually from Week 2 to Week 6 before reaching the highest level in the post-test.

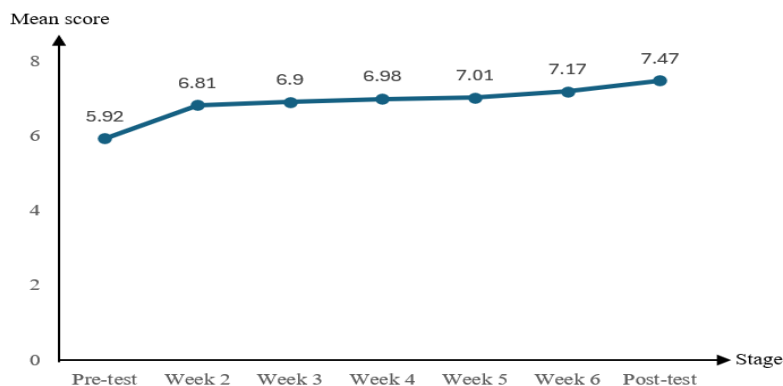


Figure 3. Weekly Progress in Writing Scores During the Intervention

3.2.2. Improvements in Writing Sub-skills

Improvements were observed across all assessed writing sub-skills following the eight-week intervention. As presented in Figure 4, post-test mean scores were consistently higher than pre-test scores in task achievement, cohesion and coherence, grammatical range and accuracy, and lexical resources.

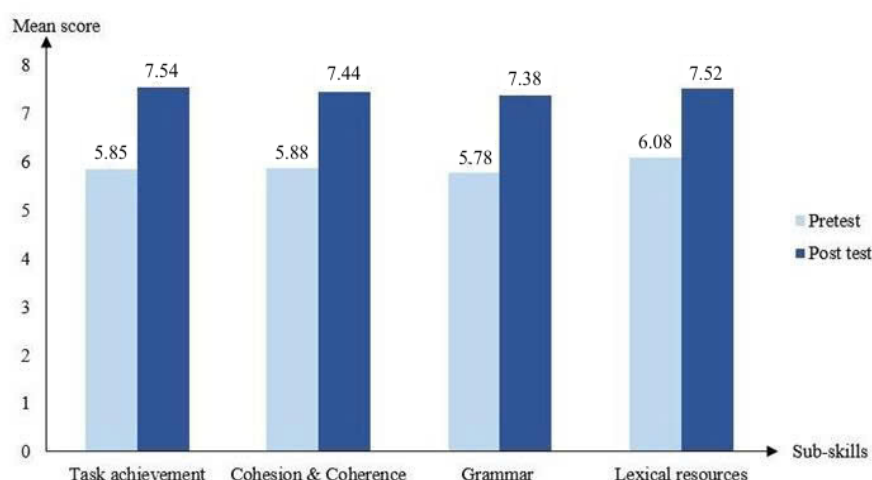


Figure 4. *Improvements in Writing Sub-skills from Pre-test to Post-test*

Among the assessed components, task achievement and grammar showed the most noticeable improvement. This was reflected in the post-test essays, in which students wrote clearer thesis statements, provided more relevant supporting ideas, and had fewer grammatical errors. They also demonstrated better control over sentence structures and a greater variety of sentence types. These improvements made their essays clearer, more coherent, and more persuasive compared to those in the pre-test. In addition, there were also considerable gains in terms of cohesion and coherence as well as lexical resource. The post-test essays showed better organization of ideas and a richer range of vocabulary.

3.3. Students' Perceptions of Guided ChatGPT-assisted Writing

Post-intervention interviews provided qualitative insights that help explain the improvements observed in students' academic essay writing performance. Students reported generally positive experiences with the guided ChatGPT-assisted writing intervention and described increased awareness of their writing processes.

More than half of the participants reported that ChatGPT was particularly helpful during the planning stage, especially for generating ideas and organizing essay outlines. The interviewed students explained that the tool helped them identify relevant arguments and structure their essays more clearly before writing. One participant noted that "I used ChatGPT for idea generation and outlining because it helped me avoid going off-topic." (P29), while another student stated that "ChatGPT supported me most during the stage of generating ideas and developing arguments for the outline." (P18).

Specifically, the students admitted that overtime, they were able to generate better ideas and structure better outlines, even without the help of the researchers. They knew how to get the most out of ChatGPT and integrate ChatGPT outputs as a rich source of input for their own essays. They learned to work with ChatGPT to build the best "skeleton" for the essay and added their own "flesh" to complete their writing. These responses help explain the improvement observed in task achievement and organization in the post-test.

Students also reported greater confidence in language use, particularly in vocabulary and grammar. As one participant explained, “ChatGPT could suggest a wide range of different synonyms that I can use in my writing so that I could avoid repeating the same simple words of many times.” (P12). This perception aligns with the gains in lexical resources and grammatical accuracy identified in the post-test results. In addition, participants emphasized the importance of instructional guidance on how to use ChatGPT effectively. The support they received during the intervention helped them understand both the value of ChatGPT and the ethical considerations of using AI in an academic environment. Participants learned to evaluate and adapt AI-generated suggestions rather than relying on them blindly. One student remarked, “After the intervention, I now use ChatGPT more carefully, mainly for reference and revision rather than copying the entire content” (P6).

Furthermore, students also recognized the limitations of ChatGPT, specifically, 47% of the students (14 out of 30) admitted the tool was not effective for developing deeper arguments. One student noted, “ChatGPT did not really help me develop deeper arguments or personal critical responses. The content was sometimes quite general and lacked creativity.” (P20).

Taken together, the interview findings reinforce the results revealed in the questionnaires and tests. These findings suggest that ChatGPT can yield positive effects, provided it is used with clear guidance on usage and ethical considerations. Moreover, actual gains from using ChatGPT in essay writing only emerge through reflective learner engagement in the learning process.

3.4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the use of ChatGPT in writing sessions had a positive impact on students’ English essay writing. The improvement in overall performance and writing sub-skills can be explained by the combination of guided support and students’ active involvement in the writing process.

From a sociocultural perspective, ChatGPT functioned as a mediational tool rather than a source of ready-made answers. With researchers acting as instructors guiding the students on generating structured prompts and feedback from ChatGPT, such feedback supported students in generating ideas, organizing their essays, and improving language use. With this support, students were able to perform beyond their initial level, producing better quality products. The level of guidance was gradually reduced as students became more independent, suggesting that they were internalizing the knowledge about ChatGPT that they had learned.

The findings can also be understood through Self-Regulated Learning Theory. Students showed progress in planning their writing, managing the writing process, and revising their work. Many students reported that they became more aware of their own mistakes and more confident in editing their writing. This suggests that they were increasingly engaged in self-reflection, which may explain the improvement in task achievement and language accuracy. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that ChatGPT-assisted writing can support improvements in language use and text organization [1]; [6]; [9].

However, some limitations should be considered. Regarding the quality of AI support, ChatGPT was less helpful in developing deeper arguments, as the content generated was sometimes general and lacked originality.

Overall, the findings suggest that ChatGPT can be effective when it is used as a supporting tool within a structured and guided learning process.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of ChatGPT-assisted writing on the essay writing skills of third-year English majors at Hong Duc University. The findings show that the guided use of ChatGPT contributed to improvements in students' overall writing performance and writing sub-skills, particularly task achievement and lexical resource. The study contributes to theory by providing empirical evidence to support the application of Sociocultural Theory and Self-Regulated Learning Theory in AI-assisted writing contexts. It also contributes to practice by demonstrating that ChatGPT can function as an effective supplementary tool when integrated with instructional guidance.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a focus on a single essay genre, which limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could be conducted over longer periods and involve a wider range of academic writing genres and larger participant groups to further explore the long-term educational potential of ChatGPT.

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