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AI-ASSISTED CONSTRUCTIVIST ENGLISH WRITING LEARNING: A CASE STUDY AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Nguyen Thi Chau Ngan¹, Duong Thi Thu Hien² and Nguyen Thi Diem³

¹University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam
ntc.ngan@ufm.edu.vn

²University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam
dtt.hien@ufm.edu.vn

³University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam
nt.diem@ufm.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) offers new possibilities for supporting English writing, but its educational value depends on how learners engage with AI rather than simply using it to generate texts. Drawing on constructivist learning theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, this study examines AI-assisted English writing learning, with GenAI functioning as a scaffold for idea generation, language support, revision, and reflection. The study addresses limited empirical evidence on students' perceptions and use of GenAI from a constructivist perspective in Vietnamese higher education. A classroom-based exploratory case study was conducted with 90 second-year Logistics students enrolled in a Writing course at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations. The findings indicate that students perceived GenAI as useful for vocabulary improvement, writing revision, idea generation, and grammatical error identification. Students also reported using AI to develop and refine ideas and evaluating AI-generated suggestions before incorporating them into their writing. However, concerns remained regarding inaccurate information, over-reliance on AI and reduced writing effort. The findings suggest that guided and reflective AI use may support constructivist English writing learning while requiring attention to learner autonomy and critical evaluation.

KEYWORDS: Generative Artificial Intelligence; constructivist learning; English writing

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has created new opportunities for teaching and learning English in higher education. Tools based on large language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot, can support learners in a variety of language-learning

activities, particularly writing. In English writing, GenAI can assist learners with brainstorming ideas, developing outlines, selecting appropriate vocabulary, drafting texts, receiving feedback, and revising their work. Recent studies have reported that AI-assisted instruction can contribute to improvements in particular aspects of EFL writing, including content, vocabulary, and language use, although its effects may vary across different dimensions of writing proficiency (Alangari, 2025). Similarly, research in university English courses has indicated that GenAI-based instruction can support both linguistic development and positive attitudes toward language learning (Lee & Davis, 2024).

Despite these opportunities, the educational value of GenAI depends largely on how the technology is integrated into the learning process. The use of AI simply as a tool for generating completed answers may limit students' active engagement and create dependence on AI-generated content. Concerns have also been raised regarding the accuracy of AI-generated information, academic integrity, students' ability to critically evaluate AI output, and ethical use of the technology. Studies of GenAI in English education have therefore emphasized the need for appropriate guidance, teacher training, digital literacy, and institutional policies (Ngoc et al., 2025). These concerns suggest that effective AI-assisted writing should not replace learners' cognitive engagement but should support them in developing their own ideas, evaluating alternatives, revising their work, and reflecting on the learning process.

This perspective is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which views learners as active participants who construct knowledge through interaction with their prior knowledge, learning environment, and other participants. In English language learning, constructivist approaches emphasize active learning, learner autonomy, collaboration, reflection, and the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than simply a transmitter of knowledge (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012; Suhendi & P., 2018). Constructivism is particularly relevant to writing because writing is not merely the production of a final linguistic product; it involves a recursive process of generating ideas, organizing information, drafting, evaluating, revising, and reflecting. Technology-supported constructivist approaches have consequently been considered useful for promoting active participation and reflection in language classrooms (Kaya, 2015; Szabó & Csépes, 2023).

Within this theoretical perspective, GenAI can be conceptualized as a learning scaffold rather than as a substitute for the learner. Kim and Adlof (2023) argue that ChatGPT can support constructivist learning when it is used as a means to enhance learning rather than as an end in itself. Their framework highlights the importance of context, collaboration, conversation, and knowledge construction in integrating ChatGPT into learning environments. More recent research has similarly suggested that guided GenAI use can promote learner engagement, critical thinking, metacognitive reflection, and writing development when AI interaction is embedded within a constructivist learning process (Cook & Cook, 2026). Thus, the pedagogical value of GenAI lies not simply in the content it produces but, in the interactions, and learning activities that occur around its use.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) provides an additional theoretical perspective for understanding this process. ZPD concerns the gap between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate guidance or support. In AI-

assisted writing, GenAI may function as a form of digital scaffolding by providing prompts, explanations, language suggestions, feedback, and alternative ways of expressing ideas. Prasad and Swaroopa (2025), for example, found that ChatGPT could provide cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic support in technical writing by helping learners organize content, improve clarity and grammatical accuracy, and revise their texts. However, such support needs to be combined with human instruction and learners' critical evaluation because over-reliance on AI and limitations in domain-specific accuracy may negatively affect the learning process.

Although previous studies have examined GenAI in English language teaching and AI-supported writing, research specifically connecting GenAI, constructivist learning principles, and English writing in the context of Vietnamese higher education remains limited. Research in Vietnam has identified both the benefits and challenges of GenAI use in English education, including enhanced learner autonomy and access to resources as well as concerns about accuracy, critical thinking, academic integrity, and data privacy (Ngoc et al., 2025). However, there is a need for further investigation of how GenAI can be incorporated into an explicitly constructivist writing process in which students actively generate, evaluate, revise, and reflect on their own writing.

Therefore, this study examines AI-assisted constructivist English writing learning at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. The study focuses on how GenAI can support students throughout the writing process while maintaining learners' active role in knowledge construction. In particular, it considers the use of AI for brainstorming, language support, drafting, feedback, revision, and reflection. The study also considers the challenges associated with AI-assisted writing, particularly AI dependence, the accuracy of AI-generated content, academic integrity, and students' ability to critically evaluate AI-generated suggestions. By examining the integration of GenAI within a constructivist framework, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how AI can be used as a pedagogical scaffold to support English writing while promoting learner autonomy, critical engagement, and responsible use of AI.

Although a growing body of research has examined the benefits and risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in language learning, relatively little empirical attention has been paid to how AI can be meaningfully integrated into constructivist English writing learning, particularly in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Existing studies tend to focus on AI as a tool for improving language accuracy, generating ideas, or providing feedback, while less is known about how students actively use AI to construct knowledge, develop writing skills, and engage in learning through AI-supported writing activities. In addition, students' perceptions of this learning approach and the benefits and challenges they encounter remain underexplored in Vietnamese university contexts. This gap highlights the need for empirical research examining how AI-assisted writing can support a more learner-centered and constructivist approach to English writing learning.

The overall objective of this study is to explore AI-assisted constructivist English writing learning among university students in Vietnam. Specifically, the study aims to (1) investigate students' perceptions of AI-assisted English writing learning from a constructivist perspective, (2) explore how

students use AI during English writing activities, particularly in processes such as generating ideas, developing and revising content, and receiving feedback, and (3) identify the perceived benefits and challenges that students experience when using AI for English writing learning.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Constructivism in English writing learning

Constructivism views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge rather than passively receive information. From a constructivist perspective, learners develop understanding by connecting new information with prior knowledge and by interacting with their learning environment and other participants. In language education, this approach emphasizes learner-centered activities, active participation, interaction, problem-solving, and reflection. Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) argue that constructivist teaching takes learners' existing knowledge into account and builds on that knowledge by providing opportunities for learners to apply and develop what they know. Similarly, Suhendi and P. (2018) emphasize that constructivist learning encourages learners to explore, create, and develop knowledge in response to their learning needs.

These principles are particularly relevant to English writing because writing involves an active process of knowledge construction. Rather than simply reproducing linguistic forms, learners need to generate ideas, organize information, make linguistic choices, evaluate their arguments, and revise their texts. A constructivist writing classroom therefore encourages students to take responsibility for their writing processes and to learn through doing, interaction, feedback, and reflection. Five principles are particularly relevant to the present study: active learning, knowledge construction, learner autonomy, collaboration, and reflection.

Within this approach, the teacher acts primarily as a facilitator. Rather than providing all the answers, the teacher creates learning conditions, provides guidance, asks questions, offers feedback, and gradually reduces support as learners become more capable. This principle is consistent with Vygotsky's ZPD (1978), which emphasizes the role of appropriate assistance in helping learners perform tasks that are beyond their current independent capabilities. In technology-supported language learning, scaffolding can therefore be used to help learners move from supported performance toward greater independence.

The relationship between constructivism and technology has received increasing attention in language pedagogy. Kaya (2015) argues that technology can be integrated with constructivist principles to improve communication, encourage active learning, and promote reflection. Szabó and Csépes (2023) similarly highlight the relevance of constructivism to digitally supported language learning, particularly as the roles of teachers and learners change in technology-rich educational environments. These perspectives provide a theoretical basis for examining GenAI as a potential tool for supporting constructivist English writing.

2.2. Generative AI in English writing

Generative AI has introduced new possibilities for supporting different stages of English writing. Unlike conventional digital resources, GenAI tools can interact with learners through natural language and provide responses that can be adapted to particular writing tasks. In English writing, these tools can support brainstorming and idea generation, vocabulary and language development, drafting, feedback, and revision.

For feedback, GenAI can provide immediate responses to students' drafts, including suggestions related to grammar, vocabulary, clarity, organization, and coherence. Prasad and Swaroopa (2025) found that ChatGPT could support technical writing by providing structured templates, formal language suggestions, contextual feedback, and assistance with iterative revision. Alangari (2025) also reported improvements in content, vocabulary, and language use following AI-assisted EFL writing instruction, although improvements in organization and mechanics were limited. These findings suggest that AI may provide useful support for some dimensions of writing while not necessarily replacing systematic writing instruction.

GenAI can also facilitate revision, an important component of process writing. Rather than treating the first draft as a final product, learners can compare their original text with AI suggestions, decide which suggestions are appropriate, revise their writing, and produce subsequent versions. This process can encourage students to become more aware of language choices and writing strategies. In this sense, AI feedback becomes most educationally valuable when students actively evaluate and respond to it rather than simply accepting it.

Nevertheless, the use of GenAI in English writing presents several challenges. First, excessive reliance on AI may reduce students' opportunities to generate and formulate their own ideas. Second, AI-generated content may contain inaccurate, inappropriate, or contextually unsuitable information. Third, unrestricted AI use raises concerns about academic integrity and authorship. Finally, students may lack the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated suggestions. Research in Vietnamese universities has identified similar concerns, particularly regarding information reliability, over-reliance, academic integrity, critical thinking, and data privacy (Ngoc et al., 2025). Therefore, effective AI-assisted writing requires clear guidance and the development of students' AI literacy and critical evaluation skills.

2.3. AI-Assisted constructivist writing learning

The combination of GenAI and constructivist learning provides a framework in which AI functions as a scaffold for learning rather than a replacement for the learner. Kim and Adlof (2023) emphasize that ChatGPT can support constructivist learning when it is used as a means of enhancing student learning. From this perspective, the educational value of GenAI depends on how students interact with the technology and how they use AI-generated information to construct and refine their own knowledge.

The concept of Vygotsky's ZPD (1978) provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this interaction. In a writing task, learners may encounter linguistic, cognitive, or organizational difficulties

that they cannot solve independently. GenAI can provide temporary support through prompts, explanations, examples, vocabulary suggestions, and feedback. Such assistance can enable learners to perform tasks that are initially beyond their independent capabilities. As learners develop greater competence, the level of external support can gradually be reduced, encouraging greater autonomy.

Another study by Cook and Cook (2026) found that guided, milestone-driven GenAI prompts embedded within a constructivist learning framework supported students' thinking and writing processes, with reported benefits for critical thinking, writing quality, perspective-taking, and metacognitive reflection. Similarly, Grubaugh et al. (2023) argue that AI can complement constructivist pedagogy by supporting personalized learning, engagement, self-reflection, and metacognition. These findings suggest that structured rather than unrestricted AI use is more consistent with constructivist principles.

At the same time, effective AI-assisted constructivist writing requires careful pedagogical guidance. Yeboah et al. (2026) identify technological readiness, ethical concerns, insufficient training, and information security and privacy as challenges in integrating GenAI into constructivist higher education. Ghimire et al. (2024) likewise report that GenAI can improve teaching efficiency, student engagement, personalized learning, and writing support, while emphasizing the importance of responsible integration. Thus, teachers remain essential in designing writing tasks, guiding AI interaction, monitoring students' evaluation of AI output, and promoting reflection.

Overall, the literature suggests that GenAI has considerable potential to support English writing, but its effectiveness depends on the pedagogical framework in which it is used. A constructivist approach provides such a framework by emphasizing active participation, knowledge construction, learner autonomy, collaboration, evaluation, revision, and reflection. However, empirical research examining how these principles operate together in AI-assisted English writing remains limited, particularly in Vietnamese public university contexts. The present study therefore focuses on how GenAI can be integrated into a constructivist English writing learning process at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, with particular attention to the ways AI supports writing development while maintaining students' active and reflective roles in learning.

2.4. Methodology

This study employed a classroom-based exploratory case study design to investigate students' experiences and perceptions of AI-assisted English writing learning in a higher education context. The study was conducted in a Writing course at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The course was taught following the regular instructional syllabus, and generative AI was not explicitly integrated into the teacher's classroom instruction. However, students were allowed to use generative AI tools as supplementary resources when completing their writing assignments. This context provided an opportunity to explore how students independently used AI during the writing process and how they perceived its role in their English writing learning. In this study, constructivism was adopted as a theoretical lens for interpreting students' learning experiences rather than as a framework for implementing a specific AI-based instructional intervention.

The participants were 90 undergraduate students enrolled in a Writing course at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. They were second-year students majoring in Logistics. The participants had different levels of prior experience with generative AI. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations. The analysis of students' previous experience with generative AI was used to describe the participants' familiarity with and patterns of AI use. Responses to the perception questionnaire were analyzed to identify students' perceived benefits, challenges, and learning experiences associated with AI-assisted English writing.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Students' previous experience with Generative AI

100% of participants (n=90) had experience using GenAI tools prior to the writing course. In terms of using duration, a majority of students (77.8%, n = 70) reported using GenAI for more than one year while 16.7% (n = 15) and 5.6% (n = 5) had been using these tools for 3-6 months and 7-12 months respectively. In terms of frequency, 38.9% and 22.2% reported using GenAI from often to very often, whereas approximately 40% used the tool sometimes. ChatGPT was the most widely adopted platform (88.9%, n = 80), closely followed by Gemini (83.3%, n = 75). Microsoft Copilot was used by 25 participants (27.8%), and other tools accounted for 22.2% (n = 20). These figures indicated a high level of familiarity and engagement with AI platforms among undergraduate Logistics students at the university.

Students reported using AI tools for different academic purposes, including 83.3% of students for brainstorming and idea generation, 72.2% for checking grammar, and 66.7% for text revision. Besides, GenAI tools were also used for translation (55.6%), vocabulary improvement (50%) and text summarization (44.4%). Approximately one-third relied on AI to complete writing texts.

Despite having reported using GenAI, participants showed a moderate level of confidence in using the tool for English writing prior to the course (Mean =3.5). Additionally, about half reported a neutral level (level 3) while a third felt confident (level 4) and one-tenth level 5.

3.2. Students' perceptions of AI-Assisted English writing learning

In terms of the functional benefits of GenAI in English writing, about 94% of respondents agreed with statements A2 ("AI helps me improve my vocabulary") and A5 ("AI helps me revise and improve my writing") (M = 4.33, SD = 0.58). High mean scores were also observed for statements A1 ("AI helps me generate ideas for my writing") and A3 ("AI helps me identify grammatical errors"), with nearly 89% agreement. These findings aligned with previous studies on the effectiveness of LLMs in providing instant linguistic scaffolding and formative feedback (Alangari, 2025; Prasad & Swaroopa, 2025). The study also showed that AI tools can support both low-level skills (grammar, vocabulary) and more advanced writing process, including idea generation or structural revision.

The data from Group B statements about the constructivist dimension showed that students consider GenAI more as a learning scaffold than a full replacement for their own thinking. In fact, every single

participant (100%) agreed that AI supported them in developing and refining ideas (B2). Similarly, nearly 89% felt the AI technology helps them learn directly from their writing mistakes (B4). The findings also reflect strong student agency during these AI interactions. Learners noted that they critically evaluate AI output before applying it (B3), while 88.9% mentioned feeling more personally responsible for their final writing choices when using GenAI (B5). While slightly lower, statement B1 (“AI encourages me to explore different ways of expressing my ideas”) still generated positive feedback, with 72.2% of respondents agreeing ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.81$). Interpreted through a constructivist framework (Kim & Adlof, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978), these findings suggested that students were not passively using AI suggestions. Instead, they continually assessed, reflected, and made conscious choices about their work. High agreement on B2 and B4 further demonstrated how GenAI functions inside the ZPD. By providing both cognitive and metacognitive support, GenAI helped learners pinpoint their writing gaps and develop tailored strategies. This hands-on process aligns with Cook and Cook (2026), who stressed that structured AI engagement promotes autonomous learning and critical reasoning.

Besides these benefits, students also pointed out clear cognitive and practical obstacles when writing with AI (Group C). The biggest issues involved accuracy and context. Statements C1 (“AI sometimes provides inaccurate information”) and C2 (“AI-generated suggestions do not always match my intended meaning”) both averaged $M = 4.11$ ($SD = 0.66$ and $SD = 0.81$, respectively), with 83.3% of participants agreeing ($n = 75$). Moreover, statement C3 (“I find it difficult to evaluate whether AI-generated content is correct”) saw a mean score of $M = 3.94$ ($SD = 0.78$, 66.7% agreement). Participants also worried about over-reliance and a potential drop in their own effort. Statement C5 (“I am concerned that using AI may reduce my own effort in writing”) logged $M = 4.11$ ($SD = 0.81$, 72.2% agreement), while statement C4 (“Using AI may make me rely too much on technology”) came in at $M = 4.06$ ($SD = 0.85$, 77.8% agreement). These concerns reflect the findings from recent research on GenAI in Vietnamese universities (Ngoc et al., 2025) and constructivist settings more broadly (Yeboah et al., 2026). Even though students maintain a critical mindset (as Group B showed), their worries about verifying accuracy (C3) and losing personal effort (C5) highlight a real need for extra instructional support. Without accessible hands-on teacher guidance and clear university frameworks on AI literacy, learners risk relying too heavily on automated suggestions, which creates a significant barrier to effective constructivist writing instruction.

4. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that GenAI can serve as an effective digital scaffold within a constructivist English writing environment. The high agreement regarding functional benefits such as vocabulary improvement, grammar correction, idea generation, and structural revision aligns with recent research emphasizing the capacity of large language models to offer immediate linguistic assistance and formative feedback. However, when examined through a constructivist theoretical lens, the true pedagogical value of GenAI lies not merely in its automated output, but in the active cognitive engagement it stimulates among learners.

The fact that all participants utilized AI to develop and refine their own ideas, while over 88% reported critically evaluating AI suggestions and taking personal responsibility for their final texts, suggests that students do not passively adopt AI-generated content. Instead, they operate as active knowledge constructors who use GenAI as a sounding board. This interaction exemplifies Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and Kim and Adlof's (2023) constructivist framework, wherein the AI functions as temporary digital scaffolding, bridging the gap between a student's independent writing capabilities and their potential performance without superseding their learner agency. These results reinforce the findings of Cook and Cook (2026), demonstrating that when AI interaction is embedded within a reflective writing process, it enhances metacognitive awareness and active learning rather than fostering passive consumption.

Despite these positive engagement patterns, the findings also highlight critical cognitive and practical challenges that warrant careful pedagogical oversight. Students expressed substantial concerns regarding the accuracy of AI outputs, contextual mismatches, and the potential for over-reliance and reduced self-effort. These concerns mirror those reported in recent studies on GenAI integration in Vietnamese higher education (Ngoc et al., 2025) and broader constructivist contexts (Yeboah et al., 2026), where digital literacy and information verification remain major hurdles. Although learners in this study demonstrated a critical mindset, the finding that two-thirds struggled to verify the accuracy of AI-generated content indicates that critical evaluation skills cannot be assumed to develop spontaneously. Unguided AI usage risks creating a paradox where learners rely heavily on automated tools while remaining anxious about their correctness, potentially undermining deep conceptual learning. Therefore, while GenAI holds significant potential as a constructivist tool for English writing, its success depends heavily on structured instructional mediation, clear institutional guidelines, and targeted training in AI literacy to ensure that technology supports rather than replaces students' intellectual effort and autonomous language development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored students' experiences and perceptions of AI-assisted English writing learning from a constructivist perspective at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. Overall, the findings demonstrate that GenAI can effectively support various English writing activities, ranging from initial idea generation and vocabulary enrichment to mistake identification and text revision. The participants generally perceived AI-assisted writing learning in a highly positive light, recognizing its capacity to enhance both their linguistic choices and their overall writing process. More importantly, the results showed that GenAI is most pedagogically effective when utilized as a cognitive and metacognitive scaffold for active learning rather than as a substitute for students' own writing. While students acknowledged the functional efficiency of GenAI tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot), the high agreement across constructivist measures reveals that students actively evaluate AI-generated output, refine their own original ideas, and retain personal agency over their final texts. However, the study also highlights persistent concerns regarding information accuracy, contextual alignment, potential technological reliance, and reduced self-effort. Therefore, integrating GenAI into English writing

requires a pedagogical framework that enhances AI scaffolding while maintaining student autonomy and critical cognitive engagement.

Implications

In order to maximize the learning potential of GenAI within constructivist writing instruction, language educators should move beyond simply permitting or prohibiting AI tools and instead adopt structured pedagogical strategies. Firstly, lecturers should construct milestone-driven writing assignments where GenAI is embedded as an explicit scaffolding tool during pre-writing, drafting, and revising stages, rather than evaluating only the final product. Also, assessment criteria should require students to document, evaluate, and justify their acceptance or rejection of AI-generated suggestions, ensuring that students do not uncritically adopt AI recommendations. Besides, classroom activities should prioritize iterative drafting and comparative analysis, prompting students to rephrase, expand, and refine AI-suggested ideas to align with their unique communicative intents. Moreover, lecturers should integrate self-reflection prompts after AI-assisted tasks, which encourages learners to analyze what they learned from their writing errors and how AI feedback contributed to their writing development.

At the institutional level, administrators play an important role in providing a supportive environment for AI integration. Universities should have comprehensive policies that define ethical AI applications, clarify boundaries between pedagogical support and academic misconduct, and normalize responsible AI usage across academic departments. Training workshops and professional development programs should also be organized to enhance AI literacy to provide faculty members with effective prompt design techniques and empower students with critical digital evaluation skills. Institutions must also publish explicit, transparent guidelines regarding AI declaration and citation practices, fostering a culture of academic honesty while acknowledging the role of modern AI technologies in professional writing.

Limitations and future research

While these findings offer useful insights, a few limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the data comes from a short-term study at a single public university in Ho Chi Minh City, focusing on a small sample of 90 second-year Logistics students. As a result, the conclusions may not fully apply to other academic disciplines or institutional contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported surveys captures how students perceive their own experiences, rather than providing direct evidence of their writing quality or actual interactions with AI tools.

To address these gaps, future research could expand both the scope and depth of AI-assisted writing studies. Future studies should also involve more participants from different majors across various universities and academic disciplines to enhance validity. Furthermore, longitudinal designs can also be used to offer a clearer understanding of how AI usage shapes actual English writing quality over time.

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Author Profile

Nguyen Thi Chau Ngan received a Ph.D. in English Studies from Queensland University of Technology in 2017. She has been working at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Finance – Marketing, since 2004.

Duong Thi Thu Hien received an M.A. in TESOL from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, in 2012. She has been working at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Finance – Marketing, since 2008.

Nguyen Thi Diem received an M.A. in TESOL from the University of Southern Queensland in 2012. She has been working at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Finance – Marketing, since 2010.