**EFL students’ AI deployment strategies for writing: A comparative case study of learners with different academic levels**

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**Abstract**

The rise of Generative AI tools has significantly influenced language learning, particularly in the field of academic writing. This study investigates the academic writing challenges faced by EFL students of different academic levels and explores how they deploy GenAI tools to address these challenges. Using a qualitative comparative case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight English majors at a public university, including four freshmen and four junior students. Findings revealed that while both groups encountered similar writing difficulties such as idea generation, vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, and coherence, their deployment of GenAI tools differed. First-year students primarily relied on GenAI tools for foundational support, focusing on grammar and vocabulary enhancement, whereas third-year students adopted a more strategic and critical use, utilizing AI to refine arguments, structure ideas, and enhance academic tone. These insights suggest the need for AI-based instructional strategies that tailor to individual learners’ needs and promote critical engagement with GenAI tools to foster responsible and effective GenAI integration in EFL writing instruction.

*Keywords:*GenAI in education, EFL academic writing, writing challenges, ai-assisted writing, student strategies, academic level differences.

**1. Introduction**

AI has significantly transformed language learning in recent years, providing new tools and resources to enhance students' writing skills. According to Marzuki (2023), GenAI writing tools are particularly useful for EFL learners with low proficiency, offering instant feedback and assistance to enhance their writing skills more quickly. Despite these benefits, students engage with GenAI differently depending on their academic level, proficiency, and familiarity with writing conventions.

As these technologies become more accessible, they have the potential to bridge learning gaps and support students in developing their academic writing skills. Prior research from Alshumaimeri and Alshememry (2023) suggested that it is essential to ensure AI is effectively and responsibly integrated into language learning, with best practices for its design and evaluation. However, there is limited research on how students at different academic levels engage with GenAI tools, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. Most existing studies focus on GenAI’s general impact on language learning rather than on students’ specific strategies at different academic levels. For example, Nguyen (2024) examined English majors' perceptions of AI in tertiary education in Vietnam, highlighting both benefits and concerns but without distinguishing between academic levels. Similarly, Pham and Le (2024) found positive student perceptions of ChatGPT in language learning but did not address differences between first-year and third-year students.

This study investigates how first-year and third-year EFL students at Can Tho University engage with GenAI tools to support their English academic writing. It examines the specific writing challenges faced by students at different academic levels and explores how they deploy GenAI to address these difficulties. By comparing the strategies and usage patterns of the two groups, the research highlights how academic experience and individual learning differences shape the integration of GenAI in writing practices. The study also assesses the perceived effectiveness of GenAI tools in enhancing students’ writing development, offering insights into their role in fostering linguistic and cognitive support across varying proficiency levels.

Aligned with the stated research objectives, the study proposes the following research questions:

1. What challenges do EFL students with different academic levels have in academic writing?

2. How do they deploy GenAI to overcome their challenges?

**2. Literature Review**

***2.1. GenAI in EFL writing learning***

GenAI is a branch of AI that uses advanced machine learning methods, especially deep learning models, to produce new and realistic content in various forms, including text, images, music, and code. Unlike conventional AI, which is centered around tasks such as classification and prediction, GenAI allows for the creation of original content driven by user inputs, enabling it to carry out complex and creative tasks. (Banh & Strobel, 2023)

GenAI-powered tools have contributed to English as EFL learning by providing writing assistance, thereby increasing their impact in both academic and professional contexts. The incorporation of AI into English as an EFL writing learning strategy has reshaped how students develop and refine their writing skills. GenAI-powered writing tools, such as grammar checkers, automated feedback systems, and error correction mechanisms, have become essential in providing real-time support to EFL learners. These tools aim to address common challenges such as grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and structural coherence in writing.

In recent years, AI systems have evolved to be more adaptive to individual learners' needs. These systems can assess the proficiency level of each student and provide personalized recommendations, thereby offering tailored learning experiences. Gen AI-powered writing tools have revolutionized the way students develop writing skills by offering instant feedback, enhancing clarity and coherence, and supporting self-directed learning. Platforms such as Gemini and ChatGPT provide a dynamic learning environment that improves student performance (Barrot, 2020; Coenen et al., 2021; Pokrivcakova, 2019; Nazari et al., 2021). These tools are particularly beneficial for EFL learners with lower English proficiency, as they facilitate structured language practice and immediate correction.

The integration of GenAI into EFL writing learning has generated significant scholarly interest, particularly in relation to GenAI-powered tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini. While these technologies have demonstrated considerable potential in enhancing writing proficiency, their implementation also presents several pedagogical challenges and ethical concerns. These include issues related to students' cognitive development, the reliability of GenAI-generated content, academic integrity, data privacy, and algorithmic bias. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the responsible and effective integration of GenAI in language learning.

***2.2. Academic writing challenges***

Academic writing is an essential skill in the EFL context. It is a formal and structured form of communication commonly required in higher education, encompassing genres such as essays, summaries, reports, critical reviews, and research papers (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010). Students must demonstrate clarity, coherence, logical paragraphing, and support their arguments with evidence while adhering to discipline-specific conventions.

Ultimately, academic writing in English presents not only linguistic challenges but also cognitive and evaluative challenges as learners are required to think critically, engage deeply with content, and communicate their ideas with precision. Writing academic texts in English, such as essays, reports, or course assignments, is a multifaceted and cognitively demanding activity that necessitates the integration of various cognitive processes, such as goal-setting, problem-solving, and memory regulation (Allen & McNamara, 2017; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

For EFL learners, academic writing poses added challenges. They often struggle with differentiating between spoken and written language, constructing grammatically accurate and cohesive texts, and avoiding ineffective vocabulary (Al Fadda, 2012; Sulaiman & Muhajir, 2019). Therefore, writing in English presents unique challenges to them as it differs significantly from writing in their native language. These differences span vocabulary, grammar, and the overall structure of academic texts, which complicates the transition (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Moreover, EFL students must develop essential academic skills such as argument construction, source integration, and critical analysis, tasks that can be particularly daunting for those not yet fully acquainted with these conventions.

Academic writing is not simply the act of putting ideas into words. It requires students to select relevant information, evaluate it critically, summarize and paraphrase effectively, and use discipline-specific grammar and vocabulary. All these skills must be employed while maintaining academic integrity, particularly by avoiding plagiarism. These tasks are especially demanding for EFL students, who often grapple with the intricacies of academic conventions and the pressure to adopt an expert voice despite limited experience or subject matter knowledge.

***2.3 Related Studies***

Marzuki et al. (2023) showed that AI-generated suggestions supported students during the revision phase, enabling them to produce more refined and well-structured drafts. These benefits were especially pronounced among learners with lower proficiency levels, for whom instant and repeated feedback helped address language gaps without the fear of immediate judgment. However, the study also warned that without proper scaffolding, students might remain overly dependent on these tools and fail to internalize writing conventions.

Kim et al. (2025) explored EFL students’ perceptions of GenAI-assisted academic writing and found that learners valued these tools not only for grammar and vocabulary support but also for help in organizing ideas, developing arguments, and paraphrasing sources. However, the study also noted that effective use of GenAI required learners to develop prompting skills, critical reading, and self-editing strategies—skills that may vary significantly between first-year and more advanced students.

Lee (2023) found that lower-level EFL students used ChatGPT mainly for grammar and vocabulary corrections, while higher-level students used it more critically—for idea generation, voice refinement, and structure. Similarly, Zhai (2022) noted that students with higher academic maturity tend to develop metacognitive strategies when using AI tools.

**3. Methodology**

***3.1. Research Design***

This study adopts a qualitative research design to understand how students with academic levels engage with AI in academic writing. A comparative case study methodology was chosen to focus on two student groups, including first-year and third-year English majors at Can Tho University.

***3.2. Participants and Setting***

This study involved eight English majors’ students from Can Tho University, with an equal representation of four first-year and four third-year students. The selection was purposive, aimed at conducting a comparative analysis of GenAI usage across different academic levels at two distinct groups of students. First-year students were chosen due to their developing foundational writing skills, whereas third-year students were selected for their greater experience in academic writing and higher familiarity with GenAI tools. By comparing these two groups, the study sought to examine differences in GenAI adoption, integration, and reliance as students progress in their academic journey.

A purposive sampling was used to intentionally select English majors’ students with different levels of engagement and experience in integrating AI technologies into their writing practices. Selection was based on three key factors: (1) engagement with GenAI writing tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini), (2) self-reported frequency of GenAI usage, and (3) English writing proficiency, as assessed through self-evaluation and instructor recommendations. This approach ensured that participants had sufficient experience with GenAI tools, enabling meaningful comparisons between different academic levels. Furthermore, selecting students with varying levels of GenAI familiarity provided a comprehensive spectrum of GenAI-assisted writing practices, from novice users focusing on grammar corrections to advanced users refining argument structures and coherence.

***3.3. Semi-structured Interviews***

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews. This method balances structured questioning with the flexibility to explore emerging topics, ensuring key themes are consistently addressed while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The interview questions were structured into four key areas to comprehensively explore students’ engagement with GenAI in writing. This structured approach ensured that the interviews covered all the key research topics while still allowing for flexibility and depth in the discussion. The four key areas provided a framework for the interviews, ensuring that all relevant aspects of GenAI usage in EFL writing were addressed.

***3.4. Procedure***

The data collection process was meticulously structured into four key stages to ensure accuracy, confidentiality, and a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. This systematic approach was crucial for maintaining the rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The first stage focused on recruiting a diverse group of participants using various methods, including advisor referrals, class announcements, and direct invitations to students using GenAI tools. Ethical participation was emphasized through an information sheet explaining the study and participants’ rights, ensuring informed consent (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Then in-depth interviews were conducted both in-person and online via Zoom, and the interviews were scheduled at convenient times to support participant engagement and accessibility. Each session lasted 30–45 minutes and was recorded with consent for accurate transcription. Conducted in Vietnamese, the interviews encouraged natural, detailed responses by removing language barriers.

All interviews were then transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese to capture linguistic nuances. The data was then coded and thematically organized. Following Attride-Stirling’s (2001) Thematic Network Analysis, this study employs a structured method that organizes themes into basic, organizing, and global categories. Selective data were translated into English for reporting results. This rigorous approach minimized misinterpretations, ensuring the reliability of the translated data.

This study followed a protective approach by prioritizing participant confidentiality while maintaining data integrity (Surmiak, 2018). To further safeguard identities, anonymized coding was implemented, and all identifying details were removed from transcripts . All data was securely organized and stored while ensuring participant confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained through detailed information sheets outlining the study, risks, and data handling. Recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files, and anonymized coding was used to remove identifying details.

 **4. Results**

***4.1. Academic writing challenges***

Academic writing poses significant challenges for many EFL students, particularly as they progress through their studies. The nature of these challenges evolves as students advance from mastering basic writing skills to producing more complex academic texts. GenAI tools, such as ChatGPT and Gemini have become a valuable resource for students in addressing these challenges.

Both first-year and third-year students faced generating ideas for academic writing, particularly when they were tasked with complex topics. First-year students struggled with developing a variety of ideas independently, leading to a time-consuming writing process. As Participant 1 explained,“The difficulty is coming up with ideas, which takes a lot of time [...] AI gives me more variety, and some of the ideas are actually better than mine.” Additionally, third-year students often struggled with refining and organizing their thoughts effectively. Participant 5 stated,“I sometimes struggle with coming up with ideas. Also, I tend to forget certain words or don’t always use them correctly in context.”

Vocabulary is another shared challenge. First-year students frequently faced difficulties with basic word choices and avoiding. As Participant 3 noted, “Yes, when I write, I often struggle with vocabulary. I don’t have enough words to express the ideas I want to convey.”Similarly, third-year students found it difficult to convey complex thoughts due to limited vocabulary, especially when writing formal texts like research reports. Participant 6 explained,

“My vocabulary is quite simple and basic, but the ideas I think of tend to be deep and complex. So, I don’t have enough words to fully develop my writing [...] Those types of writing require a lot of academic vocabulary, and the writing style must be very formal. So, I often rely on AI to ensure my writing meets the standards.”

Thirdly, mastering grammar rules remained a common challenge for all the students. First-year students made errors in basic sentence structure, verb forms, and punctuation. They highlighted the challenges in applying advanced grammatical concepts, Participant 2 noted,“I usually make a lot of grammar mistakes,” and Participant 3 highlighted,“I can write simple sentences, but when it comes to passive voice or compound sentences, I sometimes make mistakes.”Although third-year students made fewer basic errors, they still faced difficulties in refining sentence structures and ensuring grammatical accuracy. Issues such as typos, awkward phrasing, and word choice persisted. As Participant 7 explained, “My sentence structures are still quite simple, and I sometimes make minor grammar or spelling mistakes.” Similarly, Participant 5 noted, “Mostly spelling errors [...] They’re usually my own mistakes like typos or incorrect words.”

Maintaining coherence and logical flow was a common challenge for the students. Many struggled to organize ideas and create smooth transitions between paragraphs, which affected the clarity and logic of their writing. As Participant 8 explained, “Linking paragraphs can be a challenge because the ideas don’t always flow smoothly, which makes the writing less logical and harder for readers to understand.” Even with more writing experience, students continued to face difficulties in structuring formal assignments and sustaining an academic tone. The use of GenAI tools added complexity, as students had to balance AI-generated suggestions with their own writing style. Participant 6 illustrated this struggle,“If I don’t know how to give proper instructions, AI generates very sophisticated words. But if I ask it to write more simply, then it becomes too basic and doesn’t match my current level. So, it’s difficult to give the right prompts for AI to produce a suitable response.”

***4.2. AI usage patterns and differences across academic levels***

While the students encountered similar challenges in academic writing, the nature and depth of these difficulties varied by academic level. Despite the widespread use of GenAI across both groups, notable differences emerged in their engagement and dependency. While they employed GenAI for common purposes such as idea generation, grammar improvement, and sentence refinement, their strategies and depth of use varied significantly. First-year students primarily used GenAI to support foundational skills such as generating ideas, expanding vocabulary, and addressing basic grammatical issues. In contrast, third-year students utilized GenAI for more advanced tasks, including drafting content, refining arguments, and aligning their writing with academic conventions. Their use of GenAI focused on enhancing academic vocabulary, maintaining a formal tone, and improving coherence and logical flow in their writing. Table 1 summarizes the different strategies between first-year and third-year students.

 Table 1. Coping strategies of students across academic levels.

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| **Strategies** | **First-year** | **Third-year** |
| **Idea Generation** | Heavily rely on Gen AI for brainstorming and developing initial arguments. | Use GenAI to refine ideas, compare alternatives, and deepen arguments. |
| **Outlining** | Depend on GenAI for structured outlines and to avoid overthinking. | Use GenAI strategically to refine and organize complex ideas. |
| **Drafting** | Use GenAI to develop early drafts, expand ideas, and structure content. | Selectively use GenAI to enhance coherence, tone, and vocabulary while maintaining control over content. |
| **Content development**  | Use GenAI to elaborate on basic ideas and maintain flow. | Use GenAI to deepen analysis, restructure content, and improve logical flow. |
| **Vocabulary enhancement** | Ask GenAI for advanced word choices; struggle with using academic vocabulary. | Use GenAI for vocabulary expansion, academic tone, and sentence restructuring. |
| **Improving accuracy** | Rely on GenAI to check grammar, structure, and coherence. | Use GenAI for proofreading, especially to detect minor errors and polish clarity. |
| **Plagiarism checking** | Less focused on plagiarism checking; assume low risk due to paraphrasing GenAI output. | Use GenAI and other tools for intentional plagiarism checks before submission. |
| **Content validation** | Trust GenAI but evaluate accuracy manually; prompt carefully to reduce errors. | Cross-check GenAI content with external sources to ensure credibility and reliability. |

*4.2.1 Idea generation and outlining*

First-year students showed a strong dependence on GenAI for idea generation, often using it not only to spark initial thoughts but also to develop those ideas into coherent arguments. Their feedback highlighted GenAI’s versatility in offering diverse perspectives and enhancing argument structure. For instance, Participant 3 noted, "I mostly use AI to generate ideas before writing. It suggests topics, different approaches, and ways to develop arguments more clearly and in detail" and Participant 4 added, "I use AI to generate ideas and counterarguments"

In contrast, third-year students demonstrated a more strategic and critical approach. They used GenAI to compare and evaluate ideas, selecting those that best supported their arguments. As Participant 5 explained,“Before writing, I use AI to generate ideas and compare different ones to see which fits my essay best. After finishing my draft, I use AI to check for errors" Participant 8, another third-year student, emphasized the role of GenAI in enhancing the depth of their arguments, "I ask AI to generate new ideas or further develop my arguments, which adds more depth and variety to my content"

Beyond structure, first-year students also used GenAI to gather and filter information. They treated GenAI-generated outlines as flexible guides rather than fixed templates, adapting suggestions to suit their needs. Participant 1 described this approach, “My idea of outlining is like gathering information, looking at the content that AI suggests, then selecting a few of those ideas to use” Some first-year students also developed strategic methods for interacting with GenAI. For example, Participant 4 explained a methodical approach, “I provide the essay topic and ask for specific ideas for the introduction first. Then, I developed the body and conclusion myself. I find that breaking it down into sections gives more detailed results than asking AI to generate everything at once.”

In contrast, third-year students employed GenAI for outlining more strategically. They used GenAI to refine and organize complex ideas more effectively. This demonstrated a more advanced approach, where third-year students integrated GenAI-generated outlines with their research and critical analysis. Participant 6 described their strategy, “I usually give it a topic and ask it to brainstorm and list relevant ideas along with related vocabulary” Participant 5 took this further, explaining how GenAI helps in evaluating and selecting the most suitable ideas, “Before writing, I use AI to generate ideas and compare different ones to see which fits my essay best. After finishing my draft, I use AI to check for errors”

*4..2.2. Drafting and Content Development*

Using GenAI at the early drafting stage to generate and refine multiple ideas before narrowing them down. GenAI serves as a brainstorming partner, allowing students to explore different perspectives before finalizing their arguments. Participant 1 noted, "Yeah, gathering information, brainstorming ideas, maybe even drafting a little. I pick multiple ideas and then narrow them down." GenAI is not just a content generator but also a learning aid, providing scaffolding to help first-year students develop their ideas. Participant 2 highlighted how GenAI helps in breaking down complex prompts and simplifying the writing process,“Sometimes, I don’t know where to start, so I ask AI to break it down into steps or give me a simple explanation first."

First-year students often rely on GenAI throughout the writing process, from outlining to finalizing their drafts, they tend to use GenAI comprehensively, treating it as an all-in-one writing assistant. Participant 4 shared,“I use it before writing to create an outline, during writing to develop content, and after writing to optimize the academic quality."

While third-year students also use GenAI for idea generation, they engage with the tool more critically, focusing on improving academic vocabulary and enhancing the coherence of their arguments.

Instead of relying on GenAI for idea generation alone, third-year students strategically use it to refine their language and strengthen their arguments. Participant 6 explained GenAI’s role in supporting lexical development, "I use AI for multiple purposes, but mainly for drafting content. As I mentioned earlier, I often have ideas but lack the right vocabulary, so I ask AI to list relevant vocabulary or expand on my ideas."

Third-year students, in contrast, are more selective in their GenAI usage, ensuring that GenAI-generated content aligns with academic expectations. This reflects a more independent approach, where GenAI is used as a supplementary tool rather than a primary writing assistant. Participant 7 noted,

"When it comes to writing, I first determine the type of text I need to produce whether it’s a report, an opinion essay, or an essay discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a certain issue. Then, I search for and create a suitable outline. I also read sample writings and study relevant sentence structures and vocabulary to expand my word choices and understand how to use them effectively."

*4.2.3 Vocabulary enhancement*

By serving as a self-editing tool, AI allows students to improve clarity and coherence, aligning their writing with academic standards. Its role extends beyond error detection, fostering a more sophisticated and polished writing style.

A first-year participant expressed concern about their limited vocabulary. This indicates a perceived gap in vocabulary usage that GenAI might help address mentioned, Participant 4 noted, "I haven't been able to incorporate specialized vocabulary into my essays yet, so my writing is still quite basic and not very advanced"

Expanding on this, third-year student employ GenAI not only to corrects errors but also introduces users to new words and concepts. This highlights how GenAI bridges the gap between conceptual thinking and linguistic expression, Participant 5 shared, "I use it to generate ideas and expand my vocabulary related to different topics"and Participant 6 added, "Usually, when I come up with an idea, I don’t have enough vocabulary to express it. My vocabulary is quite simple and basic, but the ideas I think of tend to be deep and complex. So, I don’t have enough words to fully develop my writing."

In addition, GenAI can provide customized vocabulary suggestions. GenAI plays a role in helping students engage with academic and field-specific vocabulary, Participant 7 shared, "Yes, I do use AI in my writing studies. I often use it to analyze certain sentence structures or difficult vocabulary, as well as to get vocabulary suggestions for my writing [...] I mainly use AI to analyze and understand complex academic vocabulary and sentence structures that I come across in my lecturers' materials."

*4.2.4 Improving accuracy*

Several participants specifically mentioned using AI-powered tools for grammar refinement and proofreading. While the primary focus of this study was on generative AI tools, some students particularly first-year participants also reported using grammar-focused AI tools like Grammarly to address their linguistic challenges. For example, Participant 4 noted, “Yes, I do have difficulties with grammar [...] I use Grammarly for grammar and style improvement”

Third-year students highlighted the value of AI tools like Grammarly for detecting and correcting writing errors. While they rely on GenAI for overall writing support, they use specialized tools for precise proofreading, especially to catch minor mistakes like spelling and typos, Participant 5 explained,“Mostly spelling errors [...] They’re usually my own mistakes—typos or incorrect words [...] Well, Grammarly checks grammar and spelling accuracy, so I use it for proofreading”

Additionally, AI tools assist students in ensuring the reliability and clarity of their writing. Both groups of students trust AI for fact-checking and gathering supporting details for their writing, Participant 7 supported this view, stated, “It provides information that is almost accurate and relevant to what I need.”

*4.2.5 Plagiarism checking and content validation*

First-year students actively use GenAI to support idea generation and content validation, emphasizing its role in ensuring originality and accuracy. They consciously treat GenAI as a reference tool rather than copying its output, demonstrating active evaluation and selective use of generated content. For example, Participant 1 explained,“Since I’m not copying AI’s writing, plagiarism isn’t an issue for me [...] Since I read the assignment first before looking for content, AI provides multiple pieces of information, and I get to choose what to include. So, if something is inaccurate, it doesn’t really matter because I can filter it out.”

Similarly, first-year students recognized the importance of providing clear prompts to minimize inaccuracies. They are also aware of the potential for errors in GenAI-generated content and take steps to ensure it aligns with their needs. Participant 3 noted,“That happens rarely because I usually input the prompt clearly, so AI seldom makes content errors.”

Despite their careful use of GenAI, first-year students focus more on developing writing skills and may not view GenAI as a plagiarism-checking tool. However, they show awareness of the need to filter out inaccurate or irrelevant content, indicating active engagement with the AI-generated material.

Third-year students, who have a more advanced understanding of academic writing, utilize GenAI not only for idea generation but also for plagiarism detection and content verification. This shows that third-year students see GenAI as a reliable tool to ensure their work is free from unintentional plagiarism and meets academic integrity standards, Participant 5 shared,“When my teacher requires plagiarism checks, I use AI for that too.” andParticipant 7 added, “I use it while writing and for plagiarism checking after finishing my work.”

Third-year students rely on GenAI but also actively verify its information to ensure accuracy and relevance. They demonstrate a more sophisticated, critical engagement with GenAI-generated content, Participant 7 noted, “If I still have doubts, I cross-check the information with other sources.” This highlights that

Moreover, a balanced use of GenAI, where third-year students integrate GenAI into their process but remain actively involved in reviewing and refining the content themselves. Participant 6 emphasized their reliance on GenAI’s efficiency, said, “It’s very helpful for checking grammar and structure quickly, but I make sure I review everything myself.”

**5. Discussion**

The findings of this study both confirm and extend previous research on GenAI use in EFL academic writing. While earlier studies have acknowledged the advantage of GenAI tools for EFL learners, especially those with lower- proficiency (e.g., Marzuki et al., 2023; Lee, 2023), few have explored how students at different academic levels strategically deploy these tools based on their evolving needs. This study fills that gap by offering a detailed comparison between first-year and third-year EFL students, revealing nuanced differences in GenAI engagement and interpretation.

Consistent with Marzuki et al. (2023), the current study confirms that GenAI tools offer significant support for lower-proficiency learners, particularly in terms of grammar correction, vocabulary expansion, and idea generation. First-year students in this study heavily relied on GenAI for these basic needs and expressed appreciation for its ability to reduce writing anxiety and save time. This reinforces the idea that GenAI can function as a non-judgmental learning companion, providing repeated practice and immediate feedback.

Similarly, Lee (2023) and Kim et al. (2025) found that higher-level students use GenAI more critically, focusing on higher-order writing tasks such as argument development, paraphrasing, and tone refinement. This study supports that conclusion, as third-year participants reported using GenAI to enhance academic voice, structure complex ideas, and align their writing with academic conventions. These students showed increased prompting skills and more selective adoption of AI suggestions, indicating growing metacognitive awareness.

This study is notable for its in-depth comparison of GenAI usage between first-year and third-year students While previous studies such as Nguyen (2024) and Pham & Le (2024) examined Vietnamese students' general perceptions of AI in language learning, they did not explore how usage patterns vary between academic levels. This study contributes new insights by showing that third-year students not only use GenAI more skillfully but also more ethically demonstrating greater concern for academic integrity, accuracy of content, and plagiarism checking.

Moreover, unlike Marzuki et al. (2023), who warned that GenAI use might hinder students' internalization of writing skills, this study suggests that when used critically especially by more advanced students GenAI can enhance rather than replace cognitive effort. Third-year students in this research showed awareness of AI limitations and often cross-checked AI content with external sources, suggesting a mature, balanced engagement.

These findings suggest that academic maturity is a key factor in shaping how EFL students perceive, engage with, and benefit from GenAI tools. As students advance in their academic journey, their writing challenges shift from surface-level issues to deeper, rhetorical ones .In response, their use of GenAI becomes more sophisticated—not merely for fixing problems, but for enhancing the quality and credibility of their work.

The study also implies that GenAI use evolves from dependency to partnership. First-year students treat GenAI as a direct assistant that generates or corrects text, while third-year students view it as a collaborative tool that supports critical thinking and self-expression. This evolution underscores the need to design tiered AI literacy training in EFL education, helping students progress from passive users to active, critical deployers of AI tools.

**6. Conclusion**

This study examined how EFL students at different academic levels first-year and third-year navigate academic writing challenges and utilize GenAI tools to address them. While both groups faced common difficulties such as idea generation, vocabulary gaps, grammar issues, and maintaining coherence, the complexity of these challenges varied by level. First-year students struggled more with foundational skills, whereas third-year students dealt with higher-level academic demands. These differences shaped their GenAI usage strategies. First-year students relied on GenAI for basic support like grammar correction and content generation. In contrast, third-year students used GenAI more selectively, employing it to refine vocabulary, structure arguments, and enhance clarity. While both groups found GenAI helpful, they also noted its limitations, particularly regarding accuracy, depth, and natural language use. Third-year students were more capable of critically engaging with AI outputs, while first-year students were more vulnerable to its flaws. Students expressed interest in more advanced and adaptive AI tools but agreed that GenAI should serve as a support, not a substitute for independent thinking and writing. These findings highlight the need for developing students’ critical AI literacy and providing guidance to ensure responsible, effective use of AI in academic contexts.

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**Bionote**

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