

AI-ASSISTED WRITING STRATEGIES AMONG ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS PREPARING FOR THE VSTEP WRITING TEST

CHIẾN LƯỢC VIẾT CÓ SỰ HỖ TRỢ CỦA TRÍ TUỆ NHÂN TẠO (AI) CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TRONG QUÁ TRÌNH CHUẨN BỊ CHO BÀI THI VIẾT VSTEP

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Abstract - This study investigates the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in preparing for the VSTEP writing test among English-major students who achieved a C1 level. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including a questionnaire survey of 58 students and semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. The findings indicate that AI tools are widely used in writing preparation, with ChatGPT (82.8%) and Grammarly (74.1%) being the most frequently utilized. The most common AI-assisted strategies include brainstorming, grammar checking, and revision. These strategies support key stages of the writing process, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Overall, the study highlights the growing integration of AI tools into learners' preparation for the VSTEP writing test.

Key words - AI-assisted writing; AI in language learning; VSTEP writing; writing strategies; English majors.

1. Introduction

English proficiency is a highly significant skill for higher education. Various nations have established national language proficiency frameworks, which are often related to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training developed the Vietnamese Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, which serves as a common framework for the evaluation of language proficiency within the country's educational institutions [1]. Following this framework, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) was developed as a measurement instrument that evaluates students' English proficiency in listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills [2]. Over the past decade, VSTEP has become a graduation requirement at many Vietnamese universities; hence, it is a high-stakes test affecting teachers' instruction techniques and students' learning strategies. Previous research has proved that standardized tests create washback effects on teaching and learning methods as well as motivation [3], [4].

Among the four language skills, writing may be seen as the most difficult one, since it demands the convergence of linguistic competence with higher-order thinking skills like organizing thoughts and building arguments. Hyland [5] suggests that successful writing in a second language entails not only mastery of grammar but also clear

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu việc sử dụng các công cụ trí tuệ nhân tạo (AI) trong quá trình chuẩn bị cho bài thi Viết VSTEP của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh đạt trình độ C1. Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, bao gồm khảo sát bằng bảng hỏi với 58 sinh viên và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 10 người tham gia. Kết quả cho thấy các công cụ AI được sử dụng rộng rãi trong quá trình ôn luyện kỹ năng viết, trong đó ChatGPT (82,8%) và Grammarly (74,1%) là hai công cụ phổ biến nhất. Các chiến lược sử dụng AI thường gặp bao gồm động não ý tưởng, kiểm tra ngữ pháp và chỉnh sửa bài viết. Những chiến lược này hỗ trợ hiệu quả các giai đoạn của quá trình viết như lập kế hoạch, viết nháp, rà soát và biên tập. Nhìn chung, AI đang ngày càng được tích hợp vào quá trình chuẩn bị cho bài thi Viết VSTEP của người học.

Từ khóa - Viết có hỗ trợ bởi trí tuệ nhân tạo; AI trong học tập ngôn ngữ; bài thi Viết VSTEP; chiến lược viết; sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh.

expression of ideas. In the case of Vietnam, studies on the VSTEP Writing Test reveal that Vietnamese learners usually have problems formulating coherent answers within the allotted time period; some typical weaknesses include inadequate ideation, grammatical mistakes, and poor coherence [6], [7].

With the rapid advancement of digital technology, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for learning is a major phenomenon, with many students using AI to support writing through idea generation, revision, and feedback [8], [9]. However, research on the use of AI tools in language test preparation remains limited. The existing research on the VSTEP test has primarily concentrated on the washback effect of the test, the validity of the test, and the difficulties that learners face in executing various language skills [3], while little attention has been paid to the possibilities that new technologies may offer to language learners who are preparing for a high-stakes writing test. Accordingly, further research is required to ascertain the learning strategies that learners adopt to incorporate AI tools in their learning for the writing test.

The purpose of this research is to explore how English-major students having attained the C1 level employ AI tools for VSTEP writing preparation. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do English-major students use AI tools when preparing for the VSTEP writing test?

RQ2: What types of AI tools are most frequently used in VSTEP writing preparation?

RQ3: What writing strategies do students employ when using AI tools?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The VSTEP writing test

The VSTEP writing test requires candidates to perform two writing tasks. The first one involves a functional writing task that requires candidates to write a letter or send an email, while the second writing task requires candidates to present their opinions or argue on a given topic [10]. This writing test seeks to evaluate the candidates' ability to present ideas in a logical order, argue on a given topic, and use grammatically correct sentences and vocabulary in writing.

Past research studies indicate that most Vietnamese learners often face difficulties in the VSTEP writing test, including insufficient vocabulary, grammatical errors, and problems in presenting coherent ideas within a limited period [11]. In language testing research, the challenges faced by most candidates in completing the writing test are often examined from the point of view of washback. Previous research on the washback effects of the VSTEP examination indicates that high-stakes testing has a significant impact on teaching methods and learning strategies, in which students often adopt unique learning strategies in order to perform better in the examination [12]. Therefore, it is essential to examine the preparation methods that students adopt for the writing part of the VSTEP test in order to identify the most effective method for writing development.

2.2. Writing strategies in language learning

Writing strategies are a significant part of second language writing development. Writing is a recursive process that involves a number of stages: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Through these stages, writers are able to generate ideas, organize their ideas, and improve their writing in terms of clarity, coherence, and linguistic accuracy [5].

The planning stage involves the learner's ability to organize ideas before writing. Through planning strategies like brainstorming, outlining, or idea mapping, writers are able to better organize their ideas. This improves the coherence of their writing. Research has shown that second language learners who practice planning strategies are able to produce coherent writing [13]. In the drafting stage, writers are concerned with the expression of ideas. In second language writing, learners often experience difficulties in this stage because of their limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge [14].

The revision and editing stages are concerned with improving the quality of writing. In these stages, writers revise ideas and improve the organization of ideas. Editing involves improving grammatical errors, vocabulary usage, and sentence structures. This stage is linked to self-regulated learning. In this stage, writers are able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing. Research has shown

that the use of self-regulated learning strategies is positively linked to writing performance in second language learning contexts [15], [16].

2.3. Artificial intelligence in language learning

Artificial intelligence is a crucial technology used in education, especially in language learning, as digital tools can offer personalized feedback. AI-based tools can offer feedback to the learner, which can aid the learning process. The main use of AI in language learning is the evaluation of the learner's writings, offering feedback on the use of grammar, vocabulary, and organization of the text [9]. This enables the learner to repeatedly edit the text using immediate feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and structure [17]. Moreover, AI tools can provide suggestions, explain language use, and guide the learner through the entire process of writing. However, the use of AI in language learning can face some challenges, as the learner may rely on the suggestions of the AI tools, which may not always be correct, thereby requiring the learner to critically think [8].

2.4. Previous studies on AI-assisted writing

A number of research studies have explored the use of AI-assisted tools for writing in the context of second language acquisition. The results of the research studies suggest that the use of AI-assisted tools can contribute to the improvement of grammatical accuracy as well as the use of lexical diversity for second language learners [17]. The use of AI tools can also aid learners in the idea generation stage of the writing process, which can help them overcome difficulties with the idea generation stage [8].

Some limitations of the use of AI-assisted tools for writing have been identified by the research studies. The use of automated tools for the evaluation of writings may not contribute to the improvement of the quality of the writings, as the tools may not address higher-level aspects of the quality of the writings. The use of the tools may not aid the learners in understanding the linguistic principles underlying the suggestions made by the tools [9].

The prior research into the topic of VSTEP testing has concentrated on the effect of tests on teaching, testing validity, and problems faced by learners when completing writing tasks [11], [12]. Such an analysis has made it possible to explore how high-stakes testing affects the educational process and what difficulties appear in learners' writing performance.

Along with this, a considerable number of studies have already examined the application of AI for second language writing in general academic situations [8], [17]. Nevertheless, relatively little research into how English-major learners make use of AI during their preparation for the test has been performed yet.

Nonetheless, there is insufficient research that looks at how AI applications contribute to language test preparation, during which learners write under time constraints based on specific criteria. There has been little empirical literature concerning the use of AI by English-major students in VSTEP writing test preparation.

To fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which students majoring in English at the C1 level in the VSTEP exam utilize AI in preparing for the VSTEP writing exam. The focus will be on determining the reasons for using AI, identifying the types of AI tools that are predominantly utilized, and exploring the writing techniques that students adopt while incorporating these AI tools.

3. Methodology

In this research, a mixed-methods approach to investigating the phenomenon of using AI tools for VSTEP writing preparation among students was used. The quantitative method helped to find out common trends in the use of the AI tool by students, while the qualitative method revealed more information on how students utilize the tool. A mixed-method approach was applied as it combines both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the problem.

3.1. Subject of the study

The study gathered data from 58 participants who were English-major students from various universities in Vietnam. The majority were third- and fourth-year students who had just completed the VSTEP and obtained the C1 level. The participants were familiar with academic writing since they had taken academic writing courses during their undergraduate studies. Participants were recruited through university student groups and online academic networks. The use of an online survey in data collection has become popular in educational research since it allows the researcher to access geographically dispersed respondents [18]. The study used a convenience sampling design since the participants were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. Convenience sampling is a popular method in educational research when the goal of the study is to explore learning strategies in a specific group rather than generalization [19].

3.2. Instruments

Two research tools were used for the study, namely a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The use of both quantitative and qualitative research tools is a common trend used by many educational studies, as it allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' general experiences as well as specific details of the participants' experiences [20].

The questionnaire used as a research tool to explore the students' use of AI tools for the VSTEP writing test had four sections. The first section of the questionnaire was used to obtain the participants' demographic details, including the year of study, university, and the participants' experience with the VSTEP examination. The second section of the questionnaire was used to identify the participants' use of AI tools for the VSTEP writing test. The tools included, but were not limited to, ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc. The third section of the questionnaire was used to explore the frequency with which the participants used the tools for the VSTEP writing test. The last section focused on the reasons for

the use of AI tools, which included the generation of ideas, grammatical corrections, improvement of vocabulary, and essay organization. The questionnaire was administered online, which was helpful for the participants to access the questionnaire conveniently. Online questionnaires are commonly used for educational research because they are efficient tools for collecting research data, and a large number of participants can be reached within a short period of time [21].

The questionnaire consisted of 24 items adapted from previous studies on AI-assisted writing and technology-enhanced language learning [8], [9], [16], [17]. The items were divided into four dimensions, including purposes of AI use, frequency of AI tool usage, AI-assisted writing strategies, and perceived usefulness of AI tools in writing preparation. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/never) to 5 (strongly agree/very frequently).

Prior to the official data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with 15 English-major students to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's Alpha. The results indicated acceptable reliability values for all dimensions, suggesting that the questionnaire was reliable for the study. These findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability analysis of questionnaire scales

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Purposes of AI use	6	0.86
Frequency of AI tool usage	5	0.82
AI-assisted writing strategies	7	0.88
Perceived usefulness of AI tools	6	0.84

Values obtained through Cronbach's Alpha test range between 0.82 and 0.88, meaning that the questionnaire has high levels of internal consistency reliability [23]. Moreover, content validity was confirmed through adaptation and modification of the questionnaire based on past literature, as well as expert opinion from two lecturers specializing in language teaching and education technology.

Apart from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a limited number of participants to gain more insights into the participants' experiences with AI tools for writing. Ten participants were invited for the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used for the research because they enable the research to explore the participants' experiences more thoroughly [22]. The interviews were conducted online through video conferencing tools, which were recorded with the participants' consent. The interview questions focused on the participants' use of AI tools for writing practice, the tools they used the most, and how the tools were helpful for the VSTEP writing test.

3.3. Analysis procedures

The data obtained through the questionnaire and interview methods were analyzed through a mixed-method analysis that integrated both quantitative and qualitative

analysis methods. The mixed-method analysis is commonly used in educational studies since it allows the researcher to explore both the patterns of data and detailed explanations of learning practices [20].

First, the data from the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis in order to identify patterns of AI tool usage among students. The descriptive statistical analysis is commonly used in educational studies to identify patterns of data obtained through questionnaire methods [23].

The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis to uncover any emerging themes about students' AI-supported writing behavior. Thematic analysis was used since it allows the researcher to identify patterns of data obtained through interview methods [24].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Purposes of AI use

The participants were asked to rate the frequency of the use of the tools for the identified reasons on a five-point Likert scale. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Purposes of AI use in writing preparation

Purpose	Mean	SD	Percentage reporting frequent use
Checking grammar	4.36	0.72	81%
Generating ideas	4.12	0.81	76%
Paraphrasing sentences	3.87	0.90	63%
Improving vocabulary	3.79	0.85	59%

The study revealed that grammar checking was the primary purpose of AI tool usage by students, with a mean of 4.36, and 81% of participants reported that they frequently used AI tools for grammar checking. The participants, despite having already passed the C1 level of VSTEP, heavily depended on AI grammar checking tools during their writing preparation process. This could be due to the fact that even though students are advanced learners, they are extremely particular about grammar when it comes to writing tests. This can be attributed to the standards used when grading writing tests; namely, a grammatical mistake may seriously impact the grade. Such results have already been noted previously in several related studies [17].

The interview study also revealed some interesting facts regarding AI tool usage by students during their writing preparation process. The participants reported that grammar checking was one of the most important functions of AI tools that helped them prepare better for their writing tests.

"After I finish writing my essay, I usually check it with Grammarly. It helps me find grammar mistakes that I didn't notice when I wrote the essay" (Participant 3).

"Although AI tools are not very accurate in checking grammar, I still prefer using them over other grammar checking tools. This is because AI tools are integrated into our VSTEP system, and it makes my work a lot easier" (Participant 6).

"Even if I think my grammar is correct, I still use AI tools to check again. Sometimes there are small mistakes that I cannot see by myself" (Participant 10).

These answers indicate that AI tools are not only used to correct writing errors but also to enhance writers' confidence in the quality of the final product.

The second most frequently mentioned purpose of AI tool usage was related to idea generation ($M = 4.12$). This result underlines the significance of cognitive support during the planning phase of writing. Some of the participants used AI tools when they found it hard to come up with arguments or examples to support their essays on given topics.

This practice may be associated with the facilitatory role of AI tools in idea development. This may be especially useful during exam preparation when time constraints do not allow writers to extensively brainstorm. Additionally, paraphrasing and vocabulary improvement were frequently mentioned as AI tool usage purposes. These functions seem to support writers' intentions to generate more diverse and academically acceptable writing. Instead of relying on their own resources to express their ideas, the participants use AI tools to explore alternative ways to express their ideas. This practice may be associated with the intention to enhance the quality of writing style.

4.2. AI tools used in VSTEP writing preparation

The results indicate that English major students preparing for the VSTEP writing test heavily depended on a few popular AI programs that are easily accessible and provide support for writing. Table 3 provides a summary of the results on the number of participants who used each AI program.

Table 3. AI tools used in VSTEP writing preparation ($N = 58$)

AI tool	Frequency	Percentage
ChatGPT	48	82.8%
Grammarly	43	74.1%
QuillBot	30	51.7%
Google Gemini / Bard	21	36.2%
Other AI tools	11	19.0%

Table 3 indicates that ChatGPT was the most used AI program by the participants, with 82.8% of the participants. Grammarly was the second most used program by 74.1% of the participants, indicating that grammar is a key aspect in writing. The high percentage of participants using QuillBot (51.7%) shows that paraphrasing is also a key tool in writing. This tool is, however, used for a different purpose.

The high prevalence rate of ChatGPT usage by students shows that there is a tendency among students to make use of tools that offer multi-faceted assistance throughout various processes during writing. Unlike Grammarly, which centers on the accuracy of the language used, ChatGPT is able to help with the development of ideas, structuring, and improvement in language altogether. This implies that students require more than just accurate language when preparing for VSTEP writing tests. The

high rate of usage of ChatGPT observed in this study is in agreement with past studies carried out among pre-service EFL teachers who regarded ChatGPT as an innovative solution that saves time and assists in planning and developing content. Like the results of this study, participants in the mentioned studies utilized ChatGPT as an assistive technology instead of replacing human labor, and stressed the importance of critically examining the output produced by AI tools [25].

The interview results provided further insights into the results from the quantitative study. For instance, a number of participants indicated that they used ChatGPT during the early stages of writing.

“When I start practicing an essay, I usually ask ChatGPT to give some ideas about the topic. It helps me think faster because sometimes I don’t know what arguments I should write” (Participant 7).

Another participant highlighted the importance of the role played by the AI tool in the development of ideas:

“Sometimes I ask ChatGPT to suggest an outline for the topic. I don’t copy it directly, but it helps me see how the essay could be structured” (Participant 1).

These quotes indicate that the primary purpose for which students are using ChatGPT is not for generating essays; rather, the tool is being used for cognitive scaffolding. This means that the tool is being used for stimulating ideas rather than replacing the actual essay-writing process. This finding is in line with the latest research on the use of generative AI in the context of educational settings, which indicates that generative AI has the potential to be used as a writing assistant for students by supporting them in the development of ideas, writing texts, and improving the linguistic quality of texts [8].

This study has thus provided evidence that generative AI has already started being used by students for test preparation. From a pedagogical point of view, the reliance on ChatGPT by students for essay writing is also indicative of a larger shift in the preparation strategies used by students for writing tests. It has become clear that rather than just improving their linguistic skills, students are seeking tools that help them in the development of ideas and construction of arguments, which are both essential for essay writing.

4.3. AI-assisted writing strategies

The results revealed that students use three main strategies in AI-assisted writing, including AI-supported brainstorming, AI-assisted grammar checking, and AI-assisted revising the draft. This implies that AI acts mainly as a supporting tool and not as a replacement for the actual writing process. The students strategically employ AI at various levels of the writing process without losing control of their arguments.

The first strategy involved students using AI tools to get ideas before writing their essays. The students claimed that they used the AI tool for generating new ideas or exploring various arguments when facing problems with comprehending the essay topic. Nevertheless, they did not

use any content generated by the AI but selectively utilized certain ideas.

“When I read the essay topic, and I don’t have many ideas, I ask ChatGPT to suggest some points about the topic. Then I choose the ideas that I think are useful for my essay” (Participant 5).

This strategy can be referred to as AI-supported brainstorming. The results suggest that AI tools can help students in the planning stage by being a brainstorming partner for students.

The second technique makes use of AI-based software for grammatical and sentence-level assistance during or after the writing process. Some students stated that they made use of AI software like Grammarly and ChatGPT to point out mistakes in their writing and ensure clearer sentences. This suggests that AI software is being used to improve linguistic accuracy.

“When I finish writing my essay, I use Grammarly or sometimes ChatGPT to check grammar and improve my sentences” (Participant 2).

The third strategy that was observed is related to using AI technology in revising and refining writing drafts. Some of the students reported that they used AI technology to improve sentence structures, vocabulary, and even to make their writing concise.

“Sometimes my sentences are too simple, so I ask ChatGPT to rewrite them more academically” (Participant 4).

This evidence implies that the utilization of AI is not done to replace writing per se but to be used as a means of scaffolding during various phases of the writing process. It is consistent with the notion presented in writing process theory, wherein writing entails processes that require planning, drafting, and revising [5]. The incorporation of AI in these phases signifies a new approach in technology-enhanced writing strategies.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to explore how English major students, who achieved a C1 level of proficiency in VSTEP test preparation, used AI tools for the preparation of the writing part of the test. The research methodology used for the study was mixed, and the results indicated that the majority of the students used AI tools for the preparation of the writing part of the test. Among the tools, the most used were ChatGPT and Grammarly, which were used for idea generation, argumentation, essay planning, grammar, and linguistic correctness. The results indicated that the students used the tools for different stages of the essay.

The results of the study have some implications for language teaching. The study found that most students used the tools for their preparation for the writing part of the test. Therefore, language teachers can use the tools for their students in a guided and pedagogical manner, for example, for brainstorming, for exploring sentence structures, for essay revision, among others. In addition, language teachers can also guide their students on how to use the

tools in a responsible and critical manner so that they can be able to evaluate the suggestions instead of depending on the tools for their improvement in writing.

However, there are some disadvantages associated with this research. Firstly, a relatively small number of students participated in it. The subjects were only English-major learners who had reached the C1 level in English. Secondly, self-reporting data were used for this study, and, hence, the data are subject to response bias. Finally, the effects of using AI on learners' writing performance were not assessed directly since the research only focused on how the students reported the use of AI tools. Future researchers should address these limitations, conduct experiments, and examine whether there is a correlation between the use of AI tools and learning results.

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