

The Effectiveness of ChatGPT in Students' Practicing Writing Skills: A Study at HCM UPES

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ABSTRACT

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The research was conducted at Ho Chi Minh City University of Physical Education and Sports (HCM UPES) to bridge the gap about the application of AI tool - ChatGPT in students' practice of writing skills in the physical education university context. The study tried to apply ChatGPT in a seven-week writing practicum. The researcher, who is also the lecturer in charge of English module two, introduced and guided students to use ChatGPT when they conducted their writing task in four units. Students then answered the questions in the survey and took part in face-to-face interviews about using ChatGPT when they practiced writing skills. Data for the research was collected from students' test results (before and after ChatGPT was put into use), students' feedback through surveys and face-to-face interviews. The results showed that using ChatGPT positively affected UPES students' practice of writing skills. This result created more motivation for lecturers to conduct further research and introduce and apply AI technologies to students in their teaching practice.

Introduction

In the era of Industry 4.0, "numerous technology tools are introduced to support the learning and teaching process" (Tran, 2024, p. 1), and the incorporation of AI into contemporary digital learning systems has brought about an innovative approach to education, transforming conventional methods. De la Vall and Araya (2023) provided examples of typical AI tools that can support English language learning, categorized into three groups based on their own purposes and features: Google Translate (machine translation tools), Duolingo (language tutoring systems), and OpenAI's GPT-3 (language generation systems). Among these tools, ChatGPT, an AI-powered language model, is "a powerful tool that helps students improve their

writing skills” (Abdullayeva & Musayeva, 2023, p. 62).

Research has examined the application of ChatGPT and similar AI technologies in higher education, highlighting the growing interest in their use (Rawas, 2024; Firat, 2023; Iskender, 2023). The advantages of utilizing ChatGPT for practicing English writing include “helping students generate ideas” (Mubaroq, Kamalia, & Zenico, 2024, p. 180); “boosting motivation and engagement among self-directed learners” (Firat, 2023, p. 1); serving as a resource that supports the processes of planning, translating, and evaluating” (Levine et al., 2024, p. 10); and fostering “motivation, self-efficacy, engagement, and a tendency for collaborative writing” (Teng, 2024, p. 8).

In addition to the benefits, studies have also identified drawbacks in using ChatGPT for writing practice. Kovačević (2024, p. 1) highlighted challenges, including “the risk of plagiarism, limited interactivity, algorithmic bias, and the potential suppression of creativity.” AlAfnan et al. (2023, p. 1) alerted that unethical use of ChatGPT by students could “result in diminished human intelligence and a loss of learning.” Chukwuere (2024, pp. 41-42) pointed out ChatGPT can generate false information, and students may neglect critical thinking and independent research skills due to “the risk of over-reliance on content generated by ChatGPT.”

Literature review

The effectiveness of AI tools in improving writing skills

Artificial intelligence (AI) is defined as “computing systems that are able to engage in human-like processes such as learning, adapting, synthesizing, self-correction and use of data for complex processing tasks” (Popenici et al., 2017, p. 2). Akgun and Greenhow (2021, p. 433) made some comparisons and analyzed other researchers’ definitions about AI gave out hers as “the technology that builds systems to think and act like humans with the ability of achieving goals.”

A considerable number of studies suggest that AI tools can potentially enhance the writing proficiency of EFL learners. The study of Marzuki et al. (2023) investigated the impact of AI writing tools on the quality of student writing. The study results concluded that the use of these tools, such as Quill Bot, Word Tune, Jenni, ChatGPT, Paper pal, Copy.ai, and Essay Writer, had a positive impact on the students’ overall writing quality. Grammarly - one of the most accurate online grammar checkers in the world, according to Huang, Li, and Taylor (2020), is an effective tool for EFL students to improve their writing skills and for teachers to reduce their teaching workload. Rahman, Zulkornain, and Hamzah (2022) conducted a study that utilized Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) to identify grammatical errors and enhance writing skills among students at Malaysian public universities. They also explored the students’ perceptions of using AI software for improving writing skills. The study’s findings revealed that students had a positive view of implementing AWE. Dong (2023) in her research assessed the effectiveness of AI-powered writing tools on students’ writing skills. The results indicated that the tool had a positive impact, demonstrated by significant improvements in students’ writing scores from the pre-test to the post-test. Additionally, the tool was found to enhance the teaching process by offering timely, individualized feedback, promoting student engagement, and

improving grading efficiency.

The drawbacks of AI tools in improving writing skills

Besides the benefits that AI tools can provide in practicing writing skills, these tools also have drawbacks. Darwin et al. (2024, pp. 1-2) expressed concerns about AI's limitations, highlighting issues such as “the lack of personalization, the potential to create echo chambers, and challenges in achieving nuanced understanding” when people excessively use this tool. In Lee, Davis, and Lee (2024) research, Korean university students are concerned about becoming overly reliant on AI-based tools and seeks assistance in developing their English writing skills. According to Alotaibi (2023, p. 3724), the key concern of using Grammarly- a software for “checking grammar and written context in English” (Hakiki, 2021, p. 100) is the risk of overreliance, which could weaken a writer's ability to learn independently and apply grammar rules. Relying solely on Grammarly's suggestions might lead to errors if the tool provides contextually incorrect or overly aggressive corrections, potentially altering the intended meaning. Additionally, Grammarly's support for specialized writing styles, such as technical or academic writing, is limited, and it may overlook important stylistic or structural issues. Privacy concerns also arise, as the text checked by Grammarly could be stored or accessed by the platform.

The effectiveness of ChatGPT in students' practice of English writing skill

ChatGPT is “a recently developed conversational chatbot created by OpenAI” (Lo, 2023, p. 1). There is research that has proved ChatGPT is an effective tool to help their students in their practice of writing skills. Wahyuddin, Hasman, and Ramadhani Idris (2023) conducted a study on the application of ChatGPT in teaching writing skills for university students. By comparing the results of the pre-test (when ChatGPT was not applied) and the post-test (when ChatGPT was applied), the authors presumed that using ChatGPT in class helped students “be creative in enhancing and developing their English language skills, especially in writing.” Arbi's research (2023, p. 77) confirmed the key benefits of using ChatGPT in an EFL setting include improving overall language proficiency and specific skills like grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and the core areas of writing, listening, speaking, and reading . Baskara (2023, pp. 46-49), listed out benefits of using ChatGPT in English writing class such as “provide personalized feedback and support for student; engage and motivate learners through natural language capabilities; support the development of language skills.” According to Su, Lin, and Lai (2023, pp. 6-9), outline preparation, content revision, post writing proofreading and reflection are tasks that ChatGPT can effectively help the learners to do. ChatGPT can help to support the prewriting, during-writing and post-writing phases. In the context of Vietnam education, Ho (2024) conducted research with 120 I.T. students in Vietnam who were learning English as a nonspecialized subject. The researcher concluded that the students had positive attitudes towards the use of ChatGPT in their English learning and practicing writing skill.

The drawbacks of ChatGPT in students' practice of English writing skill

Even though ChatGPT offers benefits for enhancing students' writing skills, this tool has certain limitations. Zebua and Katemba (2024, p. 114) argued that ChatGPT could potentially obstruct the growth of important writing abilities, including critical thinking, creativity, and originality.

They explained that when students extensively use AI-powered tools like ChatGPT to generate ideas and write texts, they may become less dependent on their own thinking, which could weaken their ability to think independently and be innovative. Barrot (2023, p. 4) raised concern that teachers might find it difficult to distinguish between a student's original work and content generated by ChatGPT, as this tool can create unique material that “may not be detected by online plagiarism checkers.”

The setting of teaching and learning English at UPES

While previous studies have explored the role of ChatGPT in language learning, there is a remarkable gap in research examining their effectiveness in physical education and sports contexts, where writing skill is not typically emphasized. The researcher of this research, a lecturer of English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Physical Education, conducted this research to contribute to the research literature on the topic of the effectiveness of ChatGPT in students' practicing writing skills. This research was conducted at Ho Chi Minh City University of Physical Education and Sports, a public institution dedicated to training qualified physical education teachers for all educational levels, from preschool to high school, as well as for sports training centers. However, the unique environment of this university presents certain challenges in English instruction. Specifically, students' English proficiency remains low, and the teaching facilities have not kept pace with societal advancements. This situation significantly impacts teaching and learning at the university, where lecturers rely on traditional methods that emphasize grammar and reading comprehension. Despite these challenges, students must meet an English proficiency standard of level 3/6 (B1) according to the European Reference Framework upon graduation (UPES, 2024; MOET, 2014). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), published in 2001 by the Council of Europe is the document that “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks across Europe” (Council of Europe, 2001). People who meet the B1 standard according to this framework will be recognized as "Independent User", and are considered to have the ability to “understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure; deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken; produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans” (Council of Europe, 2001). Recognizing the students' needs in achieving this aim, the researcher, who is also an English course lecturer, made a literature review and identified ChatGPT as a potential tool to support the university's objectives and enhance students' writing skills. Tran and Ngo (2024, p. 65) stated that while English writing is the most essential skill for language learners to master, students often struggle to write English proficiently. Consequently, the lecturer introduced ChatGPT to students in the English language module. Initially, most students were unfamiliar with ChatGPT and found it confusing, especially for learning English and practicing writing skills. However, after a period of use, students gradually became accustomed to the tool. Through this study, the effectiveness of ChatGPT in the practice of writing skills of UPES students was evaluated.

Methods

Target

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using ChatGPT in the practice of English writing skills HCMC UPES. Besides, it also revealed the students' opinions about the use of ChatGPT in their English learning and English writing skill.

The study was conducted in the second semester of the school year 2023-2024 from February to April 2024 to find answers to these two questions.

1. Is ChatGPT an effective tool for students at UPES to practice writing skills?
2. What are the first- year students' perceptions at HCMC UPES about the use of ChatGPT in their practice of English writing skills?

Sampling and sample size

The participants of this study were 150 first-year students in three K17 classes at HCMC UPES. They were taking part in module English 2 at HCMC UPES. There are two compulsory English modules, English 1 and English 2. The main curriculum used in teaching is "the English for Sports Course Book" compiled by the permanent lecturers of HCMC UPES. According to the program outline, during the module, students aimed to develop the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, along with additional grammar lessons that can be applied to practice these four skills. Students take the final exams by finishing a multiple-choice test that focuses on evaluating the students' knowledge in grammar and reading and writing skill. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), published in 2001 by the Council of Europe is the document that "provides a common basis for elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001). People who meet the B1 standard according to this framework will be recognized as "Independent User", and are considered to have the ability to "understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure; deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken; produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans" (Council of Europe, 2001).

Study design

In English Module 2, the primary writing task involves composing a paragraph on specific topics such as hobbies and favorite sports. To evaluate the effectiveness of ChatGPT as a tool for practicing writing skills, we introduced it to the first- year students for the final four writing units of the module. After completing each unit, the lecturer required the students to write a paragraph on a topic specified in the program outline, interacting with ChatGPT at both the beginning and end of the writing process. Specifically, the students initially used ChatGPT to build up their outline and brainstorm ideas. At this stage, they got feedback from ChatGPT about their first draft in terms of focusing on the content, organization, and structure. They then revised their work based on both their self-evaluation and ChatGPT's feedback. After this stage, students finished their writing on their own. As they reached the final stage of writing, the

students used ChatGPT to edit their writing, namely, to enhance the language style, vocabulary, and grammar of their final draft. Subsequently, students took a writing test, and their scores were compared to those from a similar test taken at the beginning of the semester, where Google Translate was used as the support tool. Both pre-test and post-test are designed to ask students to finish writing paragraphs with topics related to the Sports section. They were both graded according to the writing rubric scale built up by all lecturers of English at this university. It included the following domains: ideas, organization, introduction, word choice, and sensory details. Additionally, all students completed a survey, and the researcher also conducted face-to-face interviews with twenty selected students to gather more in-depth opinions and views on using ChatGPT for writing practice. These students were the ones who all lived in the university dormitory and volunteered to take part in the interview. They are “convenience sampling” as “they are affordable, easy and readily available” (Etikan, 2026, p. 2).

Instrument to collect the data

Two types of data were collected in this study, namely qualitative and quantitative. The students’ answers in the face-to-face interview were qualitative data. The mean score of the test and the students’ feedback in the survey are quantitative data in this study.

Results

Quantitative data

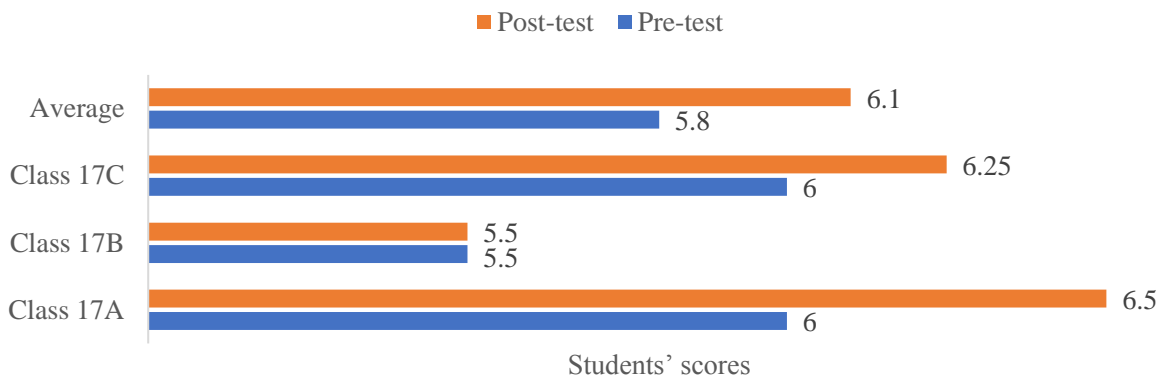
Test results

The mean score of the students at pre-test and post-test on the scale of ten in the three classes were illustrated in the table below. The lecturer chose the last test that the students did before they used ChatGPT as the pre-test. The post-test was the one that the students took after 4 lectures in which ChatGPT was used. The results of these two tests in all three classes were illustrated in Chart 1.

There is an upward trend in the average scores in the post-test (with the use of ChatGPT) in the three classes (except for the one the score of class 17B as it remained unchanged). It is a fact that the average scores of the three classes were not extremely high in both the pre-test and post-test; there was also a slight increase from 5.8 to 6.1 in the former and the latter, respectively. This evidence proves the positive impact that ChatGPT had on the students’ English learning process, especially in the practice of writing skills as reflected in their test results.

Chart 1.

The students’ scores in pre-test and post-test



The survey

After collecting the survey with the 10 numerically rated statements from the participants the researcher used the simple Excel software (ver. 2019) to analyze the data. The results of the statements were analyzed in groups to reflect the students’ beliefs, perceptions, and their motivations when they use ChatGPT as a support tool in their writing practice. As the student’s English is in the elementary level, the survey was in Vietnamese. The students evaluated the survey statements using a 5-point Likert scale (Joshi, Kale, Chandel, & Pal, 2015), where 1 corresponds to “strongly disagree” and 5 corresponds to “strongly agree.”

Chart 2.

Statement 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 on students’ belief about the effectiveness of using ChatGPT in practicing English writing skills.

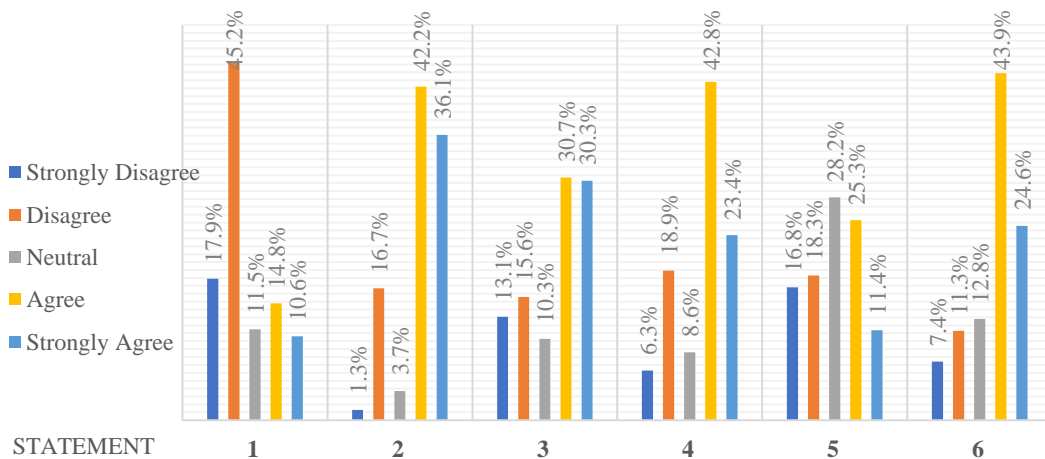


Chart 2 presents students’ feedback on statements 1 through 6 from the survey. These statements reflect students’ beliefs about the effectiveness of using ChatGPT in their English writing practice. According to the data, although only 25.4% of students found it easy to use ChatGPT as a supportive tool for practicing English writing (statement 1), the next four statements

indicate that ChatGPT significantly aided their English learning and writing improvement. Specifically, 78.3% of students agreed that “ChatGPT is an effective tool for understanding and correcting grammar and syntax errors” (statement 2). A notable 61% believed that “ChatGPT is helpful in expanding their vocabulary” (statement 3). Additionally, 66.2% of students felt that “ChatGPT offers useful suggestions for finishing writing” (statement 4). However, fewer students (36.7%) thought that “ChatGPT provides good feedback by correcting all the errors in their writing” (statement 5). Lastly, a substantial 68.5% of students believed that “ChatGPT helps identify areas for improvement in their writing process” (statement 6).

Chart 3.

Statement 7, 8, 9, 10 on students’ attitudes, perceptions, and motivations about the uses of ChatGPT in practicing writing skill

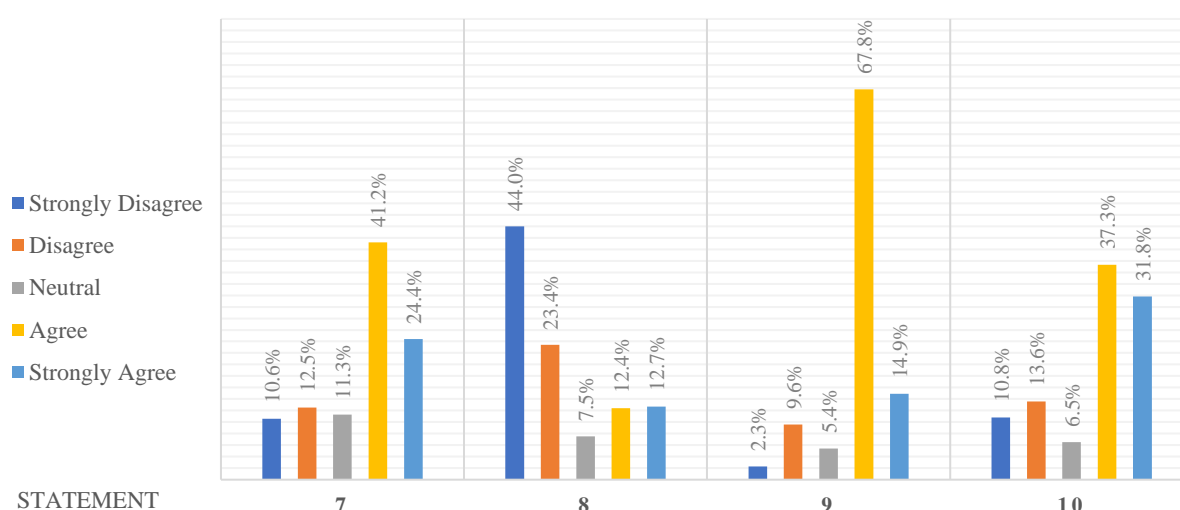


Chart 3 presents students’ feedback on statements 7, 8, 9, and 10. These statements investigate students’ attitudes, perceptions, and motivations when using ChatGPT as a supportive tool for practicing their writing skills. Feedback on statement 7 reveals that 65.6% students “feel more motivated to practice their writing with the use of ChatGPT.” However, statement 8 highlights a different aspect regarding students’ confidence in using this AI tool, with more than half of the students (67.4%) not feeling confident enough. Statement 9 illustrates student satisfaction with using ChatGPT for writing practice, with 82.7% expressing their satisfaction. Additionally, 69.1% of students believe that “ChatGPT greatly helped them improve their English writing skills,” as indicated by statement 10.

Qualitative data

The face-to-face interviews provided the author-researcher with deeper and more specific insights into students’ perspectives on using ChatGPT to practice writing skills. While ChatGPT offers dedicated support for learning English and practicing writing, students at UPES do not find it easy to use. Over half of the interviewed students explained that this is because ChatGPT is a new tool, and they have only recently gained access to it following introductions and guidance from the lecturers. The students mentioned that they were already familiar with and

frequently used Google, particularly Google Translate, as a support tool. Consequently, transitioning to ChatGPT has caused confusion. They often struggle with typing keywords and formulating questions effectively to achieve their desired outcomes in writing. Despite these challenges, students acknowledged ChatGPT's effectiveness in helping them review grammar points and apply them in writing practice. Student numbered 5 shared, "Previously, in high school, I only memorized grammar rules for tests, semester exams, and graduation exams. With the way we learn English in college, I did not know how to apply grammar to writing. However, by interacting with and utilizing ChatGPT's support, I found that I could complete my writing faster and more effectively." Regarding feedback and error correction, students explained why they disagreed with the idea that "ChatGPT can provide good enough feedback and support corrections for all the errors in my writing." Specifically, they noted that ChatGPT was not effective for assignments requiring the recounting of individual experiences. The students found it challenging to use ChatGPT in these scenarios because it cannot generate unique personal stories for everyone. Elaborating on their motivation and confidence when using ChatGPT to practice English writing, the students provided the lecturer-researcher with more details on this issue. Student numbered 18 explained, "In the past, I was very afraid of writing in English because I didn't know where to start when I had no ideas. However, with the support of ChatGPT, I feel like I can find the solution to this problem. I now have a desire to practice more so that I can improve my English writing skills by attempting several types of writing." Student numbered 9 shared similar sentiments, expressing that once they had completed the initial pieces with ChatGPT's help, they felt more confident and no longer viewed writing as a difficult skill. Instead, ChatGPT has instilled motivation and confidence in them to complete their writing assignments.

Discussion

In line with previous studies conducted by Barrot (2023), Baskara (2023), and Ho (2024), the findings of this research highlighted the effectiveness of ChatGPT in students' practice writing skills. First, the students' average scores in the post-tests slightly increased from 0.25 to 0.5 compared to the pre-test. Although this result showed that the increase in score between pretest and posttest was not as high as the similar result in Harunasari's study (2023), in which the difference between pretest and posttest was 3, and this helped to reaffirm the effectiveness of ChatGPT in the students' practice writing skills. In the lecturer's teaching experience at this university, although the increase in students' test scores reflects the effectiveness of the tool in training writing skills, this increase is not large because the students' English level is not high as well as they have not yet adapted to using the tool. Besides, the students' feedback from the survey showed that the students had positive attitudes on use of ChatGPT in their practice of English writing skills. This result is consistent with the results of previous studies by Ho (2024) who had the similar teaching context with the author of this research (teaching English to non majored students). The researchers themselves also acknowledged this in their observation notes. One of the characteristics of UPES students is that their strengths are physical subjects, so they have certain difficulties and barriers when studying English, especially when asked to perform exercises to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English.

Difficulty with low language proficiency and not appreciating the importance of learning English, students only advocate studying to pass the exam, thereby greatly affecting their motivation to study. Applying the ChatGPT tool to practice writing skills has brought certain positive effects. Thanks to the support of ChatGPT, students can orient and organize the ideas for their writing more easily. This is quite a crucial factor as students at UPES do not regularly access special academic materials, especially documents in English. With the support of ChatGPT, they can solve this difficulty. In addition, ChatGPT provides students with a variety of necessary sentence patterns and vocabulary to use in their writing. Besides, students can also receive feedback to correct errors in their writing by this AI tool. All the above factors have supported students with better writing products, creating more motivation to study English. Similar conclusions that ChatGPT can help increase students' motivation to learn English come from studies by Zebua and Katemba (2024) and Baskara (2023).

Conclusion

In the current 4.0 technology era, the application of AI in foreign languages learning and teaching is an inevitable trend of modern education. Thanks to the development of AI technology, students have opportunities to improve their language skills. The above study conducted at HCMC UPES has shown the positive effects of ChatGPT in the students' practice of writing skill. Given the evidence from this study that ChatGPT is a useful tool for training and practicing writing skills among UPES students, the researcher-lecturer plans to continue incorporating this application into their teaching. The findings of this study indicate promising new research avenues for educators and researchers interested in the effectiveness of using ChatGPT in language teaching and learning, as well as in the development of other skills such as listening, speaking, reading in English.

The researchers just conducted this study in a brief period with limited number and convenience participants in the context of HCMC UPES, thus they need more time to apply the AI technology in the future with a larger sample size. Specifically, further investigation is needed to determine how to maximize the effectiveness of ChatGPT as a support tool for enhancing writing skills. This initiative aims to support students' learning processes more effectively soon. Other research on this topic should also be done to provide further information about the effectiveness of ChatGPT in English learning and teaching as well as in the students' practice of other skills in English language. In addition, the researcher also proposed that the UPES management board pay more attention to upgrade facilities, equipment, and internet systems within the campus so that students and lecturers can apply information technology, typically AI technology in learning and teaching in the most effective way.

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Biodata

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Appendice

QUESTIONNAIRE CONTENT

1. You find it easy to use ChatGPT as a supportive tool for practicing English writing.
2. ChatGPT is an effective tool for understanding and correcting grammar and syntax errors.
3. ChatGPT is helpful in expanding the vocabulary.
4. ChatGPT offers useful suggestions for finishing writing.
5. ChatGPT provides valuable feedback by correcting all the errors in your writing.
6. ChatGPT helps identify areas for improvement in your writing.
7. You feel motivated to practice your writing with the use of ChatGPT.
8. You feel confident to practice your writing with the use of ChatGPT.
9. You feel satisfied to practice your writing with the use of ChatGPT.
10. ChatGPT helps you improve your English writing skill.

WRITING TEST RUBRIC SCORING

<u>Level</u>	<u>Description</u>
<i>Outstanding</i> Value: 9-10	Well written and very organized. Excellent grammar mechanics. Clear and concise statements. Excellent effort and presentation with detail. Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the topic.
<i>Good</i> Value: 5-8.5	Writes fairly clear. Good grammar mechanics. Good presentation and organization. Sufficient effort and detail.
<i>Fair</i> Value: 2-4.5	Minimal effort. Good grammar mechanics. Fair presentation. Few supporting details.
<i>Very Poor</i> Value: 0-1.5	Lacking effort. Very poor grammar mechanics. Very unclear. Does not address topic. Limited attempt.