



Second-Degree English Language Students' Perceptions of AI Use for Developing Writing Skills in Online Learning

Tran Thi Mai Lan

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Mekong University, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: Tran Thi Mai Lan

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly been used to support EFL writing throughout different stages of the writing process. However, less is known about how second-degree English language students perceive AI-assisted writing in fully online learning environments. This study explores second-degree English language students' perceptions and experiences of using AI to develop their EFL writing skills in an online learning environment, focusing on perceived benefits, challenges, and concerns. The study adopted a qualitative research design and involved 10 second-degree English language students from Class 16F at Mekong University. Participants studied entirely online and had experience using AI tools for English writing tasks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach. The findings identified five main themes: AI as a rapid and accessible writing support tool; AI support for language development and writing revision; AI as a source of support in fully online learning; concerns about dependence, accuracy, and academic integrity; and students' critical and responsible use of AI. Participants perceived AI as useful for idea generation, vocabulary development, grammar checking, revision, and proofreading, while recognizing risks related to overreliance, inaccurate suggestions, independent thinking, and academic integrity. The study suggests that AI can provide valuable support for EFL writing when students remain actively involved in evaluating and modifying AI-generated suggestions. The findings highlight the importance of guiding students to use AI as a supplementary writing resource rather than a substitute for their own thinking and writing.

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1. Introduction

For university students learning English as a foreign language, writing plays an important role in expressing ideas and participating in academic and professional activities. Becoming a proficient EFL writer involves more than producing grammatically accurate sentences; learners also need to develop ideas, organize information coherently, make appropriate lexical and grammatical choices, and refine their texts through revision. (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Uccelli *et al.*, 2013) ^[1, 2]. However, many EFL learners experience difficulties with idea generation, organization, language accuracy, vocabulary use, and confidence during the writing process (Fareed *et al.*, 2016) ^[3]. These difficulties can be particularly challenging for learners who have limited opportunities to receive timely and individualized feedback.

Recent advances in generative AI have expanded the ways EFL learners can obtain support during the writing process. Tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and Gemini can be used at different stages of writing, including developing ideas, improving language accuracy, revising sentences, and refining completed drafts (Escalante *et al.*, 2023; Mahapatra, 2024) ^[4, 5]. Recent studies have reported that EFL students generally perceive AI-assisted writing positively because of its accessibility, immediate feedback, and potential to support different stages of the writing process. Nevertheless, concerns have also been raised regarding overreliance on AI, the accuracy of AI-generated suggestions, academic integrity, originality, and students' independent thinking (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025; Ha, 2026) ^[6, 7].

These issues are particularly relevant to students studying entirely online. Online learners are often required to manage their learning activities more independently and may have fewer opportunities for immediate face-to-face assistance during writing tasks. In this context, AI can provide an accessible source of individualized support throughout the writing process. However, the increasing availability of AI also raises questions about how learners perceive its role in developing their writing skills and how they balance AI assistance with their own learning and decision-making.

Although research on AI-assisted EFL writing has expanded rapidly, important gaps remain. Existing studies in Vietnam and other EFL contexts have commonly examined general university students or English-major students, providing valuable evidence about students' attitudes, perceived benefits, and concerns regarding AI-assisted writing (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025; Ha, 2026) ^[6, 7]. However, second-degree English language students have received comparatively limited attention. This learner group may have educational experiences and learning circumstances that differ from those of traditional undergraduate English majors. In addition, previous research has examined classroom-based, university, and blended-learning contexts, whereas less is known about students who study entirely through online learning. Furthermore, many existing studies have employed questionnaires or mixed-methods designs to identify general patterns of perception. More qualitative research is needed to understand in greater depth how learners perceive AI-assisted writing, including the benefits, challenges, and concerns that emerge from their actual use of AI during writing activities. Therefore, this study explores the perceptions of ten second-degree English language students from Class 16F at Mekong University, all of whom study entirely online and have experience using AI tools to support their English writing. By focusing on this specific learner group and learning context, the study aims to provide a context-sensitive understanding of students' perceptions of AI-assisted EFL writing and contribute practical insights into the responsible integration of AI into online English language education.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How do second-degree English language students perceive the use of artificial intelligence to develop their EFL writing skills in an online learning environment at Mekong University?

2. Literature Review

2.1. EFL Writing and AI-Assisted Writing

EFL writing is a complex language skill that requires learners to coordinate linguistic knowledge, content development, organization, and revision. Effective writing involves more

than grammatical accuracy and appropriate vocabulary; learners also need to generate ideas, organize information logically, establish coherence, and communicate their intended meaning effectively (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Hyland, 2019) ^[1, 8]. Writing is therefore commonly understood as a process involving planning, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing rather than simply producing a final written product (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023) ^[1].

For many EFL learners, these processes can be challenging. Difficulties may include limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, problems generating and organizing ideas, inappropriate word choice, and limited confidence in producing and revising English texts (Fareed *et al.*, 2016; Hyland, 2019) ^[3, 8]. Such difficulties highlight the importance of providing learners with appropriate support throughout the writing process, particularly when opportunities for individualized feedback are limited.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has created new possibilities for supporting EFL writing. AI-powered tools can assist learners with different aspects of writing, including idea generation, vocabulary selection, grammatical correction, sentence restructuring, paraphrasing, and revision. The emergence of generative AI has further expanded these possibilities because tools such as ChatGPT can respond interactively to learners' prompts and provide explanations, examples, and alternative formulations (Barrot, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[9, 10].

Recent empirical research indicates that learners use AI across multiple stages of the writing process. Meniado *et al.* (2024) ^[11], in a study involving EFL learners in Thailand and Vietnam, found that participants used ChatGPT for brainstorming, organizing ideas, refining outlines, clarifying concepts, and editing drafts. Similarly, Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] reported that Vietnamese English-major students used AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, QuillBot, and Claude for various academic writing tasks, including essays, literature reviews, internship reports, and research papers. AI was used for grammar checking, vocabulary enhancement, translation, paraphrasing, and revision.

AI has also been investigated as a source of formative feedback. Mahapatra (2024) ^[5] found that ChatGPT could function as a formative feedback tool in academic writing and reported improvements in students' writing performance alongside generally positive student perceptions. These findings suggest that AI may provide learners with additional opportunities to obtain feedback and revise their texts beyond the feedback available from teachers.

However, the potential benefits of AI-assisted writing should not be interpreted as evidence that AI automatically improves writing proficiency. Generative AI can produce fluent responses while still providing inaccurate, inappropriate, or contextually unsuitable suggestions (Barrot, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[9, 10]. Consequently, the educational value of AI depends partly on how learners interpret, evaluate, and apply AI-generated suggestions. This makes students' perceptions and experiences an important area of investigation.

2.2. Students' Perceptions of AI-Assisted EFL Writing

Students' perceptions are an important dimension of AI-assisted EFL writing because learners' beliefs about the usefulness, accessibility, reliability, and risks of AI may influence how they use these tools. Recent studies generally indicate that students perceive AI-assisted writing positively,

particularly because AI can provide immediate assistance, generate ideas, support language development, and facilitate revision (Bok & Cho, 2023; Mahapatra, 2024; Meniado *et al.*, 2024) ^[12, 5, 11].

One frequently reported benefit is idea generation. EFL learners may experience difficulty deciding what to write or developing sufficient supporting ideas before beginning a draft. Meniado *et al.* (2024) ^[11] found that learners used ChatGPT for brainstorming, organizing ideas, and refining outlines. These functions may help learners overcome difficulties during the initial stages of writing and provide a starting point for developing their own texts.

Another perceived benefit concerns language development. AI tools can provide suggestions related to grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and word choice. Bok and Cho (2023) ^[12] found that EFL college students generally perceived ChatGPT positively as a writing revision tool. Similarly, Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] reported that Vietnamese EFL students perceived AI tools as useful for improving grammatical accuracy and vocabulary as well as increasing writing efficiency.

Students also value the immediacy of AI-generated feedback. Unlike teacher feedback, which may require students to wait for an instructor to review their work, AI tools can respond immediately to questions and written texts. Mahapatra (2024) ^[5] reported that students considered ChatGPT useful for receiving formative feedback. Similarly, Barrot (2023) ^[9] highlighted the provision of timely support as a potential benefit of ChatGPT in L2 writing. For learners studying independently, having access to such support during the writing process may help them identify and address difficulties without having to wait for feedback from their teachers.

Despite these benefits, students' perceptions are not exclusively positive. A major concern is overreliance on AI. Excessive dependence on AI for generating ideas, constructing sentences, or revising texts may reduce learners' active engagement in the cognitive processes involved in writing. Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] reported concerns among Vietnamese EFL students regarding overreliance, reduced critical thinking, loss of personal writing style, and plagiarism.

Accuracy and reliability are also important concerns. Although generative AI can produce grammatically fluent responses, AI-generated information and suggestions are not necessarily accurate or appropriate in every context. Kasneci *et al.* (2023) ^[10] emphasized that large language models provide substantial educational opportunities but also involve risks related to inaccurate information, bias, and the need for human oversight. Barrot (2023) ^[9] similarly highlighted concerns about the reliability of AI-generated responses in L2 writing.

Another concern relates to authorship and authenticity. When AI contributes substantially to the wording or development of a text, the distinction between student-generated and AI-generated writing may become less clear. Werdiningsih *et al.* (2024) ^[13], in a qualitative case study of EFL students, found that learners recognized the usefulness of ChatGPT while also emphasizing the importance of maintaining authenticity and exercising human judgment when using AI.

Academic integrity is closely connected with these concerns. The ability of generative AI to produce coherent written passages raises questions about plagiarism, originality, authorship, and students' responsibility for submitted work

(Barrot, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[9, 10]. Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] similarly identified plagiarism and excessive dependence as important concerns among Vietnamese EFL students.

Overall, previous research suggests that students' perceptions of AI-assisted writing are multidimensional rather than simply positive or negative. Learners generally value AI for its convenience, accessibility, immediate assistance, idea generation, language support, and revision capabilities, while simultaneously recognizing concerns related to accuracy, dependence, independent thinking, authenticity, and academic integrity (Meniado *et al.*, 2024; Werdiningsih *et al.*, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025) ^[11, 13, 6]. Understanding these perceptions therefore requires attention to both the benefits students experience and the challenges they encounter during actual AI-assisted writing.

2.3. AI Use in Online EFL Writing

The use of AI in online EFL writing deserves particular attention because online learning environments require students to assume greater responsibility for managing their learning activities. Online learners may need to access learning resources independently, complete writing assignments outside direct classroom interaction, monitor their progress, and seek assistance when difficulties arise. These characteristics make accessible digital learning support particularly relevant to online education.

Research on AI in education suggests that AI chatbots can provide immediate assistance, explanations, resources, and personalized learning support (Labadze *et al.*, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[14, 10]. For language learners, this accessibility provides opportunities to interact with an AI system when writing difficulties occur. Learners can ask AI tools to explain grammatical problems, suggest vocabulary, clarify ideas, or provide alternative ways of expressing meaning.

Evidence from EFL writing research indicates that students already use AI in ways that are compatible with independent learning. Meniado *et al.* (2024) ^[11] found that EFL learners used ChatGPT for brainstorming, organizing ideas, refining outlines, clarifying concepts, and editing drafts. Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] similarly found that Vietnamese students used AI tools across multiple stages of academic writing. These findings suggest that AI can function as an accessible writing-support resource when students work independently.

The online context may therefore strengthen the perceived usefulness of AI. Students who study online may not always have immediate access to teachers when they encounter difficulties during writing. AI can provide an additional source of assistance that is available during planning, drafting, and revision. From this perspective, AI may complement rather than replace teacher support by providing learners with immediate assistance between formal instructional interactions (Labadze *et al.*, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[14, 10].

However, the online environment also creates challenges. When students receive AI-generated suggestions independently, they must determine whether those suggestions are accurate, appropriate, and consistent with their intended meaning. The absence of immediate teacher supervision may therefore increase the importance of learners' ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content (Kasneci *et al.*, 2023) ^[10]. This issue is particularly relevant to writing because accepting inappropriate AI-generated language without evaluation may affect students'

development as independent writers.

Importantly, existing research has often examined AI-assisted writing among general university students or English-major students, whereas fewer studies have specifically focused on learners who study entirely online. The distinction is important because a fully online learning environment represents not merely a technological setting but also a learning context that shapes students' access to teachers, interaction with peers, and management of learning activities. Consequently, students' perceptions of AI may be influenced by their experiences of learning without regular face-to-face interaction.

This issue is particularly relevant to second-degree English language students. Their educational backgrounds and learning circumstances may differ from those of traditional undergraduate English majors. Understanding how these learners perceive AI as a writing-support resource in a fully online environment can therefore provide additional insight into the role of AI in contemporary EFL education.

2.4. Research Gap

The literature demonstrates that AI-assisted EFL writing has become an increasingly established area of research. Previous studies have shown that learners use AI for multiple writing activities, including brainstorming, organizing ideas, developing vocabulary, improving grammar, paraphrasing, obtaining feedback, and revising texts (Meniado *et al.*, 2024; Mahapatra, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025) ^[11, 5, 6]. Research has also identified several perceived benefits, particularly convenience, immediate assistance, language support, idea generation, and writing efficiency.

At the same time, previous research has demonstrated that students' perceptions involve important concerns. Learners have reported concerns about overreliance, inaccurate information, reduced independent thinking, loss of personal writing style, plagiarism, and academic integrity (Barrot, 2023; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023; Werdiningsih *et al.*, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025) ^[9, 10, 13, 6]. Thus, the research focus has increasingly moved beyond whether students use AI toward understanding how students experience and perceive AI-assisted writing.

Despite this growing literature, several gaps remain relevant to the present study.

First, a population gap can be identified. Existing studies have primarily examined general university students, English-major students, or senior students. Meniado *et al.* (2024) ^[11] investigated EFL learners in Thailand and Vietnam, while Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] focused on English-major students at a Vietnamese university. More recently, Nguyen (2026) ^[16] examined Vietnamese EFL senior students using AI during graduation-thesis writing. Although these studies provide valuable evidence, second-degree English language students remain comparatively underrepresented in the literature.

Second, there is a contextual gap concerning fully online learning. Existing research has examined AI-assisted writing in university courses, academic writing, and thesis-writing contexts. However, less attention has been given specifically to students who undertake their English language studies entirely online. This distinction is important because fully online learners may have different patterns of interaction with teachers, peers, and learning resources and may therefore experience AI differently from students in face-to-face or

blended learning environments.

Third, there is a depth gap concerning students' experiences. Existing studies have frequently used questionnaires or mixed-methods designs to identify broad patterns of students' perceptions (Meniado *et al.*, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025) ^[11, 6]. While such approaches provide valuable evidence of general tendencies, qualitative inquiry can offer deeper insight into how learners understand AI assistance, decide when to use it, evaluate its suggestions, and negotiate its benefits and limitations during writing. Werdiningsih *et al.* (2024) ^[13], for example, demonstrated the value of qualitative investigation in revealing students' complex experiences of balancing AI assistance with authenticity in academic writing.

Importantly, the research gap should not be understood as an absence of AI-assisted writing research in Vietnam. Recent studies have already established a growing body of Vietnamese research on students' use and perceptions of AI in writing. Cung *et al.* (2025) ^[15], for example, identified perceived benefits related to writing quality, productivity, engagement, and psychological support, while also highlighting concerns about accuracy and overdependence. Similarly, Meniado *et al.* (2024) ^[11] and Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[6] provide evidence of Vietnamese EFL learners' use of AI for various writing activities.

The gap is therefore more specific: less is known about how second-degree English language students experience and perceive AI-assisted EFL writing when their studies take place entirely online. This population and learning context may generate experiences that differ from those of traditional English-major students studying in face-to-face or blended environments. Therefore, the present study focuses on ten second-degree English language students from Class 16F at Mekong University, all of whom study entirely online and have actual experience using AI tools to support their English writing. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study seeks to provide an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of students' perceptions of AI-assisted EFL writing and contribute empirical evidence to the growing literature on responsible AI use in online English language education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore second-degree English language students' perceptions and experiences of using artificial intelligence (AI) to develop their EFL writing skills in an online learning environment. The study was conducted with 10 students from Class 16F of the second-degree English Language program at Mekong University. All participants studied entirely online and had experience using AI-powered tools to support their English writing activities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience with AI-assisted EFL writing. To be eligible for participation, students had to be enrolled in the second-degree English Language program, study through the online learning format, and have used at least one AI tool when completing English writing tasks. The participants had experience using tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, and QuillBot for activities including generating ideas, developing vocabulary, checking grammar, revising sentences, paraphrasing, and improving written texts.

To protect participants' identities, each participant was assigned a code from P1 to P10.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Research Participants

Student Code	Gender	Class	Program	Learning Mode	AI Tools Used
P1	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, Grammarly
P2	Male	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, Gemini
P3	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	Grammarly, QuillBot
P4	Male	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, QuillBot
P5	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	Grammarly, Gemini
P6	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, Grammarly
P7	Male	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, QuillBot
P8	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, Grammarly
P9	Male	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, QuillBot
P10	Female	16F	Second-degree English Language	Fully online	ChatGPT, Grammarly

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected to allow participants to describe their experiences and perceptions of AI-assisted writing while providing sufficient flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions when particular experiences required further clarification.

The interview protocol was developed based on the research question and the themes identified in previous studies of AI-assisted EFL writing. The interview questions were designed to address the research question and were organized around students' experiences of AI use, perceived benefits, challenges and concerns, and the role of AI in the fully online learning environment. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions with follow-up prompts designed to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions.

Participants were asked to describe how they used AI during different stages of writing, including generating ideas, organizing content, developing vocabulary, checking grammar, revising sentences, paraphrasing, and reviewing completed texts. They were also asked about their reasons for using AI, the types of assistance they found most useful, and how they evaluated or modified AI-generated suggestions.

In addition, the interviews explored participants' concerns about AI-assisted writing, particularly overreliance on AI, accuracy of AI-generated suggestions, independent thinking, originality, personal writing style, and academic integrity. Participants were encouraged to provide examples from their actual writing experiences.

Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview data constituted the primary source of evidence for examining students' perceptions and experiences.

3.3. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the general procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) ^[17], with attention to subsequent guidance on best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2024) ^[18]. First, the interview transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data. Relevant statements related to students' experiences and perceptions of AI-assisted writing were then identified and assigned initial

codes. The coding process was conducted iteratively, with codes being reviewed and refined as the researcher examined the transcripts. Related codes were then clustered into candidate themes, which were subsequently reviewed against the complete dataset.

The emerging themes were examined against the interview data to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' accounts. The analysis focused particularly on perceived benefits, writing-related uses of AI, challenges and concerns, and students' views of AI use in the fully online learning environment. Differences among participants were also considered rather than focusing only on common responses. This process resulted in a set of themes that were used to organize the findings and interpret students' perceptions of AI-assisted EFL writing.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent to participate. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. No personally identifiable information was included in the study.

4. Results

Analysis of the interview data identified five main themes concerning students' perceptions and experiences of using artificial intelligence (AI) to develop their EFL writing skills in a fully online learning environment: (1) AI as a rapid and accessible writing support tool, (2) AI support for language development and revision, (3) AI as a source of support in fully online learning, (4) concerns about dependence, accuracy, and academic integrity, and (5) students' critical and responsible use of AI.

4.1. AI as a Rapid and Accessible Writing Support Tool

The participants generally reported that AI was useful at different stages of the English writing process, particularly when they experienced difficulty generating ideas or organizing their writing. Several students explained that they used ChatGPT or other AI tools before beginning an assignment to obtain ideas, examples, or possible outlines.

P2 explained:

"When I have a writing assignment and I don't know how to start, I usually ask ChatGPT for some ideas. It helps me see different ways to approach the topic."

Similarly, P4 stated:

"Sometimes I know the topic, but I don't know how to organize my ideas. I ask ChatGPT to give me an outline, and then I choose the ideas that are suitable for my essay."

These responses suggest that students perceived AI as an accessible starting point when they encountered difficulties during the initial stages of writing. Rather than using AI only for correcting completed texts, participants reported using it during the planning stage to overcome difficulties with idea generation and organization.

P8 also described the role of AI in reducing the difficulty of beginning a writing task:

"The hardest part for me is usually starting the essay. When I ask AI for some suggestions, I have something to think about, and then I can develop my own ideas."

This finding indicates that AI may function as a form of writing scaffolding, particularly for students who experience difficulty initiating a writing task. However, the participants did not necessarily view AI-generated ideas as final answers. Some reported selecting, modifying, or developing the suggestions according to their own understanding of the topic.

Overall, the participants' responses indicate that AI was perceived as a rapid and convenient source of support during the planning and early stages of EFL writing.

4.2. AI Support for Language Development and Writing Revision

A second prominent theme concerned the use of AI to improve language-related aspects of writing. Participants reported using Grammarly, ChatGPT, QuillBot, and Gemini to check grammar, improve vocabulary, revise sentences, and paraphrase expressions.

P1 explained:

"I often use Grammarly after I finish writing because I can make small grammar mistakes without noticing them."

Grammarly helps me find those mistakes and correct them."

P6 similarly stated:

"Sometimes I know what I want to say, but I don't know the best English expression. I ask ChatGPT to give me some alternatives, and then I choose the one that fits my meaning."

These responses suggest that students perceived AI as particularly useful for language accuracy and lexical development. Rather than simply correcting errors, some participants reported examining alternative expressions provided by AI.

P7 described this learning process:

"I don't just copy the sentence from AI. I usually look at the correction and try to understand why my sentence is wrong. Then I rewrite it myself."

This response is important because it suggests that some students used AI not only as a correction mechanism but also as a source of language learning. The perceived usefulness of AI therefore depended partly on how actively students engaged with its suggestions.

Participants also reported using AI during the revision stage. P9 explained:

"After writing my first draft, I sometimes ask ChatGPT to check the grammar and make the sentences clearer. Then I read the suggestions and decide which ones I want to use."

The findings therefore suggest that students perceived AI as particularly useful for language development and revision, including grammar checking, vocabulary development, sentence revision, and proofreading. This perception is consistent with previous research indicating that AI-assisted writing tools can provide rapid feedback and support learners in different aspects of written production (Escalante *et al.*, 2023; Mahapatra, 2024) [4, 5].

4.3. AI as a Source of Support in Fully Online Learning

A particularly important finding concerned the relationship between AI use and the participants' fully online learning environment. Several students explained that studying online required them to work independently, and AI was perceived as an immediately accessible source of assistance when they encountered writing difficulties.

P3 stated:

"Because we study online, sometimes I am doing my assignment by myself and I cannot ask the teacher immediately. In that situation, I use AI to help me understand the problem."

P5 similarly explained:

"When I study at home and have a question about grammar or vocabulary, I usually check AI first. It is convenient because I can ask immediately instead of waiting for the next class."

These responses suggest that the online learning environment influenced how participants perceived the usefulness of AI. AI was not simply considered a writing tool but also a readily available source of learning support during independent study.

P10 described this experience:

"Studying online means that I have to solve many problems by myself. AI gives me some support when I am stuck, especially when I am writing an assignment at home."

However, participants did not necessarily consider AI a replacement for teachers. Instead, AI was generally perceived as an additional source of assistance that could be accessed when immediate human support was unavailable.

This finding is particularly relevant to the research context because the participants were all second-degree English language students studying entirely online. The role of AI was therefore connected not only to writing development but also to the independence and accessibility associated with online learning.

4.4. Concerns About Dependence, Accuracy, and Academic Integrity

Although participants generally perceived AI positively, they also identified several concerns. The most prominent concerns involved overdependence, inaccurate suggestions, and academic integrity.

P3 expressed concern about becoming too dependent on AI:

"AI is very helpful, but if I always ask AI to write or rewrite everything for me,

I think I will become dependent on it and my own writing ability may not improve."

Similarly, P8 stated:

"Sometimes AI can make writing very easy, but that can also be a problem. If I depend on it too much, I may not try to think of my own ideas."

These responses indicate that participants recognized a potential tension between convenience and independent learning. While AI reduced some of the difficulties associated with writing, students were also aware that excessive use could reduce their opportunities to develop their own writing abilities.

Accuracy was another concern. P2 explained:

"I don't completely trust every answer from AI. Sometimes the sentence looks correct, but when I check it carefully, it does not really express what I want to say."

P6 also reported:

"Sometimes AI gives me a very formal sentence, but it is not suitable for my original idea. I have to change it."

These responses demonstrate that participants did not always accept AI-generated suggestions without evaluation. They recognized that AI-generated language could be grammatically acceptable but still inappropriate for the intended meaning or context.

Academic integrity was another concern raised during the interviews. P9 stated:

"I think using AI to get ideas or correct grammar is different from asking AI to write the whole assignment. If students submit everything from AI, it is not really their own work."

This perception reflects an awareness of the distinction between AI-assisted learning and AI-generated substitution for student work. Participants therefore appeared to recognize the need to establish boundaries around appropriate AI use.

4.5. Students' Critical and Responsible Use of AI

The final theme concerned how students evaluated and controlled AI-generated suggestions. Although participants appreciated the speed and convenience of AI, several described strategies for deciding whether to accept, modify, or reject AI-generated content.

P4 explained:

"I don't always use the answer exactly as AI gives it. I compare it with my own idea and change the parts that don't fit."

P7 similarly stated:

"First I look at the AI suggestion, but I still decide whether it is suitable for my essay."

Sometimes I use only part of the suggestion."

These responses suggest that participants perceived their own judgment as an important part of the writing process. AI was viewed as a supporting tool rather than the final decision-maker.

P1 described a similar approach:

"I usually write my own ideas first. Then I use AI to check grammar or suggest better expressions. This way I can still keep my own ideas."

This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that some participants attempted to maintain their own role as writers while using AI for assistance. Their use of AI involved evaluation, modification, and selective

adoption, rather than simply copying AI-generated responses. P10 summarized this perspective:

"AI can help me a lot, but I think students still need to think for themselves. AI should help us learn, not do everything for us."

Taken together, these responses indicate that participants generally supported a responsible and selective approach to AI use. Their perceptions suggest that the educational value of AI depends not only on what the technology can provide but also on how students engage with and evaluate its suggestions.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the ten participants generally perceived AI as a useful tool for developing their EFL writing skills. Participants reported using AI for idea generation, organization, vocabulary development, grammar checking, paraphrasing, revision, and proofreading. This pattern suggests that students did not perceive AI solely as a content-generation tool. Rather, they positioned AI as an auxiliary resource across different stages of the writing process, particularly when immediate linguistic or organizational assistance was needed. This finding is consistent with Escalante *et al.* (2023) ^[4], who found that AI-generated feedback could provide useful support for writing, and with Mahapatra (2024) ^[5], whose study demonstrated the potential of ChatGPT to support ESL students' academic writing.

The findings also support previous research highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with generative AI in education. Kasneci *et al.* (2023) ^[10] emphasized the potential of large language models to provide individualized learning support while also identifying concerns related to accuracy, dependency, and the changing role of learners. Similar concerns emerged in the present study, particularly regarding students' reliance on AI and the need to evaluate AI-generated suggestions critically.

An important aspect of the present study is the fully online learning context. Participants described AI as particularly convenient when they were studying independently and encountered writing difficulties outside immediate teacher support. This finding provides a more context-specific understanding of AI-assisted writing by showing how students may perceive AI as an accessible source of assistance in an online learning environment. This context may be particularly important for second-degree students, who may need to manage their learning activities alongside other responsibilities and therefore value forms of support that are immediately accessible. In this sense, AI was perceived not only as a writing tool but also as an on-demand learning resource that could supplement, rather than replace, teacher support.

At the same time, the findings suggest that students did not necessarily view AI as a replacement for their own writing. Several participants described writing their own ideas first, evaluating AI suggestions, modifying generated sentences, and rejecting suggestions that did not fit their intended meaning. This finding is consistent with Werdiningsih *et al.* (2024) ^[13], who highlighted the importance of balancing the benefits of ChatGPT with the need to maintain authenticity in academic writing. The present findings extend this perspective by showing that students' perceptions of responsible AI use involved active evaluation and selective adoption of AI-generated suggestions.

The participants' concerns about dependence and academic

integrity are also consistent with Barrot (2023) [9], who discussed both the potential and pitfalls of ChatGPT for second-language writing. The present findings further suggest that students themselves recognize the importance of maintaining their own thinking and authorship when using AI. This suggests that students' perceptions of AI-assisted writing involve a balance between convenience and learner autonomy: AI can reduce immediate writing difficulties, but students remain aware of the need to retain responsibility for the content and final form of their work.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' perceptions of AI are not simply positive or negative. Rather, participants viewed AI as highly useful when it provided rapid and accessible support, but they also recognized the need for human judgment, independent thinking, and responsible use. This balanced perception is particularly relevant for second-degree English language students studying entirely online, for whom AI was perceived as providing valuable assistance but should not replace the learner's active participation in the writing process.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how second-degree English language students perceive the use of artificial intelligence to develop their EFL writing skills in a fully online learning environment at Mekong University. The findings indicate that participants generally perceived AI as a useful and accessible learning support tool.

The participants reported using AI at multiple stages of the writing process, particularly for generating ideas, organizing content, improving vocabulary and grammar, paraphrasing, revising, and proofreading. AI was also perceived as particularly convenient in the fully online learning environment because students could access immediate assistance when working independently.

However, the findings also revealed concerns about overdependence, the accuracy of AI-generated suggestions, independent thinking, and academic integrity. Participants therefore did not view AI as a substitute for their own writing. Instead, many emphasized the importance of evaluating, modifying, and selectively using AI-generated suggestions. The study suggests that the educational value of AI-assisted writing depends largely on how students use the technology. AI can provide useful support for language development and the writing process when students remain actively involved in generating ideas, evaluating suggestions, and making final decisions about their writing.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that teachers should guide students to use AI as a supplementary writing resource rather than as a substitute for their own writing. Instruction may emphasize evaluating AI-generated suggestions, checking accuracy, maintaining students' own ideas and writing style, and using AI selectively during different stages of the writing process.

Given the small sample of ten students from one second-degree English language class at Mekong University, the findings should not be generalized to all Vietnamese EFL learners. In addition, the study relied primarily on participants' self-reported experiences and did not include direct analysis of their written products or observation of their actual AI use. Future research could involve larger and more

diverse samples, students from multiple institutions, longitudinal designs, or analysis of students' actual writing development over time.

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