

Using Ai Tools in IELTS Essay Writing: Applications, Challenges and Limitations



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ABSTRACT: This study was conducted to discover the applications of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Google Translate, Turnitin, and CorpusMate in IELTS essay writing and the challenges of using those tools. The participants were 45 IELTS learners, aged between 13 and 19 at a foreign language center in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The findings indicated that young IELTS learners did not fully recognize the assistance of those AI tools in writing their essays. Moreover, in terms of their challenges and limitations, they stated that they did not know many useful AI tools; and, they found it hard to instruct properly when using an AI tool. This study gives the readers a rather different view of the applications of AI tools in English language teaching and learning field.

KEYWORDS: AI tools, IELTS essay writing, IELTS learners

I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of technology, the English teaching and learning process can be much easier with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The application of AI in the education field has been accepted by several scholars (Banihashem et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2022). More importantly, this does not exclude the context of IELTS teaching and learning. In addition, there is a reality that young IELTS learners, aged 13 and more, have a limitation of ideas and arguments in writing an essay. It is hard for them to brainstorm ideas on the social topic in IELTS writing tasks. Moreover, they have some grammatical mistakes and inappropriate style in their writing. Therefore, this study will be conducted with two main purposes. Firstly, the researcher aims to investigate the ways IELTS learners use AI tools to assist their writing process. Secondly, the author wants to investigate the challenges and limitations that IELTS learners encounter when using AI tools in their essay writing. There are two research questions as follows.

Research questions:

- 1/ What and how can IELTS learners use AI tools in their essay writing?
- 2/ What are IELTS learners' challenges and limitations when using AI tools in essay writing?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The application of AI tools in EFL writing

Barrot (2023) found some benefits and challenges when using ChatGPT in L2 writing; as well as what the teachers should do to enhance students' writing skills with ChatGPT. One of the significant applications of ChatGPT is constructive feedback on essays (Alnasser, 2022; Banihashem et al., 2024). According to Banihashem et al. (2024), ChatGPT-generated feedbacks include many types as Cognitive- Descriptive, Constructive, and Affective feedback. Truong (2023) stated that ChatGPT can provide suggestions and support for students in the writing process. Students can use ChatGPT to receive feedback, examples, or guidance on the structure and content of their writing, which helps them improve and produce higher-quality writing products. Fan (2023) figured out another important AI tool for giving feedback on writing is Grammarly. Google Translate, DeepL, and Turnitin are AI tools to help EFL learners improve their writing (Gao et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2022). Similarly, Kim & Kim (2022) focused on the benefits of using AI in creating students' skills such as problem- solving skills, creativity, and collaboration skills. In addition, Crosthwaite & Baisa (2024) and Chung et al. (2024) stated the use of CorpusMate in checking English collocations.

In this study, the authors synthesized the applications of five AI tools, namely ChatGPT, Grammarly, Google Translate, Turnitin, and CorpusMate in designing a questionnaire for learners to see how they use each type.

2.2. Challenges in using AI tools for English teaching and learning

There have been a number of previous studies on difficulties in using AI in teaching and learning. De la Vall & Araya (2023) pointed out some challenges that students face in learning English as (1) the limitation of interaction between learners; (2)

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the lack of ability to create their own language to achieve communicative purposes; and (3) the inadequate capability in recognizing errors and unreliable sources. Crompton (2024) agreed with (2) and (3) and added one more challenge; that is technology breakdowns. This might lead to technical malfunctions or incorrect responses. Dimitriadou & Lanitis (2023) raised a concern about student's ability to make something on their own when using too much AI. Cheating is another concern of Kostka & Toncelli (2023) and Lodge (2023). Nguyen & Dieu (2024) conducted a study on ELT students and also found out that some students expressed reservations about recommending ChatGPT for learning writing to those lacking self-motivation or self-regulation, due to concerns about potential over-reliance on the tool.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a descriptive design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The 23-item questionnaire was designed with three main clusters: (1) background information; (2) the applications of AI tools in essay writing; and (3) learners' challenges and limitations when using AI tools in their essay writing. In cluster 2, participants were asked to put a stick in the appropriate frequency level, from Never to Always. In cluster 3, the participants were asked to put a stick in the appropriate level of agreement as Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was delivered to all of the participants to get data on the applications and challenges of AI tools in essay writing. The data from the questionnaire was calculated by SPSS 26.

3.1. Context

This study was conducted in a foreign language center in the Mekong Delta. In this center, there are four IELTS courses, including pre-IELTS, IELTS band 4.5, IELTS band 5.5, and IELTS band 6.5. When enrolling in a course, learners are carefully consulted and are taken a placement test. Based on the score of the placement test, the learners are placed into the right course at the right level. Each course consists of 80 hours: listening (18 hours), reading (20 hours), speaking (20 hours), and writing (22 hours). There are 2 two-hour lessons each week. Therefore, each course usually lasts about 5 months. Speaking lessons are taught by native English speakers; whereas, Vietnamese teachers will be in charge of the other skills. After each course, learners have to take one achievement test. If they pass, they will study with a higher-level course. If not, they have to take the course again.

3.2. Participants

Because of the purpose of the study, the participants will be all IELTS learners, from Pre-IELTS to IELTS 6.5, in the center under investigation. They are studying in the center. There are a total of 45 (15 males and 30 females) learners. They are from 14 to 19 years old. The learners have completely different backgrounds. Most of them have been studying English for around 6- 10 years (82,2 %); some of them have more than 10 years of studying English (13,3 %) and less than 1 year (4,4 %). The majority of learners are students at nearby universities who want to take the IELTS certificate for their higher education abroad. The majority of learners are students at senior high schools and high schools. They have taken a variety of courses in the center since they were 3 years old. These participants passed children's courses such as Starters, Movers, Flyers, KET, and PET. The participants' courses are shown in the below table.

Table 1. Participants' IELTS course

Course	Numbers of participants	Percentages (%)
Pre-IELTS	6	13.3
IELTS 4.5	10	22.2
IELTS 5.5	23	51.1
IELTS 6.5	6	13.3
Pre-IELTS	6	13.3
Total	45	100.0

IV. FINDINGS

The reliability of the questionnaire was checked to see whether it was reliable enough to collect data. The Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.76$) is rather high. This means that the questionnaire was reliable to collect data.

According to Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995), the five-point Likert scale is classified into three levels: high ($M=3.5-5.0$); medium ($M=2.5-3.49$); and low ($M=2.4$ or lower).

4.1. The frequency of AI tools which are used in IELTS essay writing

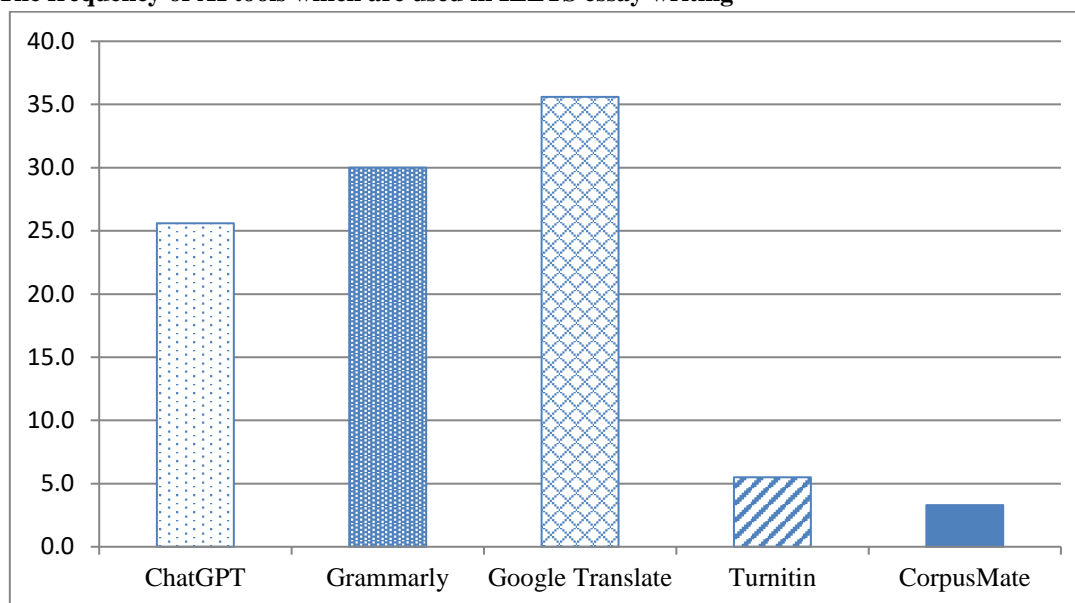


Figure 1: Types of AI tools used in IELTS essay writing

As can be seen in the figure, Google Translate (35.6%) is the most AI tool that was used by IELTS learners. The second most common AI tool is Grammarly (30%), followed by Chat GPT (25.6%). Turnitin and CorpusMate are the less frequent AI tools (5.5% and 3.3%, respectively).

4.2. The applications of AI tools in IELTS essay writing

The results of the mean scores show that AI tools were rarely used by IELTS learners. In terms of using ChatGPT, the most common application of ChatGPT is brainstorming ideas for essays ($M=2.13$, $SD=0.99$). ChatGPT is also used for giving feedback, editing essays based on ChatGPT's feedback, and planning the essays ($M=2.09$, $SD=1.16$; $M=2.09$, $SD=1.22$; $M=2.02$, $SD=1.08$, respectively). IELTS learners hardly asked ChatGPT to edit their work ($M=1.76$, $SD=1.03$) and help them to write the essays ($M=1.80$, $SD=0.94$). In terms of the application of Grammarly, the mean scores are a little higher than ChatGPT. More specifically, IELTS learners mostly used Grammarly to figure out the grammatical mistakes in their essays ($M=1.60$, $SD=1.18$). The second most usage of this AI tool is enriching learners' vocabulary ($M=2.38$, $SD=1.13$); followed by adjusting learners' writing styles ($M=2.02$, $SD=1.01$). Obviously, Google Translate is the most frequent AI tool that IELTS learners use in essay writing ($M=2.87$, $SD=1.14$). They used this tool to translate what they had written in Vietnamese to English. In addition, the learners hardly used CorpusMate to check how to use the collocations ($M=1.38$, $SD=0.86$). Similarly, they seem not to use Turnitin to check plagiarism ($M=1.47$, $SD=0.87$). The results are shown in the following table.

Table 2. The applications of AI tools in IELTS essay writing

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I use ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas for my essay.	45	1	4	2.13	0.99
I use ChatGPT to plan/outline my essay.	45	1	5	2.02	1.08
I ask ChatGPT to write the essay.	45	1	4	1.80	0.94
I input my essay into ChatGPT and ask it to edit my work.	45	1	4	1.76	1.03
I input my essay into ChatGPT and ask it to give feedback.	45	1	5	2.09	1.16
Based on the feedback from ChatGPT, I edit my essay on my own	45	1	5	2.09	1.22
I use Grammarly to find grammatical mistakes in my essay.	45	1	5	2.60	1.18
I use Grammarly to enlarge my vocabulary for the essay.	45	1	5	2.38	1.13
I use Grammarly to adjust my writing style.	45	1	5	2.02	1.01
I write the ideas in Vietnamese and use Google Translate to translate them into English.	45	1	5	2.87	1.14
I use Turnitin to check for plagiarism.	45	1	4	1.47	0.87
I use CorpusMate to check the use of collocations in my essay.	45	1	5	1.38	0.86

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4.3. The challenges and limitations of using AI tools in IELTS essay writing

The mean score of this cluster is medium, from 2.36 to 3.20. This means that IELTS learners did not have many challenges and limitations in using AI tools in their essay writing. The biggest limitation is that IELTS learners did not know many AI tools which help them in writing their essays ($M=3.21$; $SD=0.99$). When using AI tools, they had difficulties in using appropriate sentence structures in different essay types ($M=3.11$, $SD=0.98$). The functions and applications of each kind of AI tool were not recognized by IELTS learners ($M=3.04$, $SD=0.88$). When using AI tools, they rarely have chances to discuss and share their ideas in groups ($M=3.07$; $SD=1.03$). They also did not know how to evaluate the information they got; and, they sometimes were not able to find ideas for some IELTS topics ($M=3.02$, $SD=0.84$; $M=3.02$, $SD=1.15$, respectively). However, they did not think that they could not write an essay without using AI tools ($M=2.36$, $SD=0.93$). Likewise, they did not believe that it was hard for them to download an AI tool ($M=2.58$, $SD=0.84$). They argued that they can write the proper instructions when using AI tools ($M=2.64$, $SD=0.95$).

Table 3. Challenges and limitations of using AI tools in IELTS essay writing

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I do not know many AI tools for writing essays.	45	1	5	3.20	0.99
It is hard for me to download and install AI tools.	45	1	4	2.58	0.84
I do not know all the useful functions of AI tools in essay writing.	45	1	5	3.04	0.88
Without the assistance of AI tools, I cannot write an essay.	45	1	4	2.36	0.93
Without the assistance of AI tools, I cannot recognize my mistakes in the essay.	45	1	5	2.76	0.98
When using AI tools, it is hard for me to write the instructions properly.	45	1	4	2.64	0.95
When using AI tools, I do not know how to evaluate the information I get.	45	1	4	3.02	0.84
When using AI tools, I cannot find ideas for some IELTS topics.	45	1	5	3.02	1.15
When using AI tools, I do not know how to organize my essay.	45	1	4	2.80	0.87
When using AI tools, it is hard for me to use proper sentence structures for each essay type.	45	1	5	3.11	0.98
When using AI tools, I rarely discuss ideas in groups.	45	1	5	3.07	1.03

V. DISCUSSION

The findings show that IELTS learners did not fully take advantage of AI tools. More specially, although they recognized the application of ChatGPT in their essay writing, they rarely applied it. This finding is quite dissimilar to previous ones in using ChatGPT in EFL essay writing (Alnasser, 2022; Banihashem et al., 2024; Barrot, 2023). Correspondingly, Grammarly is one of the most useful AI tools for writing an essay (Fan, 2023). However, IELTS learners did not use this tool so often when they write an essay. Moreover, Google Translate was used by most IELTS learners; nevertheless, it was not used so often. Two other AI tools, Turnitin and CorpusMate, seem not to be used by IELTS learners.

In terms of challenges and limitations, this finding is consistent with De la Vall & Araya (2023) work. The learners had some problems understanding the functions of each AI tool as well as downloading and installing them. In contrast, when using AI tools, they also encountered some difficulties such as recognizing mistakes, organizing a well-structured essay, evaluating the information, and finding ideas for some topics.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that educational institutions could organize workshops and training sessions to facilitate the use of AI tools in writing, particularly to enhance essay writing skills. This recommendation aligns with Nguyen (2023), who advocated for educators to provide students with instructional guidance, including the use of generative prompts, to optimize the use of AI as a supplementary tool for writing. This alignment underscores the importance of strategies for harnessing the potential of AI-based writing aids to enhance learning outcomes

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in the process of writing an IELTS essay, learners used some AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Google Translate. Nevertheless, they did not use those tools so often. They omitted the use of Turnitin and CorpusMate. When using AI tools, they faced some difficulties as mentioned. However, the deeper reasons why they did not use the assistance of those AI tools when writing an essay were not found. Therefore, for further research, the author will interview them to get insight. In addition, the researcher will do a quasi-experimental research to find out which and how those AI tools assist IELTS learners in their essay writing.

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