

Vietnamese EFL Master's Students' Emotions in Using ChatGPT in Academic Writing Assignments: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

ChatGPT is ubiquitously heralded as a “lifebuoy” for those who navigate complex academic demands. Although prior research has explored its pedagogical, ethical, and socio-cultural dimensions, little is known about how students experience and regulate emotional dimensions of ChatGPT-assisted writing in Vietnam. Addressing this gap, the current study traces Vietnamese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) Master's students' emotional experiences with ChatGPT in academic writing. The study was theoretically guided by a blueprint that integrated Kort et al.'s (2001) Model of Emotions in Learning with Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Deploying a qualitative case study, five purposefully selected participants took part in semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Data were thematically analyzed within and across cases. The findings revealed four emotional trajectories: curiosity and initial engagement; frustration and cognitive overload; the fears of “brainrot” and academic integrity concerns; and emotional regulation through constructive adaptation and responsible usage. These trajectories highlighted emotions as central mechanisms greatly affecting technology-assisted writing and suggested practical implications for fostering the affect-sensitive and integrity-oriented integration of ChatGPT in higher education. Finally, the study concluded with its limitations and proposed methodological directions for future inquiry.

Keywords: ChatGPT, academic writing, emotions, higher education, EFL Master's students

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

The institutionalization of ChatGPT, launched by OpenAI in November 2022 (Lo, 2023), has stimulated unprecedentedly critical debates in social sciences (Qin et al., 2024). In education, particularly language education, it is positioned as a technological equipment as well as a pedagogical dilemma. Researchers have acknowledged that the integration of ChatGPT reshapes fundamental assumptions about how specific language competences are taught and experienced (Orozco & Crosetti, 2025). Vitally, recent studies imply that the discussions of this tool are inseparable from more critical questions in relation to learner agency, academic integrity, and engagement with Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) (Mali, 2025). In Vietnam, educational researchers are beginning to grapple with such issues, placing ChatGPT as a “crossroad” where individual, institutional, ethical, sociocultural considerations intersect (Le et al., 2025). Unintentionally, this leaves a knowledge gap in understanding emotional ups and downs of those who involve in implementing this tool in academic endeavors. Against this critical backdrop, the current study shifts its full attention to English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) Master's students' emotional experiences, constituting an affective dimension in shedding light on how ChatGPT is locally appropriated in academic writing.

1.2. The review of literature

The prominent emergence of ChatGPT marks a significant turning point in the integration of GAI into higher education, particularly academic writing (Lund & Wang, 2023). Built on a transformer-based architecture and trained on the vast datasets, the chatbot demonstrates its remarkable capacity in producing the textually-coherent, contextually-appropriate, and human-like texts (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Its technical sophistication, most notably the billions of parameters embedded in recent versions, enables it to generate textual summaries, explanations, and translations across languages, covering those considered low-resource (Rudolph et al., 2022). Such features have repositioned ChatGPT as a powerful pedagogical instrument with particular promise in language education. In academic writing and publishing, scholarly work has affirmed its potential in ameliorating people's academic accomplishments (see Figure 1) (Zohery, 2023). Furthermore, it can provide

writing outputs of the comparable quality to human-generated texts, particularly in tasks (e.g., information explanation, literature review drafting, and text refinement) (Aydin & Karaarslan, 2022; Wenzlaff & Spaeth, 2022). These affordances are especially relevant to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), where the writing process is accompanied by affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social challenges. Simultaneously, the integration of ChatGPT into academic writing raises ongoing concerns about products' originality, plagiarism, and academic integrity (Lo et al., 2024). As Baskara (2023) asserted, while a group of researchers appreciate its values in scaffolding people's writing, others signify its potential to undermine authenticity and erode trust in the assessment practices. Despite these tensions, ChatGPT is ubiquitously recognized as a disruptive force in education, altering conventional practices of drafting, revising, and publishing academic texts (Abdallah et al., 2025).

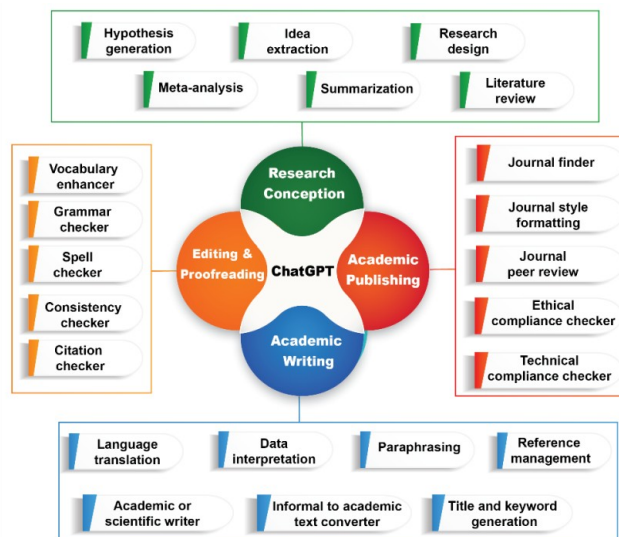


Figure 1. The role of ChatGPT in academic tasks (Zohery, 2023, p. 10)

Recent international scholarship has increasingly examined the pedagogical potential and challenges of ChatGPT in higher education. Song and Song (2023), through a mixed-methods design with Chinese EFL learners, found that AI-assisted writing instruction via ChatGPT improved writing proficiency and learner motivation compared to traditional approaches. Those who in the experimental group reported better organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary enhancement. Orozco and Crosetti (2025) extended the focus to the virtual learning environments in ELT, emphasizing the roles of design features. Their review highlighted that the adaptive feedback, learner-directed pathways, and challenge-based tasks enhanced engagement, motivation, and performance, though short-term motivational gains did not always translate into sustainable learning. In parallel, Mali (2025) synthesized research on ethical usage of ChatGPT in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing classrooms. Reviewing 32 studies, it was noted that students employed ChatGPT across various writing tasks, which illuminated its productive role in scaffolding and its association with plagiarism risks. In the same line, Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2025) conducted a scoping review of empirical evidence on GAI and critical thinking, drawing on 30 studies published between 2024-2025. Their synthesis revealed positive impacts of GAI on idea generation, argument construction and literature review. It also cautioned against the cognitive offloading, noting that over-dependence on GAI possibly hinder intellectual development.

Within Vietnamese contexts, emerging scholarship has addressed ethical implications of ChatGPT across the country. Ngo et al. (2024), drawing on a survey data from 31 teachers, explored academic integrity concerns associated with GAI-generated writing. Their findings highlighted that participants attributed student reliance on ChatGPT to limited idea generation, weak motivation, and insufficient linguistic competence. Such over-reliance was perceived as detrimental to the cultivation of critical thinking and language development. In response, teachers proposed strengthening regulatory strategies, deploying GAI-detection technologies, and embedding explicit instruction on responsible GAI use. Complementing such concerns, Le et al. (2025) published a systematic review of 29 studies examining teachers' perceptions of ChatGPT in writing classes. The review revealed a spectrum of perspectives, with a considerable number of teachers recognizing its potential in content revision, proofreading, prompt creation, idea generation, and personalized feedback. However, its integration was still in its infancy and affected by unresolved questions of academic integrity. The authors emphasized the

urgent demands for capacity-building programs that prepare teachers and students to act responsibly with ChatGPT itself.

Although existing international and Vietnamese studies have continuously portrayed valuable insights into ChatGPT's implementations across various contexts, they also reveal notable methodological limitations (e.g., an exclusive use of quantitative, mixed-methods, or corpus-based review). This leaves unexplored how EFL Master's students themselves experience emotional dimensions of engaging with ChatGPT in academic writing. The current study addresses this gap by foregrounding learners' emotional trajectories to illuminate how emotions shape and, in turn, are shaped by academic writing.

1.3. The conceptual framework informing the study

This study draws upon Kort et al.'s (2001) model of emotions in learning. Theoretically, it illustrates the cyclical, dynamic relationship between emotional attachment and cognitive development. As Kort et al. (2001) argued, "positive and negative emotions are both integral parts" (p. 1) in people's professional learning. It conceptualizes learning as a movement through phases of emotions in which initial stimulation may generate positive emotional responses while simultaneously invoking challenge-related feelings. These affective states are directed toward either constructive integration, in which individuals assimilate and accommodate the novel knowledge, or toward emotional regulation strategies that moderate subsequent performances. Arguably, in this sense, emotions function as catalysts for professional learning and shape how people respond to and process instructional events.

To further theorize the mechanisms underpinning these affective trajectories, this study adopts Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The theory coins "events as proximal causes of affective reaction" (p. 11), suggesting that positive and negative events generate corresponding emotional responses which directly have an influence on subsequent performances. Crucially, AET incorporates time as an important dimension, as "affect levels fluctuate" (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996, p. 11). This implies that the same individual may experience changing emotional trajectories across the span of an academic course. Furthermore, evidence from psychology supports the AET proposition that events or activities act as important emotional stimuli (with both activity and relation) (Finch et al., 2015). Adapted in this study, people's engagement with ChatGPT is conceptualized as an experiential learning activity capable of stimulating affective reactions. For instance, prior research has demonstrated that students with a mastery goal orientation may experience heightened frustration when facing challenges but also greater adaptability in emotional regulation, whereas performance-oriented students may sustain a more positive emotional tone by focusing on task completion (Linnenbrink et al., 2016).

On integrating Kort et al.'s (2001) model with AET, this study establishes a blueprint (See Figure 2) that situates ChatGPT-related interactions in academic writing as emotional events. Such events evoke a spectrum of affective responses that regulate people's engagement with academic writing. In turn, these responses contribute to (mal)adaptive regulation strategies, influencing levels of persistence and overall performance. The blueprint, thus, positions emotions not as incidental by-products but central mechanisms mediating the relationships between technology-assisted writing and people's academic development. Guided by this blueprint, the study addresses a sole question as follows: *How do Vietnamese EFL Master's students experience and regulate their*

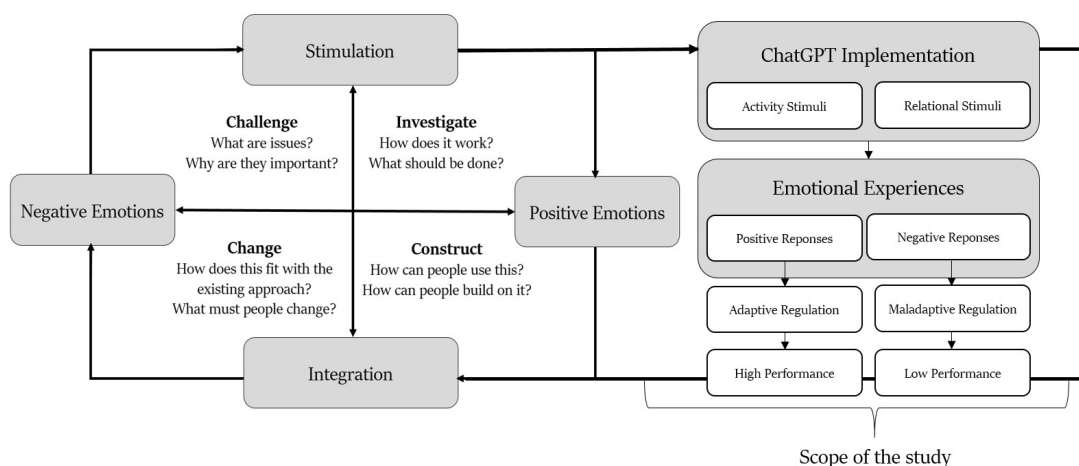


Figure 2. The integrated blueprint guiding the study

2. Materials/Methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine Vietnamese EFL Master's students' emotions in relation to the use of ChatGPT for academic writing. A case study design is regarded as particularly appropriate if the purpose is to obtain a holistic and contextually instilled understanding concerning a phenomenon within its bounded system (Yin, 2018). In the current study, each participant was treated as an individual case, facilitating an in-depth investigation into unique trajectories of emotional experiences as they occurred in the academic writing course. Furthermore, a subsequent cross-case design was undertaken to identify convergences and divergences across participants. Arguably, combining within-case depth with cross-case synthesis, the study aims to shed light on idiosyncratic experiences and the construction of overall insights relevant to EFL graduate education.

2.2. Research context and participants

The current study was deployed at a core public university in the Mekong Delta region. Specifically, it was situated within a Master's program in Principles and Methods of English Language Education (Translated into Vietnamese as "*Lý luận và phương pháp dạy học bộ môn tiếng Anh*") (Phan et al., 2025). This program aims to provide graduate students with theoretical foundations and pedagogical expertise in English language education (Trinh et al., 2025). In this program, the focal course was named "Academic writing for publication" (Translated into Vietnamese as "*Viết báo cáo xuất bản khoa học*"), a two-credit course requiring students to produce a manuscript suitable for submission to either a domestic or an international journal. As part of this course, ChatGPT is allowed as a supplementary technological equipment to support research idea generation, argument development, and textual refinement.

As to research participants, five Master's students officially participated in this study. They were recruited through purposeful sampling technique. This technique is further particularly suitable for qualitative inquiry because it enables the selection of participants who can provide rich and diverse insights into the research phenomenon (Ahmad & Wilkins 2025). The sampling process was guided by three criteria: (1) formal enrollment in the researched course, to ensure authentic engagement with ChatGPT; (2) willingness to participate in reflective practices, including interviews and written journals, to provide genuine accounts of emotional experiences; and (3) diversity in demographic and academic backgrounds to capture a possibly broadest range of perspectives. Numeral codes were assigned to protect participants' personal identities. Table 1 presents their demographic profile.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

No.	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Undergraduate background
P1	Female	27	5 years, high school teacher	English Language Teaching
P2	Male	22	None	English Language Studies
P3	Female	29	3 years, college teacher	English Language Studies
P4	Male	26	2 years, private center teacher	English Language Teaching
P5	Female	23	1 year, private center teacher	English Language Teaching

Arguably, the heterogeneity of these five participants in terms of age, gender, teaching experience, and multi-disciplinary backgrounds contributed to a well-rounded sample. Moreover, this diversity enabled the current study to capture individual nuances of each case and the commonalities that occurred across cases regarding emotional dimensions of implementing ChatGPT in academic writing assignments. Notably, P4 had prior exposure to AI-assisted academic writing through a short training course on ChatGPT and a book on the topic. This background distinguished him from other participants, equipping him with additional perspectives on his use.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

To ensure the richness of the dataset, this study employed two complementary instruments encompassing semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The use of multiple instruments enabled methodological triangulation, thereby providing both retrospective and contemporaneous insights into participants' emotional experiences with ChatGPT usage. Firstly, each of the five participants was interviewed twice: once in the middle of the course and once at its conclusion during the 2024-2025 academic year. This sequencing allowed the research team to capture ongoing, cumulative dimensions of participants' emotional experiences. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure accuracy of expression and minimize language-related barriers. Each session lasted between 54 and 68 minutes and followed an interview protocol derived from the study's

conceptual framework. To complement interviews, five participants were invited to keep weekly reflective journals over the duration of the course, totaling eight weeks. These journals provided contemporaneous accounts of feelings, thoughts, and reflections during their engagement with ChatGPT usage. They were instructed to document the emotions that they experienced and specific circumstances in which these emotions arose. They were further encouraged to provide concrete examples and their own interpretations on experiences. All of these journals were electronically submitted via a password-protected platform to establish convenience and confidentiality.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the analytical process, the research team adhered to six key phases: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) finalizing the report. Reflexive notes were kept by the research team to track decisions, reduce bias, and boost transparency. In particular, the analysis was then conducted in two main stages: within-case and cross-case analysis. In the within-case stage, each participant's data set was holistically examined to capture the uniqueness of emotional experiences with ChatGPT. Initial coding was manually performed by reading and re-reading the transcripts and journals, followed by generating codes that reflected salient features of the data. Codes were subsequently collated into candidate themes to illustrate each participant's emotional trajectory in relation to academic writing tasks. This stage preserved the integrity of individual cases, allowing the research team to highlight the depth and complexity of emotions in context. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify divergent and convergent patterns across participants. Then, the team compared themes generated in the within-case stage, looking for recurring similarities as well as divergences. This stage allowed for a construction of a comprehensive picture of how emotions were universally experienced and shaped by the academic context.

2.4. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness

This study strictly adhered to established ethical standards in qualitative research to protect participants' rights and ensure the integrity of the research process. Prior to data collection, approval for deploying the study was obtained from the research ethics committee of the host university. Participation was entirely voluntary; all participants signed the informed consent forms after being fully briefed on research aims, procedures, and potential risks of the study. They were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. To safeguard confidentiality, numeral codes were utilized in all transcripts, analyses, and reporting. The audio files, transcripts, and reflective journals were stored on a password-protected computer, accessible only to the research team.

In addition to the ethical considerations, the study employed several strategies to enhance trustworthiness, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria. Firstly, credibility was ensured through methodological triangulation, prolonged engagement with participants during the course, and member checking, whereby participants were invited to review transcripts and preliminary interpretations. Secondly, transferability is ensured by thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures provided so that readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other educational contexts. Next, to establish confirmability, an audit trail was maintained, including detailed records of data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytic memos, enabling transparency and allowing other researchers to follow the logic of the study. Last but not least, to ensure confirmability, reflexive journaling by the researchers was used to acknowledge personal biases and monitor potential influences on the interpretation of data. Furthermore, peer debriefing with a colleague helped to validate the analytic process and reduce subjective distortions.

3. Findings and discussion

After thematically coded, findings revealed a complex emotional experiences as participants engaged with ChatGPT in academic writing. Such experiences unfolded across curiosity and enthusiasm, frustration and self-doubt, and the deeper concerns about "brainrot" and academic integrity, culminating in constructive adaptation and responsible use.

3.1. Curiosity and initial engagement

Participants started utilizing ChatGPT with emotional ups (e.g., curiosity, enthusiasm, and relief). At the beginning of the course, all described a heightened sense of eagerness to explore the tool's affordances. P4 reflected in his journal,

"When ChatGPT was announced usable, I was eager to see what it could do. At the very first, it felt like having a writing partner who was available anytime, anywhere. You know, I felt very motivated to try

writing tasks because I knew ChatGPT could back me up if I got stuck and did not have any ideas for my research proposal."

Such descriptions illustrated initial affective states characterized by optimism, aligning with "stimulation" in Kort et al.'s (2001) model of emotions in learning. Within this phase, positive emotions functioned as catalysts that fostered further experimentation. His accounts demonstrated that ChatGPT generated a sense of possibility in academic writing, particularly in reducing psychological barriers.

Alongside curiosity, some experienced relief as ChatGPT assisted them in challenging parts of manuscript writing. P3 emphasized his voice,

"It was like a lifebuoy. Normally, I feel nervous when writing a literature section, but with ChatGPT, I felt less pressure because I could use it to find relevant studies, synthesize them, and condense them in a cohesive manner. In that way, I could save a lot of time and energy. I just typed the prompt which I learned from social media and it gave me ideas instantly with only one click."

This emotional experience resonated with AET. In this case, it framed technological encounters as positive events capable of eliciting motivational responses. In this study, the tool provided immediate feedback and textual resources, which participants interpreted as a form of support that enhanced their engagement.

Curiosity also carried an element of the inspiration. P1, P2, and P5 frequently referred to ChatGPT as an "endless source of ideas" and described feelings of empowerment when generating alternative phrasings and structural options. This illustrated what Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2025) described as GAI's productive role in idea generation and argument construction. Such positive emotions reinforced participants' willingness to continue experimenting and to engage actively with academic writing tasks.

While enthusiasm was a shared entry point, participants also recognized the complexity of managing ChatGPT's contributions. P4 characterized the tool as "useful but tricky", indicating an early awareness of its multi-layered nature. This perception cultivated a cautious yet proactive attitude toward exploration. From a standpoint, this reflected the co-existence of challenge-related emotions with motivational states, an interaction central to the cyclical nature of learning emotions (Kort et al., 2001).

In summary, initial emotions covering curiosity, relief, and enthusiasm established an affective climate conducive to experimentation with ChatGPT in academic writing. These findings aligned with those of Song & Song (2023), who found ChatGPT boosted motivation and writing quality, and with Orozco and Crosetti (2025) on the short-term gains of adaptive feedback. These emotions positioned ChatGPT as a meaningful affective event that stimulated engagement, lowered initial barriers, and reinforced motivation.

3.2. Frustration, doubt, and cognitive overload

As participants progressed in the use, initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to negative experiences. This shift occurred when outputs appeared inaccurate, irrelevant, or excessively verbose, creating perceptions of cognitive overload during the revision process. Rather than perceiving ChatGPT as a straightforward aid, they recognized the demanding cognitive work required to filter, evaluate, and refine its suggestions.

P1 vividly described this experience in her interview:

"At first I thought ChatGPT would save a lot of my time. But the reality was that when I saw the long answers it generated, I felt lost with such information. I did not really know how academic it was. Furthermore, I think it was not really what the papers (I had entered before) were really about. I felt more tired than writing by myself, I have to confess."

Her words shed light on the transition from excitement to personal mental exhaustion. They emphasized the taxing nature of processing overwhelming AI-generated content. Such moments resonated with Kort et al.'s (2001) model, in which learning involved stimulation and challenge-related emotions.

Cognitive overload was salient when some participants faced inconsistent outputs. P5 expressed her doubt:

"Sometimes I typed the same question twice and got two different answers. OMG! I did not know which one to trust... Furthermore, the ideas did not seemed academically appropriate as they felt too broad, and not locally relevant."

This sense of doubt demonstrated how AET conceptualized technological outputs as events that triggered affective reactions. When outputs lacked stability or reliability, the affective event generated uncertainty that resulted in demotivation. Consequently, P5 invested significant effort in cross-checking information, which intensified frustration.

Complementing this experience, P3's frustration also arose from irrelevant suggestions:

"I asked it to help me make a literature review outline, but it gave me something very general. I felt irritated because it distracted me from my main purpose... Additionally, it gave me some APA references that could not be found on the Internet. They were fake. It overwhelmed me greatly."

Her confession signified how frustration could disrupt focus, reducing perceived efficiency. This echoed findings from Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2025), who noted that over-reliance on GAI possibly hindered deep engagement by encouraging surface-level outputs that required extensive reworking.

At times, participants equated the revision process with a form of cognitive burden. P4 stated:

"At first, I expected too much, like ChatGPT could give me perfect writing which meets standard. I thought I could copy a whole paragraph into my assignment. Later, I suddenly knew that this was just a tool for generating ideas. For example, I let it suggest some possible structures for my introduction. I chose and rewrote. What is more important is how I use such ideas to generate ideas by my own. In that way, I felt more relaxed. You know, I used it for brainstorming. Hmm! I knew the responsibility was mine. Honestly, this way of thinking was also influenced by a short course I took on ChatGPT for academic writing and a book I read. Those resources helped me to know that it is about guidance."

The metaphor of the "heavy backpack" encapsulated the emotional weight of cognitive overload. While the tool expanded textual possibilities, it simultaneously demanded additional filtering, testing participants' emotional resilience.

In general, experiences of overload and doubt mirrored Raitskaya & Tikhonova (2025), who warned that over-reliance could hinder intellectual growth, and Orozco and Crosetti (2025), who noted limits to sustained motivation. In Vietnam, limited language proficiency intensified the burden of filtering and refining AI outputs. These negative experiences revealed a trajectory where cognitive overload functioned as central affective responses to ChatGPT-assisted writing. In line with Kort et al.'s (2001) model, such negative emotions represented integral phases of learning through struggle. Within AET, they could be interpreted as events that shaped subsequent strategies for emotional regulation.

3.3. Fears of "Brainrot" and academic integrity concerns

Beyond moments of frustration, participants articulated sustained anxiety about the long-term implications of relying on ChatGPT for academic writing. A prominent emotional trajectory was the fear of "brainrot", a locally popular term they used to describe the erosion of critical thinking, creativity, and independent writing ability. This fear intertwined with ongoing concerns about plagiarism, originality, and ethical use.

P2 voiced this in the interview,

"I sometimes felt scared that my brain would become lazy. When ChatGPT gave me a paragraph, I copied it down first, especially when I had a deadline and felt pressured to finish quickly. I did not think by myself, I just accepted the sentences it produced. Later when I read my draft again, I could not remember how those ideas were connected, or why I put them there. I imagined that one day I would forget how to write on my own, especially for something serious like a publication paper."

His fear connected to what AET and Kort et al.'s (2001) model conceptualize as negative affective events, in which technological reliance itself acts as a trigger for anxiety about cognitive decline. Such emotions highlight that academic writing was not only about producing text but also about sustaining a sense of intellectual agency.

Similarly, P5 described a growing sense of guilt when using ChatGPT too extensively:

"When I saw the sentences, I asked myself that 'Is this my writing or not?' Sometimes I felt like I was stealing from the machine. I felt guilty since I did want to be honest with myself in academia. If everything came from ChatGPT, then where is my effort? For example, I once let it generate part of my literature review. When I reread it, I realized I could not defend the points if someone asked me in a seminar. I felt scared that the tool would make me become very stupid!"

Her thought implied the moral dimension of emotions in academic practice. This aligns with Mali's (2025) synthesis that people oscillate between appreciating the tool as scaffolding and worrying about its association with plagiarism. For some, guilt emerged as a powerful affective signal that reinforced the importance of authenticity in academic work.

P3 expressed fear about the potential erosion of creativity:

"I am worried that if I immerse myself in ChatGPT, I will lose my own style. When I draft by myself, I

usually spend time rephrasing and adding my own examples, and that makes the text sound like me. But with ChatGPT, I noticed that my manuscript became too standard, too smooth, but they did not carry my personality or critical stance. I was afraid that if I submitted such a paper, it would not reflect me as a researcher.”

This account demonstrated that emotional experiences extended beyond cognitive efficiency to encompass identity-related concerns. The fear of losing voice in writing resonates with Raitskaya and Tikhonova’s (2025) caution that over-dependence on GAI may undermine deep engagement with critical and creative thinking and high-order thinking skills.

Concerns about academic integrity were also interwoven with institutional pressures. P4 shared:

“In my mind, plagiarism is very serious. I always checked the text again because I was afraid that the teacher or the software would think I cheated. Once I used ChatGPT to polish my introduction, but then I pasted the text into Turnitin and got nervous when I saw some similarity percentage. I felt anxious each time I submitted an assignment, because in Vietnam, if they think you plagiarize, your work may be rejected or you can get into trouble.”

This nervousness underscored the role of contextual factors in shaping emotions. Within higher education, where integrity frameworks are gaining visibility, students perceived ChatGPT not only as a tool but also a potential risk. The anticipation of the detection technologies and institutional regulations amplified their anxiety, reinforcing a climate where ethical considerations were inseparable from emotional experiences.

These realities were deeply tied to perceptions of intellectual decline and ethical responsibility. Fear, guilt, and anxiety were regulatory forces that shaped the boundaries of ChatGPT usage. Concerns over cognitive decline and plagiarism reflect Mali (2025) on the dual role of ChatGPT as scaffolding and risk, and Raitskaya & Tikhonova (2025) on diminished creativity. In Vietnam, these anxieties are amplified by stricter academic integrity frameworks (Ngo et al., 2024). Through the lens of Kort et al.’s (2001) model, these emotions illustrate the tension-filled phases of learning, where negative affect does not suppress engagement but stimulates reflection and self-regulation. Within AET, affective events demonstrate how technology-mediated writing intersects with questions of morality.

3.4. Emotional regulation, constructive adaptation, and responsible use

Within participants’ emotional experiences, a pivotal alteration from short-lived reactions toward durable capacities occurred. After initial curiosity and struggles with self-doubt, some tended to consciously regulate their emotions, adapt constructively, and embrace responsible practices. This phase functioned as the emotional “bridge” linking momentary affective turbulence with longer-term development.

P2, who once felt anxious about outputs, reflected on how emotional regulation altered his engagement:

“I stopped panicking when the answer was not good. At first, when I saw a strange answer, I deleted it immediately and felt lost. Later, I learned to breathe, look at it again, and ask in another way. For example, when preparing my methodology section, I tried three different prompts until I got something useful. This made me calmer, and I even enjoyed finding better prompts.”

This exemplified how emotional regulation operates as a blueprint mechanism: negative emotions no longer disrupted learning but were reorganized into curiosity and persistence. Through this shift, the affective spiral (Kort et al., 2001) moved upward, opening space for adaptive behaviors such as refining prompts and sustaining motivation.

P4 described a similar recalibration of expectations:

“At first, I expected too much, like ChatGPT could give me perfect writing which meets academic standard. I even thought I could copy a whole paragraph into my assignment. Later, I suddenly realized that this was just a tool for generating ideas. For example, I let it suggest some possible structures for my introduction, but then I chose and rewrote. What is more important is how I use such ideas to generate ideas on my own. By thinking that way, I myself felt more relaxed. I used it for brainstorming and generating ideas, but I knew the responsibility was mine.”

This narrative demonstrated how the blueprint involved their transformation. By moderating expectations, participants reconfigured their emotional energy into acceptance, balance, and control. From the perspective of AET, this illustrates how repeated events with the tool restructured participants’ emotional appraisal systems, producing more sustainable practices.

Constructive adaptation, another blueprint milestone, was reflected in how the participants used ChatGPT

outputs as springboards rather than endpoints. P3 explained:

"I read what ChatGPT suggested, but I always rewrote. For instance, when drafting my own literature review outline, I myself checked its ideas but then reorganized them based on the papers I had read. Sometimes I disagreed and tried my own version. The process made me feel I was not just consuming but creating. That gave me pride, because in the end the draft sounded like mine, not the machine's."

In this reflection, the constructive adaptation was considered not only a strategy but also an emotional blueprint for future learning, linking self-pride and authorship with collaborative use of ChatGPT. This reinforces the view that emotional satisfaction originates from the people's active reshaping of the tool, contributing to adaptive regulation.

Arguably, these experiences confirmed that emotional regulation, constructive adaptation, and responsible use are integral stages in the affective blueprint of ChatGPT-assisted learning. This stage demonstrates how learners' emotions can be reorganized into enduring practices that connect their immediate experiences with their evolving academic identity. This finding resonates with Song & Song (2023), who stressed learner agency, and Mali (2025), who emphasized scaffolding potential. In Vietnam, this points to the need for training programs that promote effective yet ethical integration of ChatGPT (Le et al., 2025).

4. Conclusions and implications

This study substantially traced the affective dimensions of Vietnamese EFL Master's students' engagement with ChatGPT in academic writing. The findings revealed a trajectory moving from curiosity and relief, through frustration and self-doubt, toward emotional regulation, constructive adaptation, and responsible use, and culminating in the integration of ChatGPT into participants' academic identity and future practices. These trajectories reasserted that learners' affective experiences are not peripheral but constitutive of how GAI becomes meaningfully embedded in educational contexts.

Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for a holistic integration of ChatGPT in particular and GAI in general into higher education that balances innovation with integrity. For teacher educators, this entails designing assignments that encourage strategic use of ChatGPT and independent idea generation, coupled with reflective discussions on how emotions influence writing. Program designers and administrators should embed professional peer workshops and mentoring activities where students share experiences of responsible AI use, while also aligning curricula with institutional codes of academic honesty. At the policy level, policymakers are advised to establish transparent frameworks that safeguard integrity and legitimize guided experimentation with AI. For Master's students and relevant learners, cultivating reflective habits (e.g., emotion journaling and adopting bounded uses of ChatGPT) possibly serves to sustain critical thinking and subsequently transforming the tool into a supportive partner for academic growth.

5. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study has several limitations that shape the interpretation of its findings. First and foremost, the participant pool was limited to five graduate students enrolled in a single course at one Vietnamese university. While the small, case-driven sample allowed for in-depth exploration of affective trajectories, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, it is obvious that the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced retrospective bias or selective recall. Thirdly, the study focused on short-term engagement within one course; the blueprint, while illuminating, does not capture how emotions and practices might alter over longer periods or across diverse academic contexts.

Future research should address these limitations in several ways. Larger-scale, mixed-method studies could examine whether the affective blueprint identified here resonates across disciplines, educational levels, and cultural settings. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for comprehending how emotions evolve as people move from novice to experienced users of GAI. Quasi-experimental designs could also investigate how specific pedagogical interventions (e.g., training in emotional regulation, workshops on responsible AI use) influence affective trajectories and writing outcomes. Last but not least, future investigations might also compare learners' experiences across different GAI platforms, shedding light on whether emotional experiences are tool-specific or broadly applicable.

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