

NEUTRAL BUT HELPFUL? INVESTIGATING THE USE OF CHATGPT FOR NON-JUDGMENTAL FEEDBACK IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Vo Doan Tho
(doantho@ueh.edu.vn)

University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract: With increasing inclusion in learning environments, the value of generative AI in facilitating formative feedback in academic writing needs critical exploration. This study examines how non-judgmental feedback in ChatGPT differs from feedback provided by teachers and examines students' reception of both. Informed by Feedback Literacy Theory, the research integrates a qualitative comparative case study with a total of 30 university students majoring in English Language Studies in a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Each student wrote two pieces of academic writing, marked independently by experienced instructors and ChatGPT with a common rubric. Feedback texts were thematically analyzed based on tone, area, and depth. Six focus group interviews were also conducted to gain insight into students' reception and engagement with the feedback. Results show, in contrast with teacher feedback, which inclined towards a mixture of directive comment with evaluative judgment, ChatGPT exhibited a consistent facilitative, non-judgmental tone. Students liked the polite, emotionally neutral tone in ChatGPT feedback, with comments citing it as less threatening, more encouraging for revision. However, a lack of depth, in addition to a lack of task-specificity, in AI feedback were also reported. The research suggests the value in incorporating ChatGPT as a low-stakes, non-judgmental feedback tool in support of teachers' feedback, instilling in students feedback literacy, especially in L2 writers. Implications for writing instruction include strategic integration towards an enhanced self-regulatory learning condition, with a caution against over-reliance on program-based feedback. The study calls for future longitudinal research investigating the developing status of AI in assisting academic writing development.

Keywords: academic writing, AI-generated feedback, ChatGPT, non-judgmental feedback

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The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in language education has spiked in recent years, particularly with new advanced generative technologies such as ChatGPT. Such technologies offer new avenues for affordable and tailored support in language learning, for example, in giving immediate help in academic writing tasks (Huang et al., 2023; Woo & Choi, 2021). Among their many applications, AI technologies also hold promise in providing automated feedback which is a feature where instruction in academic writing is particularly relevant. Feedback plays a central role in guiding students through the writing process, supporting revision, and fostering the development of academic literacy (Lee, 2017; Lim & Renandya, 2020). However, the effectiveness of feedback extends beyond its informational value; how

feedback is delivered, in terms of its tone, perceived judgmentality, and motivational impact, can significantly influence how learners engage with it (Zumbrunn et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2023).

In conventional writing pedagogy, teacher feedback can be extremely useful but also possess affective risks. Studies have revealed that critical or judgmental feedback can cause anxiety in students, lower writing confidence, and impede learner autonomy (Carless, 2022; Chhabra et al., 2022). Conversely, non-judgmental feedback defined as constructive comment with positive tone is found to promote greater motivation, self-regulation, particularly where students are in the process of learning feedback literacy (Han & Xu, 2020; Knight, 2024). Such AI tools as ChatGPT present a potentially useful tool in this regard in providing constantly polite, neutral, facilitative feedback. Investigations have indicated that these tools can provide affectively secure space where students can experiment with ideas, gather formative input, and edit their work, without fearing adverse judgment (Karataş et al., 2024; Mohebbi, 2025).

Despite the promise of AI-based feedback to enhance conventional teacher feedback, there are only a handful of studies comparing the two in a direct manner, particularly in terms of tone and judgmentality. Such a gap is especially pertinent in academic writing situations where students are dealing with advanced language tasks and are attuned to the tone in which feedback is delivered. If this issue remains underexplored, important pedagogical consequences may arise. Feedback that is perceived as overly judgmental may discourage learner engagement, reduce willingness to revise, and negatively affect writing self-efficacy, particularly among less experienced L2 writers (Han & Hyland, 2015; Tsao, 2021). Conversely, feedback that is consistently non-judgmental but insufficiently specific may fail to provide the cognitive challenge necessary for improvement (Ferris et al., 2013). Without a clearer understanding of how different feedback sources balance tone, specificity, and usefulness, educators may struggle to design effective feedback practices that support both affective engagement and meaningful revision. This gap is especially critical in the context of increasing reliance on AI-generated feedback, where assumptions about its supportive tone may obscure limitations in its pedagogical value.

This study closes the gap in understanding how generative AI writing tools such as ChatGPT operate as sources of feedback in academic writing by comparing feedback provided by ChatGPT and experienced writing instructors on undergraduate student writing. In this study, non-judgmental feedback is conceptualized not merely as polite or hedged language, but as a facilitative feedback stance characterized by reduced evaluative authority and increased support for learner agency. In a qualitative case study design with 30 English Language Studies majors in a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, the research examines how ChatGPT offers feedback in terms of tone, focus, and depth, and how it contrasts with teacher feedback when reviewed through a common rubric. Further, the research investigates how students interact with, and experience, both forms of feedback, especially in terms of usefulness and emotional impact. In particular, the research responds to the following research inquiries:

- (1) How does ChatGPT provide feedback on students' academic writing, particularly in terms of tone, focus, and depth?

- (2) In what ways does ChatGPT's feedback differ from teacher feedback in terms of judgmentality, specificity, and usefulness?
- (3) How do students perceive and engage with feedback provided by ChatGPT compared to that of their teachers?

By responding to these questions, the study hopes to make a contribution toward new research on AI-augmented language learning and toward informing practice in teaching writing in academic contexts. The results provide greater insight into the means in which feedback through AI tools can aid in the acquisition of student feedback literacy, foster learning agency, and foster emotionally favourable writing environments.

Feedback in Academic Writing

Feedback in the literature on academic writing is generally defined as any type of input delivered to learners with the purpose of enhancing writing performance (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). In the second language (L2) writing environment, feedback, in addition to being used for the correction of linguistic mistakes, can also help enhance higher-order thinking, metacognitive advancement, as well as textual cohesion (Lee, 2017; Lim & Renandya, 2020). Feedback can be categorized based on timing (either formative or summative), modality (written or oral), and function (directive versus facilitative), all with different pedagogical benefits.

In the writing process, formative feedback is provided with the goal of facilitating learning and revision. Research continuously shows that formative feedback enhances student performance and engagement, particularly when it is iterative and scaffolded (Huisman et al., 2018b; Yu & Liu, 2021). However, summative feedback, which is typically provided for assessment purposes after a task is completed, is often less effective in encouraging revision and long-term writing development (Din et al., 2021; Peck & Kavanagh, 2024).

Directive feedback, which is a common practice in written corrective feedback (WCF), provides clear direction by identifying and fixing specific errors. The approach can limit learner autonomy and offer few opportunities for deeper engagement, even though it is effective in improving surface-level accuracy (Diab, 2015; Lim & Renandya, 2020). On the other hand, facilitative feedback promotes introspection and decision-making, frequently by using open-ended questions to guide revision (Engeness, 2018; Jalalzai et al., 2023). When combined with students' developmental stages, it promotes improvements in organization, argument, and rhetorical sensitivity (Huisman et al., 2018a; Waluyo & Apridayani, 2024). In order to address a range of learner needs and writing tasks, effective feedback practices typically incorporate both (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

A growing body of research has drawn attention to the tone of feedback, particularly the distinction between judgmental and non-judgmental feedback. Judgmental feedback is not limited to overtly negative comments, but more broadly refers to evaluative discourse that positions learners or their works against implicit standards, often conveying approval, disapproval, or deficiency (Knight, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2021). Such feedback may include categorical evaluations (e.g., "weak," "poorly developed") or authoritative statements that leave limited space for learner interpretation.

In contrast, non-judgmental feedback is characterized by a facilitative orientation that emphasizes guidance over evaluation. It focuses on supporting revision through suggestions, questions, and alternatives, while minimizing affective threat (Edge, 2015; Wali & Huijser, 2018). Importantly, non-judgmental feedback is not simply “polite” or “hedged” language. Rather, it reflects a shift in epistemic stance, from evaluating performance to engaging learners in meaning-making and revision. It may include dialogic features (e.g., “you might consider...”, “how could this idea be expanded?”), but its defining feature lies in its orientation toward learner agency and interpretive space.

Therefore, judgmentality in feedback can be understood along a continuum, involving not only linguistic tone but also the degree of evaluative authority, directiveness, and openness to learner engagement. This broader conceptualization is particularly relevant in L2 writing contexts, where affective responses to feedback play a significant role in shaping revision behavior and feedback uptake (Carless & Boud, 2018; Yu & Liu, 2021).

AI and Automated Feedback in Education

The promotion of AI in education has transformed feedback practices, particularly in writing pedagogy. AI-driven systems now provide scalable, consistent, and immediate feedback across various writing dimensions, from grammar correction to discourse-level organization (Geetha, 2025; Gnanaprakasam & Lourdusamy, 2024). These tools have been shown to reduce teacher workload, personalize feedback, and offer timely support that can enhance student engagement and revision behaviors (Faccia et al., 2024; Hooda et al., 2022). As natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning algorithms advance, AI feedback is shifting from static error detection to adaptive, formative, and learner-sensitive responses (Messer et al., 2024; Wongvorachan et al., 2022).

AI resources are increasingly being employed in higher education to help L2 students enhance their writing. Students can revise their drafts multiple times and learn academic writing procedures by receiving feedback on their work several times through Automated Writing Evaluation systems and intelligent tutoring softwares (Liu et al., 2021). By enabling students to manage revisions on their own and prevent an excessive dependence on teacher intervention, such software stimulates learner independence. Furthermore, regardless of learner experience or classroom conditions, AI-based feedback can facilitate inclusivity by offering fair feedback (Osakwe et al., 2022).

One AI tool that has received great attention is ChatGPT, a large language model recognized for its dialogic interface and feedback-responsive design. In real-time, ChatGPT provides suggestions, explanations, and exemplary texts, often in facilitative, non-judgmental tone (Fitria, 2023; Parker et al., 2023). Giving feedback in hedged, polite form is consistent with best practice in academic writing instruction, conducive to learner agency as well as emotional safety (Aljuaid, 2024; Cardon et al., 2023). Researchers have discovered that students often prefer feedback in ChatGPT due to the neutrality and motivational tone, even when the text might be less comprehensive in depth than comments provided by teachers (Gozali et al., 2024; Steiss et al., 2024).

However, using ChatGPT also raises ethical and pedagogical concerns. Over-reliance on AI may raise concerns about learner authorship and academic integrity, and comments may occasionally be overly general or overlook task-specific nuances (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023; Johnson-Eilola et al., 2024). To ensure alignment with learning objectives and ethical considerations, educators must then carefully weigh the benefits of AI-provided commentary against the need for a human eye (Demszky et al., 2024; Escalante et al., 2023). When used properly, ChatGPT and other tools can be very helpful additions to human commentary, especially in situations involving formative learning. To explore the actual nature and pedagogical value of ChatGPT's feedback in comparison with teacher feedback, the present study investigates how students engage with both sources and how each aligns with principles of constructive, non-judgmental response.

Feedback Literacy Theory

Feedback Literacy Theory (Carless & Boud, 2018) offers a useful tool for making sense of how students experience feedback and how practice in providing feedback can be influenced in a way for favorable learning outcomes to be achieved. Carless and Boud (2018) delineate student feedback literacy as being able to interpret the purpose behind feedback, making informed decisions, controlling one's own emotion, as well as being able to react towards feedback. In comparison with the one-way activity of informational transfer, the conceptualization transforms feedback into a two-way, constantly emerging process.

On this basis, an empirically grounded feedback literacy model designed for academic writing has been advanced by Yu and Liu (2021). It involves four main skills, including understanding evaluative criteria, processing feedback, regulating affect, and making use of feedback during text revision. In L2 contexts, where the students typically experience confusion in comprehending academic requirements as well as in constructively responding to criticism, these aspects are especially applicable. As a result, the ineffectiveness of feedback also depends on a mixture of its content as well as the way in which the learners internalize it.

There is also a new body of research examining how AI resources can aid in the development of feedback literacy. Zhan and Yan (2025) illustrate how the non-threatening and immediate feedback from ChatGPT bolsters student engagement and confidence, particularly in the initial phases of writing. In the same vein, Rad et al. (2024) discovered that Wordtune users demonstrated greater awareness of writing decisions and a greater willingness to edit. Such research implies that AI resources, when adequately scaffolded, can offer a low-stakes environment for learners to practice receiving and responding to feedback, consequently deepening feedback literacy.

Guo et al. (2025) also comment on the benefit of AI-infused peer review in fostering learners' feedback ability. Practice in interaction with feedback generated by humans and machines contributes to critical reflection and feedback negotiation practice, the very essence of literacy development. At the same time, feedback literacy must also be fostered among teachers, since teachers must prepare and provide feedback practice culminating in learner agency and emotional resilience (Carless & Winstone, 2020; Lee, 2021). Teacher and student feedback

literacy meet in a constructive feedback ecology, an ecology then iteratively broadened through strategic integration of AI feedback tools (Chong, 2022; Nieminen & Carless, 2023).

In the present research, Feedback Literacy Theory provides a strong framework for an examination of how learners react when faced with varying feedback sources. It also highlights tone and delivery with respect to influencing learners' affective responses and decisions for revision. Such non-judgmental, facilitative feedback as provided by ChatGPT can potentially operate as a scaffold that may support learner autonomy, motivation, and critical engagement with writing.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative comparative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine and contrast the types of feedback provided by ChatGPT and experienced writing instructors, as well as to find out how students felt about each source. In this study, the “cases” are defined as two parallel feedback systems: (1) AI-generated feedback (ChatGPT) and (2) teacher-generated feedback, both applied to the same set of student writing tasks within a shared instructional context. Each case is bounded by a common set of conditions, including the same group of participants, identical writing tasks, and a shared assessment rubric. This bounded design enables a controlled comparison of how different feedback sources operate under similar pedagogical conditions.

A comparative case study approach was adopted to allow for in-depth examination of similarities and differences across these two feedback systems. Following Yin's (2018) logic of replication, each feedback source is treated as a distinct case, while maintaining consistency in context to facilitate analytic comparison. This design supports the identification of systematic patterns in feedback characteristics (e.g., tone, focus, and depth) as well as how these patterns are experienced by learners.

The unit of analysis for the study was written feedback on individual student essays, specifically each source's (teacher and ChatGPT) responses to the same texts. This allowed for systematic comparison of feedback features within the same writing inputs. The case boundaries were further defined by the institutional and curricular context of a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where all participants were enrolled in an English Language Studies program. Within this boundary, the study investigated feedback generated under controlled conditions with a shared rubric, and embedded within the students' ongoing academic writing development. Together with textual examination of feedback, the research also included a focus group section for collecting qualitative information about students' views of and interactions with the two sources of feedback. Focus groups are especially useful in educational research for revealing shared meaning-making, bringing into view opposing opinions, and recording how students think about their own learning experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Participants

Participants were 30 undergraduate English Language Studies major students in a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They were composed of 16 female students and 14 male students, with a distribution across academic years as follows: 7 first-year, 8 second-year, 8 third-year, and 7 fourth-year students. Their English level ranged from B1 through C1, according to CEFR-based requirements issued by the university. Students in the program are obligated to take six writing courses during their course of study, including business writing as well as academic writing styles. At the time the study took place, all participants had taken a minimum of two writing courses and were well-acquainted with major parts of academic essay composition and typical teacher comment conventions.

The students were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in year levels and English proficiency. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. In addition to submitting writing samples, all students were invited to participate in focus group interviews, which were conducted to explore their perceptions of the feedback received from both human teachers and ChatGPT.

Data Collection

The study involved two primary sources of data: student writing samples with corresponding feedback and focus group discussions. Each student also wrote two pieces of academic writing on prescribed argumentative tasks specific to their specialization area. Assignment tasks were designed to replicate normal tasks in their writing course, with clear guidelines, including assessment criteria. Each writing sample was then evaluated through two sources:

- Experienced writing instructors: Two teachers with more than five years of experience in teaching academic writing with a focus on the postgraduate level assessed the essays with a standardized, analytic rubric. While both instructors used a shared analytic rubric to guide their feedback, minor variations in individual feedback styles may still have occurred. To minimize this effect, both instructors were provided with the same assessment criteria and task instructions, ensuring a degree of consistency in feedback focus. However, the study does not aim to eliminate individual variation, but rather to reflect authentic teacher feedback practices within real classroom conditions. Criteria involved were task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and precision, and overall clarity.
- ChatGPT (GPT-4.0): The same writing samples were submitted to ChatGPT with standardized prompts (e.g., “Please provide formative feedback based on the following rubric criteria...”). Prompts were carefully designed to mirror teacher assessment categories to ensure comparability. A standardized prompt template was used for all writing samples, which included (1) a clear instruction to provide formative feedback, (2) explicit reference to the analytic rubric criteria (e.g., task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy), and (3) guidance to comment on strengths and areas for improvement. The same prompt structure and wording were applied

consistently across all submissions to minimize variation in AI responses due to prompt differences. To further enhance consistency, all prompts were administered under the same conditions, including the same ChatGPT version and interaction format. While recognizing that AI-generated responses are inherently non-deterministic, this standardized prompting approach ensured that variations in feedback were primarily attributable to the content of student writing rather than differences in prompt design.

Every comment was anonymized and stored for analysis. Apart from text-based comments, six focus group interviews were also administered, each with five students, grouped by year level in order to facilitate ease and familiarity among peers. Each session lasted about 45–60 minutes, in English and/or Vietnamese, respectively, based on participants' choice. During the focus group protocol, open-ended questions were raised inquiring about students' responses towards each type of feedback, perceived usefulness, emotional reactions, and revision activity. All interviews were tape-recorded with verbatim transcription for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected including 60 writing samples, 120 feedback documents (teacher and ChatGPT for each writing sample), and six focus group transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the case of feedback texts, an inductive-deductive coding approach was taken. Feedback comments were coded across three main dimensions:

- **Tone:** A theoretically informed coding scheme was developed to capture degrees of judgmentality beyond surface linguistic politeness. Drawing on Edge (2015) and Mitchell et al. (2021), feedback was categorized along a continuum based on (1) evaluative stance (e.g., explicit judgment vs. facilitative suggestion), (2) degree of directiveness, and (3) openness to learner interpretation. Comments were coded as *judgmental* when they contained explicit evaluative language (e.g., “weak,” “unclear,” “incorrect”), authoritative directives, or statements that positioned the text as deficient without inviting learner engagement. Comments were coded as *non-judgmental* when they employed a facilitative stance, such as suggestions, questions, or alternative formulations that encouraged revision while preserving learner agency (e.g., “you might consider...”, “this could be further developed by...”). Coding decisions were based on the overall communicative function and stance of the feedback rather than the presence of hedging markers alone.
- **Focus:** Coded as form of address (grammar, vocabulary), substance (ideas, argument), or organization (structure, paragraph)
- **Depth:** General (broad, vague statements) or specific (specific, actionable comments).

To ensure coding reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of the feedback data (20%), achieving an inter-rater agreement of 87%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

The focus group transcripts were also subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns in students' perceptions. Coding categories were initially based on the literature on feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Yu & Liu, 2021), including themes such as emotional

response, perceived usefulness, clarity, and agency in revision. Additional themes were allowed to emerge inductively from the data. Data source triangulation (feedback texts, student interviews) increased validity in results, giving a more complete understanding of how students interact with feedback from humans and AI.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutionally approved guidelines for conducting research with people. I obtained informed consent from each student after clearly explaining the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. To ensure confidentiality, I anonymized all writing samples, feedback texts, and focus group transcripts using pseudonyms. All data were securely stored and accessible only to me. I also exercised caution and transparency in the use of AI. Students were clearly informed in writing that ChatGPT would be used to generate feedback on their writing for research purposes, and I emphasized that ChatGPT served as a supplemental, non-authoritative source of feedback. Additionally, I debriefed participants on the strengths and limitations of AI in educational contexts to address any potential misconceptions and support informed engagement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, drawing from both written feedback samples and student reflections during focus group interviews. In addition to illustrative excerpts, patterns across the dataset were examined to identify the distribution of feedback types across the coded dimensions. A total of 120 feedback documents (60 teacher-generated and 60 ChatGPT-generated) were analyzed. Across these, a total of approximately 850 individual feedback comments (defined as distinct units of feedback expressing a single idea or suggestion) were coded. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in tone (judgmental vs. non-judgmental), focus (form, content, organization), and depth (general vs. specific), allowing for both qualitative interpretation and cross-case comparison. The analysis sheds light on key contrasts and overlaps between teacher and ChatGPT feedback, particularly in how each source differs in tone, focus, and depth. It also highlights how students perceive and engage with the feedback in shaping their academic writing development. The interplay between human and AI feedback reveals both opportunities and limitations for pedagogical integration.

Tone and Judgmentality in Feedback

One of the first things immediately noticeable about the two sources of feedback was tone, particularly how judgmentally or non-judgmentally the language appeared to the students. ChatGPT's feedback was framed in polite, neutral, facilitating language. Importantly, this non-judgmental tone was not limited to the use of polite or hedged expressions. Rather, ChatGPT consistently adopted a facilitative stance that framed feedback as suggestions for improvement rather than evaluative judgments, thereby positioning students as active agents in the revision

process. It frequently employed hedging expressions such as “*you may consider*,” “*it might be helpful to*,” or “*one way to improve could be...*,” which softened the delivery of criticism and conveyed a tone of encouragement and collaboration. Teacher feedback, while often very well informed and specific, occasionally had sharper, more evaluative terms such as “*unclear*,” “*weak*,” or “*poorly developed*” where some students found the feedback critical or discouraging.

A clear pattern emerged in the distribution of feedback tone across the two sources. The majority of ChatGPT-generated comments were coded as non-judgmental, consistently adopting a facilitative stance. In contrast, teacher feedback showed a more mixed distribution, with both judgmental and non-judgmental comments present. Judgmental comments in teacher feedback were more frequently associated with evaluative language and direct criticism, whereas non-judgmental comments tended to appear when offering suggestions for improvement.

While exact proportions varied across assignments, ChatGPT demonstrated a consistently higher proportion of non-judgmental feedback compared to teachers, indicating a systematic difference in feedback stance rather than isolated instances. For instance, when a student wrote an opening paragraph, ChatGPT responded with:

“You might consider clarifying your thesis statement at the end of the introduction to help guide the reader more effectively.”

The teacher, in answer to the same section, provided the following:

“Your thesis is too vague and does not clearly indicate the focus of your essay. Revise it to make your position clear.”

Although both statements sought to address the same topics, their emotional tones differed. Several students stated in focus group interviews that ChatGPT's tone helped them feel more at ease and willing to edit their work. One second-year student said, “*Even when ChatGPT tells me that something is wrong, it sounds like a suggestion, not a criticism. I feel like it’s trying to help, not judge me.*” This could also be verified in a first-year student who had just come from high school, “*When the teacher says something is ‘weak’ or ‘not good enough,’ I feel a bit ashamed. ChatGPT doesn’t make me feel that way. It’s more like a peer giving friendly advice.*”

Nonetheless, not everyone shared this inclination for a softer tone. Certain senior students, especially those used to the demands of academic writing, felt that ChatGPT's tone was unduly cautious and lacked the sense of urgency that they needed to improve. A fourth-year participant shared:

“I want to be told directly what’s wrong. When the teacher says ‘weak argument,’ I know I need to fix it. ChatGPT is sometimes too nice when it tells me to consider things, but I’m not sure how important they are.”

This contrast reveals an important pedagogical consideration: while non-judgmental tone fosters emotional safety, especially for less confident writers, some students value directness as a motivator for improvement. The key may lie in balancing clarity with empathy, a skill that

teachers can develop and that AI tools like ChatGPT are beginning to emulate through their consistently neutral feedback style.

Focus and Coverage of Feedback

Aside from tone, the two sources also differed in how much attention each paid, in feedback, to different aspects of writing. ChatGPT typically issued well-organized feedback covering a multiplicity of areas such as form, content, organization within a single comment. Comments were often presented in bullet form, thematic segments, with equal attention turned to grammar, lexicographical accuracy, development of ideas, as well as structural cohesion. In encouraging a multi-dimensional appreciation, students grasped writing as a unitary, gestalt-like process rather than a collection of disconnected parts.

In terms of focus, ChatGPT feedback demonstrated a more evenly distributed coverage across form, content, and organization, with many comments addressing multiple aspects simultaneously. Teacher feedback, by contrast, showed greater variability, with individual comments often focusing more narrowly on specific dimensions, such as grammatical accuracy or argument development.

This pattern suggests that while ChatGPT tends to provide comprehensive, multi-dimensional feedback, teacher feedback reflects more selective and pedagogically prioritized attention, likely influenced by instructional goals and student needs. For instance, one ChatGPT response included the following points:

Here are a few suggestions to strengthen your writing:

-  Your grammar is mostly accurate, but you may want to double-check subject-verb agreement in paragraph three.
-  Consider elaborating on your second main point by adding a concrete example to make your argument more persuasive.
-  Adding clearer transitions between your paragraphs might help the reader follow your ideas more smoothly.

Students consistently praised this comprehensive format. One second-year student remarked, “*ChatGPT gives me the whole picture. It doesn’t only talk about grammar or content, but it touches everything. That helps me see what I need to work on overall.*” In contrast, teacher feedback was more variable in focus. Some teachers concentrated primarily on grammatical accuracy, particularly when reviewing work from lower-year students. Others emphasized argument clarity or paragraph structure but provided less attention to language issues. One piece of teacher feedback read:

“Your use of tenses is inconsistent. Pay more attention to past and present tense usage.”

In another instance, a teacher wrote:

“Your second point is interesting but underdeveloped. You need to provide evidence and explain its relevance more clearly.”

Students noted this variability. A third-year participant commented, *“It depends on the teacher. Some focus a lot on language, some on ideas. I like ChatGPT because it’s more balanced.”* Yet many students also recognized that teachers could offer feedback that was more context-sensitive, often connecting comments to course content or disciplinary expectations. One fourth-year student recalled, *“My teacher reminded me to use more hedging language, because we had a lecture about it the week before. ChatGPT wouldn’t know that.”* Another added, *“The teacher knows what we’ve been learning. When she gives feedback, it builds on that. ChatGPT is general and it doesn’t know my progress or my goals.”*

Thus, whereas ChatGPT provided regularized and formatted feedback, teachers contributed more contextualized and pedagogically informed guidance. This comparison reveals the complementarity between the two feedback sources: AI can contribute towards ensuring students are provided with wide-ranging and well-balanced input, whereas teachers can provide depth based on the curriculum as well as the learner’s developmental profile.

Depth and Specificity of Feedback

The third significant area of variation involved the level of detailing in the feedback. Teacher remarks were typically very specific, referencing specific sentences or things and providing specific suggestions for revisions. With regard to depth, teacher feedback was more frequently coded as specific, often referencing particular sentences or sections of the text and providing actionable suggestions. In contrast, ChatGPT feedback was more commonly coded as general, offering broad recommendations without consistently anchoring them to specific textual instances.

This distinction highlights a systematic difference in how feedback supports revision: while teacher feedback tends to facilitate targeted revision, ChatGPT feedback supports broader reflection but may require additional interpretation by students to be effectively applied. For example, one teacher wrote:

“In paragraph three, you mention that ‘education helps society.’ This is too general. Add a more specific example, such as how education improves employment opportunities or civic engagement.”

This level of specificity helped students make direct and meaningful changes to their writing. A third-year student shared, *“I like it when the teacher points out the exact sentence that needs fixing. It saves time and makes revision easier.”*

In contrast, ChatGPT tended to offer more general observations, such as:

“Consider providing more specific examples to support your main points.”

Even though these remarks were clear and easy to understand, students occasionally found it difficult to put them into practice without more thorough instructions. A second-year student explained, *“ChatGPT gives good suggestions, but I’m not always sure where to apply them. I want to know: which paragraph needs more examples?”*

However, some students conveyed gratitude for ChatGPT's feedback's comprehensibility and clarity. Revision felt less daunting because of its list-based structure and courteous wording. One first-year participant noted, *“The feedback is simple and well-organized. I don’t feel confused or judged. I just follow the points one by one.”*

Several students described using both types of feedback in tandem. One fourth-year student explained:

“First, I read the teacher’s feedback to see what’s most important. Then, I use ChatGPT to give me ideas on how to improve or rephrase something. It’s like having two teachers—one gives direction, and one gives extra help.”

This finding implies that the students were acquiring tactics for balancing sources of feedback, utilising the precision of the comments made by teachers and the formality and neutrality of AI comments in order for their revision cycle to be scaffolded. ChatGPT, consequently, can be a provider of feedback, yet also a metacognitive tool incorporating reflection, reinforcement of feedback literacy, and construction of learner autonomy.

Table 1. Distribution of Feedback Characteristics across ChatGPT and Teacher Feedback

Feedback Source	Judgmental	Non-judgmental	General	Specific
ChatGPT	Low	High	High	Low
Teachers	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High

Table 1 summarizes the overall distribution of feedback characteristics across the two sources. As shown, ChatGPT feedback is consistently characterized by a non-judgmental tone and broader, more general suggestions, while teacher feedback demonstrates a more balanced distribution of judgmental and non-judgmental comments, alongside a stronger tendency toward specificity. These patterns reinforce the earlier qualitative observations, suggesting that the differences between AI-generated and teacher feedback are not incidental but systematic. In particular, the contrast between facilitative tone and actionable specificity highlights the complementary roles of the two feedback sources in supporting students’ writing development.

In short, the findings of this study reveal that while teacher and ChatGPT feedback share some common goals, namely, to guide students toward clearer, more coherent, and more accurate writing, they differ significantly in how they approach these goals. ChatGPT excels in delivering balanced, non-judgmental, and well-structured feedback that supports emotional safety and broad engagement with the writing process. Teachers, meanwhile, provide richer context, deeper insight, and more specific guidance tailored to the learner and the curriculum.

Students responded positively towards each source, but identified different strengths. They liked ChatGPT for being polite, clear, well-structured, particularly in the earliest periods of revision. They valued teachers for being precise, contextually informed, intellectually

challenging. Of perhaps greater significance, students showed a preference for a dual strategy, in which AI-based feedback generation and human feedback can supplement one another in targeting second language writing development's affective as well as cognitive dimensions.

These findings provide a basis for thinking about AI not as a substitute for teacher feedback, but as an auxiliary collaborator in developing student feedback literacy and improving academic writing pedagogy.

Discussion

This study has endeavoured to explore and contrast feedback patterns provided in students' academic writing by ChatGPT and human teachers in terms of tone, content, and judgmentality. It has also explored students' perceptions towards these two types of feedback and their impact on learning. The findings are consistent with and enrich existing literature on writing instruction feedback and are very consistent with the core dimensions of Feedback Literacy Theory (Carless & Boud, 2018; Yu & Liu, 2021).

Feedback Tone and Affective Engagement

One of the most prominent findings was the non-judgmental tone of ChatGPT's feedback, characterised by students as polite, encouraging, and emotionally neutral. This differed from teacher feedback, which - even highly contextualized and informed by expertise - felt occasionally too direct or judgmental, especially for less experienced writers. This aligns with Edge's (2015) argument that non-judgmental discourse fosters critical engagement without triggering emotional resistance. Similarly, Yu and Liu (2021) emphasize that effective feedback literacy involves the ability to manage affective responses, a process that is more easily facilitated when feedback is phrased in non-threatening ways. ChatGPT's feedback thus appears to have the potential to support students in the "managing affect" component of feedback literacy by reducing anxiety and promoting openness to revision.

Earlier research also identified the emotional value of AI-mediated feedback. Zhan and Yan (2025), for instance, discovered students preferred the encouraging tone of ChatGPT over human feedback, particularly when gaining confidence in first-stage writing. This research supports that finding yet extends it in revealing how the affective support varies in significance with students' stage in academics. While students in early years appreciated the softer tone of ChatGPT, upper-year students sometimes preferred the encouraging pressure involved in stronger, more direct teacher criticism. Such observations lead us to believe affective reactions toward feedback are fluid and influenced by students' changing academic identities as well as objectives.

These findings can also be interpreted through the lens of politeness in feedback discourse. ChatGPT's consistent use of hedging, indirect suggestions, and softened evaluative language reflects features commonly associated with politeness strategies, particularly those aimed at mitigating face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). In contrast, more direct teacher feedback, while pedagogically efficient, may carry a higher degree of face-threatening force, especially for less experienced writers.

From this perspective, non-judgmental feedback can be understood not only as a pedagogical stance but also as a form of affective alignment achieved through politeness strategies. The use of mitigation and indirectness may contribute to students' willingness to engage with feedback by reducing defensiveness and preserving learner self-image. However, as observed in the findings, excessive politeness may also reduce perceived urgency or clarity, suggesting a need to balance politeness with instructional directness in feedback practices.

Feedback Coverage and the Development of Judgment

In feedback content and focus, ChatGPT overall provided broad-balanced feedback, with coverage of surface issues (form), content development, and structural integration in a total and systematic fashion. Such a broad scope was valued, as found, by students for revision, particularly when students were uncertain where to focus. It is a sign of being able to see what Carless and Boud (2018) call a "appreciating feedback processes". It means that a feedback literate student must be able to see the different aspects of good writing and how to attend to each.

However, in this research, we also discovered that teacher feedback was less likely to be framed in a universal, one-size-fits-all manner, being instead contextualized and strategically selective, with a tendency for feedback to concentrate on the areas emphasized in class or on the student's historical performance. This complements the research of Lee (2021) and Carless and Winstone (2023), who observe that experienced instructors tend to practice pedagogical judgment in favoring feedback that complements curricular intentions or disciplinary conventions. This strategic concentration serves a crucial purpose in navigating learners through ever-more advanced writing tasks and is a significant component in assisting students in "make judgments" concerning their work (Yu & Liu, 2021).

ChatGPT, while systematic, lacked this contextual awareness. As in Guo et al. (2025), who found that AI-supported peer review lacked the socio-pedagogical depth of human feedback, students in this study noted that ChatGPT could not draw on shared learning history or classroom discussions. Therefore, while ChatGPT supports feedback literacy at a general level, teachers help students calibrate their judgments in ways that are socially and academically situated, which is an essential element of disciplinary writing development.

Specificity, Actionability, and Taking Feedback Forward

The third key dimension of Feedback Literacy Theory referred as "taking action" relates to how well feedback enables students to revise and improve their work. In this regard, the study found that teacher feedback was typically more specific and actionable, often pointing directly to problematic sentences and suggesting concrete revisions. Students reported that this helped them make focused changes and understand exactly what needed improvement.

ChatGPT feedback, while well-structured and respectful, very often provided more general feedback. This is in line with research conducted by Banihashem et al. (2024) and Alharbi (2023), who reported finding AI feedback generalized in the form of surface-level suggestions, often in need of a human moderator in order for these suggestions to manifest meaningfully in revisions. Students, however, valued the ChatGPT as a revision guideline, particularly when

paired with instructor comments. In being well-structured and easy to read, students were able to organize their revisions and think about overall writing problems, though it rarely identified specific solutions.

This suggests that AI may contribute to the feedback process by providing a scaffold for initial revision and metacognitive reflection, while teacher feedback offers more targeted guidance. Collectively, they are part of what Chong (2022) describes as a productive “feedback ecology,” in which an array of sources of feedback plays distinctive yet overlapping roles in informing student learning.

Reframing ChatGPT within Feedback Literacy Development

Interpreted through the lens of Feedback Literacy Theory, the findings suggest that ChatGPT supports several dimensions of feedback literacy, particularly in managing affect, understanding broad feedback goals, and initiating self-directed revision. It encourages students to view feedback as a supportive process rather than a judgment of ability, a shift that is essential for developing independent writing competence (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Nonetheless, the results also highlight that ChatGPT cannot provide relational, contextualized, and longitudinal feedback, which is the type of feedback that develops from sustained relationships between teachers and students and cumulatively draws on shared learning experiences. As Nieminen and Carless (2023) contend, feedback literacy cannot be adequately cultivated based on decontextualized input. It needs dialogic interaction and social engagement, especially in the forms of feedback dialogue and negotiated meaning.

In short, while ChatGPT holds the promise for scaffolding and democratizing formative comment, its application must never supersede human comment. Instead, it must form part of a hybrid model of comment which is a model employing the emotional safeguarding and efficiency of AI while continuing the disciplinary precision and developmental directionality of teacher comment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the characteristics of feedback generated by ChatGPT and experienced writing teachers on students’ academic writing, with a focus on tone, content, and specificity. It also explored students’ perceptions of both types of feedback, offering insights into how generative AI might support the development of feedback literacy in tertiary writing education. Drawing on Feedback Literacy Theory (Carless & Boud, 2018; Yu & Liu, 2021), the findings highlight both the affordances and limitations of AI-generated feedback in shaping students’ writing experiences and revision practices.

ChatGPT delivered regular feedback in a non-judgmental, positive tone, reported as emotionally empowering and convenient in reading by a significant number of students. Well-balanced in coverage of grammar, structure, and content, with a systematic, approachable layout, it delivered a tabulative means for revising plans and for developing writing skills. Teacher feedback, while occasionally reported as felt to be a more direct/critical intervention, was very highly valued for being specific, in-context, and relevant on a personal basis. Students recognized teachers could tune comments towards a personal learning profile, disciplinary

conventions, offering a depth of feedback beyond replication in ChatGPT. Of interest, there were a significant number of statements in favor of the simultaneous usage of both feedback sources, with a feeling that ChatGPT filled an auxiliary role, complementing the teaching authority, nuance, and insight in comments from teachers.

These findings also carry important pedagogical implications. ChatGPT can function well as a scaffold, especially for new writers who cherish emotionally safe and whole-form feedback. The findings also highlight the role of politeness in shaping how feedback is received, suggesting that tone, particularly the use of mitigated and non-threatening language, can influence students' emotional engagement and openness to revision. At the same time, the uniqueness of teacher feedback, particularly in the creation of academic judgment and disciplinary identification, emphasizes the value in introducing AI tools with caution and care. This study enriches current writing pedagogy literature on AI in education through revealing how ChatGPT can be conceptualized within an expanded feedback ecology, with a conducive environment for students' emotional engagement, revision strategies, as well as feedback literacy learning.

The research, however, is limited in some ways. It engaged a comparatively low number of undergraduate students from a particular Vietnamese institution, so the research can be narrow in terms of generalizability. In addition, while the research registered student views and analyzed texts of feedback, it could not track actual revisions nor learning gains, providing a clearer picture of impact. Additionally, as feedback was provided by two instructors, variations in individual feedback styles may have influenced the nature of teacher feedback. Although a shared rubric was used to ensure consistency, differences in emphasis, tone, and specificity may still have occurred. Future research could further control for this variable by involving a larger number of raters or by systematically examining inter-teacher variation in feedback practices. Lastly, because the answers provided by ChatGPT are contextual and non-static, there might be subtle differences in feedback output with stable conditions in prompting.

Further research might expand on these results in a number of ways. For instance, studies could investigate the long-term impact on student writing ability as well as feedback literacy from frequent exposure to ChatGPT. Comparative research with different populations, tasks, and disciplines would also enhance the insight into how AI software operates in any given situation. More research on teachers' views as well as interpretations and consideration for AI-provided feedback in instructional practice are also promising avenues for research.

While educational uses for generative AI are only increasing in significance, the present research contends that their application in writing instruction must seek complementarity, rather than substitution, for human feedback. Positioned as a complement, a tool for aiding emotional resilience, for fostering metacognitive awareness, for promoting writing autonomy, ChatGPT can meaningfully enrich a more inclusive, more responsive educational approach for developing academic writing.

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