



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENERATIVE AI AS A PARTICIPANT IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM INTERACTION: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has entered university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings at remarkable speed, yet how learners perceive it as a participant in classroom interaction, alongside their teachers and peers, remains underexplored, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. Adopting a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, this study surveyed 50 English-major undergraduates at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, with a bilingual instrument of 29 Likert items and two open-ended prompts, and then interviewed four focal students to interpret the survey patterns. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, non-parametric comparisons, a Spearman correlation, and qualitative content analysis were used to characterise students' patterns of GenAI use and their construal of GenAI as an interactional partner. Students used GenAI most for explaining grammar and vocabulary, generating ideas, and obtaining writing feedback, and least for speaking practice. They construed it primarily as a preparatory tutor and peer that scaffolds what they will say around class, reporting heightened willingness to communicate; yet they did not trust its English over their teacher's, ranking their trust as teacher over AI over peers. Frequency of use was moderately associated with perceiving GenAI as an interactional participant. Both strands converged on one tension: the preparatory function that supported interaction also constrained it when GenAI produced over-complex language or fostered dependency that slowed real-time turn-taking. The study offers early Vietnam-based evidence that learners position GenAI as a backstage rehearsal partner rather than a replacement interlocutor, and points to a pedagogical need for prompt literacy and register-appropriate editing.

Keywords: generative AI; ChatGPT; EFL; higher education; classroom interaction; student perceptions; Vietnam

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1. Introduction

The public release of ChatGPT in late 2022 and the rapid diffusion of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into higher education have reshaped how university students engage with English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Within less than three years, GenAI has moved from a novelty into a routine presence in students' out-of-class study and, increasingly, into the university English classroom itself (Lo *et al.*, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024). Systematic reviews already document a sharp rise in empirical work on ChatGPT and EFL, spanning writing, speaking, feedback, and self-regulated learning (Lo *et al.*, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024).

A recurring finding across this emerging literature is that students do not treat GenAI merely as a look-up tool. They describe it as a partner, a tutor, or even a companion that talks back and shapes what they say and how they say it (Teng, 2024; Rezai *et al.*, 2024; Muniandy & Selvanathan, 2025). In writing classes, students negotiate revisions with the model and reorganise their own arguments in response (Mahapatra, 2024; Werdiningsih *et al.*, 2024; Nelson *et al.*, 2025). In speaking practice, learners rehearse turns, ask follow-up questions, and report increased willingness to communicate when a chatbot is on the other side of the exchange (Wang *et al.*, 2024; Zou *et al.*, 2025; Muniandy & Selvanathan, 2025). Teachers likewise report that GenAI is beginning to reconfigure the classroom, though with mixed enthusiasm (Marzuki *et al.*, 2023; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024; Toncelli & Kostka, 2024).

These developments raise a question that has not yet been systematically addressed in the Vietnamese higher-education context: how do university EFL students perceive GenAI as a participant in classroom interaction? Existing Vietnam-based work has begun to map students' acceptance of ChatGPT for language learning (Ho & Nguyen, 2024), but the interactional dimension, that is, the sense in which GenAI takes a turn, occupies a role, and reshapes who speaks to whom, remains underexplored. This gap matters both practically, for course and policy design, and conceptually, for the growing body of research that treats AI as a mediating or participating voice in language learning (Liu, Darvin, *et al.*, 2025; Liu, Zou, *et al.*, 2025).

The present study is the first of two studies designed to empirically ground a doctoral project entitled *Generative AI as an Interactional Participant in English Classroom Discourse: A Discourse-Analytic Study in Vietnamese Higher Education*. This first paper focuses on the student perspective, combining a questionnaire with follow-up interviews so that the breadth of students' reported use and perceptions can be interpreted through their own accounts of specific classroom episodes. It addresses two research questions:

RQ1. How, and for what purposes, do Vietnamese university EFL students use GenAI tools in and around their English classes?

RQ2. How do they perceive GenAI as a participant in English classroom interaction, including the affordances and constraints they associate with classroom talk, participation, and turn-taking, and in comparison, with their teachers and peers?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Rapid Uptake of GenAI in EFL Higher Education

Two recent systematic reviews converge on the observation that empirical research on ChatGPT in ESL/EFL is expanding at an unusual pace, with the majority of studies clustering around writing, vocabulary, and speaking, and with student perceptions forming the most common data type (Lo *et al.*, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024). Both reviews highlight three consistent patterns: students generally report positive attitudes toward GenAI for language study; teachers are more cautious; and the field still lacks fine-grained accounts of how GenAI reshapes classroom interaction as opposed to individual task performance.

2.2 Students' Perceptions and Experiences

A first strand of work uses questionnaires, phenomenological interviews, or mixed methods to capture how learners experience GenAI. Xiao and Zhi (2023) provide one of the earliest exploratory accounts of EFL learners' use of ChatGPT for language-learning tasks, reporting a broadly positive experience alongside concerns about accuracy and dependency. Rezai *et al.* (2024) draw on phenomenological interviews with Iranian university students and describe ChatGPT as opening 'promising avenues' for L2 development, particularly for personalised practice. Teng (2024) coins the metaphor of ChatGPT as 'companion, not enemy' for EFL learners, and in a follow-up study links this stance to learners' metacognitive awareness in writing (Teng, 2025). Van Horn (2024), in a US university EFL context, documents how ChatGPT can support learner autonomy while raising anxieties about over-reliance.

Nelson *et al.* (2025) surveyed EFL learners in an academic-writing course and found students perceived GenAI as most useful for brainstorming and revision, but least trusted for domain-specific accuracy. Werdiningsih *et al.* (2024) similarly describe how Indonesian students balance the efficiency of ChatGPT against a felt need to preserve authorial voice. Mahapatra's (2024) mixed-methods intervention shows measurable gains in ESL academic writing alongside cautious student narratives about authorship and ethics. Polakova and Ivenz (2024) report similar writing gains linked to ChatGPT feedback in a European university EFL setting.

A parallel body of work has begun to model acceptance and motivation. Huang *et al.* (2024) integrate GenAI acceptance with perceived teacher enthusiasm and self-efficacy to predict EFL learners' intention to use ChatGPT. Qu and Wu (2024) apply hedonic motivation and adoption models to CALL contexts, showing that enjoyment and perceived usefulness both matter. Zou *et al.* (2025) explore adoption for speaking practice specifically, while Zaim *et al.* (2024) extend UTAUT to examine how pre-service teachers integrate GenAI into university teaching preparation. In the Vietnamese context, Ho and Nguyen (2024) provide questionnaire evidence of broadly positive but ambivalent acceptance among EFL undergraduates, signalling that Vietnam-specific perception work is beginning but remains scarce.

2.3 GenAI in Writing, Feedback, and Speaking

Because writing is the most researched skill in the GenAI-EFL literature, it also offers the richest picture of learners' interactional stances toward the tool. Marzuki *et al.* (2023) report that Indonesian EFL teachers see AI writing tools as genuinely improving the content and organisation of student texts. Kohnke (2024) compares students' perceptions of GenAI and traditional grammar-checking tools among English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners, and finds that GenAI is valued for its conversational, explanatory quality rather than merely for error correction. Du and Alm (2024) frame students' EAP experiences through self-determination theory, arguing that ChatGPT can support autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

For speaking and oral interaction, Wang *et al.* (2024) compare different conversational GenAI chatbots and report differential effects on EFL learners' willingness to communicate. Muniandy and Selvanathan (2025) describe a Malaysian public-university case study in which ChatGPT functions as a 'partnering tool' that scaffolds ESL learners' speaking skills. Jeon (2024) analyses AI chatbot affordances in the EFL classroom and shows that even young learners orient to chatbots as interactive interlocutors with distinctive turn-taking behaviour.

2.4 GenAI as an Interactional Participant in the Language Classroom

A smaller but conceptually important strand asks not what GenAI does for a skill but what role it takes in the classroom. Ulla *et al.* (2024) argue from a critical language pedagogy perspective that GenAI can foster more inclusive classroom participation when framed as an additional voice rather than a replacement for the teacher. Ma and Chen (2024) show that AI-empowered applications influence EFL learners' engagement in the classroom and their academic procrastination, indicating that GenAI shifts not only task outcomes but the affective and participatory texture of lessons. Slamet (2024) juxtaposes EFL teachers' and students' perceptions, finding that both groups increasingly treat ChatGPT as a co-present digital assistant. Kucuk (2024) reports similar dynamics in grammar teaching, where ChatGPT is used alongside the teacher in classroom explanations.

Two recent conceptual and empirical contributions push this framing further. Liu, Darwin, *et al.* (2025) develop the notion of AI-Mediated Informal Digital Learning of English (AI-IDLE) to capture how learners incorporate GenAI into their everyday English practice; Liu, Zou, *et al.* (2025) extend this by relating AI-IDLE to foreign-language enjoyment and willingness to communicate. In both accounts, GenAI is treated as a mediating and effectively participating voice in learners' English use. This resonates with, but has not yet been extended to, the study of classroom discourse in Vietnamese higher education, where discourse roles and participation frameworks in AI-mediated lessons remain largely undescribed.

2.5 Teachers' Perceptions as a Complementary Lens

Because students' perceptions are formed partly in dialogue with their teachers, it is useful to acknowledge parallel work on faculty attitudes. Moorhouse and Kohnke (2024) report that teacher educators view GenAI as reshaping initial language teacher education, while Toncelli and Kostka (2024) describe faculty attitudes as a 'love-hate relationship' marked by simultaneous enthusiasm and concern about integrity and pedagogy. These findings frame students' perceptions as socially situated within institutional discourses about GenAI, and motivate complementing this student-focused paper with a parallel teacher-focused study.

2.6 Research Gap

Taken together, the literature shows (i) strong evidence that university EFL students perceive GenAI positively but ambivalently across writing, feedback, and speaking; (ii) growing conceptualisation of GenAI as a mediating participant in language learning; and (iii) very limited empirical work on how these perceptions play out in the Vietnamese higher-education classroom, particularly with respect to classroom interaction itself. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on students' perceptions of GenAI as a participant in English classroom interaction at a Vietnamese public university, and by pairing survey breadth with interview depth.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (quantitative → qualitative). A cross-sectional questionnaire first mapped the breadth of students' GenAI use and their perceptions of GenAI as an interactional partner; a follow-up set of semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of respondents then provided depth, interpreting the survey patterns through students' accounts of concrete classroom episodes. The two strands were integrated at the interpretation stage, so that the interviews were used explicitly to explain, qualify, and enrich the questionnaire findings rather than to answer separate questions. The study constitutes the first, exploratory phase of a larger doctoral project entitled *Generative AI as an Interactional Participant in English Classroom Discourse: A Discourse-Analytic Study in Vietnamese Higher Education*, whose subsequent discourse-analytic phase is reported elsewhere. Given the exploratory aim and the modest sample, the analysis privileges description and association over model-testing, and claims are calibrated accordingly.

3.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, that offers a four-year BA programme in English Language. Participants were English-major undergraduates in Years 2 to 4 who had used at least one GenAI tool for English study in the current semester. The questionnaire was distributed through class group chats and

the researcher's institutional channels, and 51 students responded; one response containing no substantive answers was excluded, yielding a final analytic sample of 50. The sample was predominantly female ($n = 31$, 62%), with 18 male students (36%) and one who preferred not to disclose gender (2%). Nearly half were in their final year (Year 4: $n = 24$, 48%; Year 3: $n = 13$, 26%; Year 2: $n = 13$, 26%). Self-reported CEFR proficiency clustered around the B band (B2: $n = 19$, 38%; B1: $n = 16$, 32%; C1: $n = 4$, 8%; A2: $n = 1$, 2%), while ten students (20%) were unsure of their level. Half of the students had used GenAI for English study for more than a year ($n = 25$, 50%), with the remainder distributed across 3–6 months ($n = 12$, 24%), less than 3 months ($n = 8$, 16%), and 6–12 months ($n = 5$, 10%). ChatGPT and Gemini were the most widely used tools (each 84%), followed by Claude (22%), Copilot (14%), and DeepSeek (10%); most students reported using more than one tool. Sample characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (N = 50)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	31	62
	Male	18	36
	Prefer not to say	1	2
Year of study	Year 2	13	26
	Year 3	13	26
	Year 4	24	48
CEFR (self-reported)	A2	1	2
	B1	16	32
	B2	19	38
	C1	4	8
	Not sure	10	20
Duration of GenAI use	< 3 months	8	16
	3–6 months	12	24
	6–12 months	5	10
	> 1 year	25	50
GenAI tools used*	ChatGPT	42	84
	Gemini	42	84
	Claude	11	22
	Copilot	7	14
	DeepSeek	5	10

Note: *Multiple selections permitted; percentages exceed 100.

For the qualitative phase, a final questionnaire item invited willing students to leave contact details for a follow-up interview; seven students (14%) volunteered. Of these, four were available and consented, and all four were interviewed (labelled S1–S4). All were English majors in the target cohorts. Because the interviews were intended to interpret, rather than to extend, the survey findings, and because responses across the four converged strongly, this subsample was judged sufficient for the explanatory purpose of the phase; the remaining volunteers form part of the recruitment pool for the project's subsequent discourse-analytic study.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments were used: a bilingual (Vietnamese–English) questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. Questionnaire items were drafted in English, adapted from published GenAI-EFL instruments (Ho & Nguyen, 2024; Huang *et al.*, 2024; Qu & Wu, 2024; Zou *et al.*, 2025; Zaim *et al.*, 2024), translated into Vietnamese by the researcher, and back-translated by an independent bilingual colleague to check equivalence. The instrument comprised five sections: (i) background information; (ii) eight items on the frequency and purposes of GenAI use in and around English classes, rated on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = never, 5 = very often); (iii) eleven items on perceptions of GenAI as an interactional participant, rated on a 5-point agreement Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree); (iv) ten agreement-scale items on perceived affordances and constraints for classroom talk, participation, and turn-taking; and (v) two open-ended prompts asking students to describe one classroom moment in which GenAI helped their English interaction and one in which it made interaction harder. The full instrument is reproduced in Appendix A.

The interview guide comprised seven open questions that followed the same thematic structure as the questionnaire: purposes and timing of use; whether interacting with GenAI feels conversational and what role it occupies; an episode in which preparation with GenAI supported classroom participation; an episode in which GenAI made interaction harder; the relative ease of speaking English with GenAI versus teachers and peers; trust in GenAI's English relative to teachers and peers; and concerns about dependency together with a rule the student would set for classroom use. The guide is reproduced in Appendix B. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants' first language, to allow nuanced expression.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Content validity was established through expert review by two applied-linguistics colleagues, who checked item relevance, wording, and coverage against the research questions. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha. The eleven-item interactional-participant scale (Section iii), with the negatively worded item on reduced participation reverse-coded, showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .74$). The eight-item patterns-of-use index (Section ii) returned $\alpha = .59$; because this section indexes a heterogeneous set of use behaviours rather than a single reflective construct, it is treated as a formative profile and reported item by item rather than as a composite. The affordances-and-constraints items (Section iv) deliberately span opposing poles (supports for talk versus distractions, over-complexity, dependency, and integrity concerns) and did not form a unidimensional scale ($\alpha = .17$); they are therefore reported as individual indicators rather than aggregated, consistent with their design as a checklist of distinct perceived affordances and constraints.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire opened with an information page and a consent item; only students who consented proceeded. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and no academic credit was offered. Completion took approximately 10-15 minutes. Interviews were arranged with consenting volunteers after the survey closed, conducted in Vietnamese either face-to-face or online, and audio-recorded with permission. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was transcribed verbatim; selected extracts were translated into English for reporting, with the original Vietnamese retained in the research file.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were analysed in Python (pandas, SciPy). For each item, means, standard deviations, and the proportions of agreement (ratings of 4–5) and disagreement (ratings of 1–2) were computed. Because the data were ordinal and the sample small, subgroup differences on the interactional-participant composite were examined with non-parametric tests (the Mann–Whitney U test for gender and the Kruskal–Wallis test for year of study) rather than parametric alternatives, and the association between frequency of use and interactional perception was estimated with Spearman's rho. Given the sample size, no factor-analytic or structural modelling was attempted; inferential results are reported as exploratory.

The qualitative data, namely the two open-ended survey items and the four interview transcripts, were analysed using qualitative content analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Responses and transcripts were read repeatedly, coded inductively, and grouped into themes, with theme frequencies and representative extracts reported. The interviews were coded in Vietnamese to preserve meaning, and codes were compared across the four participants so that themes were warranted by patterned evidence rather than by single striking remarks; six themes were developed (see Section 4.4). Convergence between the survey's closed items, the open-ended responses, and the interviews was treated as triangulation, and points of divergence were noted rather than smoothed over.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and students could withdraw at any time. No academic credit was offered for participation. Interviewees gave separate informed consent for audio-recording. Data were stored on a password-protected drive accessible only to the researcher, and interview extracts are reported under pseudonymous labels (S1–S4).

4. Results and Discussion

Findings are organised by research question. Section 4.1 addresses students' patterns of GenAI use (RQ1); Sections 4.2 and 4.3 address RQ2 with the questionnaire data, reporting

students' perceptions of GenAI as an interactional participant and the affordances and constraints they associate with classroom interaction, integrating the open-ended accounts; and Section 4.4 draws on the interviews to interpret and deepen these patterns. Throughout, agreement denotes ratings of 4 or 5 on the relevant 5-point scale.

4.1 Patterns of GenAI Use (RQ1)

Students reported frequent but uneven use of GenAI across purposes (Table 2). The most common uses were cognitive and text-oriented: explaining grammar or vocabulary was the single most frequent purpose ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.67$), with 88% using GenAI often or very often and no student reporting non-use. Generating ideas or outlines ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.07$; 76%) and obtaining feedback on writing ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.94$; 74%) were close behind, followed by preparing before class ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.87$; 68%). Interactional and in-class uses were less frequent: using GenAI during class ($M = 3.58$; 58%) and after class to review ($M = 3.34$; 40%) trailed the preparatory uses, and using GenAI to practise speaking was markedly the least common purpose ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.37$), with more students reporting infrequent use (42%) than frequent use (34%). This profile indicates that students drew on GenAI predominantly to prepare and support language production around the classroom rather than to rehearse spoken interaction with it directly.

Table 2: Frequency and purposes of GenAI use (Section ii; 1 = never, 5 = very often)

Item	M	SD	% often
Q11. Explain grammar or vocabulary	4.28	0.67	88
Q13. Generate ideas or outlines for tasks	4.00	1.07	76
Q10. Get feedback on my writing	3.98	0.94	74
Q6. Prepare for class (pre-reading, vocabulary)	3.88	0.87	68
Q12. Translate between English and Vietnamese	3.60	1.18	60
Q7. Use during class (look-ups, in-class tasks)	3.58	1.07	58
Q8. Use after class to review or extend	3.34	1.06	40
Q9. Practise speaking (voice chat, role-plays)	2.92	1.37	34

Note: Items ordered by mean.

4.2 GenAI as an Interactional Participant (RQ2)

Students broadly perceived GenAI as an interactional partner, and the eleven-item scale was internally consistent ($\alpha = .74$). They readily attributed conversational and role-based qualities to the tool (Table 3). The strongest endorsement was of GenAI as a peer or partner ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.88$; 76% agreement), closely followed by the sense of taking turns with it ($M = 3.80$; 64%) and of its occupying a tutor role ($M = 3.78$; 62%). A majority also reported asking GenAI follow-up questions as they would a classmate ($M = 3.72$; 58%) or a teacher ($M = 3.66$; 60%), and half agreed that using GenAI felt like a conversation rather than a search ($M = 3.58$; 50%).

The comparative and participatory items were more measured. Students were more willing to speak English with GenAI than with their teacher ($M = 3.64$; 62%

agreement) and, less strongly, than with their classmates ($M = 3.50$; 48%), suggesting that the tool lowers the interactional stakes of using English. Agreement that GenAI made them participate more actively ($M = 3.42$; 44%) was tempered by a split response to the reverse-worded item on participating less ($M = 3.04$; 36% agreement versus 34% disagreement), indicating that the participatory effect was perceived as real but uneven across students. No statistically significant differences on the interactional-participant composite emerged by gender (Mann–Whitney $U = 311.5$, $p = .51$) or year of study (Kruskal–Wallis $H = 1.34$, $p = .51$); given the sample size these comparisons are exploratory and the null results are reported as such.

A more robust pattern was the association between how often students used GenAI and how strongly they perceived it as an interactional participant: the two were moderately and significantly correlated (Spearman's $\rho = .57$, $p < .001$). Students who used GenAI more frequently for English were more likely to construe it as a conversational partner with which they took turns and to which they attributed tutor and peer roles, an association we interpret cautiously below, given the cross-sectional design.

Table 3: Perceptions of GenAI as an interactional participant
(Section iii; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Item	M	SD	% agree
Q19. Takes the role of a partner or peer	4.04	0.88	76
Q15. Responds to me, so I feel I take turns with it	3.80	0.95	64
Q18. Takes the role of a tutor	3.78	1.02	62
Q17. I ask follow-up questions as I would a classmate	3.72	0.97	58
Q16. I ask follow-up questions as I would a teacher	3.66	1.00	60
Q22. More willing to speak with GenAI than with teacher	3.64	1.21	62
Q14. Feels like a conversation, not just searching	3.58	1.01	50
Q21. More willing to speak with GenAI than with classmates	3.50	1.13	48
Q23. Makes me participate more actively	3.42	1.09	44
Q20. Takes the role of a language model to imitate	3.42	0.93	42
Q24. Makes me participate less actively (R)	3.04	1.23	36

Note: Items ordered by mean. (R) = reverse-worded. Scale reliability $\alpha = .74$.

4.3 Perceived Affordances and Constraints for Classroom Interaction (RQ2)

Students recognised clear affordances of GenAI for classroom talk alongside equally clear constraints (Table 4). On the affordance side, the two most strongly endorsed items in this section concerned preparation and repair: GenAI helped students prepare what to say before speaking in class ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.90$; 76% agreement) and helped them repair their English when they made a mistake ($M = 3.86$; 68%). These were among the highest-rated items in the whole questionnaire, reinforcing the picture from Section 4.1 of GenAI as a production-support resource that feeds into classroom participation.

The constraint items revealed a more differentiated and, in places, reassuring picture. A majority agreed that GenAI's answers were sometimes too long or too complex for classroom use ($M = 3.50$; 56%), and that over-reliance might weaken their classroom speaking skills ($M = 3.56$; 56%). Concern about academic integrity was widespread ($M =$

3.92; 68%). Perceptions of distraction were more muted: only 38% agreed that using GenAI in class distracted them from the teacher ($M = 3.08$) and 42% that it distracted them from classmates ($M = 3.20$). Crucially, students calibrated their trust in GenAI against their human interlocutors in an asymmetric way. While 44% trusted GenAI's English more than their classmates' ($M = 3.54$), only 32% trusted it more than their teacher's, and a majority (52%) explicitly disagreed, making the teacher-comparison item ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.44$) the lowest-rated in the questionnaire. Finally, most students reported that their teachers clearly explained when and how GenAI could be used in class ($M = 3.98$; 68%), indicating an emerging, if uneven, culture of classroom guidance.

Table 4: Perceived affordances and constraints for classroom interaction (Section iv; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Item	M	SD	% agree
Q34. Teachers clearly explain when/how to use GenAI	3.98	0.89	68
Q25. Helps me prepare what to say before I speak	3.96	0.90	76
Q33. I worry about academic integrity	3.92	1.07	68
Q26. Helps me repair my English after a mistake	3.86	1.03	68
Q32. I worry reliance will weaken my speaking (R)	3.56	1.28	56
Q30. I trust GenAI's English more than classmates'	3.54	1.16	44
Q29. Answers too long/complex for classroom use (R)	3.50	1.28	56
Q28. Distracts me from talking to classmates (R)	3.20	1.16	42
Q27. Distracts me from listening to my teacher (R)	3.08	1.24	38
Q31. I trust GenAI's English more than my teacher's	2.58	1.44	32

Note: Items ordered by mean. (R) = reverse-worded. Items reported individually (see 3.4).

4.3.1 Open-ended Accounts of Classroom Moments

The two open-ended prompts elicited 48 descriptions of moments in which GenAI helped interaction and 38 in which it made interaction harder. These accounts triangulated closely with the Likert findings and articulated a single organising tension between preparation and spontaneity, which the interviews (Section 4.4) develop in depth.

Helpful moments overwhelmingly cast GenAI as a backstage resource for frontstage talk. The most frequent theme (24 of 48 responses) was using GenAI to prepare or supply answers for teachers' questions and question-and-answer exchanges, with a further ten responses describing rehearsal before speaking; students linked this preparation directly to confidence and participation (15 responses), as when one "*felt confident interacting with the teacher ... when I had background information.*" Just-in-time lexical support (16 responses) and idea generation (16 responses) were also prominent, and a few accounts described richer uses such as extended role-play "*without the dreaded silence.*"

Unhelpful moments named the costs of that same reliance. The dominant theme (18 of 38 responses) was output too long, complex, or formal for natural talk, as when AI-generated sentences "*used overly complex vocabulary that I struggled to pronounce ... causing confusion among my classmates.*" The second theme (12 responses) was over-reliance that slowed real-time interaction, in one case turning it into "*a test of memory instead of*

interaction." Off-target answers and prompt dependence (9 responses) and distraction from the teacher or peers (7 responses) completed the picture. Across both prompts the through-line was consistent: GenAI supported interaction when it helped students prepare and repair, and undermined it when its output displaced their own spontaneous, register-appropriate talk.

4.4 Interview Findings (RQ1 and RQ2)

The four interviews were analysed into six themes that both corroborated the survey profile and explained the mechanisms behind it. Because the subsample was small, the themes are reported with the number of interviewees who raised each and illustrated with representative extracts (Table 5); the account below treats them in turn. Extracts were translated from Vietnamese and are labelled S1–S4.

Table 5: Interview themes, prevalence (of four interviewees), and representative extracts

Theme	n	Representative extract
A. Backstage rehearsal and confidence	4	"AI pulled together the information I needed and suggested the questions the lecturer might ask, so I rehearsed at home and was not caught off guard in class." (S1)
B. A tutor-and-peer, but not a person	4	"A combination of a tutor and a study-buddy ... but AI cannot fully replace a classmate or teacher, because real communication has emotion, body language and unexpected reactions." (S2)
C. Lower stakes, yet humans for real practice	4	"AI is a good place to practise first, while the teacher and friends are a good place to apply communication skills." (S2)
D. When preparation backfires	4	"I spent a lot of time trying to recall the way AI had written it, instead of speaking in my own simple way." (S4)
E. Calibrated trust: teacher > AI > peers	4	"I would trust the teacher most, then AI, and lastly my classmates ... when AI and the teacher differ, I prioritise the teacher." (S2)
F. Guarding against dependency	4	"Do it yourself first, ask AI afterwards." (S3)

Note: n = number of the four interviewees whose accounts contributed to the theme.

4.4.1 Backstage Rehearsal and Confidence

All four students described GenAI chiefly as a tool used before and after class to prepare and review, echoing the survey's preparatory profile (Section 4.1). They looked up vocabulary, previewed material, and, strikingly, asked GenAI to generate the situational questions a teacher might pose so that they could rehearse answers at home. The pay-off was confidence in the moment of speaking. S1, describing a short presentation on a favourite tourist destination, explained that *"for someone who hardly ever travels, imagining the scene was quite hard,"* but that GenAI *"pulled together the information I needed and even suggested the questions the lecturer might ask, so I rehearsed at home a few times and, in class, could answer quite naturally."* S2 recounted preparing for a discussion on social media by having GenAI pose likely questions and trim over-long answers, and emphasised that the value lay not in a script but in readiness: *"I did not memorise the whole answer, only the main ideas and a few key words ... when the teacher asked something similar, I reacted faster than*

usual." For S2 the lesson was that *"AI does not need to give me a perfect answer; what matters more is that it helps me prepare and reduces my anxiety before speaking."* S3 similarly used GenAI to see *"how to develop a one- or two-sentence answer into a fuller one,"* then selected words she already understood, concluding that her confidence came *"not from memorising AI's answer, but from knowing what ideas I can say and how to express them."*

4.4.2 A Tutor-and-peer, but Not a Person

The interviews qualified the survey's interactional-participant picture (Section 4.2). Students did attribute tutor and peer roles to GenAI (S2 imagined it as *"a combination of a tutor and a study-buddy,"* valued because *"it can correct me and explain in detail"* yet also let her *"talk quite comfortably and practise many times"*), but they were equally clear about its limits as an interlocutor. S2 added that GenAI *"cannot fully replace a classmate or teacher, because real communication also has emotion, body language and unexpected reactions."* S3 saw it *"more as a tutor than a friend,"* prizing that she could *"ask the same thing again and again without feeling embarrassed."* The two more sceptical students located the difference in affect: S4 insisted that *"a real conversation has to have emotion; my AI still clearly shows that it is a system, a machine,"* and concluded that *"the most useful approach is to treat AI as a tool that is always ready for practice, rather than to insist on seeing it as a person."* S1, who did *"not particularly like talking to AI,"* noted that the experience depended on how the tool was configured. The construal of GenAI as a participant was thus real but bounded: a responsive role-player for rehearsal, not a substitute for human presence.

4.4.3 Lower Stakes, yet Humans for Real Practice

The survey's finding that students were more willing to use English with GenAI than with their teacher (Section 4.2) was, in the interviews, explained effectively and then immediately qualified. Three students found speaking with GenAI psychologically easier because it removed the fear of being judged: S3 valued that *"I am not afraid of making mistakes, not afraid of being judged, and I have more time to think,"* and S4, who described himself as *"quite shy,"* found direct dialogue with a lecturer *"stressful"* whereas AI *"feels more comfortable"* and available at any time. Yet the same students insisted that human interaction remained indispensable for genuine communicative practice. S2 framed the division of labour precisely: with AI *"there is less pressure ... but the teacher can notice mistakes AI does not always catch, and understands my level and goals,"* while classmates, being *"unpredictable,"* give better reflex practice; hence *"AI is a good place to practise first, while the teacher and friends are a good place to apply communication skills."* One student dissented from the ease claim: S1 found speaking with AI harder, because *"with the teacher and classmates I can read facial expressions ... whenever I run out of ideas and hesitate, the teacher can prompt me so I can carry on,"* whereas GenAI *"cannot sense that unless I type a further command."* The dissent is instructive, locating GenAI's interactional limit exactly where human co-participants are most useful: real-time, embodied repair.

4.4.4 When Preparation Backfires

Every interviewee independently reproduced the survey's central constraint, that GenAI's output can be too long, too complex, or too formal, and that over-reliance slows spontaneity (Section 4.3). S2 recalled memorising an impressive but elaborate AI answer about the benefits of online learning: *"when I had to say it aloud I could not remember it and could not react quickly ... I tend to look for a complete answer instead of thinking and expressing it myself."* S4 described the same trap in a class discussion, where he *"spent a lot of time trying to recall the way AI had written it, instead of speaking in my own simple way,"* because the prepared answer *"used a lot of vocabulary I do not normally use."* S3 noted that seeing *"a very complete sample answer too early"* made her *"rely on AI's sentence rather than think for myself,"* slowing her response to novel questions, while S1 described a period of dependence in which *"I was afraid to say anything in English before AI had checked it."* Importantly, three of the four had already devised a workaround, converging on the same corrective: asking GenAI for level-appropriate key ideas rather than a finished paragraph, and then speaking in their own words. As S2 put it, *"now I ask AI to use vocabulary that matches my level and to give main ideas ... then I say it my own way, which trains my reflexes better."*

4.4.5 Calibrated Trust: Teacher over AI over Peers

The interviews sharply corroborated the survey's most striking result, namely that students withheld epistemic trust from GenAI relative to their teacher (Section 4.3). All four trusted GenAI for fast, basic support, such as *"checking grammar, finding examples, explaining basic points"* (S3), but none trusted it unconditionally, and all ranked the teacher above it. S1 explained that GenAI *"is a synthesis of what people have uploaded, so of course some is right, and some is wrong,"* and reported routinely asking it *"to cite its sources."* S4 valued GenAI as *"a huge database"* for rapid checking but warned of *"information overload when both correct and incorrect material is everywhere online,"* preferring the teacher *"because the teacher has real experience and knows how far my ability goes."* S2 offered the clearest ordering, *"I would trust the teacher most, then AI, and lastly my classmates,"* on the grounds that the teacher *"can explain why an expression fits or does not fit a context,"* whereas AI can be *"grammatically correct but not the most natural way of saying something,"* and resolved conflicts firmly: *"when AI and the teacher differ, I prioritise the teacher."* The learners thus granted GenAI interactional standing for low-stakes rehearsal while reserving authority over correctness for their human teacher.

4.4.6 Guarding Against Dependency

Finally, all four articulated a concern that heavy GenAI use could erode their own thinking and speaking, and, unprompted, proposed near-identical rules for classroom use. S4 warned that total dependence would leave learners *"helpless once AI is taken away, because the brain has grown lazy from copy-and-paste,"* and S1 worried specifically about *"independent and critical thinking."* Their remedy was a sequencing rule that protects learner production: *"do it yourself first, ask AI afterwards"* (S3), or *"try and speak first, use AI*

afterwards" (S4). S2 developed the fullest version, proposing that *"AI may be used to support and to practise, but must not replace the student's own thinking and communication."* Students should answer first and only then use AI to check; teachers should *"ask students to re-explain in their own words"* after using it, and, in her memorable image, *"AI should be like a springboard"* that helps at the start but is not the destination. That students themselves converged on this pedagogy is among the study's more notable findings, and directly informs the implications developed below.

4.5 Discussion

This exploratory mixed-methods study asked how Vietnamese university EFL students use GenAI in and around their English classes, how they perceive it as a participant in classroom interaction, and what affordances and constraints they associate with it. Three findings stand out, each strengthened by the convergence of survey and interview evidence. First, students used GenAI most for explanation, idea generation, and writing feedback, and least for speaking practice, positioning it as a preparation-and-support resource rather than a spoken-interaction partner. Second, they nonetheless construed GenAI as an interactional participant, most readily as a peer and tutor with which they took turns, and reported greater willingness to use English with it than with their teacher; yet they pointedly did not trust its English over their teacher's, and in interviews ranked their trust as teacher over AI over peers. Third, both strands resolved these threads into a single tension: GenAI's preparatory function both enabled classroom interaction, through rehearsal and repair, and constrained it, through over-complex output and dependency that slowed spontaneous turn-taking. Taken together, the results suggest that these learners position GenAI less as a replacement interlocutor than as a backstage rehearsal partner whose contribution is realised in, but also at times at the expense of, frontstage human interaction.

The prominence of preparation, explanation, and feedback over live speaking practice is consistent with the broader GenAI-EFL literature, in which writing and vocabulary dominate reported use and speaking remains comparatively underexploited (Lo *et al.*, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024). That students most often turned to GenAI to explain grammar and vocabulary and to generate ideas echoes Kohnke's (2024) finding that learners value GenAI for its conversational, explanatory quality rather than mere error-flagging, and Nelson *et al.*'s (2025) observation that learners find GenAI most useful for brainstorming and revision. The relative neglect of speaking practice ($M = 2.92$) is noteworthy given the availability of voice-based tools, and the interviews suggest one reason the survey could not: several students reserved spoken rehearsal for, or preferred to conduct it in preparation for, human partners, and one (S4) noted that voice practice with GenAI *"requires a paid subscription,"* a material barrier that may depress speaking use in a Vietnamese undergraduate population.

That students attributed peer, tutor, and turn-taking qualities to GenAI extends the emerging conceptualisation of GenAI as a mediating, and effectively participating, voice in language learning (Liu, Darvin, *et al.*, 2025; Liu, Zou, *et al.*, 2025) from informal

digital contexts into students' accounts of classroom-adjacent activity. The construal of GenAI as a partner that scaffolds speaking aligns closely with Muniandy and Selvanathan's (2025) characterisation of ChatGPT as a "*partnering tool*" for ESL speaking, and the reported increase in willingness to use English with GenAI resonates with Wang *et al.*'s (2024) evidence that conversational chatbots can raise learners' willingness to communicate and with the links among AI-IDLE, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate reported by Liu, Zou, *et al.* (2025). At the same time, the interviews qualify any straightforward reading of GenAI as an equal interlocutor. Students located a clear boundary at affect and embodiment: GenAI "*clearly shows that it is a system*" (S4) and "*cannot fully replace a classmate or teacher, because real communication also has emotion, body language and unexpected reactions*" (S2). Most tellingly, S1's dissent, that speaking with AI is harder because it cannot read hesitation and prompt a stuck speaker "*unless I type a further command,*" pinpoints the interactional competence that human co-participants supply and GenAI does not: contingent, real-time repair. The willingness to "*speak with*" GenAI thus coexisted with a refusal to grant it the full standing of a human interlocutor, a calibration that echoes the ambivalence documented in Vietnamese acceptance work (Ho & Nguyen, 2024) and the authenticity concerns raised by Werdiningsih *et al.* (2024). The moderate association between frequency of use and perceiving GenAI as an interactional participant ($\rho = .57$) admits more than one reading: repeated use may habituate learners to GenAI's responsive, turn-like behaviour, fostering a more interactional construal (consistent with Jeon's, 2024, finding that even young learners orient to chatbots as interlocutors), or students who already construe GenAI as a partner may simply use it more. Because the design was cross-sectional and correlational, no causal claim is warranted, and the association should be read as a pattern to be tested longitudinally.

The interviews also give a sharper edge to the study's most striking quantitative result: the asymmetric calibration of trust, in which the teacher-comparison item was the lowest-rated in the questionnaire. Every interviewee, unprompted, ranked the teacher above GenAI, trusting the tool for "*basic*" grammar and vocabulary checks but reserving authority over correctness and contextual appropriateness for the teacher, who "*knows how far my ability goes*" (S4) and "*can explain why an expression fits or does not fit a context*" (S2). This suggests that students distinguish two kinds of interactional standing, a low-stakes rehearsal partner whose turns they welcome and an epistemic authority whose judgements they trust, and grant GenAI only the former. Such a distinction refines the picture of GenAI as a classroom participant: it is admitted to the participation framework as a rehearsal interlocutor, but not to the role of arbiter.

Perhaps the study's most pedagogically salient contribution is the tension surfaced across all data sources. The very affordance students prized, GenAI's capacity to prepare what they would say and to repair their English (both among the highest-rated items), became a liability when its output was too complex or formal for natural talk (56% agreement) or when reliance on it slowed spontaneous response. The interviews specify the mechanism as a mismatch of registers and timescales: GenAI produces polished, often

written-register text on a preparatory timescale, whereas classroom interaction demands rapid, improvised, spoken-register contributions. When students imported the former wholesale into the latter, memorising *"vocabulary I do not normally use"* (S4) or reciting an elaborate answer they then *"could not react quickly"* with (S2), interaction became stilted or, in one survey respondent's words, *"a test of memory instead of interaction."* This reframes over-reliance not merely as an ethical or autonomy concern, as in Van Horn (2024), but as an interactional one: the problem is less that students lean on GenAI than that GenAI's default output is poorly fitted to the demands of real-time classroom talk. Notably, students had themselves begun to solve this, eliciting level-appropriate key ideas rather than finished text and then speaking in their own words, an emic prompt literacy that pedagogy can build on.

Returning to the gap that motivated the study, these findings offer early, Vietnam-based evidence on a question the existing literature had left largely to informal and individual-task settings: how learners perceive GenAI as a participant in classroom interaction. The picture is neither the technophile one of GenAI as a new classroom interlocutor nor the technophobic one of GenAI as a threat to interaction, but a more calibrated account in which GenAI is a backstage participant whose value to frontstage talk depends on how its contribution is fitted to the moment. Because the evidence is drawn from a single institution, is based on self-report, and rests on a modest sample, these interpretations are advanced as hypotheses to be examined in the project's discourse-analytic phase rather than as settled conclusions.

5. Recommendations

For teaching, the findings suggest that the goal is not to admit or ban GenAI but to help students fit its contribution to the interactional moment. Because students already value GenAI for preparation and repair, and, tellingly, already propose *"do it yourself first, ask AI afterwards"* rules of their own, teachers can build on this by cultivating prompt literacy and, in particular, the skill of editing GenAI's polished output down to natural, speakable, register-appropriate language before bringing it into class. Explicitly framing GenAI as a rehearsal partner rather than an answer source, designing tasks that reward spontaneous uptake over recited AI text, asking students to re-explain AI-supported answers in their own words, and continuing the clear in-class guidance that most students already reported would together address the dependency and over-complexity that students themselves identified.

For research and theory, the study reinforces the value of treating GenAI as a participant in language learning rather than merely a tool for it, and of extending that lens from informal digital contexts to classroom interaction. It also motivates the wider project's next phase, a discourse-analytic study of GenAI-mediated lessons designed to test the backstage-participant account against classroom interaction as it unfolds.

6. Conclusion

This mixed-methods study of English-major undergraduates at a Vietnamese public university, combining a questionnaire with 50 students and interviews with four, found that students use GenAI chiefly to prepare, explain, and revise rather than to practise speaking, construe it as a peer-and-tutor interactional participant while withholding epistemic trust from it relative to their teacher, and experience its preparatory function as both an enabler and a constraint of classroom interaction. The study's contribution is to show, with converging survey and interview evidence, that learners position GenAI as a backstage rehearsal partner whose contribution supports frontstage talk when it helps them prepare and repair, but undermines it when its output displaces spontaneous, register-appropriate interaction.

Several limitations bound these claims and motivate the next steps. The questionnaire sample was modest ($N = 50$), drawn by convenience from a single institution and skewed toward female, final-year, upper-intermediate students, so the findings are not statistically generalisable and the null subgroup comparisons are underpowered; the small sample also precluded factor-analytic validation of the scales. The interview subsample was likewise small (four students), so its themes, though strikingly convergent, are best read as interpretive rather than representative. All data were self-reported and cross-sectional, licensing description and association but not causal or developmental claims. These bounds directly motivate the wider project's next phase: a discourse-analytic study of GenAI-mediated lessons to observe how GenAI actually figures in classroom turn-taking rather than how students report it, so as to test whether the backstage-participant account advanced here holds when interaction is examined as it unfolds.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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