



BEYOND TOOLS AND TUTORS: EXPLORING VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS' METAPHORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF HUMAN-AI COLLABORATION

Truong Xuan Myⁱ

University of Foreign Languages and International Studies,
Hue University (HUFLIS),
Hue, Vietnam

orcid.org/0009-0005-4276-4441

Abstract:

This study examines the metaphors through which Vietnamese university students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) construct their collaboration with generative AI (GenAI). Public and academic discourse commonly frames GenAI as either a tool that executes instructions or a tutor that explains and corrects, yet recent evidence suggests that learners enact a wider range of relationships. Adopting an exploratory qualitative design grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study elicited metaphors from 42 EFL students through a sentence-completion task and conducted follow-up interviews with 21 of them. Metaphors were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure and read along a continuum from tool to tutor to partner. Ten source metaphors were identified. The most frequent were AI as a co-pilot, a translator of thoughts, a GPS, a mirror, and a personal learning ecosystem. Grouped by relational position, tool and environment metaphors were the most common (38.1 percent), followed by guiding metaphors (26.2 percent), partner metaphors (23.8 percent), and a reflective-surface metaphor (11.9 percent). The single most frequent metaphor, the co-pilot, was a partner image, although the students who used it consistently reasserted their own authority and described a learner-led collaboration. Notably, no metaphor framed GenAI as a risk or a source of dependency, and every conceptualization was enabling in orientation. The findings bring the Vietnamese student voice to debates about human-AI collaboration and offer metaphor as a practical lens for teachers who wish to surface and reshape the assumptions students bring to AI-assisted language learning.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, generative AI, human-AI collaboration, EFL learners, Vietnam

ⁱ Correspondence: email txmy.dhnn24@hueuni.edu.vn

1. Introduction

The arrival of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in language education has changed the everyday conditions of learning English. Within a short period, systems such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude moved from novelty to routine, and students now consult them for drafting, revision, translation, vocabulary work, and feedback (Nguyen *et al.*, 2026; Putri & Jaya, 2026). What is less settled is how learners themselves understand these systems. A learner who treats GenAI as a machine that returns finished text approaches a writing task very differently from one who treats it as a study partner to argue with, and these contrasting stances carry consequences for autonomy, for the quality of engagement, and for the learner's sense of ownership over the final product.

Two images dominate the way GenAI is described. The first is the tool, an instrument that performs a function on command. The second is the tutor, a knowledgeable helper that explains, corrects, and guides. Both images capture something real, and both appear repeatedly in the educational literature on AI tutors and chatbot assistants (Marconi *et al.*, 2026; Olivier & Weilbach, 2026). Yet a growing body of work on authentic student interaction shows that these two images do not exhaust the range of relationships learners enact. Ritchie *et al.* (2026), analysing thousands of messages from school students working with a writing tutor, identified learner profiles that ranged from transactional tool users to collaborators and independent thinkers. Saqr *et al.* (2025) found that much student interaction with large language models follows an instructive, order-and-receive pattern rather than the reciprocal exchange that the word collaboration implies. The relationship between learner and system is more varied than the tool and tutor labels suggest, and the title of this study points to that gap.

Metaphor provides a way to study these framings without imposing them in advance. Conceptual Metaphor Theory holds that people understand abstract or unfamiliar domains in terms of more concrete and familiar ones, and that the figurative expressions in everyday language are surface traces of these underlying mappings (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When a learner says that an AI system is like a co-pilot, a mirror, a translator, or a sparring partner, the chosen source domain discloses how the learner positions the system, what role the learner assigns to themselves, and how the exchange is evaluated. Metaphor analysis has been used in this way to study how learners and teachers conceptualize technology, language learning, and their own identities (Schmitt, 2005; Vo & Huynh, 2025; Yan *et al.*, 2024), and it is well suited to a topic where direct questioning may elicit rehearsed or socially expected answers.

Research on the metaphorical framing of AI has grown quickly, but it has concentrated on particular sites. Several studies analyse public and media discourse (Nguyen, 2024), others examine Chinese university learners (Yan *et al.*, 2024), and a small number address Vietnamese teachers (Vo & Huynh, 2025). The metaphors that Vietnamese EFL students themselves use to construct human-AI collaboration have received little direct attention, even though Vietnam has an active population of student AI users and its EFL classrooms are a setting where questions of feedback, autonomy,

and integrity are pressing (Nguyen *et al.*, 2026; Putri & Jaya, 2026). This study addresses that gap by foregrounding learner voice rather than institutional or media framing.

The purpose of the study is to examine how Vietnamese university EFL students metaphorically construct their collaboration with GenAI, with attention to the source domains they draw on, the relational positions those metaphors create, and the attitudes they express. Two research questions guide the inquiry:

- 1) What source domains do Vietnamese EFL students draw on when they construct metaphors of working with generative AI?
- 2) How do these metaphors position the learner and the system in relation to one another, from tool to tutor to partner, and what evaluative orientations toward working with AI do they convey?

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptual metaphor as a window on learner belief

Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposes that metaphor is not merely a figure of speech but a structure of thought, through which a more abstract target domain is understood in terms of a more concrete source domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). On this account, expressions such as defending a position or attacking an argument are surface realizations of an underlying mapping in which argument is structured as war. Later developments have refined the theory, attending to the role of embodied experience and image schemas, to variation across contexts, and to the ways speakers combine and extend mappings in discourse (Kövecses, 2010, 2020; Nguyen & Huynh, 2026). For the present study, the value of the theory lies in its claim that the metaphors a person reaches for are evidence of how that person construes the matter at hand, which makes elicited metaphor a usable form of data about belief.

Because metaphor reveals construal rather than stated opinion, it has become a recognized instrument in qualitative research. Schmitt (2005) set out a systematic procedure for reconstructing metaphorical concepts from interview and text data, and Cameron and Maslen (2010) developed metaphor analysis as a research practice across applied linguistics and the social sciences. Studies using these methods have shown that self-generated metaphors can surface attitudes that participants do not articulate directly, including ambivalence and tension. Recent work continues to use metaphor to study identity and meaning-making in education, from the figurative self-representations of displaced students (Ab Rashid *et al.*, 2025) to the use of learner-generated metaphor as a stimulus for higher-order thinking (Lapidot-Lefler, 2026). Within language education in particular, metaphor elicitation has a long record of revealing how teachers and learners understand the teacher's role, often through a prompt that asks participants to complete the statement that a teacher is like something (Oxford *et al.*, 1998; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011). This body of method supports treating elicited metaphor as a legitimate route into how learners understand GenAI.

2.2. Metaphorical conceptualizations of AI in education

As AI has become salient, researchers have asked how it is metaphorically framed. Analyses of media discourse have found that AI is widely personified and is also cast as an animal or a natural force, with development narrated through metaphors of war, race, and competition (Nguyen, 2024). In conversational settings, the metaphors built into how systems present themselves shape user expectations and engagement (Maheshwary *et al.*, 2024). Within education, the dominant framings cluster around the system as a tool and the system as a human-like helper. Studies of metaphor in educational discourse more broadly show that such framings are consequential, since metaphors that cast education as a factory or a marketplace steer practice toward efficiency and away from other values (Chatreepinyo & Wongthai, 2025).

Two studies are especially close to the present work. Yan *et al.* (2024) elicited metaphors of GenAI use from Chinese university EFL learners and found a strong tendency to conceptualize the system as a human being, including roles such as teacher and assistant, alongside concerns about overreliance and integrity. Vo and Huynh (2025) analysed Vietnamese EFL teachers' narratives about ChatGPT through Conceptual Metaphor Theory and reported both shared and divergent framings across participants. These studies establish that metaphor analysis travels well into EFL settings and that tool and human-helper images recur. They also leave room for the present study, since neither centres on how Vietnamese students construct the specifically collaborative dimension of the relationship.

2.3. From tools and tutors to collaboration

A parallel literature examines what role AI actually plays when learners work with it, and it complicates the tidy opposition between tool and tutor. Reviews of human-agent interaction in education report that most designs still place the system in a one-to-one assistant or tutor role, while interest grows in richer, more collaborative configurations (Gorsky & Levin, 2025; Sun, 2026). Studies of system design describe agents acting as pedagogical tutors, co-creative partners, and metacognitive coaches within a single learning ecosystem (Nie *et al.*, 2026), and comparative evaluations assess large language models as academic tutors with varying degrees of dialogic fidelity (Marconi *et al.*, 2026). Ratniyom *et al.* (2026) found that learners assigned different roles to the human instructor and to GenAI depending on their own achievement level, casting the system as a patient tutor, a personal coach, or an intellectual sparring partner, and proposed a model in which human and AI contributions are complementary rather than interchangeable.

What this work suggests is a continuum rather than a binary. At one end sits the tool, an instrument with no agency that performs operations on demand. In the middle sits the tutor or guide, a helper credited with knowledge and a measure of pedagogical intent. At the other end sits the partner, a participant in a shared task with whom the learner negotiates. The collaboration label is often attached optimistically, yet evidence indicates that learners frequently remain in an instructive posture, issuing orders and receiving output without the reciprocal adjustment that partnership implies (Ritchie *et*

al., 2026; Saqr *et al.*, 2025). Whether Vietnamese EFL students construct GenAI as a tool, a tutor, or a genuine partner, and with what attitudes, is an empirical question that their metaphors can help answer.

Running through this continuum is the question of learner agency, the learner's sense that their own choices shape what they learn. Agency has long been treated as central to language learning and as a precondition for autonomy, and it is best understood not as a fixed trait but as something that emerges from the interaction between a learner and a particular context (Mercer, 2011). How a learner frames the system they work with is part of that context. A learner who casts AI as an instrument under their own control occupies a different agentic position from one who casts it as an authority to defer to, which is one reason the metaphors students choose are worth examining closely.

2.4. The Vietnamese EFL context and the present study

Vietnamese higher education has taken up GenAI rapidly, and studies report broad student use together with concerns about accuracy, dependence, and academic honesty (Nguyen *et al.*, 2026; Putri & Jaya, 2026). These local concerns mirror a wider scholarship on GenAI in education, which weighs the technology's capacity for personalized support and feedback against risks that include factual unreliability, over-reliance, and threats to academic integrity (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Farrokhnia *et al.*, 2024; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). Existing Vietnamese metaphor research on AI has examined teachers (Vo & Huynh, 2025) and media discourse (Nguyen, 2024), so the learner perspective on collaboration remains comparatively open. Reading these strands together, three observations motivate the study. First, metaphor is an established and sensitive instrument for surfacing learner construal. Second, the framing of GenAI in education extends beyond tool and tutor toward partnership, but the extension is contested. Third, the Vietnamese EFL student voice on this question is thinly represented. The study responds by eliciting and analysing the metaphors through which Vietnamese university EFL students construct human-AI collaboration.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research design

The study uses an exploratory qualitative design grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The aim is to describe and interpret the metaphors that learners produce rather than to test a hypothesis, which suits a question about how a relationship is construed. Metaphor was elicited through a structured prompt and elaborated through follow-up interviews, so that the analysis could work from both the figurative expression and the learner's own account of it. The design follows the elicitation-and-analysis logic used in comparable EFL and professional metaphor studies (Saban *et al.*, 2007; Vo & Huynh, 2025; Yan *et al.*, 2024) while focusing on the collaborative dimension of human-AI work.

3.2. Participants

Participants were 42 undergraduate EFL students at a university in central Vietnam. Twenty-two were women and 20 were men, and they were distributed across all four years of study (Year 1, $n = 6$; Year 2, $n = 13$; Year 3, $n = 11$; Year 4, $n = 12$). All reported regular use of at least one generative AI system for English learning, which was a condition for inclusion: 29 used such systems daily, 12 frequently, and 1 occasionally. Year of study is reported as an indicator of academic stage. A purposive subsample of 21 participants, distributed across the metaphor categories, took part in follow-up interviews. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and pseudonymous codes (P01 to P42) are used throughout to protect participants' identities.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected in two stages. First, each participant completed the sentence-completion prompt "*AI is like ... because ...*", adapted from the metaphor-elicitation approach established by Saban *et al.* (2007), which has been used to study language teachers' and learners' role beliefs (Oxford *et al.*, 1998; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011) and the conceptualization of GenAI (Yan *et al.*, 2024). The pairing of a written prompt with follow-up interviews mirrors the design used by Wan, Low, and Li (2011). The prompt elicits a source domain and then asks for a justification, and the "*because*" clause is central, since it allows the analyst to confirm the intended mapping and to read the learner's evaluation of it rather than inferring from the vehicle alone (Cameron & Maslen, 2010). A short introduction with everyday examples familiarized participants with metaphor before they responded, and students were able to express their reasoning in Vietnamese where they preferred. The prompt yielded one primary metaphorical conceptualization per participant. Second, a subsample of 21 participants took part in semi-structured follow-up interviews in which they explained the reasoning behind their chosen metaphor and illustrated it with examples from their learning.

3.4. Data analysis

Analysis combined metaphor identification with interpretive categorization. Metaphors were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Each completed sentence was examined, the lexical units in "*AI is like ...*" were assessed for metaphoricity, and the "*because*" clause was used to confirm or reject a metaphorical reading and to recover the intended source-to-target mapping. Identified metaphors were formulated as conceptual mappings of the form "*AI is a ...*" and grouped into source-domain categories following systematic metaphor analysis (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Schmitt, 2005). Each category was characterized by the relational position it assigned to learner and system, which was read along a continuum from tool to tutor to partner, and by its evaluative orientation. The interview accounts were transcribed and used to elaborate and confirm these conceptualizations, and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supported the cross-cutting readings reported in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. Coding moved between the data and prior studies (Ratniyom *et al.*, 2026; Ritchie *et*

al., 2026; Yan *et al.*, 2024), so that established categories informed the analysis without being imposed on it.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study followed standard ethical procedures for research with students. Participants received information about the purpose and use of the data, gave informed consent, and were free to withdraw. Responses were anonymized, identifying details were removed before analysis, and reporting uses codes rather than names. Because participation involved reflection on familiar classroom practice and carried no foreseeable risk, the burden on participants was minimal.

4. Findings

The sentence-completion task produced 42 metaphorical conceptualizations of working with AI, one primary metaphor from each participant. Following the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007), all completed “*AI is like ... because ...*” sentences were examined, with particular attention to the “*because*” clause, which clarified the intended source-to-target mapping and confirmed whether an expression functioned metaphorically. Ten distinct source metaphors were identified. Twenty-one of the participants took part in follow-up interviews in which they explained the reasoning behind their chosen metaphor, and these accounts were used to elaborate and confirm the conceptualizations. The presentation below reports the metaphors in order of frequency, describes the lexical realizations through which each was expressed, illustrates them with participant accounts, and then reads them along the range from tool to tutor to partner.

4.1. Students’ metaphorical conceptualizations of working with AI

The most frequently occurring conceptualizations were AI as a co-pilot, a translator of thoughts, a GPS, a mirror, and a personal learning ecosystem. Less common were the scaffold, bridge, and compass metaphors, each produced by two or three participants, while the gym and sparring partner metaphors appeared once each. Table 1 reports the distribution.

Table 1: Distribution of student metaphors for working with AI (N = 42)

Source metaphor	n	%	Relational position
AI is a co-pilot	9	21.4	Partner
AI is a translator of thoughts	8	19.0	Tool / mediator
AI is a GPS	6	14.3	Tutor / guide
AI is a mirror	5	11.9	Reflective surface
AI is a personal learning ecosystem	4	9.5	Tool / environment
AI is a scaffold	3	7.1	Tutor / guide
AI is a bridge	3	7.1	Tool / mediator
AI is a compass	2	4.8	Tutor / guide
AI is a gym	1	2.4	Tool / environment

AI is a sparring partner	1	2.4	Partner
Total	42	100	

Note: Relational position summarizes the analysis developed in Section 4.2.

a. AI is a co-pilot

This was the most common conceptualization, adopted by nine participants across all year levels. Their accounts drew on a vocabulary of shared aviation and journeying, including *co-pilot*, *pilot*, *flight*, *accompany*, *work together*, *common goal*, *alongside*, *in charge*, *control*, and *decide which suggestions to accept*. The metaphor consistently positioned the learner as the pilot who retains authority while the system provides support. A first-year female student who used AI daily explained:

“Although AI provides useful suggestions, I never feel that it is leading the entire process. Instead, I feel that we are working together toward a common goal. This is why I described AI as a co-pilot. A co-pilot supports the pilot during a flight, but the pilot remains responsible for the final decisions. [...] Rather than replacing my role as a learner, AI complements my efforts and helps me become more efficient.”

To this student, the co-pilot image captured a relationship of collaboration in which the learner stays responsible for outcomes. The same emphasis on retained control appeared alongside a clear awareness of the system’s limits. A fourth-year female student observed that the relationship was *“collaborative rather than dependent”* because the system *“occasionally provides inaccurate information”*, so she did *“not trust every response completely”*. A second-year male student linked the metaphor explicitly to learner agency:

“One reason I prefer the metaphor of a co-pilot is that it emphasizes agency. In my experience, AI should not make decisions for learners. Instead, it should help them make better decisions. [...] This balance is why I do not consider AI a teacher or authority figure.”

Across these accounts, the co-pilot metaphor reflected a partnership in which support and shared responsibility coexist with critical evaluation. Participants distinguished this collaborative stance from both passive tool use and deference to an authority, casting the system as a working companion rather than a source of answers.

b. AI is a translator of thoughts

The second most frequent conceptualization, reported by eight participants, was expressed through a vocabulary of mediation and expression, including *translate*, *transform abstract ideas*, *express*, *wording*, *refine*, and *a bridge between internal thinking and external communication*. A defining feature of these accounts was the insistence that the ideas originated with the learner and that the system only helped to word them. A second-year female student who used AI daily explained:

"I often know what I want to express, but finding appropriate English words is difficult. AI helps me transform abstract ideas into coherent language. Importantly, it does not generate the ideas themselves. The content comes from me, while AI assists with expression."

This careful separation of idea from wording recurred. A fourth-year male student described the system as *"translating thoughts rather than creating knowledge"*, and a first-year male student framed it as a way of reducing the frustration of not being able to communicate ideas effectively in English. Unlike the co-pilot metaphor, which foregrounds joint work on a shared task, the translator metaphor positions the system as an instrument that mediates between the learner's first-language thinking and English expression while leaving authorship with the learner.

c. AI is a GPS

Six participants conceptualized AI as a GPS, drawing on a vocabulary of navigation, including *direction, navigate, recommend resources, detours, recalculate routes, guidance, and efficient*. The metaphor cast the system as a guide that recommends what to study and reduces wasted effort. A second-year female student explained that when she felt *"uncertain about what to study next, AI recommends resources and learning activities"* and helped her *"navigate the large amount of information available online"*. A fourth-year male student highlighted the system's responsiveness:

"The GPS metaphor reflects the way AI adjusts its suggestions according to changing circumstances. When my goals change, AI provides new recommendations. The flexibility resembles how navigation systems recalculate routes."

Here the system was credited with directive guidance. The learner still chose the destination, yet the system supplied the route, which gives the GPS metaphor a more instructional character than the tool metaphors and a more directive character than the compass metaphor discussed below.

d. AI is a mirror

Five participants described AI as a mirror, expressed through a vocabulary of reflection and feedback, including *reflect, reveal weaknesses, patterns of error, self-awareness, and highlight strengths*. In these accounts, the system did not act or instruct so much as return an accurate picture of the learner's performance. A third-year female student explained that AI *"reveals weaknesses that I do not notice myself"* and reflected *"patterns of error"*. A second-year female student extended the image to both sides of performance:

"The mirror metaphor is not only about weaknesses. AI also highlights strengths, such as improvements in vocabulary range or argument development. Seeing both strengths and weaknesses motivates me to continue learning."

The mirror metaphor assigns the system a low degree of agency and places the cognitive work of interpretation and improvement with the learner. It is feedback-oriented, and in this respect it sits close to the guiding metaphors, yet it differs from them in that the system reflects rather than directs.

e. AI is a personal learning ecosystem

Four participants conceptualized AI as a personal learning ecosystem, using a vocabulary of integration, including *environment*, *combine functions*, *interconnected*, *integrated*, and *multiple aspects simultaneously*. A fourth-year male student explained that he used the system “for grammar practice, vocabulary learning, writing feedback, and speaking simulations” and that, “because these activities are interconnected, I see AI as an ecosystem rather than a single tool”. The metaphor framed the system less as an agent than as an environment within which several learning activities are brought together, foregrounding consolidation and convenience.

f. Less common conceptualizations

Three further metaphors were produced by two or three participants each. The *scaffold* metaphor framed the system as temporary support that recedes as competence grows; one third-year male student noted that “as my skills improve, I become less dependent on this support”, which resembles “scaffolding in construction”. The *bridge* metaphor framed the system as a connector between Vietnamese thinking and English expression and between “classroom knowledge” and “practical communication”. The *compass* metaphor was defined by contrast with the GPS; a fourth-year female student explained that “unlike GPS, a compass does not provide detailed instructions” but “offers general direction” while “leaving decisions in my hands”, which makes it the least directive of the guiding metaphors. Two metaphors appeared once each. The *gym* metaphor cast the system as a space for repeated practice, where “English proficiency develops through repeated language use”, and the *sparring partner* metaphor, the only adversarial-constructive image in the dataset, described the system as something that “challenges my ideas and pushes me to perform better”.

4.2. Positioning the learner and the system: from tool to partner

Read together, the ten metaphors distribute across a range of relational positions rather than clustering at a single point. Four positions can be distinguished, and Table 2 reports how the metaphors and participants fall across them.

Table 2: Relational positioning of the metaphors along the tool-to-partner range

Position	Metaphors	n	%
Tool / instrument and environment	Translator of thoughts, ecosystem, bridge, gym	16	38.1
Reflective surface	Mirror	5	11.9
Tutor / guide	GPS, scaffold, compass	11	26.2
Partner / collaborator	Co-pilot, sparring partner	10	23.8
Total		42	100

At one end of the range, the tool metaphors, which together accounted for the largest share of responses, construct the system as an instrument or an environment that the learner operates. The translator of thoughts and bridge metaphors emphasize mediation between first-language thinking and English expression, while the ecosystem and gym metaphors emphasize a space that consolidates practice. In all of these, the system holds little agency, and the learner remains the source of content and effort. The mirror metaphor sits just beyond the tool metaphors, since the system is credited with returning an interpretable picture of performance, yet the interpretive work stays with the learner. Toward the middle of the range, the guiding metaphors, the GPS, the scaffold, and the compass, credit the system with direction and pedagogical intent. They vary in how directive they are, from the route-level guidance of the GPS to the temporary, fading support of the scaffold and the general orientation of the compass. At the far end, the partner metaphors, led by the co-pilot, construct the system as a participant in a shared task. The partner position was anchored by the single most frequent metaphor in the dataset, and the accounts attached to it described joint work and shared responsibility rather than instruction received.

These results speak to the question that frames the study. The familiar images of the tool and the tutor were both present, and together they accounted for a substantial share of the conceptualizations, yet close to a quarter of the participants reached for partnership metaphors, and the most common single metaphor of all, the co-pilot, was a partner image. At the same time, the rationales attached to the partner metaphors suggest a qualified rather than a full reciprocity. Participants who described collaboration repeatedly reasserted their own authority, stating that the system *“should not make decisions for learners”* and that they *“remain responsible”*. The collaboration they described was one in which the learner directs, and the system contributes, which places these accounts toward the more learner-led end of partnership.

4.3. Evaluative orientations

Across the dataset, the metaphors carried a consistently positive or neutral evaluation. The most common attitudinal thread was an emphasis on learner agency and autonomy. This appeared most strongly in the partner and tool metaphors, where participants stressed that the system complements rather than replaces their effort, *that “the content comes from me”*, and that they decide which suggestions to accept. A second thread was an orientation toward efficiency and confidence, visible in the GPS, ecosystem, and translator accounts, where the system was valued for reducing wasted effort, lowering stress, and supporting clearer expression.

A third thread, present but limited, was a measured caution. Several participants who used the co-pilot metaphor noted that the system can produce inaccurate or irrelevant output and that critical evaluation is therefore necessary. This caution, however, was framed as a reason to stay in control rather than as a reason to mistrust the system, and it did not extend into negative imagery. Indeed, the most notable feature of how students evaluated the relationship is an absence. No participant produced a

metaphor of risk or dependency, such as a crutch, a trap, or a double-edged instrument, and no metaphor framed the system as a threat to learning or integrity. Every conceptualization in the dataset was enabling in orientation. This uniformly positive framing is itself a finding, and one that invites comparison with studies in which learners expressed concern about overreliance and academic honesty alongside their appreciation of the technology.

5. Discussion

The analysis indicates that Vietnamese EFL students conceptualize their work with generative AI through a range of metaphors that distribute across a continuum rather than settling on a single image. Their metaphors capture the mediating function of the system in moving between first-language thought and English expression, the directive guidance it can provide, the reflective feedback it returns, and, for a substantial group, a collaborative partnership in which the learner retains authority. Collectively, these conceptualizations offer insight into how students understand their relationship with AI in the Vietnamese EFL context, and they make visible beliefs about agency, authorship, and support that might otherwise remain implicit (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Schmitt, 2005).

The source domains students drew on were predominantly concrete and spatial, including journeys (the co-pilot, the GPS, and the compass), construction (the scaffold and the bridge), reflection (the mirror), and physical training (the gym and the sparring partner). This grounding of an abstract relationship in bodily and spatial experience is consistent with the embodied basis of metaphor (Kövecses, 2020; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The presence of human and quasi-human roles, the co-pilot and the sparring partner, echoes Yan *et al.* (2024), who found that Chinese university EFL learners frequently personified generative AI. At the same time, the sample also drew on metaphors of mediation and environment, the translator of thoughts and the personal learning ecosystem among them, with the translator in particular positioning the learner as the author of ideas and the system as an aid to expression. This emphasis on authorship is notable given current concerns about ownership in AI-assisted writing.

The distribution along the tool-to-partner range speaks to the central question of the study. The familiar images of tool and tutor were both well represented, yet partnership metaphors accounted for close to a quarter of responses, and the single most common metaphor, the co-pilot, was a partner image. This suggests that students' construals reach beyond the instrument and the instructor. The partnership they described, however, was qualified. Students who used the co-pilot metaphor repeatedly reasserted their own authority, insisting that the system should not decide for them and that they remained responsible for outcomes. The collaboration was learner-led rather than fully reciprocal, which aligns with evidence that student interaction with large language models often retains an instructive, order-and-receive character (Saqr *et al.*, 2025) and with the range of learner profiles, from transactional to collaborative, reported

by Ritchie *et al.* (2026). The distinctions students made among guiding roles, the route-level GPS, the fading scaffold, and the orienting compass parallel the role-differentiated accounts of human-AI collaboration in which the system's contribution is treated as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, human judgement (Ratniyom *et al.*, 2026).

The roles students assigned to AI also echo a longer tradition of metaphor research on language teaching. Studies that asked learners and teachers to complete the prompt that an English teacher is like something have repeatedly surfaced images of the guide, the provider, and the nurturer (Oxford *et al.*, 1998; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011). Several of the metaphors reported here, the GPS that gives directions, the mirror that returns feedback, and the scaffold that supports and then withdraws, transpose onto AI the helping roles that learners have long assigned to human teachers. What the present data add are images with no obvious teacher counterpart, in particular the co-pilot and the sparring partner, which cast the system as a peer in a shared task rather than as a figure of instruction. Students therefore appear not to be simply relabelling the teacher when they talk about AI, but also to be reaching for relational positions that the teacher metaphor does not capture.

A notable finding concerns evaluative orientation. Every metaphor in the dataset was enabling, and the strongest attitudinal thread was an emphasis on learner agency and autonomy, the sense that learners' own choices drive the work (Mercer, 2011). The measured caution that some students expressed, that the system can be inaccurate and requires checking, functioned as a reason to retain control rather than as a reason for mistrust. What was absent is as telling as what was present. No student produced a metaphor of risk or dependency, such as a crutch or a trap, and none framed the system as a threat to learning or integrity. This uniformly positive framing contrasts with survey-based studies in which Vietnamese and other students voiced concern about overreliance and academic honesty alongside their appreciation of the technology (Nguyen *et al.*, 2026; Putri & Jaya, 2026). Several readings are possible. The elicitation may have invited students to name a defining image rather than to weigh costs and benefits; the sample was composed largely of frequent and daily users, whose orientation may be more favourable; or the framing may reflect a genuine, if incomplete, optimism. Whichever applies, the absence suggests that critical awareness of the limits of AI was not salient in students' spontaneous self-construals.

This silence is striking against the wider discussion of GenAI in education. Reviews and commentaries on large language models in teaching and learning give sustained attention to their limitations, among them factual unreliability, the risk of overreliance, threats to academic integrity, and a possible weakening of higher-order skills (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Farrokhnia *et al.*, 2024; Kasneci *et al.*, 2023). The students here were not unaware of these problems, since some remarked that the system can be inaccurate and that its output needs checking, yet none reached for a metaphor that named a risk. The distance between the cautionary tone of this literature and the uniformly enabling tone of the metaphors marks a place where teaching can act, by

helping students bring their positive working images into dialogue with a clearer account of what these systems cannot do.

These findings carry implications for language teaching. Because the metaphors learners hold shape how they engage with AI, metaphor elicitation can serve as a low-cost classroom activity that surfaces these assumptions and opens them to discussion. The agency-centred framing students brought is an asset that teachers can build on, while the absence of risk-aware metaphors points to a need to cultivate critical AI literacy, helping students articulate not only how the system supports them but also where it can mislead. Inviting students to examine and extend their own metaphors, much as they already did in distinguishing the compass from the GPS, may support more deliberate and more accountable use. This pedagogical use of learner-generated metaphor is consistent with work in adjacent areas (Lapidot-Lefler, 2026).

Finally, the study confirms the value of elicited metaphor analysis as a qualitative lens on learner cognition (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Schmitt, 2005). The sentence-completion prompt, paired with follow-up interviews, gave students a way to articulate a relationship that is still new and not easily described in literal terms, and it brought the Vietnamese EFL student voice to a conversation so far shaped largely by media and teacher framings (Nguyen, 2024; Vo & Huynh, 2025).

Several limitations should be read alongside these claims. The study is exploratory and based at a single university in central Vietnam, so the metaphors reported are not presented as representative of Vietnamese learners as a whole. Each participant contributed one primary metaphor, and two of the conceptualizations rested on a single response, so the less common metaphors should be read as illustrative rather than established. The sample was weighted toward frequent and daily users, and self-report through a written prompt may favour students who verbalize their thinking readily. Within the sample, the distribution of metaphors did not point to pronounced differences by year of study or gender, and the study was not designed to test such differences, which a larger sample would be needed to examine. Comparative and longitudinal work, including studies that set student metaphors beside teacher metaphors and beside records of actual interaction, would extend these findings.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the metaphors through which Vietnamese university EFL students construct their collaboration with generative AI. Ten source metaphors were identified, distributed across a continuum from tool to tutor to partner. Tool and mediator images were the most common, but partnership was well represented, and the single most frequent metaphor, the co-pilot, framed the system as a collaborator alongside whom the learner retains control. The metaphors were uniformly enabling in orientation, with a strong emphasis on learner agency and a striking absence of risk or dependency imagery. By turning an abstract and still-novel relationship into familiar images, these metaphors allow students to express how they position themselves in relation to AI and how they

evaluate its support. The study brings the Vietnamese student voice to debates about human-AI collaboration that have reached beyond the tool and the tutor, and it offers metaphor as a practical lens for teachers who wish to surface, and where helpful reshape, the assumptions students bring to AI-assisted language learning. The value of metaphorical conceptualization lies not only in what the images reveal but also in students' capacity to examine and extend them as their experience of these systems deepens.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the Author(s)

Truong Xuan My is a PhD student in TESOL at the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University (HUFLIS), Vietnam. He holds an MA in English Language Studies from Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam. His research interests include conceptual metaphor, generative AI in language education, and EFL learner psychology. His work has appeared in venues including the AsiaCALL Online Journal and the Scientific Journal of Tan Trao University.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4276-4441>.

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