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Students' Perceptions of Using Grammarly Tools in English Writing: A Study on First-Semester EFL Students at STAIN Mandailing Natal

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ABSTRACT

Writing remains one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners due to requirements for grammatical precision, vocabulary richness, and structural coherence. This study explores first-semester students' perceptions of using Grammarly as an automated writing evaluation tool at STAIN Mandailing Natal. Grounded in Perception Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), the research employed a qualitative descriptive design involving 10 first-semester English Education students who utilized Grammarly in their writing assignments. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of student writing drafts, analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Findings reveal that students hold strongly positive perceptions regarding Grammarly's ease of use, instant feedback mechanism, and effectiveness in enhancing lower-order writing concerns such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Additionally, the tool boosted students' self-confidence and accelerated revision processes. However, primary constraints identified include limited premium features, internet dependency, occasional contextual inaccuracies, and minimal feedback on higher-order concerns like argument development. The study concludes that while Grammarly serves as a valuable supplementary tool for

self-editing and learner autonomy, instructor guidance remains essential for fostering critical thinking and comprehensive academic writing competence.
Keywords: EFL learners, Grammarly, learner autonomy, students' perception, writing skill

Introduction

Writing occupies a fundamental position in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, serving as a primary medium for academic expression, knowledge dissemination, and scholarly communication in higher education institutions. Compared to receptive skills such as reading and listening, writing is a highly complex, cognitive, and productive endeavor. It requires learners not only to master syntactic rules and vocabulary choices but also to organize thoughts logically, maintain textual cohesion, and adhere to strict academic conventions. For first-semester undergraduate students transitioning from secondary education to university-level academic requirements, writing in English poses substantial challenges. Learners frequently struggle with sentence construction, subject-verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, and rhetoric, often resulting in writing anxiety and low self-confidence.

In regional institutions such as the State College of Islamic Studies Mandailing Natal (STAIN Madina), these challenges are amplified by environmental factors, including limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom and variable entry-level language proficiency. Furthermore, instructors often face significant pedagogical constraints; high student-to-teacher ratios make it difficult to provide immediate, detailed, and individualized feedback on every writing assignment. Consequently, basic mechanical and grammatical errors frequently persist uncorrected across multiple drafts, hindering students' overall writing development and autonomous revision capabilities.

To address these pedagogical bottlenecks, the integration of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technologies has become increasingly widespread. Among various digital writing assistants, Grammarly has emerged as a prominent Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tool. Grammarly provides automated, real-time corrections for grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, and style. By offering instant feedback accompanied by brief grammatical explanations, the tool acts as a virtual self-editing assistant, allowing students to identify and correct linguistic errors before final submission. The theoretical underpinnings of CALL and Constructivism suggest that such immediate digital feedback can scaffold learning, foster metalinguistic awareness, and promote learner autonomy by transforming revision from a passive teacher-led requirement into an active, self-regulated process.

Despite the growing adoption of AWE tools globally, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding how first-semester EFL students in regional tertiary institutions perceive and interact with Grammarly. Most prior empirical studies have been conducted in major urban universities with well-established digital infrastructures, leaving the nuanced experiences of students in regional academic environments largely unexplored. Furthermore, questions persist regarding whether students perceive Grammarly as a genuine cognitive learning aid that fosters independent language acquisition or merely as an automated correction shortcut that risks inducing technological over-reliance. Understanding students' perceptions is paramount, as individual attitudes and cognitive evaluations directly govern how technology is accepted, utilized, and sustained in

language learning contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions, experienced benefits, and perceived limitations of using Grammarly among first-semester English Education students at STAIN Madina.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to capture and interpret the lived experiences and perceptions of participants in their natural educational setting without experimental manipulation or quantitative reductionism (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative descriptive approach is particularly suitable for exploring user experiences with educational technology, as it yields rich, contextualized descriptions of how individuals interpret technological utility and integrate digital feedback into their academic routines.

The research was conducted at the Department of English Language Education (Tadris Bahasa Inggris/TBI), FTIK, STAIN Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra, Indonesia, during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 10 first-semester undergraduate students from Class TBI-B. The inclusion criteria specified that participants must be enrolled in the foundational Writing I course, have actively used Grammarly for their academic writing assignments for at least one month, and demonstrate willingness to share their experiences in detail.

Data collection involved three complementary qualitative techniques to establish data triangulation and ensure analytical rigor: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all 10 participants, lasting 20–30 minutes per session. The interview protocol comprised open-ended questions targeting three core dimensions: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and encountered constraints. Classroom observations were carried out during writing sessions to document students' real-time interactions with Grammarly, their behavioral engagement, and their responses to suggested corrections. Document analysis evaluated students' writing drafts before and after Grammarly revisions, alongside digital screenshots of Grammarly feedback reports, to cross-verify reported perceptions against actual revision practices.

Data were analyzed following the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which encompasses data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Initial data reduction involved transcribing interview recordings, coding responses, and filtering observational field notes into thematic categories. Data display was organized through narrative summaries and structured tables highlighting primary perceptual themes. Conclusions were iteratively verified by comparing interview narratives with observational logs and document artifacts, ensuring credibility, auditability, and transferability of the qualitative findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are structured around three core perceptual categories that emerged from the data analysis: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and encountered constraints. These qualitative dimensions are supported by structured survey indicator distributions, interview excerpts, and writing documentation artifacts.

1. Perceived Ease of Use

Participants overwhelmingly expressed positive views regarding the usability and accessibility of Grammarly. As detailed in Table 1, indicators assessing ease of access, platform integration, interface intuitive design, and clarity of feedback were consistently rated as good by the student cohort.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Perceived Ease of Use of Grammarly

No.	Indicator	Category
1	Ease of accessing Grammarly across devices	Good
2	Ease of integration with web browsers and MS Word	Good
3	Simplicity and intuitive nature of the interface design	Good
4	Clarity of correction suggestions and visual alerts	Good

Students noted that the application's clean design and real-time color-coded error highlighting enabled them to identify linguistic flaws instantly without technical confusion. Even participants with self-reported basic digital literacy reported navigating the tool seamlessly. The ability to integrate Grammarly as a browser extension or keyboard add-on permitted frictionless usage across personal laptops and smartphones. From the perspective of Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), perceived ease of use is a foundational determinant of technology adoption. When EFL learners perceive a software application as user-friendly and low-effort, their intrinsic anxiety decreases, fostering higher willingness to adopt the tool repeatedly during drafting.

2. Perceived Usefulness

The analysis revealed that students perceived Grammarly as highly advantageous for developing their academic writing skills. Table 2 summarizes the qualitative categorization across core usefulness indicators.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of Perceived Usefulness of Grammarly

No.	Indicator	Category
1	Improvement of grammatical accuracy	Good
2	Assistance in understanding grammatical errors	Good
3	Enhancement of writing self-confidence	Good
4	Acceleration of the essay revision process	Very Good

The highest perceptual score was recorded for the acceleration of the revision process. Students highlighted that receiving immediate, automated feedback eliminated the long waiting periods typically required for teacher evaluations, allowing them to polish mechanics prior to formal submission. Interview data further reinforced these quantitative trends. Participant RD remarked:

> *"If I use Grammarly, I can instantly see the mistakes. So, I don't have to wait for the lecturer to check basic grammar. It makes my editing process much faster." (RD)*

Furthermore, Grammarly contributed significantly to psychological empowerment by boosting writing confidence and reducing foreign language anxiety. First-semester students often experience acute hesitation when submitting English texts due to fear of negative evaluation. By validating sentence mechanics before submission, Grammarly provided a psychological safety net. Participant MH stated:

"Yes, I feel confident, because it makes me learn by myself to get something new and correct my sentences before sending them to the lecturer." (MH)

3. Constraints and Limitations

Despite overall enthusiasm, participants articulated clear awareness of operational constraints associated with Grammarly. Table 3 outlines the primary limitations identified.

Table 3. Identified Constraints in Using Grammarly

No.	Indicator	Category
1	Dependence on stable internet connectivity	Sufficient
2	Restriction of advanced features in the free version	High Constraint
3	Occasional contextual inaccuracy in suggestions	Sufficient
4	Risk of technological over-dependence	Moderately High

The most severe constraint identified was the restriction of premium features. The free version of Grammarly limits corrections to basic spelling, punctuation, and surface grammar, while locking advanced feedback on clarity, tone, delivery, and vocabulary depth behind a paywall. Participant SL expressed frustration regarding this paywall:

"The explanation was very helpful and clarified the topic well; however, I am frustrated by the requirement to log in to a premium account to see full clarity and style suggestions." (SL)

Internet dependence also presented a practical hurdle for students in regional areas with inconsistent connectivity. Furthermore, students noted occasional contextual inaccuracies where Grammarly misconstrued intended narrative nuances or specialized vocabulary, demonstrating that automated algorithms lack human contextual understanding.

4. Analysis of Student Writing Documentation

Comparative analysis of students' writing drafts before and after Grammarly intervention confirmed substantial improvements in lower-order concerns (LOCs), such as subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, capitalization, and spelling. For instance, in narrative drafts, surface errors such as 'he find a small spring' and 'he crops grow well' were successfully flagged and corrected to 'he found a small spring' and 'his crops grow well'.

However, the documentation analysis revealed that Grammarly yielded negligible impact on higher-order concerns (HOCs), including thesis clarity, logical paragraph organization, rhetorical flow, and strength of argumentation. This empirical observation aligns with CALL literature (Ghufron & Rosyida, 2018; Dizon & Gold, 2023), confirming that while AWE software excels as a mechanical proofreading tool, it cannot replace instructor-led feedback on content structure and critical thinking.

Conclusion

This study examined first-semester EFL students' perceptions of using Grammarly in writing classes at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The conclusions drawn indicate that students maintain a strongly positive overall perception of Grammarly, viewing it as an accessible, intuitive, and highly beneficial digital writing assistant. The tool effectively

addresses lower-order writing mechanics, accelerates essay revision, fosters learner autonomy, and reduces writing anxiety by building self-confidence.

Nevertheless, clear boundaries define Grammarly's efficacy. Operational constraints —specifically free-version restrictions, internet dependency, and algorithmic blind spots regarding higher-order concerns like argumentation and structure—underscore that Grammarly is not a panacea for writing instruction. Pedagogically, Grammarly operates most effectively as a preliminary self-editing scaffold rather than a substitute for human instruction.

Based on these conclusions, several practical and institutional recommendations emerge:

1. Pedagogical Integration: Lecturers should integrate Grammarly strategically during early drafting stages for mechanical self-editing, thereby reserving valuable instructional time for critical feedback on content, logic, and argumentation.

2. Critical Digital Literacy: Educators must train students to evaluate automated suggestions critically rather than accepting corrections passively, preventing cognitive passivity and technological over-reliance.

3. Institutional Support: STAIN Madina and similar tertiary institutions should consider providing campus-wide institutional access to premium writing tools, ensuring equal access to advanced clarity and style feedback for all students.

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