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THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF GRAMMARLY ON EFL WRITING COMPETENCY: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT.

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Abstract

In today's technology-driven era, Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) systems and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications have become important tools for students to improve their writing skills. These digital tools, especially Grammarly, help students with various aspects of writing, including vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and overall coherence. This study focuses on examining the experiences and perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a Vietnamese university who used Grammarly as a learning resource. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, including a pre- and post-test in the classroom to measure changes in students' proficiency after using Grammarly. Twenty-two students in the experimental group completed a 5-point Likert scale evaluation, and ten students participated in interviews to share their experiences with the software. The findings of the study indicate that integrating Grammarly into English writing classes has positive effects on students' writing performance and the students generally have a positive view of Grammarly's capabilities.

Key words: *Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Grammarly, Mixed-Methods Research*

1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, the ability to communicate fluently in English is considered an essential skill for Vietnamese students. Many organizations have included international certifications such as IELTS, TOEFL, and TOEIC in their recruitment requirements. However, given the current large class sizes in Vietnam, with approximately 30 to 40 students in one class, it is a challenge for English teachers to provide detailed feedback on students' productive skills, especially writing. Therefore, students often lack opportunities to receive constructive feedback on their writing and struggle to compose complete and meaningful English paragraphs. This leads to the need for integrating CALL – Computer Assisted Language Learning – into ESL classrooms to alleviate teachers' burdens and enhance students' writing skills concurrently. Within CALL, automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools like Grammarly have become popular in the ESL community. This AI-powered tool helps learners self-correct their writing, enhancing grammar and vocabulary, and lessens teachers' marking load. While Grammarly has gained global acceptance as a useful writing assistance tool, its application mostly revolves around personal use for day-to-day communications such as writing emails, blog posts, and cover letters. In the context of academic

writing, previous studies have shown that Grammarly positively impacts students' writing skills. However, there is a notable lack of research on this topic within the Vietnamese context. For the reasons mentioned above, this study is conducted to investigate Grammarly's impact on English major students' writing skills, focusing on its use in writing complete essays and students' attitudes towards it. The research also hopes to contribute to CALL theory and promote Grammarly as a useful tool in Vietnamese English Second Language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing skills and Its Importance in ESL's teaching and learning process

In the context of ESL instruction, writing proficiency is vital for academic success and professional adaptability (Rao & Durga, 2018). It acts as an instrument for knowledge consolidation and is pivotal in higher education settings (Shrestha et al., 2016; Adi Badiozaman, 2017). Ramadani (2013) reiterate that writing is a critical communication medium and an indicator of proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking. Teaching writing extends beyond language reinforcement; it involves guiding students towards meaningful discourse and preparing them for various contexts (Harmer, 2010; Hedge, 2005; Bowker, 2007). Dhanya & Alamelu (2019) and Helena (2018) further identify the classroom environment, feedback, motivation, student-teacher relationship, teacher income, training style, external factors, learning culture, and emotional aspects as additional influential factors.

Various pedagogical strategies have been proposed for writing skill development. These include Modeled Writing, Interactive Writing, PLEASE strategy, Mind-mapping, Guided Writing (Astrini et al., 2020; Cole & Feng, 2015; Mistar et al., 2014). Teachers play significant roles as leaders, facilitators, resources, and tutors (Gadd, 2017; Arumawati, 2018; Purnama, 2015). Their duties span selecting relevant writing topics, aligning topics with learning objectives, clarifying expected outcomes, fostering independent practice, and creating conducive learning environments (Hossain, 2015; Graham, 2019). Thus, successful writing instruction largely depends on the teacher's performance and their varied roles.

2.2 The Role of CALL and AWE in Teaching Writing Skills

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is a method that utilizes computer technology to aid language learning by offering easy access to educational materials and data (Ratnaningsih et al., 2019; White & Reinders, 2010). CALL offers numerous tools such as dictionaries, pronunciation tutors, quizzes, games, and writing software (Lee, 1998; Torat, 2013). Yang (2013) classifies CALL tools into tutorials, tools, tests, and packages to enhance language skills. Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) is a branch of CALL used in education, especially for essay evaluation by considering factors like grammar, spelling, sentence construction, and word choice (Grimes & Warschauer, 2010).

AWE, introduced in the 1960s, combines elements from various fields such as educational measurement, computational linguistics, cognitive science, and pedagogy (Cotos, 2018; Elliot et al., 2013). The evolution of CALL and E-learning has revolutionized the field of language learning (Principi, 2017). The advancement of these technologies has made it possible to adopt innovative teaching methods and tools, making learning more interactive and efficient. Several studies worldwide have evaluated the impacts of CALL and AWE on writing skills. It assists teachers in grading student essays and provides opportunities for practice (Dikli, 2006). AWE offers several benefits as outlined by various researchers. Warschauer & Grimes (2008) highlight how it fosters active learning among students and alleviates teachers' workload. Lavolette et al. (2015) emphasize the immediate feedback provided by AWE to help students enhance their writing skills, exemplified by the MY Access software. Further, Grigoryan (2018) and Li & Hegelheimer

(2013) highlight how advancements in software and learning tools like grammar editing software can expedite improvement in writing skills and overall academic performance.

2.3 Functions and Benefits of Grammarly in Automated Writing Evaluation

Grammarly, established in 2009 by Max Lytvin, Dima Lider, and Alex Shevchenko, is a notable and innovative tool in Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) (Jayavalan & Razali, 2018). It is highly regarded for its exceptional precision as an English grammar checker and its status as one of the most groundbreaking companies, benefiting 30 million users in improving their writing skills. The functionality of Grammarly encompasses various aspects, as highlighted by Bailey & Lee (2020) and O'Neill & Russell (2019b). It not only identifies over 300 types of writing mistakes but also offers checks for spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and plagiarism. In recent years, Grammarly has introduced additional features such as a tone detector, mobile synonyms, consistency in writing, and tools for clarity and readability (Syafi'i, 2020).

One of the primary reasons Grammarly serves as a potent teaching tool to traditional methods is its ability to provide immediate, constructive feedback (Nova, 2018). Instantaneous feedback, grounded in learning theories such as behaviorism, helps in reinforcing correct behaviors and improving errors on-the-spot, allowing learners to better internalize corrections (Nova, 2018; Soegiyarto et al., 2020; Gain et al., 2019). Moreover, by offering insights on common mistakes (Moon, 2021) and providing an avenue for continuous practice, Grammarly aligns with the principle of repetition and reinforcement, known cornerstones in learning. The ubiquitous nature of digital tools like Grammarly ensures accessibility anytime, offering flexibility not seen in traditional educational setups (Means et al., 2013). Staples et al., (2015) point out that unlike traditional methods, which may suffer from instructor bias or variability in feedback, automated platforms guarantee consistency through their algorithm-driven responses. Beyond mere error identification, tools like Grammarly offer comprehensive explanations, aiding students in understanding their mistakes (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). This facilitates a personalized learning approach, letting students engage at their pace, revisiting content as needed, promoting deeper comprehension (Pane et al., 2015).

Although previous studies highlight the vital role and the significant impact of tools like Grammarly in writing skill development, certain gaps remain. Zhang (2021) and Stevenson (2016) focus on students' comprehension level of the edited version of their writing and the potential negative impacts of relying too heavily on AWE. Derakhshan et al. (2015) and Gao (2021) underscore the challenges and limitations of AWE, which include difficulty in using the tool, inability to answer student queries fully, and shortcomings in enhancing the logical structure of writing. Lorena & Ximena (2019) further elucidate the limitations by highlighting issues faced by students while using Grammarly. It may occasionally overlook content and context checks, unintentionally alter intended meanings, or provide feedback inconsistent with the author's intentions (Nova, 2018; Fitriana & Nurazni, 2021). Furthermore, while the free version of Grammarly effectively handles minor errors, the premium version offers more advanced features (Lailika, 2019). Lastly, the effectiveness of Grammarly is dependent on the quality of internet connectivity (Ummah, 2022). In terms of student attitudes towards Grammarly, studies by Miranty et al., (2021) and Ventayen & Orlanda-Ventayen (2018) found that students generally had positive views about the tool, with many reporting improved confidence and efficiency in their writing. However, limited studies exist in certain regions, like Vietnam, where Ngan & Tan (2020) research remains the sole work on Grammarly's impact. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this research gap by investigating the specific effects of Grammarly on this population by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does Grammarly affect students' writing skills?

2. What are the students' attitudes towards using the free service of Grammarly to improve their writing skills?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Process

The researcher adopted a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the quantitative part, two distinct groups were established: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups underwent two phases of testing including a pre-test and a post-test. The experimental sessions, spanning over 8.5 weeks, were conducted for every two-hour class meeting. The primary focus of the initial six weeks was the treatment, whereas the final two weeks were dedicated to analyzing students' results. The most prominent difference between the two groups was the method of assignment completion: the control group relied on traditional paper assignments, while the experimental group used Microsoft Word with Grammarly's features. The Grammarly tool was used to check different aspects of writing, including plagiarism, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and spelling. Both groups tackled the same writing topic for the pre-test and post-test. On the qualitative side, the experimental group also engaged in an additional questionnaire and a few of them were invited for a brief interview.

3.2 Research Participants

The research was conducted at 2 English writing classes at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The sample is made up of 35 students majoring in English Language Studies. They were randomly divided into two groups. A control group with 12 students and an experimental group with 23 students. Most of the participants were aged between 19-20, with a minority of older students. Of the participants, there were 18 females and 17 males.

3.4 Research instruments

The research employed three distinct instruments for data collection: Pre-tests and Post-tests, a questionnaire, and interviews. Pre-tests and Post-tests were used to compare the writing abilities of the participants before and after the experimental interventions. Topics for the writing tests were selected from "Skills for Success: Reading and Writing 4" by Daise et al. (2011), ensuring the alignment with material students had previously familiarized in their course. Using these recognized standards and familiar topics ensured that the assessment was both valid and reliable. Moreover, a rubric was employed to evaluate different writing aspects such as content, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. In addition to the tests, a questionnaire comprising 15 questions was distributed to 35 students. This aimed to gather information on their attitudes towards Grammarly, specifically its benefits, drawbacks, and influence on their writing skills. or added reliability and clarity, the content was translated into Vietnamese to eliminate potential misunderstandings. The responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale. Finally, a group of 10 volunteers from the experimental set were selected for interviews. These interviews served as a platform to explore in greater depth the participants' experiences and perceptions of using Grammarly. By selecting a subset of participants and having a structured set of questions, the interviews aimed to provide valid insights and consistent data across different interviewees.

The quantitative analysis employed SPSS version 29 to analyze pre- and post-test data, while questionnaire data were analyzed under the 5-point Likert scale and using Cronbach's Alpha. Qualitative analysis involved recording, transcribing, and categorizing student interviews for a systematic content analysis process.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1 Pre-test and Post-test Analysis

Table 1***Descriptive Statistics of CG's Pre-Test and Post-Test***

Item	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev	Variance
CG's Writing Pre-test	12	2.50	7.00	9.50	8.1083	0.73294	0.5372
CG's Writing Post-test	12	3.00	6.50	9.50	8.2750	0.88844	0.7893

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the Control Group's (CG's) pre-test and post-test scores. The pre-test and post-test both had 12 participants. The pre-test scores had a range of 2.50, with a minimum score of 7.00 and a maximum score of 9.50. The mean score was 8.1083, which indicates that the average performance was high. The standard deviation was relatively low at 0.73294, suggesting that the scores were close to the mean. This is further supported by the variance of 0.5372. In the post-test, the range widened slightly to 3.00, and the minimum score dropped to 6.50. However, the maximum score remained consistent at 9.50. Interestingly, despite the lower minimum score, the mean post-test score increased to 8.2750, suggesting an overall improvement in the group's performance.

Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of EG's Pre-Test and Post-Test***

Item	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Dev	Variance
EG Writing Pre-test	23	2.40	6.70	9.10	8.4826	0.70624	0.4988
EG Writing Post-test	23	2.20	7.80	10.00	9.3304	0.60184	0.3622

For the Experimental Group's (EG's) pre-test scores (Table 2), the scores ranged from 6.70 to 9.10, with a range of 2.40. The average score was relatively high at 8.4826, and the standard deviation was fairly low at 0.70624. The low variance of 0.4988 further supported this relatively low dispersion of scores around the mean. Following the intervention, the post-test results exhibited a range of 2.20, with the minimum score rising significantly to 7.80 and the maximum score increasing to 10.00. Notably, the mean score increased to 9.3304, which indicates a considerable overall improvement in the EG's performance. The standard deviation decreased slightly to 0.60184, along with a decrease in variance to 0.3622. These values suggest that the post-test scores were even more tightly clustered around the mean than the pre-test scores, implying that the intervention had a relatively consistent positive impact on the group's performance.

Table 3***Results of Independent Samples t-test for Writing Pre-Test Scores***

Independent Samples Test											
Item		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
Pre-test results	Equal variances assumed	,019	,890	1,469	33	,076	,151	,37428	,25470	-,14393	,89248
Pre-test results	Equal variances not assumed			1,452	21,693	,080	,161	,37428	,25778	-,16077	,90932

Table 3 displays the results of an Independent Samples t-test for pre-test writing scores between Control Group and Experimental Group. According to the Levene's Test, we assume equal variances between the two groups as the significance value (0.890) is more than 0.05. The t-test, both under the assumptions of equal and unequal variances, indicates no significant difference between the groups' pre-test writing scores as the p-values are greater than 0.05. The mean scores, score range, and minimum and maximum scores vary between the groups, with EG typically showing higher values than CG.

Table 4***Results of Independent Samples t-test for Writing Post-test Scores of CG and EG***

Independent Samples Test											
Item		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Interval Difference	Confidence of the Difference
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
Post-test results	Equal variances assumed	3,893	,057	4,172	33	<,001	<,001	1,05543	,25296	,54079	1,57008
Post-test results	Equal variances not assumed			3,696	16,427	<,001	,002	1,05543	,28553	,45142	1,65945

Table 4 represents the results of an Independent Samples t-test for post-test scores. The Levene's Test suggests equal variances between the groups, with a significance level of 0.057, just above the typical threshold of 0.05. The t-test shows a significant difference in the post-test scores between the two groups, indicated by a p-value of less than 0.001 under both assumptions of equal and unequal variances. The mean difference of 1.05543 is significantly different from zero, supported by a 95% confidence interval that does not encompass zero (from 0.54079 to 1.57008 with equal variance assumed, and from 0.45142 to 1.65945 with unequal variance assumed). These results suggest that the intervention significantly improved the writing scores of the students. Considering the groups were equivalent in their abilities before the intervention, we can reasonably attribute the improvement in the post-test scores to the intervention itself.

4.2 Results from questionnaire**Table 5*****EG's Perceptions of Grammarly Use Experience***

Item	Mean Score
1. Grammarly is the grammar checker tool I usually use for checking my writing	4.09
2. I think Grammarly is really easy to use	4.23
3. Grammarly makes helpful suggestions for improving my writing	4.14
4. Grammarly has helped me to save time in revising my writing	4.32
5. Grammarly is convenient to use for correcting grammar	3.36
6. Grammarly has helped me corrected spelling in writing	4.10
7. I think Grammarly has helped me to understand more about English grammar rules	3.55
8. I did not need a technical person to help me use the Grammarly	4.23
9. I thought there was too much inconsistency in this system	3.64
10. I found the system unnecessarily complex	2.77

Item	Mean Score
11. Spelling is one of Grammarly's features contains of the incorrect and confusing word	3.09
12. I do not agree with some suggestions of Grammarly	3.41
13. Grammarly's feedback is not always helpful	3.50
14. I feel frustrated by using Grammarly when there are still many grammar issues	3.09
15. I am not sure with Grammarly's corrections	3.18

The mean scores presented in Table 5 provide insights into the English Group's (EG's) perception of their experience with Grammarly. The highest rated statements, with a mean score of above 4, were "Grammarly is the grammar checker tool I usually use for checking my writing" (4.09), "I think Grammarly is really easy to use" (4.23), "Grammarly makes helpful suggestions for improving my writing" (4.14), and "Grammarly has helped me to save time in revising my writing" (4.32). These scores reflect the students' reliance on Grammarly, their ease of use of the tool, its helpfulness in providing writing improvement suggestions, and the time-saving benefits they have experienced. On the other hand, some of the statements that received lower scores include "I found the system unnecessarily complex" (2.77), "Spelling is one of Grammarly's features contains the incorrect and confusing word" (3.09), and "I feel frustrated by using Grammarly when there are still many grammar issues" (3.09). These scores point to some areas of concern among students, including potential complexity of the system, issues with spelling features, and frustration when Grammarly does not catch all grammar issues.

4.3 Interview

In an exploration of the impacts of Grammarly software on English-major students' writing skills, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 students (S1 through S10) from the experimental group. Their participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Frequency of use varied among participants. S1 stated, "I always use Grammarly to check grammar and vocabulary for my writing," while S2, S8, S9, and S10 emphasized regular use. S3 and S6 used Grammarly once or twice a week, S7 used it three times a week, while S5 admitted to rarely using the software. S4 had not used Grammarly, relying on teacher instructions for grammar improvement. Thus, the majority of participants used Grammarly frequently or at least once to three times per week.

The perceived usefulness of Grammarly was generally high among participants. Nine participants found Grammarly beneficial in checking grammar, spelling, punctuation, and plagiarism while saving them time in the proofreading process. Regarding time-saving, half of the participants (S1, S2, S7, S8, S10) claimed that Grammarly saved them an hour in checking their writing, while S3 and S6 saved approximately 30 minutes. S4, S5, and S9 were less concerned with the time saved, prioritizing the effectiveness of Grammarly in error-free writing.

In terms of strengths and weaknesses, nine participants acknowledged Grammarly's strengths, highlighting its speed, accuracy, sentence fluency suggestions, spelling and grammar correction, time-saving features, vocabulary suggestions, free access, convenience, and plagiarism-checking function. However, they also identified weaknesses. S1, S3, S8, S10 noticed some inflexible and unnecessary suggestions, while S2, S6, S7 were concerned about potential errors in complex sentences. S5 mentioned the need to purchase a premium version for enhanced services, and S9 worried about dependency on Grammarly stifling personal mastery of spelling and punctuation.

4.4 Data discussion

Assessing the first research question – "To what extent does Grammarly affect the students' writing skill?" – the data revealed that those who incorporated Grammarly into their writing practice scored higher in the post-test than their counterparts who didn't. The experimental group (EG) and control group (CG)

were initially assessed to be on similar proficiency levels as inferred from pre-test results. Post the intervention, however, EG outperformed CG in the post-test. EG's mean score ($M=9.33$) was higher than CG's mean score ($M=8.27$), indicating a significant improvement ($p\text{-value} < 0.001$). Also, the insignificant change in CG's pre ($M=8.11$) and post-test ($M=8.27$) scores contrasts sharply with the significant variation observed in EG's pre-test ($M=8.48$) and post-test ($M=9.33$) scores. This implies that the usage of Grammarly positively impacts the writing ability of students, affirming the benefits of CALL and AWE. Grammarly's efficacy as a writing enhancement tool can be attributed to several underlying factors. The software offers real-time feedback on grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, facilitating immediate corrections and fostering a more iterative learning process. Moreover, the tool's recommendations on style and tone can refine a student's writing, making it not only grammatically correct but also more engaging and coherent. By consistently integrating these suggestions, students can internalize better writing habits and strategies, leading to evident improvements in their writing proficiency over time. These findings are in line with previous research by Dizon & Gayed (2021), Miranty et al., (2021), and Karyuatry et al. (2018).

Moving on to the second research question - "What are the students' attitudes towards using the free service of Grammarly to improve their writing skill?" - the data from the questionnaire and interviews suggest that students have a favorable attitude towards Grammarly and its impact on their writing skills. They found Grammarly user-friendly and effective in identifying errors in their writing. While recognizing the potential for mistakes, students appreciated the tool's time-saving capabilities and its contribution to their learning process. Additionally, students from the EG provided some more insightful feedback about their Grammarly experience. They noted the tool's capacity to enrich their grammatical knowledge and vocabulary usage, facilitate swift error detection, and foster a better understanding of English grammar rules. Interestingly, despite the limitations of the free version, they admired the tool's utility in tracking word count, detecting plagiarism, and providing a wide array of vocabulary options. These viewpoints align with the perspectives of Hadiat (2022) and Aidil (2019). Additionally, the numerous benefits that could enhance writing are also supported by Zinkevich & Ledeneva (2021) and Miranty et al. (2021).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Limitations of the study

While this study offers significant insights into the beneficial impacts of Grammarly and presents actionable recommendations for educators and learners to incorporate this software into their pedagogical practices, it is not without its limitations, which should be acknowledged and could potentially be addressed in future research.

Firstly, the sample size's limitation hinders the broad applicability of the findings. The research was set within a specialized English Language & Linguistics program that, during the period of interest, had only three distinct classes with 15-25 students in each. This limited participant selection, paired with unique learning conditions, can inadvertently compromise the study's external validity. Expanding the sample size would provide a more encompassing view of the software's impact. Secondly, the research's timeframe posed challenges. With the study squeezed into the final 8.5 weeks of an academic year, some research components were either fast-tracked or constrained in their frequency, potentially affecting the depth and comprehensiveness of the outcomes. Lastly, practical challenges also emerged. Due to a large number of students in the program, access to specific facilities like the Multimedia Room was limited. This required participants to frequently bring their personal laptops to class, which may have placed additional strain on them throughout the study's duration.

5.2 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study was conducted to explore the positive effects of Grammarly on improving students' writing skills, showing its potential in supporting the English teaching and learning process. While Grammarly is beneficial for students to develop their writing skills, it's important to note, however, that Grammarly cannot replace traditional teaching methods or teacher feedback. In addition, it can be especially useful for students who have a strong learning motivation and discipline to practice their writing skills.

On the other hand, while using Grammarly as a tool to give instant writing feedback for students, certain considerations should be taken, especially the students' heavy dependence on AWE tools which leads to limited language skills development. Learners should use Grammarly as a support tool to improve their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and always be aware of self-improvement.

In order to effectively integrate Grammarly into the classroom, students need proper training on how to use the platform and how to compare Grammarly's corrected version with their original text to improve their writing skills. They should also be aware that AWE tools are not always accurate; therefore, students should always double-check and rely on their own language knowledge and understanding when reviewing Grammarly's suggestions.

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