Student Perceptions: Challenges and Opportunities of Using Grammarly on Thesis Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing skills in English are considered challenging, particularly in academic contexts like thesis writing, where effective organization and expression are crucial. Many students used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, such as Grammarly, to enhance their grammar, punctuation, and spelling. This research explored EFL students' perceptions of Grammarly in thesis writing, focusing on both the opportunities and challenges associated with its use and their responses to those. The study was conducted with final-year students at a reputable university who used Grammarly's free version, employing a qualitative design and using semi-structured interviews to get the data. Findings indicated that student perceptions of Grammarly were positive for its user-friendliness, instant feedback, and efficiency in addressing grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. The opportunities identified include immediate feedback, consistent evaluation, additional correction insights, and improved writing efficiency, all contributing positively to thesis writing quality. However, challenges such as over-reliance on AI, the necessity for manual rechecking, limitations of the free version, difficulties with tense detection, and internet connectivity issues were also reported. Students generally appreciate Grammarly's suggestion in correcting grammatical and technical challenges but have varied responses to its challenges, with some continuing to use the tool despite its shortcomings and others using similar alternative options. Suggestions for further research include comparing Grammarly with other writing assistance tools in the context of thesis writing and using quantitative methods to better assess its effectiveness. Future studies could develop diverse research instruments to enrich the findings of this research.

INTRODUCTION

English is the most widely studied foreign language in the world, including in Indonesia. To become proficient in English communication, students must master four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. However, writing is considered more challenging due to the complexity of translating ideas, thoughts, views, and feelings into written form while ensuring the effective organization of written aspects (Setyowati, 2016). Moreover, in academic writing, such as a thesis, the accuracy of structure and grammar becomes crucial for producing quality work. In reality, many English Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle with academic writing due to a low understanding of correct grammar usage.

This is because there are differences in elements and a lack of equivalence in words between the native language and the foreign language used in writing the thesis (Alhaysony & Alhaisoni, 2017).

In this digital era, many students use artificial intelligence-based tools like Grammarly to help them address grammar difficulties in their theses. Grammarly is an online application that offers various functions for better writing, including checking spelling, punctuation, grammatical problems, sentence structure, and verb phrases. It also includes helpful suggestions for making writing more legible, clear, and error-free. Grammarly is a program that helps students reduce writing errors, increases writing quality, boosts confidence in writing, and encourages independent proofreading (Qassemzadeh & Soleimani, 2016).

In its usage, many final-year students use the free version of Grammarly, including final-year students at a reputable university in their thesis writing. They choose the free version over the paid one for several reasons. Grammarly's free version offers basic features like spell-checking, grammar, and punctuation. On the other hand, the Premium and Business versions offer additional features such as writing style suggestions, plagiarism checking, and more in-depth vocabulary enhancement. The Premium version is designed for individual users looking for a more comprehensive writing experience, while the Business version is better suited to teams or organizations that need additional collaboration and administration features. However, students often choose the free version because it is enough to meet their basic needs without having to pay additional costs.

In this case, students' perceptions become an important factor that should be considered by lecturers. Students' perceptions are crucial to be used as a consideration by lecturers in enhancing and evaluating students' learning outcomes. According to Lailika (2019), students' perceptions determine the success or failure of the learning process. Moreover, students' perceptions provide data that is much richer in quality and leads to a more useful understanding of the student experience in terms of 'learning and teaching. According to Tudor (2010), the consideration of students' perceptions and approaches could be integrated with work focusing on improving the student experience. Thus, students' perceptions should be considered regarding whether the utilization of Grammarly brings the claimed benefits or even leads students to face any difficulties or confusion. In the context of thesis writing, students' perceptions of the use of Grammarly are necessary for lecturers to consider for guidance or further learning.

In recent years, numerous studies have delved into student perceptions of using Grammarly in academic writing. For instance, Cauring's study (2023) revealed that Grammarly significantly enhances students' research writing skills. The students in this study highlighted the user-friendly nature of Grammarly, which they believe makes it a valuable tool by offering constructive feedback and suggestions for improvement. Similarly, Fitria and colleagues (2022) reported that 80.1% of students strongly agree that Grammarly positively impacts their writing. However, Grammarly is not without its shortcomings. Nova's research (2018) indicated that while students gain several significant benefits from Grammarly, such as enhanced writing quality and valuable feedback, there are also notable drawbacks, including misleading feedback, an excessive focus on reference lists, and limitations in context and content checking that can affect the accuracy of evaluations.

Despite these insights, there is a gap in the research regarding students' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities presented by Grammarly. Previous studies have primarily focused on the convenience, benefits, weaknesses, and advantages of Grammarly. However, none of these studies have explored student perceptions of the opportunities and challenges and how students navigate them when using Grammarly. Therefore, the research questions addressed in the present study include:

1. What are student perceptions of using Grammarly for thesis writing?
2. What are student perceptions of the challenges and opportunities of using Grammarly in their thesis writing?
3. How do students respond to the opportunities and challenges when using Grammarly?

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative design to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic. To collect data, the researchers used semi-structured interviews, allowing for a flexible and thorough exploration of participants' perceptions. The study involved students from the English Language Education Department at a reputable university who were writing their theses in 2024. Participants were selected randomly, provided they used Grammarly as an online grammar checker during their thesis writing. Five final-year students were chosen for interviews to gain a detailed understanding of their experiences, as they used Grammarly integrated with Microsoft Word.

The researchers conducted interviews with students while recording the conversations to ensure that the data collected was accurate and comprehensive. After the interviews, the researchers created transcripts of the recordings to facilitate the analysis process. Next, the researchers analyzed the data by coding the interview results and identifying main themes and emerging patterns. Following the coding process, the researchers compared the findings with previous research and relevant theories to relate the results to the theoretical framework. Finally, the researchers compiled and explained the conclusions drawn from the data analysis, providing in-depth insights into the topic under study and how the findings connect with the relevant literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the collected semi-structured interviews have been analyzed to identify student perceptions of using Grammarly in thesis writing, including the opportunities and challenges they encountered with the application and their responses to these experiences. The data were analyzed using descriptive-analytical methods to gain a clear understanding of respondents' views and experiences. Below are the discussions based on each question:

Students' Perceptions of Using Grammarly on Thesis Writing

Based on data collected through semi-structured interviews, the results revealed several main themes in students' perceptions of using Grammarly for thesis writing. The main themes are outlined below.

a. The reason they use Grammarly

Based on the responses from semi-structured interviews, the researchers obtained various reasons from students regarding their use of Grammarly. The researchers then categorized these responses into three main reasons. First, many students choose Grammarly because of its ease of use in automatically correcting grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

"Because Grammarly helps me to correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation automatically, besides this application is easy to use." (Student 5)

The second reason is recommendations from lecturers or peers; students began using Grammarly after being recommended by lecturers who considered it more accurate than other AI tools, and from friends who extensively use the tool.

"I use Grammarly because it was a recommendation from my lecturer. She said that Grammarly is more accurate than other AI tools." (Student 4)

"Many people use this tool to correct their writing and I heard about Grammarly from friends who found it helpful although it is free." (Student 3)

The third reason is Grammarly's good facilities for improving writing, including its free accessibility without additional costs. This can be seen in the following diagram.

"I chose Grammarly for thesis writing because even though this application is free, it has high accuracy in detecting grammatical and spelling errors with comprehensive facilities like writing style suggestions." (Student 3)

According to the findings, students use Grammarly for three main reasons: it is easier to use than other apps, it is recommended by others, and it has good features for a free application. The statement "It is easier to use than other apps" accords with an earlier study by Pratama (2020), which showed that students believe Grammarly is easy to use. They simply open their document, and Grammarly automatically corrects it, allowing students to click on the suggestions to fix grammar and spelling errors. However, the statements "recommended by others" and "it has good features for a free application" are contrary to Fitria's (2021) study, which suggested that the free version of Grammarly is not efficient. According to Fitria, the free version has limits and lacks certain service tools, while the paid version offers full benefits, various functions, and advanced features.

b. Student beliefs about the accuracy of Grammarly

The next finding revealed in this research was students' beliefs about the accuracy of Grammarly. The researchers found varying perceptions among students regarding Grammarly's accuracy. Some students were confident in Grammarly's error detection and felt reassured by its suggestions, trusting the tool to accurately correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors.

"I trust Grammarly to catch most of my grammar mistakes." (Student 1)

Conversely, other students expressed doubts about Grammarly's accuracy, noting instances of inaccuracies in punctuation corrections and tense usage. While they acknowledged Grammarly's utility in providing corrections, they did not fully trust its suggestions due to the frequent inaccuracies they encountered.

"I often find inaccuracies in Grammarly, for example, the spelling of the word I created is correct but Grammarly gives suggestions that are not quite correct" (Student 5)

According to the findings, students' belief in the accuracy of Grammarly is divided into two groups. First, those are confident in Grammarly's accuracy in identifying and correcting errors. This concern matches with the findings of Cavaleri and Dianati's research (2016) which revealed that students believe Grammarly can improve the quality of their writing through accurate correction. Students believe that Grammarly can effectively identify and correct grammar, spelling, and sentence structure errors so that their writing is clearer, more structured, and easier to understand. On the other hand, some are a bit doubtful and feel the need to do further research or additional checks on the suggestions provided by Grammarly. This is supported by Yurika's findings (2023), where students expressed concerns that the corrections offered by Grammarly, especially for long and complex sentences, were sometimes unclear and lacked sufficient detail. This makes it difficult for them to understand the improvement suggestions provided by the tool.

c. Student perceptions of direct feedback

Based on student statements, many tend to ignore Grammarly's direct feedback. Although Grammarly offers detailed explanations for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors that could significantly enhance writing quality, a significant number of students overlook this feedback. Some

students, who are confident in Grammarly's accuracy, dismiss the feedback, believing it to be sufficient without needing further explanation.

"I do not care about the feedback. Because I'm confident that this AI is accurate." (Student 1)

Additionally, other students find the feedback unclear and lacking in detail, making it difficult for them to understand and benefit from the suggested corrections.

" I am not sure about the feedback provided by Grammarly because often the explanations are not clear and detailed, making it difficult for students to understand the feedback given." (Student 2)

According to the findings, some students ignored this feature because they did not feel the need for detailed explanations. Most of them believed in Grammarly's accuracy and thus did not require detailed reasons for their mistakes. This finding differs from Fitria's (2022) findings, which showed that students appreciate Grammarly's feedback as it helped them distinguish between correct and incorrect aspects of their writing. According to Fitria, students used this feedback to independently evaluate and improve their writing, using it as a tool for better learning.

d. *Student Perceptions of Correctness Features in Grammarly*

Grammarly's "Correctness" feature in thesis writing reveals that the tool's effectiveness varies among students based on the types of errors they frequently encounter. For some students, the primary focus of Grammarly's suggestions is on grammatical errors, including tense usage, sentence structure, and subject-verb agreement. This indicates that these students frequently face challenges with grammar in their writing.

"In Grammarly's correctness feature, the most frequent errors I encounter are grammar errors. These errors include tense usage, sentence structure, and subject-verb agreement." (Student 2)

Conversely, other students primarily benefit from Grammarly's punctuation correction feature, which addresses common issues with punctuation such as periods, commas, and hyphens.

"The most frequent error detection in this feature is punctuation errors in my writing. A feature that is very helpful in writing my thesis is the punctuation checker because when writing this thesis I often make typos." (Student 1)

For another student, the spelling checker is most valuable, as it helps correct frequent typos in English spelling. Overall, these findings highlight the diverse needs of students and demonstrate how Grammarly's features can be tailored to address specific writing challenges in thesis writing.

"The correctness feature that often appears when I write a thesis is spelling corrections. Because my thesis is written in English, I often make typos when typing." (Student 5)

Based on the insights gathered from various students' experiences with Grammarly, it is evident that the tool plays a crucial role in improving the quality of thesis writing. Different features of Grammarly are valued differently by students. Some frequently utilize Grammarly's correctness feature to detect and correct grammatical errors such as tense usage, sentence structure, and subject-verb agreement. Others find the punctuation corrector most helpful for rectifying frequent punctuation errors encountered during thesis writing. Additionally, Grammarly's spelling checker assists in identifying and correcting spelling mistakes that commonly occur in English thesis writing. These findings underscore Grammarly's versatility in addressing specific writing challenges faced by

students, thereby enhancing the overall clarity and accuracy of their academic work. They also support Armanda's research (2022) that Grammarly serves as a valuable English writing assistant, capable of checking students' writing for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors.

e. Student Perceptions of Clarity Features in Grammarly

Another feature provided by the free version of Grammarly is "Clarity," which focuses on improving writing style by addressing issues like wordy sentences and improper formatting to enhance readability and comprehension. Based on feedback from students, the feature's impact varies according to individual writing styles. Some students found the improper formatting correction particularly valuable, as it suggested replacements or removals of phrases to simplify and clarify sentences, making their writing more readable and focused.

"The improper formatting feature on Grammarly provides suggestions to enhance the clarity and readability of sentences that have already been written. It involves replacing or removing phrases that do not adhere to correct formatting, thereby making sentences smoother and more understandable to readers" (Student 1)

Other Students praised the wordy sentence correction, noting its effectiveness in offering concise alternatives to convoluted phrases, which improved their ability to convey ideas clearly while saving time in the editing process.

"Grammarly offers a shorter and clearer alternative to long and complicated sentences, keeping the essence of the message intact. This makes my writing more readable and saves time in the editing process." (Student 5)

Based on their experiences, students found clarity feature particularly helpful in improving the clarity and readability of their thesis writing. For some, Grammarly provided suggestions for proper formatting, enhancing the fluency and comprehension of their sentences. This aligns with Ummah's research (2022), which found that Grammarly's formatting suggestions helped replace or delete phrases that did not conform to the correct format. Other students appreciate Grammarly's ability to identify wordy sentences and offer shorter, clearer alternatives. This feature is effective in eliminating unnecessary words, thus directly transmitting ideas without compromising their essence. Grammarly also helps turn long, complex sentences into more concise ones, maintaining coherence and improving readability. Additionally, students noted that Grammarly not only improved readability but also saved time in the editing process. These observations support Ummah's (2022) statement that Grammarly's suggestions for concise sentences increase students' confidence in conveying ideas effectively while ensuring their messages remain clear and structured.

Students' Perceptions of Grammarly's Opportunities and Challenges

The following research findings answered the second research question regarding students' perceptions of Grammarly's opportunities and challenges. Each student had different perceptions of these opportunities and challenges, reflecting how Grammarly could assist them in improving the quality of their thesis writing. The following are students' varying perceptions of Grammarly's opportunities, including instant feedback, consistent evaluation, additional correction, efficiency, and accessibility.

a. Instant feedback

"I got an opportunity from Grammarly which provides instant feedback on errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling." (Student 4)

Students' perception of the opportunities offered by Grammarly, namely instant feedback, is very positive. This aligns with O'Neill (2019) findings, which showed that Grammarly's feedback was generally very positive. Students felt that they had received enough assistance from Grammarly and found the suggestions useful and easy to understand. They believed that the feedback improved the quality of their assignments and their grades. Additionally, Grammarly's feedback also boosted their confidence in completing assignments and developed their language skills beyond academic tasks.

b. Consistent Evaluation

"I believe in the corrections that Grammarly gives. If the sentence I make is wrong, Grammarly will immediately show me which one is wrong." (Student 1)

The second opportunity felt by students is consistent evaluation. Grammarly consistently highlights errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In line with this, Dewi (2023) stated that students feel Grammarly facilitates identifying mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and phrase alternatives in writing. The advantage of using Grammarly is its ability to show where the mistakes are and how they should be corrected

c. Additional Correction

"Additionally, I like the detailed data analysis of my thesis writing. It gives me new insights into my writing errors besides my teacher's feedback." (Student 2)

The third opportunity is additional correction, where Grammarly provides additional knowledge beyond what is taught in class. Students can use errors pointed out by Grammarly as a learning tool so they understand why the errors occurred. This is in line with what was expressed by O'Neill (2019), who emphasized that Grammarly can provide students with new and in-depth knowledge about appropriate language use. By taking advantage of these additional corrections, students can improve their understanding of grammar and write better.

d. Efficiency

"Using Grammarly saves me a lot of time because I do not have to check each sentence individually."(Student 3)

The fourth opportunity felt by students is efficiency. This is similar to Nova's (2018) opinion, which stated that the satisfaction of having a high rate of evaluation speed can also be a consideration for students in using Grammarly as a tool for evaluating their academic writing. The high rate of evaluation speed can save their time in assessing their academic writing and help them revise their writing in a shorter time. Thus, Grammarly not only helps improve the quality of writing but also enables students to be more productive and efficient in completing their academic tasks.

e. Accessibility

"Grammarly's accessibility allows me to get corrections anytime, without waiting for my lecturer." (Student 5)

The fifth perception regarding the opportunities offered by Grammarly is accessibility, as it can be accessed anytime and anywhere. This aligns with Dewi's (2023) findings, which state that Grammarly can be accessed flexibly in terms of both time and place.

Challenges in Using Grammarly

In addition to the opportunities mentioned, students also face various challenges in using Grammarly. These challenges include dependence on AI, the need for manual rechecking, incomplete features in the free version, difficulty in detecting tenses in paragraphs, such as distinguishing between simple past and simple present, and frequent lag due to unstable internet connections.

a. Dependence on AI

" The most important challenge is dependence on AI so that everything is instant without needing to be reviewed again." (Student 1)

This dependency arises because students tend to rely on Grammarly's automatic corrections and suggestions, which reduces the need for critical thinking and manual review of their writing. This aligns with what Perdana (2021) stated that users will become dependent due to over-reliance on AI. As students continuously use Grammarly, they may feel less confident in their ability to correct and revise their writing without the help of the tool, ultimately affecting their overall writing skills.

b. Need for Rechecking

"Therefore, I need to double-check to ensure that Grammarly's suggestions align with the context of the paragraphs in my thesis." (Student 4)

Although Grammarly offers automatic corrections, the accuracy of AI still cannot fully replace human ability. In line with Yasmin's statement (2021), "Since the accuracy of AI can not replace the human ability, it needed to recheck to ensure the final result." Students feel that while Grammarly helps identify errors, they still need to perform manual checks to ensure that the corrections provided align with the context and purpose of their writing. This highlights the importance of the human role in the final revision process to achieve accurate and satisfactory results.

c. Incomplete Features in Free Version

"In the free version, the features are not complete. Some essential features are only available in the premium version." (Student 3)

Although Another perception regarding the challenges of Grammarly is the incomplete features in the free version. This is similar to what Cavaleri & Dianati (2016) stated that if students want to use all the premium features of Grammarly, they must pay for it. They stated that Grammarly's free version is effective at detecting small errors such as comma errors and misuse of articles. Meanwhile, the students in this research used the free version of Grammarly. As a result, it can only verify articles, spaces, and punctuation.

d. Difficulty in Detecting Timing in Paragraphs

" When I wrote my thesis I used the past tense, but Grammarly recommended using the present tense." (Student 2)

Another challenge faced by students when using Grammarly is the difficulty in detecting tense in a paragraph. As stated by Rina (2022), Grammarly often fails to determine the writer's tense accurately, such as distinguishing between simple past and simple present. This can lead to inappropriate usage of tense, thereby affecting the quality of writing.

e. ***The application often lags due to an unstable internet connection***

   "The application often disappears and appears when opening Microsoft Word due to network instability." (Student 5)

   Students also faced challenges in using Grammarly due to frequent application lags caused by unstable internet connections. According to Yurika (2023), Grammarly required a stable internet connection. When using this application, it was better to have a good internet connection because the strength of the internet affected the performance of the application. If the internet was slow or loading, it affected the text correction process. The text disappeared instantly and was cut off as if it had not been corrected before.

Students' Responses to Opportunities and Challenges When Using Grammarly

   The research findings revealed diverse student responses to Grammarly's opportunities and challenges. In this section, students' responses to Grammarly's opportunities were examined. Overall, students felt grateful and helped by Grammarly's features. They appreciated Grammarly for easing the burden of correcting grammatical and technical errors, allowing them to focus on their thesis content.

   " I feel grateful for this AI. I am already stressed thinking about the content of my thesis; I do not want to be bothered with correcting grammar and other technical aspects" (Student 1)

   "Grammarly provides new knowledge through the feedback given. I'm pleased to get it." (Student 2)

   Students' responses to Grammarly's challenges were diverse. Some students continued using Grammarly despite frequent inaccuracies, relying on it while also double-checking corrections and seeking advice from their thesis advisors.

   "I still use Grammarly to correct my writing. But I definitely recheck by reading through my entire writing. Then I revise and change the tense to match the time context in the sentence or paragraph. Additionally, I ask for suggestions from my advisor regarding the grammar in my writing." (Student 4)

   Conversely, other students found Grammarly's feedback often inaccurate and deemed the subscription fee unjustifiable, opting instead for alternative applications with similar functionalities.

   "Sometimes I use another AI with similar functions to Grammarly." (Student 3)

   The discussion of students' responses to Grammarly's opportunities and challenges reveals diverse perspectives among them. Regarding opportunities, research findings indicate that overall, students feel grateful and assisted by Grammarly's features. This finding was also reported by Yasmin (2021), who positively views Grammarly's free version as an effective means to help students receive feedback on their writing. They appreciated this AI tool because it reduced the burden of correcting grammar and technical aspects in their theses, allowing them to focus more on content creation. Moreover, students appreciate the additional insights offered by Grammarly's feedback, as articulated by student 2: "Grammarly delivers fresh insights through its feedback. I find it valuable." This aligned with the findings of Chen (2008), who suggests that with feedback accompanied by concise explanations and examples, students can autonomously learn and undertake self-editing and self-revising of their writing.

   On the other hand, students' responses to Grammarly's challenges are also diverse. Acknowledging Grammarly's potential for errors as an AI, students indicate that they do not rely solely

on it. Some students mentioned seeking advice from their thesis advisors to ensure the validity of language structures in their writing. Moreover, some students manually review their work by reading through the entire document." It was in agreement with Ummah's study (2022), who stated that electronic feedback allowed students to read and then review written feedback on their own. This was significant because feedback allowed students to improve and learn independently. Thus, some of the respondents stated that they still followed Grammarly's suggestion after double-checking. They manually checked their writing by asking their thesis advisors or trusted sources and then removed or ignored Grammarly's feedback if they felt it was inaccurate.

However, some students choose to stop using Grammarly and use alternative AI applications to improve the quality of their thesis writing. This is in accordance with research by Ambarwati (2021) which investigated the use of Grammarly by two students. According to the report, they stopped using Grammarly because the feedback provided tended to be inaccurate and the subscription fee was deemed not commensurate with the benefits obtained. These students feel that there are other more effective and efficient solutions to help them complete their academic assignments.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated EFL students' perceptions of using Grammarly on thesis writing, focusing on their reasons for using the tool, beliefs about its accuracy, and views on its direct feedback, correctness features, and clarity features. The findings reveal that students generally have a positive response to Grammarly, valuing its ease of use, effective features even in the free version, and frequent recommendations. They appreciate Grammarly's help with grammar, punctuation, and spelling checks, as well as its suggestions for rephrasing verbose sentences and improving formatting, which enhance readability and appropriateness. However, the study also highlights both opportunities and challenges faced by students. Opportunities such as instant feedback, consistent evaluation, and improved efficiency are highly valued, while challenges include reliance on AI, limitations of the free version, the need for double-checking, difficulties with paragraph timing, and issues with unstable internet connections. While students are thankful for Grammarly's assistance in reducing their grammatical and technical burdens, responses to its challenges vary. Some students continue to use Grammarly despite its inaccuracies and seek additional advice, while others have stopped using it due to feedback issues and subscription costs, opting instead for alternative apps with similar functionality.

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