BEYOND THE RED PEN: EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' AUTONOMY AND STRUGGLES IN GRAMMAR CORRECTION

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Abstract
This study investigates how Grammarly, an automated writing feedback tool, supports the development of learner autonomy in grammar correction among EFL students; uncovers students' perceptions of Grammarly's role in grammar correction, their self-perceived responsibility in revision, and the challenges they face in becoming autonomous writers. This qualitative case study research involved ten students from the English Education Program at UIN Walisongo Semarang, representing both fifth and seventh semesters. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of student writing samples. The findings reveal that Grammarly contributes to learner autonomy by providing real-time, non-judgmental feedback that encourages revision and raises grammatical awareness. Students demonstrated increasing responsibility for their learning by combining Grammarly feedback with self-editing and peer consultation. However, challenges such as tool over-reliance, limited grammar knowledge, and emotional barriers were also evident. The study concludes that while Grammarly has significant potential to support grammar learning autonomy, its effectiveness depends on students' critical engagement and reflective use. Pedagogical guidance is needed to help learners maximize the tool's benefits and avoid passive dependence.

Keywords*:* Learner Autonomy, Grammar Correction, Grammarly

Abstrak

Penelitian ini melihat bagaimana Grammarly, sebuah alat untuk memberikan umpan balik otomatis pada tulisan, membantu mahasiswa EFL (English as a Foreign Language) menjadi lebih mandiri dalam memperbaiki tata bahasa mereka. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga mengungkapkan pandangan mahasiswa tentang peran Grammarly dalam memperbaiki tata bahasa, tanggung jawab mereka dalam melakukan revisi, dan kesulitan yang mereka hadapi untuk menjadi penulis yang mandiri. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan sepuluh mahasiswa dari Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di UIN Walisongo Semarang, yang terdiri dari mahasiswa semester lima dan tujuh. Peneliti mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen terhadap contoh tulisan mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Grammarly berkontribusi terhadap kemandirian belajar dengan memberikan umpan balik secara real-time dan tanpa penilaian yang menghakimi, sehingga mendorong mahasiswa untuk melakukan revisi dan meningkatkan kesadaran tata bahasa mereka. Mahasiswa menjadi lebih bertanggung jawab atas pembelajaran mereka dengan menggunakan umpan balik dari Grammarly, melakukan penyuntingan sendiri, dan berdiskusi dengan teman. Namun, penelitian ini juga menemukan adanya tantangan, seperti ketergantungan berlebihan terhadap alat, keterbatasan pengetahuan tata bahasa, dan hambatan emosional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun Grammarly bisa sangat membantu dalam belajar tata bahasa secara mandiri, seberapa baik alat ini bekerja sangat tergantung pada seberapa aktif dan reflektif mahasiswa dalam menggunakannya. Oleh karena itu, dibutuhkan bimbingan pedagogis agar mahasiswa dapat memaksimalkan manfaat alat ini dan menghindari ketergantungan pasif.

Kata kunci*:* Otonomi mahasiswa, Koreksi tatabahasa, Grammarly

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of feedback in grammar correction continues to spark interest in EFL pedagogy, particularly in how it affects student autonomy. One promising area involves comparing teacher-led corrections with peer feedback, as the latter has been shown to not only support grammatical accuracy but also promote collaborative learning and mutual responsibility [1].

Trust in peer input and students' perceptions of their peers' competence can significantly influence the effectiveness of this approach.

Another crucial dimension is the investigation of student preferences and perceptions toward various forms of grammar feedback. Learners may favor direct correction for clarity, while others may prefer indirect or metalinguistic cues that allow them to engage cognitively with the correction [2]. Understanding how these preferences vary by language proficiency level or cultural background is key to tailoring instruction that both respects learner identity and encourages autonomy.

To deepen grammar self-correction skills, researchers have emphasized the integration of metacognitive strategies into instruction. When students are trained to use checklists, ask reflective questions, or analyze their own recurring grammatical patterns, they become more independent and strategic writers [3], [4]. This approach aligns with self-regulated learning models, which position students as active participants in monitoring and improving their language production.

In the digital era, grammar autonomy is increasingly shaped by the presence of automated grammar checkers such as Grammarly or QuillBot. These tools offer immediate feedback and explanations, potentially enhancing accuracy and learner independence. However, further research is needed to determine whether students develop grammar awareness through such tools or merely rely on them passively, which could hinder deeper learning [5].

Moreover, affective factors such as writing anxiety, confidence, and self-efficacy play a pivotal role in determining whether learners are willing to take control of their grammar revision process [6]. Students with high writing anxiety may resist self-correction due to fear of failure, while those with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in grammar monitoring and revision autonomously.

Closely related to affect is the concept of learner identity, particularly how students' cultural beliefs about authority and independence influence their

responses to grammar correction. Learners from teacher-centered educational backgrounds may initially resist autonomous strategies, expecting the teacher to correct every error. Investigating how identity factors interact with correction preferences could help educators scaffold autonomy in culturally responsive ways [7].

The timing of feedback also affects learner engagement with grammar correction. Immediate feedback can facilitate rapid learning and correction, but delayed feedback may encourage deeper reflection and self-monitoring [8]. Future studies could investigate which approach better promotes sustained autonomy and transfer of grammatical knowledge to new writing contexts.

A longitudinal perspective is essential in understanding how autonomy in grammar develops over time. A long-term study could explore whether consistent exposure to autonomy-supportive feedback leads to lasting improvements in both writing performance and students' confidence in self-editing [9]. Tracking learners across semesters could yield insights into the persistence of autonomous behaviors.

Additionally, focusing feedback on specific error types—such as articles, verb tense, or prepositions—can help students develop targeted revision strategies. These strategies may later be generalized across writing tasks, facilitating broader grammatical development. This idea aligns with focused written corrective feedback studies that emphasize the benefits of narrowing feedback scope [2].

Finally, we cannot overlook the role of teacher beliefs and practices. Teachers' views on autonomy, error correction, and student capacity shape the feedback they provide and the extent to which students are encouraged to assume responsibility for their grammar learning. Studies that explore these beliefs alongside classroom practices can inform professional development aimed at balancing support with autonomy [10].

Previous research on grammar correction in EFL settings has mainly focused on feedback from teachers, how different types of corrective feedback (like direct and indirect) compare in effectiveness, and how automated tools like Grammarly help improve basic writing accuracy. However, relatively few studies have explored how EFL learners themselves perceive and engage with grammar correction as part of their development of learning autonomy, particularly in conjunction with digital tools. Most existing literature tends to treat Grammarly as an evaluative instrument rather than an educational partner. For instance, while Ranalli (2018) has examined Grammarly's influence on writing quality, the author did not investigate how students internalize feedback, reflect on their grammatical awareness, or take active responsibility for managing their learning [11]. Additionally, the emotional and thinking aspects of how students interact with these tools—like their feelings about corrections, the methods they use, and how they change in their ability to correct themselves—have not been thoroughly studied. To address this gap, the present study investigates how students perceive and use Grammarly not merely for error identification but as a means of fostering autonomy in grammar correction. Through a combination of interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the research captures student voices and examines their beliefs, habits, and challenges in engaging with automated feedback. This triangulated, learner-centered approach offers a more holistic understanding of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in autonomous grammar learning.

The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the student's perspective and its reconceptualization of Grammarly as a mediator of learner autonomy rather than merely a correction tool. Unlike previous studies, this research reveals how students perceive their responsibilities in the grammar correction process and how their strategies—such as self-proofreading, error journaling, and combining automated feedback with peer and teacher input—shape their development as independent writers. It also uncovers the emotional and strategic challenges students face,

particularly the tension between reliance on digital assistance and the desire for genuine grammatical understanding. By foregrounding student agency and reflective practice, this study contributes a new dimension to discussions of grammar instruction in EFL contexts. It emphasizes not just the accuracy outcomes of correction tools but the deeper processes of engagement, self-regulation, and autonomy they can foster when thoughtfully integrated into pedagogy.

2. METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore EFL students' perceptions of grammar correction autonomy, particularly in the context of using Grammarly. A case study was considered suitable because it provides a detailed look at a real situation in its natural setting, allowing the researcher to explore the complicated relationships between technology feedback tools and students' independence in writing [12].

This design facilitated a rich understanding of students' lived experiences, their evolving roles as self-directed learners, and the educational implications of integrating digital grammar correction tools in academic writing instruction.

The participants of this study consisted of ten students from the Department of English Education at UIN Walisongo Semarang. They were strategically selected from two academic levels—five from the fifth semester and five from the seventh semester—to provide a diverse yet balanced representation of learner experiences. The participants were all actively engaged in academic writing tasks at the time of the study, including final thesis writing and article composition for publication, which ensured that grammar correction was both relevant and meaningful to their learning contexts. The selection aimed to capture varied perspectives across academic maturity levels, enabling comparisons of how learner autonomy and feedback practices evolve.

To collect the necessary data, the study employed three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing the researcher to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and preferences regarding Grammarly and grammar correction. The interview guide was divided into three parts: students' perceptions of Grammarly's contribution to learning autonomy, their self-assessment of roles in grammar correction, and the challenges they faced during autonomous revision. This format permitted the interviewer to maintain consistency while also exploring spontaneous insights and elaborations [13].

Classroom observations were conducted to validate and enrich the data gathered through interviews. These observations focused on students' real-time engagement with grammar correction during writing tasks, including their use of digital tools, self-correction behaviors, and reactions to challenges. The indicators for observation were based on earlier studies, especially by Dizon & Gold (2023), and looked at things such as how well students could find and fix grammar mistakes, their willingness to look for extra help, and how they felt when facing problems. These observations provided contextual depth and revealed behavioral patterns that may not surface through interviews alone.

In addition to interviews and observations, the researcher also conducted document analysis using student writing samples that had been corrected using Grammarly. These documents offered tangible evidence of students' grammar correction behaviors, types of recurring errors, and the nature of revisions made. The analysis focused on the origin of corrections—whether they stemmed from Grammarly suggestions, self-initiated edits, or teacher/peer

feedback—and examined how consistently and accurately errors were addressed. Document analysis served to triangulate the findings from interviews and observations, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed following the procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke [15]. The process began with familiarization with all data sources—transcripts, observation notes, and student writings—followed by initial coding to identify key ideas related to grammar correction, autonomy, tool usage, and learner strategies. These codes were then developed into broader themes, such as "learning autonomy," "technology reliance," and "critical grammar awareness." The data were continually reviewed to ensure coherence and depth, and triangulation was applied to cross-validate patterns across the different methods. The researcher also sorted the grammar mistakes seen (such as subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and redundancy), looked into how they were corrected, and evaluated if the students' editing showed real involvement or just reliance on tools.

Through this multi-method approach, the study was able to generate a comprehensive understanding of how EFL students navigate grammar correction with AI tools and what this reveals about their levels of learning autonomy. The integration of interviews, observations, and documents allowed for a nuanced interpretation of both the affordances and limitations of Grammarly in fostering independent grammar learning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on how EFL students perceive and experience autonomy in grammar correction, particularly through their use of Grammarly. The data are organized into three core themes: (1) Grammarly's role in promoting learner autonomy, (2) students' self-perception in grammar correction, and (3) the challenges students face in achieving autonomy. Supporting evidence is drawn from interview transcripts, classroom observations, and student writing samples.

The research involved ten participants, all of whom were students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at UIN Walisongo Semarang. These participants were evenly divided between two academic levels: five students from the fifth semester and five from the seventh semester.

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants and uphold research ethics, the study employed anonymized code names in place of real identities. Each participant was assigned a label consisting of two capital letters followed by a number. The number corresponded to the student's academic semester. For instance, RM5 indicated a fifth-semester student, while NK7 represented a seventh-semester student. Other examples include TM5, SM7, and RM7, each uniquely identifying participants without revealing their personal information. This labeling system allowed the researcher to analyze and present findings based on semester level while ensuring the anonymity of all subjects involved in the study.

3.1 Grammarly's Contribution to Learning Autonomy

Students widely acknowledged Grammarly as a supportive tool for enhancing autonomy in writing. Most participants valued its real-time error detection, automated corrections, and structured feedback. One student, SM5, remarked, *"Grammarly gives instant correction and suggestions that help me understand my errors quickly, even more than waiting for my lecturer's response."* Classroom observations echoed this sentiment, showing students actively engaging with Grammarly during essay drafting, particularly when editing verb tenses and punctuation.

Grammarly's unique features, such as tone detection and clarity

improvements, were also appreciated. Students emphasized its objective, consistent, and non-judgmental feedback. According to RM7, *"I like how Grammarly is neutral and does not criticize—it just tells me what's wrong and what to fix. That builds my confidence."*

Document analysis further revealed that writing improved with continued Grammarly use, especially in structure and accuracy. For example, several students' drafts showed correction of recurring issues like subject-verb agreement and run-on sentences after Grammarly flagged these issues in earlier drafts.

3.2 Student Perception of Their Role in Grammar Correction

Most participants believed that grammar correction was ultimately their responsibility, and Grammarly was simply a tool to support their efforts. As TM5 explained, *"I don't rely on Grammarly for everything. I use it to check my writing after I proofread it myself."* The interview data showed that students frequently engaged in grammar self-checks, used reference books, and participated in peer discussions. Observation records indicated that some students combined Grammarly with YouTube tutorials or grammar-focused mobile apps.

A common practice among students was error journaling or checklist-making. RM5, for instance, created a personal record of mistakes detected by Grammarly to avoid repeating them in future writings. These practices indicated a degree of metacognitive awareness and personal accountability in grammar development. Classroom observations confirmed this trend, showing that students frequently revised their work multiple times before submission.

3.3 Challenges in Autonomous Grammar Correction

Despite their positive outlook, students encountered several barriers in their path toward grammar autonomy. A major concern was the over-reliance on Grammarly, especially for those using the free version, which lacks advanced features. According to SM7, *"Sometimes I feel too lazy to think about the rule because Grammarly just fixes it for me."* This phenomenon highlights a risk of passive learning, where students accept corrections without critical engagement.

Technical and emotional obstacles also emerged. Students mentioned frustration over ambiguous feedback, especially when Grammarly flagged correct sentences. RM7 shared, *"Grammarly sometimes marks my sentence wrong even when I'm sure it's right. It makes me confused and frustrated."* Others expressed anxiety when corrections exceeded their grammar knowledge, leading to reduced confidence in self-editing.

From observation, students often paused or hesitated when faced with unclear suggestions. The students struggled with *"maintaining context, interpreting error analysis results, and identifying subtle mistakes."* We triangulated these findings with writing samples, revealing that repeated unresolved errors (such as misplaced modifiers or redundant phrases) demonstrated limited internalization of the correction principles.

To overcome these issues, students adopted various strategies, including upgrading to premium versions, consulting lecturers or peers, and integrating Grammarly with manual proofreading. TM5 described their process: *"I check Grammarly's suggestion, then I look up the grammar rule online or ask my friend to make sure it makes sense."* Many learners also made use of YouTube grammar tutorials, language learning forums, and apps like DeepL for additional clarity.

3.4 Discussion

This section explains the study's results by comparing them to previous research and theories about student independence, grammar correction, and using digital tools in English as a Foreign Language writing. The results reveal that Grammarly contributes

meaningfully to learner autonomy, yet this contribution is shaped by how learners perceive their role in correction and the challenges they face while engaging with automated feedback.

The first major finding—that students perceive Grammarly as a supportive tool for autonomy—corroborates the claims of previous researchers who emphasize the affordances of technology in promoting self-directed learning [14]. Participants reported that Grammarly's instant, non-judgmental feedback increased their confidence and encouraged repeated revision. This aligns with Klimova, who assert that timely feedback fosters learner ownership in writing [16]. The tool's features—such as clarity suggestions and tone adjustments—also support Bailey & Lee's notion that feedback must go beyond grammar correction to include textual awareness and stylistic development [3]. However, the effect is not automatic. As the student *identified as SM5 stated, "Grammarly provides instant corrections and suggestions that help me quickly understand my errors, even more so than waiting for my lecturer's response."* This case study shows how digital tools, when used reflectively, can reduce dependence on instructors and support the goals of autonomous learning.

The second finding, which highlights students' perceptions of their role in grammar correction, provides further evidence of autonomy development. Students not only used Grammarly but also initiated manual proofreading, kept records of repeated errors, and consulted grammar resources. These behaviors reflect metacognitive engagement, a key component of learner autonomy as described by Harrison & Vallin [17]. TM5's remark, *"I don't rely on Grammarly for everything. I use Grammarly to check my writing after I have proofread it myself, which* exemplifies the blend of tool-supported and independent strategies. Such proactive behavior aligns with the self-regulated learning model [18], in which

learners monitor their performance and apply strategies to achieve learning goals. These actions also suggest that autonomy is not merely the absence of teacher input but the presence of intentional learning behaviors that extend beyond external feedback.

Nevertheless, the third theme exposes the limitations of tool-based autonomy. Students' over-reliance on Grammarly, particularly when using the free version, led to superficial engagement with feedback. As SM7 admitted, *"Sometimes I feel too lazy to think about the rule because Grammarly just fixes it for me,"* revealing a risk of passive learning. This observation supports concerns raised by Ranalli (2018), who cautions that automated grammar checkers may reinforce dependence if not integrated with reflective pedagogy. The emotional challenges—such as frustration, confusion, and reduced confidence—further highlight the affective barriers to autonomous learning, as previously discussed by Wiraningsih & Santosa [19]. The observation data and document analysis indicated that unresolved grammatical issues persisted, suggesting that without deeper comprehension, corrections remained surface-level and temporary.

Importantly, the strategies students employed to overcome these challenges demonstrate their desire for autonomy and learning control. Students engaged in hybrid approaches—cross-referencing Grammarly's suggestions with grammar guides, peer input, or lecturer advice. This multimodal engagement is consistent with the idea of scaffolded autonomy [20], in which learners gradually assume more responsibility while still receiving guidance. TM5's comment, *"I check Grammarly's suggestion, then I look up the grammar rule online or ask my friend,"* illustrates how digital feedback can be a springboard for more profound learning when learners are guided to reflect on and question corrections.

Overall, the findings reinforce the notion that learner autonomy in grammar correction is not solely about access to tools but about how learners interact with feedback. If students learn to use Grammarly critically and strategically, it can become a powerful resource for supporting autonomous learning. Teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating this process by encouraging metacognitive reflection, providing grammar awareness instruction, and modeling how to evaluate feedback effectively.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of Grammarly in supporting EFL students' autonomy in grammar correction. First, it was evident that Grammarly positively contributed to students' sense of independence in writing. The participants acknowledged its effectiveness in providing instant, non-judgmental feedback, which helped them identify and revise grammatical errors with greater confidence. The tool's features, such as clarity suggestions and tone adjustments, were particularly appreciated for guiding learners toward more polished and accurate writing. These insights indicate that Grammarly, when used thoughtfully, can act as a scaffold for autonomous learning behaviors.

Second, students demonstrated an increasing awareness of their own responsibility in grammar correction. Many participants employed supplementary strategies alongside Grammarly, such as proofreading their drafts manually, keeping records of repeated errors, consulting grammar resources, and engaging in peer support. These behaviors reflect metacognitive engagement and a developing capacity for self-regulation in writing—key characteristics of learner autonomy.

However, the study also revealed that autonomy was not fully developed across all participants. Challenges emerged in the form of over-reliance on Grammarly, limited critical engagement with feedback, and emotional barriers such as confusion and frustration when dealing with ambiguous suggestions. Some students accepted corrections passively without attempting to understand the grammatical rules behind them. These patterns suggest that while Grammarly offers powerful support, it cannot replace the need for guided instruction and reflective practices.

Overall, the results indicate that Grammarly is a valuable tool for enhancing grammar accuracy and promoting autonomous learning, but its impact depends significantly on how students interact with its feedback. Autonomy in grammar correction is most successfully developed when students engage critically with suggestions, apply independent learning strategies, and receive scaffolding from instructors. The study underscores the importance of integrating technology with pedagogy that supports metacognition and learner responsibility.

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