

## Improving Second Language Learners Writing Using a Linguistic Feedback Tool (LiFT)

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### Abstract

Writing is one of the skills that is considered difficult for second language learners as they are required to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge especially the appropriate and accurate use of language or specific lexicon to communicate with their readers better. Previous studies indicate that second language learners' significant writing problems are insufficient linguistic proficiency, including the command over grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. In the teaching and learning context, the ability to write well for a student depends on the amount of practice and the support from the teachers' meaningful feedback. Along with the advancement in educational technology, this study intends to investigate the use of a Linguistic Feedback Tool (LiFT) to improve students' writing by identifying and providing feedback on the use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The data were collected from 30 secondary school students using three instruments, i.e. interview, students' essays, and questionnaires. The findings reveal that using a LiFT improves students' English writing quality and minimize errors.

**Keywords:** Writing, Linguistic, Proficiency, Feedback

### Introduction

Of all the language skills that second language learners learn in school, writing is one of the skills that is deemed essential and necessary. Writing is an important ability because it helps students understand ideas and concepts better (Foo, 2007). In his article, Chappell (2011) indicates that writing allows learners to express their personality, foster communication, develop thinking skills, and prepare for school and employment. Writing is seen as vital as it is used extensively in higher education and the workplace (Walsh, 2010). Besides, much of professional communication is done in writing, such as reports, memos, letters, and more. In an ESL classroom, ESL writers are expected to do enough practice in order to write well. However, it has always been difficult for second language learners (Neda et al., 2012). Clark's (2009) study stated that youngsters could not make compound sentences, do not have a wide range of vocabulary, or use various words in their writings, and

they ignore capitalisation, punctuation, and spelling. Students also struggle with the structural components of English because the inappropriate structure complicates the content and comprehension of the test which involve a mental process (Quintero, 2008; Nik et al., 2010). Besides that, students also face challenges such as the L1 transfer, lack of motivation, lack of reading and practice (Fareed et al., 2016).

The problem of writing in English does not only concern the students, however, teachers also play a crucial role in assisting students to improve their writing. It is argued that the two factors that lead to poor writing are the teacher and the learner. Teachers lack of appropriate pedagogic approach to teach writing which includes providing prompt and effective feedback to students and teachers' lack of ability to motivate students to produce good writings. Not only that, providing effective feedback to students can also be time-consuming and effort intensive as teachers have many students in a classroom. Often, teachers would spend correcting the language errors made by the students and neglect the aspects of content quality of the writings which are more crucial to good writing.

In Malaysian context, although ESL students spend 11 – 13 years (6 years in primary and between 5 – 7 years in secondary) learning the English language in schools, the writing skills are considered weak and is still far from satisfactory (David et al., 2015; Hiew, 2012). One of the reasons for performing poorly in writing is in the revising stage. In this stage, they had to make sure that their sentences were grammatically correct and understandable. Besides, their ideas, sentences, and paragraphs should be arranged coherently, too (Hiew, 2012). Malaysian ESL teachers also confirm writing development problems among ESL learners, especially in conventions, and punctuation.

To overcome this problem, with the advancement of technology in education, the use of linguistic feedback tool such as *Ginger*, *Grammarly*, *Spell Checker* and many more have gained interest and attention among the educators and policy makers (McCurry, 2010; Wang, 2013). The use of linguistic feedback tool in this study may be unable to assess the quality of content of students' writing but it provides feedback on language accuracy which are the mechanical aspects of grammar, spelling, and punctuation as these would contribute to the accuracy in the use of English language which is fundamental to good writing.

### **The Process Writing Approach**

Process writing refers to a broad range of strategies that include pre-writing activities, such as defining the audience, using a variety of resources, planning the writing, as well as drafting and revising (Goldstein & Carr, 1996). In this approach, writing involves a recursive process and does not occur in linear sequence, and it requires cognitive process emphasizing on the importance of a recursive procedure of pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising (Hyland, 2019). The writing starts with students plan what to write and generate idea related to the topic and organize those ideas into correct structure as the text requires. Next activity would involve students to have multiple drafts of written work as they revise and edit the draft to produce the final product. In this activity, discussion and feedback from teachers or peers will help students to revise their work. As this process include teachers and peers giving them valuable input, this process approach is characterised as learner-centred approach (Rusinovci, 2015).

The use of process writing as an instructional approach has been reported to bring about positive development in students' writing skills (Myles, 2002). In particular, the iterative nature of process writing encourages students to revise their drafts and improve their writing. The feedback provided in process writing also motivates students to make revisions and move from declarative knowledge of grammar rules into procedural knowledge (Negro & Chanquoy, 2005). Within the process writing approach, students usually receive feedback from their teacher in order to improve their writing quality. However, it can be time-consuming and effort intensive.

### **Linguistic Feedback Tool (LiFT)**

To improve writing performance, ESL learners depend on the amount of practice and support from the teachers' meaningful feedback. Unfortunately, providing detailed feedback to students can be time-consuming and effort-intensive due to the many students each teacher has in a classroom. Most of the time, teachers tend to focus more on correcting the mechanics of writing than looking at the quality of the content. In dealing with students' writing, teachers have made several efforts to provide feedback, and this includes the use of Linguistic Feedback Tool (LiFT), the term introduced by (Lim & Phua, 2019). The objective in LiFT is not about a mechanised scoring of students' writing in the aspects of substance and style, but on identifying and providing feedback on language accuracy in students' writing, that is, the appropriate use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

However, the use of LiFT in this study may be unable to measure the content and the rhetorical flair of students' writing effectively as there have been concerns and criticisms on its usage. Nevertheless, this study focuses on examining the effectiveness of using a LiFT in improving students' writing primarily in the mechanical aspects of grammar, spelling, and punctuation (language errors).

The LiFT used in the present study is the free version of *Grammarly*. *Grammarly* is an online writing application that can automatically detect potential grammar, spelling, punctuation, word choice, tone, and style mistakes in writing. On its website, *Grammarly's* sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) corrects grammatical errors and makes writing more understandable and helps writers make the right impression on the reader based on the audience and goals. In addition, *Grammarly* can also check the tone of the correspondence, provide synonym suggestions to make the text more readable and precise, and even check for plagiarism. The application can be assessed at <https://www.grammarly.com/>.

Several studies have investigated the use of *Grammarly* in improving students' writing. Cavaleri & Dianati (2016) reported that most of their participants, when asked about their *Grammarly* experience, found *Grammarly* useful and easy to use and agreed that it helped them understand grammar rules. In another study, Karyuatry, Rizqan and Darayani (2018) found that most of the students agreed that *Grammarly* allows them to review or revise their essays. They also believed in the accuracy of correction by *Grammarly*. Bailey & Lee (2020) observed in their study among undergraduate students of Konkuk University, South Korea that *Grammarly* was more appropriate for local surface-level errors (e.g. articles, preposition, and verb-noun agreement).

In Malaysia, several studies have investigated the use of technological online tools such as *Google Doc* and social networking sites like *Facebook* in helping students improve their writing (Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2022; Jayavalan & Razali, 2018; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2017; Vikneswaran & Krish, 2015). However, limited studies have examined how these tools can also help teachers in their marking. To address this gap, there is a need to conduct a study which investigates the effects of using automatic writing evaluation software such as *Grammarly* to help not only students in improving their writing but teachers too, especially in reducing teachers' time in marking students' composition.

In view of this, the use of LiFT in this study acts to complement the teachers' marking rather than being used independently, hence improving students' writing more effectively especially in the drafting and revision stage. Students will review and correct their language errors (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) based on the feedback, thus assisting the teacher to focus on other writing aspects.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To find out the usefulness of using *Grammarly* to improve students' writing.
2. To examine teachers' perceptions on using *Grammarly* to help in marking students' writing.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions are raised:

1. Does *Grammarly* help students to improve their writing?
2. How does *Grammarly* help students to improve their writing?
3. Does *Grammarly* help teachers in marking students' writing?

### **Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-method approach which included surveys and interviews with both students and teachers to investigate the use of a Linguistic Feedback Tool (LiFT) to improve students' writing. There were 30 students aged 17 years old and 3 teachers involved in this study. Students were first given a familiarisation exercise with *Grammarly*, and the students spent approximately an hour on the task given. The students typed their essays using Microsoft Word (with spellcheck feature turned on). The students then revised their essays based on the feedback from *Grammarly* as well as spellcheck. The revised essays were subsequently marked by their teacher. Interview sessions with students were undertaken to elicit their experience with *Grammarly* and how it can help them improve in the essay writing. The 3 teachers involved also reflected on their experiences and provided their feedbacks on the usefulness of *Grammarly* in helping them mark the students' revised essays. The three instruments used in this study included interview with students, open-ended students' essays, and questionnaires by identifying and providing feedback on the use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The interview data was examined through content analysis in which common themes were extracted and discussed.

## Results and Discussions

### *Students' Feedback*

From the survey of 30 students, 53% of students agreed that Grammarly is “very useful” and 30% of the students agreed that Grammarly is “useful” in helping them to improve their writing (Table 1).

Table 1

*Does Grammarly help students to improve their writing?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number(N)</b>	<b>N(%)</b>
Very Useful	16	53
Useful	9	30
Somewhat Useful	3	10
Hardly Useful	2	7
Not Useful	0	0

In response to the survey question on “How does Grammarly help you to improve your writing?”, 46.6% of the students responded that Grammarly helped them correct their mistake while 16.6% felt that Grammarly helped them to correct their spelling, 13.3% agreed that it helped to improve their grammar (Table 2).

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number(N)</b>	<b>N(%)</b>
Improve my spelling	5	16.6
Improve my sentence structure	3	10.0
Improve my word choice	2	6.6
Improve my grammar	4	13.3
Improve my tenses	1	3.3
Correct my mistakes	14	46.6
Improve my English language	1	3.3

### *Teachers' Feedback*

From the teachers' interview, the emerging themes found that Grammarly helped students in identifying their own language errors, had a user-friendly interface, and saves marking time. The teachers agreed that by using Grammarly in students' essay writing does help weaker students to identify their own mistakes and thus encourage them to take greater ownership over their learning. They also added that the user-friendly interface of Grammarly help students to spot their own mistakes and correct them. As for saving the teachers' time marking, the teachers added that they had less time to mark students' essays (language accuracy – common errors) and can focus on students' expressions and grammatical structures that the LiFT did not capture (content and style). For example, a teacher mentioned that “the tool helps me in giving technical feedback to my students' work and that really reduce my marking time”. Another teacher said that “the tool helps me in ‘cleaning’ the common errors my students normally make, and I can focus on correcting the content”.

## Discussion

Through the implementation of the usage of the linguistic feedback tool in writing class, it has shown a tremendous positive effect towards both the students and teachers. Students reported that the tool was helpful to improve their writing. The findings from the survey indicate that students and teachers are receptive in the use of LiFT to identify and provide feedback on the language accuracy. The findings consistent to a study conducted by (Karyuatry et. al., 2018; Lim & Phua, 2019). Teachers also felt that the use of a LiFT could bring about greater efficiency through reducing the marking time they would need as most of the grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors would have been addressed by the LiFT. This is consistent with a study done by Bailey & Lee (2020) in which the tool is appropriate for local surface-level errors (e.g. articles, preposition, and verb-noun agreement).

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings of this research shed light on the implementation of a digital linguistic tool that aims to facilitate teaching as well as learning among secondary school students in a public secondary school in Malaysia. The current study advocates a positive attitude on the availability of the digital tools such as *Grammarly* for ESL writers. Based on the results, it is proposed that *Grammarly* can be used to support and enhance the development of ESL writers. For example, teachers can encourage students to use feedback from *Grammarly* especially the terminologies to make their writings become better and interesting for readers. Besides, *Grammarly* can also help students to identify overly used words and replace them with synonyms making their writings enjoyable to read. Teachers can also engage a discussion with students about the recommendations provided by *Grammarly* thus create an interactive classroom environment.

## Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that teachers use any available LiFT to help their students in their compositions and *Grammarly* can be used as an appropriate tool to minimize errors and improve students' writing quality. Besides, teachers can also encourage their students to maximize the usage of the tool to help them improve their writing skills. This will help both students and teachers in overcoming language issues in writing such as grammar and syntax which include incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses and sentence structure.

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