

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN NAVIGATING GRAMMARLY-BASED FEEDBACK IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AT STAIN MANDAILING NATAL

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ABSTRAK

Among the four fundamental language skills, academic writing is widely recognized as the most daunting hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It is a multi-dimensional process that requires not only the mastery of complex linguistic structures but also a deep understanding of rhetorical strategies, audience awareness, and rigid academic conventions. This study explores the subjective experiences of fourth-semester students at STAIN Mandailing Natal in navigating Grammarly-based feedback in academic writing. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected from 15 participants through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis. The findings reveal eight dimensions of navigation: cognitive authority conflict, blind acceptance patterns, affective euphoria, L1 interference, feedback fatigue, strategic cross-verification, the "fake score" realization, and reduced social shame. While Grammarly provides essential scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development, the study highlights the risks of over-reliance and the necessity for pedagogical intervention to foster critical feedback literacy. The results suggest that students' engagement with AI is a complex negotiation between technological precision and human agency.

ABSTRAK

Di antara empat keterampilan berbahasa dasar, penulisan akademis secara luas diakui sebagai hambatan paling menantang bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Hal ini merupakan proses multidimensi yang tidak hanya menuntut penguasaan struktur kebahasaan yang kompleks, tetapi juga pemahaman mendalam mengenai strategi retorik, kesadaran akan audiens, serta konvensi akademis yang baku. Studi ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif mahasiswa semester empat di STAIN Mandailing Natal dalam menavigasi umpan balik berbasis Grammarly dalam penulisan akademik. Dengan menggunakan desain fenomenologis kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 15 peserta melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, jurnal reflektif, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan mengungkapkan delapan dimensi navigasi: konflik otoritas kognitif, pola penerimaan buta, euforia afektif, interferensi L1, kelelahan umpan balik, verifikasi silang strategis, realisasi "skor palsu", dan berkurangnya rasa malu sosial. Meskipun Grammarly menyediakan penopang penting dalam Zona Perkembangan Proksimal, studi ini menyoroti risiko ketergantungan berlebihan dan kebutuhan akan intervensi pedagogis untuk menumbuhkan literasi kritik terhadap umpan balik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan mahasiswa dengan AI merupakan negosiasi kompleks antara ketepatan teknologi dan agensi manusia.

Kata kunci: Penulisan Akademik, Grammarly, AWE, Fenomenologi, Pengerjaan Digital

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, the digitalization of language learning has transformed from a mere supplementary tool into an absolute pedagogical necessity. Among the four fundamental language skills, academic writing is widely recognized as the most daunting hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It is a multi-dimensional process that requires not only the mastery of complex linguistic structures but also a deep understanding of rhetorical strategies, audience awareness, and rigid academic conventions (Hyland, 2003; Lubis, 2023). For students in Indonesia, particularly those situated in localized higher education institutions, the pressure to produce high-quality academic texts often leads to significant "writing anxiety," which can hinder their overall academic progress and linguistic development.

At the English Education Department of STAIN Mandailing Natal, students in their fourth semester face a critical transitional period. During this phase, the curriculum shifts from basic paragraph composition to more rigorous academic discourse, such as argumentative essays and research-based reports. This transition often reveals a significant gap between the students' interlanguage proficiency and the high standards of academic English. In this context, students frequently struggle with "fossilized errors" systematic grammatical mistakes that have become habitual and a lack of lexical diversity, which makes the writing process a source of frustration rather than a creative intellectual endeavor.

The primary challenge within this academic environment is the provision of timely, effective, and personalized feedback. While human feedback from lecturers is considered the "gold standard" for writing improvement, it is often hampered by practical constraints such as large class sizes and the intensive time required for thorough correction. This "feedback vacuum" has paved the way for the rapid adoption of Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools, with Grammarly being the most prominent choice among students. Grammarly offers a suite of AI-driven features that provide instantaneous feedback on grammar, punctuation, clarity, and tone, functioning as a "24/7 digital assistant" that promises to polish student work before it reaches the eyes of the lecturer.

However, the integration of such technology into the writing process is not a simple mechanical act; it involves a complex process of "navigation." Navigation in this study refers to how students cognitively process the AI's suggestions, how they emotionally respond to being corrected by a machine, and how they behaviorally implement or reject those corrections (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). There is a growing concern in ELT pedagogy that tools like Grammarly might lead to "passive learning" or "blind reliance." If students merely treat the tool as a "magic fix" without understanding the underlying linguistic principles, the educational value of the feedback is lost, and the AI becomes a crutch rather than a learning aid.

Furthermore, the experience of navigating Grammarly is deeply influenced by the unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students at STAIN Mandailing Natal. Most students are native speakers of Mandailingnese or Malay, and their English writing often reflects the structural logic and metaphors of their mother tongues. When Grammarly's algorithms which are largely based on Western linguistic norms flag these culturally-influenced expressions as "unclear" or "wordy," a unique conflict arises. Students find themselves at a crossroads between maintaining their cultural voice and conforming to a standardized, digital version of English. This creates a psychological and cognitive tension that has not been adequately explored in existing literature.

Despite the widespread use of Grammarly, there is a notable research gap regarding

the "lived experiences" of students in Indonesian religious higher education institutions. Most previous studies have focused on quantitative outcomes, such as the increase in writing scores or the accuracy of the software's error detection. However, these numbers fail to capture the internal monologue of the student the confusion, the relief, the fatigue, and the decision-making processes that occur during the revision stage. Understanding these subjective experiences is crucial for developing a more effective pedagogy that integrates AI without sacrificing student agency or critical thinking.

Therefore, this study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of the students' journey in navigating Grammarly-based feedback. By focusing on fourth-semester students at STAIN Mandailing Natal, this research aims to provide a localized perspective on a global phenomenon. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for both students and lecturers on how to foster "Feedback Literacy" in the age of Artificial Intelligence, ensuring that technology serves to empower the writer rather than silence their critical voice

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Design, as formulated by Moustakas (1994). This design is specifically suited for investigating the "noema" (the what) and "noesis" (the how) of a shared human experience. The researcher sought to uncover the "essential structure" of navigating Grammarly-based feedback. By focusing on the lived experiences of students at STAIN Mandailing Natal, the study aims to move beyond surface-level observations of tool usage and instead delve into the deep-seated cognitive and emotional processes that define the students' relationship with AI-mediated writing

The participants for this study consisted of 15 undergraduate students (12 females and 3 males) from the fourth semester of the English Education Department at STAIN Mandailing Natal. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who met three specific criteria: (1) they were currently enrolled in an Academic Writing course, (2) they had used Grammarly for at least one full academic year, and (3) they were willing to provide access to their writing drafts and Grammarly reports. This specific cohort was chosen because the fourth semester represents a "linguistic threshold" where students transition from basic narrative writing to complex argumentative discourse.

Data were triangulated through three primary sources:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: Core data source. Sessions lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, exploring internal monologues and decision-making processes.
2. Reflective Writing Journals: Weekly reflections capturing immediate reactions and frustrations over an eight-week period.
3. Document Analysis: Analysis of 30 writing drafts alongside Grammarly feedback reports to compare verbal reports with actual revision behaviors.

The analysis followed the steps of phenomenological data reduction. First, Horizontalization was performed, treating every significant statement with equal value. Second, statements were grouped into Meaning Units or thematic clusters. Third, Imaginative Variation was conducted to uncover underlying structural themes. Finally, these were integrated into a Universal Description of the experience.

Participant anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms (Participant 1 to Participant 15). The researcher practiced Epoche (Bracketing) setting aside personal experiences and biases regarding Grammarly to allow authentic student voices to emerge

FINFINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Cognitive Authority Conflict (AI vs. Lecturer)

Students often experienced a “clash” between human and digital authority.

"My lecturer said 'In conclusion' is fine, but Grammarly suggested 'To sum up' to be more concise. I felt confused because I didn't want to lose points from my lecturer, but I also wanted the AI to stop flagging my sentence." (Participant 4)

Theme 2: Behavioral Negotiation: The “Blind Acceptance” Pattern

Lower-proficiency students often engaged in “blind clicking” to handle feedback overload.

"If there are 40 mistakes, I just click 'accept' on everything. I don't have time to read why I was wrong; I just want the red lines to go away." (Participant 2)

Theme 3: Affective Euphoria: The “Green Score” Obsession

The numerical score acted as a primary emotional motivator.

"Seeing my score turn green and reach 95 makes me feel like a professional writer. It gives me a burst of happiness that makes me want to write more." (Participant 12)

Theme 4: L1 Interference and Cultural Clashes

AI algorithms often struggled with culturally-nuanced English expressions.

"I tried to express a concept about 'adit' (tradition), but Grammarly kept telling me the sentence was nonsense. I felt like the AI was trying to erase my voice." (Participant 9)

Theme 5: Feedback Fatigue (Cognitive Overload)

Massive amounts of feedback led to mental exhaustion and passive implementation.

Theme 6: Strategic Cross-Verification (Evaluative Judgment)

Advanced students used external tools to verify Grammarly's suggestions.

Theme 7: The “Fake Score” Realization

The understanding that AI scores do not always correlate with academic grades.

Theme 8: Reduced Social Shame

Grammarly functioned as a “shield” against the embarrassment of mechanical errors during lecturer consultations.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study at STAIN Mandailing Natal illustrate a complex phenomenon where Grammarly acts as both a Psychological Anchor and a Cognitive Trap. In terms of affective engagement, the tool successfully serves as an “anchor” that stabilizes students' emotions. By providing immediate corrections, it effectively lowers the “Affective Filter” (Krashen, 1982), reducing the paralyzing anxiety often associated with academic writing in a second language. Students feel a sense of security knowing that their “surface-level” errors are being monitored by an objective digital entity rather than a judgmental human eye. This emotional relief allows them to focus more on the act of writing itself, which is a positive step toward developing writing fluency.

However, the “Cognitive Trap” emerges when this emotional security leads to behavioral passivity. The data suggests that many students fall into a pattern of “lazy writing,” characterized by a lack of critical reflection on the AI's suggestions. Instead of using Grammarly as a “scaffold” to reach a higher level of linguistic understanding, they use it as a surrogate for their own cognitive effort. This aligns with the “Feedback Overload” theory, where a high volume of automated corrections causes a cognitive shutdown, leading students to click “Accept” simply to clear the interface. At STAIN Mandailing Natal, this is particularly evident among students with lower proficiency who prioritize the “Green Score” over the actual learning process. They are trapped in a cycle of performance-seeking rather

than knowledge-acquisition.

Furthermore, the "L1 Interference" findings provide a critical critique of the Western-centric nature of current AI tools. Grammarly's algorithms are primarily trained on Standard American or British English corpora, which often fail to recognize the rhetorical nuances and cultural identities of Indonesian learners. When students attempt to translate Mandailingnese or Malay concepts into English, Grammarly frequently flags these as "unclear" or "incorrect." This not only creates confusion but also risks marginalizing the "World Englishes" perspective. It suggests that while AI can assist with mechanics, it may inadvertently silence the unique "cultural voice" of the writer. Therefore, the navigation process at STAIN Mandailing Natal is not just about grammar; it is a struggle for cultural and linguistic agency in a digitalized academic world

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, navigating Grammarly at STAIN Mandailing Natal is a sophisticated "double-edged" journey where the tool serves as both a vital psychological anchor for reducing writing anxiety and a potential cognitive trap that encourages passive, "blind" acceptance. While the AI successfully provides mechanical scaffolding within the students' Zone of Proximal Development, its Western-centric algorithms often clash with local linguistic logic and cultural expressions, forcing students into a complex negotiation between digital precision and their own authorial voice. Ultimately, the effectiveness of this technology depends on the development of "Feedback Literacy," requiring a pedagogical shift where lecturers facilitate critical negotiation with AI to ensure that students remain empowered authors of their own ideas rather than mere operators of an automated system

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