

FROM DEPENDENCE TO AUTONOMY: EFL STUDENTS' STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT WITH GRAMMARLY

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how EFL students perceive and utilize Grammarly as a tool to foster grammar correction autonomy. The study involved ten English Education students from UIN Walisongo Semarang and employed interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to analyze how students edit their work, depend on tools, and think about their own learning. Findings reveal that students view Grammarly as a confidence-boosting aid that enhances grammatical accuracy and encourages independent revision. Many actively combined Grammarly with peer input, grammar resources, and self-review routines, demonstrating emerging learner autonomy. However, challenges such as excessive reliance, vague feedback, and emotional frustration hindered more profound engagement. The study concludes that Grammarly can support grammar autonomy when learners utilize it critically and educators provide reflective guidance, suggesting that students require pedagogy that balances digital support with self-regulated learning.

Keywords: *AI-Generative Correction, Self-Regulated Learning*

Introduction

The function of feedback in grammar correction continues to attract attention within EFL instruction, especially regarding its influence on student autonomy. One notable area of exploration compares instructor-driven feedback with peer-based input, as the latter not only reinforces grammatical precision but also nurtures collaborative engagement and shared accountability (Duhlicher 2019). Learners' trust in peer contributions and their evaluations of peer competence can substantially affect how successful this method becomes.

Another vital angle involves analyzing students' preferences and perceptions toward distinct types of grammar feedback. While some learners appreciate explicit corrections for their clarity, others lean toward implicit or metalinguistic hints that encourage cognitive involvement during the revision process (Gunady 2018). Exploring how these preferences differ based on language proficiency or cultural influences is crucial for designing instruction that honors learner identity and advances independent learning.

To enhance learners' grammar self-editing skills, researchers have recommended incorporating metacognitive strategies into classroom practice. When students learn to utilize checklists, pose reflective questions, or identify recurring grammar errors in their writing, they evolve into more self-reliant and intentional writers (Anh 2019; Bailey and Lee 2020). This pedagogical strategy aligns with models of self-regulated learning that position students as proactive agents in evaluating and refining their language output.

In the current digital landscape, grammar independence is increasingly influenced by the availability of automated editing tools like Grammarly or QuillBot. These applications provide instant feedback and explanations, which may bolster both grammatical accuracy and learner independence. However, more research is needed to discover if students actually learn about grammar using these tools or if they just rely on them without thinking, which could hinder their deeper understanding (Wijnands, Rijt, and Coppen 2021).

Emotional variables such as writing-related anxiety, confidence levels, and self-efficacy also shape students' willingness to assume control of their revision process. Kurniasih et al. (2022) found that only students with high motivation could excellently perform online revisions. Learners who struggle with writing apprehension might shy away from self-editing out of fear of making mistakes, whereas those with strong self-belief are more likely to engage in autonomous grammar monitoring and revision.

Closely tied to these affective dynamics is the notion of learner identity—particularly how students' cultural assumptions about authority and independence affect their responses to feedback. Those raised in teacher-centered educational systems may initially reject independent revision strategies, expecting instructors to address every error. Investigating how identity shapes feedback preferences could enable educators to promote autonomy through culturally responsive teaching practices (Saeli 2019).

The timing of feedback delivery also plays a significant role in learners' engagement with grammar correction. Li, Ou, and Lee (2025) found that delayed responses can promote more deliberate reflection and self-assessment while immediate feedback may encourage swift improvement. Future research should examine which timing strategies better foster long-term autonomy and transfer of grammatical knowledge to new writing situations.

Taking a long-term view is essential to understanding how grammar autonomy evolves. A long-term study could check if ongoing feedback that encourages independence results in noticeable improvements in writing quality and confidence in self-editing. Li and Alharbi (2025) highlight the critical role of personalized digital feedback, heightened self-efficacy, and increased autonomy in fostering motivation and enhancing English proficiency within virtual learning environments. Following learners across academic terms could reveal how independent behaviors persist and develop.

Focusing feedback on specific grammatical issues—such as article usage, verb conjugation, or prepositional accuracy—can facilitate students form targeted revision routines. These focused strategies may later generalize across writing contexts, contributing to more comprehensive grammatical development. This idea supports prior findings on focused corrective feedback, which underline the effectiveness of narrowing the scope of correction (Gunady 2018).

Additionally, the beliefs and practices of educators significantly shape grammar feedback. Instructors' perspectives on learner autonomy, error correction, and student capability directly influence the nature of their feedback and the degree to which they

empower students to take ownership of their grammar improvement. Investigating these teacher perspectives in relation to actual classroom practices can guide professional training aimed at harmonizing instructional support with independent learning (Martinez, Guadalupe, and Whitney 2025).

Earlier studies in EFL settings mostly looked at the grammar feedback given by teachers, compared different correction methods (like direct and indirect), and assessed how tools like Grammarly affect basic writing accuracy. However, few studies have explored how EFL learners themselves interpret and utilize grammar feedback as part of developing autonomy—especially in the context of digital tools. Most existing scholarship treats Grammarly as a mechanical assessor rather than as a pedagogical ally. For instance, although Ranalli (2018) assessed Grammarly's effect on writing proficiency, the study did not explore how learners process feedback, reflect on grammar knowledge, or actively manage their learning. Moreover, the emotional and cognitive dimensions of student interaction with such platforms—such as their feelings about being corrected, the techniques they employ, and how their self-editing abilities evolve—remain underexplored.

To fill this research gap, the present study examines how learners perceive and utilize Grammarly not just to identify errors but as a tool for nurturing autonomy in grammar correction. Through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, this study gathers student perspectives and analyzes their beliefs, routines, and obstacles in working with automated feedback. This triangulated and learner-centered method provides a fuller picture of the mental and emotional processes involved in autonomous grammar learning.

This study's unique contribution lies in its focus on learners' viewpoints and its reframing of Grammarly as a facilitator of independence rather than merely a corrective mechanism. Unlike prior research, this study highlights how students understand their responsibilities in managing grammatical errors and how their strategies—such as self-review, error tracking, and integrating digital, peer, and teacher feedback—contribute to their growth as autonomous writers. It also reveals the emotional tensions and strategic challenges learners navigate, especially between reliance on digital support and the pursuit of meaningful grammar comprehension.

Although prior research has examined grammar feedback in EFL settings—often comparing teacher-led and peer-based corrections or evaluating tools like Grammarly for writing accuracy—there remains a notable gap in understanding how learners actively interpret and utilize such feedback to build autonomy. Most existing studies treat Grammarly as a mechanical corrector rather than a pedagogical tool. They seldom address the emotional, cognitive, and strategic processes involved in students' engagement with automated feedback. This study fills that gap by focusing on learners' perspectives, exploring how they utilize Grammarly not only to detect errors but also to develop grammar correction autonomy through self-review, reflection, and integrated feedback strategies. Its novelty lies in reframing Grammarly as a facilitator of learner independence and in examining the affective and metacognitive dimensions of grammar correction in digital contexts.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine EFL students' perceptions of grammar correction autonomy, focusing on their engagement with

Grammarly. A case study approach was deemed appropriate as it enabled in-depth exploration of the delicate relationship between digital feedback tools and learner independence in academic writing (Yin 2003). This design offered insight into students' experiences, evolving roles as self-directed writers, and the pedagogical implications of integrating AI-based grammar support.

The research involved ten English Education students from UIN Walisongo Semarang—five from the fifth semester and five from the seventh—to represent a range of academic maturity. All participants were actively engaged in academic writing, including thesis projects and article drafting, ensuring grammar feedback held immediate relevance.

Data collection relied on three interconnected methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews served as the primary tool, guiding discussions around students' views on Grammarly's role in fostering autonomy, their perceived responsibility in grammar correction, and the challenges they encountered. The flexible format allowed for consistency across responses while also capturing spontaneous insights (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021).

Classroom observations complemented the interviews by documenting students' real-time grammar correction practices. These sessions focused on tool usage, self-editing behaviors, assistance-seeking tendencies, and emotional reactions to challenges—using indicators adapted from Dizon & Gold (2023). This method revealed behavioral patterns not easily accessible through verbal reports.

To further validate findings, the researcher analyzed student writing samples processed through Grammarly. These texts provided tangible evidence of correction strategies, error patterns, and revision sources—whether from AI suggestions, peer input, or self-initiated edits. The analysis of documents was triangulated with other methods, which bolstered the study's credibility.

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun & Clarke (2023) framework. The researcher reviewed transcripts, observation logs, and writing samples to generate initial codes tied to autonomy, tool reliance, and grammatical awareness. Themes such as “independent learning,” “AI dependency,” and “strategic editing” emerged. The analysis also categorized common grammar errors (e.g., subject-verb agreement, punctuation) and assessed whether revisions reflected genuine engagement or passive reliance on Grammarly.

This multi-method strategy provided a well-rounded view of how students interact with AI tools in grammar correction and what these interactions reveal about their learning autonomy. By integrating interviews, observations, and documents, the study captured both the benefits and limitations of Grammarly in promoting self-directed grammar improvement.

Result and Discussion

This section outlines the study's findings on EFL students' views and experiences of grammar correction autonomy, with a focus on their interactions with Grammarly. We categorize the data into three main themes. (1) Grammarly's role in fostering autonomy, (2) students' self-perceptions in grammar correction, and (3) barriers to grammar autonomy. Evidence was drawn from interviews, classroom observations, and student writing samples.

The study involved ten English education students from UIN Walisongo Semarang, split evenly between the fifth and seventh semesters to capture diverse academic perspectives.

To protect participants' identities, the researcher utilized anonymized codes consisting of two capital letters and a number indicating the student's semester. For example, RM5 referred to a fifth-semester student, while NK7 represented one from the seventh. This coding system enabled semester-based analysis while ensuring confidentiality.

Grammarly's Role in Fostering Autonomy

Students generally viewed Grammarly as a valuable aid in developing independent writing skills. Most appreciated its instant error detection, automatic corrections, and clear feedback. SM5 noted, "Grammarly gives immediate suggestions, which help me learn faster than waiting for feedback from my lecturer." Observations confirmed active student utilize during drafting, especially for correcting verb tenses and punctuation.

Features like tone adjustment and clarity enhancement also stood out. Learners favored Grammarly's neutral, consistent feedback, which they found encouraging. RM7 shared, "Grammarly doesn't criticize—it just shows what's wrong. That boosts my confidence."

Analysis of student drafts demonstrated tangible improvements in accuracy and structure, with Grammarly facilitating reduce recurring mistakes like subject-verb disagreement and run-on sentences.

Students' Self-Perception in Grammar Correction

Participants recognized that they held primary responsibility for correcting their grammar. Grammarly served as a secondary tool. TM5 stated, "I use Grammarly after proofreading my work myself." Interviews revealed frequent self-checking, use of grammar references, and collaboration through peer discussions. Observations indicated students combining Grammarly with YouTube lessons and grammar apps.

Several learners kept personal logs of their errors. RM5 tracked frequent mistakes flagged by Grammarly to avoid repeating them. This behavior reflected growing metacognitive awareness and ownership of their learning. Observations supported this, with records demonstrating multiple rounds of revision before final submission.

Barriers to Grammar Autonomy

Despite their positive stance, students faced challenges. Some admitted becoming overly dependent on Grammarly, particularly when using the free version. SM7 confessed, "Sometimes I get lazy because Grammarly fixes it for me," suggesting a risk of shallow learning.

Other obstacles included vague feedback and emotional frustration. RM7 said, "Grammarly sometimes marks correct sentences as wrong, which confuses and frustrates me." When corrections exceeded their grammar knowledge, some students lost confidence in their revision skills.

Observations revealed hesitation when students encountered unclear suggestions. Learners often struggled with interpreting feedback, maintaining meaning, and recognizing subtle errors. Writing samples supported this, indicating unresolved mistakes such as misplaced modifiers and redundancy—signs of incomplete grammar internalization.

To manage these issues, students adopted different strategies: upgrading to premium versions, consulting peers or instructors, and supplementing Grammarly with manual checks. TM5 described their approach: “I verify Grammarly’s suggestions by checking rules online or asking a friend.” Many also used grammar videos, online forums, and apps such as DeepL for better clarity.

Discussion

The study's findings align with existing theories and prior research on learner autonomy, grammar correction, and digital assistance in EFL writing. The results indicate that while Grammarly contributes to developing student independence, its impact depends on learners’ self-perception and how they navigate automated feedback.

The first key insight confirms that students view Grammarly as a tool that enhances their autonomy, echoing earlier studies that highlight technology's role in fostering self-directed learning (Dizon and Gold 2023). Participants valued its instant, neutral feedback, which encouraged them to revise more confidently and frequently. This finding supports Klimova's (2019) argument that timely responses empower learners to take ownership of their writing. Grammarly’s features—such as clarity enhancement and tone adjustments—also align with Bailey & Lee's (2020) assertion that effective feedback should promote not only grammatical accuracy but also stylistic development. However, its benefits are not automatic. As SM5 explained, “Grammarly gives instant corrections and suggestions that help me understand my mistakes faster than waiting for my lecturer’s feedback.” This data suggests that when students utilize Grammarly reflectively, they become less reliant on instructors and more engaged in independent learning.

The second finding emphasizes how students perceive their role in grammar correction. Beyond relying on Grammarly, many engaged in self-proofreading, tracked recurring errors, and consulted additional grammar sources. These habits demonstrate metacognitive involvement, which Harrison & Vallin (2018) consider central to learner autonomy. TM5 expressed, “I don’t depend on Grammarly for everything—I use it after reviewing my work first,” reflecting a balanced approach that combines personal initiative with tool-based support. This behavior aligns with the self-regulated learning model (Musliha and Revita 2021), where students monitor their performance and apply strategies to meet learning goals. Such practices indicate that autonomy involves intentional, active learning rather than the absence of teacher input.

The third theme uncovers the limitations of relying solely on automated tools. Some students, especially free-version users, displayed superficial engagement with Grammarly’s suggestions. SM7 admitted, “Sometimes I’m too lazy to think about the rule because Grammarly fixes it for me,” exposing a tendency toward passive learning. This observation supports Ranalli’s (2018) concerns that unchecked use of grammar checkers may encourage dependence rather than reflection. Emotional challenges such as confusion, frustration, and diminished confidence also emerged, echoing Wiraningsih & Santosa's (2020) findings on affective barriers to autonomy. Observation notes and writing samples revealed persistent unresolved errors, indicating that without more profound understanding, revisions remained superficial.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated efforts to regain control of their learning. Many adopted hybrid strategies—cross-checking Grammarly’s feedback with grammar books, peer discussions, or instructor input. This blended approach reflects the concept of scaffolded autonomy (Karnasuta 2017), where learners gradually assume

more responsibility with appropriate support. TM5 shared, “I check Grammarly’s suggestion, then I look up the rule or ask a friend,” illustrating how digital feedback can spark deeper inquiry when students engage critically.

In conclusion, the findings affirm that learner autonomy in grammar correction hinges not on tool availability but on how students interact with feedback. When learners approach Grammarly with critical thinking and strategic intent, it becomes a catalyst for independent learning. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding this process by encouraging reflection, building grammar awareness, and modeling how to interpret automated feedback effectively.

Conclusion

The findings reveal Grammarly’s multifaceted role in fostering grammar autonomy among EFL students. First, students recognized Grammarly as a helpful tool that boosted their confidence by offering immediate, unbiased feedback. Features like clarity suggestions and tone refinement guided them toward more accurate and refined writing. When utilized deliberately, Grammarly served as a scaffold for independent learning.

Second, students demonstrated growing ownership of their grammar correction. Many paired Grammarly with manual proofreading, error tracking, grammar references, and peer collaboration. These actions reflected metacognitive involvement and an emerging ability to self-regulate their writing—core traits of learner autonomy.

However, not all participants demonstrated full autonomy. Some relied too heavily on Grammarly, accepting corrections passively without understanding the underlying rules. Others struggled with vague feedback, leading to confusion, frustration, and disengagement. These challenges suggest that while Grammarly supports learning, it cannot substitute for guided instruction and critical reflection.

In sum, Grammarly can enhance grammatical accuracy and support autonomous learning, but its effectiveness depends on how students engage with its feedback. Learners benefit most when they utilize the tool critically, combine it with independent strategies, and receive instructional support. The study emphasizes that we need to integrate technology with pedagogy that fosters reflection and learner responsibility.

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