



Exploring the use of Automated Application in Writing Activities: University Students' Experiences

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Abstract : This study explores the experiences of university students in using Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools during English writing activities. Using a qualitative case study approach, five EFL university students were observed and interviewed to examine how they interact with AWE systems, particularly Quillbot, and how they perceive its role in their writing development. The finding revealed that students utilized AWE for grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, paraphrasing, and idea generation. While the tools were generally perceived as helpful in improving writing accuracy and fostering independence, participants also expressed concerns about over-reliance on automated feedback and the potential erosion of personal writing style. These findings underscore the importance of using AWE critically and in combination with self-reflection and human feedback to support more effective and autonomous writing practices.

Keywords: Automated Writing Evaluation; EFL Writing, Student Perception; Self-directed Learning; Writing Technology

Abstrak : Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa dalam menggunakan alat Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) dalam kegiatan menulis bahasa Inggris. Dengan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, lima mahasiswa EFL diamati dan diwawancara untuk memahami bagaimana mereka berinteraksi dengan sistem AWE, khususnya Quillbot, serta bagaimana mereka memaknai peran AWE dalam perkembangan kemampuan menulis mereka. Analisis naratif tematik mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa memanfaatkan AWE untuk koreksi tata bahasa, peningkatan kosakata, parafrase, dan pengembangan ide. Meskipun AWE umumnya dipandang membantu dalam meningkatkan akurasi tulisan dan mendorong kemandirian, para partisipan juga menyampaikan kekhawatiran mengenai ketergantungan berlebih pada umpan balik otomatis dan potensi hilangnya gaya penulisan pribadi. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya penggunaan AWE secara kritis dan reflektif, serta perlunya menggabungkan alat ini dengan umpan balik manusia untuk mendukung praktik menulis yang lebih efektif dan mandiri.

Kata kunci: Evaluasi Menulis Otomatis; Persepsi Mahasiswa; Pembelajaran Mandiri; Teknologi Menulis

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing is widely regarded as one of the most complex skills to master. Unlike speaking or listening, which can be developed through interaction and exposure, writing requires consistent attention to grammar, vocabulary, structure, coherence, and tone. Many EFL learners struggle to express their ideas clearly and accurately, particularly in academic settings where expectations are high and support is limited. In higher education, this challenge is magnified: students are often expected to write fluently and independently in English, yet receive minimal feedback during the drafting process. As a result, many seek alternative ways to support their writing development. Previous research by Barkaoui (2019) emphasizes this gap, noting that the scarcity of formative feedback in EFL classrooms often drives students to adopt self-directed strategies, including digital writing tools.

Received: July 14, 2026; Revised: Agustus 20, 2025; Accepted: Oktober 07, 2025;

Online Available: November 24, 2025

One such approach that has grown in popularity is the use of Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools. These tools such as *Grammarly*, *Quillbot*, and *ChatGPT* offer instant feedback on grammar, vocabulary, sentence clarity, and tone. AWE tools have become increasingly integrated into the writing routines of students due to their accessibility, speed, and perceived reliability. Research has shown that AWE can assist in reducing writing anxiety (Rahimi & Zhang, 2018), support revision habits (Palermo & Thomson, 2018), and enhance students' ability to self-edit (Parra & Calero, 2019). Many EFL students now rely on these tools not only for correcting errors but also for exploring vocabulary, paraphrasing ideas, and checking coherence.

In terms of technical support, AWE is often valued for its role in self-directed learning. Mohamad et al. (2019) and Lim and Phua (2019) emphasized that the ability to receive feedback without waiting for a teacher promotes independence, especially in blended or online learning environments. Similarly, Wu and Halim (2024) found that AWE use encouraged students to become more reflective and strategic in their writing. However, the benefits of AWE are not without concerns.

Several researchers have highlighted the limitations of AWE. Stevenson and Phakiti (2019) argued that AWE tends to focus on surface-level errors and struggles with deeper writing issues such as argument structure and critical analysis. Wilson and Roscoe (2020) added that while AWE may increase short-term confidence, it could also lead to dependency if students do not learn to evaluate feedback critically. Other studies (e.g., Wang, Yu, & Luo, 2020) have noted that AWE tools often fail to consider individual writing voice and intent, which may lead to homogenized or overly formal output. Furthermore, some students report confusion or contradiction in the automated feedback (Roscoe et al., 2018), which may lead to blind acceptance or disengagement.

Given the varying perspectives on AWE, it is essential to further investigate how students actually engage with these tools in real writing contexts. Rather than focusing solely on what AWE is capable of, attention must be directed toward how students use, interpret, and respond to its feedback. This study, therefore, seeks to understand the lived experiences of university students who regularly integrate AWE into their writing routines. It explores how students incorporate AWE into their writing process and examines their perceptions of the tools' strengths and limitations.

Through classroom observation and in-depth interviews, this study investigates not only how students interact with AWE in real-time, but also how they reflect on its impact on their writing development. By combining narrative data with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke,

2006), the research offers insights into how AWE can serve as both a writing aid and a site of pedagogical tension in the EFL classroom.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate how students experience the use of Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools in their writing activities. Five EFL students were purposefully selected based on their consistent use of AWE platforms in academic contexts. These participants came from different educational backgrounds but shared a level of familiarity with tools such as *Quillbot*, *Grammarly*, and *ChatGPT*.

Data collection involved two main techniques: classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. During the writing session, the researcher observed students as they engaged with Quillbot to revise their written drafts, enabling an in-the-moment look at how they interacted with AWE tools. Individual interviews were then conducted to gain deeper insights into each student's background, writing habits, and views on the role of AWE in their learning. The interview prompts were designed to encourage personal reflection and draw out meaningful stories about how AWE shaped their writing process.

To analyze the data, the study used thematic narrative analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This approach allowed the researcher to identify patterns and recurring themes across participant experiences, while still respecting the uniqueness of each story. The analysis focused on how students used AWE, their responses to the feedback provided, and their thoughts on the benefits and limitations of using these tools for developing writing skills.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study investigates how university students utilize Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools and how they perceive the tools' effectiveness in supporting their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. Through a combination of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with five participants, three primary themes emerged: students' application of AWE in writing tasks, their interactions with the tools, and their perspectives on AWE's benefits and drawbacks. These themes are discussed below, along with direct participant quotes and relevant scholarly references.

1. Students' Application of AWE in Writing

All participants demonstrated prior experience with AWE tools, particularly *Grammarly*, *Quillbot*, and *ChatGPT*. Most had been using these platforms consistently for years—some were first introduced to them during high school. One participant recalled beginning to use Grammarly in the tenth grade, while another stated that the use of AWE became essential during university due to increasing academic responsibilities and the limited availability of immediate feedback from instructors. This aligns with previous studies, such as Wang et al. (2022), which found that students often adopt AWE tools early in their academic journey to supplement feedback gaps and develop writing autonomy.

Students reported using AWE primarily for refining grammar, paraphrasing, and improving sentence clarity. They viewed AWE as a convenient and effective resource to address common writing issues. As one participant shared:

“I regularly use grammar checkers because I still struggle with grammar. I need help correcting errors I might miss.” (Interview, Excerpt 003)

Another participant emphasized time-efficiency as a major factor:

“Since college, I’ve relied on AWE tools because time is limited, and it’s hard to get manual feedback. Tools like Quillbot help me revise quickly.” (Interview Excerpt 002)

Beyond academic writing, students also employed AWE in more practical and personal contexts. For instance, one student mentioned using AWE to draft formal emails and prepare resumes for job applications. Another, who worked in real estate, used AWE to enhance promotional materials for clients. These examples illustrate how AWE tools have become embedded in students' broader communication practices.

Students consistently referred to AWE as an indispensable support tool in their writing process. Many specifically mentioned using it to overcome personal weaknesses, particularly related to grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, students expressed confidence in using advanced features such as tone suggestions, synonym recommendations, and rewording functions. Every participant stated that they had a routine of checking their writing with AWE before submitting it, especially for assignments with higher stakes. These practices support findings from Mohamad et al. (2019), who emphasized that AWE tools reinforce self-directed learning when learners manage and evaluate their own revisions.

2. Interaction with AWE Tools

The study further explored students' active engagement with AWE through classroom observations, particularly during activities that involved revising drafts with Quillbot. While individual preferences varied, all participants displayed intentional, focused interaction with the tools. Several noted that they incorporated AWE into their daily academic routines.

One student described their consistent use:

“Every time I write in English, I check with AWE tools. Even for simple word choices, I ask ChatGPT or Grammarly for alternatives.” (Interview Excerpt 010)

Another student highlighted how independent learning shaped their habits:

“Because I study independently, I use AWE two to three times a week for assignments. It helps me stay on track without depending on a teacher.” (Interview Excerpt 011)

Some students extended their use of AWE into creative writing. A few described using ChatGPT to generate ideas for poetry and fiction, followed by editing drafts through Grammarly and Quillbot. One student reflected:

“I love writing poems in English. I get ideas from ChatGPT and later refine my drafts with Quillbot or Grammarly.” (Interview Excerpt 014)

Classroom observations revealed diverse interaction patterns. Student 01 revised with speed and certainty, indicating a high level of comfort and fluency with digital tools. Student 03 displayed a more analytical approach—carefully considering feedback and discussing suggestions with peers. In contrast, Student 04 skipped over several suggestions, possibly due to confusion or time constraints. These differences support Palermo and Thomson’s (2018) findings that while AWE encourages engagement in revision, individual interaction styles significantly influence learning outcomes.

In general, students described AWE as more than just a tool for correcting grammar—it played a central role in shaping the structure, coherence, and vocabulary of their writing. The immediacy of feedback helped reduce hesitation and made revision more manageable. Over time, these tools became integral to their writing routines, contributing both technical guidance and a sense of self-reliance.

3. Perceptions Toward AWE Tools

Overall, participants expressed favorable views of AWE. Many felt that it helped them become more confident writers by reducing the stress and uncertainty commonly associated with academic writing. The ability to receive instant feedback allowed them to work independently without needing to wait for external input.

“I feel like I have a writing partner when I use these tools. They make me feel more sure about what I’m writing.” (Interview Excerpt 017)

Students viewed AWE as empowering, particularly in fostering writing autonomy. They appreciated the immediacy and availability of feedback at any time—factors that align with the core values of self-directed learning, where learners take control of their progress and outcomes.

However, participants also raised some concerns. Several admitted that they sometimes accepted AWE suggestions without critically evaluating their appropriateness. This tendency was more common when under time pressure or when students felt unsure about their own writing decisions. Such passive use poses a risk of developing over-reliance on automated feedback, potentially limiting deeper reflection and growth.

4. Limitations and Challenges

Despite its benefits, AWE tools also presented notable limitations. A recurring concern among participants was the occasional mismatch between the tool's suggestions and their intended message or tone. Although the grammatical structure may have improved, students felt that the revisions sometimes compromised their personal writing voice.

“Sometimes the tool changes my sentence too much. It sounds good, but it's not really how I would say it.” (Interview Excerpt 020)

In addition, students noted that AWE tools did not adequately support more advanced aspects of writing such as argument development, idea organization, or coherence across paragraphs. While AWE was useful for surface-level corrections, it lacked the nuance needed to guide students through higher-order thinking and rhetorical structuring which is also highlighted by Stevenson and Phakiti (2019).

There were also cases where students found AWE feedback confusing or contradictory. A few followed suggestions blindly, while others ignored those they didn't understand. These behaviors point to a broader need for developing students' critical engagement and digital literacy skills when using AWE tools.

Ultimately, although AWE is valued as a practical aid, students emphasized that it should not be used in isolation. Many agreed that the best results came when AWE was complemented by human input—whether through teacher feedback, peer review, or self-reflection. This combined approach helped students maintain control over their work while benefiting from the efficiency and accessibility of automated support.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how university students use Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools in writing activities and how they perceive their usefulness and limitations. The findings demonstrate that AWE tools—especially Quillbot, Grammarly, and ChatGPT—are consistently integrated into students' writing routines. Students used them to correct grammar, enhance clarity, paraphrase ideas, and explore alternative expressions. These results echo the findings of Link, Mehrzad, and Rahimi (2022), who observed that AWE tools serve both

mechanical and cognitive functions, helping students address surface-level errors while also supporting idea generation and sentence variation.

Students in this study viewed AWE as a tool that increased their confidence and independence as writers. Several reported that using AWE allowed them to revise their writing more effectively and reduced the anxiety they usually felt when composing in English. These outcomes are consistent with the work of Rahimi and Zhang (2018), who found that AWE use can reduce emotional barriers in writing by offering students instant reassurance and control. Wilson and Roscoe (2020) also reported that students using AWE tools tend to feel more capable in managing their writing, especially in high-stakes academic situations. In this study, AWE functioned as a digital support system—allowing students to experiment with language more freely and become more engaged in the revision process.

Furthermore, the use of AWE promoted self-directed learning. Participants consistently used AWE without prompting from instructors, and many reported using it daily or multiple times a week. These behaviors support research by Mohamad et al. (2019) and Lim and Phua (2019), who highlighted AWE's role in promoting learner autonomy, particularly in contexts where teacher feedback is delayed or unavailable. One participant described AWE as a "writing partner," emphasizing the comfort and flexibility it provided. Another noted that using AWE helped them stay on track even when studying independently, which supports Wu and Halim's (2024) findings on AWE use in blended and distance learning environments.

However, while students reported many benefits, this study also revealed several concerns. A number of participants admitted that they accepted AWE feedback automatically, especially when under time pressure. This passive approach is a key issue discussed by Stevenson and Phakiti (2019), who warned that over-reliance on AWE could undermine students' critical thinking and deeper writing development. Several students in this study did not question the accuracy of suggestions or reflect on whether those revisions matched their intended meaning. This behavior risks limiting their long-term growth as writers.

Another common issue was the loss of personal writing voice. While AWE tools provided grammatically correct suggestions, some students felt that the feedback altered the tone or message of their original ideas. Wang, Yu, and Luo (2020) similarly found that AWE often offers "mechanically optimal" feedback that doesn't consider rhetorical intent or creativity. In this study, one participant said, "It sounds good, but it's not how I would say it," which underscores the tension between correctness and authenticity in digital writing tools.

Observational data further emphasized this variation in tool engagement. While some students, like Student 01, revised confidently and purposefully, others, like Student 04, skipped

feedback or misunderstood it. These different engagement levels mirror the findings of Roscoe et al. (2018), who noted that students' digital literacy, confidence, and writing goals significantly shape how they interact with AWE. It also raises questions about equity—whether all students are equally prepared to benefit from these tools, or if some may need more guidance.

These findings suggest that while AWE tools are helpful, they are not a complete solution. Used in isolation, they may limit opportunities for deeper reflection, collaboration, and growth. However, when used in tandem with peer review, instructor feedback, and metacognitive strategies, AWE tools can significantly enhance the writing process. Lim and Phua (2019) emphasized the need for "informed integration," where students are taught how to interpret, evaluate, and apply AWE feedback wisely.

In sum, the students in this study demonstrated thoughtful, though varied, engagement with AWE tools. Their experiences affirm both the promise and the pitfalls of AWE in EFL writing contexts. As digital tools become more embedded in education, it is essential that learners are supported not just in using them, but in understanding how to use them critically. With proper guidance, AWE can empower students to become more confident, autonomous, and reflective writers.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the significant role that Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools play in supporting the writing development of EFL university students. Tools such as Quillbot, Grammarly, and ChatGPT have become embedded in students' writing routines, helping them not only correct grammatical errors but also enhance clarity, rephrase content, and broaden vocabulary use. The immediate feedback provided by these tools allows students to revise independently, build confidence, and develop a sense of ownership in their writing. For many, AWE has become more than a mechanical aid; it acts as a writing partner throughout the drafting and revision process.

Furthermore, the use of AWE appears to encourage self-directed learning, particularly in situations where teacher feedback is limited or delayed. Students who consistently incorporate AWE into their academic routines develop a stronger awareness of their writing strengths and weaknesses. This growing autonomy proves valuable in both classroom environments and professional contexts where independent writing is required.

However, the findings also reveal challenges that must be acknowledged. Some students were found to apply AWE feedback uncritically, especially under time pressure, potentially

leading to over-reliance and limited reflection. Concerns also emerged around the loss of personal writing voice and the inability of AWE tools to support higher-level writing aspects such as logical flow, coherence, and argumentation. These issues suggest that AWE, while useful, should not be seen as a complete solution.

To ensure that students benefit fully from AWE, it is recommended that these tools be used in tandem with human feedback, peer collaboration, and reflective revision strategies. Educators should guide students to interact with AWE critically, evaluating suggestions rather than accepting them blindly, and using the tools as part of a broader writing pedagogy. Similarly, students are encouraged to remain conscious of their own voice and meaning when applying AWE feedback, rather than relying solely on what is generated automatically. Future research might explore how AWE use differs across writing genres or language proficiency levels, or how long-term engagement with these tools shapes writing development. With intentional and balanced use, AWE can support students in becoming not only more accurate, but also more independent, thoughtful, and confident writers.

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