‘You want me to check your grammar again?’
How online grammar checkers can complement our feedback to students

Saib Dianati
Flinders University

Michelle Cavaleri
Navitas Professional Institute

Critical Intersections: The 12th Biennial Conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning, University of Wollongong 25-27th November 2015
Introduction

> Feedback is an integral part of student-adviser interaction, especially in drop-in centres

> Problem – Difficult to provide comprehensive feedback to students regarding all their academic writing issues

> Solution – Online grammar checkers may assist learning advisers time, resources and energy
Studies have provided evidence of significant positive effects of explicit feedback on grammar (see Bitchener, 2008; Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

Automatic grammar checkers have been around since the 80s but were considered a novelty and inaccurate (Pogue, 1993; Major, 1994).

In recent times, they are regarded as a helpful aid rather than a burden (Potter & Filler, 2008) and can allow the learner to process information at his/her own pace, and can be accessed independently which may reduce anxiety (AbuSeileek, 2009).

Despite these benefits, educators and students may still overlook the capability of this tool to improve grammar in a relevant and engaging way.
Literature Review

> Research in the area of educational ICT regarding online grammar checkers still in its infancy, many related to a French online grammar checker called BonPatron.

> Burston (2008) investigated that BonPatron found 335 purposefully incorrect errors, the program detected 296 of them (88%).

> Nadasdi and Sinclair's (2007) findings commented that it was just as effective as teacher corrections.

> Similarly, Gauthier (2013) noted that it increased linguistic accuracy by “40 times”
What do grammar checkers do?

- Checkers work by scanning through a text and providing automated immediate feedback on grammar, spelling and punctuation errors.
- They highlight issues such as subject-verb disagreement, split infinitives, double negatives, run-on sentences and incorrect use of prepositions.
- If the checker finds an error, it will explain the grammar rule and may also offer a solution which the user can accept or ignore.
- Checkers also highlight spelling errors and words that may have been confused.
- Some grammar checkers also offer feedback on style and vocabulary usage.
Grammarly

> Founded in 2009
> Most popular and most accurate (Grammarly, 2015)
> Free and premium version available (premium provides a more comprehensive analysis)
> Cost USD $139.95 p/year – but normally offer half price for language and learning units
> Offers explanations – short and long of correct and incorrect usages in green and red
> Users click ‘apply to text’ to accept suggestion
Feedback on students’ writing is considered an instrumental part of the academic advising process. However, due to the time constraints of the student-adviser interaction, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers may find it difficult to provide comprehensive feedback to students regarding their grammatical mistakes. One solution is to utilise online grammar checking tools as a complement to feedback from an adviser. These tools can save advisers’ time and resources while at the same time promote greater self-directed learning and foster students’ self-efficacy. In spite of this, many Australian higher education institutions have overlooked this intersection between grammar support and online automated technology. This paper presents an overview of Grammarly, a popular online grammar checking website. In addition, this paper provides preliminary results of an evaluation of Grammarly by students at two Navitas colleges, the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) and Navitas College of Public Safety (NCPS). The students’ survey responses are analysed against Davis’ (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which offers a conceptual framework for predicting the acceptability and use of a technology. The results reveal that students perceive Grammarly as useful and easy to use, and students reported that Grammarly improved their writing and understanding of grammar rules.
Feedback on students’ writing is considered an instrumental part of the academic advising process. However, due to the time constraints of the student-adviser interaction, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers may find it difficult to provide comprehensive feedback to students regarding their grammatical mistakes. One solution is to utilise online grammar checking tools as a complement to feedback from an adviser. These tools can save advisers time and resources while at the same time promote greater self-directed learning and foster students’ self-efficacy. In spite of this, many Australian higher education institutions have overlooked this intersection between grammar support and online technology. This paper presents an overview of Grammarly, a popular online grammar checking website. In addition, this paper provides preliminary results of an evaluation of Grammarly by students at two Navitas colleges, the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) and Navitas College of Public Safety (NCPS). The students’ survey responses are analysed against Davis’ (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which offers a conceptual framework for predicting the acceptability and use of a technology. The results reveal that students perceive Grammarly as useful and easy to use, and students reported that Grammarly improved their writing and understanding of grammar rules.
A side note

There are many other free grammar checkers available online

- PaperRater
- After the Deadline
- GrammarCheck.me
- Ginger Grammar Checker
- Online Correction
- Spell Check Online
- Grammark.org
TAM is one of the most frequently employed models for research into new information technology acceptance and has been applied in various technology contexts and environments (see Gefen & Straub, 1997; Park, Rhoads, Hou, & Lee, 2014; Park, Nam, & Cha, 2012; Straub, Keil, & Brenner, 1997)
Grammarly use at Navitas colleges

> Case study: Preliminary results of an evaluation of Grammarly by 12 students at two Navitas colleges, ACAP and NCPS.

> Research method: Survey analysis (Survey Monkey)

> Aim: To understand the acceptance and use of Grammarly among higher education students against the framework of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Students were asked about Grammarly’s usefulness and ease of use, and the impact of Grammarly on their writing
### Results: Usefulness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not useful at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Extremely useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Results: Ease of use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not easy at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Extremely easy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results: Ways Grammarly is useful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammarly gives detailed feedback</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammarly makes helpful suggestions for improving my work</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammarly gives good explanations about my errors</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammarly has helped me understand grammar rules</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results: Drawbacks of Grammarly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawback</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is not always helpful</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not agree with some of the suggestions</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot understand the explanations</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have technical issues with Grammarly</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: How has Grammarly impacted on the quality of your writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact Type</th>
<th>Count (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive impact</td>
<td>11 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results: Do you think Grammarly helps you get a better mark on your assignment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

> The factors ‘usefulness’ and ‘ease of use’ were both evaluated as positive by more than 80% of the students.

> According to the TAM, because those students found Grammarly useful and easy to use, it is likely they will continue to use Grammarly.
Discussion: Perceived usefulness

> In the short term: One student commented that she had noticed “a massive upturn in my marks after using Grammarly for my academic writing” which highlights that he/she could see the immediate benefits of Grammarly.

> In the longer term: Nine students (75%) ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the explanations had helped them understand grammar rules. This indicates that Grammarly may be useful for learning about grammar, which may transfer to future pieces of writing. Therefore, Grammarly may, in fact, provide extra opportunities for language learning that is individualised and self-directed, which aligns with AbuSeileek's (2009) findings.
Discussion: Perceived usefulness

> “I only use Grammarly for proofreading and while it has found several mistakes I have missed, they were very minor issues and could probably have been noticed if I took better care in reading my work” highlights that Grammarly may not be as useful if careful proofreading and revision is undertaken.

> However, Grammarly has highlighted to this student that careful proofreading is important. Hence, Grammarly may be useful for helping students to recognise that proofreading is a key task in the writing process and illuminate the kind of errors students should be looking for.
Discussion: Perceived usefulness

> Students felt some recommendations were flawed or hard to understand, but showed an awareness by choosing not to accept all the suggested corrections.

> One student commented that it was still a helpful process and led to reflection that may not have occurred otherwise: “I may not choose to make the changes it suggests, but find thinking about it very useful”.

> Students need to be discerning about what suggestions to take up, so Grammarly may benefit more able writers because they “have clearer communicative and rhetorical intentions for their writing than less able writers, enabling them to make more appropriate use of their grammatical understanding to shape text appropriately” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 1256).
Discussion: Perceived ease of use

> Two students found Grammarly difficult to use because “The grammer [sic] is American so I still had to consider Australian spelling & grammer [sic]. Because the user is unable to choose the dictionary manually, it affects both its usefulness and ease of use.

> One student also stated that “The site was hard to navigate also so I won't use it again” which clearly shows the link between the perceived ease of use and acceptance of the technology, as suggested by the TAM.
Discussion: Perceived ease of use

> One student reported that Grammarly “suggested something that made no sense”, highlighting that Grammarly’s use of metalinguistic terminology may be a barrier rather than a support for some students.

> This aligns with the findings of Jones et al. (2013) who reported that for some students “the level of conceptual thinking required to understand grammatical concepts and transfer that learning into their writing was too high a cognitive challenge” (p. 1256).

> Therefore, advisers may need to work initially with students to unpack some of the feedback and suggestions from Grammarly.
Implications

> The findings suggest that students can benefit from Grammarly’s individual instruction and the self-access nature of the tool.

> It can complement ALL practitioners’ feedback to students and can mitigate issues such as lack of time to address grammatical problems in student writing, leaving more time for advisers to focus on higher-level writing concerns.

> Although Grammarly is quite sophisticated, users should carefully consider each suggestion in light of the sometimes flawed recommendations to writers. Advisors should initially work with students to model how to use the suggestions.
Limitations and areas for future research

- This study was very small scale, so similar studies with a larger sample are needed to corroborate these findings.
- A follow-up survey is planned to see whether these students do in fact continue to use Grammarly in subsequent terms.
- It would also be beneficial to explore Grammarly against one of the extensions of the TAM (see Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; McFarland and Hamilton, 2006)
- More research into the accuracy of the recommendations as well as adviser and educator perceptions of the technology is needed
References


