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Leveraging Digital Platforms to Enhance ESL Reading and Writing Skills: A Case Study of Google Docs and Grammarly

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Abstract

The use of digital technology in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms has grown rapidly in recent years. It has changed the way students learn by encouraging them to work together, interact with one another, and take more responsibility for their own learning. Although technology-supported language education has received growing scholarly attention, comparatively limited research has explored learners' experiences with the combined use of collaborative and AI-assisted digital tools in higher education ESL contexts. This study looks at how two specific tools Google Docs and Grammarly were used in ESL reading and writing classes for first-year engineering students. It focuses on how students felt about these tools, how engaged they were, how they worked with their classmates, and what their overall learning experience was like. The study was also driven by the understanding that engineering students have particular language needs that traditional ESL teaching often does not fully meet.

Sixty undergraduate ESL students took part in a three-week classroom programme that involved reading together, writing in groups, giving feedback to peers, and using AI tools to improve their writing. Information was gathered through classroom observations, interviews, personal journals, and an analysis of students' written work. The data were then examined to find common patterns and themes. The results showed that Google Docs helped students work together more actively and stay engaged in class, while Grammarly helped them improve

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their writing and feel more confident. Students said they enjoyed using these tools because they made learning more flexible and interactive. Howbeit, some difficulties were also noted, including limited access to technology, differences in students' ability to use digital tools, and a tendency to rely too heavily on automated suggestions. The study concludes that digital tools can genuinely improve ESL reading and writing skills, but only when teachers guide students on how to use them thoughtfully and critically.

Keywords: technology-based learning, Google Docs, Grammarly, collaborative writing, learner engagement, AI-assisted learning, digital pedagogy

Introduction

Digital technology has changed the way English is taught as a second language, especially in universities and colleges. Modern ESL classrooms are moving away from the old model where the teacher simply talks and students listen. Instead, they are using digital platforms that allow students to collaborate, interact, and learn at their own pace. These changes have made language learning more engaging and have given students more control over how they develop their skills. “In the digital world, learners increasingly expect flexible, interactive, and personalised learning experiences. Higher education institutions have responded by adopting a blended learning approach, combining traditional and online learning environments, a trend amplified in the post-pandemic period” (Muniandy and Selvanathan 135).

For engineering students learning English as a second language, being able to read and write well is very important both for doing well in their studies and for communicating professionally in the future, many of these students still struggle with grammar, building vocabulary, understanding what they read, organising their writing, and feeling confident when using English. To help students from these difficulties, many teachers have started using digital tools that support group learning and AI-assisted language practice. Engineering undergraduates face a particular challenge: they must learn complex technical subjects while also developing strong English skills at the same time. This makes them an especially important group to study when it comes to technology-supported language learning.

Two tools that have attracted a lot of attention from researchers and teachers are Google Docs and Grammarly. Google Docs is an online platform that allows students to read and write together in real time. They can edit each other’s work, leave comments, highlight text, and build documents as a group. These features encourage students to interact with one another, share ideas, and help each other understand texts and improve their writing. Grammarly works differently. It is an AI-powered tool that checks a student’s writing and gives immediate feedback on grammar, punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure. This helps students correct their own mistakes more independently and become more aware of how to use English accurately.

Research has shown that both collaborative digital tools and AI writing assistants can help students learn more effectively. Studies on tools like Google Docs highlight how working together online can increase student participation and strengthen communication skills. Research on AI writing tools like Grammarly suggests that getting quick, automatic feedback helps students revise their writing and become more self-aware as learners, some concerns have also been raised, particularly about students becoming too dependent on technology or struggling to use these tools effectively. What makes this study different is that it looks at both tools together, exploring how their combination one focused on collaboration, the other on individual AI feedback creates a richer learning environment than either could provide alone. This is an area that has not yet been studied enough.

Although interest in digital language learning is growing, few studies have looked at how Google Docs and Grammarly can be used together in ESL reading and writing classes for engineering students. Most existing research examines these tools separately. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how first-year engineering students experienced using both tools together in their ESL classrooms. Specifically, it looks at how students felt about the tools, how the tools affected their engagement and interaction with classmates, and what advantages and difficulties they encountered. Three main questions guided this study:

(1) How did first-year engineering ESL students feel about using Google Docs and Grammarly in their reading and writing classes?

(2) How did these tools affect their engagement, collaboration with peers, and writing development?

(3) What were the main benefits and challenges that students associated with technology-supported ESL learning?

These questions were designed to focus not just what students did with the tools, but also how they felt about using them providing a well-rounded and evidence-based perspective on digital language learning.

Literature Review

The use of technology in ESL education has become increasingly common, particularly in higher education. Research consistently shows that digital learning environments help students interact more, develop greater flexibility in how they learn, improve their digital skills, and become more independent language learners. When students use technology to take part in group tasks, engage with different types of media, and communicate digitally, their reading comprehension and writing skills tend to improve (Hafner and Miller 3; Zheng and Warschauer 205).

Being able to use digital tools effectively what researchers call digital literacy has become an essential skill for ESL students. Today, students are expected to do more than just read and write in English. They also need to be able to find and evaluate information online, participate in digital discussions, and use technology-based platforms for communication and learning. “Research shows that students who are

more digitally literate tend to be more willing to try new educational technologies and get more out of them" (Nguyen and Habók 12). At university level, students regularly use digital texts, shared online platforms, and AI-assisted tools that require both language skills and technical know-how. Researchers have also pointed out that digital literacy is not just a technical ability. It also involves knowing how to think critically about digital information and use digital tools wisely and purposefully within one's own area of study (Hafner and Miller 5). For ESL students in engineering programmes, this broader view of digital literacy is especially relevant because it connects language learning directly to the kind of professional communication, they will need in their careers.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is a well-known framework that explains why people choose to use or avoid new technology. According to this model, students are more likely to use a digital tool if they believe it is useful and easy to use. Research supports this: when students see a tool like Google Docs as genuinely helpful for group work and communication, they tend to use it more actively. Similarly, when they find an AI tool like Grammarly straightforward and beneficial, they are more likely to use it to guide their own learning and revision.

The growing use of artificial intelligence in language education brings both exciting possibilities and real concerns. On the positive side, AI writing tools can help students spot and fix errors in their writing and become more aware of how to use language correctly. However, many researchers warn that students should not simply accept every suggestion that an AI tool makes without thinking. True language learning requires students to reflect on feedback and make thoughtful decisions about their writing. Teachers therefore play a crucial role in helping students use AI tools wisely rather than depending on them too heavily. This is especially important in writing classes, where developing the ability to review and improve one's own work is a key learning goal. If students simply click 'accept' on every AI correction without understanding why, they may produce cleaner text on the surface, but they will not develop the deeper understanding of language that genuine writing improvement requires.

Among collaborative tools, Google Docs has been widely studied for its ability to support group writing, peer feedback, shared note-taking, and real-time discussion of texts. Research shows that when students write and read together using digital platforms, they share ideas more freely, help each other understand difficult content, build on each other's contributions, and revise their work collectively. This kind of active, shared participation leads to increased confidence, better communication, and stronger academic writing skills (Zhou and Lee 1282; Xu and Peng 1448). In other words, a digital tool like Google Docs is not just a place to store documents, it becomes a space where students genuinely learn from and with each other.

Alongside collaborative tools, AI-powered writing assistants have also grown in popularity within ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Grammarly

is one of the most widely used of these tools. It gives students immediate, specific feedback on their grammar, punctuation, word choice, sentence structure, and writing style. Studies have found that this kind of instant feedback helps students notice mistakes, revise their work more confidently, and develop better writing habits over time. Researchers also note that using AI writing tools can boost students' confidence, help them take more responsibility for their own learning, and make them more conscious of how they use language. At the same time, concerns remain about students becoming overly dependent on these tools, reducing the amount of independent thinking they do about language, and the uneven levels of digital skill among different learners (Alharbi 8179; Nazari, Shabbir, and Setiawan 5655).

Student engagement is at the heart of effective digital teaching and language instruction. Research consistently shows that students engage more actively with technology when they find it genuinely useful, easy to access, and relevant to their learning goals. Digital learning environments tend to affect engagement in three important ways: they engage students' thinking (cognitive engagement), their feelings and motivation (emotional engagement), and their visible behaviour in class (behavioural engagement), such as attending, completing tasks, and interacting with classmates and teachers (Redmond et al. 190; Nguyen and Habók 12). When a digital tool is thoughtfully built into classroom practice and aligned with clear learning goals, it has the potential to stimulate all three of these dimensions at once making learning richer, more motivating, and more effective.

Despite the growing body of research on digital language learning, very few studies have examined the combined use of Google Docs and Grammarly in ESL reading and writing classes for engineering students in higher education. This study aims to contribute to this under-explored area by documenting and analysing students' real experiences with both tools in a technology-supported ESL classroom environment.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study approach to explore how students experienced technology-supported reading and writing in their ESL classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus was on understanding students' personal experiences, feelings, and interactions things that numbers and statistics alone cannot fully capture. A case study design was particularly fitting because it allows for a detailed, in-depth look at a specific situation in this case, how two particular digital tools were used within a specific group of students in a defined classroom setting. This approach is grounded in the understanding that students' individual experiences of learning with technology are shaped by their own backgrounds, attitudes, and classroom environment, and are therefore best understood through detailed, context-specific information rather than broad generalisations.

The participants were 60 first-year engineering students enrolled in an English language course at a higher education institution. The group included students with different levels of English proficiency and varying degrees of experience with digital tools. They were selected purposefully because they were directly involved in the technology-supported reading and writing activities being studied.

The classroom programme ran for three weeks and used Google Docs and Grammarly as the main learning tools. Google Docs served as the shared platform where students read texts together, annotated passages, left comments on each other's ideas, edited documents in real time, and worked on group writing tasks. Grammarly was used as an AI-assisted writing tool that gave students instant feedback on their grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall writing clarity. The tasks were designed to build gradually in terms of collaboration and independence. In the first week, students read and annotated texts together on Google Docs, with the teacher modelling how to give useful and respectful peer feedback. In the second week, students worked in pairs or small groups to write shared drafts, giving each other comments through Google Docs and using Grammarly to review their language. In the third week, each student independently produced a revised piece of writing, drawing on everything they had learned from working with their peers and from the AI feedback they had received.

Several different methods were used to collect information, so that a full and balanced picture of students' experiences could be built. The researcher observed classroom sessions to note how students participated, collaborated, and used the tools. Individual interviews were conducted to allow students to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences in their own words. Students also kept personal reflective journals throughout the three weeks, recording their reactions and observations as the programme progressed. Finally, the students' written work including drafts, revised texts, and peer comments was analysed to understand how their writing developed over time.

All the data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method that involves carefully reading through collected information to identify recurring ideas and patterns. This process followed the approach set out by Byrne (1402), which involves reading the data repeatedly, identifying and labelling key ideas, and grouping related ideas into broader themes. To make the findings as reliable as possible, the study used triangulation combining information from observations, interviews, journals, and written documents to cross-check and confirm patterns. Throughout the study, ethical standards were carefully maintained. All students gave their informed consent to participate, and their identities were kept confidential and anonymous in all reporting.

Findings and Discussion

1. Learner Perceptions of Google Docs and Grammarly

Overall, students responded positively to using both Google Docs and Grammarly in their ESL classes. They described the tools as easy to access, engaging, and

genuinely helpful for their language learning. Google Docs was particularly appreciated for its collaborative features. Students valued being able to write together, leave comments on each other's work, highlight and annotate shared texts, and see each other's contributions in real time. Grammarly was seen as a practical and reliable resource for catching grammar mistakes, making sentences clearer, and helping students think more carefully about how they expressed their ideas. Both tools were associated with greater willingness to participate in class, more flexibility in how students could work, and increased confidence in reading and writing.

One of the most notable outcomes of the classroom programme was how much it increased collaboration among students. Google Docs made it easy for students to engage actively in shared tasks reading texts together, discussing ideas, giving feedback on each other's writing, and editing group documents. These activities gave students real opportunities to exchange ideas, build on each other's thinking, and take a more active role in classroom learning. These findings are consistent with earlier research showing that collaborative digital tools strengthen student participation, interaction, and communication skills (Zhou and Lee 1282; Xu and Peng 1448).

Grammarly played an important role in helping students improve their writing and revise more independently. Students said that getting immediate, specific feedback helped them identify their most common mistakes whether in grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, or sentence structure and learn from them. Having instant feedback also helped to reduce the anxiety that many students feel when writing in English, and it encouraged them to revise and improve their work without always waiting for teacher input. Over time, regularly working with AI-assisted feedback helped students become better at spotting their own errors, more aware of how language works, and more confident in their academic writing. These findings support existing research suggesting that AI writing tools can meaningfully contribute to learner independence and language awareness, though they still require careful pedagogical guidance from teachers (Alharbi 8179; Nazari, Shabbir, and Setiawan 5655).

The study identified several clear benefits of using these tools together. Students reported better teamwork, stronger communication, improved revision habits, and higher levels of participation in class. The technology-supported environment also made learning feel more interactive and opened up more opportunities for collaborative reading and writing practice. However, students also identified real challenges. Some had limited access to reliable devices or internet connections. Others had less experience with digital tools and found it harder to navigate the platforms confidently. A number of students also found themselves relying too heavily on Grammarly's suggestions without fully understanding them, which points to the need for teachers to guide students in how to interpret and evaluate AI feedback critically.

Taken together, these findings support the view that digital tools can create meaningful learning opportunities when they are properly integrated into classroom practice. However, their effectiveness depends on good technical access, adequate support, and a thoughtful approach to using automated tools responsibly (Redmond et al. 190; Nguyen and Habók 12). The results also suggest that using Google Docs and Grammarly together produces better outcomes than using either tool alone. This is because the two tools complement each other: Google Docs supports the social, collaborative side of writing, while Grammarly supports the individual, reflective side. When students moved back and forth between working with their peers and reviewing their writing with AI feedback, they seemed to develop a richer and more complete understanding of writing as both a social activity and a personal process. "Purpose Editing assistance software programs are computer-based tools that check and make suggestions for the grammar, spelling and style of a piece of writing. These tools are becoming more popular as recommendations for students who struggle with written expression, such as English language learners (ELLs)" (Huang, Abd Samad, Yao, and He 1007).

2. Learner Voices and Classroom Experiences

Students' interview responses gave a vivid picture of how they experienced Google Docs as a collaborative learning tool. One participant explained, "I could read my classmates' comments while reading the passage, and it helped me understand the text from different perspectives." Another learner stated, "Working together on the same document made the activity more interesting because everyone contributed ideas." These comments show that students genuinely valued the opportunity to learn from each other and not just from the teacher or the text alone.

Students were equally positive about their experience with Grammarly. One student remarked, "Grammarly helped me identify grammar mistakes immediately, and I learned how to correct them." Another participant noted, "I became more confident in writing assignments because I could revise my work before submitting it." A third learner observed, "Before using Grammarly, I always felt nervous about submitting my writing because I was not sure if my grammar was correct. Now I feel more prepared." These responses clearly show that having immediate, accessible feedback reduced students' anxiety about writing in English an emotional benefit that is just as important as the technical improvements the tool helped them make.

Direct observation of classroom sessions confirmed what students described in interviews. During collaborative tasks, students were noticeably more active exchanging comments, talking through reading materials, and making suggestions about how to improve each other's writing. Their personal journal entries revealed that they also appreciated the flexibility that these tools gave them outside of class, allowing them to continue discussions and revisions at home or in their own time. At the same time, students were honest about the difficulties they encountered. Some found it hard to interpret Grammarly's suggestions, especially when several

different correction options were offered and it was not clear which one was best. "Purpose Editing assistance software programs are computer-based tools that check and make suggestions for the grammar, spelling and style of a piece of writing. These tools are becoming more popular as recommendations for students who struggle with written expression, such as English language learners (ELLs)" (Lamond and Cunningham 253). Others experienced interruptions to their collaborative work due to unreliable internet access. Several students also said they were unsure whether to accept certain Grammarly suggestions, particularly when the tool was making stylistic recommendations rather than pointing out clear-cut grammatical errors. This is an important finding: it shows that students need more than just access to AI tools. They also need explicit teaching on how to evaluate and use AI feedback thoughtfully, rather than simply accepting or rejecting it at random.

The overall findings confirm that digital tools can offer substantial benefits, but that successful use depends on reliable technology, good teaching support, and helping students develop the critical thinking skills needed to engage meaningfully with AI feedback.

3 Comparison with Previous Studies and Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of research on the benefits of collaborative digital tools and AI-assisted language learning. Like Zhou and Lee (1284), this study found that students became more active and engaged when using collaborative online writing platforms. Similarly, the results support Xu and Peng's argument (1450) that reading together in digital environments encourages students to engage more deeply with texts and share their understanding with one another.

The positive experiences students had with Grammarly in this study also match the findings of Alharbi (8181), who found that AI writing tools help students feel more confident and improve their writing. However, the challenges identified here particularly around overdependence on automated feedback reinforce the concerns raised by Nazari, Shabbir, and Setiawan (5658) about the need for students to evaluate AI suggestions critically rather than accept them without reflection. Together, these connections with earlier research help to confirm the current study's findings. At the same time, this study goes a step further than most previous work by showing how using Google Docs and Grammarly together rather than in isolation creates a richer and more effective learning environment. The combination of collaborative and AI-assisted tools appears to offer something that neither can provide on its own.

From a teaching perspective, this study has clear and practical implications. Teachers should not simply introduce digital tools into the classroom and leave students to figure them out independently. Instead, they need to design structured activities that guide students in how to use these tools purposefully and critically. For example, teachers could ask students to compare the suggestions they receive from Grammarly with the peer feedback they have already received through Google

Docs. This kind of task would encourage students to think carefully about language choices rather than relying solely on automated corrections. Regular classroom discussions about how both tools work, what their limitations are, and how to make the best use of their suggestions could also help students develop stronger independent thinking and self-monitoring skills as language learners. These implications are particularly important for engineering students, who need not only accurately English but also the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly and professionally.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Google Docs and Grammarly could support first-year engineering students in their ESL reading and writing classes. The results show that both tools can make a real and positive difference. Google Docs helped students work together more effectively, stay engaged in class, and take a more active role in their learning. Grammarly helped students recognise and correct mistakes in their writing, revise more independently, and feel more confident about using English. Together, the two tools created a learning environment that was more collaborative, more interactive, and more responsive to students' individual needs.

Students generally responded positively to both tools, saying they valued the flexibility, the sense of connection with classmates, and the immediate feedback that the technology provided. At the same time, the study also highlighted some real challenges particularly around unequal access to technology, varying levels of digital skill, and the risk of relying too much on automated feedback without thinking critically about it. These findings make clear that simply giving students access to digital tools is not enough. For these tools to be truly effective, teachers must actively support students in using them in a thoughtful and intentional way one that deepens their understanding of language rather than short-circuiting it.

This study does have some limitations that should be kept in mind. It involved only 60 students from a single institution and ran for just three weeks, which means the findings may not apply to all ESL students or all educational settings. Future research should include larger and more diverse groups of students, study the tools over a longer period of time, and explore different types of collaboratives and AI-assisted technology. It would also be valuable to track how students' writing develops over a full academic year, to see whether the improvements observed in this short study last over time. Comparing how students from different fields of study, or with different levels of English proficiency, respond to these tools would also add important depth to what we know in this area.

By keeping learners' own experiences at the centre, this study adds a meaningful contribution to current conversations about digital teaching, collaborative learning, and AI-assisted language instruction in higher education. As technology continues to develop and AI becomes an ever more prominent part of education, it is increasingly important for language teachers to develop clear, evidence-based strategies for integrating these tools effectively into their teaching. This study offers

one step in that direction, providing a practical, grounded account of how two widely available digital tools can be used together to create more engaging, flexible, and effective ESL learning experiences for undergraduate engineering students.

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Appendix

1. Name: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
4. Mother tongue: _____
5. Year of Study:
   a) 1st year
   b) 2nd year
   c) 3rd year
   d) 4th year

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How did you feel about using Google Docs during reading and writing activities?
2. What features of Google Docs were most useful for your learning?
3. How did collaborative commenting and peer interaction influence your understanding of reading materials?
4. How did Grammarly help you during writing tasks?
5. Did Grammarly improve your confidence in English writing? Please explain.
6. What challenges did you experience while using Google Docs and Grammarly?
7. How did these digital tools affect your participation in classroom activities?
8. Would you recommend the use of these technologies in future ESL classes? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Reflective Journal Prompts

1. What activities did you complete today using Google Docs and Grammarly?
2. What did you learn from today's reading and writing activities?
3. How did collaboration with classmates support your learning?
4. What feedback did Grammarly provide, and how did you use it?
5. What difficulties did you experience during the activity?
6. How confident did you feel while completing today's tasks?
7. What improvements would you suggest for future technology-supported lessons?

Appendix C: Classroom Observation Checklist

□ Participation in collaborative reading activities
□ Engagement in peer commenting and discussion
□ Use of Google Docs collaborative features
□ Use of Grammarly feedback during revision

□ Evidence of learner interaction and collaboration

□ Writing revision behaviour

□ Student confidence and participation levels

□ Technical or digital literacy challenges observed

□ Overall engagement in technology-supported learning activities