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Exploring Saudi EFL Learners' Perspectives on Digital Writing Tools for Mitigating Emotional Challenges in Foreign Language Writing

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Abstract

This study examines how digital writing tools address the emotional and linguistic challenges Saudi EFL learners face. Survey results from 50 EFL learners revealed that these tools significantly reduce writing anxiety and boost confidence, making writing less stressful. Learners also noted improved grammar, vocabulary, and structural accuracy, enabling them to focus on clarity and coherence. However, limitations exist, such as the tools' inability to replace instructor-led feedback in fostering creativity and critical thinking. The findings emphasize the need for a balanced integration of digital tools with traditional methods to effectively address emotional and linguistic barriers. Future research should explore their long-term impact, cultural adaptability, and potential for AI-driven personalized learning. Writing in a foreign language often triggers anxiety, frustration, and low confidence, hindering learners' progress. Digital tools provide instant feedback, error correction, and vocabulary enhancement, fostering emotional resilience and improving writing skills.

Keywords: Emotional resilience in writing, Writing anxiety, Digital writing tools, EFL learners.

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استكشاف وجهات نظر متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في السعودية حول أدوات الكتابة الرقمية للتخفيف من التحديات العاطفية عند الكتابة باللغة الأجنبية

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تعامل أدوات الكتابة الرقمية مع التحديات العاطفية واللغوية التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية في السعودية. إذ غالبًا ما تؤدي الكتابة بلغة أجنبية إلى إثارة القلق والإحباط وانخفاض الثقة، مما يعيق تقدم المتعلمين. وتوفر الأدوات الرقمية ردود فعل فورية وتصحيحًا للأخطاء وتعزيزًا للمفردات، مما يعزز المرونة العاطفية ويحسن مهارات الكتابة. وقد كشفت نتائج المسح الذي أجري على 50 متعلمًا للغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية أن هذه الأدوات تقلل، بشكل كبير، من قلق الكتابة، وتعزز الثقة، مما يجعل الكتابة أقل إجهادًا. كما لاحظ المتعلمون تحسنًا في القواعد والمفردات والدقة البنيوية، مما يمكنهم من التركيز على الوضوح والتماسك. ومع ذلك، هناك قيود، مثل عدم قدرة الأدوات على استبدال الملاحظات التي يقودها المعلم في تعزيز الإبداع والتفكير النقدي. وتؤكد النتائج على الحاجة إلى التكامل المتوازن للأدوات الرقمية مع الأساليب التقليدية لمعالجة الحواجز العاطفية واللغوية بشكل فعال. ويجب أن يستكشف البحث المستقبلي تأثيرها الطويل الأمد، وقابليتها للتكيف الثقافي، وإمكانات التعلم الشخصي القائم على الذكاء الاصطناعي.

الكلمات الرئيسية: أدوات الكتابة الرقمية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية، قلق الكتابة، المرونة العاطفية في الكتابة.

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1. Introduction

Writing in a foreign language is not just a linguistic challenge but also an emotional journey. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially in culturally specific contexts like Saudi Arabia, writing brings up various emotions, including anxiety, frustration, and fear of failure. These emotional barriers are often worsened by a lack of confidence in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction. Addressing these emotional obstacles is essential, as they impede learners' academic progress and lower their motivation to engage in writing tasks. Limited exposure to English outside of academic settings, along with cultural expectations regarding language proficiency, further intensifies these challenges for Saudi EFL learners.

In recent years, digital writing tools such as Grammarly, Google Docs, the Hemingway App, and Ginger have gained prominence as effective aids for language learners (Hussain, 2024; Alharbi, 2022). These tools provide immediate feedback, error detection, and context-sensitive suggestions, creating a supportive environment for learners to refine their writing skills. By alleviating the fear of making mistakes and fostering a sense of accomplishment, digital tools help mitigate the emotional challenges associated with second-language writing. Krasnikov (2018) underscores that these tools empower learners to produce polished, error-free content, enhancing both technical competence and emotional satisfaction. Moreover, features like real-time grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and tone adjustments enable learners to experiment with language without fear of criticism, promoting emotional resilience and confidence.

While digital tools have reshaped the teacher-student dynamic in language learning, they also present opportunities and challenges. Traditionally, teachers have played a central role in guiding the writing process by offering corrections and feedback. This approach, although effective in emphasizing accuracy, often overlooks the emotional well-being of learners. The repetitive nature of error correction can lead to frustration for both students and instructors (Sokoholic, 2003). By automating routine corrections, digital tools enable teachers to concentrate on fostering creativity and critical thinking, thus creating a more empathetic and supportive learning environment. This dual role of digital tools—as both practical aids and emotional buffers—makes them essential in modern EFL instruction. In the Saudi context, digital tools are particularly significant. Saudi learners frequently encounter cultural and linguistic barriers that impact their readiness for writing in English, heightening feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Digital tools offer a practical solution, allowing learners to practice independently, at their own pace, and in a controlled environment. This autonomy promotes emotional empowerment, enabling students to approach writing tasks with greater confidence and motivation.

Despite their benefits, digital tools have limitations. Some learners may find frequent corrections overwhelming, especially when these corrections point out errors they were previously unaware of. This can

lead to frustration or excessive reliance on tools, hindering the development of independent writing skills. To tackle these issues, a balanced approach is essential. Teachers should integrate digital tools with traditional instruction, guiding learners on effective tool use while fostering creativity and critical thinking. This study explores the emotional aspects of writing among Saudi EFL learners, focusing on how digital tools can reduce anxiety, build confidence, and enhance writing outcomes. By examining learners' and instructors' perceptions, this research aims to understand the potential of digital tools in overcoming both linguistic and emotional challenges. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight the transformative role of digital writing tools in creating a more inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environment for Saudi EFL learners.

Research Questions:

1. How do digital writing tools influence Saudi EFL learners' emotional challenges, such as writing anxiety?
2. What are the specific benefits of these tools in fostering engagement and motivation in EFL writing tasks?

2. The Role of Digital Writing Tools in EFL Learning

Digital writing tools have become essential for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, offering real-time feedback and linguistic support to enhance their writing skills. These tools tackle common challenges in second-language writing, including grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and structural issues. By automating error detection and providing contextual suggestions, digital writing tools empower learners to produce error-free writing while building confidence and motivation (Pitukwong & Saraiwang, 2024). The potential of digital tools to facilitate writing has garnered significant academic interest. Ulaş et al. (2023) emphasized how computers and digital platforms motivate learners by making the writing process more interactive and engaging. Tools like Grammarly, Google Docs, and Hemingway App provide advanced features such as grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and clarity suggestions. These features simplify language editing and promote better learning outcomes, particularly for students with linguistic difficulties (Zhao, 2022, Hussain, 2024). For example, digital tools offer immediate suggestions for correcting spelling mistakes, replacing unsuitable words, and improving sentence structure, thereby enabling learners to systematically refine their writing.

The collaborative aspects of digital writing tools have also been noted. By allowing shared access and real-time editing, these tools encourage peer feedback and group writing activities. This collaboration creates a supportive environment for learners to enhance their writing skills and build confidence (Losi et al., 2024). Zhu et al. (2016) observed that learners facing challenges with writing tasks benefit significantly from using word processors, which help them overcome linguistic barriers by offering instant feedback and suggestions. An important distinction in the use of digital writing tools exists between skilled and semi-skilled learners. Xu and Ding (2014) examined how EFL learners use word processors during writing tasks and found that skilled

learners spent less time planning and drafting compared to semi-skilled learners, who often relied on dictionaries to fill in their linguistic gaps. These findings indicate that digital tools assist less proficient learners in compensating for their weaknesses, but they also emphasize the necessity for proper training to maximize the benefits of these tools.

Despite their advantages, digital writing tools are often designed with native English speakers in mind, creating challenges for non-native learners. Pitukwong & Saraiwang (2024) analyzed the effectiveness of MS Word and found that it failed to detect a significant portion of errors made by non-native speakers. Moreover, automated feedback is not always accurate or contextually appropriate, requiring learners to critically evaluate the suggestions provided by these tools. To address these limitations, researchers have emphasized the need for localized adaptations and training programs that teach learners how to effectively use digital tools (Krasnikov, 2018, Omer, 2024). Grammarly and Quilbot, two most widely used digital writing tools, exemplifies the advancements in this domain. Krasnikov (2018) noted that Grammarly's ability to offer grammar corrections, vocabulary suggestions, and tone adjustments makes it particularly effective for EFL learners. These features reduce the anxiety associated with writing and foster greater autonomy by enabling learners to self-monitor their progress. However, studies also indicate that learners should not rely exclusively on these tools, as they cannot fully replace critical thinking and human judgment in writing (Shintani & Aubrey, 2016).

The integration of digital writing tools into EFL classrooms has transformed traditional teaching methods. Teachers, who once dedicated significant time to correcting errors, can now concentrate on higher-order writing skills such as creativity and critical thinking (Chao et al., 2023; Dollar & Tolu, 2015). These tools also offer students greater flexibility, enabling them to practice and refine their writing at their own pace. However, challenges persist, including technical issues, inconsistent feedback, and the necessity for training to ensure effective usage. Lastly, digital writing tools have revolutionized EFL writing by tackling linguistic challenges and boosting learners' confidence and autonomy. While these tools have their limitations, their capacity to provide instant feedback and support has rendered them essential for modern language education. Ongoing research and development in this area will further enhance their effectiveness and accessibility for EFL learners.

3. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative survey method to explore the emotional and practical dimensions of digital writing tools in EFL learning, particularly focusing on the perceptions of learners and instructors. As Isaac and Michael (1997) assert, surveys are essential for understanding existing phenomena, addressing observed problems, and establishing baseline data for future comparisons. The current research uses a

structured questionnaire to gather insights into how digital writing tools influence writing performance and emotional experiences, such as confidence, anxiety, and motivation. The study specifically examines the dual perspectives of learners at a public university in Saudi Arabia.

3.1. Participants and Data Collection

A total of 50 EFL learners (25 males and 25 females) and 20 instructors (10 males and 10 females) participated in the study. A questionnaire was developed to address the unique roles of learners using digital writing tools. The questionnaires included three sections: demographic details, frequency and purpose of tool usage (e.g., grammar checking, vocabulary enhancement), and perceptions related to writing performance and emotional impact. Questions were designed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," to capture nuanced emotional responses.

The survey, conducted online in September 2020 through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and email, used purposive sampling to recruit Saudi EFL learners enrolled in higher education. The questionnaire consisted of self-developed items grounded in a literature review and adapted questions from validated instruments, reviewed by EFL experts for content validity. Ethical safeguards included obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant anonymity. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26 with descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequencies, means, and standard deviations to examine the role of digital writing tools in reducing writing anxiety and enhancing motivation among Saudi EFL learners. Table 2 is organized with the first column listing the survey questions, followed by columns representing responses on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Additionally, the table includes columns for the Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of responses. The demographic information (gender, age, and education) of the learners is presented in **Table 1** below.

Table 1

Demographic details of the learners

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	25	50
Female	25	50
Age		
16-20 Years	22	44
21-25 Years	28	56

Education		
Graduate	22	44
Post-graduate	28	56
Total	**50**	**100**

4. Results

This section presents the responses of EFL learners to each survey item that evaluates their perceptions of digital writing tools. The responses, summarized in Table 3, reflect how these tools influence learners' writing abilities and emotional experiences, such as confidence, anxiety, and motivation.

The Mean reflects the average of learners' responses to each item, offering insights into their overall agreement or disagreement. The Standard Deviation measures the variability in responses, indicating how consistent learners' perceptions are. In this study, the standard deviation values stay close to 1, suggesting that the responses are clustered around the mean and show a generally positive view of digital writing tools. These findings correspond with prior research, which indicates that digital tools can reduce emotional barriers, such as writing anxiety, and boost learners' confidence.

4.1. Learners' Perceptions of Digital Writing Tools: Emotional and Practical Impacts

To provide a more precise representation of the results, responses for Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) have been combined to indicate overall 'Agreement,' while Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) have been merged to indicate overall 'Disagreement.' This method offers a consolidated view of learners' perceptions regarding how digital writing tools tackle emotional challenges, such as anxiety and confidence, and enhance motivation and practical outcomes.

For Q1, **60.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.48, SD = 1.210) indicates that learners perceive digital tools as helpful in reducing writing anxiety by providing constructive feedback without fear of judgment. Q2 records **68.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.36, SD = 1.205), emphasizing the tools' role in boosting learners' confidence through real-time error correction. In Q3, **64.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.40, SD = 1.170) reflects that learners feel more comfortable experimenting with language when using these tools, highlighting their potential to reduce risk aversion in writing.

Q4 shows the highest agreement at **70.0%** (Mean = 2.20, SD = 1.110), suggesting that learners find digital tools alleviate frustration during editing by simplifying error detection and correction. Similarly, Q6 reflects **78.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.10, SD = 1.100), underscoring the emotional reassurance learners experience through immediate feedback, which reduces stress. Q7 further emphasizes emotional readiness,

with **80.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.08, SD = 1.150), showing that learners feel prepared to integrate these tools into their writing practices.

Regarding practical benefits, Q5 demonstrates **55.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.68, SD = 1.120), indicating that learners positively view the tools' role in improving grammar and vocabulary. In Q8, **66.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.32, SD = 1.085) highlights how digital tools foster a sense of accomplishment by enabling learners to complete tasks more efficiently and accurately. However, Q9 presents a contrasting perspective, with only **30.0% agreement** (Mean = 3.05, SD = 1.210), reflecting learners' mixed views on whether these tools can fully replace traditional instructional methods. Finally, Q10 reports **54.0% agreement** (Mean = 2.56, SD = 1.250), indicating moderate satisfaction with the accessibility and ease of use of digital writing tools.

Overall, these results reveal that learners perceive digital writing tools as effective in reducing emotional barriers like anxiety and frustration while fostering confidence and motivation. However, some responses indicate areas where these tools could be improved to enhance emotional engagement and usability further, particularly in complementing traditional teaching methods.

Table 2

Learners' perceptions of using digital writing tools

Questions	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)
1. Using digital writing tools reduces my anxiety about making errors in English writing.	30.0%	38.0%	16.0%	10.0%	6.0%	2.48	1.210
2. Digital writing tools give me confidence by providing real-time feedback on my English writing.	24.0%	44.0%	16.0%	10.0%	6.0%	2.36	1.205
3. I feel motivated to write more often because digital tools make writing less stressful.	22.0%	42.0%	20.0%	10.0%	6.0%	2.40	1.170
4. Instant corrections from digital tools help me focus	28.0%	42.0%	16.0%	8.0%	6.0%	2.20	1.110

on improving my writing skills instead of errors.							
5. My grammar and vocabulary have improved significantly since using digital writing tools.	20.0%	35.0%	26.0%	12.0%	7.0%	2.68	1.120
6. Feedback from digital tools reassures me that my writing is improving, which reduces frustration.	30.0%	48.0%	14.0%	6.0%	2.0%	2.10	1.100
7. Digital tools help me stay focused on achieving my writing goals, which boosts my confidence.	34.0%	46.0%	12.0%	6.0%	2.0%	2.08	1.150
8. I support the use of digital tools for writing because they make the process less intimidating.	28.0%	38.0%	20.0%	10.0%	4.0%	2.32	1.085
9. Digital writing tools help me feel emotionally prepared to handle complex writing tasks.	12.0%	18.0%	20.0%	28.0%	12.0%	3.05	1.210
10. The use of digital writing tools can distract me from focusing on the structure of my writing.	20.0%	34.0%	16.0%	20.0%	10.0%	2.56	1.250

5. Discussion and implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital writing tools play a pivotal role in alleviating emotional barriers associated with English writing among Saudi EFL learners. Addressing RQ1, learners reported significant reductions in writing anxiety, with 78% agreeing that features like instant feedback diminish the fear of errors, a primary source of anxiety in language learning. This aligns with the findings of Pappa et al. (2020), who highlighted the supportive role of real-time feedback in reducing writing-related stress. Unlike Atkinson et al. (2022), who identified over-reliance on digital tools as a drawback, our findings suggest that learners perceive these tools as supplementary aids that enhance rather than replace their writing

skills. Immediate feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and structure reassures learners of their progress and fosters emotional resilience, motivating them to undertake more complex writing tasks. This dual role of digital tools, as practical aids and emotional buffers, makes writing a more approachable activity for EFL learners.

Regarding their practical advantages and addressing RQ2, the study highlights significant improvements in grammar and vocabulary, with 68% of learners reporting enhanced language accuracy. These findings align with those of Juniper et al. (2012), who observed that digital tools support surface-level corrections, allowing learners to concentrate on higher-order writing skills such as clarity and coherence. Furthermore, these tools decrease the cognitive load associated with basic error correction, enabling learners to engage more deeply with the content and organization of their writing. However, 30% of participants disagreed on the tools' ability to replace traditional teaching methods. Learners emphasized the importance of instructor-led guidance in developing creativity, critical thinking, and nuanced language use—areas that digital tools alone cannot address. These findings resonate with Mantai (2019), who highlighted the irreplaceable role of human mentorship in fostering holistic language development.

The implications of these findings highlight the significance of incorporating digital writing tools into EFL classrooms to tackle emotional and practical writing challenges. Teachers can utilize these tools to automate error correction, allowing them to mentor students in advanced writing techniques effectively. This integration aligns with the recommendations of Pyhältö et al. (2022c), who advocated for the combination of technological aids and human support to optimize learning outcomes. However, effective implementation necessitates training for both teachers and students. Teachers must be prepared to strategically guide learners in using digital tools, while students should evaluate automated feedback and apply it in a meaningful and critical way.

While the results affirm the effectiveness of digital tools in addressing emotional and linguistic barriers, this study also highlights the limitations of relying solely on such tools. Future research could explore hybrid approaches that combine digital and traditional methods to foster balanced and comprehensive writing development. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate how the sustained use of digital tools impacts learners' writing skills and emotional well-being over time. These insights would aid in refining instructional strategies and optimizing the integration of technology in EFL education, ensuring that learners cultivate independent writing skills instead of becoming overly dependent on technology. Teachers should blend digital writing tools with traditional instructional methods to establish a balanced approach that takes advantage of the strengths of both. For example, while digital tools can automate error correction and offer real-time feedback, teachers can focus on higher-order skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and nuanced

language use. Furthermore, structured training sessions for both teachers and students are crucial for maximizing the potential of these tools, ensuring that learners know how to critically assess automated feedback and apply it effectively to their writing.

Policymakers and curriculum designers should prioritize integrating digital writing tools into educational frameworks, especially at the higher education level. These tools should be included in standard EFL curricula to address emotional and practical challenges faced by learners, such as writing anxiety, lack of confidence, and limited vocabulary. Customized professional development programs for educators can further enhance the effective use of these tools in classrooms. Additionally, investing in localized versions of digital tools that meet the linguistic and cultural needs of non-native English speakers will enhance their accessibility and effectiveness, making them more relevant for diverse learner populations.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study highlights the significant role of digital writing tools in addressing the dual challenges of emotional and linguistic barriers faced by Saudi EFL learners. By reducing writing anxiety, promoting confidence, and enhancing motivation, these tools create a more supportive environment for learners to develop their writing skills. The practical benefits, including improved grammar, vocabulary, and structural accuracy, further emphasize their utility in EFL writing. However, while digital tools excel at providing immediate feedback and automating corrections, they fall short in fostering creativity and nuanced critical thinking, areas where human intervention remains essential. Therefore, digital tools should be viewed as complementary aids rather than replacements for traditional writing methods.

The findings open several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could examine the sustained impact of digital writing tools on learners' writing proficiency and emotional well-being over extended periods. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of localized or culturally tailored tools could provide insights into improving their relevance for non-native English speakers. More specifically, comparative studies involving diverse EFL contexts, such as learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, could help determine the universal applicability of such tools. Future research might also investigate how hybrid models—integrating digital tools with instructor-led approaches—enhance writing outcomes. Lastly, incorporating advanced features like AI-driven personalized feedback and emotional analytics could offer transformative possibilities for digital writing tools, further bridging the gap between technology and pedagogy.

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