

Learning Tools for EFL Writing: What and How based on Upper Secondary School Students' Perspectives

1*Evi Puspitasari, 2Elka Tsara

¹⁻²Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

***Correspondence:**

evipuspitasari@fpb.umy.ac.id

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Abstract

Writing in English is a bit challenging since students should deal with organization, idea development, and language. This study aims to explore the preferred learning tools used by upper secondary school students while writing and how the learning tools accommodate them in increasing the quality of their writing based on their perspectives. This study belongs to descriptive qualitative research and took place at one of the private upper secondary schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with six students serving as research participants. A standardized open-ended interview and samples of students' writing works were used to acquire the data. The first discovery revealed that students use YouTube as a video-sharing platform; Padlet as an online notice board; Grammarly, Google Translate, and Grammar Checker as language support tools; and Google Docs and Microsoft Word as word processors. Meanwhile, the two types of data shows, it is noticeable that students are helped by the tools. All of the aforementioned tools can linguistically and substantially improve their writing by providing language accommodation, idea development support, and writing organization assistance. The conclusion and recommendation are also discussed in this article after the findings and discussion are presented.

Keywords: English writing, learning, learning tools, secondary school students, writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the language performances that must be submitted to communication. Some scholars agree with the notion by giving highlighting the function of the skill as people's expression to deliver the message without meeting in person (Faturhman et al., 2016; Alfaki, 2015). Since the parties of the conversation are not doing face-to-face interaction, the writing needs to be organized, structured, and clear so that the messages can be well accepted and concerned. In a school context, writing is not only for communication but also for academic achievement. Besides being used to write an email or texts to friends and teachers, the skill is also employed for assignments in a form of reports,

essays, or literary works. Usually, teachers have specific expectations that the students should meet such as linguistics components, contents, and mechanics sometimes become hurdles for students to do writing assignments (Brookhart, 2018). Paying much attention to the components in writing, producing a writing work is such a tense for students. That is justified by Alfaki's (2015) research findings which suggested that the majority of students struggled with grammatical, mechanical, sentence structure, linguistic, and cognitive issues in writing.

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), non-native speakers consider that writing and speaking are similar for both are productive skills. However, Alsaawi (2019) agreed that they are genuinely different. Not just in terms of the form but also in the way grammar, vocabulary, and expression are deployed. When somebody writes an email, they use different words and different types of sentences from the ones they use when making a call to another party. In addition to that, people can add words to extend the duration of speaking in the middle of a conversation. They, however, cannot do the same way when writing. All ideas that will be composed in paragraphs should be planned. That is why some scholars suggested outlining the process in the beginning (Ramzan & Hafeez, 2021; Tabuena, 2020; Li & Liu, 2019). If not, the writing will seem disorganized and confusing to the readers.

Due to the complication and extensive rules of writing, this skill is unlike other skills of English which can be successfully taught by native speakers. Writing can only be taught by people who understand the rule and acknowledge how to apply the rules when writing. Thus, they are not only able to deliver materials on how to write correctly but also able to give some recommendations to overcome students' challenges in writing. According to Ghufron & Rosyida (2018), challenges that students bear that make them need teachers' help our lack of understanding in grammar to deliver ideas clearly (grammatical), less in processing variations of vocabulary in expressing ideas (vocabulary use), mistyping in writing could present misunderstanding for the reader (misspelled words), and the lack of using proper punctuation in writing. Seeing students' linguistic ability specifically vocabulary and grammar as a challenge in writing English as a foreign language is also posited by Anh (2019).

Specifying the issue in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), writing is even more challenging. Students do not only deal with the organization of the content and idea development but also with an English translation of the messages. It makes students even more anxious about writing. Research conducted by Mulyono et al., (2020) in Indonesia showed that EFL writing anxiety is surely experienced by students at any level of education. They also recommended that Indonesian teachers find strategies to minimize anxiety. In parallel, Cocuk et al., (2016) also posit that the problem can cause students' incompetency in writing. Since the effect of anxiety is quite serious, strategies to facilitate students in EFL writing are needed.

In the Industry of 4.0 era, technological advancements have an impact on the education sector, such as the utilization of learning tools. According to a study by Trisnadewi et al., (2020), learning technologies are expected to support teachers in providing information to promote learning success. Ramdhani and Muhammadiyah (2015) suggested teachers and students find strategies, tools, and approaches to generate successful learning and the idea of using technologies for learning tools seems excellent. Some studies also show the advantages of technology to support students in writing English through the tools that it

provides. Yundayani et al., (2019) showed the effectiveness of Canva to minimize students' errors in writing. Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) recommended Google Documents as a learning tool to facilitate students in collaborative writing. Meanwhile, research results conducted by Cancino and Panes (2021) proved that Google Translate can improve students' writing quality in terms of linguistic aspects. Regarding writing a fiction text, Adiningtyas' research (2020) suggested Wattpad successfully assist students to develop their ideas since the platform provides a wide range of stories to adopt or adapt for their writing.

Regarding types of learning tools that facilitate students' EFL writing, scholars have given several recommendations. One of the tools is social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Experts considered social media as an excellent platform for idea development that provides reading sources (Meinawati & Baron, 2019; Davis & Yin, 2013) to improve their writing. However, among the benefits, Kamnoetsin (2014) posits a big concern about using social media specifically Facebook in EFL writing regarding language formality. Averagely, people post or share their thoughts in a communicatively casual language. Meanwhile, in academic writing, the register of the language used is suggested formally. Both as a place to gain language input or share language output, social media at some level cannot accommodate students' language needs in academics.

Since language is the biggest issue that students come across in writing using English, they need a tool for the language. A study by Ghufuron and Rosyida (2018) suggested Grammarly helps students overcome their difficulties related to grammar and vocabulary. The tool scans the document to obtain corrections for spelling, punctuation, word choice, and capitalization. There are some other grammar checker tools besides Grammarly such as SpellCheckPlus and Ginger Software. If teachers or students do not know which one to choose over the options, Yang (2018) suggested selecting a tool that provides feedback for students instead of auto-correction so that the students can go construct new linguistic knowledge in their minds. However, several considerations for using language support tools are straightforwardly identified by experts and scholars. A suggestion comes from Bailey and Lee (2020) who posit that language tools, specifically Grammarly, assists students to correct surface-level errors such as preposition, articles, sentence structures, and subject-verb agreement. The tool is not reliable to suggest relevant diction for a particular context, paragraph cohesion, and coherence. Thus, students need to possess the good ability of grammar and writing skills before employing language learning tools to improve their writing quality so that they can digest what the tool suggests to them do to improve their writing quality (Ananda et al., 2021).

Still discussing a tool to improve linguistic aspects in writing, besides grammar correction, translation facility is another most used tool for students. Okpor (2014) explained a translation machine as software that uses artificial intelligence to translate and transform text from one language to another. Google Translate is one of the translation machines that help students to improve their writing quality in terms of language. Students who have a hurdle in expressing their idea in English, could drop the lines in the machine and transform the language into English. Within seconds, the result comes out and the English version of the sentences is available. Additionally, based on Tsai (2020), Google Translate makes the mistake of misspelling words in writing avoidable. Thus, although the language accuracy of the translated sentences is still questionable, the tool is undeniably facilitative for students. Among those benefits offered by translation tools, students need to

be alert that the translated result is not always semantically correct. The tools only help word processors can also be put in a box of facilitative learning tools for EFL writing. Google Docs and Microsoft Word are two examples of word processors for EFL writing. The tools are students' assistants for content and ideas, organization, language, and mechanics. Zhou et al. (2012) appointed Google Docs as a good medium to write a draft and enable students to work collaboratively. Meanwhile, Morphy and Graham (2012) promoted Microsoft Word for writing due to its ability to discover words to replace and autocorrect text. The tool is also beneficial to identify synonymous words through the thesaurus facility. On top of that, its availability on most of all computers makes this tool preferable for students.

Even though those studies discussed learning tools as students' facilities in EFL writing, none of them put a center on students' viewpoints. All of the tools used by the students are based on teachers' choices and recommendations. In fact, nobody can understand tools that match students' needs and intentions but themselves. Compared to teachers, students know better what aspect they need to push by using a learning tool and what features of the tool make them comfortable to employ. Additionally, this current research depicted autonomous students voices who are technology literate and how they employ technological tools to support their learning which might be more varied than what teachers have suggested. The findings of this research will enrich and complete teaching practitioners' and other students' understanding of the utilization of technology in English learning in the area of learning autonomy. Furthermore, to make this research focused, this research is guided by two questions which are 1) What are learning tools used by students for writing in English classes? 2) How do the learning tools facilitate the students' writing in English classes? Furthermore, this research is expected to give benefits and good impacts on the three aspects. First, for students, this research is expected to be a reference to choose suitable learning tools for their writing problems.

METHOD

Since the aim of this study is to explore students' preferences for learning tools and how the tools are facilitative to their EFL writing, elaborative data were needed so it belongs to qualitative research. Thus, descriptive qualitative was employed to reach the aims of the study. The data of this qualitative study were collected in one of the private senior high schools in Yogyakarta by involving six male students as participants. Those participants were chosen for their computer literacy and autonomy in finding strategies to improve their writing quality. Over those qualifications, three of them were high achievers and have a good mastery of English while the rest of them were low achievers and lacked linguistic ability. To keep their real identity for research ethics, the participants are initially presented as H1, J1, J2, K1, S1, and S2. To gather data, interviews and document analysis were utilized as methods of data collection. The interview protocol and the participants' writing documents were essential as research instruments.

Furthermore, a smartphone, notebook, and pen are complementary tools for the data collection process. In this study, the data collection was conducting a standardized open-ended interview. According to Cohen et al., (2011), open-ended question is flexible for the investigation to obtain necessary data. As the primary data, the individual interviews aimed at providing deep information from the participants. Meanwhile, their writing works were submitted as secondary data that spilled out their problems in writing which they overcame

using learning tools. The data were analyzed right after they were collected. The analysis started with transcribing which was continued to member checking to aim at validating the data. The result of member checking showed that there was no alteration for the transcription so the research continued the process to the following steps comprising open coding, analytic coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Afterward, the findings were reported by presenting narrating data and discussed by relating them to relevant references.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the problem formulation, this current research answers questions about students' preferences for learning tools to support their writing in English. The findings also explore how the tools that they selected helped them to improve their writing.

Students' Preferences on Learning Tools for EFL Writing

The interview data show four typical learning tools that the students utilized for writing English. The tools are video platforms, online notice boards, language supports, and word processors.

Video Sharing Platforms

According to the interview data, one of the facilitative tools for English writing used by the students is YouTube which belongs to one of the video-sharing platforms. J1 considered that YouTube is an excellent choice to find an idea in writing because the platform can be accessed easily through his phone whenever he wanted. He added that the most amazing part of using YouTube is free of charge.

"Youtube is one of the tools I used for writing. I used to get confused about what to write and the platform helps me to find an idea for my work. It is free and provides a lot of sources," (J1 interview transcript)

On the other hand, he also revealed two concerns in using YouTube to find ideas for his writing which dealt with distraction from entertainment thumbnails and overwhelming options of videos that made him confused to choose which ones to take.

"... But it (finding ideas for writing using Youtube) took much time sometimes. I scrolled up and down to find an idea (for writing) but I ended up watching celebrities' podcasts or other entertaining videos. ... I also thought that Youtube provides too many videos that make me confused in choosing the suitable one," (J1 interview transcript)

Parallel to the finding, YouTube as popular learning media education has been justified by experts. Tadbier and Shoufan (2021) mentioned that educational channels on Youtube have significantly increased from 2016 to 2019 which means the most potential target to get an aggregated rank from the e-platform is school and college students. Additionally, Elola and Oskoz (2017) highlighted the strong role of the platform in world literacy development in an academic setting. In an Indonesian context, Wijaya and Roki'ah (2020) captured the integration of YouTube in writing instruction and proved that the e-platform successfully advanced students' critical thinking in producing a text. Among the strengths of YouTube in supporting students' EFL writing, there are still challenges to consider. What the participant said regarding the shortcomings of the platform following Vural (2015) who saw irrelevant content as the biggest distraction when students involve social network sites including YouTube in learning. To overcome that problem, Manuel and Schunke (2016) offered a solution that deals with teachers' guidance in using technology.

Online Notice Boards

Another learning tool revealed based on the data is Padlet. This online notice board is considered a preferred facilitative tool by the students because the board offers free access and is easy to use.

"I like walls in Padlet. They helped me in a way it enables me to post my notes in writing. I stored my outline there and whenever I wanted to check the outline for drafting my piece, I checked it through my cellphone. I prefer Padlet to a binder, a physical notebook, and a laptop for its flexibility," (J1 interview transcript).

Understanding the participant's reason for using Padlet as part of learning tools for writing, research conducted by Lestari (2017) showed a positive effect of Padlet on students writing improvement. Additionally, the interview data presented a positive response towards Padlet for writing due to its facility to upload multimodal texts. Even though Padlet is preferable to support students' writing, research by Jong and Tan (2021) unveiled two issues of using Padlet that teachers should take into account which were bad internet connection and students' lack of knowledge and skill in technology. By understanding the issues, the teachers hopefully could anticipate them before the implementation.

Language Support Tools

The most utilized learning tool for students writing based on the interview with the participants is the tool that supports their language ability. Language support tools mentioned by them focus on grammar and vocabulary assistance.

H1 who preferred to employ Google Translate gave this statement in the interview, "I chose Google Translate because it provided numerous words with a lot of meaning so it did not only improve my writing works but also my vocabulary knowledge". (H1 interview transcript)

J1, J2, and S2 shared the same point by claiming to use Google Translate for writing. They agreed to utilize the tool for its assistance in composing sentences. Additionally, free of charge and practicality were J2 and S2's other reasons for selecting the tool for writing. Other preferences that the participants opted for language support in writing are Kamusku, Grammarly, and Microsoft Word.

"I like using Kamusku. I don't need to download it since it has been available on my phone. I don't need to open a browser or install a dictionary application either. Very practical," (S1 interview transcript)

"I used both Grammarly and Google Translate in writing. Google Translate is good but my sister told me that the translation result of the tool did not make sense sometimes. Then she gave me access to Grammarly to get clear word choices and sentences to express their thought when they write English texts," (H1 interview transcript)

"I used whatever I have on my laptop but mostly I used a grammar checker of Microsoft Word. My texts gave me a sign like blue or red underlined to identify incorrect grammar and misspelled words. I don't need to open another tool for using it" (S1 interview transcript)

Godwin-Jones (2015) argued encouraging students to learn through translation machines could enhance their writing. This statement indicates that using a translation machine could support the students writing. In addition, translation machines helped the student write quickly and more fluently with fewer writing mistakes (Lee, 2019). Other language support tools for writing corroborated by the participants are Grammarly and Microsoft Word. In addition, Cavaleri and Dianati (2016) said that using grammar checker

tools can help the learner to learn and enhance their grammar accuracy as efficiently and effectively. Moreover, the argument was reinforced by Yang (2018) who stated that students utilized Grammar Checker to check the grammatical error in their writing. Scientifically, Cancino and Panes (2021) also proved that Google Translate can improve students' writing quality in terms of linguistic aspects.

Word Processors

Word processor is the last learning tool that appeared in interview data. As argued by Bernstein et al., (2010), word processing encompasses a wide variety of human-computer interactions by promoting deep cognitive engagement in writing and needing complicated manipulations. Word processors can be used as a medium to edit and revise students' writing. This statement was reinforced by Yilmaz and Erkol (2015), students are more involved to edit and revise their work when they utilize a word processor instead of conducting a conventional way. J1, H1, S2, and K1 were comfortable using Google Docs and Microsoft Word to process words. J1 used Google Docs because the tool offers free access. Further, he described the function of Google Docs as similar to Microsoft Word but it is more facilitative for group writing. Students can invite other people to be a contributor who can edit and revise the file. Meanwhile, S2 preferred Microsoft Word to Google Docs since an internet connection is not required to access the tool.

Word processors are the basic tools that help students in writing. Berger and Lewandowski (2013) stated that a word processor is a helpful tool for writing since it does not only accommodate word processing but also students' language such as spelling, grammar, and organization. In addition, the tools also offer a thesaurus feature which can assist students' vocabulary so that their writing will be richer and more varied in terms of word choice. As argued by Morphy and Graham (2012), word processors allowed the student to produce documents, save the documents electronically, and show the documents on the screen. Additionally, it can be concluded the word processor can be used by students and support students to write well.

How the Learning Tools Facilitate Students' EFL Writing

From the interview with six participants validated by students' writing work, it is known that the aforementioned learning tools are facilitative in some ways. Regarding the process of writing the tools help students accommodate their language needs, assist students to develop ideas, and organize the content.

Accommodating Students' Language

Learning tools that the participants mentioned help advance their language quality. J2 claimed that Youtube provides enjoyable videos that can enhance their vocabulary.

J2 said, "when writing a procedure, I don't know how to say an Indonesian expression in English. Then, I found it by watching Youtube". (J2 interview transcript)

The linguistic benefit of using language support tools and word processors is also experienced by H1 and J1.

"I just cannot write English without Grammarly," (H1 interview transcript)

"I realize that Google Translate makes me independent in writing since I don't ask the meaning of unfamiliar words to friends and teachers. I can find them myself," (J1 interview transcript)

Looking at the students' writing work, it is acknowledged that they do need language support. J1 has a grammar issue. He missed using the past tense form for verbs when telling about his past experiences. He wrote 'At the theatre, I saw the best performance I have seen. 'Have' is supposed to be 'had' and fixing it can be done through Grammarly.

Language support tools such as Grammarly, online dictionaries, Google Translate, Grammar Checker, and Microsoft Word cannot be separated from students' writing. Online dictionaries help students translate a word from their native language into English while Google Translate offers sentences to be translated into English. However, the participants tend to be more comfortable using ones that give them a complete package which can be obtained by using Grammarly. That is supported by Ghufon and Rosyida (2018) who claimed Grammarly assists with grammar and vocabulary. The tool goes beyond translation machines by offering facilities to help students identify incorrect spelling, punctuation, word choice, and capitalization. The tool also provides suggestions to revise the incorrectness. Tools facilitate students' writing in developing ideas that are viewed as a challenge in the

Assisting Students in Develop Ideas

Learning writing process. Known from the composition that the students submitted, all participants faced hurdles to expanding their idea. The composition which consisted of four paragraphs only had two or three short sentences in each paragraph. When this issue was addressed, J1 confirmed that it frequently happened to them and he usually watched Youtube extend what he wanted to write.

"When I did homework on writing how to make popcorn for a procedure text, I got stuck. Then I watched two or three videos that related to the idea from Youtube. I took a note and it worked to develop the idea," (J1 interview transcript)

Not only Youtube, but J1 was also explorative for utilizing another tool, Padlet, for idea development.

"Padlet assisted me to save my notes. I wrote it on the Padlet wall. After having some notes on the wall, then I united them to compose paragraphs," (J1 interview transcript)

Different from J1, H1 was helped by Google Docs to construct his idea. The teacher usually shared writing samples about a specific topic using the tool and let the students check the samples. When he did not know where he should bring the idea, then he read some samples provided in Google Docs. He thought it worked for him.

As a finding, some experts also recommended several tools for idea development. A study by Felanie (2021) justified Youtube as a platform with a lot of sources that students can refer to when writing descriptive texts and confirmed that the platform helped students expand their outlines. Moreover, Elola and Oskoz (2017) described the facility that Youtube serves to language learners through commenting features. They also corroborated that, by exchanging comments with other people around the world, students get the opportunity to learn the language and culture embedded with the language. Those aspects are elements needed by students to produce good writing work. Validating J1's experience in using Padlet, secondary school students need to be motivated by the interesting tools for writing achievement and Padlet can provide that facility (Dollah et al., 2021). In addition, H1's opinion towards Google Docs is supported by Adiningtyas (2020) who stated that

students' writing improvement is achievable if they are exposed to various writing works so a platform that provides numerous writing samples is required.

Organizing Writing Content

Organization is one of the components that students need to pay attention to in writing. Disorganized organized and incoherent texts will cause readers confusion and fail to understand the messages that the writer tries to deliver. Due to that consideration, learning tools are essential to help students organize the content of the text. J1 and S1 composition showed the coherence of the idea. When they were asked for confirmation and further explanation about it, they answered,

"I usually take notes before writing. One line, two lines, and then three lines are written in Padlet then I arranged it. That is the way Padlet helps me to make my writing better" (J1 interview transcript)

"Padlet is a facilitative tool to make my writing neat." (S1 interview transcript)

Discussing the finding, experts agreed to outline as part of the crucial step to do in writing. Ramzan and Hafeez (2021), Tabuena (2020), and Li and Liu (2019) recommended the activity at the beginning of the writing. They also encouraged students not to skip it. As a learning tool, Padlet assists students to organize writing content in a way they can write their composition on the wall that the tool provides. In addition, Padlet has various types of layouts such as Wall, Stream, Grid, Shelf, Map, Canvas, and Timeline. Every layout has a different pattern and organization. For writing, students can choose one that matches the flow of their ideas and type of writing. If they have to write an experience, the timeline will help them to organize the content according to time order.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study include information about the tools used by senior high school students, as well as the reasons why students choose learning tools for writing and the learning tools that help them write. The findings are sorted into categories based on the research questions. The first and second research questions were combined into a single result that focused on the learning tools used by senior high school students for EFL writing and their reasons for using them. The types of learning tools that the students employed are video-sharing platforms, online notice boards, language support tools, and word processors. Easy to access and easy to use are the reason that majority of the students possess for selecting the tools. The tools help them improve linguistic aspects, expand their ideas, and make the content more organized. Moreover, in terms of the way the students decided what learning tools to be used to assist them in English writing, it is noticeable that the tools also promoted students' learning autonomy. According to the findings, this research encourages students to write English and count on technology to support the quality of their writing. In addition, they can meet what writing rubric's expectations that usually focus on organization, ideas, and language.

Recommendations referring to the findings are given to teachers, students, educational institutions, and other researchers. Regarding students' problems in writing that this research reveals, teachers should assist their students to overcome the issues using facilitative learning tools. In addition, understanding that some students autonomously find the solution for their writing problems, the teachers should explore facilitative learning tools that other students utilize and share with the class. Thus, all students can take benefit from

the tools to enhance their writing performance. Students should explore more tools that can accommodate their needs for writing improvement. Acknowledging that learning tools are significantly able to facilitate students' writing, educational institutions such as schools, and training centers colleges should subscribe to premium accounts for the tools as part of learning facilities for the students. This research has a limitation on the number of participants and scope of discussion. Other researchers, should involve more participants to get richer data about types of learning tools for writing. In addition to that, students' problems in writing are not the center of this research, becomes the point that the students addressed in the interview, other researchers should do more investigation to dig out the pedagogical and linguistic problems that students should face in writing.

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