Comparing Arab 'EFL Learners And Instructors' Perceptions Of Using Online Writing Tools During COVID-19

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Arab English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' and instructors' perceptions towards the use of online writing tools as a new writing tool for developing their English writing skills, as well as to compare their readiness to use such writing tools during and after COVID-19. A separate set of questionnaires was randomly distributed among 50 EFL learners and 20 instructors of a public university in Saudi Arabia to gather the data. Next, the data were quantitatively analyzed using SPSS 26. The results showed a clear benefit of using online writing tools on EFL learners' writing skills, including enhanced vocabulary, lesser grammar errors, spelling mistake-free writing, etc. In addition, they feel more confident and satisfied when they write in the English language using online writing tools. Finally, the implications of the study are also highlighted.

Keywords: English writing, EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions, online writing tool and COVID-19, Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

Since its inception, information technology has played a crucial in human life, including education. But due to the exponential spread of the coronavirus, the use of information technology has gained immense popularity globally following the closure of educational institutes because of social distancing measures that brought numerous challenges to the teaching-learning communities (Khan et al., 2021). In this context, information technology was the only platform that helped students to continue their learning activities without interruption (Zayabalaradjane, 2020; Muzaffar et al., 2020). Subsequently, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners started using different online writing tools to fulfil their learning needs, including writing needs. In this context, the learners widely use several different online tools, such as Grammarly, Google Docs, Hemingway App, and Ginger, which have gained popularity among language learners in recent times. The main aim of online writing tools is to support language learners in developing error-free content in the English language. Notably, the rise of COVID-19 supplements Korte and

Davies's (2011) observation that the continued penetration of technology was witnessed in teaching-learning activities, given the feeling that 21st-century students entering language classrooms are more tech-savvy and digitally literate learners. In fact, technological integration touched every level of education, i.e., primary to higher education level.

Consequently, the influx of research was reported in the 1990s which investigated the effect of technology on students' language learning (Warschauer, 1996). Next, technological integration in language classrooms continued. However, developing digital knowledge among learners has enabled and disabled as part of their curriculum design from time to time. In 2008, the TESOL organization proposed a framework, i.e., the Technology Standards Framework, both for teachers and learners (TESOL, 2008). The main components of this framework were teachers' and students' basic computer skills. Subsequently, at the current outset, language classrooms became more technology loaded. Therefore, most learners believe that technology is an integral part of classrooms.

In a study, Godwin-Jones (2016) noted that in a country like New Zealand this is naturally assumed that new university students at least possess basic digital competence (Prensky, 2001). Nevertheless, the students are equally proficient in using such digital tools, as countries across the globe show a strong digital divide due to limited or no internet access. In this context, the International Telecommunication Union published a report in 2017 which claimed that most parts of the world were still unable to access the internet. In this line, Africa was reported as having the lowest number of internet users, i.e., 21.8% of the total population, followed by Asia, 43.9%, and

Europe, 79.6%, respectively. Due to globalization, the education system is rapidly changing, as several international students travel to different countries for their studies. Therefore, such a digital divide may potentially hinder students learning outcomes. Such a problem becomes central to a culturally diverse country like Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Saudi Arabia needs to pay special attention to ease these cultural hindrances that might affect students' learning outcomes.

Moreover, the importance of online writing tools has become vital in the light of real-life scenarios as well as the COVID-19 pandemic as students are now more active on digital platforms. Therefore, they need a tool that can help them write their complex thoughts and ideas for the target audience or society as a whole. In this context, digital tools appear to be a useful tool as it provides a second set of eyes to scrutinize your English writing. It will identify all your spelling and grammar mistakes than your naked eyes. It can be safely suggested that with online writing tools, you can go for even serious writing with the confidence of an expert in the English language. Meyers (2005) says that writing is an action; therefore, the writing process involves several steps that need to be focused on in order to create an organized and systematic message in the form of writing. Further, the author says that teaching EFL to learners is an uphill task, especially writing, the most difficult hurdle to cross as many students feel bored while writing. Therefore, the teachers need to make the writing task interesting and relaxing for students so that they feel motivated toward this activity. In this direction, using an online tool is said to be a good idea to motivate language learners. Most students reveal that writing tasks are boring due to their poor writing quality.

The findings of previous studies suggested that most students faced difficulty in placing appropriate proverbs, good enough and enhanced vocabularies, context-sensitive words, advanced grammar rules, and collocational expressions. This facility affects the overall writing quality of learners. Further, the learners admit that good writing capability needs long term and consistent practice in order to master it. Researchers working on writing skill improvements; believe that good writing needs a lot of practice to master (Levy, 1995). Nevertheless, the teachers realize the repetitive mistakes learners tend to commit for a long; the teachers often pay extensive attention to teaching different writing models instead of focusing on learners' self-creativity (Sokoholic, 2003). Moreover, the researchers reveal that learners themselves can monitor and learn to write by using an online tool (Hui and Yinjuan, 2011). The traditional methods used for teaching & writing and the growing demand for incorporating technology in teaching and learning activities have stimulated the present study's authors to see online tools as a new media for teaching writing skills, especially during the COVID-19 situation. In this context, Krasnikov (2018) notes that Grammarly is such a digital tool that enables the user to achieve several writing goals like grammar checking, spell checking, plagiarism checking, etc., in addition to the suggestions about the content clarity, vocabulary, writing style, and tone (Krasnikov, 2018).

Since writing is seen as a teacher-student shared activity where the teacher acts as an instructor or a collaborator, the students are the ultimate recipient of learning. Therefore, this becomes crucial to determine the perceptions and attitudes of both teachers and students to understand their individual as well as university goals. As a possible way to use such tools effectively, it is essential to collect the data from both teachers and students, providing numerous insights about their difficulties, ease of use, affordability, etc. Moreover, based on these findings, a suitable framework can be developed, and next, both teachers and students can be trained to use it. In a study, O'Brayn (2008) argued that even a lesser exposure to such tools might help students go a long way. Therefore, in this study, the authors have collected the data using a web-based questionnaire from 50 EFL learners and 20 instructors of a public university in Saudi Arabia to determine their perceptions and readiness for using online writing tools as a new writing tool during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Related Works

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, researchers have actively been determining users' perceptions of the use of different e-learning platforms and online tools used for teaching-learning activities (Biswas et al., 2020). In a survey, the National Centre for Education Statistics (2020) has recorded a surge in demand for e-learning platforms and online tools among Saudian students due to the prevailing pandemic. Before the pandemic, several studies have also reported that computers in writing have immense potential to facilitate learners of all ages. In a study, Warschaunder (1999) argued about the efficacy of computers in motivating students toward writing tasks. In this context, several works have also reported about the online tools that provide support to language learners in numerous ways: identifying wrong spelling, the immediate suggestion of lexical substitutions, in addition to other extended language support, i.e., extra space between the words, repetition, speech recognition, audio feedback, wrong punctuation, and so on (Sauro, 2009; Ulsoy, 2006).

Consequently, all these contribute to making language editing jobs easy and

error-free writing in English. Studies based on these language supports have also been conducted with special reference to higher studies on students' language disabilities (Williams, 2002). Recent research has also reported that online writing tools stimulate language learners towards collaborative writing. Hence, more writing contributes to developing greater confidence among language learners (Crook, 1994; Snyder, 1994; Salomon, Kosminsky and Asaf, 2004). Moreover, students struggling with writing difficulties may well be felicitated with such a word processor to overcome these language difficulties (Zhu, Shum, Tse and Liu, 2016). Prensky (2001) concludes this discussion by noting that the effectiveness of word processors depends on two fundamental points: i) learners' knowledge of using computers and technology, and ii) user's ease and level of comfort at the time of using such tools.

Generally, it is recommended to write using a word processor for those users who have computer and internet access. Nevertheless, this is a fit case for learners of all backgrounds and ages. In their work, Xu and Ding (2014) reported that skilled and semi-skilled tertiary level (Chinese) English learners differ significantly from each other in their pause patterns during an English writing test using a word processor. The scores of 11 skilled learners among all were reported to be higher than semi-skilled learners. In order to monitor their activity during the test, screen and input capture software was employed. The recorded results revealed that skilled learners reported having less time both in pre-writing and during the writing stage than semi-skilled learners.

Nonetheless, they show no difference in their pause patterns during offline writing tasks as compared to the online ones. Xu and Ding (2014) concluded that semi-skilled writers had used the dictionary

more frequently than skilled writers. This gives a feeling that semi-skilled writers did so to overcome their linguistic disabilities.

Previous studies done on the efficacy of spell checkers and word processors reports that they are poorly designed for language learners to use it; rather, most of them facilitate native speakers of English who already bear the knowledge of using grammatically correct forms. In this context, Gupta (1998) reported that the non-native speakers of the English language in Singapore were able to use and locate correct forms of words, including those in their receptive to which they do not produce frequently using early word processors. In addition, the students were also able to correct the spelling errors through a word processor. On the contrary, in their study Rimrott and Heift (2005) noted that MS Word 2003 was unable to spot half of the errors committed by the learners. The authors also emphasized that the users or learners need to be trained that even undetected words are not definitely correct, and suggested synonymous words are also always not present in the target language's database of the spell checker. They recommended that using a dictionary and a spell checker may overcome this problem. Despite using the latest and advanced grammar tools, students reported that they do not fully rely on the immediate feedback provided by such tools (Shintani & Aubrey, 2016). This problem was persistent with the iCALL grammar reader designed for students (Lavolette, Polio & Kahng, 2015). Yet thoughtfully crafted technique has significantly improved iCALL performance and helped Korean English learners to deal with four types of problematic constructions (Cowan, Choo and Lee 2014).

Hubbard (2004) claims that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has immense potential to facilitate language

learners in numerous ways and emphasizes that students need to be trained and encouraged in the CALL environment. CALL promotes collaborative and self-learning. This may negatively impact students who bear poor technical, strategic, and pedagogical skills. Endless information available on the internet may lead to distraction among students. Finding and locating desired information, cost-effectiveness, and inadequate staff support are crucial challenges in the CALL environment (Reinders and White, 2010). Apart from grammar checker proved utilities, students reported that getting genuine and reliable feedback and exploring new opportunities are crucial problems that remain an unsolved tasks for language learners. In order to overcome such barriers, student needs to get adequate training, practice, and feedback to get ample technological benefits (Reinders and Hubbard, 2013).

Further, several studies have also been conducted to determine the factors responsible for the adoption of Web-Based Learning (WBL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), in second language learning. These platforms provide enormous opportunities to learn the language at learners' convenience. Therefore, these tools are considered powerful, flexible, and efficient. Despite MALL's popularity among learners, still, they say that CALL is the easiest and the most popular approach for writing tasks among the students pursuing higher studies due to the advanced computer technology (Karyuatry et al., 2018). Now, this approach is known as Web-Based Learning, which peers define as "a hypermedia-based educational program which utilizes the attributes and resources of the World Wide Web to create a meaningful learning environment where learning is fostered and supported" (Khan,

1997, as cited in Karyuatry et al., 2018); "individualized instruction delivered over a public or private computer network and displayed by a Web browser" (Clark and Healy, 1996, cited in Henke, 1997: 1). They further note that by using the web-based writing approach, students have significantly improved their writing skills as compared to the traditional writing methods. Lin (1997) extends this discussion by advocating the advantages of web-based writing as this helps learners to collaborate and learn from group-mates and classmates, it helps learners to share feedback with each other, also enables learners to publish their work, and hence, it provides fairly better learning opportunities to the learners. Grejda and Hannafin (1992) say that web-based learning enables students to minimize their frequent grammatical errors as compared to the pen-paper methodology, which also improves writing quality (Breese et al., 1996; Lam and Pennington, 1995). Further, McCarthy and Grabowski (1999) add more to it by saying that web-based learning is a new technique for a teacher to make teaching-learning activities more exciting and interesting for students by using advanced computer technology. As a result, WBL motivates students to know more about the required field of knowledge and provides an enhanced learning experience.

3. Online writing tool: A case study

This section enumerates the methodology employed in this study, and further sub-sections illustrate the results followed by the discussion.

3.1. Methodology

The survey method, according to Isaac and Michael (1997: p.136) is used to: "answer questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been poised or observed, to assess needs and set goals, to determine whether or not specific objectives have been met, to establish

baselines against which future comparisons can be made, to analyze trends across time, and generally, to describe what exists, in what amount, and in what context". This research has also been done through a questionnaire with the broad objectives listed above in order to elicit information and collect data about a particular phenomenon. The questionnaire method is simply a data collection tool for carrying out survey research. It is a paper produced through the application of quantitative, analytical, and descriptive methods.

3.2. Objectives

The study is based on descriptive analysis. It aims to explore the perceptions of both learners and instructors towards the use of online writing tools as a new writing tool since teaching-learning is seen as the teacher-student shared activities. Further, the data for this study were collected from a public university in Saudi Arabia. In this sense, the current study aims to answer the three following research questions:

RQ1: To determine the EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions of using online writing tools during the COVID-19.

RQ2: To understand the writing support provided by the online writing tools writing tool.

RQ3: To compare the attitudes of learners and instructors towards the use of online writing tools as a new writing tool.

3.3. Sample size

The total respondents for this study were 50 EFL learners comprising both (25) males and (25) females, and 20 instructors also included both (10) males and (10) females (as presented in table 1 and 2 below).

3.4. Tool

Two sets of questionnaires were prepared for each group of respondents (learners and instructors). The motive behind designing two sets of questions was based on the fact that the two (learners and instructors) have different roles to play in the case of digital writing tools for their writing tasks. Therefore, questions show slight variations depending on the target group. As literature shows a dearth of information on the role of digital writing tools as a writing tool from the COVID-19 perspective, therefore, the researchers themselves designed the questionnaire taking some insights from other related studies done on online writing tools. Further, the nature and design of the two questionnaires, including scaling (Likert), have been done based on the suitability of this study. The questionnaires were divided into three sections; the first section aimed to ask about the respondents' demographic details. In contrast, the second part sought information related to the frequency of using digital writing tools and their purpose (e.g., grammar checking, spell checking, etc.). Finally, the third part contained questions that were designed to determine the perceptions of EFL learners and instructors towards the use of digital writing tools and their effects on students writing. In particular, the questionnaires were prepared on 10 items (close-ended type), used five points Likert scaling system where 1 describes strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 neutral, 4 disagree, and 5 strongly disagree.

3.5. Procedures

This study is based on the primary data, the questionnaire method, and to achieve it, an online survey was conducted. The questionnaires were randomly distributed using electronic media like; WhatsApp, Facebook, and Email among 50 EFL learners and 20 instructors in September 2020. Further, a quantitative analysis of the valid responses from both learners and instructors against each question was analyzed using SPSS 26. The results were obtained in terms of percentage,

frequency, mean, and standard deviation during the analysis to sum up this study.

3.6. Results

In the following sub-sections, the results of this study have been demonstrated starting from learners' and instructors' demographic profile, frequency of using digital writing tools, and the purpose of using digital writing tools. Additionally, the perceptions of both learners and instructors towards the use of digital writing tools for their writing tasks have been compared and presented. Subsequently, discussion and implications are also presented.

### 3.6.1. Respondents' demographic profile

This section provides the demographic information (gender, age, and education) of the learners and the instructors in Tables 1 and 2 below. Further, the frequency and the purpose of using digital writing tools are presented in the following figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.

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**

Table 2: Demographic details of the instructors'

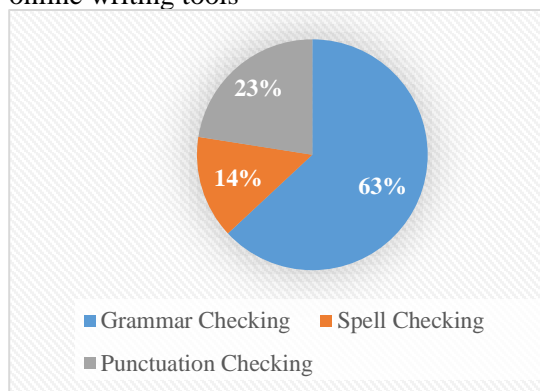| Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	10	50
Female	10	50
Age		
25-30 Years	7	35
31-35 Years	8	40
36+ Years	5	25
Education		
Graduate	22	10
Post-graduate	28	90
Total	**20**	**100**
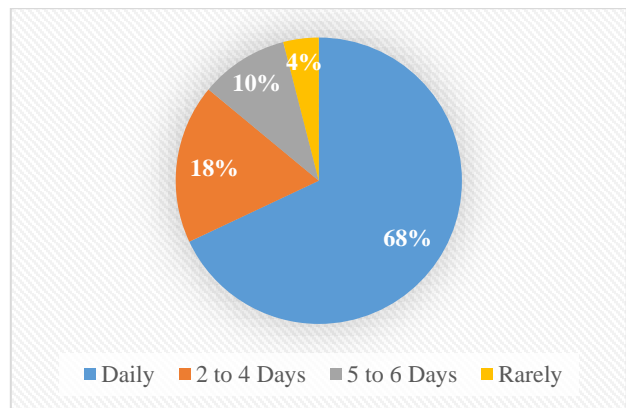
Figure 1: Learners' frequency of using online writing tools
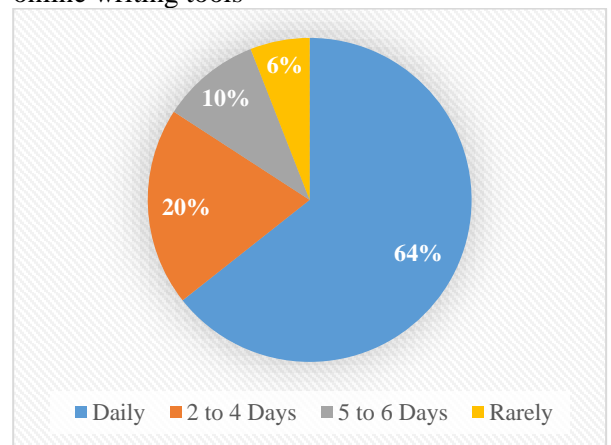
Figure 2: Instructors' frequency of using online writing tools
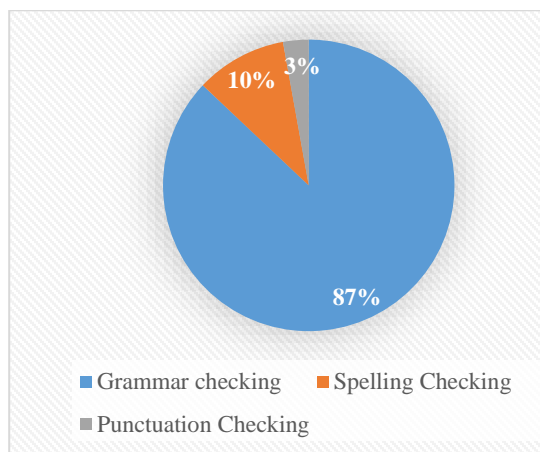
Figure 3: Learners' purpose for using online writing tools

Figure 4: Instructors' purpose for using online writing tools

3.7. Learners' and instructors' perceptions of using online writing tools

This section presents the responses of the learners and instructors against each item that determines their overall perceptions of online writing tools in Table 3 and 4 below. The tables are organized in such a way that the first column consists of questions, the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth presents responses ranging from strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral

(N), disagree (D), strongly disagree (SD) and mean and standard deviation columns. The mean reveals the average of the responses, while standard deviation is used to show the actual variation from the mean based on the responses of learners and instructors. The standard deviation of the result remains close to 1, which means that the overall answer is close to the average and shows a positive perception (Al-Hunaiyyan et al., 2018).

3.7.1. Learners' perceptions of using online writing tools

To better present the results, we have merged strongly agree and agree responses to show overall 'agreement', similarly, disagree and strongly disagree as overall 'disagreement'.

Now, we will present responses of the learners against each question, for Q1 learners' agreement is 56.0% (Mean = 2.54, SD = 1.230). Similarly, Q2 shows the agreement percentage which is 66.0% (Mean = 2.42, SD = 1.230). For Q3 the total agreement is 66.0% (Mean = 2.46, SD = 1.164). Q4 receives total agreement as 66% (Mean = 2.28, SD = 1.107), Q5 received total agreement of 50.0% (Mean = 2.74, SD = 1.133). Further, Q6 responses show 76.0% agreement (Mean = 2.20, SD = 1.124). Additionally, Q7 reveals the total agreement of 76.0% while the disagreement is 10.0% (Mean = 2.12, SD = 1.171), which means that students are ready for such tools. Q8 shows total agreement of 64.0% (Mean = 2.40, SD = 1.087). While Q9 demonstrates 28.0% agreement (Mean = 3.00, SD = 1.228). Finally, Q10 offers total agreement of 52.0% (Mean = 2.60, SD = 1.261).

Table 3: Learners' perceptions of using online writing tools

Questions	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Div.
1. Online writing tools help me write English	22.0%	34.0%	22.0%	12.0%	10.0%	2.54	1.230

Statement						Mean	SD
anytime, anywhere during COVID-19.							
2. Online writing tools help me to gain confidence while writing English.	22.0%	44.0%	14.0%	10.0%	10.0%	2.42	1.230
3. I think I will write perfect English someday with the help of online writing tools.	16.0%	50.0%	16.0%	8.0%	10.0%	2.46	1.164
4. Online writing tools help me stay motivated toward English writing during COVID-19.	24.0%	42.0%	24.0%	2.0%	8.0%	2.28	1.107
5. Using online writing tools, my English writing has significantly improved.	20.0%	30.0%	20.0%	16.0%	14.0%	2.74	1.133
6. Writing English using online writing tools is a good idea in the time of the pandemic.	24.0%	52.0%	14.0%	⎯⎯	10.0%	2.20	1.124
7. Online writing tools help me to retain writing goals.	32.0%	44.0%	14.0%	⎯⎯	10.0%	2.12	1.171
8. I welcome online writing tools as a new writing tool if implemented in the post-COVID era.	16.0%	48.0%	26.0%	⎯⎯	10.0%	2.40	1.087
9. I feel satisfied if online writing tools were implemented as a new writing tool.	16.0%	12.0%	42.0%	16.0%	14.0%	3.00	1.228
10. Using online writing tools will cause distraction in English writing.	20.0%	32.0%	30.0%	4.0%	14.0%	2.60	1.251

3.7.2. Instructors' perceptions of using online writing tools

This section demonstrates the results regarding instructors' perceptions towards the use of online wtiting tools.

The responses to Q1 give interesting results as 85% that voice clear agreement (Mean = 2.10, SD = .640). Q2 reveals 60.0% agreement (Mean = 2.30, SD = 0.801). Similarly, Q3 found that total agreement is 60.0% (Mean = 2.55, SD = 0.887). For Q4 we have got 40.0% agreement (Mean = 3.05, SD = 1.234). For Q5 the agreement is 75.0% (Mean = 2.25, SD = 1.019). While Q6 received a total agreement of 65.0% (Mean = 2.35, SD = 0.933). Q7 show 60.0% of agreement (Mean = 2.40, SD = 0.940). Further, Q8 has got 55% agreement (Mean = 2.55, SD = 1.050). The Q9 has received 65.0% agreement (Mean = 2.40, SD = 0.882). Finally, Q10 reveals interesting results, i.e., 75% show their agreement (Mean 2.20, SD = 0.951).

Table 4: Instructors' perceptions of using online writing tools

| Questions	SA	A	N	D	M	Std. Div.
1. Online writing tools help me write English anytime, anywhere during COVID-19.	10.0%	75.0%	10.0%	5.0%	2.10	0.640
2. Online writing tools help students to gain confidence while writing English.	10.0%	60.0%	20.0%	10.0%	2.30	0.801
3. Online writing tools remove psychological barriers between the teachers and students and improves interaction.	5.0%	55.0%	20.0%	20.0%	2.55	0.887
4. Adding online writing tools as a new writing tool in the post-COVID era will increase my regular work as an instructor.	15.0%	25.0%	60.0%	---------	3.05	1.234
5. I welcome online writing tools if it was implemented as a new writing tool.	20.0%	55.0%	5.0%	20.0%	2.25	1.019
6. I would like to use online writing tools for English writing after COVID is over.	15.0%	50.0%	20.0%	15.0%	2.35	0.933
7. Online writing tools help us to retain the writing goal.	15.0%	45.0%	25.0%	15.0%	2.40	0.940
8. Online writing tool will cause distraction in English writing.	15.0%	40.0%	20.0%	25.0%	2.55	1.050

9. Online writing tools help me to identify student grammatical mistakes more quickly.	10.0%	55.0%	20.0%	15.0%	2.40	0.882
10. Students' content developed using online writing tools invites less critique from the teacher.	20.0%	55.0%	10.0%	15.0%	2.20	0.882

Note: This table does not contain descriptive statistics details of 'strongly agree' response as none chose it against all the 10 items.

3.7.3. Comparison of Learners' and Instructors' perceptions of online writing tools

The results demonstrated in Tables 3, and 4 above compare learners' and instructors' perceptions of using the online writing tool during COVID-19. The term

'agreement' stands for both 'strongly agree + agree', and 'disagreement' presents 'strongly disagree + disagree'. Noteworthy to mention that the percentage shows significant similarities between learners' and instructors' responses against each item, as represented in figure 5. This clearly shows that both learners and teachers bear approximately the same perceptions and attitudes towards the use of online writing tools.
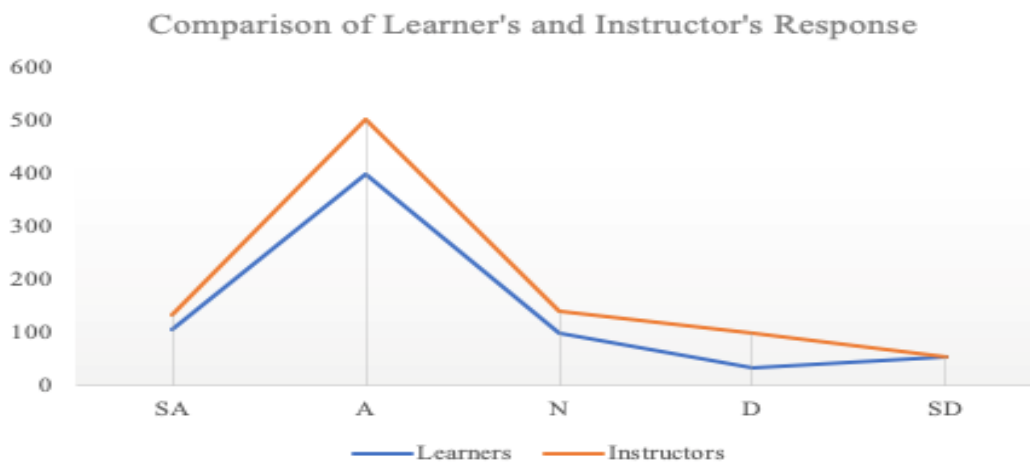
Figure 5: Comparison of Learners' and Instructors' perceptions of online writing tools

4.   Discussion and implications

The use of a computer helps learners reduce errors in writing compared to the pen and paper method (Grejda and Hannafin, 1992). The growing demand

for application-based writing has deeply penetrated our education system. This study reveals an interesting fact that 80% of the learners and 76% of the instructors use online writing tools on a daily basis. The high demand for app-based writing among the learners can best be exploited to make a shift towards such an online writing tool, namely 'Grammarly or

Google Docs'. In this regard, Krasnikov et al. (2018) reported that Grammarly has not only helped students to minimize writing errors but also enabled them to choose the right article and diction too. The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 above shows a clear lineage of positive attitudes of both learners and instructors towards the use of online writing tool. Further, the results also demonstrate that both learners and instructors strongly believe in the efficacy and effectiveness of online writing tools in writing. Such tools enabled learners to use them anywhere and anytime, which helped them achieve learning specific writing goals. Most learners welcomed using online writing tools during COVID-19 because it helps learners gain accuracy in writing and helps instructors follow learners' records while away from usual classrooms due to the prevailing COVID-19 situation. The results of this study further revealed that 90% of the respondents believe that online writing tools are helpful in their writing, as they provided immediate grammar corrections, right phrases, and articles that fit in the context. This can be supported by the findings of Lin's (1997) study that highlights the advantages of web-based writing tools in several ways; it provides an opportunity for the learners to exchange information and learn with each other, helps learners to get feedback, and finally provides a good and interactive learning platform for learners.

The results strongly suggest that both learners and instructors have agreed that content developed or scanned using online writing tools has a lesser scope of errors and corrections. Moreover, they equivocally admitted that learners' writing has significantly improved. Learners were very confident in using the online writing tool and said that by using it someday, they would write perfect English. In this regard, McCarthy and Grabowski (1999) claimed that using

technology learning experience may be enhanced.

This study is different from previous studies in the sense that it attempts to determine Arab EFL learners' perceptions about the features and services of online writing tools that influence their writing goals during COVID-19. Moreover, we have also sought instructors' perceptions about the use of online writing tools, based on the fact that instructors pose superior subject knowledge than learners. The perceptions of both learners and instructors were compared, which makes this study different and novel from that of already published works. Particularly, anytime and anywhere support feature, instant feedback about the wrong spellings, words, phrases, and articles of online writing tools that contribute to error-free writing. This indicates that online writing tools can play a significant role in the development of EFL learners' English writing skills. Therefore, instructors and university administration needs to pay attention to it.

Further, the current study makes a novel contribution to the existing literature as it attempts to explore the attributes of Arab EFL learners towards online writing tools that helped them attain writing goals during COVID-19. Moreover, the common response against all the items concerning online writing tools was indicated either as strongly agree, agree, or neutral. This indicates the worthiness of the current study. Following are the implications that are drawn from the findings of this study in the Saudi Arabia EFL context:

For all the features of online writing tools that contribute to the overall development of EFL learners' writing skills, instructors need to pay special consideration to these items. In this context, students were able to achieve their writing goals primarily through the anywhere-anytime facility of online

writing tools. Online writing tools are free online writing tool that is used on a computer or a mobile device through the internet. Therefore, it is advised that the user must ensure to have a compatible device and working internet connection to use such writing tools. Moreover, instructors acting as a collaborator must ensure unclarity related to the functionalities of online writing tools for the learners to use them smoothly. Pertinent to mention that the subject under investigation, 'Online writing tools' in this study, are mainly related to accessibility, ease of use, and accuracy.

Most of the learners have admitted the role of 'ease of use' online writing tools. Here 'ease of use' is related to anywhere-anytime, especially in the time of COVID-19. This feature attracts users to online writing tools. As a result, this will lead to technology readiness and enhanced writing experience. As much as students are ready to use technology for their writing needs, their level of satisfaction and confidence in online writing tools will improve, which will also be a success of online writing tools.

The second crucial factor in the line that contributed to the success of online writing tools is 'immediate feedback' (see item no. 7 in table 3 above) on their English writing. The same has been reported in several previous studies. This factor becomes even more significant for second language learners. In a country like Saudi Arabia, many EFL learners still believe that online tools are not a good option for error-free writing. Therefore, instructors must encourage students to use online writing tools and share their own experiences with them. This would be even better if learners were trained in online writing tools by experts. In this context, instructors must have a full understanding of the features/specifications of such tools, give utmost attention to learners' difficulties

and motivate them to use such tools continuously with other students, classmates, and peers to gain confidence in English writing.

Finally, the support features anywhere-anytime, immediate grammar feedback must be considered as the core components that contribute to the overall effectiveness of online writing tools. A large section of learners and instructors in Saudi Arabia do not find online writing tools as effective as they can fulfil learners' writing needs. However, this fact appears to be far away from reality, which is also evident in this study. Therefore, instructors must encourage learners to use online writing tools. Further, the instructor must actively work as a collaborator with students throughout the course to retain their writing goals effectively and successfully. If these measures have been adopted, we are sure that language learners will be more satisfied with the role of online writing tools.

5. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

To implement any technology in education, it is of high importance to first investigate the perceptions of both learners and instructors towards it. Additionally, the readiness of the two also needs to be checked for the effective implementation of the technology in education. Therefore, this study tried to investigate the perceptions of EFL learners and instructors towards the use of online writing tools as a new writing tool during COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia. In this context, the results of this study demonstrate a positive perception of the respondents towards the use of online writing tools, based on the fact that EFL learners were able to write anywhere and anytime using such tools, and also empowered them to develop a fair understanding about the proper use of

phrases, articles, and improved overall English writing skills of the learners. Moreover, both learners and instructors feel that by using online writing tools, EFL learners commit lesser errors. Hence, they hope that they will be able to develop better English content in the future. Finally, this study can be concluded based on the findings that overall online writing tool was helpful for the EFL learners as their usage helped them achieve their writing goals and helped them stay motivated during COVID-19. The common response was that online writing tools helped them remove the psychological barriers between the learners and instructors as well as improved interaction between them. Additionally, the findings highlighted in this study can be used by instructors and institute administration to effectively implement online writing tools to help learners achieve their English writing goals. In this context, both learners and instructors have indicated that they are fully ready for online writing tools if introduced as a new writing tool in their main curriculum in Saudi Arabia.

The main limitation of this work remains mainly on two planes; one is that the sample size is fairly small, and secondly, only sticking to the aforementioned questions, we cannot draw a fairly pinpoint perceptions of EFL learners about the use of online writing tools. Therefore, the authors strongly recommend considering some more aspects of learners' perceptions like digital infrastructure, institute support, as well as a large sample size. Though learners and instructors in this study have emphasized the importance of online writing tools in the development of their writing skills, such a tool remains in the infancy stage in the Arabian EFL learning context, and the authors further noted that despite high internet usage, online writing tools are not used widely. Or most of them use the non-premium version in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they were reluctant to fill the questionnaire, which left us with a limited number of responses.

More and more studies need to be conducted on the role of online writing tools like Grammarly and Google Docs in improving EFL learners' English writing skills in the Saudi Arabia context. Particularly keeping learners' characteristics and attitudes in view to better understand what attracts students towards such writing tools.

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