

Application of Electronic Grammar Check Functions in Writing Essays: Self Assessment and Evaluation

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Abstract

Many students and teachers are not aware of this important feature for checking the grammar and reading fluency of essays. This paper provides details of minimal applications of grammar checking functions for Microsoft Word documents. Furthermore, it explains why reading fluency and graded level scores of writing are effective applications for students in evaluating their writing skills. The application of the grammar check, reading fluency, and graded level scores is an important tool for providing students an objective analysis of their own writing development.

Introduction

One highly-emphasized area of specialization in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes is development of writing skills. ESL or EFL student essays are usually graded on content, organization, and grammar. Teachers or school programs will usually place more emphasis on one or more of these areas. This paper discusses ways to help students and teachers analyze their written essays with the help of electronic software tools available in most writing programs on the market. This paper will also discuss the advantages of having students submit essays electronically for both the teacher and the student.

Hand-written, print out or electronic submissions

Students may submit essays in electronic or hard copy format from a computer, or in hand written format in essay classes. The hand written hard copy format provides more personal identification with the writer because there are various writing styles. However, the writing styles can sometimes be difficult to read or comprehend if the teacher has difficulty reading the essay due to poor legibility. Hence, submitting essays electronically or handing in a printed document guarantees that the essay is legible and facilitates corrections by the teacher.

Spell check and grammar check functions

One of the most frequently used tools of word processing software is the spell check function. This tool can help identify misspelled words. However, it requires the author to also check that the words are used appropriately. It is possible that the spell checker function identifies a word as one of the words in the dictionary, but it could be the wrong word that was typed by accident.

The second most frequently used function is the grammar checker. This checks the sentences for functions such as agreement that are necessary for grammatical sentences. These functions can be set to check the essay as the author is in the progress of writing it or afterwards depending on the preferences of the writer.

Word count

A third tool that is available is the total word count. Most abstracts or essays have a recommended word count. This function helps the author prepare an abstract or essay of the appropriate length. Usually, it is much more difficult to summarize something concisely in only a few words than to write a lengthy account. Another option related to the total length of the essay is a calculation of the longest, shortest, and average length of a group of sentences in an essay. If an essay is written with many short sentences of four words or less, it can appear that the sentences do not flow or connect smoothly. Likewise, if an essay has too many very long sentences with more than two sentences embedded within the main sentence, the essay can become very difficult to follow or it is difficult to retain the intended message. The average length of the sentences overall is probably the most helpful and significant figure that helps determine the readability and level of an essay. Usually, an average of between 10 to 12 words per sentence would provide a possible indication of an advanced writer.

Passivity check

A fourth helpful tool is the passivity check. This tool helps determine how many passive sentences are in the essay. Technical articles usually have higher passivity scores, up to 20 percent. However, essays or letters with lower content difficulty usually have lower passivity scores from zero to 10 percent. Passivity scores can sometimes also indicate a possibility of excessive use of an electronic translation device to create the sentences in an essay. Electronic translation of Japanese sentences to English sentences usually has a large number of passive constructions. Effective use of electronic translation of Japanese sentences or essays usually requires an author to revise the essay considerably before it is acceptable to submit as a well written document and then the passivity level will stay within the acceptable levels depending on the content of the essay.

Readability tests

A fifth helpful tool is an analysis tool called the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. This tool is not automatically set as a default in most software programs, but is widely available in almost all facets for use with Windows, Linux, and Macintosh systems. However, it

is very easy to set the default for this tool by selecting the appropriate grammar check functions that opt for it. Once this tool is selected, it can serve as a powerful tool to give an indication of the difficulty of the essay in terms of reading and understanding. The Flesch Reading Ease is reported as a percentage between zero to 100 percent. If an essay rates 100 percent, it is highly likely that the average word length is very low and furthermore that the difficulty level of words used within the essay are at the lower end of the readability scale. Hence, the appropriate level of difficulty should be determined by the student or teacher, and this can vary depending on the type of topic and technical complicity of the essay. An acceptable score for tertiary classes might be somewhere between 40 and 80 percent depending on the level of the students and the topic of the essay.

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level provides a score usually from as low as 0 to a difficulty level of 12 or 13 depending on the level of students in tertiary classes. The higher the Flesch Reading Ease score, the lower the number of the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. The average number for tertiary classes at the intermediate level usually ranges from 6 to 8 while the average for advanced classes ranges from 9 to 12. Academic articles published in professional journals usually have a score of 12 or higher when they are analyzed by the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

Conclusion

Application of the Grammar Check function to get various numbers that represent the difficulty and probability of a grammatically well written article are helpful to anyone writing long essays, articles, or even personal letters. However, short essays of less than 100 words usually have a higher possibility that figures might be distorted regarding the actual reading ease or level of an essay.

What is most important for instilling writing skills in writers is that they can somehow evaluate their performance and progress on their own even after they have completed a writing course. The use of a table that looks at progress during a certain period of time (e.g., a semester in a university program) can provide tremendous insights to students. When students are aware of the quantifiable numbers and variables that contribute to better writing skills, they invariably improve their writing skills. If they can see these improvements through their own analysis of their writing using tools such as the grammar check function, then this tool and the readability tools that are associated with it are worth the effort of employing. Students' self-analysis of writing by themselves has proven to be highly beneficial and hence use of computers to help analyze written essays should be applied where possible.

Biographical Statement

Dr. Peter Wanner, Tohoku University, Language Education Department holds a Doctors Degree in Informatics from Nagoya University, a Master of Science Degree in Linguistics from Georgetown University, and a Bachelors Degree in Liberal Arts from University of Portland. His areas of specialization include cognitive sciences, language acquisition, applied linguistics, and psychology.