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Journal of International Students

Volume 16, Issue 12 (2026), pp. 253-272

ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)

jistudents.org

<https://doi.org/10.32674/rtxht455>



Preserving Humanity or Surrendering It? Grammarly Adoption a Site of Cultural- Pedagogical Negotiation in Transnational Education

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ABSTRACT: *Using a Sino-American university in mainland China as a comparative lens against findings from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia, this qualitative study examines the sharply polarized adoption of an institution-wide Grammarly EDU license. Despite free access, Chinese students and nonnative academic staff adopted Grammarly as an essential tool, while many native-speaking academic staff resisted it on philosophical grounds. A third pattern, positioning Grammarly as the ethically "safe" AI alternative to generative tools, emerged across various contexts. The paper argues that transnational campuses function as accelerated laboratories for negotiating the global boundary between corrective and generative AI in writing pedagogy. The findings contribute to internationalization theory by revealing how tool adoption becomes a proxy for deeper cultural contests over legitimate academic labor.*

Keywords: AI writing tools, China branch campuses, comparative international education, corrective vs generative AI, Grammarly, transnational higher education

Received: Dec 25, 2025 | **Revised:** April 14, 2026 | **Accepted:** May 10, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The rapid global diffusion of AI writing assistants has coincided with the expansion of transnational higher education (TNHE), resulting in new sites of cultural and pedagogical contestation over the nature of writing and learning (Mok & Marginson, 2021). This paper uses a Sino-American branch campus in China as a critical case to examine how one widely licensed tool, Grammarly EDU¹ is simultaneously celebrated, resisted, and morally bound against generative AI.

Transnational higher education (TNHE) campuses are hybrid pedagogical spaces where Western curricula are delivered via English-medium instruction (EMI) to predominantly nonnative-speaker student bodies (Knight & Liu, 2019; Liu et al., 2023), often generating documented tensions in teaching expectations and faculty experience (Cai & Hall, 2016; Knight, 2016). These campuses have become laboratories for negotiating linguistic capital and academic identity. Since 2020, Grammarly EDU has emerged as a widely licensed AI writing assistant in internationalized universities (Lookadoo et al., 2025). Unlike generative large-language models, it limits itself to corrective feedback, positioning it as a "safer" technology. Precisely because of this positioning, its adoption becomes a revealing proxy for deeper debates about pedagogy and integrity in these contested spaces.

From a sociocultural perspective, writing is a mediated activity in which tools function as cultural artifacts that shape, and potentially short-circuit, learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). The transnational campus, where Chinese examination-oriented and Western process-oriented definitions of writing coexist and collide, becomes an accelerated contact zone in which the developmental legitimacy of such tools is fiercely negotiated.

Whereas initial studies documented student perceptions of Grammarly in single-country EFL settings (Koltovskaia, 2023), the postgenerative-AI era has precipitated a global institutional crisis concerning academic integrity and pedagogy (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). This body of work, however, remains focused on policy-level responses in Western contexts and continues to marginalize academic staff perspectives. No study has examined how this crisis is lived within the unique cultural-pedagogical crucible of a Sino-foreign branch campus, where access to Grammarly EDU is universal but its meaning is fiercely contested. This paper addresses that gap.

The central research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do academic staff and students experience and rationalize their (non)use of Grammarly EDU?

RQ2: How do transnational cultural-pedagogical tensions shape these experiences?

RQ3: How is Grammarly positioned against the backdrop of generative AI tools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review situates AI writing assistant adoption within the dynamics of transnational higher education (TNHE). It argues that tools such as Grammarly EDU become sites of negotiation where deeper cultural-pedagogical tensions are played out. We employ a dual framework: scholarship on pedagogical tensions in Sino-foreign universities and the concept of the boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989), a flexible artifact that different groups interpret according to their own needs. We conceptualize Grammarly as such an object: a linguistic scaffold for students, a threat to authentic learning for some faculty, and a moral boundary against generative AI for all. Existing research has yet to apply this lens to a Sino-foreign branch campus, leaving faculty voices and the evolving AI boundary underexplored.

Grammarly in the EFL Landscape: Efficacy and the Paradox of Reliance

A substantial body of research documents Grammarly's effectiveness in EFL contexts, with studies reporting significant improvements in grammatical accuracy and measurable reductions in errors (Dewi, 2023; Hidayat & Sari, 2025). Students report increased confidence, vocabulary growth, and autonomy, valuing the tool's real-time, explanatory feedback (Cavaleri & Dianati, 2016; Nurhidayah & Irawati, 2024). However, perceptions are ambivalent. Qualitative studies reveal concerns about overreliance, contextually irrelevant suggestions, and limited feedback on higher-order concerns, such as argument strength (Setyowati et al., 2024; Zuhriah et al., 2024). Practical barriers: cost, internet dependency, technical glitches, and creating equity issues (Indiah Pane et al., 2025).

This pattern is globally consistent. Afghan students and teachers valued Grammarly's efficiency while expressing concerns about its dependency (Yousofi, 2022). Vietnamese postgraduates appreciated instant error correction but strongly preferred peer feedback for organization and argument (Ha & Ho, 2025). A persistent critique shadows this efficacy: the risk of deskilling. Scholars caution that such tools may erode internal grammar monitoring and undermine independent writing competence (Ranalli, 2021; Van Wyk, 2025). This paradox: the features that make Grammarly effective also short-circuit productive struggle, prefigures the dissonance that emerges starkly in TNHE settings.

Transnational Higher Education as a Locus of Pedagogical Dissonance

Sino-foreign cooperative universities are hybrid spaces where Western curricula delivered in English meet predominantly Chinese student bodies and internationally recruited faculty (Knight & Liu, 2019; Liu et al., 2023). This structural hybridity generates pedagogical tension, particularly in writing instruction. Asian educational contexts emphasize accuracy, error reduction, and model texts (Ha & Ho, 2025; Hidayat & Sari, 2025), while expatriate faculty espousing Western liberal-arts pedagogy prioritize process, critical argumentation, and authorial voice. This clash manifests in daily classroom

interactions and assessment disagreements. Faculty in TNHE settings are cultural mediators navigating divergent expectations (Chen & Zhu, 2022; Toohey et al., 2017). Introducing a normatively Western technology such as Grammarly intensifies rather than simplifies this negotiation, making adoption a proxy for ideological conflict.

Grammarly as Mediator in the ZPD: A Sociocultural Perspective

Sociocultural theory conceptualizes writing as socially distributed and mediated by cultural tools (Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Automated writing evaluation tools such as Grammarly function as mediators assessed against the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The critical distinction is transparency. When Grammarly flags an error and offers an explanation, it functions as a "more knowledgeable other" preserving learner agency (Thorne & Lantolf, 2007). Generative AI, by rewriting entire passages, produces opaque mediation that collapses the ZPD. Those privileging processes and intellectual struggles perceive Grammarly as developmentally legitimate yet bounded; those shaped by examination-oriented cultures may appropriate it more enthusiastically as an efficient regulator. In the culturally hybrid TNHE environment, the same tool becomes a site for contesting the legitimacy of assistance within competing ZPDs.

The Academic Staff Perspective: A Conspicuous Silence and the Seeds of Resistance

A notable gap is the near absence of academic staff voices, particularly those that are skeptical or resistant. Limited work suggests that faculty appreciate such tools for reducing workload (Ayan & Erdemir, 2023; Koltovskaia, 2023). However, faculty resistance is rarely technophobic; it is tied to perceived threats to pedagogical autonomy and professional identity (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). Faculty skepticism aligns with documented concerns: misleading feedback, misinterpretation of context, altered meaning (Ha & Ho, 2025; Indiah Pane et al., 2025), and fostering dependency (Yousofi, 2022). When faculty members warn that Grammarly allows students to "skip the process," they identify a documented pedagogical risk. Resistance may thus be a form of pedagogical gatekeeping—preserving struggle and critical thought. In TNHE settings, where faculty are already cultural mediators, Grammarly can intensify threats to autonomy. This principled resistance remains critically underexplored.

Redrawing the Boundary: Corrective AI, Generative AI, and Academic Integrity

Generative AI has forced an urgent renegotiation of acceptable boundaries for assistance (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). In this context, tools such as Grammarly are repositioned as "safer" technology within traditional integrity frameworks (Lookadoo et al., 2025), although the boundary between support and

substitution blurs as students use generative AI for ideation and Grammarly for "humanizing" output.

Our study explores this blurring in a TNHE setting, investigating how participants engage in moral bounding work (extending Star & Griesemer, 1989), defining Grammarly as an acceptable scaffold against generative AI. This negotiation is cultural. Asian EFL learners already distinguish between feedback types, privileging human peers for global concerns (Ha & Ho, 2025). Grammarly reinforces local correctness, potentially at the expense of higher-order concerns central to Western pedagogy. How this cultural-pedagogical tension shapes moral bounding between AIs in TNHE is a question central to understanding real-world institutional ethics.

Table 1 summarizes three recurrent findings from the global EFL literature, contrasts their implications under Western liberal-arts versus Chinese examination-oriented traditions, and highlights unanswered questions for TNHE contexts.

Table 1: Mapping the Literature onto the TNHE Context and Identified Gaps

Thematic Finding from Literature	Implication in Western Pedagogical Norms	Implication in Chinese Pedagogical Norms	Unanswered Question for TNHE Context
Improves grammatical accuracy (Hidayat & Sari, 2025)	Valued but may conflict with voice and argument priorities.	Aligns with examination-oriented focus on precision.	How do faculty from different traditions reconcile efficacy with pedagogical goals?
Risks overreliance & deskilling (Ranalli, 2021)	Seen as a fundamental threat to learning as intellectual struggle.	Secondary concern relative to correct final product.	Is Western faculty resistance a defense of pedagogical ideals?
Faculty as facilitators of higher-order concerns (Ayan & Erdemir, 2023)	Supports teacher as guide to critical thinking.	Conflicts with teacher as authority on correctness	How does Grammarly reshape faculty identity and authority?

This table highlights that Grammarly is not neutral; cultural and pedagogical commitments shape its reception. The Sino-American campus, where both sets of norms coexist, offers a privileged site for observing these tensions.

Synthesis and Critical Gap Analysis

The literature reveals a clear trajectory: robust evidence documents Grammarly's efficacy in EFL settings, and separate scholarship documents TNHE pedagogical tensions. These streams have not converged. First, no research has examined this phenomenon on a mainland China TNHE campus, which is significant given China's digital ecosystem, examination emphasis, and concentrated pedagogical clash. Second, the literature remains student-centric; faculty voices, particularly nonadopters and resisters, are absent. Third, no study has examined Grammarly in the postgenerative AI era, where its meaning is actively redefined in comparison with tools such as ChatGPT.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the (non)use of a freely provided institutional tool at a Sino-American university. It explores how pedagogical tensions manifest in digital practice, recovers faculty resistance voices, and captures how a community redraws ethical and pedagogical boundaries between forms of AI assistance.

METHOD

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employed a single instrumental case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine the adoption of Grammarly EDU within a bounded system: a Sino-American joint-venture university established in eastern China in 2012. The campus was selected because it represents a revelatory case of transnational higher education (TNHE): approximately 4,000 Chinese undergraduates, English-medium instruction across all programs, an approximately 50/50 split between Chinese and expatriate academic staff, and a campus-wide Grammarly EDU Premium license (provided since 2021) that is provided but not mandated or even promoted. This unique configuration creates a natural laboratory to observe patterns of voluntary adoption and resistance. Findings are systematically juxtaposed against international Grammarly literature from the UK, US, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Afghanistan (e.g., Cavaleri & Dianati, 2016; Bailey et al., 2025; Hidayat & Sari, 2025; Ha & Ho, 2025; Yousofi, 2022), ensuring that the case speaks to broader debates in international education. The license was provided but not promoted, likely a top-down administrative procurement rather than a faculty-led initiative, a disjuncture that itself contributes to fractured adoption.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive maximum-variation sampling (Patton, 2014) was employed to capture diverse perspectives across key variables: role (academic staff/student), academic discipline, cultural/linguistic background (native/nonnative English speaker), and level of Grammarly use (ranging from nonuser to power user). The search yielded

13 participants who had been exposed to the institutional license for at least one academic year (see Table 2 for participant demographics).

Table 2. Participant Overview

ID	Pseudonym	Role	Discipline	L1 Background	Grammarly Usage
1	Pragmatic Adopter	Faculty	Humanities	Native English	Occasional User
2	Pedagogical Designer	Faculty	Social Sciences	Native English	Non-User
3	Integrated Power User	Faculty	Business	Non-Native	Power User
4	Technoresistant Non-User	Faculty	Sciences	Native English	Non-User
5	Strategic Student	Student	Business	Non-Native	Power User
6	Philosophical Skeptic	Faculty	Humanities	Native English	Non-User
7	Converted Advocate	Faculty	Sciences	Non-Native	Power User
8	Savvy Learner	Student	Sciences	Non-Native	Power User
9	Situational User	Student	Humanities	Non-Native	Occasional User
10	Task-Specific User	Student	Business	Non-Native	Power User
11	Convenience Seeker	Student	Humanities	Non-Native	Power User
12	Comparative Analyst	Student	Social Sciences	Non-Native	Occasional User
13	The Reluctant User	Student	Humanities	Non-Native	Occasional User

Following guidance on saturation in thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2006), a sample of 12–15 participants is generally sufficient for identifying high-prevalence themes within a relatively homogeneous cultural context. Given the bounded nature of a single TNHE campus and the clear thematic repetition evident in the thirteenth interview, the sample was deemed adequate for the study's exploratory, theory-building aims.

Data Collection

Between July and November 2025, the first author conducted 13 semistructured interviews lasting 15–30 minutes. Interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Mandarin, English, or both languages, as needed.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Mandarin transcripts were translated into English and then back-translated by a second bilingual researcher to ensure conceptual fidelity and nuance. The brief interview duration was a pragmatic accommodation for participants with limited availability; follow-up probes were used to elicit deeper rationales, although we acknowledge this as a limitation (see Limitations).

During the bilingual interview process and back-translation, the research team paid close attention to expressions with distinct cultural connotations. For example, several participants mentioned wanting their writing to be "perfect," while one student explicitly stated she disliked "overly perfect" writing. The second author, a Chinese researcher familiar with local educational norms, explained that within Chinese educational culture, "perfect" refers not to individuality or creativity but to standardized, error-free final products. Following the discussion, the team confirmed that the student's objection to "overly perfect" writing referred to mechanical, dehumanized, and overly standardized text, ensuring coding was not biased by cross-cultural misunderstanding.

The interview protocol included questions such as:

- "How does Grammarly affect your workload or efficiency?"
- "What benefits or challenges do you face?"

The complete interview guide is available in Appendix A.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) following a six-phase process. Initial codes were generated inductively using NVivo 14. Potential themes were developed iteratively through weekly research team discussions, refining the focus from semantic to interpretive patterns. Member checking was conducted with eight participants, resulting only in minor clarifications.

The first author's position as a faculty member at a peer TNHE institution was both a resource and a potential source of bias. This insider status facilitated rapport, as participants recognized a shared understanding of the Sino-American campus context. However, it may also have shaped responses: Chinese students, aware of the interviewer's status as a native English-speaking academic, may have framed their use of Grammarly in terms of linguistic deficiency rather than strategic choice; native English-speaking faculty resisters may have felt more emboldened to share philosophical critiques with a perceived cultural peer. The second author's position as a Chinese graduate student provided a counterbalancing insider perspective during data interpretation, particularly regarding culturally specific concepts. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout, documenting these positional dynamics and informing interpretive discussions.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the host university's Institutional Review Board (protocol 2025-012). All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of complete anonymity (including the specific institution's name) and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS

Grammarly as a Linguistic and Cultural Scaffold

For the overwhelming majority of Chinese students and non-native English-speaking academic staff, Grammarly was not a luxury but a necessary tool for surviving English-medium instruction. Participant #5, a Chinese business student and daily Grammarly user, explained: "Because I'm Chinese, so my English is not very good... I need to use technology to help me." Participant #8, a science student who uses Grammarly extensively, added: "With a Chinese education background, the teacher checks the grammar very seriously... It shapes the student to focus on grammar." Participant #10, a humanities student and occasional user, reinforced this logic: "The Chinese grammar and the English grammar are quite different... it is harder for the Chinese... so I use Grammarly."

This intense reliance reveals strong cultural continuity with China's examination-oriented educational system, where grammatical precision and error-free writing are deeply prioritized over stylistic voice or process-oriented development. For these students, public grammatical correction in traditional classroom settings carries significant risks of embarrassment and loss of face. Grammarly resolves this tension by privatizing error correction, removing it from public scrutiny. This finding suggests that Grammarly does more than correct errors; it privatizes a process that, in students' prior educational experiences, was often a source of public evaluation and potential loss of face.

Non-native speaking academic staff echoed this logic, but from the perspective of workload survival. Participant #7, a science faculty member and converted Grammarly power user, stated: "I can copy and paste my paragraphs, and they would underline my mistakes... I don't have to read the whole text message again." Participant #3, a business faculty member who mandates Grammarly in his courses, integrated it into his pedagogy: "I don't want to waste my time checking their grammar... I asked students to use Grammarly so that I only need to focus on their thinking or their ideas." Thus, for non-native stakeholders, Grammarly performed a double service: it compensated for perceived linguistic disadvantage and aligned with culturally ingrained expectations of mechanical accuracy.

Philosophical and Pedagogical Resistance

A vocal minority, predominantly native English-speaking academic staff with extensive teaching experience, rejected Grammarly on deeply pedagogical and

even existential grounds. Their resistance constituted a defense of struggle as a necessary condition for learning.

Resistance was not monolithic. Three distinct, although occasionally overlapping, rationales for nonuse emerged: (1) philosophical resistance, rooted in beliefs about learning as a productive struggle and the developmental necessity of error; (2) pedagogical resistance, rooted in discipline-specific judgments that Grammarly was irrelevant to course learning objectives; and (3) technological inertia, a more passive nonuse driven by habit, comfort with existing tools, or general aversion to new software. Distinguishing among these is essential, as each implies a different institutional response.

The most articulate critic, a native English-speaking humanities faculty member with over fifteen years of teaching experience and a self-described nonuser on philosophical grounds, argued for a foundational skills-first approach: "You have to have a solid foundation before you can use this... That's the kind of thing I'd rather students muddle through when they're freshmen" (Philosophical Skeptic, Academic staff, Participant #6). The same participant framed the tool as triggering a broader crisis of purpose: "I'm trying to figure out, okay, what kind of skills do students need? Why are we doing this? What is the purpose of this?"

Other academic staff expressed resistance through technological inertia or perceived irrelevance: "If I don't have to use technology, I just don't want to," said one. (Technoresistant Nonuser, Academic staff, Participant #4) Another relied on habit: "I rely on the built-in Microsoft Word. Otherwise, I'm a grandma. Maybe I'm old school." (Pragmatic Adopter, Academic staff, Participant #1) A third saw no need within their discipline: "I just don't really see, from my perspective, the need to actually use it" (Pedagogical Designer, Academic staff, Participant #2).

Crucially, this resistance was not born of ignorance. Several resisters knew that the tool was freely licensed but chose not to use it on principle. One noted wryly that newer hires, including nonnative English writing instructors, had never received the licensing email, yet "in my mind, it's a no-brainer" that they should have. (Pragmatic Adopter).

Grammarly as the "Acceptable" AI: Preserving Humanity in an Age of Generative Tools

Across both student and academic staff interviews, Grammarly occupied a unique moral boundary. It was consistently contrasted with generative AI (ChatGPT, Claude) and declared the safer, more ethical, and more pedagogically legitimate option.

Students drew the line at voice and transparency in learning: "This Grammarly can tell me where the mistake is. This ChatGPT changes the whole thing, so I don't know where I made a mistake," one student explained (Comparative Analyst, Participant #12). This moral boundary work was not an isolated observation. In eleven of thirteen interviews, when the conversation turned to generative AI tools, participants spontaneously drew a distinction that positioned Grammarly on the "acceptable" side of a pedagogical and ethical line.

Another stated, "ChatGPT will change my meaning and change the order of my thinking, so I will prefer Grammarly. I think it will keep my mind, keep my thoughts" (Convenience Seeker, Participant #11).

Academic staff reinforced this boundary, adding concerns about academic integrity and detectability: "The journals are very sensitive to AI-generated writing... My writing and Grammarly checks it. A native reader can tell it's not AI," noted one. (Integrated Power User, Academic staff, Participant #3) Another distrusted generative AI opacity: "I'd be worried with that more with AI rather than with Grammarly... AI tends to eat everything, and you never know where it's going to re-emerge" (Pedagogical Designer, Academic staff, Participant #2).

A poignant articulation of the humanity question came from a student who disliked perfection: "Sometimes, after I correct the mistake, the word will be so perfect... I don't like a very, very perfect, very excellent work. I like a humanized work." (Convenience Seeker, Participant #11) This sentiment found an unlikely ally in a resistant academic staff member, who confessed to grading "the heroic B-minus student who's still writing as a human being" more generously than polished but suspiciously perfect submissions (Philosophical Skeptic).

From a sociocultural standpoint (Rish et al., 2015), writing depends on mediated, dialogic, and distributed authorship, processes that align with how learners in this study implicitly conceptualized writing tools as mediators of their voice. Grammarly was repeatedly constructed as a transparent mediator that sustained dialogic coauthorship ("it tells me where the mistake is"; "it keeps my mind, keeps my thoughts"), consistent with Rish et al.'s (2015) tenets of mediation and distributed authorship (Prior, 2006). In contrast, generative AI was rejected as an opaque mediator that replaced rather than scaffolded the learner's voice, a distinction not explicitly theorized by Rish et al. (2015) but consistent with the sociocultural emphasis on scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and preserving the learner's role in coauthorship (Prior, 2006). This distinction is not merely ethical; it is developmental. By preserving the error as a visible site of potential growth, Grammarly is judged to expand rather than bypass the zone of proximal development. This judgment explains its near-universal positioning as the last defensible frontier of "human-friendly" AI.

Practical and institutional frictions

Even enthusiastic users encountered significant technical and communicative barriers that muted adoption. A student lamented a key IT restriction: "All the add-ins in the Microsoft system of our school have banned Grammarly. I have to copy it and then paste it to the official website... all the formatting will be gone." (Strategic Student, Participant #5) An academic staff power user noted performance issues: "It really slows my computer down... If I let it run all the time... it's too resource intensive." (Converted Advocate, Academic staff, Participant #7).

It was unclear whether this restriction reflected a deliberate institutional policy regarding software add-ins, a technical oversight, or a broader cybersecurity precaution. Regardless of its origin, the barrier effectively

transformed a frictionless, universally licensed tool into one requiring cumbersome workarounds, disproportionately affecting the very students and faculty who stood to benefit most.

While the institutional rationale for acquiring Grammarly EDU was not publicly documented, one plausible explanation for the lack of active promotion emerged from campus informants: the license may be limited to a fixed number of seats, making widespread advertisement impractical. Such seat limitations are common in institutional software procurement and, if present, would further explain the uneven awareness and voluntary adoption patterns observed.

These obstacles, combined with uneven institutional communication about the license (“Anybody hired in the last four years didn’t get the email”), created pockets of involuntary nonuse despite universal, free access.

Summary of Results

At this transnational campus, Grammarly EDU is simultaneously celebrated as an indispensable scaffold by nonnative speakers, mandated for efficiency by some academic staff, philosophically rejected by others, and universally positioned as the “human-friendly” boundary against generative AI. The result is a deeply fractured tool culture where the same software represents salvation for some and an existential threat for others, often within the same department. This polarization reflects not individual preference but competing visions of legitimate academic labor in a space where linguistic capital, pedagogical tradition, and technological anxiety collide.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand how Grammarly EDU is adopted, resisted, and negotiated within a Sino-American branch campus. The findings reveal that it does not act as a neutral tool but as a flashpoint that makes visible deeper cultural and pedagogical tensions in transnational higher education (TNHE). Our case functions as an “extreme case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006), where universal access within a culturally hybrid institution intensifies global patterns of use and resistance.

Grammarly as a TNHE Boundary Object: Amplifying Global Patterns

The three themes—scaffold, resistance, and moral bounding—are not unique, but the transnational setting dramatically amplifies them. The near-universal adoption by nonnative speakers reflects Grammarly’s role as a compensator for linguistic disadvantage, as observed in Indonesia (Hidayat & Sari, 2025) and Vietnam (Ha & Ho, 2025). Similarly, participants’ meticulous boundary work, positioning Grammarly as the “acceptable” AI against generative models, replicates ethical distinctions observed in the United States (Bailey et al., 2025).

To systematically situate our findings within the international literature, Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of student writing support preferences across Vietnam, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and the present study.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Student Writing Support Preferences: Vietnam, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Present Study

Study & Context	Key Finding from Existing Literature	Parallel/Contrast Finding in This Study	Cultural Interpretation (Chinese Context)
Ha & Ho (2025), Vietnam	Vietnamese students prefer peer feedback for higher-order concerns (content, organization, argument).	TNHE students rarely mentioned peer feedback; they relied on Grammarly for accuracy and feared human evaluators would penalize grammar more severely than content.	In China's high-stakes examination system, grammar errors risk public correction and loss of face. Algorithmic feedback is safer and private; peer review may threaten social dignity.
Hidayat & Sari (2025), Indonesia	Indonesian students use Grammarly primarily to reduce grammatical errors.	Students used Grammarly not only for error correction but also as a face-saving strategy to avoid public scrutiny.	Beyond linguistic needs, Chinese students are motivated by face maintenance; private machine correction preserves social status.
Yousofi (2022), Afghanistan	Students and teachers valued Grammarly's efficiency but expressed overreliance concerns.	Participants showed minimal concern about overreliance; Grammarly was framed as a survival tool for EMI.	In TNHE, English proficiency is tied to academic success. Grammarly is perceived as indispensable, outweighing dependency worries.

As Table 3 illustrates, Chinese students in TNHE settings exhibit a distinctive motivation: face preservation. Where Vietnamese students seek peer feedback on higher-order concerns (Ha & Ho, 2025), our participants avoided such exposure, preferring private, nonjudgmental algorithmic feedback. This difference is rooted in an examination-oriented system that equates public error with social risk.

A recent analysis of institutional academic integrity policies across eleven countries confirms that international students are particularly vulnerable to the generative AI crisis. However, policy responses rarely account for their unique linguistic and cultural circumstances (Bannister et al., 2024). Our findings extend this work from the policy level to the classroom floor, revealing how students themselves engage in sophisticated moral boundary work and distinguishing Grammarly as "acceptable" corrective AI from "dangerous" generative tools that institutional frameworks have yet to recognize.

This campus contains, within the same departments, both the nonnative embrace documented in Global South contexts and the principled Western resistance noted in Anglo-Australian cohorts (Cavaleri & Dianati, 2016). Grammarly becomes the terrain on which competing pedagogical habitus collide: examination-oriented accuracy versus liberal-arts ideals of struggle and voice. This polarization, rooted in the tool's trade-offs (Yousofi, 2022), is charged by TNHE's preexisting cultural-pedagogical dissonance. Such resistance parallels JIS explorations of field-specific acculturation challenges, in which non-STEM international students face greater linguistic barriers than STEM peers (Zou & Fu, 2025), thereby amplifying native faculty concerns about tools that prioritize correctness over process.

This boundary work is deeply sociocultural and reflects broader negotiations of transnational academic identity, where scholars constantly navigate the intersection of their cultural, linguistic, and professional selves (Norova & Gutiérrez, 2024). Faculty and students negotiate what constitutes legitimate mediation within competing ZPDs shaped by Chinese examination culture (rapid external regulation) and Western process-oriented pedagogies (gradual internalization through visible struggle). Grammarly's transparency makes it conditionally acceptable to both camps; generative AI's opacity collapses the developmental space each tradition seeks to protect. This boundary work also fosters belonging through respectful interactions, where tool transparency sustains voice and agency amid cultural differences (Yang, 2025).

From Attitudinal Map to Negotiated Practice

Prior research maps attitudes toward Grammarly in single-culture settings (Koltovskaia, 2023; Yousofi, 2022). Our study moves beyond this to reveal institutional and intercultural negotiations between these positions. Abstract "benefits" and "drawbacks" become live points of conflict and implicit policy formation. The "heroic B-minus" paper, graded above a "suspiciously perfect" paper, is an act of pedagogical gatekeeping that defends one vision of academic labor against another. Grammarly thus transcends its function to become a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) through which linguistic capital, academic identity, and cultural authority are negotiated.

Our data suggest Grammarly under functions as a legitimate "more knowledgeable other" within the ZPD only under specific conditions. When students copy and paste without reviewing suggestions, the tool becomes a crutch that bypasses the ZPD. When they read explanatory feedback and consciously accept or reject

changes, Grammarly operates within the ZPD, scaffolding independent competence. The critical variable is learner agency. Notably, no faculty participant described providing explicit instruction on developmental Grammarly use; the tool was either mandated as a time-saving filter or rejected. This gap represents a missed opportunity: Grammarly could be positioned as one mediator among many (peer review, teacher conferencing) within an intentionally designed process-writing curriculum.

Implications for Theory and Practice in International Education

For theory, this study illustrates how TNHE campuses function as accelerated laboratories for global higher education trends. A tool's adoption becomes a high-resolution lens for examining negotiations of cultural power and academic integrity in internationalized spaces. Such a result aligns with findings on culturally responsive support for international graduate students (Mai et al., 2025), here extended to AI writing tools compensating for EFL disadvantages.

For practice, campus leadership must move beyond technical onboarding to facilitate dialo that surfaces and legitimizes philosophical resistance. Policies must clearly distinguish between corrective and generative AI to avoid conflating legitimate scaffolding with threats to authorship. Finally, persistent IT blocks and communication gaps must be addressed; universal licensing is meaningless without universal, frictionless access.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the single-campus design limits generalizability, although comparative analysis strengthens transferability. Second, the brief interview duration may have precluded richer narrative reflections. Third, self-selection bias is possible. Fourth, the study relied exclusively on interview data; classroom observations could triangulate self-reported claims. Finally, the rapidly evolving AI landscape, with Grammarly itself incorporating generative features, threatens the shelf life of these findings. Future longitudinal, multicampus studies should track whether the corrective-generative boundary holds across different TNHE models.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Explicitly distinguish corrective from generative AI in institutional policy, training, and integrity guidelines. Conflating Grammarly with ChatGPT fuels unnecessary philosophical resistance and obscures its legitimate role as a linguistic scaffold.
2. Replace generic technical workshops with facilitated dialog sessions that surface and legitimize pedagogical resistance. Acknowledging native speaker concerns about “human writing” and “intellectual struggle” is a prerequisite for productive compromise and shared policy development.

3. Implement targeted onboarding for newly hired academic staff (especially nonnative writing instructors) to close awareness gaps and provide centralized IT support to resolve technical barriers such as blocked add-ins, ensuring universal, frictionless access matches universal licensing.

4. Design process-writing curricula and faculty-development workshops that explicitly position Grammarly as one mediator among many (peer review, teacher conferencing, generative AI restricted to ideation), teaching students to self-regulate their own Zone of Proximal Development rather than outsource it entirely. Such interventions transform a potentially deskilling tool into a culturally responsive scaffold that honors both examination-oriented precision and liberal-arts ideals of dialogic authorship.

In the end, the successful integration of AI writing assistants in TNHE will not be achieved solely by better technology but through deliberate institutional mediation of the cultural, philosophical, and linguistic fault lines that the very project of transnationalization has both exposed and produced.

Acknowledgment

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used the generative AI tool Deepseek to assist with copy-editing, including improving sentence structure, conciseness, grammar, and readability of existing text (particularly in the Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections), and to compare draft versions for clarity. These tools were not used to generate new content, data, ideas, or references. The author reviewed and edited all the AI-assisted texts and takes full responsibility for the content, integrity, and ethical compliance of the published work.

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Appendix A: Interview protocol

Grammarly EDU Perception Interview Questions

1. How often do you use Grammarly EDU? Is that for study, teaching, or research? Which features do you rely on most?
2. Is there another software that you prefer to use instead? If so, why?
3. How does it affect your workload or efficiency?
4. What benefits or challenges do you face?
5. Does your cultural background shape your use?
6. Does tech access affect you? What about tech privacy?