

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In today's fast-changing job market, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are very essential because they prepare people to handle the challenges of modern work environments. Business leaders, politicians, and educators perceive that to be successful today, students need to master the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). It is well recognized that the ability for critical thinking, problem solving, and communicating effectively are key factors in determining workers' productivity (Ezzaidi, 2024).

Having good writing skill as one of the elements of communication skills is a vital part in education because the skill helps students not only succeed academically but also prepare them for the future careers (Riemer, 2007). Writing can strengthen critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and during the process of writing people can correct their misunderstanding to get more accurate perspective (Larkin, 2000). Research indicates that the ability to communicate well, particularly in writing, is one of the most top soft skills that employers look for (Ezzaidi, 2024; Ramos-Monge, 2023). This trend is supported by Rustipa's research findings which show that clear and precise writing is very important in professional settings, as the ability to write well can support the success in career and academic fields (Rustipa, 2014).

In schools, writing is an integral part of life that helps students succeed in their courses: "without some ability to express yourself in writing, you don't pass the course"

(Brown, 2000, p. 339). Moreover, Weigle (2002) states that for most students, the main goal of learning to write is to be able to take a part in different areas of life outside of school, and for some, to prepare themselves for careers that require extensive writing. It is clear that writing skill is not only essential for academic success but also to prepare students for future opportunities. It is a skill that is needed in various situations throughout life (Bowker, 2007).

Despite its importance, writing is regarded as the most complex skill among other skills such as listening, speaking, and reading. According to Weigle (2002), written language is not just writing spoken words on paper; it is a unique way of communicating that involves different social rules and cognitive processes. To write well, one must consider the social context of writing, such as the choice of genre, as different genre has its own style and structure. Furthermore, the absence of addressee is a challenge to writers (Hughey, 1983; Weigle, 2002) because they do not receive immediate feedback from their readers. This requires writers to construct coherent message through structured and formalized language so the information is effectively conveyed.

Writing is a distinctive skill characterized by its specific features and conventions (Brown, 2003, p. 218) that demands proficiency in various components, including writing organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary (Listyani, 2018). According to Campbell (2019), research reveals that academic writing poses difficulties for both native and non-native English speakers. Students often struggle with various aspects of writing, such as generating ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, applying correct

grammar, converting thoughts into written words, and ensuring coherence and cohesion between paragraphs (Al-jarf, 2009; Listyani, 2018; Naqbi, 2011; Ningrum, Latief, & Sulisty, 2016).

The students' native language interference also influences their mastery of the target language. Writing becomes a challenging skill to master due to the differences between the students' first language and the target language, as the differences in sentence structures between the two languages impact their writing performance (Almubarak, 2016; Peter & Singaravelu, 2021; Ratminingsih et al., 2022). Research conducted by Barac et al., (2014) found that children's phonological awareness in their native language has a positive relationship with their abilities in English which indicates that having strong foundation in the native language (L1) can improve the outcomes of the second language learning (L2). From the explanation of the complexity of writing, it is clear that writing is a generative skill that demands mastery of various aspects of language proficiency (Jeanjaroonsri, 2023).

Consistent with previous research, junior high school students in Tabanan also experience comparable difficulties. Preliminary observations and interviews with eighth-grade students during writing sessions revealed several challenges. Their written work indicated weak grammatical skills, a limited vocabulary, and inadequate organization. The students admitted they struggled with constructing proper sentence structures and often became stuck when trying to develop paragraphs, as they were unsure which words to use to convey their thoughts.

Besides the factors such as students' English competence and native language interference that influence the success of students' mastery in writing skill, students' willingness to engage in the learning process is also a key factor in the success of writing. Engagement is a crucial aspect of the learning process. The students' engagement influences their success in learning (Astin, 1984; Kahu, 2013). Learning participation, which is also called involvement, was originally introduced by Astin (1984). He further clarifies that student involvement refers to the level of physical and mental energy a student dedicates to their academic tasks. In writing, the student active participation in doing the tasks can lead to better writing performance such as improved proficiency, fluency, accuracy, and complexity of written expression (Han & Xu, 2021). As writing is a multifaceted process (Zhou & Hiver, 2022), it is essential for students to actively engage in the learning process to produce quality works.

There are three commonly accepted dimensions of engagement, namely behavioural, affective, and cognitive (Bond et al., 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004; Norazmi et al., 2017). Since writing is considered a social act (Yore et al., 2002), Parsons et al., (2023) propose an additional dimension of engagement, that is social engagement. Behavioural engagement refers to students' active participation in learning process, affective engagement relates to students' positive emotions and interest towards learning, cognitive engagement is students' effort to understand and master knowledge and skills required (Fredricks et al., 2004), and social engagement refers to collaborating with others in order to accomplish a task (Parsons et al., 2023). There are indicators to identify student engagement. Behavioural engagement can be identified

through student's participation/involvement, achievement, confidence, study habits and attention/focus; affective engagement can be seen from indicators such as student's positive interaction with teachers and peers, positive attitude about learning, enjoyment, interest, and motivation; Cognitive engagement can be identified through several indicators, including peer-assisted learning, in-depth understanding, self-regulated learning, a positive self-image, and the ability to think critically (Bond et al., 2020). Social engagement is shown when students are willing to share their ideas and writing with others (Parsons et al., 2023).

On the side of teachers, teaching writing particularly in EFL context is considered a challenging task. There are factors that make teaching writing to EFL students challenging. Hidayati (2018) highlighted the factors Indonesian teachers meet in teaching writing such as class condition, the aids available for teaching, and time constraints which Utami & Mahardika (2023) also identified as a persistent challenge in delivering effective writing instruction. Class condition refers to the fact that most classrooms in Indonesia are overcrowded, with a large number of students in each room. There are challenges in teaching large classes such as difficulty in giving individual attention and providing proper feedback to every student's writing. The availability of aids is another problem appears. Teachers rarely use any teaching aids to help their students in writing, thus making teaching writing more difficult. The absence of teaching aids can cause a greater burden on teachers and they must work harder to explain concepts. The limited availability of time is another factor that teachers encounter in teaching writing. Students need a longer period of time to practice but the



time allocated in the school's schedule is limited. Teachers lack sufficient time to guide students to practice writing (Hidayati, 2018).

To foster students' engagement and address the challenges students face in writing, the guidance and regular feedback provided by teachers in writing classes are very essential (Vo, 2022), especially when there is a good conversation between teacher and individual students to increase student's awareness and ability to write better and easier (Phung, 2020). Vu et al., (2022) consistently stated that students viewed instructor feedback on their writing as crucial thing to improve their writing outcomes. However, it is challenging in terms of time and effort to monitor and provide effective feedback on students' writing (Lim & Phua, 2019).

Based on the experience in teaching writing courses to the eight graders of junior high school, the researcher found difficulties in giving writing feedback on students' work due to limited interaction time between teacher and students in large classes. The classes which consisted of 34 students prevent the teacher and students to have one-on-one interaction. Furthermore, because of the tight schedule during school hours it is harder to give immediate responses to students' questions or give detailed feedback on their writing. Therefore, there is a strong need to have a teaching assistant who can regularly have personalized conversations with students to answer their questions and provide insightful feedback on their writing.

The integration of technology in English language classrooms is widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for overcoming various obstacles in the language learning journey (Knox, 2020; Roll & Wylie, 2016). Technological progress occurs

quickly to meet the needs of the educational process (Santosa, 2022), particularly by enabling interactive learning resources (Santosa, et al., 2022a). With the easy access of technology and online platforms, learners now are able to practice their language skills, particularly writing, whenever and wherever they choose (Huang X et al., 2023; Yan, 2023). This encompasses the utilization of advanced artificial intelligence (AI)-powered computer and mobile applications, which provide interactive and customized tools for improving writing skill and boosting motivation by reducing students' anxiety in writing (Jiang, 2022; Yan, 2023; Yani & Santosa, 2023). Moreover, according to the Law Number 33 the Year 2022, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia aims to support students in achieving success in their careers and life skills by enhancing the use of technology in education, helping them improve their ability to manage digital information. Integrating technology with clear instructional plans, particularly at the secondary level, is a valuable investment in this digital era as it can benefit students by making the learning process more effective (Loviyani & Santosa, 2023; Santosa et al., 2022b). Thus, the utilization of appropriate technology in the classrooms in Indonesian setting, is highly recommended to foster students' engagement, reinforce their understanding, and prepare them for future challenges.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a technology that involves developing computer systems capable of performing tasks that mimic human intelligence (Rad et al., 2023). The emergence of AI-driven writing tools on mobile devices provides a novel way to address the challenges of enhancing writing skills compared to using conventional

training methods. These AI-driven writing tools offer automated feedback on various aspects of writing, such as organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary which enable language learners to improve their writing performance. Furthermore, learners can speed up their writing progress, as AI tools assist in spotting and fixing grammatical and lexical mistakes, while also suggesting alternative sentence structures to enhance the quality of their writing (Chen, 2023; Salvagno et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022).

Numerous studies have explored the impact of AI-driven language learning tools on improving the writing skills of English language learners (Fitria, 2023; Hsiao and Chang, 2023; Liu et al., 2021; Yan, 2023). For instance, Liu et al. (2021) examined the impact of AI-supported language learning on the writing abilities of students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It was found that using AI tools greatly improved their writing abilities. In a comparable study, Yan (2023) investigated how ChatGPT, an AI language learning tool, influences the writing skills of EFL learners. The finding revealed that using AI tools like ChatGPT could improve their writing performance.

Among AI-powered writing tools which exist nowadays, Wordtune is one of the great tools to help users during the writing process. This is a form of AWCF (automatic written corrective feedback) tool that, unlike Grammarly, it does not mainly concentrate on grammar or spelling correction; instead, it supports learners in their writing by offering alternative versions or rewrites of their original text by modifying the sentence structure and substituting words with synonyms (Zhao, 2022). Moreover, Wordtune features a translation tool that assists non-native speakers in converting different languages into English (Zhao et al., 2024). Research suggests that Wordtune



is not only an effective tool for improving students' writing skills (Mahmud, 2023; Zhao, 2024), engagement, and feedback literacy (Rad et al., 2023), but it also offers language learning opportunities as users identify differences between their original text and the enhanced suggestions made by the tool (Zhao, 2022).

Synthesizing the above information, Wordtune possesses distinctive features that differentiate it from other digital writing tools (Mahmud, 2023). First, Wordtune helps learners across the entire process of writing. Unlike the currently available digital writing tools that mostly help learners with certain parts of writing, such as grammar correction (Winans, 2021), Wordtune assists learners throughout the process of writing such as generating ideas, revising content and structure, improving word choice and clarity, as well as correcting grammar and providing better tone of sentences. Second, the paraphrase feature provided by the tool enables learners to better understand and express what they are trying to say. When students see alternative versions of their sentences, they can clarify their own ideas. Furthermore, the paraphrase feature also provides opportunity for students to notice the difference in quality between their original sentence and the paraphrases offered by the tool. This awareness helps them learn how to express ideas more effectively. By continuously reflecting these better alternatives, students learn to improve their writing ability independently. Therefore, Wordtune is not just a writing tool, but also a helpful learning aid that builds students' awareness of language, helping them grow as independent learners.

Regarding how well Wordtune can improve students' writing performance, some studies have been conducted to investigate this issue. For instance, Mahmud (2023)

studied EFL students' writing performance of 2 classes in a boy's school and 2 classes in a girl's school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia through the implementation of Wordtune and reported that the experimental group outperformed the control group in writing, especially in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure, as shown by the qualitative results, with no significant difference between male and female students. Also, Zhao et al., (2024) incorporated Wordtune to see how effective it was to help Chinese international students in higher education through a qualitative study. They found that students considered it helpful for composing formal sentences in academic writing. Rad et al., (2023) conducted a mixed-method study to investigate Wordtune's effect towards Persian upper-intermediate students' writing and found that the tool could improve their writing outcome, engagement, and feedback literacy. Regarding teachers' perceptions, Marzuki et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study involving 4 EFL teachers from 3 universities in Indonesia to investigate the effect of AI writing tools on students' writing. They reported that teachers perceived the implementation of AI, including Wordtune, could enrich students' overall academic performance. Based on the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that utilizing AI-powered writing assistants offers valuable support for EFL learners in enhancing their language skills, especially in writing. Wordtune, specifically, has been shown to be effective in enhancing students' writing skills.

However, most of the studies reviewed above were conducted outside of Indonesia (Saudi Arabia, China, and Iran) and there was only one study conducted in Indonesia. Therefore, how Wordtune impacts students in Indonesian setting still need to be

explored. Furthermore, the mentioned studies mostly focused on EFL students at specific educational levels (e.g., upper-intermediate or higher education). Exploring how Wordtune affects students' writing across different educational levels in Indonesia, such as in secondary schools is necessary. While Rad et al. (2023) touched on engagement, the study was conducted in Iran, so there is still a need for deeper exploration on how Wordtune affects Indonesian students' engagement in writing. Moreover, the studies' findings were primarily derived from qualitative data. The limited quantitative analysis has become a concern recently, making it essential to conduct further research.

Despite the fact that Wordtune has shown its effectiveness on enhancing English language learning outcomes, It is still not widely used, particularly in junior high schools in South Bali, Indonesia. There is limited knowledge about how it impacts writing results of Indonesian secondary school students. This AI-powered writing tool may be unfamiliar to many junior high school teachers, and there is limited literature discussing its implementation in this educational context. Hence, this study which aims to examine the impact of Wordtune on students' writing proficiency and their engagement in the writing process, is expected to be able to provide further information on how effective the tool is.

## **1.2 Problem Identification**

The success of a learning process is essentially determined by many factors, including the teacher's role, the student's role, and the learning process itself. The teacher's ability to design lesson plans, implement instruction, and effectively use

teaching aids will significantly determine the level of success in a learning process. Moreover, student-related factors such as ability, interest, attitude, motivation, and engagement in the learning process can also significantly influence learning outcomes.

As what have been discussed in the background of the study, writing skill is the most difficult ability because it requires linguistic proficiency in multiple facets. The student's engagement in the writing process is also crucial to produce good quality of work. The use of technology, such as AI in writing instruction, has proven to be effective in addressing students' challenges in writing. In addition, the implementation of technology is highly likely to increase student engagement. This assumption arises from observing that today's students belong to Generation Alpha, who are highly connected to technology. For this generation, technology is their world as many aspects of their life such as entertainment, gaming, connecting to pairs, and even education revolves around technology (Jha, 2020). It is assumed that the utilization of technology in learning can affect the student's writing outcomes and engagement in writing.

Based on the aforementioned points, there are several issues that can be identified, such as (1) What factors hinder the achievement of writing skills? (2) What strategies can be done to improve the students' writing performance? (3) What challenges do the students face in writing? (4) What efforts need to be done to overcome the difficulties students face in improving their writing skills? (5) As writing is a complex skill, what educational technologies are effective to improve the students' writing outcomes? (6) Is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language learning classroom effective to improve students' writing outcomes? (7) How do students respond to the use of AI

in the classroom? (8) Does student's engagement affect their writing skill? and (9) Is there any relationship between the integration of AI in writing class and student's engagement in writing?

The numerous issues that can be identified, as summarized above, indicate that there is a need for research efforts to address these problems. This research is expected to be one of the steps in that direction. Various challenges encountered by students and teachers in writing classes need to be overcome to improve students' academic performance in writing, so the curriculum goals can be met.

### **1.3 Limitation of Problem**

Considering the numerous and complex issues identified, it is impossible for the researcher to investigate all the problems. Yet, having proficiency in writing is crucial to help a person express his ideas and concepts and share them with those who can benefit from this information (Klimova, 2012). For that reason, this research is focused on the implementation of Wordtune, an AI-powered writing tool, and its effect towards student's writing competency and engagement in writing.

This study was confined to examining whether and to what degree Wordtune supported students' writing and influenced their engagement in the writing process. Recount text was the writing material used in this study. This text was one of learning materials included in learning outcomes which was scheduled to be taught in the second semester. Their writing competency was assessed through writing simple and



structured paragraphs as the ability to write simple and structured paragraphs is the learning outcome for writing element of students in phase D (junior high school level).

The study included four eighth-grade classes from SMP Negeri 2 Tabanan as the sample for analysis. Two of these classes served as experimental groups, receiving instruction with the use of Wordtune, while the remaining two classes functioned as control groups and were taught using traditional teaching strategies.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

To address the aforementioned issues, this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant effect of Wordtune towards students' writing competency in SMP Negeri 2 Tabanan?
2. Is there any significant effect of Wordtune towards students' engagement in writing in SMP Negeri 2 Tabanan?
3. How do students perceive the impact of Wordtune on their writing competency and engagement in writing?

#### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

##### **1.5.1 General Objectives**

This study primarily sought to investigate how the use of Wordtune influences students' writing competency and their engagement in the writing process.

### **1.5.2 Specific Objectives**

The specific aims of the study were as outlined below:

1. To investigate whether Wordtune has a significant impact on students' writing competency.
2. To investigate whether Wordtune significantly influences students' engagement in the writing process.
3. To explore the students' perception regarding the impact of Wordtune on their writing competency and their engagement in writing activities.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

#### **1.6.1 Theoretical Significance**

Theoretically, the results of this research were expected to contribute to the development of educational theory, particularly in the area related to writing instruction. The findings were expected to offer valuable insights into technology-supported writing, specifically by demonstrating the efficacy of Wordtune in improving writing performance among Indonesian junior high school students in the EFL setting.

### 1.6.2 Practical Significance

Practical significances expected to be contributed by the results of this research were:

a. Students

The tool employed in this study may be integrated by students into their writing activities to enhance their writing proficiency and foster greater engagement throughout the writing process.

b. Teachers

For English language teachers, the results of this research are expected to serve as an alternative solution for addressing issues related to writing instruction.

c. Other Researchers

The results of this study are expected to provide a foundation for future research on the application of AI-driven writing tools to improve students' writing proficiency and engagement in writing.

