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# SUPPORTING POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS WRITING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WITH THE ONLINE MACHINE LEARNING TOOL: WRITE & IMPROVE

**Abstract.** The current paper intends to describe the practice and analyze the results of using the website Write & Improve as an additional extra-class tool of developing writing skills in the course of preparation for the FCE exam for post-graduate students. The study has proven the hypothesis that the proposed algorithm for working with the service Write & Improve is effective for teaching FCE Writing for post-graduate students, and provided the experimental research of learners' progress. Theoretical (analysis and synthesis), empirical (observation, testing, conducting pedagogical experiment) and statistical (calculating the Mean and the Standard Deviation) methods were used to achieve the stated aim. A significant difference was observed in the experimental group of 32 Kharkiv post-graduate university students where the experiment was carried out in 2017/2018 academic year. The obtained results of the experimental research demonstrate post-graduate students' progress in the FCE Writing Test and can be regarded as the evidence that the service Write & Improve does have a positive impact on mastering post-graduate students' writing skills. Furthermore, comparing the test results according to 5-band scale in four different criteria (Content, Communicative Achievement, Organization, Language) at the different stages of the course allowed to measure the development rate of the checked English writing skills. The resulting data confirmed the improvement in post-graduate students' performance in all the criteria of Writing on average by 36.1%; the most significant progress has been in Language (vocabulary and grammar aspects) with the average increase from 3.0 to 4.5 scores (50 %) whereas the least advance to be claimed is in Communicative Achievement with the results ranging from 2.8 to 3.6 (28.6%); it proves the substantial increase. Provided that Write & Improve is implemented systematically with a careful consideration of post-graduate students' problems and needs, the application of it can be said to have the obvious correlation with post-graduate students' progress. The authors' experience is significant in Ukrainian learning context as it proves the effectiveness of using innovative online instruments to teach English Writing to post-graduate students who aim to pass FCE exam.

**Keywords:** writing skills; FCE exam; Write & Improve teaching service; post-graduate students; academic performance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**The problem setting.** The new 'Law on Higher Education' defines the levels, degrees and qualifications as well as the standards of higher education. According to the National Framework of Qualifications, the standards offer the definition and evaluation of educational content quality and results, state credits, list of competences etc. Without doubt, the development of main competences acquired at school is continued further through higher

education. As it is known, among 10 key competences of the new Ukrainian school, the communication in foreign languages (communicative language competences) and information and digital competence are given due consideration.

Nowadays the English language has become a requisite tool for post-graduate students to access a range of opportunities which our modern globalised world offers ranging from academic mobility programmes to positioning yourself in a highly competitive professional environment. The fact is that these opportunities often require specific competence in a foreign language such as particular level (usually B2 or C1 according to CEFR), business English proficiency or professional knowledge of legal English. Moreover, this competence is supposed to be proven by a reliable document given by a competent authority. So, a popular practice among postgraduates is to confirm the necessary qualification in English with a certificate in an international examination, e.g. TOEFL, IELTS or Cambridge ESOL exams, the last ones recognized both by the Ukrainian institutions and companies and by many European educators and employers making them appealing to those who plan to build their careers in the countries of Europe.

As Cambridge ESOL exams are intended to test comprehensively all language skills (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) as well as the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, the preparation for them usually involves the development of certain practical language competences, for the postgraduate stage the vital being developing the proficiency in Academic Writing.

Competence in Writing is usually regarded as the most problematic language competence to master. Some surveys [1, p. 62] suggest that only 10 percent of university students are good at writing. The fact that 90 percent of non-linguistic post-graduate university students are weak in written English is a worrying fact, which English teachers need to consider. A look at their examination answer scripts reveals "poor spelling, badly or wrongly constructed sentences, inappropriate or insufficient vocabulary, and lack of organization of paragraphs and long essays" [2]. The problem becomes crucial when it comes to passing an international examination. So, the task of finding the ways to address this challenge is important especially when applied to teaching English academic writing to non-linguistic post-graduate university students, since apart from the range of written assignment envisaged by the post-graduate university course, they need to perform well in their FCE writing test.

Competence in Writing belongs to a productive skill in which individuals are expected to communicate their ideas to others in the written form. Creating meaningful activities engages post-graduate students in the learning process. Writing is one of the most rewarding yet one of the most challenging skills for English Language learners. The reason for that is that writing is an accuracy-focused activity as well as an act of communication where one can practice their skills of using grammar, vocabulary and also put their ideas together in a coherent fashion. Through writing, post-graduate students can express themselves, open their minds, reveal their findings and share views. Writing involves processing, editing, and while writing, there is more time available to the post-graduate students for thinking and accessing familiar language. Writing is a very important activity requiring a particular set of skills to develop as a part of the post-graduate students' academic study. Thus, a writing piece serves a crucial evidence of what the students have learned. University lecturers can use this product to assess the quality of learning, providing feedback to help their students learn more from the experience and practice. This is a very important part of the learning cycle in a post-graduate university course, and students should aim to learn from their assessment feedback on every task they undertake.

As writing has proven to be such a difficult skill to master, post-graduate students often experience a lack of motivation, which is a notable characteristic of some second language

learners [3]. Another concern about Writing is the fact that although some candidates perform their writing tasks on a regular basis, they still feel upset about the procedure of correcting by a human instructor whose job is to review their essays and reports, correct mistakes, offer suggestions etc. So, the above obstacles impel the university teacher to seek most effective, convenient and accessible ways of boosting post-graduate students' writing communication development. A viable solution to this problem might be the introduction and regular application of a new forefront Cambridge English technology, the service Write & Improve (https://writeandimprove.com/), an ideal online tool for improving writing skills as it addresses all the challenges which have been previously mentioned.

Write & Improve is a really useful website, tablet- and mobile-friendly, that can both provide the tasks on different levels of post-graduate students' language ability and gives instant feedback on their writing, thus engendering and sustaining post-graduate students' learning motivation. A learner starts by choosing a topic to write about from the workbooks placed on the site and then writes according to the topic suggested within offered time limits, then gets an immediate feedback about the writing in terms of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, style and register. The website can also give suggestions on how to improve a text submitted as well as makes it possible for English language learners to correct their texts in order to help them to write better in English [4]. The service uses a cloud-based algorithm to provide English writing learners with quick feedback on spelling, vocabulary, grammar and topic correspondence. The learners receive feedback encouraging them to experiment with different styles [5].

**Analysis of recent studies and publications.** On account of its difficulty, Writing has recently been the focus of attention of educationalists from different countries: thus, there are some foreign researches about techniques in teaching writing skills [2], approaches to teaching writing [1], writing theory and practice [6], writing best practices [7], methodology for creative writing teaching [8], [9], composition methodologies [10], academic writing skill [11]. The literature also holds just several insights into the positive effects of using service Write & Improve [4], [5]. Some Ukrainian scholars have studied writing activities. The well known Ukrainian researcher O. Tarnopolsky analyses the Ukrainian experience in creative EFL writing as a means of intensifying English writing skill acquisition [12]. O. Tarnopolsky and S. Kozhushko write about the principles of methods of teaching English writing for students [13].

There are some Ukrainian PhD theses about improving writing skills, targeting different specialists such as system analysts [14]; tourism managers [15]; IT specialists [16; 17]; logistic specialists [18]; teachers-to-be [19]. H. Voronina describes the main types of writing in the foreign language learning [20]; O. Tsaryk gives some recommendations to "enhance the positive impact on students' written language" [21]; I. Vetrova deals with the role of creative writing and the need of its use in the process of learning English [22]. O. Trubitsyna and I. Fedichkina offer a specially developed system of exercises for teaching creative writing [23].

Several Ukrainian articles analyse the experience of modern informational technology tools in teaching writing. N. Maiier offers to use an "electronic case" in the course management system of Moodle. [24]. L. Berezova and co-authors propose to use Web Quests for improving writing students' abilities [25]. In our recent papers we also describe the experience of using informational technology tools [26; 27; 28] in teaching English.

However, studies and experience on a new technology, the service Write & Improve, have not been widespread in Ukraine. Nevertheless, since the application of the abovementioned technology can be particularly significant for the learners at the post-graduate stage whose primary goal is to develop the necessary proficiency in English writing, providing empirical evidence to prove its effectiveness is vitally important.

**The purpose of the article.** Thus, the aim of this paper is to provide the evidence for the hypothesis that the process of teaching Writing can be supported and significantly intensified with the use of such cutting-edge technology as the Write & Improve website.

To realize the set aim, we are to reach the following objectives:

– to explain the strategies of teaching English Writing to post-graduate students;
– to demonstrate the implementation procedure of the Write & Improve service in the course of preparation for Cambridge ESOL exams;
– to present the results of the experimental research aimed at investigating post-graduate learners' progress in the FCE Writing Test.
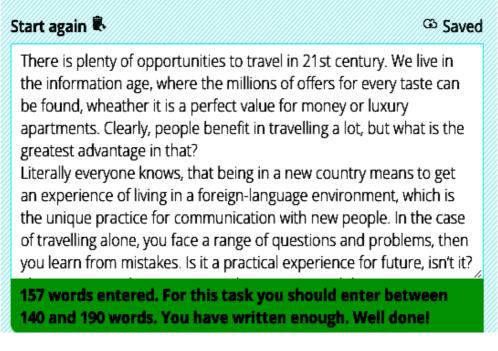
## 2. METHODS OF THE STUDY

In this research theoretical, empirical and statistical methods are used. Theoretical methods (analysis and synthesis) serve to analyze opportunities, advantages and disadvantages of the new tool in developing writing skills as well as to research the application features of the Write & Improve service. Empirical methods (observation, testing, pedagogical experiment) aim at conducting the experiment itself in order to collect data for examining the efficiency of the systematic use of Write & Improve website to teach English writing to upper-intermediate learners. Statistical methods (calculating the Mean and the Standard Deviation) helped make statistical analysis of the pedagogical experiment data; the experiment was conducted in Kharkiv, Ukraine in two post-graduate groups (at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University and H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University) in the academic year 2017/18. For one year, during the preparation period for the FCE exam, the progress in Writing by the post-graduate students who were taught with support of Write & Improve website, was carefully observed and measured.

## 3. THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

As it has been previously mentioned, the Write & Improve service is quite a new one, however gaining more and more popularity all over the world among both the English language learners and ESL teachers. Offering a range of topics in different registers (both informal, such as articles, reviews, e-mails and stories, and rather formal ones – essays, reports and letters of application) and the possibility to choose the level the learner aims at, Write & Improve gives a variety of opportunities for practicing Writing. Moreover, the immediate feedback gives additional encouragement and ardor in this comparatively tedious, laborious activity. Thus, the major idea to use this service with the group of post-graduate learners was to stimulate their independent writing and help to avoid unnecessary minor mistakes in vocabulary, grammar or spelling as well as to improve their communicative achievement before they submit their work to the teacher, in this way making their writing discussion and assessment more productive, which in the long run facilitates better academic performance in Writing.

The following figures demonstrate the features of the system on the example of aforementioned post-graduate group students' essays. In Figure 1 we can see that the words which are not recognized by the system as correct or appropriate are marked with different colours depending on the type of a mistake (e.g. spelling, vocabulary) and commented on, resulting in further improvement of the student's performance. Besides, the sentences identified by the system as doubtful or inaccurate are also highlighted attracting student's attention to the possible misuse of the language.
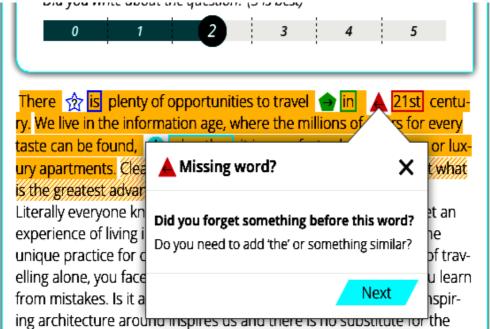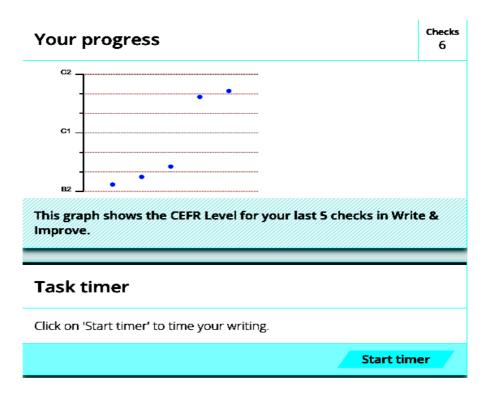
*Fig. 1. Students' mistakes analysis with the online automated service Write & Improve: focus on Vocabulary and Sentence Building*

The service also evaluates the correspondence to the topic, reminds about the expected number of words, tracks the progress according to the CEFR scale and defines the level of proficiency in Writing supported by the motivating comments on a student's writing (Figure 2).

*Fig. 2. Progress measuring with the online automated service Write & Improve*

Finally, the user can opt for corrections made in order to make a comprehensive mistakes analysis and to get the data to discuss with the teacher.

Despite all the advantages and benefits which Write & Improve offers, it is necessary to mention that as the assessment is made by a machine, it is quite artificial, sometimes even superficial, focusing on the technical language features (word order and grammar accuracy, vocabulary range, spelling rules) while such important characteristics of successful writing as text coherence and cohesion, communicative achievement, ability to demonstrate a deeper insight into the problem and creativity are predictably not taken into consideration and so require additional discussion with a teacher.

Thus, seeing the necessity of filling the gaps in the analysis pattern provided by Write & Improve resource and in that way making better use of it, we developed a method of a writing task self-evaluation involving the use of Write & Improve and encompassing four different criteria corresponding to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Content (conformity with the task), Communicative Achievement (how appropriate the writing is for the task), Organization (text coherence and cohesion), the Language Range and Accuracy. The method offers the questions which should be considered during the text analysis and the recommendations deriving from the post-graduate students' answers:

1) Content (see Table 1). This aspect refers mainly to the task relevance and also focuses on whether the text informs the target reader completely about the points set in the task.

*Table 1.*

**The procedure of text Content evaluation**

| Content | | |
|---|---|---|
| Question | Answer | Recommendation |
| What grade does the scale 'did you write about the topic' give you? | 1-3 | Read the task. Have you covered all the questions asked? Is the reader fully informed? Extend your answer and check again. |
| | 4-5 | Well done! |

2) Communicative Achievement (see Table 2). This refers to the ability to use the language resources to achieve the communicative goal within certain register requirements.

*Table 2.*

**The procedure of text Communicative Achievement evaluation**

| Communicative Achievement | | |
|---|---|---|
| Question | Answer | Recommendation |
| What is the register of your writing? | Formal (For an essay, formal letter, report) | Use formal vocabulary and grammar; try to avoid contractions, colloquial / informal vocabulary, phrasal verbs or idioms. |
| | Informal (for an email, article, review) | Opt for Use informal vocabulary and grammar, colloquial / informal vocabulary, phrasal verbs and idioms. |

3) Organization (see Table 3). This criterion makes a student consider how well the text is organized and whether the text contains the sufficient number of cohesive devises.

*Table 3.*

**The procedure of text Organization evaluation**

| Organization | | |
|---|---|---|
| Question | Answer | Recommendation |
| 1. Does the structure of your writing have all the necessary elements (introduction, main body, and conclusion)? | Yes | Well done! |
| | No | Add the missing part. |
| 2. How many linking devices have you used in your writing? | Seven and more | Check if the linking devices correspond to the format of your writing. |
| | Fewer than six | Add some linking devices to improve the cohesion of your text. |

4) Language Range and Accuracy (see Table 4). This aspect considers the problem of vocabulary and grammar variety, appropriateness and accuracy.

*Table 4.*

**The procedure of Language Range and Accuracy evaluation**

| Language Range and Accuracy | | |
|---|---|---|
| Question | Answer | Recommendation |
| What piece of text is highlighted? | Word | Substitute with the word offered by Write & Improve or check the dictionary. |
| | Sentence | Check if the word order is correct. Then try to paraphrase and check again<br><br>Are any elements of a sentence missing (an auxiliary, article, conjunction or a punctuation mark)? Add the missing elements and check again |

In order to see their progress in Writing, the students were tested by a teacher at the beginning and at the end of the course, according to 5-band scale. The average results of the assessment are shown in Table 5 with *Mean* standing for average scores for sample population of 32 students (two groups 16 students each).

*Table 5.*

**The results of students' academic performance in writing at the beginning and at the end of the course**

| Criteria | At the beginning of the course | At the end of the course | Average Progress (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean ± SD | Mean ± SD | |
| Content | 3.5 ± 0.96 | 4.5 ± 0.44 | 38.2 |
| Communicative Achievement | 2.8 ± 0.44 | 3.6 ± 0.41 | 28.6 |
| Organization | 2.9 ± 0.41 | 4 ± 0.79 | 37.9 |
| Language | 3.0 ± 0.54 | 4.5 ± 0.5 | 50.0 |
| Overall Performance | 3.05 ± 0.31 | 4.15 ± 0.43 | 36.1 |

The resulting data prove that students improved their overall performance in all the criteria of the writing competence on average by 36.1%; the most significant progress has been in Language skills with the average increase from 3.0 to 4.5 scores (50 %) whereas the least advance to be claimed is in Communicative Achievement with the results ranging from 2.8 to 3.6 (28.6%). Such results can be explained by the fact that Language competence was the main focus of practice with the Write & Improve website and besides, language skills were regularly trained in class. On the other hand, Communicative achievement is not supposed to be checked by Write & Improve, and although being under the teacher's

guidance, but not an object for individual practice with Write & Improve, this aspect appeared to be the least successful in the final score of the test result.

## 4. THE CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

On balance, the article represents the results of the experiment that was organized to explain the authors' algorithm for working with online service Write & Improve and its features for teaching English writing to pass the FCE exam, advantages, benefits, and challenges to prepare upper-intermediate students for the FCE Writing Test.

It can be concluded that the illustration of the Write & Improve website implementation showed that it is really an effective tool for teaching English writing; being focused primarily on preparation for the FCE Writing Test, it turned out fairly useful for the learners striving to achieve B2 level.

The obtained results of the experimental research demonstrate learners' progress in the FCE Writing Test and can be regarded as evidence that the online service Write & Improve does have a positive impact on mastering upper-intermediate learners' writing skills. Provided that they are implemented systematically with a careful consideration of learners' problems and needs, online tools in general can be said to have an obvious correlation with upper-intermediate learners' progress. Besides, the post-graduate learners of the experimental group expressed intention to continue to use Write & Improve website in their further English language practice.

Thus, survey findings can be said to provide justification that specially designed online instruments can serve as a perfect tool for better learning and more efficient teaching. Further research will be focused on introducing the practice of Write & Improve application into teaching other groups of learners with different educational purposes.

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# ДОСВІД ВИКОРИСТАННЯ КОМП'ЮТЕРНОГО НАВЧАЛЬНОГО ОНЛАЙН-ЗАСОБУ WRITE & IMPROVE ДЛЯ РОЗВИТКУ ПИСЕМНОГО МОВЛЕННЯ АСПІРАНТІВ

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**Анотація.** У статті описано практику і результати використання навчального онлайн-сервісу Write & Improve в якості додаткового позааудиторного засобу розвитку навичок писемного мовлення в процесі підготовки аспірантів до складання іспиту FCE. Дослідження підтверджує гіпотезу про те, що запропонований авторами алгоритм роботи з сервісом Write & Improve є ефективним для розвитку писемного мовлення аспірантів для складання FCE, що забезпечується експериментальним підтвердженням їх академічного прогресу. Для досягнення поставленої мети були використані теоретичні (аналіз та синтез), емпіричні (спостереження, тестування, проведення педагогічного експерименту) та статистичні (обчислення середнього результату та стандартного відхилення) методи. Значна різниця спостерігалася в експериментальній групі, яка складалась із 32 харківських аспірантів, де експеримент проводився в 2017/2018 навчальному році. Отримані результати експериментального дослідження демонструють прогрес аспірантів у письмі з іспиту FCE і можуть розглядатись як свідчення того, що навчальний онлайн-сервіс Write & Improve дійсно позитивно впливає на оволодіння аспірантами навичками письма. Крім того, порівняння результатів тесту відповідно до 5-бальної шкали за чотирма критеріями (зміст, досягнення комунікативної мети, побудова тексту, мовні аспекти) на різних етапах навчання дозволило зіставити динаміку розвитку навичок письма, які перевірялися. Отримані дані підтвердили покращення академічної успішності аспірантів у письмі за всіма критеріями в середньому на 36,1%; найзначніша динаміка спостерігалась у розвитку мовних навичок, що покращились у середньому з 3,0 до 4,5 балів (50%), тоді як найменший прогрес відзначено в успішності досягнення комунікативної мети з динамікою з 2,8 до 3,6 (28,6%); хоча в цілому цифри свідчать про значний прогрес. За умови, що сервіс Write & Improve реалізується систематично з ретельним аналізом проблем і потреб аспірантів, можна стверджувати, що подібні навчальні сайти мають очевидну кореляцію з академічним прогресом аспірантів. Досвід авторів є суттєвим в контексті української освіти, оскільки він доводить ефективність використання онлайн-ресурсів у вивченні англійської мови аспірантами при підготовці до складання іспиту FCE.

**Ключові слова:** навички писемного мовлення; іспит FCE; навчальний сервіс Write & Improve; аспіранти; академічні досягнення.

# ОПЫТ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ КОМПЬЮТЕРНОГО УЧЕБНОГО ОНЛАЙН-РЕСУРСА WRITE & IMPROVE ДЛЯ РАЗВИТИЯ ПИСЬМЕННОЙ РЕЧИ АСПИРАНТОВ

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**Аннотация.** В статье описана практика и результаты использования обучающего онлайн-сервиса Write & Improve в качестве дополнительного внеаудиторного средства развития навыков письменной речи в процессе подготовки аспирантов к сдаче экзамена FCE. Исследование подтверждает гипотезу о том, что предложенный авторами алгоритм работы с сервисом Write & Improve является эффективным для обучения письменной речи аспирантов для сдачи FCE, что обеспечивается экспериментальным подтверждением их академического прогресса. Для достижения поставленной цели были использованы теоретические (анализ и синтез), эмпирические (наблюдение, тестирование, проведение педагогического эксперимента) и статистические (вычисление среднего результата и стандартного отклонения) методы. Значительная разница в улучшении академической успеваемости наблюдалась в экспериментальной группе, состоящей из 32 харьковских аспирантов; эксперимент проводился в 2017/2018 учебном году. Полученные результаты экспериментального исследования показывают прогресс аспирантов в письме при сдаче экзамена FCE и могут рассматриваться как свидетельство того, что обучающий онлайн-сервис Write & Improve действительно положительно влияет на овладение аспирантами навыками письма. Кроме того, сравнение результатов теста в соответствии с 5-балльной шкалой по четырем критериям (содержание, достижение коммуникативной цели, построение текста, языковые аспекты) на разных этапах обучения позволило сопоставить динамику развития проверяемых навыков письма. Полученные данные подтвердили улучшение академической успеваемости аспирантов по всем критериям письма в среднем на 36,1%; самый значительный прогресс был достигнут в языковых навыках при среднем увеличении с 3,0 до 4,5 баллов (50%), тогда как наименьший прогресс наблюдался в успешности достижения коммуникативной цели с динамикой с 2,8 до 3,6 (28,6%); в целом же цифры свидетельствуют о значительном прогрессе. При условии, что сервис Write & Improve реализуется систематически с тщательным анализом проблем и потребностей аспирантов, можно утверждать, что обучающие сайты в целом имеют очевидную корреляцию с академическим прогрессом аспирантов. Опыт авторов важен в контексте украинского образования, поскольку он доказывает эффективность использования онлайн-ресурсов в изучении английского языка аспирантами при подготовке к сдаче экзамена FCE.

**Ключевые слова:** навыки письменной речи; экзамен FCE; обучающий сервис Write & Improve; аспиранты; академические достижения.