

## [Software Review]

### Using *Write&Improve* to improve EFL learners' writing skills

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<b>Title</b>	Write&Improve
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://writeandimprove.com/">https://writeandimprove.com/</a>
<b>Product type</b>	Online English automated writing evaluation platform
<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Cambridge English Language Assessment – University of Cambridge</b> Cambridge University Press & Assessment, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8EA Telephone: +44(0)1223 553311 E-mail: <a href="mailto:directs@cambridge.org">directs@cambridge.org</a> <a href="https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english/free-resources/write-and-improve/">https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english/free-resources/write-and-improve/</a>
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Level</b>	Six levels based on Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2
<b>Target Audience</b>	English language learners English language teachers
<b>Operating system(s)</b>	iOS, Android AS system and PC
<b>Registration</b>	Not required
<b>Hardware</b>	An internet-accessible device
<b>Price</b>	-Write&Improve: free -Write&Improve + Test Zones: £4.50 per month -Write&Improve + Class View: First 10 members: £11/month (£1.10/member) Next 40 members: £1.10 every month per member Next 50 members: £0.90 every month per member Additional members: £0.80 every month per member

## Introduction

Feedback plays an essential role in language learning in general and in writing learning in particular. Nicol (2010) says that timing is one of the most important parts of effective feedback. However, the current education situation in EFL countries with

many students and large teachers' workload makes it difficult to give feedback on time. With the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), language teachers and learners can now use several automated writing evaluation (AWE) platforms to improve writing skills (Chapelle & Voss, 2008; Hockly, 2019; Warschauer & Grimes, 2008). These AWE tools are a potential solution to the challenges mentioned above as they can help teachers provide timely feedback for student writing.

According to Hockly (2019), various criteria of written texts can be examined by AWE software, including syntax, text complexity, vocabulary choice, grammar, content and development, focus and meaning, etc. After submitting written assignments, AWE platforms give students an overall grade and, in many cases, specific comments on how to improve their writing. Writing teaching, placement testing, formative evaluation, and/or summative evaluation are benefits of using AWE tools (Hockly, 2019). On the one hand, in high-stakes assessments, where a large number of students' papers must be assessed quickly, automated scoring by a software program is cheaper and faster than using human assessors. On the other hand, the application of AWE in a formative context, i.e., to aid in the development of student writing, has potential, particularly in the area of English language teaching (ELT). When used for formative purposes, AWE software has been found to boost students' desire for writing (Warschauer & Grimes, 2008) and motivate students to examine their own work (Chapelle & Voss, 2008)

This tech review provides an overview of Write&Improve – a pioneering AWE tool designed by the Cambridge English Language Assessment team, and a reflection on its use with English major students during a course at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU).

## Overview

Write&Improve is available online at <https://writeandimprove.com/> and can be accessed by most mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc.

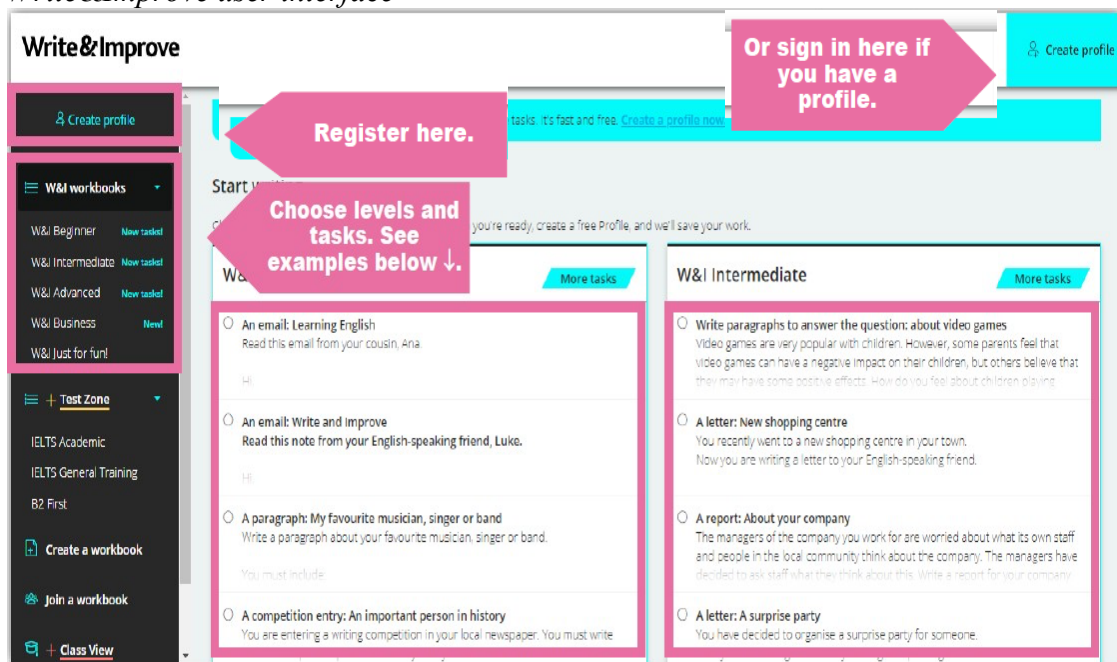
**Figure 1**

Screenshot of “Write&Improve” website



This free digital platform can assess writing skills quickly and give feedback on learners' writing based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The criteria for corrective feedback are Content, which evaluates how well the learner has completed the task, Communicative Achievement – evaluating how appropriate the writing is for the task, Organization – evaluating whether the task is in a logical order; and Language – evaluating whether the language means, morphology and syntax are accurate (Karpova, 2020).

**Figure 2**  
*Write&Improve user interface*



When clicking on the button “Start Practising Now”, the above interface (Figure 2) can be seen. Students don’t have to sign in, just choose the level and the task that they want to do and start writing. There are 177 free tasks divided into different levels, from beginner to advanced. Those tasks are either genuine Cambridge English exam tasks or written by experienced English teachers based on themes and task types seen in the Cambridge English exams. In the initial section of the program (W&I workbooks), students can choose one of five different categories to practice their writing including three different levels: Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. Also, users can choose between W&I Business – for those who study English for specific purposes and W&I Just for fun – for those who study English for the sake of entertainment. All of these sections are free.

Self-study begins with selecting an appropriate level (beginners A1 and A2, intermediate B1 and B2, advanced C1 and C2) and a writing assignment for the user to work on (an essay, report or a letter). Submitting work is done by clicking "check" after you've completed your assignment. When a draft is submitted, the system evaluates the writer's proficiency level and uses color to provide constructive feedback on both the sentence and word levels. As an example, if the sentence is highlighted in white, it

shows that it is fine, while if it is highlighted in light yellow, it suggests that these sentences can be improved. Those sentences highlighted in dark yellow are the ones that need to be corrected. Errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word choice are all represented by distinct colored symbols. In addition, the program creates a list of possible enhancements. The better word for 'Specifically', which is “In particular”, is given in Figure 3, as indicated.

**Figure 3**

*Learner's feedback view*

Nowadays, English is very important. It ☆ appears in business, economy, media, travel, communicate activities... Learning English is the best way to help you in the future. That is the reason why I choose and ☆ follow learning English at Thu Dau Mot University. With the development of science and technology, high living standard... ! Specially, Vietnam become a member of WTO that it attract a lot of f in cooperation come to Vietn

When they cor English well to speak work in a for- eign company for them. se English to communicate customers. On the other hand everyday. So always select the staff who can use English well. WOOJIN Vina company comes from Korea. So, they need the high level ! staffs in their company.

As you know, internship is very important. It helps the students use the knowledge to combine with the real life to work. On the other hand, it helps students get more experiences , the behaviors in many difficult situations. During the internship at WOOJIN Vina company, I got a lot of

**! Wrong word?** X

**You may need a different word.**

Perhaps 'In particular' is better.

Next

In addition, in the Test Zone section, students are able to test their writing skills to prepare for international Cambridge exams such as IELTS General, IELTS Academic, or B2 First Training for a subscription of 4.5 pounds/month.

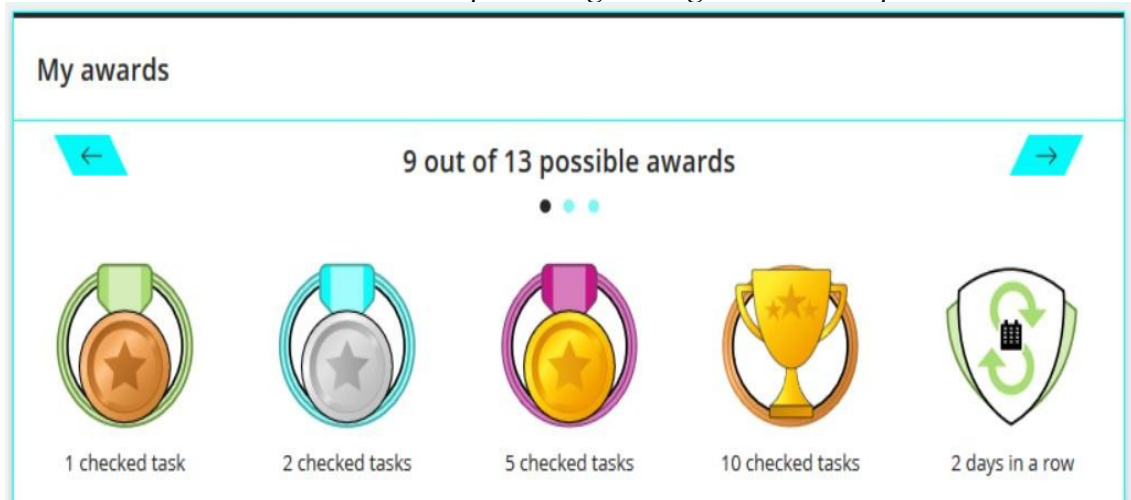
In the section called Class view, teachers have to subscribe and pay a maximum of 1.10 pounds/student/month for their writing class and they can get a discount for more students or for a longer subscription. This premium version will allow teachers to see all versions of all student writing. Teachers can then create their own tasks and add their own feedback and grades for their student writing. Also, it will provide graphs and insights into class and student progress.

Along with the benefits of providing immediate feedback, Write&Improve also allows students to take responsibility for their own learning by choosing the level they

are comfortable with. For example, low-level students can choose beginner tasks while higher-level students can choose more difficult tasks to challenge themselves.

#### Figure 4

*The awards students can earn when practicing writing on Write&Improve on their own.*



The awards they get are a good new feature compared to the 2016 version of Write&Improve that encourages students to use Write&Improve on their own (Figure 3). A bronze medal will be given to students if they have checked 1 task; it'll be a silver medal when they have checked 2 tasks and they will receive a gold medal or a golden cup when they have checked 5 tasks or 10 tasks, respectively. There is also a prize called “2 days in a row”, which is given to students who do the writing tasks continuously over a two-day period. Awards like these give students an objective to work toward, and they can compete against themselves or other students for more awards.

Teachers can also benefit from Write&Improve since it helps them automatically and immediately evaluate their student writing in terms of Communicative Achievement, Organization, and Language criteria by simply copying and pasting their student writing into any tasks in Write&Improve, which require the same number of words. They just need to justify the Content criteria in their student writing. This will obviously reduce a lot of workloads for teachers.

### Reflection

In the academic year 2021-2022, in the department of English at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU), we used Write&Improve in a course for second-year English major students, which was “Critical Reading and Writing”. This was a 12-week course, and students met each other five hours per week. A project called “Class Magazines” was assigned to the class and took up to 30% of the final score. 45 students were divided into nine groups (five students per group), and each group was asked to make a magazine by themselves. The theme of the magazine could be anything they'd like to write about, such as sports, music, fashion, or news, among others. The project included

four stages:

- Stage 1: project planning (week 1-2). Students worked in their own groups to decide which magazine theme they would like to choose;
- Stage 2: individual writing and feedback (week 3-7). Members in each group had to individually write a text out of the class for homework; then they submitted it to Write&Improve to receive feedback and redid it until they were happy with their results; they could then their products to the teacher for the last-round feedback;
- Stage 3: designing a magazine (week 8-10). When they had all finished, all the students brought their works together and turned them into a paper-based magazine;
- Stage 4: summarizing and reporting the project's results (week 11-12). Students in each group presented their magazines to their classmates in weeks 11 and 12.

After the project, students were interviewed to investigate their attitudes towards using Write&Improve. Results showed positive responses to this activity, and most of them agreed that they would continue to use Write&Improve to practice writing skills outside the classroom in the future.

## **Evaluation**

Since Write&Improve was used as a formative assessment tool in the reflection section mentioned above, this application is evaluated based on the following criteria: error detection, types of feedback, and practicality.

### **Error detection**

This application is developed to be cautious. According to Cambridge English, a mistake that is not noted is less detrimental to long-term learning than the one that is marked incorrectly. Therefore, Write&Improve gives only feedback if it is at least 90% confident that a mistake has been made. Additionally, when a particular recommendation cannot be offered but there seems to be a problem, an entire sentence is highlighted to draw the user's attention to that sentence.

The first type of error identified by Write&Improve is spelling errors. Learners typically have difficulty with terms like "beautiful" and "restaurant" since the link between pronunciation and spelling in English isn't always obvious.

Incorrect use of punctuation was the second most frequent error. Some of the most fundamental punctuation rules, such as capitalizing the beginning of a sentence and concluding it with a full stop, were identified by Write&Improve. There was also a lot of confusion among learners when it came to using apostrophes appropriately, with many of them either missing or overusing them. For several learners, paragraphing was a problem, as they preferred to write in one-sentence chunks rather than connecting sentences together to generate an overall narrative flow.

Errors with missing articles (a, an, or the) were the most prevalent in grammatical checks. Errors with derterminer-noun agreement and subject-verb agreement came next. Write&Improve mostly pointed out errors at the sentence level rather than the word level related to verb tenses.

## Types of feedback

When it comes to giving feedback, Write&Improve follows a hierarchy. Learners' motivation may be stifled if too much feedback is given at once, which is not the case here. As an alternative, the first phase of feedback identifies typical faults and corrects them before moving on to the next phase of errors. This technique helps to keep learners motivated and interested.

There are five types of feedback provided by Write&Improve. Firstly, summative feedback gives students an idea of how far they've come in terms of their writing skills and an approximate CEFR score. The second kind of feedback, indirect, semi-corrective, focuses on word-level problems such as spelling, vocabulary choice, and grammar, together with a qualitative evaluation of each phrase. Write&Improve offers no "correct answer", but the users must decide by themselves on how to continue. For example, Write&Improve could highlight a word and remark "Did you forget something before this word?". By making their own decisions about what needs to be changed, users are encouraged to reflect on their work. Overview feedback bubbles that give encouragement from the teacher are the next type of feedback. Write&Improve has more than 250 distinct bubbles. Fourthly, personal progress graphs show the student's CEFR scores to help them track their development over time (see Figure 5). As a result, this teaches students that development is made in little increments, rather than a single leap from A1 to A2. The last type of feedback given by Write&Improve is prompt relevance score, which grades learners on a scale of one to five on how well they have done the writing task.

**Figure 5.**

*Personal progress graph*



## Practicality

Eighty percent of the students (40 out of 50) who took a course on critical reading and writing stated that Write&Improve was simple to use and enjoyable. In their responses, participants cited the gamification aspect (the challenge of attempting to increase their CEFR score from one draft to the next) and the ability to obtain immediate feedback rather than waiting for a week for a teacher to return their work as

the most important factors.

## Conclusion

Write&Improve is a great automated feedback tool to help learners improve their writing skills as they can receive feedback timely, one of the criteria of effective feedback. Additionally, teachers can use it as an effective tool to assess students' writing skills. However, in order to avoid impersonal feedback from the machine, automated feedback from Write&Improve should combine with teacher-provided feedback to produce not only timely but also personal, non-judgmental, and contextualized feedback.

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