

An EFL On-line Writing: Exploring Its Gains

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ABSTRACT

This study examined an EFL on-line writing programme with its automated feedback in terms of the students' writing progress, the discrepancy between the on-line and teachers' scores, and the teachers' and students' perceptions. Fifty seven EFL students aged 18-19 years old in an English-teacher education programme in Indonesia participated in the study. They completed eight practice writings and two writing tests using *MY Access*, an online writing programme. The analytical examination of their writing found that the students made progress most evidently in organization, as well as in content and development. A paired-sample t-test reported that the on-line programme and teachers' scoring based on the same rubrics were significantly different, with the on-line programme giving higher grades than the teachers'. The questionnaire and interview revealed that the teachers and students generally had a positive attitude towards the on-line programme, especially for its immediate feedback. Yet, three issues were repeatedly raised: 1) non-specific feedback, 2) overrated evaluations, and 3) the need for teacher feedback. The findings heighten the desirability for blended learning, and writing and feedback paradigm shifts. Writing should not only be placed on the cognitive plane but also be embedded in socio-cultural contexts. Feedback should help the students develop their agency in writing and take ownership of it.

Keywords: EFL on-line writing programme, feedback, socio-cultural contexts, teachers and students' perceptions, writing progress

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INTRODUCTION

The development of student's writing is often deemed a challenge due to its high-level cognitive engagement requiring idea formulation and organization (Olive, 2002). Such processing requires students to work beyond their linguistic resources

and confront the psychological and cultural aspects of writing. In their attempts to cope with these challenges, it is not uncommon for them to shift into their L1, which often results in conflicts between developing their L2 writing discourse and subscribing to their own L1 writing. It is at this juncture that the teacher's feedback is deemed important to improve their writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006) and be cognizant of their 'safe house zone' (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 179), where they can securely reflect on their own writing. Unfortunately, as Ferris (2003) and Grimmes and Warschauer (2010) have pointed out, this task is arduous work consuming much time and energy, particularly in the real foreign language context with twenty to twenty five students in a writing class.

With advancement in on-line writing, automated feedback seems to offer efficiency in terms of reducing the teacher's work. Automated feedback has been welcomed for its immediate feedback (Yang, 2004) and greater value (Denton, Madden, Roberts, & Rowe, 2008). The intermediate intervention provided by the teacher's feedback throughout the students' writing process is argued to be more effective for students' writing (Ferris, 1995; Krashen, 1984; Leki, 1990; Zamel, 1985, cited in Ferris, 2003)

However, automated feedback is also pinpointed for its lack of specific feedback (Yang, 2004, Chen & Cheng, 2006) and tendency to award higher scores than teachers' scores (Chen, 2006, cited in Lai, 2010). In addition, upon implementing *MY*

Access, one of on-line writing programmes, this study also raises concerns as to which it may pave the way to the students' L2 writing development. Given the inconclusive results of automated feedback, this study intends to extend its line of research by examining its efficacy and the teachers' and students' perceptions.

Automated Feedback in Second Language Writing

Feedback on writing is deemed important to students' writing development although it can be described as a double-edged sword. Treglia (2009), citing studies by Anson, 1999; Elbow, 1999; Ferris, 2003, stated that most L1 and L2 writing scholars agree that how feedback is conveyed through words could improve the revision; or it could hamper students' perception of feedback and possibly the quality of the revision. The degree to which feedback can facilitate the students' writing is also dependent upon how it is processed, i.e. whether as a simple linear process entailing the teacher's reading and students' revising or as a complex, non-linear model embedding various aspects of writing and students' characteristics (Goldstein, 2010). Goldstein further mentioned that an intriguing issue is to what extent automated feedback can represent the non-linear model.

Some software applications have been developed to evaluate, score or provide feedback (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). The applications, for example, include *e-rater*, *MY Access*, *criterion*. With respect to effective feedback, Lee, Wong, Cheung, and

Lee (2009) designed their own web-based evaluation system for automated feedback on content and organization of adult EFL students' writing. Using twenty seven students who were assigned a 300-word argumentative essay, they compared the feedback given to the experimental group from the web and to the control group from the traditional pen and paper. They found that the two groups were not statistically different in relation to the length of their essays and final scores.

Adopting Criterion which provides feedback on grammar, usage, mechanic, style, content, and organization, Attali (2004) reported the analysis of the first and the last essays submitted by 6th to 12th graders in United States during 2002-2003. The study revealed that their overall scores, including those of organization and development and length of essays, improved. Similarly, adopting Criterion but with 190 freshman students in a composition course, Kellogg, Whiteford, and Quinlan (2010) conducted an experiment of impacts of varied automated feedback—none, intermittent, continuous feedback on the students' essays. They found that continuous feedback benefited the students most.

A number of studies with *MY Access* have provided some insights into the L2 writing process. For example, from four studies examining the use of *MY Access*, Elliot and Mikulas (2004, cited in Ware & Warschauer, 2006) found significant gains in writing assessment for fifth to eleventh grade students. They found *MY Access* helpful and accurate. However, such findings have not

been regarded as conclusive since they are still preliminary. Another study by Yang (2004) reported students' positive attitude toward the rapidity of feedback and their dissatisfaction with unspecific feedback. In a similar vein, looking into EFL college students' writing, Chen and Cheng (2006) pointed out the lack of specific feedback in the light of content and organization. As for the scoring system, Chen (2006, cited in Lai, 2010) noted that *MY Access* tended to give higher scores and its grammar feedback only managed limited types of errors and provided inconsistent error corrections. Similarly, raising the issue of the scoring system, Herrington (2001) argued that its scoring engine, which relied on the length of the essay, could lead the student to perceive good writing as the one with lengthy words and produce such in order to gain good scores.

Comparing peers and *MY Access* feedback, Lai (2010) conducted a study with 22 EFL learners in one college in Taiwan. Lai found a preference for peer feedback rather than automated feedback from *MY Access*. It was reported that peer feedback resulted in greater improvement in writing. These findings, as Lai argued, offered new insight into the field of writing as social learning, feedback strategies, computer anxiety, and cultural aspects in writing. Particularly looking into EFL learners' perceptions in using *MY Access*, Fang (2010) reported that 46.6% of the learners felt satisfied with the automated grading system but 40% were dissatisfied with *MY Access* as the essay grader. Fang also revealed that 85% of the

learners would revise their writing following the feedback given. The results show the learners' favourable attitudes toward *MY Access* as a writing tool but not as an essay grader.

These findings have certainly thrown light on the use of on-line writing in the foreign language contexts. However, the findings related to scoring seem to remain an intriguing issue to further investigate. One crucial question to pose is whether the automated scoring only relates to criteria set as a standard or whether the teacher's writing paradigm in foreign language contexts has been an underlying factor. Thus, it would be enlightening to extend these studies by researching on-line writing in a different foreign language milieu.

METHOD

This research was a qualitative and quantitative study examining the on-line writing by *MY Access*. It poses three research questions:

1. Did the students make progress in their writing as indicated by their analytical scores?
2. Was there any discrepancy between the analytical scores awarded by the teachers and *MY Access* based on the same rubrics?
3. What were the teachers' and students' perceptions of the on-line writing?

Participants

The participants in this study comprised 57 EFL students (12 males and 45 females aged

around 18-19 years old) of four semester two-writing classes at an English teacher education programme in Indonesia. They had been learning English for about six years. In terms of their writing skills, they had minimum knowledge and sense of L2 writing despite the fact that their senior high school English curriculum adopts genre-based teaching focusing on narrative, descriptive, hortatory, and expository essays. A brief survey conducted prior to the research revealed that they were inclined to perceiving writing as a difficult skill to develop because of grammar issues and idea development. Insufficient experience of writing and low English proficiency seemed to account for their difficulties. Based on the in-house TOEFL-like proficiency test, their scores ranged from 325-400. Besides students, this study also involved a four-writing teacher team, three holding a master's degree and one holding a doctoral degree in English language teaching. The teachers have been teaching writing for about four years but they just used the computer-mediated learning in their writing class when the study was conducted.

Preparation and Implementation of MY Access

Prior to the implementation of the on-line programme using *MY Access*, the students of the Writing I classes were briefed by an expert from the company to introduce them to the features of *MY Access*. Following this, the teachers embarked on regular instruction about teaching paragraph-writing and its transformation into essay-writing.

Informative and persuasive essays were then selected and taught respectively in the first and second halves of the semester. Two topics were selected and developed for each type of the essays. For each topic, the students were required to submit at least two practice writings, resulting in eight practice writings. For the writing tests, the students took the mid-semester and final tests using *MY Access*. The test scores were obtained from automated *MY Access* analytical scoring and from the teachers based on a 6 point-scale rubric provided by *MY Access*. The details are illustrated in Table 1.

DATA COLLECTION

Data from the students were collected from four instruments. First, the students' analytical writing scores were obtained from four writing prompts for practice and from two writing tests awarded by *MY Access* and by the teachers based on a 6 point-scale rubric provided by *MY Access*. The rubrics include five domains: (1) focus & meaning, (2) content development, (3) organization, (4) language use, and (5) mechanics and conventions. To achieve scoring reliability among the four writing teachers, each teacher scored the second submission of

one student's writing randomly chosen and discussed the feedback together. The discussion was focused on parts of the students' writing given the feedback and on aspects commented on (for example, clarity, relevance, coherence, redundancy, language accuracy). The inter-rater reliability among the four writing teachers was 88%, 86%, 92%, 94%, and 98%, respectively, for the five domains. Second, the students' perceptions of *MY Access* were revealed by using the close-ended questionnaires consisting of 14 items adopted from *MY Access* and open-ended questionnaire focusing on the benefits of *MY Access* (see Appendix). Third, the students' feelings and thoughts of using *MY Access* were also sought from their dialogue journals. These journals were written at the end of each topic, resulting in 228 journals in total. Fourth, the teachers' perceptions of *MY Access* were obtained from a semi-structured interview conducted at the end of the mid-semester and of the final test. A digital recorder was used to tape the conversations. The interview focused on critical issues that the teachers faced in using *MY Access*.

Table 1
Topics of Essays

Submissions	1st half semester	2nd half semester
	<i>Topics of informative essays</i>	<i>Topics of persuasive essays</i>
2x	Effects of technology (ET 1 & 2)	A rewarding occupation (RO 1 & 2)
2x	The person you most admire (PA 1 & 2)	Essential job skills (EJ 1 & 2)
	<i>Topic of mid-semester test</i>	<i>Topic of final-test</i>
1x	Healthy relationships (HR)	Traditional teaching <> on-line teaching (TT <> OL)

DATA ANALYSIS

The students' analytical writing scores from four writing prompts for practice were analyzed by comparing the score means of the students' first and second writing submissions to trace their possible progress. Similarly, the students' analytical writing scores from two writing tests awarded by *MY Access* and by the teachers were also compared for their score means to examine whether there was any discrepancy between *MY Access* and the teachers. A *paired-sample t-test* was performed to test the statistical difference between the students' first and second writing submissions as well as between the scores given by *MY Access* and by the teachers. With regard to the students' perceptions of using *MY Access*, their responses to the close-ended questionnaires were analyzed by counting their frequency in percentage. As for the open-ended questionnaire and dialogue journals, they were qualitatively analyzed by scrutinizing any categories that emerge from their responses. Lastly, the teachers' interviews were examined to find out what the teachers considered as critical issues in using *MY Access*.

FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of the students' writing progress, the comparison of the scores awarded by the teachers and by *MY Access*, and the students' and teachers' perceptions of *MY Access*.

Students' writing progress

The first finding reported possible progress of two students' practice writings. As shown in Table 2, the difference of the mean scores was not glaring since in all domains throughout all topics, they fell within the range of 4.00-4.900. However, the mean score of the second writing was higher than that of the first, except for EJ in the language use domain. For example, in ET 1 and 2 in the focus & meaning domain, the difference was only 0.092. In PA 1 and 2, in terms of the *content and development* domain, the gap was 0.129. In RO 1 and 2, in the *organization* domain, the discrepancy is 0.207.

A statistical analysis further supported that the students made some progress in some domains as indicated by the significant differences between their first and second writing submissions. The progress was demonstrated by ET, PA, and EJ in the *content & development* domain. Likewise, ET and PA showed the difference in the language use domain. The most apparent progress was traced in the *organization* domain with all four writing topics being statistically different. However, lack of progress was found in ET, PA, and RO in the *focus and meaning* domain and in RO and EJ in the language use domain. Nevertheless, no progress was found in the mechanics & conventions domain.

Table 2
Students' writing progress
*p value < .005

Domains	Topics	n		Mean		SD		t-value
		Submission	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	
Focus & meaning	ET	57	57	4.682	4.774	.7256	.6567	.104
	PA	57	57	4.768	4.888	.6636	.5309	.063
	RO	57	57	4.640	4.746	.6491	.5840	.112
	EJ	57	57	4.816	4.954	.5949	.5234	.044*
Content development	ET	57	57	4.209	4.412	.7132	.5468	.002*
	PA	57	57	4.296	4.425	.6015	.4958	.019*
	RO	57	57	4.165	4.281	.5930	.6618	.158
	EJ	57	57	4.337	4.539	.5821	.4887	.001*
Organization	ET	57	57	4.000	4.220	.6753	.6118	.000*
	PA	57	57	4.093	4.316	.6372	.5391	.002*
	RO	57	57	4.035	4.242	.5521	.5870	.002*
	EJ	57	57	4.251	4.433	.5362	.5184	.012*
Language use	ET	57	57	4.460	4.689	.7218	.6513	.008*
	PA	57	57	4.621	4.835	.6747	.6140	.011*
	RO	57	57	4.521	4.568	.6543	.6861	.541
	EJ	57	57	4.935	4.928	.6315	.6576	.935
Mechanics and conventions	ET	57	57	4.220	4.350	.7100	.7221	.146
	PA	57	57	4.319	4.384	.7067	.7328	.464
	RO	57	57	4.218	4.361	.7236	.7406	.174
	EJ	57	57	4.530	4.625	.7828	.7802	.388

Table 3
Comparison between the scores awarded by *MY Access* and by the teachers
p value < .001

Domains	Writing tests	n		Mean		SD		t-value
		<i>MY Access</i>	Teachers	<i>MY Access</i>	Teachers	<i>MY Access</i>	Teachers	
Focus & meaning	Mid-semester	57	57	4.467	3.763	.5956	.9019	.000*
	Final-test	57	57	5.004	4.016	.6369	.6964	.000*
Content development	Mid-semester	57	57	4.039	3.781	.4769	.7072	.000*
	Final-test	57	57	4.460	3.977	.6442	.6470	.000*
Organization	Mid-semester	57	57	4.005	3.605	.4592	.5956	.000*
	Final-test	57	57	4.344	3.960	.6167	.7240	.000*
Language use	Mid-semester	57	57	4.391	3.921	.5792	.6994	.000*
	Final-test	57	57	4.863	4.289	.7141	.7316	.000*
Mechanics and conventions	Mid-semester	57	57	4.302	3.816	.5617	.5561	.000*
	Final-test	57	57	4.521	4.149	.8202	.7069	.000*

Comparison between the Scores Awarded by the Teachers and by MY Access

The second finding presented the comparison between the writing test analytical scores given by the teachers and by *MY Access*. As shown in Table 3, it is apparent that in all domains in the mid-semester and final tests, *MY Access* yielded higher score means. In the mid-semester test, the score means of *MY Access* fell in the range of 4, while those of teachers only reached the range 3. Similarly, in the final test, the score means of *MY Access* were dominantly demonstrated by the range of 4 but the score means of the teachers were indicated by the range of 3 except for the *focus and meaning* domain with the range of 5 and 4. The statistical analyses supported that the scores of *MY Access* and those of the teachers were statistically different with p value .000.

Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of MY Access

The third analysis revealed the students' and teachers' perceptions of using *MY Access*. The analysis of the student questionnaires found that despite the students' familiarity with computer use either for various

purposes including test taking as well their preference toward *MY Access*, 57.9% (item 8) of the students rated its feedback *less effective* than the teacher's. They positively valued its *immediate score, suggestion to obtain a better score, opportunities for revision, way to improve their score, friendly tool, and writing portfolio possession*. Nevertheless, its inaccurate score stood out with 49.1% (item 10) and 63.2% (item 13). In terms of *satisfaction*, the features of *MY Access* tended to be rated 2-4, 5 indicating the greatest satisfaction (item 11). Despite these ratings, 93% (item 14) of the students wanted to continue the use of *MY Access*.

A further examination of the students' open-ended questionnaire, as displayed by Table 4 revealed for tendencies in using *MY Access*. The need for *teacher feedback* accounted for the highest with 40.4% despite the fact that they regarded the programme and feedback as useful.

Scrutiny of the students' dialogue journals revealed some interesting opinions about *MY Access*. Polarized into two groups, the majority of the students tended to see *MY Access* as an *ineffective program*. This first group of the students confirmed

Table 4
Students' perceptions of *MY Access*

No	Comments	Total number	%
1.	Provide good/useful program	16	28.0
2.	Give useful feedback	7	12.3
3.	Need teacher's feedback	23	40.4
4.	Improve my writing	8	14.0
5.	Others (time saving, new learning experience, less effective class, practical class, active learning)	3	5.3
Total		57	100

their responses in the questionnaire. The ineffectiveness was concerned with the *unclear feedback* provided by *MY Access*, *unreliable evaluation*, *slow internet loading*, *students' getting nowhere* with their writing. The other group, though smaller in number, valued it as *an effective tool* to improve their writing. With regard to the features, *the availability of the thesaurus*, *sample essays*, and *spelling check* was thought helpful. They were also happy to be able to obtain their scores immediately upon submission, giving them a sense of achievement.

Marshalling their voices for the teacher feedback, the students seemed to regard feedback as a forum for exchanging ideas with the teacher where they can securely proceed with their writing process. One voice concerning the need to share and exchange ideas with the teacher was strongly echoed across the students' diary journals. Not only psychologically did they feel relieved to be able to communicate the feedback to the teachers but also they tended to perceive the teachers' feedback as the teachers' involvement in their learning process. Using Canagarajah's (1997) term, the students needed to find 'a safe house' for them to 'pour out' the thoughts they had tried to express in their writing through the talk. It is through this oral interaction that the student can escape from their 'momentary distresses' in their attempts to negotiate the academic demands and their own writing mode. The following are several samples of their opinions placing important roles the teacher feedback:

- "I know it (*MY Access*) is useful but please...I want to get the teacher's feedback."
- "I am confused with the feedback from the on-line program...but I can understand if you give me feedback."
- "The teacher role is important... the teacher cannot just give it to a computer. We need a human approach."
- "I don't like to work with computer. I need to talk to the teacher. I got stuck with my ideas. I just stared at the computer and could not get any ideas. But when you go around and discuss my writing, that's what I really like. I can understand when you ask about my writing and my ideas start to come."
- "Learning with computer is not the same as learning with the teacher. Computer can give me a quick score but it cannot make me understand my writing. I don't feel comfortable so I am not too motivated. The teacher can motivate me to write."
- "I can ask you what I think in Indonesian but with computer, I can't tell my feeling. "

The analysis of the teachers' interviews found that in general the teachers had a positive attitude toward the implementation of *MY Access* as a writing and assessment tool. Yet three issues emerged: 1) scoring that tends to overvalue, 2) non-specific

feedback, and 3) the students' learning culture. The teachers were concerned over the tendency of *MY Access* to provide higher evaluation of the students' writing compared to the teachers' evaluation. The feedback was also thought to be normative so the students found it hard to understand. As for the last issue, it spoke the loudest. Though excited about obtaining immediate scores, the students did not seem to find it 'convenient' to work on the automated feedback themselves. This 'oral and reliant-on teacher culture' was thought to pose a major obstacle for the students to work with their automated feedback.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of possible progress of the students' first and second writing found that the students showed learning gains as indicated by their second writing's higher mean except for the fourth topic in the domain of language use. Statistically, the progress is particularly demonstrated by *organization*. These gains can be expected, given the writing syllabus that treats writing as discourse with its rhetorical properties to learn. These gains might, to some degree, be attributed to the instruction geared toward the students' awareness of the rhetoric of the sample essay, prior to their practice writing. In tandem with their organization progress, their *content and development* also demonstrated improvement. On the one hand, it is tempting to feel contented with the students' progress. On the other hand, however, the higher mean scores and statistical difference in the *organization*

and *content & development* domains should be interpreted with caution when taking into account the same range 4 yielded by the first and second writing. Based on *MY Access* 6-point scale rubric, 4 is considered adequate. This means that by quantification and statistical analysis, the students, to some degree, made some gains in their second writing, but it would have been more convincing if the students could demonstrate a higher range.

A further look into the analytical scores given by *MY Access* and by the teachers revealed that *MY Access* overrating the students' writings. The finding confirms studies by Chen (2006, as cited in Lai, 2010), Herrington (2001), and Fang (2010). From one perspective, the consistent findings reported from foreign language contexts, such as Taiwan and Indonesia, might suggest a higher standard applied by foreign language contexts. Given that academic writing is politically seen as a powerful tool to compete in an academic discourse community, these foreign language contexts might impose a stricter standard to prepare their students to face academic realms. Thus, this study suggests that the scoring should be regarded with caution, not only by seeing it as a *MY Access* scoring system constraint but also by seeking a deeper understanding of EFL writing philosophy. In so doing, the issue of scoring might open up new insights into EFL writing.

The analysis of the students' questionnaires and dialogue journals revealed a similar opinion. The on-line immediacy in feedback provision seems

to be the feature that the students value most. Yet they raised their concerns mainly over the ineffective *MY Access* feedback compared with that of the teachers. At the instructional level, the need for the teacher feedback can be seen as the students' seeking clarity about how to revise their essay. But taken further, such a voice is likely to reflect the very nature of writing. As Ware and Warschauer (2006) contended, the need for placing writing on the social and interactional plane should be understood beyond academic aspects often rigidly framed by cognitive processing. It is these understandings that can help students perceive writing as a process of negotiating and of nurturing their writing ownership. It is during this process, students might mitigate the pressure of writing as merely an enterprise involving organizing ideas using their limited linguistic repertoire.

As for the teachers' perceptions of *MY Access*, the analysis revealed their positive attitude toward the on-line writing, but they also pinpointed three issues: 1) different scoring, 2) non-specific feedback, and 3) learning culture. The first two responses support what the students have similarly pointed out in using *MY Access*. It is the last response that is interesting to examine further. It may be justified to see the students' learning culture as a hindrance in attempts to adopt on-line learning. It is true that shifting from teacher-reliance to self-learning, the students may not be ready to embrace this new learning culture. But it would be better to consider that the students' craving for the teacher feedback might speak

the need for 'a safe house' to negotiate their thoughts on writing. Canagarajah (1997, p. 190) contends that 'a safe house' can "serve to develop meta-pedagogical awareness and reflective learning." In other words, the students may have the need for feedback to negotiate their ideas as the main agency of their writing, not merely as a student following the automated feedback.

Implications for Foreign Language Writing Class

There are at least three implications that can be drawn from the findings: a blended learning, writing, and feedback paradigm shifting. It is apparent that the use of an on-line writing program does help the teachers with their daunting job in giving feedback. However, to set up a more solid instructional ground for an EFL context, a writing class should be designed as a blended learning class. This means that an on-line writing programme should be integrated with the teachers' intervention in the students' writing process. In terms of time efficiency, the on-line programme would still help generate automated feedback, but following this phase, the teachers should be in control of communicating and negotiating the feedback, paving the way of their writing ownership. To put it succinctly, this process should not be confined to surface-level comments centering on linguistic and rhetorical matters. The teachers should 'talk' and 'treat' the students' ideas as their very personal thoughts, giving the students a sense of being valued and appreciated. In so doing, it could be expected that

the negotiation would not perpetuate the pressure on students to write only for “having good scores sake” but to evoke the sense of “wanting to write for my ideas sake.” Concerning the scoring system, the teacher could combine the on-line scores and their own scores.

In line with the negotiating process in delivering feedback, the teachers and students should learn to develop a new perspective in writing. Both should shift conventional writing practices, emphasizing error-free writing and rigid organization, into a peripheral concern and start seeing writing as a social practice involving individual interaction and facilitated by the computer as a primary concern.

Lastly, the teacher needs to redefine the very essence of feedback provision. Feedback should operate beyond a technical writing enterprise throwing light only on language and organization; rather it should be expanded to serve as ‘a safe house’ for the students to express their personal load, allowing them to approach their writing with a sense of ownership. Taken further, such feedback would help the students minimize any mental blockage and writing anxiety. In other words, for the students to be situated in such ‘a safe house’, their processes of activating knowledge and exploring their writing experiences and beliefs should be embedded in sociocultural contexts (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of an on-line writing programme. The programme was

found to help the students make some progress in their writing, especially in *organization and content & development* domains. In terms of scores, the scores of the on-line and of the teachers based on the same rubrics were found to be different, the former being inclined to overrate the students’ writing. The teachers and students in general perceived the on-line immediate feedback as the most useful feature but pointed out its demerits as *unspecific feedback* and *overrating evaluation*. Teacher feedback was still viewed as of great importance. In the foreign language context, the findings seem to make it clearer that however sophisticated the software programme is, writing needs to be placed within social and interactional engagement, with the teacher serving as the prime mediator to help the students negotiate their writing and find ‘a safe house’ to cope with the pressure. A long process to see writing progress might be like an unclear journey but it will be a milestone in understanding writing.

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APPENDIX

The Students' Questionnaire of MY Access programme

No.	Items	Responses	Total	%
1	Using computer at campus	Every day	1	2.0
		At least once per week	53	93.0
		At least once per month	3	5.0
2	Using computer at home	Every day	46	80.7
		At least once per week	11	19.3
		At least once per month	0	0
3	Taking a test on a computers	Yes	32	56.1
		No	25	43.9
4	Preference to write using computer than on paper	Yes	48	84.2
		No	9	15.8
5	Problems using My Access	Yes	30	52.6
		No	27	47.4
6	Improving my writing	Yes	47	82.5
		No	10	17.5
7	Using feedback to improve my writing scores	Yes	41	72.0
		No	16	28.0
8	Effectiveness of MY Access	more effective	8	14
		less effective	33	57.9
		just the same	16	28.1
9 a	The features of MY Access like most: Immediate score	Yes	49	86
		No	8	14
b	Being told what to do to get a better score	Yes	47	82.5
		No	10	17.5
c	Being allowed to revise my essay	Yes	55	96.5
		No	2	3.5
d	A good way to improve my essays	Yes	49	86
		No	8	14
e	Easy to use	Yes	45	79
		No	12	21
f	Having my own writing portfolio	Yes	50	87.7
		No	7	12.3
10	The way MY Access scored my essay	Accurate	11	19.3
		Inaccurate	28	49.1
		Unfair	9	15.8
		Fair	9	15.8

11	On a scale of 1-5 (5 = most satisfied)						
	My Tutor	(2) = 23 (3) =22 (4) = 9 (5) = 3	40.4	38.6	15.8	5.2	
	My Editor	(2) = 16 (3) =17 (4) = 19 (5) = 5	28.1	29.8	33.3	8.8	
	Thesaurus	(2) = 18 (3) =18 (4) = 18 (5) =3	31.6	31.6	31.6	5.2	
	Student Portfolio	(2) = 13 (3) =12 (4) = 20 (5) =12	22.8	21.1	35.0	21.1	
	Resource Center	(2) = 17 (3) =19 (4) =17 (5) = 4	29.8	33.3	29.8	7.0	
12	Most favorable aspect of MY Access	Immediate scores	40	70.2			
		Being easy in the application	6	10.5			
		The provision of my editor	6	10.5			
		Others (time saving, no paper, mistake check)	5	8.8			
13	Least favorable aspect of MY Access	Inaccurate scores	36	63.2			
		Slow loading	4	7.0			
		Unclear feedback	15	26.3			
		Others	2	3.5			
14	Willingness to continue to use MY Access	Yes	53	93.0			
		No	4	7			

What are benefits of using *My Access* programme?
