

EXPLORING ALGERIAN EFL MASTER GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS SYNCHRONOUS WRITING TUTORING

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Abstract: This study reports research on online writing consultations as a technology-related support tool for EFL writing instructors. It investigates the efficacy of introducing synchronous one-to-one writing tutoring to assist EFL Master graduates from different Algerian Universities in preparing for the doctoral contest of the academic year 2024-2025. The primary objective of this study is thus to explore the attitudes of Algerian EFL Master's graduates toward the online writing tutoring approach. To achieve this, the study employs an exploratory, descriptive and correlational design, centring on virtual tutoring sessions as the core intervention. It incorporates document analysis to compare students' pre- and post-consultation drafts and a post-consultation feedback questionnaire. The findings revealed that synchronous tutoring enhanced students' understanding of academic writing and promoted positive attitudes toward it as a useful resource for their writing development. This underscores the efficacy of the target approach for language education, offering practical implications for educators seeking to improve EFL students' writing skills.

Keywords: Academic writing, English as a foreign language, online one-to-one consultations, online writing centres, synchronous virtual tutoring.

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1. Introduction

Algerian EFL learners face limited opportunities for direct interaction with English, and this lack of exposure often impedes their language acquisition. Out of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), mastering writing demands a particularly high level of effort, time, and dedication. This is because writing is not just about knowing the language; it involves a whole process that encompasses many elements, including brainstorming, organising ideas, applying an appropriate style, and adhering to academic conventions. Despite its critical role in academic success at the tertiary level, EFL students often struggle to develop their academic writing skills. Furthermore, the establishment of writing centres or similar support structures remains largely neglected by institutional support systems, leaving EFL students without adequate assistance in developing this essential skill. For Algerian EFL Master graduates seeking to enrol in Doctoral programs and training, the pressure to perform well is even greater. To be qualified as PhD candidates, they must pass a highly competitive national contest, which includes writing timed academic essays in two different modules. With hundreds competing for only a limited number of available seats, the pressure on students is immense. As a result, EFL Master's graduates find themselves in dire need of mastering academic essay writing to improve their chances of success. However, they often struggle to find the support required to develop this skill, particularly in online settings.

With that in mind, previous studies have explored various aspects of online writing support services. For instance, Martinez and Olsen (2015) provided a foundational discussion on online writing labs (OWLs), highlighting best practices in asynchronous and synchronous tutoring, as well as the integration of digital tools for effective writing instruction. Building on this, Paiz (2017, 2018) underscored the role of OWLs in fostering student agency and self-regulated learning while emphasising the need for interactive support mechanisms in EFL contexts. Additionally, Kwan (2023) examined writing tutors' experiences in synchronous one-to-one consultations, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. Despite such advancements in writing instruction, writing consultation services and OWLs remain extremely rare in Algeria, limiting students' access to crucial resources for improving their writing skills. This gap in academic support highlights the urgent need for innovative solutions that can bridge the divide between students' needs and available resources, considering current technological advancements. This article attempts to fill this gap by investigating the efficacy of introducing synchronous one-to-one tutoring to offer writing consultations to EFL Master's degree holders from different Algerian Universities. Hence, the primary objective is to explore Algerian EFL Master's graduates' attitudes toward the target approach and assess its impact on their essay writing. To this end, the following research questions are proposed:

- Does online one-to-one writing tutoring improve Algerian EFL Master's graduates' understanding of essay writing and key academic writing conventions?
- What are Algerian EFL Master's graduates' perceptions and attitudes towards the synchronous one-to-one tutoring approach?

2. Literature Review

This section proceeds as follows. Firstly, a discussion will unfold around online writing instruction and online writing centres. The focus then shifts to modern online tutorials, particularly those that are synchronous. Next, an examination of several different pedagogical approaches and strategies used in virtual writing consultations will be provided. The discussion ends with a brief investigation of the role of tutor-student interaction in achieving effective consultations.

2.1 Online Writing Labs and Virtual Tutoring

One of the major developments in the field of online writing instruction is the introduction of online writing centres, also known as Online Writing Labs (OWLs), which extend the engagement of traditional writing centres. In a few cases, however, they are created independently of their onsite versions (Martinez & Olsen, 2015). Many institutions that possess a writing centre develop their own OWL websites that reflect their vision of how they want to support their clientele virtually (usually students and faculty). Today, one of the most recognisable OWLs in the world is The Purdue Online Writing Lab, which was launched during the spring 1994 semester (Paiz, 2014). Its mission has always been to support writers anytime and anywhere they are, whether it is early mornings in the library stacks or late evenings in their dorm rooms. This is achieved by extending the Purdue Writing Lab's accessibility beyond its physical space, providing high-quality instructional resources, and allowing free and open access to individuals and academic institutions worldwide.

With the development of electronic communication tools, new online instructional spaces have emerged, adding new dimensions to the traditional writing tutor and student collaboration. While some of those tools are ineffective, others have proved successful, offering great potential and paving the way to modern interactive tutorials, with synchronous conferencing being a major one. The latter came to address the need for real-time online interaction. Muriel Harris (1997) stated that distant video conferencing is an effective way to address the needs of a successful consultation, where students and tutors engage in real-time discussions, hear each other speak, and view and work on the text together. Accordingly, Martinez and Olsen (2015) noted that due to the vast array of technologies, synchronous conferencing can be conducted via different Learning Management Systems (LMS) and conferencing technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Students who prefer not to participate in text-based synchronous contexts can complete the tutorials using free video programs, taking into account concerns related to cameras and microphones (CCCC OWI Committee, 2013; Hewett 2015).

2.2 Tutor Training

Online writing centre tutors require specialised training to assist students in virtual environments effectively. Martinez and Olsen (2015) reported that "The nature of the online conference, whether asynchronous or synchronous, presents challenges to tutors trained solely to do onsite, face-to-face writing center tutoring" (p. 205). This makes training tutors to use online technology a crucial requirement. In this regard, online tutoring demands tutors to acquire special skills. Some of these were proposed by Hewett and Ehmann (2004) and Hewett (2006), including the use of appropriate, writing-focused vocabulary that students can understand and the development of digital literacy that facilitates the use of various technologies (such as whiteboard, shared spaces, and audio functions) in the tutorials to promote student involvement. Finally, tutors need to be trained on how to address issues related to technology with students during synchronous consultations, since students come with varying levels of technological proficiency.

Besides being professional toward writers by showing up to work on time and notifying them in advance about any urgent session cancellations, there are other guidelines that tutors should adhere to both when tutoring onsite and online. These include tutors explaining their roles to their tutees from the beginning and asking them about their expectations from the consultation (Rafoth, 2000). The latter prevents unnecessary complications, such as when student writers expect tutors to write, proofread, or revise their papers for them. Another important guideline, as highlighted in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, is to give the writer control over the paper. On the one hand, when tutoring onsite, tutors need to keep the

paper in front of the writer as much as possible. When tutoring online, on the other hand, tutors should give the writer control of the keyboard and cursor. Doing this serves as a reminder for the writer (and sometimes for the tutor as well) that the piece of writing is theirs (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). Eventually, through peer-tutor training programs or guides, tutors gain knowledge on how to run consultations effectively. However, being trained alone cannot answer all tutors' questions; some things are only learned through actual consultations. Through trial and error and continuous reflective tutoring, tutors develop their own strategies and competencies for doing their work properly and efficiently.

2.3 Synchronous One-to-One Tutoring Via Web Conferencing

Although synchronous tutoring has been a subject of research since the start of the 21st century, it was not until the COVID-19 outbreak that it began to be widely implemented. Numerous research studies have been conducted to demonstrate the benefits of online learning in education (Hiranrithikorn, 2019; Salloum & Shaalan, 2019; Lockman & Schirmer, 2020). Among the major benefits of online learning is the significant role that communication with peers plays in supporting the learning process (Varma et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers' clear feedback and students' active engagement tend to create positive online learning experiences, which, according to Park and Kim (2020), contribute to effective communication. Nevertheless, the shift toward online teaching and learning has received negative attitudes from many teachers and students alike in contexts where there was a lack of e-learning sources and insufficient preparation to engage with technology-driven education (Saihi, 2019; Berbar, 2020). Thus, for online education to be successful, synchronous or asynchronous, it requires proper planning and an adequate infrastructure.

In a recent study, Kwan (2023) presented a case study of four writing centre consultants' experiences and perceptions of the synchronous one-to-one tutoring mode of instruction via web conferencing conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of revealed that all four consultants (two undergraduates and two postgraduates) found this mode of instruction a practical alternative to face-to-face tutoring. This convergence was evident in the consultants' high satisfaction with the use of Zoom Meetings (video conferencing platform). When asked about the possibility of replacing face-to-face writing consultations with synchronous virtual consultations, the undergraduate consultants showed positive acceptance of such a possibility, justifying their stance by the convenience and efficiency of video-conferencing software. However, the postgraduate consultants remained doubtful of such an option due to interactional issues such as establishing rapport and maintaining a personal touch with tutees from a distance. Both of them, nevertheless, suggested that this mode of instruction might ideally serve as a supplement rather than a replacement.

In the end, they provided some key recommendations based on their experiences with synchronous virtual tutoring. These include the use of Google Docs as an alternative to screen-sharing, which is documented in the literature on collaborative writing (Ting, 2020). Google Docs has the advantage of allowing both the tutor and the writer to engage in the writing process simultaneously by highlighting and annotating the same document throughout the consultation (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019). Another recommendation related to strengthening the quality of the consultations is awareness of potential communication issues in web-based tutoring and online facilitation (Rehn et al., 2018; Moorhouse et al., 2022, 2023), including managing session flow and promoting writer engagement through techniques like asking softball questions to assess their comprehension and presence, especially when their cameras are turned off. Finally, it is useful to remind writers of the "netiquette" of video conferencing, such as remaining in a non-distracting environment with a stable internet connection, giving constant and non-verbal feedback to their consultants, and participating respectfully in the consultations.

2.4 Tutor-Writer Relationship

The writing centre community places a strong emphasis on the tutor-writer relationship. They regard it as the backbone of the success of their work. In a recent study, Broido and Rubin (2023) used a borrowed model to give structure to the interactions within writing consultations and guide them toward success. The model is composed of three main aspects: (1) bonding, (2) goals, and (3) tasks. First, it is important to note that building rapport with writers is a crucial step to conducting effective consultations. In this respect, when the two parties form a strong bond, it creates trust and commitment. When the writer begins to trust the consultant, they are more likely to continue to meet them, which is one of the goals of the writing centre' pedagogy. The second element of the modal is related to goal setting. The consultant and writer need to agree on the goals and outcomes to guide their work together. Sometimes the writer wants to work on surface-level matters, while the tutor notices more serious issues which, if not addressed properly, may affect the relationship negatively. Finally, once there is a consensus on the goals, there should be an agreement over the activities and responsibilities that lead to desired outcomes. When applying this framework to their writing centre instruction, Broido and Rubin reported that it can serve as a powerful diagnostic tool for understanding the tutor-writer relationship, as well as a pedagogical tool for training pre-service tutors. On another note, while there is a persistent perception that online tutorials tend to limit rapport building and so affect the whole relationship dynamics, Wisniewski et al.'s results (2020) suggest otherwise. They further highlight that "Particularly with audio-video components, OWTs' pedagogical strategies and tutor-writer engagement are similar to face-to-face sessions" (p. 282).

In conclusion, the literature review has provided valuable insights into online writing instruction, focusing on the introduction of online writing labs, which laid the groundwork for modern synchronous tutorials. Building on these insights, the next section presents the methodological framework of the present study, outlining the research design, data collection methods, and analytical strategies used to ensure a comprehensive examination of the application of the target approach in the Algerian context.

3. Methodology

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this endeavour, the researcher employs a mixed-method approach using document analysis and a questionnaire as research instruments. This choice of methods helps gather inclusive data about Algerian EFL Master graduates' attitudes and perceptions towards synchronous one-to-one tutoring. In what follows, a detailed description of the participants, instruments, and procedures is presented to provide deeper insights into the study's methodology.

3.1 Research Participants

The study's sample involves 11 Master's graduates from the Department of English of different Algerian Universities. The research informants were selected based on their voluntary willingness to participate in the study after an announcement on social media about free tutoring on essay writing. The table below represents the research participants' affiliation and gender, and the figure indicates their Master's speciality.

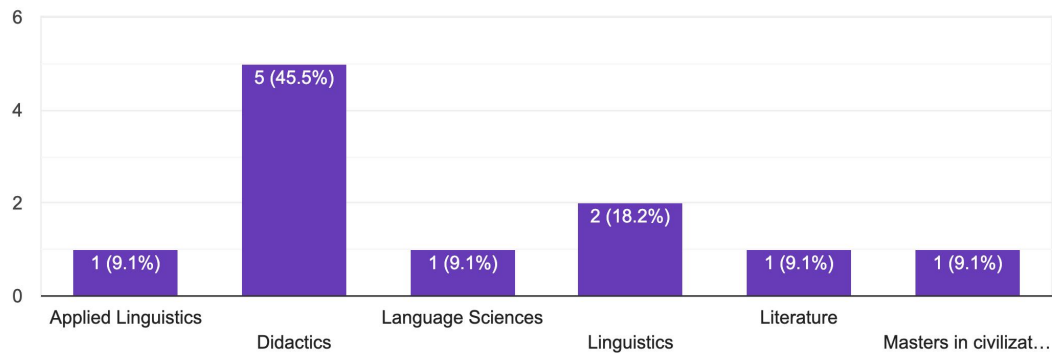
Table 1.*Participants' Profiles*

Chlef University	Gender	Tiaret University	Djelfa University	Medea University	Tbessa University	Total
/	Male	2	1	/	/	3
2	Female	1	2	2	1	8

Figure 1:*Participants' Master speciality.*

2- Your Specialisation:

11 responses



3.2 Research Instruments

The study employs two tools to gather inclusive data that would help answer the research questions. These tools include document analysis and a questionnaire. Accordingly, in conducting this study, the researcher resorts to mixed-method research, which integrates elements of quantitative and qualitative research to answer the research questions. According to George (2021), mixed methods tend to provide researchers with a more complete picture and a deeper insight into a certain problem than a standalone quantitative or qualitative study, as it draws on the benefits of both methods. Moreover, mixed methods research is particularly significant when used in the behavioural sciences, health, and social sciences, where the purpose is to identify the underlying motives of human behaviour. Therefore, the method that suits the nature of the present study best is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire will gather feedback on participants' perceptions of the consultations' effectiveness and any suggestions for improvement. This feedback will help evaluate the overall impact of the intervention and guide future enhancements, if any. The design of the questionnaire is informed by previous studies (Murray, 2012; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016; Yu & Xu, 2021) and sent to participants online. It consists of fifteen (15) questions divided into three sections (see the Appendix for the questionnaire). The first section is devoted to students' background information (i.e., gender, university and speciality). The second section contains multiple-choice and yes/no questions, which were designed to gather quantitative insights into respondents' attitudes or levels of agreement with statements

related to the use of the target approach. The last section includes open-ended questions which give participants opportunities to explain their standpoint and provide recommendations about the subject in question.

3.3 Research Procedures

It is worth mentioning that before this research was conducted, the researcher had received a twelve-hour tutor training at the hands of Lawrence Cleary, the director of the Regional Writing Centre (Limerick University, Ireland). Thanks to the training, the researcher learned a lot about both onsite and online writing consultations and was willing to practice and share this knowledge in a virtual space, namely through Zoom meetings, to conduct consultations instead of using a physical writing centre.

The study procedures are as follows: first, the researcher created a Facebook Page, where she posted instructional videos for Master's graduates aiming to sit for the 2025 PhD contest. These videos addressed various aspects of academic writing, such as essay structure and argument construction, equipping students with foundational knowledge to better understand the writing process. After that, the researcher announced the start of online consultations for those seeking further guidance with essay writing. The participants were asked to submit initial essays in response to a previous Doctoral contest question or any other preferred prompt. The essays provided a baseline measure of their writing proficiency and understanding of academic writing conventions. Eventually, eleven students reached out and booked consultations via email. The researcher, then, scheduled the booked consultation sessions on Zoom and notified each participant about his/her consultation day, time, and link. Typically, each student underwent a one-hour online writing consultation (in case it was not sufficient, the session could be extended to fifteen extra minutes). During these one-to-one sessions, both the student writer and the tutor reviewed the pre-feedback essay (first draft) and discussed it in terms of understanding the prompt, developing a clear thesis, organising ideas logically, using strong evidence, considering clarity, style and the audience. The aim was to help students better understand the writing process, guide them in self-editing their essays, and encourage them to identify areas for improvement.

Following the consultation sessions, participants were asked to revise their first drafts based on the feedback provided and send the revised versions back to the tutor. This helps the researcher assess the extent to which students have grasped the comments discussed during the consultation and whether they are willing to implement them in future writing. In order to evaluate the impact of virtual consultations on students' writing skills, the researcher proceeded with a comparative phase in which the post-feedback essays were compared with the pre-feedback drafts. This analysis focused on improvements in five key areas: structure; argumentation; critical thinking; content development; language; and style. Finally, the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire designed to assess their attitudes towards the online writing consultation sessions.

4. Results

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of students' post-feedback essays and the questionnaire responses. In the first subsection, an exploration of results from the document analysis of students' essays is provided, highlighting recurring patterns and key aspects of their writing. The following subsection examines participants' responses to the questionnaire, offering insights into their perceptions of the online writing tutoring approach. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of students' writing practices and attitudes toward the target approach.

4.1 Document Analysis

Document Analysis is the first data collection tool adopted in this research to analyse the progress in students' writing skills and revised drafts alike. The documents in this case are students' essays that were revised and resubmitted after the synchronous consultation they had with the researcher. The thematic analysis method was used to categorise findings according to the key scoring aspects used by the consultant to evaluate students' pre- and post-consultation drafts. Table 2 demonstrates the 5-point scoring key applied to assess performance across the central criteria: structure, argumentation and critical thinking, coherence and cohesion, and language and style. To better understand the impact of the intervention on students' writing performance, the analysis drew on descriptive statistics to demonstrate average development, along with anonymous excerpts from students' drafts.

Table 2.

Scoring Key for Essay Evaluation

Criteria	1 = Very Poor	2 = Poor	3 = Average	4 = Good	5 = Excellent
Structure					
Argumentation & Critical Thinking					
Coherence & Cohesion					
Language & Style					

To track students' writing progress, the consultant examined their drafts before and after revision using the above scoring criteria to grade them. The grades assigned to each of the 11 students before and after the writing consultations are displayed in the table below.

Table 3.

Students' Draft Grades Before and After the Writing Consultation

Student	Structure (Pre)	Structure (Post)	Argumentation & critical thinking (Pre)	Argumentation & critical thinking (Post)	Coherence & cohesion (Pre)	Coherence & cohesion (Post)	Language & style (Pre)	Language & style (Post)
S1	3	4	2.5	4	3	4	2.5	3.5
S2	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4
S3	3	3.5	2.5	3	2.5	3	2.5	3
S4	2.5	2.5	3	3	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
S5	2.5	3	2.5	3	2	2.5	2	2.5
S6	2.5	3	2.5	2.5	2	2	2	2
S7	3	4.5	3	4.5	3	4.5	3.5	4.5
S8	3	4.5	2.5	4.5	3	4.5	3	4.5
S9	2.5	4.5	2.5	4.5	2.5	4.5	3	4.5
S10	3.5	5	3.5	5	3.5	5	4	5
S11	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4.5

After grading the essays, the average of the pre- and post-intervention scores for each criterion was calculated manually to get clearer results of students' performance. To achieve this, all individual scores were summed and divided by the total number of students (11). This

provided a descriptive numerical representation of the overall progress across the four assessed areas, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Average Scores Before and After the Intervention

Criteria	Pre-Average	Post-Average
Structure	3.05	4.41
Argumentation & Critical Thinking	3.05	4.27
Coherence & Cohesion	2.82	4.14
Language & Style	2.91	4.14

4.1.1 Structure

The element of Structure was centred around the organisation and logical progression of ideas within the essay. As represented in Table 4, the score of Structure increased from 3.05 (pre) to 4.41 (post), indicating a noticeable enhancement of 44.6% across the participants. This suggests that, overall, students gained a better understanding of essay structure and organisation. As a matter of fact, most students already showed a good grasp of essay development before the intervention; they devoted one paragraph to the introduction, three or four body paragraphs, and one to the conclusion. That being said, *Students 8 and 9* wrote only the introduction in their first drafts with no paragraph development. Both admitted that they felt the need to do a consultation before proceeding with writing the full essay. Indeed, after discussing essay development and outlining their ideas with the consultant, they managed to write full essays in their second drafts. Furthermore, in her first draft, *Student 10* had only two body paragraphs; one being excessively long, and the second medium sized. To fix this inconsistency, the student self-edited her draft immediately during the consultation session. To do so, she divided the long paragraph into two paragraphs as its content suited two distinct subtopics.

Examining structure at the paragraph level was another key concern; 54% of the participants demonstrated a limited understanding of paragraph development in their pre-feedback drafts. For instance, while two students struggled with writing inclusive topic sentences, three others had difficulty writing transitional or concluding sentences. Also, some participants struggled when writing their supporting ideas; they either added unnecessary information or left out important details to support their standpoint. The following excerpt is taken from *Student 5's* draft. This sentence below was the only supporting sentence she had in her conclusion, and because it was very short and superficial, the student added some details to support and extend it in her second draft:

- Pre-consultation:

“Learner autonomy may encounter teachers’ reluctance, but it can be overcome through effective training in autonomous instruction.”

- Post-consultation:

“This process [fostering learner autonomy] is facing teachers’ reluctance due to several reasons, such as the fear of losing control. However, with more training and professional development, teachers can be more open to such modern learner-centred instruction.”

4.1.2 Argumentation and Critical Thinking

In the area of Argumentation and Critical Thinking, the research participants showed a notable improvement between their first and second drafts. The average score among all students increased from 3.05 to 4.27, indicating a 40% improvement. At this stage, the researcher focused on how well students constructed, analysed, and supported the central arguments of their essays. To achieve this, the consultant placed great emphasis on the thesis

statement of their essay, explaining how it reflects the entire essay. To this end, 45% of the students lacked knowledge on how to write a strong and clear thesis statement. They had issues with expressing their central claims, writing them either by overloading details or by a lack of clarity, resulting in vague arguments. When the tutor attempted to address this concern, most students admitted that it was mostly due to fear of not being articulate enough in expressing their central argument. After addressing it with the writing consultant, some students managed to solve the problem during the session, while others needed more time and practice. For instance, one student's revised draft shifted from a long and vague thesis statement to a clearer and more precise one:

- A pre-consultation excerpt:

“European writers like Joseph Conrad is believed to be the first who set the narrative about the ‘Other’, hence writing back to alter this narrative was adopted by many writers from the margin like Chinua Achebe; in other margin countries, Salman Rushdi provided an important work where he claimed back India before it was depicted by the center.”

- A post-consultation excerpt:

“The European writer Joseph Conrad is believed to be the first to set the narrative about the ‘Other’, as a response, writers like Achebe and Rushdi wrote back important works where they claimed their voices and corrected the Western misinterpretation.”

Another key focus centred on the analysis and support of the main argument throughout the essay. 45% of students' first drafts showed a lack of in-depth information, leaving their arguments not fully backed up. They seemed to be just summarising ideas instead of discussing and analysing them. The consultant explained how this would fail to satisfy their audience while not addressing the prompt. The consultant further noted that this could also indicate that the writer does not know how to critically evaluate sources, perspectives, and assumptions. One student, however, misunderstood the point by including many references and quotes that made the writing somehow lose its originality. Both issues were addressed in the consultation sessions. The following is an example of a student who added in-depth information to back up one of her claims in the revision stage:

- A pre-consultation excerpt:

“This transformation was also influenced by Michel Foucault's work.”

- A post-consultation excerpt:

“This transformation towards a more critical approach was also influenced by Michel Foucault's work, particularly his theories on the relationship between power and discourse.”

4.1.3 Coherence and Cohesion

The participants' performance in Coherence and Cohesion increased by approximately 46.8% in the post-intervention stage, showing the highest percentage gain among the four evaluated aspects. By evaluating student essays for coherence and cohesion, the researcher sought to scrutinise how well the ideas were organised within and between paragraphs. The focus was on assessing the logical flow of ideas (macro-level organisation) and sentence connectivity (micro-level cohesion). The former showed whether ideas progressed in a logical way throughout the whole essay, while the latter focused on the smooth flow between sentences. This aspect was lacking in some essays; two students even had to reorder the placement of some paragraphs at the scene because they did not flow well. Two other students, however, had to rewrite topic sentences to better link the paragraphs to the central argument of the essay.

While some students had cohesion issues at the level of paragraphs, others had them at the level of sentences (sentence connectivity). Their sentences were either wordy (wordiness) or lacked smooth flow (choppiness). To solve these hurdles, the consultant instructed students about how to avoid wordiness and encouraged them to use sentence variation, particularly “sentence opening”. Moreover, students were informed that overusing transition words can

disrupt the flow of ideas rather than enhance connectivity. Most students who had these issues in their pre-feedback essays seemed to understand the techniques and use them effectively to improve the flow of their ideas. Yet, one student seemed to be struggling with these issues even after the consultation session, requesting more consultations on that matter. The following example demonstrates how one of the students handled the wordiness problem in her/his writing by expressing with fewer but more meaningful words.

- A pre-consultation excerpt:

“In the context of language teaching, there has been a shift in the view of language learning from a set of rules to be transmitted to learners by teachers to a process in which students take charge of their learning progress.”

- A post-consultation excerpt:

“In the context of language teaching, the focus has shifted from traditional teacher-centred classrooms to modern student-centred ones.”

4.1.4 Language and Style

Following the intervention, the average score for Language and Style increased from 2.91 to 4.14, marking a 42.3% improvement. When analysing the drafts to assess language and style, 45% of the participants faced significant challenges during the initial writing phase. These challenges mainly involved issues with word choice, sentence variety, and grammatical errors. One student had the common misconception that using overly sophisticated vocabulary makes writing more impressive. The student believed that using complexity in wording equated to better writing. In reality, this made their essay sound unnatural, almost system-generated; something that many students struggle with when prioritising big words over clarity. During the consultation, the tutor guided the student to focus more on field-specific jargon and academic style, which helped them realise that academic writing is not about impressing readers with complexity, but about expressing ideas effectively. In her post-feedback essay, the student successfully solved this issue, and her writing became more engaging. The following is an example from her draft showing how she managed to solve the issue of using overloaded sentences in her writing.

- A pre-consultation excerpt:

“With its different forms and shapes, plagiarism can annihilate a researcher’s credence, compromises the value of research enfeebling substantially the whole institutional plausibility and worth.”

- A post-consultation excerpt:

“Addressing this issue [plagiarism], requires a clear understanding of its forms, the consequences it drives on researchers, institutions and the academic work, in addition to the strategies that can be implemented to limit its occurrence.”

On another note, one student had difficulty with sentence variety, as they repeatedly used the same words, expressions, and sentence structures throughout the whole essay. This lack of variation made the writing sound predictable and monotonous, reducing its overall impact. The tutor pointed out the importance of sentence variation in terms of both length and structure, encouraging the student to use various sentence openers/starters and to incorporate a mixture of short and long sentences. By making these adjustments in their post-feedback essay, the writing became more dynamic and engaging, allowing the ideas to stand out more effectively.

4.2 Students’ Questionnaire

The following are the results reported for the second section of the questionnaire, which is about students’ attitudes towards the consultation sessions.

Figure 2:
Rating of the usefulness of the consultation session.

4- How would you rate the overall usefulness of the writing consultation session?

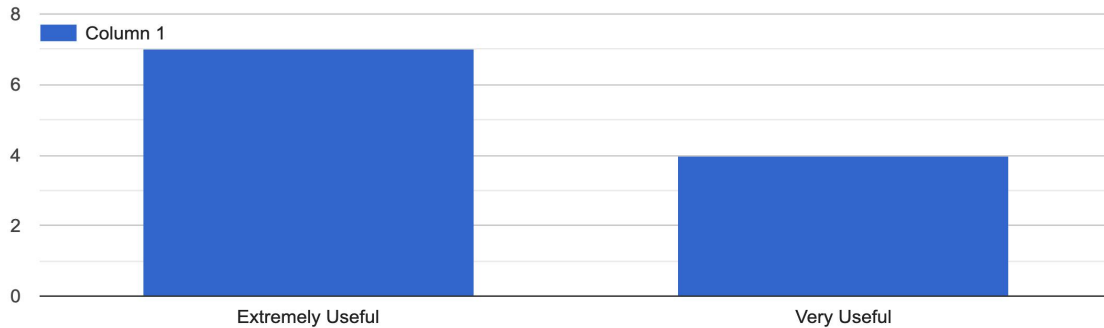


Figure 3:
Most helpful aspects of the consultation.

5- Which aspects of the consultation were most helpful? (Check all that apply. Feel free to add more if needed)

11 responses

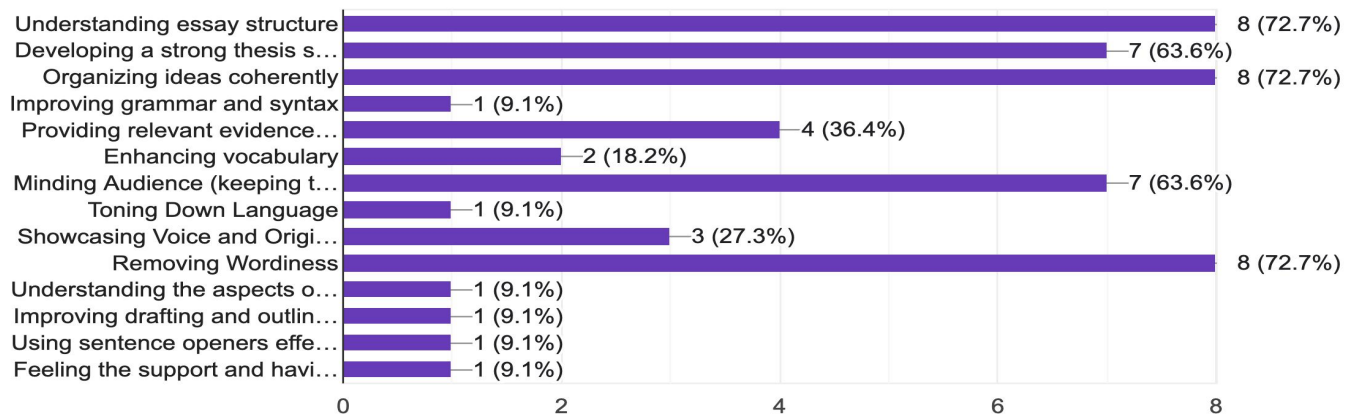


Figure 4:
Clarity of the consultation feedback.

6- How clear and understandable was the feedback provided during the session?

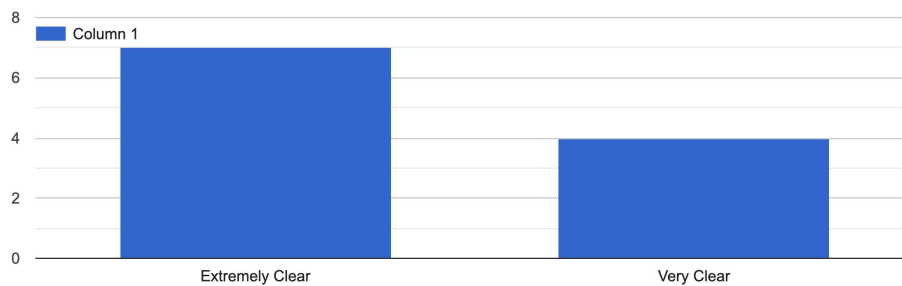


Figure 5:
Willingness to apply the received feedback in future writing.

7- How likely are you to apply the feedback and strategies discussed in the session to your future essays?

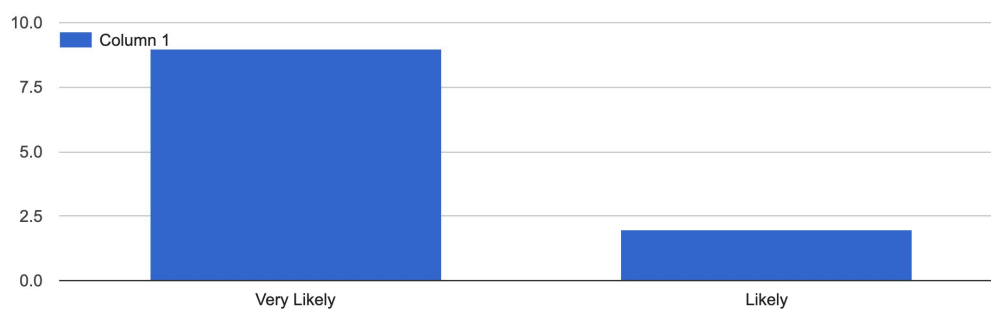


Figure 6:
Writing skill progress after the consultation.

8- Did you notice any immediate improvement in your writing after the consultation?

11 responses

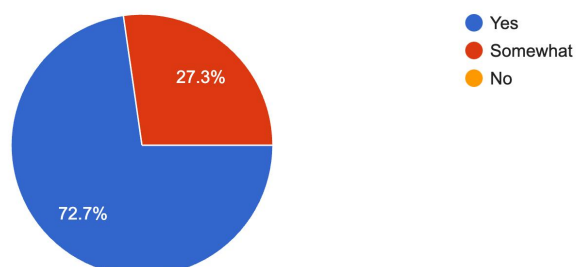


Figure 7:
Areas of writing skill improvement.

9- If yes, which areas of your writing improved the most?

9 responses

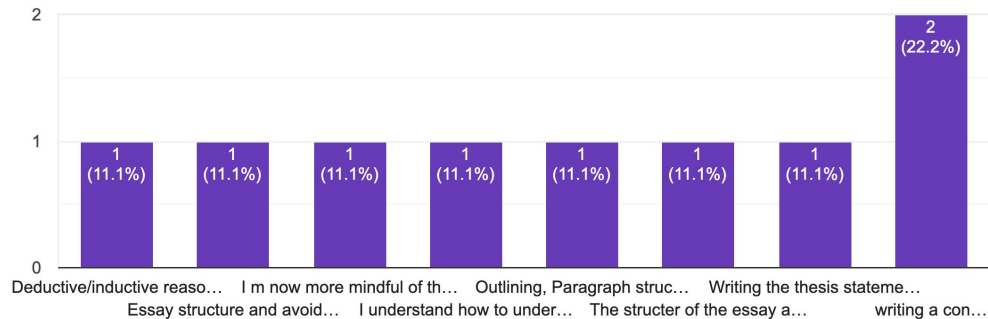


Figure 8:
Likelihood of recommending synchronous writing consultations to others.

10- Would you recommend online writing consultations to other students?

11 responses

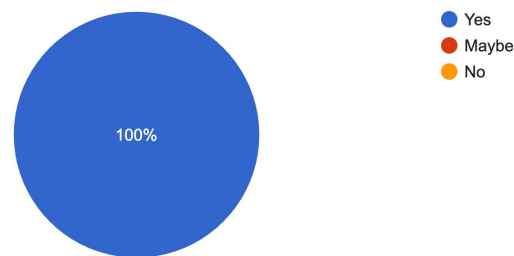
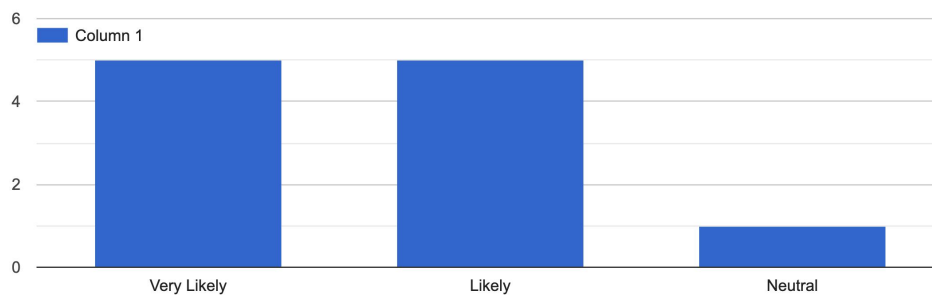


Figure 9:
Likelihood of seeking future consultations.

11- How likely are you to seek out online writing consultations in the future?



In addition to the quantitative data, participants were asked to express their thoughts on synchronous writing tutoring and provide suggestions for potential improvements by responding to four open-ended questions. The table below pinpoints a summary of their responses.

Table 5.
Participants' Perceptions

Questions	Key Insights	Sample Quotes
What did you like most about the consultation session?	Most students appreciated the discussion, the collaboration and the tutor's constructive feedback.	<p>"It stimulates critical thinking and reflection..."</p> <p>"Immediate feedback & constructive communication"</p> <p>"The teacher's expertise, effective monitoring, targeting specific needs and deficiencies. Audiovisual. Establishing Rapport."</p>
What could be improved for future sessions?	Many students found the experiment so good and had nothing to add. However, there were a few suggestions to have longer sessions, a better network connection, not opening the camera, and including tutors from different specialisations.	<p>"I believe everything was neat and orderly. The used application is user-friendly, the voice and video were clear..."</p> <p>"Network connection"</p> <p>"The only thing that distracts me is the video call and camera part..."</p> <p>"To include teachers from different specialities"</p>
Preferred Session Format (Face-to-Face vs. Online)	All students preferred online sessions over onsite ones, except for one student who found that both are the same, and another one who said that it is all about the tutor and not the setting.	<p>"Online is much better, more suitable for introverts like me."</p> <p>"I think they are the same"</p> <p>"It's not about the nature of the session, it's all about the teacher's captivating methods and strategies."</p>
Additional Feedback and Suggestions	Most students had nothing to add but to thank the tutor. Four students, however, expressed their desire to have more sessions with the tutor.	<p>- "Na"</p> <p>"Thank you. I hope we work together on future essays"</p> <p>"The overall experience was highly satisfying, enjoyable, engaging, comfortable and efficient..."</p>

5. Discussion

The findings from the document analysis and the post-consultation questionnaire reveal that synchronous one-to-one tutoring had an impact on students' understanding of academic writing while also fostering a positive attitude towards online tutoring. Thanks to the consultations, students became more aware of the higher-order aspects of their essays (which reflects a better understanding), such as thesis statement and argument development,

organisation and structure, logical reasoning, and audience mindfulness. As hypothesised, both post-consultation drafts and questionnaire responses indicate that the consultations contributed significantly to improving students' understanding of essay writing and key academic writing conventions, further reinforcing the initial assumption. The essays analysed before and after the consultations showed noticeable improvement in students' overall essay organisation, with clearer thesis statements and better paragraph development. This result is consistent with Varma et al.'s study (2023), which underscores the crucial role of peer communication in enhancing engagement and online learning outcomes. However, in a few cases, issues related to argumentation and critical analysis persisted, indicating that a single consultation may not be sufficient to tackle all aspects of writing. This matches the desire of the four participants who suggested having more sessions with the tutor while responding to question 15 in the questionnaire. This shows that the tutor was successful in creating a strong bond with the writers, which led them to commit and ask for more consultations, an element emphasised by Broido and Rubin (2023). Students' grasp of the consultation and their understanding of feedback indicated that they benefited from clear communication and felt comfortable sharing their writing with the tutor. This also reflects that the tutor was able to create an inviting and comforting atmosphere, which, according to Ryan and Zimmerelli (2016), tends to make student-writers feel at ease while sharing their drafts and talking about their writing; an act that, for many, can be quite personal.

On another note, the results of the questionnaire confirmed the hypothesis that Algerian EFL Master holders have positive attitudes toward the synchronous one-to-one tutoring approach. When asked to rank the usefulness of the consultation session on a scale ranging from 'not useful' to 'extremely useful,' the analysis of students' responses showed that 63.64% of participants rated it as "extremely useful" while 36.36% found it "very useful". Additionally, when asked about the likelihood of applying what they had learned during the tutoring session, 81.82% indicated that they were "very likely" to do so, and the remaining 18.18% were likely to apply the insights. The responses also revealed a complete consensus, as 100% of participants acknowledged that they would recommend synchronous writing consultations to other peers. Moreover, 90.91% of students expressed that they were either "very likely" or "likely" to seek out online one-to-one writing consultations in the future. These outcomes extend the work of Park and Kim (2020), confirming that tutors' clear feedback and interactive consultation sessions enhance students' engagement and create positive online learning experiences. Lastly, findings from the questionnaire revealed that 81.82% of students favoured online consultations over onsite sessions. This choice underscores the role of flexibility and ease of access in academic support services. This also indicates that students' online learning experience with the use of the Zoom video conferencing platform was satisfactory. Similar to prior studies (Kwan, 2023; Wisniewski et al., 2020), these results demonstrate a strong positive perception towards the synchronous virtual one-to-one tutoring mode of instruction via web conferencing as a practical alternative to face-to-face tutoring.

While students generally responded positively to the consultation experience, some challenges emerged. One participant suggested improving the network connection. This was due to unforeseen connection issues that occurred during the consultation and were, indeed, frustrating both to the tutor and the student writer. This situation relates to prior studies (Moorhouse et al., 2022, 2023; Rehn et al., 2018) on the importance of strengthening the quality of web-based tutoring by being aware of and preventing potential communication issues, such as internet connection. In addition, one student mentioned that turning on the camera was somehow distracting and unnecessary. To prevent this from reoccurring, the tutor will explicitly inform students that camera use is optional, as some participants preferred not to open their cameras. Furthermore, one student recommended adding tutors from different

specialisations as they may offer more insights into the content. That is, while the core aim of writing consultations is to discuss writing and structure, some students may prefer a tutor who also guides content. Therefore, the findings of the present study not only demonstrate students' positive attitudes toward online one-to-one writing consultations but also highlight the potential for expanding this approach in the Algerian academic landscape. This suggests an important implication: encouraging doctoral students from diverse disciplines to adopt/adapt this practice as it could foster peer support for Master's holders aiming to sit for doctoral contests, and even undergraduate students hustling to improve their academic writing.

6. Conclusion

This research has introduced synchronous one-to-one tutoring as a mode of composition instruction to EFL Master's holders from different Algerian universities preparing to sit for the 2025 PhD contest. The main aim of the study was to investigate participants' attitudes toward this mode of instruction and assess its effects on their essay-writing skills. The outcomes of the study demonstrated that students hold positive attitudes toward online one-to-one writing consultations, acknowledging their role in fostering academic writing development and providing accessible, flexible support. Notably, after the study was concluded, some participants reached out to announce their success in the PhD entrance exam, attributing part of their achievement to the writing consultations they had with the researcher. Four of them reported passing, with one ranking among the top ten but placed on the waiting list. While this feedback was received after the conduct of the study, it further underscores the value of the target approach.

One of the key strengths of this study lies in its exploration of how virtual writing support is received in the Algerian educational context, where such services are still emerging. The findings highlight not only students' positive perceptions towards the usefulness of writing consultations but also their expectations regarding content-related discussions. While the core aim of writing consultations is to improve writing skills, it will be advantageous to have more peer tutors from different disciplines to provide both writing and subject-specific insights to student writers. This implication highlights the potential for Algerian EFL doctoral students from various specialisations to adopt this approach in the future, offering online writing consultations to Master's graduates preparing for the PhD exam or even to undergraduate students seeking to enhance their academic writing skills.

Lastly, the study underscores the importance of tutor training and adaptability, particularly in addressing students' writing concerns, as well as being aware of how to deal with technological barriers and engagement dynamics in virtual spaces. In light of these reflections, this study contributes to the growing discussion on integrating both onsite and online EFL writing support within diverse university contexts in Algeria. It also opens avenues for further research on how writing consultations can be adapted to support not only EFL students but also faculty and doctoral students from different disciplines, enhancing their academic writing skills and research papers.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical research principles throughout its design and implementation. Participants were clearly informed about the aim of the study before their participation. To protect participants' privacy, all data were anonymised and treated confidentially.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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Appendix Questionnaire

Dear Students,

This questionnaire is part of a research study that aims to explore the effectiveness of online writing consultations in enhancing EFL Master's students' essay-writing skills and their attitudes towards writing centre pedagogy. You are kindly asked to answer the questions below based on your own experience during the consultation session. The process of answering will take approximately ten minutes. Your responses will be used anonymously for research purposes. We sincerely appreciate your participation!

Section One: Background Information

1- Gender:

- Male
- Female

2- Your Specialisation

Short-answer text

3- The name of the university from which you graduated

Short-answer text

Section Two: Participants' Attitudes

4- How would you rate the overall usefulness of the writing consultation session?

- Extremely Useful
- Very Useful
- Moderately Useful
- Slightly Useful
- Not Useful

5- Which aspects of the consultation were most helpful? (Check all that apply. Feel free to add more if needed)

- Understanding essay structure
- Developing a strong thesis statement
- Organising ideas coherently
- Improving grammar and syntax
- Providing relevant evidence and examples
- Enhancing vocabulary
- Minding the Audience (keeping the reader in mind)
- Toning Down Language
- Showcasing Voice and Originality
- Removing Wordiness

6- How clear and understandable was the feedback provided during the session?

- Extremely Clear
- Very Clear
- Moderately Clear
- Slightly Clear
- Not Clear at All

7- How likely are you to apply the feedback and strategies discussed in the session to your future essays?

- Very Likely
- Likely
- Neutral
- Unlikely
- Very Unlikely

8- Did you notice any immediate improvement in your writing after the consultation?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

9- If yes, which areas of your writing improved the most?

Short-answer text

10- Would you recommend online writing consultations to other students?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

11- How likely are you to seek out online writing consultations in the future?

- Very Likely
- Likely
- Neutral
- Unlikely
- Very Unlikely

Section Three: Further Insights and Recommendations

12- What did you like most about the consultation session?

Long-answer text

13- What could be improved for future sessions?

Long-answer

text

14- Would you rather have a face-to-face session or an online session like the one you had, and why?

Long-answer text

15- Any additional comments or suggestions?

Long-answer text