

Implementing Ecree in the Classroom

This brief aims to help middle and high school leaders and teachers understand what helps and hinders the use of automated writing feedback tools in the classroom. Curriculum developers might also generate ideas for integrating these tools into their curricula. The brief summarizes key implementation takeaways from a study of Ecree in grade 8–11 English language arts classrooms during the 2021–2022 school year and provides strategies for school and district leaders to support using Ecree. Read more about the [study methods](#).

The Ecree Tool

[Ecree](#) is a digital writing tutor that provides feedback to students on their drafts of argumentative and personal narrative essays, and scores to teachers summarizing students’ performance. Ecree’s feedback on grammar, style, vocabulary, organization, argumentation, and analysis aims to help students improve their drafts and hone their writing skills as they practice. Research suggests that students’ writing skills improve when they have frequent opportunities to practice and receive clear feedback on their writing and revisions.¹

Key Takeaways

- / Teachers need tailored technical support and time to understand how to use Ecree and integrate it with their instruction.
- / Students need clear guidance and instruction so they are not overwhelmed by Ecree’s feedback. Ecree may also be most useful for advanced writers.
- / Technical integration with learning management systems and other technology tools that teachers already use can make it easier for them to integrate Ecree with their instruction.
- / Teachers find Ecree’s feedback less useful when it does not align with their typical content sequence and grading standards.

Implementation Context

The study took place in two suburban school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers were randomly assigned to either have access to Ecree (intervention group) or teach using their typical methods (comparison group). Intervention-group teachers and students used Ecree for the first time during this study. About a quarter of students in the sample used for analysis were Black or Latino, which were communities in focus for this study.

Although teachers and students in the intervention group used Ecree, very few completed all intended activities. The Ecree team and study researchers requested teachers attend webinar trainings and assign at least six essays in Ecree. Students were intended to complete at least six essays and revise each essay at least once during the study. Across both districts, 76 percent of the teachers attended the webinar training. Teachers assigned an average of 1.5 essays, and students completed and revised an average of 1 essay in Ecree.

Samples Used for Analysis



Student surveys: 544 (intervention)



Teacher surveys: 17 (intervention)



Teacher interviews: 7 (intervention)



District leader interviews: 2

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Teachers need tailored technical support and time to understand how to use Ecree and integrate it with their instruction.

Although over half of surveyed teachers found Ecree useful to help students improve their writing, 76 percent did not think it was easy to incorporate Ecree into their teaching. District leaders reported teachers found it hard to prioritize using the tool. Some teachers cited lack of time to learn how to use Ecree and plan how to integrate it with their instruction as the reason they did not use it more often.

Tutorials are the best... having somebody with their screen shares walking through each thing.

—Grade 8 teacher

Teachers reported positive experiences with Ecree technical support, noting that Ecree staff were responsive to questions. According to one teacher, after a student had trouble saving and lost work, Ecree staff were responsive and helped immediately restore earlier versions of the essay.



Strategy. Provide technical support to teachers, whether directly or through the tool provider, and communicate clearly with teachers about what resources are available to help them integrate Ecree with their instruction.

2 Students need clear guidance and instruction so they are not overwhelmed by Ecree's feedback.

Six interviewed teachers noted that their students felt overwhelmed, frustrated, or confused by aspects of Ecree such as the type of feedback, amount of underlining, and unclear directions. Three grade 8 teachers shared that their students were overwhelmed. Two teachers reported that their students in grades 10 and 11 were confused when first introduced to the tool.

I think [Ecree] may have intimidated them a little bit...it's amazing to me, but they were overwhelmed.

—Grade 8 teacher



Strategy. Ensure that Ecree is appropriate for the students being served. To do this, schools might pilot the tool with students with different characteristics and receive feedback from them before expanding Ecree's use. Teachers can also make feedback more manageable for students by breaking down classroom review of feedback into distinct sessions, each of which focus on a specific writing skill (such as essay organization or use of supporting evidence).


3 Technical integration with learning management systems and other technology tools that teachers already use can make it easier for them to integrate Ecree with their instruction.

Most surveyed teachers reported positive views about using technology and incorporating it into their teaching. Most interviewed teachers said they see technology as a way to engage students and keep them interested in assignments.

According to interviewed teachers, lack of technical integration with other digital platforms they commonly use slowed their implementation of Ecree because they had to figure out workarounds to their normal systems. For example, it was not possible to integrate Ecree directly into one district’s learning management system (Clever and Google Classroom). Instead, teachers had to create separate Ecree accounts for their students, which delayed the start of implementation in those classrooms. Almost all students surveyed (98 percent) reported they use Google Docs to write assignments, and a common question teachers posed in Ecree training was whether students could use Ecree in Google Docs. Although that was not possible at the time of the study, Ecree staff are developing that capability now and expect to roll it out in time for the 2023–2024 school year.

100% of surveyed teachers agree using technology improves their performance.

94% of surveyed teachers agree learning to use technology is easy for them.

 **Strategy.** Integrate Ecree with existing learning management systems and other technology tools that teachers commonly use for writing instruction.

4 Teachers find Ecree’s feedback less useful when it does not align with their typical content sequence and grading standards.

Four interviewed teachers reported they used Ecree data to identify areas where students struggled and that it lessened their grading workload. For example, three intervention teachers reported that Ecree acted like a teacher’s assistant, providing students with help on their writing during class time that normally the teacher would be giving. This gave teachers time and space to provide one-on-one support or to focus on in-depth writing content (as opposed to grammar).

By using Ecree, [students] get immediate feedback [on] the whole process as they input their work. I am able to answer more questions and it lessened the stress of my workload.... It took the anxiety away from those students that ask for immediate reassurance with their writing.

—Surveyed teacher

However, five interviewed teachers reported Ecree feedback addressed topics or terms teachers had not yet taught, such as certain grammar conventions and sentence structures. Sometimes the language used in the feedback was too advanced for students. For example, one teacher said Ecree provided feedback on “passive voice,” a term the teacher had not yet introduced to students. This misalignment between topics and terms in Ecree feedback and what teachers had covered to date made the feedback unhelpful for students in those moments.

[Ecree] would flag stuff that we haven't even discussed yet. I wish I could customize some features like saying please only grade for XYZ, not everything.

—Grade 9 teacher

Five teachers said Ecree gave misleadingly low scores. Three teachers wanted more information about the scores and the evaluation rubric they use and felt frustrated by the lack of transparency. One teacher noted that the Ecree rubric graded differently than the AP writing rubric, making it less useful for teachers who teach AP English.



Strategy. Work with tool developers to provide teachers information about the underlying rubric used to assign scores and how feedback aligns to their grade-level standards and curriculum sequence. Share concrete strategies for how teachers can use the scores, for example to track individual student progress or to identify areas where they need more support.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Study design. The study team randomly assigned 45 English language arts teachers from two school districts either to have access to Ecree (intervention group) or teach using their typical methods (comparison group). The team then compared student and teacher outcomes for the intervention group to outcomes for the comparison group. The study included about 1,800 students in grades 8–11 across 19 schools. Read more about the [study methods](#).

Data and methods used for the brief. Not all study participants completed all data collection activities. The study team analyzed completed surveys from 544 students and 17 teachers in the intervention group at the end of the study to assess usability and usefulness of Ecree. The student samples used for analysis of survey measures ranged from 367 to 544 depending on the survey measure because some students left some questions blank, and not all survey questions pertained to all students. The study team also conducted interviews with 7 teachers and one student in the intervention group and two district staff, in addition to reviewing Ecree usage data. The study team calculated descriptive statistics from the survey and usage data and thematically coded interview notes.

Implementation context. The study took place in two suburban school districts in Alabama and North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instruction in both districts was conducted in person, but some classrooms in each district had to pivot at times to virtual instruction because of COVID-19 outbreaks. School districts provided students with laptops and internet access, which are required to use Ecree. The intervention-group teachers and students used Ecree for the first time during the study. About a quarter of students in the sample used for analysis were Black or Latino, which were communities in focus for this study.

Level of implementation. Although teachers and students in the intervention group used Ecree, very few completed all intended activities. The Ecree team and study researchers requested teachers attend webinar trainings, set up prompts for writing assignments, and assign at least six essays in Ecree. Students were intended to complete and revise at least six essays and use the writing diagnostic feature. Across both districts, 76 percent of the teachers attended the webinar training. Teachers assigned an average of 1.5 essays, and students completed and revised an average of 1 essay in Ecree.

Read more briefs in this series here: [Evaluating the Development of Secondary Writing Teaching & Learning Solutions](#).

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Interested in implementing Ecree in the classroom? Email contact@ecree.com.

Endnote

¹ Graham, S., Hebert, M., & Harris, K. R. (2015). Formative assessment and writing: A meta-analysis. *Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 523–547; Kellogg, R. T., & Whiteford, A. P. (2009). Training advanced writing skills: The case for deliberate practice. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(4), 250–266; Tehrani, F. A. (2018). Feedback for writing or writing for feedback? *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(4), 162–178.

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