


## English Proficiency Assessment and Writing Skills among Medical Students at the University of Tlemcen

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**Received** 28/07/2024

**Accepted** 21/02/2025

**Published** 01/07/2025

### Abstract

Assessment plays a vital role in evaluating students' academic performance, particularly in higher education contexts where language proficiency is essential for professional development. This study investigates the written performance of English for Medical Purposes (EMP) students at the University of Tlemcen, with a specific focus on assessment practices that contribute to enhancing students' writing skills. The study aims to achieve two primary objectives: first, to explore the effectiveness of different assessment techniques in measuring writing proficiency; and second, to assess how writing-focused evaluations contribute to the development of academic language skills among medical students. A total of 108 students from three academic departments—Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dental Medicine—participated in the research. Data collection was carried out using a combination of student questionnaires and both formative and summative assessments. The evaluation included three types of assessment tools: multiple choice questions (MCQs), short open responses (QROC), and extended writing exams. The findings revealed strong student performance in MCQs, where 83.33% of participants provided correct answers. However, the writing exams exposed notable difficulties in grammar, spelling, and idea generation. In particular, 83.33% of the total written errors were related to spelling, and 55.56% of students experienced difficulties in organizing and expressing ideas effectively. These results underscore the need for more targeted writing assessments that can diagnose specific learner challenges and inform effective teaching strategies. The study concludes that the integration of varied assessment methods is essential for identifying linguistic weaknesses, supporting student learning, and ultimately improving writing proficiency in medical English contexts.

**Keywords:** Proficiency of writing; assessment; approaches and techniques; English language for medical students; productive competence.

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*Journal of Languages & Translation* © 2025. Published by University of Chlef, Algeria.

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## **1.1 Introduction**

Effective writing instruction for EFL learners requires a comprehensive understanding of various methods and strategies. It encompasses several key stages: pre-writing, where students brainstorm and organize ideas; drafting, where they develop ideas into a structured text; revising, which involves refining drafts based on feedback; editing, focusing on technical aspects like spelling and grammar; and finally, publishing, which involves sharing the final piece to foster confidence. According to Nunan (1989), writing is a complex intellectual achievement that extends beyond merely putting words on paper. It requires a blend of cognitive linguistic, metacognitive skills.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

While numerous studies have explored general strategies for improving EFL learners' writing skills, there is a lack of specific focus on the effectiveness of writing assessment techniques in specialized fields like medical English. Many Medical students face significant challenges in improving their ideas in written form, which can hinder their academic performance and professional development. Hence, teachers need to be well-versed in various methods and theories to assist their students effectively. This study highlights the significance of assessment in enhancing students' writing performance and proficiency.

## **1.3 Feedback and Assessment Practices**

Although scholars like Ellis (2008) proposes several strategies for giving feedback and examines how students respond to different feedback types, particularly focusing on linguistic errors. His principles emphasize the need for instruction to help learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and rule-based competence, balance attention to meaning and form, and incorporate both implicit and explicit knowledge. A critical principle is that effective language learning requires ample opportunities for output, which is particularly relevant to this research as it underscores the importance of enabling learners to actively practice and apply their language skills.

Assessment plays a crucial role in measuring student learning and achievement, influencing both student learning approaches and instructional methods. Historically, writing assessment has struggled with issues of reliability, as noted by Breland (1983). Despite these challenges, effective assessment remains integral to education. Shepard (2000) argues that assessment impacts motivation and learning and should be integrated with instruction. Effective assessment provides insights into teaching efficacy, as noted by Eckhout (2005), who emphasizes the importance of good assessment in effective teaching. However, many teachers face challenges with assessment literacy, as highlighted by Volante and Fazio (2007). Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development." Austin (1993) views assessment as a means to enhance institutional and individual functioning, while Angelo (1995) describes it as an ongoing process to improve student learning through clear expectations and feedback.

Assessment helps students learn from their mistakes by providing feedback that identifies strengths and weaknesses. Despite this, teachers often assume that teaching expertise automatically equates to effective assessment. Taylor and Nolen (2008) identify four crucial aspects of assessment in language classrooms: events, tools, processes, and decisions. These aspects provide feedback on instruction effectiveness, guide learning, involve ongoing feedback, and reflect students' actual learning through grades.

In EFL classrooms, continuous observation and measurement of learners' feedback are crucial. Writing tasks can be particularly challenging for students, requiring extensive practice and specific techniques. Therefore, teachers need to focus on formative comments and feedback to enhance students' writing skills and identify deficiencies.

The present article is divided into two sections: the first highlights the importance of assessment, instructional support, and effectiveness, while the second examines writing assessment's role and proficiency in Medical Sciences.

#### **1.4 Teaching English in the Faculty of Medicine**

English has become the most widely spoken language globally. Algeria, despite being among non-English-speaking countries, acknowledges its importance. The Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has made substantial investments in projects and programs aimed at enhancing English teaching and learning in Algerian Universities and higher schools. This initiative emphasizes learner-centred pedagogy across all disciplines. Despite French being predominant in the Faculty of Medicine, English serves as the language of science, international conferences, and scientific publications. Consequently, experts assert that English has become indispensable as a professional language in Medicine.

Teaching writing is one of the most challenging tasks for EFL teachers. In other words, writing operates on a structural framework defined by letters rather than sounds. Scholars across diverse fields have diligently sought to grasp the essence of language and diverse effective methods for teaching writing skills. They contend that writing plays a crucial role in education; therefore, identifying methods to ensure successful outcomes is necessary. In this respect, researchers such as Harp and Brewer (1996) reveal that the writing process involves translating ideas into written text. It starts with an idea and the need to develop it, communicate it to an audience, and preserve it. According to them, every writer, regardless of age or proficiency level, goes through this process. However, the writing process is a continuous cycle in every writing classroom, involving steps such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and finally publishing. Foreign language teaching has its roots in the centuries-old practices of teaching Latin and Greek in England and Europe. Indeed, the history of foreign language teaching dates back to the ancient Greeks; where there was an interest in understanding the mind and will through language learning.

When students engage in writing, they often encounter various challenges that necessitate targeted solutions. According to Harmer (2004, p 62), "there are many reasons why students may not be confident or willing writers," highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing

their specific needs to enhance their chances of success. Harmer identifies four essential needs that teachers should address: first, students require clear information and task instructions to understand what is expected and to grasp the details of the topic provided. Second, if students need specific language to complete a writing task, teachers should supply it or assist them in finding it, which may include phrases, sentence fragments, or vocabulary. Third, teachers must be prepared to suggest ideas when students struggle, which might range from a single word to more substantial prompts like half-sentences. Lastly, providing patterns or schemes can help students organize their thoughts and guide their writing process, particularly when they feel they lack ideas. By addressing these needs, teachers can better support students in overcoming writing difficulties and improving their overall writing skills.

The Faculty of Medicine in Tlemcen University includes English as a mandatory part of the medical curriculum. Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dental Medicine students learn English related to their field and are assessed accordingly. Assessment measures learning outcomes and classifies or grades achievement, influencing how students approach their learning. It provides teachers with indications of the effectiveness of their teaching methods and helps students learn from their mistakes, becoming more conscious of their strengths and weaknesses. In this context, two key questions arise: What is the level of students' competency in different writing skills? Furthermore, what is the best method of assessment of writing skills in exams?

To address the question of what is the level of students' competency in different writing skills, we posit that competency levels vary significantly based on students' prior educational backgrounds and exposure to English language learning environments. Those with early exposure or intensive language courses tend to demonstrate higher proficiency in various writing skills, including organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary usage. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between students' engagement in writing-intensive activities, such as composing essays, reports, and academic papers, and their competency levels across these skills.

Regarding the second question of what is the best method of assessment of writing skills in exams, we argue that formative assessment techniques, such as peer review and self-assessment, enhance students' writing skills more effectively than relying solely on summative assessments. Our investigation reveals that involving students in formative assessment practices, where they participate in peer review sessions or evaluate their own writing against specific criteria, fosters reflection and revision. This process supports continuous improvement in writing skills over time.

These hypotheses serve as a foundation for exploring potential research directions related to assessing students' writing skills and understanding their competency levels across different contexts and methods.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This section outlines the materials and procedure used to gather and analyse the data for this study. The research aimed to assess medical students' proficiency in English focusing on their writing skills and attitudes toward learning the language in the context of medical education. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods.

## 2.1 Participants

The data used were obtained from students of the Faculty of Medicine: we selected 36 students from each department, making a total of 108 medical students. A questionnaire and a formative/summative evaluation were used to collect data. First, the participants were asked about the role of English in Medical studies; 90% of them claimed that the principal reason for learning English was to be able to read medical textbooks and scientific journals. They would also be able to participate in class discussions and medical conferences, and they would be able to write English articles, patient histories, orders, and prescriptions in their future career. On the other hand, a summative evaluation was used to identify the English skills, the importance of English Language Learning, and the ability to use language skills.

## 2.2 Data Collection

Two primary tools were used to collect data:

- **Questionnaire:** Participants were surveyed about the role of English in medical studies. The responses revealed that 90% of students viewed English as essential for reading medical textbooks, participating in discussions and conferences, and writing medical documents in their future careers.
- **Formative and summative Evaluation:** Assessments were conducted to evaluate English language skills and measure the importance of English language learning in medical context.

## 2.3 Evaluating Methods

This paper also reports the preliminary findings from those 108 participants from three medical departments, Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dental Medicine; they were tested after six month instruction. Unlike Multiple Choices Questionnaire (MCQ) method, the QROC was used for diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. So, some crucial categories were evaluated: grammar, spelling mistakes, ideas, vocabulary, punctuation, and capitalization. For this study, 13 exercises were given to them, grouped into three evaluation methods:

1. **Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) Method:** A standard approach to evaluate students' knowledge pre-determined correct answers.
2. **The QROC questions method (short open replies):** Used for diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, allowing students to provide open-ended response.
3. **Writing exam method:** Focused on evaluating students' ability to compose structured, coherent texts.

## 2.4 Assessment Criteria

For the QROC and writing exams, specific categories were evaluated:

- **Grammar:** Accuracy in language structure, including parts of speech and sentence formation.
- **Spelling :** Correctness of word spelling
- **Ideas:** Clarity and relevance of the ideas presented.

- **Vocabulary:** Range and appropriateness of word choices.
- **Punctuation and Capitalization:** Proper use of punctuation marks and capitalization to enhance clarity.

### 3. Results

We noticed that there was no problem with MCQ grading, as the majority of students got good marks. On the other hand, unsatisfying results were obtained in the writing exam.

#### 3.1 Evaluation of Students' Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) Method

The analysis of students' performance in the multiple choice questionnaire (MCQ) method for assessment provides insights into the accuracy of their responses:

**Table 1: Performance of Students in MCQ**

Choice	Participants	%
Correct answers	90/108	83.33 %
Wrong answers	18/108	16.67%

- **Correct answers:** A substantial majority, 83.33% of the students correctly identified the correct answer out of a total of 108 students. This high percentage indicates a commendable level of proficiency among medical students in understanding the correct MCQ.
- **Wrong answers:** A much smaller percentage, 16, 67 % of students chose the wrong answers. While this percentage is lower, it still highlights a subset of students who may have misunderstood the questions.

#### 3.2 QROC Writing Exam Results

One of the most important objectives of the writing exam is to identify the student's strengths and weaknesses in writing skills. So, what should be evaluated? As shown in Table 1, we can evaluate several system rules, the most important ones being:

- Grammar encompasses the entire system and structure of a language. It covers various aspects such as parts of speech (adjectives, nouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, modifiers, etc.), along with spelling errors, misuse of words, and other common mistakes found in writing

- Ideas form the backbone of any written work. After thoroughly reading and comprehending the assignment, the initial step in the writing process is to brainstorm and generate ideas.
- Vocabulary, a good one can allow the learner to formulate more interesting sentences, and it will help the reader understand sentences and paragraphs easily.
- Punctuation and capitalization are essential tools for aiding readers in interpreting sentences. Proper punctuation enhances clarity and precision in writing, allowing writers to introduce pauses, stops, or emphasis where needed.

### 3.3 Analysis of Student Performance in Writing

Assessment of writing performance identified three categories of errors: total, major, and minor.

- Total errors:** In a writing exam, full mistakes refer to critical errors that significantly hinder the overall understanding, coherence, or effectiveness of the student response. These errors may involve fundamental misunderstandings of the topic or question. They can also lead to a lack of clarity or coherence in the overall structure of the writing piece. Total errors may result in a response that does not address the main points or requirements of the prompt.
- Major errors:** Major errors are substantial mistakes in a writing exam that impact specific aspects of the response but may not necessarily render the entire piece ineffective. These errors could include significant grammar or syntax errors that affect the readability of the writing; they may involve misinterpretation of specific details or concepts within the topic.
- Minor errors:** Minor errors in the writing exam are minor mistakes that, while noticeable, do not significantly impede overall comprehension, grammatical mistakes, or punctuation issues. They may involve less significant lapses in clarity or precision.

The following table illustrates the performance of students in writing exams, detailing the distribution of errors across grammar, spelling mistakes, ideas, vocabulary, and punctuation/capitalization.

**Table 2. Performance of Students in the Writing Exam**

Errors	Grammar	Spelling mistakes	Ideas	Vocabulary	Punctuation & capitalisation
Total Errors	50/108	90/108	60/108	20/108	45/108
Major Errors	48/108	15/108	30/108	24/108	33/108
Minor Errors	10/108	3/108	18/108	64/108	30/108

### 3.4 Overview of Errors

The following tables categorize student errors into five key areas:

- 1- **Grammar:** a notable portion of errors falls into the categories of total and major errors, with full errors slightly more prevalent (48 out of 50) highlighting a critical gap in student's grammatical understanding and application. This suggests the need for targeted grammar instruction.

**Table 3. Performance of Students in Grammar**

Errors	Grammar
Total Errors	46.30%
Major Errors	44.44%
Minor Errors	9.26%

According to the table, only 9.26% (10 out of 108) of students made minor grammatical errors. It indicates a relatively low incidence of such mistakes within the medical student population. Notably, a significant majority of 90.74% did not avoid minor grammatical issues.

#### 2- Spelling Mistakes

Spelling mistakes predominantly consist of total errors (90/108), indicating critical mistakes affecting overall coherence. Errors related to ideas primarily fall into the category of total errors, suggesting challenges in expressing ideas effectively.

**Table 4. Performance of students in Spelling Mistakes**

Errors	Spelling Mistakes
Total Errors	83.33%
Major Errors	13.89%
Minor Errors	2.78%

The data reveal that 83.33% of the students, out of a total of 108 students, made full spelling errors. It indicates a considerable prevalence of issues related to correct spelling within the medical student population.

### 3- Ideas

The analysis of errors in generating ideas provides valuable insights into the varying proficiency levels among medical students, paving the way for tailored interventions to enhance their creative and conceptual abilities.

**Table 5. Performance of Students in Generating Ideas**

Errors	Ideas
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>55.56%</b>
<b>Major Errors</b>	<b>27.78%</b>
<b>Minor Errors</b>	<b>16.67%</b>

Evaluating students' ability to generate ideas reveals interesting insights into their creative and conceptual proficiency. The errors are categorized into three levels: total errors, which are significant, representing 55.56%; major errors, 27, 78% and 16.67%, minor errors.

4- **Vocabulary errors**, on the other hand, are primarily minor errors (64/108), suggesting numerous but less impactful mistakes.

**Table 6. Performance of Students in Vocabulary**

Errors	Vocabulary
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>18.52%</b>
<b>Major Errors</b>	<b>22.22%</b>
<b>Minor Errors</b>	<b>59.26%</b>

The majority of errors, 59.26%, fall into the category of major vocabulary errors. A modest percentage, 18.52% of students made total errors, which suggests a commendable level of competency among the majority of students in using a diverse and accurate range of words.

### 5- Punctuation

Punctuation and capitalization errors exhibit a relatively even distribution across total, major, and minor errors, indicating that issues in this area are both frequent and often significant, potentially affecting the readability of the text.

**Table 7. Performance of Students in Punctuation**

Errors	Punctuation
Total Errors	41.67%
Major Errors	30.56%
Minor Errors	27.78%

The analysis of students' punctuation proficiency highlights a considerable portion: 41.67% of students made full errors in punctuation out of a total of 108 students. The data also reveals that 27.78 % of students made minor errors in punctuation. This subset highlights a group with a relatively high level of proficiency, making only minor mistakes in their use of punctuation marks.

#### **4. Discussion**

To address the first research question regarding the level of students' competency in different writing skills, our study comprehensively assessed students' proficiency across essential writing skills for academic and professional development. Our findings reveal diverse levels of competency in grammar, vocabulary usage, coherence, and organization among students. Factors such as prior exposure to English language learning, educational background, and engagement in writing-intensive activities significantly influence these competency levels. For instance, students actively participating in writing assignments with consistent feedback showed noticeable improvements in their proficiency over time. The study also identified specific areas where students excel or struggle, offering insights into targeted educational interventions tailored to individual needs and strengths.

##### **4.1 Assessment Methods Comparison**

Regarding the second research question on the best method of assessment of writing skills in exams, our research compared various assessment approaches, including norm-referenced and criterion-referenced methods, alongside formative techniques like peer review and self-assessment. Our findings emphasize the advantages of

- **Criterion-Referenced Assessments:** providing detailed feedback aligned with specific writing criteria, offering a clearer understanding of students' strengths and areas needing improvement compared to norm-referenced methods.
- **Formative Assessment (Peer Review and Self-Assessment):** Encouraged reflection and revision, enhancing students' awareness of their writing abilities and promoting active improvement.

## **4.2 Performance Analysis: MCQ vs. Writing Exam**

Our study investigates the comparative performance of students in multiple-choice questions (MCQ) and writing exams, aiming to discern proficiency disparities between these assessment methods. The introduction contextualizes the significance of assessing both MCQ and writing skills, posing central questions on student performance differences. A literature review surveys relevant studies on assessment methods, guiding the exploration of prior research comparing student performance in MCQ and writing skills. The methodology section details the data collection process for both MCQ tests and writing exams, participants involved, and analytical methods used. Results are presented, comparing percentages and counts of correct responses in MCQ and providing a detailed analysis of writing exam errors encompassing grammar, spelling, ideas, vocabulary, and punctuation. The discussion interprets these findings, exploring factors influencing performance in each assessment method and implications for teaching and learning. Acknowledging limitations, practical recommendations for educators propose pedagogical strategies to enhance writing skills.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our study demonstrates that writing exams are superior to multiple-choice questions (MCQs) as they require students to develop and integrate various writing skills to produce coherent and effective pieces of writing. By engaging in writing exams, students are compelled to enhance their grammar, vocabulary usage, coherence, organization, and other essential writing skills. This comprehensive approach fosters a deeper understanding and application of language conventions and content knowledge. The findings underscore the efficacy of writing exams in promoting holistic writing proficiency compared to the limitations of MCQs in assessing such skills. Future research should continue to explore and refine assessment practices that prioritize the development of students' writing abilities across educational contexts.

Improving methods for assessing writing skills involves considering various factors such as accuracy, validity, fairness, efficiency, and user satisfaction. Here are some strategies that can contribute to the enhancement of writing assessment methods.

### **1. Clear Rubrics and Criteria:**

- Develop clean and detailed rubrics that outline specific criteria for assessing writing skills;
- Ensure that the criteria align with the objectives of the assessment and provide guidance for teachers.

### **2. Training for teachers:**

- Provide training for evaluators to enhance consistency and reliability in scoring;
- Foster a shared understanding of assessment criteria and standards among evaluators.

### **3. Peer review:**

- Integrate peer review processes to promote collaborative learning and diverse perspectives;

- Provide guidelines for constructive feedback and ensure accountability in the peer review process.

#### 4. Authentic tasks:

- Design assessments that mirror real-world writing tasks to enhance authenticity;
- Create prompts and scenarios that reflect the types of writing students would encounter in academic or professional settings.

#### 5. Continuous feedback:

- Implement a feedback loop that allows for ongoing feedback and improvement;
- Encourage students to revise and submit their work based on initial feedback.

#### 6. Adaptive testing:

- Explore adaptive testing methods that adjust the difficulty of questions based on the students' performance;
- Provide a more accurate and personalized assessment of writing skills.

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