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ASSESSING ACADEMIC WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION : COGNITIVE, MOTIVATIONAL, AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Despite long-standing formal instruction, the evaluation of students' written production at university continues to reveal persistent shortcomings. This article identifies four interrelated challenges that hinder the development of academic writing: (1) students' ambivalent relationship to French—vis-à-vis the growing prominence of English—which affects motivation; (2) pedagogical practices that privilege linguistic sub-systems and the final product over a process-oriented approach; (3) negative perceptions of drafting, often dismissed as time-consuming; and (4) the sacralization of writing as a rigid, intimidating act. Drawing on didactic and cognitive models of writing, the paper proposes concrete avenues to desacralize writing and cultivate competence: authentic communicative tasks, explicit teaching of the writing process (planning–composing–revising), and collaborative revision with formative assessment. These strategies aim to help learners progressively build both competence and confidence in academic writing.

1. Introduction

Students' university trajectories are shaped by a wide range of complex writing practices—essays, dissertations, commentaries, and other academic tasks. Yet evaluations often reveal that texts fall short of expected standards. As the privileged site of advanced learning, the university bears a responsibility to equip learners for this demanding intellectual activity by adopting pedagogical approaches that activate cognitive, motivational, and social dimensions of writing.

In Algerian higher education, the teaching of French in particular faces barriers that adversely affect written production. This paper foregrounds four major challenges: students' relationship to French in comparison with English; inadequacies in writing pedagogy; negative perceptions of drafting; and the sacralization of writing. Beyond diagnosis, the article advances practical perspectives that reconceptualize writing as a gradually acquired competence developed through guided, meaningful practice. For each challenge, it proposes avenues and remedial strategies that consider the production context, the progression of the writing process, and the learner–writing relationship.

2. Theoretical Milestones

The teaching and assessment of written production in higher education occur within a nexus of linguistic, didactic, and psychosocial factors.

First, French in Algeria—historically entrenched yet increasingly challenged by English—constitutes both an identity and a functional dilemma for learners. As Chachou (2020) notes, the rise of English in students' social representations reshapes the symbolic and instrumental position of French in their academic pathways (p. 112, our translation).

Second, assessment practices frequently reflect traditional pedagogies that privilege the product rather than the process of writing. Dolz, Noverraz, and Schneuwly (2001) argue that teaching should explicitly integrate the successive stages of writing—planning, text production, and revision—yet such approaches remain underused.

Third, students' representations of drafting—often seen as a waste of time—betray a limited understanding of its strategic value. As Fayol (1997) emphasizes, effective writing relies on planning and revising, precisely enabled through deliberate drafting.

Finally, the veneration of writing as a rigid, intimidating activity constrains initiative and creativity. As Reuter (1996) reminds us, academic writing requires a reflexive posture and the progressive acquisition of discursive norms—constructed with students rather than imposed as dogma.

These considerations support a modernized didactic orientation that centers the learner and treats writing as a developmental, scaffolded competence.

3. Challenge 1 — Language Cohabitation in Algeria: Is French at Risk?

Algeria's linguistic landscape—Berber, Arabic, dialectal Arabic, and French—has long been characterized by coexistence and tension. As Taleb-Ibrahimi observes, Algerian speakers evolve within a multilingual setting where competing dominant norms coexist, while popular speech remains stigmatized (our translation).

Despite this plurality, French retains prominence in education, administration, and daily life and is associated with prestige and openness. Yet, amid globalization, digitalization, and the dominance of English, many young people perceive French as less instrumental. English is experienced as the "new" language of opportunity, which fuels resistance to French, especially in writing, and weakens perceptions of its utility.

Two factors are salient. First, the global status of English consolidates its symbolic and instrumental power—demographic weight, economic and political influence, and worldwide diffusion. As Héloïse (2014) notes, English is not only the language of international business but increasingly the medium of internal communication and innovation.

Second, a policy shift has gradually marginalized French within the education system. English was introduced as an optional first foreign language in primary schools in 1995 and re-introduced earlier in the curriculum in 2022, with further expansion in higher education—especially in scientific fields. In parallel, classroom practices (Duguay, 1999) remain strongly micro-linguistic (grammar, conjugation) at the expense of global text construction and communicative purpose. These factors jointly contribute to disengagement from writing in French.

4. Challenge 2 — Erroneous Practices in the Teaching of Writing

Although learners may possess substantial linguistic knowledge, many experience writing blocks when tasked with full texts. This paradox stems from practices that overvalue formal correctness while undervaluing textual coherence, rhetorical intent, and process guidance.

For decades, teaching has centered on linguistic sub-systems; writing itself has rarely been taught as writing. Students receive a "linguistic toolkit," but little explicit instruction in composing strategies. As Reuter (1996) observes, this amounts to the absence of a theory of writing. Dabène (1987) similarly argues that the lack of theoretical grounding has hampered didactic progress.

The result is an excessively formalist pedagogy that ignores writing as complex problem-solving. Barré-De Miniac (1996) shows that traditional methods neglect the linkage between micro-linguistic mastery and macro-textual organization, while evaluative remarks remain judgmental rather than formative.

4.1 Perspectives

Writing should be taught as a multi-stage, cognitively demanding process that engages the production context, the learner's affective relationship to writing, and discursive competence. Genetic criticism (Grésillon, 2016) demonstrates that writing involves craftsmanship and iterative problem-solving. Teachers should accompany students across the entire trajectory, valuing intermediate drafts and providing formative feedback.

From cognitive psychology, Hayes and Flower's (1980) process model remains foundational: planning → composing → revising. Explicit teaching of these stages helps students move beyond surface correction toward coherence, structure, and rhetorical effect. Practices should diversify—collaborative writing, peer review, sequenced didactic units—so as to stimulate motivation and metacognition.

5. Challenge 3 — Negative Representations of Drafting

Extensive research (Barré-De Miniac, 1996; Kadi, 2014; Lantri, 2008; Reuter, 1996) shows that drafting is underused and often perceived as unnecessary. Classroom observations confirm that many students produce rough versions nearly identical to final copies, with few traces of planning or revision (Alcorta, 2001). This misconception also reflects broader beliefs: some interpret drafting as evidence of weakness; others view writing as an elitist practice reserved for gifted authors.

5.1 Perspectives

5.1.1 Analyzing Authors' Manuscripts. Showcasing drafts by canonical writers (e.g., Victor Hugo, Balzac) helps students see writing as iterative and labor-intensive. Teacher modeling can further demystify composing.

5.1.2 Legitimizing Drafting. Drafts should be recognized as learning artifacts and assessed formatively. Institutions should normalize drafting across curricula.

5.1.3 Designing Draft-Centered Activities. Instruction must emphasize structural revision—adding, deleting, and reorganizing ideas—not only surface edits. Drafting thereby becomes a lever for coherence and depth.

6. Challenge 4 — Conceptions of Writing among Educational Actors

Conceptions are socially grounded representations (Colin, 2014; Giordan, 1995). Barré-De Miniac (2015) defines conceptions of writing as how students imagine the nature of writing and its learning.

Two pervasive conceptions impede progress. The first views writing as a gift reserved for a talented few—an idea reinforced by certain school practices. Yet sustained effort, not inspiration alone, underpins mastery (see Valéry, 1931; Mailhot as cited in Reuter, 1996). The second reduces writing to technical transcription of pre-formed thought (Delcembre & Reuter, 2002; Authier-Revuz, 1995), ignoring its heuristic and transformative dimensions. These beliefs displace responsibility from pedagogy to presumed innate qualities, discouraging learners.

6.1 Perspectives

6.1.1 Building a Positive Relationship with Writing. Seminars, writing workshops, and reflective teacher communities can shift beliefs and demystify practice.

6.1.2 Improving Prompts and Criteria. Ambiguous prompts impede performance (Zakhartchouk, 2000). Tasks should be explicit and co-constructed with success criteria that serve as navigational beacons.

6.1.3 Implementing Project-Based Writing. According to the EVA group, projects follow three phases: decision (topic/objectives), implementation (writing–revising–rewriting), and socialization (sharing/feedback). This approach reduces blank-page anxiety and fosters ownership.

Conclusions

In Algerian universities, language mastery remains uneven and writing pedagogy struggles to achieve consistent effectiveness. This article examined four structural challenges and advanced actionable responses: legitimizing drafting, adopting process-oriented instruction, designing authentic communicative tasks, diversifying activities, and institutionalizing collaborative revision.

Persistent questions merit further work: Why do students, despite reforms, continue to struggle with writing? How can instruction be better structured around planning, composing, and revising? Addressing these issues calls for systematic remediation programs grounded in cognitive psychology and didactic innovation. Above all, enhancing motivation and writing pleasure is essential to sustained improvement. Through coordinated implementation, educators in francophone-minority contexts can more effectively meet the specific challenges of teaching and learning academic writing.

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