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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Investigating Moroccan EFL Students' Writing Issues: A Case Study of First-Semester Students at Cadi Ayyad University**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The present study purports to explore the major writing issues faced by Moroccan EFL students in their writing endeavor. More precisely, it focuses on the types of writing errors, their underlying causes, and the strategies students employ to overcome them. To conduct the study, a descriptive quantitative design was adopted, and data were garnered from two groups of 90 first-semester EFL students at Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakesh. The main instrument used for this study is a multiple-choice questionnaire. The latter consists of three sets of questions adapted from Sahki (2024). Data analysis revealed that grammatical (61%) and lexical (49%) errors were the most prevalent, while linguistic and psychological factors identified as the main causes of writing difficulties. Notwithstanding these challenges, participants reported using strategies such as planning, drafting, and revising to enhance their writing. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations emphasizing explicit grammar instruction, process-based writing pedagogy, learner training in self-regulation and editing techniques, and the incorporation of writing workshops.

**| KEYWORDS**

Moroccan EFL students, writing issues, underlying causes, students' strategies, Cadi Ayyad University

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**1. Introduction**

EFL Writing is considered one of the most cognitively challenging skills to acquire. Not only does it require linguistic competence, but it also requires metacognitive, psychological, and organizational control (Hyland, 2019). For EFL learners, especially those with limited exposure to English, drafting accurate and coherent written material is a significant obstacle.

In the Moroccan context, where English has gained traction over the past few decades in both academic and professional spheres, EFL learners remain incapable of writing well-organized, error-free texts. The main reason behind this challenge is the complexity of the writing skill, which presupposes command of various essential foundational skills.

A clear microcosm of this situation can be observed among First-semester English students at Cadi Ayyad University who struggle with various issues that impede the development of their writing skills. These issues often include grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, and organization (Aknouch & Bouthiche, 2022; Azennoud, 2024; Oubadi, 2024).

In light of these documented challenges, the current study adopts a diagnostic approach, seeking to identify the most prevalent writing problems encountered by Moroccan EFL students, their root causes, and the strategies they employ to address them. By targeting semester 1 students at Cadi Ayyad University, the study will contribute to the growing literature on Moroccan research, which explores the issues of language learning in tertiary education.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Notwithstanding the growing interest in English in Moroccan universities, a great gap between students' current writing competence and the desired level of proficiency persists. Some of the most prominent problems reported by Moroccan EFL instructors include grammatical errors, poor vocabulary use, lack of cohesion, and underdeveloped ideas. These issues can be observed across all academic levels, which indicates that earlier instructional methods for teaching EFL writing failed to prepare learners to become competent writers.

According to previous studies conducted in the Moroccan context (Aknouch & Bouthiche, 2022; Azennoud, 2024; Mamad & Vigh, 2023; Oubadi, 2024), students' writing issues are mainly attributed to internal and external factors. Internal factors include linguistic problems, insufficient vocabulary, and psychological constraints such as anxiety or a lack of confidence. External influences tend to be associated with a lack of instructional time, excessive group sizes, and conventional teaching methods that focus on product-oriented writing rather than process-based ones. As a result, many students are unable to proceed with meaningful writing tasks or cannot get constructive feedback that would encourage them to revise and learn from their mistakes:

This paper addresses the critical challenges faced by first-semester EFL students at Cadi Ayyad University. Particular attention is paid to the classification of errors, their contributing factors, and the corrective strategies students utilize to address them. The paper employs a descriptive quantitative approach to provide empirical insights that can inform future pedagogical reform in Moroccan university writing instruction.

## **3. Objectives of the Study**

The primary objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the main writing issues faced by Moroccan EFL students in their writing endeavours.
2. To identify the underlying causes of these writing issues.
3. To determine the main strategies employed by Moroccan EFL students to overcome their writing difficulties.

## **4. Research Questions**

1. What are the main challenges faced by Moroccan EFL students in improving their writing endeavors?
2. What are the underlying causes of students' writing issues?
3. What strategies do Moroccan EFL students employ to overcome their writing issues?

## **5. Hypotheses of the Study**

Based on the literature and the objectives of this research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Moroccan EFL students at Cadi Ayyad University experience significant challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and organization when writing in English.
2. Linguistic and psychological factors are the primary causes of students' writing difficulties.
3. Moroccan EFL students employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as planning, revising, and proofreading to mitigate their writing problems.

## **6. Literature Review**

### **6.1 Writing in the EFL Context**

It is widely acknowledged that writing is the most complex of the four language skills, as it requires a combination of linguistic knowledge, critical thinking, and cultural awareness (Hyland, 2019). In the case of EFL learners, limited exposure to authentic language input and minimal feedback opportunities further exacerbate the problem. Azeez (2024) explains that fossilized

grammar and lexical mistakes are fundamentally caused by the EFL writers' inability to conform to linguistic norms of English discourse.

In the Moroccan context, previous research by Aknouch and Bouthiche (2022), Azennoud (2024), Mamad and Vigh (2023), and Oubadi (2024) demonstrated that students' writing issues are mostly linguistic in nature, which encompass grammatical, vocabulary, and spelling deficiencies. These studies also indicated that Moroccan EFL students have limited metacognitive awareness, whereby they usually perceive writing as a one-step product rather than a recursive process of planning, drafting, and revision.

## 6.2 Major Writing Issues among EFL Learners

Empirical research investigating the written discourse of EFL learners consistently categorizes grammatical errors as the most recurrent errors in students' written work. Fareed et al. (2016) discovered that tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and misuse of articles were some of the most frequent errors. In the same vein, in Moroccan universities, Oubadi (2024) observed that first-year English students are struggling with morphology and syntax and often transfer structures from Arabic or French. Vocabulary misuse also remains a significant issue and indicates poor lexical competence and poor reading routines.

Beyond linguistic errors, organizational challenges, such as a lack of cohesion and coherence, also affect students' writing quality. Sahlane (2019) argued that Moroccan students often produce fragmented paragraphs lacking logical transitions and thematic flow to guide the reader. This produces a collection of unstructured ideas lacking persuasive arguments. This ties in well with the idea presented in Hyland's (2019) work, which observed that coherence is a linguistic and cognitive skill that requires explicit instruction.

## 6.3 Causes of Writing Difficulties

According to scholars, students' writing issues can be attributed to a set of linguistic (Habibi et al., 2017; Inggawati et al., 2023; Moon, 2014; Rasool et al., 2023), psychological, cognitive, and instructional factors. Cheng (2004) and Inggawati et al. (2023) posit that linguistic factors include insufficient grammatical knowledge and limited vocabulary, whereas psychological factors include anxiety, low motivation, and a lack of self-confidence.

As far as cognitive factors are concerned, Patty (2024) argues that such factors are mainly due to students' low working memory capacity, low general cognitive ability, and poor reading ability (Patty, 2024). In fact, writing tasks are cognitively demanding because they place an excessive cognitive load on working memory, especially for students who do not possess automated basic writing skills (Berninger et al., 2002).

Instructionally, the current pedagogical methods employed in EFL classrooms further exacerbate students' writing issues. These traditional methods limit students' ability to self-monitor and revise their work, particularly when punitive approaches are used. As a consequence, students develop apprehension feelings and avoidance behaviour toward writing (Fischer et al., 2017). Thus, it is of paramount importance to tackle these interconnected issues to improve learners' writing skills. One way to do so, as suggested by Afdalia et al. (2023), is incorporating technology and peer feedback to promote learner autonomy and confidence among the learners.

Generally speaking, the underlying reasons behind EFL students' writing issues, according to scholars, include students' limited writing practice (Palermo & Wilson, 2020), L1 interference (Hashim et al., 2024; Sadouk, 2020), and insufficient feedback from instructors (Abdellaoui & Grazib, 2025). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand the nature and causes of these writing issues to design effective instructional interventions that promote writing quality and learner autonomy.

## 6.4 Strategies for Improving Writing

EFL students make use of multiple strategies to reduce the number of their writing mistakes. These strategies include brainstorming, outlining, and revising (Fareed et al., 2016). According to Al-Ahdal and Hameed (2025) students who engage in revision and self-evaluation show measurable improvements in writing accuracy and coherence.

Additionally, the other strategies employed by students include seeking assistance from peers and instructors, utilizing supplementary resources, and engaging in extensive practice to overcome difficulties in writing (Sakkir et al., 2025). Besides, incorporating digital tools such as dictionaries and writing assistants also proved to be effective strategies as they contribute positively to improving writing when used critically rather than dependently. Research indicates that tools like Grammarly are deemed useful for immediate feedback provision and improving grammar, vocabulary, and coherence, especially for non-native English speakers (Xena et al., 2025).

In short, the previous studies underscore the complex nature of writing issues faced by Moroccan EFL learners and the need for instructional models that integrate linguistic accuracy, process-oriented teaching, and self-directedness. Also, more targeted pedagogical strategies are needed to address these specific writing issues (Isma et al., 2023). Such strategies may entail optimizing correction methods by involving students in the feedback process to foster autonomous and self-regulated learning (Nguyen, 2024).

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The current investigation used a descriptive quantitative design to explore Moroccan EFL students' writing issues, their underlying causes, and the strategies used to address them. This research design enables the systematic identification and analysis of emerging trends and patterns from a large-scale learner dataset.

7.2 Context and Participants

As stated earlier, the study was carried out at Cadi Ayyad University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Marrakesh. The sample consisted of 90 first-semester EFL students, distributed across two intact groups. The subjects are enrolled in writing and composition courses during the 2025–2026 academic year.

7.3 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all first-year ESL students at Cadi Ayyad University. A convenience sampling technique was employed because the sample (n = 90) was chosen based on its accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. This sample is deemed to be representative of the larger population of Moroccan EFL university learners at the beginner-intermediate level.

7.4 Gender Distribution

Table 1

Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	42	47%
Female	48	53%
Total	90	100%

The study used a convenience sample of 90 first year students studying at Cadi Ayyad University at Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Marrakesh. It consisted of 42 males (47%) and 48 females (53%) , representing a relatively balanced gender distribution (as shown in Table1). This distribution strengthens the reliability of the results and the study's external validity, as it adequately captures both male and female perspectives on their writing difficulties. Such balanced gender representation also eliminates potential bias, thereby allowing for a more nuanced investigation of potential differences in writing performance, motivation, and strategy use

7.5 Research Instrument

The main instrument used for this study is a multiple-choice questionnaire. The latter consists of three sets of questions to investigate Moroccan EFL students' writing difficulties. It consisted of items addressing students' perceived writing challenges, the causes of writing errors, and the self-correction strategies employed by students to address these challenges.

The questionnaire was adapted from Sahki (2024). Its validity and reliability were confirmed by the researcher. Additionally, it was piloted with 15 students before administration to ensure clarity and more reliability.

## 7.6 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered in class with the assistance of their instructor. Responses were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). The data were visualized in tables to facilitate interpretation.

## 8. Results

### 8.1 Types of Writing Errors

**Table 2**

*Percentages of Errors by Category*

Error Type	Percentage (%)
Grammatical	61%
Vocabulary (word choice)	49%
Mechanical (spelling, punctuation)	13%
Cohesion and coherence	9%
Content and organization	17%

Table 2 showed that grammatical errors (61%), followed by vocabulary-related issues (49%), were the most recurrent writing issues among Moroccan EFL students. The prevalence of these issues underscores the linguistic complexity posed by grammar and vocabulary in English, which are particularly challenging for learners whose first language (such as Arabic) differs significantly in structure and syntax. These results are consistent with Fareed et al. (2016), who pointed out that verb tense mistakes, subject-verb agreement, and omission of articles are the most frequent grammar mistakes made by EFL learners in such contexts.

Furthermore, mechanical errors (13%) such as punctuation and capitalization issues indicate limited exposure to authentic English writing norms. Cohesion and coherence problems (9%) suggest that students struggle to logically connect ideas within paragraphs, which often results in fragmented discourse. This supports Sahlane (2019), who argued that Moroccan EFL students often lack training in paragraph unity and logical flow. Content and organization errors (17%) insinuate that despite students' aptitude to generate ideas, they still struggle with structuring essays coherently, a skill often underdeveloped in traditional product-based writing instruction.

Overall, these results confirm H1 which states that Moroccan EFL students at Cadi Ayyad University experience significant challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and organization when writing in English.

## 8.2 Factors Contributing to Writing Errors

**Table 3**

*Percentages of contributing Factors*

Contributing Factor	Percentage (%)
Linguistic factors	55%
Psychological factors	31%
Cognitive factors	19%
Teaching factors	14%
Time management factors	30%

A significant proportion of the participants (55%) attributed their writing problems to linguistic deficiencies (see Table 3). This is consistent with previous studies (Habibi et al., 2017; Inggawati et al., 2023; Moon, 2014; Rasool et al., 2023), which also identified linguistic factors (including language proficiency, vocabulary, grammar, and structure) as the most prevalent writing issues among EFL learners. These issues significantly hinder their ability to express ideas fluently and accurately in English.

Psychological factors were identified by 31% of respondents as the second most important factors that contribute to students' errors. This highlights the strong affective dimension of writing. Learners demonstrated sentiments of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence, which often inhibit them from experimenting with complex sentence structures or new vocabulary. Such emotional impediments resonate with Cheng (2004) and Inggawati et al. (2023), who emphasized that writing anxiety negatively correlates with writing performance across EFL contexts.

Time management factors come in third place, with nearly one-third of the respondents (30%) indicating that they struggle to devote enough time to planning, drafting, and revising, which are primary stages of the writing process.

Meanwhile, Cognitive Factors (19%) point to higher-order cognitive processes of writing, including organizing and structuring ideas, while Teaching Factors (14%) indicate that insufficient feedback, large class sizes, and exam-oriented instruction contribute to persistent errors. These results collectively underscore the interaction between internal learner variables and external instructional constraints in shaping writing performance.

Generally speaking, the previous results on the contributing factors to writing errors strongly support the hypothesis H2 that linguistic and psychological factors are the primary causes of students' writing difficulties.

## 8.3 Strategies for Self-Correction

**Table 4**

*Strategies employed by Learners*

Strategy	Percentage (%)
Brainstorming and goal setting	36%
Planning before writing	50%
Drafting strategies	30%

Strategy	Percentage (%)
Revising and proofreading	16%
No strategy	12%

According to Table 4, half of the respondents (50%) reported engaging in planning before writing, while 36% employed brainstorming and goal setting. These findings indicate that many students recognize the importance of pre-writing strategies in organizing their thoughts. However, only 16% consistently revised or proofread their work, revealing limited awareness of post-writing strategies crucial for improving accuracy.

Such an imbalance between the pre-writing and post-writing stages supports Hyland (2019), who emphasized that EFL students tend to place too much importance on generating ideas and overlook revision and editing. Furthermore, due to time constraints and insufficient teacher feedback, they often consider their first drafts as their final drafts. As a result, they submit unrefined work, particularly when dealing with cognitively demanding writing tasks (Chung et al., 2021).

Notably, 12% of respondents said that they do not use any explicit writing strategy, which may be due to either a low level of writing awareness or insufficient writing strategy training in secondary school. The conclusions indicate that writing strategies, particularly revision and error analysis, must be explicitly taught as a part of writing skills during university writing classes to promote autonomy among learners.

These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that Moroccan EFL students employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as planning, revising, and proofreading to mitigate their writing problems.

## 9. Discussion

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the effect of linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors on Moroccan EFL students' writing performance.

### 9.1 Dominance of Linguistic Errors

The fact that grammatical errors constitute the majority (61%) underscores the ongoing dilemma of syntactic accuracy in Moroccan EFL environments. (Fareed et al., 2016; Aknouch & Bouthiche, 2022; Azennoud, 2024; Mamad & Vigh, 2023; Oubadi, 2024), confirming that grammar remains the most problematic writing issue for EFL writers. The impact of students' L1 (Arabic) and L2 (French) is particularly perceived through sentence structure, verb usage, and article placement. Oubadi (2024) and Sadouk (2024) attribute this to the syntactic dissimilarity between English and the learners' native languages, which often leads to negative transfer and fossilized errors.

The substantial proportion of vocabulary errors (49%) underscores limited exposure to English reading materials and inadequate lexical input in writing courses. Students' reliance on translation strategies often results in the use of inaccurate words, collocation errors, and inappropriate register. These findings are in line with

Previous studies by Cain and Oakhill (2011) and Duff et al. (2015) noted that involving students in reading experiences exposes them to new and meaningful vocabulary, thereby promoting their vocabulary repertoire (Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Duff et al., 2015). This view is further supported by the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986), the phenomenon in which early readers progress and become proficient, while struggling readers are left behind, widening the gap between them over time (Stanovich, 1986).

### 9.2 Psychological and Instructional Dimensions

Recognizing psychological factors (31%) as a critical impediment corroborates the growing awareness that writing is not just a linguistic process but also an affective process. Many students consider writing a stressful, evaluative skill rather than a developmental one. This observation aligns with Cheng (2004) and Inggawati et al. (2023), who demonstrated that anxiety, fear of criticism, and lack of confidence reduce fluency and creativity in writing. In Moroccan higher education, where correctness is still favoured over expression in assessment, students are often concerned with producing error-free rather than meaningful written manuscripts.

Instructionally speaking, the study revealed that writing courses remain product-oriented, emphasizing surface-level accuracy at the expense of process-based instruction (Mamad & Vigh, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2023). Teachers often provide limited feedback due to large class sizes and time constraints, which leads to repetitive errors. The lack of individualized feedback discourages students from engaging in revision and self-editing, as evidenced by the low percentage (16%) practicing proofreading.

### **9.3 The Role of Writing Strategies**

The findings regarding students' writing strategies indicate partial awareness of the writing process. Unlike planning and brainstorming, which were relatively frequent, revision practices were less pronounced. This echoes the model of process writing proposed by Hyland (2019), which values cyclical drafting and reflection. The data suggest that students' understanding of writing as a recursive process remains incomplete.

This gap may stem from the educational system, which often presents writing tasks as formulaic and examination-driven. Kadmiry (2021) emphasized that without effective instruction on how to revise and evaluate one's own work, Moroccan EFL learners cannot tackle their writing issues effectively. Therefore, shifting the focus toward metacognitive strategies such as self-assessment, peer review, and reflective journaling moves learners beyond formulaic writing, improves their writing quality, and promotes learner independence.

### **9.4 Gender Distribution and Writing Performance**

Despite a slightly uneven gender distribution (47% male, 53% female), no significant statistical difference in error patterns was observed. However, data indicated that female students are more inclined to use revision-oriented strategies and demonstrate slightly higher motivation for improvement. This supports Afdalia et al. (2023), who noted that female EFL learners often exhibit stronger self-regulation and task engagement. Nonetheless, the overall similarity across genders confirms that writing challenges are systemic rather than gender-specific in Moroccan higher education.

## **10. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

This study explored Moroccan EFL students' writing issues at Cadi Ayyad University, focusing on error types, causes, and coping strategies. Results revealed that linguistic and psychological factors remain the main obstacles to effective writing. Students showed awareness of planning strategies but limited engagement in revision and proofreading.

The results of this investigation yield several important pedagogical implications for the teaching of EFL. First, there is a need to integrate process-based writing instruction emphasizing planning, drafting, and revising. Instructors should shift their attention from a product-oriented writing approach to one that equally emphasizes the writing process (Mamad & Vigh, 2023) or at least combine the two approaches to facilitate writing instruction (Abouabdelkader & Bouziane, 2016).

The second implication that emerges from the study is the reinforcement of explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction contextualized within communicative tasks. This does not mean employing outdated "drill-and-kill" or "sink-or-swim" to teach grammar, but rather making it explicit and meaningful. In this sense, grammar and vocabulary become the tools needed for real communication. Students will master these tools only when they can see that they use them for a clear purpose.

Another main implication that can be perceived from the study is promoting learner autonomy through reflective writing journals and peer feedback. This is particularly ideal to enable learners to take charge of their learning and shift the responsibility from the teacher as the sole authority to a shared responsibility with students, fostering a collaborative learning community. Learners then become proactive agents in their own development through self-reflection on peer learning.

Another compelling implication suggested by the study's data is the incorporation of writing workshops that address anxiety and self-confidence issues. Obviously, writing, especially in a new language, is a psychological and emotional process. The presence of affective filters (like anxiety) can obstruct language acquisition and proficiency, even when instructional methods are sound. Thus, instructors should address the emotional and psychological constraints to writing before tackling technical issues.

## **11. Suggestions for Future Research**

Building upon the current study, several avenues remain open for further investigation. First, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches, combining questionnaires, writing samples, and semi-structured interviews to triangulate data and provide deeper insights into how and why these errors occur among EFL Moroccan students.

Second, this study targeted semester 1 university students, a population still transitioning from secondary to higher-education academic writing norms. More Longitudinal studies are needed to capture writing development across various semesters



or from the baccalaureate level into university. Such studies would be valuable, especially for curriculum designers and teacher training programs, as they could inform them about how writing competence evolves over time, and at what stages instructional intervention is most effective.

Third, since the primary focus of this study was to identify key contributing factors such as linguistic and psychological variables, further inquiry is needed to investigate the impact of specific affective factors. In this respect, factors such as writing self-efficacy, motivation, classroom environment, and teacher feedback could be addressed through methodologically sound approaches, such as validated scales or classroom ethnography. More specifically, Moroccan researchers could examine the interactions among writing anxiety, feedback practices, and assessment policies in educational settings.

Finally, since instructors are key agents in shaping students' writing development, the voices of instructors should be prioritized in future research. Studies geared towards teachers should explore their perceptions of writing instruction, feedback provision, assessment challenges, and professional development needs in Moroccan EFL institutions.

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