

International Journal on Multidisciplinary and Applied Research

<https://doi.org/10.63236/ijmar.1.2.3>

Date received: 14/09/25; revised: 19/10/25; accepted: 04/12/25; published: 31/12/25

Navigating the Writing Centre Pedagogy in the Literature and with Academics: First Steps in Establishing the English Writing Support Centre at the University of Tlemcen

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most important skills to practise and learn at university level. Although English Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Algeria are offered writing courses and support in all stages of their EFL education, many students still struggle with their writing skill, a fact that indicates their need for a personalised support to boost their writing to the next level. This study aimed to synthesise the insights that the researcher gained from the literature and the community of writing centres that she had consulted before establishing the first writing centre in Algeria, namely the English Writing Support Centre: Univ-Tlemcen. This study reviews all the documents and the academics regarding the literature of writing centres from a theoretical and an analytical point of view. Such a centre is worth establishing, not only in the University of Tlemcen but in all Algerian universities because EFL students are in constant need of academic writing support in order to progress academically and professionally.

Keywords: Writing centre pedagogy, writing centre establishment, EFL student writers, University of Tlemcen.

1. Introduction

There is no wonder that writing heads the list of language skills when it comes to students' academic progress and success (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2002, 2009; Turner, 2011). Despite all the emphasis given to writing instruction, students' writing skills remain a constant complaint among teachers and students alike (Cummins, 1980; Alderson, 1997). This is due to many reasons such as the complexity of the writing process, time constraints, large class sizes and the diversity of writing genres

including essays, letters, articles, research proposals, research papers, theses, and dissertations (August & Shanahan, 2006; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Owing to the complexity of the writing process and the significance of academic writing for university students, second or foreign language teachers and academics should look for solutions to help students improve their writing skills more practically, communicatively and effectively. A typical such place would be a writing centre. Accordingly, the next sections deal with the needs analysis of the EWSC establishment. Then a review of the theoretical foundations and analyses of all the writing centre documents that the researcher had read and reflected upon are discussed based on the researcher's reflective annotated bibliography.

Situation Analysis

The researcher is not merely concerned with the teaching of writing but also with improving students' writing skill. Based on the teaching experience of writing since 2014 at the Department of English at the University of Tlemcen (Algeria), it appears that EFL learners do not need only sessions, resources and teaching methods to improve their writing. They also need a space where (i) their writing process can be socialized, (ii) their teacher feedback can be communicated, (iii) their writing endeavours can be discussed and revised before being submitted and (iv) their writing process can be tutored and coached. Therefore, a teaching method or a place that covers all these aspects of writing is necessary. As a first step, typing in the research engine (Google) expressions such as "improving EFL/ESL student writing" and questions such as "How can students improve their writing outside the classroom?" and "Where can students develop their writing skills?" revealed phrases such as "writing centre", "writing support centre", "(the name of the university) Writing Centre", and "English Writing Improvement Centre". The concept of writing centres and their pedagogy had cropped up in neither graduate nor post-graduate studies nor in the researcher's teacher-training practice.

According to Hoon (2009), a writing centre has round tables and two seats where a writing tutor or consultant holds one-to-one tutorials or consultations with a student to discuss their piece of writing. Typically, writing tutorials are individualized, student-centred, non-judgmental, non-directive and non-threatening. According to Lunsford (1991), in a tutorial students usually read their paragraph or writing assignment and their consultants take notes. Then they ask students probing questions or offer recommendations and suggestions to improve their piece of writing. The writing centre interventions can associate positively with students' academic writing progress and achievement as they are based on individualized or small group tutorials, usually known as consultations (Irvin, 2014). The latter are usually held one-to-one (one writing consultant with one student) to discuss and review a piece of writing in progress and receive guidance on general academic writing genres, such as essays, letters, article manuscripts, research proposals and the like (Rafoth, 2000; Ritter, 2002).

Since no writing centre exists in the Algerian universities, the researcher sought to establish one in the University of Tlemcen. After reading about second language writing, a network was established with foreign academics and practitioners in this

field. As a consequence, the researcher became acquainted with the notion of a writing centre and was motivated to establish the English Writing Support Centre: Univ-Tlemcen (EWSC). The interest in writing centres led to an awareness of writing centre pedagogy, culminating in a joint research project¹ about the writing centre pedagogy entitled *"Boosting EFL Students' Academic Writing through Writing Center Pedagogy: A Move towards the Target"* (see Appendix 1), followed by the establishment of the English Writing Support Centre: Univ-Tlemcen, on April 15th, 2025. Valuable insights into effective writing support and strategies were gained and are reviewed and discussed in the following sections:

2. Theoretical Foundations

In describing the features of the writing centre pedagogy, Lerner (2014) notes that the writing centre pedagogy involves a point of contact and a conversation about writing in which students gain one-to-one attention and guidance and a great deal of practice with a teacher who "is a guide rather than a sage" (p. 303). In essence, the writing centre's pedagogy sees writing as a social process where the student and the writing centre tutor talk about writing instead of editing a piece of writing. Along this line of thought, Lerner notes, "At the heart of the writing centre session is conversation about student writing" (p. 304). Therefore, question-asking is the main tool that writing centre tutors use to improve students' writing skill. This is because the role of the writing centre tutor is not to edit a piece of writing for the student or to lecture about writing but to talk with students about their piece of writing so as to improve their craft.

Tighe-Mooney and Farrell's (2015) guide revealed many aspects that relate to the establishment of a writing centre in a university. Firstly, the rationale of the writing centre that centres around the idea that writing is not simply an output of enquiry but rather a form of enquiry and that the centre is not established to simply learn about the world and ourselves but to create the world and develop ourselves as well. The guidebook also presents the writing centre's vision, mission and values in that its mission is to support students to become more competent, flexible, fluent and enthusiastic writers. Similar to the contention of Babcock and Thonus (2012), a writing centre is set to promote students' academic excellence through a mediation between theory and practice; therefore, its approach is based on learner centredness and collaboration. Accordingly, its main values relate to building a culture of equity, respect, and openness where writing is valued, practised, celebrated, and enjoyed by all staff and students (Girgensohn, 2012). Tighe-Mooney and Farrell dealt with some practical considerations (for example, what? who? where? when? how?) relating to the establishment of a writing centre. These include the following:

- scoping (making practical visits to some writing centres; joining international and notional writing centre associations; conducting several readings about writing centre establishment and writing tutoring; having discussions with writing centre managers and tutors);

¹ This project was submitted under the category of PRFU research project which stands for *Projets de Recherche Formation Universitaire* or *Research Projects of University Training*. <https://www.prfu-mesrs.dz/index.php?lng=fr>

- consulting and making the case (talking to teachers, students, pedagogical committees, faculty officials about the idea of a writing centre and what it might offer to students and staff alike);
- project planning and getting started (considering the logistical/practical issues like context, rationale, aims and goals; and taking into account project management such as personnel, approach, risks, quality measures/success measures);
- deciding on the clients of the centre (is it for undergraduate students? postgraduate students? is it for a range of disciplines?);
- location (is it going to be set in an independent space? shared space? virtual space?);
- staff (Who will staff it? direct it? How will tutors be trained? By whom? How many tutors will it hire?);
- offering (what kind of writing-related support and services will be offered?);
- keeping records (paper-based records; electronic-based records);
- equipment and resources (round tables, comfortable seating, storage space; dictionaries, host of resources);
- advertising (connecting with staff and students, telling folks, putting up posters about what the centre is and provides, its venue, opening hours, location);
- connecting (maintaining strong communication with the university community, library staff and sometimes the non-academic staff is important); and
- evaluating the writing centre (evaluation processes can take different forms: team meetings, paper-based records, electronic-based records, online surveys to identify what is working well, what it is not and what actions the centre needs to take for future staffing, funding and resources) (Tighe-Mooney and Farrell, 2015).

Establishing a writing centre is not limited to the above but the guide proves to be a comprehensive guide (O'Sullivan, 2017) for any researcher interested in the establishment of a writing centre. Hoon's (2009) *Assessing the Efficacy of Writing Centers: A Review of Selected Evaluation Studies* starts with a definition of a writing centre that caters for many aspects, including the levels of education the centre welcomes, its location, the programmes it can support, the funding resources it can benefit from, the clientele the centre can serve, the writing tutors the centre can hire, the tutoring mode, and the various services the centre can offer to its clientele. Furthermore, the article explains the lack of empirical studies that evaluate the work of writing centres on the basis of statistical analyses (Jones, 2001; Lerner, 2003; Thompson, 2006) seeing that most research conducted on writing centres tends to focus on qualitative measures, including tutors' narratives as well as students' web-based or paper-based records. He reviews the qualitative studies of Taylor-Escoffery (1992) and Ady (1998) and the quantitative studies of Bell (2000), Carino and Enders (2001), Lerner (2003), and Niiler (2003). These indicate that writing centres have proved to reduce students' writing anxiety and encourage positive effects on their writing ability. This is because one-to-one tutorials improve students' motivation and confidence towards writing. Moreover, reviews of quantitative studies reveal that

writing centre tutorials have succeeded in boosting students' writing competence and grades in general. This indicates that what is learnt from the tutorials would continue to be useful even in other writing assignments and future writing.

Furthermore, Lunsford (1991) covers the concepts of collaboration and control in his discussion of a writing centre. He was convinced that working in groups or collaborating with others meets many needs such as identifying problems, problem solving, understanding others, fostering interdisciplinary thinking, encouraging active learning, and reaching higher achievements in general. He mentions reservations about the terms "collaboration" and "control". The control of a writing centre resides not in the staff or the clientele, but in the negotiating group, while its collaborative environment engages its clientele, not merely to value collaboration, but to monitor, evaluate, and build a theory of how collaboration works as well.

Kennell (2014) tackles the need for ESL training for writing tutors. The writer explains that the change in the writing centre clientele (that is, the existence of international students) has caused tutors to work with ESL writers in need of sentence-level language help – a focus which does not go with what writing tutors used to do with the former writing centre clientele (English native speakers). Following the changes in the writing centre clientele, a reformulation in the training programme is necessary. Furthermore, Bell and Youmans (2006) confessed that misunderstandings could occur between writing tutors and ESL clientele who have different social norms. In light of cultural differences, writing tutorials typically change from a focus on the so-called *higher order concerns* (content, language style, organization) to sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar or *lower or later order concerns* (Blau & Hall, 2002). In an attempt to meet those needs, intensive ESL tutor training is essential.

The intensive training programme needs to be evaluated in terms of format and materials. As far as its format is concerned, the intensive ESL tutor training programme was not set in group meetings or workshops. Rather, it was arranged in a series of one-hour assignments that are completed per tutor at schedule times. Typically, Estes and Martina (2010) designed self-guided training modules that present varied tutoring-related concerns. As far as materials are concerned, the tutors were provided with materials and assignments that engage them in self-reflection about topics that were limited to the impact of culture in seemingly inexplicable places, the language and writing issues that accompany writing in an L2, and the attempts of academia to address the first two. Munger (1996) opined that tutor training should not only deal with how tutors interact with the writing centre clientele but also how to observe and reflect about them alike: It "must include observation, interaction, and reflection". In order to cater to all learning styles and preferences of tutors, various input, output and feedback forms were employed.

In addition, Harris and Silva (1993) emphasize the guidance that writing tutors need when dealing with ESL clientele in a writing centre. They explain that ESL clientele's drafts are more time and effort consuming than those of native English-speaking writers – a fact that makes writing tutors subject to deep reflections. These include the following:

- what errors (global errors vs. local errors) to prioritize in their tutorials;
- which linguistic and rhetorical patterns encourage ESL clientele's L1 transfer to L2 writing;
- how understanding and accommodating cultural differences are central to effective ESL tutorials;
- whether the tutorial would focus on improving the tutees' sentence-level language help or on the tutees' writing skills and process;
- whether intuitive understanding of how English works is sufficient for ESL clientele or explicit explanation is more effective when dealing with sentence-level concerns;
- what traits are similar or dissimilar when tutoring ESL writers and NES writers; and
- what steps and strategies should be provided to ESL writers when any dissimilar traits arise (Harris & Silva, 1993).

In dealing with those issues, Harris and Silva emphasize adjusting tutees' expectations from those of writing tutors. For instance, it is necessary to explain to tutees that tutors are not editors, but collaborators who listen to tutees' concerns and help with writing strategies that will result in an effective, independent writer. The authors also recommend setting precise goals per tutorial. For instance, if the tutee's draft is in its final phase, the goal of the tutorial is proofreading or offering moral support. However, when dealing with an early draft, it will be more realistic to:

- focus on one or two striking problems in the tutees' draft per consultation.
- establish hierarchies when confronting language problems at the sentence level language (for example, to deal with verb tense/form and derivational/inflectional morphemes when they affect the reader's understanding of what the writer is trying to say); and
- encourage rule-based proofreading strategies. Proofreading does work with non-native English-speaking writers as their intuition helps them learn how English functions (Harris & Silva, 1993).

However, proofreading for ESL writers does not seem to be an effective strategy, although a focus on rule-based proofreading strategies might be useful. Reichelt et al.'s (2013) establishing of ERIC (English wRiting Improvement Centre) in 2011 at the University of Lodz in Poland was evidence of the fact that a writing centre can be established successfully with no funds. Polish EFL writers' main source of difficulty is not much rhetoric as general approach and attitude to writing; thus, one-to-one tutoring rather than instruction is more helpful in improving those student writers' skills - a fact that calls for a writing centre approach. The distinguishing characteristics of ERIC include its limited clientele (EFL students in the Institute of English Studies), diverse tutors (MA students, Ph.D students, instructors and the founder of ERIC), and its advertisers (owing to the unfamiliarity of students and instructors with the idea of writing centres). Finally, the authors noted the difficulty of starting a writing centre without funds was eventually overcome by the possibility of realizing one when there is a team spirit and interest in helping students become better writers.

After reading about writing centres, the next focus of the researcher was meeting and interacting with writing centre practitioners and staff in an attempt to visualize all that she learned about writing centres in a real-world layout. Since no writing centre exists in her country, namely Algeria, or in the neighbouring countries, the researcher joined some international writing centre associations such as MENAWCA (The Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance) and IWCA (the International Writing Centers Association). This led to online meetings with some international academics and practitioners who belong to the writing centre community. These include centres at Baruch College, New York City; the University College in the UAE; John Cabot University in Rome, Italy; and the University of Limerick in Ireland.

In all the above online conversations the focus was on the mission of writing centres, the basic roles of writing consultants, the steps, equipment, staff, challenges and the common concerns involving a writing centre establishment, to name a few. In addition, more was learnt about the writing centre pedagogy that involves but is not limited to the following:

- Writing centre pedagogy focuses on personalised guidance and support, collaborative learning, and interventions.
- The mission of the writing centres is not to provide students with lectures about writing or edit students' writing. Rather, it is to provide students with individualized guidance and support to help them identify their mistakes and correct them.
- Writing centre tutorials or consultations are interactive in nature and are based on collaborative learning. That is to say, writing tutors and students engage in a conversation about the writing assignment in an individualized, student-centred, non-judgmental, non-directive and non-threatening consultation.
- Writing centre pedagogy considers writing as a process, not a product. This means that students should come to the centre at any step of their writing process (for example, brainstorming, organising, drafting, editing, and revising).
- Writing consultations are likely to empower students' writing and not their piece of writing. Students will learn effective writing strategies which will make them grow confidence and independence as writers.
- Writing centres are not only created for ESL or EFL language learners, but for learners across disciplines and at all levels.
- The aim of writing centres foundation is not editing student writing, but improving (i) students' critical thinking skills regarding their own writing by encouraging them to analyze arguments, synthesize ideas, or organize their thoughts in a logical, coherent way and then (ii) their self-editing and proofreading skills by helping them identify, understand and correct their mistakes in order to improve their future writing endeavours.

All in all, the writing centre pedagogy emphasizes that student writing should be socialised in a supportive learning milieu where students can receive personalised guidance and individualized feedback to improve their writing process and skill in collaboration with a trained writing consultant or tutor and in a one-to-one setting.

3. Reflective Analysis

This section involves reflective analysis of writing centre pedagogy literature and of discussions with the writing centre academics previously mentioned (Lerner, 2014; Tighe-Mooney & Farrell, 2015; Harris & Silva, 1993; Hoon, 2009; Kennell, 2014; Lunsford, 1991; Reichelt, et al., 2013). The quantitative and qualitative evidence reviewed in Hoon's (2009) research work is crucial to consider in the pre-establishment phase of the EWSC: Univ-Tlemcen seeing that those data serve in proving the efficacy of writing centres establishment when no writing centre exists in Algeria. Accordingly, both quantitative and qualitative reviews indicate how helpful writing centres are in supporting student writing in other Algerian universities as well.

The rationale for establishing a writing centre in Algerian universities results from the status of English in Algeria as a foreign language (Boufeldja & Bouhania, 2020; Rahmani, 2021), the complexity of the writing process Hyland, 2002, 2009; Biber, 2006; Turner, 2011), and the focus on writing relating to all branches of university studies (Belkhir, 2024; Hamzaou, 2021). Accordingly, the main mission of the writing centre is to assist students in any phase of the writing process, from brainstorming to revision, to guiding them towards the appropriate voice in their writing in order to eventually become more coherent, logical and flexible writers. In an attempt to fulfil this mission, it is important to consider several values that evolve around a culture of teaching that regards writing as not merely a skill to process and evaluate but also a skill to value and enjoy in an inclusive, collaborative, and integrative space (Tighe-Mooney & Farrell, 2015). Once the initial writing centre project plan has been defined in terms of both practical issues and management measures, including its context, rationale, mission, values, goals, actions, personnel, funding, risks, and success measures (Bell, 2000), it is important to consider who the centre is aimed at before determining the centre's location, services, equipment and resources (Reichelt et al., 2013).

The EWSC: Univ-Tlemcen in the Department of English or in the Intensive Teaching Centre of Languages known as CEIL (Centre d'Enseignement Intensif des Langues), will work largely with undergraduate students. This is because the departments that are located near CEIL are the Departments of Arabic, French, English, Spanish, human sciences, technical sciences, and biological sciences. For postgraduate students (doctorate students), the disciplines that the latter can relate to would be linguistics, didactics, literature, psychology and other specialties in human, biological, and technical sciences. The centre will be run by a full-time professor or an associate professor and staffed by peer tutors, postgraduate students, and full-time or part-time teachers who will work as writing tutors, commonly known as consultants. The consultants need to have certain qualities, such as being active and mindful, possessing excellent writing skills, having experience, and being passionate about helping and collaborating with students to improve their writing skills to the next level. The training of writing consultants will take the form of a pre-employment training that involves information about the centre in terms of its mission, vision, values, goals, pedagogical approaches and strategies, institutional policies and procedures and other practical issues (Kennell, 2014; Lape, 2008). This can be dealt

with in a number of seminars and workshops that the director of the centre is expected to plan and manage.

It is important to note here that training Algerian tutors to deal with ESL writers or students in the writing centre is not as challenging compared to the US context, for example, because in Algeria both tutors and tutees have learned English as a foreign language. Also, the Algerian writing tutors can rely on their students' L1 linguistic and rhetorical transfer when writing in English as both tutors and tutees share the same L1. Accordingly, EWSC: Univ-Tlemcen's tutors and tutees, are expected to be familiar with the issues and challenges that would accompany tutees when writing in English. What is more challenging for these tutors is how to fulfil all students' expectations from a tutorial. ESL/EFL students need sentence-level help while the tutor's role is to focus on global errors rather than on local errors in order to help them become effective, independent writers and not perfect, accurate writers.

Advertising about the writing centre at EWSC: Univ-Tlemcen is significant because it is the first of its kind in Algeria and students need to be encouraged to visit the centre. Accordingly, advertising should provide some key-facts about the centre (e.g. its mission, services, location, opening hours and days, its venue, and the like). This can be done in different forms, including word-of-mouth, posters, noticeboards, emails or Facebook. In terms of location, services, equipment and resources, it is advisable to start small and take account of only what can be offered (Reichelt et al., 2013; Tighe-Mooney & Farrell, 2015). Accordingly, it is recommended to be located in a shared space, such as the CEIL of the university of Tlemcen, where one-to-one bookable appointments will take place between consultants and students in a room with tables, seats, some dictionaries, and a paper-based record to keep records of the students who attend the centre. It will also be necessary to evaluate the work of the centre constantly in terms of what is working well and what is not as this will determine what actions the centre needs to take regarding staffing, funding, equipment and resources.

Reichelt et al. (2013)'s centre is set up in a context that is similar to the current researcher's circumstances - a milieu where the idea of a writing centre and its establishment is new to students, faculty and university principals. Therefore, Reichelt et al.'s writing centre model has provided a basis for the establishment of the EWSC, especially in terms of the tutors' training programme, high-tech resources and the clientele of the centre.

4. Conclusion

This article presents the researcher's drives and potential justifications for establishing a writing centre in the Algerian context, namely the English Writing Support Centre (EWSC): Univ-Tlemcen (Algeria). It also reviews the insights and procedures gained from the researcher's navigation of the writing centre pedagogy 'in the literature and with academics from 2021 to 2024. The notion of the writing centre and its pedagogy emerged from a professional development trend and not from a former education or training programme. Seeing that no writing centre exists in Algeria, the researcher found it challenging to review and synthesise the writing centre pedagogy and to spread a culture of writing centre establishment in the University of Tlemcen in

particular and Algeria in general. Eventually the EWSC: Univ-Tlemcen was established on April 15th, 2025, in the FLPATP Research Laboratory at the University of Tlemcen, an original initiative in the University of Tlemcen and Algeria.

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This paper may be cited as:

Belkhir, F. Z. (2025). Navigating the writing centre pedagogy in the literature and with academics: First steps in establishing the English writing support centre at the University of Tlemcen. *International Journal on Multidisciplinary and Applied Research*, 1(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.63236/ijmar.1.2.3>

Appendix 1 (Original Document)

République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire
Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique
Direction Générale des Enseignements et de la Formation
Direction de la Formation Doctorale
Sous-Direction de la Recherche-Formation
Projets de Recherche Formation Universitaire PRFU
Confirmation de la soumission

Date soumission : Lundi 20 Juin 2022 à 00 heures et 46 minutes et 54 secondes

Date impression: Lundi 20 Juin 2022

Établissement : Université de Tlemcen
Domaine : LETTRES ET LANGUES ETRANGERES
Filière : Langue Anglaise
Spécialité : Linguistique et langues appliquées
Intitulé du projet : Boosting EFL Students' Academic Writing through writing center Pedagogy:
A move towards the target
Code : H02L01UN130120230005

Composante humaine

Chef du projet

Mme. BELKHIR FATIMA ZOHRA : **MCA**

Équipe projet

Mme. ABDAT Yassamina : **MCB**
Mme. DocPRFU1 Anonamous : **Doctorant**
M. DocPRFU2 Anonamous : **Doctorant**
Mme. Benettayeb Assia : **MCA**

Translated Version of Appendix 1

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
General Directorate of Education and Training
Directorate of Doctoral Training
Sub-Directorate of Research and Training
University Training Research Projects (PRFU)
Submission Confirmation

Submission Date: Monday, June 20, 2022, at 12:46:54 AM

Print Date: Monday, June 20, 2022

Institution: University of Tlemcen

Field of Study: Letters and Foreign Languages

Specialty: English Language

Specialization: TEFL and Applied Linguistics

Project Title: Boosting EFL Students' Academic Writing through Writing Center Pedagogy: A Move Towards the Target

Code: [H02L01UN130120230005](#)

Human Component

Project Leader: Mrs. BELKHIR FATIMA ZOHRA: Associate Professor

Project Team

Mrs. ABDAT Yassamina: [Assistant Professor](#)

Ms/Mr. DocPRFU1 Anonymous: [Doctorate Student](#)

Ms/Mr. DocPRFU2 Anonymous: [Doctorate Student](#)

Mrs. Benettayeb Assia: [Associate Professor](#)