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Assessment of written competence in the context of the Cambridge English Preliminary Test B1: Systematic review

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Abstract

The assessment of writing skills in standardized English exams, such as the Cambridge English Preliminary Test (PTT) at level B1, is fundamental for measuring candidates' communicative ability in this skill. This article presents a systematic review of the assessment criteria applied in the written section of this exam. It considers points related to the different bands that make up the assessment rubric and the weighting that candidates can obtain by fitting into each band. With this approach, a descriptive analysis is carried out on the different elements assessed by official examiners, revealing a deeper understanding of the composition of the assessment criteria for writing skills in individuals with a B1 level of international English. The results clearly indicate each of the points to consider for optimizing the training and assessment process for candidates taking this test. The article concludes that this test provides a powerful feedback tool for practice in simulations and classroom exercises, focusing on content, communicative achievement, organization, and language use.

Keywords: Written competence level B1; Preliminary Test B1; assessment rubric; assessment criteria; language learning.

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Evaluación de la competencia escrita en el contexto de Preliminary Test B1-Cambridge English: Revisión sistemática

Resumen

La evaluación de la competencia escrita en exámenes estandarizados de inglés, como el Preliminary Test nivel B1 de Cambridge English, es fundamental para medir la capacidad comunicativa de los candidatos en esta destreza. Este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática de los criterios de evaluación aplicados en la parte escrita de dicho examen, al respecto se consideraron puntos referentes a las distintas bandas que componen la estructura de la rúbrica de evaluación y la ponderación que los candidatos pueden obtener al encajar en cada una de ellas. Con este enfoque, se realiza un análisis descriptivo de los diferentes elementos que son evaluados por examinadores oficiales y se despliega un conocimiento más profundo de la composición de los criterios de evaluación de la destreza escrita para personas que tienen un nivel B1 de inglés internacional. Los resultados indican con claridad cada uno de los puntos a considerar para optimizar el proceso formativo y evaluativo de los candidatos de esta prueba; permitiendo concluir de forma general que este Test brinda una herramienta poderosa de retroalimentación para prácticas en simuladores y ejercicios en el aula apoyado en el contenido, el logro comunicativo, la organización y el uso del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: Competencia escrita nivel B1; Preliminary Test B1; rúbrica de evaluación; criterios de evaluación; aprendizaje de idiomas.

Introduction

The assessment of writing competence in English learning as a foreign language has gained increasing importance in both educational and professional contexts. In this regard, standardized examinations such as the Preliminary Test (PET) B1 from Cambridge English play an essential role in certifying candidates' level of linguistic proficiency. As noted by Hughes & Hughes (2020); and Bachman & Palmer (2022), the writing competence assessed in these examinations encompasses not only grammatical and spelling accuracy; but also, the ability to communicate ideas clearly, coherently, and appropriately according to the context (Weigle, 2010; Brown, 2014).

The evaluation criteria used in PET B1 constitute a crucial component in ensuring objectivity, reliability, and validity, as established by Messick (1989). However, despite the existence of official rubrics, several studies have highlighted the need to

improve the specificity and clarity of these criteria in order to facilitate a more transparent and formative assessment. Authors such as Lumley (2005); Alderson (2005); and Hyland & Hyland (2019), point out that the lack of uniformity in the application of evaluation criteria can negatively affect candidates' experience and performance.

Therefore, this article conducts a systematic and critical review of the evaluation criteria used to assess writing competence in the PET B1 examination, integrating findings from the academic literature drawn from different sources in order to establish a broader understanding of each of these criteria. The aim is to identify the main components of the current evaluation criteria and to propose recommendations aimed at optimizing the results achieved by future candidates who intend to take the examination. Additionally, the study seeks to provide guidance for professionals who prepare students to obtain this linguistic proficiency certification.

1. Theoretical foundation

1.1. Conceptualization of writing competence

Hyland (2003); and Weigle (2010), argue that writing competence can be defined as the ability to produce appropriate texts for different communicative purposes; integrating linguistic, discursive, and pragmatic aspects. According to Bachman (1990), this competence involves mastery of lexical, grammatical, and organizational resources, as well as the ability to adapt language to different social and cultural contexts. In this sense, academic writing requires cognitive and linguistic skills that develop progressively, along with an appropriate level of accuracy (Salihi & Rexhepi, 2025).

According to the Council of Europe (2020), at the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the user is able to write simple and structured texts, describe events and experiences, and justify opinions in a basic manner. This allows learners to participate in initial writing tasks in scientific or academic contexts with guidance and support. Montaner-Villalba (2020) clarify that at this level users are competent enough to function in professional and academic environments at an intermediate level in English-speaking countries; therefore, collaborative and experiential tasks are recommended.

Although the B1 level does not allow the autonomous production of complex scientific articles, it does enable students to construct coherent paragraphs; using basic connectors such as because, so, and then, and employ limited technical vocabulary. According to Flowerdew (2015), the development of academic writing in contexts of English for Specific Purposes should include the gradual incorporation of students into authentic written production tasks, even from intermediate levels. Furthermore, Basturkmen (2012) highlights that well-designed academic English programs allow learners to gain confidence and become familiar with rhetorical

structures typical of their disciplines, which is essential for an effective transition toward more advanced levels of writing competence.

Various theoretical approaches have proposed models for assessing writing competence. For example, the taxonomy proposed by Bachman & Palmer (2022) distinguishes between textual production skills, coherence, cohesion, and linguistic accuracy. These elements are essential for the construction of effective written texts in a foreign language, as good written production does not depend solely on the correct use of grammatical structures, as is often assumed. Uzun (2024) even suggests that, in order to achieve communicative mastery, academic production should be viewed not only as a competence but also as a means of acquiring new knowledge.

Weigle (2010) also notes that writing assessment should consider both linguistic skills and the cognitive processes involved in text production. Likewise, the communicative competence model developed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) has been widely used to assess writing competence, including components such as organizational and pragmatic knowledge, which are essential for writing tasks at intermediate levels. Task-based models have also gained prominence in the assessment of writing at the B1 level, as they allow the measurement of a student's ability to use language in a functional manner. This approach is consistent with the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2009), which emphasize the ability to write simple and coherent texts on familiar topics or subjects of personal interest.

Recent research, such as that of Khalifa & Weir (2009), supports the use of cognitive-interactive models for evaluating writing, highlighting the importance of context and communicative purpose in student performance. Likewise, the Cambridge English Writing Assessment Scale, developed on the basis of empirical studies, has become a reliable tool for assessing writing competence at the B1 level; as it integrates criteria such

as content, organization, language, and communicative achievement (Green, 2021).

In summary, assessing writing competence in English is a complex process that includes not only grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively, adapting them to the audience and the purpose of the text. Thus, being competent in English writing goes beyond the ability to write in a grammatically correct manner; it involves articulating coherent arguments, structuring texts appropriately, and using an adequate register for each communicative situation, while incorporating critical thinking in a highly creative process.

1.2. Assessment of writing competence in the B1 Preliminary standardized examination of Cambridge English

According to Cambridge English (2024), assessment in international examinations such as the B1 Preliminary (PET) is based on detailed rubrics that describe performance levels for each evaluated criterion. Cambridge Assessment English states that the evaluation criteria consist of four components: content, communicative achievement, language, and organization. Evaluation rubrics generally ensure that the assessment process is systematic, consistent, and transparent, particularly for productive skills such as speaking and writing (Andrade, 2005; Brown, 2014).

Cambridge English Language Assessment (2014) indicates that the content component focuses on the relevance, appropriateness, and completeness of the response to the assigned task, ensuring that the candidate has fulfilled the communicative demands required in the section. This approach responds to a functional conception of language that highlights the ability to produce texts for specific communicative purposes in real contexts, as explained by Taylor (2011). Furthermore, Weir et al. (2013) argue that the content focus is closely related to the notion of task achievement, indicating that assessment

involves not only linguistic accuracy but also pragmatic and contextual aspects.

The communicative achievement criterion evaluates the overall effectiveness of the text in terms of its appropriateness for the communicative purpose, the intended audience, and the selected text type. This criterion is not based solely on grammatical correctness but also on the candidate's ability to use language effectively, as established by Cambridge Assessment English (2020). For their part, Bachman & Palmer (2022) argue that effective communication is related to the ability to make linguistic decisions according to dialogic objectives. Moreover, this criterion is closely linked to pragmatic competence and discourse competence, which are considered key indicators for fulfilling the communicative intention of a task (Khalifa & Weir, 2009).

According to Cambridge Assessment English (2020), the organization criterion focuses on the logical and cohesive arrangement of the text. A well-organized text should present a clear sequence of ideas connected through cohesive devices, appropriate punctuation, and clearly defined paragraphs. According to Halliday & Hasan (2014), textual cohesion enables individual linguistic units to function as part of a coherent whole. Additionally, Weigle (2010) states that the overall quality of writing allows readers to clearly understand the text, and therefore this aspect should be taken into account when evaluating written production.

Finally, the language use criterion, according to Cambridge Assessment English (2020), evaluates two components. The first is grammar, which requires mastery of simple structures and attempts to use some more complex ones. The second is vocabulary, where the student is expected to demonstrate an acceptable repertoire of words to communicate in specific contexts. According to Little (2006), it is necessary to consider the learner's linguistic repertoire, which is indicative of grammatical and lexical development. Polio (1997) has demonstrated that both accuracy and variety are necessary to differentiate levels of performance, as they

reflect not only technical correctness but also the ability to select appropriate linguistic forms for different communicative situations.

Recent studies have indicated that clarity in the description of these criteria directly affects the evaluator's ability to assign fair scores and students' understanding of their areas for improvement, as noted by Lumley (2005); Alderson (2005); and Hyland & Hyland (2019) also highlights that continuous training for examiners contributes to reducing variability in scoring.

Thus, it can be understood that the evaluation criteria for writing competence in the B1 Preliminary standardized examination developed by Cambridge English are fundamental to the appropriateness and reliability of the assessment process. From this perspective, the design and application of this scoring scale carry significant weight in ensuring that the evaluation is considered legitimate by the community of specialists in the field and that the results are widely accepted.

1.3. Importance of rubrics in written assessment for measuring English proficiency

According to Andrade (2005); and Torres et al. (2022), rubrics are fundamental tools that explicitly describe performance standards for each evaluated criterion. Jonsson & Svingby (2007) argue that rubrics improve transparency and allow students to understand examination expectations, helping them recognize what is required to be placed at a particular level in an international language certification.

In the case of written production assessment, Brookhart (2013) considers rubrics an effective way to measure levels of performance, quality, and the reliability of the grades obtained by students. Furthermore, accumulated evidence indicates that rubrics have positive and moderate effects on academic performance, as they directly influence self-regulation and self-efficacy.

This supports their value for both summative assessment and process-oriented learning (Panadero et al., 2023). Brown (2014) also emphasizes that literature identifies two main types of rubrics: Holistic and analytic. Weigle (2010) highlights that analytic rubric, such as those used in the B1 Preliminary examination by Cambridge English, evaluate each criterion separately, allowing for more specific and detailed feedback on each aspect assessed.

Recent studies conducted with EFL university students indicate that analytic rubrics and their integration into classroom practice improve writing performance and align feedback more closely with task objectives (Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2024). Likewise, validation research has demonstrated high consistency and evidence of construct validity when rubrics are appropriately designed and examiners are trained for specific genres, reinforcing their relevance for operationalizing complex constructs of writing competence (Aliaga-Pacora et al., 2023).

In conclusion, rubrics play a crucial role in written assessment for measuring English proficiency because they provide a more objective perspective by offering clear evaluation criteria while simultaneously fostering autonomous learning and greater confidence in assessment outcomes. Their implementation in the classroom not only contributes to fairer and more precise evaluation but also empowers students by providing them with the necessary tools to improve their linguistic competence.

1.4. Challenges and limitations in the assessment of writing competence

According to Lumley (2005), writing assessment presents several challenges, including the quantitative measurement of qualitative aspects of a text, such as reliability, assertiveness in the use of grammar and vocabulary, among others. These inherent characteristics of written production represent clear difficulties when attempting to evaluate it objectively.

For Attali & Burstein (2006), natural language processing technologies have emerged as a promising alternative for reducing evaluation errors, although they still present limitations in assessing creativity and discourse coherence. However, Sun & Wang (2024) demonstrate that aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and coherence can now be evaluated with greater precision than in previous approaches. In fact, recent studies have integrated large language models with linguistic features, strengthening the robustness of automated assessment across different types of writing tasks (Hou et al., 2025).

Briesmaster & Etchegaray (2023) emphasize the importance of incorporating other approaches to writing assessment, such as metacognitive strategies; which have shown improvements in learners' awareness of planning, monitoring, and revision processes, although there remains an excessive focus on superficial correctness. In response, Zhao & Zhao (2023) argue that combining self-assessment with teacher feedback promotes deeper reflection on discourse structure.

Regarding reliability, the B1 Preliminary (PET) examination developed by Cambridge English has a reliability coefficient of 0.93 and a low standard error of measurement (2.17), despite being evaluated by human raters using an assessment rubric. This indicates an adequate level of consistency in scoring, as reported by the Cambridge English Research Group (2024). For this reason, many researchers suggest that a hybrid approach, combining technological tools with human judgment, is necessary for effective writing assessment (Yoo et al., 2024).

Finally, to address issues of variability and validity, methods such as comparative judgement have been proposed to reduce scoring inconsistencies across evaluators (Sickinger et al., 2025). Similarly, Moses & Yamat (2021) discuss the development of instruments that combine empirical analysis with expert judgment, which has proven effective in ensuring validity in the evaluation of academic writing.

Overall, this body of research clearly shows that the assessment of writing competence in English remains a complex issue. Although researchers have validated several instruments that reduce distrust in measurement results—particularly regarding the influence of subjective elements—it is still necessary for educational institutions to continue working on ways to standardize evaluation processes. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that writing is a creative and personal process that cannot always be measured with complete precision.

2. Methodology

From a methodological perspective, this article follows a systematic literature review aimed at synthesizing previous and recent findings concerning writing competence in English at the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its assessment through the standardized B1 Preliminary (PET) developed by Cambridge English, including its corresponding analytic scoring rubric. This approach makes it possible to integrate both empirical and theoretical evidence regarding learning processes, performance, and feedback in written production within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

To this end, an exhaustive search was conducted in recognized academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC, and Google Scholar. This search was complemented with grey literature and institutional reports from Cambridge Assessment English. The search strategy included keywords such as: writing competence, written proficiency, B1 level, intermediate English, assessment, evaluation, rubrics, Cambridge English, PET exam, ESL writing, and academic writing.

The inclusion criteria consisted of studies addressing English writing competence at the B1 level; research focused on assessment through rubrics, standardized examinations, or cognitive-interactive models; publications

in journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science; academic books and official reports; and empirical, theoretical, or review studies providing evidence regarding performance, feedback, and learning strategies in academic writing. Conversely, the exclusion criteria included studies whose results were not applicable to the B1 level, publications lacking peer review or sufficient empirical evidence, and research focused exclusively on reading comprehension, speaking, or vocabulary without relation to written production.

The selection process was carried out in three stages. First, titles and abstracts were screened, eliminating duplicates and irrelevant documents. Second, a comprehensive reading of the preselected texts was conducted to evaluate their relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to the objectives of the review. Finally, key information was extracted, including the type of study, target population, evaluation model, rubric criteria, and principal findings.

Subsequently, the data were subjected to a thematic and comparative analysis, organizing the information into four main analytical axes: the conceptualization of writing competence; assessment through standardized examinations; the importance and application of analytic rubrics; and the challenges and limitations in writing assessment (Andrade, 2005; Brookhart, 2013; Aliaga-Pacora et al., 2023). This structure

made it possible to identify research trends, existing gaps, and recommended practices in the teaching and assessment of writing at the intermediate level.

3. Results and discussion

Regarding the results, it is important to highlight that, in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the review, priority was given to the inclusion of recent studies (2018–2025); complemented by classical references that support fundamental theoretical frameworks. Likewise, the databases consulted, search terms used, and selection criteria applied were systematically recorded, ensuring transparency and traceability in the review process.

The triangulation of information derived from empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and official reports made it possible to generate a comprehensive, up-to-date, and critically analyzed overview of the assessment of English writing competence at the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In particular, the analysis considered research related to the evaluation criteria applied in the B1 Preliminary (PET) examination developed by Cambridge English, as well as studies addressing the use of analytic rubrics in written production assessment (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Sources and Key Findings on Writing Competence and Assessment at the B1 Level

Author(s) and Year	Type of Study / Source	Level / Context	Objective / Topic	Relevant Findings	Application in the Review
Hyland (2003)	Academic book	L2 English	L2 writing theory	Integrates linguistic, discursive, and pragmatic aspects	Provides the conceptual foundation for writing competence
Weigle (2010)	Academic book	ESL/EFL	Writing assessment	Evaluates linguistic abilities and cognitive processes	Basis for analyzing coherence and cohesion
Bachman & Palmer (2022)	Academic book	General L2	Communicative competence assessment models	Differentiates organizational, pragmatic, and linguistic knowledge	Supports multicomponent analytic rubrics
Salihi & Rexhepi (2025)	Article	B1 level	Progressive development of skills	Highlights the importance of correction and guided practice	Evidence of progression in academic writing

Cont... Table 1

Montaner-Villalba (2020)	Article	B1 level	Collaborative and experiential strategies	Recommends contextualized interactive tasks	Supports task-based methods
Flowerdew (2015)	Article	ESP	Incorporation of authentic tasks	Enables the production of basic academic texts	Reinforces a practical pedagogical approach
Basturkmen (2012)	Article	Academic English	Academic English programs	Promotes confidence and familiarity with rhetorical structures	Relevant for transition to higher levels
Uzun (2024)	Article	L2	Academic production	Writing as a tool for knowledge acquisition	Supports an integrative approach to writing
Cambridge Assessment English (2020)	Institutional report	B1 Preliminary (PET)	Assessment rubrics	Evaluates content, communicative achievement, language, and organization	Main source of standardized criteria
Green (2021)	Academic book	PET B1	Cambridge Writing Assessment Scale	Criteria include content, organization, language, and communicative achievement	Evidence of exam reliability and validity
Khalifa & Weir (2009)	Empirical article	L2	Cognitive-interactive models	Context and communicative purpose affect performance	Supports the importance of purpose and audience
Jonsson & Svingby (2007)	Article	Education	Use of rubrics	Improves transparency and understanding of expectations	Theoretical basis for rubric use
Brookhart (2013)	Book	Education / EFL	Analytic rubrics	Facilitate performance measurement and specific feedback	Supports detailed writing assessment
Alghizzi & Alshahrani (2024)	Empirical article	EFL university students	Integration of rubrics	Improves performance and feedback alignment	Evidence of the impact of rubrics on learning
Aliaga-Pacora et al. (2023)	Article	Postgraduate	Rubric validation	High consistency and construct validity	Supports operationalization of complex constructs
Lumley (2005)	Article	EFL	Assessment challenges	Difficulty in measuring qualitative aspects	Highlights methodological limitations
Attali & Burstein (2006)	Article	Automation	Natural language processing	High precision in grammar and vocabulary but limited creativity evaluation	Supports hybrid human-technology assessment
Sun & Wang (2024)	Article	Automation	Automated evaluation	Improved accuracy in vocabulary, grammar, and coherence	Evidence of technology integration
Hou et al. (2025)	Article	Automation	Large language models	Robustness across different task types	Supports combining human judgment and automated tools
Zhao & Zhao (2023)	Article	Education	Metacognition and self-assessment	Self-assessment plus feedback improves reflection on discourse structure	Supports autonomous learning strategies
Sickingner et al. (2025)	Article	Assessment	Comparative judgement	Reduces errors in scoring variability	Supports alternative reliability methods
Moses & Yamat (2021)	Article	Assessment	Hybrid instruments	Combination of empirical analysis and expert judgment ensures validity	Relevant for evaluation design

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Beyond the findings related to the general body of scientific production presented in Table 1, it is also important to highlight the contributions of Bachman (1990); Hyland (2003); and Weigle (2010). When analyzed from a state-of-the-art perspective, their work demonstrates a cohesive understanding of

writing competence as a multidimensional construct, integrating lexical, grammatical, discursive, and pragmatic resources. Within this framework, particular emphasis is placed on the applicability of descriptors from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for the B1 level.

Moreover, the role of practice in the development of writing skills is also noteworthy, as emphasized by the Flowerdew (2015); Council of Europe (2020); and Montaner-Villalba (2020). In this context, analytic rubrics, such as those provided by Cambridge University Press and Assessment for the B1 Preliminary (PET) examination, can be considered a central tool for ensuring transparency and providing specific feedback regarding the different aspects evaluated in B1-level writing (Andrade, 2005; Cambridge Assessment English, 2020).

Additionally, attention has been drawn to the growing contribution of technologies integrated into automated writing assessment, including systems based on large language models (LLMs) and platforms such as Write & Improve, which provide instant feedback on written production. These technological approaches are complemented by alternative methods such as comparative judgement and self-assessment, which present mixed evidence regarding validity and the evaluation of creativity -LLM trends 2023–2024- (Attali & Burstein, 2006). Together, these perspectives broaden the scope of evaluation methods and strengthen the diversity and plurality of assessment practices.

Finally, other authors such as Parrales & González (2024) emphasize the need for a more inclusive approach to assessment, one that considers the diverse abilities and writing styles of students; rather than imposing a single standard that may not be appropriate for all learners. This perspective suggests that, when evaluating writing, it is equally important to ensure alignment between the evaluation criteria and the text being assessed, as well as clarity among all stakeholders involved in the process regarding the objectives of the evaluation.

Conclusions

At this point, it can be affirmed that a critical aspect emerging from the literature review on the topic addressed in this article is

the diversity of approaches to the assessment of writing competence. In this regard, several studies highlight the importance of using clear and well-defined rubrics that allow examiners to score objectively, thus avoiding unintended biases or misunderstandings. As documented by numerous researchers, such rubrics should consider aspects such as text structure, grammar, vocabulary use, and the overall quality of the written production. However, a major challenge lies in the subjectivity inherent in qualitative assessment, where different examiners may apply varying interpretative criteria.

Likewise, it is necessary to consider the importance of prior instruction and preparation of students or candidates for the examination, as this factor has a strong impact on assessment outcomes. Indeed, the systematic review conducted indicates that deliberate practice and constructive feedback during the learning process significantly contribute to improving writing competence. This suggests that teachers should consider adopting teaching strategies aligned with the requirements of the B1 Preliminary (PET), providing learners with opportunities to develop specific skills through practical exercises that simulate the format of the exam.

Ultimately, the assessment of writing competence in the B1 Preliminary (PET) developed by Cambridge English presents significant challenges that require continuous attention. Among these challenges are the implementation of objective assessment strategies, the adaptation of teaching practices to the exam's requirements, and the consideration of technological tools as essential factors for ensuring that assessment is both effective and meaningful. The systematic review of the literature highlights not only current best practices, but also the need to innovate in methods that foster learning and effective communication in an increasingly globalized world.

At this stage, it is also important to emphasize that this study highlights the importance of evaluating writing competence within the context of the B1 Preliminary (PET),

but it goes beyond that aspect by establishing the relevance of using or designing appropriate rubrics according to specific academic contexts. Consequently, it becomes clear that every evaluative act in education should be contextualized and critically understood by both evaluators and those being evaluated.

Regarding limitations and future research directions, it is necessary to recognize that the diversity of authors who have addressed this topic increases the difficulty of reaching a unified consensus. Although the systematic review attempted to cover a wide range of approaches, methods, and evaluation models, further research could focus more deeply on one or several of the most widely used methods. From this perspective, future studies could identify recurring patterns and regularities, thereby contributing to a more robust understanding of writing competence assessment in English language learning contexts.

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