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## **DELVING INTO WRITING STRATEGIES AND DIFFICULTIES OF PRIMARY LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

*Writing has been regarded as a most challenging language skill, which has been placed at the center of the research and teaching activity over the last decades. Writing skill along with reading are the two key-skills that shape the context of literacy in a target language while special emphasis is placed on developing and empowering different aspect of students' literacy repertoire to students even from an early age.*

*This paper presents and describes a multidimensional study which was designed and carried out to investigate primary education students' difficulties in writing Greek texts. In parallel, the study aimed at investigating the strategies that employed by the students throughout the writing phases. To this end, thirty-five 10-year-old students attending Greek primary education classes took part in this study during the school year of 2020 – 2021. The students lived in Larissa, a city in Central Greece and they participated upon receiving the agreement of their parents. They were engaged in semi structured interviews related to writing a text and they were also invited to complete specifically designed questionnaires focusing on both students' writing difficulties and the strategies they employ pre- while and post- writing texts in Greek. Both the interviews and the record protocols have been designed and developed by the researcher in an attempt to focus on the students' writing profile in multidimensional way.*

*Following the data processing, the findings indicated that students were acquainted with their difficulties in writing texts in the Greek language. However, through the study it was released that the students do not make a regular use of writing strategies during their writing activity. Thus, the author of the article presents suggestions for further research and educational practice in primary education contexts.*

**Keywords:** *writing; young learners; production; strategies; difficulties.*

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**WRITING SKILLS: an introduction.** Writing, along with reading, function as complementary skills that constantly interact to build the literacy component of language.

According to Ramya & Pongoodi (2017), the acquisition of writing is realised only after the mastering of the three other language skills: listening, speaking and reading. The writing skills are not naturally acquired but are subject to learning and cultural transmission in “*formal instructional settings or other environments*” which necessitate their “*practice through experience*” (Myles, 2002, p.1), whereas effective writing could be seen as a manifestation of “*successful language learning*” (Zerin, 2007, p.5). A person’s writing is a form of output which mirrors their fluency in a given language as well as their ability to use it accurately, and “*it is produced as an evidence because it is visible and concrete*” (Ramya & Pongoodi, *ibid*, p.782). This inherent transparency of written language accounts for the objective measurement of a language user’s performance, and facilitates its assessment.

The inherent communicative features of writing led McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2012, p.190) to define writing “*as a vehicle for language practice*” and an effort to communicate with and understand the writer’s state of mind, and Ramya & Pongoodi (2017, p.782) to claim that writing exploits “*a conventional graphic system to convey thoughts of the writer to the reader*”. Dyson & Freedman (1991) treat writing as “*a process-oriented, goal-directed and problem-solving process which involves the writer’s awareness of the composing process and the teacher’s or peers’ intervention at any time needed*”, whereas Susser (1994, p.39) supports the view that writing is “*a recursive, non-linear cognitive process in which the writer moves back and forth between prewriting-idea generating, writing, revising and editing until he/she is satisfied with his/her creation*”. According to Flower (1994), the social context in which writing is produced and practised should not be disregarded mainly due to its being a “*socially situated communicative act*” (Artero, 2013, p.7). The emphasis placed upon different aspects of writing as proved by its various definitions, are rooted in the respective approaches to writing adopted over time, which penetrate the development and teaching of writing. Considering all the above, it can be inferred that writing is the product of the constant interaction between the text, the writer and the reader, or, as Ramya & Pongoodi (2017, p.782) argue, “*writing is a medium through one can express his or her own ideas and convey information. Writing influences the readers significantly*”.

The writing skill has been mentioned to be developed after the mastery of the three other language skills: listening, speaking and reading. This assumption refers both to L1 acquisition- and L2 teaching contexts. The successful combination of text-, writer- and reader-based approaches is essential in order to promote a global understanding of the nature

of writing (Hyland, 2003). However, the variables that affect the writing, are personality and its cognitive factors (Ramya & Pongoodi, 2017).

Affective variables relate to the learners' motivation and attitudes towards the writing skills (Myles, 2002). These psychological factors seem to affect the learners' development. Language learners are not restricted to the approach followed in the teaching of writing, but involve affective performance in many different ways as they are considered "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts" (Rifkin, 2000, p.2), and they are closely linked to social parameters as well.

The cognitive load exercised by writers is significantly higher when compared to the other three language skills. According to Hermansson and Lindgren (2019, p.6), "*writing as a cognitive process refers to the thinking and processing of information that goes on in writers' brains when they write a text*". In particular, the writer undergoes a variety of cognitive activities while composing a text. They engage in *planning* in order to generate and brainstorm ideas, followed by the *transformation* of these ideas into words and their subsequent *transcription* on paper, which is realised with the linguistic resources a writer possesses, and, finally, they revise and edit their text during the process of *reviewing* (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Each writer experiences these stages in the writing process in a different way on the basis of some cognitive variables affecting the development of writing, namely their learning style, their type of intelligence, as well as the strategies they employ.

Efficient language learning, and especially the written component of language "*presupposes the ability to make appropriate selection and use from a strategy repertoire*" (Chamot et al, 1988, Green & Oxford 1995, p.1). Weinstein & Mayer (1986, in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.17) define learning strategies as "*the behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning*" that foster learning and promote autonomy. In the case of writing, the employment of strategies differentiates the less skilled writers who are not trained enough in strategic use, from the skillful and independent writers who engage in process-oriented and self-regulated writing to plan, compose and refine their texts, according to the model proposed by Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987, in Hyland, 2016).

## **THE STUDY. THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

The reason for carrying out this study stemmed from the fact that Greek classrooms are characterised within linguistic and cultural diversity because of the advent of students with migration/refugee biography. In the research process, an attempt was made to record immigrant students' difficulties in writing as well as writing strategies employed by them.

More specifically, the study was designed to address the following questions:

What writing difficulties are encountered by immigrant students in the Greek language?

Which strategies immigrant students employ before- while and after writing a text in the Greek language?

## **SAMPLE**

The sample consisted of 35 Albanian- and Bulgarian-speaking students, 10 years of age. They were attending the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade of Greek Primary Education and they were selected as a convenient sample, attending the classrooms of a collaborative teacher.

The period of their staying in Greece was 4 years. It is worth mentioning that 75% of them use the Greek language mainly at school while there is also another 25% using it both at school and at home, as their parents had been employed by Greek farmers. Their language level in Greek appears to be A2+/B1.

## **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT & PROCEDURES**

The researchers made use of a multi-dimensional questionnaire in their attempt to research on the immigrant students' writing difficulties and strategies when writing a text in the Greek language. Moreover, interviews served as an additional and supplementary research instrument that was used for every student individually.

In the process of studying Greek texts, the researchers conducted interviews with each student individually along with the use of a multi-dimensional questionnaire. More specifically, both the interviews and the questionnaire consisted of two thematic strands. The first thematic strand was related to the difficulties/challenges that immigrant students face when writing a text in Greek. In parallel, the second thematic strand referred to strategies that immigrant students made use of when writing in Greek, thus it focuses on pre-writing strategies, while-writing strategies and post-writing strategies.

As for the procedures of this research conduction, every student was requested to write an informal letter (between 80-100 words) in Greek. Upon the completion of the writing, the students were invited to participate in an investigatory interview and then complete the questionnaire. First, they dealt with the difficulties they encountered when writing the text in the Greek language. At the next stage they were urged to reflect on the writing strategies employed by them.

It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire wording was simplified in an attempt to facilitate students' understanding. Moreover, when students called for a clarification, the teacher supported them by explaining the statements of the questionnaire.

### RESULTS- FINDINGS

Following the processing of the data derived from the students' responses in the questionnaire and the interviews, various findings have emerged.

With regard to the immigrant students' difficulties encountered when writing a text in the Greek language, the following figure (Figure 1) presents the difficulties that immigrant students have before they start writing. They have many difficulties in findings ideas for their text (48%) as well as many problems in finding the right/appropriate word for their text (52%).

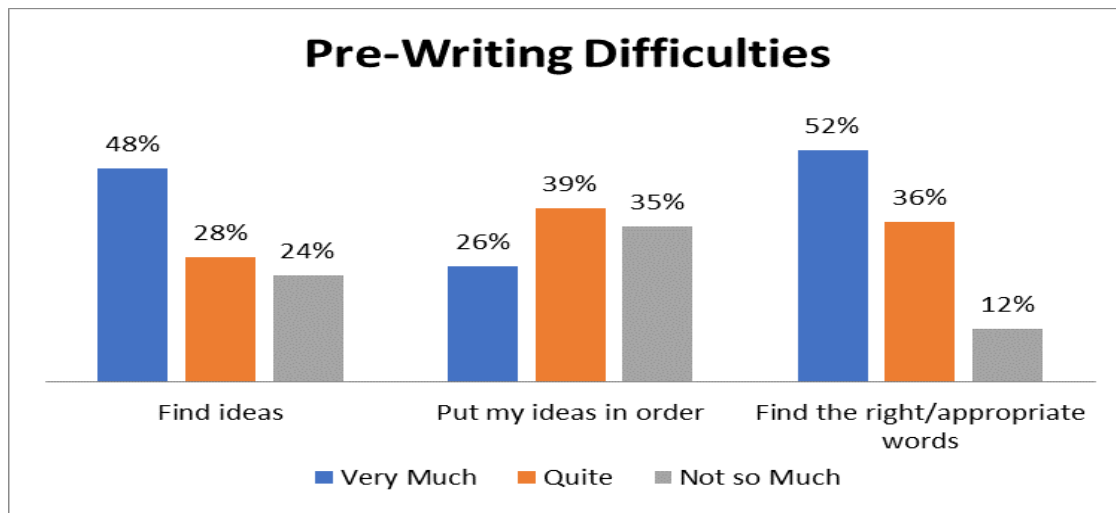


Figure 1. Pre-Writing Difficulties of Immigrant Students

The following figure (Figure 2) presents the difficulties that students face while writing a text in Greek. In particular, they have many problems in toning the words (59%), putting the words in the correct order (56%) and writing the words correctly (41%).

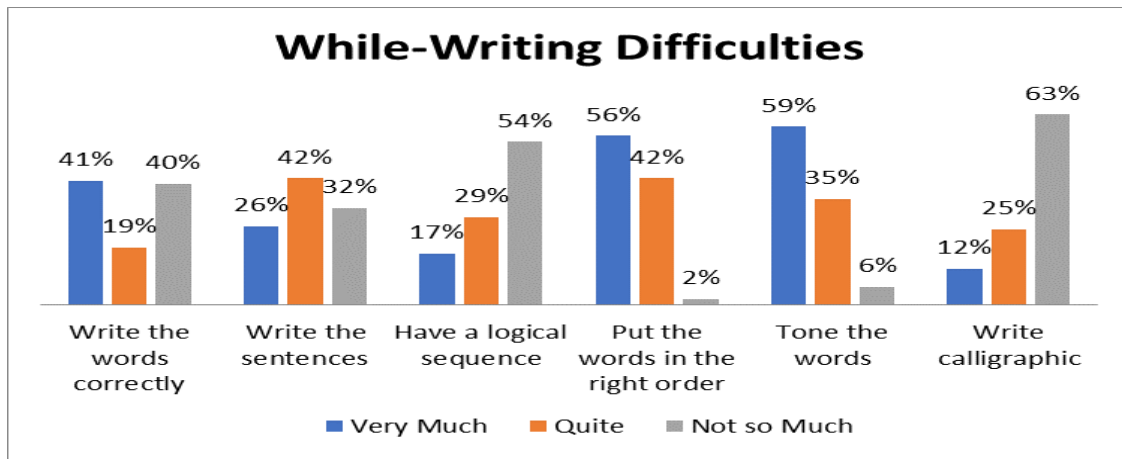


Figure 2. While-Writing Difficulties of Immigrant Students

The figure below (Figure 3) presents the difficulties that immigrant students have upon the main writing procedures. More specifically, they have difficulties in reviewing the whole text again to make potential corrections and correcting their spelling problems.

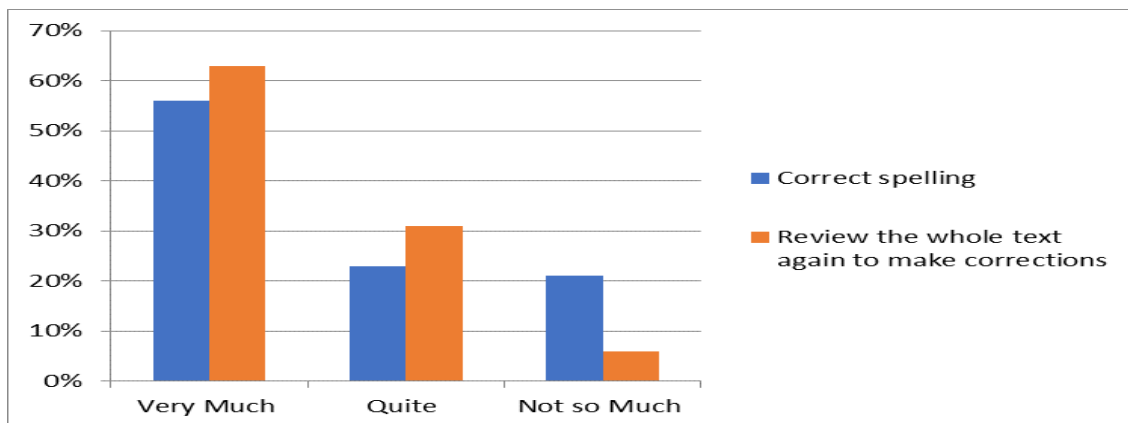


Figure 3. Post-Writing Difficulties of Immigrant Students

### 3. Post-Writing Difficulties of Immigrant Students

Concerning the students’ strategies in writing, students appeared to use both cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies but not to a great extent (Figure 4). In particular, they seem to rarely change/adapt their register and their vocabulary (55%), note and analyse their mistakes (69%) and write every new word they learn in a sentence (54%). However, they tend to use linking words (81%), organise their texts into paragraphs (74%) and thinking about their ideas before writing (67%).

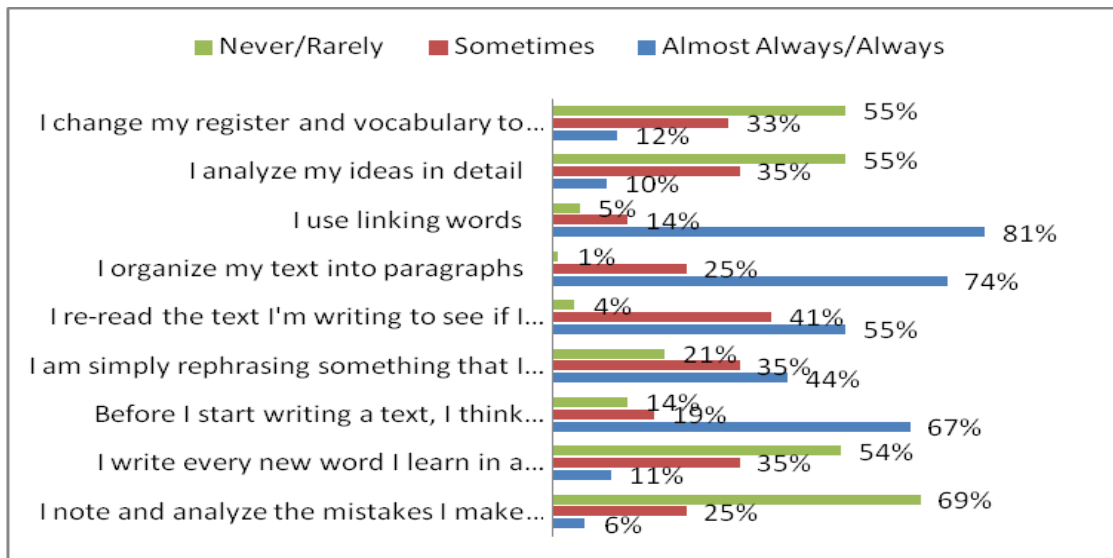


Figure 4. Writing Strategies of Immigrant Students

With regard to the students' compensation strategies, when they face difficulties in their writing procedures, it was revealed (Figure 5) that they make an extensive use of strategies asking for help (48%), using their L1 (51%) and omitting the words (48%).

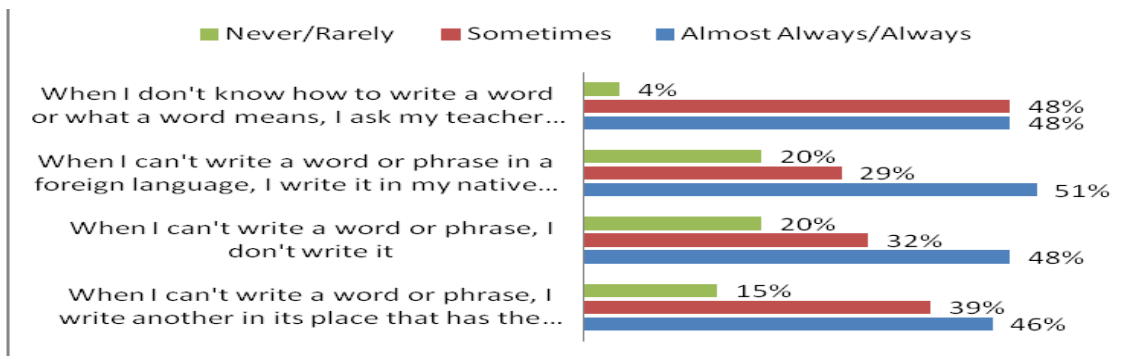


Figure 5. Compensation Strategies of Immigrant Students

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the process of our research, an attempt was made towards identifying the difficulties that immigrant students have when writing in the Greek language in parallel with investigating and recording the writing strategies they employ.

Data analysis clearly demonstrated, that students were aware of the difficulties faced when writing in the Greek language while they also showed a great flexibility in the strategies they employ not from cognitive/metacognitive perspective but from compensation perspective, in their attempt to overcome potential problems and difficulties. Indeed, Dyson

& Freedman (1991) treat writing as “*a process-oriented, goal-directed and problem-solving process which involves the writer’s awareness of the composing process and the teacher’s or peers’ intervention at any time needed*”, whereas Susser (1994) supports the view that writing is “*a recursive, non-linear cognitive process in which the writer moves back and forth between prewriting-idea generating, writing, revising and editing until he/she is satisfied with his/her creation*”.

Strategies are not developed automatically but are subject to instruction and direct training (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) that should take place throughout the planning, transformation, transcription and reviewing stages of the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981), using a “*workshop approach to instruction*” (Myles, 2002, p.2). The use of strategies is considered a decisive factor contributing to the development of L2 writing and, at the same time, the ability of students to perceive and use strategies (Papadopoulos & Rapti, 2021) during their writing instruction and practice with high flexibility functions as the manifestation of the learners’ mastery of the highly demanding skill of writing.

Therefore, language teachers should consider carefully their students’ needs and employ such teaching strategies that will facilitate the writing skills development of the immigrant students in the Greek language. They need to foster an environment, which will contribute to the students’ writing strategies and skills, accommodating their needs and problems.

However, the variables that affect the writing skills development in language learners are not restricted to the approach followed in the teaching of writing, but involve affective, personal and cognitive factors (Ramya & Pongoodi, 2017, Papadopoulos & Rapti, 2021).

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## ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ СТРАТЕГИЙ И ТРУДНОСТЕЙ ПИСЬМА В ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНИСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА УЧЕНИКАМИ НАЧАЛЬНОЙ ШКОЛЫ

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*У статті розглядається питання письма учнями на початковому етапі вивчення мови як найскладнішої мовної навички, яка була поставлена в центр*

дослідницької та викладацької діяльності протягом останніх десятиліть. Навичка письма разом із читанням – дві ключові навички, що формують контекст грамотності іноземною мовою, тоді як особливий акцент робиться на розробці та розширенні можливостей різних аспектів репертуару грамотності учнів навіть із раннього віку.

У цій роботі представлено багатовимірне дослідження, яке було розроблене та проведене для вивчення труднощів, з якими зустрічаються учні початкової школи при написанні грецьких текстів. Паралельно це дослідження мало на меті дослідити стратегії, які застосовували студенти протягом усіх фаз написання. З цією метою тридцять п'ять 10-річних учнів, які відвідували грецькі класи початкової освіти, взяли участь у цьому дослідженні протягом 2020 – 2021 навчального року. Учні проживали в місті Ларисі, в Центральній Греції. Дослідження з учнями було проведене зі згоди батьків. В інтерв'ю, з написання тексту, пропонувалося заповнити спеціально розроблені анкети, присвячені як труднощам письма студентів, так і стратегіям, які вони використовували до і після написання текстів грецькою мовою. Усі документи – співбесіди, протоколи записів – були розроблені та оброблені дослідником та зроблений багатогранний аналіз письма учнів.

Отримані висновки показали, що учні були ознайомлені зі своїми труднощами при написанні текстів грецькою мовою. Однак завдяки дослідженню було встановлено, що учні не використовують регулярно стратегії письма під час своєї письмової діяльності. Таким чином, автор статті подає пропозиції щодо подальших досліджень та освітньої практики в контексті початкової освіти.

**Ключові слова:** письмо; учні початкової школи; дослідження стратегії письма; дослідження труднощів письма.

## ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ СТРАТЕГІЙ ТА ТРУДНОЩІВ ПИСЬМА У НАВЧАННІ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ УЧНІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ

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Письмо считается наиболее сложным языковым навыком, который в последние десятилетия занимает центральное место в исследовательской и педагогической деятельности. Навыки письма наряду с чтением являются двумя ключевыми навыками, которые формируют контекст грамотности на изучаемом языке, при этом особое внимание уделяется развитию и расширению возможностей различных аспектов репертуара грамотности учащихся даже с раннего возраста.

В данной статье представлено и описано многомерное исследование, которое было разработано и проведено для изучения трудностей учащихся начальных школ при написании греческих текстов. Параллельно с этим исследование было направлено на изучение стратегий, которые использовали студенты на этапах написания. С этой целью тридцать пять 10-летних учеников, посещающих уроки греческого начального образования, приняли участие в этом исследовании в течение

*2020-2021 учебного года. Учащиеся жили в Ларисе, городе в Центральной Греции, и они приняли участие после получения согласия от своих родителей. Ученики были вовлечены в интервью, связанные с написанием текста, и им также было предложено заполнить специально разработанные анкеты, посвященные как трудностям учеников с письмом, так и стратегиям, которые они используют до и после написания текстов на греческом языке. И интервью, и протоколы записи были разработаны и обработаны исследователем в попытке сосредоточить внимание на письменном профиле студентов в многомерной форме.*

*После обработки данных результаты показали, что ученики были знакомы со своими трудностями при написании текстов на греческом языке. Однако в ходе исследования выяснилось, что учащиеся не регулярно используют письменные стратегии во время своей письменной деятельности. Таким образом, автор статьи вносит предложения по дальнейшим исследованиям и педагогической практике в контексте начального образования.*

**Ключевые слова:** *письмо; ученики начальной школы; исследования стратегий письма; исследования трудностей письма.*

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