Testing writing in EFL exams: The learners’ viewpoint as valuable feedback for improvement

Maria N. Melissourgou*, Katerina T. Frantzi

* University of the Aegean, 1 Democratias str., Rhodes 85100, Greece

Abstract

In various English as Foreign Language exams, writing is one of the four skills tested, along with reading, listening and speaking. The combination of competences that writing requires often results in student confusion and anxiety. Teaching experience implied an increased difficulty in learners’ writing. In order to gain valid and detailed information on the learners’ views and add to this underrepresented area in the literature, it was decided to conduct a survey based on questionnaires addressing issues such as the time limitation factor, feedback, and main causes of difficulty and teaching methods. Students’ answers are analysed quantitatively according to age and CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) level variables and presented in graphs. Drawing on existing literature, we discuss these findings in relation to the Greek EFL context and its particular characteristics and show where there is room for improvement regarding teaching and testing practices.

1. Introduction

Various researchers have described writing as a cognitively challenging task. Raimes (1994:164) describes it as “a difficult, anxiety-filled activity”. Lines (2014: 83) goes into more detail:
“For any writing task, students need to draw on their knowledge of the topic and its purpose and audience, and make appropriate structural, presentational and linguistic choices that shape meaning across the whole text, as well as achieving specific rhetorical or aesthetic effects through manipulation of sentences and vocabulary” (Lines, 2014: 83).

It is even more complex for second language writers. Examining seventy-two studies, which compare research on first and second language writing, Silva (1993: 669) observed that writing in a second language is “strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing”.

This study focuses in second language writing for testing purposes. It is related to standardised high-stakes language testing rather than classroom assessment. As Gebril & Plakans (2015) point out “Testing in general strikes a deep emotional chord in people” can be an “ordeal” and a “daunting” experience. Our interest derives from experience in preparing students for these exams. We have shared these stressful moments with them when performance over a short time-span can have a great impact on their future. As writing has seemed to be the skill where candidates have most difficulty, we wanted to conduct a survey in order to check if personal impression was true for a large sample of students, the reasons behind this and what the students had to say on several aspects related to writing preparation and testing. Although there have been several studies concerning teachers’ or raters’ attitudes towards writing (Cumming, 2003; Leki, 2003; Lines, 2014;) and learners’ performance (Dendrinos et al. 2013; Flowerdew, 2000; Henry & Roseberry, 2007;), second language learners’ views on writing, especially for testing purposes, seem underrepresented in the literature. Hamps-Lyons (2003: 168) points out “in writing assessment research the writer has too often been forgotten, probably because researchers are more distant from actual writing classrooms than they should be.” She believes that the lack of student-focused research is “regrettable and problematic in all contexts” since it means that we cannot confidently advice teachers or education authorities and concludes that “the writer should never be perceived as a forgotten element”.

2. Methodology

A questionnaire was handed out to students of five secondary schools in Rhodes, Greece, during the first months of 2015. It included mostly closed answers and was brief and anonymous in order to be easily accepted by teachers and students. Both the questionnaire and the analysis refer generally to language certificates and testing bodies, avoiding specific names. The focus was on CEFR levels and practices which are common in all exams rather than on comparisons between specific certificates.

The sample included 600 students, 268 male and 332 female. 389 of them belonged to the first age group (12-17), 186 to the second (18-24) and only 25 were older than that. Data was stored and analysed using Excel spreadsheets. Results are discussed in relation to the Greek context as well as to existing literature with some pedagogical implications for future improvement.

3. Research results and commentary

Due to space limitations and because each question is different, we have chosen to present the question and answer close to each other, with a commentary in some cases, for the reader to be able to relate to the topic more easily.

Question1: How many students were certified and in which CEFR levels?

Answer: Our sample included 65% certified, 17% non-certified and an 18% who did not provide an answer to this question. (Figure 1)

Commentary: It is common for students in Greece to attend extra private lessons in the evening preparing themselves as candidates for language certification outside school. (Tsagari, 2012; Dendrinos et al., 2013; Sifakis & Fay, 2011). This is partly because of the great value the Greeks share for foreign languages due to the touristic sector, the official recognition of these certificates by the state and the chances for future employment this entails, and partly because of the common spread attitude that work done at school may be insufficient. According to a study by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA), the yearly house expenditure related to foreign language education (materials and fees) rises up to 15,4 of the total yearly expenditure and is the third cost in terms of numbers affecting the family budget.

Figure 1 shows the levels of language certification acquired by our participants. B2 has “the lion’s share”. B2 level certificates are the basic and most sought after level in Greece as it offers a lifelong professional qualification. C2
certificates are also important for jobs that require a more knowledgeable person. The fact that only 12% of the students have a C1 certificate can be explained easily in the Greek context. Firstly, because C1 certification exams were developed later, with B2 and C2 traditionally being the target for years and secondly because the C2 certificate in Greece has given the holders the opportunity to acquire another important qualification, the right to teach English in private English Language Centres. This has raised a lot of discussion diachronically with university degree holders being the main opponents (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2012).

Then, we separated students of the first two age groups in order to see if there are any changes in their preferences. The following table (table 1) shows that C1 and B1 certificates as well as those that are lower than B1 level, which were recently administered and promoted, have had fewer participants in the second age group. So it is not only a matter of preference but also of the availability of the certificates long before the candidates and their teachers make their decision. For B2 and C2 levels that have been traditionally out there the picture is similar to the first. B2 is the first choice and C2 the second in both groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CEFR level</th>
<th>Age group A (12-17)</th>
<th>Age group B (18-24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;B1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2: Comparing certified students with those who are not (or those who did not provide any answer) are there any significant differences in terms of gender?

Answer: Gender did not seem to be connected in any significant way to success or failure in language certification as a whole.

Question 3: Focusing on writing from then on, we asked the participants what seemed to be the main cause of difficulty when tested in writing. They were given a set group of choices and had to select only one.

Answer: According to these answers, as shown in figure 2, grammar/syntax was the first problem with vocabulary/appropriate phrases being close. They were given the choice to answer ‘none of the above’ and this was
chosen by 15%. Content came 4th and word-limit seemed to be the problem only for 8% of students. Finally, only 4% stated that understanding the question was their main difficulty.

![Figure 2. Learners’ main difficulty when tested in Writing.](image)

Then we wondered if the main difficulties remained the same in higher levels. For this reason, we isolated answers only for C1 and C2 students. It is interesting here that none of the above was the first answer (29.5%), which shows that problems are not so acute at this level and that grammar, and syntax (20%) was not higher than vocabulary and phrases (26%) as was the case for the whole sample. This is easily understood, as we know that C level vocabulary is demanding while basic grammar is usually covered by the time students reach level B2. Folse (2008:15) has pointed out that “commonly used assessment rubrics give substantial weight to vocabulary - either directly or indirectly” and that teaching vocabulary should be embedded in writing programmes.

Question 4: Next, we gave them another set of choices trying to see what they would like to have more of in the writing classroom. Here they could choose more than one answer.

Answer: As we can see in the following pie (figure 3), the majority (41.8%) would like to be given model answers, the second large number (37.3%) indicates their wish to write more often and their third choice which is very close (36.8) shows their need to participate in discussions concerning the specific topic before writing. 32% of the participants asked for more time. We also notice that the need for more detailed feedback was expressed by more than one fourth of the learners. It is interesting that knowing the assessment criteria beforehand is not really important for students or perhaps we could assume they do not understand what this means. We can also assume that this is so because most of them have not discussed the assessment procedure in classrooms. In this question, students had an open choice in case they wanted to add anything else. Only 8 students chose to write something there. This is what they asked: no word-limit (3)- more thematic vocabulary (1)- more help with syntax (1)- clear topic questions (1)- help with structure (1)- some first ideas for development (1).

Commentary: The finding about model texts agrees with Tardy’s (2006: 94) comment “Learners tend to use models productively when they are provided, and they often seek out models when they are not provided”. Although we have not proven the actual educational value of model texts it is clear that the majority of the students regard them as an important tool in the writing classroom.
Question 5: The time limit during exams was also an interesting aspect for us so we asked them how the time limit affected their writing when writing for testing purposes.

Answer: Almost 35% of the students seemed to be affected moderately and 33% slightly. We specifically asked them if time affected the quality of their writing or worse, if they had problems completing the task because they did not have enough time. Seeing the numbers (figure 4), this is not true for the majority of candidates. For almost 14% of them, time affected the quality of what they wrote but only 5% stated they had to hand in their texts incomplete.

Question 6: This question had to do with classroom preparation time specifically for writing.

Answer: As we can see in figure 5, the majority of students (37%) stated that they had spent 1/3rd of total class time on writing preparation. The next big percentage (29%) chose 1/4th of the time. Of course this has been a rough estimation by students as they have taken courses in several contexts (schools, private language centres, one to one lessons) but it shows that according to them time has been allocated fairly. However, there was a 6% that stated they had spent almost no time in the classroom preparing writing.
Question 7: Finally, we asked them to rate the four skills (Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing, and Speaking) in terms of difficulty, in order for us to check their view on the writing skill.

Answer: Writing was rated as the most difficult skill by almost 42% of the participants. This percentage was far bigger than any other percentage.

Commentary: The ESLC was a project initiated and organised by the European Commission, which set out to make a valid and reliable appraisal of students’ foreign language proficiency in EU member states and provide participating countries with comparable data on good practice in language teaching and learning. This project included Greek learners and the findings concerning writing were rather encouraging. According to the Greek report, learners did very well on the writing part compared to the other parts which the authors find “rather surprising”, since “higher performance in writing is unusual” and writing usually “is considered one of the most difficult aspects of testing”. They attribute this success to the to the types of writing tasks students were tested in – either an informal email or an application letter- types appearing really often at well known exams and a common teaching routine in courses which prepare students for these exams. However, the authors repeat their doubts on those findings “this result needs to be investigated further because it does not make absolute sense.” (Dendrinos et al., 2013:29, 42). Although this study did not measure actual learners’ competence, we believe that it supports the previously mentioned doubts since Greek learners would be far more confident in writing if they did well and achieved high scores regularly.

In table 2, one can see the profile of the students who rated writing first in terms of difficulty. Some students did not provide all the demographics (gender/ age group/ certification) so we present percentages based on the data that was given for each case. Regarding gender, male participants were more than female. We also notice the majority of the students came from the first age- group. Seeing gender in every age group we notice a significant difference between male and female. However, this distance is smaller with both male and female having large percentages in the young learners’ group. Although gender does not seem to affect candidates’ chances of success in certification exams in general, boys have more difficulties in writing than girls. This must mean that boys supplement this weakness with higher achievements in other parts or that they work harder during preparation and eventually minimise this difference. Further investigation on this would be interesting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Certification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (12-17)</td>
<td>B (18-24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusions

Summarising our findings, we would say that the majority of students have some kind of language certification. B2 level certificates are the most sought after, followed by the C2 ones. There are no significant differences according to gender, either between certified students or non-certified ones. Students find grammar/syntax followed by vocabulary and appropriate phrases to be their main difficulty when writing. However for C levels it is the other way around. They show some interest in issues of feedback but minimal interest in assessment criteria. Emphasis is placed on preparation during which they ask for model answers and more frequent writing for practice. They also ask for discussions closely related to the topic before writing. Time limitation affects the majority of students but only a few of them state that it prevents them from completing the task. During teaching, time seems to be allocated fairly, with 1/3rd or 1/4th of total time spent on writing. However, the majority of students (41.9%) state clearly that compared to the four skills tested in exams, writing is the most difficult one. This is mostly evident in younger ages and male rather than female students. Writing was the first choice both by certified and non-certified students.

Limitations of the study have to do with the closed questions posed. In some cases, perhaps students had a limited choice of ready-made answers, which may to an extent be subjective not covering all possible answers. This is a common problem when one tries to create a short questionnaire. If more open answers were permitted this could have affected the results. However, since most of the participants were young and restless we opted for large participation numbers rather than detailed questionnaires from less participants. Also, one should be aware that the aged 25 and above sample is rather small as the study was interested in test-takers, close to the time of testing. Therefore, conclusions for those ages may not be very reliable.

If 1/3rd or 1/4th of classroom time is devoted to writing, then the fact that students still find it difficult may show that more time is needed for writing preparation. Based on the previous findings, this seems especially necessary for younger learners. Considering the shortage of class time this could be covered with homework assignments. Learners wish to be armed with more linguistic resources in order to feel confident. Offering model answers and ensuring there is enough writing practice combined with detailed feedback motivates learners, as they feel more secure.

References


