

# INVESTIGATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EFL WRITING APPREHENSION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY IN CROATIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Writing apprehension defines a person's ability to write under various stress types. Depending on a situation, an average person might perform below expectations, or be less apprehensive about writing than a professional. The purpose of this research is to investigate Croatian University students' English as a foreign language writing apprehension. For the purpose to determine if the variables of students' gender and academic level (age) play a role in their writing apprehension, we adapted WAT (Writing Apprehension Test) so this would be tailored to our study population. A longitudinal study was conducted among the students who were studying at the University of Juraj Dobrila, Pula. The participants were tested twice: in the first and in the third year. The results of the study indicated that, in contrary to respondents' gender, academic level was significant variable in their estimates of writing apprehension. In accordance with the findings stated above, a number of recommendations for handling writing apprehension were set.*

**Keywords:**

writing apprehension, longitudinal study, gender, academic level, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing Apprehension, a subject and situation specific anxiety about writing, is related to a variety of measures of self-esteem and personality in a lot of studies (Daly and Miller, 1975; Daly, 1978; Shell, Murphy, and Bruning, 1989; Pajares and Johnson, 1993; Shell, Colvin and Bruning, 1995; Dickson, 2001; Stolpa, 2004; Kurk and Atay, 2007).

The term writing apprehension was coined by Daly and Miller (1975). It refers to a situation and subject specific individual difference associated with a person's tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to potentially require writing accompanied by some amount of perceived evaluation.

It is generally understood to mean negative, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one's writing situation, or one's writing task) that disrupt some part of the writing process. The term is used to describe writers who are intellectually capable of the task at hand, but who nevertheless have difficulty with it (Grabe and Kaplan 1996). These feelings may not be pervasive in a person's writing life. For example, a person might feel perfectly fine writing a biology lab report but apprehensive about writing a paper on a novel. Someone might confidently tackle a paper about the sociology of gender but delete and start over twenty times when composing an e-mail to a cute classmate suggesting coffee. According to (Hassan, 2001) writing anxiety is *situational*. The term itself does not describe psychological attributes. People are not born anxious writers, rather, they become anxious or blocked through negative or difficult experiences with writing.

Writing is a language skill that is essential to academic success. Since it is an active, productive skill, students learning to write in a foreign language face multiple challenges. There is an emphasis placed on writing at University Juraj Dobrila in Pula. In the first year class students learn to write short presentations on a specific topic. In the third year students write 10-15 pages documented research paper that has to be presented during their seminary class in front of other students. Additionally they have to write an essay on a specific business situation. They must receive a passing score on each paper in order to pass the exam. Their writing requires thinking strategies that allow the individual to express him or herself competently in the other language, and is a complex activity that requires a certain level of linguistics knowledge, writing conventions, vocabulary and grammar.

The complexity of writing as a task tends to heighten anxiety levels in students who are taking writing courses. According to Sharples (1993) this anxiety can often demotivate the student or lead to discouragement, and thus may result in negative attitudes towards writing. Fear of writing was reported as the number 1 of Americans in a recent nationwide survey of adults. Results from data collected from nearly 20 000 college students at Michigan State University, Illinois State University and West Virginia University over the past eight years, suggest that between 15 and 20 percent

of American college students suffer from debilitating writing apprehension (Smith and Renk, 2007).

Most students, low and high achievers alike, find writing difficult and view it as something they just have to persevere through in order to pass certain exams (Yavuz and Genç, 1998). This may relate to affective elements such as student attitudes, writing apprehension and self-efficacy in writing. In their studies Pajares (2003) and Pajares and Valiante (2001) revealed that if a student is unwilling to express him or herself in writing, lacks confidence in his or her ability to write, or feels apprehensive about writing, then the student is unlikely to be proficient at writing composition.

Regarding the characteristics of the high apprehensive' written work, Daly (1978), confirm that it is of lower quality and their papers appeared to be shorter and have less developed language and sentence structure (Faigley, Daly and Witte, 1991). According to the results of his research Reeves (1997) states that high apprehensive writers have more difficulty with getting new ideas which are not well-developed. The author adds that those students' score lower on measures of syntactic maturity.

In their study, Mochizuki and Aizawa (2000) stated that a number of females in their responses to the open question about causes for their writing apprehension mentioned that teachers deal harshly with their students' errors in writing. Others mentioned that teachers do not give them feedback about their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Some other female students reported that they are being laughed at by their colleagues or teachers when making mistakes (Webb, 2008). The majority of students of both sexes emphasized that their lack of proper vocabulary and grammar necessary for writing and writing teachers lacking experience in teaching writing were the prime reasons behind their writing anxiety. This means that students misunderstand the nature of writing; they believe that writing is just mastery of vocabulary and grammar which is erroneous (Pérez Basanta, 2005).

Although there is a great deal of variation among individuals, there are also some common experiences that *writers* in general find stressful.

For example, a person writing may struggle when:

- adjusting to a new form of writing. (for example, first year college writing or papers in a new field of study Stapa and Abdul Majid, 2009);
- writing for a reader who has been overly critical or demanding in the past (Grundy, 1985);
- remembering negative criticism received in the past even if the reader who criticized students' work won't be reading their writing this time (Maria-Rankin, 2006);
- working with limited time or with a lot of unstructured time (Fritzsche, Young and Hickson, 2003).

## Research Question

This study is considered as an investigatory one which aims to investigate Croatian EFL writing apprehension from the learners' own views and hence suggest suitable remedies for this phenomenon. From displaying and investigating the problem of the study, the following question that needs to be answered by the present study, emerged:

Do the variables of students' gender and academic level (age) play a role in their writing apprehension?

## Research Hypotheses

In the light of the problem of the present study and the research questions that have been raised and after studying the literature related to this area, it is hypothesized that:

- (1) There are statistically significant differences in estimation of writing apprehension due to students' gender.
- (2) 2. There are statistically significant differences in estimation of writing apprehension due to students' academic level.

## 2. METHODS

### Participants

A study was carried out on a total of 124 informants majoring in tourism, marketing, informatics and finance at University in Pula. These were Croatian-speaking learners of EFL who were tested twice, that is, in the first year and in the third year. The sample was homogeneous as regards social environment and type of instruction. Moreover, learners shared the same L1. All the participants were full time students, at the beginning of the study they were 19 years old. Longitudinal studies are prone to participant attrition, unfortunately, this one was no exception. From the initial 183 participants, 59 students either dropped out of their study or did not attend school during data collection sessions, so there are no longitudinal results for them. Concerning the subjects' sex, the majority were females; whereas 52 (42%) were males, 72 (58%) of them were females.

Participation was voluntary and took place during regular class time.

Questionnaires were completed with no personal identification to insure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses.

## Measures

To measure writing apprehension, the scale developed by Daly and Miller (1975) was used. This is a 26-item questionnaire that features items with positive polarity and 13 with negative polarity. Scores can range from 26 to 130. Scores below 59 indicate high willingness to write without hesitation. Scores ranging 60 - 96 indicate moderate level of writing apprehension. Scores above 97 indicate high writing apprehension. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agree with statements by marking a number representing their response to each statement using the following the Likert scale - strongly disagree = 1; disagree = 2; neutral = 3; agree = 4; strongly agree = 5.

This inventory was specifically designed to measure self-reported writing apprehension. The test was originally developed with reference to first-language learners, particularly English native speakers.

There have been a few attempts to measure writing apprehension in L2, all of which have used modified versions of the Daly and Miller instrument. (Bruce, Gungle and Taylor, 1989; Masny and Foxall, 1992; Boice, 1993:). Cornwell and McKay (1999) stated that, although on the whole the Daly and Miller Writing apprehension test (WAT) has been shown to be an instrument of satisfactory internal consistency reliability with concurrent and predictive validity, it needs to be adapted in order to be used to study foreign language writing. We adapted the WAT for use with our Croatian EFL students as follows:

First, the WAT was translated from English to Croatian and back-translated to insure accuracy.

Second, translations were compared and necessary changes were made so that all items in the scale were clear to Croatian EFL students. We added to questions the phrase "in English" so as to be clear that we were talking about writing in English not Croatian.

A previous pilot study was carried out with this test and it proved to be suitable for our informants' age and language level. Questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the semester. The time allotted to complete it was 15 minutes during class time. At the beginning of each test, clear instructions were given in the students' mother tongue to clarify what they were being asked to do.

## Data analysis

Results from the reports were processed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with analysis of data, presentation of results and discussion and interpretation of these results. It attempts to answer the research questions. It also tests whether the hypotheses of the study will be retained or rejected. The statistical test adopted in this study is the t-test independent sample used to show the difference in means between two independent groups. It is worth mentioning, the significance level for these statistical measures was set at the conventional (0.05 and 0.01) levels. Results will be presented and discussed in terms of the study hypotheses.

The participants in our study reported moderate level of writing apprehension. According to Daly Miller (1975) most students who score in this range (scores ranging 60 - 96) do not experience a significantly unusual level of writing apprehension. However, the closer the score to the limits of this range, the more apprehension students are to experience feelings or behaviors characteristic of the next range of scores. Daly Miller (1975) underlined that students should be alert to the fact that they may manifest signs of writing apprehension in performing certain writing tasks or in writing with varying purposes for different types of audiences.

#### The First Hypothesis:

There are statistically significant differences in writing apprehension due to students' gender.

The researcher assumes that gender is an important factor in the students' estimates of their writing apprehension. Data related were statistically treated using t-test paired sample. The results are summarized in the following tables.

**Table 1.:** Gender differences in writing apprehension - first year

	Male	Female	t	p
N	52	72		
M	72.36	72.44	.676	n.s.
SD	8.84	8.85		

Source: authors'

**Table 2.:** Gender differences in writing apprehension - third year

	Male	Female	t	p
N	52	72		
M	73.43	73.22	.988	n.s.
SD	8.59	8.21		

Source: authors'

As can be noticed in Tables 1. and 2., there are no statistically significant differences due to students’ gender in their estimates of writing apprehension. Although not at a statistically significant level, the students’ apprehension decreased over the semesters.

The results of research on gender differences are not conclusive. Some studies confirmed the existence of gender differences in favor of one of the genders whereas others asserted that gender plays no role in writing apprehension. The findings obtained in the present study are confirmed by some researchers and refuted by others. For instance, Masse and Popvich (2003) and Popvich and Mark (2003) say that there is no evidence that there are differences in apprehension due to gender. Daly (1985 cited in Gungle and Taylor, 1989) has noted that females have significantly lower levels of writing apprehension than their male counterparts because they get more positive teacher reactions to their writing than do males. Nonetheless, Abdul-Fattah (1995) concluded that his female subjects in general and advanced students experienced more writing apprehension than did males and less advanced students. This finding is confirmed by Masny and Foxall (1992) who stated that their data indicated that female subjects were more apprehensive than males. The results of the current study are consistent with those of Daly and Masse and Popvich whereas they contrast those found by Abdul-Fattah and Masny and Foxall.

To sum up, the first hypothesis is refuted since no statistically significant differences occurred between male and female students’ estimates of writing apprehension.

**The Second Hypothesis:**

There are statistically significant differences in writing apprehension due to students’ academic level (age).

**Table 3.:** Academic level difference in writing apprehension

	First year	Third year	t	p
N	124	124		
M	77.12	73.51	-2,58	0,05
SD	10.43	8.80		

Source: authors’

Table 3. shows the t-test analysis results used to assess changes that occurred in the means of the variables assessed in the first and in the third year. T-value indicates that a statistically significant difference occurred between first and third year students in their estimates of writing apprehension:  $F(124) = -2,58, p < 0,05$  The third year students reported higher willingness to write.

Accordingly, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

We believe that in our case the level of writing apprehension was reduced because we applied measures of reducing writing apprehension during the EFL classes. We followed strategies proposed by researchers for handling writing apprehension. These are the follows:

- give students writing assignments that are not graded. Such as exploratory writing on a topic, and rough drafts of essay (Clark, 2005)
- identifying error patterns students make and helping student-writers correct these errors rather than correcting every single mistake by the teacher is a widely accepted technique in overcoming high levels of writing apprehension among students. (Bernstein, 1978; Wachholz and Etheridge, 1996; Reeves, 1997).
- resorting to peer feedback as a substitute for teacher feedback when it works (Krause, 2001; Borich, 2004; Kurk and Atay, 2007)
- countering negative experiences by actively creating positive ones (Sommers, 2006; Rankin-Brown, 2006).
- encouraging students to write more and to celebrate their success (Adolphs and Schmitt, 2004; Staehr, 2008)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of writing apprehension has received much scholarly effort because of the importance assigned to it by many educators and writing specialists. Apprehension about writing is a common condition on colleges. Because writing is the most common mean of sharing knowledge, students put a lot of pressure on themselves when they write. As noted by Celce-Mercia (1991), expressing one's ideas in written form in a second or foreign language, and doing so with reasonable accuracy and coherence, is a major achievement.

This study was undertaken to examine Croatian EFL writing apprehension from the learners' own views. A related purpose was to determine if the variables of students' gender and academic level (age) play a role in their writing apprehension.

Results of the current study show that the participants in our study reported moderate level of writing apprehension. Our findings state that gender plays no effective role in the students' estimates of the causes of writing apprehension. We assume that the causes which make both male and female students anxious when practicing writing are approximately the same.

The data collected for this study demonstrate that there is a statistically significant difference between first and third year students in their estimates of writing apprehension. The difference was in favor of third year students. It is reasonable to speculate that in our case the level of writing apprehension was reduced because during the course of education, students learn to apply writing skills, based on perception, language usage, nonverbal and verbal communication. Emphasis is placed

on effective writing and methods for overcoming barriers to writing. This research could be considered a preliminary investigation on which follow-up work could be based.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Instrumentation of the current study is a questionnaire tackling the area of the study from the students' own perspective. Had other instruments such as observation or interview been used, more reliable results might have been reached.

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