

# WRITING IN ENGLISH – THE PROFICIENCY OF CROATIAN STUDENTS AT THE END OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Lovorka Zergollern-Miletić

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

***Summary** - The article describes the aims, the methodology and the results of a study on writing proficiency in English as a foreign language. The study was conducted within the project English in Croatia (130514). The aim of the study was to establish the respective levels of writing proficiency in Croatian learners of English at the end of their primary, and at the end of their secondary education – whether they attain the levels envisaged and required by the national curriculum: level A2 at the end of primary school, and level B1 at the end of secondary school. The results have shown that students have attained those levels. The results have also shown that the proficiency in writing, the most complex of the language skills, is affected by the length of English tuition (years), the intensity of tuition (applies only to secondary school students), learning other foreign languages (primarily German), as well as the use of the Internet. The research has proved that the girls attending primary and secondary schools have scored better at the English writing test than their male counterparts. The students' overall proficiency in English is in line with their results at the writing test. Writing is the best predictor of the mark in English. In addition to the results and comments, the article offers suggestions for further research.*

***Key words:** level A2, level B1, primary school, secondary school, writing skills*

## INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four skills that have to be mastered in learning a language, be it one's mother tongue or a foreign language. Writing, as well as speaking, is a productive skill. In teaching foreign languages writing was neglected for a long time (see Carter & Nunan, 2001). The above mentioned authors claim that

until the 1970's writing was treated as a helping, subsidiary skill, not a skill deserving particular attention. In other words, writing was used in grammar exercises, in answering questions about texts, as well as in dictations.

The 1980's brought about the awareness that writing as a text-building process should also be taught as a part of the process of teaching English as a foreign language. At the beginning, theoreticians and practitioners relied upon the theories and practices used in teaching English as the first language. The 1990's witnessed a growing interest in the phenomenon of teaching essay-writing to foreign students. A significant number of books have been published since then, ranging from theoretical titles to textbooks giving practical instructions to teachers and students. The theoretical literature emphasises the importance of pragmatics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics (Carter & Nunan, 2001; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Practical textbooks, such as L. G. Alexander's *Essay and letter writing* (1965), or *Writing Tasks* by David Jolly (1984), have become almost inevitable in writing instruction. Nowadays, writing instruction in English exists at all levels, the most advanced level being writing academic texts, designed for university students of English.

Contemporary L2 writing research can be grouped into four main orientations representing primary concerns of L2 writing practitioners and researchers (Leki, 2002):

1. Text- and classroom-based orientations
2. Process-based orientations
3. Budding sense of disciplinarity
4. Growing orientation to sociopolitical issues

All the research done so far has not been able to resolve one crucial problem - to decide what a good text really is. The assessment of texts should include: language mistakes, contrastive rhetoric (stylistics), the reader's understanding of the text, as well as the assessment by a trained evaluator. Over the past twenty years errors have been the overriding issue of concern in L2 writing instruction – how much emphasis should be put on them, especially on language errors (Ferris 1999; Truscott, 1996 – in Leki, 2002).

The Council of Europe, inspired by the awareness of the necessity of writing instruction, as well as by other new ideas concerning foreign language instruction, has devised instructions for language learning, teaching and assessment (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, 2001). In our project<sup>1</sup>, respecting the Framework, we set the criteria for assessing writing assignments in English. The assignments, as well as the criteria, were different for eighth-form students of primary school from those devised for the students in the fourth form of secondary school.

---

<sup>1</sup> Project number 130514 *English in Croatia*. For details on the project see J. Mihaljević Djigunović and V. Bagarić this issue.

Eighth-formers should reach level A2. When it comes to writing, this means that they should be able to write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. They should also be able to write very simple personal letters, for example thanking someone for something.

Students attending fourth grade of secondary school should attain level B1. In terms of writing proficiency, it means that they should be able to write simple connected texts on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. They should also be able to write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

## AIM OF RESEARCH

This research aims at defining the writing proficiency acquired by Croatian students – L2 learners of English at two respective levels – at the end of their primary schooling (eighth year), and at the end of their secondary schooling (12th year). We wanted to establish whether students had attained the proficiency envisaged and required by the national curriculum: level A2 in primary school, and level B1 in secondary school.

We were also interested to see whether there were differences in proficiency based on gender, intensity of instruction (lessons per week), length of learning (years), learning English outside school, learning other foreign languages, as well as the use of the Internet. We also looked into the role of writing proficiency in the overall proficiency in English.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Writing proficiency was tested on 1716 students, which included 1306 primary school students and 410 secondary school students.

### Instruments

To assess writing proficiency we used tests devised by a team of Hungarian experts (for details on tests used within the project *English in Croatia* see J. Mihaljević Djigunović and V. Bagarić this issue).

The test assessing the writing proficiency of eighth-formers contained one task with a visual element - two apparently identical pictures, instructions and some space for writing. The respondents were required to describe the differences between the pictures in 20 simple, or 10 complex sentences. The instructions contained the objects and the persons connected with the differences, so the respondents did not have to discover the ten existing differences by themselves. This is an open-type task which enables assessing a relatively wide scope of competences: grammatical competence, textual competence, functional competence,

and sociolinguistic competence (for details on the above mentioned competences see V. Bagarić and J. Mihaljević Djigunović this issue).

The test assessing the writing proficiency of fourth-grade students of secondary school comprised one open-type assignment. The respondents were required to write a letter of approximately 150 words to a magazine, suggesting that their best friend should be elected the friend of the year. Competition was used as a verbal incentive for writing.

In their letters, the students were expected to answer the following questions:

- a) Who is that person
- b) What does he/she look like
- c) What does he/she do
- d) The experiences they have shared
- e) Why that person should get the award

This assignment also enabled the testing of a wide range of competences (grammatical, textual, functional and sociolinguistic).

## Procedure

The writing tasks for both sub-samples belonged to the ‘common package’ used to test both writing and listening skills. The writing tasks were to follow the listening tasks. The testing took place during regular English classes.

As this type of testing is prone to subjectivity, we used analytical scales to assess the essays. As well as the tests, the scales were designed by Hungarian experts.

The assessment of writing proficiency included the following four elements: 1) task achievement, 2) vocabulary, 3) grammar/accuracy 4) text.

The essays were assessed by previously trained evaluators. The training of the evaluators of the primary school essays was held separately from the training of the evaluators of the secondary school essays.

The assessment criteria for writing tasks are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1: Criteria for Writing Tasks (8<sup>th</sup> Form of Primary School – 8 Years of Learning English)*

|     | <b>Task achievement</b>                                     | <b>Vocabulary</b>   | <b>Grammar/<br/>Accuracy</b>  | <b>Text</b>  |
|-----|---|---|---|--|
| 7-8 | The text is on 9 or 10 things relevant to pictures A and B. | A rich scale and good choice of vocabulary, appropriate to tasks. | The whole text is comprehensible; a few grammar or spelling mistakes do not interfere with comprehension. | The text is well structured: parts on different things are separated. Sentences are logically linked. There are some complex sentences. More than 3 sentence types vary. |

|     | <b>Task achievement</b>   | <b>Vocabulary</b>   | <b>Grammar/<br/>Accuracy</b>   | <b>Text</b>   |
|-----|---|---|--|---|
| 5-6 | The text is on 7 or 8 things relevant to pictures, or on 9 or 10 things partly relevant to pictures. Text is about both A and B.        | A wide scale and choice of vocabulary, mostly appropriate to task.    | Some mistakes occur, but the whole text is comprehensible.                             | There are some links between the sentences, but the text is unstructured. Minimum three sentence types vary (e.g. stating existence, positive and negative statement, actions). |
| 3-4 | The text is on 5 or 6 things relevant to pictures, or on 7 or 8 partly relevant things. Text is on both A and B.                        | A good scale or choice of vocabulary, mostly appropriate to the task. | Several basic mistakes occur, but most of the text is comprehensible.                  | The text consists of a sequence of sentences. One or two sentence types are repeated.   |
| 1-2 | The text is on 2 or 3 things relevant to pictures, or on more, but only partly relevant. Text is on either A or B.                      | A limited scale and choice of vocabulary, or often inappropriate.     | Many basic mistakes occur, only part of the text is comprehensible.                    | The same sentence type is repeated.   |
| 0   | No text. Few words or sentences which are irrelevant to the pictures. The handwriting is illegible. The text is not related to the task | A very limited scale and inappropriate vocabulary.                    | The text is incomprehensible because of grammatical mistakes and/or spelling mistakes. | The text is unstructured, incomprehensible.   |

It can be concluded from Table 1 that the maximum number of points was 32.

*Table 2: Assessment Criteria for Writing Tasks (4<sup>th</sup> Form of Secondary School – 12 Years of Learning English)*

|     | <b>Task achievement</b>                    | <b>Vocabulary</b>   | <b>Grammar/<br/>Accuracy</b>  | <b>Text</b>   |
|-----|--|---|---|---|
| 7-8 | All 5 points are appropriately written on. | A rich scale and good choice of vocabulary, appropriate to tasks. | The whole text is comprehensible; a few grammar or spelling mistakes do not interfere with comprehension. A variety of structures are used. | The text is well structured; paragraphs can be identified; sentences and paragraphs are logically linked. The text reflects features of a letter. |

|     | <b>Task achievement</b>  | <b>Vocabulary</b>   | <b>Grammar/<br/>Accuracy</b>   | <b>Text</b>  |
|-----|--|---|--|--|
| 5-6 | 4 points are appropriately written on, or 5 are partly written on.   | A good scale and choice of vocabulary, mostly appropriate to the task.  | Some basic mistakes occur, but the whole text is comprehensible. A good number of structures are used.               | Paragraphs are not separated, but sentences are logically linked; or paragraphs are separated but not all sentences are logically linked. The text reflects some features of a letter. |
| 3-4 | Out of 5 points 3 are appropriately written on, or more tasks are partly fulfilled.  | A right scale and choice of vocabulary, mostly appropriate to the task. | Several mistakes occur, but most of the text is comprehensible. A few structures vary in the text.                   | In most cases sentences are logically linked, the text is partly coherent.   |
| 1-2 | Out of 5 points 2 are appropriately written on, or more tasks are partly fulfilled.  | A limited scale and choice of vocabulary, or often inappropriate.       | Many basic mistakes occur, only part of the text is comprehensible. Only the same few structures are used.           | A minimal logical link between sentences. Limited cohesion.  |
| 0   | Nothing is written, or some text on 1 of the points; the handwriting is illegible; the text is on something else, or for someone else. | A very limited scale and inappropriate vocabulary.                      | The text is incomprehensible because of grammatical mistakes and/or spelling mistakes. The same structures are used. | No logical link between words/sentences.   |

Again, the maximum number of points is 32.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results were processed by using the following statistical procedures: descriptive statistics, t-test, correlational analysis, regression analysis.

We shall first describe the results for the two sub-samples concerning the number of scored points. After that we shall proceed by comparing the differences in achievement concerning gender, the intensity of instruction (lessons per week), length of learning (years), learning English outside school, learning other foreign languages, as well as the use of the Internet.

### Writing Proficiency

Tables 3a and 3b show that the highest proficiency was achieved in the first element, i. e. task achievement.

Table 3a: Results on the writing test (primary school)

|                  | N    | Mean | SD   |
|------------------|------|------|------|
| Task Achievement | 1306 | 5,39 | 2,40 |
| Vocabulary       | 1306 | 4,55 | 2,22 |
| Grammar/Accuracy | 1306 | 4,28 | 2,19 |
| Text             | 1306 | 4,01 | 2,14 |

Table 3b: Results on the writing test (secondary school)

|                  | N   | M    | SD   |
|------------------|-----|------|------|
| Task Achievement | 410 | 4,40 | 2,56 |
| Vocabulary       | 410 | 4,31 | 2,46 |
| Grammar/Accuracy | 410 | 3,97 | 2,30 |
| Text             | 409 | 4,24 | 2,25 |

It is obvious that our respondents have mastered the English language to such a degree that they can complete the communicative task at the appropriate level (A2 and B1). It seems that both the primary and the secondary school students are relatively in good command of vocabulary. The biggest problem for the primary school students was to structure the text well: to connect sentences in a logical manner, and to use various types of sentences. On the other hand, for the secondary school students it was difficult to write accurately, i.e. without grammatical mistakes that affect comprehension. One possible explanation might be that the communicative tasks at A2 level do not require the use of complex structures, so the primary school students could resort to the well mastered structures. On the other hand, it seems that the secondary school students might be imitating texts from English magazines that they read in class or outside class. In the process of essay-writing they might be paying more attention to the use of vocabulary and text-structuring, so they neglect grammar.

The next thing we compared was the students' results on the writing test with the results on the other tests (tables 4a and 4b).

Table 4a: Results on all the tests (primary school)

|           | N    | Mean  | SD   | Minimum | Maksimum |
|-----------|------|-------|------|---------|----------|
| Writing   | 1306 | 18,23 | 8,45 | 0       | 36       |
| Speaking  | 190  | 40,64 | 9,80 | 80      | 48       |
| Reading   | 1254 | 34,12 | 8,59 | 20      | 46       |
| Listening | 1408 | 18,64 | 2,32 | 10      | 20       |

Table 4b: Results on all the tests (secondary school)

|           | N   | Mean  | SD    | Minimum | Maksimum |
|-----------|-----|-------|-------|---------|----------|
| Writing   | 409 | 16,94 | 9,05  | 0       | 32       |
| Reading   | 656 | 23,17 | 13,39 | 0       | 46       |
| Listening | 656 | 9,21  | 4,41  | 0       | 16       |
| Speaking  | 78  | 36,91 | 9,82  | 5       | 48       |

We can conclude from the tables that the students' proficiency in writing is lower than their proficiency in the other three skills.

These results are not surprising if we bear in mind that writing is the skill that is the latest and the most difficult to acquire. In the Croatian schooling system writing is still used mostly as a means for practicing grammar and vocabulary, and, unfortunately, very rarely as the target. When writing is taught as text-producing, then it is linked with a certain communicative goal, and becomes quite a complicated process – for students, as well as for teachers. We attempted to explain it in the introduction.

### ***The Relationship of Writing Proficiency in Relation to Other Variables***

#### **Gender**

In the following analysis we compared the results achieved on the writing test by the female respondents to those achieved by the male respondents. The results are shown in tables 5a and 5b.

Table 5a: The Significance of The Differences on The Writing Test Based on Gender (Primary School)

|         | Gender | N   | Mean  | SD   | T     | P    |
|---------|--------|-----|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | M      | 584 | 16,95 | 8,72 | -4,89 | <,05 |
|         | F      | 718 | 19,25 | 8,04 |       |      |

The girls scored better than the boys.

Table 5b: The Significance of The Differences on The Writing Test Based on Gender (Secondary School)

|         | Gender | N   | Mean  | SD   | T     | P    |
|---------|--------|-----|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | M      | 169 | 14,44 | 9,91 | -4,58 | <,05 |
|         | F      | 238 | 18,66 | 7,98 |       |      |

The girls attending secondary school, just like the girls attending primary school, scored better on the writing test. The difference between the boys and the girls in both primary and secondary school is statistically significant.



As we have already stated, writing is a very complex skill, so writing proficiency is influenced by several factors – motivation, the length of instruction, reading proficiency, knowledge of grammar, learning another foreign language. When motivation is concerned, it proved to be higher with the girls than with the boys - girls attending primary school:  $t = -4,56$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ; girls attending secondary schools:  $t = -2,26$ ,  $p < 0,05$ . The length of instruction showed to be significant with girls attending secondary school:  $t = -2,49$ ,  $p < 0,05$ . In addition, girls in high school scored better on the reading test than their male counterparts:  $t = -2,47$ ,  $p < 0,05$ . In both female groups we can find that their school marks in English are better than the boys' marks – girls in primary school:  $t = -7,80$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ; girls in secondary school:  $t = -3,48$ ,  $p < 0,05$ . Girls in primary school, as well as girls in secondary school, learn other foreign languages in addition to English in greater numbers than their male counterparts – girls in primary school:  $t = -2,66$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ; girls in secondary school:  $t = -5,05$ ,  $p < 0,05$ .

### The Intensity of English Instruction

In the following analysis we attempted to establish which was the effect of the intensity of instruction on the success at the writing test. Tables 6a and 6b show whether there are any significant relations between the number of English classes per week and the score on the writing test. The groups of respondents were not balanced (most of them had three classes per week), therefore we decided to compare only the extreme groups – the ones having two or fewer classes, and those who had four or more.

Table 6a: The significance of differences on the writing test regarding the intensity of instruction (Primary School)

|         | Classes per week | N  | Mean  | SD   | t   | P    |
|---------|------------------|----|-------|------|-----|------|
| Writing | 2 or fewer       | 63 | 23,69 | 7,16 | ,86 | >,05 |
|         | 4 or more        | 26 | 22,18 | 8,55 |     |      |

The results do not show any statistically significant difference between the respondents who have four or more classes per week and those who have two or fewer classes.

Table 6b: The significance of differences on the writing test regarding the intensity of instruction (Secondary School)

|         | Classes per week | N  | Means after Scheffe (Alpha =.05) |  |       | F     | P    |
|---------|------------------|----|----------------------------------|--|-------|-------|------|
| Writing | 2 hours          | 88 | 13,05                            |  |       | 21,69 | <,05 |
|         | 4 hours          | 27 |                                  |  | 24,85 |       |      |

There is a difference between the primary and the secondary school students – with the secondary school students a larger number of classes per week has resulted in considerably higher writing proficiency.

We presumed that the intensity of instruction would affect the results. This happened only in the case of secondary school students. A possible explanation could be that the knowledge of English in primary school students is accumulated, but still passive, while the knowledge of English in secondary school students has been activated. An additional explanation for this result could be the fact that primary school students write essays very rarely, so the number of classes does not influence their writing proficiency.

### Length of Learning English

Our next object of interest was the relation of the length of learning (years) with the results on the writing test. This was investigated by using the correlation coefficient.

*Table 7a: The Results on the writing test in relation to the length of learning English (Primary School)*

|                                     |                |              |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
|                                     |                | Writing      |
| Length of learning English in years | Pearson r<br>N | ,18*<br>1240 |

\*p<,05

Table 7a shows that there is a statistically significant, yet rather low positive connection between the results on the writing test and the length of English instruction.

*Table 7b: The Results on the writing test in relation to the length of learning English (Secondary School)*

|                            |                |             |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------|
|                            |                | Pisanje     |
| Length of learning English | Pearson r<br>N | ,11*<br>375 |

\*p<,05

The results of the secondary school students, just like the results of their primary school counterparts, show that there is a statistically significant positive connection between the results on the writing test and the length of learning English. As this connection is rather weak, we believe that for obtaining good results on writing tests the length of English instruction is not important. What matters is whether writing skills are taught at all.

### Learning English Outside School

It is also interesting to see if there is a difference in the results on the writing test depending on whether students, in addition to the regular instruction, learn English outside school. Tables 8a and 8b show that the differences are statistically significant.

Table 8a: (Primary School):

|         | Learning English outside school | N    | Mean  | SD   | t     | P    |
|---------|---------------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | No                              | 1164 | 18,03 | 8,41 | -5,71 | <,05 |
|         | Yes                             | 101  | 22,43 | 7,34 |       |      |

Table 8b: (Secondary School):

|         | Learning English outside school | N   | Mean  | SD   | T     | P    |
|---------|---------------------------------|-----|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | No                              | 363 | 16,86 | 8,96 | -2,19 | <,05 |
|         | Yes                             | 15  | 22,00 | 7,18 |       |      |

Both primary school students and secondary school students who learn English outside school showed better results on the writing test than those who learn English only in school. This result was not surprising, since learning English outside school augments the overall language proficiency, as well as the quantity of writing exercises. We can also presume that these students are more motivated for studying. It is also possible that they come from families having a good socio-economic status, where reading and writing skills are respected and nurtured.

### Learning Other Foreign Languages

Our further concern is the question whether there is a difference in writing proficiency between students who learn only English and those who learn another foreign language as well. Tables 9a and 9b show that the students who learn another foreign language in addition to English have better writing proficiency than those who learn only English.

Table 9a: (Primary School):

|         | Learning other foreign lang. | N    | Mean  | SD   | T     | P    |
|---------|------------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | no                           | 1003 | 17,41 | 8,39 | -6,55 | <,05 |
|         | yes                          | 303  | 20,97 | 8,06 |       |      |

Table 9b: (Secondary School):

|         | Learning other foreign lang. | N   | Mean  | SD   | t     | P    |
|---------|------------------------------|-----|-------|------|-------|------|
| Writing | ne                           | 124 | 11,90 | 8,41 | -8,04 | <,05 |
|         | da                           | 241 | 19,28 | 8,25 |       |      |

In both groups of students (primary and secondary school) there is a significant difference between those who learn one more foreign language in addition to English, and those who learn only English.

We presume that the linguistic awareness of the students learning an additional foreign language is more developed. This awareness includes analytical thinking, comparing the two foreign languages with each other, as well as with Croatian.

The following tables (10a and 10b) present the differences in linguistic proficiency and motivation between groups concerning the second foreign language:

Table 10a : (Primary School):

|         | Second foreign lang. | N    | Means after Scheffe(Alpha=.05) | F     | P    |
|---------|----------------------|------|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| Writing | no                   | 1003 | 17,41                          | 34,03 | <,05 |
|         | Italian              | 92   | 20,65                          |       |      |
|         | German               | 152  | 22,94                          |       |      |

We can conclude that the writing proficiency in English of those students who learn one more foreign language and the writing proficiency in English of those who do not vary significantly. We can also conclude that those who learn German are more proficient.

Table 10b: (Secondary School):

|         | Second foreign language | N   | Means after Scheffe (Alpha =.05) |       |       | F     | P    |
|---------|-------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Writing | No                      | 124 | 11,90                            |       |       | 27,57 | <,05 |
|         | Italian                 | 62  | 16,18                            | 16,18 |       |       |      |
|         | More languages          | 22  |                                  | 16,68 | 16,68 |       |      |
|         | German                  | 147 |                                  |       | 20,95 |       |      |

Secondary school students who learn an additional foreign language, just like their primary school counterparts, have exhibited better writing proficiency in English. Again, those who learn German have shown the best results.

We suggest that one of the possible explanations might lie in the fact that there are many similarities between English and German in grammar and vocabulary (English is considered to be a Germanic language, in spite of the significant influence by Romance languages – primarily Latin and French). It would be interesting to investigate to which extent learning German and learning English may influence each other in a positive way, and to what extent they cause interference.

### The Use of The Internet

As the use of the Internet may significantly increase the exposure to English, we wanted to find out whether there was a link between the use of the Internet and the results on the writing test.

*Table 11a: The differences in the results on the writing test concerning the use of the Internet (Primary School)*

|         | Using the Internet | N   | Means after Scheffe (Alpha=.05) |       |       | F     | P    |
|---------|--------------------|-----|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Writing | no                 | 424 | 15,13                           |       |       | 62,49 | <,05 |
|         | rarely             | 381 |                                 | 18,56 |       |       |      |
|         | often              | 451 |                                 |       | 21,21 |       |      |

*Table 11b: The differences in the results on the writing test concerning the use of the Internet (Secondary School)*

|         | Using the Internet | N   | Means after Scheffe (Alpha =.05) |       |  | F     | P    |
|---------|--------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-------|--|-------|------|
| Writing | no                 | 58  | 12,84                            |       |  | 10,62 | <,05 |
|         | rarely             | 132 |                                  | 16,10 |  |       |      |
|         | often              | 186 |                                  | 18,68 |  |       |      |

We can observe that there are significant differences in writing proficiency in English between the students who never use the Internet, those who use it rarely, and those who use it often. With increased use of the Internet writing proficiency in English also increases. This is a very important result, because it suggests the potential usefulness of the computer in teaching English.

In the secondary school students' group, when writing is concerned, there is a significantly greater difference between the first and the second group (i.e. those who do not use the Internet at all and those who use it rarely), than between the second and the third (i.e. those who use the Internet rarely and those who use it often). The primary school students' groups differed from each other equally.

**The Overall Results in English**

Our research had yet another goal: to find out whether there were significant differences between the groups of students concerning the results on the writing test and their school marks (the marks measuring their overall proficiency in English).

*Table 12: The significance of the differences on the writing test regarding the students' marks in English (Primary School):*

|         | Mark in English | N   | Means after Scheffe (Alpha = .05) |       |       |       | F      | P    |
|---------|-----------------|-----|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| Writing | 2               | 227 | 8,87                              |       |       |       | 378,77 | <,05 |
|         | 3               | 299 |                                   | 15,02 |       |       |        |      |
|         | 4               | 326 |                                   |       | 20,53 |       |        |      |
|         | 5               | 418 |                                   |       |       | 24,45 |        |      |

Table 12 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the results of the groups of students concerning their marks in English. All groups showed statistically significant differences at the writing test.

This is not a surprising result, since in the eighth form writing skills are one of the basic elements in forming a student's mark. Students with worse marks in English were expected to score worse on the writing test.

**Writing as A Predictor of Proficiency in English**

Finally, we wanted to establish the importance of writing skills as possible predictors of a student's mark in English (a mark being the measure of overall proficiency). In this analysis, we included as predictors the results of the tests for other language skills.

Our results are shown in Tables 13a and 13b.

*Table13a: The Predictability of The Mark in English Based on the Tests for All Four Skills (Primary School):*

| N=152     | R R <sub>c</sub> F | Correlation of marks and tests | Standard Regressional Coefficient |
|-----------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|           | ,66 ,43 28,17*     | R                              | Beta                              |
| Writing   |                    | ,62*                           | ,38*                              |
| Speaking  |                    | ,47*                           | ,10                               |
| Reading   |                    | ,58*                           | ,25*                              |
| Listening |                    | ,39*                           | ,02                               |

\*p<0,5

The Standard Regressional Coefficient .38 points to the high level of predictability of the mark in English based on writing. Writing has proved to be the best predictor of overall proficiency measured by a school mark.

*Table 13b: The Predictability of The Mark in English Based on the Tests for All Four Skills (Secondary School):*

*Note:* as the number of secondary school students taking the speaking test was rather small, we decided to use only three language skills as predictors in our regressional analysis.

| N=54      | R R2 F         | Correlation of marks and tests | Standard Regressional Coefficient |
|-----------|----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|           | ,55 ,31 57,54* | R                              | Beta                              |
| Writing   |                | ,50*                           | ,38*                              |
| Reading   |                | ,31*                           | ,12*                              |
| Listening |                | ,39*                           | ,21*                              |

\*p<0,5

With secondary school students, as well as with primary school students, the best predictor of the mark in English is the result on the writing test.

## CONCLUSION

Our research has established that Croatian primary school students have acquired the level A2 writing proficiency in English, and that secondary school students have acquired the level B1 writing proficiency. Writing proficiency is at the lowest, when compared to the other language skills. This was expected, given the fact that writing is a very complex skill.

Female students scored better at our tests than their male counterparts. The intensity of learning English (number of classes per week) affected the score on the writing test, but only in the case of the secondary school students, and not the primary school students. Our explanation is that the primary school English instruction does not include sufficient essay-writing. The length of learning (years) has influenced the scores of both groups on the writing test. Learning English outside school was also influential. Learning other foreign languages has positive effect on the development of writing skills, and learning German has proven to bring about the best results. The use of the Internet enhances the writing proficiency in English, which was expected. The last object of our investigation was the question to what extent can writing be a predictor of proficiency in English. Our results have shown that writing is the crucial element in predicting a student's mark in English.

The research has confirmed some of our suppositions based on intuition and practical experience. It has also borne some unexpected results (the influence of learning German on the development of writing skills in English). New questions

emerged, to which further research should find answers. These questions include the mutual influence of learning German and English. It would also be interesting to look deeper into the connection of writing and reading.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, L.G. (1965). *Essay and letter writing*. Essex: Longman.
- Carter , R., & D. Nunan (2001). *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & E. Olshtain (2000). *Discourse an Context in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Dambridge University Press.
- Jolly, D. (1984). *Writing Tasks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leki, I. ((2002). Second language Writing. *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (pp.60-69). Robert B. Kaplan (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.