

## A Study on Self-Regulatory Processes in EFL Academic Writing

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*The process of academic writing is a highly demanding mental activity that presents a number of difficulties for students, especially when it comes to L2/FL (second/foreign language) writing. The study employs the social-cognitive model of writing to explore the issue of students' self-regulated learning (SRL) in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing, with a special emphasis on the most important processes and strategies that may influence the quality of writing performance. We also wanted to explore whether there is an improvement in the quality of writing performance due to regular students' exposure to EFL learning at the university levels. The quantitative part of the study involved 104 students (53 undergraduates and 51 graduates), while the qualitative part focused on two groups of higher and lower proficiency writers. The quantitative part of the study pointed out a significant difference between the first and second measurement points in the quality of students' writing performance both at the undergraduate and graduate levels of study. Students in second measurement point had a better writing performance compared to the ones in the first measurement point. The qualitative research results showed that higher proficiency writers exhibited better SRL processes compared to lower proficiency writers. The research findings suggest that the students' writing proficiency benefits from incorporating more SRL processes in EFL learning/teaching in the Croatian educational context.*

**Key words:** *academic writing, self-regulated learning (SRL), university students, higher/lower proficiency writers.*

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## Introduction

Considering how demanding and challenging the task of writing can be in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), it is no surprise that many students around the world face a number of difficulties in the process.<sup>1</sup> The English language is *conditio sine qua non* of the modern digital world in which students must acquire learning strategies in EFL academic writing to be able to accomplish and improve their writing performance before they become competent writers. In the process of EFL teaching, writing has been neglected for a long time.<sup>2</sup> L2 writers should be taught to employ different kinds of knowledge, such as content knowledge (ideas and concepts), system knowledge (syntax and lexis), process knowledge (how to prepare and carry out the writing task), genre knowledge (understanding different genres and their values) and context knowledge (awareness of readers' expectations).<sup>3</sup> Students at the end of primary and secondary school achieve below-average scores in writing across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Students in Croatia, starting from upper primary grades up to higher education levels, achieve average or even worse results when it comes to their writing proficiency.<sup>5</sup> One reason for these findings might be that our educational system does not put adequate emphasis on the issue of self-regulated learning (SRL)<sup>6</sup>, defined as the "self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions that writers use to attain various literary goals, including improving their writing strategies and skills as well as enhancing the quality of the text they create"<sup>7</sup>. The absence of SRL teaching consequently causes a lack of students' SRL improvement through

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ken HYLAND, *Second language writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; Yanyan ZHANG, Hui Guo ZHANG, A study of English writing and domain-specific motivation and self-efficacy of Chinese EFL learners, *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 16 (2012) 2, 2012, 101-121.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. David NUNAN, Ronald CARTER (ur.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*, Cambridge, Cambridge university press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hyland, *Second language...*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Steve GRAHAM, Gert RIJLAARSDAM, Writing education around the globe: Introduction and call for a new global analysis, *Reading and Writing*, 29 (2016) 5, 781-792.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Ana JERKOVIĆ, Jasminka BRALA-MUDROVČIĆ, Ispitivanje nekih komponenti samoregulacije učenja u domenama čitanja i pisanja kod učenika različite dobi i roda [Examining some components of self-regulation of learning in domains of reading and writing in students of different ages and genders], *Napredak*, 159 (2018) 1-2, 73-99; Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Katica BALENOVIĆ, Jasminka BRALA-MUDROVČIĆ, Self-Regulated Learning and Sociodemographic Factors in Students' L1/L2 Writing Proficiency, *Journal of Language and Education*, 8 (2022) 1, 100-116, doi:10.17323/jle.2022.11581.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Jasminka BRALA-MUDROVČIĆ, Konceptualizacija psihologije čitanja i pisanja s implikacijama za poučavanje [Conceptualization of the Psychology of Reading and Writing with Implications for Teaching], *Lingua Montenegrina*, 2 (2018) 22, 263-288.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Barry J. ZIMMERMAN, Rafael Risemberg, Becoming a self-regulated writer: A social cognitive perspective, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 22 (1997) 1 73-101, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1997.0919>.

the academic years.<sup>8</sup> Another reason could be that EFL students are not aware of SRL strategies in writing. A writer has to regulate metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, emotional, contextual and behavioural processes when creating lengthy texts.<sup>9</sup> Writing strategies are sequence of activities in which a writer engages in planning, making a draft, composing, revising and other writing related activities.<sup>10</sup> They are also defined as conscious decisions made by the writers to solve a writing problem.<sup>11</sup> Cognitive writing strategies are employed when transforming background knowledge into a text world.<sup>12</sup> Metacognition involves planning, setting goals, monitoring, and evaluating, whereas motivation involves one's capability to self-motivate, by taking on responsibility for successes and failures and enhancing self-efficacy<sup>13</sup>. SRL processes related to behaviour include help-seeking and creating a positive learning environment for learning task. Writing strategies are realized through writing skills, such as brainstorming, researching a topic, collaborative learning, etc.<sup>14</sup> Inefficient educational strategies are generally found in the process of EFL learning/teaching in Croatia, with writing skills often considered the most difficult to acquire. Namely, many students lack the basic skills required for proficient writing.<sup>15</sup> In other words, there seems to be a widespread need to improve writing proficiency in various countries.

In two-thirds of schools, writing is not taught adequately since little attention is paid to writing strategies.<sup>16</sup> Teachers allocate minimal time to instruct students on writing, leading to a lack of feedback on their writing proficiency. In most schools, less time is devoted for teaching specific writing strategies and skills when compared to other language aspects. Teachers teach each stu-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Shirin ABADIKHAH, Zahra ALIYAN, Seyed Hassan TALEBI, EFL students' attitudes towards self-regulated learning strategies in academic writing, *Issues in Educational Research*, 28 (2018) 1, 1-17.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Pietro BOSCOLO, Suzanne HIDI, The Multiple Meanings of Motivation to Write, in S. Hidi, P. Boscolo (Eds.), *Writing and Motivation*, 1-16 (2007) Elsevier, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9781849508216\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9781849508216_002).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. TORRANCE et al., 2000 in Nanik RAHMAWATI, Endang FAUZIATI, Sri MARMAN, Writing Strategies used by Indonesian high and low achievers, *International Journal of Social Science & Humanities*, 4 (2019) 2, 35-48, <http://ijssh.ielas.org>.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Congjun MU, Suzanne CARRINGTON, An Investigation of Three Chinese Students' English Writing Strategies, *TESL-EJ*, 11 (2007) 1, 1-23.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Stephen L. KUCER, The Making of Meaning: Reading and Writing as Parallel Processes. *Written Communication*, 2-3 (1985) 317-336, <https://doi.org/10.1177/074108838502003006>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Abadikhah, Aliyan, Talebi, *EFL students' attitudes...*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Psihologija pisanja – Određenje pisanja i njegovih procesa, razvoj pisanja kod djece te pristupi poučavanju pisanja [Psychology of Writing – Defining Writing and Writing Processes, Development of Writing in Children and Approaches to Teaching Writing], *Školski vjesnik*, 62 (2013) 2-3, 391-409.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jelena MIHALJEVIĆ DJIGUNOVIĆ, Vesna BAGARIĆ, English in Croatia – From needs to achievements, *Metodika*, 8 (2007) 1, 38-50.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Steve GRAHAM, A revised writer(s)-within-community model of writing, *Educational Psychologist*, 53 (2018) 258-279, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2018.148140>.

dent equally, regardless of differences among them. Although many factors can influence students' writing development (e.g., biological functioning, genetics, socioeconomic status), many of them do not receive the requisite institutional writing instruction.<sup>17</sup> There has been no progress in recent decades in this direction. In conclusion, there appears to be a need for increasing practice when it comes to writing processes and writing strategies at the level of schools and universities.<sup>18</sup>

Applying process-oriented approaches and following the Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulated learning<sup>19</sup>, recommended to shape the socio-constructivist context of education, teachers should create such writing conditions akin to those used by professional writers. One way to increase SRL processes is to provide a writing environment or writing situations that increase the likelihood of SRL. The authors explained that teachers are able create such environments by encouraging writers to deal with projects of their own choice, develop their own specific understanding or personal ideas about the educator's assigned topics, develop personal plans for doing writing tasks, move on the tasks at their own speed, and provide an appropriate writing environment.<sup>20</sup> The most important instructions to make students successful writers include the following: social cognitive self-regulation instruction (CSRI), self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), the writer(s) within the community model of writing (emphasis on collaborative writing), writing strategy instructions, the model of process-oriented writing, etc.<sup>21</sup> These instructions are based on approaches for active learning, student-centred learning, and constructivist learning as parts of SRL. In this sense, SRL is seen as a method where students push themselves to be actively involved in the learning processes and strategies.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, students are required to set their goals and cultivate self-efficacy as their personal beliefs in their own capacity are important for learning achievements.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Graham, *A revised writer(s)-within-community...*, 260.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Drs Herman M. B. FRANSSEN, Cor AARNOUTSE, Schrijfonderwijs in de praktijk [Writing education in practice], *Pedagogiek*, 23 (2003) 3, 185-198.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Albert BANDURA, *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Steve GRAHAM, Karen R. HARRIS, Self-regulation and writing: Where do we go from here? *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 22 (1997) 1, 102-114.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Samoregulacija i pisano izražavanje [Self-regulation and written expression], *Suvremena psihologija*, 21 (2018) 2, 161-185.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Barry J. ZIMMERMAN, Development of self-regulated learning: Which are the key subprocesses?, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 16 (1986) 307-313.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Cognitive and Affective Processes in Academic Writing

From the 1980s, researchers intended to analyse the interaction of cognitive processes during the process of writing, but from the 1990s up to now, they first stressed the in-depth analysis of working memory and long-term memory, i.e., metacognitive, and cognitive processes in writing. Initially, their focus was on their role in expert text writing; however, they later delved into the motivational, emotional, and social processes of writing.<sup>23</sup> The affective processes of writing are important at the beginning of SRL, although metacognition and cognition stand as central processes in such learning.<sup>24</sup> 'SRL, as defined above, is an active, constructive process where learners set goals for their learning and attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition'. SRL takes place in four general domains: metacognitive, cognitive, affective, behavioural, and contextual.<sup>25</sup> The cognitive domain includes using strategies, such as rule-governed methods for organizing, producing, and transforming written text. To encourage metacognitive and cognitive processes, it is equally important to initiate both motivational and emotional processes that are closely related to writing (e.g., self-image, self-confidence, interest, expectations, and positive emotions)<sup>26</sup>.

### 1.2. Previous Research on SRL Strategies Use in EFL Academic Performance

Previous studies investigating the role of SRL strategy use in EFL writing performance have pointed out that EFL learners who employ more strategies perform better in writing. Students who used SRL strategies in writing courses widened their cognitive levels and enhanced their self-efficacy in learning and consequently, significantly improved their writing performance. Furthermore, some research has shown that higher proficiency EFL learners tend to use SRL strategies more,<sup>27</sup> particularly in the areas of meta-cognitive and cognitive

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Pregled kognitivnih i motivacijskih čimbenika pisanja [An overview of cognitive and motivational factors in writing] *Psihološki teme*, 23 (2014) 2, 189-208.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Senad BEĆIROVIĆ, Amna BRDAREVIĆ-ČELJO, Edda POLZ, Exploring the Relationship Between Language Learning Strategies, Academic Achievement, Grade Level, and Gender, *Journal of Language and Education*, 7 (2021) 2, 93-106. <https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2021.10771>.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dale H. SCHUNK, Self-regulated learning: The educational legacy of Paul R. Pintrich, *Educational Psychologist*, 40 (2005) 85-94.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Nikčević-Milković, Brala-Mudrovčić, *Konceptualizacija psihologije čitanja i pisanja...*, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Lee Chien CHING, Strategy and self-regulation instruction as contributors to improving students' cognitive model in an ESL program, *English for Specific Purposes*, 21 (2002) 3, 261-289.

strategies.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, among high-proficiency EFL undergraduate learners in China, there was a preference for meta-cognitive rather than socio-behavioural strategies in their L2 writing. A study was also conducted among first year EFL students in Budapest, showing that the participants recorded a medium level of strategy use.<sup>29</sup> It was additionally found that the strategy used had a positive relationship with the increased level of learners' motivation and self-efficacy. Another study, conducted in Iran, also revealed that their EFL university students were moderately to slightly high in using self-regulatory strategies and processes.<sup>30</sup> Students took advantage of applying SRL in the process of EFL writing.<sup>31</sup> Cognitive processes are important for success in EFL writing, followed by sociodemographic factors and motivational processes.<sup>32</sup> In short, SRL in EFL writing courses appears to be beneficial to EFL learners' proficiency.

### 1.3. Aim

The main aim of this study was to gain insight into students' EFL academic writing at the university level. The research aimed to answer the following questions: (1) Is there any improvement in EFL writing proficiency between the two measurement points among undergraduate and graduate students? and (2) What are the most crucial self-regulated learning (SRL) processes for writing success according to higher and lower proficiency writers? We anticipate that the level of EFL writing proficiency will be better in the second than in the first measurement due to the exposure to formal EFL learning at the university level. We also assume that higher proficiency writers will exhibit better SRL processes – metacognitive, cognitive, social, behavioural, motivational, and emotional. These issues are interesting to examine in the Croatian educational context since they seem to be insufficiently explored, especially when higher education is taken into account.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Teng, Zhang, *Effects of motivational regulation...*, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Kata CSIZER, Gyula TANKO, English ma-jor's self-regulatory control strategy use in academic writing and its relation to L2 motivation, *Applied Linguistics*, 38 (2015) 3, 386-404.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Abadikhah, Aliyan, Talebi, *EFL students' attitudes...*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Ariyanti ARIYANTI, Rinda FITRIANA, Widi Syahtia PANE, Self-Regulated Learning in Writing of EFL Learners, *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 3 (2018) 1, 155-166.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Nikčević-Milković, Balenović, Brala-Mudrovčić, *Self-Regulated Learning...*, 100.



## 2. Method

### 2.1. Ethical considerations

The current study was conducted after obtaining consent from the university institution. The aim of the study was presented to the participants along with the details of their involvement in the study; they were also told that the whole procedure would be audio recorded. The participants were additionally guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, they were asked to give their consent to be voluntarily engaged in the research provided that their names and data would be coded to enable the researcher a link to their writing assignments.

### 2.2. Participants

The quantitative part of the research was conducted on a purposive sample – students (in higher adolescent development period) at the undergraduate level of study (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year; average age  $M = 20.3$ ;  $SD = 0.69$ ) and the graduate level of study (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year;  $M = 22.2$ ;  $SD = 0.570$ ). The total number of respondents was 104, with 53 of them being undergraduates and 51 graduates. They were expected to be at the B2 level according to CERF (*The Common European Framework of Reference for Language*).

The qualitative part of the research included two focus groups. Two quota samples (eight students in each group) comprised higher and lower scoring students ('higher proficiency writers' and 'lower proficiency writers'), based on their EFL writing scores and their GPA from courses in English.

### 2.3. Data collection

In the current study, a mixed-method approach was used, with observations and focus group interviews, to provide a detailed explanation of EFL writing processes employed by university EFL students. It was conducted on the initial and final year students at the beginning and at the end of the academic year 2020/2021. Students wrote essays in English on *The position of the Croatian and/or English language in global processes*. As a motivation before writing, they were instructed to read the professional text *English as a Global Language* by David Crystal (2009)<sup>33</sup>. Between the first and the second teacher-student meetings, they could explore the given topic. Their essays were assessed by two

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. David CRYSTAL, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

English teachers on the basis of the criteria applied at the State Graduation Examination (*Centre for External Evaluation of the Republic of Croatia*) which is in line with the CEFR grading scale. The points achieved in the exam, according to the scale, were converted into grades ranging from 1 (not satisfactory) to 5 (excellent). The correlation between the evaluators was high ( $r = 0.87$ ).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. The Quantitative Research Results

To answer the first research question considering the improvement in EFL writing proficiency between two measurement points, a *t-test* for independent samples was performed (Table 1).

Table 1. The testing difference in writing in two measurement points between the two groups of students

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-test</i>	<i>p</i>
FIRST MEASURING POINT	Group 1	2.71	0.825	0.73	0.577
	Group 2	2.46	0.967		
SECOND MEASURING POINT	Group 1	3.37	0.955	0.74	0.755
	Group 2	3.62	0.870		
GROUP 1	First measuring point	2.62	0.837	8.84 □	0.000
	Second measuring point	3.32	0.894		
GROUP 2	First measuring point	2.67	1.438	2.60 □	0.012
	Second measuring point	3.25	1.163		

Legend:  $p < .05$ ; N Group 1 = 53, N Group 2 = 51; Group 1 – The undergraduate level of study, Group 2 – The graduate level of study; First Measuring Point – The Grade from the 1st Written Essay, Second Measuring Point – The Grade from 2nd Written Essay

Table 1 indicates a statistically significant difference between the first and second measurements in the writing proficiency of undergraduate students ( $t = 8.84$ ;  $p < .00$ ). Their performance was better in the second measurement point ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.894$ ) when compared to the previous one ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.837$ ). In addition, there was a statistically significant difference between the first and second measurement points in students' writing proficiency at the graduate level of study ( $t = 2.60$ ;  $p < .012$ ). In the second measurement point, these students exhibited better writing proficiency ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.163$ ) compared to the first measurement point ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.438$ ). Such results were expected because of the students' exposure to formal EFL learning and their



university practice in writing.<sup>34 35 36</sup> The results are potentially explained by the more intensive engagement of students throughout their studies, both when it comes to writing tasks and practice in oral language skills.

### 3.2. The Qualitative Research Results

As mentioned above, the qualitative part of the study investigated students' SRL processes in EFL writing through two focus groups. During the focus group interviews, the participants were questioned about their thoughts, feelings and behaviours while writing the texts. Three groups of questions were used (Table 2): 1. Academic Cognition and Metacognition, 2. Academic Behaviour, and 3. Academic Motivation and Emotions in Writing.<sup>37</sup>

Table 2. Questions depending on processes of SRL in EFL writing

1. Academic Cognition and Metacognition
Question no. 1: <i>What was going on in your mind while writing the text?</i>
Question no. 2: <i>What difficulties did you often have while writing?</i>
Question no. 3: <i>What was the easiest and the most difficult thing in writing?</i>
Question no. 4: <i>Can you write different types of texts?</i>
Question no. 5: <i>Do you use: a) declarative, b) (meta) cognitive, c) conceptual, d) procedural knowledge when writing the text?</i>
2. Academic Behaviour (strategies and skills)
Question no. 1: <i>Do you know who your intended audience is?</i>
Question no. 2: <i>Do you use a help-seeking behaviour strategy?</i>
Question no. 3: <i>Do you revise text while writing?</i>
Question no. 4: <i>Do you think about the structure of the text in advance or while writing?</i>
Question no. 5: <i>Do you correct text while or at the end of writing?</i>
Question no. 6: <i>Do you correct a text in layers (sentence meaning, sentence structure, grammar, writing style, spelling, etc.)?</i>
Question no. 7: <i>Do you use a collaborative learning skill in writing?</i>
Question no. 8: <i>What kind of writing practice have you had during your education?</i>
2. Academic Motivation and Emotions
Question no. 1: <i>Have you been developing motivational processes in writing (e.g., intrinsic interest in writing, self-efficacy, the expectation of success in writing, the value of writing, self-control, self-observation, self-reflection).</i>
Question no. 2: <i>What kind of emotions does writing usually evoke: positive or negative, activating or deactivating?</i>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Seyyed Ehsan GOLPARVAR, Afshin KHAFI, The role of L2 writing self-efficacy in integrated writing strategy use and performance, *Assessing Writing*, 47 (2021) 100504, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2020.100504>.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Steve GRAHAM, April CAMPING, Karen R. HARRIS, Clarence NG, Writing and Writing Motivation of Students Identified as English Language Learners, *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 3 (2021) 1, 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.46451/ijts.2021.01.01>.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Nikčević-Milković, Balenović, Brala-Mudrovčić, *Self-Regulated Learning...*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Fitriana, Pane, *Self-Regulated Learning in Writing of EFL...*, 155.

Qualitative results in the first category, focusing on the metacognitive and cognitive writing processes, showed that the majority of higher proficiency writers (70 %) prioritized grammar and spelling over text structure (40 %). Lower proficiency writers (70 %) wrote texts by transferring writing rules directly from their mother tongue (Croatian language) to English. All participants pointed out problems with vocabulary rather than with grammar (50 %). This is in line with what many linguists claim, that is, “without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, all participants reported that it was easier to write a literary text about familiar topics. All higher proficiency writers stated that they knew how to write essays, school assignments, seminar papers, and letters; they also claimed that they needed more practice. However, the majority of lower proficiency writers (70 %) mentioned that they did not know how to write different types of texts. All participants found it easier to write when they knew the topic in advance. Some research indicated that the quality of the text was related to the experience of reading and writing<sup>39</sup>, with many teachers believing that students learn to write primarily through reading, which is not entirely true according to some studies.<sup>40</sup> The crucial for the quality of the text writing is to acquire writing processes and writing strategies, given that writing is an extremely complex skill, requiring substantial time and effective instruction.<sup>41</sup> Many research studies show that metacognitive processes are the most important in writing.<sup>42</sup> Our research also showed that higher proficiency writers used all types of knowledge: declarative, metacognitive, cognitive, procedural and conditional, which allows writers to apply writing strategies, writing skills, and text-type knowledge in their writing. On the other hand, lower proficiency writers did not use metacognitive knowledge as the most important, which indicated a low level of their writing quality. Metacognitive knowledge is the most important in students’ EFL proficiency, which includes students’ awareness of what one knows, what one does not know, and how one can learn. EFL students need to possess not only a writing ability and L2 linguistic knowledge but also an awareness of the meta-textual knowledge of a specific discourse context.<sup>43</sup>

Our research results in the second category, with reference to writing strategies and skills, showed that all higher proficiency writers knew who their in-

<sup>38</sup> Cf. David Arthur WILKINS, *Linguistics in Language Teaching*, Suffolk, The Chaucer Press, 1972.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Timothy JAY, *The Psychology of Language*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Tien Ping HSIANG, Steve GRAHAM, Teaching writing in Grades 7–9 in urban schools in the Greater China Region, *Reading and Writing*, 29 (2016) 869-902, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-015-9597-5>.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Steve GRAHAM, Changing How Writing is Taught, *Review of Research in Education*, 43 (2019) 1, 277-303, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821125>.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo, Polz, *Exploring the Relationship...*, 93.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Abadikhah, Aliyan, Talebi, *EFL students’ attitudes...*, 1.

tended audience was. Most of them (70 %) wrote a draft before writing, while a smaller number of them (14 %) used *the idea storm technique* in their writing. The lower proficiency writers wrote a concept and used *the idea storm technique* only when they wrote texts with demanding forms/topics. All participants used the help-seeking behaviour strategy, seeking assistance primarily from colleagues and occasionally from their teachers. This aligns with previous studies which claimed that help-seeking behaviour could be a significant predictor of success in writing performance.<sup>44</sup> Writing performance could be improved by students' willingness to accept the lecturer's suggestion or feedback on their writing.<sup>45</sup>

In our research, all higher proficiency writers reviewed the text during its creation to get inspiration for further writing, and some of them (50 %) checked the quality of the text after writing. Similar results were observed among lower proficiency writers as well. All higher proficiency writers also thought about the structure of the text beforehand, while the majority of lower proficiency writers (70 %) contemplated structure only during the writing process. Some research results also proved that thinking about the structure of the text in advance is one of the main differences between higher and lower proficiency writers.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, most of higher proficiency writers (90 %) used a planning strategy in advance or during the writing process. They also used revision strategy during the writing process or after the text was written. Sometimes they made a draft. Our research results showed that lower proficiency writers (70 %) also used a planning strategy in advance or while writing, creating a draft beforehand. However, most of them utilized a revision strategy only after writing. Moreover, a portion of lower proficiency writers (40 %) planned to focus solely on the introductory part, considering it the most crucial aspect of writing. Only a smaller number of both focus groups (15 %) mentioned that they had been practising the writing strategies/skills in primary and secondary school, while no one was learning how to publish a text. Previous research studies also showed that students in the Republic of Croatia did not have enough knowledge about writing strategies/skills and their proper usage, and they incorrectly used the revision strategy, what was ultimately confirmed in

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Shaun HAWTHORNE Engaging reluctant writers: the nature of reluctance to write and the effect of a self-regulation strategy training programme on the engagement and writing performance of reluctant writers in secondary school English, unpublished Docotoral Thesis, University of Auckland, 2008, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37986986>; Carlo MAGNO, Self-Regulation and Approaches to Learning in English Composition Writing, *TESOL Journal*, 1 (2009) 1-16; Nikčević-Milković, *Samoregulacija i pisano izražavanje...*, 180; James WILLIAMS, Seiji TAKAKU, Help Seeking, Self-Efficacy, and Writing Performance among College Students, *Journal of Writing Research*, 3 (2011) 1, 1-18.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fitriana, Pane, *Self-Regulated Learning in Writing of EFL...*, 155.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Nathan L. MERTENS, *Writing-processes, tools and techniques*, New York, Nova Science Publishers, 2010.

this study as well.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, previous studies showed that the revision strategy was crucial for the quality of written text.<sup>48</sup>

In our research, lower proficiency writers mentioned that a good-quality text had to be written without mechanical errors (typos, incorrect spelling) while expert authors mostly focus on semantic aspects of a text.<sup>49</sup> All higher proficiency writers in our research corrected errors directly in the text when they came across them while a smaller number of them (20 %) corrected the text in layers as follows: sentence meaning, sentence structure, grammar, writing style, and spelling. All lower proficiency writers corrected each error at once, which was in line with previous studies<sup>50 51</sup>. Our research results showed that all higher proficiency writers used the collaborative learning method when writing certain forms of text, while only 30 % of lower proficiency writers used this method. Research studies in many countries, including The Republic of Croatia, showed a lack of a collaborative learning skill as a recommended writing skill for SRL in the writing domain.<sup>52</sup>

The results obtained in the third category, focusing on motivational and emotional processes, revealed that almost all higher proficiency writers (90 %) had positive attitudes towards writing. Other surveys also showed that the majority of students were somewhat able to motivate themselves to learn *how to write*, do some efforts to be engaged in writing class, and willingly rehearse, organize and elaborate lesson materials by themselves. Some students motivated themselves for writing through self-talk and self-consequating. Students possess some knowledge and awareness of the efforts required to learn, especially when facing challenges during the learning process, prompting them to seek help when needed. Students have good enough management relating to their effort engaging in academic activities and accomplishing the learning objectives<sup>53</sup>. In our research, all students believed that writing was a generic ability that requires a lot of effort. They also maintained a positive self-image when being involved in the process of writing. Furthermore, they claimed it was necessary to develop an ability to improve their self-efficacy in writing.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, Cognitive and Metacognitive Writing Processes in Students of Different Educational Level, in: Gerry Shiel, Ivanka Stričević, Dijana Sabolović-Krajina (ur.), *Literacy without Boundaries – Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Reading*, Zagreb, 2007, 133-137.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Nikčević-Milković, *Samoregulacija i pisano izražavanje...*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Deborah L. BUTLER, Cory L. ELASCHUK, Shannon POOLE, Promoting strategic writing by postsecondary students with learning disabilities: A report of three case studies, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 23 (2000) 196-213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511164>.

<sup>50</sup> Joan B. McLANE, Gillian D. McNAMEE, *Early Literacy*, Cambridge, University Press, 1990.

<sup>51</sup> Denis ALAMARGOT, Lucile CHANQUOY, *Through the Models of Writing*, England: Harvard, 2001, DOI:10.1007/978-94-010-0804-4.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Fien DE SMEDT, Hilde VAN KEER, Emmelien MERCHIE, Student, teacher and class-level correlates of Flemish late elementary school children's writing performance, *Reading and Writing*, 29 (2016) 5, 833-868, doi:10.1007/s11145-015-9590-z.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ariyanti, Fitriana, Pane, *Self-Regulated Learning in Writing of EFL...*, 155.

Self-efficacy is an important predictor of text quality, and it is positively associated with writing interest.<sup>54</sup> Students who are more self-efficacious tend to be more motivated and devote more effort to the writing task<sup>55</sup>. Our findings also showed that most higher proficiency writers had control over the writing process; their interest in writing was both intrinsic and extrinsic, although, for some of them, the interest was only extrinsic. Unfortunately, many studies have confirmed that interest in writing (and reading) declines during school years and through adulthood.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, all lower proficiency writers in our research had no control over writing and had a negative attitude towards writing processes. Most of them (76 %) believed that the ability to write was a result of an effort, while only a smaller number of them (14 %) believed that it was a result of talent. Lower proficiency writers had a negative image of themselves as writers who were driven by the external interest in writing with negative self-efficacy. Regarding their goal orientation, both focus groups mostly mentioned that they used learning and performance goal orientations, which was also found in the previous studies.<sup>57</sup> According to Khafi, during the writing process, high self-efficacy, and better self-image which is associated with an efficient use of writing strategies resulted in better quality of a text. Self-efficacy and self-regulation strategies are assumed to play an important role in the writing process.<sup>58</sup>

Our research results revealed that writing causes positive and activating emotions to all higher proficiency writers, while provoking negative and deactivating emotions to lower proficiency writers. Positive emotions trigger self-regulatory behaviours, as well as the use of adaptive learning and writing strategies resulted in better-written performances.<sup>59</sup> The role of a teacher in the writing process is very important because a teacher can make students emotionally active, positive, and challenging. However, many teachers are not familiar with the effective processes of writing, and for that reason fail to pay enough attention to such processes, strategies, and skills in many classes around

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Frank PAJARES, Giovanni VALIANTE, Gender differences in writing motivation and achievement of middle school students: A function of gender orientation?, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26 (2001) 3, 366-381, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.2000.1069>.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Golparvar, Khafi, *The role of L2 writing self-efficacy in integrated...*

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo, Polz, *Exploring the Relationship...*, 93; Ina V. S. MULLIS et al., PIRLS 2011. Results in Reading, TIMMS and PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, 2012, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544362>; Nikčević-Milković, *Samoregulacija i pisano izražavanje...*, 180.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Anela NIKČEVIĆ-MILKOVIĆ, *Samoregulacija učenja u području pisanja* [Self-regulation of learning in the field of writing.], unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Golparvar, Khafi, *The role of L2 writing self-efficacy...*

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Lynne HAMMANN, Self-Regulation in Academic Writing Tasks, *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 17 (2005) 1, 15-26.

the world.<sup>60</sup> Finally, in many countries, including the Republic of Croatia, the quality of students' writing performance is still at low proficiency level.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.3. *Limitations*

The main limitation of our study lies in the fact that the participants were recruited from a single institution, making generalizability unjustified. Although the sample in the quantitative part of the research was limited, the smaller size in its qualitative part was appropriate. The qualitative methodology explored data in depth, which would not have been possible in a larger quantitative scale study.<sup>62</sup>

### *Conclusion and Further Implications*

Our study aimed to explore and compare students' EFL writing proficiency between two groups of students at two measurement points, and after exposure to formal EFL learning for one study year at the university level. Two focus groups were formed (higher and lower proficiency writers) to examine differences in students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in the processes of EFL writing, with special emphasis on the role of SRL in students' EFL writing proficiency. Quantitative research results showed that participants in both groups (the undergraduate level of study and the graduate level of study) demonstrated better written performance in the second measurement point, which confirmed our first hypothesis. Qualitative research results showed that higher proficiency writers exhibited superior SRL processes, thus confirming our second hypothesis. Our findings indicate the importance of increased exposure to EFL learning, including SRL, at the university level. The research results suggest that the application of SRL in EFL teaching to be beneficial for students' writing proficiency in the Croatian educational context.

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Kristen Campbell WILCOX, Jill V. JEFFERY, Andrea GARDNER-BIXLER, Writing to the Common Core: Teachers' responses to changes in standards and assessments for writing in elementary schools, *Reading and Writing*, 29 (2016) 5, 903-928, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1097681>.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Graham, *A revised writer(s)-within-community...*, 260.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Jonathan A. SMITH, Paul FLOWERS, Michael LARKIN, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, London, Sage, 2009.



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*Istraživanje procesa samoregulacije učenja u akademskom pisanju na engleskomu kao stranomu jeziku*

Sažetak

U procesu akademskog pisanja, kao izrazito zahtjevne mentalne aktivnosti, studenti se suočavaju s brojnim poteškoćama, posebno kada je u pitanju pisanje tekstova na stranom jeziku. U okviru socio-kognitivnog modela pisanja provedeno je istraživanje radi uvida u samoregulacijske procese i strategije koji značajno utječu na kvalitetu pisanja na engleskom kao stranom jeziku. Također, istraživanjem se nastojalo utvrditi poboljšava li se kvaliteta pisanog izražavanja studenata prijediplomske i diplomske razine studija nakon učenja engleskog jezika u formalnoj nastavi. Kvantitativni dio istraživanja proveden je na uzorku od 104 studenta (53 s prijediplomske i 51 s diplomske razine studija) u dvije točke mjerenja (prije i poslije formalnog učenja). Kvalitativni dio istraživanja proveden je u dvije fokus grupe koje su sastavljene na temelju procjene kvalitete i sposobnosti pisanja. Prvu fokus grupu činili su studenti više razine sposobnosti pisanja, a drugu grupu studenti niže razine. Rezultati kvantitativnog dijela istraživanja pokazali su statistički značajnu razliku između prve i druge točke mjerenja u kvaliteti napisanog teksta u obje grupe studenata – prijediplomske i diplomske razine studija. U drugoj točki mjerenja kvaliteta napisanog teksta bila je bolja u odnosu na prvu točku mjerenja. Rezultati kvalitativnog dijela istraživanja pokazali su da studenti s razvijenijom sposobnosti pisanja učinkovitije koriste samoregulacijske procese i strategije pisanja u odnosu na studente s manje razvijenom sposobnosti pisanja. Na temelju rezultata istraživanja zaključuje se da je, u hrvatskom obrazovnom kontekstu, za kvalitetu pisanog izražavanja na engleskom jeziku, potrebno više eksplicitnog poučavanja strategija i vještina samoregulacije učenja u području pisanja na stranom jeziku.

*Ključne riječi: akademsko pisanje, autori manje/više razvijene sposobnosti pisanja, samoregulacija učenja (SRU), studenti.*

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