

# Most Students Cannot Write: Of course we knew that

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## Abstract

The article presents survey data from a small investigation carried out in 2012 and 2013 collected through a questionnaire from 135 university students in B2 level (CEFR) English language courses. The aim was to explore the students' behavior on the Internet with regard to their written language production, namely frequency and amount of written text produced online. The analysis showed a preference for a particular online service and limited written language output. The results are discussed in the light of the need to support university students in their attempts to produce longer pieces of narratives, argumentative and discursive types of texts. Suggestions are made for modifying pedagogical practices so as to engage students in activities that promote extensive writing.

*Keywords:* foreign languages teaching, writing, social media

## Резюме

Статията представя данни от проучване, събрани чрез въпросник, проведено през 2012 и 2013 година с 135 студенти в курсове по английски език на равнище B2 (CEFR). Целта на проучването е да изследва поведението на студентите в интернет с оглед на произвеждане на писмен текст, и по-специално честотата и количеството писмен текст онлайн. Анализите показват предпочитания на студентите към определена онлайн услуга и ограничена писмена продукция. Резултатите се обсъждат в светлината на необходимостта да се подпомогнат студентите в опитите им да композират по-дълги аргументативни и експозиционни текстове. Правят се предложения за модифициране на преподавателските дейности, като се ангажират студентите в дейности, насърчаващи по-обширна писмена продукция.

*Keywords:* чуждоезиково обучение, писане, социални медии

**Writing as ability and as a skill.** Writing is one of the most complex skills and is taught last. Considering the other skills and abilities, a child starts recognizing sound i.e. starts developing listening abilities even before birth; for the next 6-7 years speaking is in focus. Reading starts at about the age of 5, and writing is the last of the skill to be developed. That is, students have been developing the other skills more for about seven years before writing is introduced. Moreover, it takes further several years before a child moves away from the mechanics of writing to the expression of thoughts in a written form. Therefore writing is the last to be mastered.

**Writing in school.** A part of the problem with underdeveloped writing skills lies in pre-university education. In primary education the focus is mostly on mechanics of writing and graphemic representation and literacy. Until age 14 the focus shifts to literacy (syntax and morphology) and composing short pieces of text mainly in Literature classes. By the time students finish secondary education, most writing occurs in Literature classes and occasional other subjects. In short, in mainstream schooling writing is avoided by both students and teachers whenever possible. It is seen as time-consuming and as a result is very often neglected. Students have little practice in expressing their own ideas in a structured form in writing. Their skills in writing are developed mostly in foreign language classes at intermediate or higher levels. Yet, writing texts longer than 200 words is almost never considered since no external or internal body requires written output of such length.

**Writing in university.** When at university, under the false assumption that the first and second year students have mastered writing as a skill, faculty expect them to compose coherent, logically structured text in the form of course papers, projects, project proposals and theses. At the same time course assignments increasingly move to

alternative ways of evaluating students' knowledge and performance in the form of standardized tests, multimedia projects, and various forms of visual engagement of the new Net generation to capture new skills and literacies. As a consequence, the 'old-fashioned' essay or course project is equally frowned upon by the management, the faculty and the students.

As a part of the final exam at B2 level at New Bulgarian University (NBU) the students are required to write an essay, so this is taught in language classes. However, both students and teachers face difficulties. Therefore, this study set out to explore some of the reasons for the students' difficulties in writing a longer piece of an argument. The hypothesis is that the frequency and amount of the students' language production on the Internet influence their skill level in foreign language writing tasks. The reality as evident from the results presented in this article show that students do not engage in writing activities online as an opportunity for improving their writing skills.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 135 students from eight groups in B2 level (CEFR) English language courses. The age range (Figure 1) was 19-22 (25.9%) for the male students, 19-22 (48.1%) for the female ones and 19-27 (25.9%) unreported. The biggest group was 19-year-olds comprising a third of the participant population. First and second year students comprised two thirds of the participants (Figure 2).

The participants represented a large array of majors (Table 1) with 44% of the majors being very much related or somewhat related to ICT, computer technology and social media like Informatics, Mass Communications, Tourism, Graphic design, etc. *Very much related* is understood as studies that involve computer programming, computer graphics and design, while *somewhat related* is viewed as much of the work in the profession being done through and/or with social media and Internet communication being involved.

### **Materials and Procedure**

Data was collected over two years in 2012 and 2013 at the beginning of each term through a survey by means of a questionnaire comprising 17 questions about the frequency and amount of the students' written text production on social media platforms on the Internet. The questionnaire asked about whether the students had accounts on Twitter, Facebook, forums, blogs and email and how often and how much text they produced. The questionnaire also included questions about the frequency and amount of texting on mobile phones and smart phones. For visual comparison of text quantity the students were presented with a handout containing chunks of 50, 100 and 200 words of Lorem Ipsum dummy text generated on <http://www.lipsum.com>.

### **Results**

The results are summarized in Table 2; what follows is a breakdown of the results for the different online services.

**Twitter.** Nearly 93% of the students have no Twitter accounts. Those who reported having Twitter accounts send about 10 tweets weekly.

**Facebook.** A little over 96% of the students have Facebook accounts (48.1% female, 22.2% male, 25.9% unreported) with an online activity of 15 posts on average daily.

**Forum.** Posting on discussion forums and groups is similar to the activity on Twitter. Over 81% of the students do not post to forums and only 18.5% do with an average of 12 posts (comments) weekly. The male-female ratio is 1:5, i.e. female students post more comments in online forums.

**Blog.** Nearly 89% of the students have no blogs. While 4% of the participants own a blog but do not post, 7 % of the total research population post on other people's blogs. Furthermore, their comments are in Bulgarian language.

**E-mail.** Students send 31 emails weekly on average which makes about one email message a day. Data in Table 3 provides a breakdown as per the number of words in email messages. As can be seen, nearly two thirds of the students report sending emails of 50 or fewer words, 26% report their email messages contain between 50 and 100 words, and no one has reported sending emails of 200 words or longer.

**Texting.** Texting turned out to be the second most used communication service. Only one student reported not having a mobile phone and 74% reported they owned a smartphone. In total close to five hundred sms messages weekly have been reported on average. Further ad-hoc investigation revealed that of those students who owned a smartphone, 85% texted using the chat-based mobile application provided by Facebook. On the whole the students reported being connected and using this feature "all the time" "every day".

## Discussion

A lot of the communication on the Internet is through a written medium. The platforms and online services included in the questionnaire – Twitter, Facebook, forums, blogs, email – allow for different amounts of text ranging from no text to an unrestricted amount, the later being forums (discussion boards and discussion groups), blogs and email. It is thought that language output produced on blogs, forums and in email is longer, more logically structured with the author having considered the target audience, the argumentation, the choice of vocabulary and the established style. It is also thought that students who write longer texts and who write more often would feel more confident in their writing skills.

However, the results show that students do not produce written text online longer than 200 words. Moreover, the most used online service is Facebook which would rarely encourage longer narratives or argumentative texts. The data confirm earlier informal, unstructured observations that students do not often engage in extensive writing activities, therefore they underperform in university settings when they are required to write extended narratives or any kind of structured written text.

There is plethora of research on using digital tools for developing writing skills. A number of researchers report on various positive outcomes from using blogs, to mention a few: improved students' attitudes toward writing and increased students' motivation to write (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2007), confidence in writing, self-expression and engagement in learning writing in real-life situations (Fageeh, 2011). The later study also showed that university students' interest was incremented. Other researchers' findings are that students become more careful with planning their tasks

and improved error correction before submitting their work (Vurdien, 2011). Positive outcomes from peer feedback in using blogs for promoting text production were reported in a study by Álvarez (2012). Sampath&Zalipour (2009) have shown positive outcomes from approaches to product, process and post-process in writing. Sousa&Soares (2009) report on the development of discursive skills, contributing to linguistic analysis practices in the classroom.

The issue should be addressed at all levels of education concerned. When students come underprepared from secondary education, the university does not see compensating for this as its major objective. However, if we are to do our job, we have got to move students away from the click-share happy texting and Facebook behaviour to the blogging and wiki culture. By promoting students' collaboration, peer-assessment and evaluation, we could encourage deeper discussion, drafting and re-writing thus improving their writing skills.

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Notes

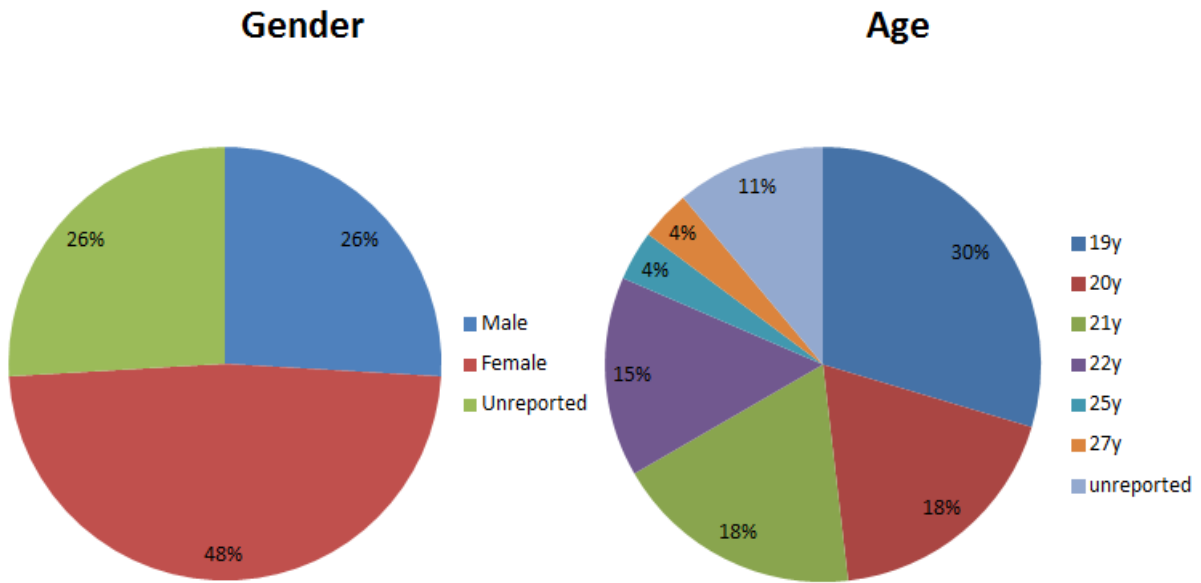


Figure 1. Participants by age and gender

### Year at Uni

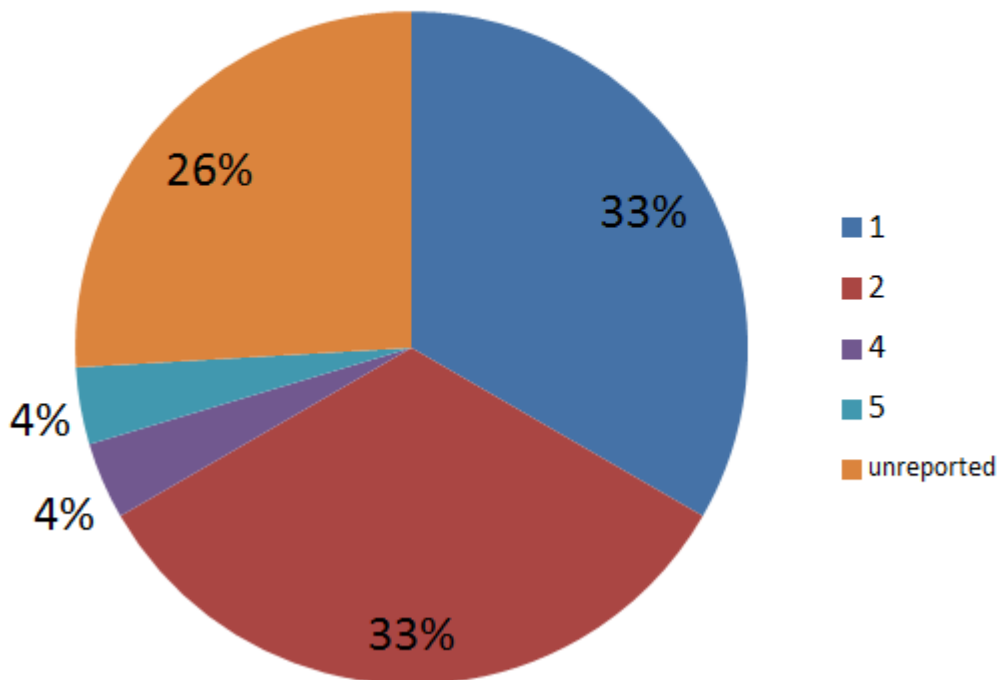


Figure 2. Year at university

Table 1. *Majors*

Major	%	related
Mass communications	3,7	Very much related
Telecommunications	3,7	
Information Technology	3,7	
Informatics	3,7	
Business Administration	3,7	Somewhat related
Public Administration	3,7	
Administration and management	3,7	
Tourism	7,4	
Graphic Design	3,7	
Interior Design	3,7	
Finance	3,7	Not related
Civil and Corporate Security	11,1	
Psychology	14,8	
History of Arts	3,7	
*Unreported	22,2	
	56%	

Table 2. *Students' online activity*

online activity	sms	twitter	facebook	forum	blog
yes	85,1%	7,4%	96,2%	18,5%	7,4%
no	14,8%	92,5%	3,7%	81,4%	88,8%

Table 3. *Words in email*

words in emails	up to 50	50-100	100-200	200+	Obtained responses
Male	18,5%	3,7%	3,7%	0%	100%
Female	61,5%	15,4%	0%	0%	76,9%
Unreported	28,6%	42,8%	14,3%	0%	85,7%
Total	65,2%	26,1%	8,7%	0%	85,2%