



# The dimensions of written expression: Language group and gender differences



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## ABSTRACT

This study compared the written expression of 159 English-speaking first (L1) and second language (L2) learners ( $M_{age} = 9; 7$  years,  $SD = 3.63$  months) in England. The L1 learners outperformed their L2 peers on the four dimensions of written expression, namely holistic quality, written vocabulary, organisational quality, and compositional fluency. Girls also outperformed boys on all dimensions, except for organisation. The interaction between language group and gender was nonsignificant, but there was a trend for the language group differences to be larger for boys. Vocabulary, organisation, and compositional fluency made unique contributions to holistic quality in both language groups and the strength of these relations were relatively comparable across the L1 and L2 groups. Educational implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Meeting the needs of learners from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds remains one of the major challenges facing education professionals today. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by reports indicating that minority language learners who speak a language other than the instructional language at home are more at risk of underachievement in reading comprehension and writing (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2011; Statistical First Release [SFR], 2011). There are about one million (15%) school age minority language learners in England (SFR, 2012c) and based on the current trends, it can be projected that in ten years' time almost one quarter of all school age children will speak a language other than English. Thus far, most research on minority language learners has focused on reading; with the exception of a notable few (e.g., Cameron & Besser, 2004), there is a dearth of studies comparing first (L1) and second language (L2) learners' written expression. Hence, we lack an understanding of how L2 learners perform on different dimensions of written expression and how aspects of their written expression contribute to their overall writing quality. Additionally, there is some evidence that L2 boys from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds might be more at risk of underachievement in writing skills

(Cameron & Besser, 2004). However, the research evidence on gender differences in writing is far from conclusive (Jones & Myhill, 2007; Peterson & Parr, 2012), and it remains to be clarified whether L2 boys are more at risk of low writing achievement. The primary goal of the current study is to address these gaps in the literature by examining the written expression of both L1 and L2 learners.

### 1.1. Language group differences in written expression

Most research on L2 writing tends to focus on older age groups who speak English as a foreign language and involves the psycholinguistic analysis of the writing processes of students in their first and second languages (for an overview, see Wolff, 2000). There are also others that have examined the cross-linguistic interactions in the written discourse of children (Berman & Verhoeven, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2006; Zecker, 2004). However, research on minority language learners, who tend to have little or no literacy skills in their home languages and who are learning to write in a second language (e.g., English) which is also the language of instruction, is highly limited at this time (Lesaux, Geva, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006).

Cameron and Besser's (2004) seminal study remains the most comprehensive study conducted on L2 learners' writing in England. The authors examined two writings (one fiction and one persuasive) of 138 L2 and 126 L1 learners produced for the national attainment tests at the end of primary school (about 11 years of age). The L2 sample was very heterogeneous and mostly composed

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of learners from Indian, Pakistani, Black–African, Chinese, and Bangladeshi heritage. Most L2 learners had been living in England for at least five years. Cameron and Besser (2004) found that the L2 achievement gap on the national writing test was nine percentage points. The follow-up analysis revealed no language group differences in spelling accuracy levels. This was in accordance with the reports that L2 learners tend to underperform on overall writing quality but their spelling accuracy level tends to be comparable to that of their L1 peers (Babayigit, 2013; Lesaux et al., 2006). Cameron and Besser's (2004) linguistic analysis of the scripts revealed that the L2 learners tended to make more grammatical mistakes than their L1 peers (e.g., in the use of prepositions and articles) and were less likely to use complex grammatical structures (e.g., adverbs, sentences with multiple clauses). Similar findings have been reported with 8–10 year old Turkish–Dutch speaking learners (Verheyden, Van den Branden, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh, & De Maeyer, 2010). The children were asked to retell a comic strip story through writing in Dutch. Relative to their monolingual Dutch speaking peers, the Turkish–Dutch speaking learners were found to make more syntactic mistakes in their writings. Together these studies highlight that weaknesses in sentence structure and grammatical accuracy may undermine the L2 learners' overall text quality.

The quality of written vocabulary, often assessed in terms of the appropriate choice of words and diversity, is another important dimension of written expression that influences text quality. Cameron and Besser (2004) did not find any language group differences in the quality of written vocabulary and Verheyden et al. (2010) did not assess the vocabulary dimension of children's written text. Hence, given the paucity of studies, we do not know whether L2 learners' written vocabulary differs from that of their L1 peers. We also do not know which dimensions of written expression contribute to the overall writing quality in L2 learners and whether the pattern of these relations is comparable across the L1 and L2 groups. For instance, in a study with predominantly L1 learners, Olinghouse and Leaird (2009) found that the diversity of written vocabulary along with compositional fluency (total number of written words) were the strongest predictors of children's overall writing quality. To date, no study has examined these relationships with L2 learners.

### 1.2. Gender differences in written expression

The reports on the national attainment tests of writing achievement indicate a relatively stable gender gap in favour of girls (NAEP, 2011; SFR, 2011, 2012b). By contrast, the findings from research studies have been mixed (e.g., Jewell & Malecki, 2005; Jones & Myhill, 2007; Malecki & Jewell, 2003; Olinghouse, 2008; Peterson & Parr, 2012; Stainthorp & Rauf, 2009; Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers, & Lawrence, 2012; Williams & Larkin, 2012). For instance, Olinghouse (2008) found that girls outperformed boys on the measures of both compositional fluency and quality. Likewise, Malecki and Jewell (2003) found that girls outperformed boys on all dimensions of written expression including compositional fluency and spelling accuracy among children from early to middle primary grade levels. Troia et al. (2012) reported similar gender gaps in favour of girls with children from about 8 to 16 years of age. Cameron and Besser (2004) did not formally test gender differences in L1 and L2 written expression. Nonetheless, their report also indicates a tendency of more girls to obtain higher scores in writing in both L1 and L2 groups. Moreover, they found that the L2 achievement gap in writing was slightly larger for boys than girls: whereas the writing achievement gap between L1 and L2 boys was 12 percentage points, that for L1 and L2 girls was 9 percentage points. However, not all studies have found a gender difference in writing

quality (e.g., Jones & Myhill, 2007; Williams & Larkin, 2012). For instance, Jones and Myhill (2007) tested adolescents between 13 and 16 years of age and found very limited evidence to suggest that boys' writing quality was poorer than that of their girl peers. Similar results were reported by Williams and Larkin (2012) with younger children aged between 8 and 11 years: although girls wrote longer texts than boys, there were no significant gender differences in writing quality.

Numerous explanations have been proffered for these seemingly contradictory findings, including the large variation of performance within each gender group (Jones & Myhill, 2007), a possible mismatch between the boys' writing style and curricular expectations that may put boys at a disadvantage in national attainment tests of writing (for reviews, see Jones, 2012; Peterson & Parr, 2012), and gender differences in beliefs about writing and motivations (Pajares & Valiante, 2001; Troia et al., 2012). Whatever the reasons might be, the gender gap is not considered problematic, as it has not contributed to academic underachievement or socioeconomic disadvantage for boys in general (Jones & Myhill, 2007). However, this is not the case for certain ethnic minority boys from low SES backgrounds. For instance, Spanish–English speaking Hispanic children constitute the largest group of L2 learners in the US who also tend to come from predominantly low SES backgrounds (Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2010). The low literacy achievement has been implicated as one of the primary factors that put Hispanic boys more at risk of academic underachievement and poor vocational prospects (for a review, see Goldenberg, Reese, & Rezaei, 2011). Therefore, some have posited that the study of gender differences in literacy levels should take place within the wider context of ethnic and SES group differences (Hansen & Jones, 2011; Mead, 2006).

The gaps outlined in the literature provide the rationale for this study. The written expression of L1 and L2 learners was examined at four levels: written vocabulary, organisation, compositional fluency, and overall holistic quality. There were two main research questions. The first research question concerned the extent to which the performance on the dimensions of written expression was moderated by language group and gender. Here, the main interest was to examine to what extent there was an L2 disadvantage in written expression and to what extent L2 boys were more at risk of underperformance on writing. The second question related to what degree the contributions of written vocabulary, compositional fluency, and organisation to the overall writing quality were invariant (equivalent) across the L1 and L2 learners. Thereby, the study sought to examine whether the aspects of written expression played a comparable or differential role in the overall writing quality of the two language groups.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 89 L1 (42 males and 47 females; mean age = 115.4 months, SD = 3.71 months, range = 109–122 months) and 70 L2 (35 males and 35 females; mean age = 115.4 months, SD = 3.55 months, range = 108–121 months) learners at Year 5. The L1 and L2 learners were recruited from the same classrooms across seven primary schools. The information about the home language, the duration of formal schooling in England the special educational needs status, and entitlement to free school meals (FSM) was obtained through a short verbal questionnaire and the school records. The FSM is the most readily available demographic measure, which provides a proxy index of SES. In line with the formal definition of L2 in England, students who spoke a language other than English at home or in their community irrespective of the level of fluency and the time of exposure were classified as being L2 (Department for

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