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Analysis of Writing Errors in Younger School-Aged Children

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Abstract
Writing represents a complex human ability that plays an important role in communication and education. It involves a range of motor, sensory, linguistic, and cognitive components, requiring coordination across different parts of the nervous system. The aim of this study was to examine linguistic errors in the writing of younger primary school children, with particular emphasis on differences related to gender and age. The sample consisted of 90 pupils from the third, fourth, and fifth grades of primary school, evenly distributed by gender. For the analysis of written samples, the standard text *"Dear Friends"*, which contains all the letters of the Serbian language, was used.
Errors were analyzed at the levels of letters, syllables, words, and sentences. The results showed that boys made a significantly higher number of linguistic errors compared to girls, especially in cases of adding unnecessary letters and syllables, substitutions and mixing, as well as grammatical and spelling errors. A clear tendency toward a reduction in the number of errors with increasing grade level was also observed. It was concluded that children of younger school age make errors across all language elements, with their frequency decreasing significantly with age. These results highlight the importance of monitoring the development of writing skills in children in order to enable timely recognition of disorders and the implementation of appropriate intervention programs.

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Introduction

Writing is a complex human ability that plays an important role in an individual's communication and education. It involves a range of motor, sensory, cognitive, and linguistic components, requiring coordination among different parts of the nervous system. Furthermore, writing serves as a significant means for intellectual development, creativity, and personal expression. Mastery of writing skills is preceded by a relatively long developmental process of graphomotor and linguistic abilities (Vuković et al., 2015). Writing requires an individual to actively use linguistic structures to form meaningful messages while simultaneously relying on the motor skills necessary for the graphic formation of letters. Due to this complexity, acquiring writing skills often represents a challenge for children, especially in the early stages of schooling, when graphomotor and linguistic abilities are developing intensively.

As mentioned, writing is a complex skill that requires the simultaneous engagement of multiple cognitive and motor processes. According to the model proposed by Berninger and colleagues (2002), the writing process encompasses text generation at the word, sentence, and discourse levels, supported by transcription (handwriting and spelling), as well as planning, reviewing, and revising. In younger children, these components develop gradually, and a lack of their automatization can limit children's ability to adequately express their thoughts in written form (Berninger et al., 2002; McCutchen, 2006). This model serves as a basis for analyzing developmental and individual differences in children's written production.

A further review of the literature shows that writing begins with the planning phase, during which thoughts are organized and a lexical-grammatical outline is prepared. The writer must take into account the writing system being used, legibility of handwriting, rules of graphic expression, spelling conventions, as well as the use of punctuation marks. The next stage in the writing process involves motor control and visuospatial orientation, which includes the ability to coordinate the hand and eye, as well as the position of the hand and body during writing, among other factors (Vuković, 2016).

From a developmental perspective, writing requires systematic and continuous learning and refinement. In younger school-aged children, learning to write is a complex process that necessitates the integration of linguistic knowledge, graphomotor skills, and cognitive abilities. Mastery of writing depends on the maturity of fine motor skills and the children's ability to organize their work graphically on paper, as well as on their understanding of fundamental linguistic structures such as phonology, vocabulary, and syntax. Children begin learning to write upon starting school, so the basic motor prerequisites for acquiring writing skills are typically achieved around the age of six. In addition to motor, visual, and intellectual abilities, the development of the linguistic system is essential for learning to write, meaning that the child possesses age-appropriate phonological, grammatical, and lexical-semantic skills. During the process of learning to write, children may exhibit a variety of difficulties. Some children experience challenges in forming letters, maintaining the line or row in which they write, or maintaining appropriate spacing between letters and lines. In addition, some children display linguistic errors in their writing. Given the importance of writing for an individual's learning and development, the study of writing errors and the factors influencing their occurrence holds a significant place during the early school years. Monitoring the development of writing and identifying writing errors contributes to the early detection of writing disorders in children, thereby

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enabling the provision of appropriate support throughout the educational process. With this in mind, the focus of this study is the examination of linguistic errors in the writing of younger school-aged children.

Linguistic errors in writing

Writing errors represent a complex interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and motor factors. In early school-aged children, these errors may result both from incomplete acquisition of linguistic rules and from insufficiently developed graphomotor skills (Ward, 1996). Since the issue of writing errors in younger school-aged children is complex and requires the examination of various aspects of language, motor, and cognitive development, this study focuses specifically on the linguistic characteristics of these errors.

Linguistic errors refer to the incorrect use of language units, such as letters, syllables, and words. They often involve difficulties with recognizing and correctly applying the phonological and morphological elements of a language. These errors may be associated with the child's age and the level of development of their cognitive and motor abilities (Golubović, 2000; Janjić et al., 2019; Miller, 2011; Vuković, 2012). Linguistic errors in writing most frequently occur in children during the initial stages of language acquisition, when they have not yet fully mastered linguistic structures and spelling rules. Such errors may manifest through omissions, substitutions, and confusions, as well as the addition or incorrect combination of phonemes and graphemes, resulting in the production of irregular word and sentence forms.

Linguistic errors in writing refer to irregularities that arise from insufficient knowledge of language structure, including phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects. These errors can manifest in various forms, such as omission, addition, or substitution of letters within words. Letter omission is a common error observed in children during the early stages of writing acquisition and may result from difficulties in sound recognition or inadequate motor control. Letter substitution typically occurs in words with similar phonological structures, indicating the need for additional practice in phonological awareness. Errors at the level of letters and syllables represent a specific type of linguistic error and include omissions, transpositions, additions of extra syllables or letters, substitutions, confusions, as well as perseverations and anticipations. These errors often indicate a lack of control in recognizing and reproducing sound sequences and may result from cognitive difficulties in planning and organizing linguistic units into a coherent whole.

According to Kojić (2001), Vuković (2016), and Ilić-Stošović (2014), the doubling or transposition of syllables often occurs in children who are still in the process of developing the phonological and morphological structures of language, which requires special attention in instruction. Errors at the word level include irregularities in word joining and separation, disruption of word boundaries, as well as incorrect spelling forms. Children in the early stages of development do not yet fully understand spelling rules, which makes them prone to confusing joined and separated words or forming words incorrectly. This type of error indicates insufficient knowledge of the syntactic structure of the language and may require additional explanation and practice. Systematic analysis and correction of these errors can significantly contribute to improving the quality of children's writing.

Errors at the sentence level relate to mistakes in connecting words within a sentence, incorrect punctuation, and grammatical and spelling errors. These errors represent a significant

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challenge in the development of written expression, as they affect the clarity of the written text. When words in a sentence are not properly connected, when there is a lack of agreement between the subject and predicate, or when punctuation marks are used incorrectly, the meaning of the sentence may be distorted or completely lost. Such errors not only hinder text comprehension but also indicate insufficient mastery of grammatical and spelling rules. This, in turn, affects overall linguistic literacy, which encompasses the ability to express oneself clearly, accurately, and meaningfully in written form.

The main objective of this study was a linguistic analysis of writing errors in younger school-aged children. Errors at the levels of letters, syllables, words, and sentences were analyzed. The occurrence of writing errors was examined in relation to the participants' gender and school age.

Methods

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of a total of 90 students from the third, fourth, and fifth grades of primary schools. The research included three primary schools in the city of Banja Luka, with 30 participants from each grade and an equal distribution of boys and girls. In "Dositej Obradović" Primary School, the third grade was tested, comprising 16 girls and 14 boys. The fourth grade was tested at "Branko Radičević" Primary School, consisting of 16 boys and 14 girls. The fifth grade, including 15 boys and 15 girls, was tested at "Petar Petrović Njegoš" Primary School. Overall, the sample included participants aged 8 to 10 years with typical intellectual abilities. Participants with sensory or severe physical impairments were not included. All participants were enrolled in the regular education system, ensuring equal opportunities for the development of writing skills.

The sample was balanced by gender and grade level, with half of the participants being female (45 students) and the other half male (45 students). Regarding school age, the sample included 30 students from each of the third, fourth, and fifth grades.

Instruments and procedure

Written samples were collected through three different tasks: dictation, free composition, and copying. A standard text, *"Dear Friends,"* which contains all the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, was used. Before conducting the tasks, children were given instructions to write with a graphite pencil, to use cursive Cyrillic letters, to write on unlined A4 paper, and not to use an eraser. The first task was dictation, delivered at a rhythm appropriate for the child's age. After the dictation, the children were asked to write a free composition on the topic *"One of My Experiences."* They were instructed to think of an event from their vacation and describe it. The final task involved copying a text that had previously been used for dictation. The examiner wrote the text on the board in cursive Cyrillic letters, and the children were instructed to copy it.

The collected written samples were analyzed on an individual basis, with a focus on linguistic errors. Within the linguistic analysis of the written samples, errors were analyzed at three language levels: a) letters and syllables, b) words, and c) sentences.

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a) Analysis of errors at the level of letters and syllables includes omissions, transpositions, additions of extra letters or syllables, substitutions and confusions of graphemes, as well as occurrences of perseveration and anticipation errors. Omissions, transpositions, and additions are errors characteristic of children with insufficiently developed phonemic analysis skills (for example: “bart” instead of “brat” [brother], “jenda” instead of “jedna” [one], “šekola” instead of “škola” [school]). Substitutions and confusions of letters most often arise due to difficulties in distinguishing phonetically similar sounds, as well as challenges in associating phonemes (sounds) with the corresponding graphemes (letters), that is, when a stable connection between the meaning and visual form of a letter has not yet been established. A separate group includes perseverations (fixation on a previous syllable or word, e.g., “planinina”) and anticipations (premature insertion of an upcoming element, e.g., “gogor” instead of “logor”), where the targeted sound is replaced by one from the previous or the following word or syllable. These specific errors often result from difficulties in processing successive information.

b) Analysis of errors at the word level includes the separation of parts of a single word, the merging of multiple words, as well as the disruption of word boundaries. Such errors indicate difficulties in identifying and individualizing separate words in speech, which also affects written expression.

c) Analysis of errors at the sentence level includes mistakes in connecting words within a sentence, grammatical errors, spelling difficulties, and incorrect punctuation. These errors are more frequent in children with underdeveloped speech and language abilities (e.g., “The ducks went out to the lake came to the water water is gone”).

Statistical analysis

During data analysis, various statistical methods were applied, depending on the nature of the data and the results obtained. In the case of numerical data (the number of linguistic errors), the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the distributions of the results significantly deviated from normality. Therefore, non-parametric techniques were used in further analyses to examine relationships among variables. In this context, relationships between categorical and numerical data were tested using the Mann-Whitney test as an alternative to the t-test and the Kruskal-Wallis test as an alternative to ANOVA, while relationships between numerical variables were examined using Spearman’s correlation coefficient instead of Pearson’s coefficient.

Statistical analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software package, and a significance level of $p < 0.05$ was adopted.

Results

In this section, we will analyze the assumption concerning linguistic errors in relation to the participants’ socio-demographic characteristics. Since school grade and chronological age of the participants are fully correlated, the analysis focuses on gender and grade as the socio-demographic features of the sample.

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Table 1. *Linguistic errors by participant gender*

Error type	Gender	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*U*	*z*	*p*
Omissions	Female	45	0,71	1,04	889,50	-1,09	,275
	Male	45	1,27	1,80			
Addition of extra syllable or letter	Female	45	0,13	0,41	825,50	-2,17	,030*
	Male	45	0,49	0,99			
Substitutions and confusions	Female	45	1,96	2,10	736,50	-2,27	,023*
	Male	45	2,71	1,97			
Perseverations	Female	45	0,18	0,54	1010,50	-0,03	,978
	Male	45	0,18	0,49			
Splitting parts of the same word	Female	45	0,38	0,81	1005,50	-0,08	,938
	Male	45	0,38	0,94			
Merging multiple words	Female	45	0,40	0,84	1000,00	-0,13	,895
	Male	45	0,36	0,65			
Disruption of word boundaries	Female	45	0,07	0,45	922,00	-1,69	,091
	Male	45	0,56	1,94			
Errors in connecting words within a sentence	Female	45	0,24	0,98	795,00	-2,52	,012*
	Male	45	0,53	0,92			
Grammatical errors	Female	45	0,71	1,20	781,00	-2,03	,042*
	Male	45	1,18	1,30			
Spelling difficultie	Female	45	4,31	3,97	679,50	-2,71	,007**
	Male	45	6,40	4,66			
Incorrect punctuation	Female	45	0,42	0,84	966,00	-0,48	,633
	Male	45	0,42	0,72			

N – number of participants; *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation; *U* – Mann-Whitney U test value; *z* – Z value; *p* – significance level ; ** - statistically significant at p < .01; * - statistically significant at p < .05.

Regarding linguistic errors, the table shows that a statistically significantly higher number of errors in the addition of extra syllables or letters was observed in male participants (U = 825.50; z = -2.17; p < .05), substitutions and confusions (U = 736.50; z = -2.27; p < .05), errors in connecting words within a sentence (U = 795; z = -2.52; p < .05), grammatical errors (U = 781; z = -2.03; p < .05), and spelling difficulties (U = 679.50; z = -2.71; p < .01). Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is a significant tendency for male participants to exhibit a higher number of linguistic errors, predominantly at the levels of letters, syllables, and sentences.

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Table 2. *Linguistic errors by participants school grade*

Errors	Grade	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*H*	*df*	*p*
Omission	III	30	1,43	1,85	4,73	2	,094
	IV	30	1,07	1,51			
	V	30	0,47	0,78			
Addition of extra syllable or lette	III	30	0,67	1,06	14,74	2	,001**
	IV	30	0,17	0,59			
	V	30	0,10	0,40			
Substitutions and confusions	III	30	2,63	2,33	3,13	2	,209
	IV	30	2,70	2,38			
	V	30	1,67	1,12			
Perseverations	III	30	0,27	0,52	4,99	2	,082
	IV	30	0,23	0,68			
	V	30	0,03	0,18			
Splitting parts of the same word	III	30	0,53	1,04	2,72	2	,257
	IV	30	0,23	0,57			
	V	30	0,37	0,93			
Joining multiple words	III	30	0,60	0,93	5,25	2	,073
	IV	30	0,20	0,55			
	V	30	0,33	0,66			
Disturbing word boundaries	III	30	0,17	0,65	0,00	2	,998
	IV	30	0,50	2,01			
	V	30	0,27	1,29			
Errors in connecting words within a sentence	III	30	0,50	1,28	0,54	2	,762
	IV	30	0,43	0,90			
	V	30	0,23	0,57			
Grammatical errors	III	30	1,53	1,61	10,87	2	,004**
	IV	30	0,90	1,06			
	V	30	0,40	0,72			
Spelling difficulties	III	30	7,03	5,49	8,07	2	,018*
	IV	30	5,47	4,47			
	V	30	3,57	1,96			
Incorrect punctuation	III	30	0,50	0,90	1,56	2	,458
	IV	30	0,50	0,82			
	V	30	0,27	0,58			

N – number of participants; *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation; *H* – Kruskal-Wallis test value; *df* – degrees of freedom; *p* – significance level; ** - statistically significant at p < .01; * - statistically significant at p < .05.

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The results indicate a statistically significant trend showing that students in higher grades experience a notable decrease in the number of linguistic errors related to the addition of extra syllables or letters ($H(2) = 14.74$; $p < .01$), grammatical errors ($H(2) = 10.87$; $p < .01$), and spelling difficulties ($H(2) = 8.07$; $p < .05$). If we also consider the fact that a similar trend is present in errors that are not statistically significant, we can conclude that as students' grade level increases, there is a decrease in the occurrence of linguistic types of writing errors.

Discussion

In this study, a linguistic analysis of writing errors among younger school-age students was carried out. The occurrence of errors was examined in relation to the participants' gender and age. Our results showed that both girls and boys of younger school age make different types of writing errors, such as the substitution and addition of letters and/or syllables, the merging of two separate words, as well as grammatical and spelling errors when independently writing sentences and connecting them into written discourse. Therefore, our results indicate that children in the early school age are still in the process of developing the phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects of language, which is consistent with the findings of other authors (Kojić, 2001; Vuković, 2016; Ilić-Stošović, 2014).

By comparing the total number of writing errors in relation to the participants' gender, our findings show that boys made statistically significantly more errors across all linguistic units compared to girls of the same age. These results suggest that boys acquire linguistic elements in written language at a slower pace, which may represent a particular challenge for future research. For example, Beard and Burrell (2010) found in their study that girls generally achieve better results in writing tasks, whereas boys' written work more frequently exhibited linguistic errors. Similarly, Davies and Brember (1994), in their study *Gender Differences in Writing: The Mediating Effect of Language*, also found that girls achieved significantly better results in writing tasks compared to boys.

A further review of the literature also points to the existence of differences in writing between boys and girls of younger school age. Similar to our findings, Berninger et al. (2007), Vuković et al. (2015), and Golubović (2020) also report that boys make a greater number of spelling errors in writing compared to girls of the same age. The presented results indicate a relatively stable gender difference in the domain of written expression, which recurs across different samples and contexts. Accordingly, it can be concluded that children of younger school age exhibit different types of errors during the development of language literacy, with errors being more frequent among male participants.

In addition to differences in errors at the level of syllables, letters, and words, the study conducted by Furtina, Fata, and Fitrisia (2016) indicates that boys, on average, make more grammatical errors in writing than girls. Similar results were found in the study by Almusharraf and Alotaibi (2020), which showed that certain types of grammatical errors were significantly more frequent in boys' written work compared to girls. These studies, along with the results of our research, indicate that girls achieve significantly better writing performance compared to boys. These differences may essentially be influenced by various factors, such as differences in fine motor development, language abilities, social expectations, the type of support received during

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writing acquisition, learning styles, or motivation for writing in boys and girls, which may represent a challenge for future research.

Besides gender, the students' grade level also proved to be an important factor influencing the number and types of writing errors. Our results show that the number of errors significantly decreases with age, and that a continuous improvement in writing skills can be observed during the early grades of primary education. Specifically, students in higher grades within our sample demonstrated a statistically significantly lower number of linguistic errors compared to students in lower grades. This finding indicates that with age and school experience, students' ability for linguistic expression develops, along with their mastery of grammatical and spelling rules. A review of the relevant literature also indicates that age affects the occurrence of writing errors. For example, Berninger et al. (2008) argued that older children make fewer linguistic errors compared to younger children. The authors explain this by the development of metalinguistic skills, that is, the ability to consciously recognize and analyze language structures during writing. Berninger et al. (2002), as well as Graham (2000), point out that the number of linguistic errors in writing, including grammatical errors, decreases with age as a result of language maturation, schooling, and increased exposure to the standard language. Additionally, Ward (1996) emphasizes that older students make fewer morphological errors compared to younger students, and that writing errors are often related to phonological processing. Consequently, in written tasks, younger children frequently exhibit letter substitutions and inversions, as well as the addition of syllables.

Conclusion

Analysis of linguistic errors revealed that male participants exhibited significantly more errors at the level of letters, syllables, and sentences. These errors manifested as the addition of extra syllables or letters, substitutions and confusions of letters and syllables, joining words within a sentence, as well as grammatical and spelling mistakes. With increasing school age, there was a gradual and significant decrease in the total number of errors, indicating the natural progression of writing skill development in typically developing children who are included in the educational process. The gender and age differences observed in this study point to specific developmental needs and challenges characteristic of different groups of children. The results highlight the need for greater individualization of instruction, particularly in cases where children demonstrate an increased frequency of writing errors. An important step involves the training of teachers and speech therapists, to recognize difficulties early and provide the necessary support to children who experience writing difficulties. The results of our study contribute to existing knowledge by showing that gender significantly affects the occurrence of writing errors. This may reflect developmental differences in language processing, attention, and school motivation, as well as potential differences in the support children receive in their environment. Accordingly, these findings confirm existing empirical findings and further highlight the need for an individualized approach in teaching, with particular attention to providing support to boys who exhibit greater difficulties in this area.

Conflict of interest

None.

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