

# Writing skills and strategies of bilingual immigrant students learning Greek as a second language and English as a foreign language

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The present study was concerned with eliciting information about the problems that bilingual or immigrant students' encounter and the strategies that they employ whilst writing in Greek as a second language (GL2) and in English as a foreign language (EFL). The sample consisted of a total of 32 bilingual students, aged between 10 and 12 from Albanian, Russian and Georgian families. The study followed a qualitative and quantitative method of data collection and analysis: (1) a screening writing test was used for student selection and their categorisation into skilled and less skilled writers; (2) student think-aloud reports and retrospective interviews were used to collect data whilst students were writing in GL2 and EFL. The findings indicated that the skilled bilingual writers held a much broader and complex view of their own writing process and showed more strategic knowledge compared to less-skilled writers. In particular, they were more flexible in using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies and employed a wider range of more 'elaborated' strategies. In contrast, the less-skilled writers had a more limited knowledge of the writing task, and they adopted lower-level processes and strategies. However, they had adequate awareness of their own writing problems related to word level, and they employed certain compensation strategies to overcome writing weaknesses. Some suggestions are made about the creation of educational and teaching conditions for developing bilingual students' linguistic cognitive and metacognitive skills and expanding opportunities for them to become autonomous writers.

## Introduction

The reason for conducting this study stems from the growing number of second-language students in Greek primary schools since Greece has been an immigrant-receiving country for the last two decades. Given the fact that immigrant children are subject to assimilation processes in Greek primary education, they are expected to learn the Greek language once they enter school, receiving no instruction in their home language. In the Greek educational context, immigrant students should acquire a functional command of the Greek language (GL2) which is at the same level as students with Greek as a mother tongue. In addition, in primary education, these students have to learn English as a first foreign language (FL1) and French or German as a second foreign language (FL2). These students are bilingual in the sense that they either have 'native-like control of two languages' (Bloomfield 1933:56) or they 'can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language' (Haugen 1953:7). In addition, they are trilingual, as they have to acquire two non-native languages (Cenoz & Genesee 1998), namely Greek and English, as part of their schooling.

In such a context, language teachers are expected to meet the varied needs of the immigrant students and support them. However, they often express their anxiety about teaching immigrant students (Tressou & Mitakidou 1997:332), and they appear to share certain misconceptions related to the following:

1. the maximum exposure to the target language (L3), as the home language of the students is perceived as an obstacle (Mehmedbegovic 2008; Sutton 2006)
2. the fact that bilingualism leads to cognitive and linguistic delay due to the burden on the part of the learners of handling two languages (Griva, Geladari & Tsakiridou 2011)
3. the need for support in the so-called 'theoretical' school subjects such as history and language activities. (Griva, Dinas & Stamou 2013)

On the contrary, research has indicated that balanced bilingual students develop metalinguistic awareness and use a wider range of language-learning strategies compared to monolingual students (Cenoz & Valencia 1994; Griva, Chostelidou & Tsakiridou 2011; Lasagabaster 1998). Also, learning a third language (L3) is not the same as learning a second language (L2) (Cook 2001; Jessner 1999). Third-language learning shows some special characteristics, which distinguish it from L2 acquisition, as the students:

1. have more language experience at their disposal as L2 learners
2. are influenced by the general effects of bilingualism on cognition
3. have access to two linguistic systems when acquiring L3. (Cenoz & Valencia 1994; Cook 2001; Herdina & Jessner 2002; Jessner 1999)

Throughout school, equality of access to learning should be promoted, irrespective of students' cultural or linguistic background and abilities, and every opportunity should be provided to develop their language skills. Of these language skills, the skill of writing is regarded as an important part of literacy development. Writing is multidimensional and should therefore be treated as such whilst an understanding of the various elements that writing entails, the micro- and macro-components of writing and their interrelationship in attempting writing activities in the target language should also be considered (Raimes 1998).

In acknowledgement of the fact that the process of writing in L1 depends on the mastery of a variety of processes and sub-skills such as generating and drafting ideas, producing, revising and editing a text (Griva, Tsakidou & Nihoritou 2009; Ascención 2004), L2 and especially L3 writing are considered to involve all of these processes, including L1 and L2 competence issues (Bereiter & Scardinalia 1987, in Griva & Chostelidou 2011). Research on writing (Ascención 2008; Cumming 2001; Grant & Ginther 2000; Stein 2000) indicates that the use of strategies and the knowledge which students bring to the text influence their writing process in a significant way. Furthermore, it has been indicated that problems in the students' approach to writing ultimately reflect a deficiency or lack of awareness of the processes involved in performing a writing task (e.g. Victori 1997, 1999).

Studies have also shown that skilled writers tend to view planning and composing as a continual process which includes developing an initial set of goals or plans to guide the writing process (see Ascención 2004; Goddard & Sendi 2008; Plakans 2009). In contrast, less skilled writers seldom set writing goals, seldom monitor their final product as regards the writing goal and rarely revise a text (Goddard & Sendi 2008; Graham, Harris & Reid 1992). Also, less skilled writers are believed to have weaknesses in the following areas of language:

1. size of vocabulary
2. correctness of language
3. unconscious processing of language
4. language creation
5. mastery of the functions of language. (Victori 1997)

Having briefly examined the literature and given the findings of the studies outlined above, the attention now shifts to the present study, which was aimed at:

- Mapping the range of cognitive and metacognitive writing strategies employed when immigrant bilingual students write a task in Greek (GL2).

- Mapping the range of cognitive and metacognitive writing strategies employed when immigrant bilingual students write a task in English (EFL).
- Identifying the potential difficulties encountered by students whilst composing a text in GL2.
- Identifying the potential difficulties encountered by students whilst composing a text in EFL.
- Identifying the possible differences between more and less-skilled bilingual writers in their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

## The study

### Method

#### Participants

A total of thirty-two bilingual students, aged between 10 and 12 ( $M = 11.4$  years,  $SD = 0.45$ ), from immigrant families of Albanian, Russian and Georgian origin, participated in the study. Sixteen students were born in Greece or had moved to Greece before the age of five, and 16 students entered the Greek school at a later age. All students can read and write in L1. Also, all of them (100%) declared that they almost always speak their L1 at home, and most of the participants (65.6%) stated that they also speak Greek at home in some cases.

The participants were selected from 13 classrooms in seven Greek primary schools, with a total of 58 bilingual students, according to the following criteria:

1. Their higher (standard score: 13 or above) or lower writing ability in GL2 (standard score: 7 or less) based on the scores of a group administered screening writing test.
2. Their language competence based on the classroom teachers' judgements.

#### Procedure and instruments

The study followed a qualitative and quantitative approach of data collection and analysis. The following standardised tests were used to identify the level of students' writing skills:

1. A standardised writing test for their writing strengths and weaknesses in Greek as a second language (GL2). (Porpodas, Diakogiorgi, Dimakou & Karantzi 2004)
2. The KGP writing test for EFL level A1/2 on the scale set by the Council of Europe.

Student think-aloud reports and retrospective interviews were the basic instruments for collecting data. Cognition and metacognition can easily be assessed amongst young children through think-aloud and retrospective interviews as well through observing young children in the process of doing their own writing. Verbal report data were collected individually; every student was requested to produce a piece of writing between 200 and 250 words in GL2. Whilst writing a text, the students were asked to think aloud about all the techniques and procedures they used as well as about the difficulties they encounter. They had to say aloud 'everything they think and everything that occurs to them while performing the task' (Garner 1987). In this way, writers' strategic processes during text production were

revealed (Morrison 1996). After the think-aloud sessions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students in order to gain further insight into their usual approach to writing, the strategies they employ and their perceptions on their abilities and weaknesses.

After the completion of the whole procedure, exactly the same procedure was repeated a few days later, and the same instruments were used to collect data for students' writing processes and strategies in EFL. The students were asked to compose a piece of writing in English of between 100 and 150 words whilst verbalising their thoughts.

### Data analysis

All 'think aloud' sessions were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The verbal data underwent both qualitative and quantitative analysis:

1. Through the qualitative analysis, which involved first and second-level coding, groups of sub-categories resulted, 'labelled' by a specific name (codes) (Miles & Huberman 1994), which were grouped into categories and then classified into basic thematic strands.
2. Furthermore, quantitative analyses of the verbal data were used. In order to assess efficiency of the writers' strategy, each strategy was rated on a scale ranging from 0 to 2. In each case, 0 corresponds to inadequate strategy use, 1 corresponds to partially adequate strategy use and 2 corresponds to efficient strategy employment. In order to record writers' difficulties whilst composing, each subcategory was rated on a scale ranging from 0 to 2. In each case, 0 corresponds to 'no difficulty', 1 corresponds to 'mediocre difficulty' and 2 corresponds to 'great difficulty'. Frequencies and percentages for all categories and subcategories were obtained. The techniques of the Chi-square-test ( $\chi^2$ ), *t*-test and one-way ANOVA were performed in order to identify differences in writing weaknesses and strategy use between less-skilled and skilled writers.

## Results

After being analysed qualitatively, the verbal data from the task in GL2 and the task in EFL, resulted in 34 codes for GL2 and 35 codes for EFL, which were grouped into four basic thematic strands:

1. prewriting processes and strategies
2. whilst-writing processes and strategies
3. metacognitive processes and strategies
4. writing difficulties (see Tables 1, 2, 3, 5).

### Pre-writing stage: Processes and strategies

#### Prewriting processes and strategies in the Greek language

Before starting with their task, most of the students reported that they relied on external resources for generating content and that they thought about organising the content of the task in GL2. They showed a preference for drawing on prior knowledge to make sense of the topic they were writing

about and to generate ideas. Moreover, they suggested that they generated new ideas as their composing process went on. Some participants stated that they generated alternative ideas at paragraph and sentence boundaries, which were constantly evaluated, checked against the context and often re-structured. In contrast, the less-skilled writers did not devise an initial plan when writing as they preferred to 'write sentence by sentence' (see Table 1).

The cross-tabulation indicated statistically significant differences between the two sub-groups in the following processes and strategies:

1. generating ideas ( $\chi^2 = 18.462$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), since 68.8% of the skilled writers used this strategy efficiently whilst none of the less-skilled writers was found to use it in an effective way
2. organising ideas ( $\chi^2 = 27.246$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), since 100% of the less-skilled writers used it inefficiently, but only 6.3% of the skilled writers underused it and 50% of them employed it in an efficient manner
3. activating background knowledge ( $\chi^2 = 8.533$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ), since 87.5% of the skilled writers followed it, but 37.5% of the less-skilled writers showed a preference for this strategy
4. recalling vocabulary ( $\chi^2 = 15.676$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), since this strategy was used more by less-skilled writers (75%) compared to more competent writers (6.3%).

#### Prewriting processes and strategies in English as a foreign language

Before start writing in English, most of the competent students drew upon previous experience to generate ideas. They reported that they relied on external resources for generating content and that they thought about organising the content. In addition, the majority of the students, irrespective of their language level, (1) used the title to produce ideas and (2) were concerned about recalling and selecting the appropriate vocabulary for their piece of writing (Table 1).

The cross tabulation indicated statistically significant differences between the two sub-groups in the following processes and strategies:

1. 'Generating ideas' ( $\chi^2 = 22.044$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), since 93.8% of the skilled writers used this strategy efficiently whilst 12.5% of the less-skilled writers were found to use it in an effective way.
2. 'Organising ideas' ( $\chi^2 = 12.522$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ), since 56.3% of the less-skilled writers used it efficiently whilst nobody from the group of less-skilled writers employed it in an efficient manner.
3. Activating background knowledge ( $\chi^2 = 9.309$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ), since 56.3% of the skilled writers employed it whilst only 6.3% of the less-skilled writers showed preference for this strategy.

However, no statistical differences were revealed in relation to (1) 'recalling vocabulary' ( $\chi^2 = 0.650$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), which was preferred by both groups, and (2) 'using the title'

( $\chi^2 = 0.155$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), since both skilled (68.8%) and less-skilled writers (75%) used this strategy.

### Whilst-writing processes and strategies in the Greek language

Whilst composing the text, most of the students followed certain sub-processes and employed a number of cognitive strategies such as drafting, redrafting, composing without drafting of redrafting, rereading what they have written, writing sentence by sentence, translating or using resources (see Table 2).

The comparison between the two groups indicated statistically significant differences between skilled and less-skilled writers in relation to two sub-processes whilst composing a piece of writing:

1. Drafting and redrafting ( $\chi^2 = 12.857$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) were employed mostly by skilled writers either efficiently (26.7%) or partially efficiently (33.3%). However, 100% of the less-skilled writers were not engaged in drafting and redrafting during text construction.
2. Composing sentence by sentence ( $\chi^2 = 9.309$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) was followed by the great majority of the less competent writers (93.8%) in contrast to more competent writers (43.8%).

It is interesting to note that, whilst the students were composing the text, they employed some *compensation strategies* in order to overcome their limitations in writing (see Table 2). Amongst these were adjusting the message, switching to L1, using a synonym or circumlocution, getting help and partially avoiding communication. In some cases, less-skilled writers avoided using some expressions, or they abandoned writing midway because they were not able to use a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical items. In other cases, when the skilled writers could not come up with the right or desirable expression, they were able to adjust the message by making the ideas simpler or less precise and by using a synonym.

The cross tabulation indicated statistically significant differences between the two sub-groups in the following compensation strategies. The skilled writers were more willing to be engaged in 'adjusting the message' ( $\chi^2 = 9.890$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and to 'use a synonym' ( $\chi^2 = 11.768$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) (56.3% and 56.3%, respectively) in order to overcome some knowledge limitations. However, only 6.3% of the less-skilled writers used 'adjusting the message', and 0% could

use a synonym or a circumlocution effectively. In contrast, less-skilled writers showed greater preference (93.8%) for 'avoiding communication' ( $\chi^2 = 18.286$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and for 'getting help' ( $\chi^2 = 12.698$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) compared to more competent writers (18.8% and 25%, respectively).

### Whilst-writing processes and strategies in English as a foreign language

Whilst writing in EFL, most of the students reported to re-read their text to assess its correctness, and they pinpointed some weak points which they changed or some words and sentence structures which they revised (see Table 2). Only a very small number of students wrote non-stop about the topic for a given time, not pausing to edit for appropriateness or correctness. The more competent writers indicated their preference for re-reading and revising paragraph by paragraph. Also, the children's writing was reportedly interrupted mid-sentence by language concerns such as spelling, grammar, word choice or struggling with putting ideas into coherent English and doubt about the meaning conveyed. Whilst the skilled bilingual writers' composing process involved a sentence by sentence approach in English, the less-skilled writers' composing process was interrupted as they struggled with vocabulary, grammar and spelling. During the writing process, most of the competent students re-read their text to assess correctness, and they changed or corrected some words and revised the sentence structure.

The participants admitted that they thought in either L1 or in L2 and then translated into English and wrote down the ideas in FL. A smaller number of the students declared that they apply knowledge of words and structures from L1 to EFL in order to produce an expression in the new language. Some students relied on the strategy of 'recombining' in order to produce a sentence. The selection of the appropriate vocabulary was viewed of highest importance for the majority of both the more competent and the less-skilled young writers. It is worth mentioning that most of the less skilled writers referred to more local processes dealing with 'spelling words' and 'sentence structure' since their concern, whilst writing a draft, was to produce grammatically and syntactically correct sentences.

The comparison between the two groups indicated statistically significant differences between the skilled and less-skilled writers in relation to three sub-processes whilst composing a piece of writing:

**TABLE 1:** Categories and codes of the thematic strand 'prewriting stage'.

Themes or Categories	Codes in EFL	Codes in GL2
Cognitive sub-processes	GENIDE = Generating ideas	GENIDE = Generating ideas
	ORGIDE = Organising ideas	ORGIDE = Organising ideas
	ACTBKN = Activating background knowledge	ACTBKN = Activating background knowledge
	USTITL = Using the title	USTITL = Using the title
	RVOCUSE = Recalling vocabulary to use	RVOCUSE = Recalling vocabulary to use
	GENIDEA = Generating ideas	GENIDEA = Generating ideas
	ORGIDEA = Organising ideas	ORGIDEA = Organising ideas

EFL, English as a foreign language; GL2, Greek language.

1. 'Composing word by word' ( $\chi^2 = 18.286$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) was employed mostly by the less skilled writers (81.3%) as only 6.3% of the skilled writers were engaged in it whilst writing the text.
2. 'Composing sentence by sentence' ( $\chi^2 = 18.000$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) was preferred by the vast majority of skilled writers (81.3%) writing in English.
3. 'Reading back' ( $\chi^2 = 3.882$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) over what they have written was utilised by all skilled writers (100%) whilst a lower percentage of the less-skilled writers (68.8%) followed this technique.

However, no statistical differences emerged regarding the following cognitive strategies:

1. 'Using resources' ( $\chi^2 = 2.540$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ): Both groups showed little preference for consulting a bilingual dictionary as 75% of the less-skilled writers and 56.3% of the skilled writers did not use a dictionary.
2. 'Translating in L1' ( $\chi^2 = 1.247$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ): Both the less-skilled (56.3%) and skilled writers (75%) translated words, phrases and patterns from L1 whilst writing in L3.
3. 'Translating in L2' ( $\chi^2 = 0.667$ ;  $df = 2$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ): The great majority of skilled writers (81.3%) and a significant percentage of less-skilled writers (68.8%) translated from L2 whilst writing in L3.

Whilst the students were composing the text, they employed some *compensation strategies* in order to overcome limitations in writing. About half of the students used code mixing by adding word endings from L2 into words from L1. In addition, most of the less-skilled writers asked the researcher for either a missing expression ('I cannot remember this word ... how could you say ...?') or for the spelling of a word ('How do we spell it? ... I am not sure ... is it ok?'). In some cases, they avoided using some expressions, or they abandoned writing midway as they were not able to use a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical items. In contrast, when the skilled writers could not come up with the right or desirable expression, they were able to adjust their message by making the ideas simpler or less precise or by using a synonym.

More precisely, the students employed the following *compensation strategies*:

1. 'Using a synonym', where the writers occasionally crossed out words or looked for substitutes.

2. 'Adjusting or approximating the message', where most of the skilled writers declared that they wrote some slightly different expressions, which meant almost the same thing whenever they could not come up with the right expression.
3. Switching to L1 or L2.
4. Abandon writing midway.
5. 'Asking for help', where some of the less-skilled writers asked the researcher for help in translating a word or in word choice (see Table 2).

The cross tabulation indicated statistically significant differences between the two sub-groups. The skilled writers were more willing to be engaged in 'adjusting the message' ( $\chi^2 = 3.882$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and in 'using a synonym' ( $\chi^2 = 15.768$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) (43.6% and 75% respectively) in order to overcome certain or some knowledge limitations. However, only 6.3% of the less-skilled writers used 'adjusting the message', and 6.3% could 'use a synonym or circumlocution' effectively. At the same time, the less-skilled writers showed greater preference (62.5%) for 'getting help' ( $\chi^2 = 6.348$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) compared to the more competent writers (18.8%).

### Metacognitive strategies in learning a second language

The majority of the participants showed a positive attitude towards evaluating their own writing and became involved in the processes of identifying difficulties and problems and of self-correcting. They reviewed and commented on their drafts, focusing on the style, content, spelling and punctuation (see Table 3).

Cross tabulation revealed statistically significant differences between skilled and less-skilled writers in the range of metacognitive strategies. As far as 'planning for the writing task' is concerned ( $\chi^2 = 7.385$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), none of the less-skilled writers was found to do so whilst 37.6% of the skilled writers indicated that they plan for their writing before starting to compose. Similarly, the less-skilled writers showed no 'selective attention' ( $\chi^2 = 21.895$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) whilst a large proportion of the skilled writers (81.3%) paid attention to certain language elements whilst composing. In addition, 'reviewing' ( $\chi^2 = 13.714$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) was a strategy favoured more by skilled writers (87.5%) than by less-skilled ones (25%).

**TABLE 2:** Categories and codes of the thematic strand 'whilst-writing stage'.

Themes or categories	Codes in EFL	Codes in GL2
Cognitive strategies	COMSESE = Composing sentence by sentence	COMSESE = Composing sentence by sentence
	COMWDR = Composing without Drafting or Redrafting	COMWDR = Composing without Drafting/ Redrafting
	DRREDRA = Drafting or Redrafting the text	DRREDRA = Drafting or Redrafting the text
	REABAWR = Reading back over what they've written	REABAWR = Reading back over what they've written
	USIRESO = Using resources	USIRESO = Using resources
	TRANSL1 = Translating from L1	TRANSL1 = Translating from L1
Compensation strategies	TRANSL2 = Translating from L2	TRANSF = Transferring
	ADJMESS = Adjusting the message	ADJMESS = Adjusting the message
	USYNCR = Using a synonym or circumlocution	USYNCR = Using a synonym or circumlocution
	AVOWRCO = Avoiding written communication partially	AVOWRCO = Avoiding written communication partially
	GRIDEFR = Grouping ideas into frameworks	GRIDEFR = Grouping ideas into frameworks

EFL, English as a foreign language; GL2, Greek language; L1, language 1; L2, language 2.

Regarding 'self-evaluation', the more competent learners evaluated themselves more highly than the less competent ones ( $\chi^2 = 19.444$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). More precisely, 68.8% of the skilled writers ranked themselves as 'very skilled', and 25% ranked themselves as 'skilled enough'. In contrast, 68.8% of the less-skilled writers ranked themselves as 'weak', and 31.3% ranked themselves as 'skilled'. In addition, in the retrospective interviews, they declared that they had to improve some aspects of their writing. Concerning 'organising ideas' ( $\chi^2 = 0.821$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), 25% of the skilled writers expressed their desire to improve this skill whilst only 12.5% of the less-skilled writers focused on developing this process.

In contrast, less-skilled writers referred to more local processes dealing with:

1. 'spelling words' ( $\chi^2 = 8.127$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) since a large proportion of them (81.3%) would like to be better at spelling (for skilled writers, the comparative figure was 31.3%).
2. Less-skilled writers also referred to 'accuracy' ( $\chi^2 = 5.236$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) with half of the less-skilled writers (50%) expressing their desire to be better at 'accuracy' and only 12.5% of the more competent students focussing on this skill.

The one-way ANOVA test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two subgroups in using both cognitive ( $F(30) = 4.821$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and metacognitive strategies ( $F(30) = 7.846$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) when performing the task in GL2.

### Metacognitive strategies in English as a foreign language

It was recorded that the better of the writers preferred re-reading and revising paragraph by paragraph. They reorganised some sentences and deleted or changed some words, and they were more capable of evaluating and revising their work. These sentences were constantly evaluated, checked against the context and often re-structured by the skilled writers (see Table 3). However, what the less-skilled writers did was to revise their work at the surface level. They focused on vocabulary and grammatical aspects such as the right words, right tenses and prepositions since their primary concern was to translate their thoughts into words and sentences. Most of them became distracted by punctuation and spelling, and they were often overwhelmed by the

demands of writing. In addition, their writing process was sometimes accompanied by comments such as 'I don't know what else to write' or 'let's see if something else comes up'.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the majority of the participants showed an overall positive attitude towards evaluating their own writing and became involved in the processes of identifying difficulties and problems, and they attempted self-correcting. They planned for the task – what they wanted to write, the vocabulary that was adequate and the appropriate language functions and structures. They reviewed and commented on their drafts, focusing on the style and content or spelling and punctuation. Only the skilled writers showed interest in 'paying selective attention', focusing on specific aspects of language such as 'how to use specific expressions and how to use tenses'. The vast majority of students, irrespective of their language level, reported that their concern, whilst writing a draft, was to write grammatically and syntactically correct sentences. However, 'spelling words' was the preference of less-skilled writers.

Cross tabulation revealed statistically significant differences between the skilled and less-skilled writers in relation to:

1. 'Selective attention' ( $\chi^2 = 12.522$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ). Although 56.3% of the skilled writers plan for their writing before starting composing, none of the less-skilled writers was found to use it.
2. Another difference, 'reviewing' ( $\chi^2 = 18.333$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), was a strategy favoured more by the skilled writers (87.5%) than by the less-skilled writers (12.5%).

Furthermore, there were statistically significant differences between the competent and less-competent learners in the way they corrected their mistakes by either changing ( $\chi^2 = 13.333$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) or deleting ( $\chi^2 = 9.309$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) some items whilst composing the text, as well as by 'checking grammar' ( $\chi^2 = 5.926$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Also, both the less-skilled (62.5%) and skilled writers (87.5%) placed emphasis on 'checking spelling' ( $\chi^2 = 2.667$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.5$ ). Regarding 'self-evaluation', the more competent learners evaluated themselves higher than the less competent learners ( $\chi^2 = 18.667$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). More precisely, 50% of the skilled writers ranked themselves as 'very skilled' and 31.3% as 'skilled enough'. In contrast, the vast majority of the less-skilled writers (93.8%) ranked themselves as 'weak' writers.

**TABLE 3:** Categories and codes of the thematic strand 'metacognitive processes and strategies'.

Themes or categories	Codes in EFL	Codes in GL2
Awareness of writing processes	-	REVIWRT = Re-viewing the written text
	SELATTEN = Selective attention	SELATTEN = Selective attention
	SELFEVAL = Self-evaluation	SELFEVAL = Self-evaluation
	CORCWOR = Correcting and changing words	CORCWOR = Correcting and changing words
	DELWOPH = Deleting words or phrases	DELWOPH = Deleting words or phrases
	CHGRASY = Checking grammar or syntax	CHGRASY = Checking grammar or syntax
	CHSPEL = Checking spelling	CHSPEL = Checking spelling
	WRIMPVO = Writing improvement awareness related to vocabulary	WRIMPVO = Writing improvement awareness related to vocabulary
	WRIMPSP = Writing improvement awareness related to spelling	WRIMPSP = Writing improvement awareness related to spelling

EFL, English as a foreign language; GL2, Greek language.

In addition, in the retrospective interviews, the less-skilled writers declared that they need some improvements in writing. No significant differences were revealed between skilled and less-skilled writers since most of the students, irrespective their language level, referred to more local processes dealing with:

1. 'Vocabulary development' ( $\chi^2 = 2.133$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) where (93.8%) of the less-skilled and 75% of the skilled writers would like to acquire a wider range and variety of vocabulary.
2. 'Spelling words' ( $\chi^2 = 0.155$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) where a large portion of both the less-skilled (68.8%) and the skilled writers (75%) would like to improve at spelling.
3. 'Accuracy' ( $\chi^2 = 3.233$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) as 62.6% of the less-skilled writers and 25% of the more competent students expressed their desire to be better at this skill.

### Total number of strategies employed in the Greek language and English as a foreign language

The one-way ANOVA test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two subgroups in using both cognitive ( $F(30) = 4.821$ ;  $p < 0.050$ ) and metacognitive strategies ( $F(30) = 7.846$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) when performing the GL2 (see Table 4).

Furthermore, the one-way ANOVA test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two subgroups in using metacognitive strategies ( $F(30) = 11.865$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ) whilst performing the EFL. However, no significant differences were produced between the two subgroups in using both cognitive ( $F(30) = 1.418$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and compensation strategies ( $F(30) = 1.336$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) (see Table 4).

### Writing difficulties in the Greek language

Most students, irrespective of their language level, declared that they encountered certain difficulties whilst writing the

task. However, the skilled writers had problems with gaining control of the 'basics' of writing (spelling, vocabulary and grammar) and organising the content of the text whilst the less-skilled writers' major concern was to recall and use the appropriate vocabulary and the correct spelling (see Table 5).

Specifically, a statistically significant difference was identified for encountering difficulties at the vocabulary level ( $\chi^2 = 12.374$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ). The less-skilled writers (68.8%) encountered greater difficulties than the skilled writers (12.5%) in recalling and using the appropriate words. In addition, statistical differences were indicated ( $\chi^2 = 8.583$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between skilled and less-skilled writers as the latter were revealed to encounter greater problems with 'word spelling' (62.5%) than the former (12.5%). Moreover, for less-skilled writers, writing correct and effective sentences was a significant problem ( $\chi^2 = 7.770$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and they found it more difficult (56.3%) to structure a sentence than did the skilled writers (12.5%).

### Writing difficulties in English as a foreign language

Most students, irrespective of their language level, declared that they encountered certain difficulties whilst writing. However, the less-skilled writers encountered problems with gaining control of the 'basics' of writing (spelling, vocabulary and grammar), and their major concern was to recall and use the appropriate vocabulary and to use the correct spelling (see Table 5).

Specifically, 'finding and using the appropriate words' was very difficult for the majority of both the less-skilled (93.8%) and the skilled writers (68.8%). However, the less-skilled writers declared that they encountered greater difficulty in 'structuring a sentence' ( $\chi^2 = 10.400$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) as well as in 'grammar' ( $\chi^2 = 4.571$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) than did the skilled writers. The majority of the less-skilled writers had problems with: (1) subject-verb agreement and with the order of words within a sentence (75%), compared to

**TABLE 4:** Differences between skilled and less-skilled writers in cognitive, compensation and metacognitive strategies.

Variables	Less skilled writers		Less skilled writers		Skilled writers		Skilled writers	
	GL2	Standard deviation	EFL	Standard deviation	GL2	Standard deviation	EFL	Standard deviation
Cognitive strategies	.2766	.1838	.4625	.1746	.4766	.037	.5563	.1209
Compensation strategies	.3229	.2149	.6500	.1243	.3854	.1455	.5000	.1633
Metacognitive strategies	.1125	.1628	.1005	.3612	.6250	.2049	.5375	.2500

GL2, Greek language; EFL, English as a foreign language.

**TABLE 5:** Categories and codes of the thematic strand 'writing difficulties'.

Themes or Categories	Codes in EFL	Codes in GL2
Vocabulary	DIFPRAW = Difficulties related to pragmatic awareness	DIFPRAW = Difficulties related to pragmatic awareness
	DIFSEAW = Difficulties related to semantic awareness	DIFSEAW = Difficulties related to semantic awareness
	DIFFSPE = Difficulties related to spelling	DIFFSPE = Difficulties related to spelling
Sentence or text level	SENTSTR = Sentence structure	SENTSTR = Sentence structure
	APPUSGR = Applying or using Grammar	APPUSGR = Applying or using Grammar
	PLCONTE = Planning the content of the text	PLCONTE = Planning the content of the text
	PRODIDE = Producing ideas	PRODIDE = Producing ideas
	ORGIDES = Organising ideas	ORGIDES = Organising ideas

EFL, English as a foreign language; GL2, Greek language.

the skilled writers (25%), and (2) verb-tense consistency and plural form of nouns (37.5%) in contrast to the skilled writers (6.3%). Furthermore, 'spelling' ( $\chi^2 = 13.250$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) was a part of writing which made it harder for the less-skilled writers (81.3%). In contrast, only 18.8% of the skilled writers declared that they had problems with spelling.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

The study, although limited in scope, revealed some interesting insights into the writing skills of bilingual immigrant students included in mainstream classes. Significant differences were revealed between skilled and less-skilled writers in employing both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Specifically, the skilled bilingual writers held a much broader and complex view of their own writing process and showed more strategic knowledge since they were more flexible in using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies and employed a wider range of more 'elaborated' strategies such as 'drafting or redrafting', 'activating background knowledge', 'adjusting the message', 'using synonyms', 'organising content' and 'reviewing' (Stein 2000). In contrast, the less-skilled writers adopted lower-level processes and strategies, did not display a wide range of organisational strategies and did not revise ideas (Goddard & Sendi 2008; Zimmerman & Risemberg 1997). However, they had adequate awareness of their own writing problems related to the word level, and they were engaged in using certain compensation strategies to overcome language problems.

Another important finding emerging from this study is related to writing in a third language (EFL writing). The results suggest that learning a third language does not have a negative effect on the skilled writers' composition-related metacognitive strategies since a certain metacognitive procedural knowledge and control was revealed. Competence in L1 and L2 proved to be another factor that affected success in the third-language writing (EFL writing) (see Cenoz 2003). For example, the 'less skilled' EFL writers, who were also found to be 'less skilled' in writing in Greek (GL2) (Griva & Chostelidou 2011), showed a limited awareness of the writing task and adopted lower-level processes and strategies (see Goddard & Sendi 2008; Griva *et al.* 2009; Zimmerman & Risemberg 1997). In addition, some of the strategies acquired in L1 and L2 were transferred to EFL writing (Ricciardelli 1992).

It is noteworthy that the strategic flexibility of both groups (less-skilled and skilled writers) and their ability to monitor their language production in the third language (EFL) were 'weaker' than that found in GL2. They generally employed a smaller number of strategies and faced greater difficulties in EFL writing related to lower-level text processing skills (accuracy, spelling, vocabulary use). Skilled writers were indicated to be concerned with macro aspects of writing whilst less-skilled writers were more concerned with forms and language difficulties at micro level. This pattern of findings could be attributed to the fact that both groups of the students did not have a competent language level in EFL.

Although the study is limited in scope, some important data have been revealed, which provide accounts for practices to develop bilingual students' literacy skills. The implementation of more effective literacy practices to strengthen students' development in GL2 and EFL should be examined. It is also suggested that additional intervention programmes should be implemented that address the inclusion of newcomer immigrant children and support their literacy development (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001). Specifically, schools should:

1. Expand opportunities for bilingual students to become autonomous readers and writers.
2. Provide a strategy training programme, which helps less-competent students become critical readers and strategic writers. (n.p.)

Both L2 and EFL instruction should promote bilingual students' linguistic and cognitive development as well as encourage the growth of their metacognitive skills by training them into a variety of strategies and informing them explicitly about what is expected of them in terms of successfully performing in a writing task.

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### Authors' contributions

Both authors E.G. (University of Western Macedonia) and D.C. (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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