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**USING LETTER JOURNALS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' WRITING
SKILLS IN ENGLISH IN GRADE 7**

DIPLOMA PAPER

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**VĒSTUĻU DIENASGRĀMATU IZMANTOŠANA SKOLĒNU
RAKSTĪŠANAS PRASMJU ATTĪSTĪBAI ANĢĻU VALODĀ 7. KLASĒ**

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I declare that this study is my own and does not contain any unacknowledged work from any source.

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ABSTRACT

In this Diploma Paper the development of Grade 7 English as a foreign language students' writing skills are explored using letter journals.

Within the case study the author wanted to find out how students evaluated their writing skills and practice; for this reason a self-evaluation questionnaire was designed. Furthermore, the letter journals students wrote throughout the school year were analyzed to seek for evidence of learning based on set criteria. Finally, an expert interview was conducted with a teacher who used the same method.

The author found out that letter journals can be used to develop writing skills, as they offer continuous writing practice in safe environment, however, it was concluded that students with poorer command of the English language learn more efficiently with direct correction and immediate feedback.

Keywords: writing skills, letter journals.

ANOTĀCIJA

Diplomdarbā tika pētīta 7. klases skolēnu rakstīšanas prasmju attīstība angļu valodā, izmantojot vēstuļu dienasgrāmatas.

Vispirms, lai noskaidrotu, kā skolēni vērtē savu rakstītprasmi un rakstīšanas procesu, tika izveidota pašvērtējuma anketa. Pēc tam skolēnu rakstītās vēstules tika analizētas, meklējot liecības par mācīšanās procesu. Visbeidzot tika veikta eksperta intervija ar skolotāju, kura pielietoja iepriekšminēto metodi savā pedagoģiskajā darbībā.

Tika noskaidrots, ka vēstuļu dienasgrāmatas var tikt izmantotas, lai attīstītu rakstīšanas prasmi angļu valodā, jo šī metode dod iespēju skolēniem regulāri praktizēt rakstīšanu. Tomēr tika secināts, ka skolēniem ar zemākām valodas zināšanām nepieciešami konkrētu kļūdu labojumi, kā arī nekavējoša atgriezeniskā saite.

Atslēgvārdi: rakstīšanas prasmes, vēstuļu dienasgrāmatas.

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INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is one of the international standards that is used to describe language ability. In CEFR four main skills are distinguished: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The author believes that writing, although a vital skill, is neglected in the English as a foreign language classroom. Moreover, research carried out by Barkaoui (2007) shows that writing is especially difficult to acquire for EFL learners. Although, quite a lot of writing is done in EFL class, for example, writing notes or completing exercises, there is not enough time to practice writing longer texts, which the students are required to produce in the State Exams at the end of Grades 9 and 12. Longer texts require more steps to be completed, a five-step process that starts with drafting and ends with publishing is usually distinguished. Based on the author's experience the process could take up to three lessons. Considering the time constraints some parts of the writing process are sometimes omitted, leaving the students with producing a draft and writing a composition within one to two lessons, one lesson devoted to pre-writing and drafting, and the other for writing the required composition or essay. It is possible that for most written work students will not receive peer feedback and the only audience will be the teacher, regardless of the theme of the writing. Moreover, a significant part of the writing done at school is based on prompts, which does not prepare students for the writing they will be expected to do after finishing school.

Often in language class a lot of time is dedicated to grammar and language use drills. Teachers know the importance of practice, for this reason active vocabulary or specific grammar structures are included in text, listening tasks, and language use exercises. Meanwhile, the development of writing skills is sometimes not the primary aim even when students are writing, as the aim for the writing tasks is connected with vocabulary or grammar.

Usually the students would study some writing genres repeatedly throughout the years, often performing controlled writing tasks, for example, responding to a postcard using a model text provided in the textbook. Considering this, students should be able to produce a quality piece of writing at some point. In reality, free writing assignments can still be problematic for students, because they could have a problem coming up with content, expressing their opinion in a coherent way, while also considering the vocabulary and grammar structures they use. This is a cognitively demanding process and for this reason students are not enthusiastic about writing assignments and have no motivation to complete them.

Despite all this, the author believes that the main problem with writing assignments in EFL is the meaningfulness of the tasks. It is almost impossible to create a task that all students would be interested in completing, but teachers should strive to make writing tasks relevant for students. One of the ways to do this is by making writing meaningful to the writers, either by letting students choose the topic for writing, or letting them write about the topics that are relevant to them. Another way is by showing students that they are writing for a real purpose, an audience that will respond and reflect on their work. Students have to understand that their writing will generate a response, motivating them to become better writers, not only write for the sake of receiving a grade. Additionally, “When students recognize that they are writing for authentic purposes and readers (...) they likely will be more engaged as writers” (Whitaker, 2005: <https://www.learner.org/workshops/middlewriting/images/pdf/HomeBestPrac.pdf>).

Having considered the aforementioned, the teacher is left with the task to choose their practices that would motivate and challenge students to become better writers. The author of this Paper chose letter journals as the core method in developing writing in Grade 7. Galarza (2016) wrote letter journals to build the teacher-student relationship in her classrooms. She was impressed with how involved the students were once they were able to write about things that are meaningful to them, especially knowing that someone will respond to their work. Contrary to the author’s research sample, the teacher’s target group were native English speakers. Although the primary aim of the teacher interviewed in the article was to promote a positive classroom environment by improving the communication between teachers and students, the author of this Paper chose to use this method hoping to provide the opportunity to differentiate content for students of various levels, give motivation for students to participate in the task because they would be able to write about the things they liked and were interested in. Most importantly, within this method the students are conversing with the teacher in written form, therefore, there is an audience that reads and responds to their writing. Since the writing would be done in a notebook throughout the school year, students would be able to go back and reread what they had written and see the improvement of their writing, if they wanted to. Additionally, the letters written by the teacher serve the purpose of a graded reader, since letters to each student would be composed in accordance with their level of ability.

The **aim** of the Paper is to find out how Grade 7 students’ writing can be developed using letter journals.

In order to reach the aim, the following **objectives** have been set:

- to study and analyze theoretical literature on meaningful writing in EFL class and the most common writing challenges for EFL students;
- to implement letter journal writing assignments in the syllabus;
- to design a self-evaluation form for students to find out their attitude towards writing and their writing practices;
- to find out one practicing teacher's experience in using letter journals;
- to analyze students' letter journals to track the development of writing skills.

The **research questions** of the Diploma Paper are the following:

- What is the applicability of letter journals in the English lesson;
- How using letter journals can help develop students' writing skills in EFL.

The chosen **method of research** is a case study, carried out from September of 2016 to April of 2017. Grade 7 B students of Garkalne Arts and Comprehensive Secondary School are the **research sample** of the Paper.

The following **data collection methods** are used:

- Self-assessment forms for students in order to find out their attitude towards writing and evaluate their writing skills;
- Content analysis of students' journals to track the development of writing skills;
- Expert interview with one practicing teacher to discover their opinion of using letter journals in English class.

Outline of chapters:

Chapter 1 reviews teaching writing in the EFL classroom.

Chapter 2 reveals common writing challenges in EFL.

Chapter 3 analyzes how using letter journals can help improve writing in EFL.

Chapter 4 examines the case study carried out at Garkalne Arts and Comprehensive Secondary School. The data of the study are presented.

1. TEACHING WRITING IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

There are many definitions available for what writing is. On the one hand, as previously discovered, writing is a fundamental skill, the ability to put one's ideas into written words. On the other hand, when thinking about the writing process, it is clear that putting an idea on paper is more complicated than the previous statement may suggest. During the writing process the writer does not transfer their ideas directly onto paper, since the thinking process differs from the writing process greatly. The closest example of the direct thought to paper transfer could be free writing, when the writer puts any thought into writing without considering it first and making it understandable for a reader. Writing is a skill that can be perfected lifelong. The ability to write evolves along with the writer. Just as one's ideas and opinions change, the ability to write, if continuously developed, improves and matures. Most importantly, writing is one of the skills that together with reading form literacy, a competency characterized by the ability to analyze written information and use it in varying formats. Research done by OECD (2000) shows that higher literacy levels correspond to general well-being and political participation.

Both native and foreign language teaching has changed and developed since the 20th century. For instance, the prevailing method of teaching English in the Soviet Union, including Latvia, according to Khan (2016) was the grammar-translation method which was later gradually replaced by methods that facilitated and encouraged communication, as the aims for learning a foreign language changed. Naturally, the importance of writing instruction varied depending both on the method that was used in the classroom and the teacher, as it does today. The author believes that writing instruction in a foreign language cannot be fully understood without considering the trends of teaching writing generally. The most significant difference between writing now and in the 20th century is the absence of penmanship. In Latvia, much like in other countries across the globe, penmanship used to be a separate school subject, taught with the primary aim to put one's spoken words on paper. Although there are teachers who regard penmanship as a valuable part of the curriculum and believe it should be renewed as a subject, it is unlikely that the subject would regain the influence that it had in the past. One of the reasons is that digital tools have slowly but steadily replaced hand-written correspondence. In regards to learning writing, penmanship was the first step for many students. Writing for the freedom of expression proceeded a lot later. Hawkins and Razali (2012) mention that handwriting was viewed as one of the tellers of one's intelligence and social status, for a long time students replicated letters and words, until the writing was good enough to use it for other purposes.

Moreover, penmanship was an exercise in patience and willpower, since it took a lot of practice for novice writers until they were able to produce the writing that fit the demands of the curriculum.

After penmanship was eliminated as a subject, it was absorbed into the native language curriculum. Now, it is up to the teacher to choose how much importance they place on the subject matter, keeping in mind the State Standard, in which it is asked that by the time a pupil finishes 3rd grade, they are able to write letters and sentences neatly and correctly (Ministru Kabinets, 2014).

Another stage in the development of writing instruction, which was a crucial part of the writing done in school for years, was writing for product. The author would argue that this model of writing dominates many classrooms of today, same as it was 10 and 15 years ago. Hawkins and Razali (2012) expand on this, saying that this type of writing is still constrained by conventions, namely, students must be diligent writers, making sure that they use correct grammar, syntax and vocabulary at all times. The teacher, on the other hand, is to correct each mistake. The aim of this type of writing is to produce a quality product at the end. A significant sign for this was the frequency of writing various compositions and essays, especially in the native language and literature studies. These were extensive papers written solely for the teacher to read and correct, they served no other purpose.

The transition between writing for product and writing for process, to the author's mind, is still ongoing. Once again it should be mentioned that these details are in no way enforced by the State Standard. These are the decisions that teachers are to make. The main difference between writing for process and writing for product is that in writing for process scaffolding is present. All steps of writing are considered, starting from pre-writing and ending with reflection. Some parts of the process can be omitted, for instance, students are asked to create an outline for their writing, instead of writing the full composition. A positive quality of many textbooks, especially those for native and second language teaching, is that this is respected and there are exercises that help the teacher scaffold writing instruction in manageable chunks. Nevertheless, if one was to take in account evaluation, many teachers would still evaluate the finished product, instead of the process.

In the coming years education in Latvia is expected to undergo major changes. The transition from a skills-based to a competence-based curriculum will take place over the following 5 years, the project finishes in 2022. The reasons for this shift, specified in the project

description are that the education in Latvia does not adequately prepare students for the life after school, provided by the fact that the content is too dense and disconnected in an interdisciplinary level. Above all, the primary aim is to lead all education in Latvia to a paradigm shift from passing on information to competence based learning (National Center for Education, s.d.). Naturally, these changes will also influence language teaching. Written content has changed significantly over the years, and the change has become especially rapid with the development of social media and the rising popularity of user-generated content. Educators know this, therefore teacher training emphasizes the need to teach media literacy, critical thinking and the ability to analyze written text. While these changes should also include writing, it is still neglected, left to the professionals, like journalists and classic authors. The author of the Paper would like to speculate that these days students do more writing than ever before and that includes writing in a foreign language. The writing they do may not be academic or school appropriate, but it is still writing. Just because it happens outside of school does not mean that it teaches them any less than the writing they do in school. Teenagers communicate with each other on social media and instant messaging constantly; they use Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, Facebook, and various other channels for staying in touch or getting their messages across. Many of them produce content in English, because they know that that is a way to reach a wider audience. Ignoring this and proceeding to teach writing the same way it has been taught for years seems like a lost opportunity. Therefore, teachers have to consider how to make time for writing instruction that facilitates tasks that go beyond standardized testing and encourage intrapersonal development, analysis and introspection, but are not oversimplified to the point of vulgarization. Giving pupils the chance to take charge, choose topics and mediums that are relevant to their day-to-day life can strengthen the bond between the learning that happens in school and outside school.

By helping students develop their writing skills, teachers give them another medium through which to share their messages. Hail (s.d.) suggests that encouraging EFL learners to write in English offers them the chance to see themselves as writers, which in turn builds their confidence and empowers them to tackle increasingly difficult tasks. To sum up, writing in school has changed as a discipline and continues to change today. Teachers are responsible for cultivating pupils' interest in the writing process and helping pupils develop their writing skill.

1.1 ELEMENTS OF WRITING

By the end of primary school EFL students are expected to be able to produce a coherent piece of writing based on their knowledge about a particular subject matter or reflecting their interests, as well as a letter, in which the writer details an experience they have had (Ministru Kabinets, 2014). The author of this Paper believes that the main issue with teaching writing in the classroom is that all writing activities should be purposeful and reflect real-life situations. The students should later use their acquired skills, when faced with the task to produce any piece of writing. Instead, the majority of writing in EFL is exam or test practice based activities, where students recycle general truths, but no real learning happens. As per the above stated, the author will expand on the following elements of writing in EFL distinguished by Muchmore-Vokoun (2010): purpose, audience, clarity, unity, and coherence.

When producing a piece of writing, the writer is to consider the purpose of the text. The purpose is the reason why a text is being written; without considering the purpose, the writer is unable to correctly deliver the main idea of the text, therefore, the text is meaningless. In writing there are three commonly used purposes: to inform the reader, to persuade the reader, and to entertain the reader (Muchmore-Vokoun, et.al, 2010). In early secondary school EFL writing the topics would correspond to the entertaining and informing categories. However, according to Freiermuth (2005) writing assignments do not have a purpose by default, it is up to the writer to determine the purpose of the task; otherwise, the writing would reflect the lack of purpose and could be unclear. More importantly, having defined a clear purpose helps the writer stay on topic during the writing process and make sure no unnecessary information is included. Purpose of a text should be discussed in the pre-writing process and should be kept in mind until the finished product. To characterize the purpose the writer also needs to keep in mind the audience. The purpose is linked with the audience, as the audience will be the judges whether or not the text has fulfilled its purpose. In order to determine the purpose, students could analyze various texts and learn to determine their purpose. Moreover, to improve their writing, students could practice writing purpose statements for every paragraph that they write. Purpose statements reflect the aim of the paragraph and, by comparing the purpose statement to the paragraph, students should be able to tell if the paragraph had reached the intended aim.

Purpose statements for each paragraph contribute to unity of the text. Once the piece of writing is in process, the writer has to make sure the complete product contains no redundancies. Unity in writing is the ability to stay on topic and write in accordance to the controlling idea.

Audience is the next element a writer should consider before producing the text. Like purpose, this aspect should also be kept in mind throughout the entire writing process. Knowing one's audience can help determine the vocabulary or layout of the text. In real-life situations, the audience or the receiver of the text is a very important aspect to writing. For instance, if students were to write an e-mail of the same purpose, to invite a guest to a school play, but address it to two different people, a classmate and a teacher, the content of the e-mail would change significantly. To the author's mind, audience is a particularly challenging and problematic aspect in writing in EFL. Most texts produced in EFL class will be written for an imaginary audience, therefore, the actual audience, the receiver of the text, will be the teacher. In the case of many assignments, the final text is not authentic and purposeless, submitted for the sake of being graded (Jackson, 1998; Badger and White, 2000 in Freiermuth, 2005). Learning to produce a text in accordance to the intended audience is a usable skill, but it requires plenty of authentic practice in order to develop understanding of written communication with a particular audience.

There are many ways to introduce authentic audience and produce purposeful work. For example, assigning writing for which the teacher of the subject is not the primary audience (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2008). To ensure this, students can pursue blogging, writing journals, or e-mailing, for example. Due to the technological advancements there are many mobile learning solutions designed for students learning writing, which could be helpful. For talented students an extra motivator could be publishing, since it is possible for student writers to become published and paid artists and authors. Additionally, for students who need extra assistance, there are phone and tablet apps that allow students to produce writing, supplemented by animations or customizable stock art that can be shared on social media or printed. Regardless of the solution teachers choose to take, it is important that students are aware that the writing practice they are doing is preparing them for the writing that they will have to do outside the classroom environment and that the assignments are purposeful.

Clarity in writing is measured by checking how understandable and readable the final text is. Precision in word choice and specific language factor into the readability of the material. However, it is important to consider that EFL students, besides having a limited range of vocabulary, can often produce texts with many errors, which can distort the piece of writing to the point of being illegible. Freiermuth (2005) argues that accuracy in the EFL writing classroom is somewhat overrated, adding that accuracy is too limited to judge a learner's ability to write. Besides, issues with accuracy may not influence an author's written communication skills. The

author can agree to an extent, especially considering the authentic writing students will do outside their classrooms; it is highly likely that the writing will be done via PC or mobile phone, where they can use support tools that check spelling or correct errors. If what Freiermuth is suggesting is correct, the EFL writing class is distracting the student writer from clarity of their writing, since it is usually emphasized to check spelling and grammar, instead of concentrating on vocabulary and, for example, elaborating for the sake of giving context. Developing clarity in writing could also be useful in other aspects of language use, such as speaking, since students would be more aware of the language they use, they could make for fluent speakers with diverse vocabulary.

Coherence in writing helps follow the text more easily. In a coherent text there is logical order and sequencing of events or arguments and appropriate linking. Coherence is more difficult to achieve in writing than in speaking, since the writer does not receive any response from the audience to see if the written text has been understood. In other words, while writing the writer has to keep the reader in mind and try to understand the text from another perspective.

To sum up, there are many elements that need to be taken in mind during writing, which can be difficult for the novice writer, but the aforementioned elements are present in writing in all languages, not just EFL. Therefore, teachers can address this in their writing instruction, possibly even combine writing instruction in multiple language subjects, for example, English and Latvian. That way teaching could be more efficient and students could have the opportunity to explore the languages more, while getting extensive practice.

1.2 FIVE STAGES OF WRITING

There are many ways that the writing process can be scaffolded. The most common ones are the five or six stage writing approaches that divide the process in pre-writing (followed by outlining in the six-step process), drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Scaffolding the writing process helps the writer develop awareness of their writing and breaks it down in manageable sections (Vernon, 2001). Moreover, looking at each stage separately helps differentiate instruction for all ability students and shows how the stages factor into developing a cohesive final product. If the five-stage process is used regularly it can serve students as a checklist for their future independent writing. Scaffolding the writing process can also help in making the process more collaborative among students. The amount of support the student requires from the teacher depends on both on their ability and prior writing experience, meaning, some students could be able to handle all five writing stages quickly and without any assistance from the teacher, while other students, especially those who struggle with writing in general, could need support from the teacher in each step.

Pre-writing is the first step in the writing process. This step similarly to a lead-in in a lesson should help students activate their previous knowledge about a topic if the writing has to respond to a prompt. In this step students are to determine the audience and purpose, elements described in the previous subchapter. One of the pre-writing activities that is often used is brainstorming, followed by mind-mapping or using another graphic organizer. Pupils are familiarized with mind maps already in primary school, therefore, the concept should not be a novelty when used to help in writing. The pre-writing stage helps gather ideas about a particular topic, decide how the ideas relate to one another, and how they could be used to express the writer's ideas about the given topic. Outlining is the step that can follow pre-writing. In it students start to organize their ideas into sentences. This step, however, can be avoided for lower level writers.

Following pre-writing is the **rough draft**. The author believes that this is a very important step for students to employ. Drafting should help students see that making mistakes is part of the writing process. Students should be encouraged to try to arrange their previously brainstormed ideas into paragraphs in order to see how the central idea forms. According to Vernon (2001) this step may be overwhelming for lower ability students, since they tend to concentrate on mistakes, for instance, in grammar or spelling, rather than the coherence of the text. Additionally, students

should be reminded that even professional writers go through several stages of drafting and editing before they arrive to the final product.

Once the rough draft is finished, writers are to proceed to the **revision** stage. In this stage the writer should receive feedback from a teacher or a peer. If the writing process happens in a concentrated manner, for example, the stages are covered in one lesson, it may be difficult for students to revise their own work, since they might not be able to notice their errors right after writing. This stage again allows for peer collaboration. Students may exchange their work with peers and get feedback. Moreover, this offers a chance for additional work for higher ability students. As mentioned before, some students may be able to complete all stages of writing quickly and without support from a teacher. These students should be offered the chance to do additional work by helping their peers review their work. For more extensive writing, especially writing that involves research, a teacher should review the writing and offer feedback to each student. As with the drafting stage, advanced writing should include several drafting and revision stages.

After students have received back their revised papers, they can continue with **editing**. Considering that in the rough draft the aim was to put the text together, instead of concentrate on technical details, it is likely that there may be many corrections to be made. During the editing stage students should prepare their paper for handing in or publishing. In order to do this, pupils should correct errors, such as spelling and grammar. Additionally, after a peer or a teacher has read the paper, it should become clear whether or not the writer has been able to successfully convey their idea and put it in writing. If not, the writer should edit their writing accordingly.

Once the writer has completed the aforementioned steps, the final copy is finished. The final step in the five stage process is **publishing**. The publishing stage differs from the audience of the writing. As mentioned before most of the writing done in school would be directed to the teacher or the evaluator of the writing. In this case the publishing stage is simple, students hand in their work for evaluation. Alternatively, students could share the work with their peers in the form of a read-aloud or a presentation. Visually supported work, such as projects can be displayed in a classroom. This type of publishing is recommended in order to increase agency and ownership of students' work. It is suggested that students perform better if they know that their work will be visible to other audience than the teacher (Ramirez, s.d.).

2. CHALLENGES IN WRITING FOR EFL STUDENTS

As previously discovered, writing is one of the most complicated skills for a learner to develop. There are several reasons why writing in a foreign language proves to be more difficult than other language skills. For instance, writing with meaning can be challenging for EFL learners due to limited vocabulary. When speaking, learners are often understood from gestures and facial expressions, therefore, learners are able to express themselves without having to use extensive vocabulary. In writing, however, no audience is present, therefore, the writer has to rely on their existing vocabulary (Cole, Feng, 2015). Aside from these, writing is a cognitively demanding task. At any time during the writing process students are to be able to plan ahead, put their ideas into words, and transfer those words onto paper. This presents another challenge for the students who plan their writing in their native language and translate in English. Once the text has been written, students again have to revise what they have written to check for errors. An experienced writer may do more revision after writing or do extensive planning, while a novice writer would be primarily concerned with the thought transfer process (Galbraith, 2009). On top of the aforementioned, there is a plethora of subskills necessary to produce a quality piece of writing, such as accurate punctuation, spelling, choice of genre and audience, a reasonable range of vocabulary, cohesion, and many others. Some of these, for example, active vocabulary and the use of it are covered in daily EFL class, while others, such as paragraph linking, may be neglected. It can be concluded that EFL students are expected to be able to appropriately use a wide range of skills with minimal day-to-day practice that is necessary for retention.

The author believes that no valuable conclusions about learning writing could be made without considering the specific learner group, in this case, secondary school students. As adolescents go through many changes within a relatively short period of time, ages 12 to 14, the learning process may also suffer. For instance, adolescents are especially susceptible to criticism, both by peers and adults, consequently they could be discouraged from participating in writing activities due to error correction anxiety (Somerville, 2013). Moreover, the writing process takes a reasonable amount of concentration and undivided attention, it can be frustrating and overwhelming for students, particularly without guidance and scaffolding. All of the mentioned has to be considered when planning engaging writing instruction in EFL class.

Dubson (2001) has observed that college students who take entry level writing classes do not take ownership of their work, believing that the assignment is finished as soon as the paper has been handed in. This observation resonates with teaching writing in EFL class. Not only are

students reluctant to write, often uninvolved in the writing process, or writing to hand in the paper, they are also uninterested in the process that has taken place after the paper has been handed in. In theory a very important part of the writing process for the student should be receiving the corrected paper with a teacher's or a peer's feedback in order to acknowledge one's mistakes and consider the possible improvements. In reality, however, students may not look at the feedback or the corrections after they have seen the grade. Teachers are aware of this and many strategies have been invented to combat this and make sure students take notice of their errors. Meanwhile, it should also be considered why students do not care about the feedback on their work.

In elementary grades most of the writing done in EFL is personal or creative writing. Students may be asked to write short stories, poems, film reviews, or letters to friends. This tendency continues in secondary school, except in upper-secondary grades where students are required to produce more complex pieces. The writing section of the State Exams in 9th grade has assignments that are based in a student's personal experience. Considering correction and feedback for these assignments, students should be aware that they are not graded for their ideas or their opinions, but for the technicalities, such as spelling, vocabulary, etc. In turn, there are students who are aware that writing is difficult for them, possibly even in their native language, therefore, it is possible that they have already developed an apprehension towards writing tasks of any kind.

In personal writing some students may choose to use imaginary scenarios to not express their opinion or reflect their life experience about something very personal in order to distance themselves from the paper, as well as the possible negative feedback from the teacher. This, in turn, may make the task seem less relevant for the students. Perhaps a way to motivate students to write genuinely and put in the necessary work would be by giving open-ended assignments, where students choose what they want to write about. Dubson (2001) argues that this would only work for self-motivated students, besides, those who do not struggle with writing in general. For the rest of the students the lack of structure and rules may lead to procrastination and further loss of motivation.

Perhaps one of the main characteristics of adolescence is the importance placed on friendship and interaction with peers in general. Before a person sees themselves as an individual, they see themselves as part of a group. In their friend group teenagers are free to explore their interests, share ideas, and build a friend network. Due to the brain still developing, teenagers can

act on emotions, some are easily threatened or embarrassed (Wolfe, 2001). For these teachers can use various tools and activities that facilitate social interaction to make the classroom a safe and accessible place. For example, if students have to answer a question, the teacher might suggest Think-Pair-Share to have the students discuss with their seating partners first. That way everyone benefits; students get to see different points of view, while also feeling more secure about their answer because it has been peer reviewed. There are many tools that work in a similar way. Not many of them, however, work for writing, especially in the writing for product situations. As it was just established, people, especially teenagers, need social interaction. Writing in most cases is a solitary activity. Therefore, this time that pupils use for writing, is time when besides doing a difficult task for the brain and the body, they are not allowed to communicate, moreover, they are removed from their friend group and have to work on their own. In some cases this is beneficial. Comparing writing and speaking, for instance, some students might be reluctant to speak up and express their opinion, fearing the criticism of their peers. In writing they could be able to express themselves in a relatively confidential environment. This works well in the case where the student has an opinion about the given subject matter. A teacher might choose to take the process approach in this case and scaffold the assignment. That way some of the parts of the writing could be done in pairs or groups, therefore, keeping the collaborative aspect of learning that students like. However, teachers in most classrooms face time constraints for various reasons, ranging from classroom management issues to diverse needs of students that can take up an unexpected amount of time (Saloviita, 2016). Due to this, writing is treated as an individual assignment, in some cases even given as homework.

Another challenge for the foreign language writer is the difference between their native language and the foreign language, in this case, English. Breuer (2015) has discovered that not only are the writing processes slower in the foreign language compared to native language, the processing that happens on a cognitive level also varies. For instance, in the native language the writer is capable of writing more words in one burst, indicating fluency. In the foreign language, fewer words are produced, as the writer has to stop in order to find vocabulary. Additionally, the revision process differs greatly. While in the native language, the revision process is often superficial, in the foreign language it is an important step for the writer and they make comparably more revisions. Applying these findings to an EFL classroom, one can conclude that writing in a foreign language is, indeed, a time consuming task that for many students, especially

those who struggle with literacy and writing in general, is too difficult to tackle without scaffolding or the support of a more capable writer: teacher or peer.

After reviewing several of the challenges EFL student writers face, it should be clear that the writing instruction and the process itself should be organized in a way to eliminate as many of the challenges as possible, in order to motivate the novice writer. One aspect where students could have the chance to alter the task so that it is interesting and motivating for them would be by choosing topics that are appealing to them. This would also correspond to Wolfe's (2001) conclusions that teenagers need to feel an emotional connection to the study content in order to be interested in it. Interest, in turn, promotes motivation and retention. Still, most writing in school is done to prompts (Peha, 2003). The reason for this is simple, students will have to write to a prompt in the State Exam. It would seem like a logical solution to balance the number of times students write to a prompt and, in turn, let them choose topics that are of interest to them the rest of the time. However, it has already been concluded that writing assignments are not a frequent occurrence in the EFL classroom, therefore, there is only enough time to practice writing to prompts. The author believes that prompts will, unfortunately, rarely provide ground for meaningful writing that the students enjoy. For example, a prompt from the 9th grade State exam in English (see Figure 2.1). In this assignment students are to write about a day without technology.

You have seen the following note on your school's information board.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY

Write what you imagine a day without a computer, TV and mobile phone would be like. Describe:

- how you would feel, why;
- how you would spend the day;
- what you could learn from this experience.

Figure 2.1. Writing Prompt from 2015/2016 State Exam

It is difficult to imagine that this prompt will help a struggling writer to produce a good piece of writing. Firstly, the students who graduated 9th grade last year were born after year 2000, which almost guarantees that they have not experienced a day in their lives where they would not be surrounded by technology of any kind. Therefore, the prompt is built in a way that the students most likely will have no strong emotions about the situation, since it is an unrealistic scenario few

have experienced. As previously stated, it is complicated to write about a topic one has no interest in. Secondly, to consider the purpose of the text. Students should come to the conclusion that the purpose is to inform about one's experiences during a day without technology. The real-life purpose for most students will be to pass the State Exam. It would also be interesting to consider the audience in this particular task. The writer should know the audience in order to choose the appropriate tone and vocabulary. Of course, the real-life audience of the finished piece is the person who will correct the paper, but even if a student liked to imagine the intended audience, they might not be successful. Peha (2003) confirms that students perform better in writing if they can choose topics that are interesting for them. That way, pupils can choose what they want to say and through that put in more effort in their words. Intrinsic motivation should not be sacrificed for the sake of State testing.

Writing is a process where the effort students put in their work does not always correlate to the mark or feedback that they get. Sometimes, although the ideas are original, the finished piece is difficult to read, possibly "littered" with various errors. Error correction in writing is overwhelming both for students and teachers. For students it could mean that the composition on which they have spent a certain amount of time and energy will be returned covered in red ink. For teachers it means spending hours reading and correcting papers, only to see most students look at the mark and throw the paper out. These are situations that most have experienced. As a student, it is completely normal to only be interested in the mark, especially if the assignment, topic, and the writing process have been underwhelming.

2.1 FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION IN WRITING

In education research there is extensive discussion about feedback and evaluation in written assignments (Guenette, 2012). Some researchers suggest indirect correction, namely, highlighting student errors or assigning a code for certain kinds of errors, for example, marking *Sp.* on the margin of the page to highlight a spelling mistake. Addressing mistakes in this way should promote problem-solving among the students. Additionally, self-correcting leads to faster retention, therefore, students hopefully would not repeat the mistakes in the future. The issue here is that, as previously mentioned, many students do not care about the corrected paper after they have seen the mark they have received. If indirect correction was used, teachers should consider how they would follow up and check that students had really understood their mistakes and tried correcting them.

Another popular method for correcting written work is the corrective feedback method. Guenette (2012) suggests that research has proven this to be the more effective method with lower ability learners. With the corrective feedback method the teacher highlights the mistake and provides the correct way it should have been written. The author would agree that this method could be more effective in the short term, but should be used with caution, perhaps only for specific types of errors, for example, if a student always chooses the incorrect article for a noun. It was mentioned before that each mistake should not be highlighted and pointed out every time a student practices writing, as it can contribute to mistake anxiety and create a negative attitude towards writing in general.

Since mixed-ability classrooms are the reality of education, teachers have to consider how they provide feedback to fit the diverse needs of students. As an example, if two students write the same sentence with the same lexical error, for instance, using the incorrect word form in a sentence, but one of them does not understand the difference between an adjective and a noun in the native language or the foreign language, it would seem more beneficial to use the corrective feedback method in this case. Meanwhile, the second student, perhaps a more advanced student, could gain more from discovering the mistake on their own. Thus, error correction in student writing is a challenging process for teachers and it could be improved.

To sum up, it seems redundant to discuss what the most important skill that school teaches is, but these discussions do happen sometimes. The conclusion often is that learning to read is a significant success, since without reading students are set to fail in any subject, not only in language learning (Grunke, Leonard-Zabel, 2015). However, literacy is a combination of

reading and writing, it should not be limited to one of the skills. Writing should stretch beyond the composition writing of State Exams. Students write to take notes, to express their thoughts online and on paper. Likewise, they will someday write e-mails, product descriptions, reports, and academic papers. It has been established long ago that English is the lingua franca of many fields, such as academia, business, or tourism, therefore, it is very likely that a lot of their writing will happen in English. Students should be adequately prepared, consequently, it is necessary to spend time on writing instruction in the EFL classroom.

3. LETTER JOURNALS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' WRITING

In the previous chapters it has been concluded that literacy is important for student success at school and beyond. The main challenges for students in writing in EFL are caused by the fact that a great deal of the writing pupils do in school seldom reflects the writing done outside the classroom. There are many resources available for teachers that facilitate meaningful writing. One of the possible meaningful writing activities is journal writing. According to Isaacs and Brodine (1994; in Marculāne, 2017) there are four types of journals: individual journals, dialogue journals, learning logs, and team journals. The author of the Paper has chosen one of them, dialogue (or letter) journals, for further study.

One of the daunting challenges teachers of today have to face are large mixed ability classrooms. Although schools tend to divide students in smaller groups for language classes, the number in many cases would still exceed 10 pupils per group, which can be difficult in terms of individualized instruction for each pupil. In addition, there may be one or more special education learners in the classroom with a variety of needs and requirements that the teacher has to be able to support. In order to effectively teach, teachers have to grade instruction for each level of students, as well as assist and keep students engaged during class. Classroom management issues, such as discipline and order in the classroom, not enough support from the teacher, or the general classroom climate can be the reasons why some students choose to stay quiet and avoid working in class. Even though teachers aim to engage the entire class and make sure all pupils are involved in work, there are pupils, often times the shy and quiet students, who might feel neglected in language class. Letter journals allow the teacher to connect with every student on a more personal level (Miller Linnell, 2010). Additionally, this is a multi-level classroom friendly method, as the teacher can individualize the content for each student, based on their abilities and English level, for example, differentiating syntax and vocabulary. Besides, letter journals serve as a reading activity as well, offering each student a graded text to read. By using the letter journal method regularly and for a long period of time the teacher can monitor the progress of their students, including the ones who may be reluctant to speak up and actively participate in class.

“Dialogue journals are written conversations in which a learner and a teacher communicate regularly” (Peyton, 2000: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED450614.pdf>). To start writing letter journals the pupils need a notebook that is easy to transport if they choose to write by hand. It is also possible to write letter journals electronically, for example, it could be done via Google Docs, where more than one person can access and edit a document. However, the author

believes that writing by hand is more personal. The teacher, individually or together with the learners can decide how often they will write the letters and agree on other details, such as length, topics, and evaluation. It is also possible to not set any limitations and allow the pupils write their letters about the things they find relevant. It is important that students understand that they are not expected to write long and perfectly correct letters, as the dialogue journal method should focus on the process of writing, rather than the form (Peyton, 2000). The letter writing can be started both by the teacher or the students. If the students have to start writing, it might be difficult for them to compose the first letter. Alternatively, Peyton (2000) suggests that the journal writing partner does not have to be the teacher. It can also be a classmate or a person from another class. In this Paper the author reviewed letter journals written between a teacher and a pupil.

The main rationale of letter journals is that they offer continuous communication between a teacher and a pupil, thus, giving students the opportunity to practice writing without the anxiety of being corrected or censured. Denne-Bolton (2013) points out the relation between the development of both productive skills, writing and speaking, stating that students should write as much and as often as possible in order to understand how written communication works, regardless if it is a letter between a teacher and a student or an academic paragraph. Moreover, most teachers would admit to devoting a large amount of time in English lessons to the development of speaking skills, as students are also motivated to do it, therefore, students get to develop fluency in speaking, whereas writing, while being just as usable of a skill, is left behind. The author of the Paper would argue that in some cases a good command of the written word could be more necessary than the ability to speak fluently, for instance, when applying for a job one would have to send in a CV or a motivation letter, therefore, the first impression would depend on one's ability to present themselves well in writing.

In the world outside the classroom, particularly the job market and higher education, academic writing is prevalent. However, one could argue that, for example, the tone in an e-mail communication between two coworkers could resemble the written communication between a teacher and a student. Besides academic writing, the rapid development of social media, particularly visual content, shows the general trend for shorter syntax in personal and creative writing, which would mean that students do not have that much option to practice relevant personal writing on their own. Although there are educators who believe that students should practice academic writing in order to be reasonably prepared for their future in higher education, Denne-Bolton (2013) argues that students first have to develop sufficient writing skills and that

can be done through the personal environment of the writing journals. Students not only have the required practice, they also develop confidence in writing and that prepares them for more complex writing tasks in the future.

Breuer (2015) stated that freewriting produced positive aspects in foreign language writing, particularly, by activating the linguistic structures that the writers had memorized. Since pupils know they will not be evaluated for the accuracy of their work, they can engage in a similar process if the teacher suggests it. Some teachers who use the letter journal method prefer that students complete them in the classroom, for example, at the end of the class. In this case the teacher could suggest that the students write without stopping to think or consider for a limited amount of time. By doing this pupils are required to use the vocabulary they have, mimicking situations when they are speaking. Since teenagers are often result and success oriented (Wolfe, 2001), this could be one of the ways students can demonstrate their knowledge, or in turn become more aware of their weaknesses.

Regardless of whether the journals are completed in the classroom or at home, it should be done regularly in order to prove successful of anything other than improving student-teacher relationships. Cole and Feng (2015) suggest that writing journal entries should be done on a day-to-day basis with the teacher replying once per week or every other week. Galarza (2016) mentions that her students complete the journals as often as they want, with her replying once per week. Another bonus for this is if students miss school a lot, they are still able to complete the entries with the teacher replying once they return. Ongoing practice is needed for any skill one wishes to master, naturally, it applies to writing as well. With consistency at the end of the schoolyear, as the aforementioned research suggests, students have a written account of their progress in writing.

A valuable benefit Cole and Feng (2015) outlined in their research is that letter journals allow students to ask questions without worrying about peer criticism. The peculiarities of teenagers were discussed in the 1st chapter, where it was concluded that teenagers see themselves as part of a group, before being able to see themselves as individuals. Consequently, the opinions of a peer group may become more important than academic success. This is often seen in class, students do not speak up when they do not understand something. There can be various reasons, such as the aforementioned fear of peer ridicule, or inability to formulate a question in English, as many EFL teachers ask students to only speak English during class. The letter journal gives an opportunity for the student to ask something they are curious about and receive a written answer,

which may be easier for a novice learner to understand, as they can read it as many times as necessary, or look up the unfamiliar words, which they could not do with a verbal answer from the teacher.

Perhaps the most notable benefit seems to have little to do with learning writing. Continuous communication is besides everything an exercise in trust. Students choose what to tell the teacher, but many will tell about the things that are going on in their life. Pupils let their private lives in the classroom, therefore, the teacher can learn about each of the students more than they normally would (Bolton, 2013). On the one hand, there are teachers that would say that it is somewhat dangerous to cultivate a friendly relationship with students, fearing that it could cause classroom management problems, as the power differential shifts. The author, however, believes that a closer relationship with the students helps understand the various situations that the students are in, which makes for better teaching. Additionally, the letter journal may become a way for the students to cultivate a positive relationship with their English teacher, which will promote a better environment for learning.

Despite the aforementioned benefits of writing dialogue journals, studies do show drawbacks in using this method, notably for developing writing skills. The primary criticism is that the journals do not offer specific feedback regarding student errors (Hail et. al., s.d.). Particularly, if a teacher does not point out an error, many students may proceed to repeat their mistakes. Even though there are ways to provide feedback implicitly, for example, paraphrasing what the student has said using the correct conventions, it is guaranteed that many students would not notice this. Moreover, one could even suggest that in order for a student to recognize and mimic a teacher's writing patterns, they would have to have a fairly developed linguistic intelligence.

Comparing Hail's (s.d.) discoveries about the error correction and the previously discussed methods for providing useful feedback, one could conclude that the teacher who uses the letter journals would still need to find a way to address student errors but to do it in a way that students cannot make the connection between writing in their journals and error correction, in order to keep the freedom expression without the fear of evaluation.

In conclusion, it seems that that the benefits of writing letter journals outweigh the drawbacks. Although there are mixed opinions as to what this method can offer as a tool to develop writing, there is general consensus that the method effectively improves teacher-student relationships, which cultivates a positive learning environment and more efficient communication

between the learner and the teacher. Additionally, writing letter journals empowers students to experiment as writers without the fear of negative feedback or poor marks for their work. More research should be done in order to fully evaluate whether or not this method is useful for developing writing and how it could be improved to address the lack of direct feedback.

4. CASE STUDY ON LETTER JOURNALS TO DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS OF 7TH GRADE STUDENTS

In order to help promote the development of students' writing skills, the author of this Paper chose to carry out a case study in 7th grade of Garkalne Arts and Comprehensive Secondary School. Students of 7th grade had to pass a school exam in English at the end of the schoolyear, which had a writing component, therefore, there was further motivation to improve the students' writing skills over the year. It should be mentioned that the author worked as a teacher in the aforementioned school and taught English to the research sample group.

Garkalne Secondary was located 20 km outside the capital city, Riga, and it was the only school in Garkalne. The school had about 250 students in the previous schoolyear and it was the last year of the school offering to study in grades 1 to 12. Starting from the following schoolyear, Garkalne Secondary was to offer education up until grade 9 due to the low student count in high school. Despite the fact that most of the students that studied in this school came from the neighborhood or the suburbs surrounding Garkalne, many chose to continue their studies in high schools in one of Riga's suburbs, such as Riga Teika Secondary School or Riga Jugla Secondary School.

Regarding the level of English in Garkalne Secondary during the schoolyear the author came to the conclusion that the school could not compete with the level of English in other secondary schools. The author believed that a major reason for this was that the school lacked support in terms of inclusive education in mixed-ability classrooms. The primary issue was that most groups, including the 7th grade that was the research sample, had at least 1 student with special needs. In some of the groups the number of special needs students was larger. Unfortunately, in foreign language subjects the school was unable to offer a teacher's assistant or special education teacher. Due to this the author often came to the conclusion that she lacked the proper training and adequate materials to support all learners, considering their specific needs. Additionally, Garkalne Secondary offered education both in Russian and Latvian. It was possible for students with Russian as their native language to learn in Russian from 1st to 6th grade. Starting from grade 7 all students received education in Latvian. In the author's experience this posed another issue, since students with Russian as their native language had to study a foreign language, English, using Latvian as the bridge language, since the author, who was also the teacher, was Latvian.

There were 14 students in the 7th grade. For 12 out of the 14 pupils the native language was Russian, for two it was Latvian. This was a highly diverse group of learners with the level of English ranging from independent user (CEFR scale B1) to basic user (CEFR scale A1). There were two students with special needs in the research sample group, but neither participated in writing the letter journals. On average the students in this 7th grade showed the best results in math (class average 6.9/10), home economics (class average 8.5/10), and informatics (class average 7.7/10), while the lowest results were demonstrated in history (class average 5.5/10) and language arts subjects, including English (class average 6.0/10). As a group the students were pleasant and easy to work with, although, they struggled with motivation. The reason for this could be that two out of three English classes were in late afternoons, namely 14:50-15:30. About 2/3 of the pupils were involved in extracurricular activities within the school, such as art classes, music, or sports.

The aim of the case study was to discover how letter journals could improve 7th grade students' writing skills. To reach this aim the author selected the following data collection methods: self-evaluation questionnaire for the students, expert interview, and analysis of letter journals, which were continuously written by the teacher and students over the schoolyear. Each data collection method and the main findings will be described further.

At the beginning of the schoolyear the teacher instructed each student to choose a notebook that would last for the entire year and introduced the method by telling about it on the first English class. The students were not informed that they are part of a case study in order to avoid participant bias. At the end of the first lesson the teacher had with this group the students were asked to write 3 facts about themselves that the teacher would not be able to tell by looking at them or their past report cards. The facts the students chose to write served as liaison for the first letter. Since the teacher was the one to start the letter journals, the letters needed to be captivating to motivate the students to participate. Along with the first letter that the teacher wrote, a description of the task (see Appendix 1) was included in each student's notebook. In the first letter the teacher referred to the facts students had written about themselves, providing follow-up questions.

Students had to write an entry once every two weeks. They had to hand in the notebooks on Fridays and the teacher returned them the following Wednesday. For each entry, regardless of amount, content or quality of text, the students received *tested* or *not tested* for each entry missed.

The teacher did not enforce participation and allowed the students to choose whether or not they wished to hand in the assignments.

Letter writing was always given as a homework, as the students did not have other homework in English. Other writing assignments in the classroom were done seldom. In the 1st semester there were two short compositions that students had to write as a part of unit tests. In the 2nd semester pupils did not write compositions within unit tests, but did other writing-related activities. For instance, the group had to choose a topic they were all interested in, determine word count, and brainstorm the possible content and key words. After having done this, the students wrote a composition. Another example, pupils had to write topics that could have served as titles, exchange with their classmates and tell what they would have written about, what tense they would have used, etc. At the end of the schoolyear students had a school exam in which they were required to write a composition overviewing their year so far.

In general, writing letter journals was expected to serve as supplementary writing practice outside the classroom. To determine the pupils' attitude towards writing and to have them self-evaluate their writing practice, the author had the students fill in a self-evaluation questionnaire.

4.1 STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

The author of the Paper was interested how students self-evaluated their writing practice. In order to make conclusions, a Likert scale questionnaire was designed (see Appendix 2). The students had to self-evaluate on 20 statements regarding writing. The questions covered four out of the five stages of writing: prewriting, writing, revision, and editing. The fifth stage of writing, publishing, was not included in the questionnaire. Additionally, there were questions to determine the pupils' general attitude towards writing. At the end of the questionnaire the students were asked to evaluate the given language skills, ranging the skills from their best to worst. The questionnaire was given to the students at the beginning of the second term, in January. Students completed it individually with the teacher providing assistance with translation of the statements when necessary. For the author of the Paper the data of the questionnaire were valuable discoveries, as they helped to further plan, which stages of the writing process needed extra attention, in order to help the students improve their writing process.

On the day of the questionnaire 11 out of 14 pupils were present. 7 out of the 11 students regularly wrote in the letter journals. 4 of the students did not participate in writing at all. The data of the questionnaire were analyzed taking into account participation (see Appendices 3 and 4).

Firstly, to draw conclusions about the pupils' attitude towards writing, two general statements were posed. Students had to evaluate, on the scale of 1 (never true) to 5 (always true), how much they liked writing in their native language and in English. As previously discovered, students that struggled with writing in their native language were more likely to have difficulties writing in a foreign language. In another statement students were asked to evaluate how nervous they felt when asked to write in English. The aim of this statement was for the author to discover whether or not any of the students suffered from writing anxiety, which could factor into poor writing performance. Two other statements related to writing in general were connected to how frequently students looked for opportunities to practice writing in English outside the classroom, as well as how frequently students wrote in English. The primary aim for these questions was to find out if students were motivated to seek out supplementary practice outside the classroom, as it could aid their future performance in writing tasks in school. Upon analyzing the data, it was discovered that there was no significant difference between the answers of the students who participated in letter writing and those who did not.

All respondents expressed a generally positive attitude towards writing in their native language. While the majority of students felt the same way about writing in English (see figure 4.1.), three of the respondents (two of whom did not participate in letter writing) admitted that they usually disliked writing in English. One of the students who expressed a dislike for writing in English had listed writing as their worst skill, meanwhile another admitted that writing in English usually made them nervous. It can be concluded that, as stated in theory, writing anxiety and attitude towards writing are related to a student's success in writing tasks.

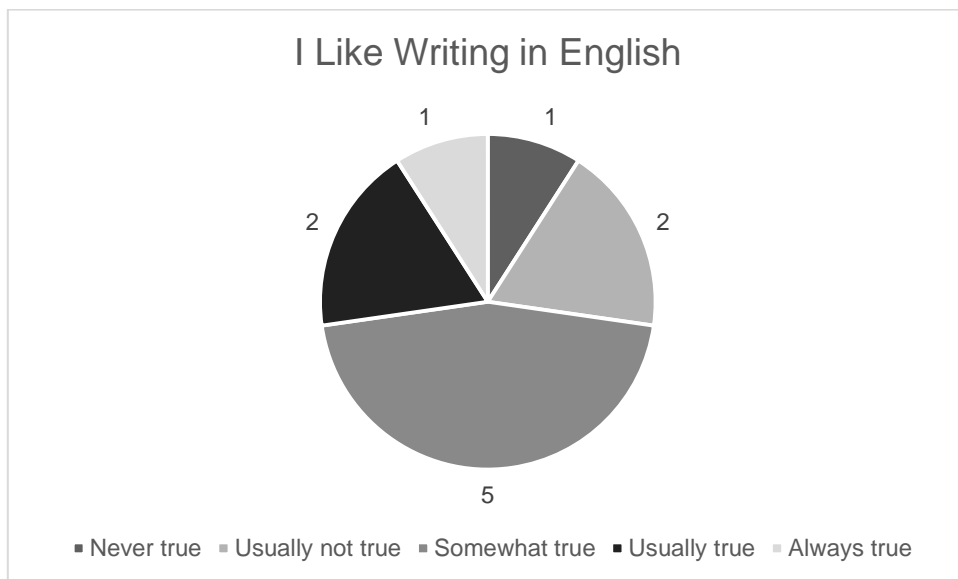


Figure 4.1. Questionnaire Results for Statement *I like writing in English*

Secondly, the students' prewriting practices had to be discovered. In order to do this, the author chose statements that were connected with the idea that foreign language learners tend to prepare for writing in their native language. The first statement in the prewriting section was connected with idea gathering and brainstorming, both important parts of the writing process. Further on students were to evaluate how often they used their independent thinking in their writing. The three final statements in the prewriting section dealt with the connection between students' native language and English. Students evaluated how often they planned their writing in their native language. Then, students evaluated how frequently they planned writing in English. Finally, students were to evaluate how often they wrote in their native language and translated the written text into English.

Interesting conclusions could be drawn from the students' responses in the prewriting statement section. It was ascertained that about half of the respondents had trouble brainstorming and gathering ideas before writing, which correlated with the author's idea that students had significant difficulties building a text without support (see figure 4.2.). Moreover, the greater part

of the respondents admitted that they were faced with complications when having to use their independent thinking in their writing. Since most of the writing the students had done used prompts, it could be deduced that it had been cumbersome for students to relate to the given prompts, hence the lack of independent ideas. Regarding planning, the respondents planned their writing in their native language more often than in English. Three of the students who admitted to never planning in English did not participate in the letter writing. Over half of the respondents noted that they usually or always wrote in their native language and translated the text into English.

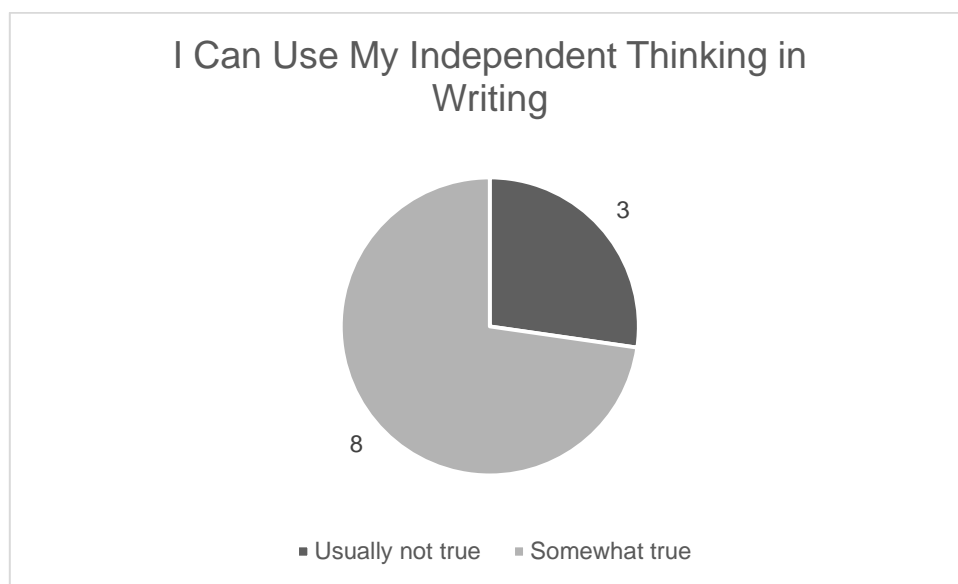


Figure 4.2. Questionnaire Results for Statement *I can use my independent thinking in writing*

The statements that covered the writing stage dealt with fluency, accuracy, and general practices of the students. Three of the five statements were posed as *I can* statements. The students evaluated their ability to organize their ideas logically, use appropriate spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, as well as the ability to write quickly. There were two more statements concerning the writing stage, in one the students assessed how often they used a dictionary when writing in English. The other statement concerned the students' ability to self-motivate, making writing assignments interesting for themselves by writing about issues interesting to them. To the author's mind, the results of this statement would have proved the pupils' involvement in the writing process.

The statements regarding the writing process showed almost unanimous results across most of the questions. A large majority of the students evaluated that they were sometimes able to use appropriate conventions when writing, as well as organize the text and write fluently (see figure 4.3.). This led to the conclusion that students did not feel confident about their writing

and were in doubt of their abilities. If the results were compared with the fact that 8 out of 11 students mentioned usually or always using a dictionary when writing, it could be interpreted that these respondents felt that they had trouble with writing in English. The above statement was also supported by the fact that 7 students confirmed that they could almost never revised and self-corrected their writing. Meanwhile, three respondents claimed to never or almost never edit their writing once faced with mistakes. The rest of the respondents, on the other hand, claimed to edit their writing with varying frequency.

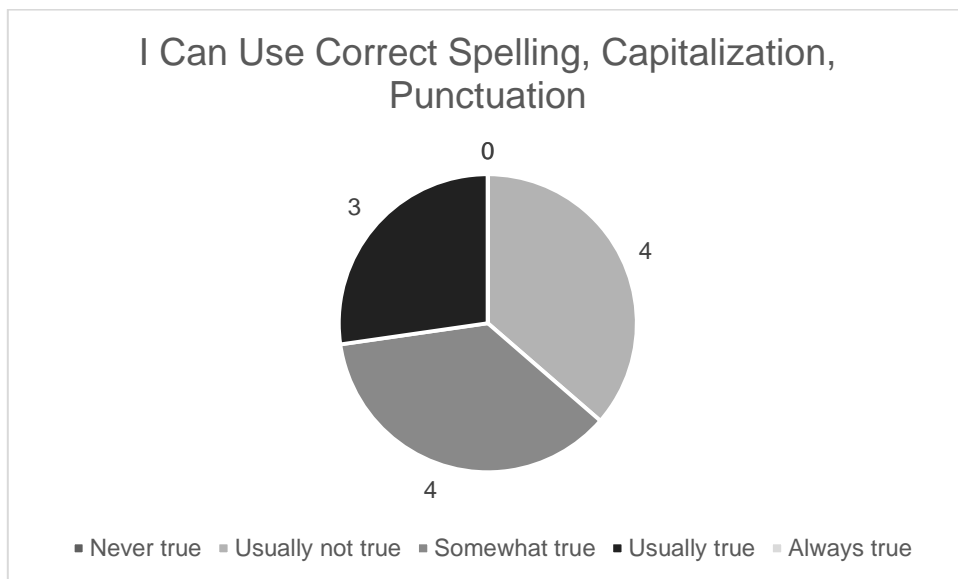


Figure 4.3. Questionnaire Results for Statement *I can use correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation*

In order to find out more about the pupils’ revision process, the author chose two statements. The first one was an *I can* statement where students evaluated how strongly they felt that they could revise their writing and self-correct. In the other students rated how frequently they revised the text after writing it.

Finally, students rated one statement that covered editing. The statement was posed to find out if students agreed that their editing process includes editing grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation. After having revised the questionnaire the author came to the conclusion that it would have been useful dividing the aforementioned statement to cover each type of edit separately, in order to discover what edits the students make to their texts after having written them.

There were two more questions regarding feedback in the questionnaire. The author did not classify these as part of the writing process, as the statements concerned the students’ future writing. In the first statement students evaluated how much they agreed with the fact that they

liked to receive feedback about their writing. In the following statement students were asked to evaluate if they used the feedback they received to improve their future writing. The first question about the students' attitude towards feedback was meaningful to the author in order to compare the results with the claims made in literature that feedback could be overwhelming to students.

Two statements regarding feedback were included to find out the respondents' feelings towards receiving feedback and using it to improve their further writing performance. The author discovered that all but two students only somewhat agreed to having liked to receive feedback about their work (see figure 4.4.). This proved true what was stated earlier in the Paper about feedback and evaluation that the teacher feedback often overwhelmed students. Possibly students had had a negative experience with feedback that they had received on their written papers. The respondents' attitude towards using feedback to improve their future writing received mixed answers, ranging from positive to negative, however, over half of the pupils admitted to using the feedback they received to improve.

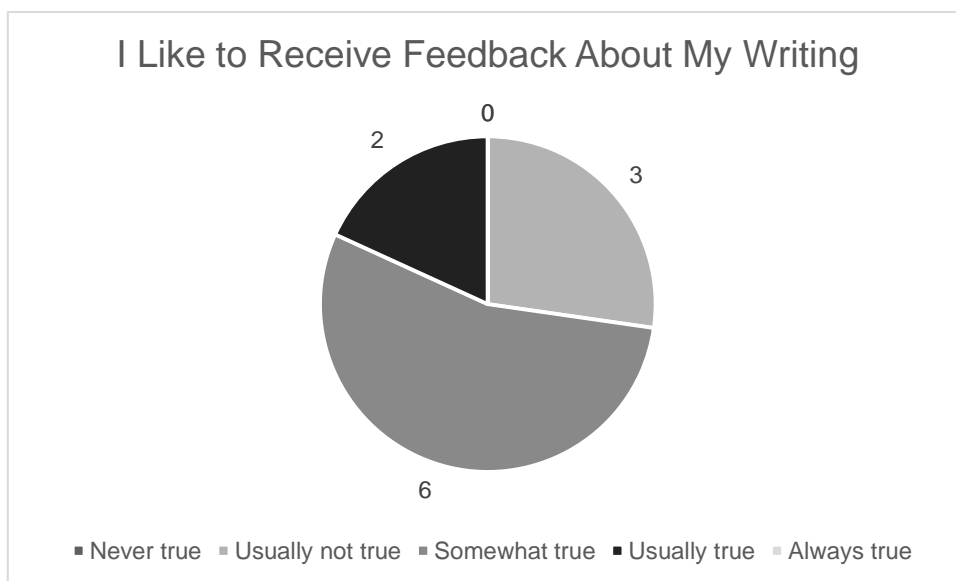


Figure 4.4. Questionnaire Results for Statement *I like to receive feedback about my writing*

The questionnaire was concluded by asking the respondents to evaluate their English language skills, ranging from best to worst. The included skills were listening, reading, writing, speaking, and language use. The author of the Paper expected that most students would list speaking as their strongest and writing as their weakest skill.

Contrary to the author's hypothesis, only one student listed writing as their weakest point (see figure 4.5.). This student participated in the letter journal writing. Totaling the answers of the

entire group, the average results listed speaking as the best skill, followed by reading, writing, listening, and language use as the worst.

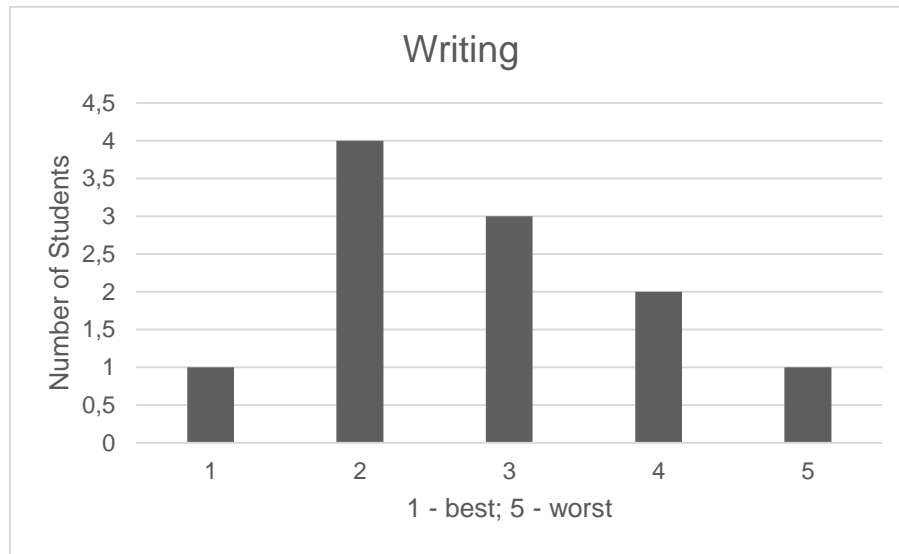


Figure 4.5. Students' Self-evaluation, Ranging Command of Skills (Writing)

After reviewing the results of the questionnaire the main conclusions were that the respondents had a generally neutral attitude towards writing in English. However, it could be seen that the students' self-esteem about their writing was rather low. Moreover, students had difficulties planning and brainstorming, as well as organizing the process in a time and labor effective way. Additionally, the respondents claimed to be resistant towards receiving feedback, which could be connected with prior negative experience. All in all the questionnaire provided insight into the respondents' writing habits and helped make further steps regarding planning writing instruction in English lessons.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF LETTER JOURNALS

Writing letter journals was chosen as a primary means of 7th grade student writing practice this schoolyear. The author's prior experience had shown that students often struggled with writing, both with expressing their ideas and the technicalities, like grammar and spelling. The rationale for choosing this method was that it would serve as a way to offer continuous practice to students without overwhelming feedback and limits in regards to topics and content. Moreover, as a new teacher for this group the author wanted to get to know the students and find out more about their interests, hobbies, and habits, which could have proved useful in tailoring the learning process to fit each students' needs.

During the letter writing period (September to end of April) the students managed to write 12 journal entries. 6 letters were written in the 1st semester, the same amount was written in the 2nd semester. In the 1st semester there were 10 students who wrote regularly and 1 who managed 3 letters. In the 2nd semester there were 7 regular participants and 3 who journaled rarely, averaging on 3 entries per semester. Both in the 1st and 2nd semester there were 4 students who did not participate at all.

To track the development of students' writing, evidence of learning was looked for in the letter journals, specifically, self-correction, such as students correcting the spelling of words or changing structures that they commonly use in the letters over time. Additionally, edits were looked at, for example, crossed out and rewritten words or sentences. Translated words in the teacher's letters were also classified as evidence of learning.

Although the students' writing was not being corrected it was necessary to address the mistakes in order to help students correct them. The most prevalent mistakes in the writing were misspellings and incomprehensive sentences, which could be explained by the fact that many of the students used online translation tools, such as Google Translate, where the translations are not always accurate. To help students take note of their errors, the teacher tried repeating the words and sentences that students used but using the correct conventions. Another way to approach errors was by asking the students for clarifications or an alternative explanation when the main idea was unclear.

The evidence of learning in some students' work was difficult to trace. It could be observed that in time the general structure and content of the letters improved, but specific evidence could not be pointed out. Three participants whose work exemplified significant

evidence will be reviewed further. The participants will be referred to as participants A, B, and C for the sake of anonymity.

Participant A showed the greatest improvement in her writing. She had participated in the letter writing throughout the year and was eager both to write and receive replies. In the self-evaluation questionnaire participant A had evaluated writing skills as her second to worst, followed by listening. In classes participant A was active and motivated. As a result oriented student she wished to improve her level of English and receive better marks to achieve a higher average on her report card. In her letters participant A exemplified all three criteria for evidence of learning that the author had chosen. The evidence of participant A’s learning is reflected in the below table, No. 4.2.1.

Table 4.2.1. Evidence of Learning, Participant A

Criteria	Evidence				
Translation	In the 2 nd letter written by the teacher participant A had translated new vocabulary in her native language, which is Russian. The translated items of vocabulary: space (пространство), memoir (воспоминание), probably (вероятно), any (любой) (see Appendix 5).				
Self-correction	Table 4.2.1.1. Evidence of Learning, Participant A, Letter Closing Self-correction				
	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 50%;">1st letter closing</th> <th style="width: 50%;">3rd letter closing</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td><i>I am waiting for you replay! Love, Youre pupil</i></td> <td><i>Looking forward to your reply. Love, Youre Participant A</i></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	1st letter closing	3rd letter closing	<i>I am waiting for you replay! Love, Youre pupil</i>	<i>Looking forward to your reply. Love, Youre Participant A</i>
	1st letter closing	3rd letter closing			
	<i>I am waiting for you replay! Love, Youre pupil</i>	<i>Looking forward to your reply. Love, Youre Participant A</i>			
Table 4.2.1.2. Evidence of Learning, Participant A, Question Formation Self-correction					
<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 50%;">2nd letter question formation</th> <th style="width: 50%;">4th letter question formation</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td><i>What you favorite singer?</i></td> <td><i>What is your goal for this year?</i></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	2nd letter question formation	4th letter question formation	<i>What you favorite singer?</i>	<i>What is your goal for this year?</i>	
2nd letter question formation	4th letter question formation				
<i>What you favorite singer?</i>	<i>What is your goal for this year?</i>				

Upon the analysis of participant A’s translation the author could immediately conclude that in the letters she needed to give more context to the vocabulary the students may have to translate. For instance, translating the word *space* into the author’s native language using Google

Translate, the first offered result was *пространство*, which refers to *space* as in *area*, meanwhile the meaning of the word in context was *outer space*, which should be translated as *космос*. A similar case was observed with the second word in the table, *memoir*. It could be presumed that the participant misread the word, as the translation she had indicated was *воспоминание*, memory in English.

In regards to self-correction participant A showed improvement in many areas over time, for instance, question formation, verb tense consistency, and spelling. The error that participant A corrected the soonest was the letter closing example seen in Table 4.2.1.1. above (see Appendix 6). The participant gradually self-corrected, presumably by having seen the teacher's written response, which in all letters was the same, "Looking forward to your reply. / Love, / Your teacher". Additionally, participant A's question forming skills improved over the semester, especially for simple wh- questions, although, she still showed difficulties in choosing the appropriate question words.

Participant A did not have many edits and corrections in her text. The author suspected that the participant made a draft and wrote the letter after, which would have corresponded to the participant's self-evaluation questionnaire, where she reported almost always writing in her native language and translating the target text in English after.

Generally, within the school year Participant A improved her English. Along with the progress in command of the language, the participant's confidence to use the language grew and she became more active and eager to participate in the lessons. This was also reflected in the letter journals, as her replies became longer and more expressive in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure.

Participant B had fairly good results in English over the schoolyear and in the past. In the self-evaluation questionnaire she indicated writing as her second best skill in English, and had reported that she liked writing both in English and her native language, which was Russian. Despite the fact that this student was one of the strongest in English in her class, she was quite shy and reluctant to speak up in class. In fact, aside from the letter journals this student did not communicate much with the teacher until the end of the first semester. Although participant B did not show drastic improvement within the letter journals, there were aspects the author wanted to mention.

In one of the 2nd semester letters (see Appendix 7) participant B reflected on her learning in the previous semester and expressed that she had difficulties concentrating in class. In the

following letter she elaborated that the difficulties were due to the noise level during the lessons. This was valuable feedback for the teacher and she could take the required steps to reduce noise level in lessons by giving more individual work, instead of pair work as before.

Concerning participant B's writing it was difficult to trace particular points of improvement, as her writing was comparably accurate to begin with, however, comparing the 1st and 5th letter (see Appendix 8) from September and May, respectively, it could be noticed that the sentences had become longer, as well as a more diverse set of vocabulary was used. The main difference between letters 1 and 5 was the use of connectors in sentences. In the 1st letter participant B used only one connector, *and* to link an idea. The rest of the sentences were complete, but not linked to one another. Meanwhile, in the 5th letter participant B used connectors *but* and *because* to explain contrasting ideas and give reasons. Due to the use of connectors the letter became more coherent. Additionally, paragraphing was present in the 5th letter, where participant B divided the paragraphs by topic. In the 1st letter paragraphing could not be traced and the letter was written as a single unit, despite different topics and ideas.

Contrary to participant A's letters, where the improvement was gradual but steady, participant B showed gradual improvement at first, but later her writing worsened. This led to the conclusion that the participant had most likely lost interest in writing, therefore, spent less time on the revision process.

Participant C had evaluated writing as her second best language skill. Comparing to the previously described participants, C had admitted that she only sometimes liked writing in English. Despite that participant C had actively participated in letter journal writing throughout the year and had handed in all entries.

Like participant A, this participant also showed signs of drafting her letters before writing them in the journal notebook (see Appendix 9). What pointed to it was the repetition of sentences that were crossed out in the letter. Participant C's letters had examples of edits, which was one of the criteria for points of learning. From reviewing the edits it could be seen that participant C went over the letters after having written them and made the corrections as needed (see highlighted part in Appendix 9). Similar examples were in almost every written letter.

Mainly participant C's letters were comparably better than her in-class writing and general language command, which signified that the writing was well thought about and revised before handing in.

The other participants' evidence of learning was more difficult to track, in particular the students' who are less capable in English generally. In several cases the participants proceeded to make the same spelling and structural errors throughout the letters, which substantiated the previously cited claims made by Hail (s.d.) that students could keep making the same errors, unless directly confronted about them. For instance, another participant who had a generally poor command of English, despite having written regularly in the second semester did not show any visible improvement to her writing within the letter journals.

To sum up, the author concluded that although all participants seemed to have improved their writing from what could be seen during classes, it was challenging to evaluate the role of the letter journals in the improvement. However, the letter journals definitely served as a safe environment for the students to practice their writing, and it seemed to have helped them release some of their inhibitions in writing.

4.3 EXPERT INTERVIEW

To obtain a different point of view the author of the Paper interviewed an expert, another teacher who journaled with her students. The aim of the interview was to find out the expert's insights about using letter journals, specifically the rationale for having chosen this method and the results.

The expert with whom the interview was conducted was also a teacher in Garkalne Secondary School. She started writing letter journals with her 7th and 8th grade students in the 2nd semester of the previous school year.

In order to reach the aim of the interview, the author planned an unstructured interview. First, it was necessary to establish the background information of how the expert started using this method. After that, the author wanted to find out the grade level with which the method is used and the main aims for choosing it. Furthermore, a question regarding the benefits and drawbacks was posed, followed by a question about ensuring student participation, as this was an issue the author struggled with. Finally, the expert was asked to comment on how she teaches writing in her EFL class, as well as suggestions for future practice in writing. The interview transcript can be found in Appendix 10.

Like the author of the Paper, the expert journaled with her grade 7 and grade 8 students. Upon having analyzed the interview the author discovered that the expert faced the same issue as the author had, namely, student participation. Since neither of the teachers presented this activity as mandatory for the students, many chose to disregard it. Therefore, a large part of the students were left without any writing practice aside from the writing done in the classroom. As hypothesized before, writing was neglected in EFL class and this was also confirmed by the expert. The interviewee claimed that most of the writing practice done within English lessons was connected to practicing vocabulary or grammar, therefore, the aims of the tasks were not directly related to developing writing skills.

Regarding the benefits and drawbacks the main takeaway from the interview was that the interviewee felt that by using this method students were able to experience firsthand that writing in English is not beyond their ability level and was attainable for all participants. As the interviewee stated the aim of the task was to "*let them understand that writing in English is not so crazy and they are able to communicate in English, even though they make some mistakes*". Moreover, the interviewee expressed the sentiment that students could see that they were able to communicate with someone else in writing and still be understood, even though they had made

some mistakes. This resonated with the opinion of the author who also believed that one of the main benefits of the method was that students were given the opportunity to see that they could express themselves and be understood in a different manner than they were used to. If the difficulties of writing versus speaking were compared one of the significant differences was that when speaking students were able to use their body language or signs to get their idea across to the receiver, while in writing they had to rely on words alone. This was often the issue that was difficult for students, not being able to understand whether or not they have effectively communicated their idea to the recipient. As stated by the expert, writing letter journals showed them that the recipient, the teacher, was able to understand them.

During the interview the author also wanted to find out the amount of work the teacher had to do to facilitate the letter journals. The expert confirmed that “*In the beginning when there were more these chat books, I would say 4, 5 hours. Now, less people are giving them, so it’s like 2 hours approximately*”. Since the average classroom size in Garkalne Secondary was about 15 students, this seemed to be relatively manageable. The author had a similar experience, but usually tried replying to the letters during the week in order to avoid having to write for several hours at a time. Nonetheless, it had to be considered if this method was feasible for teachers with larger number of students. Although the benefits of communication and practice were there the author does not see the benefits outweighing the costs if a teacher had to spend more than 10 hours per month answering student letters. In this case an alternate method of pupils writing letters to each other could be more beneficial.

Finally, the interviewee was asked if she had any advice about teaching writing in EFL, but the answer was negative, claiming that she did not feel to be an expert in the field. This led to the conclusion that some teachers were also confused about approaching writing instruction in the class, which could lead to no direct writing practice for the students.

In conclusion, the main insights from the expert interview were that participation was an issue in the expert’s case as well as the author’s. Additionally, the expert substantiated the claims made in literature that the letter journal method helped to empower novice writers and got them interested in writing, which in turn helped to build their confidence.

CONCLUSION

Writing is one of the skills that students are expected to acquire within their education process. Along with reading, these skills are referred to as literacy, which is cited as one of UNESCO's fundamental human rights. Although reading has undoubtedly been recognized as an important skill both in school and outside, writing, especially in EFL, has been neglected. Lack of time during class, lack of teacher's experience, difficulties with student participation, and uncertainty of the effectiveness of methods cause the slow development of writing skills.

Within the research the author reviewed writing as a skill in EFL and the common challenges that students face when learning to write in a foreign language. The results of the study confirmed the discoveries other researchers had come across, such as that pupils who write in a foreign language can have difficulties expressing their ideas with their limited vocabulary, or that writing in a foreign language is a slow process, as it involves complex thought processing in order for the author to be able to express their idea.

In the Paper the author has selected one of the methods that could be used to help students develop writing skills, letter journal writing. The research sample was 7th grade of Garkalne Arts and Comprehensive Secondary school with which the author wrote letter journals throughout the schoolyear. The purpose of the study was to discover if letter writing could be a useful tool for helping 7th grade students develop their writing skills. This case study gave evidence that this method was not as effective for 7th grade students as the author originally suspected. Within the research process it was proven that, although a number of students benefited from the continuous practice, it was difficult to trace the development of writing skills for students with a poorer command of English, as they were more likely to repeat mistakes without corrective feedback. However, letter journal writing proved to be a valuable tool for student empowerment as novice writers, as well as a good way to facilitate good student-teacher relationships, which proved it to be a meaningful writing activity. Furthermore, it was discovered that although the majority of students in the research sample had a neutral or positive attitude towards writing both in English and their native language, which could signify that pupils would be potentially motivated writers, due to the time consuming nature of writing practice and lack of experience of teachers, the development of this skill was not often addressed in the classroom.

One of the limitations of the research was the limited number of participants. Since the author carried out the case study with a relatively small group, 10 students who journaled regularly, it was not possible to draw general conclusions about the effectiveness of the method.

Moreover, the study was exposed to researcher bias, as the author of the study was also a teacher in the sample group. Although the result of the study proved the original hypothesis to be inaccurate, the author believes she cannot completely objectively evaluate the writing development in the letter journals of the students without taking into account their in-class performance. To the author's mind, the results of the study would be different if the research sample were students with a better command of English, they could benefit more from indirect feedback, as confirmed in the literature review.

When studying the existing research and comparing it with the author's experience and the expert interview the author concluded that teachers lacked knowledge and practical advice for writing instruction and meaningful writing in the EFL classroom. This should be a further explored field, as letter journal writing was only one of the many 21st century appropriate writing practices cited in studies. In order to facilitate the development of writing skills teachers need novel approaches to teaching writing considering the changing classroom climate due to technological advancements and improvements in the State curriculum.

Furthermore, an issue that the author encountered was the lack of available research relevant to writing in EFL in Latvia. The author could not find research that would point to other teachers using the letter journal writing method to improve the writing skills of the students, which lead to the conclusion that this method is relatively new and would need additional qualitative and quantitative data in order to discover how it could be used in an effective and meaningful way.

Overall, the author enjoyed using this method with the pupils because it allowed to facilitate a close relationship with them, as the pupils gladly wrote about their interests and life both in school and outside. Although the author will not continue her research of this method in this school, she would like to continue working with it in her future practice and study it more, especially with older grade level students.

THESES

1. Writing is the most difficult skill for foreign language learners to acquire.
2. Practicing writing regularly builds confidence and empowers students to see themselves as writers.
3. Five elements of writing need to be taken into account in order to produce a good composition: purpose, audience, clarity, unity, and coherence.
4. There are five steps to the writing process, they are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The more complex the writing the more drafting and revision stages there will be.
5. Most writing done in school is done by prompts, although there is evidence that pupils perform better without prompts.
6. Dialogue or letter journal is the continuous written communication between a teacher and a pupil.
7. Letter journals emphasize the writing process over product, therefore, fluency is more important than accuracy.
8. Writing development with letter journals happens faster for higher ability students, whereas students with a poorer command of the language need direct error correction and feedback in order to improve.

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APPENDICES

Appendix No.1

Description of assignment



Dear Student,

Today I have given you back the notebook I asked you to bring on the first week. In it you will find a letter from me. Your task is to reply to that letter (you may write several entries per week if you wish). I will be collecting your notebook again next Friday (September 23rd). We will continue to write letters to each other throughout the year. There are two aims for this activity – for you to practice writing and for me to get to know you better. You are allowed to write whatever comes to mind.

I will not be correcting your writing, so feel free to express yourself. This assignment will not be marked but you will receive a tested (for handing in) or not tested (for not handing in).

I know writing in English can be tough but you have to try. It will get easier.

Love,
S.

P.S. – in case you do not understand this message, please refer to Google Translate.

Writing self-evaluation

Information			
Name		Surname	
Date			

Evaluation: writing

Please evaluate the below statements in the scale of 1 to 5.

	1 (almost) never true	2 usually not true	3 somewhat true	4 usually true	5 (almost) always true
I can logically organize my ideas when writing.					
I can use appropriate spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.					
I can easily brainstorm and gather ideas before writing.					
I can revise my own writing and self-correct.					
I can write quickly in English.					
I can use my own independent thinking in my writing.					
I often write in English.					
I use a dictionary when writing in English.					
I plan my writing in my native language (make notes, outlines, etc.).					
I plan my writing in English (make notes, outlines, etc.)					
I write in my native language first and then translate it into English.					
I make my writing assignments fun for myself by writing about things that are interesting for me.					
After writing I go back to what I've written and revise the text.					
When revising, I edit my grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.					

I like to receive feedback about my writing.					
I use the feedback that I receive to improve my future writing.					
I look for opportunities to practice writing in English (outside the classroom).					
I feel nervous when I have to write in English.					
I like writing in English.					
I like writing in my native language.					

Evaluation: general

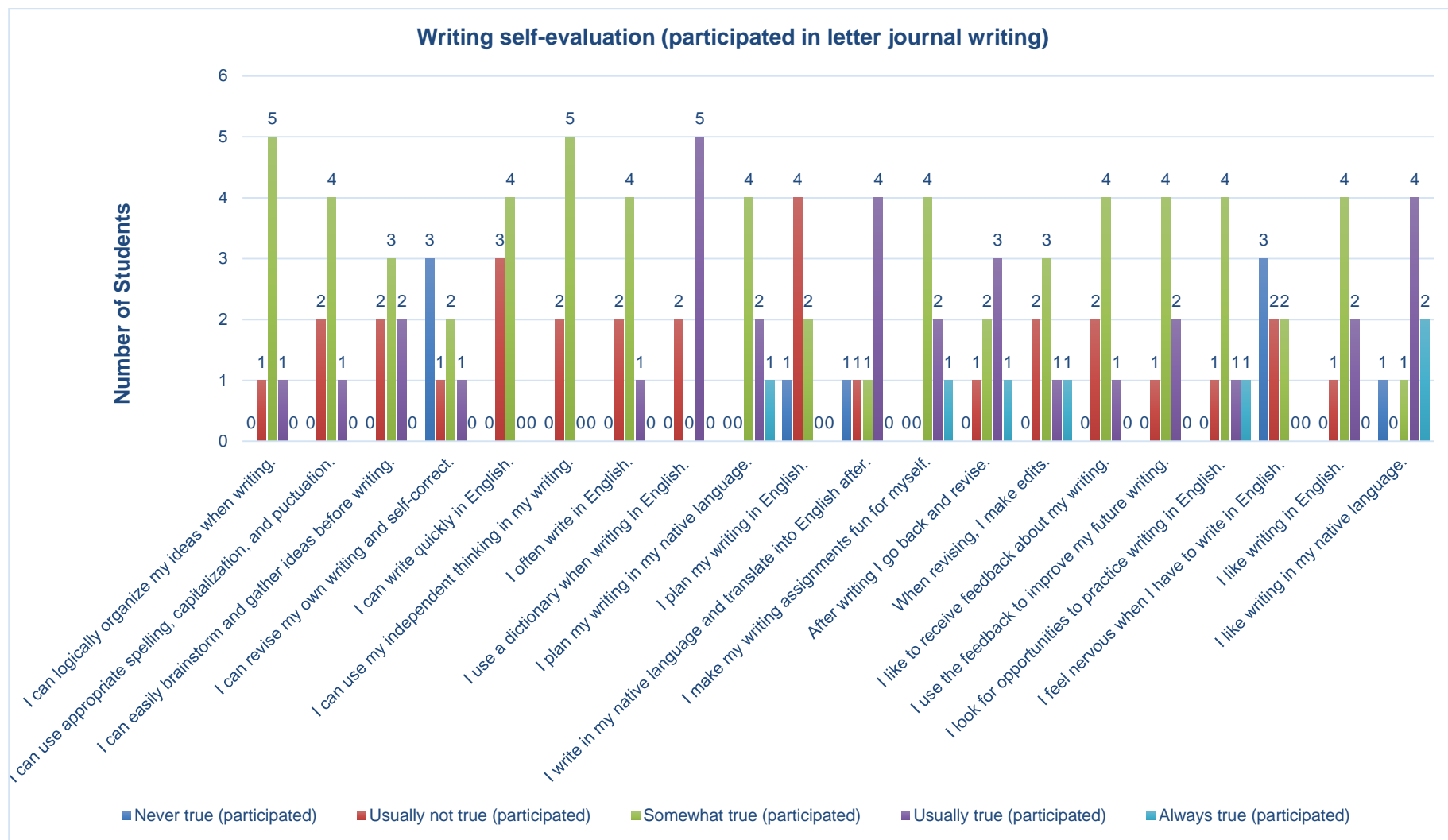
Please evaluate and arrange your English language skills from best to worst (1 – best; 5 – worst).

Listening	
Reading	
Writing	
Speaking	
Language use	

The provided data is confidential and only the results will be published.

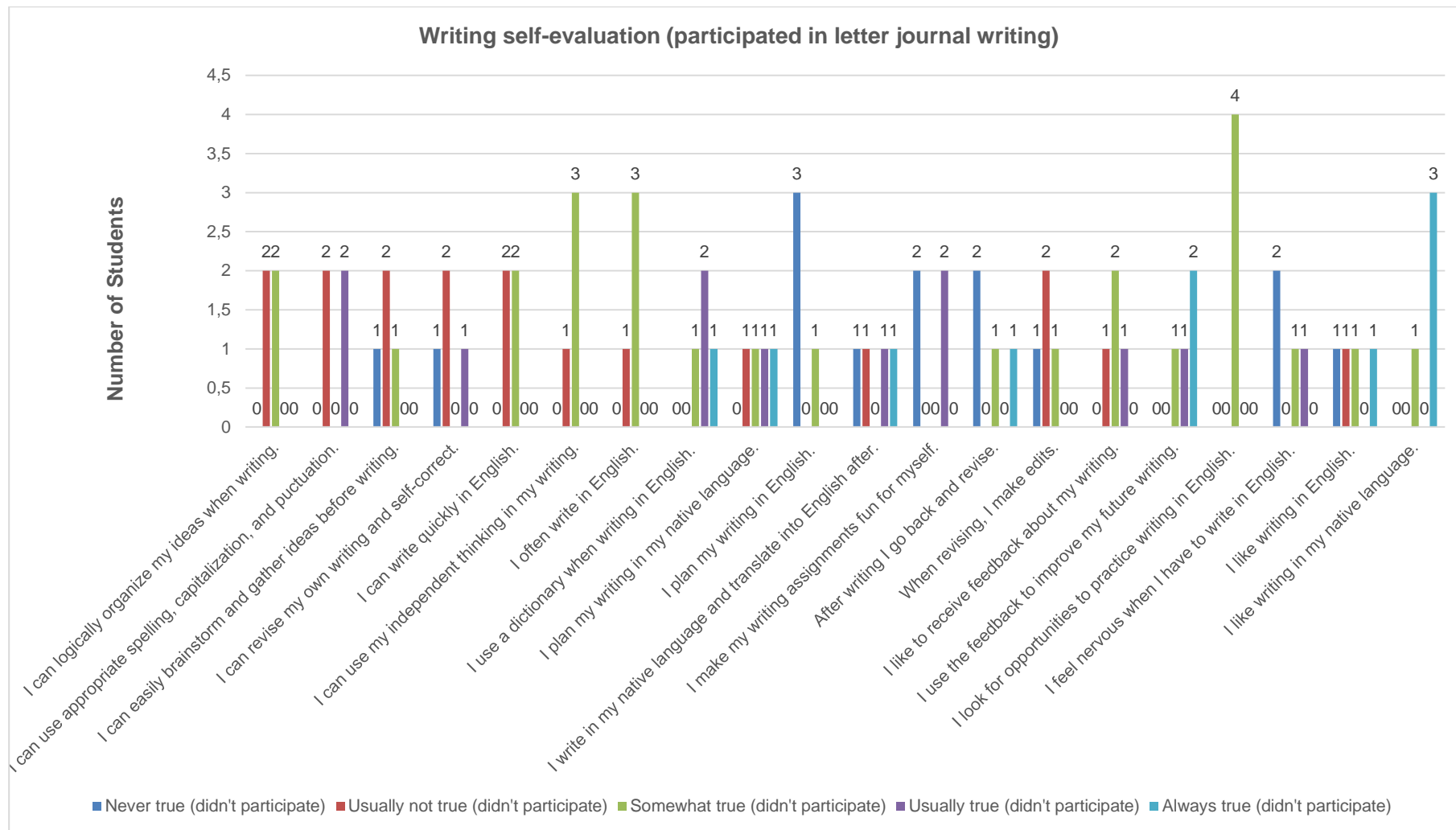
Appendix 3

Questionnaire results (students who participated in letter writing)



Appendix 4

Questionnaire results (students who didn't participate in letter writing)



Appendix 5

Evidence of learning: participant A's translation

Dear Wjana,

Thank you very much for your reply.

I haven't seen the movie that you like, should I watch it? I think I saw Narnia on TV, is the book better than the movie?

My favorite film is "Interstellar", it's about the end of the world and space. It's a really good movie.

My favorite book is "Meaty" by Samantha Irby. It's her memoir, it's super funny. And my favorite food is probably soup (any soup).

Do you have any plans for this and next weekend? I am moving this Saturday, it's a bit scary.

Looking forward to your reply.

Love,

Simona

Appendix 6

Participant A's self-correction

questions. What you favorite food or juice?
I am waiting for you replay!
Love, 😊
Your pupil.

Dear teacher,
Thank you for your reply.
I don't know. But I think that will go to some coffe.
Es my favorite ^{be}brand is Mohito. I don't no. I have
one cactus he's not pricy and he's really cute.
I like travelling and I'd like to go the dondon
in Angland. That music you listen? I like different
music but most of all I like funny and
relaxing music. And now I listen Dreams. What
breend of dogs do you like most. I like the
breend Golden retriever. I think this dog breend
very beautiful and sweetheart. What you
favorite singer?
Looking forward to your reply
Love,
Your Ufjana.

Dear Teacher,

I was the worst learner and I was harder to concentrate on learning. Probably yes.

Recently, I ~~decided~~ to relax and ~~spending~~ time with my family a little.

This winter I was playing in the snow and riding on a sled with friends and we had a good time.

Love

Vina

Dear Teacher,
My dog is 6 years old. He is black. Her is toy poodle.
I live not far from school. I usually wake up at 7:00 ~~am~~.
I like draw and ride a horse.
I collect horse figurines and now I have 32 figurines. I don't like read a books. My favorite movies is Hunger games and Divergent. Do you have favorite ~~ted~~ movies?

Your student Ura.

Dear, Teacher

I don't like cold weather too, but I like winter. Because winter is very beautiful when there is snow.

My favorite season is summer, because it is holidays and in summer you can go camping.

Yes, I had decided I will write ZPD. I will write about continued last year theme of gardens only in the other direction. Last year I and my friend wrote about gardens in English and French style. But this year we will plan our garden in the style of the four elements (fire, water, earth and wind), or something like that.

Love,
Vika

Appendix 9

Participant C's letter

Dear Simona,
Thank you for your reply.
I absolutely agree that marks
don't show your real knowledge
of a subject. I think that if a teacher
doesn't like some students it would
be very difficult for them to have
~~good~~ difficult for them to have a good
mark in this subject. If you liked
English and literature you should
be a true humanitarian, ~~should~~
~~be a true~~. As regards me, I am
also humanitarian, because I like to
read, especially books about adventures.
My favourite book is "Hio, my Hio".
But I don't like to read books
from our school programme.
I think that it would be difficult
for me to work at school. 😊

Appendix 10

Expert interview transcript

Author: So, hello, thank you for meeting me for this interview.

Expert: Mhm.

Author: So, first question, please, tell me how you started using this method and how it is going.

Expert: Well, um, actually I stole this idea from my colleague if I could say so and my colleague was very excited about this, if you could call it like that. And, yeah, I decided to try it.

Author: Ok, and with which grades do you use this method?

Expert: Um, I'm using it with 7th and 8th grade.

Author: Ok, and what is your aim?

Expert: Uh, my aim is just to test it actually, um, I, I guess my first idea was that these letter journals, we are calling them chat books, um, that that would not maybe improve their writing but let them understand that writing in English is not so crazy and they are able to communicate in English, even though they make some mistakes. I'm able to understand the main idea what they are writing, so just encourage them to write I would say.

Author: Ok, and so far what would you say are the main benefits and drawbacks?

Expert: Mhm, um, benefits, I've noticed that there are some students who are super excited. They ask me every week if I have answered, they're really waiting for the answers and they are eager to write. Of course there are some part of the students who are not so interested and they don't participate in this activity and that's fine, because it wasn't obligatory, it's for tested, not tested. Um, yeah. But so far with the students who are doing this I'm very satisfied.

Author: And how much time does it take for you to answer the letters?

Expert: Um, hard to tell. In the beginning when there were more these chat books, I would say 4, 5 hours. Now, less people are giving them, so it's like 2 hours approximately.

Author: Ok, and now a more general question about practicing writing. How do you help students practice writing in your English lessons?

Expert: Mhm, uh, well, we don't have, um, like specific writing exercise. We don't write a lot of letters or e-mails or something like that. We only have like write a short story, it's connected to learning the vocabulary or some grammar structure. Usually it's in pairs. Um, yes, and writing is also practiced within some exercises from workbook, but I would say that we don't have a lot of big writing assignments like essay or something like that.

Author: Ok, and do you have any suggestions for teaching writing in English?

Expert: I have a feeling I'm not an expert on this field yet. Advice for teaching writing. Um, no. I don't have advice.

Author: Ok, thank you for the interview.

Expert: No problem.

Author: Have a nice day.

Expert: You too.