İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN ÖĞRENCİLERİN AKADEMİK YAZMA KONUSUNDA KARŞILAŞTIKLARI ZORLUKLAR

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ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümü öğrencilerinin kullandıkları yazma stratejileri, yazma ödevlerine karşı tutumları ve bu ödevleri tamamlamak için kullanmayı tercih ettikleri kaynakları ve bunların yanı sıra akademik yazma konusunda karşılaştıkları sorunları ortaya çıkarmaktır. Çalışmaya 2017-2018 akademik yılında İstanbul'da bir vakıf üniversitesinin İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümü 2. sınıfında okumakta olan 34 öğrenci katılmıştır. Araştırmanın amaçlarına ulaşmak için nicel ve nitel veriler bir anket yolu ile toplanmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları, öğrencilerin üst bilişsel yazma stratejilerinin öneminin farkında olduklarını ortaya koymuş, bunun yanı sıra öğrencilerin büyük bir çoğunluğunun yazım öncesi evrede beyin fırtınası ve taslak hazırlama stratejilerini kullandıklarını göstermiştir. Öğrencilerin hemen hepsinin en çok düzeltme stratejisini kullandıkları bulunmuştur. Ancak öğrencilerin düzeltme stratejisini kullanırken yazım öncesi evrede akran geri bildiriminden faydalanmayı tercih ettikleri ve yazım süreci sonunda ise akran dönütüne değil öğretmen dönütüne önem verdikleri tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca, öğrencilerin yarısının İngilizce yazma aktivitelerini günlük hayatta kullanmayıp sadece verilen ödevleri yapmak için kullandıkları belirlenmiştir. Öğrencilerin ödevlerini hazırlamakta kullandıkları ana kaynakların sırasıyla kitaplar, dergiler ve Internet veri tabanları olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bunlara ek olarak, öğrencilerin yazma sürecinde en sık yaşadıkları sorunların sırasıyla Konu ile ilgili kaynak bulma, Konu seçme, Açımlama, Kaynak kullanma ve alıntı, Kendi düşüncelerini ifade etme, Bağlaşıklık ve bağdaşıklık ifadelerini kullanma ve Dili kullanma olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademik yazma sorunlar, yazma stratejileri.

EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to explore the writing strategies used by ELT students and the difficulties they experience in academic writing. A questionnaire was used to collect the data that was obtained from 34 second-year students, studying at the English Language Teaching Department of Education Faculty at a foundation university in Istanbul, Turkey in 2017-2018 academic year. The results of the present research revealed that the participants of the study are aware of the importance of using metacognitive writing strategies in the completion of quality writing assignments. It also became clear that the participants pay attention to the identification of what they specifically want to say at the pre-writing stage. That is, they use brainstorming techniques and prepare an outline before they begin to write their first drafts on a given topic. The participants favor peer feedback at the pre-writing stage but not at the post-writing stage. The most frequently used writing strategy was found to be revising strategy. However, it also became clear that the participants prefer self-revision or teacher feedback for the improvement of their papers. Finally, the findings of the study indicated that the participants experience many difficulties in writing, such as finding relevant references, choosing a significant topic, paraphrasing, referencing and citation, expressing own voice, coherence and cohesion, using conjunctive cohesive devices appropriately, and language use, respectively.

Keywords: Academic writing difficulties, writing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

EFL learners experience a lot of difficulties when they try to learn and practice language learning skills and strategies. One of the most difficult language skills that the students encounter when learning English is writing (Al Badi, 2015; Al Fadda 2012 & Xiao & Chen, 2015). Academic writing is considered as a difficult and a complex task, because it consists of learning to use many aspects of writing. EFL students who lack the ability to master all those aspects of writing suffer many

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difficulties when they try to express their messages in written English (Xiaoxiao, 2010; Xiao & Chen, 2015). Academic writing is complex process, because it requires learners to generate ideas, select and use appropriate language and vocabulary in addition to organizing information through drafting, revising and editing (Rusinovci, 2015). Teachers spend a lot of time and effort to meet the students' needs in academic writing tasks. Despite the teachers' efforts, the students might continue suffering writing difficulties, as they are not only learning a foreign language, but also try to learn how to compose successfully. For these reasons, there is a need to conduct research on the difficulties EFL students experience in academic writing, so that the instructors working at universities can make informed-decisions when teaching academic writing strategies. The current research aimed to explore the writing strategies used by ELT students, their attitudes towards writing assignments and the sources they like to use, and the difficulties they experience in academic writing. The following research questions framed this study:

1. What are the writing strategies used by the students?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards writing assignments?
3. What are the sources the students like to use in writing?
4. What difficulties do the students encounter in academic writing?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research methods were employed in order to collect as well as to analyze the data of this study. This study was conducted at a foundation university in İstanbul, Turkey in 2017-2018 academic year. The participants of the current study were a total of 34 students, studying at the English Language Teaching Department of Education Faculty. The participants were second year (sophomore) Turkish students. The data of the study was collected through a questionnaire developed by Al Badi (2015). The questionnaire includes 4 sections. The first section of the questionnaire includes 3 questions to collect demographic data about the participants of the study. The aim of the second section of the questionnaire is to find out the writing strategies ELT students use in the completion of writing assignments. To achieve this aim, the participants are provided with 12 writing strategies based on a 6-point Likert-type rating scale. The response options are from *Always* to *Never*. Section 3 of the questionnaire aims to identify the students' attitudes towards writing assignments and the sources ELT students like to use in writing. Accordingly, Section 3 involves 2 questions. The first question asks the students to rate whether they find writing assignments easy or difficult based on a 4-point Likert-type rating scale from *easy* to *neither difficult nor easy*. The second question of Section 3 offers the participants 4 sources that they may possibly use to accomplish their writing assignments. The sources the participants are offered include *Books*, *Journals*, *Both*, and *Others* (*specify*), respectively. Section 4 of the questionnaire aims to find out the difficulties ELT students experience in academic writing. In order to find out the areas of difficulty ELT students experience, they are provided with 8 options. The questionnaire contained options such as, *Referencing and citation*, *Language use*, *Paraphrasing*, *Expressing own voice*, *Finding relevant references*, *Coherence and cohesion*, *Choosing a significant topic*, and *Others (specify)* that give the participants the chance to add any additional ideas. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire was subjected to the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software, version 22.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The first research question of the study aimed at finding the types of writing strategies the students use in the completion of their writing assignments. The findings of the current study revealed that the most frequently used writing strategies by the majority of the students are *Revising the content and ideas* and *Editing the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation*. The frequent use of these two strategies shows that revising strategies are the most commonly used writing strategies among the students. Based on this finding, we may conclude that almost all of the students are conscious of the importance of revising the content of their papers, paying attention to the ideas conveyed. We can also state that almost all of the participants know that editing is very important in producing a quality product and that is why they try to check and revise what they have written. This conclusion is in line with some other studies, which also investigated the students' use of writing strategies. For instance, Sadi & Othman (2012) conducted a research on writing strategies of Iranian EFL learners. After analyzing the data of their study, they found that "repetition, rereading, revision…" are the mostly used strategies by good writers (p.1151). Moreover, Mohite (2014) conducted a study to investigate

the English language writing strategies used by Polish EFL learners. The findings of this research revealed that the participants tend to "favor revision strategies over the planning strategies" (p. 39). On the other hand, the findings of other researchers may contradict the conclusions arrived in the current study. For example, in his study of Japanese students, Yasuda (2004) found out that "students used more strategies in the writing stage than in the prewriting and revising stage" (p. 54). In the current study, however, we concluded that almost half of the participants have not established the habit of giving or receiving feedback from their peers when revising their papers, but that they prefer self-revision or teacher feedback for the improvement of their papers. Based on this conclusion, we might argue that the participants of the study need additional explicit exercise on how to give and receive peer feedback at the revision stage. The findings of the current study indicated that almost half of the participants perceive their teacher as a source of information and as a reliable reference. On the other hand, more than half of the students stated they discuss what they are going to write with other students at pre-writing stage. In addition to the frequent use of revising strategies, we found out that almost all of the students use pre-writing strategies. That is, they use brainstorming techniques and prepare an outline before they begin to write their first drafts on a given topic. Following Riazi's (1997) classification of ESL writing strategies, we may conclude that the students in the study are aware of the importance of using metacognitive writing strategies in the completion of quality writing assignments (cited in Abdul-Rahman, 2011). We may also conclude that the students in the present study pay attention to the identification of what they specifically want to say at the pre-writing stage. Finally, we conclude that all of the students do not write in English for pleasure, but they only write in English in order to complete their assignments.

The second aim of the study was to identify the students' attitudes towards writing assignments. The analysis of the data revealed that only one third of all the participants find writing assignments difficult. Drawing on this finding, we might assume that the participants of the study are used to writing in English and this is why they do not perceive writing as a difficult task. This finding is in line with that of Hanane (2015) who also conducted a research on students' attitudes towards academic writing in Republic of Algeria and came up with similar results to those of the current study. These results show that most of the participants find it interesting and easy to write in English.

The third aim of the study was to find out the sources the students like to use in the accomplishment of their writing assignments. The findings showed that most of the students prefer using both Books and Journals as main sources to accomplish their writing assignments. The second source as identified by the students was Internet. On reflection, we realized that the students' choice is dependent on the nature of the writing assignments required by the instructors at the university. For this reason, we might conclude that the instructors at ELT department use books, journals, and web sites frequently as sources of information. Review of literature regarding the sources ELT students use in the completion of their writing tasks seem to be under-researched. We could not find much study to compare this conclusion with those of other researchers. However, in a related study, McCulloch (2012) stated that it is necessary that the students become acquainted with using source materials successfully. This would assist them in their discussions. In other words, the most important thing is to utilize source materials efficiently and successfully whatever these materials are.

The final aim of the study was to identify the types of difficulties the students encounter in academic writing. On analyzing the students' responses to the questionnaire items, we concluded that the most difficult areas of writing for most of the students were *Finding relevant references* and *Choosing a significant topic*. This finding indicates that the students in the study suffer when trying to find suitable references that help them complete their writing assignments. In addition, they are confused about how to select important topics and leave those of less importance. These two difficulties are discussed in a study done by Al Badi (2015). In this study, the results reflect that finding relevant references as well as choosing a significant topic are two difficulties faced by the students. The second most difficult area of writing for many of the students in this study was *Paraphrasing*. This finding reveals that the students need additional practice activities on paraphrasing in order to be able to say someone else's ideas using their own words. This finding is in line with that of Liao & Tseng (2010) who concluded that the students had serious problems in appropriate paraphrasing which resulted in plagiarism. The next most difficult area of writing for most of the students in our study was *Referencing and citation*. This conclusion clearly indicates that the students find it difficult to quote from a book, paper, or author and then list the sources they have cited. This finding is in line with that of McCulloch (2012)

who conducted a case study on five Japanese postgraduate students. McCulloch (2012) concluded that the students had difficulty to cite the materials that they had used in their writing products. Moreover, we concluded that the students in the current study experience difficulties in *Expressing own voice*. This conclusion reveals that the students have difficulties in conveying their ideas in addition to linking their ideas logically to produce coherent texts. This conclusion is in line with the conclusion of Bailey & Pieterick (2008). Bailey & Pieterick (2008) conducted their study on first year students at a UK university, and they concluded that the students suffer when trying to express themselves in academic writing. Furthermore, the students' responses reflected that they encounter difficulties in *Language use* as well as in producing *Coherent & cohesive* written pieces. This finding shows that some students experience problems in using grammatically correct and appropriate sentences in English. Moreover, the students have difficulties in using conjunctive cohesive devices appropriately. This conclusion is compatible with that of Al Badi (2015). In this study, the findings depict that the most frequently experienced difficulties are language use as well as coherence and cohesion. Finally, 2 students pointed out that they suffer other difficulties. They find *time management* and *using the same words continuously; difficulties in finding synonyms* difficult to cope with in writing assignments. Experiencing difficulties in time management was also cited in Yeoh & Terry's (2013) study. This study was conducted on research students in Australia. The results indicated that time management was one aspect of the academic challenges faced by the students. Secondly, using the same words continuously and having difficulties in finding synonyms is in line with the findings of Chi (2010) who conducted a research on engineering major students at Hong Kong University. The finding of this study demonstrated that "the students lacked vocabulary knowledge" (p.171).

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