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WRITING STRATEGY PREFERENCES OF TURKISH UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS

Abstract

The main aim of this study is to examine Turkish undergraduate students' writing strategy preferences within foreign language context. The purpose is to determine whether before, while or after writing strategies are preferred respectively at three different stages of writing process by students majoring in English as a foreign language. This study also aims to identify the frequency of strategy type by students. The participants of the present study were 80 students of English language and Literature Department in Turkey. The study revealed that students employed during writing, post writing and before writing strategies respectively. That is, the least preferred strategies are at before writing stage while the most used ones are that of during writing stage of the writing process.

Keywords: Writing Strategies, Writing Process, Strategy Type, English as a Foreign Language

TÜRK LİSANS ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN YABANCI DİL YAZMA STRATEJİLERİ TERCİHLERİ

Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, yabancı dil bağlamında Türk lisans öğrencilerinin yazma stratejisi tercihlerini incelemektir. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, yabancı dil bağlamında Türk lisans öğrencilerinin yazma stratejisi tercihlerini incelemektir. Amaç, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak kullanan öğrenciler tarafından yazma stratejilerinin yazma öncesinde, yazma sırasında veya sonrasında hangi sırayla tercih edildiğini belirlemektir. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda öğrenciler tarafından kullanılan strateji türünün sıklığını da belirlemeyi hedeflemektedir. Mevcut çalışmanın katılımcıları, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümünde eğitim gören 80 öğrencidir. Çalışma, öğrencilerin yazma stratejilerini yazma sırasında, sonrasında ve öncesinde sırasıyla kullandığını ortaya koymuştur. Çalışmanın sonucunda en az tercih edilen strateji türleri yazma öncesi aşamasında, en çok kullanılanlar ise yazma süreci aşamasındadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yazma Stratejileri, Yazma Süreci, Strateji Türü, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce

INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging skills in the foreign language learning process is writing. Flower and Hayes (1980) point this difficulty stating that writing skill involves many components such as planning, revising and monitoring. Similar to Flower and Hayes, McKay (1979) defines writing as “recurring phrases such as thinking process, stylistic choice, grammatical correctness, rhetorical arrangement, and creativity”(p. 73). That is, writing is one of the arduous tasks as it requires being competent in many aspects such as word choice, grammar, mechanics of the language, and organization simultaneously. Hence, the reason for challenge in writing process lies under the fact that the learners need a strong vocabulary, grammar and arrangement skills during the writing task. In addition, the audience factor also contributes to complexity of writing process as Porto (2001) indicates “the writer creates a picture of the reader, who thus becomes an ideal reader, attributes to this reader certain experience, knowledge, opinions and beliefs on the basis of which the writer builds his message” (p.39).

Recently, in parallel to shift from teacher-centered and product- oriented writing classrooms to student –centered and process-based writing courses, students are encouraged to manage their own writing process. Thus, employment of writing strategies has been regarded as a crucial need for promoting writing skills. Accordingly, since past decades, studies have attempted to increase awareness towards the crucial role of strategy use among language practitioners. Therefore, research in strategies has increased markedly over years.

The main aim of the present study is to identify the strategy types employed by undergraduate students. Another preliminary purpose of the study is to determine at which stage of writing process, strategies are used mostly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Writing is a demanding task in the foreign language learning process. For many years, researchers in the field intended to develop new approaches to overcome the difficulties faced in the writing process and to foster writing skills of the learners. One of these approaches is product approach to writing which emphasizes the role of grammatical and syntactic elements (Tangpermoon, 2008). Therefore, the correctness of vocabulary, syntax and mechanic aspects such as punctuation and spelling are regarded as the main factors determining the success in foreign language writing process.

Another approach to writing is genre approach which supports the role of the social environment in writing and its particular purpose (Badger& White, 2000). In other words, in contrast to product approach, genre approach views writing as a process within its context not isolated from its function and readers . Therefore, students are involved in various genres such as letters, compositions, and essays.

Process approach is another one that focuses on the process of the writing task rather than the final outcome which is the main concern of product approach to writing. As Hyland (2003) indicates, writing is not a linear and predictable process as the opponents of product approach suggest; that is; it goes through many stages such as planning, during writing activities and postwriting tasks.

Figure 1. Recursive and unpredictable model of process writing (Tribble, 1996).

As Figure 1 explains, learners engage in a writing cycle to improve their final product. Therefore, it is a need for writers to produce many drafts during the writing process until producing the final one. Accordingly, the role of the teacher shifts from being a director to a facilitator of the teaching activities. In other words, to promote the learning skills gain importance as the learners manage their writing process on their own while the instructor merely guides them.

In this regard, an interest among the researchers has increased towards the strategies as the writing process, in which learners have the autonomy and independence, requires learners' employment of strategies. At this point, many definitions of language learning strategies are put forward by researchers in the field. According to Rubin (1987), language learning strategies are "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information"(p. 19) while Stern(1992) defines it as "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or

remember new information.”(p. 261). One of the most popular classifications of the taxonomy of language learning strategies is that of Oxford’s (1990) as the following figure shows:

Figure 2. Classification of language learning strategies by Oxford(1990)

In addition to Oxford (1990), there are also many scholars classifying language learning strategies (Ellis, 1994; O’ Malley& Chamot, 1990;Oxford 1990; Stern 1992; Wenden & Rubin, 1987) into different subcategories. Despite the great interest in language learning strategies, the particular strategies in the domains of language, such as writing, are partly omitted. However, the past decades have witnessed an increasing interest among researchers in the role of strategies in writing process (Fidalgo, Torrance, Rijlaarsdaam, van den Bergh & Alvarez, 2015; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Zamel (1983) investigated the skilled and unskilled ESL learners’ writing processes and found that more skilled learners spent more time on their essays and revised their drafts more compared to less skilled writers. Similar to this study, Raimes (1985), based on his study, revealed that less skilled learners allocate less time for planning and during

writing processes. That is, the related literature shows that the use of strategies at different stages of writing promotes the writing skills.

Methodology

Participants, Instrument and Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative and descriptive research design. The data were collected through the use of WSQ (Writing Strategy Questionnaire) by Petric and Czarl (2003) and permission from the researchers via e-mail account provided. A 33 item Likert-type scale, of which Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.78, was used. The questionnaire was conducted on the students majoring in English as a foreign language. 80 participants for the research were selected randomly from the second year students studying at English language and Literature department of Bingöl University, in Turkey. Their consent for participation to study was taken into consideration by the researcher.

Results

The overall use of writing strategies at three different stages of writing by 80 students is analyzed by SPSS program and showed at Table 1.

Table 1. Writing strategy use in each stage of writing

Stages	Before	During	After
N	80	80	80
Mean	2.41	3.091	2.62
SD	.679	.582	.512

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As for writing strategies employed at three stages of writing process, the findings of the qualitative data demonstrate that students used strategies most at during writing stage (M=3.091;SD=.582) while the least preferred strategies belong to before writing stage (M=2.41;SD=.679). Table 2 shows the strategy use in more detail for each item.

Table 2. Frequency of strategy use at item level in before writing stage

Before writing strategies	Mean	SD
1. I make a timetable and arrange the time I will spend for the writing process.	1.80	.959
2. Before I start writing I revise the requirements.	2.56	1.14
3. I look at a model written by a native speaker or more proficient writer.	2.07	1.25
4. I start writing without having a written or mental plan.	2.92	1.49
5. I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but not on paper.	3.17	1.33

6.	I note down words and short notes related to the topic.	2.30	1.21
7.	I write an outline of my paper. (MC)	2.16	1.38
8.	I write notes or an outline in my native language.	2.33	1.26

As it is displayed in Table 2, mostly employed strategy in before writing stage is item 5 which is “I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but not on paper.”(M=3.17)

Table 3 displays the frequency of strategy use in during writing stage.

Table 3. Frequency of strategy use at item level in during writing stage

	During writing stage	Mean	SD
1.	I start with the introduction	3.01	1.31
2.	I stop after each sentence to read it again which would help me see if it requires editing or how to continue	2.86	1.21
3.	I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covering one idea to help me see if any editing is required or how to continue.	2.73	1.08
4.	I reread what I have written to get ideas how to continue.	3.13	1.19
5.	I go back to my outline and make changes in it	2.82	1.25
6.	I write bits of the text my native language band then translate them into English.	2.80	1.34
7.	I go for sure in grammar and vocabulary	3.23	1.20
8.	I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English.	3.30	1.17
9.	If I don't know a word in English, I write it in my native language and later try to find an appropriate English word.	3.15	1.38
10.	If I don't know a word in English, I find a similar English word that I know	3.61	1.13
11.	If I don't know a word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary	3.65	1.27
12.	I use a bilingual dictionary.	3.25	1.48
13.	I use a monolingual dictionary	2.63	1.37
14.	I ask somebody to help out when I	3.06	1.49

have problems in writing

It is clear that most preferred item in during writing stage is “If I don't know a word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary.” (M=3.61)

Table 4 shows the frequency of strategy use at item level in after writing stage.

Table 4. Frequency of strategy use at item level in after writing stage

	After writing stage	Mean	SD
1.	I read my text aloud.	2.46	1.41
2.	I only read what I have written when I have finished the whole paper	3.12	1.18
3.	When I have written my paper, I hand it in without reading it	2.08	1.23
4.	I use a dictionary when revising.	2.75	1.34
5.	I make changes in vocabulary	3.12	1.12
6.	I make changes in sentence structure	2.97	0.980
7.	I make changes in the structure of the essay	2.52	1.030
8.	I make changes in the content or ideas.	2.35	.887
9.	I focus on one thing at a time when revising	2.38	1.06
10.	I drop my first draft and start writing again.	2.20	1.08
11.	I check if my essay matches the requirements.	2.75	1.15
12.	I leave the text aside for a couple of days and then I can see it in a new perspective	2.21	1.76
13.	I show my text to somebody and ask for his/her opinion	3.12	1.31
14.	I compare my paper with the essays written by my friends on the same topic	2.47	1.22
15.	I give myself a reward for completing the assignment.	2.08	1.32
16.	I check my mistakes after I get back the paper with feedback from the teacher and try to learn from them.	3.43	1.41

As Table 4 provides detail, the highest used strategy in after writing stage is item 16 (M=3.43) which is “I check my mistakes after I get back the paper with feedback from the teacher and try to learn from them”.

Discussion

The preliminary aim of this study was to identify the preferences of writing strategies in essay writing task among EFL students.

The findings of the present study revealed that students employed writing strategies at before writing stage least. This finding indicates that the students do not involve in before writing strategies as much as during and post writing stages. That is, they potentially underrate the role of prewriting techniques such as planning, brainstorming, clustering or outlining which in turn enable them to develop their writing skills in terms of word choice, organization and content (O’Mealia, 2011). In his study, O’Mealia finds that strategy training for prewriting stage improves students’ writing skills in terms of arrangement of ideas, content and motivation. The relevant literature also adds support to this finding as they show that less successful learners omit the use of prewriting strategies (Dujsik, 2008; Hu&Chen, 2007; Ridhuan & Abdullah, 2009). Thus, it can be stated that encouraging students to use strategies more in prewriting stage by wiring instructors might be a need for promoting students’ skills in writing process as previous studies support.

The study has also revealed another important result which is that students used strategies most at during writing stage. Consistent with the findings of the present study, Raschiti (2011) points the importance of during writing strategies as the researcher, based on her study, views these strategies as key factors provoking thinking skills and encouraging learners to produce various drafts. Additionally, this result is also similar to that of Maarof and Murat (2015) who found that the while-writing strategies were the most frequently used ones. However, the researchers state that in spite of being high users of while writing stage, many students reported their stopping and rereading either after each sentence which in turn might lead them to lose time. That is, employing during writing strategies without paying attention to and allocating time for prewriting stage strategies may be unhelpful in organizing their essays and generating ideas to write. At this point, the language practitioners should increase awareness through strategy training in each stage, particularly the prewriting one.

Moreover, the results of the present study show that in after writing stage students have inclined towards using the strategy of checking their papers in light of the feedback by writing instructor. This result implies that learners are still in need of revising their essays due to comments of teacher similar to that of conventional approaches to writing such as product-oriented approach. At this point, it is crucial to suggest that writing instructors’ education concerning giving feedback should be provided and strengthened as to not demotivate the students through feedback focusing on grammar or spelling mistakes.

Conclusion

Based on findings, it can be concluded that participants in the present study are inclined to use of while writing strategies whereas they tend to employ strategies least in prewriting stage. Additionally, the most preferred strategy type in three stages of writing process is students’ choice of getting feedback from the writing instructor. In light of the findings, it can be

recommended for language practitioners to raise awareness towards each type of strategy and enable students to apply various strategies in the writing process.

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