

Challenges Facing Students in Acquiring Writing Skills in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract: Writing, which is overlooked during the learning process when compared to other skills, is one of the most challenging skills to acquire foreign language learners. Constraints such as time limitation, grammar, reading, speaking, and so on can be the reasons behind this disregarding. Moreover, some of the foreign language teachers complain that students are not competent enough to write appropriately in the target language as required. The survey method was used in this quantitative study, aiming to determine the views of foreign language learners on the acquisition of writing skills. The scope of the study comprises of students studying in the preparatory program of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University School of Foreign Languages in 2021-2022 education periods. 176 students studying in the preparatory program were included in the sample with the random sampling technique. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze the data entered in SPSS 20. Keeping all this in mind, the aim of this study is to reveal the opinions of the students with the data obtained from open-ended questions, and thus to suggest some points to make writing skill more attractive along with the techniques used in process writing approach.

Keywords: Writing Skills, Language Teaching, Process Writing, Collaborative Study

1. Introduction

Writing skill, one of the four basic skills in foreign language teaching, is the skill that students and teachers have the most difficulty with. Students are expected to use speaking and writing skills, two of the four basic skills, in order to see what and how much they have learned and to evaluate this process. It is a known fact that among these two skills, the skill that students have difficulty with is writing. While doing this, foreign language learners need to express systematically writing, which is a system in which verbal expressions are coded with symbols. According to Nunan (2003), writing is revealing thoughts and specifying how to express them and presenting them to the reader in sentences and paragraphs. Similarly, Meyers accepts writing as a skill that can be developed by writing and states that it is a process that includes research, putting ideas together on a piece of paper, revising and rearranging them. In other words, points such as how and where the expressions to be written should be constructed, in which order they should take place, and which parts of a meaningful whole should be formed are also among the factors that should

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be known in a good written expression.

In order to improve the writing skill, which is one of the four basic skills that students should acquire in the foreign language teaching process, there are courses under different names, especially in foreign language education departments or foreign language preparatory classes. In these courses, students are taught written expression techniques and students are expected to improve themselves in this field. Mostly, these lessons are taught in the form of student-centered lessons, with the students working individually and sometimes together on the subjects determined by the relevant lesson teacher.

1.1 Why Is Writing Difficult?

In general, students consider writing to be the most difficult skill. This may be due to the unclear expectation of the teacher concerned. One thing that most foreign language teachers err on with regard to the concept of writing skill is to expect students to individually write a complete essay without any assistance. However, considering the foreign language teaching process, it is seen that this cannot be the case. In fact, the process is the same in mother tongue teaching. In the process followed according to the level of the student, activities such as a sentence, a paragraph, a list or note taking can also be considered as a writing activity in itself. The point to be emphasized here is how to write an effective essay and how to help the student in this regard. To put it briefly, it is a very difficult and time-consuming process to acquire writing skills in the process of learning a foreign language, as in the mother tongue. The necessity or desire to acquire this skill, which is a necessity especially in foreign language teaching, affects the success and motivation of the students. Students who think that they cannot express their thoughts in writing although they know it, have a negative reaction to language learning. Another reason for not achieving the desired success is that the students are not able to fulfill some of the rules arising from the writing activity itself. Studies on this subject show that students' ability to write in foreign language and mother tongue is difficult, but they show that this skill will become more enjoyable by increasing interest and motivation with various methods and activities.

1.2 The Importance of Writing in Foreign Language Teaching

It is known that the activities carried out to gain writing skills have many benefits in the language learning and teaching process. As stated in Akpınar's (2007) research, writing skills are very important in terms of revealing the deficiencies of students and guiding them in this regard. In general, it is possible to state that an effective writing lesson or any writing activity has many consequences for foreign language teachers. In short, the writing skill is thought to help achieve the following goals:

1. To control the learning process,
2. To determine the level of students,
3. Reinforcement of the structures or words taught,
4. Seeing language mistakes,
5. Teaching punctuation marks,
6. Better learning of other skills,
7. Developing students' language skills,
8. To enable students to think creatively,

9. Transferring the learned subjects from short-term memory to long-term memory,
10. For students to transform their competence into performance.

1.3 Which Topics Should Be Written and Why?

There are a vast number of reasons why students should write inside or outside the classroom. Such activities that everyone does in daily life such as e-mail, telephone messages, application form, note taking, complaint letter, shopping list and diary can be considered as some of them. While doing these, the person has various purposes such as asking questions, getting information, giving information, asking for something, expressing thoughts, following a process, not forgetting, etc. Therefore, it is inevitable to have a target audience, that is, a reader, while writing them.

Knowing what, how and when to write to whom is important in terms of rearranging the relevant text and choosing the words to be used according to the situation. Of course, the language, format and method of a text prepared for official situations and a text prepared for informal environments are different. Basically there are three parts in this whole process:

1. Preparation: In this period, the target audience, that is, the reader, is taken into consideration and the content and appropriate method are determined accordingly.
2. Drafting: The ideas to be written are given in draft form. Here, a general outline is determined using techniques such as listing and brainstorming.
3. Editing and rewriting: The text is written several times, revised and necessary corrections are made, if necessary, it is read by someone else and given its final form.

1.4 Progressive Writing

Nowadays, it has become a dream to expect students to sit at their desks and write something in an hour without making a plan, correcting or group work, with a blank sheet of paper in front of them. Generally speaking, a good writer plans before writing, revises his plan, writes, asks others while writing, researches, makes others read, and makes many drafts before finalizing. It goes through many stages before reaching the final product. All these processes are called "processed writing". Following this process in order to achieve effective writing in the classroom environment increases the success and efficiency of the student working in an independent but collaborative environment. Bayraktar (2009) states that in the Process Writing approach, the writing process is seen as a social activity and the writer is an independent and an active participant. According to Genç, in this process, students' individual and group work and their ability to use their creative thoughts can be effective in improving their writing skills. The aim here should be to increase the motivation of the student in directing writing by focusing on activities that will contribute to the writing skill. White and Arntd (1991) state that students' fluency in writing is more important than their language mistakes or grammatical accuracy for this approach, which is now being implemented in foreign language teaching and has achieved positive results.

According to White and Arntd (1991, pp. 23-25), the following steps are followed in a good process writing:

- Gathering information about the subject to be written,

- Organizing thoughts,
- First draft,
- To review in terms of meaning integrity,
- Second draft,
- To review in terms of language and punctuation,
- Final draft.

2. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to determine the views of foreign language learners on the importance and difficulty of writing skills in the language learning process. When the studies are examined, it is seen that there is no similar study that includes the opinions of foreign language students obtained with these research questions. This research sought answers to the following questions:

1. Do you think writing or speaking is more difficult?
2. Can you write compositions in your mother tongue?
3. Do you get bored while typing?
4. Do you need help writing?
5. How do you like to work while writing?

3. Method

3.1 Model of the Study

This study is a quantitative research which aims to determine the views of foreign language learners on the acquisition of writing skills. In this study, the survey model was used.

3.2 The Scope and Sample of the Study

The scope of this study consists of students studying in the preparatory program of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University School of Foreign Languages in 2021-2022 education periods. Due to the large number of the research population, sampling was preferred. For this reason, 176 students studying in the preparatory program were included in the sample with the random sampling technique.

3.3 Data Collection Tool and Data Analysis

The scale, which was developed as a data collection tool and developed by Çakır (2010), was used to get the thoughts and opinions of foreign language learners on writing skills. The scale questions created in the light of the data obtained as a result of the literature review were in the form of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The scale was applied to 176 students chosen by random sampling technique. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze the data entered in SPSS 20. The answers to the open-ended questions were also listed and interpreted.

4. Findings and Discussions

In general, the difficulty of writing is an accepted fact for students. However, this skill is also important in terms of learning the language completely. In this context, the opinions of 176 students applied within the scope of the sample are given below in line with the purposes of the research.

4.1 Difficulty of Writing

The first question of the scale, which is also included in the aims of the research, is “Do you think writing or speaking is more difficult?” As a result of the analysis of the scale, 112 of the students think that it is difficult to write in English. This is a phenomenon that students and teachers also encounter in foreign language teaching. When the answers given to the open-ended question about why writing is so difficult were evaluated, the following answers were obtained:

- Good grammar is needed.
- It is difficult to express thoughts in writing.
- Writing has many unique rules that must be followed.
- The person writing about the subject to be written should have sufficient knowledge.
- For an effective written expression, the target language should be well known.
- Punctuation marks are difficult to apply properly.
- It is necessary to construct meaningful sentences.

Given the above considerations, it is possible to state that it is difficult for students to acquire writing skills. That’s why; it is not easy to produce in the relevant language without having enough equipment for the target language. The same is true for mother tongue.

4.2 The Benefits of Writing Compositions in Mother Tongue and Written Expression

Can you write compositions in your mother tongue?” As can be seen from the percentage of answers given to the question (78% No, 22% Yes), students generally do not like to write. Therefore, it is seen that students who do not have the habit of writing have difficulties in this regard. On the other hand, students are aware that written expression is important for them and they express this as follows:

- Writing develops imagination.
- It leads to research.
- It helps the student to explain himself.
- It gives fluency and accuracy in writing.
- It increases vocabulary.
- It contributes to learning the spoken language.
- It accelerates the learning of the target language.
- It helps to consolidate the language.
- It helps to recognize the target culture.
- It helps to see language mistakes.
- It teaches to use time properly.

It is observed that students who do not have the habit of writing in their mother tongue do not like or have difficulty in writing in a foreign language. On the other hand, considering the benefits of writing in both languages, it is important for students to acquire and develop this habit.

4.3 Are You Bored While Writing?

Considering the answers given to the question "Are you bored while writing," it is noteworthy that although the answer "Yes" is limited to 27%, the rate of those who say "Sometimes" (58%) is high. For this reason, group work and pair work can relieve students' boredom and make writing lessons more enjoyable. In the writing process, the student should be helped to decide on the subject to be written, should be supported in making plans, and their own views should be supported as much as possible.

Another question asked of students is whether they need help with writing and how they like to write. As can be seen from the answers given to both questions, 68% of 176 students state that they need some help while writing. The answer to the question "How do you like to work while writing is Alone" was limited to 34%. 86% of 176 students state that they like to write as two people or in groups. The stage to be mentioned here in the co-authoring phase is the studies that were passed before starting to write. These are the most applied activities, especially in the approach called process writing. As stated below, it is known that students like this kind of work very much. Students who took this course for a semester came to the view that their writing skills improved thanks to such activities and stated that this course was necessary.

- Students learn to write in detail, which helps to develop their writing skills.
- In our daily life, we need to be able to organize our thoughts properly and express them in writing.
- This course helps students to write academically and consciously.
- This course is necessary for good writing.
- It is necessary for good planning and effective transfer of ideas.
- It is a good narrative activity.
- Being able to make a sketch is useful in terms of providing environments such as group work, pair work, and brainstorming.
- Writing is a process, not a result.
- It offers the opportunity to research on related topics.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although writing is accepted as one of the four basic skills in foreign language teaching and an important skill to be acquired in order to see students transform what they know into practice, most students have difficulties in this regard. Byrne (1982) emphasizes that communication should be more important than reinforcing the structure of language in writing. Activities aiming to improve students' writing skills should be included more in writing lessons. It is thought that it will be important for foreign language teachers to consider the following suggestions during the preparation and implementation of an effective writing lesson in increasing success.

- Writing lessons should be no longer boring and activities that increase students' motivation for writing should be intensified.

- Writing skill should not be considered as a stand-alone skill and should be used together with other skills (reading, listening, and speaking).
- In-class studies should be diversified.
- Group work should be given importance and collaborative study and learning techniques should be applied.
- Students' views should be included in the determination of the topics to be selected.
- During the writing process, teacher-student meetings (Teacher-Student Writing Conference) should be held frequently.
- Attention should be paid to the application of procedural writing techniques.
- It should be ensured that the process is kept under control by following the works done with the filing technique (portfolio).
- In writing studies, students should pay attention to fluency as well as accuracy of the written product.
- The use of technology (internet, projector, music, etc.) should be emphasized.

Particular attention should be paid to the use of the Internet, and for this, it is necessary to encourage students in this regard by helping them in the use of e-mail. According to Erkan's research on university preparatory students, it was concluded that international correspondence via e-mail is an effective way to improve students' self-efficacy in English writing, and it is thought that such effects can increase writing success when given enough time. In other words, e-mail activities provide students with self-confidence, critical thinking, the development of their knowledge of the target culture, and the development of the use of a second language and increases success. Bayraktar (2009) claims that during the writing process, the student's motivation and success can be increased by the private conversation between the teacher and the student outside the classroom environment, and that it is important in terms of revealing and directing the existing competencies of the student.

On the other hand, it is possible to contribute to the development process of students' writing skills by using the filing technique, according to the results of Tan's study. In summary, acquiring writing skills is important for students to understand and use that language well. An important point to be considered for foreign language teachers is that in order for this skill to be acquired effectively, the expectations from the students should be revealed thoroughly and they should be included in the process together with the students.

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