

Full Length Research Paper

An analysis of writing activities in the student workbooks of a secondary-level Turkish language course

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The purpose of this study is to analyze writing activities in the student workbooks of a secondary-level Turkish language course (grades 5 to 8) according to the principles of progressive writing. The study is descriptive and employs content analysis as a qualitative research paradigm. The writing activities of the books in this study all published by The Ministry of Education are categorized according to task, namely those involving sentence, paragraph and text-level writing; those focusing on spelling and punctuation; those which could not be categorized based on their instructions; and those based on their text types. The activities and their development from the 5 to 8th grades are examined. It is concluded that no principle of progression exists in the activities, except in those involving sentence-level writing tasks.

Key words: Writing activities, Turkish language student workbooks, content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Writing can be described as an expressive tool that enables authors to articulate feelings, thoughts, wishes and imaginations. Özbay (2007) extends this definition and attributes to writing the quality of necessity, that is, writing as a process stemming from an inherent human need for expression. However, writing is not merely a process with different communicative, cognitive, and textual dimensions. In a democratic society, writing also corresponds to freedom of expression and social responsibility. Moreover, the permanent nature of writing is emphasized in the lives of individuals and nations (hence the saying, “spoken words fly away, written words remain), with humanity owing its accumulated knowledges

and contemporary culture to their generational transfer via writing.

Given the indisputable significance of writing in the social world, its successful acquisition requires systematic instruction. A primary goal of Turkish language courses is to produce individuals capable of accurately and effectively articulating their feelings, thoughts, and wishes. These courses are being taught at all educational levels with an aim to equip students with writing skills. The development of basic writing and literacy skills is emphasized during the initial years of primary school; specifically, during the first grade of primary school writing is taught alongside reading, with listening and

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speaking abilities being supplemented by the family. During this period, students begin to practice sentence and text construction with an emphasis on grammar. In subsequent grades, students begin responding to writing tasks which rely upon their prior internalization of basic grammar, spelling and punctuation rules. As the grade level increases, learners obtain knowledges and practice skills related to topics such as phraseology and idea development (Göçer, 2011). In comparison to listening, speaking and reading skills, writing proficiency emerges at a later period with more difficulty. Despite the difficulty of developing effective writing skills, this process does not require extraordinary student characteristics. As Kavcar (1998) states that writing proficiency can be achieved within the appropriate learning environment through continuous practice and effort-in other words, anyone can master the ability to express him- or herself effectively in writing.

The Primary School Turkish Language Course Curriculum (Grades 6, 7 and 8; 2006) asserts that helping students produce different genres of writing such as short story, novel, and poetry is possible, although these genres require certain levels of creativity and individual talent which students may develop when provided technical knowledge of writing. Karatay (2011: 23) explains students' misconceptions of writing ability in the following way:

“Learners believe that writing is a skill specific to certain individuals. Consequently, most of them believe that they do not have this skill and that they cannot be successful in writing. These considerations adversely affect their attitudes towards writing. These students should be convinced that writing is a skill that can be developed with some work. This is because the language itself is an innate capability unique to human beings, which is different in other living creatures. This capability should be trained in order for it as a whole or its sub-skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing to be used effectively” .

In general, courses and teachers play a significant role in students' development of writing skills. Moreover, these skills should not be treated as autonomous, that is, as existing separately from listening, reading and speaking skills. Like in any language education, all areas of learning are intertwined in Turkish language education. Achievement in each learning area supports achievement in another. Considering the fact that writing requires the use of knowledge, experience, and effective language, this process should be supported by activities involving listening/watching, speaking, reading and grammar. From this point of view, the curriculum should include the “application of writing rules, planned writing, writing different genres, evaluation of [one's] own writing, acquiring the habit of expressing [one]self in writing,

spelling and punctuation rules and practices” (MEB, 2006: 7).

Like reading, writing occupies an important place in human life. The clear and concise writing of feelings, thoughts and information requires the development of a variety of mental capabilities. Students learn to rank, limit, regulate and write about their thoughts; moreover, they master punctuation and spelling rules through writing skills. As mentioned previously, writings ability closely correlates with listening, speaking and reading ability. Students improve writing ability through continuous reading, writing and self-evaluation (MEB, 2009). Moreover, the development of writing skill, which can be a long process, is only possible through a variety of writing practices and encouragement by teachers (MEB, 2006; MEB, 2009).

In order to acquire writing proficiency and further to evaluate student progress, process writing which involves clearly defined stages is of primary importance. Expected writing skill should correspond with grade level. Moreover, writing ability should improve as the educational level progresses, as should the complexity of texts which students are required to compose. Literacy training constitutes the first stage of writing education. After this stage, writing education gradually advances to sentence, paragraph and text-levels of complexity (Özbay, 2000).

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate systematically specifically in accordance with the principles of progressive writing, the writing activities in student workbooks published by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) for a secondary-level Turkish language course.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents detailed information on this study's research model, data collection techniques and analysis of collected data.

Research model

A main objective of this study, which is descriptive in nature, is to theorize the concepts and relationships reflected by the collected data; hence, the content analysis method is employed. Şahin (2010) explains this method as the comprehensive analysis of a written or spoken text and symbols as well as, and its quantitative representation and verbal interpretation.

The construction of content analysis instructions

Four books published by the MONE are investigated in this study alongside six basic questions. Each of these questions is organized

according to a “theme” in the content analysis instructions. Various studies were employed in the construction of these questions/themes (Coşkun, 2011; Çeçen, 2011; Göçer, 2011; Özbay, 2000). The selected themes were submitted to three experts for their investigation and comments.

One of the precautions to improve convincing effect of the study is to invite people to scrutinize the study who have general knowledge about the topic at focus and expertise in qualitative research. In this investigation, the expert critically analyses each step of the study from research design to data collected as well as writing of the results and provides feedback to researchers on each of these. This feedback not only will be beneficial in self-evaluation of the researcher’s approach, but also will provide the researcher the chance to assess the effects of this approach. Furthermore, the experts may contribute to improvements in the overall quality of the study by making proposals on the various stages of research (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005).

The content validity of the study directly is related to the effectiveness of the six items in accomplishing the objectives of this study. The themes derive from the insights of two groups of experts, one group involving educators who deliver graduate courses in research methods. The writing activities in the workbooks are analyzed according to these themes, and the data are categorized by these themes. The frequencies and percentages of data also are represented.

The data collected in the study have been interpreted according to following research questions:

In the workbook of the related grade level:

1. What is the number (n) of

- i. Sentence level writing activities,
- ii. Paragraph level writing activities,
- iii. Text level writing activities,

and their frequencies (%) in all activities when compared to the other writing activities?

2. What is the number (n) of writing activities for spelling and punctuation and their ratio (%) to the other writing activities?

3. What is the number (n) of writing activities that could not be categorized based on their instructions and their ratio (%) to the other writing activities?

4. What is the number (n) of each text type in text based writing activities and their ratio (%) to all text based writing activities?

Coding and analysis of the data

In the initial stage of the study, four workbooks of the Turkish language course were studied in order to construct the “sub-themes” of the themes stated in the content analysis instructions. For instance, for the question, “What is the number (n) of writing activities for spelling and punctuation and their ratio (%) to the other writing activities?”, the following twenty-seven sub-themes were determined (activities involving full stop, the comma, the semi colon, the question mark, the exclamation point, the dash, the colon, parentheses, brackets, the hyphen (-), the back slash, ellipses, the dash, capitalization, separate and adjacent “-dE” and “-kl”, question suffixes, numbers, abbreviations, mis-spelled words, etc). Later, these four workbooks were reinterpreted based on this categorization, and each entry was individually coded into “sub-

theme”.

The coding in this study was conducted by the researcher at two different times, and there is no mismatch between the two codings. Therefore, this study’s reliability is assured. In the following procedure, the occurrence of related theme/sub-theme in the workbook of the course was checked (exist or not-exist) and numbers (n) and frequencies (%) were calculated. All data are presented in tables.

FINDINGS

Sentence-level writing activities published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

Table 1 portrays the distribution of sentence-level writing activities according to grade level. According to the table, there are fifty sentence-level writing activities in the 5th grade student workbook, and the percentage of these activities in all writing activities at this grade level is 37.31%. This figure is forty-one in the 6th grade, and the percentage is 33.88%. Meanwhile, the number of activities in the 7th grade is thirty-seven, with their percentage being 30.57%. Finally, there are twenty-five activities in the 8th grade with a percentage of 28.73%. Sentence-level writing activities are employed most frequently in the 5th grade, and the number tends to decrease as the level increases. The lowest number of activities exists in the 8th grade workbook.

Paragraph-level writing activities published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

The distribution of paragraph-level writing activities according to grade level is presented in Table 2. In the 5th grade, there are 11 activities, with their percentage in all 5th grade writing activities being 8.20%. There are five writing activities in the 6th grade, with their percentage being 4.13 %. The ratio of nine activities to the total number of writing activities in the 7th grade is 7.43 %. Moreover, the ratio of six activities to the total number of writing activities in the 8th grade is 6.89 %. While the number of paragraph-level writing activities is highest in the 6th grade, it is lowest in the 8th grade. The number of these activities is higher in the 6th grade in comparison to those in the 7th grade.

Text level writing activities published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

Table 3 summarizes the data regarding the number and ratio of text-level writing activities to the total number of

Table 1. Distribution of sentence-level writing activities according to grade level.

Grade level of student workbook	Number of sentence-level writing activities	Ratio to other writing activities (%)
Grade 5	50	37.31
Grade 6	41	33.88
Grade 7	37	30.57
Grade 8	25	28.73

Table 2. Distribution of paragraph-level writing activities according to grade level.

Grade level of student workbook	Number of paragraph-level writing activities	Ratio to other writing activities (%)
Grade 5	11	8.20
Grade 6	5	4.13
Grade 7	9	7.43
Grade 8	6	6.89

Table 3. Distribution of text-level writing activities according to grade level.

Grade level of student workbook	Number of text-level writing activities	Ratio to other writing activities (%)
Grade 5	29	21.64
Grade 6	21	17.35
Grade 7	25	20.66
Grade 8	26	29.88

writing activities. The table shows that there are twenty-nine activities in the 5th grade, and the ratio to writing activities is 21.64 %. The ratio of twenty-one activities to the total number of writing activities in the 6th grade is 17.35 %. While the ratio of twenty-five activities in the 7th grade is 20.66 %, the ratio of twenty-six activities in the 8th grade is 29.88%. The number of paragraph-level writing activities is highest in the 8th grade and lowest in the 6th grade. The highest ratio of 29.88% in the 8th grade indicates the progressive development of writing skill. However, the lowest number, supposed to exist in the 5th grade, exists instead in the 6th grade at 17.35%.

Spelling and punctuation related writing activities published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

Table 4 illustrates the number of spelling and punctuation related activities in each grade and their percentages in writing activities. According to this table, one activity in grade 5 consists of 0.74% of writing activities in this level. Similarly, there are thirty-one activities in grade 6 with a 25.62% ratio to other activities. While the ratio of twenty-eight activities to the total number of writing activities in

the 7th grade is 23.14 %, the ratio of nine activities in the 8th grade is 10.34%. Therefore, the number of activities related to spelling and punctuation is the highest in the 5th grade and the lowest in the 6th grade.

Writing activities which could not be categorized based on their instructions, published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

Table 5 records the number of activities, which could not be categorized, based on their instructions as well as their percentages in writing activities. One activity requires that students “please write about Atatürk’s love for his country, nation and human beings based on the anecdote (they have) listened to.” (Arhan et. al., 2014). Based on this instruction, students could write an essay, article, short story, or anecdote. According to the table, there are forty-three activities in the 5th grade, and their percentage in all writing activities is 39.44%. In Grade 6, there are twenty-three activities in this category and the percentage is 21.10%. While there are twenty-two activities in grade 7 with a 20.18% ratio, there is a similar number in Grade 8, with twenty-one activities and a

Table 4. Distribution of spelling- and punctuation-related activities according to grade level.

Grade level of student workbook	Number of spelling- and punctuation-related activities	Ratio to other writing activities (%)
Grade 5	1	0.74
Grade 6	31	25.62
Grade 7	28	23.14
Grade 8	9	10.34

Table 5. Writing activities which could not be categorized based on their instructions, published by MONE for 5, 6, 7 and 8 grade Turkish language course workbooks.

Grade level of student workbook	Number of activities which could not be categorized based on their instructions	Ratio to other writing activities (%)
Grade 5	43	39.44
Grade 6	23	21.10
Grade 7	22	20.18
Grade 8	21	19.3

19.3% ratio.

Writing activities according to text type, published by MONE for 5, 6^t, 7 and 8th grade Turkish language course workbooks

Table 6 summarizes the numbers of text types which students are required to construct in writing activities as well as their ratio to the total number of text-level writing activities. There are twenty-nine activities in the 5th grade workbooks, and among these activities, there is only one occurrence of memoir, legend, travel writing, journal entry, and theatre genres. The ratio of these to all text-level writing activities is 3.45%. The ratio of seven activities in story-writing is 24.14%. There are three activities in letter-writing with a 20.69% ratio. The number of activities whose text types are not stated in the instructions is eight, with a 27.59% ratio.

In the 6th grade, one activity in each of the categories of biography, news article, and poetry comprises 4.76% of all activities observed at this grade level. In each of the essay and story categories, there are three activities with a 14.29% ratio. There are two letter-writing activities, with the ratio being 9.52%. Finally, there are ten activities without any stated text type, whose percentage in all writing activities is 47.62.

One activity in each of the categories of anecdote, travel writing, journal entry, tale, letter, and poetry comprises 4% of all activities observed in the 7th grade. The percentage of the three activities in essay type is 12%. In short story type, ten activities have a 40% ratio. Finally, six activities without any stated text type have a ratio of

24%. The analysis of 8th grade workbooks reveals one activity for each of the categories of biography, legend, essay and poetry, with a 3.85% ratio. In criticism and interview, there are two activities, and they comprise 7.69% of the activities. Four narrative activities comprise 15.38% of all activities. There are seven activities without any stated text type, which comprise 26.92% of all writing activities.

In conclusion, there are eight writing activity types observed in the 5th grade, six in the 6th grade, eight in the 7th grade, and eight in the 8th grade. When variety is considered, the least number of writing types is expected in the 5th grade workbook, and the highest number of activity is expected in the 8th grade book. However, the data in the table indicates that the least variety was observed in the 6th grade (n=6).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some inferences can be made based on the data of this study. A positive aspect of the workbooks is the inclusion of writing activities from all three progressive-writing levels (sentence, paragraph and text). The use of writing activities at each of these three levels provides students with the opportunity not only to improve their writing skills of lower levels, but also to develop higher level writing skills. One important detail to note is the level of compliance of the activity with students' level in terms of the number and quality of the activities. Along with this compliance, characteristics of the writing activity expected from students should be stated as concretely as possible.

Table 6. Distribution of text types in writing activities according to grade level.

Text types	5 grade writing work book	Percentage in text-level writing activities (%)	6 grade writing work book	Percentage in text level writing activities (%)	7 grade writing work book	Percentage in text level writing activities (%)	8 grade writing work book	Percentage in text level writing activities (%)
Memoir	1	3.45	-	-	-	-	-	-
Biography	-	-	1	4.76	-	-	1	3.85
Essay	-	-	3	14.29	3	12	7	26.92
Legend	1	3.45	-	-	-	-	1	3.85
Critic	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	7.69
Anecdote	-	-	-	-	1	4	-	-
Travel writing	1	3.45	-	-	1	4	-	-
Journal	1	3.45	-	-	1	4	-	-
News article	-	-	1	4.76	-	-	-	-
Story	7	24.14	3	14.29	10	40	4	15.38
Article	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3.85
Tale	-	-	-	-	1	4	-	-
Letter	3	10.34	2	9.52	1	4	-	-
Interview	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	7.69
Poetry	6	20.69	1	4.76	1	4	1	3.85
Theatre	1	3.45	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	8	27.59	10	47.62	6	24	7	26.92
Total	29	100	21	100	25	100	26	100

There are certain writing activities in the workbooks which could not be classified based on their instructions. The students cannot clearly understand what kinds of texts they are expected to write; therefore, these activities do not successfully serve their purpose. Moreover, this situation prevents the establishment of the text concept in students' minds. Students tend to write the type with which they are familiar and, thus, feel comfortable when writing. As a result, their development of skills for composing other types of texts is impeded.

The first finding of this study regards sentence-level writing activities. One scholar defines

sentence in the following way:

"A sentence is a string of words to utterly express feelings, thoughts, and a wish. Sentences are the fundamental elements of understanding and expression as they state complete ideas which are the basic units of thinking" (Güneş, 2003).

Elaborating upon to this understanding, Tansel (1985) asserts that "the purpose of written expression is to express a topic and thoughts about the topic as a whole by arranging sentences and paragraphs". In line with this easy-to-difficult principle of written expression, sentence-level

writing activities occur most frequently in grade 5 (n=50), and the number of these activities decrease and the grade level increases (n=41, n=37, n=25).

The second finding of this study pertains to paragraph-level writing activities. In prose, a paragraph is a collection of sentences that develops, in a coherent manner, an aspect of an extensive topic. As a result, a student who successfully acquires sentence-level writing ability should not continue to practice text-level writing without first mastering paragraph-level writing skills. Otherwise, certain negative results might occur; for instance, the student might fail to

sequence thoughts in a logical order, to distinguish necessary information from unnecessary information, and, ultimately, to establish coherent texts. In order to ensure coherence in a paragraph, the student should have knowledge of certain writing elements including topics, perspective, the main idea, and supporting sentences (Tok, 2014). These features enable paragraphs to function as bridges between texts and sentences. Proficiency in paragraph-level writing skills can be interpreted as the outcomes of sentence-level writing skills and prerequisites of text-level writing skills. Therefore, all students should receive paragraph-level writing instruction (Coşkun, 2011).

Despite the importance of this principle of progression in writing development, the number and percentage of paragraph-level activities in Turkish language workbooks did not exhibit a decreasing pattern as was the case in sentence-level writing activities. When the textual standards, teaching principles, and features of writing ability are considered, paragraph-level writing activities are expected to decline towards the 8th grade. due to a shift in emphasis from paragraph- to text-level activities.

The third finding of the study involves text-level writing activities. According to Çeçen (2011), a text is “a structure composed for an emotional or intellectual purpose with a certain meaning and form unity”. The ultimate aim in writing instruction is to enable students to construct texts successfully. In order to have text level writing skills, an individual needs to have mastered the objectives of both sentence- and paragraph-level writing instruction, and this is possible only with progressive instruction. Just as sentence-level writing activities are emphasized in lower grades, the quantity and percentage of text-level writing activities should increase along with grade level. Although the percentage of the grade 8 text-level writing activities is higher when compared to other grade levels, the numbers and percentages of text-level writing activities in the 5, 6 and 7th grades are not entirely congruent with the principles of progressive writing.

The fourth finding in this study regards the number of writing activities for spelling and punctuation in Turkish language course workbooks as well as their percentage in all activities of the given grade. According to Özbay (2011), the acquisition of spelling skills is especially important because the standard language easily is affected by the spoken language, that is, dialect. punctuation, on the other hand, plays an important role in written expression and reading. An important reason underlying spelling and punctuation instruction is to aid students in facilitating better understandings of texts. Özbay also conducted a study pertaining the use of punctuation marks and revealed that the students in his study lacked the required capacity to apply correctly their punctuation knowledge.

The knowledge of spelling rules and punctuation usage

is highly important for the development of cognitive and expressive capabilities. Therefore, they should be included in the objectives of writing instruction. Although related objectives are included in the Turkish language curriculum, spelling and punctuation are not adequately incorporated by the student workbooks. Especially in 5th grade workbooks, there is almost no example of spelling and punctuation activities. The situation is similar in the 8th grade books. Spelling and punctuation seem to be reserved for the 6th and 7th grade books. Another detected issue is the disconnect between objectives involving spelling and punctuation and their actual applications (inclusion in activities). The number and percentage of such activities are expected to increase in these books alongside grade level.

The fifth finding of the study regards the number of writing activities could not be categorized based on their instructions as well as their ratio to other writing activities of the given level. In written expression activities, the text type should be stated clearly so that students may easily determine the text type and construct a plan of the written text. This is because the most important factor in determining the text plan is the text type. Furthermore, students tend to develop negative attitudes towards writing activities whose topics and text types are not stated (Karatay, 2011).

The sixth finding of this study regards the number of each text type in text-based writing activities and their ratio to all text-based writing activities in the Turkish language course workbook. The principles of progressive writing were not considered in determining the text types of writing activities given to students. For instance, journal entry activities are expected to typify books from lower grades in order to facilitate students' development of writing habit. The difficulty level of keeping a journal is appropriate for developing writing habit from early ages. However, there were no journal entry writing activities in the 6th grade book. In the 5th grade book, there was only one journal activity. Contrary to this situation, theatre activities were present in the 5th grade books but not in any other grade levels. In order for the writing instruction to achieve the determined objectives, the text types and number of activities should be appropriate to the grade level of students.

Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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