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Can we prepare effective writing teachers for academically diverse classrooms?

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This study examines whether preservice teachers, who provide writing instruction in native language education, are ready to teach students with different learning needs effectively. This study used a survey research design and qualitative data collection tools. An interview form and writing samples from students in the same class with different writing learning needs were used for data collection. The data of the study, which was conducted with the contribution of one hundred eighty-six preservice teachers, were analyzed using descriptive analysis, a method of qualitative data analysis. The study found that the preservice teachers were unable to determine the deficiencies in the content of the writing samples and had more difficulty in cases of multiple learning needs. The preservice teachers were found to know common practices that can be used to address the needs of students in academically diverse classrooms; however, they had limited knowledge about long-term effective teaching methods and current writing models. Moreover, half of them were found to have inadequate knowledge about motivational practices. A considerable portion of the preservice teachers reported that their teacher training program did not contribute to their own development as much as they expected, and they felt the deficiency of practical courses in particular.

Key words: Preservice teachers, writing instruction, academically diverse classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Writing skills play a key role in school, business and democratic social life. Therefore, improving this skill is regarded as an important goal for school life (Colby and Stapleton, 2006; Norman and Sprencer, 2005; Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011). Thus, formal writing instruction begins on the first day of school and continues till older ages. Teachers also play an important role in this process. Today's classrooms include students with different backgrounds, motivation levels and language competencies -in other words academically diverse students. The impact of teachers is being felt more in recent years (Zenkov et al., 2014).

In todays' academically diverse classrooms, the most important expectations from teachers include accurate determination of students' needs, designing meaningful writing tasks, being a good model in writing and motivating students with dialogue, feedback and in-class behavior (Dudley-Marling and Paugh, 2004; Moore and

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Seeger, 2009; Rosen and Abt-Perkins, 2000; Zimmerman et al., 2014; Ball, 2006; Beach and Friedrich, 2006). Tomlinson et al. (2003) state that students in academically diverse classrooms differ by their readiness, motivation and learning profiles. Assessing the readiness of each student, determining how much and what kind of writing skills scaffolding and support they need and preparing writing tasks using teaching methods, techniques and models to address the needs of each student are important to the effectiveness of writing teachers in academically diverse classrooms (Gibson, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2003). At this point defining students' needs and having sufficient knowledge of methods that enables to address students' needs is getting more important for teachers (Oliver, 1995; Routman, 2004).

Similarly, the motivation levels of each student are different and motivation problems negatively affect their development unless they are resolved by their teachers with appropriate interventions (Brunning and Horn, 2000; Guay et al., 2016; Eccles et al., 1993; Pajares and Valiante, 2001). Research has shown that writing successfully is closely related to the motivational constructs such as self-efficacy beliefs (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2003; Meier et al., 1984; Pajares and Valiante, 1997), attributions (Shell et al., 1995; Tai and Pan, 2009), interests (Lipstein and Renninger, 2006; Hidi et al., 2001; Hidi and McLaren, 1991) and goals (Pajares et al., 2000; Schunk and Swartz, 1993). Additionally writing motivation is different from reading motivation. Since writing is a productive process, students must produce meaning by themselves rather than making inferences from what is given as in the process of reading (Hidi and Boscolo, 2006; Pajares and Valiante, 2006). Thus, the likelihood of success is lower for students with poor motivation. Learning profiles include many variables that affect the academic success of students: intelligence type, culture, gender, in-class environmental factors and attention levels (Tomlinson et al., 2003). The fact that teachers arrange these subjects in favor of the students to teach effectively contributes positively to their success.

In addition to variables above, teachers' efficacy beliefs and attitudes also have an impact on achievement (Mills and Clyde, 1991). Teachers' perceptions of writing, their beliefs about and attitudes towards writing, how much they value the improvement of writing skills, their methods, resources, strategic knowledge and in-class activities affect the quality of their teaching (Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011; Morgan and Pytash, 2014). Studies show that the characteristics of teachers that affect the quality of writing instruction have two sources. The first is their own writing experience, and the second is their education (Bruinsma, 2006; Mathers et al., 2006; Norman and Spencer, 2005). Therefore, professionals in the field of teacher education see studies of these two sources as very important. In particular, preservice teacher training has attracted a great deal of attention in the twenty-first century.

Studies, conducted in the 2000s, have examined many factors such as the competencies of preservice writing teachers (Fong et al., 2013; Parr and Timperley, 2010), their writing experiences and beliefs about them (Mathers et al., 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2014), their attitudes and real class experiences (Bintz and Shake, 2005). Furthermore, studies have focused on how teacher training programs can be developed more differently and on practices that contribute to the development of preservice teachers (Le Fevre, 2011; Barksdale-Ladd et al., 2001; Hobson, 2014, Lesley and Matthews, 2009).

As discussed above writing teachers should have adequate field knowledge that enables them to determine students' writing needs, to teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms consisting of students with different learning needs. They should have enough pedagogical knowledge to address the needs of students accurately and enough theoretical and practical knowledge about motivation to motivate them to write. Additionally, their efficacy beliefs should orient them to teach writing effectively. Is the education given to preservice teachers adequate in this respect? Studies show that training programs for preservice writing teachers in many countries are not adequate to make them effective in terms of pedagogical knowledge and skill (Bruinsma, 2006; Gibson, 2007; Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011; Hochstetler, 2007). This causes preservice teachers to enter their profession without adequate knowledge and skill and not to be able to give what are expected from them.

This study aimed to investigate the situation in Turkey. As stated before, studies in a variety of countries found that teacher education programs were not satisfactory in terms of providing pedagogical knowledge and field knowledge (Bruinsma, 2006; Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011; Gibson, 2007). However, these studies generally did not focus on motivation. In other words, preservice teachers' command of motivation theories and practical knowledge regarding the extent to which they can use these theories in their classrooms were not directly included in studies in the field of teacher training as a research problem. This study not only examined the situation in Turkey in terms of subjects examined by other studies, but also tried to fill this gap in the field, by discussing motivational theories and practices. Preservice teachers' efficacy beliefs and opinions about the teacher education programs that shape the beliefs and the other qualifications of teachers also investigated.

Writing is not a separate course in Turkish schools. It is taught in Turkish courses. These courses are given by homeroom teachers in primary schools and by Turkish language teachers in secondary schools. This study directly focused on preservice Turkish teachers who have been taught to teach language skills. During their undergraduate education, preservice Turkish language

teachers take courses including Writing Techniques for one semester, Written Expression for two semesters, Writing Instruction for one semester and Domain Specific Teaching Methods - including teaching writing - for two semesters. These 21 credit hours include 14 h of theoretical training and 7 h of practical training. Preservice teachers who complete these courses in the first six semesters observe and perform practices in real classrooms in the fifth semester for 4 credit h and in the sixth semester for 6 credit hours. Moreover, courses that vary from university to university such as Academic Writing, Copywriting, Material Development for Writing and Speaking Instruction are offered to students as electives. These courses and their contents were developed in accordance with the Bologna Process to establish standards in higher education and to minimize the differences between countries in Europe.

Research questions

The aims of this study are to examine how preservice Turkish language teachers who will provide writing instruction in Turkey determine the different learning needs of students in academically diverse classrooms in accordance with the education they have received and can address these need with their pedagogical knowledge. Moreover, preservice teachers' command of motivation theories and putting them into practice, which were not generally examined by the previous studies, are also included in the research subject of the present study.

Thus, answers were sought for the following questions:

1. Can preservice teachers determine the learning needs of students and find solutions for them?
2. Do preservice teachers have the theoretical and practical skills to motivate students with different learning needs to write?
3. What are the beliefs of preservice teachers about whether they can provide effective teaching in academically diverse classrooms?
4. What do preservice teachers think about the deficiencies in their teacher training programs?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study is designed in two stages. In accordance with the mixed method, qualitative and quantitative techniques were used together. In the first stage, preservice teachers were asked to work on the writing samples of students who had different learning needs. The documents obtained in this stage were analyzed. Document analysis is a qualitative method based on the examination and interpretation of any kind of relevant written and visual documents (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

During the second stage, interviews were carried out with the preservice teachers about topics that can affect their ability to teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms and their education. Their knowledge levels, beliefs and opinions about the relevant subjects were examined using this survey type research method. The basic aims of survey studies in which interviews can be used for data collection are to collect information about the characteristics of the population of a certain group and to describe an existing situation using this information (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

Sample

A total of 186 preservice teachers in their senior year in the department of Turkish language education in four different faculties of education in Turkey were contacted in this study. Of the preservice teachers included in the study, 54% were females, and 46% were males.

Instruments

The writing samples of academically diverse students

The writing samples of four students who were studying in the same classroom and had different writing learning needs were used as one of the data collection tools. The selection of students whose writing samples was used was conducted in cooperation with their teachers. Students with low motivation for writing who were experiencing long-term difficulties with writing were selected. Afterwards, their writing samples were examined, and the studies that best address their learning needs were selected for use in this study.

One of the samples included only writing mistakes (misspellings, mispunctuation, incorrect suffixes and so forth). It had no other serious problems. The main problem of the second sample was a lack of attention to the structural features of the text (text placement, margins, paragraphs, headings and writing in straight lines). The most serious problem of the third sample is content. It has problems with ideas, the development of ideas, supporting ideas, sentence fluency and choice of vocabulary. The last sample had all the problems in the other samples.

Interview form

Another data collection tool used in this study was a structured interview form. This form has three sections. The first section included questions about the preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge such as their ability to determine different writing learning needs, in-class activities addressing learning needs, current methods of writing instruction, motivation theories and motivational activities. The second section asked out their beliefs about whether they could address the needs of students with different learning needs in academically diverse classrooms. The last section solicited their opinions about the extent to which their education prepared them for academically diverse classrooms and the effectiveness of their teacher training programs. The preservice teachers were also asked what kind of education they should receive to be more effective teachers and to give information which contributes to the formation of teacher training programs with reference to their weaknesses.

The research process

Hard copies of the data collection forms were prepared and distributed to the preservice teachers, and no time limit was

imposed. The data collection process took place, as follows:

First, the preservice teachers were asked to examine the writing samples. They were asked to determine the main writing problems of the students who wrote them and thus to reveal their learning needs. Then, they were asked to remark what kind of education and in-class activities each student would need to address their specific learning needs. Second, questions relating to their knowledge about current writing instruction methods, motivation theories and activities for motivating students were asked. Finally, data collection process was completed with the second and third sections of the interview form.

The data were collected in written form so that the preservice teachers could express themselves more easily and have enough time to give detailed information for each question.

Data analysis

The works of the preservice teachers on the text samples written by students were individually examined to see whether they determined the students' needs and whether the solutions they found would be able to address these needs. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis, and their percentage-frequency values were calculated. The data obtained from the interviews were also analyzed using descriptive analysis. Percentages-frequencies and examples of the preservice teachers' responses are presented in this study.

RESULTS

The ability to determine and address the writing needs of academically diverse students

The preservice teachers were asked to examine the writing samples of students in the same classroom with different writing learning needs and to determine their learning needs in order to answer the first sub-problem. Of the preservice teachers who examined the writing sample in which spelling mistakes were predominant, 73(39%) identified this problem correctly, and 61% stated that there were no serious problems in the text. Here are some sample responses from the preservice teachers who identified the problem accurately:

"The most serious problem is spelling mistakes" (PST-22).
"The most serious problems in the text are spelling mistakes and inadequate use of punctuation" (PST-46).
"The content of the text is fine, but its punctuation is poor" (PST-103).

Of the preservice teachers who examined the writing sample with structural problems, 114 (61%) stated that the text was problematic in terms of its structural features. The rest (39%) drew attention to the misuse of one or two punctuations and failed to notice the main problem. Some preservice teachers stated that they could not identify the problem. Here are some examples of the pre-service teachers' assessments:

"The order of words and the use of page are the most serious problems. Since the page layout is not well-organized, the writing is not appealing to the eye and makes it hard to read" (PST-3).
"Attention was not paid to the page layout. The first lines of paragraphs were not indented. There is no heading" (PST-11).
"Content is definitely more important than format in writing instruction. However, the page layout on this paper is very poor. There are no appropriate spaces between words and lines. No headings and indented paragraphs. Also, the lines are not straight and slope downward" (PST-62).

Of the preservice teachers who examined the writing sample with content problems, only 49 (26%) reported that the content of the text was problematic. Most of the other preservice teachers focused not on content, but on writing and grammar mistakes and mentioned one or two spelling mistakes. Some preservice teachers commented about the structural features of text since they did not focus on its content.

"The idea suggested by the student in the introduction is different from the ideas explained and supported in the other sections, and there is no consistency between them" (PST-135).
"Generally, there are inconsistencies between sentences in the whole text. There are no connections between sections. It seems that the student could not decide what he or she wanted to talk about. I think the vocabulary of the student is weak. This text is poor" (PST-184).

Of the preservice teachers who examined the last writing sample, only 41 (22%) reported that this sample had very serious problems with its content, structure and punctuation. Of the other 145 (78%) preservice teachers, 43 found the sample problematic only in terms of its structural features, 29 in terms of spelling and punctuation, 5 in terms of its content and 24 in terms of both its structural features and spelling and punctuation. Other preservice teachers stated that they could not identify the main problem of the sample or that cursive handwriting was not used correctly. Here are some sample responses from preservice teachers who identified the problems correctly:

"All areas of this paper have problems. I think that writing instruction should be started from scratch" (PST-32).
"The text does not have paragraph breaks, headings and upper and lower letters were used in a complicated way. It is not clear what is being discussed, and the sentences are inconsistent with each other. The suffixes were also spelled incorrectly" (PST-94).

Generally, the preservice teachers had difficulty

assessing the texts in terms of content. They focused on stylistic features and spelling mistakes instead of content. These results are unlike those in the literature since prior studies point out that, although the preservice teachers had such tendencies at first, they tended to begin to focus on the content in written expression in the course of time (Moore and Seeger, 2009). Given that the preservice teachers interviewed in this study had attended all the courses about writing instruction and practiced for one semester, they were expected to focus on content more. However, this was not the case.

Using the writing samples, the preservice teachers were asked how they can solve the problems which they determined and what kind of practices they use to address the learning needs of their students. Regardless of the question type, the three most common solutions were: a) providing immediate feedback and enabling students to correct their mistakes, b) showing good examples and enabling them to perform similar exercises and c) giving writing assignments and getting them involved in writing a journal to enable them to write outside of school. Most of the practices recommended by the preservice teachers can address different writing learning needs. However, the preservice teachers were expected to mention more comprehensive instructional models, but did not do so.

Given that instructional models or approaches play an important role in the long-term development of students, the preservice teachers were asked which current writing instruction models and approaches they know. More than half of the preservice teachers stated that they did not have any knowledge about writing models commonly used in education. Of the preservice teachers, 39 reported that they knew about writing process, a commonly used current model, while 42 mentioned activities performed before writing such as brainstorming, concept maps and so forth. It is normal for students to know about writing process that has been known and used in classrooms for a comparatively long time.

A study by Cutler and Graham (2008) found that almost all US teachers use the writing process model. The writing process model was also included in the curricula of programs in Turkey by the most recent updates in 2015. On the other hand, none of the preservice teachers mentioned the 6+1 Trait Writing Model of Instruction and Assessment, the popularity of which is increasing and is being used more and more. Although it is not commonly used, the preservice teachers were expected to know about this model because studies of its effectiveness are conducted both in Turkey and in the world. However, the results were not as expected.

Motivating academically diverse students for writing

Two main questions about motivation were asked of the preservice teachers. One was whether they know what type of practices they should use to motivate students in academically diverse classrooms. The other question was whether they know about motivational theories that can guide their classroom activities.

Of the preservice teachers, 117 (62%) were found not to know how to motivate their students, and 29 reported that they will teach by focusing on subjects in which their students are interested. Of the preservice teachers, 17 reported that they allow their students to select subjects, while 13 stated that they will encourage their students by giving them feedback.

Four pre-service teachers reported that they will motivate their students by inviting them to share what they write, two by making their students feel the importance of writing and one by helping them determine their goals. Giving students the opportunity to choose supports their autonomy. Enabling students to share what they write increases their external motivation and encouraging them to be successful by means of feedback increases their self-sufficiency. These are practices that do motivate students. Many studies have found that such practices increase the motivation of students for reading and writing (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 1996; Hidi and Boscolo, 2006; Nolen, 2007). Here are some of the preservice teachers' statements about this subject:

"I will not give my students conventional writing exercises. Instead, I will ask them to select and write about subjects the way they want" (PST-11).
"I enable my students to study more by giving feedback such as 'Well-done' or 'You can do better and I believe in you'" (PST-22).
"I motivate my students if I enable them to write about subjects in which they are interested. For example, I allow my male students to write about football" (PST-49).
"I ask my students to write their emotions and opinions about a specific subject in a planned way and to share them in our classroom every week" (PST-99).

On the other hand, a minority of the preservice teachers know the theoretical bases of these practices. Only seven (4%) of the preservice teachers reported that they knew about current motivational theories.

These included attributions, self-efficacy beliefs, expectancy-value theory, goal orientations and intrinsic-extrinsic motivation. None of the preservice teachers, including those who reported that they will pay attention to the interests of their students in their practices stated that they had any theoretical knowledge relating to interests. As a matter of fact, giving information about in-class motivational activities and briefly explaining their theoretical basis can be beneficial for teacher training programs.

There is a serious deficiency in this respect.

The beliefs of preservice teachers about whether they can provide effective teaching in academically diverse classrooms

The other secondary aim of the study was to determine the beliefs of preservice teachers about whether they can provide effective teaching in academically diverse classrooms. Of the preservice teachers, 99(53%) reported that they believe that they can teach students with different learning needs in the same classroom while 87 (47%) stated that they did not have enough competence to teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms. Of the preservice teachers who believed that they could teach effectively, 50 reported that they would allow their students to do individual practice after determining their needs, and 26 stated that they can address the specific needs of students by allocating time out of school and providing additional activities for them. Of the preservice teachers, 9 reported that they believe that they could teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms by using different methods and techniques and 4 by designing activities to meet different learning needs. Of the preservice teachers, 7 did not mention a specific practice and reported that they believe that being able to teach effectively in all circumstances is a requirement for being a teacher, and 3 preservice teachers reported that they could teach effectively by working with small homogeneous groups and sparing more time for students with more learning needs.

The solutions found by the preservice teachers are not unreasonable in general. Similar practices are adopted by many teachers, and even teachers think that there is a high correlation between these practices and success and motivation (Gibson, 2007).

The preservice teachers' assessment of their education

Of the preservice teachers, 52(27%) reported that their education will enable them to teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms, while 134 (73%) stated that the teacher training programs are inadequate.

The preservice teachers who thought that the teacher training programs are inadequate were asked what type of education helps them provide more effective teaching. Of these 134 preservice teachers, 58 did not give a clear answer to this question. Of them, 56 stated that education with more practical training is needed, and 14 reported that practicing with real examples, in other words, with writing samples of students from academically diverse classrooms would be more beneficial. Moreover, these preservice teachers reported that practical training in schools is inadequate and activities in courses do not reflect the real situation of students in classrooms. Four preservice teachers stated that the number of courses relating to the development of basic language skills is limited, and one preservice teacher emphasized that the quality of pedagogical courses should be improved. One preservice teacher noted the insufficiency of courses relating to students with learning disabilities.

Like the results of other studies in this field (Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011; Gibson, 2007; Bruinsma, 2006) it is found that three out of four preservice teachers in Turkey think that teacher training programs fail to educate effective teachers. The problems most commonly identified by preservice teachers have also been addressed by researchers in the field. They are the lack of practical experience with real classrooms and the lack of practical work with writing samples from real students (Colby and Stapleton, 2006).

DISCUSSION

This study found that the preservice teachers had difficulty determining the deficiencies in the content of the writing samples. They focused on spelling and grammar mistakes instead of content. However, effective teachers should not focus on simple spelling and grammar mistakes in their assessments (Moore and Seeger, 2009). Teachers who focus on such technical issues and provide feedback about them do not support the development of their students (Parr and Timperley, 2010; Fathman and Whalley, 1990). It is not possible for students who have learning needs, particularly in planning and organizing the content of written expression to benefit from such an approach. Thus, the quality of teacher training programs should be examined, especially because this study's preservice teachers were about to graduate, had taken all the courses about writing instruction and were student teaching in schools.

On the other hand, the practices the preservice teachers reported that they can use to address different learning needs, such as providing immediate feedback, showing good examples and enabling them to perform similar exercises, and giving writing assignments and getting them involved in writing outside of school, are effective methods. The literature also indicates that these suggestions are highly effective and accurate (Dempsey et al., 2009; Graham and Harris, 2005). The fact that feedback from their teachers and peers considerably influences students' success in writing is also stated in other studies in this field (Beach and Friedrich, 2006; Matsumura et al., 2002). Similarly, practicing with good examples as a model and engaging in more practice are important, and teachers value these practices (Gibson, 2007; Grisham and Wolsey, 2005). Personal interventions can be performed using such practices while teachers are working with students who have different learning needs, particularly in the same classroom. It is surprising that the preservice teachers did not mention more

comprehensive writing instruction models since the fact that these models—especially the writing process model—produce effective results in diverse classrooms was reported even in earlier studies (Hornick, 1986). The problem here is that the preservice teachers did not have any knowledge of these models or about the fact that they can be used in academically diverse classrooms. A considerable portion of the preservice teachers reported that they did not have any knowledge about models that can be used in writing instruction. This raises the issue of the quality of their training program again.

Although neglected by prior researches, this study's results about the ability of preservice teachers to motivate their students are very thought-provoking, since almost all the preservice teachers reported that they did not know about modern motivational theories. Six of ten preservice teachers did not know how to motivate their students to write. However, studies of motivation have made considerable progress in the last forty to fifty years, and many studies concern classroom practices (Pajares, 2003; Hidi and Boscolo, 2006; Brunning, and Horn, 2000). Clearly, their results have not been incorporated into teacher training programs.

The beliefs of preservice teachers about whether they can teach effectively in academically diverse classrooms can be regarded as normal when this study's other results are considered since being unable to determine the learning needs of students accurately, lacking the command of methods and techniques that can be used to address these needs and knowledge about motivational practices indicate that most of the preservice teachers cannot teach effectively. These deficiencies also diminish preservice teachers' self-confidence. The results regarding the beliefs of preservice teachers again draw attention to the quality of teacher training programs.

A clear picture emerges about the assessment of teacher training programs, which are regarded as a source of many problems. Three of four preservice teachers found their teacher training programs insufficient. The results of a variety of studies in the field (Hall and Grisham-Brown, 2011; Gibson, 2007; Bruinsma, 2006) indicate that the most important problem with teacher training programs in Turkey, as in other countries, is that they are inadequate at providing preservice teachers with adequate knowledge and experience.

CONCLUSION

This study's results indicate that teacher training programs should be structured to provide preservice teachers with more rich content about current practices, models, motivational theories and activities. There is an important insufficiency particularly in motivational theories and activities, and study results in this field should definitely find a place in teacher training programs.

The quality of activity opportunities provided to pre-service teachers was not examined in this study. It is clear that studies that collect information about this subject are needed. Activities that help preservice teachers obtain maximum benefit from the period they spend in schools should also be examined. More interaction with students in academically diverse class-rooms can change considerably the knowledge, skill and beliefs of preservice teachers about effective teaching, and examining activities that help preservice teachers and students to interact more will be beneficial.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.

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