THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING DOCUMENTED ESSAY WRITING

ARAŞTIRMA VE BELGEYE DAYALI AKADEMİK YAZI ÖĞRETİMİNDE KARŞILAŞILAN ZORLUKLAR

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Abstract

For freshman students, documented essay writing, that is to say, academic writing is a considerable challenge. This skill requires the acquisition of various sub-skills, such as reading with comprehension, finding the main ideas and points in a text, writing in a particular style, applying critical thinking and doing research. All freshman students at Izmir University of Economics are required to take "ENG 101 and ENG 102 - Academic Reading and Writing Skills 1 & 2" courses so that they can cope with their departmental courses. This paper aims at exploring in detail the process of writing documented essays, as taught at ENG 101 & 102 courses, by analyzing the results of the students' responses and their reactions towards learning the relevant skills such as paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting and synthesizing. Implications for program designers are considered and suggestions for the syllabus renewal are given.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, Academic Writing, Freshman, Lifelong Learning.

Özet

Üniversite birinci sınıf öğrencileri için araştırma ve belgeye dayalı, başka bir deyişle, akademik yazı yazma oldukça zordur. Bu beceri başka birçok alt becerinin de bilinmesini gerektirir; örneğin, anlayarak okuma, parçanın ana fikrini ve önemli noktalarını bulma, belli bir türde yazma, eleştirel düşünme ve araştırma yapma, gibi. İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi'nde bütün birinci sınıf öğrencileri, onları bölüm derslerine hazırlayan, "İNG 101 ve İNG 102 – Akademik Okuma ve Yazma Becerileri 1 & 2" derslerini almak zorundadırlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı yukarıda belirtilen türde yazılar yazma sürecini, gerekli beceriler olan farklı şekilde ifade etme, özetleme, alıntı yapma ve sentez yapmayı öğrenme aşamasında öğrencilerin vermiş olduğu cevap ve reaksiyonları da dikkate alarak detaylı bir şekilde incelemektir. Çalışmanın sonunda programcılara ve müfredat yapanlara öneriler yer almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademik Amaçlı İngilizce, Akademik Yazı, Üniversite birinci sınıf, Hayat Boyu Öğrenme.

Introduction and the Aim of the Study

The world is in the process of continuous change and development in the 21st century, and information, science and technology are very important concepts. In order to keep up with these changes, as Plato and many other philosophers concluded, education is crucial. For Plato, education was the most important thing that was needed to nourish the development of a person's character, their moral and political values (Dutton, 1984). Education is a very important social construct, and should be ongoing. According to Rubenson (Wilson & Hayes, 2000, p. 643), lifelong learning is necessary for everybody in the world of business. It "relates to learning throughout the lifespan – covering all life from cradle to grave, starting at any age" (Smith & Spurling, 1999, p. 10). In societies in which this is possible, people are encouraged to think, to put their thoughts into practice and usefully occupy themselves. Societies which do not apply this do not have a bright future.

Towards the end of the 20th century, with the developments in science and technology, there have been great changes in fields such as economics, transportation, communication, management systems, social structures, political and cultural issues. However, these changes have also had negative effects, such as global warming, an increase in terrorism and epidemic illnesses, and different nations have started to come together to find solutions to such problems. All these changes have started a period called globalisation and Turkey, like all countries, is also experiencing both positive and negative effects of globalisation.

In Turkey, people find it a real challenge to enter a profession but the time and level of the formal education that individuals receive is generally thought to be insufficient for professional life. Because the nature of knowledge is continuously changing, as previously mentioned, learning should be ongoing. Nowadays, innovations and learning are an integral part of the business world. For this reason, lifelong learning has become an important skill. As Nomura (1998, p. 19) mentioned,

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Living in a society full of uncertainties and increasing turbulence, the contemporary man, in his over-anxiety to possess the latest and most useful information in the '24-hour world', is paralysed from having to decide between what is essential and what can be discarded, and appears to have lost his bearings in the whirlpool of confusing data that constantly assaults him.

For this reason, individuals need to be equipped with the necessary skills to deal with this challenge, deciding what is essential and what is not.

In order to gain this skill 'collaborative learning through research and inquiry', which has become popular, especially among science teachers, could be applied. In collaborative learning, two or more people work together to reach a common aim and each member's contribution is equal. As a learning method, social interaction is used when giving information (McInnerney & Robertson, 2004). It "is a philosophy of interaction of personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers" (Panitz, 1996). In this type of learning teachers encourage learners to learn how to learn and guide them through the fundamentals of self-directed learning. In self-directed learning (SDL), the learners themselves take the responsibility for what happens. In other words, they choose, manage, and evaluate their own learning activities. For them, SDL involves initiating individual learning activities and developing the qualities that will enable them to successfully achieve them. In her article on self-directed and transformative instructional development, Cranton (1994, p. 738) mentions that in this model, faculty gives decisions about the learners' development, what and how they learn, and that "it is the educator's aim and responsibility to foster and encourage SDL" (p. 729). In another research by Terry (2006, p. 28), two programs were evaluated considering SDL among several other factors essential to the learning process. It was found that adult literacy students could choose their "subject areas, assignment topics, learning pace and attendance schedules" (p. 32) and the learners gave good feedback on these issues.

Inquiry is a form of self-directed learning which has as its main aims the building of research skills in students. The American Physiological Society (APS) development programs focus on inquiry-based learning for several reasons, of which two important ones are, first, it is an "effective method for teaching both content understanding and process skills. Second, most…standards encourage…the incorporation of inquiry-based lessons into the curriculum" (Matyas, 2000).

Self-directed learning skills are necessary for graduate students, especially if they want to continue their studies at post-graduate level. Research techniques enrich a person's existing knowledge. They are used by lifelong learners not only in advanced studies but also at all levels of learning. To take one illustration from industry, "total quality management and quality circles are based on workers' research for piecemeal improvements to products or services" (Smith & Spurling, 1999, p. 53). To sum up, as another writer Cigankova (2003, p. 17) mentions, in order to help learners to be successful in academic and professional life, teachers need to endeavour to develop lifelong learning skills in their students and those who are teaching academic English already aim at doing this. She also adds that students need to improve their writing style if they want to improve in business or academic life.

For this reason, it has been decided to teach freshman students the skills and behaviours necessary for lifelong learning at Izmir University of Economics. Among the life-long skills listed by Appleby (2001), the following are given priority: reading with comprehension and identifying major points, writing in a particular style, listening attentively, demonstrating critical thinking skills, and submitting assignments on time and in acceptable form. It is considered that if we teach the students how to learn by doing research, it will be of great help to their post graduate and/or business life. However, the acquisition of these skills and particularly, the academic writing by non-native speaker freshman students who study in an English medium university are quite challenging. In this paper, the acquisition of the process of learning to write 'documented essays' will be explored critically by summarising the steps that are followed and the feedback on each step taken from the learners. Here, the term 'documented essay' will be used to refer to papers written by freshman students where they choose a particular topic related to their majors, do some library and / or internet research, and write a synthesis on by citing from different sources. We hope that this study will help teachers and/or program designers in addition to students.

Earlier Studies

When we examine the studies, we encounter various subjects related to our topic such as academic literacy, research skills, learning through inquiry and plagiarism. A great deal of the articles on academic writing or academic literacy is about post-graduate students (Turner, 2004, Ferenz, 2005, Cargill & O'Connor, 2006 and San Miguel & Nelson, 2007). Some others are about university students and they show the importance of using writing as a part of a course. To illustrate, in a project done by Keightley (1979, p. 171), the researcher "made writing an integral part of a lecture course which dealt with the Origins of Chinese Civilisation." Each week they discussed a variety of questions and the students were required to select one about which they would write a two-three page paper. The students' reactions showed that they "…took an interest in both the course and the writing experiment" (p. 173) The reactions also showed that "they have wanted just this kind of directed practice in writing in order to feel more secure about expressing themselves" (p. 175).

Other studies are on research skills, namely, Cigankova's (2003) and Granville & Dison's (2005). In the former, Cigankova designed activities to help students to use the internet to develop their on-line academic research skills. The results showed that the quality of the students' writings improved in the target group. The students also practiced skills; such as, language and writing, information management, critical thinking, time management, interpersonal communication, and life-long learning. The researcher states that these skills were designed to improve the quality of students' learning and adds that her students found the activities useful as well. In the latter, Granville & Dison (2005) worked on "encouraging students to develop meta-cognitive reflective skills as a means to enhancing learning and developing higher order thinking" (p. 99). In one of the tasks on a long-term research project, the students came up with "rich and complex responses" (p. 99).

In another project, which was about academic literacy, Ferenz (2005, p. 340) tried to analyse the effect of "the social environment in developing graduate students' L2 advanced academic literacy (AAL) within an EFL setting" with the idea in mind that not all the L2 students can access an academic and social environment necessary for such literacy. The results of the study showed that the learners' identities and aims had an effect on their social networks, which influenced their L2 AAL acquisition. So there was a difference between academic-oriented and non-academic-oriented ones since their identities and goals were different from each other. Ferenz also mentioned that students' identities and goals might influence their motivation to acquire L2 AAL, and suggested that these should be taken into account when expecting L2 AAL achievement from the students.

The last two studies are on teachers. The first one is by Gerber, Price, Brovey, Barnes & Barnes (2002), who aimed to "deliver a Learning through Inquiry Science and Technology (LIST) professional development program to…teachers". The findings suggested "greater use of inquiry-oriented teaching strategies, increased use of technology in the science classroom and renewed interest in science teaching." The teachers reported that "their students had a greater interest in science, lower off-task behaviour, better test performance and more positive interactions with teachers." The second one is by Sutherland-Smith (2005, p. 83), who first looked at the challenges faced by teachers "when dealing with plagiarism". The findings showed that the teachers could not reach an agreed definition of plagiarism and that "collaborative, cross-disciplinary re-thinking of plagiarism is needed to reach workable solutions".

Background Information and Student Profile

Some Turkish learners have difficulty in learning how to think critically. First of all, a type of social conditioning starts in the family because parents usually punish their children without giving a reasonable explanation. This leads the children to conceal their feelings and thoughts as they are unclear as to what their parents believe to be right or wrong and why. Secondly, schools play a crucial role. In Turkey, traditional learning is applied in many schools. In this kind of learning, information is provided by the teacher in the form of a lecture and there is a high reliance on printed books. Almost no student-to-student interaction takes place; learners are passive, at least in the formal learning process (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). As the students are not asked about their opinions, it becomes difficult to spot the difficulties they have with the course on time and deal with them (Gür & Seyhan, 2006, p. 18). At school, learners are expected to learn by memorisation and since they are not used to questioning, they quickly learn by rote but fail to understand and absorb new knowledge. To illustrate, the teachers try to teach abstract concepts at the age of ten, when such concepts should not be introduced before the age of twelve. Therefore, students find understanding these concepts a challenging task. According to constructivist

theories, children under the age of twelve are in the concrete operational stage of development. So before that age, if problem solving and abstract thinking are aided using concrete things, they would learn more easily (Kaminski, Sloutsky & Heckler, 2006 and Dacey & Travers, 2002, p. 294). Thirdly, the teachers play a crucial role in sustaining the status quo in that they also fail to question what they have been taught and the way in which they have been taught. Apparently, as they have been brought up in the same culture and are not used to being questioned, they feel outraged when students question them and at times take the questions as a personal attack. Moreover, the assignments the students are given require repetition of what has previously been memorised rather than a result of their own reading and research. Thus, students never discover the pleasure of learning new ideas through their own reading. For example, there are still some Turkish language teachers who, instead of encouraging learners to read classical Turkish literature, ask the learners to memorise long poems without understanding the meaning behind them. Lastly, the idea of plagiarism and giving due acknowledgement to others' considered opinions and work is relatively new to Turkish culture. As Hyland (2001, p. 375) also mentions, "ESL teachers may find it hard to deal with plagiarism because they are aware that it is a concept which is to some extent specific to western cultures". A Copyright Law was only accepted and implemented quite recently, in 2004. For this reason, Turkish people have not yet fully understood that it is unacceptable to use others' ideas without giving reference to the authors of those ideas. To sum up, lack of experience and the active discouragement of critical thinking have led the students to a state of ignorance.

However, when the students go to university, they are expected to gain the necessary skills for successful integration into the academic world, the ultimate aim being to have individuals become a part of the academic community. Giltrow (2002) distinguishes between school situations and university situations, which she describes as research institutions.

> The knowledge students acquire is the kind of knowledge that comes from the techniques of inquiry developed by the various academic disciplines. …the wording of the facts and concepts students must absorb derives from research practice…such wording is also the medium in which students must work (p. 27).

Therefore, the students need to be familiarised with what are called academic skills.

As in most universities, the students at IUE are also required to learn this wording and other skills such as doing research and writing academic papers. It is evident that these skills could best be taught at freshman ENG 101 and 102 – Academic Reading and Writing Skills 1 & 2 courses. In 2006 when the syllabi for these courses were being redesigned, the school of foreign languages conducted a research to assess the needs of the faculties. The results of that study showed that in almost all the departments, the students were required to do a lot of critical reading, respond to what they had read, and write argumentative and documented essays. This lead the syllabus committee to redesign the course to include those skills students would need during their studies in the faculties.

After the changes, the courses included the following. In the first term, the Eng 101 course had two components; reading and writing. In the reading component, the students developed their reading skills, such as finding the main idea, referencing, guessing the meaning of unknown words, identifying the topic sentences and details. Reading is usually seen as an essential skill in EAP since an academic text is hardly ever written without reading anything. So, in addition to learning how to write, the learners should also know what to write. In Todd (2003, p. 151)'s article where he discusses the appropriate approaches and techniques of EAP teaching, inductive learning is given priority over "more teacher-centred deductive approaches " and "…the teaching of reading focusing on text analysis, and approaches where students are encouraged to act as researchers all place emphasis on induction". As a technique, brainstorming is suggested by Todd, and it is widely used in our program as well.

In the writing component, the focus was basically on revising the types of essays; namely, compare-contrast, process, cause and effect, and discursive, to prepare the students for the writing of research papers and synthesising which would come in the second term.

In the ENG 102 course, in order to teach how to synthesise, several steps were followed. The first was to introduce them to the concept of inquiry. For example, before the reading passage, at the pre-reading part, the students were asked to fill in the following table:

What I already know	What I would like to know	What I have learnt

After the passage is read, if the students still had some unanswered questions (in the second column), their homework was to find the answer(s) to them. In the next class, they were required to discuss these

answers in groups. The second step was to review the steps of the writing process. In all the groups, this was done with the help of the students' laptops. First, the students were asked to search on the internet for the steps of the writing process and then compare these with the steps in their books. Later, a discussion was held to make each step clear. The third step was the most challenging one, in which the students were introduced with important concepts such as how to paraphrase, summarise, and quote directly; in short, how to avoid plagiarism. Each one was dealt with in detail and many examples and exercises were done. In the last step, the students learnt how to choose a topic for their essays, how and where to find and evaluate information, how to state their thesis, and how to write, revise and edit their essays.

Paraphrasing, summarising and quoting skills were assessed through formal testing and the synthesising skill was tested by a 2-3 page long documented essay, which had to be given towards the end of the term and that, too, was included in the overall grade. To write the essay the students had to use information from at least five different sources and submit a copy of them with their first and final drafts.

However, it would be worth mentioning here that the students had difficulty managing how to synthesise. Synthesising is a challenging skill for many of our students as it requires a high level of thinking, critical reading, understanding and integrating one's opinions and observations with what is read. However, it should be remembered that not all the students can reach the level required by the course. Nevertheless, as they are freshman students, the faculty considers that the students will have three further years to improve this skill.

Method

The study was conducted on fifty freshman students from three different departments at Izmir University of Economics; 21 students from Business Administration (BA), 13 from International Trade and Finance (ITF), and 16 from Interior Architecture and Environmental Design (IAED) Departments. (Table 1)

Table 1:

	# of students
BA	21
ITF	13
IAED	16
Total	50

It was conducted in 2006-2007 academic year fall term. As for the student profile, there were great differences between the groups in terms of level of English, motivation, and needs. All of these are important but, as Hyland & Hamp-Lyons (2002, p. 2) also emphasise, EAP not only includes study-skills but also general English because EAP is often defined as teaching English to those who are using English for their studies. This leads us to one of our biggest problems. When the students come to IUE, they are required to study at English Preparatory program for one year. However, for the learners with zero English one year is never enough. Even the students from upper levels have great difficulties in learning enough English to cope with their departmental courses. Here it would be appropriate to mention the minimum level of English required to pass the preparatory program. It is about 5.00 on IELTS.

The BA group had a relatively high level of English. They were motivated to learn and for them, the course was relevant to their needs. The reason could be that they were frequently asked to write academic papers in other departmental courses and they were encouraged by their professors to learn how to write opinion essays, in which they had to do a lot of reading first and then synthesise what they had read.

The other two departments were almost the opposite, their English and motivation levels being lower. The students from ITF were not asked to write such papers before the third year; so, they did not value the course in the freshman year. As Leki (2003, p. 322) mentioned "until (students) get to courses in their majors, whatever writing skills these students develop may not be engaged until some time down the road and so many degrade before they can be used". However, among these three groups, the students from IAED were the most difficult because they were so busy with the departmental projects that they could not give priority to ENG 102 course.

Reactions of the students were taken through informal questionnaires, in which they were asked to write their ideas on two things; the first one was 'is it useful for your department?' and the

second was 'can you do it?' The students were asked these questions after the four important components of documented essay writing: Paraphrasing, summarising, quoting and synthesising. In addition, at the end of the term the students were asked whether they benefited from the course or not. Finally, despite the fact that the students were required to write a short (2-3 pages) paper, they found the course load heavy. However, most of them managed to hand in the papers on time; very few gave their papers on the last day of the term.

Results

As for the formal assessment, the averages were considered. According to these, the BA group had the highest average, with 81.3 out of 100, the IAED was the second, with 69.5 average and the ITF was the third, with an average of 65.8. No student failed in the first group, in the second one 4 students failed, and in the third 2 students failed. (Table 2) In other words, in total, 6 students scored below 60.

Table 2:

	# of successful students	# of unsuccessful students	averages (%)
BA	21	0	81.3
ITF	11	2	65.8
IAED	12	4	69.5

When we look at the informal assessment, in other words, the results of the questions after each component, we can say that the reaction differed considerably according to the departments but on the whole, we can say that, they mostly suggested the students' interests in learning how to write documented essays. Below, in table 3, the results are given in detail for each department and for each component in percentages:

Table 3:

	Paraphrasing (%)		Summarising (%)		Quoting (%)		Synthesising (%)	
	Useful	can do	Useful	can do	Useful	can do	Useful	can do
BA	100	85	100	85	90	95	90	80
ITF	76	76	69	61	61	69	53	46
IAED	75	68	62	56	50	68	56	62

When we look at the table, all the students at BA department found paraphrasing useful and a great many of them (seventeen students out of twenty-one) thought they were quite good at it. However, with the ITF and the IAED departments, the averages were lower; at ITF ten (out of thirteen) students thought paraphrasing was useful and ten of them thought they could do it, at IAED fourteen (out of sixteen) students thought that paraphrasing was useful and eleven of them thought they could do it.

With summarising, the BA department showed exactly the same results with the results they had for paraphrasing. At ITF, nine students thought summarising was useful and eight of them said they could summarise. At IAED, ten students said summarising was useful and nine said they could do it.

At BA, almost all the students, nineteen of them thought quoting was useful, and twenty of them said they could do it. At ITF, eight of them said it was useful, and nine said they could do it. At IAED, half of them, eight said it was useful and eleven of them said they had no difficult with quoting.

Lastly, at BA, nineteen students thought that synthesising was useful and seventeen said they are good at it. At ITF, seven of them found it useful and six of them said they could synthesise. At IAED, nine students said it was useful and ten of them said they could do it.

In the last stage of the research, at the end of the term, the students were asked if they found the ENG 102 course useful or not. The results showed that all the students at BA department found the course useful. Some of their comments were: "My paraphrasing improved", "I can write better term papers for other department courses", "The experience helped me to learn how to do research", "This course is different from the writing course we took at preparatory class. ENG 102 is more useful" and "I can find the main ideas and summarise more easily now". At ITF, four of them were not happy with the course at all. Those who were not happy mentioned things such as: "I did not get any benefit" and "I think this course is not necessary". Finally, at IAED, six students said they did not benefit from the course. Two of their comments were: "I am bored with English courses" and "I did not have enough time, we had a lot of projects to finish in other courses".

Conclusion

When we consider the responds for the four skills, we can say that they were all useful for the students and they felt confident with them. So, it can be concluded that, on the whole, the course was very useful to the students who were competent in English and to the ones who knew the basics of writing; such as, how to write topic sentences, thesis statement, how to support their ideas by giving examples, statistics, and personal experience. However, those who had problems with English grammar at sentence level were the ones who got less benefit from the course. When we look at the results, all the BA students said they benefited from the course. 70% of the ITF students benefited from the course and lastly for the IAED department the rate was 63%. The possible reasons have previously been explained in the method part.

However, several things could be considered to raise these percentages. First of all, the preparatory class writing and reading courses could be redesigned to include critical thinking and essay writing. As the students only learn how to write paragraphs the whole year, they not only get bored with it but also experience difficulty in dealing with ENG 101-102 courses at freshman. Secondly, different ENG 102 programs could be designed for different departments. Since there are huge differences between the departments, such as having students with varying needs and abilities, their programs can be different. Thirdly, the university administration should reconsider the times of ENG 102 courses, which are mostly after 15.30. This increases the motivation problems. Lastly, plagiarism is a difficult concept for Turkish students because it is a relatively new concept for Turkish culture and the students do not understand 'why using others' ideas would be stealing'. For this reason, the subject 'plagiarism' can be explained in greater detail and more time can be allotted on this subject in the program.

Another important thing is the fact that these students study English for at least six years before coming to university; so, they get bored with learning English, especially if they have not been successful enough in mastering it. For this reason, as ENG 102 teachers, we need to explain very clearly that this is not a course for learning English. The course aims should be made clear to the students right from the beginning.

To sum up, by applying the inquiry-based teaching process, the learners will be given a chance to develop: a sense of responsibility for their own learning, abilities in making decisions, how to access information and an understanding that sharing information in groups will benefit them. These are very important skills for their future. The outlines of this course should be kept and developed in order to continue the improvements that are already apparent. Therefore, further research can be conducted on how to raise the students' and the teachers' awareness on these topics. In addition, it would be beneficial to interview department instructors' and work more closely with them to integrate their needs more into the curriculum.

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