

ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: CRITICAL THINKING OR READY MADE STRUCTURE?

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the causes and the fundamental problems students in Turkey face when producing scientific research papers focusing on measurement and assessment methods, curriculum design, English language and academic writing skills of students. The study is based on a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions prepared in 2012. It was designed to measure the general research skills of 100 undergraduate students from different programs at one of the universities in Turkey. Results showed that academic essay writing is as difficult to university students as it is to academics. The researcher believes that this study can emphasize why academic writing is an issue for scholars and university students in Turkey.

Key Words: Research methods, curriculum design, measurement and assessment methods.

“Most of today’s scientists did not have a chance to take a formal course in scientific writing. As graduate students, they learned to imitate the style and approach of their professors and previous authors. Some scientists became good writers anyway. Many, however, learned only to imitate the writing of the authors before them – with all its defects – thus establishing a system of error in perpetuity.” (Robert A. Day & Barbara Gastel, 2011, preface section xvi)

INTRODUCTION

Writing a scientific research paper requires students to conduct a critical and thoughtful investigation on their specific topic. Students need to get involved in reading, thinking and presenting their own views as well as research findings (Öz, March 2000, p.1). So, the assessment will concentrate on one significant question: Why scientific research papers cannot be produced by the Turkish higher education system? Under the light of this study, the factors we concentrate on can be divided into four sub-topics. These are basically measurement and assessment methods, curriculum design, English language proficiency of students and how familiar students are to academic essay writing.

METHOD

This student based study was conducted at one of the universities in Turkey in fall semester of the 2012–2013 academic year. The questionnaire asked participants to evaluate their knowledge on scientific research methods. The population included 50 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and the other 50 students from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Participants were first, second and fourth year students. The researcher administrated the questionnaires during a regular lesson. They were instructed not to write their names on the surveys.

MEASURES

The questionnaire was designed to explore how familiar the students are to research based assignments. The researcher wanted to analyse what actually causes the high failure rate amongst the students. Findings showed that there are particularly four significant points which cause the high failure: measurement and assessment methods, curriculum design, English language and academic essay writing skills of the students. The participants were asked to respond 12 questions specifically on these points.

RESULTS

Measurement and Assessment Methods in Secondary and Higher Education

Turkish universities - which have shown great improvement have been succeeding to get better recognition among other institutions. On the other hand, due to a great influence of globalisation on Turkish education, new strategies should be taken into consideration. According to Küçük & Çepni (December, 2004), teachers are expected to use assessment to determine which student reaches skills and knowledge level as well as why students fail. Short answer and multiple choice tests are still the common methods employed by teachers. However, modern teaching and assessment methods are the most desirable ones among universities and the National Ministry of Education (p:13). Both authors think that even student centered teaching method is not a tangible indicator to determine their success rate because students are taking an active role only while writing an essay or during their oral examinations (p:13). Most significant measure, both authors believe, should indicate how students join others in research, share ideas and take care in classroom activities (p:13, 14). Results in table 1 support Küçük & Çepni's thoughts. It showed that 98 percent of our participants prefer short answer or multiple choice tests rather than long answer ones. Only 2 percent of these students prefer long answer tests. Interestingly, nobody prefers project or essay type assignments. It is probably the most common case at universities in Turkey.

Table 1:

What type of questions would you prefer in your examinations?	Total number of Participants:
100	
Multiple choice questions	56
Short answer questions	42
Long answer questions	2
Projects	0

Furthermore, another author Tokay Gedikoğlu (June 2005) points out that memorising lecture notes is common among students. Gedikoglu believes that this study method is not very beneficial for students because they may forget what they have memorised in short run. Hence, the author thinks that the educational system should teach students less but useful knowledge rather than more but unnecessary points. The aim should be teaching how to find source and use it in regards to their needs (p:75). Whereas, 74 percent of our participants only use their main texts rather than scientific journals and other publications in their assignments. Internet sources are not common preference amongst the students so only 20 percent of these respondents use Internet sources. Interestingly, nobody uses scientific journals. The full list of results can be seen in table 2:

Table 2:

What sources do you usually use for your assignments? 100	Total number of participants:
Main text	74
Internet sources	20
Encyclopedia	6
Scientific journals	0

This study also showed that, 42 percent of the students agree that the limited length of time spent on mid-term and final examinations is the main problem and 40 percent think there are many lecture notes to study before the examinations. 13 percent of these believe there is not enough source to use before their examinations.

Table 3:

What is the most significant problem do you usually have during the examination period? 100	Total:
Limited time	42
Overload study notes	40
Not enough sources	13
No problem before examinations	5

Parallel to Gedikoglu's point of view, the number of students who study their lecture notes or summaries is high by 40 percent. On the contrary, 22 percent of our respondents study certain points highlighted by lecturers. Only 6 percent choose their main texts instead of lecture notes or other publications. The interesting point is that there are some students attempting to memorise their notes and their rate is 32 percent. The results are in table 4 below:

Table 4:

What technique(s) do you apply while studying for mid-term and final examinations? 100	Total:
Studying lecture notes or summaries	40
Memorising lecture notes	32
Studying only certain points	22
Studying the main text	6

Curriculum Design at Tertiary Level

Since 1998, the Council of Higher Education in Turkey has been designing standardised curriculum for all faculties of education in the country (Güven, 2008, p.11). The same condition applies for universities in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as well. Influence of the Council on universities to design their full curriculum according to their needs is vast. Based on the official website of the European University of Lefke, there is only one course called 'Scientific Research Methods' offered by the English Language Teaching Department in their second year curriculum as shown in table 5.

Table 5: ELT Curriculum (Second year, second semester, 2012)

ELT272	English Literature II	(3,0)3
ELT274	Linguistics II	(3,0)3
ELT276	Approaches to ELT II	(3,0)3
ELT278	Language Acquisition	(3,0)3
GCU272	Scientific Research Methods	(2,0)2
EDU272	Methodology I	(2,2)3
EDU274	Teaching Technology and Materials Design	(2,2)3

According to this study, students are also not encouraged to make frequent use of library and to give true commitment regarding their assignments. The rate for those who donot frequently use the library during their studies is 68 percent. On the other hand, the participants who frequently use the library are 32 percent of the total number. The results are in the 6th table below:

Table 6:

Can you frequently use your library?	Total number of participants: 100
Yes	32
No	52
Sometimes	16

Furthermore, the rate for those who often use library materials more than five times a week is only 5 percent. Nearly half of the participants by 48 percent (see table 7) uses various sources in the library less than three times a week. 43 percent of them even do not use any material in the library.

Table 7:

How often do you use library materials a week?	Total number of participants: 100
None	43
0-3 times	48
3-5 times	4
More than 5 times	5

Additionally, they are incapable of using library catalogue and indexes by 90 percent.

Table 8:

Can you use the library catalogue and indexes in an effective way?	Total number of participants: 100
No	90
Yes	10

English Language Skills of University Students

English is one of the global languages many journals are written and published. In their journal article titled *Turkey's English Deficit*, Koru and Akesson (December, 2011) provide a detailed discussion on why, what and how Turkey's poor English proficiency level is part of a broader education problem. One of the factors both

research associates argue is that English language instructions in top and mid-ranking countries commence in the first grade. In contrast, students receive language instructions in the fourth grade in Turkey (p:3). Another point of the discussion in Koru and Akesson's paper is the language instructions in the fifth and sixth grade. Those instructions were fully postponed to be held between the eighth and ninth grade in the 1990s. In the year 2005, those classes were withdrawn. Preparatory year is only offered for those who want to attend university programs but students, then, turn to the age 18 (p:3). Both associates, therefore, believe that it is not possible to get English language skills in our education system. The majority of the population cannot afford to attend private schools or tutorial classes (p:3). As can be seen in table 9, our research findings support Koru & Akesson's argument. 97 percent of the participants are below the proficiency level. 15 percent of them have even no English. Only 3 percent of these think they are advanced level students. This indication gives us a clue on why university students are not willing to contribute in scientific projects.

Table 9:

What is your English language proficiency level?	Total number of participants: 100
None	15
Beginner	40
Intermediate	42
Advance	3

In addition, majority of this group by 85 percent cannot use print or visual materials published in English. Students who always use materials in English covers 1 percent of the total amount as indicated in table 10.

Table 10:

Can you use materials published in English for your assignments?	Total number of participants: 100
No	85
Sometimes	14
Yes	1

Academic Essay Writing

Academic essay writing requires well organised research as mentioned earlier in this paper. The rationale for studying on academic essay writing is best given by Vogan & Plotnick. Both authors' analysis is very crucial bringing an interesting approach why students especially struggle during their undergraduate study. What Vogan & Plotnick consider is that students should forget some basic rules they have learnt in high school because these rules will limit their freedom. As a result of following these rules, both authors emphasize, students may lead to repeat awkward expressions (p:1). The authors, therefore, underline the differences between those institutions from philosophical aspect.

One of the differences unveiled by Vogan & Plotnick is the ready-made structure to work with in high school. In contrast, university education provides freedom to come up with own way of structuring arguments so the critical thinking (p:2). Their arguments are convincing because according to Varaki (2006), critical thinking is basically the process of examining, analyzing, questioning and evaluating information from all kinds of survey results, theories or scientific research reports on a specific topic (p:178). Hence, it is quite an essential issue to find some of the reasons why students are not very productive in essay writing without knowing basic principles of scientific research in Turkey. Even though most students know about classical essay types, our astonishing results demonstrate that all students who responded to our questionnaires do not know how to apply scientific research methods in their assignments and oral presentations. Within this frame, our findings showed that all our participants are not capable in the use of research methods and they do not know the

significant importance of some terms such as '*plagiarism*', '*quotation*' and '*paraphrasing*'. It has become clear that none of our respondents has produced a research paper through the implementation of basic research principles before. Results are shown in table 11 and 12:

Table 11:

Have you ever taken a course on scientific research methods?	Total number of participants: 100
Yes	0
No	100

Table 12:

Have you ever written a research paper before?	Total number of participants: 100
Never	100
Once	0
Few times	0

RECOMMENDATIONS

In their first year, students should be informed about the importance and benefits of research techniques during their studies.

Practice seems an important factor to develop their skills. Students should be encouraged to write research based essays rather than using classical examination styles to measure their success rate.

Curriculums should be designed according to current needs at universities.

Special seminars can be organised for students from other faculties to improve or update their skills in research techniques as well.

Actual research papers might be used as sample writing by academics so students can be more familiar to journal articles.

CONCLUSION

This research clearly illustrates that scientific research techniques in further education need to be of greatest concern for teachers and academics. Despite the traditional form of measurement and assessment methods used in teaching and learning, a valid formula on a large extent would be a key for those who have similar responses. Although it takes a considerable period of time to develop new strategies in the Turkish higher education system and designing process of new curriculum depends on the Council of Higher Education in Turkey since 1998, this student based research clearly exposes the importance of more research based assignments use by academics in order for students to practice more at university. It may increase their productivity and work practices. Gaining research skills will assist them to increase their critical thinking in their related field as well.

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