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Students' Views about the Non-Traditional Writing

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine university students' views about the writing to learn activities. The study involved two the same level classes with total of 78 students (39 students in each classes) in a large university at eastern part of Turkey. Both of the groups wrote letter as writing activity. Students completed two writing activities and each student received feedback to it. The only difference between these groups was different audience for writing letter. While one groups' audience is elementary students, the other groups' audience is teacher. Students wrote letter about different two topics (matter and force). At the end of this writing to learn activities, students were administrated questionnaire to determine their beliefs about non-traditional activities of each group. Results showed that all of students determined writing is as a useful and instructive activity

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1. Introduction

Latest studies have shown that the role of language has significant effects on science learning. Language is emphasized to have a significant effect on showing learners what they know (Prain, 2007). This method of showing is often used as writing activity in educational settings. Writing, explaining, serves as a bridge between new knowledge and the existing knowledge (Keys, Hand, Prain & Collins, 1999). Many studies have shown that students can be effectively informed by writing about a topic (Mason & Boscolo 2000). Fulwiler (1997) emphasized that writing about a topic provides persons with more learning than verbalizing it. Additionally, the more writing strategies the students use and revise what they have written, the more they benefit from that class (Kief, Rijlaarsdam & Bergh, 2006).

Making use of writing in science classes is an opportunity to show students how and why they learn (Hand, Prain, Lawrance & Yore, 1999). It has been observed in many studies that making use of writing activities positively effects students' learning (Mason & Bascolo, 2000; Hohenshell & Hand, 2006; Hand, Hohenshell &

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Prain, 2007; Rijlaarsdam & Galbraith 1999). For instance, Hand et al. (2007) investigated the effects of writing and perceiving the role of writing on students' learning science when students deal with multiple writing assignments. They conducted a study with tenth grade biology students on cell and molecular biology units. Qualitative results showed that students completing multiple and traditional writing activities gained benefit on learning the molecular biology unit. According to Mason and Boscolo (2000), if we want to give students the opportunity to use writing as a learning tool, we should not ask students to copy what their teacher writes; we should give them the opportunity to think and reason in order to create their own presentations; and we need to make it possible for them to think in the language of their own narration about the topic we want them to learn. This type of non-traditional writing activity consists of five basic components (Günel, 2009; Prain & Hand 1996). These are: topic, activity, purpose, addressee, and the method of text production. This study aims at identifying students' thoughts on non-traditional writing activity by them for various addressees.

2. Method

This research has been conducted with 3rd year science students studying in two different groups at a large university in the East. Students in both groups did writing activity for learning purposes within this research. The activity was completed in two different successive topics (matter and force) and in letter format. Both groups completed two writing activities. Total 78 students, 39 from each group, participated in the research. Groups had classes taught by the same instructor in the same style. The only difference between the groups is that they had different audiences for the writing activities. One group wrote to an elementary student whereas the other wrote to the teacher. Students received feedback upon completing each activity. Following this process, a 30-item questionnaire was given to the students in order to elicit their thoughts on non-traditional writing. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher as 3-point scale Likert type with responses of "I agree", "Neutral", and "I do not agree". Students were reminded to take into account their experiences preparing the assignments, when considering the statements on the questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed at eliciting their thoughts on writing activity, writing for different audiences, and getting feedback. For this purpose within this research, only the questionnaires where students considered writing were used.

3. Result

The questionnaires given to the students are presented in three different parts as doing the non-traditional writing activity, correcting for this activity, and evaluating writing for different audiences. Considering that the only difference between groups is the audiences, the part with thoughts on evaluating the audience on the questionnaire will be given separately to both groups. On other evaluations, differences between both groups were checked and since the difference between student thoughts is almost none, they are given common ones. Some points including student thoughts on evaluating writing and correction are given on Table 1.

Examining Table 1, it can be seen that 78% (n=59) of students stated they learned the topic while writing the letter; 82% (n=62) said they noticed their inadequacies on the topic while writing letter; 62% (n= 47) stated their self-expression skills developed through the writing activity; 66% (n= 50) said it increased retention on learning, and more than half of the students said more than one writing activity is more instructive. In addition, 67% (n= 50) of the students stated that correcting was instructive; 64% (n=48) said revising the assignment led them to think whereas only 37% (n= 27) stated that evaluation on the revision was helpful; 41% on the other hand said it was not helpful. Furthermore, 46% (n= 34) of the students stated that they would use this activity with their students when they start teaching whereas 37% (n= 27) said they would not. Each group had a different audience. 61% (n=22) of those who wrote to an elementary student stated that writing to an elementary student is helpful and writing to a lesser audience is stated to be not so hard in general. In the group of those who wrote to a teacher, majority said they could not decide about three questions.

Table 1. Student thoughts in relation to questionnaire items.

questionnaire items	1. I do not agree		2. Neutral		3. I agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
write letter and feedback						
<i>Q1. I learned the topic when writing the letter.</i>	7	9.2	10	13.2	59	77.6
<i>Q2. I noticed my inadequacies about the topic when writing the letter.</i>	5	6.6	8	10.5	62	81.6
<i>Q6. Writing the letter helped develop my self-expression skill.</i>	17	22.4	12	15.8	47	61.8
<i>Q12. There is no instructive dimension difference between writing a letter once or three times.</i>	41	53.9	13	17.1	22	28.9
<i>Q17. The evaluations I received for my assignment did not help correct.</i>	27	37.0	16	21.9	30	41.1
<i>Q18. Correcting on the assignment made me think.</i>	19	25.3	8	10.7	48	64.0
<i>Q21. I am thinking to apply letter writing technique on my students when I start teaching.</i>	27	36.5	13	17.6	34	45.9
<i>Q24. I think preparing the letter increased retention of my learning.</i>	9	11.8	9	11.8	50	65.8
<i>Q25. Correcting was instructive.</i>	14	18.7		14.7	50	66.7
write the letter to an elementary student						
<i>Q27. It was hard for me to write the letter to an elementary student.</i>	12	32.4	11	29.7	14	37.8
<i>Q28. It was very instructive for me to write the letter to an elementary student.</i>	22	61.1	10	27.8	4	11.1
<i>Q29. It would be more instructive for me to write the letter to my teacher or my friends.</i>	12	33.3	17	47.2	7	19.4
write the letter to a teacher						
<i>Q27. It was hard for me to write the letter to a teacher.</i>	12	35.3	11	32.4	11	32.4
<i>Q28. It was very instructive for me to write the letter to a teacher.</i>	11	33.3	15	45.5	7	21.2
<i>Q29. It would be more instructive for me to write the letter to an elementary student.</i>	6	17.6	15	44.1	13	38.2

4. Conclusion

Writing for learning purposes provides students with awareness. Large majority of the students stated that they learned well while writing and what they learned retained; they noticed their inadequacies and their self-expression skills developed through the writing activity. Yore (2000) stated that writing for learning is a toll for structuring science learning and showing this. According to Yore, individuals find opportunities of developing vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, discussion samples and techniques as well as knowledge of the topic, during these writing activities. Writing is used as putting thoughts on words (Rijlaarsdam & Galbraith 1999). Therefore, learning is a tool for learning and evaluating. When students do writing for learning, they also learn writing. Providing students with feedback in this process helps them with the topic, reflection, punctuation, and with showing their inadequacies in completing writing activity suitable for addressees. When teaching writing,

feedback on how this process is required to be should be provided (Rijlaarsdam & Galbraith 1999). In this study, more than half of the students believe in the benefit of revision, however, they think feedback is not very effective in these revisions. The reason for that might be the grading system; grading without marks may have not directly shown students their errors. In addition, since students had difficulty thinking on the assignment when revising, very few students think of using in the future the letter writing activity they considered contributive in their learning. The more the students apply writing strategies and revision, the more they benefit from the class (Kief, Rijlaarsdam & Bergh, 2006). Students express this view on their opinions.

Groups did writing for various audiences. Majority of the students writing to an elementary student find writing to a lesser audience instructive, on the other hand, it is remarkable that few students writing to a teacher find this activity instructive. Level of the audience on the written texts is effective in the process of learning and presenting the knowledge (Günel, Hand & McDermott, 2008). Likewise, Günel, Kabatas-Memis and Büyükkasap (2009) have stated that writing to a lesser level brings more success than writing to a teacher, on the post test scores. Students' attitudes towards writing also present a similar result. In conclusion, this activity which helps students learn in educational settings should be granted effective use.

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