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English Major Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing: A Struggle between Writing to Learn and Learning to Write¹

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Abstract

Even though writing as a language skill takes a back seat especially with reference to the natural order hypothesis, appreciation of writing in academic settings propel learners to challenge the validity of this order. It is not surprising therefore that writing deserves a higher priority in academic settings due much to its immediate practical application in a variety of academic tasks such as examination questions, essays, research reports, dissertation thesis and so on. In line with this constant practice with writing, English majoring students are quite usually subject to production of texts in the academic essay genre and desire to position themselves in academic discourse community through following the desired academic conventions. However, a considerable number of students fail to achieve the desired proficiency; cultural variations intrude into the language classrooms and differences in meaning learners attach to the writing activities are evident, which makes it necessary to explore students' perceptions from academic writing courses. To this end, questionnaires on students' writing efficacy were distributed to the freshman students enrolled in Academic Writing class, and interviews were carried out to have a broader understanding of the expectations from the course. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS and content analysis was employed to analyze the interviews.

Keywords: Learner expectations, ESL writing, Academic writing, English majoring students

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1. Introduction

The growing emphasis on the learner-centred approach has been influential in all walks of education and, not surprisingly, the focus on the learners has become more pronounced than ever. In line with this proliferation of studies aiming to capture learners from a wider range of skills, viewpoints and stakeholders, an exploration of the attitudes and perceptions of learners towards different writing genres has been of instrumental value. Therefore, an exploration of learners' views and perceptions might make the learners more engaged and more comfortable in their learning environment. According to Wu (2006), when the learners' expectations are undermined, resistance to learning might be identified. Thus, the need to integrate learner perspectives could add a fuller version of the truth.

Suggesting a traditional marginalized role of L2 writing would not be poorly evidenced. When the history of L2 writing instruction is considered, it is seen that due attention to writing instruction was only the case only in the last decades of the 20th century (Jawid & Umer, 2014). Before 1960s, when the Audiolingualism was in its heyday, emphasis usually fell on spoken language. Moreover, with the escalating number of students enrolling in American universities, a growing interest in writing was conceivably situated. However, the growing interest in second language writing was not much influential in the social aspects of writing and it is not surprising to see that the social nature of the writing was underrepresented (Can & Walker, 2014). For many years, the pedagogical aspects rather than the psycholinguistic or cognitive aspects of writing has been the focus of studies (Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson, & Gelderen, 2009) and cognitive-oriented research in writing instruction has been a late bloom. It is also evident that students' perceptions towards writing in a second or foreign language is under researched (Petric, 2002). Therefore, the need to include learners' perspectives of writing in the second language is more necessary than ever.

Moreover, when writing in foreign and second language contexts are also compared, learners in the former setting usually demonstrate a lower level of proficiency and less fully developed competencies (Ortega, 2009). One of the main curiosities of the researchers in second language writing field has been the poor standards of the second language writers. To begin with, the absence of explicit writing instruction in the L1 has been an issue contributing to the substandard performance of the learners in L2 writing. This makes them somehow limited because absence of explicit instruction could make learners of L2 writing potentially disadvantaged in terms of their expression in L2. Antoniou and Moriarty (2008) claimed that explicit teaching of writing is hardly a case. The result is the novice writers who struggle to make their way in this challenging process.

Studies conducted on EFL learners usually point to the learners who fail to attain a proper degree of L2 writing proficiency (e.g., Cai, 2013; Ergür & Saraçbaşı, 2009; Tahaineh, 2010) and a considerable number of learners face the problem of meeting the writing demands

of the students. Especially for the neophytes, writing, as Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins (2009, p. 270) argued, is an intimidating experience as their limited experience might lead them to exceed their emotional threshold and “cripple early writing endeavours”. This is aptly put by the authors as follows:

Thus, beginning academic writers face a considerable writing challenge. They are developing their understanding and practice of writing as a messy process of writing and rewriting that brings ideas into being, and can be thrown into turmoil when they cannot seem to ‘get it right’ the first time. They only have others’ finished work to compare theirs with; generally they do not see the messy drafts of their peers and supervisors. And their own critical voice tends to be far stronger than their creative voice (p. 272).

Findings from China, for instance, report on the students who demonstrate a low level of academic writing proficiency (See Cai, 2013) and tend to imitate certain expressions in their writing books (Xu, 2005). Similarly, students in Saudi Arabia were reported not to have the desired competencies in L2 writing (Jahin & Idrees, 2012). Except for situations in which students feel individually motivated, mastery in writing is rarely achieved and consequently students harbour feelings of dread and self-doubt (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). Given that learners of L2 writing are usually in “an excursion space”, which suggests that they are not in their own territory, feeling the pulse of the learners through related means would help researchers design their writing instruction and tailor it more the learners’ needs and expectations.

Learners who want to develop their proficiency in academic writing skills usually find themselves in a different realm. This pursuit of academic excellence in a new territory is usually value-laden, that is a particular set of values are assumed. Thus, not surprisingly, learners’ L1 or L2 output, as Rinnert and Kobayashi (2009) argued are somehow shaped by the social context they live in and their perceptions, preferences, values and language proficiency, which are affected by their L1 and L2 instruction as well as disciplinary knowledge. Students’ writing in L2 is usually affected by their rhetorical and cultural writing patterns in their native language (Kaplan, 1987, 1988). Connor (2008) argued that rhetorical patterns are unique to each language and culture and the differences in these rhetorical patterns might make it more challenging for the learners to identify themselves in the new writing conventions. Contrastive rhetoric, which suggests the cultural uniqueness of the rhetorical aspects, helps the learners to opt for ways to view the differences in their first and second languages and benefit from the dynamic cultural and interlinguistic influences. Therefore, narrowing the lens on a particular setting in a particular culture will make the investigation into the perceptions of learners will make it easier to account for culturally variant patterns.

The focus of the study will be on the perceptions of English major students. English major students either of native or non-native origin are in a position to meet the growing need for written products and make their way in several issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling (Jahin & Idrees, 2012). Since these students are enrolled in English language related departments such as English language and literature, English language teaching, American language and literature, they are usually asked to write in English or most of their research endeavours depend heavily on their academic writing skills. Therefore, the stakes are high when they are duly equipped with writing skills.

2. Literature Review

According to Silva (1990), several approaches would help us keep track of the developmental stages in L2 writing. Product-based approach, which is described as “a traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, usually is presented and analyzed at an early stage” (Gabrielatos, 2002, p.5) enabled learners to copy texts focusing on grammatical accuracy. The focus on the language structures, sentence patterns paved the way for writing frames and table substitution (Jordan, 1997) with the emergence of functional approach, essay development gained prominence with particular attention to introduction, body and conclusion structures. As Turgut and Kayaoğlu (2015) put it, this concern on the product is favorably regarded by the language teachers:

...writing is used conventionally by teachers as a means of quickly assessing the students' language production, giving too little attention to the process of writing including the conscious and unconscious decisions which the students can make for the purpose of communicating in different situations (p. 48).

However, the process approach shifted the focus from the finished product to the processes writers go through. In accordance with this view, writing is a “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). With the introduction of process approach, mental processes inherent in writing came to the fore and learners were encouraged to pursue their own learning agenda. Feedback gained prominence here and peer evaluation, conferences and written comments which helped learners sort out the problems through their subsequent drafts and revisions.

Despite the merits of the process approach in L2 writing instruction, process-based writing pedagogy or communicative teaching of writing did not always produce the expected results which led teachers to consider the little incentive in “Western writing pedagogy”. In other words, even if the process approach is welcomed as an approach, it does not always produce desirable outcomes. Large classes, L1 use, resistant student-teacher beliefs,

contextual considerations which are not taken into account, teachers' lack of emphasis or preparedness in communicative teaching, testing-oriented curriculum are among the reasons for the lack of predicted outcomes (see Casanave, 2009; Liu at all, 2004; Nunan, 2003). All these, indeed, take us to the need "to negotiate in the local institutional culture" (van Lier, 2004). So as to achieve such reconciliation, addressing to the needs and expectations of the stakeholders would produce meaningful results.

On the other hand, writing has often been associated with the results of acquisition, rather than a tool that assists acquisition process. To put it differently, learners are assumed to develop their writing at the last stage. This traditional learning-to-write perspective has been influential in writing pedagogy and integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods have considerably helped researchers go into the emic perspective through analysing the perceptions of the writers and the readers (Hyland, 2011). However, how people learn to write is still a question at its embryonic stage. In process writing, learning how to write by writing is the major focus.

According to Mantle-Bromley (1995) attitudes have cognitive, evaluative and behavioural components. Cognitive component refers to objects or situations which are related to attitudes, while evaluative component is about the likes and/or dislikes generated through particular attitudes. Behavioural component, on the other hand, triggers learners to develop particular learning behaviours. Therefore, understanding learners' attitudes might help researchers develop reasoning for particular actions, behaviours and situations and so on. Chen (2006) investigated Taiwanese EFL students' writing deficiencies through error analysis and found that grammatical errors related to learners' L1 are considered to be among the chief reasons for learners' failure to demonstrate adequate L2 writing proficiency. Xu (2005) pointed to Chinese students' tendency to imitate certain expressions and the format of the published papers and much of their effort is devoted to layout though move or steps are not given the due respect they deserve. White and Bruning (2005) identified the role of transmissional and transactional beliefs on learners' writing quality. Low transactional beliefs were found to be correlated with low organization and writing quality while learners with high transactional beliefs meant improved idea-content development, organization, voice sentence fluency conventions and so on.

Cai (2013) developed a needs analysis framework and the researcher came up with the finding that the participants attached a significant importance to writing especially with reference to their high instrumental motivation mean (4.55 out of 5.00) of completing their graduate studies compared to relatively lower mean of inner pleasure in academic writing (1.80 out of 5.00). The participants' writing need driven more by their instrumental needs was crippled by their inability to write an effective content and in an appropriate structure and

style. Reporting that they had considerable difficulty in reviewing and critiquing, the participants demanded more assistance in academic features and styles.

When the challenges of writing were taken into consideration, it was evident that anxiety and fear override their emotions (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 273). The following table provides an account of the challenges that workshop participants faced (See Table 1):

3. Methodology

In this study, a mixed-methods design was employed to triangulate qualitative and quantitative data collection. According to Dörnyei (2007), mixed-methods research has several advantages:

- the opportunity to combine both qualitative and quantitative research findings
- complementary nature of qualitative (words) and quantitative (numbers) data
- increased validity thanks to the convergence of findings
- its wider appeal compared to a mono-method study.

Table 1

Examples of the challenges of writing

The challenges of writing	
Self-doubt	Proper construction of ideas
Insecurity	Own voice is exposing
Intimidating to start (frightening)	Fear of critique
Getting ideas	Judging/comparison in relation to other writers
Are the ideas worth talking about?	Judging against other people
Doubt about relevance of ideas	Marking and approval
Struggle to accumulate material	Pressure of other people's expectations
Courage to ditch material	Own judgment call
Lack of skills	Lack of confidence

Source: Selected statements from a brainstorm on the challenges and highlights of writing by L2 participants at one writing workshop, September 2005.

This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of English major students studying at an English language and literature department towards Academic Writing courses. It was conducted at a north-eastern state university in Turkey in 2014-2015 spring semestre. The English major students who are taking Academic Writing classes were given Academic Writing perceptions questionnaire developed by the researchers. Moreover, of the students who took the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were carried out with students to further explain the needs and expectations of the learners. As stated in the course objectives,

the course aims to help learners to “focus on various academic writing activities such as summarizing and synthesizing, rhetorical analysis, argumentation and academic research paper. The academic research paper will provide a guideline for students on how to write their graduation theses at the fourth year (Course Description).”

The study was conducted with 115 freshman students whose age ranged from 18 to 44 ($M=20, 7$). Of the 115 participants 90 were female and 25 were male, and 7 students (5 F, 2 M) took the semi-structured interviews. A simple sampling procedure was employed to choose the participants of the questionnaire. According to Dörnyei (2007), random sampling “involves selecting members of the population to be included in the sample on a completely random basis” (p. 97). On the other hand, convenience sampling procedure (see Dörnyei, 2007) was employed in deciding the participants who took the semi-structured interview. The reason why English major students were included in the study is that they were they were taking Academic Writing classes and they were demanded to demonstrate a proper proficiency in academic writing skills. Appropriate English is necessary for these English major students when they submit their assignments, when they are about to publish something in the school journal or when they are writing their exam papers or thesis. Thus, writing in English is an integral part of them.

To promote the credibility of the construct, the questionnaire was developed by the researchers in the light of the literature. First, some items developed by Ismail (2011) were included and those items were extended to include learners’ feelings, general beliefs, and beliefs of L1 and L2 writing. A 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) was employed. The instrument items were found to be quite reliable ($\alpha = .83$). Moreover, interview items were adapted in the light of the items developed by Majidi (2005). A piloting was carried out with a student who was taking Academic Writing course at the time of the interview. Then focus group interview was conducted with 7 students in their mother tongue, Turkish. The interviews took 20 and 25 minutes respectively. After writing the data verbatim, codes were developed by the researchers and to promote the consistency of codes and themes, another researcher was asked to analyze the transcription and develop codes. A 90% consistency was found when two codings were compared.

4. Findings and Discussions

Feelings towards schooled writing

Students’ tendency to write was not adequately nurtured in school settings. Sixty-seven out of 115 learners stated that they loved writing, but not for school. Twenty six participants reported that they loved writing whereas the remaining 19 indicated they did not love writing. The reluctance to get involved in school writing is aptly reported in focus group interviews:

I: *What kind of activities are you involved in terms of academic writing?*

SI: *Assignments, poems, journals...*

I: *Which one sounds more attractive?*

SI: *Everything not related to school*

It follows that when learners are pushed to write on certain issues, they may not welcome such top-down imposition. Thus, one can reason the integration of students as decision makers in topic choice, which could make the writing practice gain a wider appeal. Such integration would help learners claim ownership of the tasks they are likely to get involved in. The lack of enjoyment in writing tasks can be supported through questionnaire items 19, 28 and 30 (See Table 2).

Table 2

Feelings towards L2 Writing

	SA+A	SD+D	Mean	SD
1. I do not enjoy writing in English because it is a very difficult skill for me	39	47	3,1	1,3
2. I enjoy writing in English.	47	38	2,8	1,2
3. I hate writing in English because I had some bad experience in the past.	31	69	3,6	1,4

The items in the table above suggest that about one third of the students do not love writing. One reason for students' lack of love for writing could come from the topics assigned. In support of the teacher-driven topic choice, one informant in the second focus group expressed that:

For instance, the lecturer asks us to do something are we feel bounded by that topic, by the rules such as controlling idea, supporting idea. Since we feel limited, we cannot express ourselves freely. However, in the absence of a teacher, we feel we have more freedom. Freedom to choose our topic, examples... (FG2)

A similar reaction to the school-imposed topic choice was mentioned by an informant in the first focus group:

We love the topics if they have any relevance to us; however, if we are asked to produce scientific things, the responsibility to 'produce' makes me nervous indeed. ... (FG1)

The emphasis on "freedom" or lack of freedom is implied by another respondent who pointed to the strict rules:

We seem to pay attention to rules more than we do to our ideas.

We feel bounded by MLA, APA and punctuation. Spelling, punctuation, word choice ... (FG2)

Table 3

Writing at school

	N	SA+A	SD+D	Mean	SD
4. I do not feel comfortable during a writing activity.	115	44	41	2,9649	1,23324
5. Writing is something I only do in school	115	44	41	2,9739	1,28049
6. Writing is something I only anticipate doing for writing course	115	35	30	3,0783	1,06085

Moreover, schooled writing tasks are considered to have little utility in real life. Students who do not feel comfortable when writing, who perceive writing as a school task or who do it only for writing course could best illustrate little value in real life (See Table 3).

Even though academic writing is not welcomed by every student, the participants generally agreed that academic writing was an essential aspect of their current and future life. A great many learners (71) believe that learning to write in English is a very important skill for their academic study at university. This conviction is supported by the high majority of learners (85) who contend that academic writing skills are necessary for their graduate studies. This necessity is coupled with the future career (74), publishing (69), and future job (74) (see Table 4).

Table 4

Motivation to write in L2

	SA+A	SD+D	Mean	SD
7. I write pretty well but will improve with more practice	68	32	2,5	1,3
8. Learning to write in English is a very important skill for my academic study at the university.	71	32	2,3	1,5
9. I need to learn to write in English because it is a very important skill for my future job.	74	27	2,3	1,3
10. Writing is not a very important skill for me.	34	66	3,4	1,5
11. I do not practice writing in English because it is not very important for my academic study.	43	60	3,2	1,5
12. Academic writing skills are necessary for your current graduate studies	85	9	4,08	1,03
13. Academic writing is necessary in publishing your graduate studies	69	8	3,7	1,04
14. Academic writing is important for your future career	74	18	3,8	1,1

When students' motives for academic writing are considered (see table 5), some conclusions could be drawn:

Students in general consider mastery of writing as a practice that improves through practice. That a great many students other agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that they will make better writers when they practice adequately can be taken as the learners' optimistic beliefs regarding the achievability of the writing course. However, 56 out of 115 believed that writing is a talent which some people are granted casts some doubts on the beforementioned optimism. To achieve better writing, learners usually point to a "writing model", that is, they write better than usual when they are supported with a model. In accordance with the focus group interviews, this "model" is usually considered as essays written by native speakers.

Even though being integrated in the discourse community of the target language is something that students seem to be armed with since they are English major students, this is hindered by certain limitations. This willingness to get immersed in the discourse community of the target language is articulated by a respondent who argued: *"We feel ourselves as part of the discourse community; that is actually the reason why we have chosen this department...(FG2)"* However, even though the learners do want enter such discourse communities, they do not think they are equally advantaged when they compare themselves with the native writers: *"The native writer is advantaged as s/he knows the culture of the language. If you have difficulty in thinking in Turkish.....it will be a problem for you in writing. But s/he [the native writer] can think in that language (FG1)." They assume that they are somehow behind their native counterparts: "I think it will be premature to argue that we*

Table 5

Beliefs about L2 writing

Beliefs...	SA+A	SD+D	Mean	SD
15. Writing is something that gets better and better the more you do it	67	23	2,40	1,3
16. Writing is a talent that some people have and others don't	56	42	2,82	1,3
17. I feel that I can be a good writer if I practice writing regularly.	66	33	2,53	1,3
18. I prefer to work with the teacher during a writing activity.	36	32	3,07	1,1
19. I can write better when I work with other students.	34	40	3,15	1,2
20. I prefer to look at a writing model before I start writing in English.	57	29	2,64	1,1
21. People who are good at grammar will have no trouble in writing.	40	47	3,07	1,3

are like native writers. In fact, they are also human beings like us and there are some rules that they also follow.” (FG2). Writing like a native speaker is usually the appreciated “model”. This is best described by an informant in the first focus group interview:

I think it is important to write like a native speaker. If we see realize that their writing is easily understood and accepted to be consistent, we feel compelled to write like them. That not everyone has the same capacity is quite acceptable, but everyone has the potential express their ideas (FG1).

When students' L1 writing and L2 writing perceptions and behaviour is compared, some patterns could be developed. First, about one third of the students (39) believe that their writing fluency in English is supported by their writing proficiency in their L1 (See Table 6). An equal number disagree with this while nearly the same number is neutral. That students are not supported by their L1 writing proficiency is supported by our informal conversations with the students. A great many students complain about their insufficient essay practice in Turkish. It is assumed that L1 interference could be facilitating the L2 writing proficiency. On the other hand, L1 interference could yield to be debilitating as the constant attempt to translate sentences might make them potentially disadvantaged:

Thinking in Turkish makes me suffer when writing in English. I make up complex sentences [in Turkish] and attempt to translate them into English. Sometimes I make up very complicated sentences and I feel I cannot think in a more simple way. I think the problem is with me. I want to provide a detailed answer, but I see that the teacher wants us to make up clear and concise sentences... (FG2)

Teachers' expectation in “a simple way” is theoretically grounded when the different writing patterns across different cultures are taken into account. Even though Western influence in writing style and argumentation has been felt especially with the rising impact of globalization, Turkey falls much into Asian and Arabic traditions when it comes to use of argumentation patterns (Uysal, 2012). However, the adorned or flowery language style is not welcomed by English and Northern European cultures as they do not tolerate uncertainty (Hendricks et al., 2005). Teachers' expectations seem to be target discourse-community driven, while students seem to uphold the adorned language which is a feature of Turkish writing (Enginarlar, 1990). One informant's description of a good writer follows the hints of the elaborate style in question: “A good writer is someone who description and explanations are vivid, who has a powerful imagination. If the person provides coherent ideas, if you understand something when you read him/her, that's it” (FG2).

Table 6

Beliefs about L1 and L2 writing proficiency

	SA+A	SD+D	Mean	SD
22. I like to write in English because I am a good writer in Turkish.	39	39	2,9	1,1
23. I am not a good writer in both Turkish and English.	41	47	3,1	1,3
24. I think the writing traditions in Turkish and English are quite different.	56	30	2,6	1,2
25. I do not think I am equipped with English writing conventions.	32	38	3,06	1,09
26. Only the native speakers can write efficiently in English.	41	59	3,3	1,4
27. A person must know the target culture well in order to be a proficient writer.	40	25	2,8	1,08
28. In terms of writing style, English and Turkish are similar.	33	51	3,2	1,2

5. Conclusions

Teachers and learners should find a balance between learning to write and writing to learn. English major students sometimes have difficulty in choosing to invest their effort either on content or language. Especially if learners do not live up the expectations of academic writing, such a balance could prove to be instrumental. An extensive body of research has accumulated to point to the connection between writing and L2 learning. That numerous learners do not feel themselves adequately equipped represents the traditional perspective, and writers might feel that their L2 development is not mature enough to cope with the demands of academic writing (Williams, 2012). However, in line with the writing-to-learn perspective, output plays a facilitating role in promoting L2 development. To this end, teachers' balanced stance will help capture the interplay of content and language, both of which are desirable for English major students.

Teachers' decision making processes should comply with learners' needs and expectations. In this specific case, provision of feedback that is beyond grammar (see Özbay & Kayaoğlu, 2008), teacher-led topic choice, and teacher as the sheer audience seem to be the instances of a teacher-imposed curriculum; however, negotiation could result in more participatory and more internalized topics. Students as sole decision-makers could provide choices or make decisions which are not approved by learners. This will hardly result in learners' appreciation or internalisation of the topic. A negotiated-syllabus in which students

claim ownership of content selection, assessment and route of working could be instrumental on the way to help learners become active decision-makers in the organisation of teaching and learning (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Learners have a desire to write like native speakers, even though some of them expressed that it would be premature to write in that way. Native-like writing fluency would be no more than a myth; however, some learners want to take native writers as a reference point. Though, as Schumann (1978) argued, identification with the native speakers could aid learners' language development, this could play an inhibitive role as such mastery is an unrealistic expectation.

Students' eagerness to get engaged in out-of-school writing practices gives the impression that schooled writing is not favorable for all learners. Therefore, schools should teach writing which combines everyday life. Scientific connotations of "academic" makes academic writing an endeavour which is beyond the reach of learners. The word "academic" should be demystified and integrating writing in a more enjoyable, meaningful and engaging way should be sought.

This study is reduced to English major students; the findings may not be generalizable to all English learners. A five-point Likert scale was used in the study; however, sometimes a considerable number of learners remained neutral, which made it difficult to interpret the results. Future studies could be extended to different learners from different backgrounds and scales of different granularity (7 or 9 point scales) or an even-numbered scale could be employed to eliminate the neutral or indifferent option.

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