



## CAN WE HELP OUR STUDENTS WRITE BETTER?

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### Abstract

The paper investigates the effect of a writing program on EFL students' writing skill. 353 Turkish EFL students and 23 English teachers participated in the study. The students received two hours of writing instruction per week for 18 weeks. Then they were administered the PET. The student performance on the writing component of the test was evaluated using the CEFR rubric. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to analyze the data. The results indicated that the students improved their scores only on the organization component. No significant difference was observed on content, grammar, vocabulary, and effort-creativity components.

**Keywords:** writing, EFL, writing program, EFL students

### 1. Introduction

Writing seems to be one of the most problematic areas of language education. While discussing the sources of writing-related problems, the lack of grammatical knowledge has been presented as the main cause of poor writing (Wyse, 2001). Besides, it has been pointed out that students' lack of schemata, both content and formal, about the topics they write prevents them to produce well-versed writing (Read, 2010). Some others have laid stress on the organizational aspect of writing and indicated that students experience serious difficulties about how to organize their ideas smoothly and fluently (Graham, 2005; Wiesendanger, Perry & Braun, 2011).

The positions to overcome these writing-related problems can be grouped into two; interventionist and non-interventionist. Those who believe in the value of intervention in writing have suggested various ideas, methodologies, and techniques to help students write better. Some focus on the use of language (Myhill & Watson, 2014), some on the conventions, others on content, ideas, and organization. Although there are studies reporting that error correction fosters more accurate writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, Hartshorn, 2010; Sheen 20007), the research does not look promising for the interventionists. The studies carried out on error correction (Truscott, 1996, 2007;

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Truscot & Hsu, 2008) and grammar teaching (Andrews, et al., 2006) demonstrate the inefficiency of error correction. Furthermore, it is indicated that the corrective feedback given to students about their written work can hurt their self-image and motivation (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2010). Thus, the research generally supports the arguments proposed by the non-interventionists who believe that writing emerges naturally as a result of acquisition (Krashen, 2017a, 2017b. Sari, 2013). However, they draw attention to a different function of writing practice; it does not serve developing formal aspect of writing, rather it becomes a means of clarifying, discovering and organizing one's ideas (Krashen, 2009, 2013; Ponniah & Krashen, 2008). Considering these two different points of view, interventionist and non-interventionist, it can be proposed that these two positions seem to overlap about the value of intervention in writing with respect to generating and organizing ideas.

In an EFL context like Turkey, writing is one of the most neglected and problematic issues in language education. It has either a subservient role to practice target language forms or is scattered in coursebooks with no careful and systematic planning. That is why it is a must to design a systematic writing course and study the effects of its each component on EFL students' writing. Hence, this study was carried out to see the effects of a writing course on learners' writing. Different components, namely content, grammar, vocabulary, organization, and effort-creativity were studied analytically to see how they influence the written production of learners.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

353 high school prep class Turkish students formed the target population of the study. The students were the graduates of regular Turkish elementary schools and received two hours of English per week in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades and four hours of English in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The instruction they received were general English and there was no specific focus on the writing skill (see "[www.meb.gov.tr](http://www.meb.gov.tr)" for the foreign language education system in Turkey, and "<http://yayim.meb.gov.tr/cd.html>" for the methodology, syllabi, course books, and sample activities prepared for the English course by the Ministry of National Education).

23 English teachers were teaching in the program. The information about the teaching staff is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Teacher Background Data**

Academic Background		Teaching Experience		Training on Teaching Writing	
Level	N	Years	N	Yes	No
BA	19	2-5	5	19	4
MA	3	6-10	12		
PhD	1	11-13	7		

The teachers were generally experienced teachers and received a course on how to teach writing in their undergraduate English language teaching programs.

## 2.2 Procedure

The academic year consisted of two semesters, 18 weeks each. The participants received 25 hours of English instruction per week. The English program consisted of two components, general English and skills. In the general English component which was offered 19 hours per week, students followed a course book organized around themes and formal aspects of English. The skill component comprised six hours per week and students studied course books designed to teach specific skills. During the program the accurate use of language was targeted in accordance with the grammar component of the program. Moreover, the students were given feedback about the grammar mistakes they had committed in their production. Likewise, in each unit the general English course targeted certain vocabulary items and provided practice with them. The students were expected to use vocabulary appropriately and they were given feedback about their errors. The content of their production was also a concern and students received instruction and were provided with comments about it considering the purpose and audience.

In the second semester, students received 2 hours of writing instruction per week for 18 weeks. The instruction had a comprehensive approach. The writing component of the program started with filling in a form, putting sentences/paragraphs in correct order, completing a chart/sentence/paragraph, identifying lexical items/sentences that violate coherence, continued with the parts of a paragraph and essay and ended with the use of cohesive devices and conventions. Especially coherence, the organization of ideas in a paragraph or essay was emphasized. Students were asked to analyze paragraphs first to identify the topic sentence, supporting ideas, and facts and examples. Then the parts of a paragraph were handled one by one. They were required to choose the best title from among three options and then write their own. The same process was repeated for topic sentence, theme, supporting ideas, details, facts and examples, and conclusion. They were also instructed to discover and organize their ideas first and then prepare a rough draft before start writing. The essay was also handled in the same way the paragraph was studied.

At the end of the first semester the KET (Key English Test) and at the end of the academic year, the PET (Preliminary English Test) was administered. KET corresponds to A2 level and PET B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Since these tests are the international standard tests for the two consequent levels described by CEFR, the KET was accepted as the pre-test and the PET post-test. The writing components of the tests were evaluated analytically based on the CEFR rubric. The results were compared by using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. The papers were evaluated by two teachers who had a training on how to score papers using the writing rubric developed by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate. The sum of the scores given by the two scorers was taken. The reliability of the scores given by the scorers was found to be high (Cronbach's alpha: 0.87).

### 3. Results

The results of the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2 and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test in Table 3.

**Table 2:** The mean and standard deviation of KET and PET writing components

	Content		Grammar		Vocabulary		Organization		Effort-creativity		Total	
	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd
KET writing	2,63	,51	1,86	,51	2,26	,58	1,65	,48	2,23	,65	10,63	1,42
PET writing	2,66	,80	1,94	,52	2,21	,49	2,95	,68	2,19	,39	11,95	1,98

**Table 3:** The comparison of KET and PET writing components

PET writing	Content	Grammar	Vocabulary	Organization	Effort-creativity	Total
KET writing	Content	Grammar	Vocabulary	Organization	Effort-creativity	Total
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,691	,179	,579	,000	,529	,000

P < .05

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed that with respect to content, grammar, vocabulary, and effort-creativity there was no difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the students. Significant difference was observed in organization and total scores. The difference between the total scores was mainly because of the increase in the organization scores on the post-test.

### 4. Discussion

The results indicated that despite the general English course, skills course, and two hours of writing instruction for 18 weeks, no significant difference was observed between the pre-and post-test writing scores, except for organization. The form-focused activities in the program seemed to be inefficient to help the students come up with more accurate texts. Likewise, the focus on vocabulary was far from being satisfactory. Since content of the papers were assigned randomly from a variety of topics, not limited to the ones they studied at school, the students could not develop/enlarge schemata related with limited number of topics. Thus, the content-related work did not cause considerable improvement in the students' writing. The lack of schemata may cause content-related problems in their writing. In other words, the students may have required language skills, but they may not know what to write about. To overcome this problem content-based instruction can be implemented and students' schemata can be expanded on certain topics. Similarly, writing topics can be chosen from among the other school subjects. However, focus on organization did affect the students' writing positively and they were much better on their second writing task (post-writing task) in comparison to the previous one (pre-test). The results suggest that the role of instruction about the formal aspects of a language to improve writing is far from realizing the expected goals. It can be proposed that writing is the product of acquisition which occurs over time in accordance with the pre-determined internal syllabus (Ellidokuzoğlu, 2017; Krashen, 2009; 2013; Krashen et al., 2017). Exposing

students to the comprehensible samples of a language takes care of the accurate production of language. Accordingly, the accuracy aspect of writing goes together with the general language development which diminishes the role of intervention (Krashen, 2017a). In addition, the research suggests that there is a strong causal relationship between reading and writing, good readers are better writers. Hence students are to be encouraged to read more (Olson, 2007, Krashen. 2011, 2015). Finally, language is a whole and the skills develop altogether, not in isolation. Thus, classroom tasks in which all language skills are integrated for purposeful aims foster student writing.

On the other hand, the results suggest that instruction does have a role in writing in terms of organizing ideas. Writing instruction focusing on the organizational aspect of the writing process can help students form a solid conceptual basis on paragraph and essay organization. Through repeated practice and feedback, students can learn that a paragraph or an essay is an integrated whole in which all ideas are organized around the topic sentence and/or thesis statement. Thus, the instruction can foster the production of coherent and cohesive texts. Hence, it can be concluded that rather than wasting effort on teaching formal aspects of language to improve writing, the writing instruction is to be geared towards what is plausible, organization.

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