

CHALLENGES OF DISSERTATION WRITING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND STRATEGIES USED: THE PERCEPTIONS OF DISSERTATION SUPERVISORS

Nazmiye GÜREL (*)

Abstract

Throughout the world, an increasing number of graduate students pursue advanced degrees in English medium universities or departments where English is a foreign language and are required to write doctoral dissertations in the foreign language. Thus, it is important to examine the challenges faced during dissertation writing in English and to discover the linguistic and socio-cultural variables that inform those challenges and strategies used during the process to overcome them. To meet this significant need, this study uses quantitative and qualitative means of data collection through administering a comprehensive survey and conducting face-to-face interviews with dissertation supervisors. The challenges revealed are grouped under four main categories as lack of writing practice, lack of writing ability, having a limited ability of expressing ideas, and having a weak English background. The strategies accounted by advisors to overcome the challenges are categorized into five groups which are reading and correcting, teaching, making suggestions/advising, directing to sources, and reading but not correcting. The results of the study have significant implications for English language pedagogy and language policy initiatives in higher education, for agents within the academic community, for academic writing teachers, and for English for Academic Purposes scholars.

Key Words: foreign language writing, graduate students, dissertation writing, challenges, strategies.

“Yabancı Dilde Tez Yazmanın Zorlukları ve Kullanılan Stratejiler: Tez Danışmanlarının Görüşleri”

Özet

Dünya genelinde, İngilizcenin yabancı dil olduğu ülkelerde İngilizce eğitim veren üniversiteler veya bölümlerde lisansüstü eğitim gören ve tezlerini yabancı dilde yazmak zorunda olan öğrencilerin sayısı giderek artmaktadır. Bu nedenle, İngilizce tez yazarken karşılaşılan zorlukların incelenmesi ve bu zorlukları açıklayan dilsel ve sosyokültürel etmenlerin ve süreç içerisinde karşılaşılan zorlukları aşmak için kullanılan stratejilerin ortaya çıkarılması önemlidir. Bu çalışmada, kapsamlı bir anket uygulaması yapılması ve tez danışmanları ile yüz yüze görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmesi suretiyle nicel ve nitel veri toplama yöntemleri kullanılmıştır. Karşılaşılan zorluklar yazma pratiğinin eksikliği, yazma yetisinin eksikliği, fikir ifade etme yetisinin sınırlı olması ve İngilizce alt yapısının zayıf olması olmak üzere dört ana başlık altında gruplandırılmıştır. Kullanılan stratejiler ise okuma ve düzeltme, öğretme, öneride/tavsiyede bulunma, kaynaklara yönlendirme ve okuma ancak düzeltme yapmama olarak beş kategoriye ayrılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları İngilizce pedagojisi, yüksek öğretimde dil politikaları, akademik çevredeki temsilciler, akademik yazma öğretmenleri ve İngilizcenin akademik amaçlı öğretiminde çalışan bilim insanları için önemli çıkarımlar ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yabancı dilde yazma, lisansüstü öğrenciler, tez yazma, zorluklar, stratejiler.

*) Harran Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ABD (e-posta: ngurel@buffalo.edu yahoo.com)

Introduction

Most of the research done on the dissertation writing (DW) level of advanced academic writing focuses either on the structural analysis of dissertation sections across disciplines, or on tracing the course of DW, or dissertation supervision. In addition, international students studying at a university in an English-speaking country-which is mostly the US- comprise the participants in almost all the inquiry carried out at this level. Although multilingual scholars have been the center of attention for research as their struggle to publish in English on the international level has stimulated great interest (e.g., Curry & Lillis, 2004), foreign language (FL) users of English who write their dissertations in English in FL contexts have never attracted attention. So far, researchers have focused on international graduate students studying mostly in Anglophone countries and their struggle to adapt the conventions of academic community. The results of such studies are often overgeneralized so that one comes to believe that graduate students in FL contexts undergo the same processes as their counterparts in English-speaking countries. However, there are differences between the contexts where English plays different sociolinguistic and sociocultural roles.

Kachru (1985, 1992) presents a sociolinguistic profile of the English language in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. He states that these circles represent “the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages” (Kachru, 1985, p.12). The Inner Circle represents the traditional basis of English where English is the primary language. The USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are the countries in the Inner Circle. The Outer Circle includes countries which have a colonial history and thus where the English language “typically exhibits an extended functional range ... and is used in various social, educational, administrative and literary domains” (Rajadurai, 2007, p. 74). Among these countries are India, Nigeria, Ghana, and Singapore. In the Expanding Circle countries, such as Turkey and Israel, English is used for international communication and for scientific or technical purposes as a FL. It does not have an official status and is basically used in restricted contexts as it has no role in daily life. However, its importance cannot be ignored especially in higher education as English is the single lingua franca for the international academic community. As such, it is not only a foreign language for the scholars in Expanding Circle countries like Turkey but an international language through which scientific knowledge is transmitted.

Given the differences between the contexts, one objective of this study is to specify the challenges faced and strategies used during DW in the FL as, throughout the world, an increasing number of graduate students pursue advanced degrees in English medium universities or departments where English is a FL. The second objective of the study is to discover the linguistic and socio-cultural variables that inform those challenges by examining the interrelations and academic socialization processes reported by dissertation supervisors of graduate students.

This study contributes to the current body of knowledge by increasing our understanding of the process of DW in English as a FL in a FL context as the results have significant implications for English language pedagogy and language policy initiatives in higher

education that inform the curricula that focus on academic writing for advanced learners. The findings from the study also yield useful information for agents within the academic community who are a part of the DW process, academic writing teachers and English for Academic Purposes scholars so that the curricula of graduate programs can be modified according to the needs of graduate students.

1. Literature Review

The body of scholarship on advanced academic writing includes a wide range of studies which can be divided into six most relevant categories. The first category focuses on academic writing in content courses (e.g., Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Braxley, 2005; Spack, 1997) and explores the difficulties encountered during the process. The second category consists of the studies which examine the nature of writing by international scholars and nonnative graduate students with the purpose for publication in academic journals and their struggle (e.g., Cho, 2009; Flowerdew, 1999a; Gosden, 1996; Li, 2006, 2007; Li & Flowerdew, 2007). The third category of research analyzes the structures of different sections of research articles (e.g., Holmes, 1997; Öztürk, 2007; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Williams, 1999) such as introduction or discussion. There are also a considerable number of studies which examine the structure and parts of doctoral dissertations (e.g., Bunton, 2005; Hasrati & Street, 2009; Kwan, 2006; Thompson, 2005), metadiscourse (e.g., Hyland, 2004), rhetorical functions (e.g., Charles, 2007, 2011), and identity construction (e.g., Cadman, 1997; Starfield & Ravelli 2006). Moreover, a great number of studies examine the course of acquiring disciplinary literacy (e.g., Belcher, 1994; Braine, 2002; Casanave, 2002; Ferenz, 2005; Riazi, 1997; Tardy, 2005) and sheds light on the course of practice. Academic writing literature also includes studies that present the process and challenges of writing a dissertation in the second/foreign language (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Dong, 1998; Paltridge & Starfield, 2008).

However, for the purpose of this study, only the relevant literature is reviewed below to present studies which reveal some challenges FL users of English face while writing at the graduate level. These studies also reveal the strategies that students use at this level of academic writing and inform us about the acquisition of disciplinary literacy at the graduate level.

In his qualitative study where he investigates the acquisition of domain-specific literacy, Riazi (1997) collected data from four Iranian doctoral students studying at Canadian universities. The study uncovered that the participants were attentive to acquiring new domain-specific knowledge and field-related terminology and enjoyed getting feedback from professors as they see it “as a significant factor in improving their texts on the one hand and developing their language learning and writing in the long term on the other” (p. 131). As for the strategies, those include researching for appropriate formats and consulting with professors and peers to carry out new tasks, modifying goals set by the professors in the course outlines, and synthesizing materials from various sources.

Casanave and Hubbard (1992) surveyed 85 supervisors across 28 departments at Stanford University and explored the writing assignments and requirements of first-

year doctoral students. It is reported that “NNS [non-native speaker] students have more problems with surface-level features of writing” (p. 42) such as grammatical accuracy and appropriateness and vocabulary appropriateness than at the paragraph level. They also underline that “importance of writing in the lives of doctoral students increases over time” (p. 44). However, they do not primarily focus on the dissertation writing process.

In her article, Dong (1998) presented findings regarding two different formats of DW (traditional vs. article format), the effect of social networks and utilizing resources on DW, the role cultural and linguistic differences play on DW, and the impact of advisor supervision from the perspectives of both the students and their advisors. It is suggested that non-native graduate students need help with how to cite resources, organize paragraphs, develop ideas, draw conclusions, avoid plagiarism, create social networks and utilize resources, and develop understanding of discipline-, genre- and audience-specific knowledge.

As seen above, all the participants in cited studies are international/nonnative students who study in an English-speaking country. In addition, these studies do not report the perspectives of faculty, either course professors or dissertation supervisors, whose insight on the issue, the challenges faced during DW in the FL, is also critical for a more objective and healthier analysis. They either survey the faculty but not focus on the challenges of DW in the second/foreign language or focus on dissertation writing but not on faculty perceptions of difficulties encountered during the process. It is clear that there is a need to focus on graduate students who write their dissertations in the FL and uncover the challenges they face and the strategies they utilize from the perspective of their advisors as the outcomes of such a study might be unique. Thus, this study aims to fill such an important gap in the understudied area of academic writing among advanced foreign language users.

2. Methodology

2. 1. Participants

Participants of this study are the advisors of doctoral students who are Turkish studying at Turkish state universities, enrolled in an engineering graduate program, at the stage of DW, and required to write their dissertations in English, a FL in this context. The number of advisors who participated in the study by taking the survey is forty-four while the number of participants who were interviewed was eleven. While the survey was sent to all the professors who met the criteria, the selection of the interview participants was made according to their willingness to participate and cooperate.

2. 2. Data Sources

This study uses a mixed-method study using both quantitative and qualitative means of data collection. Data from a comprehensive survey constitutes the quantitative part of this study (see Appendix). Qualitative data comes from face-to-face semi-structured interviews and comprises multiple case studies that are analyzed to create a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were conducted in Turkish as the participants

preferred to use their native language (NL). All the interviews were recorded after consent was given by the participant. As a part of a larger research, doctoral dissertation, data for this study was collected over a five-month period between September 2009 and January 2010.

2.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using the statistical analysis software called SPSS for Windows. Descriptive statistics such as frequency tables were used to calculate the percentages of responses. Also, coding categories were created for the responses to open-ended questions in the survey. Qualitative data comes from the interviews which were transcribed in their entirety. After transcription, data was annotated and categorized in light of the research questions of the study. The process resembles a spiral model as suggested by Creswell (2007).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Challenges

The survey outcomes and interviews with the advisors provided a detailed picture of challenges the doctoral students face during DW in English. These challenges were classified into four main categories as lack of writing practice, lack of writing ability, having limited ability of expressing ideas, and having weak English background.

3.1.1. First difficulty: Lack of writing practice

The most common of the problems identified and stated by the advisors during the interviews is the lack of writing practice. It is asserted that the students are not required to write much in the FL throughout their undergraduate and/or graduate level studies at the technical departments such as engineering departments. Thus, they do not have the chance to practice and get experience writing in the FL.

“For example, one of the most important reasons is in many courses.. I mean in many courses we do not assign homework, even we do we ask for a solution of a problem. That’s it. I mean the habit of writing reports is not common at even English-medium universities in Turkey”

The students in engineering departments are, as reported, mostly asked to solve mathematical problems or do designs on the computers but rarely required to write reports or papers, unlike their counterparts in social sciences departments. As they do not practice writing in the FL much until they complete the coursework of the doctoral program and come to the stage of writing their dissertations, it becomes inevitable for them to face many challenges. Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) state in their study that natural sciences or business communities demand less writing from their students in contrast to humanities and when they do these writings are in well-defined genres. Thus, they assert that business and science students are at an advantage when they move to their specific programs as less is expected from them in second/FL writing. However, the present study

shows that the limited writing requirement in the second/FL in graduate courses may seem to be an advantage but it causes great challenges when these students come to the stage of DW with too little experience.

3.1.2. Second difficulty: Lack of overall writing ability

The second major and most common issue raised by the advisors as a challenge faced by their doctoral students is the lack of overall writing ability - which is consistent with the findings of the survey (item #17). Most of the advisors believe that their advisees' writing ability play a negative (22.7%), very negative (25.0%) or considerably negative (9.10%) role in DW in the FL. This issue is voiced by one of the advisors as:

“... but let me tell you this at least, based on my experiences until now.. I mean among the students who have worked with me, I did not meet anyone who has the ability to write. I am saying this very explicitly, openly, simply”

Having no overall writing ability in Turkish, their NL, let alone in English, their FL, is observed closely by the advisors and shows itself in two ways. One of them is reported as having no sensitivity towards writing. Insensitivity towards language use in the society, as mentioned by some advisors, reflects on the use of the FL and causes the students to write with a terrible style which does not satisfy their advisors. As the doctoral students are observed as indifferent to the appropriate and careful use of language in their NL, their expressions in the FL are reported more problematic by their advisors. The other is having no ability of writing long passages.

“I mean these kids do not learn how to write a long text in any way. ... they do not learn at least that a text has an introduction, a development part and a conclusion ... that conclusion connects with the next paragraph.”

In the same vein, the advisors reported in the survey that the most difficult sections of the dissertation for their advisees were “discussion” (μ 3.295) and “conclusion” (μ 3.295) which were followed by “implications” (μ 3.272) and “abstract” (μ 3.090). These sections have been reported as problematic for second/FL English writers (see Buckingham, 2008; Flowerdew, 1999b). The least difficult sections were “literature review” (μ 2.046), “findings” (μ 2.272), and “introduction” (μ 2.883).

3.1.3. Third difficulty: Having limited ability of expressing ideas

Advisors also stated that their doctoral students cannot successfully and appropriately express what they wish to convey in the text of their dissertations. Consistent with the findings of the survey, the advisors reported that these students may not be able to transfer what they think, to find and/or use the correct word and/or expressions, to move from one idea to another, and to organize and present the ideas in a logical manner.

In the survey, the advisors were asked about the problematic areas for their advisees and to rank fourteen different areas. The results were calculated by using descriptive

statistics and mean (μ) scores were obtained (see Table 1). The most problematic ones were reported as “having less rich vocabulary and expressions” (μ 3.162) and “drawing conclusions” (μ 2.931) which are followed by “presenting ideas clearly” (μ 2.906) and “using proper grammar” (μ 2.883). Casanave and Hubbard (1992) assert in their study that “much of the key vocabulary in ST [science and technology] fields is technical and technical vocabulary is more ‘universal’ in English” (p. 42) and thus “ST faculty perceived vocabulary use to be much less of a problem” (p. 43). However, the findings of this study demonstrate that ST faculty consider it as a main problem as one of the advisors states that “Our students fail to express ideas properly as they lack necessary vocabulary. .. their vocabulary is so limited that they usually fall in repetition.. use the same words and phrases over and over again.’

Table 1. Mean scores of problematic areas during the process of thesis/dissertation writing as reported by advisors.

Mean scores	Problematic areas
Having less rich vocabulary and expressions	3.162
Drawing conclusions	2.931
Presenting ideas clearly	2.906
Using proper grammar	2.883
Organizing the whole text	2.860
Stating problem clearly	2.681
Choosing correct words	2.651
Presenting ideas in a logical way	2.651
Connections and transitions	2.590
Organizing paragraphs	2.428
Using proper mechanical conventions	2.340
Outlining each chapter	2.325
Avoiding plagiarism	2.186
Reading the relevant literature	1.452

It is also reported that these students also end up writing huge problematic sentences. Two reasons are documented for this observed inability of these students. One stems from the effect of the native language on the FL use. The other is related to studying at a technical program.

“I mean especially in English text format, I mean, as far as I recall, you know, in Turkish we, most of the time, reach the conclusion from the reason through an indirect way but in English texts it is more direct, I mean what needs to be done [in an English text] is to state a problem and discuss it”

Here the advisor mentions the indirect style of presenting and discussing a problem in a written text which is a common style of language use in Turkish. He states that this effect of Turkish on English text production by the Turkish doctoral students results in inexplicit and unclear expression of ideas (see, for example Akyel 1994, Akyel & Kamışlı 1996, Kaplan 1966, Kubota 1998, Oktar 1991, Uysal 2008 on contrastive rhetoric).

“I cannot say anything about the students who write dissertations in social sciences. But at electric engineering and information systems [departments], these [students] have high technical abilities and hold strong scientific knowledge. But they have communication problems. ... when it comes to dissertation writing they struggle to present the topic thoroughly as expected from a scientific study.”

Most of the advisors, like the one above, agree that their students have communication problems in expressing what they think and that it stems from their studying in technical programs. No matter how highly-capable these students are technically and theoretically in their own scientific fields, they are not able to transmit these abilities as they cannot communicate ideas thoroughly in the FL.

Another aspect of having limited ability of expressing ideas is recorded as not being able to find and/or use correct words and/or expressions stemming from “having less rich vocabulary and expressions” (µ 3.162):

“There happen struggles on vocabulary to some degree because you find out that they did not use proper words. Even it sometimes happens that you know they got [the word] from a dictionary because though the dictionary meaning is true [that word] does not fit there at all. He/she uses a word or a verb which sounds very awkward, very unusual...”

Most of the advisors interviewed complained about their students’ inability to make proper choices of vocabulary while they are writing in the FL. Having limited ability of expressing ideas in the doctoral dissertation, which is written in the FL, also shows itself in the text as huge and problematic sentences. Most of the advisors complain about it and state:

“generally what I see is that they form very very long sentences. When the sentences are too long, then you have ambiguities. I mean they cannot fully express what they want to in English”

It is clear that these students experience a dilemma. On one hand, they try to explain and express complicated concepts in the text of their dissertations. They need to convey the idea and sound professional and technical. In the other hand, they lack the ability to form complex sentences in the FL which would transmit the message they wish to communicate. Thus, either they end up writing complex but ambiguous sentences which are not explicit or clear, or they prefer writing short and simple sentences which are concise and understandable but lack the complexity of the scientific idea aimed to be expressed.

Casanave and Hubbard (1992) claim that the humanities and social sciences faculty put greater emphasis on the development of ideas, organizational issues, and appropriateness of vocabulary and style. However, this study shows that science and technology faculty also emphasize the importance of such elements of successful writing. One of the most common problems observed by the advisors who supervise doctoral dissertations is their students' inability to move between ideas – one of the most problematic aspects of DW in the FL as revealed from survey results. This is actually one of the most recorded problems reported by the advisors.

“the biggest problem is this: when you write something, it has to be connected to each other. It has to move as a chain. You cannot see that in their writing. They write something, and then suddenly move to another thing. How it came to that, what kind of a link there needs to be between those two ideas, whether there is continuity we cannot see that”

When the advisors read the text of their doctoral students' dissertations, they expect a chain of ideas which is presented logically throughout the text. However, as stated, most of the students are incapable of making such connections and transitions. Thus, the dissertations turn out to include sections that are considered disconnected and ill-organized and to be unsatisfactory for the advisors.

3.1.4. Fourth difficulty: Having weak English background

Advisors interviewed identified having a weak English background as another challenge. Under this main problem, they reported two aspects. One of them is having insufficient English education throughout their lives at all levels. The other is the habit of thinking in Turkish not in English while writing.

All of the advisors interviewed agree that the quality of English instruction in Turkish education institutions is not satisfactory as it cannot meet the demands of academic work especially at graduate levels. It is stated that the quality of English education a student receives depends on the kind of high school or university the student attended and thus affects his/her abilities in the FL.

“... especially if you are a graduate of a high school or university that does not provide English instruction, then you have more problems while writing the dissertation ... I mean the problems are greater then.”

Having a weak English background also results in the habit of thinking in Turkish while writing in the FL. The discrepancy between the two results in problems during DW. Many of the advisors interviewed complain about this habit of their doctoral students:

“I mean while thinking in Turkish I mean when they try to write what they want to state in English language, Turkish is still dominant. ... I mean when you look at the form of sentences, the sentence structures in English [that they wrote], you see that these are quite different than the normal English sentence structures as we know of.”

As it is clearly explained by this advisor, the problem of Turkish doctoral students is to think in the NL and rely on their knowledge of first language while they are writing in the FL. Their inability to make proper use of such knowledge causes incorrect sentence structures and results in inaccurate transmission of ideas in the written text.

3.2. Strategies

The survey findings revealed the strategies used by the doctoral students as perceived by their advisors. One comprehensive question was asked which included seventeen subsections (see Table 2). According to the survey results, the most utilized strategy was “looking for published research for text format and content” (μ 3.681). It was followed by, in order, “doing a great deal of reading of the literature” (μ 3.590), “taking other dissertations as sample models” (μ 3.409), “asking/getting feedback from the advisor or other professors” (μ 3.295), and “relying on past experiences in academic writing” (μ 3.186). The least utilized strategies included “using a native speaker or professional editor to check mistakes” (μ 2.190) and “making use of peer help in reviewing writing in terms of content” (μ 2.452).

Table 2. Mean scores of the strategies utilized to overcome challenges during thesis/dissertation writing.

Mean scores	Strategies utilized
Looking for published research for text format and content	3.681
Doing a great deal of reading of the literature	3.590
Taking other dissertations as sample models	3.409
Asking/getting feedback from the advisor or other professors	3.295
Relying on past experiences in academic writing	3.186
Making use of guidelines provided by course instructors or advisor	3.186
Revising and writing drafts	3.119
Selecting proper vocabulary (words or phrases) from written sources	3.068
Using spell-checks or manuals to edit mechanical mistakes	2.976
Using source books or dictionaries	2.976
Having discussions with senior students or peers (or people within academic circle)	2.954
Planning/Outlining	2.906
Summarizing and paraphrasing materials to avoid plagiarism	2.809
Making use of peer help in reviewing writing in terms of mechanical mistakes	2.750
Relying on native language to sharpen meaning	2.744
Making use of peer help in reviewing writing in terms of content	2.452
Using a native speaker or professional editor to check mistakes	2.190

Previous literature includes discussions of the issues of advisor-advisee relations and its effects (see Acker & Black, 1994; Buckingham, 2008; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Ferenz, 2005; Jenkins, Jordan, & Weiland, 1993) and touches slightly upon the role of the course instructors on writing drafts of international students (see Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Riazi, 1997; Zhu, 2004); however, they lack the in-depth analysis of how an advisor acts (or does not act) as a source of help especially with regards to writing in the FL. This is an important gap as well. Thus, a number of questions are raised by the present study.

Below, the strategies that the advisors themselves used to help their advisees overcome the challenges of DW in the FL are presented. These strategies are categorized into five groups which are reading and correcting, teaching, making suggestions/advising, directing to sources, and reading but not correcting.

3.2.1. First strategy: Reading and correcting

In the survey, the advisors were asked about the assistance that they provide for their advisees during the process of DW in the FL and whether or not they consider this assistance as adequate. 31.8% of the advisors stated that they read and give much extended oral and written comments while 43.2% asserted that they provide much assistance as they read and give extended oral and written comments.

Almost all of the advisors interviewed reported that they do correction when they are reading the dissertation chapters of their doctoral students - the most common strategy practiced by the advisors. The amount and kind of corrections of mistakes differ to some degree.

“I mean the student may not know exactly where and what to use, which word he/she should use. So I delete the words he/she uses and write the more proper synonym”

Riazi (1999) noted that words used in academic texts are not ordinary ones which can be easily found in dictionaries. As stated above, the advisors may simply provide the student with the appropriate word and make the change in the text by themselves. By doing so, the academic advisors demonstrate the students academic genre and its correct presentation in a scientific text.

The advisors also reported that they add, delete or change a sentence when encountered a problem in communicating the meaning:

“There are not connections, no flowing [of ideas]. ... You do not see that connection most of the time. ... For this reason, we either add sentences or delete sentences and write our own”

Most help, as reported by the advisors, included “drawing conclusions” (79.5%), “presenting ideas in a logical way” (77.3%), and “developing ideas” (75.0%). On the other hand, the advisors stated that least help is given included “making decisions about citing articles” (40.9%).

3.2.2. Second strategy: Teaching

Some of the advisors show greater interest in the success of their students' dissertations and offer more time to do revisions. It is documented that these advisors sit down with their doctoral students and go over the dissertation chapters sentence by sentence. They not only discuss the mistakes made or the meaning given but also show and teach how to use the FL more correctly and appropriately. They act as a teacher and instruct their students about format and structure of a doctoral dissertation as well as its organization and content. This strategy is disclosed as the second common strategy.

“you know passive voice is used in our scientific technical stuff. We teach [the passive voice] first. If he/she has 30 mistakes [regarding the use of active/passive voice] in the first chapter, it decreases in other chapters. Here the thesis supervisor is to some extent acts as a teacher”

It is accounted that a common practice for the doctoral students in engineering departments is co-authoring an article with their advisors. During the process of writing an article and getting it ready for publication, interaction between the advisor and the doctoral student increases as stated by the advisors themselves. It is during such times, the doctoral students learn a lot more of the conventions of writing in their scientific fields.

“... making a publication requires much more of interaction with the student. ... you show greater interest and your corrections, your contribution is greater. There of course the student learns more about technical writing, narrating and stuff. If the publication [process] happens before his/her dissertation, it of course contributes [to the student's knowledge] while he/she is writing his/her dissertation”

3.2.3. Third strategy: Making suggestions/advising

As discussed previously, one of the problems Turkish engineering doctoral students face is the inability to write complex sentences in the FL and ending up having huge problematic sentences. Thus, the advisors recommend their students write simple and short sentences as much as possible to avoid making mistakes.

“I mean for example in Turkish speaking short is a talent. ... But in technical [studies].. in our dissertations at engineering departments.. the first thing that I advise to the students is ‘try to write short sentences’. Because if you keep it long, it gets incomprehensible”

The advisors state that as a solution, they also suggest their students read more. These advisors believe that reading is the key to solve the problems in the FL.

“I mean you need to fix [the problems encountered in the foreign language] by reading. Reading reinforces writing”

On the other hand, some advisors believe that students learn writing by practicing writing. It is not possible to learn how to write if you do not experience it as much as you can:

“I have a tendency of asking for written documents once the students complete the coursework. Like do a.. I mean, like ‘you did the experiment, well done, but bring me a written report of it’ ... I force them to write short texts”

As explained clearly by this advisor, getting the student to write whenever possible is a driving force to improve his/her abilities in writing. It is worth to note that this advisor gives a real reason for her student to write in the FL. As the practice is meaningful, the benefits must be invaluable for the students.

3.2.4. Fourth strategy: Directing to sources

Another important strategy utilized is directing those students to other sources than the feedback they receive from professors. The sources to which the students are being directed are listed as follows: sample dissertations, academic writing centers, professionals who do proof-reading, and guide books and manuals. The survey results show that “journal articles published in the area of specialization” (μ 4.181) and “source books” (μ 3.627) are the most common sources utilized. On the other hand, “manuals” (μ 2.125) and “grammar books” (μ 2.200) ranked the lowest in the list.

It is previously discussed that sometimes the students fail to use proper words or expressions while they are writing their dissertations in the FL. Inaccurate use of vocabulary results in having a poorly written text. Thus, the advisors state that they require the students to follow scientific publications, a strategy ranked highest in the survey as well, so that they can avoid making such mistakes.

“... mostly I advise them follow scholarly publications. Because it is the way of overcoming [such challenges]. Which word is suitable where is a bit about being familiar with [the literature]”

The scholarly articles are good samples and written sources of help for the doctoral students who write their dissertations in the FL as they offer examples of accurate sentence structures and word use and get the students to be familiar with the conventions of writing in their own scientific fields.

3.2.5. Fifth strategy: Reading but not correcting

Some of the advisors state that they do not make any corrections when they read the dissertation chapters of their doctoral students. This is revealed as the least practiced strategy by the advisors. Some advisors read, put little notes or marks on the side of the page, and ask the student to revise it. Some ask the student to have a third person read and give feedback. For example, the advisors documented that members of the dissertation committee are the second source of help for the advisees during DW (53.5%) who are followed by the fellow students (37.2%). When asked how the advisors characterized the feedback that their advisees got from others, a majority of them (76.2%) reported it as helpful while some (16.7%) believed it had no effect.

On the other hand, some advisors force their students to revise the document all by themselves so that they can improve their writing.

Studies conducted in Anglophone settings either rely on the structural analysis of dissertation sections or on surveys which reveal a wide range of difficulties (such as grammatical inaccuracy, inappropriate vocabulary choice, organizational and stylistic issues) encountered during advanced-level writing in the second language due to limited experience of the students or their cultural background. None of the studies in the literature of advanced FL writing report such a detailed picture of challenges doctoral students face and the strategies they utilize to overcome those challenges while writing in English as FL from the perspectives of academic advisors. This study does and thus yields to significant implications.

4. Implications

of the implications of this study may appear at first as they are only significant or relevant for the case of Turkey; however, they can and should be extended to other FL contexts as their effects are too important to be ignored.

The findings of this study indicate that the students rely on resources in their NL while they write in the FL (e.g., to find appropriate words). If a student holds strong knowledge and communication abilities in his NL, it is more probable that he will transfer all these to the FL and learn the FL more easily and better (Collier, 1995). Thus, native language instruction should be improved in quality so that its positive outcomes can be transferred to the developing skills in the FL.

Most of the Turkish students receive their undergraduate education in Turkish-medium state universities as there are few English-medium state universities in Turkey. The lucky ones who can enter one of these privileged universities have one year of preparatory language school education before moving to their departments and receive instruction only in English throughout their education. Thus, as reported, these students face fewer challenges during their graduate education and in terms of writing in the FL. However, the unlucky majority have to struggle more. Therefore, the FL education should be gradual and continuous. Uninterrupted instruction better yields to positive outcomes.

Findings indicate that writing skill is virtually ignored throughout graduate engineering education. The students are not asked to write long passages as most of the writing in the FL they are required to do include solving mathematical problems or explaining equations through formulas (e.g., West & Byrd, 1982; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983). Thus, they face challenges when they come to the stage of writing dissertations in English. To address this, the advisors and content course professors should give them writing assignments throughout their graduate education. As a result, the students will have a real reason to practice writing in the FL and thus improve their writing skills before they come to the stage of DW.

It is clear that graduate students are in great need of academic writing classes. These classes should be based upon and constructed according to their changing needs and include meaningful and purposeful practices. For example, during their first year graduate education the students can be taught how to write reports and research papers. As they move towards the end of graduate education, the writing instruction can be directed solely

on how to plan, organize, and write a doctoral dissertation. In this vein, a corpus-based academic writing course could be of benefit for the students to see how they write compared with established researchers in their field (Coniam, 2004; Lee & Swales, 2006).

Most common of these issues arise from having less rich vocabulary and expressions (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Dong, 1998) to produce original narratives especially in discussion, conclusion, and introduction sections. Using technical language most of the time is not an advantage as claimed but rather a disadvantage as these students cannot improve their vocabulary in the FL throughout their education and thus fail to generate original texts. Academic writing teachers should focus on improving their students' vocabulary stock by assigning them reading of materials other than scholarly publications in their respective fields.

The importance of writing increases over time during graduate studies (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992). Thus, gradual and focused academic writing classes offered to graduate students in foreign language contexts will remedy the challenges faced during writing in the FL. This will not only help the graduate students finish their programs and be granted doctoral degrees after completing their doctoral dissertations successfully but also prepare them to publish in the FL on the international level as future scholars.

The results of this study also indicate that the advisors are the greatest source of help for their graduate students. Most of the participants in this study emphasized the importance of having publications before coming to the stage of DW as the process requires much interaction and provides the student with the chance of getting ample amount of feedback and assistance in writing in the FL. The advisors verify that the students learn a great deal during such a process. Thus, the academic advisors should encourage their graduate students to write papers based on the research they work and prepare them for publication. They should try to equip their graduate students with skills necessary to survive as scholars on the international level.

Professors should also encourage graduate students to have meetings to have discussions, to encourage collaboration and interaction, and to aid each other throughout their studies at the graduate level. Technology can also be a useful tool to create such a constructive and social academic atmosphere. Online discussion boards and list-serves can be created by means of which the graduate students can interact with each other, immerse in valuable discussions, and get help from peers and more experienced senior students.

References

- Acker, S., Hill, T., & Black, E. (1994). Thesis Supervision In The Social Sciences: Managed Or Negotiated? *Higher Education*, 28, 483-498.
- Akyel, A. (1994). First Language Use in EFL Writing: Planning In Turkish Vs. Planning In English. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4, 2, 169-196.
- Akyel, A. & Kamyşlı, S. (1996). Composing In First And Second Languages: Possible Effects of EFL Writing Instruction. Paper Presented At The Balkan

Conference On English Language Teaching of The International Association of Teachers of English As A Foreign Language.

- Angelova, M. & Riazantseva, A. (1999). "If You Don't Tell Me, How Can I Know?": A Case Study of Four International Students Learning To Write The US Way. *Written Communication*, 16, 4, 491-525.
- Belcher, D. (1994). The Apprenticeship Approach to Advanced Academic Literacy: Graduate Students and Their Mentors. *English for Specific Purposes*, 13, 1, 23-34.
- Bitchener, J. & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the Difficulties of Postgraduate L2 Thesis Students Writing the Discussion Section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5, 4-18.
- Braine, G. (2002). Academic Literacy and the Nonnative Speaker Graduate Student. *Journal of English For Academic Purposes*, 1, 59-68.
- Braxley, K. (2005). Mastering Academic English: International Graduate Students' Use of Dialogue and Speech Genres to Meet the Writing Demands of Graduate School. In K. H. Hall, G. Vitanova, & L. Marchenkova (Eds.). *Dialogue with Bakhtin on Second and Foreign Language Learning* (Pp. 11-32). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bridgeman, B. & Carlson, S. (1983). Survey of Academic Writing Tasks Required Of Graduate and Undergraduate Foreign Students (Research Report No. 15). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Buckingham, L. (2008). Development of English Academic Writing Competence by Turkish Scholars. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 3, 1-18.
- Bunton, D. (2005). The Structure of Phd Conclusion Chapters. *Journal of English For Academic Purposes*, 4, 207-224.
- Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis Writing For International Students: A Question of Identity. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16 (1), 3-14.
- Casanave, C. P. (2002). *Writing Games: A Multicultural Case Studies of Academic Literacy Practices In Higher Education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Casanave, C. P. & Hubbard, P. (1992). The Writing Assignments and Writing Problems of Doctoral Students: Faculty Perceptions, Pedagogical Issues, and Needed Research. *English for Specific Purposes*, 11, 33-49.
- Cho, D. W. (2009). Science Journal Paper Writing in an EFL Context: The Case of Korea. *English for Specific Purposes*, 28, 230-239.
- Collier, V. P. (1995). Acquiring a Second Language for School. *Directions in Language and Education, National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education*, 1 (4), 1-10.
- Coniam, D. (2004). Concordancing Oneself: Constructing Individual Textual Profiles. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 9, 2, 271-298.

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Curry, M. J. & Lillis, T. (2004). Multilingual Scholars and the Imperative to Publish In English: Negotiating Interests, Demands, And Rewards. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 4, 663-688.
- Deem, R. & Brehony, K. J. (2000). Doctoral Students' Access To Research Cultures- Are Some More Equal than Others? *Studies in Higher Education*, 25, 2, 149-164.
- Dong, Y. R. (1998). Non-Native Graduate Students' Thesis/Dissertation Writing In Science: Self-Reports By Students And Their Advisors from Two US Institutions. *English for Specific Purposes*, 17, 4, 369-390.
- Ferenz, O. (2005). EFL Writers' Social Networks: Impact on Advanced Academic Literacy Development. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, 339-351.
- Flowerdew, J. (1999a). Writing for Scholarly Publication in English: The Case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 2, 123-145.
- Flowerdew, J. (1999b). Problems in Writing for Scholarly Publication in English: The Case Of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 3, 243-264.
- Gosden, H. (1996). Verbal Reports of Japanese Novices' Research Writing Practices In English. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 5, 2, 109-128.
- Hasrati, M. & Street, B. (2009). Phd Topic Arrangement in 'D'iscourse Communities of Engineers and Social Sciences/Humanities. *Journal of English For Academic Purposes*, 8, 14-25.
- Hyland, K. (2004). Disciplinary Interactions: Metadiscourse in L2 Postgraduate Writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 133-151.
- Jenkins, S., Jordan, M. K., & Weiland, P. O. (1993). The Role of Writing in Graduate Engineering Education: A Survey of Faculty Beliefs and Practices. *English for Specific Purposes*, 12, 51-67.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Kubota, (1998). An Investigation of L1-L2 Transfer in Writing among Japanese University Students: Implications for Contrastive Rhetoric. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7, 1, 69-100.
- Kwan, B. S. C. (2006). The Schematic Structure of Literature Reviews in Doctoral Theses of Applied Linguistics. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 30-55.
- Lee, D. & Swales, J. (2006). A Corpus-Based EAP Course for NNS Doctoral Students: Moving From Available Specialized Corpora to Self-Compiled Corpora. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 56-75.
- Li, Y. (2006). Negotiating Knowledge Contribution to Multiple Discourse Communities: A Doctoral Student of Computer Science Writing For Publication. *Journal*

- of Second Language Writing, 15, 159-178.
- Li, Y. (2007). Apprentice Scholarly Writing in a Community of Practice: An Intraview Of An NNES Graduate Student Writing A Research Article. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 1, 55-79.
- Li, Y. & Flowerdew, J. (2007). Shaping Chinese Novice Scientists' Manuscripts for Publication. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 100-117.
- Oktar, L. (1991). Contrastive Analysis of Specific Rhetorical Relations In English And Turkish Expository Paragraph Writing. Unpublished Phd Dissertation. Izmir, Turkey: Ege University.
- Öztürk, I. (2007). The Textual Organization of Research Article Introductions In Applied Linguistics: Variability Within A Single Discipline. *English For Specific Purposes*, 26, 25-38.
- Rajadurai, J. (2007). Revisiting the Concentric Circles: Conceptual and Sociolinguistic Considerations. *Journal of English as An International Language*, 1, 73-87.
- Riazi, A. (1997). Acquiring Disciplinary Literacy: A Social-Cognitive Analysis of Text Production and Learning among Iranian Graduate Students Of Education. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 6, 2, 105-137.
- Samraj, B. (2002). Introductions in Research Articles: Variations across Disciplines. *English For Specific Purposes*, 21, 1-17.
- Samraj, B. (2005). An Exploration of a Genre Set: Research Article Abstracts And Introductions in Two Disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24, 141-156.
- Tardy, C. M. (2005). "It's Like a Story": Rhetorical Knowledge Development In Advanced Academic Literacy. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, 325-338.
- Thompson, P. (2005). Points of Focus and Position: Intertextual Reference in Phd Theses. *Journal Of English For Academic Purposes*, 4, 307-323.
- Uysal, H. H. (2008). Tracing the Culture behind Writing: Rhetorical Patterns and Bidirectional Transfer in L1 And L2 Essays of Turkish Writers In Relation To Educational Context. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17, 183-207.
- West, G. K. & Byrd, P. (1982). Technical Writing Required of Graduate Engineering Students. *Journal of Technical Writing And Communication*, 12, 1-6.
- Williams, I. A. (1999). Results Sections of Medical Research Articles: Analysis of Rhetorical Categories For Pedagogical Purposes. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18, 4, 347-366.
- Zhu, W. (2004). Faculty Views On The Importance of Writing, The Nature of Academic Writing, And Teaching And Responding To Writing in The Disciplines. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 29-48.