

## An Analysis of the Contributions of Scholastic Surveys to Composition Skill in EFL Classes

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This quantitative study investigated EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' perceptions of 'scholastic-survey about social issues at campus and its contributions to their compository skills (Intermediate and Upper Intermediate level)'. This study was carried out through a questionnaire administered to those student writers among four groups of composition writers (N= 126) who conducted scholastic surveys and wrote compositions with their data at Cumhuriyet University in Turkey. Analyses of evaluative criteria and writers' comments yielded the following results: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students commenting on survey conducting and composition writing showed greater concern and consciousness about contributions of survey conducting to composition writing. This tendency suggests that there is a gradual change in Turkish student writers' perceptions of survey conducting and English composition instead of topic assigned writings. The results imply that the EFL students' awareness of primary sources is more than what they have in their minds, and experience together with survey conducting helps for the better compositions than the previous self-esteemed compositions.

*Key words:* scholastic survey, composition skill, perception, primary source.

### İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Öğrencilerinin Kompozisyon Yazma Becerilerinin Geliştirilmesinde Okul Anketlerinin Katkılarıyla İlgili Bir Analiz

Bu nicel çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen, orta ve ileri bir aşamaya getiren İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Lisans öğrencilerinin kompozisyon yazma becerilerinin geliştirilmesinde okul anketlerinin katkılarını araştırmak amaçlıdır. Bu araştırma Cumhuriyet Üniversitesinde dört grup ve 126 kişiden oluşan, kampüsteki sosyal konularda anket düzenleyip verileriyle kompozisyon yazan öğrenci yazarlara araştırmacı tarafından anket uygulamak şeklinde yapılmıştır. Değerlendirme ölçeği ve yazarların yorumlarından aşağıdaki sonuçlar çıkmıştır: İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler anket düzenleme ve bu verilerle kompozisyon yazma konusuna hayli ilgi göstermiştir. Bu eğilim İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrenciler arasında 'Konu başlığı' esaslı kompozisyon yazmaya göre algılama farklılıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırmadan çıkan sonuçlar yazmada birincil kaynaklar konusunda farkındalığın ve deneyimle anket uygulamanın kompozisyon yazımına birikim halindeki bilgilerden daha fazla katkıyla yardımcı olduğu doğrultusundadır.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* okul anketi, yazma becerisi, algılama, birincil kaynak.

As the teachers of BA (Bachelor of Arts) students of EFL classrooms in ELL (English Language and Literature) departments, we expect our students to be competent in composition skills and further studies. They may lack and not be willing to do required studies. This is mostly because of their selection and placement exam which does not require them to be successful in writing skill and which is only based on grammar-competency, reading comprehension and vocabulary competency. A student may say "I like writing, but writing in English is a tough job for me." In the process of 'learning writing by writing' they have to improve paragraphs, compositions, term-works, articles and graduation study. In some cases, students can say 'I cannot remember enough for this subject or title.'

"Because of the complexity and individuality of the composing processes in writing, students must have the opportunities to examine, analyze and practice a variety of possible strategies as they work with their writing" (Oxford, 1990 & Reid, 1994, cited in Reid, 1994, p.ix). This is more difficult for EFL students. They need twice as much energy as native speakers of that language do.

Making decisions how to begin and how to organize a task is important for student writers as well as every responsible person. Composition writing is the process to

work along with the appropriate feedback from the readers such as the teacher or other students. They should not expect the sentences they put on the paper will be perfect right away. They will discover new ideas and new sentences. The aim and the scope of this study is a way of giving opportunity to explore a topic and to gain confidence by the help of scholastic-survey conducting.

As Raimes (1983, s.12) says, "choosing classroom techniques is the day-to day business of every writing teacher." Although we dare say that this way of doing our job will be of helpful to our student writers, we still feel necessity of discussing some points concerning this process. In what ways will our having student writers conduct scholastic surveys accelerate their coping with the messy job, composition skill?

"There is no one way to teach writing, but many ways. The process of writing is a valuable learning tool for all of our students" (Raimes, 1983, s.11). To be able to find the better ways of teaching the composition skills more industriously in EFL classes, the scholastic survey conducting in English or Turkish was aimed and the BA students were assigned by the instructors to go through social issues related to the life of university students.

Having our student writers conduct their scholastic surveys to other students at the campus and write a

composition with their data, we conducted another survey to student writers to measure their perception of survey studies and their contributions to their composition writing. We share Dörnyei's claim that "One of the most common methods of data collection in second language (L2) research is to use *questionnaires* of various kinds. The popularity of questionnaires is due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable" (2003, s.1). The use of questionnaires for data collection can help both student writers and researchers.

"Sometimes the opinions, preferences, or views of a number of people are necessary as evidence. Like interviews, surveys (also called questionnaires) are a way of gathering evidence about a topic. While you could write a paragraph about just your opinion, an audience might be interested in a variety of viewpoints, or your academic writing task may ask you to include the opinions of others" (Reid, 1994, s.175).

Some researchers may claim that "questionnaire data are not reliable or valid because of some limitations such as self deception, halo effect, fatigue effects, simplicity and superficiality of answers and unreliable-unmotivated respondents" (Dörnyei, 2003, s.9). These problems can be solved by avoiding ill-constructed questionnaires. Among our respondents belief in the necessity of competent compository skills and practice-driven study are believed to solve these problems. For the scholastic surveys, there is not much difficulty as long as they choose actual and important social subjects.

The question of feeling confident in using the data in their study is not an obstacle for the students and researchers. Except ill-prepared surveys, most questionnaires are believed to give trustable data as long as they are well-planned and conducted attentively. Both student researchers and action researchers can feel confident in using data they collected in their term-works as compositions and scientific writings as articles.

### Students' Experience of Surveys

The students observed their social life at the campus for a while and decided to analyze the subject they were interested. Sample scholastic surveys were given to the students and the sample they chose was asked to modify and improve. Their drafts of surveys were checked by the teacher in respect of sequence, coherence and unity. Their subject titles were such as 'Public Bus Service, Accommodations, Reading Habits, Smoking, and Spending Time'. When they were sure of their study after their collaborative pre-writing, revision, discussion and drafting, they were asked to conduct their surveys to at least 25 students. They classified their data in percentage values by discussing and comparing the most interesting results. In accordance with these values they commented, and they organized their findings in introduction, development and result paragraphs of their studies. No figures were included in their compositions. The students' compositions after their survey study were graded on basis of preparation, process and composition. Their perception

of the process was evaluated by another teacher-prepared survey at the end of the academic term.

The results from a single survey can be used in several (multiple) paragraphs. For example, a student may want to write about whether students on their campus prefer to live in dormitories or in apartments (comparison-contrast); in another paragraph, they might report on the results of a survey question about why the students chose either dormitory life or apartment life (cause-effect). Evidence for both of these paragraphs could come from the same survey.

In this study, we researched if there were contributions of the scholastic-survey conducting to composition skills of EFL students. We also checked fields of social issues students are interested. For this survey, some of the current writings among the scientific publications were checked. One of the creditable studies was the one conducted to EFL students in IELI (Intensive English Language Institute-State University of New York) by Reid (1994, s.175) to describe the students' attitudes towards survey conducting. The result was reflected to be satisfactory.

Questions of researchers' survey to describe student writers' perception of their own survey studies were determined as follows:

1. Do the student writers believe in the importance of survey conducting for their process of compository skill development?
2. Were they aware of what they did when they conducted a scholastic survey?
3. Did they feel any confidence in writing compositions after their survey study?
4. To what extent did their experience of survey conducting contribute to their studies?
5. Was there any relation between the evaluation of the survey and sex, years at university, the grade students earned?

### Method

The Scale: In this study, the researchers themselves constructed the survey items in accordance with professionally prepared surveys and their long-term observations and evaluations. Items of the survey came from the needs and confusions of the student writers in the first year composition courses. As action researchers, we have to take care of and include the opinions of our students for our courses and studies.

In constructing our questionnaire, we explained some points at the beginning of the survey and informed the student writers that they didn't have to write their names, and the data would be merely used for scientific purposes. Age, grade and gender were asked to include in their survey completion. Vitality of completing all procedures and rating all items for the sake of scientific study were reminded.

The adapted Likert Scale was used to measure the perceptual ratings. The scale measured the student writers' perception of their survey studies in a five optional Likert Scale ranging from 'Absolutely Agree' to 'Absolutely Disagree'.

**Sample:** Our survey of 20 items conducted to 126 student writers (N=126) has the aim of measuring their perception of scholastic survey conducting to other students and its contributions to their several types of composition studies and term works. The student writers were supposed to know the several types of paragraph patterns and have the experience of writing multi-paragraph compositions. Since they conducted their own questionnaires to other students, they were aware of the process. They all took the first-year course IDE 1007 Composition.

**Procedures:** Our student writes were not included in a pilot study, for the study is practice-driven. Our survey sheets of 20 items were distributed to the student writers in their classrooms. Survey items were explained when necessary, and scientific importance of their contribution to our study and their own educational process were reminded. Most students completed the questionnaire in ten minutes. Returned sheets were checked for complete ticking. Very few students returning their sheets with

missing ticking were invited to complete them. No significant problem was met in the process of administering the survey by the researchers.

**Analysis:** 20 items were exposed to factor analysis. The result of the analysis showed that a single scale is the best solution to proceed further calculations. After observing the results of the factor solution and the subsequent reliability analysis, the items were reduced into 10. Since, it is known that the shorter surveys with robust alpha scores are more practical in employment (See the items below). The scale recorded an alpha score of .75 which is satisfactory enough to treat the data. In its present condition the scale can be called as the Scale for the Measuring of the Survey Study.

## Findings

The mean and the standard deviations of the items of the survey were presented below:

Tablo 1  
*Descriptive Statistics of mean ratings of survey items by student writers*

	Items of the Survey	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Preparing a scholastic survey provides partial information for a writing term work	126	4.00	.76
2	Surveys permit real information to be conveyed.	126	3.65	1.01
3	Conducting surveys makes us realize what we know and we do not know about the subject	126	4.16	.88
4	My own background information on the chosen subject is enriched with the data from the survey study.	126	4.06	.88
5	Surveys are not waste of time.	126	4.13	1.03
6	A survey is an aid for researchers in Social sciences to overcome some confusion.	126	3.94	.78
7	I feel more confident after survey study	126	3.77	.95
8	I feel myself more sociable after survey	126	3.51	.97
9	Teaching/learning a survey is important	126	4.09	.79
10	Conducting survey is useful for composition skill	126	4.19	.84
	Total	126	3.95	.49

The total % of the mean scores which are above 3.99 (i.e. corresponding to agree and absolutely agree) is .52 (n=66). This shows that about half of the students see the survey study as useful.

No significant relations were found between the scale of students' survey success and such independent variables as grade, age and gender.

## Discussion and Conclusion

After giving our findings, we can discuss possible questions. A question, 'Does it make the student writers realize what they know?' can be answered easily and meaningfully. After deciding on a social subject they are given sample questionnaires, and they realize that they have to modify them in accordance with teacher's instructions. If the teacher instructs something they don't know, they have to look for it/them and learn. After they administer the surveys, they realize the difference among the respondents, and they see what they know and what

they do not know about survey conducting and its contributions to composition writing.

Another possible answer for a possible question is that this study is a student-centered process. First-year students are assigned for the preparation of survey conducting and using the data in their composition studies. Taking the responsibility of a long and tiring study prepares them for longer and more serious studies. Not everything is ready-made for them. Important steps are to be decided by themselves for their own needs and success.

Can the information they collect be called 'real information'? We can certainly say that the data collected are real. To be able to complete this task they have to follow a road map and they have to file important drafts for survey conducting to deliver at the end of the term as term-works. Pen and paper survey sheets are delivered to other students and collected and processed in percentages. After a fertile process, the student-researchers would rate the questionnaire items in the survey about their study by

the instructor. So there is no reason for suspicious behaviors about the real information from student researchers.

When we come to its being whether an easy or difficult task, we may think that this is a task for professional researchers. It is not so easy for BA students, but most of the student researchers can do it if they are given true and systematical guidance. Sample questionnaires help them open a way for their social subjects to be rated. They rehearse the topic, they get ideas from the others, and they make connections to reach the end of the study. Allowing them to study in groups is another help to prevent their failure.

As a result, we can say that no good process or task is achieved through an easy and short-cut access. Planning and spending your time is essential to reach a fertile result. Writing an academic composition in EFL studies is not so easy, and it requires either a good background knowledge or a systematical analysis of primary and secondary sources. In this study, we have offered an easing way of solving the lack of enough data for a competent composition on social subjects.

This study is believed to help student-writers feel themselves more secure and sure of themselves in composing studies for their term works and graduation thesis. In addition, the importance and existence of primary sources for objective, competent and satisfactory studies were also felt by the teachers and students. We believe that this pragmatic and practice-driven study can be enriched by conducting the survey with attitudinal items to get data consisted of the respondents' more objective opinions, beliefs and interests.

To sum up, the student researchers have had experience with scholastic survey conducting. They feel

more confident themselves in using survey data in their writings. We believe that sample surveys are helpful to prepare new ones. Although scholastic survey conducting is not an easy task, it is student-centered and permits real information into composition studies. Survey conducting makes researchers aware of what they know and enriches their background information.

Finally, besides its being worth of teaching and learning, either scholastic or professional, a well designed and processed survey is an important aid for some confusions in compository skills, and all researchers of social issues have to be conscious of its lending itself to present and future studies.

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