

Main ideas: An investigation into student writing¹

Cetenay KAGHADO²

Abstract

Written final exams of many ESL or EFL students attending college or university are often written and memorized before the actual test in some manner. Often, the students will usually have some sort of idea of what they will be tested on in the final exam. As such, they are under pressure to perform and not only that, but to obtain a certain percentage on their final exam. From my personal observations, these students usually memorize their answers beforehand and simply rewrite them during their final exams. The students may or may not have adequately prepared for their final exams and may at times forget the material that they tried to memorize. This paper addresses the issue of whether or not students are able to independently compose a solid main idea in the writing process (n=39). Furthermore, additional observations will be made. For instance, can these students connect ideas and arguments based off of their main idea? This paper aims to contribute an analytical approach for instructors at Duzce University so that they may assist students with their composition writing skills in the future.

Key words: Memorize, main idea, observations, arguments, writing.

Ana fikirler: Öğrencilerin yazma becerilerinin incelenmesi

Öz

Liselerde ve üniversitelerde ikinci dil veya yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin final sınavlarında yazdıkları metinler genellikle sınavdan önce bir şekilde yazılıp ezberlenir. Genellikle öğrenciler sınavlarda kendilerine sorulacak yazma konusu hakkında bir şekilde bir fikre sahiptirler. Öğrenciler bir edineç baskısı altında ve final sınavlarından belli bir puan almak zorundadırlar. Benim kişisel gözlemlerime göre, bu öğrenciler cevapları sınavdan önce bir şekilde ezberleyip sınav esnasında sadece bunları yazarlar. Öğrenciler bazen final sınavlarına yeterince çalışmamış olabilirler ve bazen de ezberlemeye çalıştıkları materyalleri unutabilirler. Bu çalışmada, öğrencilerin yazma sürecinde somut bir ana fikri kendi başlarına oluşturup oluşturamadıkları incelenmiştir (n=39). Bunun yanı sıra, ek gözlemler de yapılacaktır. Örneğin, bu öğrenciler ana fikirden soyutlanmış fikir ve görüşleri ilişkilendirebiliyorlar mı? Bu çalışma, Düzce Üniversitesi'ndeki öğretim görevlilerine gelecekte öğrencilerine kompozisyon yazma becerilerinde yardımcı olabilmeleri için analitik bir yaklaşıma katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ezber, ana fikir, gözlem, görüş, yazma.

Introduction

This paper is the culmination of close analysis and investigation which I conducted on the samples of written exams completed by Hazirlik students. I personally transcribed all 39 handwritten exams and

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² Öğr. Gör., Düzce Üniversitesi (Düzce, Türkiye), Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, cetenay@duzce.edu.tr, ORCID ID: [Makale kayıt tarihi: 16.11.2018-kabul tarihi: 23.12.2018; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.454266]

uploaded them online for my colleagues and other teachers at the university to review. My findings revealed that much insight can be gained from the way in which students write because there is a link with the way they process and remember information and their writing. This paper will provide the point of view from a native English language teacher after having observed written work from ESL and EFL students. As English (2011, pg. 102) points out, "Learning is not a neutral process of acquisition of skills sets, as implied in skills discourses, but a transformative process in which our different identities and our different frames of knowledge intermingle." My hope is that my contribution will help transform future generations of teachers and students to view writing in English differently and to work on developing their weak points and expand on their strong points.

Since I am a teacher at Hazirlik, I have been exposed to how students prepare themselves for exams as well as how they perform on exams. I know because I have actually sat in and tested students in speaking exams, which test their capacity for speaking and comprehending the English language. It is from my own personal experience and observation where I am able to say that students often enter the examination rooms with some sort of prior knowledge of what the exam content is. That being said, the question of whether or not the students have a full grasp and have in fact learned the course material still lingers. The patterns of writing I have discovered suggest a direct correlation with the memorization of a set of sentences, and then transferring them onto the exam paper during the time of the actual exam itself.

Method

In total, I have sampled the writing exams of 39 students from the Hazirlik written exams. With 25 being the highest grade able to be earned by a student, most students averaged in at about 14 out of 25 points. That being said, only three of the 39 students earned a 25 out of 25 on their final exams. Meanwhile, only seven other students had grades ranging within the 20's. When divided in half, 14 is just a little over the halfway mark of 12.5. This means that the majority of these students sufficiently passed the written portion of their Hazirlik final exams. However, it is safe to say that the three students who earned a 25 out of 25 grade on their final exams excelled beyond their peers in writing skill and the seven other students who ranged in the 20's, possessed able qualities which allowed them to also perform well.

As Mitchell explains,

"...inherent within the cognitive perspective is this notion of technique. The belief was that once successful techniques were delineated through the study of successful writers, these strategies could be imparted to students. These very strategies in many ways began to represent, or in fact constitute, a body of knowledge, one easily codified into a set of techniques or rules for carrying out the writer's task."

Taking my search and grading criteria into consideration, I had several rules or techniques with which I conducted my evaluations of the student writing samples. These rules include: composing a main idea, connecting their ideas together, vocabulary comprehension, overall use of language, wording style, length and organization of the piece, and any grammatical errors that were present. When considering the cognitive writing approach, if students could incorporate such strategies into their writing, then essentially, they would be able to successfully carry out their writing task. These were some of the key factors that I reflected on while surveying the written portion of the Hazirlik final exams because I felt that they were the most essential parts that come together as a whole, unified experience while reading a composition piece and trying to interpret it.

1. Findings

The writing patterns of this are evident because for instance, a student will be midway through a sentence or thought and the writing will just abruptly stop. This clearly indicates that a student memorized their answer and simply just forgot the rest of their answer. One example of this would be when a student wrote, “People don’t improve themselves.” This student wrote this sentence without even including a period at the end. As a result, the work is left incomplete due to the sudden ending. As readers, we are left wondering *how* and *why* people don’t improve themselves. Usually, while students are trying to commit themselves to writing an ending to their composition, they will improvise with information that is relevant or in close connection to the subject matter. However, that is not the case with the student exams from the written portion of the Hazirlik finals. More often than not, students can be seen merely making a claim in a proposed argument and without warning, ending their piece unexpectedly and without making a further attempt in finishing what they initially started.

Moving on, the students at times wrote in sentence fragments, which sends a message of the temporary inability to recall one’s memory to a certain degree. In short, they simply could not get their thoughts together while trying to remember what they had to write for the exam response. This leads to the issue of connecting ideas based off of their main idea. Often times, the students would branch off and veer into a different direction entirely, as opposed to where they originally began in their writing. This leads to the endings of compositions written by the students to be fractional and lacking any sort of final resolution. What is essentially missing is elaboration or evidence after having made a claim or statement.

The three students who did earn the maximum of 25 points on their written exams did indeed stand apart from the rest of their peers. They stood apart in terms of formation, content, and execution. That includes but is not limited to being able to introduce their subject matter, form a solid main idea, supporting their main idea with legitimate reasons, constructing the highlight of their piece, and including a proper conclusion. The students who did attain a 25 would do things in their writing that clearly established both their understanding of the exam topic, and their writing skills.

The capability of these students was exhibited when they would do things in their writing such as defining words or phrases in their introductions, and explaining the points that they established with logical thinking and reasoning within their body paragraphs. One concise example of this would have to be when a student wrote, “Influenc[ing] people[’s] behavior means according to movies or television, people make some different changes [in] their speaking, opinion, and daily routine[s].” This ability of expanding on a subject displays that the student is ready to provide more information when requested to do so, i.e. connecting ideas, while at the same time staying focused on the objective in front of them; their main idea. One may say that memorizing the definition of something is fairly easy, however, considering having to build an entire response based off of that definition is where the real challenge is—the explanation part of the writing task.

For instance, one of the three students who got a 25 on their paper wrote the following: “Influencing people’s behavior means effecting people to change their ways [of action.]” In some rare cases, such as the aforementioned sample, students choose to define or paraphrase a quote in their writing. This distinguishes them from their peers in the way that they choose to approach their writing: which is the systematic method of setting their main idea into motion. In essence, they have cleared the way so there is no room for errors to be made; the subject matter has been defined so we can delve right into dissecting it.

Furthermore, these students would try to impart messages to their readers as well as try to give advice to them. To illustrate once more, the same student who scored a 25 on their paper also wrote the following: “[a] television [show] or a movie will try to give you a message, saying something like ‘be brave’ or ‘if there [are] humans, there is hope.’ If you catch these messages and apply them to your life, [then] your behavior will become better.” Not only are these well-thought-out quotes, but the advice that is given at the end is in harmony with the quotes. There is a clear indication of unity that is prevalent throughout this student’s writing; which is why it was one of the most successful submissions in the Hazirlik final exams. Surely, not only is higher-level thinking showcased in these instances, but so is higher-level writing.

2. Findings

Moving on, something these stronger writing pieces all have in common is a calculated introduction. The subject is introduced to the readers while also giving a brief insight into what will follow later on in the rest of the writing. An accurate example of this would be the following introduction from a different student that scored a 25 on the Hazirlik final exam as well: “Do you watch television? If yes, [then] what kind of TV programs do you watch? As everybody [already] knows, there are a lot of people who watch television frequently [and] there are TV programs and movies that affect people easily.” The type of introduction that begins with a question works really well at pulling readers in; it is an attention grabber and it was effectively deployed by this particular student.

Next, a statement or argument is presented for the readers to consider. Following which, evidence is relayed to the readers and this compels the readers to really believe the writer and side with the writer and their perspective on the subject. Thus, we are faced with such an example from the third and last student that scored a 25 on the Hazirlik final: “TV or movies might make people asocial. According to research, people who always watch TV [tend to be] more asocial than others.” As mentioned before, this is an appropriate example of a statement being made and then being backed up—in some way, what is stated is reinforced.

Upon further reading, what I like to call the highlight moment of the writing piece will be sure to follow. The highlight moment of the piece is what makes it academic and exceptional in the scope of writing analysis. An example of a highlight moment will usually be something along the lines of a fact or a set of facts pulled from researchers or quotes that are synchronized with the rest of the piece. An example that stood out to me while I was reviewing the final exams would have to be this one from a student who scored in the high 20’s: “...people who watch TV can [be isolated] from society. To illustrate, scientific research shows that 47.25 % of people stay [at] home [and] watch TV instead of [going] outside.” As can be seen, this is where the student’s writing skills are fully engaged.

As such, another exemplary feature these select students displayed in the written portion of their final exams was how they imparted a little piece of themselves onto their readers. They would do this by giving their opinion on the subject matter and not just stop at that—they would go on to account for why they felt so in the first place. A decided example of this put into play would have to be the following excerpt from a student who scored a 20 on the Hazirlik final written exam: “A year ago, when I [was watching] TV, I saw a man who [studied] mechatronic engineering and I [chose] this major because I [was] impressed [by] him...[another] beautiful example [would have to be] cartoons. For instance, when a [super] hero save[s] a normal [person’s] life, [a child] want[s] to save their friend’s life in their game.”

The latter is something I hardly ever saw while spending the many hours that I did reviewing the Hazirlik written final exams. What is normally seen is that the students would just declare something and leave it at that—with little to no exploration of what they had just previously written. Not only that, but what they are writing about is not being argued in any way. Essentially, it leaves the reader so to say “hanging” and also searching for more information that is not presented in the writing. The following example was selected from the work of a student who scored a 5 out of 25 to demonstrate an inconclusive ending: “...we usually [turn on the] TV or [watch] a movie for [purposes] of relaxing, but the television we watch for relaxing influences our behaviors. In my opinion, it influences us badly. The reasons are as follows:” The student failed to express just *how* exactly watching television influences our behaviors and *why* it is so that watching television influences our behavior badly. What’s more, the student did not even go on to list the reasons for their stance on the matter. They just showed their intention for wanting to do so but did not fully execute the entire task at hand.

This nonperformance to not follow through can be clearly seen in a number of writing samples from students who took the Hazirlik finals. Another noteworthy example of a collapse in further explaining or elaborating would have to be from the following excerpt from a student who scored a moderate 13 on the written final exam: “So really, people must not spend time [watching] television or movie[s]. Perhaps they [can do] different activities.” The student proposes a suggestion on how to find a possible solution for people who watch, what seems to be, harmful television. However, examples of such supplementary activities are not provided by the student. This disappointing finding was accompanied by a further claim made by the same student in their writing. The student goes on to write: “Finally, the [programs these people watch bring] damage onto themselves, whereas people must look at themselves.” Once more, an assertion is made later on in the writing which seems to point to self-reflection. But one must ask, *why* is self-reflection relevant to this subject matter? The student, once more, did not clarify or demonstrate this purpose in their writing.

Another matter that is worth mentioning is a consolidated ending, or conclusion to a student’s writing. The key terms that I searched for while reviewing the final writing exams from the Hazirlik group included: “in summary, in conclusion, to sum up, and finally.” The application of these terms in a given student’s writing signifies to me, that the student knows and is familiar with the writing process, and can confidently bring a sound ending to their work. A positive example of such an ending would have to be that of one of the three students that scored a 25 on the Hazirlik written final: “To sum up, [the] media has been affecting our [lives] in bad terms. [I believe] people should decrease watching TV or movies. With this ensured, our future will be better.” Although I detected a little ambiguity towards the end, it still exemplifies to me, a fairly solid ending to their work.

Conclusion

Presently, the observations made all had one focal point in mind: can students in fact compose an authentic and concrete main idea in the writing process? Only 16 students out of the 39 students in total, who took the Hazirlik final writing exam, demonstrated that they can construct an original main idea and connect ideas and arguments together which are related to their main idea. In short, a little less than half of the total number of students were successful in this. I carefully scrutinized the papers and despite the fact that I was sincerely hoping for a higher number, this is what my findings yielded.

In conclusion, I hope that the findings in my paper assist or inspire the academic community and teachers at Duzce University to approach and view writing in a different way. There are so many

components to consider in writing that make the challenge in truly finding or creating quality writing, a journey more than worth embarking on. The fact of the matter is that not only is writing a creative process, it is an experimental one as well. Especially when considering student writing, there are many cues that present themselves on how we can better guide and assist students in cultivating their written works. Encouraging students to express and explore themselves as they write is one of the surefire ways in steering them away from the memorization of discourse, and fostering individual and scholarly writing pieces.

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