The Effects of Writing Activities Prepared Considering the 8th Grade Students' Cognitive Levels into Consideration upon their Writing Skill Success[i]

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Ortaokul 8. Sınıf öğrencilerinin bilişsel gelişimlerini dikkate alarak yapılan yazma aktivitelerinin öğrencilerin yazma becerisi başarılarına etkisi

Öğrencilerin yazma becerisine olan ilgilerini arttırmak ve başarı oranlarının yükseltilmesi amaçlanan bu çalışmada bilişsel yaklaşım kullanılmıştır. Amasya Suluova Bolat İlköğretim Okulu'nda 12 hafta süren öğretim etkinliğinde 24'er kişilik iki sınıf deney ve kontrol grubu olarak oluşturulmuştur. Kontrol grubu ile öğretmen kılavuz kitabında öngörülen geleneksel yöntemler kullanılırken, deney grubu ile bilişsel yönteme göre aktiviteler düzenlenmiş ve uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın en başında her iki gruba da araştırmacı tarafından hazırlanan İngilizce Yazma Becerileri Testi ön-test olarak uygulanmış, fakat iki grup arasında önemli bir farka rastlanmamıştır. Ancak 12 hafta süren öğretme etkinliğinin sonunda deney grubu son-test sonuçlarının kontrol grubununkine göre daha başarılı olduğu saptanmıştır. Ayrıca, çoğu zaman öğretmenler tarafından zaman alıcı olarak görülen ve öğrenciler tarafından zor olarak nitelendirilen bu becerinin bilişsel yöntemlerle öğretilmesinden dolayı deney grubunda hem beceriye hem de derse olan ilgi artmıştır. Bundan dolayı, öğretmenlerin öğrencilerine yazma becerisini kazandırırken bilişsel gelişimlerini dikkate almaları ve bilişsel yöntem kullanmalarının hem öğrencilerinin yazma gibi üretimsel bir becerideki başarıyı hem de derse olan ilgi ve motivasyonu arttıracağı düşünülmektedir.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bilişsel Yaklaşım, Bilişsel Gelişim, Yazma Becerisi*

Introduction

Language teaching has been a very hard process for many years. People have needed to learn language for many different reasons like reading works of philosophy, religion, science or politics written in other languages. With the changing needs of both teachers and learners new approaches came into being and as a result, different and new methods aroused naturally.

Developments in other fields affected language teaching. After some experiments conducted in the field of psychology, Behaviorism was applied to language teaching. With the application of this approach, imitation, practice, feedback and habit formation gained importance. On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the invention of some tools like tape recorder, radio, computer, and TV which are

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essential in language teaching, the four skills were begun to be taught effectively. The innate ability of an individual was emphasized by Noam Chomsky who put Generative Grammar Theory and the term Language Acquisition Device forward. With the Krashen's Input Hypothesis which claims that input should be a bit beyond the already existing capacity of the learner, Cognitivism was supported. Relatively, cognition has begun to be more and more important in language teaching. According to Ashcraft, "Cognition is the collection of mental processes and activities used in perceiving, learning, remembering, thinking and understanding, and the act of using those processes." (1998:4) The intellectual capacity of a learner is developed through involving in such mental activities.

Recently, English is started to be taught to young learners at 2nd grade to 4th grade two hours a week, three hours a week in 5th and 6th grades, and four hours a week in the 7th and 8th grades. Though beginning age for learning English is degraded, teachers believe that they still cannot find sufficient time for developing main skills and the subskills as well. On the other hand, teacher may see the procedure of writing as a burden as it needs the active involvement of both teachers and students. Nevertheless, the skill –writing- requires the utmost attention of both teachers and learners. With the help of the writing activities teachers and learners can find the opportunity to reinforce the items they have learned or internalized. On one hand, writing can be a difficult skill both in terms of the teacher and the learner as it is a productive skill and requires the creative thinking and production skill of the learner, on the other hand, this skill takes the learner and the teacher to a further step in producing if the process appeals to the learners' cognitive developments and factors. Additionally, apart from the other skills, teacher may find teaching writing skill tiring and time-consuming. Thus, they do not spend their time on guiding the students through writing skill but rather teaching grammar. As a result, writing skill becomes an ignored skill when compared to the other skills. However, it is needed to make learners think productively through developing appropriate strategies to improve their cognition. At this point, the teacher is the activator and conductor of this process. In relation to this, Allami and Nodoushan states that "… the role that the teacher plays in the classroom is of vital importance. S/he is not a mere mediator between the learner and the phenomenon of writing, but rather an authoritative source of information that appropriates and guides the 'productive thinking' in their students. (Allami & Nodoushan 2006: part:3, paragraph:4) As this point is not considered by teachers most of the time, this skill is chosen to study.

In this study, it was aimed to teach writing skill via cognitive and traditional methods considering the learners' cognitive levels. While teaching via traditional method or in other words Grammar Translation Method native language was made use of and the subjects were presented deductively and while teaching with Cognitive Code Learning target language was used and the topics were presented deductively beforehand. The writing activities presented in Spot On 8 Coursebook which was sent to schools by the Ministry of National Education was made use of. The two classes were chosen as control and experimental groups. This study was carried out during 12 week period with presenting different writing activities.

Cognitive Code Learning which was made use of in experimental group's lessons is an approach rather than a method that puts the rules and applications of cognitivism forward. It was a reaction to behaviouristic techniques and methods which rely on imitation and repetition in language teaching rather than mental structures and specialities of human being. According to Hadley (2003) learning is the result of mental activities, subskills must also be practised. Moreover as language proficiency develops internal representations of language are reformed.

Learning is heavily based on cognitive structures of the human, not on the behavioral aspects. By making the students exposed to the language teaching material and the rules, they form their understanding of language and it, then becomes automatic. According to Stern (2003) this method put an emphasis on innate organizing principles in human perception, and cognition. Cognitive Code Learning was chosen as the method to fulfill the aims of Cognitive Approach. This method emphasize the importance of deductive learning techniques to have a better basis for the practice of the target subject or item. Cognitive Code Learning has some ideas about its function and its application of the approach concerning language teaching. This approach gives importance to the linguistic competence of the learners, thus it makes use of deductive teaching style. In this approach, visual materials, auditory materials, body language, facial expressions, gestures are made use of by teachers. Additionally, the materials used during the teaching process should be meaningful. What is meant by meaningful is that the material useed in teaching process

should cater for the aims of the subjcet and the level and needs of the students. Language teaching is rule-governed and errors are corrected immediately. It is a learner-centered approach and the emphasis is on the target language.

In contrast to these, because of the exam (now called TEOG, then SBS) that the students take at the end of each year, teachers focus on sentence structures and combinations rather than making students create a text. Due to this act, the result is not so satisfactory, moreover if the cognitive factors of the learners are not activated and appropriate activities are not prepared, the result turns out to be a failure.

To get over this obstacle, in this study, completion and role play activities were used. Moreover, writing dialogues and conversations make the learners think the rules and use them communicatively. To get to a better point in teaching writing via Cognitive Code Learning, such activities like scrambled sentences and words, question and answer drills, competition and recognition drills, completing a story, writing paragraphs about a picture or a real object were highly used. In this study, substitution, transformational and conversational drills were also used. These were not mechanical, but meaningful drills which enabled the learners activate their cognition for writing. Additionally, semantic mapping, brainstorming and clustering were different techniques used in this approach. With the help of these techniques, the learners could see the classification of the items and code them easily into their minds. The following research questions were asked to investigate how Cognitive Approach is effective on teaching writing skill.

Research Questions

1. Will teaching be more efficient, if writing activities which are appropriate to their cognitive development are prepared?
2. Will the selection of appropriate writing activities make teachers more active?
3. Will teaching be more efficient and permanent if the writing activities are prepared appropriate to their cognitive factors?

Literature Review

Teaching writing can be considered as a fearful process both in terms of teachers and students. As a result of limited sessions and the multiple choice tests (TEOG) conducted by the Ministry of National Education, many teachers see the teaching and practice process of this productive skill as a burden.

However with the application of Cognitive Approach to teaching writing, teachers may find the effective ways to make the process permanent. This approach is also known as Cognitive Code Learning. It puts an emphasis on deductive teaching style of teaching through meaningful practice and creativity. By the time the Cognitive Approach came into being, Audiolingual Method started to lose its effect upon language teaching, because it was limited in making the students express themselves freely. As River (1981) mentioned just by practising drills, students had certain problems in expressing their own meanings. However, it is needed to make learners think productively and creatively. At this point, the teacher plays an important role because s/he acts as an activator and conductor of the process. Verloop et al (2001) and Suawed (2011) emphasize the importance of the teachers knowledge as it directly effects the teaching practice. Dufee and Aikenhood (1992) state the teachers beliefs and knowledge about teaching provide a framework for teachers to make decisions of their own beliefs and knowledge. If teachers can manage this, they can better be able to make their own students braver, more creative and more productive in terms of the skill writing. If a student does not feel any prejudice and fear towards the skill, teachers can make them write and generate ideas better and more effective.

The Aim and The Scope of The Study

The aim of this study is to teach writing via Cognitive Code Learning Method considering learners' cognitive development. The students are divided into two groups as the Control and the Experimental Group. For Control Group, Grammar Translation Method is used, and the topics are not presented inductively, and the native language is used. On the other hand, Experimental Group's topic is presented deductively, and Cognitive Code Learning is used. The scope of the study is teaching of writing via writing activities presented in Spot On 8 Coursebook, which Ministry of National Education has distributed. This

study is based on teaching writing skill concerning learners cognitive developments and decide whether the activities presented in the coursebook are suitable to the learners cognition, needs and abilities.

Method

As it will be stated in a more detailed way in Data Collection Tools part, quantitative research methods are used. Data collection is experimental and SPSS is used in statistical analysis of the study. This research is carried out to determine the difference between the Traditional and the Cognitive Approaches. The attendants of the study are divided into two groups as the Control and the Experimental Group. In the Experimental Group Cognitive Code Learning is used. While using this method in the teaching process, the information about the target subject is taught deductively to the students beforehand and they are activated by using visuals like pictures and flashcards, auditory materials, body language, facial expressions to make the results permanent. However, unlike the Experimental Group, in the Control Group, Traditional Method, GTM, is used. In Grammar Translation Method, the native language is highly made use of , the students are allowed to use bilingual dictionaries and translation is used, thus, this method does not allow students to use their creativity and cognition properly. Moreover translation was also used and this made the students learn language items in a traditional way. In other words, vocabulary is aimed to be taught through direct translation and there is no attention for the pronunciation of the words.

Participants

In this research, 48 students (24 students for experimental group and 24 students for control group) were determined among the 8th grade students of Amasya Suluova Bolat Primary Education School. There are 13 male and 11 female students in the experimental group and 15 male and 9 female students in the control group. The students included in this study are of middle socioeconomic level and fourteen-year-old.

In the 2009- 2010 academic year first semester, both experimental and control group students were required to have the English Writing Comprehension Test developed by the researcher. 8/A was determined as the Control Group and 8/B as the Experimental Group.

In order to determine whether the Experimental Group students' writing skill proficiency level is similar to the Control Group students' writing skill proficiency level, Mann Whitney U Test is conducted on the pre-test scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the both experimental and the control group students and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Mann Whitney U Test Results of the Pre-Test Scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the Experimental and the Control Group Students

Groups	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	St. Deviation (Ss)
Experimental	24	19,65	471,50	41,44	13,12466
Control	24	23,42	562	43,92	14,72504

The statistical results given in Table 1 show that the difference between the pre-test scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the experimental and the control group is insignificant. The other test statistics are Z: -2,279 / Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed): ,533. According to this result, it can be concluded that the students in both the experimental and the control group are equal to each other in terms of Writing Skill Proficiency Level.

Data Collection Tools

Throughout the study, the Writing Comprehension Test, which was prepared by the researcher, was used. The reliability and the validity of the test are detected via English Language Teachers teaching English to the same level students and lecturers teaching at Educational Sciences department of the university. In the Writing Comprehension Test there are two parts. The first and the second parts are 50 points each. Each item in the test are prepared according to the literature and the teaching programme that is presented by

the Ministry of National Education. In the first part of the English Writing Comprehension Test, the students are required to answer fifty multiple choice questions. In the second part of the test, there are seven parts. In part A, the students are required to write the words they hear correctly. This part tests the listening and writing ability of the students. In part B, the students are asked about the punctuation. As punctuation is a vital element of writing, they need to put them into their correct place. In part C,D and E, the students are required to put the words into the correct order to make up a meaningful whole, construct new sentences via drills and setting sentences and construct new sentences with the information given. These parts test the grammar and syntactic knowledge of the students. In part F, reading and writing skills are tested together through multiple choice questions about the given text. In part G, another important element of writing, capitalization, is tested. The students are required to find the words which should be capitalized. In part H, the students are required to fulfill a guided writing activity. While preparing this English Writing Comprehension Test, the teaching curriculum presented by the Ministry of National Education 8th graders and primary school curriculum were taken into consideration.

Data Analysis

In the 2009- 2010 academic year first semester, the students were required to have the English Writing Comprehension Test developed by the researcher. 8/A was determined as the control group and 8/B as the experimental group. In order to determine whether the experimental group students' writing skill proficiency level is similar to the control group students' writing skill proficiency level, Mann Whitney U Test was conducted on the pre-test and the post-test scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the both experimental and the control group students. The pre-test scores of both groups are presented in the previous part via Table 1.

The teaching procedure was completed both for control and experimental group in 12 week time. The control group practised writing skill via Traditional Method, however experimental group practised the same skill via Cognitive Approach.

At the end of this 12 week period, both the Control and the Experimental Group took the Writing Skill Proficiency Test again. The post-test scores of both groups are stated below:

Table 2: Mann Whitney U Test Results of the Post-Test Scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the Experimental and the Control Group Students

GROUPS	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	St. Deviation (Ss)
EXPERIMENTAL	24	29,10	698,50	55	13,70497
CONTROL	24	19,90	477,50	45,25	15,62676

The pre-test and the post-test of the English Writing Comprehension Test of both the experimental and the control group students data are transferred to the computer to be evaluated through Mann Whitney U Test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test in order to carry out this study and to test the hypotheses. In order to evaluate the results 0.5 is taken as the highest, and 0.1 is taken as the lowest value.

Findings

At the beginning of this study, four hypotheses were stated. The studies were done to prove these hypotheses.

1. The post-test scores of the English Writing Comprehension Test of the experimental group who were taught English Writing Skill based upon "Cognitive Teaching Method" will be higher than the post-test scores of the control group who were taught English Writing Skill Based upon "Traditional Teaching Method". Mann Whitney U Test was conducted to test the difference between the control and the experimental group results. The post-test and the pre-test of both control and experimental group results are stated above. As a result, the results of the experimental group are higher than the control group's results. The difference is significant on the level of $p < .05$ and the results of the post-tests are (Mann

Whitney U test= 177,500 / Wilcoxon W = 477,500 / Z=-2.279 / Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)= ,023 / Sig.=,566) These results confirm the hypothesis of this study.

2. The post-test scores of the Writing Comprehension Test of the experimental group students practiced the English Writing Skill based on "Cognitive TeachingMethod" will be higher than the pre-test scores.

The difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores of the experimental group is significant on the level of p<.05. The other scores are Mann whitney U Test= 171,500 / Wilcoxon W= 471,500. These results verify the the second hypothesis of the study.

3. The post-test scores of the English writing Comprehension test of the control group students who practiced the English Writing Skill based on "Traditional Teaching Method" will be higher than the pre-test scores.

The difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores of the control group is significant and on the level of p<.05. The other scores are Mann Whitney U=262,000 / Wilcoxon W=562,000. These results confirm the third hypothesis of the study.

4. Teaching became more effective and permanent when the writing activities are prepared considering the learners cognitive developments. Thus, this can be referred from the pre-test and the post-test scores of the participants of both groups.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In this study, the effects and the results of both Cognitive Code Learning and Grammar Translation Method on teaching writing skills are examined in the 8th grades of a state primary school. In the experimental group Cognitive Code Learning was used, whereas in the control group Grammar Translation Method was used. As a result, the Cognitive Code Learning used in the experimental group's courses increased the level of success more than the Grammar Translation Method used in the control group's courses.

In the experimental group, the lessons were arranged according to the features of Cognitive Teaching Method. During this process, realia, pictures, flashcards, slights, groupwork and cognitive teaching techniques were highly used. By using these techniques and materials, the cognition of the students' was activated. In the experimental group the lesson was divided into three sections as pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. With the help of these phases, students could find opportunity to be prepared for the writing activity, activate their previous knowledge about the topic, generate ideas, evaluate the piece of writing and internalize what had been written.

On the other hand, the control group was taught writing skill via Traditional Method. The students were not taught with cognitive techniques and materials that could activate their cognition. In this group, it became really difficult to make the students concentrate on writing activity as techniques and materials which were appropriate to the students' level of cognition, interest, and abilities were not used. Thus, it was seen that the activities and the techniques used in the experimental group increased the students' level of success when compared to the control group's students.

Additionally, by guessing, discovering and lessons become more enjoyable for the students. Also, techniques like semantic mapping, brainstorming and clustering teachers can make the lessons more attractive and comprehensible. By considering the students' level of cognition, abilities and interests students become more successful. Making use of different materials which cater for visual, kinesthetic and auditory learners the learning and teaching becomes more comprehensible and permanent. Moreover, by not skipping but practising writing skills periodically and regularly, the students improve this skill and it becomes no longer a feared one. Some activities that takes in the coursebook may not cater for the needs, abilities and cognitive levels of the students, but the teacher may adapt these ones in relation to the required items. When other researches done in this field are considered, it is seen that researchers like Kahraman (2003), Olson and Land (2007), Yigitoglu (2011) have focused on the teachers' cognition rather than students' cognitive developments. In relation to what they have mentioned, it should be stated that seminars needed to be arranged on Cognitive Teaching Method and both primary-secondary and high school teachers should attend these seminars and practise the techniques and activities to use them in their own classes. It is important to make writing skill an enjoyable skill but not a skipped one due to the

lack of time. On the other hand, as writing is a productive skill, we, teachers may see it as time consuming and exhausting. However, English comprehension is tested via multiple choice tests at the end of the year and during the preparation process, naturally teachers focus on the language items, vocabulary rather than productive skills. Nonetheless, language teaching is based upon four skills and the other sub skills, none of which should be ignored. On the other hand, teachers complain about the limited time and what to do in the classroom concerning writing skill. This study gives information about manipulating a writing lesson in all kinds of schools by overcoming prejudice, lack of time and other difficulties. With the help of Cognitive Teaching Method, students improve their cognitive abilities like thinking, creativity, memorization, problem solving and generating ideas as well as their writing skill. As students overcome the difficulty of writing in their minds, they try to generate their own pieces of writing. As a result, some students are so motivated that they have begun to write their own diaries in English. As seen, practising writing skill regularly and periodically in courses has an impulsive effect upon students that is why they want to practice it on their own.

The coursebooks that are going to be used by teachers and students during a year is chosen by the Ministry of National Education. However, teachers could choose their coursebooks previously. The chosen coursebooks may not cater for the needs, abilities and cognitive level of the students in each society or region. This criteria is needed to be considered by the authorities while choosing a coursebook. Moreover, the writing activities should be enjoyable and attractive for the students. If there are more up-to-date pictures, schemes, activities and exercises, it is easier to make the students concentrate on the writing courses and get better results.

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In this study, in order to raise the level of interest and success of the students towards writing skill, Cognitive Approach was used. This study took place in Amasya Suluova Bolat Primary Education School and 24 students attended the study as the control group and the other 24 students attended as the Experimental Group. While the Traditional Method, which was also suggested by the Teacher's Book presented by the Ministry of National Education was used for the Control Group, Experimental Group's lessons included activities considering Cognitive Approach. English Writing Skill Test which was prepared by the researcher was practised on both groups and no significant difference was detected. However, at the end of the 12 week period, Experimental Group's post-test results were higher than the Control Group's. Though this skill is considered as time-consuming from most teachers' point of view and difficult from the students', it is seen that if it is taught via Cognitive Approach, the interest towards the skill and the lesson increases. It is thought that if the teachers take the students' cognition level into consideration and use Cognitive Approach in their lessons, both the success level in such a productive skill and interest as well as motivation will increase towards English lesson.

Key Words: Cognitive Approach, Cognitive Development, Writing Skill