The Process of Writing Research Articles in English and Getting Published: A Case Study

İngilizce Araştırma Makaleleri Yazma ve Yayınlatma Süreci: Bir Vaka Çalışması

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Abstract

Getting published in indexed English journals is a rather long and challenging process for non-native academics that have to write in English. In this study, we interview four Turkish academics (two physicists and two civil engineers), who use English as a foreign language, and analyze the processes they undergo while writing research articles (RA) and striving to get them published. We also interview other four academics (a historian, a linguist, a sociologist and an educational scientist), who have no published works in indexed journals, to gain more insight about the difficulties entailed in getting published in English journals. In Turkey, it is a prerequisite to get published in indexed journals, most of which are English, in order to get a tenure position at Turkish universities. However, this process is much more difficult and demanding for those who have no US or UK background and who have had no formal education in writing of any kind. The interviews we conducted and the observation process hint that science and engineering articles have preset rules and conventions and that writing such articles is a mechanical process.

Keywords: The process of writing research articles; Writing conventions; Writing strategies; Referee comments

Özet

Anadili İngilizce olmayan ve İngilizce yazmak zorunda olan akademisyenlerin makalelerini indekslerde taranan dergilerde yayınlatmaları, onların oldukça uzun ve zor bir süreçten geçmelerini gerektirir. Bu çalışmada, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak kullanan dört Türk akademisyenle (iki fizikçi, iki inşat mühendisi) görüştük ve İngilizce makale yazarken ve onları yayınlatmaya çalışırken içinden geçtikleri süreçleri analiz ettik. İngilizce dergilerde makale yayınlatmanın zorlukları hakkında daha fazla iç görü kazanmak için indekslerde taranan dergilerde yayınlanmış makalesi olmayan dört akademisyen (bir tarihçi, bir dilbilimci, bir sosyolog ve bir eğitim bilimci) ile daha görüşme yaptık. Türk üniversitelerinde doçentlik kadrosu alabilmek için, akademisyenlerin indekslerde taranan ve çoğu İngilizce olan dergilerde makale yayınlatmaları bir zorunluluktur. Ancak bu süreç, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde ya da İngiltere'de uzun süre bulunmamış ve yazma konusunda herhangi bir formal eğitim almamış akademisyenler için çok daha zordur. Yaptığımız görüşmeler ve gözlem süreci, fen ve mühendislik alanlarında yayınlanan

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makalelerin önceden yerleşmiş kurallar ve kalıplar çerçevesinde yazıldığını, bu alanlarda makale yazmanın mekanik bir süreç gibi algılandığını ve bu yüzden de sosyal bilimlerle ilgili makalelerden daha kolay yazılıp yayınlandığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Araştırma makalesi yazma süreci; Yazma gelenekleri; Yazma stratejileri; Hakem yorumları

I. INTRODUCTION

Second language writing research is a flourishing field of inquiry within applied linguistics. Especially there has been a growing interest in cross-cultural study of academic writing in social contexts where English is used as a second or foreign language (see e.g., Atkinson, 2004; Dahl, 2004; Peterlin, 2005; Liu, 2005; Jarratt, Losh and Puente, 2006). In a socio-politically oriented study Li (2006) analyzes the influence of the student's relationships with his/her institution, his/her supervisors, and the gatekeepers of his/her target journal. Social contexts where scholars are in a way detached from the outside culture or in Atkinson's terms "big culture" (Atkinson, 2004) and where no formal education in any kind of writing is provided appear to have large-scale implications for a deeper understanding of the processes that lead to products worth publishing.

Within the field of second language writing, a shift of focus from contrastive rhetoric research (e.g. Vieira, 2005) to more inter-and intra-cultural and context and genre-based research (e.g. Suzuki, 2006; Vinyard, 2006; Zhu, 2006) is apparent (Hyland, 2003; Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland and Warschauer, 2003). Connor (2004: p. 292) proposes some new methods for intercultural rhetoric research, asserting that there is a need for reexamination of methods of intercultural rhetoric. Drawing on Atkinson's model of culture for contrastive rhetoric, Connor claims that "complexly interacting small cultures in any educational or other intercultural situation" should be considered. Her suggestion to focus on the processes that lead to the products rather than the products themselves points to a noteworthy shift of focus in intercultural research and forms the most crucial basis for this study. She also highlights the importance of ethnographic approaches, pointing at the increasing awareness of the social nature of discourse and maintaining that such research has a great value "especially when corpora are collected in L1, as well as in English as a second language" (p. 300-301). Kaplan and Grabe (2002:216) emphasize that "it is increasingly necessary to take account of texts written in English by non-native English speakers." This also justifies the method of both corpora selection process and the process of interviewing the participants taken as cases in this study.

In her study on four bilingual Japanese academics Casanave (1998) analyzes how the participants establish identities as academicians in two different languages and environments and the role of writing in their lives. Through interviews that she carries out during and after the process of writing research

articles she finds out that contrary to the assumption that "the interactions that most profoundly shape professional evolution in academic settings are local" the participants interact with many people all over the world. Casanave studies the transition that the Japanese scholars with a US-background undergo after they return to Japan. However, she does not focus on the participants' rhetorical strategies and motives during the writing process. Worth seeing is also Cotteral and Cohen's (2003) analysis on supportive conditions, extending current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence, extensive group and one-to-one talk about writing, autonomy and authentic experience of producing an academic essay. Also worth mentioning here is Johns et al. (2006)'s commentaries on genre analysis and context. Scrutinizing the social and situational context and motives of Turkish academicians that have published articles in Turkish and English journals will provide us with a better understanding of writing conventions of non-native speakers of English that cannot be taken as bilinguals.

Following Connor's (2004) and Kaplan's (2002) suggestions and drawing some insights from Casanave's study of bilingual non-native speakers of English, we aim to analyze the processes non-native speakers of English that cannot be taken as bilinguals undergo while writing research articles (RA) and striving to get them published. Certainly not every academician in Turkey holds degrees by US- or UK-based universities, yet it is a prerequisite to get published in indexed journals to get a tenure position at Turkish universities. Getting published in indexed journals is a rather long and challenging process even for scholars that have a US or UK background. However, this process is much more difficult and demanding for those who have no such background and who have had no formal education in writing of any kind (Cargill & O'Connor, 2006; Cheng, 2006). Despite such difficulties and shortcomings, scholars working in the fields of science, engineering or medicine produce and publish more works when compared to those working in the field of social sciences. This seems to be the case not only in Turkey but also in other countries and there must be many reasons for this, disproportion of number of indexed journals being only one of the reasons. Assumptions and beliefs that underlie rhetorical conventions or textual features, techniques of argument (Liu, 2005), writing conventions of non-native academics, differences between languages and the effect of culture are assumed to be some of other factors that lead to the difference (Noor, 2001).

In 2005 Turkey was the 19th in 190 countries with 15666 articles published in journals covered by SCI, whereas it was the 25th in 159 countries with only 682 articles published in SSCI journals. Therefore, we will focus on the cause or causes that bring about such a difference in the number of published works in these broad fields and try to gain insight about the reasons behind such an imbalance of number. It may prove worthwhile to study published texts written by non-native and non-bilingual physicists and civil engineers and the processes that lead to the publication of the texts.

II. SETTING

A scholar in any field of science must have at least one paper published in an indexed journal in order to get a position of non-tenured assistant professor in a university in Turkey. As most indexed journals are published in English-speaking countries, scholars have to write their papers in English (Tardy, 2004; Belcher, 2007). Several good articles are needed to have a position of tenured associate professor in both basic and social sciences. The number of articles and/or books required changes from field to field, but no matter what the number is, it is a prerequisite for applying to associate professorship. A high number of good articles are not a guarantee for getting the position, for there are other requirements such as passing a foreign language test and presenting a colloquium in the presence of the elective board. Although the number of good publications is not sufficient to satisfy all the conditions, it is an important factor especially in science and engineering; that is in "hard sciences".

These facts seem to have caused a disproportion in the number of articles published in indexed journals by Turkish scholars in different fields. In 2005, Turkish scientists published 15666 articles in journals covered by Science Citation Index (SCI) (Turkish Academic Network and Information Center [ULAKBIM], n.d.). This means that Turkey is the 19th country in terms of scientific publications output in "hard sciences". The number of articles published by Turkish scientists in journals covered by Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) was 682 and only 64 articles were published in journals covered by Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) in the same year. This gives Turkey a ranking of 25 in social sciences and 35 in arts and humanities. University of Gaziantep, where this study was carried out, was listed as the 40th out of 71 universities in Turkey with 166 articles in journals covered by SCI, the 66th with only 2 articles in journals covered by SSCI. In 2005, University of Gaziantep had no articles published in journals covered by A&HCI. See Table 1 for further details about number of articles published by Turkish universities in recent years.

Table 1 Number of articles published by Turkish universities in indexed journals over the last three years

Year	All Turkish Universities			University of Gaziantep		
	SCI	SSCI	A&HCI	SCI	SSCI	A&HCI
2004	13882	552	71	209	3	0
2005	15666	682	64	166	2	0
2006[1]	3363	62	19	59	2	0

Source: http://www.yok.gov.tr/content/view/320/118/lang.tr_TR/ Retrieved 21 October 2009.

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[1] Until May, 2006

Certainly, there must have been many reasons for such a disproportion of ranking of Turkey in terms of articles published in the fields of science and engineering on one hand and in social sciences and arts and humanities on the other and analyzing all reasons or factors would exceed the limits of this study. Nevertheless, studying the stories of writing research articles by Turkish scholars that have published their papers in journals covered by SCI may shed some light on this issue of imbalance and enable us to spell out some implications for writing conventions of Turkish scientists. Interviewing four Turkish academics that work in the field of social sciences and that have no articles published in indexed English journals and analyzing their views about the factors that hinder them will also shed some light upon the issue. This will also serve as a triangulation tool and enable us to compare views of the two groups to reach sound conclusions.

III. PARTICIPANTS

All eight participants in this study worked on Kilis Campus of University of Gaziantep and four of them (two physicists and two civil engineers) were the only scientists on the campus that had articles published in indexed journals. They all had positions of non-tenured assistant professor. Another common characteristic was that all of them had their BS, MS and PhD degrees from Turkish universities. That is, none of them had any kind of US- or UK-based education background and all of them were self-taught in terms of writing research articles. Dr. Aksoy[2] and Dr. Deniz were physicists and Dr. Mutlu and Dr. Yavuz were civil engineers. As for the participants from the field of humanities and social sciences, there was a sociologist (Dr. Hazar), an educational scientist (Dr. Sahin), a historian (Dr. Er) and a linguist (Dr. Tas). None of the participants in this group had an education background in Anglophone countries, either. As it is a prerequisite in Turkey to pass University Language Exam (ÜDS) before getting the position of non-tenured assistant professor, all participants were assumed to have a good command of English, at least good enough to read and write. The researcher has been working on the same campus as an instructor of English for over five years and has provided some help with the proofreading of article drafts written by participants to be published in indexed journals. Thus, he had the opportunity to observe some of the processes they went through and the strategies they adopted while writing research articles.

IV. ASSUMPTIONS

A common assumption in the setting of this study is that writing research articles in any field of science and engineering is relatively easy when compared to humanities and social sciences. Most social scientists on both main campus of University of Gaziantep and Kilis Campus believe that science and engineering articles have a fixed set of rules and that writing such articles is nothing more than a

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[2]All names are pseudonyms.

mechanical process. To put it more precisely, it is assumed that all researchers in various fields of science and engineering use similar structures and sentences to report literature, relate the aim of the study, narrate the method and the applications and finally summarize the findings. Such assumptions are apparent and usually overtly articulated, for this issue has long been causing much dispute among scholars belonging to different disciplines. Analyzing both the published articles by physicists and civil engineers and the processes whereby they are written and get published, we will try to draw some conclusions and implications as to whether or not these assumptions are justified.

V. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Taped interviews[3] and analyses of articles published in indexed journals and the processes they went through till publication form primary data sources for this study. The interview guide we prepared for semi-structured interviews is mainly geared to probing the soundness of above-mentioned assumptions. Our previous observation of the writing process also guided us in setting the guidelines for the interviews. The interview guidelines were grouped together under three headings so as to cover issues relevant to the objectives of the study and facilitate evaluations, comments and discussions on findings. Thus, the first part of interviews focused on general educational background of the participants. The second part covered the process of writing research articles and the third part was designed to analyze the participants' views of and experiences in the process of getting published (see Appendix). Certainly, the overall structure and interview items were different for academics working in the field of humanities and social sciences. For example, as they had no articles published in indexed journals, items concerning writing in English and the publication process were removed for convenience.

VI. THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Learning to Write

None of the participants had any kind of formal education in any form of writing. Dr. Deniz stated that he had read and was still reading a lot of articles before writing a research article (RA). In fact, reading a lot of articles and thus learning to make similar sentences in their own writing was a common practice of all four participants from the field of science and engineering. Dr. Mutlu said he did some translation work to prepare for an exam and reported that translation improved his writing skill. He also asserted that he had some interest in literary texts and that, therefore, writing was an enjoyable task for him. Dr. Aksoy had read and studied two books about academic writing, but he had learnt writing RA's by reading RA's and analyzing the way ideas were worded in each section. Obviously, they had learnt to write RA's through hands-on experience and they were self taught. This is quite understandable, for almost no formal education in academic

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[3]Interviews were carried out in Turkish.

writing is provided for students in Turkey. Participants from the field of humanities and social sciences asserted that writing was difficult even in Turkish, adding that sometimes it took days to write one or two paragraphs. This also points to the inefficiency of or, to put it more precisely, lack of formal training for writing RAs.

Only Dr. Yavuz had a US background. He noted that he had stayed in the US for four months and studied as a research scholar at a university in Iowa. However, he asserted that he had no formal writing instruction.

Preference of Language

Dr. Mutlu was regretful for having had to write his articles in English. He said it would be easier for him to write in his mother tongue. Dr. Aksoy was also of the opinion that he could write better in Turkish. On the contrary and rather interestingly, Dr. Deniz claimed that he was more at ease with English while writing his articles, adding that writing in English had become "a habit" for him. With this, we presume, he meant English had become a part of his academic life. His ideas were noteworthy in that he said "he felt it was scientific only when he wrote an article in English". Although Dr. Yavuz accepted that it would be easier to write in Turkish, he pointed out that it was crucial for scientists to write in English. This opinion was also invariably shared by other participants. All participants believed they had to write in English because of factors such as the criteria for the position of tenure associate professorship, grants provided by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) for each article published in indexed journals and the unrivaled dominance of English in the research world. This means that social sciences academics that participated in the study were aware of the importance of writing in English. However, they found it difficult to write and actually they had never tried to write an article in English. It is quite obvious that motivation and command of English as a second language are not main hindering factors. Details of the interviews and the observation process enable us to suggest that insufficient knowledge of techniques entailed in writing RAs and the belief that it is almost impossible to get published in mainstream Anglophone journals are some of the most important inhibiting factors.

Writing Strategies

The two physicists and two civil engineers emphasized that they wrote their articles directly in English, that is, they did not write them first in Turkish to be later translated into English. They did not also have native speaker help, except Dr. Yavuz, who had once had help from one of his friends he had met at a university in Iowa. They sometimes asked, they said, their friends whom they believed to have a good command of English to do the proofreading of their papers. They all verified that the introduction, literature and methodology sections of research articles in their field of study had a fixed language and that they adopted most commonly used sentences in their own writing with slight changes. On the other hand, they established that they had to make their own sentences when discussing the findings,

making comments and/or writing the conclusion. Therefore, they invariably found introduction, literature and methodology sections of their papers to be the easiest and discussion and conclusion sections to be the hardest to write.

Dr. Deniz stressed that he did not believe writing research articles was a mechanical process, despite the fact that he admitted to have sometimes paraphrased some reporting sentences or adopted some phrases from other articles published earlier. He also accepted that he frequently searched for some particular phrases via Google to see whether or not such phrases were used in any resources. Although not overtly stated, other three participants from the fields of science and engineering also implied that they had sometimes borrowed sentences and phrases from other sources. This can be taken as something like "borrowing some language tools" and is not, we presume, plagiarism. This is something like looking up words in dictionaries and sentences in grammar books without mentioning any names as reference. Sentences or phrases they borrow are just sets of words that can be used in different contexts and with different content. Borrowings concerning content are of course cited and acknowledged as references (See also Koo, 2006; Keck, 2006; Shi, 2004).

Frequent cases of metaconversations (McMillen & Hill, 2006) among physicists and civil engineers seem to have affected the process of writing RAs, a characteristic not observed with participants from the fields of humanities and social sciences. They usually cooperated with their colleagues (See also Li, 2006) and talked about technical issues concerning their research, which was mostly unintelligible to outsiders.

Getting Published

Obviously the process of getting published was long and tedious in fields of both civil engineering and physics. Dr. Deniz said that it took him three and a half months to get his article published in a good indexed journal in the field of solid state physics. However, other participants argued that it took on average one year to get a paper published.

They admitted that they had many journals in their field of study and that they chose journals that best suited to the quality and content of their articles. Dr. Aksoy had two papers that were rejected and Dr. Mutlu and Dr. Yavuz had one each. Answering the question concerning the reasons for rejection, Dr. Aksoy explained that one of his articles was rejected because its subject was not up-to-date and the other was rejected because one of referees wanted him to "further prove" his claims. Dr. Mutlu's article was not published because it did not conform to the format requirements of the journal. Dr. Mutlu said that that article was published in another journal. The reason for the rejection of Dr. Yavuz's article was that he refused to do the alterations related to the experimental design of the study as was demanded by referees.

Interview questions related to the publication process were modified for participants from the field of humanities and social sciences and they were asked about the getting their articles published in Turkish journals. They all agreed that it took long time and much effort, asserting that it usually took one or two years to get published in a Turkish journal. Interestingly enough, Dr. Hazar claimed that some scholars get their work published through personal contacts and phone calls to friends that might be in the position of gatekeeping. Not surprisingly, Dr. Sahin was the only academician in this group that had a rejected paper and the cause of rejection was "inaccurate statistical analysis", which he believed to be the referee's fallacy and therefore refused to revise.

Reviewers' Comments

Transcription of participants' answers to the question concerning the focus of referees' comments revealed that what interested reviewers most was content and format of articles, and not the language. Participants did have some feedback concerning language, but they were quite insignificant. They acknowledged that referees pointed to grammatical errors or misspellings usually in only one sentence. Indeed, analyzing reviewers' comments sent to the participants of this study I found out that only one sentence was about grammatical errors or misspellings. Some examples from reviewers' comments are as follows:

"There are some miss-spelling errors to be corrected."

"Is the five digit really effective? There are some miss-spelling errors to be corrected."

"The overall paper is well-written."

"The English of the paper needs to be improved throughout the manuscript."

Here is a tabulated account of the themes emerged from the interviews and the observation process (Table 2):

Table 2 An overall account of the themes emerged from the interviews and the observation process

	science and engineering	social sciences
Learning to Write	no formal training; hands-on experience, reading articles	no formal training, no writing experience in English
Language Preference	English; for pragmatic reasons	Turkish; for political reasons
Writing Strategies	paraphrasing, borrowing, revising, proofreading	No observable strategies
Getting Published	X submissions to English-medium journals; X rejections	No submissions to English-medium journals
Reviewers' Comments	Usually only one sentence about grammar and spelling check	Usually content-related comments from referees of Turkish journals

VII. A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED BY PARTICIPANTS

We analyzed the results and discussion sections of RAs published by the participants in English indexed journals to see whether or not there were any traces of interaction between the writer and the reader or "reader in the text" (Thompson, 2001; Hyland, 2002). Existence of words or structures pertaining to such a theme would, we assumed, show participants' command over English as foreign language. It would also provide us with an answer to the question whether or not participants' RAs in the fields of physics and civil engineering had pre-set structures or inflexible writing conventions.

Not surprisingly, we found no instances of such interaction with the reader or the scientific community. Actually, the results and discussion section of published articles contained no words or sentences that could be taken as pertaining to "discussion". The "results and discussion" subtitle seemed to be borrowed from similar research in the field and overused without fully understanding what it entailed. An abundance of passive sentences like the following was easily observable:

"...x obtained from the specimen is shown in Figure x with indexed peaks."

"The lines observed in the x was identified as x and γ austenite phase reflections and indexed on the x base respectively."

"X which were observed by SEM…"

"The specimen prepared for bending test have been induced…"

As far as participants of this study, who had their articles published in indexed English journals, are concerned, the assumption and common belief that "science and engineering articles have a fixed set of rules and that writing such articles is nothing more than a mechanical process" proved to be justified.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

All participants had similar stories concerning their education background, the strategies they used during the writing process and the feedback they got from reviewers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to make broad generalizations, because each participant had his own reality that was formed by many uncontrollable factors. Although it is difficult to make generalizations, it seems possible to infer that some useful techniques such as searching via Google for the way some expressions are used by native speakers and collecting practical sentences and clauses from the literature for future use have successfully been adopted by non-native speakers of English. All four participants from the fields of science and civil engineering had articles that were published in indexed journals despite the fact that all participants but one did not have a background of any English-speaking country and none of them had any kind of formal instruction in writing RAs. Obviously factors such as their high motivation due to requirements for getting tenure position of associate professorship and the strategies they had developed to write RAs had balanced their disadvantages of being non-native. Therefore, it seems that Tychinin and Kamnev's (2005) claim that "authors with a limited knowledge of English find it difficult to compete with their proficient colleagues." is not always justified for fields of science such as civil engineering and physics. As was mentioned by the participants, technical language of RAs in these fields, use of tables, charts and diagrams and the universal language of mathematics are among the factors that obliterate disadvantages entailed in being non-native.

Appendix
Guidelines for the Interviews
1. Background
   - MS/PhD degrees? Where, when, subject?
   - Projects? When? In what language/s?
   - Number of published articles? Turkish? English?
   - Conferences in Turkey? How often? Language/s spoken at conferences?
   - Conferences outside Turkey? How often? Languages spoken?
   - Length of time living abroad? When? Purposes?
   - Language learning background?
   - Any formal writing education?
   - Any education in writing research articles?
2. Process of Writing Research Articles
   - Source of motivation for writing articles in English?

- Strategies adopted while writing in English? Translation, paraphrase, redrafting, native speaker help, etc.?
- Challenging aspects of writing research articles in English?
- Rhetorical concerns while writing articles in English?
- The most easily written section of articles? In English? In Turkish?
- The most challenging section of articles? In English? In Turkish?
- The most time consuming aspect of writing a research article? In English? In Turkish?
- Preference of language if there were not any requirements or obligations? Reasons?

3. The Process of Getting Published
- Journal selection?
- Rejected articles? Reasons?
- Length of time it takes to get an article published?
- Main focus of reviewers' comments?
- Reviews and comments concerning language use?
- Personal views on reasons for publishing more articles in "hard sciences" than in humanities and social sciences?

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