

Osmangazi Journal of Educational Research Volume 10 (Special Issue) 2023

100th Anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye



RESEARCH

Open Access

Suggested Citation: Bayraktar, A., & Acar, E. (2023). Personal writing activity: Investigation of students' oldest childhood recollections. *Osmangazi Journal of Educational Research*, 10(Special Issue), 1-14.

Submitted: 25/03/2023 **Revised:** 17/10/2023 **Accepted:** 20/10/2023 **DOI:** 10.59409/ojer.1270780

Personal Writing Activity: Investigation of Students' Oldest Childhood Recollections

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Abstract. The personal writing genre can provide valuable space for students to start from what they know best, themselves. In this qualitative study, middle school students' earliest memories and the kinds of remembered memories were tried to be investigated. Students' earliest memories were analysed based on their written personal writings. In addition, how well students remembered the names of the objects shown to them in a short time was analysed. Thus, the study also aimed to investigate which objects were remembered by students in a quick learning activity. The participants of the study were 21 struggling middle school students participated into a summer project titled as "Let's Discover Our Thoughts: What Do I Know and How Do I Use My Knowledge?" Data was collected from students' writings reflecting their earliest memories and lists of remembered items' names. The study's findings yielded that the most remembered feeling was being sad. Other reflected emotions were feeling happy, embarrassed, and tired. Analyses of the data also showed that the most remembered items were oranges, playing cards, and lemons. According to the used memorization test, among struggling middle school students only two students had good memorization skills.

Keywords. Personal writing activity, childhood recollections, children's visual memory.

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Writing plays an important role on students' academic achievement. Through effective writing skills, students not only express their learning but also have chances to communicate their feelings, ideas, desires, and experiences. In this sense, personal writing genre can provide valuable space for students to start from what they know the best, themselves. Additionally, even though it helps to encourage students composing freely and eagerly, personal writing as a genre is a neglected one in English classes. Gardner (2018) argues that since teachers do not feel comfortable about teaching writing and do not see themselves as writers, they usually ignore teaching it in their curriculum and focus teaching grammar instead. However, Gardner emphasizes that personal writing helps students to see themselves as writers and got engaged in this genre.

Personal writing activities encourage students to improve their writing skills by also highlighting important phases of their lives. In their case study, Li and Deng (2019) found out that struggling Chinese college students worked on finding out similarities and differences while composing their own life experiences and increased their academic writing skills. In a similar study, Griffith (2018) saw that eight grade students were able to compose successful texts after they wrote several personal writing topics in which they included dialogue and action. Through in-depth interview, the author found out that students who composed successful personal entries reconsidered and re-contextualized their past experiences during the pre-writing stage then shared their texts to gain peer feedback. Furthermore, reading and providing feedback about someone's experiences helps establishing a friendly environment in the learning community. Thus, student writers can practice and learn to be open, honest, and respectful (Martinviita, 2016).

Personal journals or entries allow students to see how their language and expressions affect their classmates. Additionally, having personal entries "suggested new writing possibilities to the students" (Fulwiler, 1982, p. 25). Fulwiler (1982) also stated that when students share their entries with each other they not only learn about others' experiences but also, they can work on peer education by giving feedback to each other. Pytash (2016) also emphasized that being able to write freely and explain their emotions helped adolescent students who had been suspended from school several times.

In this study, the author recommended educators to provide time for personal writing activities since these activities help students to cope with daily stress, to use it as a tool to communicate with others, and to develop their voices. Thus, for all these reasons personal writing was recommended to be used in language arts curriculum. For this reason, the purpose of this study

was to see if children could express and share their childhood memories when they were encouraged to compose and given the opportunity to write about their previous experiences. Thus, researchers tried to determine the nature of the earliest memories of students. To motivate students to start writing, students were also asked to be involved in a memory game. By allowing them to participate into this game the researchers wanted students to be relaxed and feel comfortable. In such a small competition students became more familiar to each other, laughed a lot, started to share their ideas and strategies to remember certain objects and which objects were more meaningful to them. In other words, they became better prepared to freely express their earliest memories in written entries. Thus, the second objective of the study was to investigate which objects were remembered by students in a quick learning activity. Therefore, the below questions were the research questions of the study:

1. What is the content/subject of students' earliest memories that they can remember?
2. Which objects were remembered the most by the students?

Method

Research Model

In the study in which document analysis was used as a method, students' earliest memories and the kinds of these remembered memories are tried to be investigated. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis examines and interprets data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007; cited in Bowen, 2009). Document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies, which are intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, or event when it is used as a research method (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994; cited in Bowen, 2009). Studies investigating the quality of an interaction, event, action, a condition or material are accepted as the qualitative research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Study Group

The participants of the study were composed of 21 at-risk middle school students participating in a summer camp for 10 days in summer season. Even though these students were in middle school they were specifically chosen because of their low academic achievement in reading and language arts. Students' grades showed that they were behind their peers in terms of their reading and writing performances. Shortly, their reading performances were in line with elementary

school students. The study is part of a TÜBİTAK project which was implemented to improve students' academic/non-academic knowledge and skills and aimed at thinking training. Half of the participating students are children living in 'Love Houses' established under the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. These children were recommended by an expert who knows them well and is experienced in the institution and was approved by the institution administrators.

Thus, the participants were struggling writers who resisted composing during a summer learning camp, as one of the out-of-school learning activities.

Data Collection Tools

Data of the study was collected through participating students' personal writing texts and testing memory worksheet used during the memory game, which was taken from the book titled as "Brainbox" written by Steven Rose and Alexander Lichtenfels, during the summer project titled as "Let's Discover Our Thoughts: What Do I Know and How Do I Use My Knowledge?".

Process

In this study, disadvantaged middle school students tried to be motivated to compose their childhood memories. To follow this aim, the visuals coming from a book titled as "Brainbox" which was written by Steven Rose and Alexander Lichtenfels, and a writing activity were used.

Students' earliest memories were investigated based on their written personal writings. Then, the students' expressions were analysed descriptively. Apart from the documents, some sources such as participant or non-participant observation, and physical artefacts (Yin, 1994) (objects in this study) were used to understand the students' expressions. The less structured literature, such as reports and internal correspondence, is a potential source of empirical data for case studies; for example, data on the context within which the participant operates (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; cited in Bowen, 2009).

In order to ensure the students were familiar with the targeted vocabulary, prior to the task, the researcher reviewed each item. During the data collection period, a worksheet with 20 objects was reflected on the board for students to look at for a minute.

Then, the researchers removed the reflected page and asked students to list as many numbers as the objects they remembered. Reflected objects were coins, clothes pins, electrical cables, keys, hazelnut, safety pin, brush, paint, rubber band, pill, feather, playing cards, seashells, lemon, oranges, leaves, crayons, buttons, sea stars, and match. The objects that children encounter every

day or encounter more frequently in their lives were chosen because it was essential for them not to be forced during the warm-up activity and to be motivated for the actual work.

The used visual was given below:

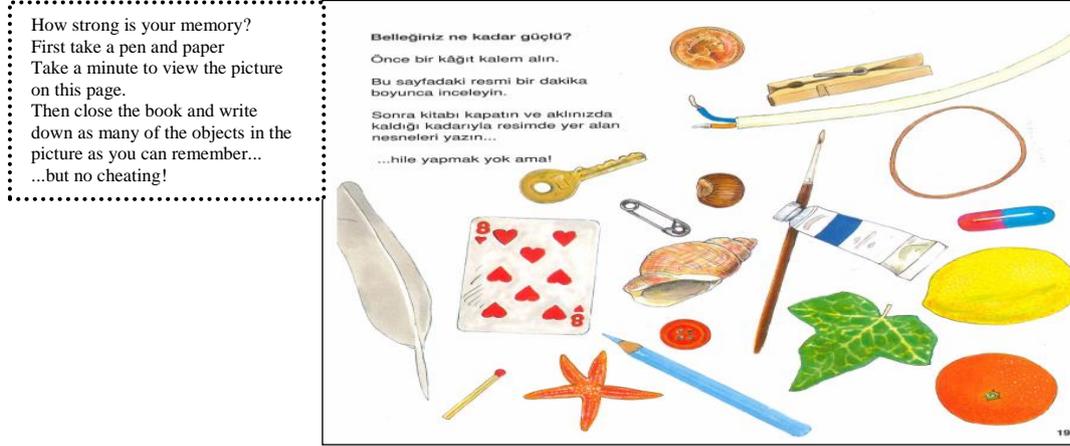


Figure 1. Reflected Page.

Later, students were asked to write about their earliest memories. They were instructed to try to remember an experience and write about that event. According to Alvarez and Cavanagh (2004), one feature (e.g., colour or orientation) of up to four objects can be stored. Even two or four features for up to approximately the same limit and four objects are remembered. Luck and Vogel's claims emphasize that the capacity of visual short-term memory is set in terms of the number of objects that can be stored, and not the number of features as well (Alvarez and Cavanagh, 2004).

Data Analysis

Since the data of the study was obtained through the written personal writings and listed remembered words, the collected data was analysed through the document analysis method (Krippendorff, 2004). In document analysis, like other qualitative analytical methods, data is examined and interpreted to interpret and elicit meaning, gain understanding and also develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007; cited in Bowen, 2009). The written resources about events and phenomenon are investigated and analysed. The analytic procedure entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents. Document analysis yields data—excerpts, quotations, or entire passages—that are then organised into major themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003).

While analysing the data, first, a framework based on the research questions for data analysis was created. According to this framework, researchers determined under in which sub-categories data can be coded.

Later, collected data was read several times and coded under the related themes. Both researchers checked whether expressed memories were listed under the correct sub-categories or not. Data were evaluated after reaching a full consensus between the researchers. Each participating student (S) was labelled by a number (i.e., "S1" refers to the first participating student).

In the many research, overall, children's understanding of emotions has been reduced to their understanding of stereotypic situations that usually accompany certain emotions (Barden, Zelko, Duncan, & Masters, 1980; Fabes, Eisenberg, McCormick & Wilson, 1988; Gnepp, McKee & Domanic, 1987; Green, 1977; Harris, 1983; cited in Hadwin & Perner, 1991). In this study, the children's responses were scored to the type of emotions in the matching visuals. Stotsky (1995) also explained that shifting the concentration from reference books and textbooks to students' beliefs and feelings is important and necessary when teaching them language arts courses. For all these reasons, educators should be reminded that personal writing activities can encourage resisting and struggling students to talk about themselves, their likes, dislikes and memories. It allows students to write about the topics they know the best. Thus, it can eventually increase students' writing skills and fluency. Additionally, personal writing can be therapy for struggling students especially if they have chances to share and listen to each other's similar and different experiences.

The personal writings were coded under four themes, and their written memories were coded under subcategories including sad, happy, tired, and embarrassed memories. One student's written text did not reflect any emotions. Thus, that paper was coded as neutral and the remaining 20 papers were analysed.

Results

Overlapping with the purpose of this study, the first analysis results were about the children's expressions of their childhood memories. Researchers tried to determine the nature of the earliest memories of students. According to the analysis results, in which the students' personal writings were coded under four themes, the children's expressed emotions were stated. Only one student's written text did not reflect any emotions. To the analysis, while the most expressed emotion was 'feeling sad', the status statement only expressed once was 'being tired', which is not an emotion. The remaining 20 papers were listed at Table 1.

Table 1.

Kinds of Stated Emotions in Students' Personal Writings

| Kinds of stated emotions | (f) |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Sad | 12 |
| Happy | 5 |
| Embarrassed | 2 |
| Tired | 1 |

As seen at Table 1, 12 students' written memory was about being sad. Other reflected emotions (and a statement) were feeling; happy (f=5), embarrassed (n=2), and tired (f=1). According to Table 1, the mostly remembered feeling was being sad. The emotion of feeling sad was described under four sub-categories. These sub-categories are having pain-crying, having an accident, making a mistake, and feeling scared-anxious. The kinds and frequencies of reflected sad feelings were given at Table 2.

Table 2.

Sub-categories of Feeling Sad in Students' Personal Writings

| Sub-categories of Feeling Sad | (f) |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Having pain-crying | 6 |
| Having an accident | 3 |
| Making a mistake | 2 |
| Feeling scared-anxious | 1 |

The emotion of happy also had four sub-categories. These categories are being excited, being persistent, having fun, and being secretive as listed at Table 3.

Table 3.

Sub-categories of Feeling Happy in Students' Personal Writings

| Sub-categories of Feeling Happy | (f) |
|--|------------|
| Being persistent | 2 |
| Being excited | 1 |
| Having fun | 1 |
| Being secretive | 1 |

The second objective of the study was to investigate which objects were remembered by students in a quick learning activity. Analyses of the data showed that the mostly remembered item was orange (f=19). The second mostly remembered item was playing card (f=17), the third one was lemon (f=15). The item that was remembered the least was hazelnut (f=2). According to the used memorization test the students remembered 15 or more objects have a good memorization. In this study only two students remembered 15 or more items (15 and 16 items remembered). Majority of the students could list 6 to 10 items (n=13). Only one student remembered less than five items (the total of two items).

Even though the researchers expected that the students who remembered the most number of objects could remember their earliest childhood memories easily, the students with the highest number of remembered objects could remember their childhood memory took place when they were seven years old. On the other hand, the students with the lowest number of remembered object (two objects) could write about a memory belongs to his/her fifth year. The earliest written memories occurred when students were three years old. Two students could remember their memories that belong to their age three. One of these students could remember seven items while the other students remembered eleven items from the memory test.

Discussion and Conclusion

The whole document analysis done in the study showed that the emotions being able to express in the writings is related with the students' very simple life experiences, feeling sad, happy and embarrassed. Also, we can figure out that some students are not aware of their emotions or cannot define them, because 'being tired' is not an emotion otherwise it is a physical or mental condition felt because of an activity. 'Being sad' is the most remembered emotion, so it is the most

permanent one. When we examined the sub-categories of this emotion, we saw that it had felt at the end of a bad event or a mistake (having pain-crying $f=6$, having an accident $f=3$, making a mistake $f=2$, and feeling scared-anxious $f=1$). With this logic, it can be said that negative, bad events and mistakes made more permanent traces and easy to remember. When good and bad are presented equally, the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh those of the good ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).

More than half of the students wrote about their sad memories as the earliest personal memory they remembered. Ruggles Gere (2001) argued that when students are asked to compose a personal writing, they feel that instead of focusing their word choice and expression, they concern that they need to write a dramatic event in their lives because they feel that they can gain higher scores with entries which have the most drama in. This might be one of the reasons for these participating middle school students to mainly focusing on their sad memories. Also, as Morgan (1998) stated, teaching content area knowledge is not the only responsibility teachers have, they also need to conform and support their students. Through reading their personal entries and providing them feedback or by simply listening to their memories teachers can provide informal counselling. The students also preferred to write about their happy experiences under four sub-categories, being excited, being persistent, having fun and being secretive. Interestingly, these categories contain another emotion (feeling excited), such behaviours (being persistent and secretive) are an activity. Therefore, we can see the students have some problems on defining their emotions.

At the beginning of the project, the participating students were asked to do different writing activities and tasks. From time-to-time students were resisting writing or sharing their texts. Through personal writing task, as the data collection tool for this study, the students seemed more motivated to compose and share their memories. Richardson (2001) stated that the meaning writers create for their lives connect them to others. In this study, a similar experience was observed and students became more connected to their peers through their memories. Students in this study not only learned about from each other but they also realised how they could write easily when it came to focus on their memories. After experienced composing personal writing, Banks (2003) showed disappointment for not composing personal texts before and wasting all those years. Participating students' personal entries show how undeveloped their texts were. Higgins and Brush (2006) also recommended using personal writing activities especially with writers whom texts are under elaborated or disconnected. The researchers also provided some suggestions to teach students to increase their personal writing skills. Some of their recommendations are asking students to use

descriptive images and details, to explain reasons of their certain behaviours and to include dialogue so listeners or readers can see the whole picture. One of the reasons for having these less successful texts might be students having not enough instruction on how to develop their written personal entries.

According to another objective of the study, the objects remembered by students in the applied learning activity were determined to understand the nature of the earliest memories of students. It was seen that 'orange' (f=19), 'lemon' (f=15) and 'playing card' (f=17) were the mostly remembered objects from the visual cards presented to them. The least remembered object was hazelnut (f=2). Children's recall levels were determined in direct proportion to the number of objects recalled, after the used memorization test applied to them. According to the test evaluation criteria, remembering 15 or more objects is a good indicator of memorization. According to the research (Luck & Vogel, 1997; Vogel, Woodman & Luck, 2001), visual short-term memory is limited by the number of objects that can be stored, independently of the number of features probed for each object (Alvarez & Cavanagh, 2004). In this study, only two students' remembering 15 or more objects, give the impression that most of the students (n=13) lack the ability to code the objects shown to them by matching their emotions and experiences (they just could list 6 to 10 objects).

Fulwiler (1982) argued that since personal or journal writing seem too personal or informal majority of teachers prefer not to use them in their courses. Additionally, the author stated that some other reasons of not using this kind of writing activities is teachers do not know how to measure students' skills in personal writing or simply see these activities as waste of their time. Connor (1987) argued that asking students to compose on non-personal specific subjects was criticized in the past however, nowadays we may still see teachers asking students to write compositions in which they explain the meaning of proverbs and idioms (Aslan, 2010). On the other hand, Whitney (2009) highlighted the connection between personal and more formal writing called as professional writing by stating "personal writing has frequently been considered as a precursor to professional writing or to the essay" (p. 238). Williams Mlynarczyk (2006) also supported this view by stating "all students- and especially basic writers- need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse." (p. 4).

In this study, middle school students' earliest memories and the kinds of remembered memories were investigated. Then, their personal writings were analysed to see earliest memories.

As a result of the study, the visual objects helped children remember their earliest memories and uncover their feelings related to the objects. The most remembered feeling was being sad. Other reflected emotions were feeling happy, embarrassed, and tired while the most remembered items were oranges, playing cards, and lemons. Additionally, the used memorization test results showed that among struggling middle school students only two students had good memorization skills.

Recommendations

The data of this study are limited to the personal writings of secondary school students who stay as boarders in a social institution under state protection in Aydın province and are nominated for additional education programs due to their low academic success. In other words, students in this study were struggling and at-risk students. Further studies can also include struggling students to increase their writing skills through letting them to be involved in personal writing activities. As Connor (1987) stated probably “Write what you know” has been the most common recommendation given to students (p. 179). In future studies, researchers can investigate mainstream students’ personal writing texts as well. In those studies, students can have more time to compose their texts and have opportunities to share their memories to get to know their classmates better. Furthermore, being exposed to others’ feelings and memories students can realize that they are not the only ones going through certain things in their lives and they can reduce the feeling of loneliness in the World (Ruggles Gere, 2001).

In this research, only the personal writings of at-risk students were examined as a connected text. In future studies, using other types of written texts by students as data collecting tools, such as stories, poems, and informative texts, can also be suggested. Additionally, the duration of the research can be kept longer by giving students feedback on what they have written, so that they can create many drafts in the process and learn to write more effectively. The duration of the training program that students attend is limited to one week. Therefore, events and training contents were planned intensively. Longer-term training events can be organized to monitor students’ development. In other words, researchers can design studies to collect data over a longer period longitudinally. Struggling students can take risks in a safe and friendly environment. To create such a learning environment, teachers should teach and use personal writing in groups/classrooms to celebrate students’ uniqueness, habits and skills. Thus, they can create an accepting learning environment. Being experienced on personal writing can encourage students to develop their writing skills in other genres including expository and persuasive writing as well.

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Conflict of Interest

It has been reported by the authors that 'There is no conflict of interest'.

Funding

Funding was received by TÜBİTAK in the scope of 4004 Nature Education and Science Schools Program with the project number '117B177'. This study is just a little part of this project.

Ethical Standards

There is ethics committee approval for this research.

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