



## **EFFECTS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND GENDER ON TEST RESULTS OF UNDERLINING**

### **YABANCI DİL BİLGİSİ VE CİNSİYETİN ALT ÇİZME SINAV SONUÇLARINA ETKİSİ**

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#### **Abstract**

Research has shown that freshmen at universities suffer from reading assignment as they cannot decide what to read without help. This study had a mixed design in which quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to find out expository text underlining skills of 107 university students from two departments with respect to department and gender. After the underlining skill test, an interview was given to 20 students from the two departments. Quantitative research showed that foreign language competence significantly contributed to the test scores, but not gender. Findings from the quantitative research were theme-coded and transferred into tables for 20 participants.

**Keywords:** Reading assignment, study strategies, underlining, foreign language, gender

#### **Öz**

Araştırmalar üniversiteye yeni katılan öğrencilerin neyi okumaları gerektiğini bilmediklerinden dolayı okuma ödevlerinde zorlandıklarını göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, yabancı dil bilmenin ve cinsiyetin, üniversite öğrencilerinin metin alt çizme üzerine etkisini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Aynı zamanda, bu konuda yüksek ve düşük notlar alan bazı öğrencilerin okuma ve alt çizme konusundaki görüşleri ile kendilerini birer okur olarak nasıl algıladıkları da araştırılmıştır. Bu amaçla, sınav sonuçlarına göre, her iki bölümden toplam 20 öğrenciden görüşme yoluyla nitel veri toplanmıştır. Nicel araştırma yabancı dil bilgisinin açıklamacı metin alt çizme üzerinde anlamlı bir fark yarattığını göstermiştir. Cinsiyet aynı konuda anlamlı bir belirleyici değildir. Nitel bulgular tema kodlaması ile tablolara aktarılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Okuma ödevi, ders çalışma stratejileri, alt çizme, yabancı dil, cinsiyet

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

When students are asked to read a chapter before coming to class, some do not read the assigned chapter at all, and many others do not know what to read in order to meet the expectations. Clump, Bauer and Bradley (2004) found that only 27.46% of students read the reading assignments before the class. If it is impossible to cover everything in the lectures due to time constraints, reading assignments appear to be of high value for teachers, especially at universities (Afflerbach, 2002). Yip and Chung (2005) state that study strategies and academic performance are closely interrelated

especially in the first year of university education, in which teaching learning strategies and supporting students should be the university policy in order to help students adapt to a new environment (Lindblom-Ylänne, 2004; Simpson & Nist, 2000, 2002). Study skills are highly significant to academic performance as they achieve the tasks thanks to their cognitively active participation in the learning process, direct their own learning (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002) and reduce the cognitive burden (Peveryly, Brobst & Morris, 2002).

Identifying information in text is crucial (Pressley, 2000) and as readers get more aware of the text, they use some useful strategies like underlining and note-taking (Brown & Smiley, 1978; Pressley, 2002; Yüksel & Koşar, 2001). Owing to the fact that not every reader is a good reader, some readers cannot make homework really work for themselves (Culyer, 1996). Therefore, college or university students tend to use underlining (or highlighting) very often without knowing how much they benefit from it. Their primary motive is to structure the text in their simple focusing efforts (Derry, 1988-1989). Students frequently use underlining while studying their textbooks because of its practicality, popularity, no training requirement, and the need for reducing the text (Blanchard & Mikkelson, 1987).

Learning a foreign language is performed consciously and deliberately (Vygotsky 1962), and causes greater cognitive awareness (Hosenfeld, 1978). If it is possible for second language reading competence to have effect on general reading behavior (Carrell, 1989), then transfer of strategies should be looked into. Jimenez, Garcia and Pearson (1996) studied two related languages, Spanish and English and found that successful second language readers use strategies effectively in first language reading as well. As cultural differences result in different strategy use (Padron, 1992) unrelated languages may also do so. Some may hypothesize that students competent in a foreign language will decide better on what to study in a reading assignment. However, English and Turkish are poles apart in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax. It could be interesting to find out if anything is transferred from English to Turkish, that is to say, if competence in English ends up with awareness of study strategies, which will help students better identify information that is worth reading in a text written in Turkish.

The influence of gender on reading comprehension has long been studied and the findings are contradictory (Colom, Contreras, Arend, Leal & Santacreu, 2004). According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) girls are better than boys in overall reading comprehension, but once boys are highly engaged they outperform girls. Brantmeier (2003) found no gender effect on comprehension scores of second language learners. Oxford and Nyikos's (1989) study revealed that female university students use more general study strategies than males. Interest also was found to be significant in reading comprehension and in choice of strategies of males and females (Ainley, Hillman & Hidi, 2002; Bray and Barron, 2003-2004; Carrell & Wise, 1998).

The latest (2006) OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that Turkey has the penultimate place in reading scores among all OECD countries. As PISA tries to

observe young people in using their reading ability in real-life challenges, it is highly critical for Turkish young people to be aware of their own reading behaviors as they carry everything to the university setting where they are confronted with a great deal of reading assignment. Some research has been done in the area of study strategies (Clump, Bauer & Bradley, 2004; Gettinger & Seibert; Lindblom-Ylänne, 2004; Yip & Chung, 2005) in recent years. Research is needed in Turkey in order to obtain insight into the ability of university students in deciding what information is valuable enough to read and also into the possible effects of foreign language knowledge and gender.

The aim of this study is to look into the effects of foreign language knowledge and gender on the scores of an expository text underlining test. It also aims at collecting their opinions about reading, underlining and how they perceive themselves as readers. Detecting to what extent students are able to choose important information in a given text could help university professors and instructors better understand the nature of their reading assignments and what students of different characteristics do with them, so that they could take necessary precautions.

## **2. METHODS**

This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The quantitative part of the study compared underlining test scores of the participants on an expository text in terms of departments and gender. In the qualitative part, 10 participants from each department were interviewed.

### **Participants**

Participants in the quantitative study were 107 freshmen enrolled in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Turkish Language Teaching (TLT) programs at a Turkish urban university. The participants entered the university so as to become teachers in their fields, so they were all potential teachers of English language and Turkish language. The 53 students in the TLT program stated that they did not study English intensively before coming to the university. The 54 students in ELT program were competent in English as a foreign language along with their mother tongue, Turkish. Of the participants, 58 were female and 49 were male students. The age average of the participants was calculated to be 18.6. In the qualitative study, 20 students were the ones chosen from the participants of the quantitative study with regard to their expository text underlining scores. The highest scored 10 were considered to be High Grade participants whereas 10 with the lowest scores to be Low Grade participants.

### **Instruments and Procedure**

For this study, a 719 word piece text on the main properties of qualitative research from a book (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004) was chosen. It was preferred since it was decided by 6 scholars in the field to be slightly beyond the level of the participants and to be similar to the university textbooks in text structure. The chosen text was retyped from the original source modifying the comprehension aids

like italics and underlining. For the assessment of the test scores of the underlining test, a key was developed. For this purpose, the expository text was handed out to 26 professors and instructors at the university and they were asked to underline as many sentences as they thought to be important, with the rationale that Pressley (2002) states well-educated grown-ups somehow become mature in metacognition of strategies. Each sentence was numbered and 13 sentences appeared to be more frequently underlined than the others, thus they were accepted to be the answer key to the test. The participants were told to underline 13 most important sentences in the text, a limitation recommended by Blanchard and Mikkelsen (1987). Scores of 107 participants were calculated on the number of correct sentences underlined. After the underlining test, 10 high scorers (5 from each department) and 10 poor scorers (5 from each department) were interviewed on a semi-structured interview for 30-35 minutes to explore the opinions of the participants about reading, how they perceive themselves as readers, and what they did while underlining. The interview questions were developed by the researchers and checked by 3 scientists from the field for validity. The participants answered open-ended questions during the interview with a pen-and-paper technique. This technique was used as some participants were reluctant to be audio-taped. The predetermined structure of the interview helped the research reliability of theme coding, which was also double-checked to avoid missing any valuable findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The underlining scores of the participants were analyzed with SPSS 10.0 program. Analysis was made in terms of mean scores with respect to department and gender. Two-way ANOVA was applied to compare the underlining scores of the two departments and the two genders to obtain if the differences were scientifically significant.

The qualitative data, collected on a semi-structured interview, were analyzed on a theme-coding system (Türnüklü, 2000; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004). The frequent statements and the points sought in the interview were separated from the data to be grouped considering the predetermined framework of the study. The statements of the participants were translated from Turkish to English by the authors and presented in tables. Tables were created considering qualitative data analysis of the semi-structured interview.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Effects of Foreign Language Knowledge and Gender**

Means, standard deviations and two-way ANOVA results were obtained to see if there were any significant differences between the departments and genders with respect to test scores for the underlining test. Table 1 indicates that total average of the participants is 7.22 (56%). ELT students outscored TLT students regardless of gender. The average score for ELT students is 7.57 (58%)

whereas it is 6.87 (53%) for TLT students. The range between the scores of female and male students for both groups is not big. Female students have an average of 7.31 (56%) while the male have achieved an average of 7.12 (55%).

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Expository Text Underlining Scores*

Department	Gender	Mean	Max. Score	SD	N
TLT	Female	6.75	13	1.54	24
	Male	6.97		1.32	29
	Total	6.87		1.41	53
ELT	Female	7.71		1.49	34
	Male	7.35		1.53	20
	Total	7.57		1.50	54
TOTAL	Female	7.31		1.57	58
	Male	7.12		1.41	49
	Total	7.22		1.49	107

In order to work out the differences between the scores of the departments and genders, a two-way ANOVA was applied. The result showed that there is a significant difference between the two departments at  $p < 0.05$ . However, gender does not have a significant effect on the test scores. This finding is not congruent with what Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) states. It supports the findings of Brantmeier (2003). Results from the ANOVA are shown on Table 2.

Table 2  
*Two-way ANOVA Results of Expository Text Underlining Scores*

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Department (D)	11.549	1	11.549	5.381	.022*
Gender (G)	.127	1	.127	.059	.809
D*G	2.099	1	2.099	.978	.325
Error	221.074	103	2.146		
Total	5821.000	107			

Ταβλ. 6  $p < 0.05$

Findings from the quantitative study reveal that freshmen in the language departments at a Turkish university are able to decide on what is worth reading in expository texts to some extent. Their

overall score 7.22 out of 13 calls for some support for the first year university students as they cannot be accepted to be prepared enough for the heavy workload of the university life (Martino, Norris & Hoffman, 2001).

The ELT students performed significantly better than the TLT students in underlining test. This finding gives an idea about how important it is to know foreign languages maybe because foreign language learning may have developed strategies unconsciously although ELT participants had no strategy instruction. Competence in a foreign language and bilingualism might grow awareness of language and improve first language reading strategy use (Jimenez et al., 1996) as a result of some transfer from English to Turkish although they are very distant languages. What Vygotsky (1962) speculated on bilingualism might be true for foreign language competence as well. Gender did not appear to have an effect on the underlining test scores of TLT and ELT students.

### How Students View Themselves as Readers and Their Opinions about Underlining

The qualitative data from the interview were analyzed within the framework predetermined with the semi-structured interview questions. The statements of the participants were transferred into tables (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004). The interview searched for the opinions of the participants about reading, how they perceive themselves as readers (Tables 3 & 4). Some other questions focused on what they did in the expository text underlining test and how. They were asked what they did to achieve the test and what was easy or difficult for them in the test (Tables 5 & 6).

Table 3

#### *Opinions of the High Grade Participants about Reading and Themselves as Readers*

Statements	Sibel	Caner	Zeki	Belgin	Esra	Leman	Serap	Asuman	Buket	Feride
Reading is an act of visualization.		X			X		X			
Reading is gaining information.	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Reading means evaluating the text.				X	X		X		X	
Reading means getting the meaning.		X	X	X	X					
A good reader has a purpose to read.	X			X	X					
A good reader asks questions reading.										X
People read because they have to.	X				X					
People read to get rid of boredom.				X				X	X	
Reading is a free time activity.			X	X				X	X	
I am a good reader.		X			X	X				X
I am not a good reader.	X		X	X			X	X	X	
I like reading.		X			X	X				X
I do not like reading.	X		X	X			X	X	X	

Table 4

*Opinions of the Low Grade Participants about Reading and Themselves as Readers*

Statements	Musa	Cengiz	Hande	Selim	Fatma	Hasan	Hilmi	Sevgi	Deniz	Murat
Reading is an act of visualization.	X			X						
Reading is gaining information.	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Reading means evaluating the text.	X			X			X		X	
Reading means getting the meaning.			X		X	X		X	X	X
A good reader has a purpose to read.	X	X		X				X		
A good reader asks questions reading.								X		
People read because they have to.	X				X					
People read to get rid of boredom.					X		X			
Reading is a free time activity.	X				X					
I am a good reader.			X				X			X
I am not a good reader.	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	
I like reading.		X	X			X	X			X
I do not like reading.	X			X	X			X	X	

Qualitative data from the study indicate that a great majority of the participants (90%) perceive reading as a process of gaining information. High order mental processes and strategies like ‘having a purpose’ and ‘asking questions’ are not emphasized by the participants. Some believe that reading activity has evaluation (40%) and visualization (25%). Reading means getting the meaning to the participants especially for low grade participants. Their definitions for a ‘good reader’ are quite varied and it is interesting to see that mainly TLT students stress having a purpose to read. Some take reading as a free time activity and it is serious to observe that many participants (55%) do not like reading. It should also be noted that the participants who state that they do not like reading do not consider themselves to be good readers. 70% of the qualitative study participants believe that they are not good at reading. This finding is supported by Odabaş, Odabaş & Polat (2008). It is interesting that a great number of university students in Turkey do not perceive themselves as good readers.

According to the qualitative data (Tables 5 and 6), almost all participants (95%) underline while studying, supporting previous literature (Blanchard & Mikkelsen, 1987; Brown & Smiley, 1978; Pressley, 2002; Yüksel & Koşar, 2001). Definitions were focused on by both groups, and high grade participants paid more attention to the general statements than low grade participants. Less attention was paid to examples and conclusions. Also, high grade participants seem to be more aware of structure of the text as they made use of it (Derry, 1988-1989). Limiting the number of the sentences

to be underlined was a challenge especially for low grade participants. High grade participants did not suffer much from the limitation.

Table 5

*Opinions of the High Grade Participants about their Underlining Process*

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Sibel</b>	<b>Caner</b>	<b>Zeki</b>	<b>Belgin</b>	<b>Esra</b>	<b>Leman</b>	<b>Serap</b>	<b>Asuman</b>	<b>Buket</b>	<b>Feride</b>
I underline while studying.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
While underlining I chose the general statements.	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
While underlining I tried to find the main idea.			X	X						
While underlining I paid attention to the definitions.	X	X		X		X	X			X
While underlining I paid attention to examples.						X	X	X		
While underlining I paid attention to the conclusion.	X									
While underlining I tried to understand the writer's purpose.			X							
Underlining was easy because of the structure of the text.	X	X	X		X	X				X
Underlining was hard because of the structure of the text.										
Underlining was hard due to the limit number of 13.						X	X		X	X
Underlining was hard due to unknown terminology/subject.			X	X						

Table 6

*Opinions of the Low Grade Participants about their Underlining Process*

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Musa</b>	<b>Cengiz</b>	<b>Hande</b>	<b>Selim</b>	<b>Fatma</b>	<b>Hasan</b>	<b>Hilmi</b>	<b>Sevgi</b>	<b>Deniz</b>	<b>Murat</b>
I underline while studying.	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
While underlining I chose the general statements.	X						X	X	X	
While underlining I tried to find the main idea.							X			
While underlining I paid attention to the definitions.		X		X	X	X		X		
While underlining I paid attention to examples.	X									

While underlining I paid attention to the conclusion.	X			X					X
While underlining I tried to understand the writer's purpose.									
Underlining was easy because of the structure of the text.	X	X							X
Underlining was hard because of the structure of the text.				X					X
Underlining was hard due to the limit number of 13.	X		X	X	X		X	X	
Underlining was hard due to unknown terminology/subject.		X	X	X			X		

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The quantitative results call for taking precautions in order to help university students distinguish the important information in a given reading assignment. Thus, firstly, scaffolding gains more significance for the freshmen because it may “play a key role in facilitating student engagement in complex tasks” (Lutz, Guthrie & Davis, 2006, p.15). Secondly, that ELT students scored better than TLT students shows the importance of knowing foreign languages. Thus, Turkish students should be motivated to study foreign languages.

The qualitative data indicate that university students take reading as an information gaining activity and they do not verbalize the cognitive processes much. Also, a great majority perceive themselves as inefficient readers. Therefore, reading should become a habit in early stages of their lives to prepare them for university years (Lindblom-Ylänne, 2004; Simpson & Nist, 2000, 2002).

As underlining is a frequently used study strategy, content area and reading instructors should teach students how to use this particular strategy effectively. Also, other study strategies should be introduced to make their homework really work (Culyer, 1996).

More research on study strategies of university students in Turkey is needed with different types of texts assigned to university students. The effects of reading assignment scaffolding could be investigated with treatment and control groups. After discovering the strategy use among Turkish university students, some research with young learners could be helpful to find ways of preventing future problems.

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