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Research Article

Is L2 writing difficult? Causal attributions of Turkish pre-service EFL teachers and relevance to writing scores

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Abstract

In Turkey, first-year preservice English teachers learn L2 writing in at least two compulsory courses throughout their undergraduate ELT programs. This study, conducted in this context, intends to investigate preservice English teachers' perceptions about L2 undergraduate writing difficulty and their causal attributions for these difficulties. It also aims to examine the relationship between density/variety of perceived difficulty in L2 writing and writing scores. For these purposes, the case study approach was adopted. In order to answer three research questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 first-year preservice teachers studying in the ELT department of a Turkish state university, and their first-midterm writing scores were collected. According to the findings, firstly all the interviewees agreed that students in the program had difficulty while writing in L2. Secondly, the correlational analyses revealed a negative relationship between density/variety of perceived L2 writing difficulty and writing scores. Lastly, three main sources of perceived writing difficulty were identified: 1) *student-based sources*, 2) *educational practices and tendencies* and 3) *lecturer-based sources*. After all, the related inferences, discussions and suggestions about learning and teaching of L2 writing have been addressed based on the current findings.

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İkinci dilde yazma zor mudur? Türkiye'deki hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmenlerinin nedensel yüklemeleri ve yazma puanı ile ilişkisi

Öz

Türkiye'de, birinci sınıf hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmenleri, lisans programları boyunca en az iki zorunlu derste ikinci dilde yazmayı öğrenmektedirler. Bu ortamda yapılan mevcut çalışma, İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının lisans programları sırasında ikinci dilde yazma zorluğu hakkındaki algılarını ve bu zorluklarla ilgili nedensel yüklemelerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca ikinci dilde yazmada algılanan zorluk derecesi / çeşitliliği ve yazma puanlarında arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçlar doğrultusunda vaka çalışması yaklaşımı benimsenmiştir. Üç araştırma sorusunu yanıtlamak için, bir Türk devlet üniversitesinin İngilizce Öğretmenliği bölümünde öğrenim gören 26 birinci sınıf öğretmen adayıyla derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmış ve ilk ara sınav notları toplanmıştır. Bulgulara göre, öncelikle tüm görüşülen kişiler programdaki öğrencilerin ikinci dilde yazarken zorluk yaşadıklarını kabul etmektedir. İkincisi, korelasyonel analizler algılanan ikinci dilde yazma güçlüğü sıklığı / çeşitliliği ile yazma puanları arasında negatif bir ilişki olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Son olarak, algılanan üç ana yazma zorluğu kaynağı belirlenmiştir: 1) *öğrenci temelli kaynaklar*, 2) *eğitim uygulamaları ve eğilimleri* ve 3) *öğretim görevlisi temelli kaynaklar*. Sonuç olarak, ikinci dilde yazmanın öğrenilmesi ve öğretilmesi ile ilgili çıkarımlar, tartışmalar ve öneriler mevcut bulgulara dayanılarak ele alınmıştır.

Gönderim
18 Aralık 2018

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Anahtar kelimeler
ikinci dilde yazma zorluğu
zorluk kaynakları
yazma performansı
lisans öğrencileri

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Introduction

Undergraduate programs of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Turkey require first-year preservice English teachers to learn and practice L2 writing in at least two compulsory courses. For this reason, writing has always been one of the language skills intended to be improved in these programs in addition to being a skill aimed to be improved globally. These purposes are fairly reasonable. When L2 education is concerned, competency in writing has always been an essential component of effective communication and academic life as it allows students to clearly articulate their feelings and thoughts and communicate them through well-developed texts. On the other hand, writing has been observed as challenging and/or problematic for Turkish (i.e. Çakır, 2010) and for other undergraduate students (e.g., Al Mubarak, 2017; Lee & Tajino, 2008; Wanja, 2016). This challenge has also been observable in students' written assignments and papers as well as their failure ratios for two compulsory writing courses in the department.

Calderhead (1987) recommends that as doctors diagnoses diseases, teachers must be able to understand the challenges students face. The issue of diagnosing challenges becomes more critical in L2 context because "the difficulties of second language learning are a common-sense fact which is universally recognized." (Stern, 1983; p. 400). Taking these issues into consideration, the current study attempts to make a contribution by researching on the first-year preservice teachers enrolling in the program of ELT. It firstly intends to investigate preservice teachers' perceptions about L2 undergraduate writing difficulty and their causal attributions for these difficulties. It also aims to examine the relationship between density and variety of perceived difficulty in L2 writing and writing scores.

Literature Review

When the related research on L2 writing difficulty is examined, it has been encountered that the concept of difficulty has been interpreted with different motives. Some scholars frame writing difficulty with L1/L2 difference, student errors and linguistic competency (e.g., Tajino, 1997; 1999; 2003). Others (e.g., Tajino, 1997) address the question of "*Does no error mean no difficulty?*" (Lee & Tajino, 2008, p. 1) and draw the attention to interrelationship between student error, writing performance and difficulty in writing. The literature also indicates that writing scores or performance in writing and student errors do not necessarily correlate with perceived difficulties (e.g., Tajino, 2003; Tajino, 1997; Tajino & Woodall, 1995). According to Lee and Tajino (2008), the difficulty perceived by students may correspond to a small fraction of writing errors, and this can be due to the fact that students avoid using anything that they find difficult. Also, Jing (2005) and Tajino (2003) indicate one another reason of why the difficulty is not related to errors. It is that difficulty may associate with factors such as "motivation, intelligence, and expectation of success" (Lee and Tajino, 2008, p. 2) instead of directly with writing errors. From a different perspective, when perceived difficulty is approached in terms of risk taking, it can be found as affecting L2 learning positively. If students perceive tasks as medium-difficult, it may be the case that students spend a considerable amount of effort for that task (Prabhu, 1987).

Apart from the findings above, Evans and Green (2007) have found that language-related components of academic writing such as expressing ideas properly, precisely and

fluently is perceived as more difficult than structure/content-related components, which is also confirmed by some other scholars in different learning contexts (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Dalsky & Tajino, 2007; Lee & Tajino, 2008). In contrast, Marshall (1991) demonstrated that the structure-related components are perceived as more difficult than language-related ones. Lastly, Kubota (1998) approaching the issue from another angle argued that teachers' instructional tendencies could account for the perceived difficulty in L2 writing. All these findings and claims make it necessary and valuable to do research on how writing difficulty is perceived by a specific group of students and what is at stake as sources of these difficulties.

With special reference to Turkish context, Çakır (2010) questioned the issue of why writing is perceived as difficult among the L2 learners studying in the language preparatory program in a Turkish state university. He came up with the following responses that are:

- “There is a need for good grammar.
- It is difficult to tell the thoughts in a written way.
- There are many specific rules that should be followed while writing.
- The person must have enough knowledge about the topic that he is supposed to write.
- The target language must be well known for effective writing.
- It is difficult to apply punctuation marks as needed.
- It is necessary to establish meaningful statements.” (p. 171)

However, the students learning in a foreign language school, just as in the study of Çakır (2010), follow different curriculum and schedule from preservice English teachers majoring in the department of ELT. Furthermore, the literature embodies various findings for the difficulties experienced in L2 writing which is described as an affective factor (Lee & Tajino, 2008) and therefore can be perceived distinctively by different learner profiles in different contexts. As a result, it can be speculated that each L2 learning/teaching environment conceives to create its own conditions and dimensions of L2 writing difficulty as well as causal attributions for these difficulties.

In the light of these research studies and claims, the current study attempts to make a modest contribution by researching on the first-year preservice teachers enrolling in the program of ELT and by examining causal attributions of this research group for L2 writing difficulty. It firstly intends to investigate preservice teachers' perceptions about L2 undergraduate writing difficulty and their causal attributions for these difficulties. It also aims to examine the relationship between density and variety of perceived difficulty in L2 writing and writing scores. In this sense, three research questions have guided the current research:

- (1) Do first-year preservice English teachers perceive L2 undergraduate writing as a difficult skill?
- (2) Is there any relationship between difficulty density/variety in L2 writing and writing performance of first-year preservice English teachers?
- (3) Why do first-year preservice English teachers perceive L2 undergraduate writing as a difficult skill?

Methodology

Research design

The case study approach was adopted as research methodology following Cohen and Manion (1989) who state that “the case study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit - a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyze intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which that unit belongs.” (pp. 124-125). In the current study, the case of first-year ELT students at a Turkish state university was addressed. It particularly attempted to examine this group of students’ perceptions about L2 undergraduate writing difficulty and their causal attributions for these difficulties within a specific learning environment developed through two different writing courses. The stages conducted in case study research suggested by Bassey (1999) were followed that are:

- Stage 1: “identifying the research as an issue, problem or hypothesis.
- Stage 2: asking research questions and drawing up ethical guidelines.
- Stage 3: collecting and storing data.
- Stage 4: generating and testing analytical statements.
- Stage 5: interpreting or explaining the analytical statements.
- Stage 6: deciding on the outcome and writing the case report.
- Stage 7: finishing and publishing.” (p. 66)

Participants

The interviewees consisted of 26 first-year preservice English teachers studying in the ELT department of a Turkish state university. The qualitative sampling method used in the current study was purposeful sampling in which “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomena.” (Creswell, 2012; 206). Most of the interviewees were female ($n=22$) while the rest were male ($n=4$) students (see Figure 1 in ‘Findings’) whose mean age was found as 19.39 ($SD=1.21$). The participants had already attended the course of *Written Communication* in the 1st semester. During data collection process at the end of the 2nd semester, they had been taking the course of *Academic Writing and Report Writing*.

Data collection and analysis

In order to answer three research questions, the researchers collected first-midterm writing scores and conducted in-depth (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 67) interviews with all participants in pairs via the following interview prompt and interview questions.

“My name is and I work as a research assistant in the Department of English Language Teaching. In this interview, I would like to ask some questions about your undergraduate L2 writing courses that are *Written Communication* and *Academic Writing and Report Writing*. Interview Question 1: Firstly, do you think that students in our program have difficulty while writing in English?”

Interview Question 2: (If yes) Why, do you think, students in our program have difficulty while writing in English?”

The interviews were semi-structured because the responses to the Interview Question 2 shaped the following ones. They were audio-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed with actual words and pauses. As for the ethical issues, we asked for the interviewees’ volunteer participation in the study and informed them on the purpose and procedures of the research. It was also guaranteed that the actual names of the interviewees would never be unclosed. Also, while reporting the findings, pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect participants’ anonymity.

As for validity, after the records of interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were sent back to the interviewees, and they were asked to check whether they reflected what they meant to say. As for reliability, a critical colleague working as a research assistant in the same department thoroughly read the transcripts and challenged the codes through “peer debriefing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All disagreements were discussed and resolved via the coders together. After all, the data were imported into the computer assisted qualitative data analysis package, MAXQDA 2018 (VERBI Software, 2017), in order to visualize and report the codes in an effective way.

Findings

As for the RQ1, pre-service English teachers had been interviewed through the following question: “Do you think that students in our program have difficulty while writing in English?”. All the interviewees ($n=26$) agreed that students in the program had difficulty while writing in L2.



Figure 1. Writing exam scores of interviewees in an ascending order on the scale of 100

Figure 1 visualizes the first mid-term writing exam scores (and gender) of 26 interviewees which range from 38 to 91 (out of 100) with a mean of 66.58 ($SD=15.649$). For RQ2, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between density and variety of perceived difficulty in L2 writing and writing scores. The *density of perceived difficulty* corresponds to the total number of codes for each participant (see “SUM” line in Table 1 below). The *variety of perceived difficulty* represents the types of codes for each participant (see Table 3 below). For example, the density of Esra’s perceived difficulty in L2 writing equals to “10” coding while the variety of her difficulty corresponds to “5” sub-codes. Based on these concepts, the correlational analyses indicate that there was a negative correlation between density of perceived difficulty and L2 writing scores ($r = -0.280$, n

= 26, $p = .166$). Moreover, a negative correlation between variety of perceived difficulty and L2 writing scores was found ($r = -0.183$, $n = 26$, $p = .371$).

For RQ3, the possible sources of students' perceived difficulty in L2 writing were questioned by semi-structured interviews starting with the question of "Why, do you think, students in our program have difficulty while writing in English?". As seen in Figure 2 below (as well as in Table 1 and 2 on the next page), three main codes ($f=126$; $n=26$) related to the sources of difficulties in L2 undergraduate writing have been identified: 1) *Student-based sources* ($f=67$; $n=22$), 2) *Educational practices and tendencies* ($f=52$; $n=21$) and 3) *Lecturer-based sources* ($f=7$; $n=6$).

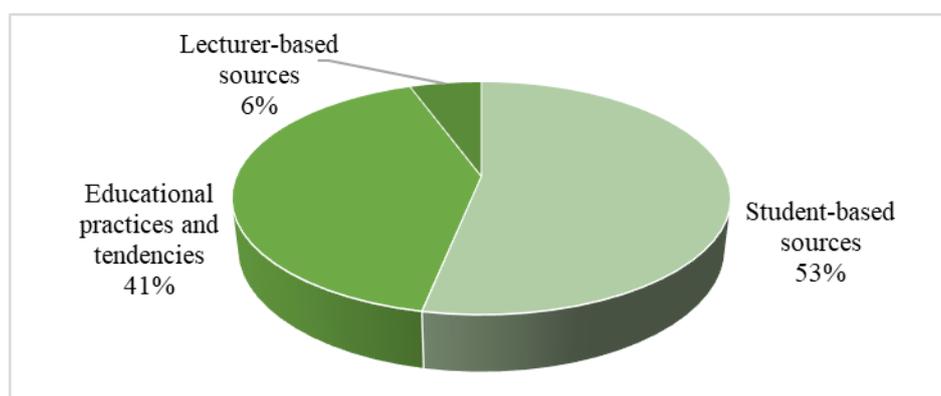


Figure 2. The distribution of three main sources for difficulties in L2 writing

Table 2 indicates the distribution of three main codes across 26 participants. The participants are ordered from left to right according to their writing scores in an ascending order, which presents us clues about learner profile and their stated sources. 5 participants (i.e., Ceyhan, Suna, Gönen, Ayla, Seyhan) address all the three main codes as the sources of difficulty in L2 writing. The 13 participants (e.g., Esra, Başak, Meriç, Meral) refer to only two main codes while 8 of them (i.e., Sezen, Dicle, Porsuk, Aksu, Müge, Aras, Mine, Firat) regard only one code as the source of difficulty in L2 writing.

Student-based sources

Table 3 summarizes the subcodes of three main codes for perceived difficulty in L2 writing. The first subcode category, student-based sources ($f=67$; $n=22$), outnumber the other two and are divided into 8 subcodes that are *demotivation* ($f=21$; $n=10$), *limited practice in and effort for L2 writing and reading* ($f=16$; $n=11$), *nervousness and fear* ($f=11$; $n=6$), *linguistic competence* ($f=6$; $n=6$), *class absenteeism* ($f=5$; $n=4$), *competency in writing* ($f=4$; $n=4$), *lack of planning/time management* ($f=3$; $n=2$) and *attitudes towards lecturer* ($f=1$; $n=1$).

The first subcode category identified is *demotivation* ($f=21$; $n=10$). One participant thinks that the biggest reason for difficulty in L2 writing is lack of motivation. In this regard, he connects students' lack of motivation for writing to negative learning experiences of primary education.

“I think the most important problem is lack of motivation. There is no motivation in students, no desire and effort to write. To me, it is because of the education system. We started writing at fourth or fifth grade in elementary school. Then it was like a torture because of the teachers’ style: “If you don’t write, you’ll fail.”. They never made the course enjoyable. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks. At that age, we hated to write subconsciously.”(Murat)

Demotivation is one of the most centralized student-based sources for which different reasons are stated by the participants. One is that the writing course is found by students to be challenging and more academic than necessary. In addition, the interviewees claim that this course is only necessary for their colleagues who will teach at the university level, implying that there is no necessity or a useful gain for a teacher who will teach at primary level.

“The courses in the department are far too academic. They are really useful for those who would follow an academic career. But still these courses should be elective. Those who would like to follow an academic career would already take these courses. Thinking that I will be an ordinary school teacher, I do not understand why I am having this much trouble here. One year later I will be teaching merely the numbers in English for example.”(Esra)

Table 1. The three main codes visualized in the “Code Matrix Browser” segment of MAXQDA

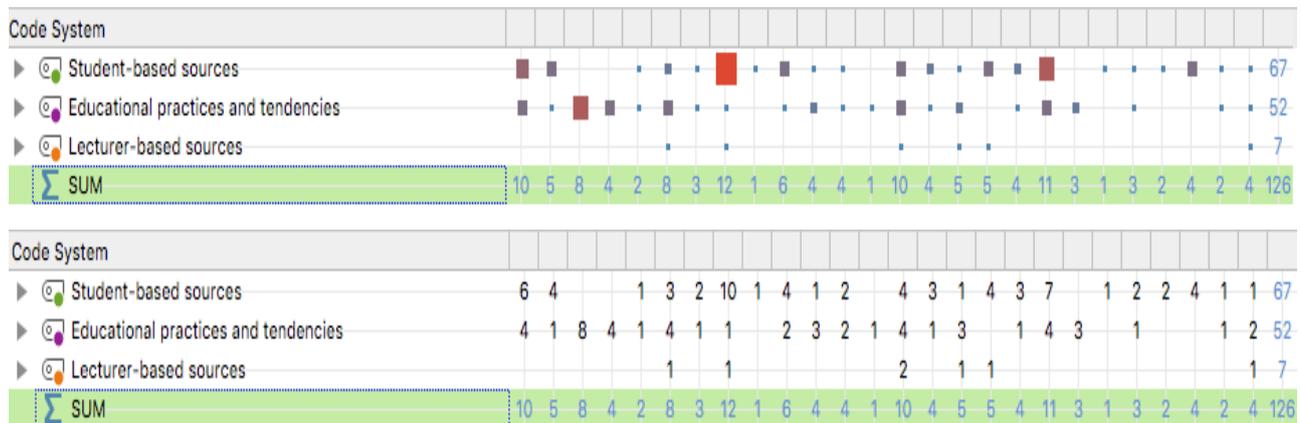
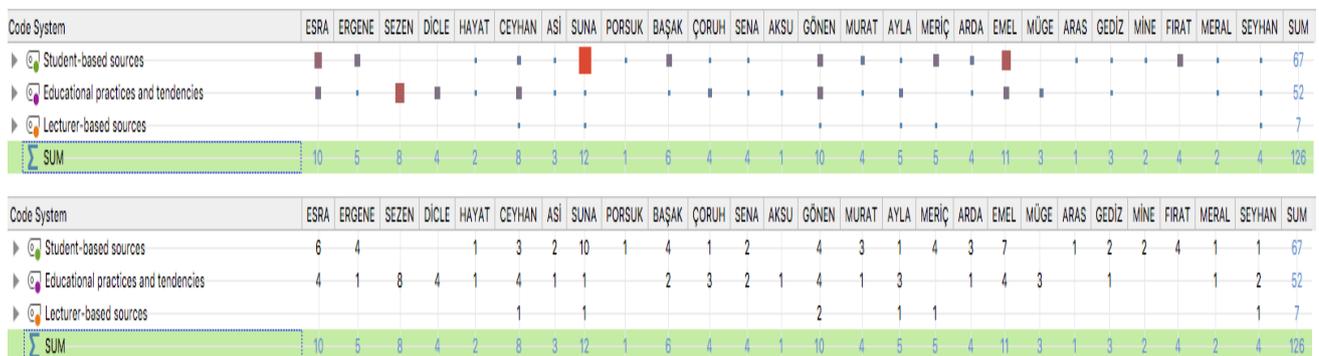


Table 2. The distribution of three main codes across 26 participants



From a different point of view, another interviewee emphasizes the boringness of the course and says that it does not arouse any desire to follow.

“I think this course should not be dull in any way. Many students are often absent, which is probably a cause of boredom. I am also very bored at times. There is in fact nothing that the lecturer can do? How can you make fun out of this content?” (Emel)

The second student-based factor is the *limited practice in and effort for L2 writing and reading* ($f=16$; $n=11$). Ergene expressed that they had the opportunity to develop their writing skills only when they came to the university, which is found late. Some other participants critically approached the attitude students hold in the first-year writing course. For example, two participants believing that writing skill only develops as they write and do intensive practice clearly state that doing no homework has a negative effect on the exam success.

“It is often too late when we start studying at the university to see the different functions and structures of writing, which is why we are having difficulty. Because we always either focused only on grammar or we solved multiple-choice questions. We did neither wrote nor read much. We learnt structures, I know the structures but I do not know how to use them. I have to think a lot before using a structure in writing which can be very time-consuming.” (Ergene)

“I think the problems stem from a lack of practice. The lecturers already teach the necessary steps. Then we write an essay which is assigned as homework. We write just because we have to, not to improve our writing. Then in the exams we are supposed to write essays at 2-3 different genres. Perhaps if we practice writing every day on regular basis, that would be beneficial because we need writing practice.” (Hayat)

“I rarely did my writing homework or did so negligently. Now when I read my papers I see that I never understood the writing topic. I only wrote for the sake of completing the homework. Therefore, I took the exams without preparation.” (Suna)

In parallel, some participants point out that there is a tight link between reading and writing, suggesting that people who did not acquire the habit of reading could not write well. Aras shares his concrete observation and says that his friends who keep a diary write more quickly and practically. He also claims that people can be integrated into the writing process only by writing and reading. The opposite can be interpreted as a source of writing problems.

“We also do not hold a habit of reading and writing anymore. That’s why writing is too difficult for the university students at my age. Those who do not read cannot write well because those people have a rigid idea on mind which is

repetitive and hard to change. In this sense I think not enough reading is also an associated issue.”(Gönen)

“I think the primary cause of this problem is reading little because you can get used to writing through reading and writing. For example, as I observed, my friends who keep a diary can write better and faster since they already have some structures ready in their mind. Additionally, we need to write at different genres and specifically study writing by drawing upon the feedback.”(Aras)

The third student-based source has been identified as *nervousness and fear* ($f=11$; $n=6$). The anxiety and fear of writing are found to be related to writing topic, the distance between students and their writing skill as well as (i.e., Başak) lack of self-confidence (i.e., Gönen). At the same time, the fact that they are evaluated and noted through the written text they produce creates a concern for the students (i.e., Arda).

“Anxiety...That is very influential. I think to myself “I have to write about this topic but how am I going to do this” when I see the writing topic. I think writing scares everyone for this reason. The more you write, the better you get in fact. I only write from homework to homework since I am afraid.”(Başak)

“I think the first reason is not to have confidence in ourselves. We always start writing thinking “I cannot do this, how am I going to write?”. Then, even the easiest tasks seem hard to us. We get stressed while trying to generate ideas but one cannot generate any idea under pressure. We live in a society which is afraid to speak out the ideas and this is also seen in writing.”(Gönen)

“Fear of assessment also...One does not express his ideas when he knows that his ideas will be evaluated. Sometimes, we can change our real ideas thinking that the lecturer would be offended. However, perhaps what comes to our mind for the first time is more likely to be true. What if I will be misunderstood or express my ideas in a wrong manner... and what if I make mistakes in expressing these ideas in English and get low grades.”(Arda)

The fourth student-based source is *linguistic competence* ($f=6$; $n=6$). Use of language only for academic purposes instead of using it authentically, weak vocabulary knowledge and lack of enough command of pragmatic and cultural elements of L2 are indicated as the sources of weak *linguistic competence*, and as a consequence, the sources of difficulty in L2 writing.

“I think the real problem for the students is not the use the language effectively. The students only use the language and get exposed to it only in the courses. Back in the high school we only go through multiple choice questions but the more efficiently you use the language, the deeper you get into it and write accordingly.”(Ergene)

“Vocabulary knowledge gets more importance in that we have to paraphrase our ideas and this ability is dependent upon our vocabulary size I think.” (Asi)

“I think this definitely stems from the fact that we are not into English language completely. You have to speak with native speakers when you learn a foreign language. There are differences about culture and so forth, thus it is expected for us to strive at writing since we do not know many components of the language.” (Başak)

“We are thinking in our own language (Turkish). For example, in Turkish I often use proverbs and sayings but when it comes to using them in English, I am limited. This of course stems from the lack of knowledge. That is why we are having difficulty in writing.” (Meriç)

Class absenteeism ($f=5$; $n=4$) is also expressed as one of the student-based sources by some participants. Since many examples are presented and how to write is believed to be learned in the course, class absenteeism is seen as a factor affecting student achievement.

“I think attendance is a matter of importance. Because when we are absent we miss a lot of coverage.” (Sena)

“I think it is due to being absence. If you don not attend the courses, you cannot write properly. Thus, the students are very responsible from this respect. Yes, attendance comes first.” (Emel)

By the interviewees, L2 writing is also seen as a process of acquiring competency. Therefore, an unacquired *competency in writing* ($f=4$; $n=4$) is regarded as a source of L2 writing difficulty. It is suggested that only two days of study before writing exam will not be enough to write well. In addition, trying to write without realizing the essence of writing and to obtain a beautiful product without any labor are stated as the factors revealing student shortcomings.

“It is not easy to improve writing only by studying. If it had been grammar, you would have grasped rules and structures by studying but when it comes to writing it has certainly much got to do with a background.” (Ergene)

“The cause of many writing problems is that the students begin writing without even getting familiar with writing. When you do not put enough labor in to the writing task at the background, the rater or scorer sees every flaws, incompleteness and lack of research.” (Meral)

Lastly, *lack of planning/time management* ($f=3$; $n=2$) and *attitudes towards lecturer* ($f=1$; $n=1$) have been ordered as the *student-based sources* of L2 writing difficulty. Suna claims that students' habits of writing and preparing homework without planning, outlining and

revision cause them to have problems in writing. Also, Seyhan indicates that negative *attitudes towards lecturer* ($f=1$; $n=1$) can result in negative attitudes towards the course, as well.

“I think the students suffer from disorganization and procrastination. They generally give a-week time for the writing homework so that we can conduct a background research and get prepared for the writing. But there is really few who do follow these steps.”(Suna)

“I think getting on well with the instructor is another factor because if you have a quarrel or something with the lecturer, then you might hold negative attitudes towards the course.”(Seyhan)

Educational practices and tendencies

The sources based on *educational practices and tendencies* ($f=52$; $n=21$) consist of 7 subcodes that are *language education before university* ($f=17$; $n=11$), *examination in classroom environment* ($f=16$; $n=11$); *rule-based, multifaceted nature of L2 writing* ($f=11$; $n=6$), *cultural and parental tendencies* ($f=4$; $n=3$); *late or imprecisely given feedback* ($f=2$; $n=2$); *unclear evaluation criteria* ($f=1$; $n=1$) and *limited time for teaching/learning* ($f=1$; $n=1$). The interviewees point out that writing can only be addressed during their university education. Therefore, they can grasp the nature of writing at that stage, which implies the source of their delay and difficulties. The biggest expected gain of high school was to perform better in the national language test which consists of multiple-choice questions and does not measure any language production skill, including writing. They emphasize that the structures they acquire about language were always in receptive level, and thus production was not experienced and/or automatized well enough.

“Often it is too late to understand the different functions and structures of writing when we come to study at the university. We do not have a prior background. We always either solved multiple choice questions or focused only on grammar. We learn the structures but never use it at high school. That is why we are striving at writing.”(Ergene)

“I think the primary reason we cannot improve our writing skill is the exam [University entrance exam]. Thus, we almost always solved multiple choice question to excel in the exam.”(Dicle)

Examination in classroom environment ($f=16$; $n=11$) is also characterized as one of the factors that makes writing difficult. The possibility of having no idea about the exam topic, the fact that the examination environment does not allow to do research and the limited time are considered as highly worrisome factors by the participants. Especially, the limited time can deprive students of compensation processes such as revision and edition. Despite their awareness of errors and/or shortcomings, the time limit does not allow students to correct

them. Thus, the examination environment opposes the retrospective nature of L2 writing and forces students to accept the deficiencies and continue.

“Practicing before the exams does not benefit because of the writing topic given. When you do not know anything about the topic you just cannot write. So, my biggest fear is about the writing topic of the exam.”(Aksu)

“When we practice writing at home, we could resort to some sources to support and develop our ideas but we cannot do the same in the exam. The time is also limited.”(Dicle)

“You have to generate many ideas within a short time in the exam. You also spend time deciding and choosing among the topics given. I think it is difficult because it depends on your creativity and generation.”(Müge)

“I write worse in the exam’s duration. Perhaps I realize the flaws in a paragraph of mine but the time is limited and I cannot change what I have already written. So, I just complete my essay despite the flaws and submit in that way.”(Çoruh)

Rule-based, multifaceted nature of L2 writing ($f=11$; $n=6$) was also described as a source of L2 writing difficulty by nearly half of the students. Essay types, different rules/techniques of writing and the perception of the necessity to follow all of these seem to impose some mental and psychological burden on students. In addition, the fact that writing includes other language proficiencies and components such as grammar is perceived as a challenge by the interviewees. Moreover, writing has to proceed together with doing research, producing ideas and doing revisions, which is interpreted as a source of difficulties in L2 writing, too.

“There is a certain structure of writing. Certain patterns to use in the introduction and in the conclusion... For example, you have to write a thesis statement all the time. I cannot focus on my ideas while too much concentrating the technical details of writing.”(Sezen)

“There are different genres or a big number of different essay types. They expect us to write at least one sample from each genre. I think this variation in the text types makes the things even harder to be processed by the students. I think the curriculum is a way too loaded, I think they should simplify it and include a smaller number of genres.”(Ceyhan)

“Writing course demands your previous grammar knowledge. You have to recall what you learnt previously. It is like a mixture of all. I think this is the reason of difficulty.”(Dicle)

“I think writing is very difficult because it is too demanding... Previous research, attending during writing to several points and specially checking

some details even after writing... Therefore, the students do not want to take all these troubles. Finding an idea is also very important, we very much strive when we cannot find an idea.”(Seyhan)

Some of the interviewees who emphasize the positive impact of feedback on learning report that the *late or imprecisely given feedback* ($f=2$; $n=2$) could also be one of the sources of writing difficulty.

“I think feedback is and can be very influential. When you get a feedback, it shows you the right path to go, then, your writing starts differing. But it’s difficult to find these points in the feedbacks given all the time.”(Sena)

“We make mistakes... What is feedback for? To make us realize our weaknesses? But we take the exams before we get enough feedback on our strengths and weaknesses. I think timely feedback given in a regular basis can cure the problems.”(Emel)

At the last stage, *cultural and parental tendencies* ($f=4$; $n=3$), *unclear evaluation criteria* ($f=1$; $n=1$) and *limited time for teaching/learning* ($f=1$; $n=1$) are expressed as the sources of difficulties experienced in L2 writing.

“I think the way one is raised and traditions are at play. We already do not read or write in Turkish, so writing in English can be a nightmare. For example, some families regularly carry out reading hours or encourage their kids to write their daily activities.”(Gönen)

“...and I also think about the assessment criteria. We always think as students among ourselves like “that lecturer is a low-scorer”. Perhaps if scored by another rater, our papers get different grades. Is everyone equal while delivering their scores?”(Emel)

“Time is very scarce. A genre has to be put across in just one week. The lecturer has to give a homework to be finished next week. What can be taught within just one week?”(Gediz)

Lecturer-based sources

The last main source category, *lecturer-based sources* ($f=7$; $n=6$), are limited in number and include 3 subcategories that are *lecturer attitude* ($f=4$; $n=4$); *lecturer’s teaching characteristics* ($f=2$; $n=2$) and *expectations of lecturers* ($f=1$; $n=1$). Specific to *lecturer attitude*, Ceyhan states that the characterization of first-year students as English language teachers and that the expectation of "you must write very well" has become a cause for concern. According to her, this point of view damages the perception that first-year students are still learning, which gives rise to more of her fault.

“Because the lecturers have too high views of students...For example, our writing teacher said “you are teachers anymore, not students, so you have to write accordingly”. This made me so nervous. No! I am still a student and first I need to learn a lot before I am named as a teacher. I think we make even more mistakes under such a pressure.” (Ceyhan)

Comparing two lecturers' influence on her attitude and motivation for the course, writing and attendance, Suna argues that the lecturer can indirectly become the source of writing problems. Meriç, on the other hand, mentions how the sympathetic character of a lecturer can motivate students. In the contrary case, she claims that neither the students nor the lecturers would be able to benefit from and enjoy the class.

“I think it much depends on who the lecturer is. I took my previous writing course from another lecturer. We also wrote several essays. I was so eager to attend the courses and do the homework, and, I completed the course with a high grade. But when the lecturer changed in this semester, I had great difficulty.” (Suna)

“I think the teacher should be appealing and engaging to motive the students to write. This has very much got to do with the teachers' personality. When the teacher only says “Just write”, it does not make any sense for the students. At least the teacher should be smiling to engage us.” (Meriç)

The two participants also believe that the *teaching characteristics of lecturers* ($f=2$; $n=2$) can also be a source of writing difficulties. For instance, the preference of Gönen's high school teacher to prepare students for university entrance exam instead of improving their writing skill had emerged as the most obvious element shaping the operation of that course. Seyhan regards the lecturers not delivering a lecture well enough, not giving the necessary information and using higher level of English during the course as the ones who challenge students while learning L2 writing.

“I think the teacher's approach is important. I remember when we were at high school we had six hours of English but no teacher ever came to class in 5 hours. They just leave us alone in the classroom to get prepared for the university exam.” (Gönen)

“Teacher might be incapable of delivering the necessary points. Perhaps his/her language is too heavy. These can be the reasons of having difficulty.” (Seyhan)

The last lecturer-based source is related to the *expectations of lecturers from students* ($f=1$; $n=1$). Ayla exemplifies the issue of criteria and scoring with indentation. While one lecturer attaches importance to the “indentation” as a criterion by taking points off a student,

the other prefers ignoring it. Therefore, the expectations of lecturers can become a factor guiding students.

“Our lecturers across two semesters are different from each other in terms of their assessment criteria. For example, when we indent the paragraphs we used to get higher points in the first semester, but in the following semester our next teacher said it was not that important and did not give extra points for indenting.” (Ayla)

Discussion

This study was conducted to reveal the writing difficulties experienced by undergraduate students at first hand which has been observed as a challenging skill. The research motivation was that diagnosing these challenges and difficulties could take the first step in dealing with them. In addition, identifying who and/or what are seen as the sources of difficulties could be one of the lights that illuminate the possible pathways to solution.

The overall findings reveal that *student-based sources* are more than the other two. This shows us that students are more inclined to see and show their own attitudes, preferences, decisions and acts as sources of difficulties instead of *educational practices and tendencies* or *lecturer-based sources*. This is a promising finding because being aware of his own roles and deficiencies is one of the biggest and most effective doors for a person that can be opened to change. From a similar angle, except one (i.e., Seyhan), all the participants indicating *lecturer-based sources* as a source of L2 writing difficulty are observed to get average scores in their writing exams (from 55 to 76). On the contrary, the *student-based sources* are addressed more frequently by successful students (e.g., Seyhan, Meral, Firat, Mine, Gediz, Aras) which is followed by *educational practices and tendencies*. Hence, it can be claimed that successful undergraduates do generally not see the lecturers as a source of writing difficulty. They, instead, provide some roles to themselves and educational dimensions.

Even slight, the findings also indicated a negative correlation between density/variety of perceived writing difficulty and writing scores which implies a reverse relationship. Therefore, it is possible to frame that this participant group are inclined to fail at writing exams as long as they perceive it as difficult. Although it cannot be generalizable, this finding should at least alert lecturers, trainers and students about the negative role of perceived difficulty as an affective factor in writing scores.

One another striking finding is that the interviewees see the academic writing course only necessary for their colleagues who will teach at the university level. This view implies that students do not value the course much enough. They do not think that academic writing skills would contribute to their future teaching or academic life, which is a worth-stressing attitude. As it is an undeniable fact that beliefs could play an effective role for students, we can direct these beliefs in the interests of the students. For this reason, it can be valuable to inform students about the probable contributions of this skill and to persuade them about the value of it.

Another issue needs attention is the concept of language-related and structure/content related components of writing in the literature. By six different times, *linguistic competence*

($f=6$; $n=6$) has been regarded as a source of writing difficulty which corresponds to the concept of *language-related components* (e.g., Evans & Green, 2007) in the literature. The *rule-based, multifaceted nature of writing* ($f=11$; $n=6$) has, on the other hand, been voiced by eleven times, and this code matches up with the concept of *structure/content-related components* of writing (e.g., Marshall, 1991). The findings indicate that although the interviewees remark both language-related and structure/content-related components as a source of writing difficulty, the frequency of the second one is observed to be higher, and this frequency seems to support the findings of Marshall (1991) instead of the ones of Lee and Tajino (2008), Dalsky and Tajino (2007) or Evans and Green (2007).

In the current study, the possible explanation for this tendency can be the L2 level of undergraduates. The interviewees were ELT majors, and they had already passed the national and institutional placement exams and got more than a semester of education in ELT department. All these must have been enough to bring them somewhere close to being proficient or at least higher-intermediate level in L2. The participant group of Lee and Tajino (2007), on the other hand, consisted of first-year science majors. In parallel, the ones of Dalsky and Tajino (2007) were first-year literature and agriculture majors. As for Evans and Green (2007), they researched on the undergraduates from 26 different departments of an English-medium university. Therefore, the participant profile, especially their English levels, can be observed and argued as a factor affecting the outcome as the perceived L2 writing difficulty is concerned.

To our best knowledge, with special reference to Turkish context, only Çakır (2010) questioned the issue of why writing is perceived as difficult among L2 learners. His findings both overlap and contradict with the current ones to some extent. For example, the *linguistic competence* and *competency in writing* (i.e., There is a need for good grammar. / The target language must be well known for effective writing. / It is necessary to establish meaningful statements. / It is difficult to tell the thoughts in a written way.), *rule-based, multifaceted nature of L2 writing* (i.e., There are many specific rules that should be followed while writing.), and *nervousness and fear* resulting from the writing topic assigned (i.e., The person must have enough knowledge about the topic that he is supposed to write.) are also found as sources of difficulty by Çakır (2010; p. 171). However, the current interviewees did not describe the mechanical elements of writing like punctuation marks as a source of writing difficulty unlike the participant group of Çakır (2010). In this respect, it can be argued that what lecturers pay attention and students attach importance to seems to both overlap and differ in the two research contexts to some extent.

Conclusion

The current study was designed two-dimensionally. It firstly intended to investigate preservice English teachers' perceptions about L2 undergraduate writing difficulty and their causal attributions for these difficulties. It also examined the relationship between the density/variety of perceived difficulty in L2 writing and writing scores. As the overall findings revealed, all the interviewees agreed that students in the program had difficulty while writing in L2. The correlational analyses similarly indicated a negative correlation between the density/variety of perceived L2 writing difficulty and writing scores. Lastly, three main sources of perceived writing difficulty were identified: 1) *student-based sources*, 2) *educational*

practices and tendencies and 3) *lecturer-based sources*. The *student-based sources* were subcategorized into eight codes: 1a) demotivation, 1b) limited practice in and effort for L2 writing and reading, 1c) nervousness and fear, 1d) linguistic competence, 1e) class absenteeism, 1f) competency in writing, 1g) lack of planning/time management and 1h) attitudes towards lecturer. The *educational practices and tendencies* consisted of seven subcodes: 2a) language education before university, 2b) examination in classroom environment, 2c) rule-based, multifaceted nature of L2 writing, 2d) cultural and parental tendencies, 2e) late or imprecisely given feedback, 2f) unclear evaluation criteria and 2g) limited time for teaching/learning. The *lecturer-based sources*, on the other hand, were divided into three subcategories: 3a) lecturer attitude, 3b) lecturer's teaching characteristics and 3c) expectations of lecturers.

Based on these findings, it is possible to argue some suggestions. *Examination in classroom environment* (2b), for instance, has been found as one of the L2 writing difficulty sources related to *educational practices and tendencies*. One possible way to handle this problem can be to assign take-home writing homework instead of in-class exams. Or, at least, the weight of homework and in-class exams in overall assessment can be evenly distributed. Therefore, such difficulties as limited time, topic familiarity and examination anxiety can be overcome as suggested by Emel: "... *The only assessment channel can be homework. For me, there shouldn't be any in-class exams. We sometimes get stressed and just can't write. But, I have already labored over a period of time, delivered my homework... When I can't write there, it just ends.*"

Similar to the lines above, since the *nervousness and fear* has been found as sources writing difficulty, giving as much as options about writing topic related to the issues referred in the classroom beforehand, providing reasonable time interval during in-class exam and informing students about the criteria they are supposed to be evaluated on may be the elements that will reduce the anxiety and fear that students will feel.

The next issue discussed is related to the *limited practice in and effort for L2 writing and reading*. By the interviewees, undergraduate education is interpreted as a late phase for the development of such a comprehensive skill as writing. Especially at high school, the language students who have enough time to develop their language skills should be equipped with skill training as much as possible because of its positive contribution to students' self-confidence and skill development process. Also, since the period of time allotted for teaching writing in a semester is not seen enough by the interviewees (i.e., *limited time for teaching/learning*), the writing skill acquired at high school can support their new learning positively and increase their ability to write.

Some of the interviewees reported that the *late or imprecisely given feedback* could be one of the sources of L2 writing difficulty. Considering the workload of teaching staff, some strategies can be developed on how to give more and more effective feedback. For instance, peer-feedback can be an alternative here. Gradually, training of students through the feedback given by their instructors can both make them more competent in the process of writing and equip them with the skills to evaluate their peers. Although instructors cannot give feedback to each student every time, they would be able to raise students' awareness by evaluating even a few paragraphs or essays chosen.

All in all, the present study revealed that perceived L2 writing difficulty was an important factor to consider on. Especially, when the attribution of failure is considered, students' perceptions of difficulty may be seen as a problem. If students attribute the source of their failure in writing to their perceived difficulties, this perception can cause them to lose their self-confidence and to be demotivated in their subsequent learning. For this reason, the discovery of the difficulties experienced by the students and their sources should be exploited in order to shed light on any kind of communication conducted with students to overcome these difficulties.

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