

## Academic Writing Proficiency: The Role Of Academic Writing Instruction In Efl Preparatory Programs

Ryan Mcdonald & Hannah Murtagh

Koç University, Turkey

Submitted: 19.06.2014.

Accepted: 22.11.2014.

### Abstract

In studies of writing, linguistic proficiency has been assumed to play an important factor contributing to writing proficiency (Raimes, 1987; Bereiter&Scardamalia, 1987; Hayes 1996). Additional factors such as “cognitive” processes (i.e. planning and reviewing) (Ellis, 2005), memory (McCutchen, 1996, Alamargot&Chanquoi, 2001), and the matter of the quality of writing and lexical fluency (Van Gelderen&Oostdam; 2002, 2004) and error correction (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris;1999, 2002, 2004) have been among the focus areas. This study examines whether instruction in a university preparatory EFL program increases the quality of writing. A typical criticism from university academic writing classes often argues that short preparatory programs do not produce able, coherent, and proficient writers as preparatory reading and writing programs face the dual challenge of integrated skills instruction as well as covering many of the conventions of academic writing. In an effort to evaluate the effects of teaching academic writing within an EFL preparatory program, this research aims to compare the quality of writing within two groups of students, low level EFL students (pre-intermediate and intermediate levels) after a two-three semester program against students whose initial fluency was significantly higher at the time of university entry (direct-entry students with an IELTS 6.5 equivalency or higher). To this aim, four factors which are readability, lexical density, coherence and grammar complexity in 50 essays have been examined quantitatively. In this presentation, we aim to highlight implications of the findings for academic writing instruction at EFL university settings and for the broader context academic programs in EFL context. Our findings indicate that EFL students graduating from the ELC score well below their direct-entry peers in a number of categories.

**Keywords:** linguistic proficiency, EFL program, instructions, integrated skills

### Introduction

Our students are as diverse as their needs, and as Raime’s (1991) noted, “there is no such thing as a generalized EFL student” (p. 420). Students arrive in our classrooms from a variety of heterogeneous contexts, which adds an additional dimension of difficulty to an already challenging situation. However, that does not mean we are reduced to helplessness. Ferris and Hedgecock( 1998) remind us that “there are ways of identifying, categorizing, and working with these multiple variables” (p. 14). Teachers often rely on their instincts, rubrics, and checklists to determine the overall quality of student writing, but this can only provide a limited (and arguably biased) approach to assessment (Rezaei, A. R., & Lovorn, M. 2010). As EFL preparatory teachers, we are concerned about our students’ writing ability in relation to their peers. The question then becomes more about how to assess the quality of writing and the ability of the student. Rather than focus on ways to improve qualitative analysis, this study attempts to eliminate subjectivity and analytically evaluate student papers quantitatively. We are aware of the challenges of quantifying a skill that is arguably qualitative in nature, and it’s not unusual to find that students’ levels of proficiency differ from their writing ability (Raimes, 1985). However, our university is relatively new (20 years) with an expanding EFL program. There has been a reworking of past EFL curriculum to focus more on integration and production skills with common end

goals for all students graduating from the English Language Center (ELC). Upon graduating from the ELC, these students have to compete alongside direct-entry students who have greater faculty with English. Therefore, research is needed to determine if and where students graduating from the ELC are falling short of their direct-entry peers, and what we, as educators, can do to marginalize those inequalities.

**This study focused on two major questions:**

1: Is there value in quantifying the quality of student compositions after graduation from the ELC preparatory program?

2: What does the data suggest about the preparedness of our students when they graduate (in terms of readability, lexical density, coherence, and grammar complexity) and what still needs to be improved?

While we attempted to stay focused on these two areas, we did occasionally find useful or interesting data that varied slightly from our original goals.

**Methods & Procedures**

**Data Collection**

The participants in this study were 50 EFL college students, typically 17-19 years old, enrolled in Academic Writing at a private Turkish university. They were selected based on a several control factors. Direct entry students – a “control group” – comprised of 13 students who learned English outside the university (typically in high school or international school settings) and directly entered the university (bypassing the ELC) with a TOEFL IB test of 80 or greater or an academic IELTS score of 6.5 or greater. These students took the Academic Writing class in their first semester of university. The second student group was chosen based on their successful completion of the ELC and consisted of two sub-groups; 13 pre-intermediate students and 24 intermediate students. Both groups were chosen based on the following factors: they had all successfully completed the program (none of the participants had dropped out during the semester to participate in outside preparatory English classes) in 2-3 semesters (Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters of 2012-13), they all participated in the Academic Writing class during the first semester of their first academic year (2014), and they had all entered the university directly after leaving the ELC, meaning they did not take a semester or year of leave (this does not include the summer semester if they had passed out after semester two). All students were enrolled in ACWR 101 with five instructors and nine classes. The student’s papers were chosen based on their first written drafts in response to an academic article and discussions taken place during class time. The topics of the articles and papers showed significant variety.

It should be noted that G1 will from this point refer to students who started the preparatory program at pre-intermediate level students; G2 at the intermediate level; and G3 as students directly entering the university.

**Data Analysis**

The data was viewed based on several factors: readability, lexical density, coherence and grammar complexity, and each shall be observed separately.

*\*Note on parametric values:* The research data gathered was run through the program for Statistical Analysis in Social Sciences (SPSS) and tested for validity using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality and

a Q-Q plot for additional verification. Data that was found not to be parametric was considered for further thought, but will be noted as non-parametric; unless otherwise noted, all data can be assumed normal according to these measurements.

### **Readability**

Considering readability, this project viewed several sub-groups, including words per sentence, passive sentence use, academic vocabulary word use, Flesch Reading Ease, and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level.

### **Vocabulary Usage**

Students need to have a wide range of disposable vocabulary in order to be confident users of language. While grammar can be understood as the framework of language, educators understand that grammar is an arbitrary and meaningless construct without vocabulary (Dagut, 1977; Laufer, 1990; Meara 1996). It is also well documented that students often consider vocabulary as one of the primary barriers to communication and comprehension (Raims, 1985; Spack 1988;). This research looked at the rate in which ELC students used frequent and academic vocabulary in relation to the direct-entry students. Our primary concern was whether or not our students were using the vocabulary we were teaching them. Over the course of a year, G1 and G2 students were provided with explicit instruction on as many of the Coxhead570 semantic fields as possible, placing emphasis on academic vocabulary, while addressing frequent words as they arise.

In terms of vocabulary usage, this study focused on three subgroups, K1 (1-1000), K2 (1001-2000), and the Academic Word List, as measured by Lextutor. Surprisingly, the data showed that student starting proficiency levels did not significantly influence vocabulary. Regardless of the slight mean average difference between the groups, the percentage of common and academic words did not vary greatly between the three groups. All three groups ranged from 74.7 – 77.6 percent of words on the K1 list; 4.5-5.9 on the K2 list; and 6.6 – 8.5 percent on the AWL. Similarly, the range in ability within these groups did not significantly differ.

### **Sentence Length**

In order to gain a general idea of how well students were able to write, in terms of complex and compound sentences, the study briefly surveyed sentence length using Microsoft Word. Although this is useful for an overview, it is by no means conclusive on the level or accuracy of the sentence structure. This quick analysis does not validate grammar use, nor does it check for run-on sentences. However, the study found a statistically significant difference between the ability to write more words per sentence and the starting English level. Students from the G1 level were writing a mean average of 15 words per sentence (wps), while G2 were writing at 20wps, and G3 at 23 wps. Additionally, the range of sentence length decreased significantly (18, 11, 12 respectively) between the lower and advanced starting level as well.

### Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch Kincaid Grade Level

Using the Flesch Reading Ease scores and FleschKincaide Grade Level, as calculated in Microsoft Word, this study compared the reading difficulty between the three groups of students. The results confirmed our suspicion that students starting in G3 had an advantage over the G1 and G2 students.

Regarding the Flesch Reading Ease, while the average mean for students in G1 & G2 was very similar, there was a statistically significant variance between the G1 – G3, G2 – G2 average means (see Chart 1 & Chart 2 below).

Chart 1			Chart 2	
		Mean		Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	G1	52.1667	Pair 1 G1 – G3	.006
	G3	40.0250		
Pair 2	G1	52.1667	Pair 2 G1 – G2	.942
	G2	51.9417		
Pair 3	G2	51.9417	Pair 3 G2 – G3	.018
	G3	40.0250		

As expected then, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level showed similar correlations. G1 students were typically writing at the high end of a ninth grade reading level (G2 scored slightly higher at just over 11<sup>th</sup> grade). However, the G3 level students were starting comfortably in the first year university level at 13.2. Again, only the G1-G3 and G2-G3 pairs showed a statistical difference with a *p* value at .002 and .043 respectively, as can be seen in chart 3 and chart 4.

Chart 3			Chart 4	
	Range	Mean		Sig. (2-tailed)
G1	7.00	9.8250	Pair 1 G1 – G3	.002
G2	5.40	11.0583	Pair 2 G1 – G2	.165
G3	5.60	13.1583	Pair 3 G2 – G3	.043

### Lexical Density

When considering lexical density, we again used Lextutor to compare functional word tokens with the total number of tokens in each essay to determine lexical density. However, the mean average of each group was almost identical, with G1, G2, and G3 scoring .556, .538, and .547 respectively. Additionally, when compared using a SPSS paired sample t-tests, *p* value showed no statistically significant difference.

### Coherence

This study looked specifically at the use of transitional devices and connectors to consider coherence, which overlaps into the field of cohesive devices. We viewed these devices in four categories; additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. Documents were searched in Microsoft Word and then visually counted to find correct use of each device. Within each category, we looked at the use of specific words: additive (also, and, for example, in addition, furthermore, moreover, for instance, in other words, besides, likewise); adversative (however, but, on the other hand, in fact, on the contrary, as a matter of fact, nevertheless, in contrast); causal (so, therefore, as a result, consequently, hence, then to that end, in this case, thus); and temporal (first(ly), (second(ly), third(ly), then, following, in summary, in conclusion, to conclude).

The data collected was viewed, using Shapiro-Wilks, and found to be non-parametric. The usage of the different types of these devices did not seem to show an advantage or disadvantage in terms of ability and starting level of the students. However, in the lower entry level, namely G1 and G2, we did see a tendency to overuse certain devices. For example, the average mean of usage in additive device in G1 was about 34 uses per page. However, of these 34 uses, 27 were “and.” Additionally, 5 of the 13 G1 students exclusively used “and” and no other additive device. The same overuse was found with “but” and “in conclusion” as well.

### **Grammar Complexity**

In this study, we looked at grammar complexity by viewing relative clause use, used correctly, to help determine the level of grammar ability in a student’s unedited writing. Clauses were separated into two sections, the use of relative clauses using pronouns and those using adverbials. All of the relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, and that) as well as relative adverbs (where, when, and why) were counted only if they were used correctly, and there was no data collection for rate of error usage with relative clause use.

The overwhelming majority of the data showed adverbial relative clauses to be sporadic, and while the G3 students used these at a slightly higher and more consistent level, when the data was considered in Shapiro-Wilk, it was found to be non-parametric. Therefore, while we have noticed some correct usage, the same size was not such that we could compare the data.

When considering pronoun use in relative clauses, the results were considered parametric, and the findings showed a significant difference between the three levels, when considering the mean and range. We found that the accurate use of relative clauses increased significantly as the entry-level increased and the range in use decreased, pointing to a more controlled ability to use this grammatical structure. The average means ranged from 5.8, 8.9, and 13.2 in G1, G2, and G3, respectively. Additionally, the *p* value showed statistically significant differences between all groups. This would be a useful area to follow up in terms of what program values are lacking in terms of grammar usage and advanced structures.

## **Results and discussion**

### **1: Is there value in quantifying the quality of student compositions after they have graduated from the EFL preparatory program?**

At our institution, students are leaving the preparatory program and entering the university sometimes after only one semester. The more traditional students remain in the program for two or three semesters. There is a concern that students, when leaving the ELC, are not as capable as the students who directly enter the university. New curriculum was developed and implemented last year, and this is the first study to comparatively assess former ELC student’s compositional ability with that of their

peers. Concern remains, even after the new curriculum shift, among faculty members that students are not adequately prepared for university level composition, and this data may be useful in adjusting the curriculum planning for upcoming years.

There is strong evidence to suggest that annual evaluation of students leaving the ELC program would be beneficial to determine the overall quality of student writing, as a quantification of various factors. Of particular use will be further assessment of the AWL list vocabulary as well as continuing evaluation of Flesch-Kincaid analysis. With annual assessment, this program will have a baseline which can be measured against annually. This, when paired with qualitative assessment, can provide a more complete overview of exactly what our students leaving the ELC can do in relation to their direct-entry peers, and we can address curricular shortfalls and refocus specifically on skills which our students lack proficiency.

## **2: What does the data suggest about the preparedness in our students when they graduate (related to readability, lexical density, coherence, and grammar complexity) and what still needs to be improved?**

### **Readability**

*Vocabulary:* In terms of vocabulary usage, our preparatory students performed well in use of the K1 and the AWL (which is heavily integrated into the pre-intermediate program). As the program has been working specifically to increase both receptive and productive use of academic vocabulary during the last school year, as well as vocabulary diversity, this is relatively good news. The assumption has been that students with lower levels of English will have a more difficult time producing academic level vocabulary. One of the major concerns is that students have only receptively learned vocabulary throughout their 2-3 semester study in the preparatory program. However, although there is certainly the unknown of how *accurately* the students were using this vocabulary, they do, even at the lower levels, incorporate academic vocabulary into their draft writing.

*Sentence Length:* Our research found a significant difference in the sentence length of the students relative to their starting level. This suggests perhaps additional research is warranted in order to determine the actual complexity and grammatical accuracy of these sentences. However, it does suggest more confidence or effort involved at the G3 level as they had a significantly higher wps use while drafting.

*Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch Kincaid Grade Level:* Perhaps the most surprising data collected was the vast level difference reported by the Flesch Kincaid analysis for grade level and readability. While our pre-intermediate students were only writing at the ninth grade level during their first year of academic classes, the expectation that they are writing at a level equivalent to direct-entry students may be unreasonable. We recommend further study of this issue to look more closely at the samples to determine specific ways to improve both the readability and grade level at which our students produce academic writing. In order to focus on program evaluation, it may be useful to determine the reason why the Flesch Reading Ease as well as the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level results point to such a difference in readability and what can be done to increase these levels.

*Lexical Density:* As stated above, the data for this section showed no real difference in use. Although this is an encouraging sign when considering the level at which a student starts, further research is needed to determine if this is, in fact, a point of no difference. If this data is accurate, it would suggest that lower level entry students are able to compete, not necessarily at grade level, with higher-level students and would be encouraging.

*Coherence:* While the coherence data was found to be largely non-parametric, the fact that students are clearly over relying on the conjunctions “and,” “but,” and “because” may speak to an underlying issue in the way writing is taught. Although direct-entry students showed a slightly higher ability to diversify their transitional markers, it would not be unexpected for ELC students to enter at a lower level; however, it is concerning that part of the aim of the preparatory program is to help students learn academic writing, and a significant amount of time is spent on writing ability, including the use of transitional devices. This points to the need to further evaluate student writing in terms of markers in order to determine if the program is lacking in the area coherence.

*Grammar Complexity:* Relative clause pronoun use was shown to be more than double in terms of usage between G3 and G1&2. This points to a need for improvement in the way this skill is taught, practiced, and reinforced in the program. Currently students spend time focusing on relative clause pronouns mostly in their grammar classes, and reading and writing teachers do not explicitly check for or expect students to accurately use such constructions. This data points to the consideration of the incorporation of relative clause pronoun use into the writing curriculum.

## Conclusions

It is clear to us that students graduating from the ELC still need writing support and scaffolding to compete with direct-entry students. Not only are they writing at a dramatically lower level (according to the Flesch-Kincaid analysis) than other students, but they also score lower on a number of indicators of quality writing such as sentence length and relative clause use. Both of these skills can be improved through direct instruction and practice, and we advise the ELC to incorporate more time and focus on those areas. We advise continued annual evaluation of students exiting the ELC both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as a continued measurement against direct-entry students, providing the ELC with measurable yearly data which will inform curricular and assessment changes.

## References

- Alamargot, D. & Chanquoy, L. (2001). *Through the models of writing. Studies in Writing*, Vol. 9. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bander, R. G. (1983). *American English rhetoric: A two-track writing program for intermediate and advanced students of English as a second language*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Cobb, T. Web Vocabprofile [accessed xx Month 200x from <http://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/> ], an adaptation of Heatley, Nation & Coxhead's (2002) Range.
- Dagut, M. (1977). Incongruencies in Lexical Gridding. An Application of Contrastive Semantic Analysis to Language Teaching. *IRAL. International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching Lund*, 15(3), 221-229.
- Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *System*, 33(2), 209-224.
- Ferris, D., & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be?. *Journal of second language writing*, 10(3), 161-184.
- Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. S. (1998). *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice*.



- Hayes, J. R. (1996). A new framework for understanding cognition and affect in writing. In C. M. Levy & S. Ransdell (Eds.), *The science of writing: Theories, methods, individual differences, and applications* (pp. 1–27). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Heatley, A., Nation, I.S.P. & Coxhead, A. (2002). RANGE and FREQUENCY programs.
- Laufer, B. (1990). Why are some words more difficult than others?—Some intralexical factors that affect the learning of words. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 28(4), 293-308.
- Lee, I. (2000). Exploring Reading-Writing Connections Through a Pedagogical Focus on 'Coherence'. *Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 57(2), 352-356.
- Meara, P. (1996). The vocabulary knowledge framework. *Vocabulary Acquisition Research Group Virtual Library*.
- McCutchen, D. (1996). A capacity theory of writing: Working memory in composition. *Educational Psychology Review*, 8(3), 299-325.
- Raimes, A. (1985). What unskilled ESL students do as they write: A classroom study of composing. *Tesol Quarterly*, 19(2), 229-258.
- Raimes, A. (1987). Language Proficiency, Writing Ability, and Composing Strategies: A Study of ESL College Student Writers\*. *Language Learning*, 37(3), 439-468.
- Raimes, A. (1991). Out of the woods: Emerging traditions in the teaching of writing. *Tesol Quarterly*, 25(3), 407-430.
- Rezaei, A. R., & Lovorn, M. (2010). Reliability and validity of rubrics for assessment through writing. *Assessing Writing*, 15(1), 18-39.
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (1991). Literate expertise. *Toward a general theory of expertise: Prospects and limits*, 172-194.
- Spack, R. (1988). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: How far should we go?. *Tesol quarterly*, 22(1), 29-51.
- Van Gelderen, A., & Oostdam, R. (2002). Improving linguistic fluency for writing: Effects of explicitness and focus of instruction. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 2(3), 239-270.
- Van Gelderen, A., & Oostdam, R. (2004). Revision of form and meaning in learning to write comprehensible text. In *Revision Cognitive and Instructional Processes* (pp. 103-123). Springer Netherlands.