

Preferred Writing Topics of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to determine the preferred writing topics of Turkish preservice teachers. The participants were 271 female and 233 male students from a public university in Turkey. The data collection instrument was a self-report survey instrument. Findings indicate that students prefer writing particularly on love, education, adventure, language/literature, history, and politics matters. They also indicate more convergence on writing topic preference between female and male students than divergence. The findings related with the preferred writing topics of female and male students were discussed.*

Keywords: *writing education, writing topics, preservice teachers*

INTRODUCTION

Richness in language brings about richness in thinking which depends on the existence and efficient use of one's qualities like vocabulary, expression power, ability and way to exemplify. Writing is a product of thinking. There is no writing that doesn't contain thinking. People generally express their feelings in poetry and their thoughts in prose. An important feature of a composition is that it is based on a sound idea. Writing is a complex metacognitive activity that draws on an individual's knowledge, basic skills, strategies, and ability to coordinate multiple processes (Walker et al., 2005). For this reason, writing is such a linguistic skill that requires more consideration, training and exercise than other skills.

It is expressed that writing skills of primary, high school and university students in Turkey are not good enough. Regardless of the education level, when students are asked to write a composition, it is seen that they don't seem so pleased, which can be evaluated as that they don't like writing activities very much. Many reasons can be put forward to explain why students aren't successful in writing, but those which stand out can be counted as abstract writing activities especially at primary school that are far from real life experiences, excessive focus on testing, ignoring writing activities and therefore causing anxiety in students through low marks (Agca, 2003; Gul, 2007)

Basic compulsory education in Turkey is eight years. Writing instruction starts during the first years of this compulsory education and goes on from primary school to the end of high school years. However, it can't be said that, except for education faculties, extensive writing instruction is provided during the university years. Only in these faculties writing is provided for only one period as a two-credit course. Knowing the writing preferences of pre-service teachers might increase the efficiency in the writing activities they will make use of. If the pre-service teachers of today acquire efficient writing skills, this might lead to successful students of the future in writing.

Few studies have investigated the writing topic preferences or interest of students (Flynn, 1983; McCutchen, 1986; Voss & Schauble, 1992; Levine & Geldman-Caspar, 1996; Shippen et al., 2007). The latest and the most comprehensive research on writing was done by Shippen et al. (2007). According to his findings, adolescents are more interested in supernature, education, teen issues (driving, pregnancy), and current events. In a research on university students done by Boser, Wiley, and Clark (1991), it was found out that response length, the difference

between males and females in response length was significant for strengths but not for weaknesses. In both situations, females wrote longer responses. And also, females tended to write in more formal style (using sentences) for both strengths and weaknesses than did males. Flynn's (1983) research revealed that the male students made few references to women and often wrote on typically "male" topics: gun control, nuclear power, or cars. In contrast, the women revealed worlds in which men were definitely present but they often expressed contradictory attitudes toward both men and traditional sex roles. The women described a more complicated reality than the men in that their conflicts resulted not only from their inexperience but also from their gender conditioning. Their settings were more frequently interior spaces, and their actions were less assertive than that of men. Women frequently described accommodation to the environment rather than rebellion against it. Levine & Geldman-Caspar (1996) found out that almost 60% of the boys preferred to write about science-related inventions, whereas girls' preferences were distributed among the different tasks. Kellog (1987) suggested that the more an individual knows about the topic, the more automatic s/he can be in written expression. However, there are no studies surveying preservice teachers about their topic preferences in Turkey. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the preferred writing topics of Turkish preservice teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The participants included 504 (271 female and 233 male) volunteered undergraduate students from a public university education faculty in Turkey. The data collection instrument was a self-report survey instrument developed by Shippen et al. (2007). Survey instrument was designed to obtain information about participants' preferred writing topics for each of the three genres (i.e. real or imagined story, report, and opinion). With the permission granted from the developers, instrument was translated into Turkish. In particular, a group of experts assessed the instrument in terms of its content, language, and also determined that it was culturally appropriate. Participants were asked to identify their preferred writing topics in each genre. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The instrument was administered to the students during the class sessions. It took four months to collect data. Data were analyzed through content analysis. During data analysis, the researcher and academicians in the field of Turkish Language teaching department examined and analyzed the raw data. An open coding process was used to understand what the collected data could reveal with respect to common themes in each genre. Themes were compared in terms of gender. During data analysis, all the raters met to discuss, analyze and report on the raw data; inter-reliability was maintained by those discussions.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the preferred writing topics identified preservice teachers and to analyze whether these topics were convergent or divergent. Looking at Table 1 about the writing preferences of youngsters, it is seen that they prefer writing about *love, history, and adventure* subjects in "real or imagined story" type, *education, language/literature, and politics* subjects in "report" type and *education, love, and politics* subjects in "opinion" type. As seen above, pre-service teachers prefer especially *love, education, adventure, language/literature, history, and politics* subjects. In such a conservative country as Turkey, the majority of youngsters experience their first love especially during university years. This can be an indicator of how much importance they give to love. Moreover, it can be argued that such media as TV, newspapers and magazines contribute to keeping this subject on the agenda.

The reason why pre-service teachers give importance to such subjects as *education, language/literature, and history* might have something to do with their faculty (education faculty), the courses and course books in the program. Also, an individual's tendency to such socio-cultural subjects is regarded as an expected reaction in order to achieve his cultural development in this period. If this study had been carried out on students in another faculty such as economy, engineering or medicine, such subjects as *economics, technology, health, science, and space* would have inevitably stood out instead of *education, language/literature, and history*.

Issues such as adventure and politic matters are of concern to university students because this is the first time they leave their families, they have to stand on their own feet and they try to build up their own world. Politic matters are especially attractive for male students in this period.

Table 1. Overlapping preferred writing topic themes for female and male participants

Overlapping themes		
Real or imagined story	Report	Opinion
Love	Education	Education
History	Language/Literature	Love
Adventure	Politics	Politics
War	History	Life
Fears	Technology	Death
Death	Space	Language/Literature
Detective	Health	Books
Politics	Economics	Religion
Friendship	Global Warming	Society
Life	Books	Economics
Nature	Science	Happiness
Fiction	Sports	Psychology
Childhood	Society	Culture
Family	Examinations	History
Future	Religion	Movies
Religion	War	Sports
Heroes	Terror	Current events
	Unemployment	

When the preferences of education faculty students are analysed, it is seen that they generally concentrate on such certain subjects as war, fears, technology, death, space, detective, health, friendship, economics, fiction, sports, family, books, science, nature, future, religion, movies, culture and current events etc. that are, in fact, hot news in the media globally. In addition, while such subjects as *global warming* has recently been in the global media, other subjects like examinations, terror, and unemployment can be defined as peculiar to Turkey.

Gender differences

When previous studies on writing preferences and skills are analysed, it is determined that there are significant differences between girls and boys. On the basis of studies conducted in the USA, and the UK, girls in general are found to hold more positive attitudes towards writing than boys, to write better than boys (Collis & Ollila, 1986; White, 1989; Boser, Wiley, and Clark, 1991; Engelhard, 1991; Schick, 1992), to choose different topics in their writing (Flynn, 1983; Ollila, Buller & Collis, 1989; Keroes, 1990), and to prefer different writing styles (Stobart et al., 1992). However, Table 2 and Table 3 indicate more convergence on writing topic preference between female and male students than divergence in our studies. In the study of Shippen et al. (2007) similarities stand out between urban and rural students. These similarities might have mostly resulted from the fact that they share the same environment. As known, pre-service teachers generally live in the same dormitory and watch the same TV programs. Moreover, they mostly socialize in the same places like cafés and pubs etc. They also have the same lecturers at university. All of these might have caused them to enjoy similar things. Above all, the increasingly globalizing world urges stereotypes anyhow.

Although similarities generally appear between girls and boys in the study, some differences occur in some areas as well. When these differences are analysed (Table 2-3), girls are found to prioritize such subjects as love, education, history, language/literature, adventure, life, war, politics, health, death, fears, space, and books; boys are more interested in love, education, war, politics, history, life, adventure, language/literature, death, space, and sports. We can see that although both girls and boys have the subjects of love and education in common, girls prefer health, fears, and books more, while boys prefer politics, and sports more. These differences between boys and girls generally overlap the differences they bring from their childhood. As known, girls are more inclined to social subjects than boys. Also, the fact that girls are interested in such subjects as health and books might be an indicator of the outcome of the studies which show that they are more successful than boys academically (Collis & Ollila, 1986; White, 1989; Boser, Wiley, and Clark, 1991; Engelhard, 1991; Schick, 1992).

Table 2. Preferred writing topic themes from female students

Female students themes		
Real or imagined story	Report	Opinion
Love	Education	Love
History	Language/Literature	Education
Adventure	History	Life
War	Politics	Politics
Life	Health	Death
Fears	Space	Books
Friendship	Technology	Turkey
Childhood	Economics	War
Death	Global Warming	Religion
Family	Books	Language/Literature
Detective	Science	Childhood
Nature	Geography	Happiness
Happiness	Examinations	Movies
Peace	Unemployment	World
Religion	Future	Society
Society	War	University
Psychology	World	History
Motherhood	Religion	Family
Fiction	Pollution	Peace

Table 3. Preferred writing topic themes from male students

Male students themes		
Real or imagined story	Report	Opinion
Love	Education	Education
War	Politics	Politics
History	History	Life
Adventure	Language/Literature	Love
Politics	Technology	Language/Literature
Death	Space	Sports
Detective	Economics	Economics
Fears	Sports	Culture
Heroes	War	Death
Fiction	Global Warming	Psychology
Future	Art	Youth
Nature	Life	Society
Friendship	Society	Current events
Religion	Science	War
Dreams	Health	Books
Murder	Religion	Terror
Mafia	Middle East	Morals
	Terror	Unemployment

FINAL THOUGHTS

This study provides educators with the information about which topics students are interested in and whether there is a significant difference in terms of gender. The participants in this study reported that they are mostly interested in writing about love, education, adventure, language/literature, history, and politics issues. Educators who use these topics in their classrooms may increase students' writing since they appear motivational to students. The author of

this study interprets this reporting of topic preferences by these participants as encouraging for educators. Educators should take note that students are interested in social issues such as education, politics, and history as well as issues about their everyday personal activities such as love and adventure. Finally, we can not assume that all the people in different educational majors are interested in writing; education programs should be designed to pursue their engagement in writing. Hence, they can be appropriate role models for their future students.

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