



## Attitudes of the preparatory class students towards the writing course and their attitude-success relationship in writing

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the attitudes of Turkish EFL students towards the writing course at university and to investigate the relationship between students' attitudes and their overall proficiency in writing. The participants were 782 students from various departments in the pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate levels in a preparatory program. The data were collected through questionnaires administered to the students before and after they took the writing course. The students were asked to reflect their attitudes towards the writing course as pre- and post-tests. In addition, their writing scores in the proficiency exam were assessed, and the relationship between students' average attitude scores and their overall writing proficiency was compared and contrasted. Our results revealed that there was a slight decrease in their attitudes towards writing in the post test, which was not statistically significant. On the other hand, the overall writing proficiency results revealed that the students' attitude towards writing skill had a positive effect on their proficiency in writing.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Aspects of writing

Writing is one of the most important language skills to be developed for people learning a second language, and this is more emphasized in academic world. Harmer (2004) emphasizes that "being able to write is a vital skill for speakers of a foreign language as much as for everyone using their own first language" (p. 2). Weigle (2002) points out that "the ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign- language education" (p. 1).

Writing is one of the most important language skills to be developed for people learning a second language, and this is more emphasized in academic world. Harmer (2004) emphasizes that "being able to write is a vital skill for speakers of a foreign language as much as for everyone using their own first language" (p. 2). Weigle (2002, p. 1) points out that "the ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign- language education."

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As in L1, L2 writing is undeniably a complex process that involves both the cognitive processes of second language acquisition, as well as the genres, purposes, and values of the targeted L2 discourse community (Polio & Williams, 2009). Writing triggers thinking, enables learners to concentrate and organize their ideas, and increases their ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize (Rao, 2007; Ur, 1996, p. 186). On the other hand, Ur (1996) defines writing as a complex and a difficult task. It demands a good planning, content organization, use of appropriate vocabulary and structure depending on the genre, and practice. The complexities associated with writing come from two major factors: the nature of writing itself and the nature of classrooms as educational settings (Dyson and Freedman, 2003). The distinction made by Krashen (1982) between language acquisition and learning can also be applied for language skills and it is argued that writing skill is different from the other skills in that it is not acquired but learned (Johnson, 1996; Myles, 2002).

Although writing was a neglected skill in teaching of English as a second or foreign language, it has gained importance over the last decade and a half (Matsuda and Silva, 2005). According to Grabe and Kaplan (1997), while learning English, all language learners need to attain some proficiency in writing. Silva (1997) emphasizes that L2 writers are less effective than the ones who write in their native language. The reason why writers are ineffective in writing in a foreign language may come from the fact that “writing skill may be labeled as intricate” (Arslan and Zibande, 2010, p. 109).

Hyland (2008, p. 34) points to the fact that “L2 writers generally write shorter, less cohesive and fluent, and their products contain more errors.” In a study, Zamel (1983) investigated six L2 students’ writing performances and she observed that competence in writing was more important than the linguistic competence and she concluded that poor L2 writers generally depended on L1 in their writing in L2 (cited in Kroll, 1990). The reason why many learners of English have troubles with writing may result from the fact that in the act of writing, the writer needs to equilibrate several aspects of writing such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, and the language use according to the genre.

### *1.2. Attitudinal factors in writing*

Various studies (Verma, 2005; Karahan, 2007; Denny, 2012; Mcleod, 2014) have pointed out the significance of attitudinal factors in language learning. In an academic setting, the major focus of many teachers is on preparing learners to cope with the language requirements, and in particular, the writing requirements of university courses (Bruce, 2008). The increase in writing activities has presented teachers with the challenge of determining their students’ attitudes towards writing because of the link between motivation and literacy learning (Kear, Coffman, McKenna & Ambrosio, 2000). As they suggest, if we are more knowledgeable about our students’ attitudes toward writing, then our writing can potentially benefit from this new information. According to Klein (1986), in order to master language skills, adults should be suitably motivated. In a language learning environment, students’ attitudes influence their learning in two major ways. The first one includes exposition to large amounts of input necessary for language acquisition, and the second one, on the other hand, is related to being open to the language (Krashen, 1987). This takes us to a key factor which influences the success of students in second language learning that is the subject area of this study – students’ attitudes towards writing in preparatory classes in a university setting.

### *1.3. Research questions*

Seeking to gain an insight into the attitudes of the prep class students towards the writing course and with a focus on the attitude and success relationship, this study aims to find out answers to the following research questions: 1) What are the attitudes of the students towards the writing course before and after they take it? 2) To what extent do the attitudes of the students change towards the

writing course? 3) To what extent do the attitudes of the students change according to the level of English? 4) Do the attitudes of students towards writing course affect their success in writing?

## 2. Method

This study aims to find out students' attitudes towards writing course in a school of foreign languages at a state university, and to investigate the correlation between students' attitudes and their overall performance in writing based on the proficiency exam results. Thus, this study was designed as a descriptive study. According to Rumrill, Cook and Wiley (2011), the primary goal in descriptive studies is to describe events, experiences, attitudes and observations rather than to establish a causal or predictive relation between variables.

### 2.1. Participants

Within the scope of this study, the first attitude scale was administered only on pre-intermediate and intermediate level students in day and night classes. Out of 1171 students having English preparatory program, a total of 782 students participated in the pre-and post-test. Among the participants, 51.2 % of them were female (400), and 48.8 % of them were male (381) students, and the mean age was 18.8. The distribution of the participants according to their level of English was as follows: 83.8% Pre-Intermediate level (655), 11.2% Intermediate (88), and 5% Upper-Intermediate (39).

### 2.2. Instrument

In the study, a questionnaire developed by Erdem (2007) was adopted to the context of the current study and after piloting, it was used as the data collection tool for this study in order to measure the attitudes of the students towards the writing course. In the questionnaire, 1-5 Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was used to find out the attitudes of the participants. Before the actual study, the questionnaire was applied on 100 students in the pilot study. The validity and reliability of the scale were tested after the piloting, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 89.4; additionally, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the main study was .91.

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

The instrument was administered twice as pre- and post-test in the actual study at the beginning and at the end of the term in order to find out whether the students' attitudes changed within the course of instruction during the spring term. Within this procedure, it was possible to find out how their attitudes changed between pre-test and post-test. After conducting the attitude scale to the same students, the results were analyzed in SPSS 16 and in the final step, students' final exam results were compared according to their attitude levels.

In the analysis of the data, four main analysis techniques were used:

- (1) Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to find out whether the data were parametric or non-parametric
- (2) Mann Whitney U-Test to compare two groups
- (3) Kruskal Wallis to compare three groups
- (4) Wilcoxon signed-rank test to find out whether students attitudes differ according to their overall proficiency.

- Apart from these techniques, students' writing scores in the proficiency exam were collected and their level of success was calculated.

As the sample size was bigger than 50, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to determine the analysis instruments to be used in the study. In Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the indifference of the sample to the normal distribution is assessed. Conformity of the distribution of sample to normal distribution is interpreted as the sample representing the target group, and this state is accepted to be supporting the validity of the scale.

### 3. Results and Discussion

First of all, the learners' attitudes towards the writing course before they took it were investigated based on the pre-test results. Our data revealed that the students had positive attitudes towards writing course (mean: 3.41) in general. According to the results, the students (mean: 3.95 regarded writing as an important course, and they believed that it would be useful for them in their life and in their education. However, some of them (mean: 3.15) also reported that "they got bored in writing courses."

The attitudes of students before taking English writing course differed significantly with respect to their gender ( $U=68108.000$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). The rank average showed that female students had higher attitude scores compared to male students (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The results of Mann Whitney-U test with respect to the gender variable

Variable	n	Rank Average	Rank Total	U	p
Female	400	411.23	164492.00	68108.000	0.01*
Male	382	396.76	140879.00		

\*  $p<0.05$

On the other hand, the attitudes of students towards the writing course before taking it did not differ significantly with respect to their level of English ( $\chi^2_{(sd=2, n=782)} = 0.636$ ;  $p>0.05$ ) (see Table 2). This finding suggests that their level of English had no influence on the attitude scores of students regarding English writing course. On the other hand, all the participants had positive attitudes towards writing, and intermediate level students had the highest attitude scores while the pre-intermediate level students had the lowest.

**Table 2.** Results of Kruskal Wallis-H test with respect to the level of English

Variables		n	Rank Average	sd	x	p
Level of English	Pre-Intermediate	655	388.66	2	0.636	0.728
	Intermediate	88	406.38			
	Upper-Intermediate	39	405.55			

We analyzed our data regarding the perceptions and attitudes of the students towards the writing course after they took it with respect to "Overall Attitude Score", "Gender" and "Level of English". Our results revealed that the students had a mean score of 3.39 as overall attitude score. Compared to pre-test results, the students' attitudes towards writing decreased in the post-test, however, this was not statistically significant. Plata (2008, p. 357) pointed out that a negative attitude toward writing may not

be unusual because “few people are skilled enough for writing, and even many people do not like writing very much”.

Students’ attitudes scores showed that they had neutral attitudes towards writing course after they took the course. When their participation levels in the questionnaire were analyzed, it was observed that writing was an important skill for them (mean: 3.95) which they believed they would need in their future life. When responses to the positive statements were analyzed, a majority of the students (mean: 4.27) strongly agreed that they wanted to improve their writing skill in English as much as possible. On the other hand, they disagreed that they looked forward to having English writing course. Thus, we can point out that they are aware of the importance of writing skill but writing courses are not instructed in an attractive way for them.

In addition, the attitude scores were analyzed with respect to gender. For this purpose, the number of female and male participants was computed, and their rank averages were compared using Mann Whitney-U test. The results in Table 3 show that the attitudes of students did not differ significantly with respect to their gender ( $U = 71109.000$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that in our study gender had no influence on the attitudes of students towards writing. On the other hand, the mean score for male students was higher than that of the female ones.

**Table 3.** Results of Mann Whitney-U test with respect to the gender variable

	Variable	n	Rank Average	Rank Total	U	p
Gender	Female	400	378.27	151309	71109.000	0.106
	Male	382	404.36	154062		

In order to find out how their attitudes varied according to their level of English, their attitude results were analyzed by using Kruskal Wallis-H. The results showed that the attitudes of students towards writing with respect to their level of English did not differ significantly ( $\chi^2_{(sd=2, n=782)} = 3.847$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that their level of English had no influence on the attitude scores of students. On the other hand, among the participants who had positive attitudes towards writing, the intermediate level students had the highest attitude scores while the upper-intermediate students had the lowest (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Results of Kruskal Wallis-H test with respect to the level of English

Variable	n	Rank Average	sd	X	p	
Level of English	Pre-Intermediate	655	392.77	2	3.847	0.14
	Intermediate	88	410.70			
	Upper-Intermediate	39	326.91			

When the pre-and post-test results are considered, the post-test results are in favor of the negative rank. These results showed that having taken English writing course had no influence on improving the attitudes of students towards this course. Although the students took the course for a whole term, their attitudes towards the writing course did not increase in a positive way. Although the difference between pre- and post-test was not statistically significant, the students’ attitudes decreased to some

extent in the post-test. Studies conducted on writing attitudes reveal conflicting results. Some studies (Buhrke, Henkels, Klene, and Pfister, 2002; Gau, Hermanson, Logar and Smerek, 2003) suggest that students' writing attitudes increase within the course duration. On the other hand, Petric (2002, p. 17) points out, in her study, on writing attitudes:

a positive attitude does not automatically turn into behavior because of students' perceived lack of control over the situation due to pressing factors such as examinations and other external factors; however, factors may be internal, that is, if a student perceives her language proficiency inadequate, she may not develop a positive attitude within the course of time.

With respect to the perceptions of male and female students towards writing course, the attitudes of female students showed no significant difference after they took the course, and the attitudes of both female and male students were nearly similar ( $U=71109.000$ ;  $p>0.05$ ). Pajares, Miller and Johnson (1999) conducted a study on gender differences in attitudes towards writing. Their results revealed that girls were judged superior writers in the pre-test, but there were no significant gender differences in writing when the pre- and post-test results were compared. In our study, we also found similar results; female students had higher attitudes in the pre-test, however, in the post-test, their attitudes decreased and results showed that gender has no significance effect on attitudes based on the gender variation. Additionally, Yong's (2010) study suggests that female students had positive scores in their attitudes towards writing; likewise, males also had similar attitudes together with the female students. In her study, she concludes that although females seem to have higher attitude scores, males show similar attitudes just in a less manner. Another study on how gender differences affect students' writing attitudes was conducted by Greene (1999). The study examined the relationships among self-efficacy for writing, self-efficacy for academic achievement, self-evaluative standards, verbal aptitude scores, grade goals, final course grades, and gender among university students in first-semester English composition classes. The results of the study indicated that gender was not significantly related to attitude in writing, which also shows similar results with our study.

Our results revealed that the students' level of English was not a significant issue in their attitudes towards the writing course both before and after taking the course. According to our post-test results, the upper-intermediate level students' attitude scores decreased from 405.38 to 326.91 although pre-intermediate and intermediate level students' attitude scores increased. When the pre-intermediate and intermediate level students finish the preparatory school at the end of the second term, they finish the program at upper-intermediate level. However, this situation does not provide an impact on students in a way to change their attitudes towards the course. Our results show that their level of English has no influence on the attitude scores of students regarding the writing course before and after taking the course. Their attitude score was ( $sd=2$ ,  $n=782$ ) = 0.636;  $p>0.05$ ) before the course and ( $sd=2$ ,  $n=782$ ) = 3.847;  $p>0.05$ ) after the course.

**Table 5.** Attitudes of students before and after taking the writing course regarding language level

Level of English	Attitudes before taking the course					Attitudes after taking the course				
	N	Rank Average	Sd	x	p	Rank Average	Sd	x	p	
Pre-Intermediate	655	388.66	2	0.636	0.728	392.77	2	3.847	0.146	
Intermediate	88	406.38				410.70				
Upper-Intermediate	38	405.55				326.91				

In his study, Marx (1991, p. 5) compared the attitudes of students from three different levels of English and came up with the result that in the developmental level students shared similar attitudes with the advanced level students. Middle ability group students showed negative attitudes towards writing. However Marx (1991, p. 5) concluded that “a student’s writing ability did not necessarily correlate directly with his/her attitudes towards writing”. This study also supports our study in that students’ level of English has no direct effect upon their attitudes towards writing.

### 3.1. The Perceptions and attitudes of students towards writing course according to their success in writing

In order to find out whether the attitudes of students towards writing course affect their success in writing, we tried to find correlations between their mean scores and achievement grades. In the analysis of the relationship between attitude scores and writing achievement, a Pearson Correlation test was conducted, and thus, the correlation coefficient between students' attitudes and their achievements was calculated;  $r= 0.275$  ( $p=0.000$ ). This result indicates that there is a positive relation between writing attitude and success in writing. Table 6 below shows the Pearson Correlation test result conducted to see the relation between writing attitude and writing achievement. While analyzing the students' success in writing, their scores in the proficiency exam results in writing were gathered. Those who had scores 70 and over out of 100 in the writing section of the proficiency exam were regarded as “successful” and the ones who had lower than 70 were considered unsuccessful. When Table 6 is analyzed, it can be seen that there is a relationship between the students’ overall attitudes towards writing and their writing performance.

Our results are supported by a number of studies stating that there is a direct link between attitude and success, and one of them was conducted by Powell (1984). The results of the study indicated that there is a relationship between (1) attitude and writing performance and (2) grade point average and writing performance. Gardner and Lambert (1972) also point out that learner’s attitudes are believed to affect his success in language learning considerably because motivation to learn the second language, thus writing in our context, is determined by attitudes. Thus they claim that social-psychological factors (attitudes) relate strongly to achievement in L2 learning. Additionally, Dörnyei (2003) emphasized that high motivation and success has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as a key factor in rate and success of second language or foreign language learning. Gallick and Sheryl (1997, p. 71) also share similar findings which indicate that after completing an action research project based on process approach to writing on students, the researchers concluded that “students demonstrated a 100 percent increase in positive attitudes towards writing” and their pre- and post-test results showed an increase in their success in writing.

**Table 6.** The correlation between Writing attitude and Writing Achievement

<b>Correlation</b>			
		positive	success
Attitude	Pearson Correlation	1	.275**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	782	782
Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.275**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	782	782

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4. Conclusions

The results of the study revealed that students had positive attitudes towards writing when they came to School of Foreign Languages, and they agreed that writing skill was necessary for them in their academic and future life. Sustainability of this attitude depends on the instruction of writing course, materials used in the class, content of the course and the exams. The post-test results showed that students' attitudes towards the writing course were still positive, however after taking the course, their attitude scores decreased but this was not statistically significant. There was no statistically significant difference in terms of gender and level of students. On the other hand, there was a positive relation between attitude of participants towards writing and their academic success in writing.

Our results imply that students are partly content with the writing program in the School of Foreign Languages. However, it is a fact that these students have the academic writing course for the first time in their life, and it is worth noting here that they are even inexperienced in L1 writing as the studies (Kuvaç, 2008; Nohl and Sayılan, 2004) suggest. In order for the students to continue the positive attitude towards writing, teachers should be aware of their attitude. They should increase the number of the tasks so that students will be busy with different topics in different genres. Additionally, they need to be provided models and encouraged to practice their writing skill more as part of their learning process. The results also imply that students are bored in the writing course, and the content does not attract their attention at the desired level based on the syllabus. Thus, the teachers should give the writing instruction in an attractive way so that they follow the course content in pleasure, and feel eager to participate in and out of the class. In addition, students should be grouped according to their departments because their success and learning phase change significantly depending on their department.

In order to make students more aware of the fact that they need writing skills in their academic life after preparatory class, students can be given brief introductions by the head of the departments before they begin their academic year in the preparatory classes. As they start their education life in the preparatory classes for the first time in the university, most of the students do not have adequate information about the course requirements in their own departments, so teachers should arrange meetings and acknowledge them why they need language skills, and emphasize the necessity of writing skill.

As a key factor in the teaching/learning process in and out of the class, the instructors can get information about the students' attitudes and perceptions, and may help them to improve positive attitudes towards writing skills through various achievable tasks graded from simple to more advanced ones in addition to constructive and positive feedback to help the learners to move beyond their both linguistic and affective barriers in writing. Thanks to achievable tasks that teachers provide, students will be aware that they can achieve them by spending necessary effort, which will also lead them to build self-confidence and higher attitude.

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## Hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin yazma dersine karşı tutumları ve yazma dersinde tutum-başarı ilişkisi

### Öz

Bu çalışmada Pamukkale Üniversitesi hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin yazma dersine karşı tutumları incelenmiş ve öğrencilerin tutumları ile genel başarı oranları arasındaki ilişki ortaya koyulmuştur. Çalışmada hazırlık sınıfında çeşitli yabancı dil seviyelerinde ve farklı bölümlerde okuyan 782 öğrenciden veri toplanmış ve veri toplama çalışması anket yoluyla yapılmıştır. Veriler öğrencilerin yazma dersini almadan önce ve sonrasında olmak üzere ön-test, son-test şeklinde toplanmıştır. Ayrıca, tutum-başarı ilişkisinin incelenebilmesi için, öğrencilerin yeterlilik sınavında yazma bölümüne ait notlar çalışma bağlamında değerlendirilmiş ve tutum ortalamaları ile kıyaslanmıştır. Elde edilen veriler ışığında, hem ön-test hem de son-test tutum ortalamalarına göre öğrencilerin yazma dersine karşı pozitif tutuma sahip oldukları ancak son-test sonuçlarında dersi almadan önceki tutum oranlarına göre anlamlı olmayan bir düşüş olduğu görülmüştür. Diğer taraftan, öğrencilerin genel başarı notları göz önüne alındığında tutum ile başarı arasında anlamlı bir ilişki olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* yabancı dilde yazma becerisi, tutum, hazırlık sınıfı, başarı

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