PROBLEMS FACED BY PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS[1]

Hizmet Öncesi İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Araştırma Makalesi Yazımında Karşılaştıkları Problemler

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ABSTRACT: Writing a research paper is one of the areas that ELT students have difficulty throughout their university education and future academic career. The aim of the present study is to investigate how ELT students tussle with research paper writing. Gender, research methods course and students' years of studying are chosen to be independent variables for this study. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire adapted fro

m Köksal and Razı (2011) and conducted on 117 students studying English Language Teaching at Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, which is a state university in Burdur. The study results reveal that, students have problems most in lacking experience in scholarly writing, lack of critical reading skills, referencing and being talented or gifted. Also, the findings show that there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of the writing difficulties they experience. Moreover, according to the results, there is no significant difference between students who took research methods/skills course and students who did not. The results did not reveal any significant difference with respect to the students' years of studying, either. Also, with respect to students' level of writing skills

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the study reveals that there is a significant difference between students who defined their English as 'excellent' and those regarding their English as 'bad'.

Keywords: Research paper, applied linguistics, higher education, English for academic purposes.

ÖZ: Araştırma makalesi yazmak İngiliz Dili Eğitimi okuyan öğrencilerin üniversite eğitimleri ve gelecekteki akademik kariyerleri boyunca zorluk yaşayabilecekleri alanlardan biridir. Bu çalışma İngiliz Dili Eğitimi öğrencilerinin araştırma makalesi yazmakla nasıl başa çıktıklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Cinsiyet, Araştırma Yöntemleri dersi ve öğrencilerin kaçıncı sınıf oldukları bu araştırmanın bağımsız değişkenleri olarak seçilmiştir. Veriler Köksal ve Razı (2011)'dan uyarlanan bir anket yoluyla toplanmış ve Burdur'da bir devlet üniversitesi olan Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi'nde İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümünde okuyan 117 öğrenciye uygulanmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları gösteriyor ki öğrenciler en çok akademik yazımdaki tecrübe yetersizliği, eleştirel okuma eksikliği, kaynak kullanma ve yazma konusunda doğuştan yetenekli olma konularında sorun yaşamaktadırlar. Ayrıca, bulgular gösteriyor ki yazma zorlukları açısından kız ve erkek öğrenciler arasında herhangi bir anlamlı fark yoktur. Aynı zamanda, sonuçlara göre, Araştırma Yöntemleri dersi alan ve almayan öğrenciler arasında da istatiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark yoktur. Sonuçlar öğrencilerin kaçıncı sınıf olduğunun da herhangi bir fark yaratmadığını ortaya koymuştur. Bunların dışında, araştırmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin yazma beceri düzeyleri bakımından, sadece İngilizcesini 'mükemmel' olarak tanımlayan ve İngilizcesini 'kötü' olarak tanımlayan öğrenciler arasında bir fark olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Araştırma makalesi, uygulamalı dilbilim, yüksek öğretim, akademik amaçlı İngilizce (EAP).

INTRODUCTION

With the first step taken into the university life, pre-service English language teachers find themselves in an academic milieu where they are required to produce specific academic writing genres almost for each course they take either as part of course evaluation or requirement. Research papers are the most common type of coursework assigned to students (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). Therefore, the ability to write a good research paper is an essential and survival skill for ELT students throughout their study. Additionally, ELT students, as future English language teachers, should be equipped with effective writing skills. ELT students start taking writing courses beginning from the first term of their freshman year (Advanced Reading and Writing I) and in the second term (Advanced Reading and Writing II). Besides these compulsory courses, some ELT programs also offer optional courses under

different names, such as Academic Writing and Research Skills, which are often limited to one term and mostly run without practical workshops. It is not surprising that since students are not familiar to writing research papers from their high school days, they usually dread this assignment (Rooney, 1995) and are afraid of the prospect of writing a research paper due mostly to its complex and challenging nature (Frankel and McHale, 2002).

Many ELT practitioners are also aware of the fact that students experience difficulty in producing expressive and reflective research papers. The chief reason probably originates from the fact that research paper writing skills require students to engage in a great deal of training and practice. According to Newfields (2003: 99) "[l]anguage difficulties are only part of the problem" in writing research papers". Similarly, Rooney (1995: 8) argued that "[p]art of the problem stems from the nature of the research paper". The point these researchers seem to miss is that the underlying problem probably relates to the fact that ELT students, particularly in Turkey, have barely (or never) written a research paper before commencing on their programs. They have thus very little previous experience in writing such academic papers.

In addition, research papers differ from other written assignments. They are not the collection of the writer's own ideas or views, as is seen in essay-type tasks. While writing a research paper on a given topic, supplementation of interpretations along with information from outer sources (published journals, books, theses etc.) is of utmost prerequisite, because the quality of the research is judged against accurate and effective presentation of ideas in the paper. Hence, students should master the conventions of research papers.

Overall, the problems students encounter can be put into three categories: (1) problems with the concept of research, (2) problems with writing/presentation of the research findings, (3) problems with language. Additionally, the complexity of research paper writing process can play a deteriorating role for ELT students in producing acceptable research papers. In the foreword to his book, Öz (2003) referred to this process, emphasising how writing research papers might be burdensome for students:

Writing a research paper is a long, recursive, open-ended, and creative process. This process usually becomes an overwhelmingly complex task for a graduate and undergraduate student when s/he is unfamiliar with or not accustomed to 'scientific' conventions as well as techniques, skills, and steps involved in achieving the task itself (Öz, 2003: v).

The previous research into academic writing has often dealt with the problem of language difficulties (mainly syntactic and morphological) students encounter

in written tasks, e.g. the problem of faulty sentence structures, misused words. However, there are a limited number of studies on the problems that ELT students face during the process of constructing a research paper. Moreover, the previous studies were, in fact, concerned more with graduate ELT students and professionals (e.g. Köksal and Razı, 2011; Rummel, 2005). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the kind of problems and obstacles ELT students encounter when writing research papers and the factors behind those problems.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research in higher education

Research can be described as a rigorous effort for "systematic investigation to establish facts or principles or to collect information on a subject" (Collins, 1994). For students at higher education, research is an inescapable task as a required part of their degree programs. The main reason lies in the fact that many university assignments require students to do some research. As a result, it is deemed as valuable part of an undergraduate education (Fister, 2001). For some, though, as already mentioned, it might be a dreadful task, which often results in negative statements by students. For instance, they can utter sentences as follows: "I never understand what they [lecturers] want", "Writing here [at tertiary education] seems completely different to anything I've done before", "The thought of writing assignments makes me panic" (Crème and Lea, 1997: 1).

Indeed, there is a highly widespread misperception among students about research paper writing. Many are convinced that academic writing requires an innate ability. That is possibly the reason why most students tend to attribute their failure in research and their lack of research skills to not having such an innate ability. Contrary to such misperceptions, Ellison (2010: ix) contended that "anyone can learn to write a scientific research paper". However, it is true that for novice students, it may be tough in the first place (Davis, 1997).

Research in applied linguistics

Scholars emphasize that research is absolutely vital in the field of applied linguistics and its sub-branches, e.g. EFL and ELT (Köksal and Razı, 2011). As distinct from the general understanding of research, in applied linguistics, research is described as "any systematic and principled inquiry" into any problems in which language has an issue (Brown, 2004: 478). According to Nunan (1992: 2), the procedure of research is threefold: "(a) defining a problem, (b) stating an objective, and (c) formulating a hypothesis", adding further

that this process consists of "gathering information, classifying, analysis, and interpretation to see to what extent the initial objective has been achieved".

Linguistic research, as with that of other fields, may be categorized as qualitative and quantitative. The former lays huge emphasis on interpretation of the analysis limited to certain cases, therefore being hard to generalize, whereas the latter deals with multiple cases in an attempt to quantify the collected data to reach generalizations (Mackey and Gas, 2005; Nunan, 1992). Following Köksal and Razı (2011), this paper takes Brown's (1988) classification, which is based on primary and secondary research. In secondary research, data is garnered from written or online documents such as books, articles, magazines (known as secondary sources) about language-related issues while primary research is contingent on original documents composed during the time under study (known as primary resources) often via working with human participants (e.g. an EFL group).

Undergraduate students usually tackle with theory-based assignments that call for some research with extensive (critical) reading, criticism or evaluation of related theories, often at a simple level. Such tasks are known as literature-review-based assignments in which students are driven into intense reading which centres on the subject in question. If students are to work on more practice-driven projects by doing empirical research and collecting primary data, they often need to calculate the descriptive statistics and related measures, such as mean, range, standard deviation and even to run some inferential statistics depending on the purpose of the research.

EAP and research paper

EAP broadly "refers to any English teaching that relates to a study purpose", according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 34). They further added that non-native English learners might need assistance "with both the language of academic disciplines and the specific 'study skills' required of them during their academic course" (p. 34). Students at higher education have a need for EAP for their university studies, at least, to deal with required readings and writing academic texts (Jordan, 1997). In line with the preceding discussion, it might be averred that courses on EAP intend to provide students with the basic structures and patterns used in academic studies, with a substantial emphasis on academic writing.

The subject-matter this paper seeks to address falls into the scope of English for general academic purposes, the teaching of which at higher education is preferred over ESP based on the conclusions pointed out by Zamel (1993) while arguing for English for general rather than specific purposes. The rudimentary conclusions she drew concerning general academic English are as follows:

1. students will encounter a variety of unpredictable assignments in their future courses;

2. their interpretations of those assignments will be unique and idiosyncratic; and

3. their academic coursework will be "generally unimaginative and formulaic" (Zamel, 1993: 34), with the subject matter presented in an "authoritarian" manner, preventing students from "engaging with material and work they are assigned".

Research paper is one of the genres in academic writing. "[a]ny paper requiring the writer to research a particular topic is a research paper" (Eby, 2011: 17). It also "requires [students] to seek out information about a subject, take stand on it, and back it up with opinions, ideas and views of others" (Winkler & Metherell, 2011: 3-4). It plays a crucial role in learning about a topic assigned to or chosen by students. In her book, Blandford (2009) explained the main philosophy of research paper, particularly addressing the students of English studies, as shown below:

The foremost goal of the research paper project is to learn the process of researching and composition. At this level, it is most important for you to develop the skills necessary to produce the papers, primarily the reading, understanding, evaluating and connecting of ideas from material that is more sophisticated, complex, and perhaps more technical than what they have done before (Blandford, 2009: vii).

A research paper consists of several sections and sub-sections (i.e. ingredients), which are the hallmark of the genre of this kind distinguishing them from other written documents. As with many scientific papers, the research paper is composed of main, secondary and complementary sections (Chiswick, 2004). There is a broad consensus among scholars that the major sections are introduction, body and conclusion (Derntl, 2014; de Figueiredo, 2010; Woods, 2002). According to Woods' (2002) analogy where research papers are likened to sandwiches, the design of a research paper takes the following shape:

The secondary sections are constituted by abstract, methods, results (findings), discussion, and appendix. Except for the sections abstract and appendix, the remaining sub-sections are placed within the body of the paper. According to the type of the research, say, empirical or theoretical, these sections might differ, be omitted, or new ones can be added especially if the research paper is of a theoretical base. Other essential parts such as the cover, title, outline pages are complementary to the main sections of a research paper.
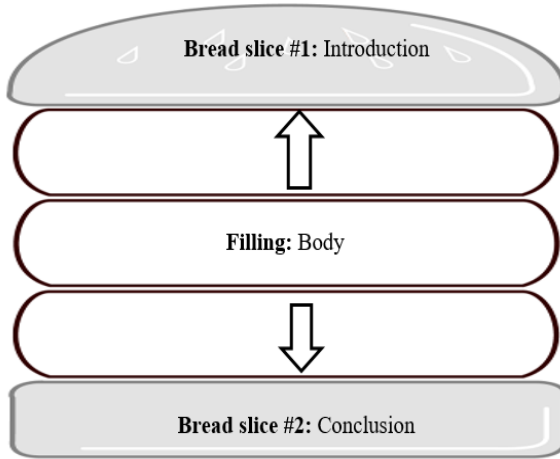
Figure 1. Main sections of a research paper (http://www.Docstoc .com/docs /40131644/ESSAY-WRITING-SANDWICHDIAGRAM)

Students' research paper writing experiences

Several studies on students' linguistic practices in writing can be found in the previous literature. For example, researchers abundantly conducted studies on common errors committed by students in writing essays (e.g., Darus and Ching, 2009; Tan, 2008) punctuation and capitalization errors (Elkılıç, Han and Aydın, 2009) prepositional errors in students' compositions (Tahaineh, 2010), among many others. The number of examples can be multiplied, but since it is not within the scope of this paper, the given examples suffice to point out that linguistic part of academic writing has been extensively studied to date; however, there is a dearth of research on research paper writing, its conventions and the research process itself, especially in the context of Turkish higher education.

The issues revolving around research paper writing and problems encountered during the writing process are still an under-researched area due to limited number of studies and lack of interest in the research topic. For instance, one initial study on research paper writing is that of Rooney (1995) in the USA. In her doctoral research, she examined 348 first-year college students' experience, knowledge about, and perceptions of the research paper and the research paper writing process. She collected data by surveying students via questionnaires. The findings revealed that the majority of the students stepped into college without experience of writing even a research paper before. They also perceived research papers as a mandatory chore at tertiary level to deal with rather than an assignment type which has relevance to their day-to-day

lives. Moreover, research paper was interpreted as an assignment which is full of artificial constraints and therefore students' own interpretations cannot occupy space in the paper.

Unlike Rooney's (1995) study with students, in another study, Flowerdew (1999) qualitatively explored the problems of 26 Chinese scholars in writing research papers for publication. The interview findings were interpreted from the perspectives of native and non-native dichotomy. The problems that non-native scholars faced included having difficulty of expression, needing longer time to write, having a less rich vocabulary, difficulty of making claims for their research with the appropriate amount of force. Participants also perceived writing papers of qualitative nature tougher than writing quantitative papers. In addition, the most problematic parts of the research paper were regarded as the introduction and discussion sections.

In an identical, but small-scale study, Okamura (2006) investigated 13 Japanese researcher's awareness of language difficulties during the process of research paper writing, and the strategies they followed while producing research papers. It was uncovered that Japanese researchers suffered most from the lack of academic vocabulary, overuse of hedging expressions, lack of enough knowledge about English rhetoric, difficulties in finding suitable linguistic forms and expressions to attract readers' attention. They reported to use two types of strategies to overcome the aforesaid difficulties: subject-knowledge oriented and language oriented strategies. It was revealed that all researchers adopted the first type in which they read research articles extensively to be familiar with the genre and then piled and grasped useful expressions to use in their own writing.

Turning to another context, Indonesia, with a focus on students, Wirza (2007) examined 60 third-year ELT students' understanding, practice and experience in writing research-based papers in a specific writing course in the 2005-2006 academic year. Assigned with two-mini research projects, students were aided to get prepared for their final project in which they had to submit a full research paper. The results showed that students were unaware of how to conduct research and report them in a document in an organized way. In addition, they did not have the necessary skills and experience indispensable for research paper writing process. However, as the findings underscored, the quasi-experimental study with two mini-research projects aided them to gain first-hand experience to conduct research; contributed to their knowledge of research paper writing, and lastly helped them improve their academic writing skills. In a similar location, Malaysia, problems that 10 Arab postgraduate students of Business College faced while writing for academic purposes

in general and research purposes in particular were handled elaborately in Al-Khasawneh's (2010) diagnostic study. The primary goal was to provide solutions to the problems expressed by the postgraduate students. Collecting data with face-to-face interviews, the researcher reached the following conclusions: the problems faced by Arab students are several ranging from vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, to referencing styles. Suggested solutions to such problems are encouragement and support as well as guidance from the lecturers, employing multiple teaching techniques, including fun activities and games, and increasing the number of academic writing tasks for the betterment of students' writing abilities.

Similar studies on research paper writing can also be tracked in the Middle Eastern countries and Euroasian countries. Take, for example, the study of Buckingham (2008) who conducted a small scale study in the Turkish context by interviewing 13 Turkish researchers from the humanities faculty of a private university, Sabancı University. The main objective was to identify the scholars' perceptions about the discipline-specific second language writing capabilities. It was unearthed that scholars' achievement of scholarly writing expertise in their disciplines had strong ties with the process of exploration of genre conventions, i.e. conventions of the research paper. The study concluded that portfolio-based academic writing is to be adopted so that junior researchers can recognize the rhetorical, organizational, and linguistic characteristics of academic writing required in their disciplines. Another study approaching the same issue from a similar perspective in the Turkish context was conducted by Köksal and Razı (2011) with ELT stakeholders. By implementing a mixed-study research design in which data collection was done with questionnaires and interviews, they elicited information from 159 academicians and under- and post-graduate students. Their aim was to explore students' and staff's experiences in research and writing a research paper, and perceptions of difficulty with regards to different parts of the research paper. They found that there were statistically significant differences between academicians and students. A consensus was reached by academicians that their profession cannot be detached from research seeing that it is a priority for ELT practitioners, be they students, teachers or researchers. Finally, they regarded the discussion section as the most difficult part, whereas writing the bibliography was perceived as the easiest part of a research paper.

In a large scale qualitative study, Buckley (2010) investigated and described 40 undergraduate students' expectations, outcomes, experiences and epistemological gains. As distinct from studies of similar kind, she embraced a qualitative method by interviewing and surveying her participants at regular

intervals. According to the results, participants had different expectations regarding undergraduate research according to their background variables, such as major fields of study, epistemological assumptions, previous research experiences and gender. Students reported that they became more independent of their lecturers, felt challenged and supported during the research process. Their experience in research was cited to be fairly positive due to the gains and meaningful relationships in relation to their research experiences and interactions with their course instructor.

METHOD

Research setting and participants

The study was carried out at Mehmet Akif Ersoy University with 117 students, sampled from the department of English Language Teaching. A convenience sampling method was employed in the collection of the data. Only second-year, third-year and fourth-year students were involved in the study. The exclusion of first-year students was due to the fact that they neither took any courses, nor wrote any assignment(s) which include research at the time of the study.

The majority of the students' age range was between 19 and 22 (82.9%, n=97). The number of female participants were 83 and male participants 34. In terms of students' study year, the majority were second-year ELT students (n=49) whereas 36 were third-year and 32 were fourth-year students. A quite large number of students (n=85, 72.6%) already took research-related courses, while 27.4% of them (n=32) did not. Those who already had research method modules were third and fourth-year students; however, second-year students reported not taking any research methodology related courses at the time the study was processed.

The majority (n=56, % 47.9) perceived their writing ability as good while only 8 students (% 6.8) considered themselves to be excellent writers, and 5 (4.3%) students to be poor writers. These figures clearly indicate that students are cautious about being placed at the end points of this writing ability continuum, probably to avoid being too assertive. As a result, they conceivably tended to rate their writing ability as standing out between fair and good. It is worth noting that differences in perceptions of their writing ability might indirectly influence their conception of research paper writing skills and experiences and accordingly the difficulties faced. Figure 2 summarizes students' perceived writing ability based on a five-point scale from 'poor' to 'excellent'.
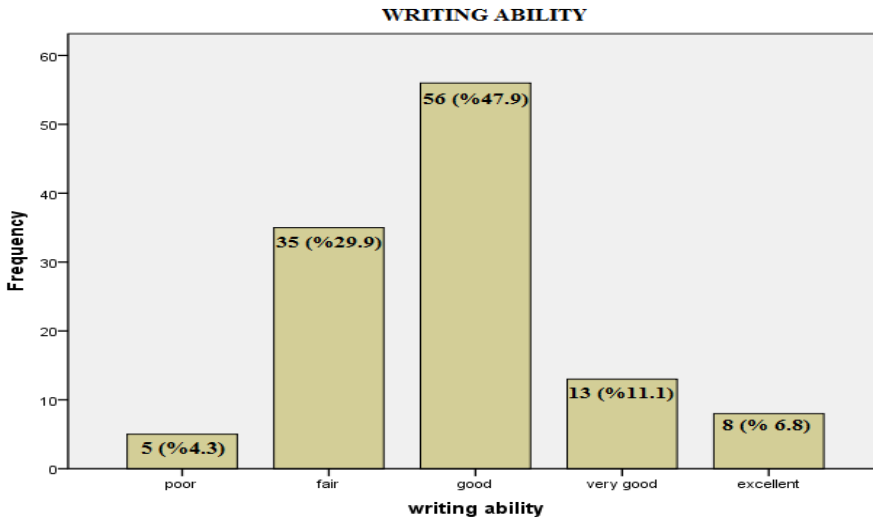
Figure 2: Students' perceived writing ability

Instrument

The data collection tool was adapted from Köksal and Razı (2011), and modified with a few amendments based on the meticulous review of the related literature and similar studies for the purposes of adapting the data collection tool for the specific foci of the research questions. The instrument is a survey questionnaire which consists of two sections: (1) personal data in which students' age, gender, class and research method skills and writing ability were elicited, and (2) questionnaire items regarding the participants' research experience and skills e.g. their weaknesses and strengths in the research and writing process. Students were asked to what extent they agree with the given statements on a five-point Likert scale.

Field experts were consulted for their views on the questionnaire items so that the validity and reliability conditions as well as face and content validity were assured. As maintained by Vogt (1999), content validity, which attends to the degree with which a certain data collection tool measures an aimed content area, is not a "statistical property", but "a matter of expert judgement" (p. 301). Those experts were two ELT lecturers, who already tutored for research related modules, a research assistant specializing in educational research design, and finally the then MA supervisor of the researcher.

For validity, a pool of questionnaire items was generated after reviewing the related literature and consulting field experts. For content validity, as

mentioned previously, experts in the field were consulted and the items were rectified according to their suggestions. In order to test the construct validity of the scale, the scale was piloted and tested for the specified single-factor structure. The total variance was calculated as being 17%. In a single-factor structure, the total variance should at least reach 30% (Büyüköztürk, 2009). However, the scale did not show a single-factor structure. For this reason, each item will be compared with each other one by one instead of comparing total scale scores.

In addition, reliability values were obtained by looking at coefficient of internal consistency and calculating the Cronbach Alpha value. The reliability coefficients calculated for 20 items showed moderate internal reliability (coefficient alpha=.782, $p<0.05$). Many researchers have argued that reliability coefficients in excess of 0.70 should be aimed. Regarding the relevant cut-off point, Dörnyei (2007: 207) noted that "if the Cronbach Alpha of a scale does not reach 0.60, this should sound warning bells" for researchers. Although researchers suggest some other cut-off points, the cut-off point, .70, is the oft-cited and used one in the field of applied linguistics. Therefore, resting on this cut-off point, the scale of the study can be judged as acceptable.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaires were administered in the fall term of 2012-2013 academic year. The researcher visited all classes at different time-scales and on different days in co-operation with the course lecturers. Participants were informed about the scope and aim of the research both verbally by the researcher and in written instructions in the questionnaires. The average time-length for filling in the questionnaires corresponded to 15 minutes. It was particularly assured to the participants that the data collected would remain confidential and anonymous, and there were no wrong or right answers, but sincere answers were of quite importance for fulfilling the research objectives. They completed questionnaires designed according to a pen-and paper procedure. The questionnaires were turned into numerical data in SPSS 16 for descriptive and inferential analysis. In the analysis of the data, independent sample t-tests and one way Anova tests were employed alongside descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the results of the statistical analyses of 20-questioned second part of the research instrument and one qualitative open-ended question are presented. While doing so, the emerging major points are also discussed with reference to the findings of previous research on the same issue. The results

are presented according to the order of research questions, and following the presentation of the results of each research question, discussion and interpretation of these results are provided in detail.

Research question 1: What are the problems faced by ELT students in relation to research paper writing and what are the causes of these problems?

To answer this research question, students' responses to the questionnaires were analysed descriptively in two ways: first, the responses to the 20 Likert-scale items were subjected to the descriptive statistics in SPSS in order to calculate the mean and standard deviation scores. Next, students' qualitative responses were placed after the quantitative analyses so that both issues which were not covered in the 20-item and parallel themes could be included in the results. The analyses of the students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire (i.e. 20 quantitative items) are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Problems

Item no	Items in part II	Mean	SD
12	needing more experience in research paper writing*	3.9402	.87386
13	needing more experience in critical reading*	3.9145	.85674
6	feeling confident in using supporting materials	3.7949	.79371
14	finding research method course helpful	3.5299	1.06328
8	looking up info for a research project	3.4872	.98799
19	identifying a research problem for research purposes	3.3675	.81577
1	having experience in writing research papers	3.3675	.98784
10	being capable of blending ideas with those of others	3.3248	.88891
16	lacking ability to write research papers*	3.2821	1.06549
15	determining a working topic for research purposes	3.2479	.96406
4	having no trouble locating info for relevant research	3.2222	1.09946
5	being knowledgeable about plagiarism	3.1197	1.42128
20	having problem in reviewing the relevant literature	3.0684	.84819
3	feeling confused about organizing the notes in the paper	3.0513	.95454
17	having trouble presenting the research in written form	2.9744	.95106
11	being challenged in obtaining relevant info on the internet	2.9145	1.31682
2	being good at following the required referencing styles*	2.8205	1.03903
18	having difficulty in completing the paper in due date	2.7265	.99675
9	feeling insecure about taking notes from reading sources	2.6239	1.00624
7	having difficulty in reading sources for research purposes	2.5983	1.14515

Table 1 presents that students experience problems the most in lacking experience in writing scholarly papers, as they reported that they need more experience to produce well-written research papers. Secondly, lack of critical reading skills foregrounds with a high mean score. Another problem-causing area is related to referencing. Following the required referencing style is considered arduous by students in general. Moreover, the participants think that writing research paper requires talent and only those who are gifted can achieve to write good research papers. The results show that they do not perceive themselves as capable enough and therefore regard this lack of capability as a problem for failing in research paper writing. These four main sources of problem areas are marked with an asterisk (see items 12, 13, 16 and 2), since they are easily noticed by referring to the mean scores. These results largely corroborate previous studies indicating that students' failure to produce good research papers are due to just a lack of practice in writing such papers and critical reading for academic purposes (Rooney, 1995; Wirza, 2007) and that the bibliography section is perceived by students and researchers as being the easiest section to write in a research paper whereas the discussion section as the most difficult one (Flowerdew, 1999; Köksal and Razı, 2011). However, students' reference to innate ability as a factor that impacts upon writing acceptable research papers has not previously been described, which is thus an anticipated finding.

The other items whose scores gather around the hypothetical neutral value coded with the number 3 in the data collection tool draw us to the understanding that students have neither too much trouble nor convenience in these areas of research. These items include finding a working topic, searching information, identifying a research problem, having enough research paper writing experience, blending their own ideas with those of others, being aware of plagiarism, *inter alia* (see items 10, 15, 4, 5, 20, 3, 17, 19, 1 and 11). On the other hand, Table 2 shows that participants feel strong in some research areas such as having hands-on experience in writing research papers, using supporting materials, reaching relevant sources with ease, being confident about taking notes and successfully submitting their research papers in due date (see items 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 13, 14 and 18). These findings underline the importance of familiarity with research paper conventions, as noted earlier (Buckingham, 2008) and the role of knowledge of some genres of academic writing (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

Table 2: Average and Frequency Scores of Students' Perceptions of Problems

Statements (n=117)	SA (f)	(%)	Agree (f)	(%)	Neutral (f)	(%)	Disagree (f)	(%)	SD (f)	(%)
1. I have experience in writing research papers.	12	10.3	45	38.5	39	33.3	16	13.7	5	4.3
2. I am good at writing the references according to APA and/ or MLA styles.	4	3.4	26	22.2	47	40.2	26	22.2	14	20.0
3. I often feel confused about what information to include in a research paper.	3	2.6	43	36.8	32	27.4	35	29.9	4	3.4
4. I do not have trouble locating information for a research paper in the library.	9	7.7	49	41.9	27	23.1	24	20.5	8	6.9
5. I am knowledgeable about what plagiarism is.	28	23.9	21	17.9	25	21.4	23	19.7	20	17.1
6. I feel confident using supporting materials in my writing.	20	17.1	60	51.3	30	25.6	7	6.0	0	0
7. It is difficult for me to read books and articles for a research project.	8	6.8	19	16.2	27	23.1	44	37.6	19	16.2
8. I can easily look up information for a research project in books and journals.	14	12.0	52	44.4	33	28.2	13	11.1	5	4.3
9. I don't feel confident taking notes from my readings for a research project.	2	1.7	23	19.7	36	30.8	42	35.9	14	12.0
10. I believe that I am capable of blending my ideas with those of the experts.	9	7.7	42	35.9	46	39.3	18	15.4	2	1.7
11. Searching on the Internet for relevant information is challenging for me.	15	12.8	30	25.6	22	18.8	31	26.5	19	16.2
12. I think I need more experience in writing a research paper.	32	27.4	55	47.0	21	17.9	9	7.7	0	0
13. I need more experience in critical reading in order to write a research paper.	31	26.5	52	44.4	27	23.1	7	6.0	0	0
14. Research Methods/Skills Course contributed to my research skills.	21	17.9	45	38.5	31	26.5	15	12.8	5	4.3
15. I can determine a working topic for my research without difficulty.	10	8.5	39	33.3	41	35.0	24	20.5	3	2.6
16. I think my ability to write research papers is not strong enough.	13	11.1	43	36.8	30	25.6	26	22.2	5	4.3

Table 2: (Continuation)

17. I find it hard to present an analysis of my research in written form.	6	5.1	27	23.1	48	41.0	30	25.6	6	5.1
18. I have difficulty in completing my research papers in due date.	3	2.6	24	20.5	41	35.0	36	30.8	13	11.1
19. I am able to identify a problem for research purposes with ease.	8	6.8	42	35.9	54	46.2	11	9.4	2	1.7
20. I feel that reviewing the relevant literature for my research is problematic.	4	3.4	31	26.5	54	46.2	25	21.4	3	2.6

The item 21 was an open-ended question for those willing to share any other problems which went unmentioned in the surveys. It was included to add a qualitative dimension to the study. The participants were not required to answer this item, as it was designed to be answered on a voluntary basis. Accordingly, not all participants provided responses to it, but only a handful of, that is, 13 out of 117. To secure their confidentiality, the participants were coded with the letter 'S' which stands for *student* and are given a number to avoid confusion. Below are their further statements regarding the problems they faced. Their accounts are reported as word for word with no correction of grammatical errors and punctuation marks. They are as follows:

Table 3: Students' (verbatim) Responses to the Open-ended Question

Student ID	Students' accounts on problems, causes and suggestions	Problem Areas	Reasons
S1	I am lack of practice because of our teachers teaching methods. and I am difficult in finding grammar and listening books to practice on my own. I think we haven't got enough means to practice and learn new things in our areas.	having a sense of inadequacy in undertaking research	teachers' way of teaching lack of practice / materials
S2	It is very boring. We must add some funny things	getting bored / disliking the task	lack of fun elements
S3	You must share all problems with one another.	ignorance of problems	lack of cooperation
S4	It is difficult to find source for the research paper.	accessing to sources	not stated
S5	I think, in universities, research skills course should not be just one term. It's a short period of time. Even we are ready for our topic totally, the presentation of the research can't be done entirely to the experts owing to the crowdedness of the classes. Not know about procedure exactly-- According to me, the paper gets strong with its presentation. Both of them balance each other. Every student should have a chance to show his/her paper to the experts. By this way, we can realize quality of our research and improve ourselves. Putting the paper to good use is significant for researches!..	presentation skills deficient knowledge about research procedure lack of feedback on students' works	limited training in research skills overcrowded classes
S6	I have difficulty in make a research.	deficient knowledge about research process	lacking knowledge / training in research process
S7	Actually research is a broad environment. So making research is difficult. And finding source for research is difficult.	research process accessing to sources	not stated
S8	I have some problem about finding out research question, thesis statement.	identifying research question formulating thesis statements	not stated

able 3: (Continuation)

S9	Variety of reading can really help anyone to write better in every kind of writing. In the progress of developing my writing skills, it was very hard to make a sense between L1 and my foreign language. However, I overcome this problem by the way of developing my thinking ability in my foreign language.	inability to think in the target language	lack of reading various types of reading genres
S10	I do not have a computer so I have difficulties about research. I have not enough source.	accessing to sources	lack of technological support
S11	I have problems in body part of writing.	writing the main body of the paper	lacking knowledge / training in research process
S12	Sometimes I have problems choosing suitable words for academic writing.	academic writing conventions	informality in vocabulary use
S13	more reading	insufficient knowledge	lack of reading

As Table 3 shows, students commented on some affective factors which barred them from writing well-organized research papers, such as a sense of inadequacy and disliking the task. The main reasons behind them were pinpointed as teachers' teaching methodology and lack of fun elements and aiding materials (e.g. visual and audial) in classes. Other than affective factors, students wrote that they had difficulty in accessing sources, getting satisfactory feedback on their work from teachers, determining a thesis statement, research question and forming the main body their paper. They attributed these problems to lack of enough training in research process and research paper writing, insufficient reading (of various genres), lack of technological support (e.g. provision of PC or laptop), overcrowded classes and particularly being unaware of research and academic writing conventions. They also emphasized the significance of presentation of their research results, because, to their mind, it would increase the quality of their research paper by receiving feedback both from their peers and from teachers. These results further support the idea that teachers' role in teaching research paper writing is crucial because their approaches and teaching techniques exert influence on students' perceptions of the research papers, seen as a tedious task (Al-Khasawneh, 2010). It is also noteworthy that technological tools need to be an integral element of academic writing sessions and fun elements should be brought to the classroom environment by EAP teachers.

Research question 2: Is there a statistically significant difference between male and female students regarding the problems they face?

The research question aimed to investigate whether students differed from one another in terms of the problems they experienced in writing research papers based on their genders. To this end, an independent sample t-test was run to find whether there is a significant difference between students' mean scores obtained from the data collection tool on the basis of their genders. The related statistical values are presented in Table 4, which compares male participants' responses to those of females.

Table 4: T-test Results for Gender of Participants

Gender	N	$\overline{X}$	S	df	t	Sig.
Female	83	62.6	5.9	115	.715	.476
Male	34	63.7	5.9			

As Table 4 shows, 83 participants are female and 34 are male. The data analysis has not indicated any significant differences between males and females [t(115)=0.715, p>0.05]. The average score female students obtained from the data collection tool amounted to 62.6, while it was 63.7 for male students. Despite the lack of a statistically significant difference between male and female students, it was found that there were 1.1 percentage points of difference in favour for the male students when the arithmetic mean of the total scores was examined. This outcome is, however, in contrary to previous studies that have observed significant gender differences relating to the problems experienced (e.g. Buckley, 2010).

Research question 3: Do students who have taken research methods/skills course differ from those who have not regarding the problems they face?

Through this question, the aim was to determine whether students who had already taken a research methods/skills course differ from those who have not regarding the problems experienced in writing research papers. A vast majority of the participants (n= 85) reported that they had attended a research methods/skills course previously, while the rest of the students (n=32) have not taken this module at the time of data collection. With an eye to ascertaining whether students are statistically distinguished from one another in respect of having taken a research methods/skills course, an independent sample t-test was carried out. According to the t-test results, no significant difference was observed between students who took research methods/skills and students who did not [t(115)=0.1.553 p>0.05]. In conclusion, it might be postulated that having taken a research methods/skills course did not have a significant effect

on the research paper writing problems, which students frequently confront with in their degree courses. The t-test results are given in Table 5 below.

Table 5: T-test Results for having taken a Research Methods/skills Course by Participants

Research methods/skills	N	$\overline{X}$	S	df	t	Sig.
Yes	85	63.8	6	115	1.553	.123
No	32	65.7	5.5			

The above table shows that the arithmetic average of the total scores obtained from the research instrument by students who had taken a research methods/ skills course was 63.8, whilst it was 65.7 for students who did not complete a course on research methods/skills. Notwithstanding that there was no significant difference between the problems that students suffered from in research paper writing, the arithmetic average of the scores obtained from the research instrument indicates that students with the experience of taking a research methods/skills course remained ahead of students who did not have such a course, with a difference of 1.9 percentage points. This result is indicative of two possibilities: First, it indicates the need to reshape the curriculum by adding more research-based courses. Second, the scenario goes like that the course covers the issues for a research paper, but students have failed to master them yet. It is for this reason that having taken a research methods/ skills course did not lead to any significant difference among students. It may be to the benefit of students to include more issues around research paper writing within the scope of the course unless the course addresses research relevant issues, or familiarise students with the basic fundamentals of doing research and reporting it.

Research question 4: Is there any statistically significant difference between students based on their year of study?

The fourth research question has been formulated to investigate whether ELT students, that is, prospective teachers of English, would indicate significant differences in relation to research paper writing problems based on their year of study in their programs. To answer this research question, a one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) test was run for all the three groups of students (2nd, 3rd and 4th year students). Below are the descriptive statistics of the one-way ANOVA test, and the results of the one-way of ANOVA test according to the classes students are placed in at the time of data collection.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of the One-way ANOVA Test for Students' Grade

Class	N	$\overline{X}$	Sd
1	49	64.7	5.3
2	36	65.4	6.5
3	32	62.5	5.7

Table 7: One-way ANOVA Test Eesults for Students' Classes

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	
Between groups	148.454	2	74.227	2.170	0.119	-
Within groups	3898.999	114	34.202			
Total	4047.453	116				

The results of the one-way ANOVA test did not reveal any significant differences between the mean scores of the groups [F(2-114)= 2.170, p>0.05; p=0.119]. Put differently, studying in the 2nd, 3rd or 4th class did not have any impact on the perceived problems that students reported as regards research paper writing. The arithmetic average of the total scores first-year students obtained from the research instrument was 64.7, whereas it was 65.4 for the second-year students, with third-year students having the highest arithmetic average of the total scores from the instrument of all the three groups (see Table 15 above). Clear as it is, even the arithmetic averages of the total scores of all the three groups obtained were fairly close to each other's.

Research question 5: Do students differ from each other regarding their perceptions of problems based on their writing skills?

On the basis that students have varying perceptions of their writing skills, it was presumed that the differences in their perceptions of their writing skills would potentially have an impact on the ways they sensed the research paper writing problems. To statistically explore the existence of such a difference, one-way ANOVA was applied.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics of the One-way ANOVA Test for Students' Perceived Writing Ability

Writing Ability	N	$\overline{X}$	Ss
Bad	5	57.2	7.3
Fair	35	63.9	4.3
Good	56	64.03	6
Very good	13	67	6
Excellent	8	69	5.1

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Table 9. One-way ANOVA Test Results for Students' Perceived Writing Ability

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Sum of squares	Sd	Mean square	f	P	Significant difference		
Between groups		531.982	4	132.995	4.273	0.003	Bad -Excellent
Within groups		3515.471	112	1.388			
Total		4047.453	116				

Relating to students' level of writing skills, a significant difference was found only between students who defined their English being at an 'excellent' level and those regarding their English as 'bad' because of P being above 0.05 [F(4-112)= 4.273, p<0.05, p=0.00]. Accordingly, the arithmetic average of the total scores of students with 'excellent' writing skills added up to 69, whilst that of students with 'bad' writing skills was 57.2 and the level of difference of significance between these two groups is p<0.003 at the level of p<0.05. Descriptive statistics of the one-way ANOVA demonstrate that students identifying their writing ability as 'fair' gained an arithmetic average of 63.9, whilst the mean scores of their friends' with 'good' writing ability was 64.03 and the arithmetic average of students with 'very good' writing ability was calculated as 67. Descriptive statistics of the one-way ANOVA test are given in Table 8 and the results of one-way ANOVA based on students' perceived writing ability in Table 9 above.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper was born out of an interest in studying pre-service English language teachers' perceived problems when writing research papers to fulfil course requirements. Overall, the results have drawn us to the conclusion that the main problems that the students face while constructing a research paper are lack of experience, trouble with referencing, lack of critical reading skills and not being self-confident in writing a research paper. The evidence from the results suggest that, to overcome these problems, the students might be given the chance to give a try to intensively write in writing courses. They could start with a sentence first and building on that, they may form a thesis statement. That way, the students might feel more experienced in writing and they could perceive themselves as capable enough to write a research paper. Also, the students need to develop critical reading skills that would improve their writing ability. Once the students develop critical reading skills, the students would then be able to organize their ideas quickly and in much better manners. The organization and the presentation of the ideas are significant as much as the depth of the content or the accuracy of the information for

such academic papers. The students' reading ability, in terms of awareness and critical thinking, plays an important role in their writing ability. Added to these, teachers should not ignore providing feedback to students so that they can see their overall progress as well as weaknesses and strengths in writing research papers.

Also, to inspire students to write, more enjoyable tasks might be assigned. The tasks could be prepared according to the students' profile, age and gender. If the population in the class is small, the tasks may be prepared for each end every student individually. Surely, that would be very time consuming for the teachers, but the teachers may try to involve the students in preparing the tasks. Being a part of the task, the students would internalize the task more and, hopefully, they may be eager to do it. In addition to enjoyable tasks, other elements could aid the teacher to make the class more fun. Different visual and audio materials and technological devices might be integrated to teaching and learning process. Moreover, a course about writing research papers could be added to the curriculum as the results indicate that there seems to be a lack of training about writing a research paper and most students seem to be unaware of research and academic writing conventions. Besides training, students should be engaged in practice of writing. Regarding this point, it is suggested that the institution where students are based can establish a writing centre from which students can get help feedback and assistance on their writing assignments. Teachers in that centre can also identify students' weaknesses and focus on these areas needing improvement.

Additionally, the findings indicate that there seems to be no significant difference between male and female students in terms of the difficulties they encounter while writing a research paper. Hence, gender issue does not appear to play a significant role in this study. Furthermore, the results show that the problems are not related to taking or not taking the research methods/ skills course although there is a tendency to think it is the case. One possible explanation for this might be the thought that if students are instructed about research and research methods, that will be adequate for students to have a mastery of research process and writing a research paper. However, as the findings already reveal, this is not the case probably because offering one course on research is just an initial step but still inadequate. As some studies (e.g. Rooney, 1995) in the literature review section implied, students should get an early start on being familiar, at least, with critical reading and writing processes and then with issues around research. Also, that the students who have taken the research methods course face more or less the same problems as the students who have not taken a research method course may imply that

the content of the courses might not be satisfactory enough to equip students with necessary knowledge and skills in terms of writing an academic paper. In such a case, what is needed is to reform and reshape the course content to make it more aligned with research process and academic writing as well as help students attain skills required for effective research paper writing.

Furthermore, the study reveals that there seems to be no significant difference between the students' years of studying and the problems they face in writing research paper. That is to say, it carries no importance for a student to have studied for a couple of years or not when it comes to write a scholarly paper. Lastly, considering the findings, there appears to be a significant difference in terms of writing skill between the students defining their English as "excellent" and the students defining their English as "bad". This finding suggests that students' perceived English proficiency impacts upon the likely problems they will face in writing research papers. We believe that this is a critical issue that needs to be scrutinized more thoroughly in future research.

Before closing the paper, a few further points need to be noted here. First of all, the scope of this research was limited in terms of the student sample (i.e. students from a single state university), students' disciplinary background (i.e. pre-service English language teachers) and the data collection tool utilized (i.e. survey questionnaires). One should exercise some degree of caution as to generalizing the findings to other students and research contexts. However, the findings can provide insights into the nature of the common problems students experience in writing research papers at institutions and disciplines with identical characteristics. More research on the problems students tackle when writing research papers is needed, particularly with students enrolled in different academic disciplines and based in different universities. Further studies need to be carried out with various data collection tools, particularly qualitatively driven tools to obtain an in-depth understanding and treatment of the research paper writing problems.

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