The Perspectives of Primary School Teachers on the Evaluation and Remediation of the Compositions of Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Many individuals having learning disabilities show inadequacies in written language field. Written language consists of hand writing, spelling and composition abilities. This study aims to determine the perspectives of primary school teachers in the evaluation and teaching of compositions of children with learning disabilities. The study was designed as a research in screening type aiming to acquire descriptive data. The data of the study was acquired through survey method consisting of open-ended questions. The study included 180 primary school teachers. A survey was developed and implemented in order to determine the perspective of participants in the evaluation and treatment of the compositions of students with learning disabilities. Descriptive analysis was implemented in order to analyze the answers of the participants to open-ended question in the survey. Finding are listed below stated mistake types and suggested teaching studies.

Key Words: Composition, learning disabilities, primary teachers, evaluation, teaching, descriptive analysis

Many individuals with learning disabilities display inadequacies in the area of written language. Written language consists of hand writing, spelling and composition skills. *Hand writing* refers to the motor activities involved in writing, and *spelling* is the ability to use letters in order to create words. *Composition* is the ability to create an idea, and to express this idea using acceptable grammar and in a certain stylistic manner (Pierangelo ve Giuliani, 2006). Individuals with learning disabilities may have problems in either or all fields of the written language (Hallahan and Kauffman, 2003).

Individuals with learning disabilities usually do not write fluent compositions (Hallahan ve Kaufman, 2003; Mercer, 1981). The fluency of an composition depends on the coherent use of the elements of content, organization, vocabulary, syntax and writing conventions (Isaacson, 1991; Kameenui ve Simmons,1990). Children with learning disabilities have various difficulties in the five elements of the composition, notably with content, organization, vocabulary, syntax and spelling rules. Below is a consideration of the elements of compositions and a summary of the difficulties children with learning disabilities have in these fields.

Content concern the correlation of the composition with the subject determined, giving examples regarding the subject, intra-paragraph topic integrity, and inter-paragraph topic integrity (Isaacson, 1991, Smith, Polloway, Smith-Beirne, 1995). The compositions of children with learning disabilities include information that is irrelevant to the subject and present information and thoughts that are significantly limited and their the examples are generally irrelevant to the subject (Isaacson, 1987; Lerner, 1993).

Organization involves the presence of an introduction, a body of text and a conclusion, the presence of a main idea in each paragraph, the support of each idea with supplementary ideas, the relevance of the examples to the topic of the paragraph, a logical sequence of paragraphs and the relation of paragraphs with each other (Isaacson, 1991; Smith, Polloway, Smith-Beirne, 1995). The compositions of children with learning disabilities generally include paragraphs consisting of irrelevent sentences. Cohesion does not exist in and between paragraphs (Isaacson,1987; Lerner, 1993).

Vocabulary is about the richness, consistency and originality of words used in a composition (Kameenui ve Simmons,1990).

When the compositions of children with learning disabilities are examined in terms of vocabulary, it can be seen that the children are prone to use comman words instead of original ones and make mistakes in the use of abstract words (Lerner, 1993; Isaacson,1987).

Syntax includes the appropriate use of grammatical rules, the complexity of sentence structure, the consistency of subject and verb usage and the use of pronouns (Isaacson, 1987). The compositions of children with learning disabilities generally include simple sentence structures consisting of subject-verb or subject-verb-complements, and inverted sentences instead of simple sentences. It is observed that they generally make mistakes on subject-verb consistency, the use of tenses (past-present-future) and the use of pronouns (Lerner, 1993).

Writing conventions include the use of punctuation, the correct writing of words, hand writing, page-setting, the use of capital-small letters, beginning a paragraph and writing letters in a line (Kameenui ve Simmons, 1990). The compositions of children with learning disability includes illegible writing, letters are frequently in reverse order, there are many mistakes in the writing of words as well as mistakes in the use of punctuation and mistakes in the use of capital letters (Isaacson,1987; Lerner, 1993).

Perceptions on the evaluation of a composition constitutes the basis for the preparation of an instructional programme to be prepared for developing the composition (Dixon, Carnine, Kameenui, 1993; Goodman ve Goodman, 1989). When the composition is evaluated, the mistakes should be determined and studies targeting these mistakes should be included in the instructional programmes to be prepared to correct these mistakes. For example, even though there are mistakes on the content and organization of an composition, if only the mistakes on punctuation, capital letter usage and the readability of the writing are indicated, the remediation studies will target only these issues. Therefore, the measures used in the evaluation of an composition are important in terms of reflecting the perception in preparing instructional programmes.

The perception regarding how mistakes determined in a composition will be corrected is as important as the determining of them. The literature includes many instructional programmes whose effectiveness for developing the compositions of children with learning disabilities are proven by scientific research (Englert, Raphael, Fear, Anderson, 1988; Graham & Harris, 1997). The main elements of effective composition education includes the use of instructional methods whose effectiveness is proven by research, teaching writing strategies, and the conducting of studies on the word-sentence-paragraph level (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009), and conveying text structure knowledge (Englert & Mariage, 1991). Each of these compounds contributes to the development of the composition writing skill and the correction of evident mistakes.

There are many methods and implementations which are used for those students who experience difficulties in acquiring and implementing their knowledge, that reveal the skills and strategies necessary for them to develop their compositions, and whose effectiveness has been proven by scientific research. The first of them is the *writing process approach* which is based on the perception that each writer has different requirements, which can only be met by giving the writer the opportunity to engage in writing frequently (Applebee, 1981; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Goodman, 1986; Goodman, Goodman, Hood, 1989). The second is *cognitive strategic education* based on explicit and systematic education, direct education and scaffolding and modeling (De La Paz, 1999; Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, Stevens, 1991; Graham, 2006). The third is the use of *procedural facilitators* such as cue cards, think sheets, graphic organizers, mnemonics and prompts in order to successfully support each student in the completion of the writing task (Englert, Zhao, Dunsmore, Collings, Wolberts, 2007). The fourth is to provide *opportunistic instruction* through mini-lessons in order to ensure the development of the student and to meet his/her needs (Cazden, 1988; Graves, 1983). The fifth is offer a *model* through authentic texts or the texts of students or the texts teachers have prepared in order to illustrate the writing type that the teacher expects the students to devise (Englert & Mariage, 1991; Rosenshine & Meister, 1992).

One of the important elements of writing education is clear advice and instruction for children with learning disabilities, as well as for all other students, on how to use writing strategies. The teaching of writing strategies is important because such strategies make the intellectual processes required to write a successful composition visible and help required complex skills be provided and organized by enabling a clear plan for a successful completion of a writing task (Englert, 1992; Graham, 2006). Currently, the Self-Regulated Strategy Development is one of methods teaching writing strategies whose effectiveness has been proven by scientific research (Graham, 2006).

Since children with learning disabilities have problems in skills like hand writing, the correct writing of words as well as, forming sentences and paragraphs, explicit and systematic studies of this issue contribute to the development of writing quality. Primarily, the problems regarding hand writing and the correct writing of words should be handled so that the cognitive skills of the writer can be directed toward the thought to be expressed in the writing and through their organization (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009). In order to overcome the problem of forming a simplistic and repetitive sentence structure, sentence forming strategies should be systematically taught (Schumaker & Sheldon, 1998).

Texts consist of text structures differentiating according to text type. The insufficiencies of children with learning disabilities in using metacognitive strategies (Hallahan ve Kauffman, 2003) negatively affect their awareness in organizing strategies and using them. Therefore, they have difficulties in understanding text structures, which are the organizing structures, and using these structures for organizing their own texts. Since they are not aware of the text structure or, they cannot use their knowledge of text structure as a supplementary skill for organizing their writings or both. Children with learning disabilities are unsuccessful in organizing their written expressions and writing in compliance with the demanded text type (Englert & Mariage, 1991; Englert & Thomas, 1987, Stewart, 1991).

Even though the literature includes many studies determining the measures used in the evaluation of mistakes in compositions and the effectiveness of educational programmes aimed at developing composition writing, it is not known what the perspectives of primary school teachers working in the implementation of the present study in evaluation and remediation are. This study aims to determine the perspectives of primary school teachers in the evaluation and remediation of the compositions of children with learning disabilities. The determination of the perspectives of primary school teachers in the evaluation and remediation of compositions by children with learning disabilities is important in terms of realizing the insufficiencies in this issue and taking the necessary precautions.

Method

Design

The study was designed as research of a screening type aiming to acquire descriptive data. The data of the study was acquired through a survey method consisting of open-ended questions.

Participants

The study attempted to contact 200 primary school teachers, which constitutes 10% of a total of 2092 primary school teachers randomly determined from 7 of the 57 public primary schools in the Kadıköy district of the Istanbul province. These schools included 652 male and 1440 female teachers. While choosing teachers from the teacher list, 200 teachers were randomly determined, with consideration given to a ½ gender rate. However, since participation in the study was voluntarily, 20 teachers declined to participate, so the study included 180 participants.

The participants were recruited via a three-step process of permission. Firstly, written permission was obtained from the Provincial Directorate for National Education in order to make the implementations in public schools. Then, the administrative departments of the determined schools were informed about the study. Thirdly, the participants were given a written document which stated the aims of the study and guaranteed that the identities of the participants would be kept anonymous, and they were asked to sign the document if they agreed to participate. 120 (67%) of teachers were female and 60 (33%) of them were male. The age average was 35 years and the average professional experience time was 12 years.

Data Gathering Tool

A survey was developed and implemented in order to determine the perspective of participants in the evaluation and remediation of the compositions of students with learning disabilities. This survey consisted of three parts. The first part consisted of questions concerning demographical information such as the gender, age and professional experience of the participants. The second part included a written composition sample which contained mistakes in many writing elements such as organization or word usage, and the text was the work of a student diagnosed with learning disability in the fifth grade of a primary school. Then, the participants were informed that this written composition sample was the work of a student in the fifth grade of a primary school, and they were given space for writing which mistake types they observed in this written composition sample.

In the third part, the participants were asked "What work should be done with the student to enable him/her to be able to remedy the mistakes you noticed" and they were requested to write their study suggestions.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted in the schools in which the participants worked. The researcher determined the convenient times (between course hours, lunch breaks, etc.) and conducted the study in a room assigned by the school administration. The study was conducted through the handing out of a 3 page survey to the participant and waiting until he/she had completed it. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was implemented in order to analyze the answers of the participants to the open-ended questions in the survey. While analyzing the open-ended questions all answers given to each question were documented. And then, a total answer number for each question was obtained. After that, the themes were determined based on the answers under the title "mistake types determined in the written composition", and the five measures (content, organization, vocabulary, syntax, spelling rules) that had been suggested for consideration in the evaluation of the written composition. In line with this, a master key was prepared and the answers were then coded accordingly. Coded data were ranked under the appropriate theme. The answers were ranked under the themes and were then re-read and sub-themes were determined. According to this, the frequencies of the themes and sub-themes were determined. After the documentation of the answers given to the second question "What work should be done with the student to enable him/her to be able to remedy the mistakes you noticed", the similar answers were united and sub-themes were formed and their frequencies were counted.

In the research, in order to determine the inter-evaluative reliability, two experts made notes working on the answers independently and using the master key for the evaluation of the answers given in 60 surveys, which is 30% of the total implemented surveys. After this operation, the notes of both researchers were compared and the reliability coefficient was found. The reliability count was made through [Agreement/ (Agreement+ Dissidence)] X 100 formula. According to this, the reliability percentages of items under each sub-title were calculated. The reliability rate between the two independent evaluators ranged between 80-100% and the average reliability was found to be 95%.

Findings and Comments

Stated Mistake Types

Table 1 shows the distribution of answers when the mistake types as stated by the participants were gathered under the general titles of Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Syntax and Spelling Rules after evaluating the composition.

Table 1. General Distribution of Mistake Types

	n	%
Spelling rules	312	55
Content	137	24
Syntax	64	11
Vocabulary	32	6
Organization	21	4
TOTAL	566	100

When the total 566 mistake types as stated by the participants were examined, *spelling rules* (n=312, 55%) were observed to be significantly dominant, which was followed by content mistakes stated 137 times (24%). *Syntax* (n=64, 11%), *vocabulary* (n=32, 6%) and *organization* (n=21, 4%) mistakes were stated at lower rates. Information about the mistake types is given below and stated under each theme.

Spelling Rules

It is remarkable that more than half of the 566 mistake types as stated by the participants, in other words 312 (55%) were spelling mistakes. When the answers of the participants were examined in terms of the types of mistake in spelling rules, *the incorrect writing of words* (n= 126, 40%) was observed in the first order, which was followed by *hand writing mistakes* (n=98, 31%) and *the use of punctuation* (n=61, 20%).

In addition, spelling mistakes include *making a paragraph* (n=7, 2%), *writing the letters in a line* (n=6, 2%), *writing in colloquial language* (n=5, 2%), *page setting* (n=4, 1%), *the use of capital-small letters* (n=3, 1%), *not leaving space between words* (n=2, 1%).

Content

Only 137 (24%) of the 566 mistake types stated by the participants were about content. When the mistake types stated by the participants about "content" were examined, it was observed that *insufficiency in expression and statement in writing* (n=85, 62%) is in the first order, which was followed by *the absence of content integrity in the text* (n=29, 21%). It also included *information-explanation deficiency* (n=16, 12%), *illustration deficiency* (n=4, 3%), *defining deficiency* (n=3, 2%).

Syntax

Sixty four (11%) of the 566 mistake types as stated by the participants concerned syntax. The most frequent mistake type is *improper sentence structure* (n=41, 64%), which was followed by *writing of suffixes/prefixes* (n=14, 22%) and *subject-verb inconsistency* (n=6, 10%). The mistake types also included *complexity level of sentences* (n=2, 3%) and *mistakes in tenses* (n=1; 1%).

Vocabulary

Thirty two (6%) of the 566 mistake types stated by the participants were about vocabulary, which included *poor vocabulary use* (n=20, 63%) and *improper word usage* (n=12, 37%).

Organization

Only 21 (4%) of the 566 mistake types as stated by the participants concerned organization, which included *absence of composition parts* (n=11, 55%) and *unorganized thoughts throughout the written expression* (n=9, 45%).

Suggested Remediation Studies

The participants were asked what remediation studies should be carried out to correct the mistakes in the written composition they were asked to evaluate. Table 2 shows the remediation studies the participants suggested and their distribution.

Table 2. Remediation studies the participants suggested

	n	**%**
Hand writing studies	86	25
Oral expression studies	85	25
Reading books	38	11
Sight-writing	36	10
Punctuation should be emphasized	22	6
Written expression studies	19	6
Studies regarding grammar education	16	5
Studies developing vocabulary	16	5
Conducting research and examining the issue	14	4
The mistakes should be indicated by individual study	8	2
Writing words correctly	3	1
TOTAL	343	100

The most suggested remediation studies were *hand writing studies* (n=86, %25), *oral expression studies* (n=85, %25), *reading books* (n=38, %11) and *sight-writing* (n=36, %10), which were followed by the *emphasis on punctuation* (n=22, 6%), *written expression studies* (n=19, 6%), *studies about grammar education* (n=16, 5%), *studies developing vocabulary* (n=16, 5%), *conducting research and examining the issue* (n=14, 4%), *the indicate mistakes through individual studying* (n=8, 2%) and *writing the words correctly* (n=3, 1%).

Discussion

This study aims to determine the measures the participants used while evaluating the written composition sample of a student and therefore a written composition sample was used which had an example of every type of mistake and which was written by a student with a learning disability.

When the frequency of mistake types as stated by the participants while evaluating the written composition of the student was examined, it was remarkable that the mistakes regarding spelling rules were more frequently stated when compared to the other ones.

The mistakes in spelling rules, in the order of the most frequently stated mistake types by the participants were followed by content and syntax mistakes. It was observed that the mistakes about organization and vocabulary were significantly less frequently stated when compared to other mistake types. Briefly, the mistakes in spelling rules came to prominence in the evaluation of the written composition and other elements were emphasized less. While both evaluating the written compositions of students and conveying our thoughts, primarily, and sometimes only focusing on spelling rules, which is described as the mechanical feature of written expression makes teachers inaccurate and unclear in their assessments since they miss other important factors.

When the content mistakes that the teachers stated were examined, expression and description insufficiencies and content integrity in text were found to be the most frequently stated mistakes. On the other hand, illustration insufficiency, information and description insufficiency were the least frequently stated mistakes.

When the organization mistakes as stated by the teachers stated were examined, the absence of composition parts and unorganized thoughts throughout the text were the most frequently stated mistake types. Disconnected sentences were the least frequently stated mistake.

When the vocabulary mistakes that the teachers stated were examined, poor vocabulary use and improper word usage were the most frequently stated mistake types. The least stated mistake type was the absence of originality in the used words.

When the syntax mistakes that the teachers stated were examined, improper sentence structure and the mistakes in the writing of prefixes/suffixes were the most frequently stated mistakes. On the other hand, the complexity level of sentences, subject-verb inconsistency and the use of tense were the least stated mistakes.

The stated mistake types were not expressed by the teachers even though examples of them were present in the written composition sample. Therefore, it can be concluded that the teachers did not consider these measures while evaluating the written composition and include them in the education of written language instruction.

When the spelling rules mistakes that the teachers stated were examined, writing the words incorrectly, mistakes in hand writing and mistakes in punctuation came into prominence. On the other hand, the least stated mistakes were page setting, the use of capital-small letter, writing the words in a line, writing in colloquial language and not leaving space between words.

Students finish the writing process after completing the first rough outline, where they write down their first thoughts, and they believe that the writing process is completed. However, experienced writers know that they should review their compositions based on the responses of others to the rough draft outline. Throughout the review process, writers enhance their thoughts on and in their compositions (Tompkins, 1994). A review may be repeated several times and corrections can be made in this process. Reviews may be about content, the way that the thoughts are expressed, proper word usage, sentence structure and the ranking of thoughts. Finally, a review can be made in order to determine the mechanical mistakes like the correct writing of words, their suitability for spelling rules, and the appropriate use of punctuation (Lerner,1993).

Many mistakes in the composition could be observed in the sample used in the research. The mistakes in the sample resulted from the absence of review and correcting strategies for the student with learning disability. On the other hand, the most frequently stated mistakes by the teachers were limited to spelling rules. This perception will cause the remediation studies to be biased in that direction. As a matter of fact, when the remediation studies as stated by the primary school teachers were examined, the most suggested studies were *oral expression studies, hand writing studies* and *reading book studies*. On the other hand, the indication of the mistakes by the individual study, studies for grammar education or written composition studies, which aimed at correcting the mistakes in written composition, were stated by very few teachers.

The literature stresses that the aim of education is to enable the student to complete a task independently (Tompkins, 2000). The aim of the teacher is to provide the opportunity for a child to progress on his/her own and to increase the difficulty of the task when necessary (Smith-Burke, Deegan, Jaggar, 1991).

To that end, while organizing educational-instructional activities, the highest level of help should primarily be provided for the student and the teacher should withdraw his/her help as the effectiveness of the student increases, in this way, it is ensured that the student is enabled to work independently (Dixon-Krause, 1996).

One of educational strategies that teachers can use is *emphasizing the mistakes of students*. When the written compositions are completed, students should read them to the class or to the teacher and then it is recommended that the teacher should focus on the mistakes in the written composition of the students in order for them to develop their skills (Tompkins, 2000). In order to help the student to correct their mistakes, teachers should offer a series of questions concerning information that the student should add or what corrections the student should make. The teacher should be responsive in this situation. In other words, the teacher should make effort to highlight and encourage the thoughts, knowledge and skills of the students instead of making strict and conventional interventions and thus neglecting the requirements and knowledge of students (Cazden, 1988). A student sharing his/her composition with the class helps him/her make changes such as adding, eliminating, dividing, and changing the order. This stage is important in terms of the development and enrichment of the composition. Social interactions provide feedback in terms of the realization of the relationship between what is meant to be said by what is written and what the audience comprehends (Englert & Mariage, 1991).

In short, even primary school students in small classes can make significant reviews and corrections through the mutual exchange of view based sessions in a supportive social environment and under the teacher's guidance. For students with learning disabilities, who have only a few criteria and correction strategies for evaluating the composition, an education based on an interaction with teacher and peers, as well as direct education, is required for the acquisition of correction skills (MacArthur, 1994).

In addition, the creation of contextual factors supporting educational methods is important in the development of written composition skills. Among them, the primary one is that the teacher should perceive the written composition as an important tool contributing to the cognitive and social development of the student and should show a positive motivational attitude towards the writing of the students. Secondarily, the teacher should have high expectations for his/her students regardless of their social-economic statues, experience, gender or disability. Thirdly, it is important to create a physical environment, including reading-writing material of different levels, topics and types that increase the motivation of students for writing. Fourthly, the students should be supported with well-structured cooperative writing activities that give them the chance to learn from each other. Fifthly, the teacher should develop cooperation by enhancing his/her relation with students in the classroom and in out-of-school environments. Sixthly, the teacher should spare frequent and regular time for written composition activities in order to teach the writing process, with the appropriate strategies and skills. And finally, teachers should conduct well-structured authentic written composition studies that allow the implementation of knowledge, skills and strategies concerned with basic written expression rather than filling the work sheets that are irrelevant to the context (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009).

Students with learning disabilities show insufficiencies at various levels regarding skills involved in written composition. Therefore, the primary school teachers of these students require the development of educational programs that will guide both the evaluation and writing instruction implementation

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