PERCEPTIONS OF UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL EFL LEARNERS REGARDING THE EFFECT OF ONLINE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND ONLINE FEEDBACK ON THEIR WRITING PERFORMANCES

YABANCI DİL OLARAK İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRENEN ORTA ÜST DÜZEY ÖĞRENCİLERİN ÇEVRİMİÇİ YAZMA ÖDEVLERİ VE ÇEVRİMİÇİ GERİ BİLDİRİMLERİN YAZMA PERFORMANSLARINA ETKİSİYLE İLGİLİ ALGILARI

Mehmet SARAÇ

Dr., Bursa Uludag University, School of Foreign Languages

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6639-9726

ABSTRACT

In online foreign language courses, students are assigned online writing tasks, and they are given online feedback for their tasks. Throughout the courses, e-portfolios are used for monitoring the progress and achievements of EFL learners as they present a systematic collection of students' tasks and performances. At the end of the courses, the learners' tasks are graded, and these grades affect the final scores of the learners in end-of-course exams. The current paper aims to explore the perceptions of upper-intermediate level Turkish EFL learners regarding the effect of online writing assignments and online feedback on their writing performances. The study adopted a case study design, and the qualitative data was collected from 24 upper-intermediate level EFL learners enrolled in an online language course. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and content analysis procedures were followed to analyse the qualitative data. A second field expert reviewed the outstanding themes and codes for inter-rater reliability. The content analysis revealed three central themes: strengths, weaknesses and challenges. The study findings revealed a good deal of research evidence on the divergent perceptions of the learners. The learners displayed positive perceptions towards the online writing assignments and online feedback in general on the grounds that they were practical and the learners could use many online tools to improve their writing while doing tasks online.

On the other hand, they mentioned weaknesses like lack of authenticity and direct instructor feedback in person. As for the challenges, some participants stated some challenges they faced, like technical issues, loss of data and being unfamiliar with the platforms used. The current research findings provide insights from the learners' perspective and shed light on the requirements for the assignments, implementations and evaluations of online writing tasks. In addition, some suggestions are offered regarding online feedback given to the learners.

Keywords: Online Language Learning, Online Writing Assignments, Online Feedback

ÖZET

Çevrimiçi yabancı dil kurslarında öğrencilere çevrimiçi yazma görevleri verilmekte ve bu ödevler için çevrimiçi geri bildirim verilmektedir. Kurslar boyunca, e-portfolyolar öğrencilerin görevlerinin ve performanslarının sistematik bir koleksiyonunu sundukları için İngilizce öğrenenlerin ilerlemesini ve başarılarını izlemek için kullanılmaktadırlar. Kursların sonunda öğrenicilerin e-portfolyolarında yer alan çalışmaları notlandırılmakta ve bu notlar öğrencilerin kurs sonu sınavlarındaki final puanlarını etkilemektedir. Bu çalışma, üst-orta seviye Türk İngilizce öğrenenlerin, çevrimiçi yazma ödevlerinin ve çevrimiçi geri bildirimin yazma performansları üzerindeki etkisine ilişkin algılarını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma bir vaka çalışması tasarımını benimsemiştir ve nitel veriler çevrimiçi bir dil kursuna kayıtlı 24 üst-orta seviye İngilizce öğrenicisinden toplanmıştır. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmış ve nitel verileri analiz etmek için içerik analizi prosedürleri izlenmiştir. İkinci

bir alan uzmanı, değerlendiriciler arası güvenilirlik için öne çıkan temaları ve kodları gözden geçirmiştir. İçerik analizi sonucunda, güçlü yönler, zayıf yönler ve zorluklar olmak üzere üç ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmanın bulguları, öğrencilerin farklı algıları hakkında çok sayıda araştırma kanıtı ortaya çıkarmıştır. Öğrencilerin, pratik oldukları ve çevrimiçi görevleri yaparken yazmalarını geliştirmek için birçok çevrimiçi aracı kullanabildikleri gerekçesiyle, genel olarak çevrimiçi yazma ödevlerine ve çevrimiçi geri bildirime karşı olumlu algılar sergiledikleri belirlenmiştir.

Öte yandan, otantik olmama ve bizzat eğitmenlerden doğrudan geri bildirim alamama gibi bazı zayıf yönler de katılımcılar tarafından ifade edilmiştir. Çevrimiçi yazma çalışmaları bakımından karşılaşılan zorluklara gelince, bazı katılımcılar teknik sorunlar, veri kaybı ve kullanılan platformlara aşina olmama gibi güçlükler ifade edilmiştir. Mevcut araştırma bulguları, ele alınan konuya ilişkin öğrencilerin perspektifinden değerlendirmeler sunmakta ve çevrimiçi yazma ödevleri, uygulamaları ve değerlendirmeleri için gereksinimlere ışık tutmaktadır. Ayrıca öğrenicilere verilen çevrimiçi geri bildirimlere ilişkin bazı öneriler de sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çevrimiçi Dil Öğrenme, Çevrimiçi Yazma Ödevleri, Çevrimiçi Geri Bildirim

INTRODUCTION

Improving writing skills in a foreign language is perceived as a challenging process by many instructors and students. Many students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) struggle with coming up with ideas, communicating those ideas, organising those thoughts, and making correct grammar and spelling choices, among other issues. In that sense, EFL instructors incorporate a wide range of digital tools, including word processors, e-mail, online course management systems, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis, Internet websites, social networking sites, mobile devices, and others, into the instruction of writing in their classrooms in order to foster better writing skills in their students. This integration process has been the matter of numerous research studies in the related literature, and many studies (Mair, 2012; Conroy, 2010; Ritchie and Black, 2012; Lin and Yang, 2011; and Boas, 2011) reported that the implementation of those technologies results in better writing skills and success.

With the growing interest in online language courses, language schools and courses have begun to offer online courses to their students. Within these online foreign language courses, students make use of various digital platforms for revision, practising and their performance tasks. Among many other online tasks, students are assigned online writing tasks, and they are given online feedback for their tasks. Throughout the courses, e-portfolios are used for monitoring the progress and achievements of EFL learners as they present a systematic collection of students' tasks and performances. At the end of the courses, the tasks of the learners are graded, and these grades affect the final scores of the learners in end-of-course exams.

The effect of online writing tasks on the student's writing skills and the learners' perceptions regarding these tasks have been studied in some studies in the related literature. Research studies indicate that the utilisation of electronic portfolios and online writing tasks has been shown to be beneficial for students in terms of the development of reflective learning skills as well as an improvement in their writing skills. For example, Bacabac (2012) discovered that as a consequence of the study, technical writing programs at the schools that participated in the study got stronger, and the graduates became more competitive.

Students are given online feedback for the online writing tasks. The concept of online feedback and its effects on writing skills is a relatively novel issue in the related literature, and it has been studied in a limited number of studies. The post-response information that is delivered to learners through online methods and "which informs the learners on their actual states of learning and/or performance" is what we refer to when we talk about online feedback in the context of educational settings (Narciss, 2008, p. 292). Therefore, the term "online feedback on ESL/EFL writing" refers to the evaluation of a piece of text that is offered by instructors, students, or automated software through the internet, and it demonstrates care for the writing of language students (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Several empirical studies (such as Guasch et al., 2013; Latifi et al., 2019; Link et al., 2020; Noroozi & Hatami, 2019) have investigated the impact of online feedback on ESL/ EFL writing. The findings of these studies generally reflect that online feedback contributes to the development of ESL/EFL writing and provides better pedagogical meaning for ESL/EFL teachers or learners.

Writing instructors, particularly those in college settings, deliver more online feedback to students via electronic files, chats, wikis, and blogs. This is because electronic-mediated instructions are becoming increasingly relevant (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Since there is a considerable difference in the amount and quality of conventional feedback and electronic feedback, empirical research suggests that students can benefit from electronic writing feedback offered by teachers (Johnson et al., 2019)

In that sense, the current paper aims to explore the perceptions of upper-intermediate level Turkish EFL learners regarding the effect of online writing assignments and online feedback on their writing performances.

METHOD

The study adopted a case study design, and the qualitative data was collected from 24 upper-intermediate level EFL learners enrolled in an online language course. The level of the students was determined according to a level exam applied at the beginning of the language course. A convenient sampling strategy was adopted while selecting the research setting and the participants. For the purpose of data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants' group. As the overall language level of the participants was considered proficient enough to answer the interview questions, the questions in the interview were prepared in English; however, to prevent constraints resulting from foreign language barriers, the students were also given the opportunity to answer the interview questions in Turkish, their mother language. The interviews were conducted via an online meeting platform, and the sessions were recorded for analysis purposes. Content analysis procedures were followed to analyse the qualitative data. The qualitative data was examined in detail, and outstanding themes and the codes within those themes were identified. A second field expert reviewed the outstanding themes and codes for inter-rater reliability.

FINDINGS

Following the procedures, the content analysis revealed three central themes: strengths, weaknesses and challenges. In light of these three main themes, 24 EFL learners' opinions about online writing assignments and feedback will be clarified in detail hereafter with the excerpts from the semi-structured interviews. Table 1 presents the distribution of codes within the three main themes.

Table 1. Themes and the distribution of codes within the themes.

Themes		Codes
Strengths	✓	Freedom in using online tools while writing
	✓	Practicality
	✓	Flexibility
	✓	Instant feedback from the teacher
	✓	Easy to share with peers and/or teachers
	✓	Automated correction of the programs
	✓	Easy to find synonyms and antonyms of the words
	✓	Easily stored for revision
	✓	Practical for keeping track of self-improvement
Weaknesses	✓	Limited amount of feedback
	✓	Ineffective when feedback is given late
	✓	Not effective when translation is used
	✓	Too much dependence on self-discipline
Challenges	✓	Technical issues
	✓	Instant loss of data
	✓	Being unfamiliar with the platforms used
	✓	Need for clear instructions and modelling

In view of the qualitative research findings, a great number of participating students reported that online writing assignments were giving them freedom in using online tools while writing. The participants regarded this aspect as one of the strengths of online writing assignments, as they can make use of online tools and applications to facilitate their writing processes. Many other students reported that online writing

assignments were practical and flexible in that they were not limited to time and facilities in a real classroom setting. Regarding this aspect, one of the participants, ST11, stated her perceptions with the following statement.

> *"While doing online writing tasks, I can use many applications, which helps me a lot. For example, I set a dictionary in my Word, and I can easily find the meanings of the words or look for synonyms or antonyms when needed. This is really practical and facilitative."* ST11

Peer feedback is frequently preferred by EFL instructors, and managing this process for paper-pen tasks might sometimes be complex and hard to follow; however, when the tasks are online, students can easily share their tasks with pairs of peer groups. In addition, the students have the chance to track the changes and read the comments and suggestions of their friends more easily than the same process for in-class writing tasks. The students in the participating group perceived this aspect as one of the strengths of online tasks and credited this type of assignment for the aforementioned reasons. As an example of this perspective, ST8 stated that:

> *"When I have to share my paper-pen tasks with a friend, it is confusing. Sometimes, I lose my work, or my friends do not give me the paper on time. I prefer this process to be conducted online. It is much easier for us, I can share the online task with my friends easily, and it is good to be able to track the changes, not accept and not to accept them"* ST8

Some participants highlighted the positive effects of being able to keep their tasks for review purposes. The students emphasised that keeping their tasks as an online portfolio was good not only for review purposes but also for keeping a file of tasks to monitor their improvements and to hand in the school or instructors when they as for it. For example, ST18 stated in the semi-structured interview that:

> *"I create a separate drive file for my writing assignments. I can easily monitor my progress, and when teachers ask me to present my present or past tasks, I can easily share them with teachers. I have similar files for the previous levels, and seeing my progress motivates me."* ST18

The participating students also expressed positive perceptions regarding the online feedback for their online writing assignments. They stated that when the teachers provide them online feedback on time, they find the process more effective. I was seen in the qualitative data that mostly for practical reasons, the participating students found online feedback from their peers or teachers effective.

As for the weaknesses of online writing assignments and online feedback, the most outstanding feature was the amount of feedback. In a real classroom setting, teachers can observe and guide the writing process, which increases the amount of feedback that the learners get from their teachers; on the other hand, in the online process, the feedback is more mechanical as the amount of interaction between the parties is limited. Some participants underlined this aspect and stated the relation between the amount of interaction and feedback. Regarding this issue, ST2 expressed her opinions with the following statement.

> *"My teacher regularly gives online feedback for the online writing assignments; however, they are mostly about mechanical mistakes. There is limited feedback in that way, I can see the corrections, but I sometimes cannot understand the underlying reasons. For the feedback phase, I would prefer to get the feedback face-to-face and ask my questions in person. I also need guidance for idea generation, not only mechanical things."* ST2.

Regarding the overall perceptions of online writing assignments, some students stated that they would be more disciplined and organised in a real classroom setting. Some of the students stated that the process depends too much on self-discipline; however, there are many distractors, and they occasionally find themselves reading something else or writing out of the given topic.

The third central theme was in relation to the challenges that students face in the process. Loss of data, some technical issues and being unfamiliar with the platforms used were some of the difficulties highlighted. In online courses, students write their online assignments into a word processor; however, the process of sending the tasks, giving or getting peer feedback and teacher feedback is conducted through different platforms depending on the choice of the school or the instructors. According to the students, when they are not familiar with the preferred platforms, it might become confusing for them to follow and monitor the process. As an example of this perception, for example, ST10 stated in the semi-structured interview that:

> *"Even though I write my tasks on time, I sometimes cannot send them, or my teacher says that the task is not submitted. Particularly at the beginning of the course, I was unfamiliar with the platform, and it caused some problems for me. We need clarification and modelling at the beginning of the course process."* ST10

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the perceptions of B1 level EFL learners regarding the online writing assignments and online feedback provided for those tasks. The findings of the study provided insights into the perceptions of EFL learners. The overall research findings have revealed positive research evidence for the online writing assignments. In this respect, the findings of the paper are in parallel with Bacabac (2012), who also concludes that the students feel more competitive and active in online writing assignment processes.

Depending on the results, it could be concluded that the effort of the EFL instructors to incorporate digital tools into the process of teaching writing skills might result in favourable outcomes, as also concluded by Elola & Oskoz, (2017) Alshayee, (2016), Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, (2018), and Hyland & Hyland, (2019).

Like several other empirical studies (such as Guasch et al., 2013; Latifi et al., 2019; Link et al., 2020; Noroozi & Hatami, 2019; Nguyen, 2012), the findings of this study reflect that online feedback contributes to the development of EFL writing.

As for the weaknesses and challenges reported by the participating students, it could be concluded that in the process of online writing tasks and providing online feedback for those tasks, the instructors might need to guide the learners, provide models and take some certain precautions to improve the efficiency of their implementations.

REFERENCES

Alshayee, A. (2016). Exploring Arab ESL Students' Perceptions on Integrating Social Networking Websites into English Writing Classrooms. *Arab World English Journal*, *7*(3), 394–409. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol7no3.28

Bacabac, F. E. (2012). Creating Professional ePortfolios in Technical Writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication,* 27(1), 91–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651912458921

Boas, I. V. (2011). Process Writing and the Internet: Blogs and Ning Networks in the Classroom. In *English Teaching Forum* (Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 26-33).

Conroy, M. A. (2010). Internet tools for language learning: University students taking control of their writing. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *26*(6). https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.1047

Dizon, G., & Thanyawatpokin, B. (2018). Web 2.0 tools in the EFL classroom: Comparing the effects of Facebook and blogs on L2 writing and interaction. *The EuroCALL Review*, *26*(1), 29. https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2018.7947

Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2017). Writing with 21st century social tools in the L2 classroom: New literacies, genres, and writing practices. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *36*, 52–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2017.04.002

Guasch, T., Espasa, A., Alvarez, I. M., & Kirschner, P. A. (2013). Effects of feedback on collaborative writing in an online learning environment. *Distance Education*, *34*(3), 324–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2013.835772

Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2019). *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues*. Cambridge University Press.

Johnson, W. F., Stellmack, M. A., & Barthel, A. L. (2018). Format of Instructor Feedback on Student Writing Assignments Affects Feedback Quality and Student Performance. *Teaching of Psychology*, *46*(1), 16–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628318816131

Latifi, S., Noroozi, O., Hatami, J., & Biemans, H. J. (2019). How does online peer feedback improve argumentative essay writing and learning? *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *58*(2), 195–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1687005

Lin, W. C., & Yang, S. C. (2011). Exploring students' perceptions of integrating Wiki technology and peer feedback into English writing courses. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, *10*(2), 88-103.

Link, S., Mehrzad, M., & Rahimi, M. (2020). Impact of automated writing evaluation on teacher feedback, student revision, and writing improvement. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *35*(4), 605–634. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2020.1743323

Mair, C. (2012). Using technology for enhancing reflective writing, metacognition and learning. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *36*(2), 147–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2011.590583

Narciss, S. (2008). Feedback strategies for interactive learning tasks. In J. M. Spector, M. D. Merrill, J. V. Merrieu¨nboer, & M. P. Driscoll (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology* (3rd ed., pp. 125–143). Erlbaum

Noroozi, O., & Hatami, J. (2018). The effects of online peer feedback and epistemic beliefs on students' argumentation-based learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *56*(5), 548–557. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2018.1431143

Nguyen, P. T. T. (2012). Peer Feedback on Second Language Writing through Blogs. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching*, *2*(1), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijcallt.2012010102

Ritchie, M., & Black, C. (2012). Public Internet Forums: Can They Enhance Argumentative Writing Skills of Second Language Learners? *Foreign Language Annals*, *45*(3), 349–361. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2012.01203.x