THE EFFECT OF VISUAL MATERIALS IN IMPROVING CREATIVE WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the contribution of visual materials in improving the writing skills of students, to determine their effect against traditional writing methods and to contribute to writing studies conducted in this direction. For this purpose, a controlled experimental design based on pre-test-post-test measurements was used in this study. Writing studies supported by images were conducted on the experimental group, whereas writing studies based on the traditional method were conducted on the control group. The study group consists of Şair Nef'i Middle School 3rd grade students (experimental group = 8/A; control group = 8/B) in Palandöken district of Erzurum province. The data were collected by the "Creative Writing Assessment Scale". Validity and reliability of the scale was evaluated; the Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be 0.83, and the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test statistic was found to be 0.651. The Mann-Whitney U-Test was used to compare the success score averages between the groups, and the Wilcoxon Marked Ranking Test was used for the pre-test and post-test comparisons within the groups themselves. As a result of the research, it was determined that the creative writing skills success score averages of the students who used visual materials were higher than control group students.

Key Words: Visual materials, creative writing, mother tongue teaching.

1.INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are the language skills the students learn the last and are most difficult to implement. The reason for this is the lack of interaction between the individuals in written expression studies, the difficulties that students have in expressing themselves in writing and the lack of information about the subject.

In the behavioral language approach that puts the teacher in the center, in the writing studies in education models based on memorization and repetition, the subjects being pre-determined by the teacher and dictated on the students, and the main subject of planning to be followed in the writing being determined pushes students away from creative thinking and even diminishes the creativity of the student. But writing exercises are a language skill that makes the individual think, and allows the individual to use his or her creativity limitlessly.

One of the prominent approaches in the age of information and technology is the constructivist approach. This approach will improve students' thinking skills and give students the ability to ask questions, do research, express their opinions, and respect other people's ideas. These environments can only be achieved through constructive education approach (Wilson, 1996).

The new curriculum (MEB, 2006) in our country, which is based on the constructive language approach, is a program that encourages teachers to engage in activities that will attract the attention of students and enable students to actively participate in the education process with the aim of enabling students and improving their critical thinking and creativity skills. This program includes creative writing activities that take into consideration the features listed above.

It was first seen in American universities that creative thinking was combined with writing studies and emerged as a field of science. Creative writing that supports literary studies with the approach of putting the individual

at the center began with the literary movement *"New Criticism"*, seen in America between 1920 and 1960 (Smith, 2005: XIII). Scholes (1985) also accepts creative writing studies that students write in the school environment as creative writing, also defined as *"Textual Power"*. The essay studies at Harvard University at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century are considered to be the first examples of creative writing activities (Myers, 1993; Bishop, 1994; Öztürk, 2007).

According to Dawson (2005: 133), the foundations of creative writing are based on the views Piaget calls "New Methods". The student-centered teaching put forth by Piaget is an integral set of activities based on the needs and interests of the student. The aim of creative writing, which facilitates the student to express him/herself, and contains a contemporary and progressive education approach, is to enable the student to express him/herself freely.

It is also emphasized in the *Common European Application Document and the European Language Development Code*, based on a communicative approach with comprehensive, transparent and coherent principles that enable creative writing studies to improve the student's creative thinking skills; creative writing skills are accepted as a method that needs to be found in all curricula and carefully considered (Mariani, 2004).

Serafini (2002:212) emphasizes that the Process-Based Approach, also defined as Creative Writing Approach, gives students the opportunity to be more free to express themselves and to be competent to use the target language. Being creative means to be able to produce products with new and original ideas. In addition, Doğan (2007) defines creativity and creative writing as thinking and hypothesizing on a given subject, identifying problems and knowledge deficiencies, defining the problem, finding solutions and making assumptions.

Writing studies are based on skill rather than knowledge. The development of this skill depends on application. According to most researchers working on this field, writing is a multidimensional and complex action. Success in writing requires a rigorous writing process and long practice. Due to these reasons in writing studies, many students find it difficult to express their thoughts in writing (Collins & Parkhurst, 1996; Collins & amp; Cross, 1993; Ganopole, 1988; Applebee, Langer & amp; Mullis, 1986; Kırmızı, 2011: 24).

The most important purpose of creative writing studies is to reveal the thoughts, feelings and knowledge of students in a unique, fluent, and motivating way rather than writing tedious, constantly recurring, uniform writings. In addition, creative writing activities go into the cognitive worlds of students, their subconscious. (Temizkan, 2010: 629). Creative writing also helps students develop reflective thinking and critical thinking skills (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; McWilliams & Nahavandi, 2006; Cunliffe, 2002).

Essex (1995:11) and Maltepe (2006, 61) have stated the necessity of creative writing due to its functions of discovering the values and function of writing, improving students' imagination and artistic expressions, entertaining children, enabling students to be open-minded, enabling children to get to know themselves, and teaching reading and writing.

Creativity is a skill that exists in every individual, and manifests itself in a wide range of situations, from the daily life of the individual to the life of education and training. Today, creativity has entered education programs in the developing world, and is an indispensable form of practice that has also entered into the skill areas that need to be developed especially in Turkish teaching (Akkaya, 2001: 312). Coming up with new and different thoughts, using the opportunities well and being innovative are sought after characteristics in today's individuals. For this reason, individuals need to be creative and think originally.

In our country, the notion that writing is a difficult field requiring special ability is predominant in mother tongue programs applied at every stage of education and training institutions. Writing studies in Turkish teaching were carried out by teachers assigning any topic or a saying and the students were expected to write an essay in a limited time. As a result of these activities, the essays of the students are often far from being original. Creative writing is a writing technique that removes these limitations and allows the student to think, imagine and be original. Today, emphasis is given to creative writing activities in the native language teaching programs applied. It is used in a number of materials aiming at bringing the creativity of the students to the forefront and developing their imagination by making the students to think originally. One of these materials is visual objects. It may be possible to make a difference in education, and to motivate the students by using these tools correctly (Akengin and İbrahimoğlu, 2010; 2).

Due to their nature, visual materials (image, cartoon, graphic), which have a structure that guides the reader towards creativity, critical thinking and interpretation, and enable the viewer, are teaching materials that are very appropriate and effective in terms of the students reaching these targeted skills (Bayülgen 2011, 40).

The use of visual materials in the development of basic language skills in native language teaching lessons improves critical and creative thinking and interpreting skills. With these characteristics, visual materials are a teaching tool that is appropriate for other achievement goals of the program in terms of directing students towards critical and creative thinking. Based on studies conducted on visual materials, the areas where visual materials can be used for educational purposes can be summarized as "developing problem-solving and thinking skills, providing motivation, elaborating scientific knowledge that is universally accepted as valid, and making scientific thinking accessible". In this respect, cartoons are widely utilized in all areas of education (Özşahin, 2009: 101-122).

Learning-teaching process is brought to life, made more interesting and active by using instructional materials such as explanatory, directional, complementary pictures, graphics, and shapes in planned educational applications (Kırbaş et al., 2012: 2218).

According to a study by Bleed (2005), a student in the United States is spending an average of 10 thousand hours playing video games and talking on a mobile phone, and receiving or sending 200,000 e-mail messages by the age of 21. One of every four children under two years old has a television in the bedroom. A teenager between the ages of 13 and 19 watches an average of 22 thousand hours of television. The importance of visuals in human life is increasing day by day, and visuals are becoming an indispensable part of our everyday life. Technological visual tools such as computer, television, signage, panel, and video are present in all areas and stages of our home and business life.

This demonstrates how effective visuals produced by technology are in the daily lives of individuals, indicating that visuals affect the mental processes of the new generation and their levels of alertness and change their nature (Bleed, 2005; Sankey, 2002; White, 1987; Akpınar, 2009: 39). The most effective use of visuals in education, which are deeply integrated into our lives and affect us so much, is a topic that is/should be emphasized by educators at every stage, and especially those providing mother tongue education (Kırbaş, 2011: 707).

Perhaps the most important contribution of making students writing texts through pictures is that it has an effect to develop an ambition of writing in students. Here, the qualities of the pictures to be selected are among the main issues to be considered. This is because it is necessary for the selected pictures to match the interests, desires and levels of the students. It can be seen that visual items support students' ability to think and express in the abstract thinking stage, but especially during concrete thinking stage.

During a writing study with students, selection of images that point out different aspects of a topic will be advantageous in developing the creative writing skills of students. In everyday life, symbols, logos, pictures and photographs attract more attention compared to written texts, and therefore are used extensively in every field. The fact that visuality is at the forefront in mass media compared to writing supports this notion (Yengin, 1996: 8).

2. PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The most important point to be determined when teaching activities are planned is to determine the learning and teaching method. Because target-behaviors are taught to students only through teaching methods (Bilen: 1999). As in all language skills, it is also important to apply contemporary methods in writing education.

The aim of this study is to determine the contribution of pictures that constitute an important part of visuals, to the creative writing skills of students, and to encourage students to write more original and more creative pieces of writing by increasing their imagination and creative thinking skills. The aim is to determine its effectiveness against the traditional creative writing technique and to propose a solution model to writing studies in this direction. Visual elements are of great importance, especially in the context of concrete thinking, to guide students on the subject they are dealing with, to open new and different horizons, and to provide a critical perspective.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Method

In the study, an experimental design with a control group (Karasar: 2000) based on pre-test and post-test measurements was used to determine the effect on improving creative writing skills of middle school students by making use of visuals. In the study, "Mann Whitney U-Test for Unrelated Measurements" was used in the comparison of the averages between the groups, and "Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for Related Measurements" was used for the pre-test-final test comparisons within the groups.

3.2. Data Collection Tool

In order to obtain products of written expression from middle school students, four different creative writing topics were determined by taking the opinions of five instructors, six Turkish teachers and field experts experienced in the field of writing who were determined by the researcher. Based on the opinions obtained, the topic was decided as "Imagine the place where you live, fifty years later". Based on this topic, the students were asked to write an essay and the essays were collected.

3.3. Analysis of Data

"Creative Writing Assessment Scale" was used on the data obtained as a result of the study. The validity and reliability test of the scale was applied in a different middle school as a pilot study. As result of the validity and reliability study, Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be 0.83, and the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test statistic was found to be 0.651. This result indicates that the scale applied in the study is valid and reliable. The obtained data were evaluated in the SPSS 20.0 computer program.

3.4. Research Process

The application was conducted by the researcher over 3 class hours. In accordance with the topic of *"Imagine the situation of the place where you live, fifty years later"*, visual materials/pictures were prepared by the researcher in accordance with the age and mental development of the students related to the mentioned topic by taking the opinions of Turkish educators, Painting teachers, Guidance and Psychological Consultants working in the school where the study was conducted.

In the application phase of the research, experiment and control groups were formed by random assignment during the first class hour. Care was taken to ensure that the writing skills of the experiment and control groups were at the same level. For this purpose, a pre-test was applied to the students in the experiment and control group, and the students were asked to write an essay with the free composition method. When the pre-test results were evaluated, it was determined that the written expression success levels of the experimental group and the control group were close to each other. After this result, the research was initiated. During the second class hour of the study, the experimental group was distributed with the pictures/visual materials related to the topic and necessary explanations were made about the subject. This was not done for the students in the control group.

In the final phase of the research, to investigate the effect of visual materials on the development of creative writing skills, the students in the control group were asked to write an essay on the subject of "Family Love" with free composition method, and students in the experimental group were asked to write an essay on the same subject on the basis of the visual materials distributed to the students.

3.5. Research Sample

The study group of this research consists of 3rd grade students of Şair Nef'i middle school in the Palandöken district of Erzurum province. The experimental group consists of students in class 8/A and the control group consists of students in class 8/B. Groups were determined by unbiased sampling.

4. FINDINGS and RESULTS

In this section, findings and interpretations obtained as a result of the statistical analysis of the data collected in the research are included.

Table 1: MWU Test Results That Demonstrate the Success of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-test Writing Skills

Groups	*n*	*Rank Avg.*	*Rank Sum*	MWU	P
Experimental Group	27	25,85	698,00	320,00	.439
Control Group	27	29,15	787,00		

*P < 0.05

The writing success status of the experimental and control group of the study was measured before the application. Based on the MWU test results, there was no difference between pre-test results of the experimental and control group students (MWU = 320.00; P < 0.05).

Table 2: MWU Test Results That Demonstrate the Success of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Post-test Writing Skills

Groups	n	Rank Avg.	Rank Sum	MWU	P
Experimental Group	27	39,87	1076,50	30,500	.000
Control Group	27	15,13	408,50		

*P < 0.05

In order to demonstrate whether there is a difference between the experimental and control groups after the application, creative writing skills of both groups were measured, and the obtained data were analyzed by Mann Whitney U-Test. Based on the results obtained, a statistically significant increase was found in the experimental group compared to the control group based on rank averages (MWU=30,500; P < 0.01).

Table 3: Wilcoxon Test Results That Demonstrate the Success of the Control Group in Pre- and Post-Application Writing Skills

Pre-Test and Post-Test	n	Rank Avg.	Rank Sum	Z	P
Negative Rank	2	9,00	18,00	3,435*	.001**
Positive Rank	19	11,21	213,00		
Equal	6	-	-		

*Based on negative rank
**P < 0.01

Based on the analyses, a significant difference was found between the pre-application and post-application scores obtained by the control group in the creative writing skills test (z= -3.435; P < 0.01). The increase in the rank sum values of success scores are in favor of the post-test. Based on this result, it can be said that the creative writing method applied to the control group increases the writing skills of students compared to the free writing method.

Table 4: Wilcoxon Test Results That Demonstrate the Success of the Experimental Group in Pre- and Post-Application Writing Skills

Pre-Test and Post-Test	n	Rank Avg.	Rank Sum	Z	P
Negative Rank	0	,00	,00	-4,622*	.000**
Positive Rank	27	14,00	378,00		
Equal	-	-	-		

*Based on negative rank
**P < 0.00

As a result of the analysis, it was found that there was a significant difference between the pre-application and post-application scores of the experimental group obtained from the creative writing skills test (z = -4.622, P < 0.00). The increase in the rank sum values of success scores are in favor of the post-test. This result clearly shows that the visual materials utilized in the creative writing studies applied to the experimental group improved the students' creative writing skills.

5. CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

Based on the findings obtained in this study, following conclusions were reached.

It was determined that the scores of the students in the experimental and control groups were close to each other according to the pre-test results conducted to determine the writing ability levels of the students before the application, and that the difference was statistically insignificant. In the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups, it was seen that there was a significant positive increase in the scores of both groups. The method applied in both groups was found to be effective in improving the writing skills. However, when the post-test results of experimental group and control group were examined, the experimental group using visual materials was found to have a higher level of creative writing skill scores than control group students. Therefore, it can be concluded that visual materials are effective in improving creative writing skills of students.

The choice of different methods and techniques to be applied in creative writing activities that require creativity, imagination and productivity, all of which have a very important place in human life, will improve students' creativity and productivity, and enable them to think differently; and will increase their attitudes, interests sond desires for writing activities. The use of visual materials in lectures is an effective teaching material in terms of not only increasing motivation but also in terms of being liked by students and positively impacting student achievement compared to traditional approaches.

Bayülgen (2011) stated that visual materials such as pictures and cartoons used in writing studies are effective in maintaining motivation in the classroom environment, and reached the conclusion that these materials attracted the attention of both teachers and students. These studies reveal that visual materials are associated with cognitive skills in developing creativity and language skills. Coombe and Canning (2002) found that the use of different techniques contributed to the writing education process in terms of improving student awareness and increasing student participation in the teaching process. Küçük (2006) suggested that five senses should be absolutely utilized in writing studies, especially in primary and secondary education, that this should not be neglected by educators and textbook authors; and reached the conclusion that there should be studies and efforts on sight, which is one of the five senses, and these should even be included in textbooks.

Yaman (2010) concluded that visuals were positive in terms of facilitating learning, enhancing creativity, providing retention, making classes more fun, facilitating recall, reducing repetition, making teaching more concrete, and increase motivation towards the lessons; and stated that visuals improved student success in Turkish language and grammar teaching compared to classical grammar teaching. Kırbaş (2011) investigated the effect of visual materials on improving writing skills, and reached the conclusion that pictures improved the writing skills of students. Karadağ (2003: 11) emphasized the importance of using photographs and pictures in writing studies in order to organize the flow of writing. These studies show similarities with the results obtained in this research.

When the Turkish Curriculum is examined, it can be seen that the aim is for teachers to enable students to actively participate in the learning process, highlight the creativity of the students, and create a classroom environment that attracts the interest and attention of the students during the teaching of the goals and achievements. It is very important to create such a classroom environment in the field of "writing", which is perceived to be more difficult to learn compared to the other basic Turkish language skills of listening/watching, speaking, and reading. In conclusion, visual materials that both attract the attention of the student and improve their creativity and increase their motivation towards the lesson should be seen as an effective method in creative writing studies.

For these purposes, the curriculum encourages teachers to organize the learning process in a way that allows for active participation of the students, and to create a classroom environment that attracts their interest and attention. It is highly important to create a motivational classroom environment in the field of "writing", which is perceived to be more difficult by students among the basic language skills of listening/watching, speaking, reading, and writing in Turkish language education. In order to teach this skill, teachers should enable students to focus on the lesson, make the students have a positive attitude towards the lesson, and engage in activities that will motivate the students. These will make it easier for the teacher to reach the goals of the lesson. At this point, using cartoons can be listed as an effective teaching method to help students feel that the activity of "writing" should not be feared, and to get students to love writing more, and to ensure that the students are emotionally motivated.

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