

## A Survey of University Composition Education in Turkey

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### ABSTRACT

Composition studies is often associated with universities in the United States and is characterized by elements such as FYC (First-Year Composition), writing centers, and advanced writing training for graduate students. Composition is by no means limited to any one country, but research on how it manifests itself in other contexts is limited. This is the case for Turkey as well, a nation that possesses a unique infrastructure of composition education that is influenced by its own challenges and lived environment. In this paper, Turkey's composition studies infrastructure is analyzed with regard to its context, purpose, aims, and outcomes. It was found that a framework for writing education exists in both public and private universities and is a central focus of various university language education programs. However, even up till the graduate level, issues are evident that draw attention to the educational experience that students receive. The small-scale studies that have been done to date give clues that often correspond with each other on where the problems lie, including in the need for more feedback, instruction in writing and mechanics, and more specific attention to early university writing education.

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### 1. Introduction

Composition education at the university level in Turkey, while possessing similarities to the familiar system of composition to the United States, is also unique in that it has evolved in response to its own respective needs. Additionally, it has followed the trend of the increased importance of English within the Turkish educational system at the larger policy level. Unlike in the United States (or other native-speaking countries) where the purpose of such composition coursework is to teach students who already are fluent in the language how to express their ideas adequately, non-native countries like Turkey do not have this liberty. Learning to write becomes an entirely different challenge when even comprehension capabilities are limited. This is highly relevant in Turkey, where the nation scores low on English proficiency measures such as the EF English Proficiency Index, being nearly the bottom of Europe in this regard ("EF EPI 2019 – Turkey," n.d.).

As Turkey intends to advance itself nationally in English proficiency, its university system has adapted to providing English education. The most prominent example is through English Medium Instruction (EMI) universities or programs that essentially deliver their offerings completely in English. This is in opposition to Turkish Medium Instruction (TMI) universities or programs, which remain significant in Turkey (universities may even offer both options). For university entry, "students must sit an exam conducted by the Student Selection and Replacement Centre (OSYM) and the grade they achieve determines the programmes they can pursue. Students come from different educational backgrounds and most of them enter higher education with limited English" (Ekoc, 2018, p. 232). Studying in an EMI program generally requires a higher score on the exam, and thus, lower-achieving students have less access to English-medium tertiary education. Still, all university students receive a degree of English language education. Indeed, "policy for higher education in Turkey states that as of the academic year 2001–2, compulsory foreign language preparation classes will be integrated into all Turkish-medium university programs" (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005, p. 254).

This is where the most significant difference comes in, however. English composition education is not equal across the country. Instead, it is given to those students who can manage to be selected into an English medium program, and at an increased level, those who manage to get into the better EMI universities. While all university students will take some version of first-year English, this can have massive variations. For the student in a TMI program, this will often be in EFL-type courses to build up basic English

proficiency. For the student in a complete EMI program, the first-year English course could in practice vary from simple English literacy education to a framework of study very similar to goals and intended competencies to what a student at an American university student would partake in, such as in writing a variety of compositions or being educated in academic writing practices.

Here then, lies a class difference. Not all students have access to English composition education (although in TMI programs, a course pertaining to Turkish composition is often a requirement); only those who elect to study in English (whose departments often have a higher score requirement) get this opportunity. This underscores the importance of high school success, especially on the “determine all” exam, the YKS, which is taken after the last year of high school, and whose score dictates where a student goes from that point. This exam does not include a foreign language portion except for students wanting to study English, English Language Teaching, or other Foreign Languages. As there is no way to gauge English language competency, students who get a high enough score on the exam and elect to enter an EMI program will enter university, starting with a preparatory year of English to build appropriate language competencies before starting degree-specific requirements. Given the high degree of importance attached to English language competencies in the country compounded with an already overcrowded job market for university graduates, it can reasonably be inferred that students getting access to advanced educational opportunities in English (and elements such as writing) will set them apart. Indeed, English is considered a “must” in both the entry and advancement of competitive jobs within urban Turkey and even in a dated study of the state of English in the Turkish job market, it was found that the majority of job descriptions required a certain degree of English proficiency (and this was listed as a priority item on the list of necessary qualifications) (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005, p. 33-34). There is excellent social prestige associated with English (Zok, 2020, p. 2).

## **2. Models of English Composition Education**

It is essential to take a closer look at the various ways in which English education is delivered within the country at the tertiary level. English education takes place only in EMI programs and can be considered “two-phase.” The first phase is an English preparatory year, or one year of intensive English study for students to build up sufficient English capacity to then move onto their respective programs of study, which lasts another four years. In summary, “If they attain a suitable score, usually 70 and above which it is felt corresponds to B1 and above on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), they are allowed to proceed to studying in their faculty” (Trotman, 2016, p. 59). And “Students who fail to turn up for the exam and those attaining less than the required score are obliged to take the English preparatory year. To pass, by the end of the year, students are expected to be at or very near to B1 level on the CEFR” (Trotman, 2016, p. 59). The second phase is when the students begin their respective programs, taking one course per semester during the first year in “Academic English” or a similar course of essentially, English writing education. This describes a general standard across Turkish universities, although the title and syllabi of the coursework may vary, much as they do in universities within the United States.

While the preparatory year can best be defined as ESL education rather than composition, it still develops the fundamental tools that will later be applied in the academic writing courses in the first official year of university studies. The preparatory year contains writing education (such as essay writing) embedded within it. In many ways, this compares to what is known in the United States as “Basic Writing”, and its associated coursework, which, similar to the preparatory year in Turkey, “began as an effort to give access to college writing to students who had not had access before” (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010, p. 78). Specifically, these students were considered “high risk” and those perceived unprepared for conventional freshman composition coursework (Nordquist, 2018). For the students in both classrooms, freshman composition occurs only after remediation.

## **3. The Preparatory Year**

The preparatory year (sometimes known as the English Language Preparatory Year, or ELPP) is the first phase of intensive English education at the EMI university or program. The preparatory year allows for language competency building of those students who will be pursuing their degrees in English but lack English competency. In theory, a student who scores high enough on the YKS exam to be placed into an EMI university or department with a low English background will not be disadvantaged. The preparatory year is an integral part of future English success at the tertiary level in Turkey. Indeed, “the Turkey National Needs Assessment report by TEPAV (2013) state that although Turkish students receive more than 1000 hours of instruction between Grade 4 and 12, their level of English is still rudimentary, and they fail to communicate in English. It is argued that students do not seem to be motivated to learn and communicate in English mostly because their English knowledge does not contribute to their scores in university entrance exams (TEPAV, 2015)” (Bayram & Canaran, 2019, p. 48). As can be seen, students struggle with prior preparedness in English and a lack of incentive to learn it. For a high school student in Turkey, the aim is to score high on the YKS, not to increase their English skills, incentivizing a “studying to the test” strategy.

In general, the preparatory year program is a two-semester, 28-week (30 hours per week) intensive program that emphasizes four macro skills (writing, reading, listening, and speaking) as well as other micro sub-skills like grammar and vocabulary (Coskun, 2013, p. 5). In this program, an integrated skills framework is used for instruction on all of these skills, “such as the four-level (beginning, high beginning, low intermediate, intermediate) coursebook and other additional materials like hand-outs” (Coskun, 2013, p. 5).

When these students arrive for their studies, most of them “display low proficiency levels in English, and they start EPPs from beginner or elementary levels” (Bayram & Canaran, 2019, p. 49).

The lack of competency described above brings challenges for both students and teachers. Students need to be taught within one year “to be able to read, write, speak and listen in English to succeed in their departmental courses,” and teachers, “who -as curriculum developers- have to design their language curriculum in such a way that it can provide support for students with limited exposure to English so that they can pursue their academic studies in their undergraduate courses.” (Bayram & Canaran, 2019, p. 49). It is a mistake to think of the preparatory year as something separate from university-level writing education. Students who often come from meager English backgrounds develop what will essentially become the entirety of their English skills in this crucial year. The training in grammar, punctuation, and other aspects of writing within the preparatory program is theoretically designed to make students competent participants within their respective programs of study.

Of course, every program varies, in its quality, staff, and even teaching frameworks, curriculums, and methodologies, but they all emphasize writing skills to some extent. In one study, it was observed that students had their first exposure to English writing instruction during the preparatory year, with one student observed stating, “I didn't even know what an essay was like until I came to prep school at the university. I learnt all about it here” (Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019, p. 93). Per the study, “At the initial phases of the undergraduate program, students who had studied at one-year preparatory school encountered considerably fewer challenges and felt more self-confident in terms of their writing practices in contrast to students who came directly from secondary school and lacked systematic practice prior to their first academic writing assignment” (Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019, p. 93). In that sense, the preparatory program plays a huge role in continuing tertiary level English writing success from that point forward.

#### 4. Academic Writing

Once students successfully pass the preparatory year, they begin their intended (four-year) courses of study. Students will take two semesters worth of further English (and specifically writing) coursework in the first year of official university study. This course sequence is essentially the Turkish version of FYC, and the objectives are directly related to the building up of writing competencies. The course title may vary among universities but is generally “English for Academic Purposes,” “Academic English,” or “English I.” As mentioned before, this is generally a two-semester sequence of courses, but certain universities, especially those that market themselves as fully English medium, have longer sequences of up to four semesters of study.

There is a gap of literature existent with regard to outcome analysis on this level of composition education. Compared to the United States, the first-year writing course seems to be quite a mute topic in Turkish scholarly circles and points to a lack of perceived relevance when compared to the preparatory year.

Syllabi vary between universities, although they are generally similar in their respective objectives and aims. The variations are dependent on whether the university is a private (foundation) or public university, and, assuming the university is private, what exactly its educational influences are. For example, certain private universities in Turkey follow closely an American model of education and strive to do so through constant program evaluation. To illustrate some curricular examples, the syllabus texts from various universities can be looked at (public versus private).

*Introductory Writing Course Syllabi Descriptions for Various Universities<sup>2</sup>*

University	Title	Description
Ankara University (Public)	Development of Reading and Writing Skills in English I	Consolidation of what has been learned in English Preparatory School. Grammatical and lexical improvement of students who have completed English Preparatory School. Improvement of Reading Comprehension skills.  1) Students will have an intermediate level of vocabulary.  2) Can use basic English structures creatively and form full and correct sentences.  3) Students will be able to comprehend intermediate-level reading texts, answer questions and make inference about the text

<sup>2</sup> This information was found from university databases; links can be found in the works cited.

Atilim University (Private)	English For Academic Purposes I	English language skills, especially academic skills, such as reading comprehension, vocabulary building and critical analysis of texts; listening and note-taking, class discussions, presentations, writing, research assignments and use of technology.
Bilkent University (Private)	English and Composition I	The central basis of ENG 101 is to introduce students to an academic approach to thinking, reading, speaking and writing in an integrated, meaningful manner such that they are able to apply the skills learnt to their departmental studies. In addition, the ENG 101 course aims to further develop the students' linguistic accuracy and range in English.
Istanbul Technical University (Public)	English I	The English 101 course is designed to improve the students' skills of reading, understanding and analyzing texts published in English and writing an academic text using this information. Students are both prepared by writing for the requirements of Academic and Technical English and also develop other linguistic and critical thinking skills. In addition, in this course, students will be able to define an object and a mechanism in a comprehensive way using appropriate technical language; to classify the information about the subject they are researching effectively and to write an analytical text on this classification; It is expected to refer to external resources that it utilizes in all these processes.
Middle East Technical University (Public)	English for Academic Purposes 1	The overall aim of this course is to develop students' academic writing skills through reading, listening and speaking, which serve as input for writing.
Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University (Public)	Academic Writing and Oral Presentation Skills I	The aim of this course is to develop the reading and academic writing skills and to improve the perceiving ability of students.

After surveying universities across the country, these examples are representative of private and public institutions. However, while public universities generally have a similar curriculum, private ones vary slightly. It is interesting to see writing courses being standardized across universities, evidenced by the similarity of course titles and their respective descriptions. Unfortunately, not all universities have accessible information systems (i.e., databases or websites to access syllabi and other course documents), making it difficult for academics and researchers to deeply understand respective curricular objectives and methodologies.

### **5. Private Universities**

Until 1981, all university education was public in Turkey, and private higher/tertiary education was unconstitutional (Dogramaci, 2005, p. 1). In 1981, a significant reform finally allowed private universities under specific and stringent conditions. According to the report, *Private Versus Public Universities: The Turkish Experience*, by the late Ihsan Dogramaci, private universities are characterized by elements that make them unique. These include being exempt from certain governmental oversight for "financial or administrative issues," which allows for "a far greater ease of action than do the public universities" (Dogramaci, 2005, p. 4). Additionally, all private universities have a Board of Trustees, which allows for these institutions to "re-allocate funds to areas which in its judgment need more financial assistance than originally planned on" rather than be lost to macro-management (Dogramaci, 2005, p. 4). Since 1980, Turkey has advanced heavily in research rankings as a nation, leading to the conclusion that "the establishment of strictly non-profit private universities has influenced the public universities to raise their standards of teaching and research" (Basal & Keskin, 2013; Dogramaci, 2005, p. 4).

The most prominent among these private universities, namely Bilkent University, Koç University, and Sabancı University, are outstanding examples. These universities rank highly in national rankings, at 1, 6, 9, and 14, and all of them have sophisticated, well-formed, and advanced first-year writing programs and course offerings (U.S. News & World Report). These universities also have made a significant contribution to larger Turkish academia in general. For example, Bilkent and Koç universities have a disproportionate representation in academic publications (Nature Index, 2021). These universities were founded in emulation of the highest international education standards and have constantly engaged in program improvement.

The mentioned characteristics reflect significantly on the quality of composition education in private universities, with offerings of both introductory and advanced courses related to reporting writing, research, essay writing, editing, and grammar. Additionally, these universities have writing centers staffed with highly trained national and international, often native-speaking faculty. However, when it comes to writing about other private universities, these vary considerably from the top cadre of institutions mentioned earlier. There are numerous private universities in Turkey (above 80), and a wide range of quality exists across them. Nonetheless, one of the selling points of these universities is their emphasis on international (and specifically English) education. In that sense, writing and academic English classes are generally offered, although there is a gap in scholarship related to outcomes.

## **6. Public Universities**

The public university system is Turkey's most prominent component of tertiary education. With around 125 public universities (this number continues to change with the aspect of mergers and the creation of new universities), public universities account for the majority of the student population in the country. Indeed, half a million students enroll in private universities, while more than 6.5 million students study in state universities (Yinanc, 2019). However, a significant disparity amongst these public universities is evident, although they have the same oversight from YÖK.

"Turkey has promoted a rapid expansion of universities since 2006, establishing 58 universities throughout the country at a growth rate of 109%" (Acer & Guclu, 2017, p. 1911). These new universities were created as part of government policy to increase tertiary educational access and have, in that sense, been successful. However, tremendous differences are relevant in the quality of English education from the highest-ranked public university to the lowest-ranked one. More so than that, because of the inherent bureaucracy that public universities operate under, there is a high degree of isomorphism that exists (Acer & Guclu, 2017). The aspect of isomorphism means that educational innovation is often slow compared to private universities with an entirely different set of incentives to improve pedagogy. And, as would be expected, any type of policy change within public universities requires going through bureaucracy, thus greatly impeding the ability to make progress. Therefore, private universities have a competitive edge in providing quality English (and composition) education.

The top public universities have sophisticated English composition frameworks similar to what was described before concerning the top private universities, with writing centers and advancing course offerings beyond freshman composition. The reason for this often has to do with special allowances given by the government for these institutions for either historical or other reasons that allow them to be more independent. The Middle Eastern Technical University (METU) is an outstanding example, which "was first established by the Americans as an offshore American University, in the early 1960s (and) was established as a special university by special decree" (Hami Oz, 2005, p. 336). Thus, its course curriculums, including in freshman composition, are modeled on international (and particularly American) standards. Another example is Boğaziçi University, arguably the best university in the country, which, since its inception, has had a high degree of internationalization in its staff (the highest in the country, which stands at 18%) and a wide array of curriculum offerings (Boğaziçi University). Other high achieving public universities like ITU also have high standards of English education, and even the lower ranking EMI institutions have started to make strides in this regard, with academic writing education being present across the board and even writing centers being observed in universities. However, as said before, public universities significantly vary in quality, despite the oversight being the same through YÖK. For that reason, even where public universities operate under a degree of standardization, they can and do vary considerably. The higher-ranked public universities are far more innovative in their educational practices, and their student bodies are remarkably differentiated. The differences also bleed into university budgets due to the benefits of research and the increased ability to compete for funding that higher-ranked institutions have.

The lower-ranked EMI universities/programs also possess the baseline preparatory year and one year of academic writing, but these programs exist in the minority. Nearly all the public universities operate as TMI, with only a few exceptions. There is certainly a system in place for structured composition in public EMI universities (which also tend to be higher ranked on the scale of universities). However, little work has been done in program evaluations and analysis, making it difficult to assess quality. The broad class descriptions and curriculum flow chart sheets showing the requirements for writing-based courses that are generally available hardly give many insights.

### **7. Analyzed problems in Writing**

Across the board in Turkey, "Undergraduate students in Turkey are observed to experience difficulties with academic writing as they try to accommodate their existing writing knowledge to the requirements of the new discipline-specific writing and learning situation of tertiary level education." (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019, p. 88). To expound on all of these would be a lengthy discussion, but to highlight them briefly is essential to understanding the context of composition in the country. The paper by Derya Altınmakas and Yasemin Bayyurt "An exploratory study on factors influencing undergraduate students' academic writing practices" in Turkey, sheds light on this matter. From that very detailed study, the authors analyzed four major factors:

- 1) the amount and nature of L1 and L2 pre-university writing instruction and experience
- 2) students' perceptions about academic writing and disciplinary-specific text genres
- 3) prolonged engagement with the academic context and discourse
- 4) expectations of faculty members

Per the study, these four factors, briefly summarized, affected academic writing competence the most. To elaborate, it was found that pre-university writing education was insufficient. Interestingly, this insufficiency had to do with even a lack of effective instruction at the L1 level, and then on top of that, poor L2 writing instruction. Also, the issues that exist due to a differentiation in high school, the level of English writing education provided, and the lack of incentive for high schools and their students to work on skill development for any areas outside of the high-stake university selection exam. Additionally, students cannot differentiate between regular English L2 writing and actual structured academic writing. More so, they had trouble working within the perceived rigidity of composition frameworks taught to them, considering their impediments. Finally, faculty members were analyzed to lack consideration for student backgrounds, ultimately leading to a disconnect given the faculty's preconceived notions in opposition to the student's actual state of unpreparedness and the inability to meet expected standards. Other analyzed issues and considerations included low self-efficacy and writing anxiety (Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015). In one study done at METU, writing inadequacies stemming from low L1 writing in Turkish affected English writing competency (Zor, 2006). Additionally, in the transfer of skills between L1 and L2, L2 proficiency affected writing, and general observations were observed that correlated L1 (Turkish) rhetorical patterns with L2 English writing (Uysal, 2008).

### **8. Graduate Education**

Turkey's English policy is expressed in economic and scientific terms, in line with a national desire to excel in science and technology. As these components occur in an academic context, it's essential to view academic writing and the other parts of composition education in Turkey at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Those who pursue graduate education are the next generation of scholars, researchers, and academics, who will ultimately engage with the international academic discourse. In that sense, the skills they build and impart regarding academic writing and publishing are important to analyze. Additionally, the jobs for those possessing graduate degrees will be those requiring more skill and be gateways for promotion into leadership and managerial positions. It is important for teachers of writing and composition to realize that the idea of writing education stopping during the first year of studies (or even later) is itself flawed.

Detailed studies on the topic of academic writing and composition education at the graduate level in Turkey would be an important feature of future research. This is because the situation on the ground varies considerably given the differences existent in graduate education by default, including the fact that education at this level is far more university and faculty-specific, even in the very centralized Turkish context. That discussion extends far beyond the scope of this paper. Still, there have been some fine and detailed studies in this topic which can be looked at to gain a glimpse of the matter, for example by Louisa Buckingham (2008), Yagiz, et al. (2009), Servet Celik (2020), and Ziya Toprak & Volkan Yucel (2020). These studies have looked at the challenges of academic writing at the graduate level and allude to similar points despite the nearly ten-year gap between the older and newer studies.

For example, Celik's work gives a snapshot of the current state of graduate-level writing education. Celik found in his research (which while performed at a small-scale, built upon past research in the topic through its comprehensive literature review) that the conclusion remained that "even experienced graduate students in Turkey lack the writing skills that will be critical to their advancement in their academic careers" (Celik, 2020, p. 12). Why is this? Toprak and Yucel point to one concern being a pedagogical one and explain that writing has not yet been viewed as what it really is by the next generation of Turkish scholarship. Writing is something that "involves complex rhetorical moves, strategies, and an understanding of research" (Toprak, & Yucel, 2020, p. 12). It is not, simply "a practice that takes place at the end of the research" or merely a "matter of "writing up" findings" as it is only too often seen as in the Turkish context (Toprak, & Yucel, 2020, p. 12). This reinforced the findings of Buckingham, who, in her analysis of Turkish academics (faculty-level), found that "despite receiving an unusually high level of exposure to formal English through a

largely bilingual education" that group being observed still "perceived significant linguistic difficulties in developing their L2 scholarly writing abilities" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 15).

The premise that writing competencies are very much lacking at the graduate level is something that scholarship on this topic is in agreement of. There is a low level of efficacy, and the problems are not so different from those faced at the early tertiary level. Of course, for a practitioner of composition, this is not surprising. The one year of FYC/Freshman English (or whatever else it may be termed) that evolved in the United States was designed to address this precisely. While one year of writing training is hardly ever sufficient, through further college coursework, students will ideally be able to continually improve their writing with the strong base that FYC has theoretically imparted on them. For example, FYC includes becoming familiar with brainstorming, editing, proofreading, fixing grammatical errors, analysis, and addressing contextual issues such as audience, purpose, and developing stronger research skills. What can be learned from Celik's study is that there is a wrench in the process of English teacher training that needs to be assessed, particularly concerning writing instruction. Celik's study, presenting concerns that the graduate students should be given more support in skills like mechanics in the English language "such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, word choice, transitional language and so on," gives light to this (Celik, 2020, p. 12). We also notice that the graduate students in this qualitative study (which was an action research study, meaning the students were engaged in academic writing instruction through the duration of the study) found that instruction in the process model of writing, feedback, and time management, greatly helped them, giving light to a defining feature of composition instruction (Celik, 2020). Indeed, in composition-related courses, these are all stressed skills and thus, the notion that effective first-year writing instruction is important is strengthened.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper provided a broad summary of the state of composition education at the tertiary level in Turkey. This study is by no means comprehensive, but for a researcher interested in global composition pedagogy, it is hoped that this will provide a glimpse for further research. As Turkey intends to increase its English education quality, composition education is already a parcel of Turkish higher education. Indeed, tremendous strides have been made in the post-1980 period, and as the influence of English has grown across academia, this has been reflected in Turkish national policy. It was found that a framework for writing education exists in both public and private universities and is a central focus of various university language education programs. However, even up until the graduate level, there seem to be issues that draw attention to students' educational experience. The small-scale studies that have been done to date give clues on where the problems lie, specifically in the need for more feedback and instruction in writing and mechanics, and more attention towards early writing education.

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