Graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and its problems: A qualitative study in Turkey

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Academic writing, which allows scientific research to be shared with other researchers, has an important place in graduate education because individuals at this stage of education gain experience in their fields with their academic writing experiences and are referred to as field experts when their education has been completed. At this point, graduate students' perception of academic writing and their experiences in this process are seen as an important element. The purpose of the current study is to examine graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and its problems. To this end, a phenomenological study design was adopted, with a purposive sampling to obtain participants for the study. Nine students who were attending a state university in Turkey volunteered to participate. Using a content analysis approach, perceptions of academic writing and the problems experienced in academic writing were derived from the responses to the interview questions. Results showed that graduate students' perceptions of academic writing fitted into five sub-themes: grammar, process, product, form and content. Problems experienced in academic writing were grouped under five sub-themes: text, mistake, competence, support and place of publication. In light of these findings, suggestions are offered about improving the acquisition of academic writing skills and confidence.

Introduction

Writing is seen as one of the important skills aimed to be imparted to individuals through education. This skill, which is one of the four basic language skills and continues to be important in other education levels starting from the compulsory education level, has an important role to play in the self-expression of individuals. Demir (2013) defined writing as the expression of emotions, thoughts, wishes and events with certain symbols in accordance with certain rules and thus focused on this skill as a means of expression. It should be noted that the skill of writing is not just an act as simple as putting thoughts on paper. This skill is defined as a metacognitive complex activity that includes individuals' knowledge, basic skills, and ability to coordinate multifaceted systems (Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins & Cihak, 2005). In this regard, it can be said that writing skill is not a mechanical but a mental process.

The act of writing, which includes higher-order mental activities of individuals, may differ in terms of the products presented. There are many writing products ranging from messages we use for daily communication to top-tier works. Academic writings are also described as a product of this act of writing. Although it has similarities with other writing products and processes in terms of structure, it is useful to examine academic writing in its own nature. Academic writing is defined in different ways in the relevant literature. Tok (2013) defined academic writing as a type of writing as far away as possible from artistic expressions, language games and metaphors which are called creative writing, and as a

type of writing in which the basic and term meanings of words are used. Bahar (2014) defined academic writing as textualising the research by complying with all the principles taken into account in the reporting of a scientific research, as well as complying with the general rules of writing. Zwiers (2008) defined academic writing as the establishment of vocabulary, grammar and organisational strategies necessary to achieve the goals of academic language. Academic writing is commonly defined as "scientific writing", which is characterised as structured research and is used by researchers at the higher education level (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Coşan-Yılmaz and Emiroğlu (2005) emphasised that academic writing, unlike other types of writing, has a scientific quality and that it should be prepared in line with scientific method and ethical principles. Based on these definitions, academic writing can be defined as a process of creating a text based on reporting for the purpose of sharing scientific information.

It is stated that academic writing is a type of text in which thoughts are logically structured and justified (Bayat, 2014). Academic writing is purposefully informative, it is written by an expert with special knowledge, for a specific audience that shares this special knowledge, it is heavily edited and produced over a long period of time (Gray & Biber, 2018). In this context, academic writing has different features from other types of writing. These features can be listed as follows (Bayat, 2014; Bowker, 2007; Tok & Gönülal, 2016):

• Academic writings have more precise rules than other writings.
• Thoughts described in academic writings are supported with scientific sources.
• More attention is paid to spelling and grammar rules in academic writings.
• Since the subjects in academic writings have abstract features, they are explained with concrete expressions.
• Academic language is used instead of everyday language in academic writings.
• In academic writings, thoughts are expressed clearly by avoiding rhetoric.
• In academic writings, the process is organised in a planned manner.

Academic writing, where writers have to learn, synthesise, develop, discuss and demonstrate about a topic, is a form of scientific writing that includes complex and dynamic procedures (Akhtar et al., 2019). Academic writing, which has an important place in conducting research, sharing and disseminating this research, is a practice that people in the academic world constantly experience. In this process, academicians carry out the act of academic writing in order to bring their various researches into the world of science. However, academic writing can be a challenging experience for beginners or graduate students, due to the techniques and mechanics it contains (Chakma, Li & Kabuhung, 2021). While academic writing is not easy for anyone, it cannot be denied that some writers face different challenges than others (Langum & Sullivan, 2020). In this context, perhaps the people who experience these difficulties most deeply are graduate students. It is a matter of doing a scientific research at the graduate level, bringing it to the literature and specialising in a field.

In this context, academic writing, which enables sharing scientific research with other researchers, has an important place in postgraduate education. Bahar (2014) stated that specialising in a field of science is largely based on the publication of research and

publication of research is mostly based on the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills related to academic writing. Academic writing products in graduate education and in the following processes also contribute to other scientific advancements. In this connection, determining graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and its problems was determined as the problem situation for the current study. It is thought that especially graduate students' views on this subject should be examined in depth and that the results obtained can be used as a needs analysis.

The purpose of the current study is to examine graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and the problems experienced in this process. To this end, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. How do graduate students make sense of the academic writing process?
2. What are graduate students' perceptions of the problems experienced in the academic writing process?

Method

Research model

The current study employed a phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research designs. Patton (2014) stated that the phenomenological approach refers to a way of concentration that requires a methodological, rigorous and in-depth description of how people experience certain phenomena. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016) also remarked that the phenomenological design constitutes a suitable research ground for studies that aim to investigate the phenomena that we are aware of but cannot fully comprehend. Creswell (2013) stated that in the phenomenological design, answers are sought to questions "What are the perceptions/experiences related to this phenomenon?" and "What are the environments and conditions in which experiences of this phenomenon occur?" in general. The main focus of the current study is how graduate students with academic writing experiences make sense of their experiences. Thus, it is thought that the current study is suitable for the phenomenological research design, since it is aimed to determine the perceptions of graduate students about the phenomenon of academic writing.

Participants

The current study was carried out with the participation of 9 individuals who were attending a state university and volunteered to participate in the study. Criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used to determine the participants of the study. Criterion sampling aims to select all the cases that meet certain criteria (Patton, 2014). The criteria determined for the current study are the participants' studying for a graduate degree and having at least one academic writing product. The students participating in the study were coded as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9 in order to keep their identities confidential, and these codings were used throughout the study. Information on the demographic features of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' demographic features

Student psuedo-nym	Gender	Degree pursued	Academic writing course	Academic writing products
S1	Female	Doctorate	Taken	Presentation, article, thesis
S2	Female	Masters	Not taken	Presentation, article
S3	Male	Masters	Not taken	Presentation, article, thesis
S4	Female	Doctorate	Not taken	Presentation, article, thesis, part of a book
S5	Female	Masters	Not taken	Presentation, project, thesis
S6	Male	Masters	Taken	Presentation
S7	Female	Doctorate	Not taken	Presentation, article, thesis, part of a book
S8	Female	Masters	Taken	Presentation, article
S9	Male	Doctoral	Taken	Presentation, article, thesis, project

Table 1 shows that the participants are graduate students studying for masters and doctorate degrees. Some undertook took an academic writing course, whilst all have at least one academic writing product.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher was used to obtain data in the study. The relevant literature was used in the development of the interview form. The form was submitted to the review of three experts and the questions were revised in light of the suggestions made.

Individual interviews were conducted with the participants. Patton (2014) stated that in order to collect data in the phenomenological design, in-depth interviews should be conducted with people who have directly experienced a phenomenon of interest, that is, who have "lived experiences". Richards and Morse (2007) stated also that the interview provides researchers with interaction, flexibility and opportunity to ask follow-up questions in revealing the meanings and experiences of the cases. For this reason, it was deemed appropriate to use the interview technique to collect data in the current study. The interviews were conducted individually in order to prevent the answers given by the participants from being influenced by each other. First of all, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and it was stated that their answers would only be used in a scientific research. In addition, the participants were told that a voice recording would be made to avoid data loss. The interviews lasted approximately 20-25 minutes and the data were transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the content analysis method to reach concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data. In this framework, the purpose is to reveal the facts that may be hidden in the data. Content analysis gathers similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret it in a way that the reader can understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). First of all, the data obtained through voice recording were

transcribed. Then, the answers given to the questions were coded by the researcher. The codes were brought together and themes were determined according to their common characteristics. Thus, the content analysis process was completed and the outlines of the findings were created.

Validity and reliability of the study

For the validity and reliability of the study, methods suitable for the nature of the study were preferred, as explained below.

Credibility
Reporting the collected data in detail and explaining how the researcher reached the results are among the important criteria of validity in qualitative research (Yıldırım, 2010). In this context, the research process was explained in detail and sample quotations from the answers given by the participants were included.

Transferability
Two methods are proposed to increase the transferability of qualitative research. The first of these is detailed description and the second is purposive sampling (Erlandson, Haris, Skipper & Allen, 1993: as cited in Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In order to increase the transferability of the current study, detailed descriptions were included, the data collection process, the characteristics of the participants, the criteria by which the participants were selected and how the collected data were analysed were given in detail. At the same time, the typical case sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was preferred in the determination of the study group in the current study; thus, contributions were made to data triangulation and the transferability of the study.

Dependability
In order to ensure the dependability of the study, the answers given by the participants to the interview questions were coded independently by two different researchers. The percentage value of agreement between the codes created separately was checked. Agreement between the researchers was found to be 88%, according to the equation proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), $P=(Na \times 100)/(Na+Nd)$, where P=percentage of agreement, Na=number of agreements, Nd=number of disagreements.

Confirmability
Within the context of the concept of confirmability, what is expected from the researcher is to constantly confirm the results with the data collected and to offer a logical explanation to the reader. In this regard, the data set was coded twice by the researcher at different times and the percentage of agreement was calculated to be 91. It is thought that this value establishes the confirmability of the study.

Findings

Two themes emerged from analysis of the interview data: perception of academic writing and problems of academic writing.

Five different sub-themes were obtained within the theme of perception of academic writing, as shown in Figure 1.
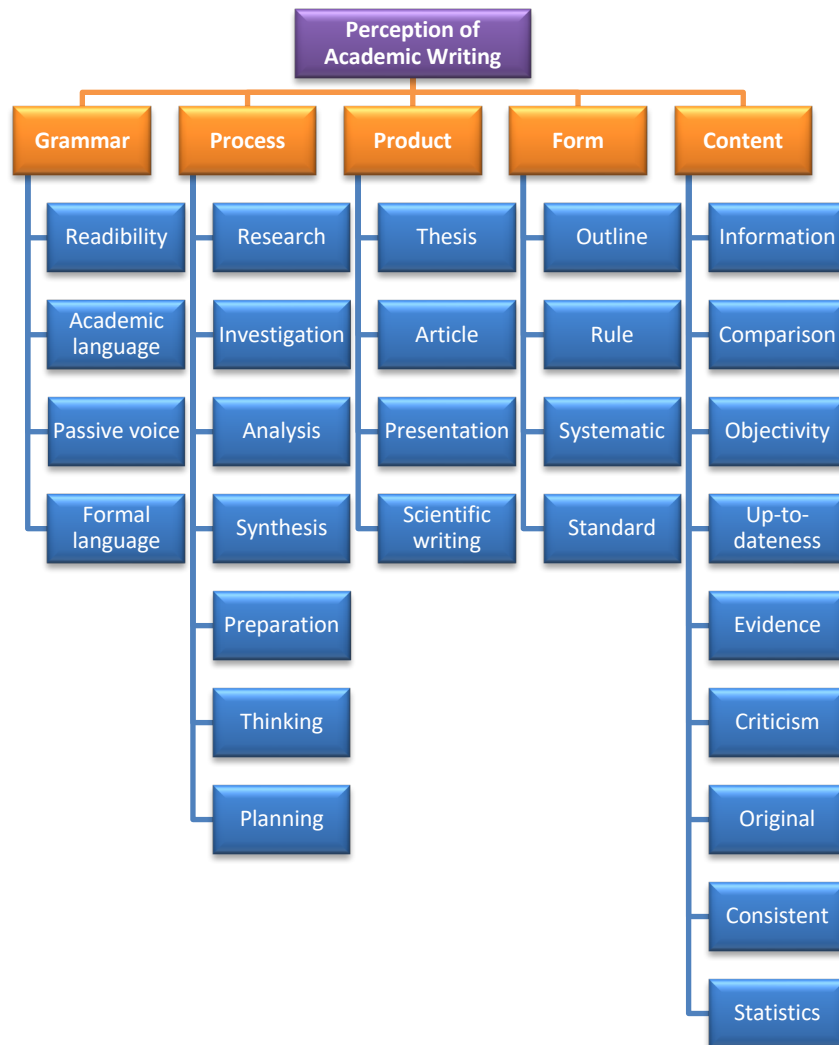

Figure 1: Perceptions of academic writing

Figure 1 shows graduate students' perceptions of academic writing grouped under five sub-themes: grammar, process, product, form and content, which are explained below.

Grammar

The graduate students mentioned grammar features related to the academic writing process. When the concept of academic writing is mentioned, they think of a readable text, writings prepared in academic and official language, and a narrative made using the passive voice. One participant explained his/her opinion on the issue as: "*…a bit of 'official*

and serious' language with its own special rules comes to mind." (S4). Another participant explained that academic writing genres are different from other texts:

> It is important to know how to use academic language. For example, language is used in a Turkish lesson, but the academic language is different. Passive voice is used. (S5)

Process

The graduate students mentioned process features included in academic writing. Considering academic writing as a process, they stated that it requires research and investigation, analysis and synthesis, serious preparation, engaging in thinking and planning activities throughout the process. One participant emphasised that

> Academic writing is a process and in this process, it should be progressed in line with a planning. In this process, continuous research is done and it requires higher-order thinking (S1).
> Another participant said,
> … More research is needed. Corrections need to be made more carefully. A review is done later. It requires a significant preparation." (S7)

Product

The graduate students mentioned thesis, article, presentation and scientific writings as the products of academic writing. One said, *"When I hear the word 'academic writing', I think of writing types with a scientific quality such as articles, presentation, thesis"* (S9). Another participant expressed a product-oriented view on academic writing with the statement, *"For me, academic writing is writing a thesis or article in its own field"* (S2).

Form

The graduate students mentioned the formal features of academic writing. When they hear the term "academic writing", they think of features such as a certain outline, rules, a systematic writing and standards. One participant said, *"We can think of academic writing as the systematic formatting of the presented information according to certain rules"* (S1). Another participant said, *"The work to be done is to be written in accordance with certain standards and in a scientific outline"* (S8).

Content

The graduate students also mentioned content-related features of academic writing. They expressed opinions emphasising textuality and text content, such as information, comparison, objectivity, up-to-dateness, evidence, criticism, originality, coherence and statistics. One participant expressed his/her opinion on the issue:

> When I hear the word 'academic writing', I think of different perspectives and thoughts that are of quality enough to be cited, expressed in a scientific framework, productive enough to generate other studies and at the same time, clear enough to be understood by everyone (S3).

Another participant emphasised the content of academic writing,

> In my opinion, academic articles are articles that provide information on a subject, try to prove something, create new and original perspectives on a subject, and convey them within a certain plan" (S9).

Five different sub-themes were obtained in the theme of problems of academic writing. Sub-themes and codes related to this theme are shown in Figure 2.
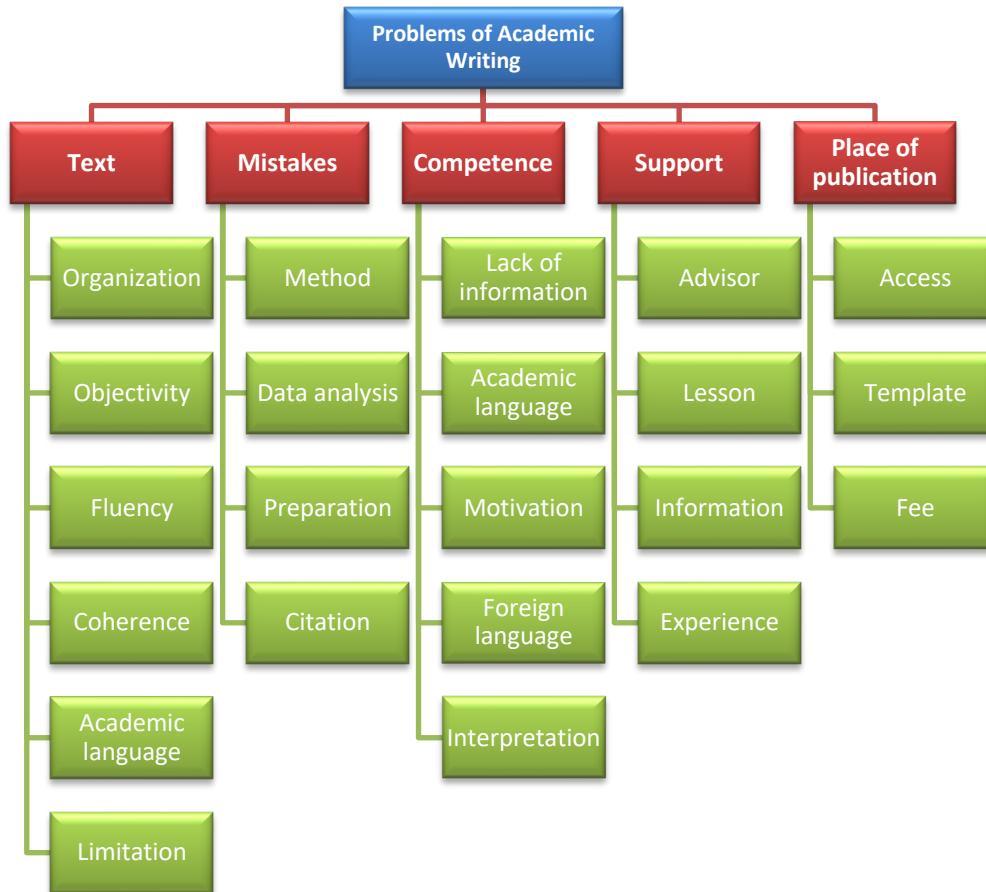
Figure 2: Problems of academic writing

Figure 2 shows graduate students' views on the problems experienced in academic writing grouped under five sub-themes: text, mistakes, competence, support, and place of publication, as explained below.

Text

The graduate students stated that there are some problems in the text preparation part of the academic writing process. In this context, they mentioned that they have problems in

the organisation of information, using objective expressions, presenting information fluently, ensuring coherence in the text, using an academic language, and setting limitations. One participant said,

> …The most important problem among them is the inability to establish the integrity of meaning in academic writing. The reason for this is that thoughts cannot be organised correctly and sentences cannot be formed for the purpose (S7).

Similarly, another participant expressed the problems experienced in academic writing by stating, "*Researchers' willingness to share everything they have found can sometimes make their writing devoid of coherence and fluency*" (S1).

Mistakes

The graduate students stated that they experienced some problems due to mistakes made in their academic writing. In this context, they mentioned mistakes caused by lack of methodological knowledge, inaccuracies in data analysis, inefficient preparation, and inability to present the citations correctly created problems. One indicated a problem arising from not knowing how to cite:

> I have a hard time citing. Because we cannot write an idea as it is. We have to read that sentence and make sense of it and express it in our own words. Otherwise, we are more likely to commit plagiarism. However, the use of wrong citations makes it difficult to find the correct one (S8).
> Another said,
> I think one of the most important problems is that I do not have full knowledge of methods and data analysis techniques and the mistakes made in this regard are one of the most important problems (S6).

Competence

The graduate students stated they experienced some problems related to competence in academic writing. They mentioned problems arising from personal competence, such as lack of knowledge, lack of ability to use academic language, lack of motivation to write, lack of foreign language competence and weak interpretation skills. One said,

> When I first started, I didn't know how to write. What we learned during the undergraduate education was not enough. Yet I learned something. After I got into the business, I had a better understanding after writing a couple of papers and especially after preparing and finishing the thesis proposal. My problems have decreased. I didn't even know where to find articles. I learned that too. Not knowing this was a problem for me" (S2).

Another participant mentioned problems arising from lack of personal competence:

> A lot of problems can be mentioned in this process such as not having an academic language and style, not being able to create an integrity of meaning, not being objective…" (S9).

Support

Graduate students experienced some problems due to the lack of support provided during the academic writing process. This included problems such as the advisors not giving adequate support, lack of courses on academic writing, not being able to access the necessary information, and not having opportunities to acquire experience. Not being supported by the advisor or writing skills courses at the graduate level was a serious problem,

> Finding a field expert is a problem. One of the most important things about academic writing is that the advisor should be a guide. I see they are inadequate and we learn by trial and error" (S5).
> The biggest problems encountered in the academic writing process are that academic writing skills are not adequately addressed in the undergraduate and graduate courses or that such courses are insufficient in terms of content" (S3).

Place of publication

There are some problems related to finding a place to publish their scientific products emerging from their academic writing work. Some mentioned problems such as not knowing how to reach the places where the products will be published, the use of different writing templates by different publishers, and fees requested for the publication of their products. Different journals having different writing templates can be an important problem, one participant saying,

> It is not possible to create a clear template, especially since the places publishing scientific products have different writing rules. In terms of academic writing, I think this hinders consistency" (S3).
> Another participant expressed his/her opinion as,
> …Another problem experienced in the process is that you cannot find the appropriate journal for your study or that these journals require an article publication fee" (S5).

Discussion and conclusion

In the current study, which aimed to examine graduate students' perceptions of the academic writing process and the problems experienced in this process, research findings were obtained from analyses of interview data.

Graduate students' perceptions of academic writing occurred in different ways. According to the findings, graduate students defined academic writing within the themes of grammar, process, product, form and content. When they hear the term "academic writing", they think of a readable text, writings prepared in academic and official language, and a narrative made using the passive voice. Due to its nature, academic writing uses a more formal language than other writing types. Rao (2018) stated that academic writing should be understandable for the reader and emphasised that a formal language should be used. Bahar (2014), who explained the verb tenses that should be used in academic writing, stated that it would be more appropriate to use the passive voice in these texts. These

features can be said to be among the factors that make up the graduate students' perceptions of academic writing.

The graduate students considered academic writing as a process that requires research and examination, analysis, synthesis and serious preparation, that thinking activities should be engaged in throughout the process, and planning is needed. Academic writing has been described by Murray (1985) as an eight-stage process. These stages are pre-writing, planning, drafting, reflections, peer and instructor evaluation, review, additional research, editing and publishing. Tompkins (1997), on the other hand, stated that academic writing consists of five stages: preparations before writing, drafting, revision, editing, and printing and sharing with the audience. In this context, it can be said that academic writing requires some activities until it is shared with the reader. In this connection, the graduate students mentioned pre-writing and writing activities as a process, but did not emphasise the editing and publishing stages. When academic writing is considered as a process, it can be said that these stages are also an important part, like other stages, and they need to be addressed when engaged in academic writing.

The graduate students stated that as far as academic writing is concerned, products such as thesis, article, presentation and scientific writing are produced. Academic writing is considered as a process and scientific texts such as graduate theses, articles, and presentations are produced at the end of this process (Kan, 2017). During their education, graduate students experience the academic writing process through academic publications such as articles, presentations and theses. Although students consider academic writing as a process, it is thought that academic products are the place where they can express their perceptions on this subject concretely.

The graduate students stated that when they hear the term "academic writing", they think of features such as a certain outline, rules, systematic writing, and standards. Bowker (2007) explained that academic writing first requires some kind of structure having the introduction, body and conclusion and that this type of writing is organised around a formal order or structure in which ideas are presented. These features, which distinguish academic writing from other writing types, were also expressed by the graduate students.

The graduate students expressed opinions emphasising textuality and text content such as information, comparison, objectivity, up-to-dateness, evidence, criticism, originality, coherence and statistics in relation to academic writing. The features of academic texts expressed in the literature include simplicity, coherence, objectivity and reasonability (Salam, Mahfud & Nurhusna, 2018). Bahar (2014) defined coherence, consistency, purposefulness, acceptability, informativeness, relevance to the situation, and intertextuality as the main features of academic writing. It can be said that the graduate students have perceptions of academic writing including some features of text content and textuality.

The graduate students mentioned problems in the organisation of information, using objective expressions, presenting information fluently, ensuring coherence in the text, using an academic language and setting limitations. Other researchers have found authors

have similar problems in the preparation of their texts (e.g. Becker, 2015; Kan & Gedik, 2016; Tok & Gönülal, 2016). The fact that academic writing products appeal to a different audience than other written texts and that scientific studies are based on it brings some differences in the textual sense. In this regard, Jiang and Hyland (2020) stated that academic writers use a range of linguistic and rhetorical elements to persuade readers of their contributions. The fact that graduate students do not have sufficient knowledge and skills in this regard brings along the problems experienced. When the academic writing courses taken by graduate students were examined, it was observed that the students who did not take any academic writing course experienced such problems to a greater extent. Aull et al. (2017) and Jalali (2017) clearly showed that novice writers face difficulties in expressing themselves and their views in the text and demand more explicit interventions in dealing with posture in academic writing teaching. It is stated that student writers do not feel comfortable using stance markers as experts do, they avoid talking about themselves to present themselves as an author, and their texts are more descriptive and lack stance (Hyland, 2004). In this context, it is thought that a course or applied academic writing activities are important in terms of academic writer identities of graduate students. In addition, it is seen that students do not make much reference to reading on this subject. Belcher (2019) stated that the best way to write an article is to read an article, emphasising that most students do not do this. It is thought that the stated problems are related to writing, and it can be said that there is a lack of awareness, perhaps, of reading. It is considered important to develop skills that have an integrative effect, such as reading, in the development of students' academic writing skills.

The graduate students explained that mistakes committed in data analysis, due to lack of knowledge of methodology, inefficient preparation process and inability to present citations correctly, create problems in their academic writing. This shows that graduate students have a lack of knowledge not only in academic writing but also in scientific research methods. The existing research also shows that graduate students have problems with scientific research methods (e.g. Akgün & Güntaş, 2018; Aslan, 2010; Kana & Kuluroğlu, 2018). The problems that students experience with scientific research methods directly affect their academic products, because academic writing includes not only an act of writing, but also the process of reporting a scientific study.

The graduate students mentioned that they have problems due to lack of knowledge, lack of competence in using academic language, lack of motivation to write and lack of foreign language competence and interpretation skills. Although this situation may change depending on the knowledge, skills and experience that students have personally, it can be said that the problems can be minimised by imparting academic writing competences to students in a qualified manner. In this regard, opportunities should be created such as academic writing activities that include collaborative group work and peer learning. "…writing a report is an act of learning, and in that sense we write for ourselves so that when we read what we write, we eventually learn what we learned." (Winter, 1996). Students' academic writing difficulties are mostly related to the difficulties they encounter while trying to adapt their existing – and largely incomplete – writing knowledge and experience to the needs of the new writing and learning situation (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019). Effective practices, such as ensuring that students are included in a learning cycle

with continuous writing in order to solve the problems they experience in academic writing, will be important at this point.

Problems with advisor support emerged, such as the advisors not providing sufficient support, lack of courses on this subject, not being able to reach the necessary information, and lack of opportunities to gain experience in academic writing. The most important result here is that graduate students do not benefit enough from their advisors in terms of academic writing. In graduate education, advisors provide the necessary mentoring to prepare students for the academic world. In this context, the advisor has important responsibilities for improving students' academic writing skills. Advisors cannot always provide the support that students expect, as they have to carry out many different tasks at the same time, such as conducting research, carrying out projects, fulfilling administrative duties and offering academic counselling to undergraduate and graduate students (Philips & Pugh, 2005). However, students not receiving sufficient academic writing support from their advisors makes this process difficult for them and reduces their motivation. This suggests that students feel alone in academic writing and and insufficient in problem solving skills. Although there are academic writing courses offered as an elective, it can seem that the expectations and needs of the students are not met in this area.

The graduate students also touched upon some other issues such as not knowing how to reach the places where their written products will be published, using different writing templates required by different publishers and being asked for a publication fee. Such problems negatively affect the comfort that begins with the end of the writing process (Tok & Gönülal, 2016). Academic journals are currently the places where authors can be most visible and receive the most credit (Bahrami et al., 2018). The academic writing process ends with the sharing of the product with the reader. However, problems experienced during the publication stage prevent the process from progressing in a healthy way and reduce the motivation of the authors. Academicians can overcome these problems with their experience and the support of their social environment and peers. However, graduate students have more difficulties at this stage.

Suggestions

In light of the results of the current study, the following suggestions can be made:

- It is recommended that the academic writing course be taught in a practical way, by creating opportunities for students to participate in continuous writing actions with collaborative group work in the graduate period;
- Teaching such courses in a practice-oriented manner in the undergraduate period rather than in a theory-oriented manner will reduce the problems experienced in academic writing;
- Seminars or courses aimed at minimising the problems encountered in the academic writing process can be organised by institutes at regular intervals;
- Environments can be created that will enable advisors to be better guides for students, especially in academic writing;

- Students can be encouraged not only to write theses but also produce various other kinds of academic products during their graduate period;
- Seminars can be organised to inform students about appropriate publishers for their academic products.

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