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## **University Language Students' Experience of Handwriting and Typing Assignments: Issues and Challenges**

**Abstract:**

While new technological developments and devices have transformed writing in several ways, little research has examined how learners experience handwriting and typing assignments and writing responses in the examinations in such cases. Basing the data source on in-depth interviews, the current study aims to examine Turkish university language students' experiences, viewpoints, difficulties and challenges with regard to typing and handwriting assignments and responses in the exams at a state university in Turkey. The findings show that while the majority of the participants preferred to handwrite assignments, they also acknowledged several benefits of typing on a computer such as checking grammar and spelling easily and the fast corrections. The findings also indicate that the participants tried to take necessary precautions to resist the distractions of the digital world while typing and that they did not want to type their responses during the exams, for it would require much more time and fast keyboard skills.

**Keywords:** handwriting, typing, digital literacy, writing, assignments

### **Introduction**

New generations grow up with their electronic devices, and much of their informal learning also occurs through these devices, and they learn how to use the keyboard, a touch screen, and a mobile phone as they learn how to walk. Technology has become increasingly integrated into our daily life and has been changing the ways we live and use our skills (Kessler 2017). Writing, for example, is one of these skills which technology has affected profoundly. The advent of computer technology has contributed to the way people write in terms of handwriting and style in a variety of ways over the last few decades (Harralson 2013). The act of writing with a pencil or pen seems to have been replaced by a variety of technological tools, if not forgotten. People communicate through laptops, mobile phones, and tablets using the physical or virtual keyboards so much that they rarely feel the need to take a handwritten note. They either take photos of the notes they might need or type their notes on their note applications. Besides, the easy use of word processing software and the easy-share of these typed documents seem to decrease the need for handwriting. Technology has affected and changed how learners write to such an extent that it is discussed and suggested that students, when requested, should be allowed to type their answers via technological devices, rather than handwriting their responses to exam questions in the classes (Mogey et al. 2008). However, the study conducted by McCarroll and Fletcher (2017) has stressed the importance of the quality of handwriting suggesting that there is a close relationship between academic success in the subject area of writing and the quality of handwriting in addition to reading.

The introduction of new digital devices such as tablet PCs and smart phones and the accompanying word-processing software seem to be replacing writing by hand. This, in return, seems to lead today's children to start typing on a digital device or touching a screen first before they learn how to write and master handwriting (Mangen and Velay 2010). However, although most work is done by students on digital devices, in most educational contexts, they have to take

examinations where they have to handwrite their responses. Therefore, it might be useful to determine the main advantages and disadvantages of typing and handwriting assignments.

Several studies have examined the effects of handwriting and determined that handwriting has various advantages over typing. For example, Kiefer et al. (2015) compared the effects of handwriting and typing training on letter recognition, reading and writing performance of preschool children. The participants in one group were trained in writing eight letters using a pen on paper, while the ones in the other group practiced typing the same letters on a computer using a keyboard. The results of the study indicated that no significant differences were found between the scores obtained by the participants in each group. However, the results revealed that handwriting training led the students to perform better than the other students in several word reading and writing tasks. Similarly but from a different perspective, Karavanidou (2017) stated that the main advantage of typing over handwriting, due to the developments in word-processing software, is that users can easily tackle spelling mistakes and editing processes, resulting in the faster production of words in addition to correct spelling and legible writing.

Handwriting is believed to help learners remember their notes easier compared to typewriting as handwriting allows more time to consider what learners write and revise it. However, typing through word-processor software provides learners with the opportunity to easily correct and revise what they have written and enhance the final product (Mogey and Hartley 2013). As also indicated by Mogey and Fluck (2015), the choice between typing on technological devices and handwriting most often depends on learners' needs such as practical reasons and habits as in the study conducted by Mogey et al. (2008) and aesthetic reasons (Farinosi et al. 2016), and each choice has several advantages or disadvantages over the other one. The study conducted by Farinosi, Lim, and Roll compared the essays on reading and writing practices by German, British, and Italian students and conducted qualitative content analysis to reveal the reasons and the effects of the participants' choice of medium (paper, keyboard, or screen) on their reading and writing practices. The results of the study indicated that there were no major differences among the three groups of students. It was also determined that while the majority of the participants preferred to handwrite for daily activities such as personal letters and shopping lists, they also used technological devices to write more formal issues such as thesis writing and important papers. The results also indicated that the main advantage of typing on a computer or any electronic device was that they could benefit from immediate correction of mistakes provided by word-processing software and easy access to dictionaries in addition to easy editing and revising the paper.

However, several studies have also indicated that integrating technology into the classroom has distracting effects hindering learning. One distracting effect is on student writing, which is found to be deteriorating with the use of technology in terms of spelling when they have to handwrite and the use of formal words and another is the distraction caused by electronic devices (Spitzer 2014). Dahlström and Boström (2017) compared the effects of writing narrative texts in three different conditions: pen and paper, tablet, and tablet with access to speech synthesis. The participants included a class of fourth graders in Sweden. Based on the theoretical model, the Wheel of Writing, and the process analysis in Systemic Functional Linguistics, the observations were subject to content analysis. The results of the study indicated that when the participants used the digital devices, their use of processes to describe action verbs increased, while they used more processes regarding feelings and verbal processes when they handwrote and that spelling, structure, and content were affected positively when the participants used digital resources.

Despite these studies, some of which indicate the major benefits of handwriting over typing and of typing over handwriting, several other studies did not determine any significant differences between handwriting and typing. Mogey et al. (2010), for example, aimed to explore the differences in scoring when students were given the choice to provide their responses in two formats: typing or handwriting. The participants included seventy first-year divinity students who were asked to take a mock examination in one of these two formats. The responses were evaluated and scored by four

markers. The results of the study indicated no significant differences in terms of scoring due to the format in which students had provided their responses by either typing or handwriting. However, it was determined that the participants typed more than they could handwrite, which was not associated with their typing speed. Regarding attitudes towards handwriting and typing, Mogeey and Fluck (2015) aimed to determine and compare the attitudes and behaviors of seventy-two students at two universities located in the UK and in Australia regarding using computers in examinations where they were required to write essays. The results of the study indicated that although most students expressed confidence in typing as fast as they can handwrite, several concerns were voiced by the students such as typing ability and the reliability of the hardware and software. The results also revealed that the participants would need to feel comfortable as they would not want to suffer from hardware or software failure.

As the review of the aforementioned studies indicates, most of the studies were conducted in contexts where the participants were exposed to computer use in the classroom such as taking notes. However, to the best knowledge of the author, there are no studies conducted to determine the participants’ views and experience in contexts where the use of technological devices is rare except for the use of lecture slides and presentations. The current study aims to examine the experiences and views of Turkish university students currently studying in a state university in Turkey on handwriting and typing assignments in addition to typing responses during exams. The participants of the study were senior undergraduate students in several departments. The study aims to answer the following question: What were the students’ experiences, viewpoints, difficulties and challenges with regard to typing and handwriting assignments and responses in the exams?

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

The study is an interview-based study and benefited from qualitative data obtained through the participants’ responses provided during semi-structured interviews. The aim of using in-depth interviews to conduct the current study was to understand the lived experience and views of the participants (Seidman 2006; Arksey and Knight 1999) as well as the challenges linked to typing and handwriting assignments and responses in the exams. It was believed that as it was not possible, if not impossible, to obtain data by using other sources or methods on the participants’ experiences, interviews were believed to determine the meaning that the participants would make of that experience and those challenges faced during typing and handwriting.

### *Participants*

Potential informants from the seniors in the Department of Foreign Language Education at a state university were contacted via emails and announcements in the class to ask whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Of these students, thirty agreed to be interviewed regarding their experience and views on typing and handwriting assignments. Therefore, the participants of the study included thirty Turkish pre-service seniors studying English Language Teaching at a state university in Turkey. Of these participants, 25 were female, while 5 were male students. Their average age was 23.5, and they were all graduates of high schools in Turkey.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Semi-structured interviews aimed to determine the participants’ experience and views in addition to the challenges that they faced while typing and handwriting the assignments. The interviews took place in the researcher’s office depending on the availability of both the researcher and each participant. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ mother tongue, which was Turkish. The interview sessions included questions that probed (i) their experience with typing and handwriting assignments, (ii) difficulties and challenges caused by typing and handwriting

assignments, (iii) their preferences regarding how to prepare assignments, and finally (iv) their views on typing responses in the exams. However, since the interviews were semi-structured, based on the nature and the flow of the interview, the participants asked and were asked several other questions related to the aim and the scope of the current study. The following are the questions that were planned to be asked to the participants in advance:

*Typing assignments*

1. Do you type your assignments? How often do you type your assignments?
2. Do you think that typing assignments provides you with benefits? Can you name any?
3. Do you think that typing assignments leads to any challenges? Can you name any?

*Handwriting assignments*

1. Do you handwrite assignments? How often do you handwrite your assignments?
2. Do you think that handwriting assignments provides you with benefits? Can you name any?
3. Do you think that handwriting assignments includes any challenges? Can you name any?

*Typing the responses to exam questions*

1. Have you ever typed your responses to questions in an exam in the class?
2. If allowed, would you like to type your responses to the questions during exams? Why? Why not?

The data analysis included reading and re-reading the notes taken, summarizing the participants’ main responses and views, grouping and categorizing these summaries in addition to assigning them to emerging themes and codes.

*Procedure*

Of all the potential participants, thirty were willing to participate in the study. These participants, who responded positively, were briefly informed about the aim and the scope of the study and asked to provide the dates and time suitable for them to be interviewed for two weeks. Depending on the schedule of the researcher, the interviews were conducted in his office.

The interviews were conducted in Turkish, and the participants were directed eight questions under three main headings: (i) typing assignments, (ii) handwriting assignments, and (iii) typing the responses to exam questions. However, due to the nature of the semi-structured format of the interviews, both the researcher and the participants were free to lead the conversation. In other words, the participants were also given the opportunity to raise other issues connected with the interview questions or the responses they provided. In the same vein, the researcher could also focus on and probe into the issue in detail raised by the participants, require further clarification or explanations depending on the responses, which enabled obtaining richer and substantive data in line with the aims of the study.

**Results and Discussion**

The findings based on the responses provided by the participants during the semi-structured interviews have been discussed under each theme and the corresponding codes. The themes with the corresponding codes were determined as: (i) typing assignments (benefits and challenges), (ii) handwriting assignments (benefits and challenges), and (iii) typing responses to exam questions (inability to type fast and technical issues). Moreover, several quotes were selected to better

represent the participants’ experience and views, and it is ensured that these quotes are the most representative of the findings of the current study (Table 1).

*(i) Typing Assignments (Benefits and Challenges)*

The interview transcripts showed that the majority of the participants ( $n=25$ ) agreed that typing assignments provided them with several comforts. They stated that they could easily correct and revise the assignments in addition to the word-processing features such as spell-check. For example, one of the participants expressed his views as follows:

The word-processing software that I used provided me with several features such as easy editing and revising the text and spellcheck. I could easily correct my mistakes and whenever I could not remember the correct spelling or the synonyms of several words, the software helped me by indicating several options [Interviewee ID 12, Male].

**Table 1**  
 The themes and main codes that emerged during the semi-structured interviews

Theme	Code	Sample Response
Typing assignments	<i>benefits</i>	<i>While typing, I could easily correct any mistake. I mean spelling mistakes, mainly. Handwriting does not allow easy correction, or if you try to correct, one can easily understand that. Moreover, I can also use the dictionary functions of the word-processing features such as finding the synonyms.</i>
	<i>challenges</i>	<i>I often felt the urge to check my e-mails or Facebook messages while trying to type my assignments. I think it really affected my performance. I want to say that typing took a lot more time compared to writing using pen and paper. I also engaged with other tasks like watching videos.</i>
Handwriting assignments	<i>benefits</i>	<i>You can write your assignments whenever you want. You do not need to find a suitable place or deal with the charging problems as it happens with the electronic devices. I also believe that you can easily focus on what you want to say in your assignments.</i>
	<i>challenges</i>	<i>If your handwriting is not good and legible, that is the worst situation. Moreover, if you have to write your assignments in ink and make a mistake, you have no other option but to rewrite it from the beginning. It takes a lot of time to do.</i>
Typing responses to exam questions	<i>Inability to type fast</i>	<i>I do not think it is a good idea to type our answers using a laptop or any other electronic device because it will not be easy for many, including me, to type fast. I am not the person that can type fast. I can handwrite a lot more than I can type. So, I would not type. It would be an obstacle for me as I use two fingers while typing.</i>
	<i>technical issues</i>	<i>What if the computer crashes down when you are almost finished with your answers? Or if your computer turns itself off as you are out of battery. I think it would not be convenient to type during an exam as it will bring many other problems and issues to resolve.</i>

This finding is consistent with that of the studies conducted by Karavanidou (2017), Mogeey and Hartley (2013), and Farinosi, Lim, and Roll (2016), indicating that one of the main advantages of

typing assignments seems to be related to the features of word-processing software such as spellcheck and easy editing of the texts produced by the participants.

However, the participants believed that typing presented several major challenges to their learning in addition to the benefits of typing assignments. Most participants did not prefer to type when they were given the option. Several participants ( $n=5$ ) added that as they had training on how to type using a keyboard using their ten fingers, they were able to write as much as they handwrite or faster. Accordingly, they preferred to type their assignments, and one of these participants expressed this as follows:

I can type much faster than I handwrite as I had training on typing fast using ten fingers even without looking at the keyboard. This training was part of my high school curriculum, and I knew that in the future I would benefit from this skill. Typing fast allows me to submit my assignments on time and spare more time to other activities.

On the other hand, the majority of the participants ( $n=25$ ) did not prefer to type their assignments as they could not type as much as they handwrite. This has been clearly expressed as follows:

I cannot type as much as I handwrite. I mean, I can write many more words and sentences than I can type. I can only use a few fingers and it takes time to write the words since I also have to check the screen to see if I am writing correctly. I did not have any training in keyboard skills. Maybe because of that I do not want to type [Interviewee ID 18, Female].

When the participants were asked further questions on this issue, it was determined that they could type using their two fingers, and most of the time they had to hunt for each letter, which appeared as the main obstacle for them. This finding is contrary to that of the study conducted by Moge and Fluck (2015) as the current study indicated that the participants had difficulty in typing fast. This might be attributed to the fact that almost all the participants in the current study did not practice taking notes on their laptops or any other electronic devices, while in the other study the participants were used to taking notes on their laptops, which might affect their typing ability and their preference. Moreover, as indicated in the participants' responses, handwriting is more confined to short notes and personal correspondence; however, even these uses might often be done on mobile devices using various software such as *Facebook*.

Regarding the challenges of typing assignments, it was determined that the most stated one was to resist the distractions of the digital world while typing their assignments on their computer, which caused the writing process to take longer compared to handwriting or pen and paper writing. Half of the participants agreed that they also engaged with other tasks such as instant messaging and watching videos while trying to write and type their assignments. Several participants ( $n=6$ ) explained that they disconnected their computer from the Internet while typing in order not to check their emails or respond to a friend on *Facebook*. One of the participants expressed that as follows:

It was difficult for me to concentrate on the assignment that I was supposed to write as I felt the need to check Facebook messages or whether there were any new e-mails that arrived in my Inbox. I tried hard not to be distracted and sometimes I had to disconnect my laptop from the Internet [Interviewee ID 24, Male].

Therefore, ten participants argued that handwriting could be one way to overcome these distractions, and often opted for the option to handwrite the assignment first and then type when required. This finding corroborates that of the study conducted by Spitzer (2014), which indicated that learners' attention was directed to other activities rather than writing the assignment itself.

*(ii) Handwriting Assignments (Benefits and Challenges)*

All the participants stated that they all had to type assignments in the courses that they took in the department and that the instructors required them to submit their assignments electronically or in print. However, when they were asked whether they would prefer to handwrite or type if they were given the opportunity to select, the responses indicated that a great majority (n=25) preferred handwriting assignments rather than typing them if given the opportunity to select due to several reasons, one of which is that they could focus more on the content and remember their notes easier. The participants explained that they could handwrite in a variety of environments such as on the bus or in a café without much caring about the requirements to do the same with a laptop or any other equipment. One of the participants underscored the importance of freedom regarding the time and place to work as follows:

I can easily focus on what I write when I handwrite. I do not have to sit in front of a screen for a long time or to be worried about battery status. I can write my assignments whenever and wherever. Not worrying about the technical issues is a real comfort. All you need is just a pen and paper [Interviewee ID 29, Female].

This finding is consistent with that of the study conducted by Mogey and Fluck (2015), which indicated that the real concern of the participants was the technical issues and that the participants should not worry about hardware or software failure while typing their responses or assignments. However, although handwriting is believed to offer several benefits, it is not without challenges, as indicated by the responses. Many participants (n=26, out of 30) indicated that it was their handwriting that was the main concern for them. In other words, good and legible handwriting cannot be easily achieved. Moreover, when the assignments are to be written in ink, corrections become a real concern for the participants. One of the participants expressed this issue as follows:

Handwriting offers several benefits, but if you cannot write legibly, it is a real problem as lecturers also pay attention to the format. Moreover, when you write in ink, corrections might become a real torture as you might have to rewrite your assignment from the beginning even though you were writing the last line, which appears a real disaster [Interviewee ID 30, Female].

*(iii) Typing Responses to Exam Questions*

The participants were also asked their decisions on typing responses to exam questions in the class. When asked whether they would like to benefit from typing their responses on their computers or any other suitable electronic device, a great majority of the participants (n=24) expressed that they would not like to do it in exams since it would take much more time compared to handwriting. One participant explained this as follows:

I cannot type as much as I handwrite. So, I would not opt for typing. If we think that there are many other factors such as organization, spelling, and selection of words, it would not be reasonable to type as it would take much more time, at least for me [Interviewee ID 29, Female].

Three of the participants expressed that they would like to type responses, for their handwriting was not legible. However, three participants stated that they would type responses to exam questions as they could type much faster than they handwrite as they had training in typing. One of these participants expressed this as follows:



I think it would be a different experience to type responses to the exam questions if we do not consider technical issues such as computer crash or charging problem. I can type faster and easily edit, change, or even organize my responses without spending much time on making my handwriting look fine or legible or dealing with erasing some of my text.

However, it is also due to note that two of the five participants who stated that they preferred to type their assignments as they had proficiency in it did not want to type responses during examinations due to several technical issues and concerns also voiced by the other participants. In addition to the ability to type fast, the participants also voiced technical issues and concerns regarding typing during an examination. One of the participants pointed out her preference as follows by indicating the possible technical problems and the noise that might affect her performance:

I haven’t tried typing during an exam, and I do not think it is possible to do that in this university. There might be many technical problems, let alone the noise of typing on the keyboard. Think about that. While you are trying to think about what to write, you will have to bear the noise coming from the keyboards. Moreover, it would also take more time to write if you are not really good at typing [Interviewee ID 6, Female].

In sum, based on the participants’ responses regarding their experiences with typing and handwriting their assignments, it can be stated that both bring a mixture of advantages and disadvantages. One major disadvantage is that learners found it difficult to resist the distractions of what was offered to them while working on a computer. This might also show the sign of addiction to the Internet, for the responses also indicated that they frequently felt the need to check their emails and Facebook messages whenever they worked on their computer. Moreover, typing was determined to require much more time as most participants found it faster to handwrite their assignments and did not wish to type during examinations although a few participants would like to type responses as they had the ability to type fast. Moreover, typing also offered several advantages such as spellchecking and easy revision.

### **Implications**

In some other educational contexts, writing with paper and pen might be quite common at university and predominates writing, especially assignments and handwriting might help learners remember and focus on content more compared to typing without any requirements such as fast keyboard skills and a suitable place to use a computer. However, this does not mean that learners should only be allowed to handwrite. It must be also acknowledged that typed assignments offer several advantages to lecturers, not just learners in that the digital documents can be easy to read and be checked fast and easily for plagiarism. However, both handwriting and typing should be offered to learners, helping them improve their digital literacy skills in addition to benefits that handwriting offers to them. Lecturers can assign assignments, several of which are to be handwritten and typed. In this way, the mixture of advantages and disadvantages can be equally shared among learners, and while encouraging learners to improve their digital literacy, it is also ensured that they also develop legible and fluent handwriting. Lecturers might also consider allowing students to type their responses during exams provided that they take necessary precautions against cheating.

### **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to determine the experience and the views of university language education seniors regarding handwriting and typing assignments in addition to their views on typing responses during exams. The study was an interview-based study, and the data were collected through in-depth interviews. The main findings indicated that the great majority of the participants

preferred to handwrite assignments and responses to exam questions rather than typing assignments. However, several benefits of typing assignments were voiced such as spelling and grammar checking features. Moreover, the participants did not like the idea of typing responses during the exams, for it would require much more time and typing fast. It is due to note that the current study is limited in various aspects. First, as the study was based on the data obtained through semi-structured interviews, it needs to be triangulated through other sources of data such as observing. Moreover, the results and the discussions are framed within the participants' responses, which means that the data is solely based on the self-reported data. Finally, further research can also conduct experimental studies in which the participants can take examinations through technological devices and are asked to share their experiences and views.

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