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EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

A peculiar practice of academic writing: Epidemic writing in the Turkish graduate education

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Abstract: The function of academy depends on wide practices of institutionalization. Academy is not only responsible to instruct, but also it has to train generations that will take over its own institutionalism. Academic writing is the foremost tool of academy's own reproduction. The problem of this study is academic writing. Academic writing in Turkish graduate education, the culture of academic writing, and the research on the academic writing are unproductive as opposed its abroad counterparts. What is the current situation of culture of academic writing? What are the issues of academic writing among candidate scholars and what can be done to improve the situation? This study tasks itself to produce research-based answers to these questions. In this respect, this "retrospective study" examines, through plagiarism detection software (*Turnitin*), 600 graduate theses, written in the field of education between the years of 2007–2015. Findings of the study point serious concerns with regard to academic writing in the Turkish graduate education. It has been found that 34.5% the examined theses include plagiarism and the originality of theses has been found to be 28.7%. The study concludes by providing possible explanations to the situation and offers some ideas and mechanisms to improve the situation.

Subjects: Education; Further & Higher Education; Educational Research

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Writing is the ultimate formal tool at the disposal of universities to communicate outside world to create impact and disseminate knowledge. Besides, writing also serves candidate scholars as a tool to join academic communities. It is the gatekeeper which decides who will join the academia. Writing as such is not mere an issue of grammar, style and technique, but rather a more complex set of repeated rules, which are created over a time period to provide responses to certain exigencies. When assessing writing, two problematics stand out: plagiarism and originality. In order to even to be considered as eligible to join the academia, writers must write plagiarism free and original pieces. In this study, we address plagiarism and originality as two basic indicators/requirements of quality writing. In this regard, the aim of this study is to investigate the quality of writing in the Turkish writing. We examine graduate theses with respect to plagiarism and originality to locate the basic characteristics of academic writing in Turkey.

Keywords: Academic writing; plagiarism; originality; graduate education; plagiarism detection software (PDS)

“What types of knowledge are you trying to disqualify when you say that you are a science?”

Foucault (2003, 10)

1. Introduction

The word “*university*” comes from the Latin *universitas*, meaning the gathering of masters (*magistorum*) and scholars (*scholarium*) (Gregorutti & Delgado, 2015, 109). The foundation of the university is based on the Platonic Academy. Even though the academia and the university are different concepts today, they are sometimes used in the same manner.

If we look at the history of the academy, Plato founded the first academy in 387 BC in Athens. The academy was a society in an isolated olive garden far from the Agora. It is based on the abstract thinking and criticism (Kırmızıaltın, 2010) that aims to conduct studies on society. The academy has seemed to be the best way to escape from censorship and oppression. Because the forms of any power in the antique society did not allow to be criticized by philosophers. Consequently, the academy has become a place where forms of power, free ideas and traditions are discussed and developed. Scholars as Bourdieu (1988), Foucault (2003), and Göker (2010) have been discussed these issues extensively. Yet they fail to provide an extensive account of writing and its relation to academy.

Academy on the one hand, attempts to develop a perspective of its own and independent of society and on the other, it tries to determine what is best and moral for people and the future of societies. The unique tool that academy and academics use is writing. Writing stands at the center of academic practices. All we, as academics, do in the end is writing; the core practice that we find little to time to reflect on. Medical doctor, engineer, sociologist, historian, psychologist, physicist, and all other eventually are writers. Despite this fact, the theory and research about writing, the investigation of the place of it within the academia have just started to be questioned and examined. Both the theoretical and empirical data about the writing is very limited. This study stems from this gap.

This study questions the place, the quality of writing in the Turkish graduate academy. Strikingly, the investigation of academic writing has not seen the attention it merits. There is no single review addressing the quality and the practice of academic writing. This project is the first one to address the innate characteristics of academic writing in Turkey. This article addresses the crevice and questions the place and the quality of writing in the Turkish academy by examining one of the most generic forms of academic writing; theses and dissertations. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap and an invitation to reconsider the relationship between academy and writing. Based on these premises, this study examines 600 graduate theses with respect to two parameters; originality and plagiarism.

2. Literature review

The issue of writing is not as simple as it appears but instead a more complex one; encompassing and correlating different disciplines like linguistics, philosophy, politics, history and teaching. In such manner, it is vital to conceptualize writing, specifically academic writing, beyond proper grammar, correct spelling, and appropriate style. Becoming a successful author and a scholar is much more a matter of understanding writing as a regularized, normalized social and cultural practice that one needs to learn. In the following pages, we propose a classification with regard to academic writing, which we consider as important in conceptualization of academic writing. The first type of writing that we propose is epistemic writing which denotes role of writing in shaping, generating, and producing knowledge. In contrast to epistemic writing, we see epidemic writing denoting the recurring patterns of knowledge production and meaning contributing nothing new while using the existing knowledge.

2.1. Academic discourse and graduate writing

The whole process of writing in the academia is closely related to and elegantly articulated within the academic discourse. The success of students is heavily dependent on their understanding of academic discourse:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion-invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (Bartholomae, 1986, 4)

Doctoral writing and thesis writing are “the ultimate student paper” (Paré et al., 2010, 179) and the most crystallized forms of academic writing. Despite its significance and superabundance within the academy, one can easily claim that dissertation and thesis writing is under-theorized, under-examined, and underestimated (Lundell & Beach, 2002; Paré et al., 2010). In a similar vein, Kamler and Thomson (2006, x) observe that there is a scarcity of well-theorized material about the graduate writing. They note; graduate writing was a kind of present absence in the landscape of graduate education. It was something that everyone worried about, but about which there was too little systematic debate and discussion. Besides, there is not always well-organized help for graduate students, which causes students to look at self-help books, manuals and how-to-text books for help. A typical example of these kinds of books is mainly made up of advices on what to do and what not to do while writing. These books offer advices about structure, organization, wording, and style. For example, Joyner, et. al.’s *Writing the Winning Thesis or Dissertation: A Step-by-step Guide* advises students to:

A Step-by-step Guide advises students to:

- (I) Use jargon with discrimination.
- (II) Avoid fad expressions.
- (III) Avoid colloquial expressions.
- (IV) Avoid the use of contractions.
- (V) Avoid adjectival nouns.
- (VI) *Avoid the vague use of we and our.* (Italics in original text)
- (VII) *Avoid the second person you.* (Italics in original text)
- (VIII) Avoid the sexist use of the masculine pronouns in referring to males and females (Joyner et al., 1998, 121).

By being appropriated by the academic discourse and “the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault, 1972, 227), students learn and understand what it means to be a part of the academy, and what counts as good writing in their respective fields. It is not our intention to go deep in details of the academic writing, but rather we want to stress that the academic discourse constraints and supports graduate writing, defines the process of writing a dissertation, and eventually locates dissertation writing in the wider intellectual and disciplinary context. In this sense, it is logical to overview main tenets of the academic discourse and how it influences academic writing.

The traditional understanding of academic discourse is that it is way of thinking and talking within the academia (Bizzell, 1992; Hyland, 2009). It has its unique language, which students learn to socialize in the academia. Moreover, academic discourse affects worldviews, its rules are implicit and it is exclusionary (El-Bezre, 2014, pp. 58–60).

We have learnt from Foucault (1972; 1981; 1994) that a discourse is not merely a matter of vocabulary, grammar, or textual structures, but rather it has material effects, it locates us in

certain subject positions, delimits us, controls us and enables us to speak. It affects and shapes our worldviews and our actions. In a similar vein, the academic discourse changes, bends, reshapes our views and transforms our identities (Bawarshi, 2003; Green, 2005; Ivanič, 1998). While writing, the novice academic writers are assimilated into the academic discourse. The rules that newcomers are expected to accommodate are basically seen as natural, self-evident and taken for granted (Hyland, 2009; Lillis, 2001; Paré, 2002; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). These rules and their normalized status of deeply influence the process of writing. Starke-Meyerring (2011) refers to a “cloak of normalcy” to draw attention to the “sociocultural situatedness of writing”. These rules are assumed invisible, universal and normal. Yet if the cloak of normalcy is removed, only then we can realize that “what is normalized and appears universal to long-time members of a research culture is deeply culturally specific to that research culture and therefore new to doctoral students” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, 79). Therefore, the process of graduate writing should include the introduction of these rules to the students to let them to discover the epistemic nature of writing. Otherwise, students will fear of asking questions regarding their writing, feel inadequate and a sense of being left in the dark. In turn, the cloak of normalcy works as a mechanism of exclusion that delineates students “to take a more active control over their meaning making and, hence, the voices they wish to make heard” (Lillis, 1997, 185).

This leads to what Starke-Meyerring (2011) refers to as the paradox of writing in graduate writing: “On the one hand, the discursive knowledge-making practices research cultures develop over generations to accomplish their knowledge work become normalized, transparent, invisible, and indeed appear universal to long-term members of research cultures, rendering writing a non-question. On the other hand, for newcomers, these very practices constitute new territory and a vital site of inquiry into how knowledge and researcher identities are produced and negotiated in these research cultures” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, 92). Students are simply expected to know the rules of game and how to play with these rules despite the fact that these rules are in the first place there to exclude them to join the play and make them to feel as outsiders. The success of students is heavily dependent on letting them to learn the rules of the game that requires a new theoretical approach to academic writing.

2.2. Re-contextualizing writing and rhetorical genre studies

A literary critic notes, “I soon discovered that higher education research journals were filled with articles written in a style that I, trained as a literary scholar, found almost unreadable” (Sword, 2012, 4). Some might find this statement exaggerated but the statement is also making a factual point: Academic writing has genre of its own that has developed through generations of researchers. Reader or a writer, if she wants to be a part of this culture, she needs to understand participate in this genre. This study is about this genre and its features. It understands academic writing as a matter of genre that regularizes values, norms, and patterns of power relations.

In this regard, this study places its epistemological stance within the field of rhetorical genre theory (Bazerman et al., 2010; Paré, 2014), which sees “discourse and writing as historically evolved social and ideological practices that are regularized in genres, which are defined as recurring patterns of discursive action that arise in human collectives, such as research cultures and institutions, over time” (Starke-Meyerring et al, A14, Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). These patterns determine and define the limits of writing. What will be written? How will it be written? Who will write? What rules are there for scholars to participate? What values and norms are attached to academic writing? These are some of the questions that the rhetorical genre theory tries to answer with regard to writing. Since the seminal work of Miller (1984), the issue of genre has moved beyond textual regularities and became a central focus in investigating the complicated relation of writing and social action.

What sources are making possible genres to have certain effects? What are their rhetorical situations? How do these situations emerge? In addition, what happens when these situations

emerge? Bitzer's (1968) argument in relation to formation of genres in their particular situations is brilliantly elaborated and explanatory:

Due to either the nature of things or convention, or both, some situations recur From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established ... The situation recurs and, because we experience situations and the rhetorical response to them, a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own-the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form. (13)

It is widely known that the essay is the default form of writing in the academia and student writing. The essay is panacean genre of writing all along the educational systems across the world. Starting from the first grade to the Ph.D. degree, writing is primarily sounded with the essay. The more you move up within the systems, the central becomes the essay. The essay is so naturalized that we tend to forget "the essay is a culturally specific form of communication which has not always existed, and which depends for its existence now on some quite definite institutional contexts" (Womack, 1993, 42). Earlier in the eighteenth century, essay was one of many assessment tools of student learning, yet as times went by it became the sole assessment tool. Today, applications to universities, research grants, and being published hence becoming a scholar, are actualizing through essays. Womack (1993) discusses that the essay is so organized generically that it allows only someone to do it. Essay is so structured that it seems everyone can do it because it is "to be analytic up to a point, but it is not to subject the text to the inhuman mechanical analysis of the professional scholar; rather, it is to express the cultivated response of a man of taste" (Womack, 1993, 43). It does not require creativity like poem or certain expertise like report or manual writing. It is the genre that one could participate if she uses the language and can think; therefore, it is accessible to everyone. Yet, this is not the case most of the time, not everyone can participate in the genre, only a handful of people can do it. "[T]he essay is a structurally contradictory sign: it has value both because it is universally human and because only some of us can do it" (Womack, 1993, 46). In the context of exigency, essays were devised to divide the poor from the middle class, which became a necessity after the industrial revolution of Britain. Now, essay is the sole form of assessment of becoming a member of an elite class on not only Britain but also all around the world.

The example of essay illustrates that genres, just as many different human enterprises, are cultural artifacts that constructed to answer certain exigencies. Genre in this sense is a form of social action (Miller, 2984) that binds the intention and the effect.

It suggests that what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another, instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take on an official role, account for progress in achieving goals. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potential for failure and success in acting together. As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality ... for the student genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in actions of a community. (Miller, 1984, 165)

Understanding research cultures is an important part of rhetorical genre studies because the aim of candidate scholar is to eventually become a part of a research community. As we have noted repeatedly, the success of graduate students does not depend only proper grammar, correct spelling and appropriate styling. In fact, graduate students' success is correlated positively with the extent to which they internalize the rhetorical and generic nature of writing that finds its meaningful context within the research communities. In this sense, it is equally important for a graduate student to make her familiar with the discursive practices of her respective research community.

Research communities or discourse communities refer a group of individuals who uses similar connotations and regularized research and writing practices to pursue a common goal (Bizzell, 1992; Swales, 1990). Swales (1990, 24–27) proposes six characteristics for discourse communities:

- (I) A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
- (II) A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
- (III) A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily provide information and feedback.
- (IV) A discourse community utilizes and hence possess on or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
- (V) In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.
- (VI) A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise.

The Frankfurt School and the Chicago School of Economics are two of the typical examples of research communities. Becoming a member of this these communities, just as any other, depends on the degree to which one internalizes the norms, values, expectations, patterns and generic features that are acceptable to the community. These rules and norms define the boundaries of a discipline and determine who is capable of entering into the particular field. It is crucial to understand the difference between what and how of writing because, as Hyland notes, “while disciplines are defined by their writing, it is how they write rather than simply what they write that makes the crucial difference between them” (Hyland, 2004, 3). All of these remind that writing is never a neutral practice but rather located in socio-cultural locations of academe and a specialized form of communication among certain individuals who share and pursue a common goal. Through time, research communities come to a general understanding of doing things, and develop a unique discourse limits and defines ways of talking, arguing and writing. They develop their unique genres, which regularize limits of sayable, thinkable and knowable. Below are some of the examples that genres work within research cultures to regularize:

- (I) Whether one’s work is to be presented as a matter of arguing, describing, and reporting.
- (II) What kinds of questions can and should be asked and how they should be phrased?
- (III) How data can or must be generated, justified, discussed, and interpreted.
- (IV) How much and what kind of subjectivity (e.g., “I”) writers can or should project in their writing.
- (V) What kinds of knowledge claims can be made, how, based on what kind of evidence.
- (VI) What constitutes appropriate evidence and how it is to be presented? (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, 77–78)

Being the basis of writing, the genres and what they regularize are cultural constructions that address exigencies of research communities. In this regard, genres and writing by extension, is a political and an ideological practice. As Gunnarson et al. (1997) remind, “[w]e must ... ask ourselves not only how professional genres have been constructed but also for whom, for what needs and why they have been formed the way they are” (Gunnarson et al., 1997, 3). The large extent of this study deals with these kinds of questions, and invites its readers to reflect on, investigates how academic writing in general, dissertation in particular, comes to occupy the position it has been occupying and the meaning of being there. Dissertation as a genre of academic writing is unique in the sense it has been diversified into sub or micro genres and is “handled with care” within the academic discourse.

2.2.1. Epistemic writing

Since Sumerians, writing has come to occupy a central position in humanity's organization activities, knowledge production and sharing processes, and formation of the social. Regardless of the way, that writing has always been the primary tool in accumulating knowledge and passing that knowledge to next generations; it is only the last century that writing came to play an important role in the research.

Derrida's (1998) "*Of Grammatology*" is perhaps the first significant and comprehensive work that solely seeks to challenge the place of writing in the Western thought. The enigmatic title of the book refers the problematic place of writing in Western tradition of philosophy, which sees writing secondary to the speech. Derrida argues that writing is not civilization but a sign of civilization that has been characterized by ethnocentrism and logocentrism. Hence, writing is a derivative of the truth. Derrida challenges the logocentric tradition of the Western thought, i.e. the privileged position of speech over writing. One could easily argue that Derrida is the first who acknowledges the place of writing in the history of thought and civilization that it deserves. Since speech (the signifier-the signified system) is the basis of the truth, and writing is out of the system, Derrida argues, there can be no science of writing. Writing is the origin that conceals the origin; a tricky origin that abruptly and repeatedly erases its appearance and itself. The whole mainstream Western philosophy is an attempt to protect speech and to exteriorize writing. By attacking to the privileged position of speech over writing, through various conceptual tools like *différance*, trace, space, supplementary, text, and Derrida (1998, 2005) attempts to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. In his deconstructive readings, he shows how fundamental concepts of western thought have contradictory meanings and fail to express only one meaning. All of these indicate a necessity of revision in philosophical and scholarly work; stop searching for foundations and truths because it is not possible to secure a foundation or truth through language since the universe of the system of language is incapable of giving one. The ideas of Derrida have different implications for writing, especially the academic writing.

Within the Western tradition of thought, writing appears as a problem that philosophers, thinkers, scholars had to deal with. From Plato to S. Freud and onwards, the major way of dealing has been the repression and suppression of writing, which also "constitutes the origin of philosophy as *episteme*, and of truth as the unity of *logos* and *phone*" (Derrida, 2005, 246, emphasis in original). This problematic place of writing in the Western notion is a necessity for the possibility of the reason. Besides, by formalizing and adding different formations to writing, it turns into unique powerful tool of producing and maintaining of the margins and borders in knowledge: "The greatest force is the force of a writing which, in the most audacious transgression, continues to maintain and to acknowledge the necessity of the system of prohibitions (knowledge, science, philosophy, work, history, etc.)" (Derrida, 2005, 442). The system of prohibitions denotes the disciplination of writing in accordance with different disciplines and sub-disciplines that works as "systems of exclusion". The disciplination of academy also brings in the disciplination of writing, hence genre-fication of writing.

The reason that we are doing this discussion is two folds. The first is to show that writing is not mere an issue of grammar, style and technic, but rather a more complex set of repeated rules, traditions, and genres that mark civilizations. The second is to define the limits of scholarly work, and decide who is going to be a scholar on what accounts. We see Miller's (1984) approach to genres as a turning point in the study of writing. Miller's approach to writing addresses the complicated and dynamic relationship between genre specific features of writing and social practice. She sees genres as social actions that address particular social and cultural exigencies that are "located in the social world" and "objectified social need" (Miller, 1984, 157). Traditional writing approaches, which Ivanič (2004) elaborates in detail, tend to see genre as unchanging and stable textual forms, and a formal body of texts that has occurred with repetition. However, Miller's notion of exigency denotes that genres are not unique and stable at all, but are dynamic forms that constantly change with time and place. "Exigence is a set of particular social patterns and

expectations that provides a socially objectified motive for addressing danger, ignorance, separateness” (Miller, 1984, 158). In a similar vein, Amy Devitt sees genre as the “dynamic patterning of human experience” (Devitt, 1993, 573) and “the semantic resources associated with situation types, the meaning potential in given social contexts” (Devitt, 2004, 17–18). The idea here is not to focus on the formal characteristics of genres and their effects, but rather focusing on their sources. Genres develop because of recurring certain needs.

In other words, genres are not some forms of pre-given, natural ways of writing, but rather they are patterns with a dynamic nature that have been formed and normalized to answer and fulfill certain recurring exigencies. To be clear, seeing genres as rhetorical tools means that they are not only formal entities but also they have certain social and material effects on whoever participates. They are means of becoming a part of culture; in the academy. They are tools to be a member of a certain research community. The key to seeing genres as social practices is to understand genres as repeated and regularized discursive practices that arise to address recurred exigencies and find its meaning and value within certain institutional contexts (Artemeva & Freedman, 2006; Bazerman, 1988, 1994, 2002; Bazerman et al., 2010; Devitt, 2004; Devitt et al., 2003; Giltrow, 1994; Miller, 1984; Paré, 2002, 2005, 2014; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). Hence, a theory and pedagogy of writing should take into consideration socio-cultural situatedness of writing and its relationship to meaning making and knowledge production, i.e., episteme. In addition, a proper academic citation should provide a way for authors to trace their influences, to situate themselves intellectually, to prove that they have done their background theoretical reading, to demonstrate engagement in an ongoing community of inquiry, and to provide sources for readers who want to consult earlier thinkers or data (Blum, 2009, 1).

The second reason of us doing this discussion is to locate the act of writing in the realm of episteme. Seeing writing as an epistemological act is to recognize it as a social action (Miller, 1984). In this regard, writing is not (or should not be) something that researchers do toward the end of the research. It is not simply a matter of “writing up” findings. It involves complex rhetorical moves, strategy (not tactic), and understanding researching as writing. Kamler and Thomson (2006, 4) see three fundamental problems with the notion of “writing up” and seeing writing as separate from the research:

- (I) “Writing up” obscures the fact that graduate writing is thinking and considering.
- (II) “Writing up” obscures the fact that producing a dissertation text is hard work.
- (III) “Writing up” obscures the fact that graduate writing is not transparent.

The idea of “writing up” simply ignores or misses that writing is a social practice, epistemic, and a way of building links among cultures, ideas, and knowledge, in this regard; writing is not a matter of skills but rather a “social practice”. Seeing writing as a social act is way of seeing writing as a dynamic process that includes and requires constant remaking, and thus realizing its epistemic nature. In other words, writing is not something that researchers do at the end of the fieldwork, but it is an “integral part” of the research process through which ideas and knowledge are developed and shaped. In fact, writing is a way to write; a technology to generate, explore, inquiry, question closely, work out, and structure ideas and knowledge. Therefore, it is not writing up of ideas and thoughts generated elsewhere but it is itself generating and shaping ideas and thoughts; i.e. it is epistemic; a point mostly ignored in the processes of writing. In contrast to epistemic writing, there is another type of academic writing that we call as “epidemic writing”.

2.2.2. Epidemic writing

The epidemic writing is like a rife that spreads without respect to any form body of writing. It repeats itself without producing something new and genuine. The repetition quite often occurs with one text copying another. It is a loop that undermines the quality of academic writing and its commitment to knowledge. The epidemic writing has distinctive features; (i) it is not original and (ii) it is plagiarized.

2.2.2.1. *Originality*. Originality is an important issue around the academic circles. According to written codes and non-written conventions, studies are expected to make an originality argument concerning their contribution. In these discussions, studies make their claims about what and how they contribute to the existing knowledge in their respective and particular fields. Moreover, graduate theses are supposed to have a specific section devoted to the original contribution of the study. Therefore, it is this section that studies argue their legitimacy and their necessity. Originality in its simplest terms is the expression of the legitimacy. Even the conduct of studies that are weak in their argumentation of originality is questionable. In this regard, it is outmost importance for studies to have a solid basis of originality, which would also increase the chance of avoiding to be repetitive (epidemic) study, and contributing meaningful knowledge. Despite being such a significant issue, it was hard to provide empirical data on the originality of studies. Yet, with the advent of technologies like plagiarism detections software (PDS), it is now possible to quantify the authenticity of any work. PDSs like *Turnitin*, *iThenticate*, *Viper*, *plagiarismChecker.com*, *Plagiarism Detect*, *Plagiarisma.net*, *CheckForPlagiarism.net*, *EVE2: Essay Verification Engine*, *Grammarly*, *Whitesmoke*, *Plagiu*, *Paperrater*, *CrossCheck*, the AMLC,¹ etc. are among the widely used software (Zhang, 2016: 8) used to check and enhance the quality of academic writing. For example, *Turnitin* serves more than one million instructors at ten thousand educational institutions worldwide (Brynko, 2012).

Conventional PDSs provide their users with a rate called similarity index. It is conceivable to use the similarity index as an “originality indicator” given in PDSs. Likewise, the originality of studies with high similarity indices leads to doubt. Although the threshold of similarity is ambiguous, there are some related reviews in the literature. For instance, this rate is 3% for Martin et al. (2011), 5% for Garden (2009) and 10% for Bretag and Mahmud (2009). In this study, the threshold is accepted as 15%. As needs be it should be considered that a study with a similarity index above the border rate might have originality problems. This rate can also be used as an indicator of plagiarism. Undoubtedly, a study with an index above the border rate does not mean it is plagiarized and a study with an index below the border rate does not mean it is not plagiarized. Limit rate is an indication that the dissertations ought to be examined in more details.

2.2.2.2. *Plagiarism*. Plagiarism, which basically means the use of ideas, thoughts and concept sets in another work without reference to the original work, is a common problem. It is a hot topic of discussion in higher education (Neville, 2010, 28). With the rise of the Internet, plagiarized works increase (Zhang, 2016, 8; Weber-Wulff, 2014, 58; Lampert, 2008, 5; Eisner & Vicinus, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Marsh, 2007, 123; Francis, 2005, 23; Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Kaplan, 2000). Plagiarism is a phenomenon, which impinges upon the processes of teaching, learning and assessment (Pecorari, 2013, 143). Researchers commonly define academic plagiarism as literary theft, i.e. stealing words or ideas from other authors (Gibb, 2014, 10). Avoiding plagiarism should first entail knowing how to use sources appropriately:

The view of plagiarism as a dishonest act masks the difficulty of avoiding plagiarism for academic writers. Theft can be avoided by abstaining from a proscribed act: if you want to avoid stealing someone’s property, just leave it where it is. However, since virtually all academic genres, from term paper to thesis to research article, refer to other sources, writers who are concerned about plagiarism cannot simply avoid using other people’s texts. (Pecorari, 2008, 37)

Plagiarism can be in conceptual dimension, in sentence dimension or even in paragraph dimension. The true plagiarist writes to conceal the sources (Angélil-Carter, 2000, 22). Ison (2012) examines plagiarism in three dimensions: low, medium and high. Low-level plagiarism can be conceptual or quantitatively low levels of plagiarism. Medium level plagiarism involves extreme sentence-level plagiarism. High-level plagiarism covers paragraphs in size. There are many

particular studies held by researchers demonstrating how plagiarism is a serious debate and has been in the center of interest in academic communities:

A 1997 psychological record study found that 36% of undergraduates surveyed had plagiarized at one point or another in their college careers (Marsh, 2007, 124).

Of more than 70,000 undergraduates and 10,000 graduate students surveyed across 83 college campuses in the United States and Canada, 62% of undergraduate and 59% of graduate-student respondents admitted to have engaged in cut-and-paste plagiarism from online sources (McCabe, 2005).

More than 75% of students in American colleges admit to having cheated; 68% admit to cutting and pasting material from the Internet without citation (Blum, 2009, 1).

A study done on college research papers turned in from 2004 to 2008 demonstrates how plagiarism continues to be a problem. It found that more than 25% of assignments had some sort of plagiarism and that 10% had a lot of material plagiarized (Walker, 2010).

This study has mainly investigated the high level of plagiarism as it aims to reveal the dimensions of the writing problems in the universities and graduate education. Findings therefore relate to plagiarism in extreme levels.

In this work, the researchers make some suggestions for the solution of the existing (retrospective) problems in relation to the findings of originality and plagiarism. A detailed presentation of the analyses it could be an issue of a separate publication. The search that stands out here is focused on the possible solutions.

3. Method

This review, which is a descriptive study, includes analysis of 600 randomly selected master's and doctoral dissertations with universal rules and equations applied by the supervision of *Turnitin's* plagiarism algorithm. The analysis has been done with respect to of similarity and plagiarism parameters.

3.1. Data

In the scope of the study, 600 theses have been examined in detail. The theses, including 470 masters and 130 doctorates (retrospectively), were randomly selected from the studies conducted between 2007–2015 in educational sciences as ruled by The Council of Higher Education Thesis Center.²

The majority of the theses to be worked on are already produced in schools that have already received “membership” in *Turnitin* and are using the program for “plagiarism purposes”. In this respect, the aim of the research and the aim of universities by using *Turnitin* are the same for inspection. Many of the theses examined have already been pre-loaded to and questioned (retrospectively) in *Turnitin*. In this respect, the archive repository of the *Turnitin* program is not deleted and provides a very broad database and universal platform for researchers and further research. In the study; only the coefficient equations and indexing parameters of the *Turnitin* program were observed and no other indexing factors were considered.

3.2. Procedure and analysis

After the selection of sample, pages that reveal the identity of author and the name of the university were removed and the remaining texts were coded randomly. Codes, yl1, yl2, yl3, ... yl470 were assigned to MA theses, whereas codes, dr1, dr2, dr3, ... dr130 were assigned to doctoral theses. Coded samples then were uploaded into *Turnitin* where they have already mostly been in for a long time.

The investigation of theses conducted thoroughly. Two different automated filters were applied during the process. The first one was used to exclude the matches up to the five

words. The second filter excluded the bibliography sections of the uploaded material and direct quotes within the materials. Beyond automated filters, manual filters also used to eliminate the matches occurring with the texts that had been published after the uploaded sample. The data, the code of the sample, its similarity indexes, and its plagiarism case, were coded into SPSS for the further analysis. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to conduct the analysis. Analyzed material erased from the *Turnitin*.

4. Research findings

This section focuses on the findings related to the main problematic of the study; similarity and plagiarism.

4.1. Similarity findings

- (I) This study investigated thoroughly 600 theses. Accordingly, the average similarity index of theses is 28.7% (SD = 11.58). This rate is almost twice of the threshold of the study, 15%. Similarly, the average of theses is significantly different from the threshold ($p < .001$). This means that the originality and the contribution of the sample are questionable. The investigated studies are either very similar to each other or rehashing each other. The repeat, not replica, seems to be theoretical as well as methodological.
- (II) The similarity indices of MA and doctoral theses are found as 29.44%, (SD = 11.48) and 25.46%, (SD = 11.43) respectively. Both rates are significantly different from the threshold value ($p < .001$ for MA theses and $p < .001$ for doctoral theses). The difference between doctoral and master's theses is also significant ($p = .001$). Accordingly, both genres bear serious problems with regard to originality and contribution. In other words, theses are not original and making much contribution to their respective fields. On the other hand, the results also indicate that doctoral theses are slightly better than MA theses in terms of originality and contribution.
- (III) This study also examined theses with respect to their language. For this purpose, 55 MA theses and 34 doctoral dissertations written in English uploaded to Turnitin. Accordingly, the similarity rate of Turkish theses and dissertations is 29.31 (SD = 11.54). This rate is significantly higher than the threshold of the study ($p < .001$). On the other hand, the similarity indices of MA and doctoral theses written in English are 24.37% (SD = 10.97). This rate is also significantly higher than the threshold rate. These findings indicate that Turkish students cannot produce original studies and make significant contributions to existing knowledge of their respective fields. The findings also indicate that the language they use to write is not a factor. Whether they write in Turkish or in English, they fail to contribute significantly. However, interestingly there is a significant difference between theses written in English and those written in Turkish in favor of the former group. Theses written in English are significantly better than their Turkish counterparts with respect to originality. In other words, Turkish students are producing more works that are original when they write in English, not in their mother tongue. Our explanation for this situation is that theses written in English are better because of their institutions. Most of the English written theses are products of universities that are widely considered as the best universities of Turkey. It is also important to note that the medium of instruction in these universities is English.

4.2. Plagiarism findings

- (I) The number of theses that are highly plagiarized is 207, which makes 34.5% up of the 600 examined theses. The reader should notice that this finding includes only theses that involve a high level of plagiarism. One might expect the number of plagiarized works to be much higher, if low and mid-level plagiarism were included.

- (II) The number of plagiarized texts for the MA and doctoral theses are 173 (36.8%) and 34 (26.15%) respectively. Similarity rate for plagiarized theses is found as 38.32%, which is significantly higher than the threshold of 15% ($p < .001$).
- (III) The number of highly plagiarized theses written in Turkish is 182 (35.62%), whereas the number for English theses is 25 (28.10%). Leaving for no space for the mistake, there is no threshold for plagiarism. It ought to be zero. These numbers are appallingly high, which requires immediate action. In what follows we offer two explanations for the situation and possible ways of action for the solution and improvement of the graduate academic writing in Turkey.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show us that the Turkish academic writing at the graduate level is alarming and worrisome in relation to quality and ethics of academic writing. To be fair and straightforward, these findings indicate that the Turkish academic writing at the graduate level is like an epidemic and contagious disease. Notion epidemic here denotes that the Turkish academic writing is developing rapidly, while disease denotes that this development is occurring by mostly copy-pasting the existing knowledge. In fact, this is not only the problem of the graduate education. The Turkish education system as a whole is now suffering the practice of copy-paste (Toprak, 2015).

Concerning our findings, we offer two explanations; an ethical clarification and a pedagogical clarification. Plagiarism findings of the study are about the high level of plagiarism. This demonstrates that some of the researchers plagiarized knowingly and willingly, which raises ethical questions about the process. It reveals that the Turkish graduate academic writing has an epidemic feature by which we mean the research in the academy is like a kind of pan(aca)demic disease that repeats and multiplies itself through recurring practices along the body of different institutions. In order to avoid ethical violations, we offer ethics centers that unequivocally concern with the writing process of the research. These centers could be established as a separate entity or as a part of the existing ethics committees that monitor the ethical application of the research process. The findings of the study reveal the immediate need of an ethical code that concerns itself with the writing. However, an ethical code and a center that will monitor the process alone cannot be an answer to the problem. We also realize that there is a pedagogical side of the issue.

The results of both originality and plagiarism shows us that, in its simplest terms, students do not know how to write and their advisors do not know to help them to improve their writing skills. Henceforth the pedagogy of writing should be addressed. It is a common practice in the academy to have a thesis manual. We have examined several of them and noticed that they have distinctive features and they are not actually about the writing. It seems that each university has its own sets of rules that define the layout and style of the thesis. We think that a commonly accepted manual has the potential to bring a standard and prevent confusion among the students. Moreover, interestingly there is not any manual prepared for advisors. We believe that such a manual could offer much help to advisors and students by extension. Truth be told, there is no single published material in Turkish regarding advising side of the thesis writing.

The second and major way of addressing the pedagogy of writing should start with the reconsideration, reevaluation and redefinition of the relationship between the academy and writing. In the current practices, writing is seen and regarded as a practice that takes place at the end of the research. It is simply seen as a matter of “writing up” findings. Rather we offer an “epistemic” understanding of writing, which involves complex rhetorical moves, strategies, and an understanding of research as writing. The idea of writing up simply ignores or misses that writing is a social practice, epistemic, and a way of building links among cultures, ideas, and knowledge. In this regard, writing is not a matter of skills but rather a social practice: Seeing writing as a social

act is way of seeing writing as a dynamic process that includes and requires constant remaking, and thus realizing its epistemic nature.

In other words, writing is an integral part of the research process through which ideas and knowledge are developed and shaped. In fact, writing is an approach to write; a technology to generate, explore, inquiry, request, question closely, work out, and structure ideas and knowledge. Therefore, it is not writing up of ideas and thoughts generated elsewhere but it is itself generating and shaping ideas and thoughts; i.e. it is epistemic; a point mostly ignored in the procedures of writing.

We precisely offer academic writing centers that are built up on the “epistemic” nature of writing. Such centers with an anti-plagiarism policy (Zhang et al., 2015) would not just train students about the “technic” of writing, yet additionally its organic and epistemic feature. An academic integrity policy, not letting students make plagiarizing into a game where whoever cheats the most is the winner, is only possible with the contributions from administrators, board members, faculty, students, and even parents (Lathrop & Foss, 2005, 249). A general strategy ought to be received by the Board of Education, publicized all through the locale, and actualized decently and reliably by all institutions.

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Notes

1. *Academic Misconduct Literature Check*, a software developed by China Academic Journals Electronic Publishing House and Tongfang Knowledge Network Technology Co. Ltd.
2. “The Council of Higher Education Thesis Center”. <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi>.

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