

The Opinions of Students about Choosing Thesis Subjects in Turkish Education and Turkish as a Foreign Language Department

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to determine the challenges faced by master-level graduate students, studying Turkish Education and Turkish as a Foreign Language. The study is a qualitative research, and the research group of the study, where criterion sampling from purposive sampling methods is applied, is composed of 15 postgraduate students from Istanbul University, Institute of Educational Science, Department of Turkish Education master's program and Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Turkish as a Foreign Language master's program. A semi-structured interview is applied while collecting data, and content analysis is performed in the data analysis step. Findings and results are categorized for each of the interview questions. This paper is expected to be a guide to students who are recently doing so or who will be in writing a thesis in related departments.

INTRODUCTION

In the advanced education system, higher education institutions are expected to contribute to the progress of science, technology, and society by training qualified individuals. In this regard, it is obvious that modern individuals and societies use science and research in the process of knowledge acquisition, problem solving, and progress (Buyukozturk 1994: 387). Higher education institutions establish several education levels to meet the expectations. Postgraduate education is designed to provide opportunities to those with a bachelor's degree to enter a scientific field or complete a master's degree in an area of their interest (Turkiye Bilimler Akademisi 2011: 792). The students at the postgraduate stage can major in their area by producing knowledge and improving it or having information in a different area and achieving knowledge and experience in areas of interest (Cebi Kozallik and Karakaya 2015: 185). In this sense, it is important that the thesis should be about a subject in which the student is

interested, willing to produce knowledge, and improve. This is because the expectations from the postgraduate thesis are to produce knowledge and technology that will help the country develop in order to operationalize the knowledge and technology and to help solve problems (Karakutuk 1989: 525).

Postgraduate education studies are conducted based on the Postgraduate Education Regulation, which is within the scope of the law numbered 2547 (URL). According to regulation, the aim of a master's program with a thesis is "to make the student gain the abilities of accessing information by doing scientific research and evaluating and interpreting the knowledge" (Paper 9/a). In accordance with this purpose, the master's programs with a thesis element are comprised of two periods, namely, the course and thesis periods. Both of the periods are challenging in their entirety. The thesis period is more demanding for students. The process of writing a thesis is rather difficult and choosing the thesis subject is the first stage of this period. The study by Aslan (2010) about academic self-efficacy of postgraduate students reveals that the students feel inadequate about choosing a thesis subject. According to the paper, "Problems of Students in Postgraduate Education" written by Arabaci and Akilli (2013), another difficulty that the students face is the potential for the advisors to dislike the students' thesis topics.

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Tuncer (2013), in his study about the problems of postgraduate students who complete master's degrees in primary-school education, states the problems faced by the students while writing their thesis, which include, self-efficacy concerns, finding a topic that has not been studied before, narrowing the topic, having an advisor whose profession and fields of interest do not match, finding literature, realizing that the chosen topic has been used before, and having advisors that do not guide. Similar statements were made by Akbulut et al. (2013) in their paper about determining the problems in the thesis period. As stated by the studies, choosing a thesis subject is a stage where the students have difficulty. In this regard, "What are the problems students face while choosing a thesis topic?" becomes the research question of this paper.

According to Sevinc (2001: 133), most of the theses prepared in postgraduate institutes in Turkey have the characteristics of ordinary homework. Having no information about the other thesis subjects sometimes results in theses with the same subject in the same area. Because of this, this paper expects to determine the problems faced by students while choosing a thesis subject and to guide students who are or who will be in the period of writing a thesis. The aim of this paper is to determine the problems that the postgraduate students who study for a master's degree in Turkish Education and Turkish as a Foreign Language departments have while choosing their thesis subjects.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design/Model

Because of properties such as, "Empathic neutrality and mindfulness, personal experience and engagement, holistic perspective, emergent design flexibility, inductive analysis, voice, perspective and reflexivity" (Yildirim and Simsek 2008: 41), a qualitative research is used in the study.

Working Group

The research group of the study comprises of 15 postgraduate students from Istanbul University the Institute of Educational Science the Department of Turkish Education master's program and the Institute of Social Sciences Department of Turkish as a Foreign Language master's program. While determining the research

group of the study, criterion sampling from purposive sampling methods within qualitative research methods is used. This is informed by Yildirim and Simsek's claim, "The main understanding that lies behind this sampling method is studying all the situations that meet a series of already determined criterions" (2008: 112). Accordingly, the research group is generated by considering some criterions such as "living in Istanbul, being a former or current postgraduate student in one of the universities mentioned above, having chosen the thesis subject, being in the thesis subject choosing period, having his/her thesis finished, and being self-motivated to research." The paper is narrowed down according to these criteria. The information about the interviewees such as gender, undergraduate department, master's department, education period and occupation status are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: The information about the interviewees

Variables		f
Gender	Woman	14
	Man	1
Undergraduate Department	Turkish teaching	9
	English teaching	2
	Translation and interpreting	2
	Linguistics	1
	Turkish language and literature	1
Master Department	Turkish education	5
	Turkish as a foreign language	10
Education Period	4	5
	6	5
	8	1
	12	1
Occupation status	Graduate	3
	Employed	13
	Unemployed	2

According to the variables, most of the interviewees are women, and the Turkish Teaching Department is an important undergraduate department. The students who graduated from other departments do a master's degree in Turkish as a Foreign Language department. Most of the interviewees have done their master's degree later in life and most of them are employed.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

In the data collection phase, semi-structured interviews are used as a qualitative research method, since this technique "combines fixed

alternative questions and in-depth interviews about the related area" (Buyukozturk et al. 2013: 152). After reviewing the literature on this topic, ten open-ended questions, which are prepared specifically for this interview type, were presented to one qualitative research expert, five domain experts, and one assessment and evaluation expert in order to ensure the internal validity of the study. The questions are modified according to this expert feedback about the questions in terms of clarity, expediency, and suitability of method, scope, and technique. As a result of rearrangement, the number of questions was reduced from ten to seven, some changes were made in the content of some questions, and at the end an interview form is filled out. Aslan claims, "While preparing the interview form, to establish more effective and efficient communications with the interviewees, the questions are carefully created not to be multidimensional to provide the interviewees with ease of understanding, to allow in-depth explanations and answers and to avoid an unnecessary burden to interviewees. Besides, some clues and multiple-choice questions are prepared in case the interviewee does not understand the question" (Aslan 2010: 6). The interview forms were resubmitted to the experts, adapted according to this second round of feedback, and updated for the last time. The personal information form is created to gather information about the gender, age, occupation status/job, education, undergraduate department, and master's department of the interviewees. Before the interview, necessary information was given to the participants, and participants were reminded that the personal information is to be used only for scientific purposes. The interviews are recorded with the permission of participants using tape recorders in Istanbul University, Hasan Ali Yucel Faculty of Education. The interviews lasted for 10 to 20 minutes.

The questions below were used in the interview:

1. How can the courses taken before writing a thesis be beneficial while choosing thesis subjects? Name specific benefits.
2. Before choosing your thesis subject, did you have the feeling of adequacy in writing your thesis? Why?
3. What tools did you use while choosing your thesis subject? Describe your process of choosing a thesis topic?
4. What is the effect of current research and studies in your area have on you choosing your thesis subject?
5. What the role did your thesis advisor play in your choosing a thesis subject?
6. At what point/points did you experience difficulties in choosing a thesis subject?
7. Are you satisfied with the thesis topic that you are currently working on? Why?

Data Analysis

In the data analysis process, a content analysis is performed for the gathered data. While analyzing the data, the questions are examined separately, the answers given to all the questions were categorized and coded according to the similarities between them, frequencies and percentages are calculated and recorded, quotations are made from the interviews with the participants, and all this information is tabulated. In this process, the external validity of the study is ensured. To procure the reliability of the study, different researchers analyze the data at different times.

FINDINGS

Below, the findings acquired from the answers given to the seven questions above are presented with example sentences and frequencies calculated by tabulating all the information. While presenting the opinions, coding is done using the interview orders and digits (See Table 2).

Aspects of a graduate degree that influence the choice of a thesis topic include, homework and presentation done for courses, ideas about current studies, the courses about their areas of interest, the discussions, and academic knowledge generated through discussion. The students without a background in education state that the courses make it easier to study educational sciences. Two students think that non-seminar courses have no influence on choosing a thesis subject.

According to Table 3, most of the students feel inadequate because of the insufficiencies of scientific research. This might not be a generalization. It can be stated that students want to do research with different methods and techniques, but they have difficulty articulating their subjects because of feelings of inadequacy concerning scientific research. The other reasons for the students to feel inadequate are low levels of academic knowledge, lack of self-confidence, being unable determine an areas of interest, being

Table 2: The benefits of the courses which are taken before writing thesis while choosing thesis subject

<i>Answers</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Examples</i>
The presentations and coursework have an influence.	3	"I think the homework that we do for the courses are like little theses" (S14)
The ideas given about the current studies have an influence.	3	"I think some courses are opened just to meet the credit limit and they are only waste of time.
Only the courses about the areas of interest have an influence.	2	I would like to have more courses where applications are performed" (S6)
Since the academic knowledge increases with the courses taken, the courses have an influence.	2	
The courses apart from the seminar lectures have no influence.	2	
The courses are helpful for studying in educational sciences for the students apart from Faculty of Education graduates.	2	
The academic subjects discussed in the courses have an influence.	1	

unable to use Turkish effectively, and insufficient sources. The answers given about being unable to use Turkish effectively and insufficient sources belong to the foreign students who do a master's in Turkish as a Foreign Language. Two students feel adequate to start writing a thesis since they have decided the area that they want to work in and they trust their knowledge in the area of study.

In the context of academic writing, researchers want their target audience to understand and accept their findings and arguments. Therefore, it is also critical that when writing for academic purposes, certain conventions and techniques are used. It is of utmost importance that what is written reaches the targeted readers and fellow researchers in order to construct the intended meaning when reading research papers or theses. In other words, academics attempting to write theses must know "how to write well in order to deliver the research findings effectively," and in

order to achieve this, one must know the conventions of academic writing. This is especially important if one is a novice or a new member of academic discourse as in the case of students attending the Research Methodology course (Stapa et al. 2014: 498) (See Table 4).

By examining the answers given to the question that focuses on the influence of current studies on choosing thesis subject, it can be concluded that the current studies generally influence the process of choosing a thesis subject. The students approach the influence of current studies in two ways. The first standpoint suggests that it is easier to do research on a subject about which a similar study has been conducted. According to the second standpoint, a new idea can be generated instead of using previously studied subjects by examining the current studies. Two students state that the current studies have no influence on choosing a thesis subject.

Table 3: Students' feeling of adequateness to write thesis before choosing a thesis subject

<i>Answers</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Feeling inadequate because of the insufficiencies of scientific research.	8	"No, I did not feel. There are some formal rules that we should follow, I can apply them. Apart from this, I have more difficulty in researching, I need to do a lot of literature review and I have difficulty in gathering the data all together." (S7)
Feeling inadequate because of low level of academic knowledge.	2	
Feeling inadequate because of lack of self-confidence.	2	
Feeling inadequate because of being unable to determine the areas of interest.	2	
Feeling adequate on account of trusting the wealth of knowledge about the area of study.	2	"No, I did not feel. I had no idea about the method and the path
Feeling inadequate because of being unable to use Turkish effectively.	1	
Feeling inadequate because of insufficiencies of source selection.	1	I should follow" (S3)

Table 4: The influence of current studies on choosing thesis subject

Answers	f	Examples
Since doing a study is easier when there is a similar	7	"There was a study on a similar topic. I taught I could make a similar research."(S4)
On producing a totally new idea rather studying with an idea that is already used.	6	"It influenced neither positively nor negatively."(S5)
Have no influence.	2	

Research supervision has become a vital part of the process of successful postgraduate studies. In this process, the thesis advisor is the most important person for a student choosing a thesis subject (Abdullah et al. 2012: 788). According to student answers, the influence and role of thesis advisor on choosing a thesis subject is manifested by choosing a subject held in common with the thesis advisor. This may be seen as a constructive beginning of the period of thesis writing. Apart from this, four students accepted a thesis subject suggested by the thesis advisor, three students chose a thesis subject independent from his/her advisor, one student chose a subject within the profession field of the advisor, and one student thought thesis advisors had no influence in choosing a thesis subject. These answers may have negative sides as well as positive sides. The students may be forced to study an area in which they are not interested. This situation may result in a rough thesis period. Therefore, it is important for the advisors and students to communicate extensively during the thesis-writing period. In this communication process, the interaction between supervisor and student should be one-on-one and mostly face-to-face (Kleijn et al. 2013: 1012) (See Table 5).

While choosing thesis subjects, the students followed procedures and used tools such as sample theses, academic articles, websites, textbooks aimed at teaching Turkish to foreigners, receiving the opinions of academic members, advisors,

and experts, notes taken during courses, homeworks, and presentations, and papers and Turkish textbooks (See Table 6).

Concerning the question about the difficulties that are faced or that may be faced by students while choosing thesis subjects, student difficulties include being unable to determine the area of interest, having no application area of a topic, narrowing the topic, deficiencies on using the scientific method, finding a subject not previously studied, following official correspondence (the documents that the student should follow during the whole period), indecision brought by having an insufficient wealth of knowledge, special reasons, and differences between the fields of interest of the student and the advisor. In addition to these difficulties, the students in Turkish as a Foreign Language added the hardship of finding the resources in their own language (See Table 7).

It is good news that the students, both the ones who have already finished their theses and the ones who still continue writing, gave positive answers to the question about the student satisfaction about their thesis subjects. The students' reasons for satisfaction are adding something new to the field, studying a subject that has not previously been studied, choosing a thesis subject that is related to the students' field of interest, contributing to their profession, and matching the students' field of interest with the advisor's field of interest. One student is not

Table 5: The influence and role of thesis advisor on choosing thesis subject

Answers	f	Examples
Choosing it together.	6	"My advisor gave me the thesis subject" (S1)"
Accepting it that the advisor suggests.	4	My advisor took a very active role. He wants us to study in his profession since he can guide better in his profession field. He was very determinative in choosing thesis subject"(S2)
Choosing it independent from advisor.	3	
Choosing it that matches with the profession of the advisor. Thesis advisor has no influence.	11	

Table 6: The procedure followed and the tools used while choosing thesis subject

Answers	f	Examples
Sample theses	8	"Primarily, I leafed through the homework given during course period and the academic books that I used before." (S14)
Academic books	6	"I used internet mostly."
Websites	6	I checked the these written until now. Notes
Textbooks aimed at teaching Turkish to foreigners	3	Frankly speaking. I could not use
Receiving the opinions of academic members, advisors taken during courses, homeworks and presentations	3	books a lot." (S8)
Papers	3	
Turkish Textbooks	2	

pleased with his/her thesis subject because of choosing the subject according to the advisor's field of interest, and another student became less interested in his/her subject because of not having completed the thesis after a long period of time (See Table 8).

DISCUSSION

The majority of interviewees feel inadequate when choosing a thesis subject for themselves because of the insufficiencies of scientific re-

search, low level of academic knowledge, and insufficiencies of source selection. In Aslan's (2010: 21) study, graduate students who participated in interviews feel similarly inadequate when choosing a thesis subject and writing the thesis. In the same article, the majority of interviewees studying Turkish education at Ankara University say that they feel inadequate in research methods (2010: 22). Similarly Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986: 89) state that the Honors or Master's students at Griffith University must complete their

Table 7: The difficulties that may be faced while choosing thesis subject

Answers	f	Examples
Being unable to determine the area of interest	5	"I had trouble while choosing my thesis subject. What is the benefit of choosing this subject? Who would take advantage of this? It is hard to determine the aim." (S8)
Lack of resources in the area of Turkish as a Foreign Language	4	"No one Finding a subject not studied researched on my subject before. Books and resources contained nothing about my subject. The most current I could find was from 70's." (S10)
Having no application area of a topic, difficulties in narrowing the topic	3	
Deficiencies on scientific method	2	
Finding a subject not studied before	2	
Following official correspondences	2	
Indecision brought by having insufficient wealth of knowledge	1	

Table 8: Being pleased with thesis subject

Answers	f	Examples
I am going to add something new to the field; I am pleased with my thesis subject since it was not studied before by anyone else.	6	"Yes, I produced something for myself. This is amazing. My thesis became a study that I can use for my profession in terms of usability." (S12)"
I am pleased with my thesis subject since it is related to my field of interest.	5	I am displeased because I think I would be more productive if I had studied on another subject. I would have taken more pleasure in writing my thesis on another topic. (S2)
I am pleased with my thesis subject since it contributes to my profession.	4	
I am pleased with my thesis subject since my field of interest matches with my advisor's field of interest.	1	
I become less interested in my subject because of not having the completed the thesis after a long period of time.	1	
I am not pleased with my thesis subject because of choosing my subject according to my advisor's field of interest.	1	

thesis in a very restricted period of time, but they do not complete their research on time because they have had no experience of independent research or any formal instruction on techniques or research methods.

Academics attempting to write this must know “how to write well in order to deliver the research findings effectively,” and in order to achieve this, one must know the conventions of academic writing. This is especially true if one is a novice or a new member of the academic discourse as in the case of the students attending the Research Methodology course (Stapa et al. 2014: 498). Related to this, in this paper, one of the most important problems highlighted by the participants is the absence of a scientific research methods course. The students think that it is hard to close the gap during the thesis period, and this situation results in failure and a lack of self-confidence.

In this paper, it is apparent that the academic advisor has important influence on choosing a thesis subject, and students need the advisor’s guidance. According to Hardy and Ramjeet (2005: 30), students who find themselves in the position of preparing a thesis, need to consult with an advisor in order to determine a research approach and the most appropriate thesis format. Likewise, Altintas and Gorgen’s (2015: 54) findings show that students have difficulty in deciding on a thesis topic and hence they generally consult with their advisors. In terms of the rules of thesis writing, students can be accepted despite a lack of knowledge. From a student point of view, scholars responsible for administrative works might not take responsibility for thesis counseling. Kleijn et al.’s (2013: 1024) research also stresses that it is important for students to receive positive and goal-related feedback from their supervisor. Mhunpiew (2013: 122) contributes, “the goal of being a good supervisor is aimed to help a student as an advisee to complete the thesis and dissertation.” Thus, this situation increases the students’ motivation, and “motivation plays an important role in explaining students’ academic achievement” (Kadioglu and Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci 2015: 1).

CONCLUSION

The coursework, presentations done for courses, and course discussions are effective means of choosing a thesis subject. The majori-

ty of interviewees feel inadequate to choose a thesis subject because of insufficiencies with scientific research, low-level of academic knowledge, lack of self-confidence, being unable to determine the areas of interest, being unable to use Turkish effectively, and insufficiencies of source selection. The tools that help the students with the highest percentage (53%) are the sample theses written by previous students.

The percentages of students who want to choose a thesis subject that was not studied before (40%) and those who prefer studying a subject for which a similar study was done before (47%) are pretty close to each other. The main concern of the students who want to study a subject where similar studies are available is the feeling of academic inadequacy. Most of the students choose their thesis subject with their advisors (40%), whereas, twenty-seven percent of the students directly accepted the subject given by their advisors.

The main problem of the foreign students who study in the Department of Turkish as a Foreign Language is the insufficient source selection. Similarly, foreign students select their sources mostly from the publications of their own countries. Also, the foreign students’ concern about using Turkish effectively is one of the influences on choosing a thesis subject. Most of the students (87%) are pleased with their thesis subjects, and all of the students who study a subject about which no similar studies exist (100%) are pleased with their subjects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations may be made as a result of this study. The inadequacies of scientific research methods, which is frequently emphasized by the students, can be resolved by offering the course both semesters. It may be better to choose the thesis subject not within the advisor’s field of interest but within the student’s. For the students who have difficulty with academic writing, it is a good practice to obtain some example theses related to the same program from the university or academic institution’s library of past students’ work. The students who study a new and original subject are a hundred percent pleased with their thesis subjects. For this reason, the students may be directed towards fields where they can be more creative, productive, and innovative.

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