

WCLTA 2010

# Examining social studies performance assignments of 5<sup>th</sup> grade primary school students

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## Abstract

Performance assignments require students to show their development of high-level skills associated with their daily lives. The purpose of this study is to examine the Social Studies performance assignments of 5<sup>th</sup> grade primary school students in terms of format, content, language, and expression. In light of the results of the study, it can be stated that from within the group of natural disasters, students preferred to study “earthquakes”. They paid attention to format, page layout, and placing visual elements on their performance assignments. However, it was determined that all students made grammatical, and punctuation mistakes in their assignments.

*Keywords: Primary education; Social Studies course; performance assignment*

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## 1. Introduction

The constructivist view of learning underlies the fact that learning takes place as students relate past experiences to new situations. Constructivists claim that students learn by adapting to the world in which they live (Farris, 2004). Constructivist learning supports performance assessment which presents data gathered from tasks that require complex, higher-level thinking, often through inquiry and problem solving (Zarrillo, 2004). The primary education curriculum in Turkey was redesigned in 2004. This curriculum was prepared by taking into consideration the constructivist approach. Especially, social constructivism which emphasizes thematic learning, problem solving, and cooperative learning provide a basis for the new curriculum (Ozturk, 2009). 2004 curriculum includes a different perspective to the evaluation process. Therefore, teachers need to apply assessment activities appropriate to the constructivist view.

Evaluation is a crucial and complicated part of Social Studies. In this regard, assessment tools are expected to help teachers examine their own effectiveness as well as the learning of their students. Teachers assess this learning through students’ behaviors and products (Turner, 1999). Performance assessment fosters students’ ability to read and to write standard language through different methods of study, such as portfolios, writing essays, and written assessment tasks (Chapin, 2006). Assessment processes including active participation of the learner help meet the students’ needs to reach the goals of the Social Studies program. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for students to acquire an understanding of the social world in which they live and act (Sunal and Haas, 2002). Such assignments as reading stories, writing reviews, and making maps provide a significant means for assessing each student’s

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progress. Without a doubt they are more meaningful for everyone concerned than scores on standardized normative tests (Kaltsounis, 1987). As a component of assessment, performance assignments, which can serve to establish the relationship between theoretical knowledge and daily life in the Social Studies course, are one of the most important tools in helping students acquire basic knowledge, skills and values about social life. Additionally, in the Regulations of Primary Education Institutions, it is stated that students are expected to prepare at least one performance assignment in the form of individual or group work in their courses for each semester. Therefore, it can be said that the examination of students' performance assignments is much more important in the Social Studies course in order to benefit from performance assignments. The purpose of the study is to examine the Social Studies performance assignments of 5<sup>th</sup> grade primary school students in terms of format, content, language, and expression. The following questions were addressed in light of the main purpose of the research:

- What kind of format characteristics were determined in students' performance assignments?
- What kind of content characteristics were determined in students' performance assignments?
- What kind of language and expression characteristics were determined in students' performance assignments?

## 2. Method

The study was carried out in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of a primary school in Eskisehir, in the academic year 2008-2009. The Social Studies performance assignments of 22 students were examined in the scope of the study. Document analysis as a qualitative research method was used in the study. The criterion sampling method was used to determine which classroom teacher would like to participate in the research (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005). The teacher had an understanding of the assessment process of the constructivist approach, and practiced performance assignments effectively, including giving students guidance and efficient feedback. This was accepted as the main criteria for the selection of the teacher. The teacher was interviewed prior to the study in terms of the process she applied for performance assignments in the Social Studies course. A Performance Assignment Evaluation Form (PAEF) was developed by the researcher with reference to the related literature and the classroom teacher's "Social Studies Course Performance Assignments Check List" which she used for the purpose of evaluating the performance assignments of students. The performance assignments of 22 students were analyzed descriptively based on the PAEF. For reliability of the study, an independent expert examined the assignments in terms of items determined in the PAEF. Following this, the researcher and the expert both compared the findings that they determined in the assignments, and they agreed with each other's view. Students were given code names and direct citations from their assignments are presented in the findings section.

## 3. Findings

The findings of the study are presented in three sections. These three sections were explained under the titles of "findings regarding the format of the Social Studies performance assignments", "findings regarding the content of the Social Studies performance assignments", and "findings regarding the language and expression characteristics of the Social Studies performance assignments".

### 3.1. Findings regarding format of Social Studies performance assignments

Items such as the cover page, contents page, readability, page layout, and use of visual elements were considered regarding the format of Social Studies performance assignments in the "Performance Assignment Evaluation Form". It was seen that all of the students (100%) prepared a cover page for their assignments. The name of the natural disaster, name of the course, students' name and surname, class number, and student number were given on the cover pages of the assignments. Students wrote with different colors on the cover page in order to support visibility. Some students used pictures and slogans on the cover page relating to the subject. For example, a student named Baran wrote the slogan "If we do not want to be effected by floods, we need to plant trees" on the cover page of his assignment. Moreover, he pasted a photograph showing a house destroyed in a flood. Figure 1 shows this student's cover page.

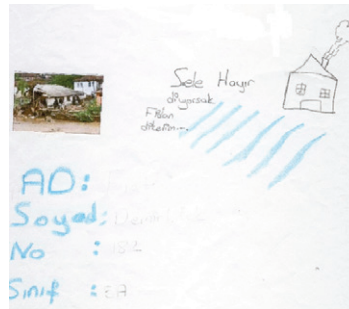


Figure 1. Cover page of the assignment

Upon investigation of the assignments, it was discovered that only one student ( $n=1$ , 5%) had prepared the contents page in her performance assignment. The student, named Beril, wrote titles and page numbers in the contents page. It can be claimed that the teacher may not have given sufficient explanation about preparing the contents page to the students. In the scope of the readability item, it was seen that majority of students ( $n=21$ , 95%) wrote their assignments by hand. Only one student wrote his assignment on the computer and printed it. In fact, the teacher explained that she had instructed the students to write their assignments by hand. It can be said that the readability of the assignments was fulfilled by the majority of the students. On the other hand, students did not take care about the margins with regard to the page layouts. They placed visual elements in the written text carefully.

It was determined that the students had tried to enrich their assignments with visual elements related to the topic. 18 photos, 2 maps, 1 graphic, 1 schema, 1 cartoon, and 1 newspaper clipping were found in the students' assignments. In the light of this finding, it can be concluded that the most widely used visual element was photography. 14 of these 18 photographs were related to earthquakes, 3 of them were about avalanches, and lastly one of them was related to a flood. In figure 2, the photographs placed on the performance assignment by Banu are shown. Both of the 2 maps used show the earthquake regions of Turkey in the students' performance assignments. A student named Caner examined "avalanches" in his assignment, and he drew a graphic titled "Avalanches by Year". Additionally, he cut a cartoon from a magazine and pasted it into his assignment. Figure 3 shows the graphic drawn by this student. A student named Burcu pasted a scheme showing the formation of an earthquake on her assignment. Another student, named Altan, examined "erosion", and he placed a newspaper clipping onto his assignment about an interview with an advisor from TEMA (The Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation and the Protection of Natural Habitats).

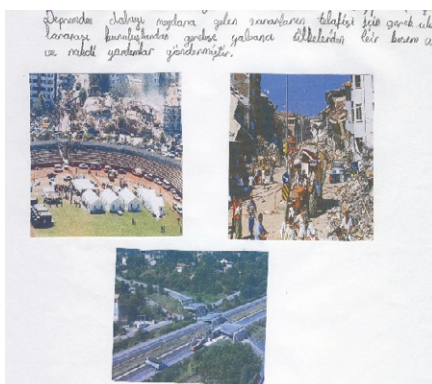


Figure 2. Earthquake photographs

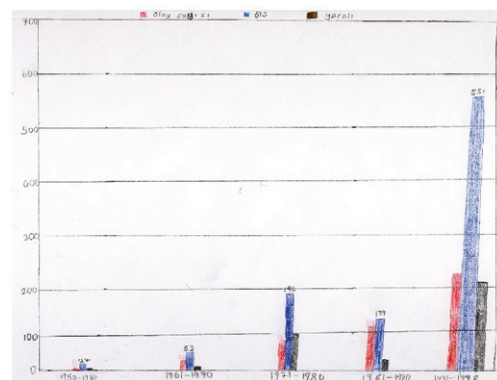


Figure 3. Graphic showing avalanches

### 3.2. Findings regarding the content of the Social Studies performance assignments

The topics, research methods, information sources, presentation of information systematically and, explaining his/her own opinions items were examined as regards the content of the Social Studies performance assignments. In general, students were asked to choose and examine a natural disaster which can be seen in their country. They were required to choose and conduct research about a natural disaster, and integrate information they had obtained from different sources. Last of all, they needed to write a report which should include their own views and comments.

When students' performance assignments were examined, it was seen that more than half of the students, 12 students (54%), focused on "earthquakes" as a topic for their performance assignments. This can be explained by the fact that earthquakes are one of the most prominent natural disasters in Turkey, causing loss of life and property damage. "Flood" was another natural disaster which students preferred to investigate, with 4 students (18%) choosing to study this topic. The other topics students focused on for their performance assignments were "erosion", and "avalanches". 3 students (14%) studied "erosion" while the other 3 examined "avalanches". It can be claimed that the geographical conditions of the region in which the students live affect their choice of the topic for their assignment. Students living in Eskisehir, located North West of the Central Anatolia region, are not very familiar with "avalanches" as a natural disaster.

It was determined that all students reviewed literature while preparing their assignments. Only 3 of the students (14%) interviewed source people for their study. Textbooks, the internet, people as resources, and newspapers were determined as the main information sources for students. All students used textbooks in their assignment. At the same time, most of the students (n=15, 68%) used Internet sources. The teacher said that she had warned students about using internet sources, and did not let them take information directly from the internet. Therefore, students needed to integrate and analyze information which they had obtained from the internet and the other resources. Few students (n=3, 14%) sought help from the people as resources. A student named Berk interviewed one of his relative about the earthquake of 1999. He transferred the data indirectly from the meeting. Berk explained the information he had obtained about the earthquake, such as "My uncle told me that the Adapazari earthquake was in 1999. Eskisehir was also affected by the earthquake. The earthquake had lasted 45 seconds." Two students (9%) benefited from newspaper news in preparing their Social Studies performance assignments. It was seen that one of the newspaper items related to the subject "erosion" and the other is related to "earthquakes". It can be said that students should be encouraged to be aware of current events in the scope of learning much more about natural disasters which happen in their own country and the world. During the course of the research, it was discovered that all students were careful to present the content of their assignment systematically. They positioned all the titles which their teacher had wanted them to investigate. These titles were "The reason, form, and results of the natural disaster", "The date, effects, and results of the natural disaster in our country", "What can be done for prevention of the natural disaster", and "General evaluation of the natural disaster". Students integrated all of the information from different sources and visual elements under these titles. It was seen that students expressed their own opinions in the "General Evaluation" section of the assignment. In this part, they initially summarized information about the natural disaster, and then offered suggestions for what could be done regarding problems encountered from natural disasters. In this context, it was determined that students expressed themselves in the content section of the performance assignments.

### *3.3. Findings regarding the language and expression characteristics of the Social Studies performance assignments*

Grammatical accuracy, use of punctuation marks, and use of clear and concise language were examined in the section of the findings regarding the language and expression characteristics of the Social Studies performance assignments. Students had tried to use clear and concise language, and integrate and present information they had obtained from different sources through their own views. On the other hand, it was determined that all students made grammatical, and punctuation mistakes. For instance, students made grammatical mistakes such as subject-verb agreement and spelling correctly, as well as in their use of question marks, conjunctions, and expressions. Additionally, students made some mistakes regarding punctuation, such as failing to place periods at the end of sentences, begin with a capital letter after the period, or place commas or other punctuation marks where necessary in their assignments. In conclusion, based on the evidence of the study, practice should be done to develop the writing skills of students in Social Studies courses.

## **4. Conclusion and discussion**

Students are required to prepare a performance assignment about "Choose and examine a natural disaster which can be seen in our country". Natural disasters are an important subject field which necessitates the integration of data from such different disciplines as geography, history, economy, and politics. Moreover, natural disasters help students acquire citizenship knowledge, skills and values. The findings of Lintner's study support this idea. Lintner (2006) examined the teaching of citizenship responsibilities and roles via the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in a study titled "Hurricanes and Tsunamis: Teaching about Natural Disasters and Civic

Responsibility in Elementary Classrooms”. Lintner found that natural disasters help students see the relation of different disciplines of Social science, and help students acquire citizenship responsibilities and roles effectively.

According to the results of the study, it can be said that most of the students chose to examine “earthquakes” out of the “Natural Disasters” topic. This result is perfectly reasonable when we consider the fact that one of the most common natural disasters in the geographic area of the country in which the students live is the earthquake. Thus, students chose the topic of their performance assignment according to the principle of studying the closer environment before the wider one. The other issues students focused on were “floods”, “erosion”, and “avalanches”. Considering the results on the format of the Social Studies performance assignments, it was observed that all students had prepared a cover page for their assignments. Students usually paid attention to readability. However, they did not exert themselves in terms of the page layout. It was determined that students mostly used photographs as a visual element in their Social Studies performance assignments. Besides photos, they preferred to gain information from maps, graphics, schemas, cartoons, and newspaper clippings. Students made a point of placing visual elements in their assignments. Literature supports this finding of the study. Use of visual elements both facilitates teaching and embodies issues in Social Studies. Visual materials such as photographs, pictures, graphics, cartoons, and maps are expected to be more effective than written material without any visual elements, especially in issues of abstract concepts (Ulusoy and Gulum, 2009; Yasar and Gultekin, 2009). Similarly, Gallavan and Kottler (2007) underline the fact that graphics are ideal learning tools for all grade students, and explain that graphics help students relate information in the study field while providing effective and enjoyable learning. Therefore, it can be claimed that encouraging students to use visual elements in their performance assignments and other studies can be beneficial in terms of learning Social Studies. Students applied methods such as literature review, investigation of current events, and interviewing people as resources while preparing their assignments. It was seen that the main information sources for students were textbooks, the internet, people as resources, and newspapers. Students presented information which they had obtained from different resources systematically, and they wrote a general evaluation section, including their own opinions. It was determined that the majority of students wrote their assignments by hand, and tried to use a clear and intelligible language. However, they had some difficulties with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. On the basis of the results of the study, it can be offered that teachers should pay attention to determining topics for the performance assignments in Social Studies which students can relate to their lives and research within their environment. A detailed guideline should be given to the students about the format of the performance assignments. Teachers should guide students effectively regarding research methods and information sources which they can use to complete their assignments. Practice should be done during Social Studies classes to develop students’ writing skills.

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