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A SMALL-SCALE STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Turkey's search for upgrading the quality of English language teaching is still in progress. Publication of Ministry of National Education's English Language Curriculum for Primary Education Grades 4,5,6,7 and 8 (2006) framed the content and delivery of our primary school English language teaching classes along with a list of suggested classroom activities. However, much research is needed to identify what happens in English language classrooms in Turkey so that further action takes place to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Hence, the aim of the present study is to identify the types of English language teaching activities carried out in Turkish primary schools along with the problems they face while teaching. As a small-scale study based on 46 teachers' answers to a questionnaire, the study found that pupils appear to be passive learners since teacher-centered activities continue to be used. Also, vocabulary, speaking, and pronunciation are considered as the most important domains and skills for the pupils to master while their knowledge of culture, writing, and grammar are of less importance. Teachers suggest that smaller class size, newer technologies, and a rich variety of print materials can improve their English language teaching.

Keywords: Activity, primary school, children, English, young.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other countries around the globe, Turkey's search for upgrading the quality of English language teaching is still in progress. Publication of Ministry of National Education's English Language Curriculum for Primary Education Grades 4,5,6,7 and 8 (2006) framed the content and delivery of our primary school English language teaching classes along with a list of suggested classroom activities. Just as the importance of English is growing in Turkey, the age of starting to learn English has decreased for the last decade. This policy has found support in the public sphere as far as relevant research shows. Aytar and Öğretir's (2008) study of 350 parents whose children receive pre-school education shows that more than 80% of these parents accept that English should be taught in pre-school institutions. Similar results were found by İlter and Er (2007) which support the view that parents and teachers think that English must be taught in Turkey's preschool institutions.

When the case of Turkey is further considered, it can be seen that a variety of studies has focused on primary school teachers' use of language activities in the classroom. Özdemir and Uşun (2009) found that primary school English language teachers (n=95) from Çanakkale considered themselves to be sufficient in using speaking activities, providing pupils with writing activities that can enhance their correct use of English grammar, and using drama and songs. However, they find themselves to be insufficient in using audio materials such as the tape recorder and CD player, using films or cartoons that are of pupils' interests, and using computers in classrooms.

Although policy changes, parents' and teachers' support reflect a need for high quality course delivery in English language teaching, teaching English to young learners comes with many problems among which the suitability of classroom activities and materials along with teachers' successful use of these activities and materials is the leading one. Part of this problem stems from the fact that young learners do not learn like adult learners of English. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) rightfully claim in their introduction to teaching English to young learners that

- activities for young learners should incorporate the content with body movement and senses,
- pupils should experiment with the language they are learning while absorbing it rather than receiving grammar rules,

- classroom interaction should foster cooperation rather than competition,
- there must be variety of every component of classroom planning, teaching, and assessment (pp. 5-7).

As these aforementioned studies and views show, much research is needed to uncover all aspects of teaching English to young learners so that the quality of teaching increases as expected and planned. In this study, following questions were asked to be answered:

1. What kind of and how frequently language learning activities are carried out in Turkish primary schools' English classes?
2. What are the self-reported needs of teachers to improve their teaching?
3. What do teachers think about their students' needs so as to be considered as successful language learners?

METHODOLOGY

A total number of 46 primary school English language teachers participated in the study. Convenience sampling was used in selection of the participants. All of the participants were members of an online forum on English language teaching and they were sent a link to the scale by means of emails. Out of the 60 members who were sent the scale, only 46 of them returned it all of which were used in the final analysis. All of the participants were ELT graduates and were under the age of 30. The internal reliability of the scale was found to be .836, suggesting a moderately high reliability. A statistical package for social sciences was used in calculating the mean values, standard errors and standard deviations of the results.

RESULTS

Research question 1. What kind of and how frequently language learning activities are carried out in Turkish primary schools' English classes?

Item	Mean	St Err.	St Dev.
1. Copying down to notebooks	3.67	,165	1,117
2. Teacher reading stories	2.72	,134	,911
3. Students memorizing words and phrases	**3.74**	,160	1,084
4. Singing songs	2.61	,130	,881
5. Children repeating after the teacher	**3.83**	,185	1,253
6. Role-play	3.24	,187	1,268
7. Silent reading	2.85	,167	1,135
8. Listening to the tape/ CD	3.17	,195	1,322
9. Students telling stories	*2.09*	,128	,865
10. Playing games	3.20	,130	,885
11. Rhymes or poems	*1.96*	,103	,698
12. Working on the computer	*2.30*	,175	1,190
13. Watching videos/ TV	*2.07*	,144	,975
14. Handwriting exercises	3.39	,188	1,273
15. Grammar exercises	**3.93**	,114	,772
16. Students reading out loud	**4.07**	,147	,998

17. Project work	2.91	,124	,839
18. Studying grammar rules or tables	3.48	,161	1,090
19. Creative/ Free writing	*2.24*	,121	,822
20. Filling in gaps/ blanks	**4.13**	,134	,909
21. Spelling exercises	3.37	,177	1,199
22. Puzzles	2.89	,147	,994
23. Arts and crafts (drawing, painting, puppet making, etc.)	2.87	,160	1,087

Teachers report that filling in the gaps/ blanks (4.13), students reading aloud (4.07), completing grammar exercises (3.93), and children repeating after the teacher (3.83) are the leading activities employed in Turkish EFL classrooms. What follows these is children memorizing words and phrases in English with an average mean score of 3.74. These results suggest that young learners' English language classrooms follow a traditional syllabus rather than a constructivist one which was prioritized by the Ministry of Education over the traditional ones. Hence, these classrooms sound more like traditional classrooms where students continue to be passive learners who learn through teacher-centered activities. The activities which could stand for a more constructivist classrooms such as students telling stories (2.09), rhymes and poems (1.96), project work (2.91) creative and free writing (2.24) all of which have received the lowest scores. As can be seen in Table 1, the use of technology seems to be rather low since the mean of listening to the tape or CD is 3.17 and watching videos and TV for teaching purposes is even lower (2.07).

Research question 2. What are the self-reported needs of teachers to improve their teaching?

Item	Mean	St Err.	St Dev.
1. Better access to print materials (textbooks/ materials)	**3.57**	,091	,620
2. Having fewer tests or exams	*2.80*	,134	,910
3. Not having national exams such as SBS	*3.09*	,167	1,132
4. New technologies such as computers or DVDs	**3.72**	,080	,544
5. Receiving training in new teaching methods	**3.52**	,111	,752
6. Improving one's own English	3.11	,165	1,120
7. Smaller classes	**3.83**	,064	,437
8. Students starting English at an earlier age	**3.52**	,115	,781

Results suggest that poor physical conditions lessen the quality of their classroom teaching. The highest mean scores for teachers' needs are having smaller classes to teach (3.83), having new technologies such as computers or DVDs (3.72), and having better access to print materials (3.57). Teachers also claim that having fewer tests or exams will not improve their teaching (2.80) although the mean score for national exams such as SBS is higher (3.09). As these results show, teachers seem like trying to improve their teaching conditions and in this process teaching in smaller classes and with newer technological applications will improve their teaching more than anything else.

Research question 3. What do teachers think about their students' needs so as to be considered as successful language learners?

Item	Mean	St Err.	St Dev.
1. Writing	*3.04*	,107	,729

2. Pronunciation	**3.39**	,110	,745
3. Reading	**3.35**	,104	,706
4. Grammar	*3.15*	,112	,759
5. Speaking	**3.41**	,110	,748
6. Vocabulary	**3.78**	,061	,417
7. Listening	3.24	,117	,794
8. Culture	*2.78*	,135	,917

According to the teachers, primary school students need to develop their vocabulary most (3.78) in order to be successful language learners followed by speaking (3.41) and pronunciation (3.39). Teachers rate culture (2.78) and writing (3.04) to be the least important ones for their students followed by grammar (3.15) and listening (3.24).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study fully support that of Özdemir and Uşun's (2009) study in which they found that English language teachers considered themselves to be sufficient in using speaking, grammar, drama and singing activities, but insufficient in using audio materials such as the tape recorder and CD player, using films and computers. In the present study, it was found that teachers somehow refrain from using TV, Computers, and DVDs in their classrooms while prioritizing teacher centered activities such as grammar exercises. English language teachers' problems with tapes and CDs have been reported in larger scale studies as that of Büyükduman's (2005) who suggested that tape recorders and casettes should be distributed by the Ministry of National Education to Turkish primary schools' English language classes.

More research is needed to understand the nature of the activities employed in Turkish EFL classrooms. Teachers want their students to be competent in vocabulary and speaking (Research question 3, items 5 and 6). However, participants' answers to the first question show that students continue to be passive learners who learn through teacher-centered activities. It is problematic to see that these two realities cannot nurture each other to educate successful learners since students cannot be competent users of a foreign language by learning vocabulary and speaking as passive learners. It is also problematic that teachers do not give importance to culture of the language learned and taught.

According to Ministry of National Education's ÖBBS report (2009) which included 630 primary school English language teachers' habits of and views on teaching English in primary schools suggests that English teachers see themselves sufficient in reading, but insufficient in speaking and listening. Furthermore, many teachers of English refrain from preparing slides and making models to be used while teaching. These results should be taken into consideration carefully since these teachers' beliefs may shape their classroom performance and choice of skill-based activities. In addition to this, according to the Ministry of National Education (2008) only 36.5% of teachers think that primary school English language teachers find coursebooks used in their classrooms sufficient in creating student-centered classrooms which might be a reason for this study's participants choice in teacher centered activities.

Previous research has shown the importance of courses on teaching English to young learners as a part of pre-service teachers' teacher education programs (Özkan & Arikan, 2010). Hence, these courses should be strengthened and updated regularly to help pre-service English language teachers' development as effective teachers who will then use appropriate materials and activities in their future teaching contexts.

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