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## Barriers Experienced by Middle School Students in the Process of Learning English

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### ABSTRACT

English has gained a significant role in technological, business, economic or political areas and has been a part of educational policies in different countries. However, many learners of English have difficulties in learning and using the language effectively due to a number of reasons. Accordingly, a descriptive study was conducted in order to investigate what kind of foreign language (English) learning problems the middle school students experience in Turkey. A total of 164 (92 female and 72 male) middle school students (5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> grade) in 4 public schools in Sakarya, Turkey participated in the study. The data were collected through an open-ended question and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed and coded thematically. The results have indicated that middle school students mostly face linguistic, instructional, affective barriers as well as lack of assistance and useful resource. Considering the findings, some possible reasons and suggestions were also provided to help teachers and learners overcome the relevant barriers in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Turkey

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### 1.Introduction

The role of English as a lingua franca on the developments of economic, political, cultural and technological areas has led the acceptance of English in the education system of Turkey as in many different countries (Kırkgöz, 2014). Accordingly, English instruction has become compulsory starting in primary school in Turkey as an EFL country with the aim of equipping learners with communicative competence (Kırkgöz, 2009). Even though Turkish students have some negative attitudes towards learning English, they are all aware of the importance of English (Çetinkaya, 2009; Karahan, 2007) as well as the parents (Ahmad, 1993, cited in Başıbek, et al. 2013). However, although a number of changes and revisions have been made on the language teaching curriculum and policies, Turkish learners' level of English proficiency is still not satisfactory to use the language as communicatively as necessary on an international level (Dinçer, Takkaç & Akalın, 2010; Işık, 2008; Demirel, 2003, cited in Haznedar, 2010). Learners experience various difficulties while learning English in different contexts in terms of using some language skills or different linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary. Khan (2011) classifies several barriers underlying such inadequacy as deriving from pedagogical, socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, affective or parental issues. One of the best ways to find out English learning barriers that learners encounter is to investigate their perceptions on the difficulties they face while learning English.

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### **1.1.Literature review**

There is little research on the language barriers of middle school students while learning English in Turkey as well as in different countries. Most of the relevant research is conducted on undergraduate or secondary school students. A number of factors have been asserted to affect the success of learning English in various contexts. Soner (2007) claimed that “limited number of teachers, teachers’ inadequate foreign language knowledge and methods, teachers’ using old fashioned language approaches, students’ not giving importance because of the heavy burdens of other courses in school, insufficient language equipments in schools, students’ lack of motivation and interest about foreign language, and students’ not having a chance of using the language outside the class”(p.236) are the main difficulties that bring out the failure in learning and teaching English (cited in Dinçer, et al., 2010). Ghrib (2004) found out that many of the difficulties that Tunisian secondary school students have encountered emerge due to their inefficacy on the linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar and phonology knowledge. Akbari (2015) made a comprehensive analysis on existing research on junior high school students and regarded the lack of English speaking environment and heavy emphasis on grammar teaching as the most important barriers to use language successfully in Iran. The detailed literature for English learning barriers is classified as below.

### **1.2. Difficulties with the Grammar**

Crivos and Luchini (2012) define grammar as “a device for constructing and conveying meaning without which, effective communication would be impossible” (p.1). However, the pedagogical developments in recent years on grammar teaching area have not been sufficient to answer the needs of language teachers to enable learners to gain grammatical knowledge (Ellis 2002, 2006; cited in Richards & Reppen, 2014). There are many barriers to learning and using linguistic forms accurately as well as fluently. Larsen-Freeman (2001) implies that learning linguistic forms correctly depends on not only the type of instruction (e.g. teaching grammar structures in isolated sentences) but also the lack of exposure in EFL contexts (cited in Gürata, 2008). EFL contexts inhibit the use of language fluently as well as accurately as students do not feel any obligation of learning English (Akbari, 2015). Also, the literature indicates that first language (L1) interference is one of the most common barriers to learning the structures of language for both Turkish and other learners from different contexts. As introduced by Lado (1957), contrastive analysis examines two languages to reveal the differences in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features to estimate what type of difficulties the students may encounter in the second or foreign language (L2) learning process (cited in Abushibab, 2014). Kesmez (2015) examined 120 compositions of prep-class university students and found that Turkish learners made a number of L1 interference errors categorized as morphological (e.g. tense and subject-verb agreement), syntactic (e.g. word order and prepositions), lexical (e.g. punctuation and capitalization) and orthographic (e.g. word for word translations) aspects. Mede, Tural, Ayaz, Çalışır and Akın (2014) indicated that the study they conducted with Turkish university prep-class students revealed L1 interference such as ‘slowly speak’ as causing difficulty (p. 79) and the researchers discussed the result with respect to word order differences between the languages as Turkish has a SOV (subject-object-verb) word order whereas English has a SVO order. Sawir (2005) explains that grammar is regarded as difficult by many international students due to the differences between their first languages and English and their experience on grammar-based instruction in previous classroom practices that result in thinking in L1 during speaking and writing; thus focusing on grammar structures impedes successful interaction.

### **1.3. Difficulties with the Vocabulary and Reading Skill**

Orawiatnakul (2011, cited in Demir, 2013) states that knowledge of vocabulary is essential for learners to develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. There is a positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension as well as the success of foreign language learning just like in the first language learning (Lervåg & Aukrust, 2010; Plinscar & Brown, 1985, cited in Ahmadi, İsmail & Abdullah, 2012; Sidek & Rahim, 2015). Despite the role of vocabulary in communicating effectively,

learners experience many problems in learning vocabulary (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010). There are a number of barriers affecting learning vocabulary such as individual differences, the affective issues (motivation, attitudes towards vocabulary learning, fear of failure) or the language learning aptitude as Takač (2008) marked (p.17). In addition, the pronunciation or spelling of words can be another barrier for language learners. However, the most prevalent factor hindering vocabulary acquisition is that learners are not conscious or good at using effective vocabulary learning strategies (Kocaman & Kızılkaya Cumaoglu, 2014). Demir (2013) investigated the effectiveness of in-class vocabulary teaching strategies instruction on the 8th graders' retention of the amount of vocabulary. As the outperformance of the experimental group implies, the traditional vocabulary instruction which includes writing definitions and memorization can be a barrier for successful vocabulary acquisition. Similarly, Schmitt (2000, cited in Edvardsto, 2010) believes that strategies such as simple memorization, repetition and taking notes for vocabulary learning are not useful enough for improving vocabulary knowledge. According to Oxford (1990, cited in Wu, 2013: 202), "the degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, general learning styles, personality traits, motivation, and purpose for learning the language" can affect the use of learning strategies. In his study on Chinese learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies, Wu (2013) found motivation and family background as underlying factors of foreign language proficiency and vocabulary learning strategy. Accordingly, most of the researchers suggest teaching students to use strategies effectively (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010; Ahmadi, et al., 2012; Subaşı, 2014).

#### **1.4. Difficulties with the Pronunciation**

Pronunciation is one of the most important and problematic area faced by learners while learning English despite the amount of training in classes (Gilakjani, 2011). Fraser (2000a, cited in Gilakjani, 2011) states that pronunciation is one of the most important sub-skills of speaking and regardless of accuracy or poor pronunciation can make the comprehension really difficult. As a reason for failure, Zhang and Yin (2009) explained that Chinese students are not good at English pronunciation due to interference of mother tongue, learners' age, attitudes, psychological and instructional factors. Furthermore, Jahan (2011) made a study on Bangladesh university students and pointed at shyness, and classroom practices along with the teacher's proficiency and the interference of L1 as influential on the learners' pronunciation level.

As a barrier for learning English, Geylanioglu and Dikilitaş (2012) stated that Turkish learners face difficulty in the pronunciation of some English words and this issue has been an area of research recently. They also address teaching practices and ignorance of pronunciation practice in classroom activities as the most common barriers based on their research. Similarly, according to Demircioğlu (2013), the L1-L2 differences or lack of emphasis in teaching pronunciation at primary, secondary and university level causes barriers in language learning. Bayraktaroğlu (2008) examined the pronunciation difficulties of Turkish learners of English. He states that there is not one-to-one letter-sound correspondence in English orthographic system as in Turkish and such difference causes interference with the appropriate English pronunciation as a barrier to acquiring English. Besides the orthographic interference, Khalilzadeh (2014) also addresses the lack of being exposed to English in their daily life (in Iran, as an EFL context) as a barrier in acquiring pronunciation. Bekleyen (2011) also mentions that Turkish learners' attempt to over-generalize the pronunciation of words due to orthographic differences of two languages and the complexity of spelling of English may end up with failure.

#### **1.5. Affective Factors (anxiety, self-confidence, attitude and motivation)**

Affective factors including motivation, anxiety, self-confidence and attitude have great impact on the language acquisition process as both impeding and facilitating role in utilizing language input (Krashen, 1985, cited in Du, 2009). In their study with junior high school students, Zhu and Zhou (2012) found that the anxiety, boredom, hopelessness and low self-confidence are main factors that affect the success of foreign language learning. Among others, considering the impact of anxiety on foreign language learning, Cui (2011)

investigated the high school students' English learning anxiety in Chinese EFL classrooms and found that fear of negative evaluation (mostly by teachers) and test anxiety due to national examinations are major factors inhibiting Chinese learners' language learning achievement. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) explored the reasons of language speaking anxiety of 383 pre-intermediate university prep-class students. The results revealed that pronunciation, immediate questions by teachers, fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation influence the anxiety level and success of language learning. Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) categorized the causes of language anxiety in speaking classes as due to linguistic difficulties (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure), cognitive challenges (fear of failure in front of others, fear of exams, fear of failure in communication, lack of self-esteem, fear of making mistakes), the role of the teachers, competitiveness and lack of information in learners' L1 (p. 149).

Attitudes and motivation are other affective factors in determining the success of foreign language learning. Gardner (1985) defines attitude as "an evaluative reaction to some referent or object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent" (p. 164, cited in Gardner, 2006). Çetinkaya (2009) conducted a study with 15 first year university students on their perceptions and attitudes towards English. She spotted that learners are aware of the importance of English in their future study and career but they have been reported to be against the dominance, in other words, the "imposed power" of English in the world (p.117). Ellis (1994, cited in Atchade, 2002) explains that the learners' attitudes both influence and are influenced by the learners' improvement in second language learning. Accordingly, the constant failures are most likely to lead learners to develop more negative attitudes towards the language learning. Also, Oxford (1994) says that learners with negative attitudes usually have inefficient learning strategies. Thus, Oxford (1994), Atchade (2002) and Kocaman and Kızılkaya Cumaoglu (2014) hold the idea that teachers should train learners on learning strategies with the view of individual differences like attitude, beliefs and needs. Gardner (2006) claims that motivation and attitude are so important factors that complement each other to enhance language learning. Confirming that statement, Mustafa, Rashid, Atmowardoyo and Dollah (2015) made a study on Indonesian university students and revealed that the degree of learners' achievement is highly related to their motivation and attitude levels. The studies mentioned in the next section by Meshkat and Hassani (2012) students can reveal some demotivating factors for high school students, which hinder learners' development in second language acquisition and use.

Self-confidence has also a crucial role in second language learning and developing attitudes towards language learning. Zhu and Zhou (2012) explored some affective factors influencing Chinese EFL junior high school students and found that the learners have lack of confidence in learning English as constituting one of the major language learning problems. The authors categorized the increasing difficulty of vocabulary and grammar, getting low marks in the exams, poor performance, caring about peers, parents and teachers' criticisms on their success as leading to develop low self-confidence about their ability to learn English.

#### **1.6. Instruction (Teacher, classroom management, methodology, coursebooks)**

Teachers as individuals and their choice of methods and materials as well as coursebooks can affect the success of learners' improvement in second language learning. Çelik, Arıkan and Caner (2013) investigated the Turkish undergraduate learners' perceptions of an effective teacher. The learners reflected on teachers' pedagogy-specific knowledge, personality traits, professional skills and classroom behaviours. According to the learners, teachers should be fair, enthusiastic, friendly, loving, creative and experienced in terms of personality (p.292). Regarding pedagogy-specific knowledge, teachers should teach pronunciation and four language skills adequately and explain grammar rules well (p.293). Teachers should also be proficient in grammar and vocabulary, and be good at classroom management, reducing anxiety and use of technological and visual materials (p.293). Similarly, Baytur and Razi (2015) examined the 6th and 12th grade learners' perceptions of effective language teachers with respect to personal, professional and pedagogical aspects. The results of the study were reported as that learners appreciate the teachers who are good at pronunciation, classroom management, grammar teaching, use of technological devices and creating an affective atmosphere in the classroom. Meshkat and Hassani (2012) analyzed the demotivating factors for

Iran students. Learning content and materials, teachers' competence and teaching styles were found to be important demotivating factors for Iran learners. Lessons with too much grammar focus, accuracy based activities, long reading passages, least amount of communicative skills, coursebook and exercise books have been reported to be demotivating by the learners in the study. It is also clear that besides teachers as individuals, teaching methods and coursebooks have great impact on improving second language learning. Falout, Elwood and Hood (2009) investigated the demotivating factors for 900 EFL Japanese learners and found that the learners do not favour grammar translation method which is implemented due to national examinations and want communicative activities involved in the lessons to use English interactively with peers and teachers. Al-Khairy (2013) found that Arabian EFL university learners mostly complain about the teachers' behaviours, methods, use of mother tongue, difficult textbooks, peer pressure, lack of technological materials and the difficulty of vocabulary and grammar as demotivating factors in their context of learning English.

### 1.7. Family, Resource and Technological Support

Learners who live in rural areas can have difficulties in reaching some sources necessary for their second language improvement. There is little research on the effect of family support on the effect of learners' second language development. Salameh (2012) examined the perceptions of 1200 secondary school learners to reveal the effect of parents' socio-economic and educational levels' on learners' English learning. The results show that well-educated parents have been perceived to be more helpful in leading the learners' success of L2 development since they can provide support and be good models for their children. Alidoost, Paknejad, Toulabi, Mirchenari & Nokarizi (2014) investigated the effects of parental, socio-economic conditions on 7th, 8th and 9th grade learners' success of learning English. Parents' direct (namely, the parents' direct assistance in helping their children learn English, such as helping them with their English homework, providing them with private English lessons after school, etc.) and indirect behaviours (home literacy and language environment and the parents' English proficiency) described by (Wigfield, Esoles, Schiefele, Roeser & Davis-Kean, 2006), cited in Alidoost, et. al, 2014: 46) have been reported to influence learners' foreign language learning positively.

While studying English or any other language, learners need some resources to get help. Besides their families, the use of dictionaries and technology in today's world are good resources to provide necessary information and language learning practice. Stein (1989) believes that although the use of bilingual dictionaries may be helpful in the beginning stages of learning, they can mislead learners to choose the wrong equivalent of a word which has multiple meanings in the target language. Accordingly, Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984) stated that "bilingual dictionaries often fail to give complete definitions or to include enough idioms." (p.269). Considering the effect of technology use in EFL learning, Çelik et al. (2012) investigated the role of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) for self-regulated learning as an out-of-class learning of English on prep-class university students. The results show that learners both utilize and have positive attitudes towards the use of ICT to support their learning out of the class on vocabulary learning and developing listening and writing skills.

The literature indicates some difficulties faced by EFL learners in the process of learning English regarding various language aspects. The following research question has been investigated in the present study to provide suggestions for the language learning barriers for middle school students in Turkey.

RQ: What are the English language learning barriers perceived by middle school learners in Turkey as an EFL context?

## 2.Method

### 2.1. Participants

A descriptive study was carried out with 164 students consisting of 92 female and 70 male students from 2 village schools and 2 schools in the town. 5th and 6th graders study English at least for 3 hours a week as compulsory and 7th and 8th graders study English at least for 4 hours a week as compulsory each year. Detailed information about the participants regarding number grade, age and gender is given in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** The number of participants from the village schools

Gender	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Female	15	14	15	12
Male	11	8	10	14
Total	26	22	25	26

**Table 2.** The number of participants from the city schools

Gender	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Female	3	6	23	4
Male	8	2	13	6
Total	11	8	36	10

### 2.2. Data collection

The data were collected through a survey with an open-ended question. The learners were asked to write about what kind of barriers they face while learning English. Besides, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 6 students who were chosen randomly from each school to get more specific examples and figure out the underlying reasons. The data were obtained by four teachers employed at data collection settings. The purpose of the research was explained in each class and the students were assured that their names would not be made public and the results would not affect their grades.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed through content analysis through which the students' responses were thematically coded. Each barrier was classified in the tables including themes, codes, sub-codes and the frequency of answers. Extracts from the students' answers and interviews were transcribed and presented so as to provide detailed analysis of the results.

## 3. Results

The findings revealed that middle school learners face a number of difficulties in learning English process. The relevant barriers are categorized in Tables 1-9.

**Table 3.** Students' perceptions of the linguistic barriers: Vocabulary

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Linguistic barriers 1	Vocabulary [Total f: 102]	Memorization - Retrieval	60	S4, S8, S18, S20, S21, S23, S24, S27, S29, S30, S32, S33, S38, S39, S43, S48, S52, S54, S55, S56, S62, S64, S65, S66, S69, S70, S72, S74, S75, S77, S89, S90, S92, S93, S95, S97, S99, S102, S104, S105, S109, S112, S113, S118, S120, S128, S130, S135, S137, S139, S140, S141, S143, S146, S152, S156, S157, S159, S160, S161
		Dictionary (absence or lack of quality)	15	S1, S3, S4, S8, S9, S14, S17, S19, S21, S22, S29, S31, S32, S53, S59
		Orthography (Spelling)	15	S3, S4, S11, S21, S24, S31, S62, S63, S69, S70, S99, S133, S140, S141, 164
		Numbers	4	S1, S6, S7, S15
		Practice / Revision	3	S31, S47, S136
		Days	2	S4, S15
		Antonyms	1	S138
		Multiple meanings	1	S91
		Finding irrelevant	1	S60

As seen in the Table 3, most of the students (f=60) have difficulty in the memorization and retention of the vocabulary. The problems about the use of dictionary (f=15) and the orthographic differences (f=15) are revealed as other important factors hindering the students' English learning process. 8 of the students in total stated that they have difficulty in learning some specific lexis such as numbers, days, antonyms and words with multiple meanings. Some students (f=4) reflected that some of the words are not recycled and practised enough all through the units in the coursebook. Only one of the students claimed that the words in the unit are irrelevant for their age and interest. The detailed comments of the students are as;

S31. "... I have difficulty in both writing and pronouncing the words.... I see the words we have studied once or never in the second term."

S69. "I can't differ the *different* or *difficult*, they are similar." (interview)

S99. "...Learning vocabulary is too difficult. Some words are too long so I can't memorize and remember."

S141. "...It would be easier to remember or memorize if the words are pronounced as they are written."

S164. "...I misspell some words...for example, *beautiful*...because...written and pronounced differently." (interview)

**Table 4.** Students’ perceptions of the linguistic barriers: Grammar

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Linguistic barriers 2	Grammar [Total f: 79]	Sentence construction (Word order, negative, affirmative, interrogative sentences)	57	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S12, S13, S14, S17, S18, S19, S20, S22, S26, S29, S31, S32, S35, S38, S39, S40, S41, S43, S50, S51, S54, S55, S59, S62, S63, S64, S65, S66, S68, S69, S70, S71, S72, S73, S75, S77, S78, S79, S90, S91, S97, S99, S114, S135, S146, S152, 163
		Tenses (Subject-verb agreement, suffixes)	14	S5, S9, S13, S45, S61, S67, S68, S69, S76, S83, S110, S134, S137, 163
		Time telling	5	S6, S80, S82, S86, S87
		Preposition of movements (Giving directions)	2	S4, S80
		Quantifiers (A few, a little)	1	S27

The table 4 indicates that half of the participants face problems with English grammar. The students (f=57) mostly have difficulty in forming sentences in terms of word order and transformation. Also, 14 students find tenses requiring the use of suffix and subject verb agreement as challenging. As a part of the curriculum, 8 students in total see time telling (5<sup>th</sup> grade), giving directions (5<sup>th</sup> grade) and quantifiers (6<sup>th</sup> grade) as difficult to learn.

- S9. "...I misuse and have difficulty in 'don't and doesn't'."
- S40. "I sometimes disorder the words while making sentences and I think this as a big problem."
- S41. "I have too much difficulty in making sentences and forget *-es* and *-ing* suffixes."
- S70. "I have difficulty in transferring sentences from affirmative to interrogative or negative."  
(interview)
- S86. "There is nothing difficult for me but just 'What time does your friend wake up?' and time telling."
- S114. "I can't unscramble the words (as an exercise)."
- S134. "I never understand how to use irregular verbs in past tense."
- S163. "...I sometimes misuse '*are-is*' ... while asking questions" (interview)



**Table 5.** Students’ perceptions of the linguistic barriers: Speaking skills and Pronunciation

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Linguistic barrier 3	Pronunciation & Speaking Skill [Total f: 74]	Difficult	46	S2, S19, S21, S23, S24, S28, S29, S31, S32, S41, S45, S46, S49, S51, S59, S62, S70, S71, S73, S74, S78, S84, S94, S101, S102, S103, S104, S105, S107, S109, S115, S117, S121, S122, S123, S124, S126, S133, S135, S136, S139, S146, S154, S155, S158, S162
		Spelling / Letters	13	S15, S20, S22, S25, S27, S33, S47, S70, S88, S89, S93, S96, S98
		Anxiety (Peer pressure, Losing face, shyness)	8	S4, S6, S14, S18, S22, S26, S39, S45
		Fluency	7	S74, S101, S107, S122, S123, S124, S125

As another important linguistic aspect, the students pointed at pronunciation and accordingly the speaking skill as an important barrier in the learning process. 46 of the students referred English language as difficult to pronounce. Some of the students attributed the problem they face to the spelling system of the language (f=13) whereas 8 of the students explained that they feel anxious in pronouncing due to peer pressure, losing face and shyness.

S14. “I feel shy (hesitate) when I pronounce English words because I think my friends will laugh at me ... my teacher can get angry.”

S25. “We have difficulty because we can’t articulate English letters (sounds) well. I wish we could say the words well.”

S74. “I have difficulty in speaking fluently and making sentences.”

S69. “I mispronounce ‘who and how’...sounds similar.” (interview)

**Table 6.** Students’ perceptions of the linguistic barriers: Reading Skills

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Linguistic barriers 4	Reading Skills [Total f: 39]	Comprehension	17	S8, S12, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S41, S46, S55, S57, S64, S65, S67, S89, S131, S139
		Translation	13	S26, S28, S29, S32, S55, S75, S70, S91, S93, S96, S98, S116, S153
		Question & Answer	9	S24, S41, S51, S57, S69, S76, S77, S85, S86

In table 6, it is revealed that some students have difficulty in comprehending (f=16) and translating (f=13) paragraphs or even sentences. Accordingly, 8 of the students say that they do not understand the questions and answer well. Some of the relevant extracts are given below.

S26. “I have difficulty in comprehending the dialogues.....translating the reading texts.”

S41. “I don’t understand what paragraph means...”

S69. “I sometimes have difficulty in answering questions...”

In fact, these problematic findings can be attributed to lack of vocabulary knowledge as well as reading skills or strategies as one of the students stated as;

S77. "... I have problems with question words..."

**Table 7.** Students’ perceptions of the instructional barriers

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Instructional barriers	Teacher, Material, & Instruction [Total f: 82]	Classroom management	20	S12, S58, S87, S89, S93, S99, S100, S101, S102, S104, S106, S107, S109, S112, S113, S114, S116, S117, S118, S119
		Teaching skills, methods, techniques, activities	19	S2, S23, S93, S100, S101, S102, S103, S104, S105, S108, S109, S111, S116, S122, S124, S132, S133, S134, S139
		Tests	11	S1, S2, S4, S5, S14, S16, S17, S20, S23, S109, S162
		Homework	8	S5, S17, S20, S23, S26, S27, S28, S55
		Coursebook	8	S22, S26, S28, S32, S40, S54, S55, S60
		Teacher (behaviour, characteristics)	5	S102, S103, S107, S111, S113
		Background	5	S16, S26, S88, S127, S144
		Professional, field skills	3	S102, S103, S114
		Technology, visual aids	3	S142, S144, S145

Besides the linguistic problems, half of the students face difficulty in learning English due to instructional barriers. As seen in the Table 7, there are a number of factors encountered in the instructional process. Classroom management (f=20) and teaching methods and skills (f=19) were stated as the biggest problem by the students pointing to the noise and discipline problems as well as the effectiveness of the activities conducted in the lesson. Coursebook (f=8) and the use of technology (f=5) also have been reported to pose difficulty in learning English as material-based problems. Students explained that they cannot do the homework (f=8) and tests (f=11) well due to several reasons such as difficulty or lack of vocabulary. Some detailed comments of the students are provided below.

S23. "I wish the teacher prepared more enjoyable activities, taught better ..... I want to learn jokes..."

S28. "The coursebook is difficult. I don't understand the homework."

S55. "I don't understand when the topics are nonsense."

S60. "...The cooking unit is too irrelevant (*for male students*)... Girls know better how to cook..."  
(repeated in interview)

S99. "I can't understand the lesson because of the noise in the class."

S104. "We write too much.....We don't use the coursebook...She shouts at us."

S107. "The teacher never smiles..... I don't like English.... I get bored."

S127. "Since we didn't study English in the primary school, English is very difficult for us this year."

S142. " ..Lesson is very boring because we don't have computer and projector in class."

**Table 8.** Students’ perceptions of the affective barriers

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Affective barriers	Affective factors [Total f: 59]	Anxiety (fear, excitement, losing face, peer pressure, shyness)	19	S1, S2, S3, S11, S12, S14, S15, S18, S19, S35, S36, S37, S39, S40, S41, S43, S66, S83, S94
		Attitude	17	S48, S52, S54, S60, S96, S98, S107, S106, S108, S127, S129, S145, S147, S148, S149, S150, S151
		Motivation	15	S23, S29, S30, S48, S52, S70, S71, S96, S102, S107, S108, S133, S134, S142, S145
		Self-confidence	8	S11, S17, S18, S30, S46, S59, S83, S129

One of the significant barriers for students in learning English is the affective factors that can be seen in the Table 8 (f=58). Anxiety (f=18) is attributed as an important factor affecting the learning process. 17 of the students have negative attitudes towards learning English and 15 students seem to be unmotivated. Additionally, 8 students show lack of self-confidence in attaining the learning. Some extracts can provide detailed understanding below.

S19. “I get excited when I talk to my teacher ..... I get upset when I fail.”

S39. “I fear reading paragraphs because I think that my friends will make fun of me.”

S41. “I’m afraid of making mistakes and I don’t participate...”

S46. “I like English lesson...Our teacher teaches well but I just can’t get it. If I understood, I would be a professor.”

S48. “... I’m against learning English but I have to learn...because it is a must.”

S60. “I don’t want a foreign language to be spoken in my country. I just want our mother tongue to be used as the only language.”

S83. “I even can’t learn my mother tongue, how can I learn English?”

S96. “I don’t understand...Learning English does not make sense to me...”

S147. “I hate English.” (*stated as the only reason*)

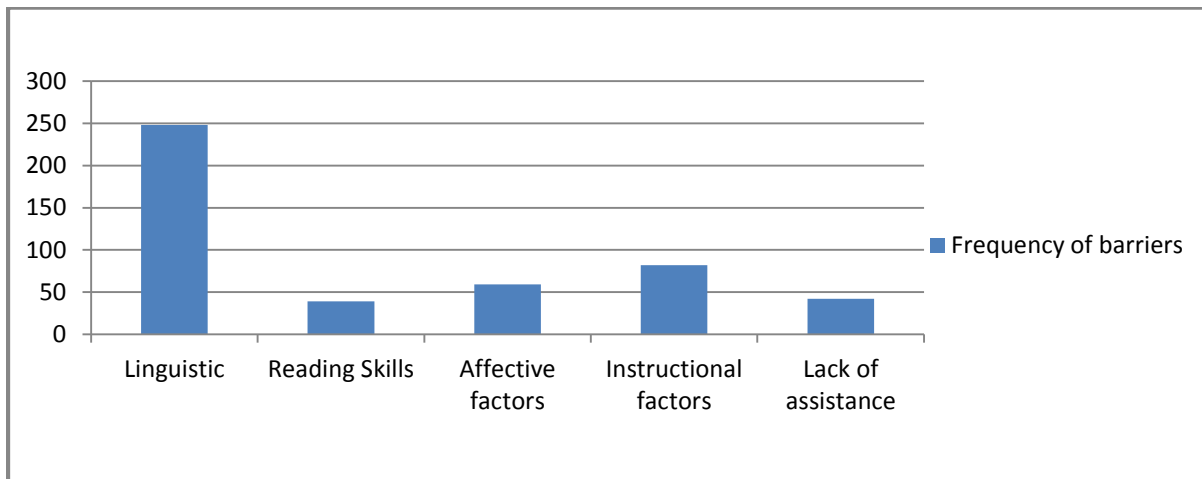
**Table 9.** Students’ perceptions of the lack of assistance and resource

Theme	Codes	Sub-codes	f	Students
Lack of assistance	Lack of assistance & Resources [Total f: 42]	Computer-Internet	16	S5, S11, S16, S17, S19, S20, S22, S26, S31, S33, S40, S41, S43, S45, S46, S53
		Resource (dictionary)	15	S1, S3, S4, S8, S9, S14, S17, S19, S21, S22, S29, S31, S32, S53, S59
		Family assistance (EFL context)	11	S7, S12, S16, S17, S19, S22, S26, S27, S32, S69, S116

As demonstrated in the Table 9, 41 of the students complained about the lack of assistance and resource impeding their learning progress. Village school students referred the lack of computer and dictionary as important factors for their failure in learning vocabulary, comprehension, doing homework and tests. Some students (f=11) also mentioned the lack of parental assistance in doing homework and practising English.

S21. “... I can’t translate the paragraphs because I don’t have a dictionary.”

- S22. “ ... I have difficulties because my parents don’t know English and also my sister doesn’t help me...”
- S32. “... There is nobody to speak English.”
- S59. “... I don’t know some of the words in the paragraphs. I look up the dictionary but I can’t find so I don’t understand the paragraphs well.”
- S69. “... I think it is (English learning) due to the lack of practice ....” (interview)



**Figure 1.** The total frequency of English learning barriers faced by middle school students

As seen in the bar chart, the major barrier for learning English is due to linguistic aspects including vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation respectively (see table 3, 4, 5). Instructional and affective factors constitute the other important barriers. The relevant discussion will be provided in the next section.

#### 4. Discussion and Suggestions

The study aimed to find out what kind of barriers the middle school students face while learning English in Turkey. The findings revealed that linguistic (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, speaking and reading skills), instructional (classroom management, teaching skills and methodology, tests, homework, coursebook, teacher as an individual, technology and background), affective factors (attitude, motivation, anxiety and self-confidence) and lack of assistance and resource (EFL context, lack of technology, internet and dictionary) constitute major difficulties in the learning English process.

Some possible reasons can be considered to discuss the present results when the literature and some theories have been taken into account. First of all, the major barriers to learning English have been found as due to some features of English vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Especially, the failure in remembering words as stated by most of the students is most likely because of the lack of (effective) strategy use. However, most of them may not be aware of the range of strategies to learn vocabulary effectively because of their age. For example, S35 mentioned her strategy use as a successful solution to her vocabulary learning problems both in the interview and writing;

*“... I overcame my difficulty by playing (designing) word games with my friends after each unit. This developed my lexicon and I can memorize words better now...”*

What S44 reflected also implies the importance of using ICT or some software programmes for encouraging self regulating as Çelik et al. (2012), Kocaman and Kızılkaya Cumaoğlu (2014) highlighted this issue as a fun and facilitating tool in promoting L2 development;

*“...If I had a computer and internet, I could play the online games my teacher mentioned...so that I believe I could learn English and vocabulary better...they (computer games) are enjoyable...”*

Use of dictionary is also another problem causing difficulty and lack of vocabulary knowledge in learning English. Therefore, students should be provided with more efficient dictionaries. For example, S56 states her experience in a desperate way as below while using a dictionary;

*“...I sometimes do tests...but I can't find the words in my dictionary...when there are so many unknown words, I really get stressed and have headache...”*

Also, this statement may refer to the importance of affective factors as crucial for language learning in terms of the role and efficiency of dictionaries as necessary resources.

Grammar is another problematic issue for students regarding their inability to construct well-formed sentences and some of them focus on this feature as a major problem such as S40 (see table 4). This may result from the ineffective and heavy emphasis on grammar teaching in English courses. Yet, the L1 interference seems highly influential to pose problems for developing grammatical competence as nearly 57 students stated in the present study. Similarly, as claimed by Bayraktaroğlu (2008), the orthographic differences may have influenced the students' success and skills in pronunciation as S25 implied (see table 5). Also, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) refer to anxiety due to pronunciation as a barrier in developing speaking skill as S14 said (see table 5).

Secondly, the inefficiency of instructional factors such as teaching skills, techniques (e.g. grammar-based), classroom management and lack of consciousness on the learners' needs, proficiency and skills pose barriers to the English learning process. The noise, boring and traditional activities and lack of technological devices can demotivate students to further their interest in learning English.

Additionally, the lack of an English speaking atmosphere (Turkey as an EFL country) outside the class which results in the least amount of practice influences the improvement of the target language adversely. The little guidance by parents most probably due to socio-economic, educational background or attitude may make young learners feel alone and desperate to manage the complex stages of learning English as can be understood by the reflections of S22 and S69 (see table 9).

The affective factors such as negative attitudes towards English due to cultural (resistance to power of English) or instructional issues, anxiety, demotivation and lack of confidence may cause resistance to learn and improve English. S60 insisted that he favours Turkish as an only language (mother tongue) to speak and has opposition to English as a foreign language (see table 8). Most of the students uncovered their fear of losing face, hatred, incapability and anxiety during the tests. Accordingly, the constant failure or the difficulty level of the activities may have brought about the lack of confidence, language learning anxiety and negative attitudes. Also, boring activities or fear of teacher (e.g. punishment) may be other threatening factors impeding the learning process. Thus teachers are important factors in the learning process. As warm and indirect way to imply that issue, S81 wrote;

*“I don't have much difficulty since the teacher teaches well, clearly and slowly. She is also very warm-hearted; ... I overcome the difficulties by getting help from her.”*

Some suggestions can be put forward to help learners overcome those difficulties as below;

- Learners should be trained for language learning strategies especially on vocabulary and grammar. As Oxford (2002) and Griffiths (2015) suggest, the strategy training should be integrated into classroom practices bearing some variables in mind such as the learner characteristics, goals, learning styles and any other contextual differences.
- However, teachers should design their own methodology based on their context of teaching that may require taking learner needs, characteristics, socio-economic issues (e.g. village schools), stakeholders, national examinations, etc. into account (Ur, 2013).
- Considering the importance of affective factors in learning a language (Krashen, 1985), teachers should design classroom practices to enhance students' motivation, attitudes and self-confidence. Accordingly, the use of enjoyable activities (e.g. games), raising consciousness about the importance of English in today's world (e.g. career) and preparing activities with an eye to mixed abilities can serve those purposes.
- In-service trainings should be increased to lead teachers to update themselves on new techniques and trends in language teaching throughout the country. Also, teachers should be encouraged to carry out action research to keep themselves alert about their students' learning barriers and needs.
- Technology and use of visuals should be used more frequently for more effective teaching. For instance, teachers should implement more enjoyable and online games to motivate learners' for

learning English, especially vocabulary. Also, teachers should direct learners to use online learning English games as much as possible and integrate them into the classroom practice, as well since the technology is an indispensable part of our daily life and can be an effective way to help learners regulate their own learning.

The present study has some limitations. A limited number of 6th and 8th graders in city schools participated in the study due to the reluctance of learners or teachers. Also, the study included just a small scale of the target sample. Thus, the study should be replicated with a large number of participants involving schools in different regions of Turkey. A study investigating the views of teachers on the barriers faced by learners during the English learning process may also be beneficial to see the match or mismatch between the perceptions as well as the possible reasons for the learning barriers in a more reliable, valid and detailed way.

To conclude, the study explored the English learning barriers experienced by the middle school students. As a result of the descriptive analysis, the findings revealed that middle school students have difficulty in linguistic areas of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation respectively. Apart from linguistic features, the instructional factors such as teachers' choice of methodology, teaching and management skills, affective factors and the lack of assistance due to the contextual constraints of being an EFL country have adverse effects on the English learning and development. The findings and suggestions could be helpful for teachers, administrators as well as families to minimise the English learning problems by taking the value of English into account in the globalizing world. Besides, further research with a larger sample is really worthwhile to be conducted to get more comprehensive results considering the constraining variables in the present study because early experiences can really hinder the future attitudes, motivation and success of learning English and relevant results can lead to better changes in the foreign language learning curriculum in our country.

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