

Turkish University Students' Experiences of Learning English: Is English Class a Dark Forest or a Clear Sky?

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Article information

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|------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| Submission | 17/07/2020 | Revision received | 21/08/2020 |
| Acceptance | 15/09/2020 | Publication date | 20/10/2020 |

Keywords: EFL education, English as a foreign language, language anxiety, language learning problems, learner autonomy

Abstract: With the continued failure of large numbers of university students to achieve proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL), a great deal of research has been devoted to issues such as outdated curriculum design, inadequacies of course materials, poor teacher quality, and learner motivation, among other concerns. However, few studies have focused on the opinions of learners themselves regarding the factors that may impact their efforts to develop competence in English. Taking the view that students may have useful insights with respect to their successes or failures, the researchers designed this qualitative study as a means to clarify, via open-ended survey questions, the opinions of Turkish university students concerning both the external and internal factors they attributed to their proficiency levels after a decade or more of studying the language. The results revealed that the participants were highly dissatisfied with their achievement, an issue for which they largely faulted external factors such as the Turkish education system, and in particular, the quality of their teachers. Internal issues such as anxiety and poor motivation were also mentioned, but overall, the students did not take much personal responsibility for their perceived lack of success.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

İngilizce eğitimi, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, yabancı dil kaygısı, dil öğrenme problemleri, öğrenen özerkliği

Türk Üniversite Öğrencilerinin İngilizce Öğrenme Deneyimleri: İngilizce Dersleri Karanlık Bir Orman Mı, Yoksa Açık Bir Gökyüzü Mü?

Özet: Çok sayıda üniversite öğrencisinin yabancı dil olarak İngilizce derslerinde istenen yeterliliğine ulaşamaması, diğer kaygıların yanı sıra, miadını doldurmuş müfredat tasarımı, ders materyallerinin yetersizliği, düşük öğretmen kalitesi ve öğrenci motivasyonu gibi konularda birçok araştırma yapılmıştır. Buna rağmen çok az sayıda çalışma öğrencilerin İngilizce yeterliliklerini geliştirme çabalarını etkileyebilecek faktörlerle ilgili olarak öğrencilerin kendi görüşlerine başvurmuştur. Öğrencilerin kendi başarı ya da başarısızlıkları ile ilgili en güvenilir bilgiye sahip kişiler oldukları düşüncesiyle, bu nitel araştırma Türkiye’de bir üniversitede eğitim gören ve neredeyse on yılı aşkın bir süre İngilizce eğitimi almış olan öğrencilerin başarısızlıkları ile ilgili iç ve dış faktörleri yansıtabilecekleri açık uçlu anket soruları kullanılarak yürütülmüştür. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların genel İngilizce başarılarından hiç memnun olmadıklarını ve bu başarısızlıklarında Türk eğitim sisteminin yapısının ve özellikle de öğretmen kalitesi gibi dış faktörlerin etkili olduğunu düşündüklerini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Ayrıca, katılımcılar kaygı ve düşük motivasyon gibi başarısızlıklarını etkileyen iç faktörlerden bahsetmiş olsalar da, araştırma sonuçları genel olarak öğrencilerin algılanan başarı eksikliğinden dolayı çok fazla kişisel sorumluluk almadıklarını göstermiştir.

To Cite This Article: Çelik, S., & Bayraktar Çepni, S. (2020). Turkish university students' experience of learning English: Is English class a dark forest or a clear sky? *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 14(2), 97-118.

1. Introduction

The status of the English language as a contact medium throughout the global community is widely acknowledged. Over the past twenty years, in particular, its prominence has expanded to such a degree that those who use English as either a second or foreign language now outnumber its native speakers (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004). Therefore, as Collins (2010) points out, “Non-English-speaking countries have no choice but to learn English” in order to remain competitive on an international level (p. 97). While Turkey falls under the classification of those countries in which English has no standing as an official language, the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has been highly emphasized by educational policy makers (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2005; Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004; Collins, 2010; Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Kızıldağ, 2009) in order to ensure the continued economic, educational and social progress of Turkish citizens. Thus, instruction in English has been mandated by the Ministry of National Education from the primary school level through university to equip citizens with the foreign language skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to achieve this goal. Yet, despite this emphasis on English language education, a significant percentage of Turkish university graduates leave school without achieving a sufficient degree of mastery to allow for effective communication. As Kızıldağ (2009) notes, “We have been hearing of those who have been learning English at schools for years; yet many could not reach the desired communicative level to follow even a basic level of conversation” (p. 189). The continued efforts of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to remedy this issue have included the recent reform and restructuring of the educational system (Besimoğlu, Serdar, & Yavuz, 2010; Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Kırkgöz, 2007). In addition, a plan to hire thousands of native English speakers to work in Turkey’s public schools (Coşkun, 2013) has also been considered as a potential solution; however, this proposal has not moved past the discussion phase. This study provides insights into the perspectives of language learners on the current state of English teaching in the state school sector.

1.1. An Overview of Current English Language Instruction in Turkey

As Büyükkantarçioğlu (2004) explains, English, as well as French and German, has been included in the curricula of state-run Turkish schools since the early 1920s. However, recognizing the increasing importance of English as an international language following the end of the Second World War, MoNE focused particular attention on English, making EFL instruction compulsory for all Turkish elementary school students (Karahan, 2007). Initially, English lessons were offered beginning in the 6th grade; however, following the passage of a statute in 1997, which required all Turkish children to undergo at least eight years of formal schooling, English was taught as a mandatory subject from the 4th grade onward (Bora-Günak, 2010; Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; ESKİCUMALI & TÜREDİ, 2010). Furthermore, recent modifications to the Turkish educational system that are aimed in part at improving English language learning outcomes mandate that instruction in English begin in the 2nd grade, continuing through the final year of high school (Çelik & Karaca, 2014; Çelik & Gül Peker, 2019; Kırkgöz, Çelik, & Arıkan, 2016). Ongoing English language study is also required for all university students, particularly through compulsory English courses in their freshman and sophomore years in college (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004). Furthermore, some universities and/or departments require incoming students to take a standardized English proficiency examination. Those who do not achieve a satisfactory score are required to successfully complete a one-year English preparatory program before they can officially start their degree programs.

1.2. Reasons for EFL Learners' Lack of Success

Given the clear necessity for developing communicative competence in the English language and the constant failure of students, not only in Turkey, but worldwide, to develop a desired level of proficiency despite years of instruction, an enormous amount of effort has been directed at understanding the reasons for this deficiency. The current literature reveals an extensive array of factors contributing to this widespread problem, ranging from lack of opportunity for interaction with English speakers to institutional problems to the shortcomings of the learners themselves. These obstacles can be grouped into several broad categories, including the status of English as a foreign language (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Kızıldağ, 2009; Maniruzzaman, 2010; Rabab'ah, 2005; Wiriyachitra, 2002); the instructional models employed in schools (Kızıldağ, 2009; Rabab'ah, 2005; Zhong, 2010); ineffective teaching methodologies (Ahmad, Ahmed, Bukhari, & Bukhari, 2011; Kırkgöz, 2007; Maniruzzaman, 2010; Rabab'ah, 2005); the characteristics of classroom instructors (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004; Kızıldağ, 2009; Maniruzzaman, 2010; Turula, 2002; Wiriyachitra, 2002); traditional classroom learning environments (Aydın, 2008; Lin & Warden, 1998; Tanveer, 2007; Turula, 2002; Wei & Elias 2011); linguistic issues and the mechanics of speaking (Kuehn, 2012; Maniruzzaman, 2010; Rabab'ah, 2005); cultural issues in relation to the target language and its speakers (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009; Çelik & Erbay, 2013; Genç İter & Güzeller, 2005; Karahan, 2007); and various internal and personal factors (Besimoğlu et al., 2010; Karahan, 2007; Khanwal & Khurshid, 2012; Rabab'ah, 2005; Thang, Gobel, Mohd, Suppiah, & Suppiah, 2011). Given these challenges, further studies must be conducted to address the issues perceived by language learners themselves.

1.2.1. *Instructional model and factors that affect the teaching of English*

Studies that have investigated the existing problems with English language teaching point to certain factors that affect the acquisition of language skills. For example, the status of English as a foreign language and lack of access to native speakers are often cited as affecting students' ability to achieve proficiency in speaking and understanding English (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Kızıldağ, 2009; Rabab'ah, 2005; Wiriyachitra, 2002). In order for EFL learners to develop communicative competence, it is necessary to practice the language in real life situations; however, in many parts of the world, English use is primarily restricted to an academic setting (Rabab'ah, 2005). Therefore, although English instruction is continually emphasized in the educational process, the limited opportunities for students to interact with other speakers of English outside the classroom setting tend to restrict their ability to develop true communicative skills (Wiriyachitra, 2002) or to retain the material they have been taught.

An additional factor was identified by Maniruzzaman (2010) who discusses the importance of using an appropriate instructional model in English language instruction, noting that "syllabus designers, materials developers and test constructors play a vital role in the successful implementation of a second/foreign language teaching programme" (para. 49). Yet those who are placed in charge of designing English language courses often lack the relevant knowledge and experience; and as a result, "they fail to meet the learner's needs as well as the national demand" (para. 49). In the Turkish context, for example, EFL teachers in state-run schools are required to use standardized teaching texts prepared by the MoNE (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004; Çelik & Erbay, 2013; Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Kaya & Ok, 2020); however, these materials are prepared by Turkish writers who may have little

experience with English beyond the formalized classroom context, and therefore, as Büyükkantarçioğlu (2004) points out, “the books used do not meet the communicative needs of the students” (p. 49).

Furthermore, Rabab’ah (2005) faults an unbalanced curriculum, inadequate classroom resources and low teaching standards for undesirable learner outcomes; while Kızıldağ (2009) argues that an over-scheduled curriculum and unrealistic teaching goals often stand in the way of learner success, as instructors may be obliged to rush through material in order to cover all of the required content within an allotted period of time.

Standardized testing is another issue seen as inhibiting the development of communicative ability in English. As Wiriyachitra (2002) states, the educational systems of numerous countries require “university entrance examinations which demand a tutorial teaching and learning style” (p. 2); because scoring well on these examinations is a prerequisite for university admittance, and standardized tests stress rules of grammar and vocabulary rather than speaking and listening abilities, EFL instructors are often pressured to focus on these skill areas at the expense of speaking proficiency. Likewise, Zhong (2010) argues that standardized examinations may serve as the primary motivating factor in language learning; in China, for instance, exam scores are taken into account by companies in their hiring decisions, giving Chinese students a great deal of economic incentive to focus on testing, rather than on communicative skills. Existence of standardized testing leads to similar concerns such as disregarding the risk for the development of communicative ability in the Turkish context. In addition, the need to prepare students for standardized tests impacts the teaching and learning of English in Turkey, resulting in teacher and textbook-centered and grammar-based classroom practices (British Council & TEPAV, 2013; Hatipoğlu, 2016).

1.2.2. *Teaching methodologies*

Current research into effective teaching methodologies indicates communicative language learning and a student-centered approach as being instrumental in learner success (Besimoğlu et al., 2010; Rabab’ah, 2005; Zhong, 2010). However, the effectiveness of these methodologies has been hindered due to the continued adherence to teacher-centered instructional approaches (Kaya, 2018; Kozikoğlu, 2014), as well as lack of assessment of listening and speaking skills (Kaya, 2018) in Turkey. Instead, EFL teachers in many cases continue to practice a more traditional, teacher-centered approach, in which the instructor is the authority in the classroom and students are expected to assume a passive role (Rabab’ah, 2005). Emphasis is frequently on mastering lists of vocabulary and grammatical rules, rather than on developing communicative skills such as listening and speaking. Rabab’ah emphasizes that, despite the current focus of many teacher education programs on communicative language learning, EFL teachers tend to teach in the way that they were taught; therefore, in his view:

Teacher-training programs [are] not highly successful in changing the teachers’ methodology. The adopted methodology is claimed to be eclectic and to focus on communicative approaches to language teaching, but because of teachers’ practices in the classroom, it is more likely a grammar translation method. (pp. 187-188)

Researchers such as Ahmad et al. (2011) contend that, under these circumstances, “the learning difficulties of students are directly related to the nature of curriculum or methods of teaching” (p. 21). Khanwal & Khurshid (2010) likewise highlight the problems related to

foreign language teaching methods, noting that a significant number of university students in Pakistan report being dissatisfied with the current teaching methodologies employed in EFL classrooms. A similar concern is relevant in Turkey, where the failure of Turkish students to use the English language despite over thousands of hours of classroom instruction is partly associated with traditional grammar-based approaches and methodologies (British Council & TEPAV, 2003; Çelik, 2017; Özşevik 2010, Uztosun, 2013). The gap between the desired communicative learner outcomes in English and the continued use of traditional instructional practices has been linked to a strict adherence to repetitive textbooks, teacher-fronted activities, traditional classroom discourse and the persistent use of learners' first language (Turkish) to teach English (British Council & TEPAV, 2003). This situation is further exacerbated by the emphasis of the Turkish education system on standardized testing, which motivates both teachers and learners to focus on the aspects of the language that are covered by testing – namely, grammar and vocabulary – rather than on the communicative elements (British Council & TEPAV, 2003).

1.2.3. Qualifications of classroom instructors

The shortcomings of EFL instructors have been the subject of considerable attention (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004; Doğan, Çapan, & Cığerci, 2020; Kızıldağ, 2009; Maniruzzaman, 2010; Wei & Elias, 2011; Wiriyaçitra, 2002). Kızıldağ (2009), for example, notes that Turkish EFL teachers are often overburdened, teaching 20 or more class hours per week in addition to administrative and counseling duties. Furthermore, they frequently lack sufficient understanding of language teaching, and in many cases, they do not take advantage of professional development opportunities beyond what is required by law. In addition, EFL teachers in Turkish public schools are not always well-compensated; therefore, the most highly qualified teachers tend to gravitate to better-paying jobs in private schools, leading to a constant shortage of skilled English language instructors available for work in state-run institutions (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004).

Noting the inadequate achievement levels of English language students in Thailand, Wiriyaçitra (2002) expresses that EFL teachers often lack knowledge both English language and of the culture of native English speakers. Similarly, Maniruzzaman (2010) blames “faults in teaching, indifference of the teacher to how the learner learns pronunciation of difficult words/expressions and the teacher’s lack of training” (para. 5) for the poor performance of foreign language learners. Wei and Elias (2011) also indicate lack of teacher preparation as being instrumental in poor learner outcomes in Malaysia, explaining that the teachers assigned to teach EFL classes often have little or no training in English language instruction. On the other hand, in another survey of Malaysian students, Thang, Gobel, Mohd, Suppiah, & Suppiah (2011) found that, in line with the level of respect afforded to teachers in Asian cultures, university students typically credited their instructors with their successes, while blaming their failures on internal factors such as their own lack of effort and ability.

1.2.4. Classroom environment

The traditional, teacher-centered classroom environment has been linked by numerous researchers to language anxiety, which is claimed to have a negative impact on language learning (Aydın, 2008; Lin & Warden, 1998; Tanveer, 2007; Turula, 2002). For instance, in a survey of 346 Taiwanese university students studying English as a foreign language, Lin

and Warden (1998) underscored several factors related to the classroom setting that appeared to adversely impact learning. Most notably, the participants cited fear of being laughed at by other students, anxiety about making grammatical mistakes, and fear of examinations as deterrents to language acquisition. In addition, prior negative experiences related to classroom overcrowding and the threat of physical punishment by schoolteachers were cited as reasons for participants' reluctance to participate in English classes.

According to Kızıldağ (2009), overcrowded classrooms and heavy teaching loads contribute to a stressful learning environment in Turkish schools, while Aydın (2008) emphasizes the fear of exams and negative evaluation as contributing to the inhibition of EFL learners. Likewise, a study conducted by Turula (2002) with adult EFL students in Poland highlighted classroom-related factors such as the judgmental behavior of teachers and fellow students, a sense of competition and isolation, and lack of control as affecting participants' attitudes towards learning.

1.2.5. *Linguistic problems/mechanics of speaking*

For learners whose native language has a dissimilar linguistic structure to English, mother tongue interference can create a considerable impediment. With regard to Thai and Taiwanese students, for instance, Kuehn (2012) reveals that “interference from a student's native language is a major problem in EFL and ESL teaching and learning” (para. 1); he explains that difficulties with pronunciation and following English sentence structure present a significant challenge in developing speaking and writing skills. Maniruzzaman (2010) likewise notes that differences from the native language in sentence construction, as well as lexical issues and problems with pronunciation, stress and intonation, may “seriously retard the learning of EFL by the Bengali speaking learner” (para. 2). Rabab'ah (2005) further stresses mother tongue interference as a deterrent to developing speaking skills in English and argues that learners must develop communicative strategies such as “paraphrase, description and gesture” (p. 192) in order to overcome the difficulties they may experience when poor pronunciation, lack of vocabulary knowledge, or improper grammatical forms interfere with their communicative goals. Similarly, mother tongue interference has been noted in the Turkish context as a major impediment to learning of English as a foreign language, particularly with respect to writing (Elkılıç, 2012; Kesmez, 2015; Kırkgöz, 2010), grammar (Erarslan & Höl, 2014; Kırmızı & Karıcı, 2017; Mede, Tural, Ayaz, Çalışır, & Akın, 2014), vocabulary (Erarslan & Höl, 2014; Erkaya, 2012; Kırmızı & Karıcı, 2017; Sönmez Boran, 2018) and speaking and pronunciation (Elkılıç & Aydın, 2009; Yıldız, 2016). As such, it can be inferred from the studies mentioned here that language teachers and material developers must be better prepared to take the necessary actions to minimize these problems.

1.2.6. *Cultural issues*

It has been argued by numerous experts that culture and language are interrelated and cannot be separated in the foreign language teaching process (Baker, 2012; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004; Kramsch, 1993, 1998, 2004). In this regard, adding a cultural dimension to language teaching is held to add depth of understanding of the target language and to promote the development of communication skills (Alptekin, 2002; Baker, 2012; Byram et al., 2002; Çelik & Erbay, 2013; Zorba & Çakır, 2019). However, the cultural aspects of language learning may, in some instances, become an inhibiting factor. For instance, in a study of 150 students at a southwestern Turkish

university, Genç İltter and Güzeller (2005) found that although the majority of their respondents had an overall positive view of English-speaking cultures, nearly 60% stated that they were uncomfortable with the culture-related words found in their EFL textbooks, and over one third of the students surveyed felt that the textbook publishers were trying to promote British culture. While the participants in Karahan's (2007) study likewise expressed a favorable attitude toward native English speakers and their culture in general, they took exception to the use of English in the Turkish context.

On the other hand, in their investigation regarding the motivation and attitudes of Yemeni students for learning English, Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) contend that some Arab learners resist English language instruction due to their rejection of European and American culture. As one participant stated, "I don't like to be a part of the West and their culture ... it is not a reason [to learn English] at all" (p. 41). However, other respondents reported that distrust of the West was, in fact, a motivating factor in their desire to learn English, stating that by comprehending the language, they would be better able to "understand Western cunning" (p. 41). As one participant explained, "If you understand the language of people and a culture, you can never be harmed by it" (p. 44). The mutual interaction between language and culture must be considered thoroughly, and cultural factors that inhibit language learning must be eliminated or minimized.

1.3. Internal Factors Affecting EFL Learners

According to constructivist theory, learning is an active process that involves the creation of meaning on an individual level; thus, the acquisition of knowledge is highly personal, and the understanding achieved by each learner is affected by his or her attitudes and experiences (Besimoğlu et al., 2010; Seifert, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1999). It follows, then, that internal factors can play a significant role in the outcome of EFL instruction. Numerous issues, such as poor motivation, negative views of self-efficacy, lack of self-confidence, and even the starting age of English instruction have been cited as having an impact on learner success.

To illustrate, in a survey of over 1,000 English learners attending six Malaysian universities, Thang et al. (2011) examined the causes that students attributed to their level of achievement in English. Their findings revealed that the participants overwhelmingly pointed to internal obstacles, such as lack of effort, failure to prepare for lessons, disinterest in learning, and perceived lack of ability as having a negative impact on their success, as opposed to external issues such as the quality of instruction or course design. Similarly, in a study involving 240 undergraduates enrolled in EFL classes at a Turkish university, Besimoğlu et al. (2010) examined the reasons that students attributed to their success or failure in acquiring the expected language skills. In their findings, the internal aspects of interest, effort, and learning strategy were stressed much more frequently than external factors such as teachers, the classroom environment, and educational policy as contributing to their achievement, both for students who performed well and for those who earned poor marks. Also noting the effects of learner attitudes on achievement, İnal, Evin & Saracaloğlu (2010) point out in their study on Turkish high school seniors that those who reported negative attitudes toward learning English generally achieved lower marks than those with a more favorable outlook on EFL instruction. Rabab'ah (2005) likewise contends that the inability of Arab learners to develop sufficient communicative skills is frequently a consequence of low motivation for studying English.

Taking an alternative approach to the issue, Karahan's (2007) study on the attitudes of 190 eighth-graders in a private elementary school toward English found a strong correlation between the age of students at the onset of instruction and their perspectives toward learning. While the participants generally felt that English was an important part of their education, the students who had begun EFL instruction before the age of six typically had a more positive attitude toward learning and expressed a greater degree of self-confidence in speaking; however, those students who had started their English lessons at six years of age or older reported less interest in learning and had a more negative view of their ability to use English in a practical setting.

It is clear from the evidence that the failure of any particular group of students to develop sufficient English skills cannot be ascribed to a singular set of circumstances, as the causes for poor learner outcomes are often complex and intertwined. However, Table 1, based on the review of literature outlined above, provides a summary of the major factors influencing students' failure to master an adequate level of proficiency in English. The data in this table were extracted from relevant research produced in the last two decades. Over 25 articles and theses containing reasons for students' failure to develop proficiency in English were analyzed, and common themes were clustered around the titles provided in the table.

Table 1.

Reasons for Students' Failure to Develop Proficiency in English

| | |
|---|--|
| Foreign Language Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of opportunity to use the language outside the classroom ● Lack of access to native speakers |
| Instructional Model | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poor curricular design ● Inadequate instructional materials ● Standardized testing |
| Teaching Methodology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher-centered approach ● Rote learning ● Emphasis on grammar and accuracy, rather than on communicative skills |
| Classroom Instructors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teachers' lack of training ● Teachers' poor understanding of foreign language instruction ● Excessive teaching loads ● Teachers' attitudes toward language teaching ● Teachers' attitudes toward the needs of students |
| Classroom Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negative attitudes of peers (i.e., other students) ● Insufficient classroom resources ● Overcrowding ● Lack of sufficient class time to cover the required material |
| Linguistic Problems / Mechanics of Speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interference from native language ● Dissimilarities to native language ● Difficulties with pronunciation ● Unfamiliar grammatical rules |
| Cultural Issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rejection of English-speaking/Western culture ● Distrust of native English speakers ● Attitudes toward use of English in the Turkish context |
| Internal Factors Affecting EFL Learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low motivation ● Lack of self-confidence ● Insufficient effort ● Lack of enjoyment |

1.4. Purpose of the Study

Despite a high level of concern for the continued failure of large numbers of Turkish university students to achieve proficiency in English, the majority of the related research has focused on this issue in terms of the inadequacies of course materials and design, the characteristics of English teachers, and the views of students regarding the shortcomings of English language instruction. Few studies (e.g., Demir, 2017; Genç, 2016; Yurtsever Bodur & Arıkan, 2017) have focused on the opinions of Turkish learners themselves regarding the factors that may have had a negative impact on their efforts to develop competence in English. However, the researchers in this case believed that it was ultimately the students themselves who could provide the greatest insight into their learning experiences. Accordingly, this study was designed as a means to clarify university senior students' opinions concerning their level of proficiency, as well as the causes they attributed to their perceived success or failure, following a decade or more of EFL instruction, by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceived levels of proficiency in English?
2. How satisfied are the students with their perceived levels of proficiency in English?"
3. What are the students' perspectives on factors affecting their proficiency levels in English?

In answering these questions, the researchers hoped to supplement the limited research into aspect of the ongoing failure of Turkish students to achieve communicative competence in English. In addition, it was anticipated that the study would provide educators and educational policy makers with critical information that may assist in the development of the curricular tools needed to increase EFL learners' competence and improve the quality of English language instruction.

2. Method

Because the study was concerned with the views and experiences of university students, a qualitative research design was employed to explore their opinions and concerns and gain insights into how they perceived the issues that emerged (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

2.1. Setting and Participants

One hundred eighty eight university level students in their senior year participated in the study after being recruited via convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling used to include the members of the target population who were easily accessible in terms of contact and reach. While time- and cost-effective, convenience samples may not be representative of the population studied. However, this will be of a comparatively minor concern in a qualitative study of this nature that does not aim to make generalizations about the results (Saumure & Given, 2018).

The rationale for selecting senior students was that these participants were expected to have completed all of the compulsory English lessons, from primary school through their university education; therefore, the data gathered from their experience with English

learning was considered to yield better results. The participants ranged in ages from 18 to 26, including 78 males and 110 females. Students from numerous fields of study were included. No attempts were made to compare differences between ages, genders and majors. The departments/programs and distribution of participants from each department are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

List of Departments/Programs and Number of Participants in Each Department

| Department | Number of Participants | Percentage (~) |
|--|------------------------|----------------|
| • Educational Sciences (Psychological Counseling and Guidance) | 47 | 25.00 |
| • Fine Arts Education (Art Education, Music Education) | 2 | 1.06 |
| • Mathematics and Science Education (Biology Education, Chemistry Education, Mathematics Education, Physics Education, Science Education) | 63 | 33.51 |
| • Special Education (Gifted Education, Hearing-impaired Education, Mentally disabled Education, Visually-impaired Education) | 33 | 17.55 |
| • Turkish and Social Sciences Education (Geography Education, History Education, Social Studies Education, Turkish Education, Turkish Language and Literature Education) | 43 | 22.87 |
| TOTAL | 188 | 100.0 |

2.2. Data Collection, Procedures and Analysis

To collect the data, a background-section-added version of the “Perspectives of University Seniors on Learning English as a Foreign Language” questionnaire was administered by one of the researchers to 305 students studying in the Faculty of Education at a state university in northeastern Turkey. A total of 188 questionnaires were completed, constituting a return rate of 61%. The participants received a printed copy of the questionnaire and asked to respond to the questions either before or after a class period. They were informed of the purpose of the research, and only those who volunteered to participate were included in the study. The questionnaire consisted of an open-ended format that gave the participants an opportunity to express their views in a free-flowing manner. The first section of the questionnaire included questions through which information on participants’ age, department, and gender were collected. The second section inquired about the participants’ perspectives on learning English and consisted of eight open-ended questions, each of which was developed by the researchers in light of the existing literature in order to elicit the perceptions of the participants concerning their English language learning journey. The participants were asked to provide responses to the following eight questions:

1. How would you rate your level of English proficiency?
2. Are you satisfied with your current level of English? If not, how would you improve if you could?

3. How do you feel about your English learning experience overall?
4. Do you think learning English is difficult? Why or why not?
5. What do you think is your biggest problem with learning English? Please be specific.
6. Do you think English language teaching in Turkey is effective in general? Please explain your answer.
7. If you could change one thing about your experience learning English, what would it be, and why?
8. Do you think you will continue to use your English skills after you graduate? Why or why not?

As the participants' level of proficiency in English might either limit their responses or prevent them from answering, all questions were translated into Turkish, their first language. The responses were written in Turkish, and the researchers translated them into English prior to the analysis.

The qualitative data were systematically analyzed through the ATLAS-ti (Version 9) software program (<https://atlasti.com>), which was developed to arrange, reassemble, and manage data to reveal explanations based on the responses of the participants. The software enables researchers to code the data according to recurring patterns in the perceptions of study participants and aid researchers in making inferences about a certain theme or topic. The results of the analysis are provided in the following section. For anonymity, no names or identifying details are used to refer to the participants; instead, a participant number is given next to P (participant), as in P61.

A number of strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. As the data were collected from senior university students studying in various departments, the findings of the study revealed the perspectives of a wide range of participants. Therefore, while the aim was not to generalize the findings, the results of the study have the potential to yield suggestions for similar settings (Cope, 2014). Moreover, peer debriefings were utilized to support the credibility of the analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Morse, 2017). After the data were analyzed and clustered around the recurring themes, these themes were checked by two expert colleagues in English language teaching who were not involved in the study, and a few slight changes were made to the reporting based on their feedback and mutual exchange of interpretations.

3. Results

The participants' perceptions of their proficiency and satisfaction in learning English are described in the following section. Table 4 demonstrates the perspectives of the participants on their English proficiency levels.

Table 3.

Student Perspectives on Their Proficiency Level

| Perceived Proficiency Level | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| Very Low | 17.6 % |
| Low | 17.3% |
| Moderate | 55.9 % |
| High | 6.5 % |
| Very High | 2.7 % |

The data revealed that roughly 3% (n=5) of the participants regarded their proficiency level to be “very high”; while 6.5% (n=13) of the participants reported their proficiency as “high.” On the other hand, nearly 18% (n=33) rated themselves to have a “very low” proficiency level, and 17% (n=32) of them considered it to be “low.” However, more than half of the students, 56% (n=105), reported their proficiency level in English as “moderate.”

Regarding the participants' satisfaction with their current level of English, nearly 14% (n=27) stated that they were satisfied, while approximately 86% (n=161) of the participants reported that they were not happy with their proficiency.

After the participants rated their proficiency and satisfaction levels with English, they were prompted to report what they thought about the key factors affecting their proficiency levels in English. The analysis revealed that most of the students found language instruction in Turkey to be ineffective, leading to strong dissatisfaction, with a perceived moderate to low level of proficiency of over 90% of the participants. The participants' responses entailed several reasons regarding the poor English language outcomes. These were organized into two categories: external factors and internal factors. The external factors consisted of sub-categories such as problems with national English language curricula and lack of teacher qualifications; while the internal factors were reported to be lack of motivation, difficulty in retention, and speaking anxiety. In addition, the participants offered some solutions for the problems they cited.

3.1. External Factors

3.1.1. Problems with instruction in English classrooms

The fact that the participants had taken English courses for numerous years but had failed to develop competency in English stood out in many of their responses. In this regard, the national curricula and teaching programs were regarded to be insufficient. Nearly 32% of the participants shared that uninteresting instructional books, as well as teachers' heavy dependence on these books, hindered them from improving their language skills. Moreover, they reported receiving similar instruction in the grammar rules year after year, resulting in a failure to grasp other aspects of the language. For example, one of the participants (P15) stated:

I think I am competent enough to learn English; however, the techniques and procedures followed by teachers and national syllabus for English do not facilitate my learning. We have been taking English courses since primary school, but we still have to deal with similar grammar rules every year.

Twenty-eight percent of the participants shared that heavy emphasis on grammar instruction was one of the reasons for their failure in language attainment. Regarding the question asking about the difficulty level of the English courses in Turkey, one of the respondents (P97) stated, “It is very difficult, because instruction is flawed,” adding that “since many native speakers of English do not have a full mastery of their grammar, why do language teachers in Turkey keep insisting on [students] learning grammar perfectly?” Another participant (P56) also remarked on this issue, noting that “it took me years to understand perfect tenses. I wasted my time by trying to learn grammar rules, which resulted in failure in other skills—especially in speaking.”

The idea that memorization gets in the way of learning was likewise emphasized by the participants. Some of the students pointed out that the focus of language instruction in

Turkey included memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary, which were easily forgotten in a short space of time, leaving them with a low level of English after years of instruction. Indeed, when the respondents were asked what they found to be the most problematic area of language learning, 17% cited English teachers' tendency to make them memorize grammar rules and vocabulary while neglecting opportunities for using the language for interaction.

3.1.2. *Insufficiently qualified teachers*

Another idea that was frequently expressed by the participants about their English learning experiences was inadequately qualified teachers, as well as lack of facilities that could help them be more proficient. In this sense, they felt that teachers should be a source of guidance and motivation for cultivating their language skills; most of the students were cognizant that teachers' qualifications were important to their success in language classes. Yet, as one of the participants (P48) revealed, "I never heard my English teacher in high school speak a word in English. She used to teach in Turkish, leaving English to the passages of the [text]book."

Furthermore, as respondent (P3) pointed out, techniques that the teachers used in the classroom did little to encourage students to use the language in real life contexts. As the student argued, "The English that we have been offered in the classroom is not of great use to us to use in our daily lives. That is why we have big problems speaking and listening to English."

From another perspective, some participants mentioned having English teachers who were not actually trained to teach the language, while one in particular (P2) also referred to the constant turnover of English language teachers in primary school. In his words:

I did not have a chance to keep up my studies with one English language teacher. I had different teachers almost each term, which hindered me from focusing on my foreign language studies. Even worse, in high school, we had an English teacher who was a graduate of architecture.

3.1.3. *Lack of opportunities to practice English*

Another issue that emerged from the data was a lack of opportunity to use English for real-life communication. Overall, nearly 70% (n=131) of the respondents considered lack of practice in English as a barrier to their language improvement, reporting that their English language experience was limited to the classroom, impeding their use of the language in real life contexts. As one of the respondents (P50) expressed, "I wish we had had more practice in [speaking] English, rather than just taking notes from everything that the teacher wrote on the board." In this regard, according to participant P22, "language can only be mastered by experiencing it first-hand through practice. I have been learning English since primary school; however, due to a lack of practice, I do not remember much of it." Because of this concern, the vast majority of the respondents considered that travelling abroad was a must to acquire exposure to English and opportunities for practice.

3.2. **Internal Factors**

3.2.1. *Lack of motivation*

Similar to the results of Thang et al.'s (2011) study, most of the participants did not feel they received enough support and encouragement to learn English. They reported that they

felt lost and hopeless in the classroom and ultimately placed little to no value on their progress in English. Overall, the students expressed that their English teachers did not offer them the insights and guidance needed to thrive in the classroom by creating learning opportunities addressing their diverse needs, and this led to negative learning experiences and a lack of enthusiasm on their part. For example, one student (P61) explained:

My experience has shown me that English classes are boring, and teachers are out of touch. The English teachers I had failed to motivate me to practice English as needed; they had an outdated view of teaching, and their only concern was to stick to the national curriculum and textbooks, which made English classes uninteresting and demotivating.

Moreover, the last question on the open-ended questionnaire concerned the students' plan to use their English skills after graduation. Approximately 40% (n=75) of the participants believed that they would not need English after graduation when they started their teaching careers, reflecting a lack of external motivation. On the other hand, 11% (n=20) of the participants stated that they needed to improve their language skills, as they did not feel sufficiently qualified to use English in their professions. Almost half of the respondents were unsure about the possibility of using English upon graduation.

3.2.2. Lack of retention

According to the questionnaire results, the participants recognized that vocabulary knowledge was necessary for fluent production of the target language. However, their responses also indicated that the process of learning lexical items and retaining them over time was problematic. As of the participants (P60) revealed:

Because I did not have much chance to use my English in daily life, I used just to memorize the words before an exam and forget all of them few weeks later. I could not keep this knowledge long; that is why I think vocabulary retention is difficult.

Generally, they reported that they were not aware of appropriate strategies for vocabulary retention, and they held their teachers responsible for that, claiming that rote learning of grammar and vocabulary was not contextualized or meaningful. For example, participant P57 claimed:

My high school English teacher made me memorize five words a day, which contributed a lot to my lexical knowledge. At the time, I was trying to bring words together to express myself, and I was relatively successful. However, now, I have forgotten everything... I was not trained on how to keep my memory fresh and strong so I could retain the words for a long time. I was told just to memorize, and I did.

Another major concern of the students was their inability to pronounce and spell words in English correctly. They were aware that vocabulary knowledge required a blend of understanding the meaning with accompanying pronunciation and spelling skills. As participant P98 put it, "Knowledge of vocabulary along with accurate pronunciation and spelling is essential to be a good language user, but often, due to time constraints, teachers failed to provide us with such training."

3.3. Solutions Offered for Problems

To compensate for their failure in English, many of the participants – almost 57% (n=107) – reported that they had considered enrolling in private language courses to help them enhance their language skills. Their reasoning was exemplified by Participant P98: “I don’t think I will ever be able to learn it in school.”

Other measures that they believed would help them to improve their language proficiency were travelling abroad to study English, being an exchange student in an English-speaking country, watching movies and listening to songs in English, and taking advantage of opportunities to practice English more frequently.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the participants reported having experienced major difficulties and frustrations while learning English, over 70% (n=132) of them believed that learning English was easy. In this respect, they often claimed that they could have certainly become proficient in English if the quality of education were better, if the teachers were sufficiently competent, and if they had received an appropriate amount of instruction. They also highlighted the need for language teachers to be aware of the affective domain of learners, such as their emotions, values, and attitudes, in order to create a positive and optimal learning environment for students.

With respect to the students who reported success in learning English, most had taken an English preparatory program (prep class)—an intensive year-long program English language program offered in some high schools and universities prior to beginning their university education. The participants with prep class experience stated that the increased number of hours in English in these programs provided them with ample opportunities to learn and practice the language, and subsequently, they had developed solid basic language skills. However, they added that with reduced hours of English classes following the prep year and lack of practice over the subsequent years had led to a decline in their level of English. For example, one of the students (P55) acknowledged:

I studied in an Anatolian High School, which offered an intensive prep class year. During that year, I enhanced my English language skills so much that I was actually expressing myself comfortably. However, I now feel discouraged to speak English, as I have forgotten most of the things that I learnt.

The students who had not had a chance to study in a prep class, on the other hand, acknowledged that an intensive year of English would be essential to acquiring the necessary background knowledge in English to enhance their language skills on their own.

3.3.1. *Would have they changed about their English language learning experiences?*

In response to the question, “If you could change one thing about your experience learning English, what would it be?” the participants provided a wide variety of responses. Similar responses were compiled and organized into the following statements (starting with the most commonly reported):

- I would have enrolled in private courses (32% of the participants);
- I would have studied harder and practiced English more (20% of the participants);
- I would have tried to learn more vocabulary (16% of the participants);
- I would have tried to communicate with foreign people (14% of the participants);
- I would have read more books in English and listened to more songs (6% of the participants);

- I would have changed my English teacher (5% of the participants);
- I would have tried to improve my pronunciation (3% of the participants);
- I would not have acted biased against English (2% of the participants);
- I would have started learning English earlier (2% of the participants).

These general statements reveal that the participants considered the efforts they had exerted for learning English to be insufficient, and they recognized that there were options such as putting more individual time and effort into their studies. However, nearly one out of three referenced private English classes, indicating their mistrust in the public education system in terms of providing them with a desired level of proficiency in English.

4. Discussion

This study explored both the external and internal factors that the participants attributed to their proficiency levels after more than a decade of studying the language. The data revealed that, although most of the participants recognized the social and instrumental value of English, most of them were less than satisfied with their current English proficiency level. Supporting the views of Kızıldağ (2009), the participants stated that they were unable to communicate effectively in English despite years of English classes.

The participants elaborated on this failure by commenting on their own experiences; their reasons were grouped into two categories: external and internal factors. Problems with instruction in English classes, heavy emphasis on grammar and memorization, insufficiently qualified teachers and lack of practice were the most commonly mentioned external issues among the respondents.

At odds with the emphasis to the alignment of the instructional model in the teaching of English as a foreign language to the needs of learners (Maniruzzaman, 2010), the participants communicated displeasure and frustration with the overall nature and organization of English classes in terms of programs, materials and assessment. For instance, deficiencies in classroom texts and materials and teachers' heavy reliance on the allegedly dull books were brought up as potential reasons for their failure to learn English.

Similar to Rabab'ah (2005), who argued that traditional teacher-centered instruction turns students into passive receivers of language, the current study revealed that the participants' experiences with language learning had consisted of a heavy emphasis on grammar instruction and memorization, with a disregard for other skills such as speaking and listening. In the view of the participants, the lack of practice in these communicative skills led to challenges with long-term retention.

As with Wiriyachitra (2002) and Maniruzzaman (2010), the participants pointed to the personal and professional qualities of teachers as some of the main factors that affected their language development. They felt that their teachers should be more proficient in both English and English language teaching, noting that the techniques they used in their classes failed to create adequate learning opportunities. In this respect, because the participants did not perceive the teachers as providing scenarios in which they could use the language for authentic interactions, they felt that they lacked opportunities for practice. This concern was expressed as the primary barrier to language learning.

Lack of motivation to learn English and lack of retention of learned structures were the internal factors reported by the participants as impeding their successful language learning.

In agreement with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the participants thought they needed motivation and support in order to be engaged and invested in learning English. They added, however, that their classroom learning experience and their overall interactions with their teachers were not encouraging enough to raise their enthusiasm to put more time and effort into English. They believed they could have received more support from their teachers in practicing the language, particularly with respect to strategies to help them improve vocabulary and language use. To compensate for years of failure and to achieve better competence in English, most of the participants reported having considered enrolling in private language courses, travelling abroad and watching movies in English.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In the current study, the perspectives of the senior university students were elicited via an open-ended questionnaire to gain insight into the factors they believed contributed to their failure to achieve sufficient proficiency in English. The data revealed that the participants conceptualized the notion of failure as an outcome that could be controllable by actions such as making adjustments to the English language curricula, increasing the quality of the language education by focusing more on productive skills, establishing rapport with the students, offering them the help and support to maintain a high level of motivation, and finally, teaching language learning strategies in the classroom for better retention. They attributed their failure to both external and internal factors. In particular, the participants mentioned problems with the content of instruction, which they thought repeated itself every year, hindering them from improving their language skills. They also believed that the limited number of course hours allocated to English language classes made exposure to English inaccessible, although the participants who reported having studied for an English prep class in their high schools were confident that they could easily boost their proficiency in English with appropriate class hours and systematic individual effort. Another factor that influenced the participants' failure in English was less-than-desirable teacher traits and qualifications. They considered that teachers generally did not serve as good role models for English, pointing to a lack of focus on speaking skills, which the students thought resulted in their poor communicative skills in English. As English is a foreign language and had no official status in their contexts, they also referenced the restrictions on opportunities to practice what they learnt in the classroom. Finally, the participants reported that they memorized the grammar rules and vocabulary items in classes solely to be successful in school, but that did not correlate to actual use of the language or long-term retention.

Considering all these experiences and the realization of the importance of English in their daily lives, the participants in this study expressed the wish that they had, in their primary and secondary education, put more time and effort into their foreign language studies, found opportunities to practice it more often, and supported their formal learning through private English classes.

Nonetheless, while the information provided by the participants offers some important insights into the nature of foreign language education in Turkey, the findings of this study and the conclusions drawn should be considered in light of certain limitations. The first concerns the sample and selection. The participants in this study were recruited from among university students conveniently located in the same university as the researchers. Since the participants may not necessarily reflect all students in Turkey, similar studies could be carried out to further investigate and explore the issues raised here from a wider

perspective. The second limitation regards the instrument and techniques used to collect the data. While the open-ended questions in the second section of the questionnaire were well-prepared, passing out the written questionnaire right before or after a class might have limited the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of some of the responses. Allowing for a chance to receive, complete and return the questionnaire at their convenience—and not on the same day—could contribute to more elaborate responses from the participants. In addition, following up with some of the respondents regarding their answers could help to increase the researchers' ability to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data and results.

The findings of the study revolve around issues that affect English language teaching in Turkey that have been previously reported in the literature. However, this study is significant in that it elicited data on the perspectives of the participants not only on their level of proficiency in English, but also on factors that they attributed to their failure to learn English. A detailed analysis of these factors may provide curriculum developers, teachers, language practitioners and researchers valuable insight that may be used to minimize problems before learners encounter them, resulting in the development of more effective learning environments. In addition, efforts must be made to improve teachers' pedagogical skills in teaching a foreign language, as well as increasing their language proficiency. Moreover, beginning at the primary school level, learners' awareness must be raised concerning the importance of learning English. Additionally, learners must be equipped with independent learning skills that will aid them to be more autonomous in pursuing new information, making use of advanced computing technology to aid the learning process.

Ethical Issues

This study is exempt from the current research requirement in Turkey for ethics committee approval that came into force in 2019 as the data of this study were gathered in 2017.

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