

55. Mapping university preparatory school A1 level students' high school English learning experience

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Abstract

Due to the importance of English in the global scale, English has been included in curriculum and taught from kindergarten to high school in Turkey for many years. Despite all the time, money and energy invested, students cannot pass English proficiency exam offered by their universities and are obliged to enroll in one-year English preparatory (prep) program at universities. The aim of this study is to investigate A1 level university prep students' English learning experiences at high school, determine the possible reasons of failure in English in their previous schooling that have led them to start the prep school with the lowest entry level and get students' suggestions to learn what can be done to improve the current situation and curriculum at high schools. 521 questionnaires that consisted of 19 items requiring short answers and an open-ended question were collected in the prep school of a state university in the fall term of 2018-2019 academic year. While analyzing the quantitative data, frequencies and percentages were taken into consideration. For the qualitative data in the open-ended question, content analysis was done. The findings show that English lessons at high schools do not focus much on communication skills and genuine learning.

Keywords: English language learning, English language teaching, high school, higher education, Turkey, university preparatory school students

Üniversite hazırlık sınıfı A1 kuru öğrencilerinin lisedeki dil öğrenme deneyimleri

Öz

İngilizcenin küresel boyuttaki öneminden dolayı, Türkiye'de İngilizce ders olarak müfredatta yer almaktadır ve okul öncesinden liseye, her eğitim seviyesinde yıllardır öğretilmektedir. Harcanan zamana, paraya ve enerjiye rağmen öğrenciler üniversitelerdeki dil yeterlik sınavlarını geçememektedir ve bir yıllık üniversite hazırlık programlarına bölümlerine başlamadan önce devam etmek zorunda kalmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, hazırlık öğrencilerinin gözünden lisede gördükleri yabancı dil öğretiminin/öğreniminin bir resmini çekmek ve lisede anlamlı bir dil öğrenme ortamı yaşayıp yaşamadıklarını anlamak, mevcut durumu ve lisedeki müfredatı iyileştirmek için önerilerini almaktır. 2018-2019 güz döneminde bir devlet üniversitesi hazırlık okulundaki 521 A1 başlangıç düzeyindeki öğrenciden kısa cevap gerektiren ve bir açık uçlu sorudan oluşan 19 soruluk bir anketle veri toplanmıştır. Nicel verileri analiz ederken sıklıkları ve yüzdeleri alınmış, açık uçlu soruya verilen nitel cevapları incelemek için de içerik analizi yapılmıştır. Bulgular, lisedeki İngilizce derslerinin iletişim becerilerine ve gerçek bir öğrenme ortamına odaklanmadığını ortaya koymaktadır.

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Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce dil öğrenimi, İngilizce dil öğretimi, lise, yükseköğretim, Türkiye, üniversite hazırlık sınıfı öğrencileri

Introduction

As English has become an indispensable part of our lives in today's world, students are mandated to take English lessons from kindergarten to university in most of the countries. Turkey is not an exception with respect to teaching English. English has an instrumental function as the most studied foreign language and the most popular medium of instruction in Turkey (Dogancay-Aktuna,1998). The foreign language curriculum has experienced many changes in Turkey in the recent years. The changes include making English as a compulsory school subject, its duration and the approach to teach English (Gursoy, Korkmaz and Damar, 2013).

Many scholars (Coskun, 2016; Sincer, 2017) underlined the importance of English in future employability. For instance, being fluent in English is deemed prestigious at work and in the community (Acar, 2015). Public and private sectors often reward people who are proficient in English. Similarly, Selvi (2014) maintains that

as English continues to serve as the linguistic infrastructure for international business and carries the symbolic value of modernization and Westernization, it becomes a defining characteristic of an educated populace (p. 134).

Therefore, learning English has utmost importance in students' future career. However, not all the students have the chance to finish high school with advanced English. Students who are placed in a high school are considered as a homogenous group of learners, but they have differences in terms of their language skills, motivation and desire to reach their goals (Demir-Ayaz, Ozkardas and Ozturan, 2019).

English instruction varies across Turkey. Many students begin learning English at early education levels such as kindergarten or primary school while some others start learning English at high school, but they cannot reach the desired level of proficiency at all or have difficulty, especially in productive skills (Karahan, 2007). However, it is not only the years that are spent to teach English but also the quality of teaching that affects students' learning experience and achievement. A hardworking student can use "past perfect and past simple" in grammar exercises correctly but cannot share an event that makes him/her upset easily as in the following example: "Yesterday, I wanted to see the film *Arrival* at the cinema. I bought the tickets online. When I arrived at the cinema, the film had already started".

When the increasing number of students enrolled in English prep school programs at universities is considered, it may be concluded that students seem to fail to acquire the optimal proficiency levels in English despite many years of schooling. Similarly, the report by the British Council (2015) emphasizes that students start prep school with low English proficiency levels and low engagement. As Parker et al. (2004, p. 163) underpin, university students in their first year "face a variety of stressors: making new relationships, modifying existing relationships with parents and family (e.g. living apart), and learning study habits for a new academic environment".

In addition to the aforementioned problems, students are also concerned about learning English. Their prior language learning experience does not smoothen the transition from high school to university. Students seem to be in a vicious circle in which they repeat the same grammar content again and again

throughout their previous schooling and university English one-year prep program. In this one-year program, students are trying to overcome the obstacles of language learning and get the required score to start their education in their departments. Before the academic year, based on their proficiency test scores, they are placed in level classes, A1 (breakthrough/beginner/basic user), A2 (waystage/elementary/basic user), B1 (threshold/intermediate/independent user) in accordance with the standards provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They take intensive courses for one or two semesters to get the minimum score to start their departments. As indicated in the report by the British Council (2015), it does not seem plausible to expect students to reach the target level of B2 (upper intermediate, independent user) easily at the end of prep school program due to various reasons. This is also related to time and space constraints faced by schools of foreign languages, not solely the students themselves.

Even after a year of prep school, they have difficulty in passing the proficiency exam as their entry level to prep school is very low. If they fail to pass the proficiency exam in their second attempt in September, they have to retake the proficiency exam without attending their courses in their departments. It was observed that students experience difficulty in attaining the desired level at university. Even if they pass the proficiency exam and start education in their departments, they feel that they are not sufficiently prepared for their departmental lessons in English (Erarslan, 2019). They still have difficulties in following their lessons and writing reports, essays in English.

With these problems in mind, the aim of this study is to underpin A1 level university students' perceptions, at one-year English prep school program, regarding English instruction in their previous schooling, particularly, at the high school level. In this context, the study poses two research questions as follows;

1. What are English language preparatory school A1 level students' perceptions about their previous schooling, high school English language education?
2. What can be done to improve the quality of high school English language education to smoothen the transition from high school to university?

Teaching English at high school level in Turkey

While teaching English at the high school level, there are many factors that should be taken into consideration. First, it should be noted that the education system is very examination oriented in Turkey (Hatipoglu, 2016). For instance, high school years in Turkey mark the period when students are getting prepared for the university entrance exam. Due to the increasing number of students who demand to study at university, students feel themselves under pressure to solve as many multiple-choice practice tests as they can. The university entrance exam is based on specialization. If a student wants to get in any programs in Engineering Faculties, they need to answer more questions in Maths, Physics, Biology, etc. Therefore, class hours are sometimes sacrificed for the sake of getting students ready for the university exam. English is relatively ignored and considered as a source of distraction from their targets (British Council, 2013). Therefore, it constitutes an example for courses that are spared for university exam preparation.

Effective lessons are not possible under these conditions, and instead of genuine and meaningful learning, success is seen as a high number of correct answers. This does not stem from only students'

attitudes alone. School administrators also want to increase the number of students who are eligible for university education to increase their school prestige. Therefore, English language teachers experience many classroom management problems while working at high school. It is even difficult to cover materials related to curriculum. According to the report by the British Council (2013), some students tend to ignore the teacher totally and complete the mechanic exercises if they are supposed to 'participate' in the lesson. As a result, they learn nothing and fail to make any progress in English.

As for the number of compulsory English lessons at the high school level, it should be noted that it varies across school types. There are different types of high schools in Turkey. According to 2018-2019 Curriculum at the time of the study, there is a difference in terms of class hours allocated to English in different types of high schools. English lessons at high school change from two to five hours each week in various high schools. Only some high schools such as Anatolian High Schools and Social Sciences High Schools have a prep class with 20 hours (MoNE Board of Education, 2018).

The classroom is largely considered to be the domain for the acquisition of English in Turkey and outside school context, there are few chances to practice English in everyday communication (Dogancay-Aktuna,1998). Needless to say, digital platforms including social media, mobile applications offer learners great opportunities to practice their English, but those utilizations can be considered among one's individual attempts to enhance his/her language skills. However, the growing number of students at English language prep schools at university show that exposing students to long years of English instruction does not guarantee success. Sahlberg's (2018) words can be illuminating for this situation. He maintains that exposing students to many hours of a lesson that they do not like does not mean anything and brings pitfalls rather than benefits. In a similar vein, Acar (2015, p. 562) notes, "even after years of instruction at schools, English language learners cannot utilize the English in the proper way". The underlying reasons for this failure in learning English need to be questioned.

Previous studies investigating high school English instruction in Turkey from the perspectives of students

Prevailing discussion about English language teaching always seems to be on the agenda of Turkey. This issue has been under scrutiny from students' and teachers'/instructors' perspectives. However, there are only a few studies that map students' perceptions regarding high school English lessons. Dinçer, Takkaç and Akalın (2010) investigated university prep school students' perspectives regarding English language education at high school. A composition related to their prior language education experiences in their primary and high school years was written by each participant, and they were also asked to support their views by examples from English teachers who they admired most, or they were not satisfied with. Another scholar, Gomleksiz (2014) explored students' opinions on the use of methods and techniques in English classes at a Turkish high school. It was found out that males considered methods and techniques used in English classes at high school context more effective than females did. Tokoz-Goktepe (2014) analyzed the speaking problems of ninth-grade high school Turkish EFL learners from teachers' and students' perspectives. It was seen that their difficulties resulted from "insufficient language and content knowledge, limited contact with English outside the classroom, and the misdirected use of methods and materials used in the classroom" (Tokoz-Goktepe, 2014, p.1875). Limon (2015) examined 9th and 10th graders' perceptions about English as a foreign language through a metaphor analysis and the results showed that a greater number of the participants used negative metaphors to describe their attitudes and feelings towards English. Denkci-Akkas and Coker (2016) investigated the opinions of the teachers and students on the use of

communicative approach in 9th grade English language class. Their study revealed that the majority of the participants considered such activities advantageous and supported the inclusion of them in their lessons. Although teachers are aware of the advantages, they find it difficult to implement because of large class sizes, grammar-based evaluation system, lack of time in the schedule, etc. Coskun (2016) put the famous cliché “I can understand but I can’t speak” under scrutiny in two state high school with 293 participants. It was revealed that they can’t speak due to

the focus on grammar rules in English lessons, differences between English and Turkish, lack of experience abroad, limited speaking practice opportunities outside the classroom, feeling anxious while speaking English, use of mother tongue by the teacher and the course books which do not include colloquial English (Coskun, 2016, p. 1).

Bektas (2017) also investigated the perceptions of high school students for English through metaphors in Tokat. In his study, it was seen that a high majority of the participants held negative feelings towards English.

All these studies tried to take students’ perceptions into consideration, however, except Dinçer, Takkaç and Akalın’s (2010) research, no study tried to investigate English prep school students’ perceptions about their high school education. Especially, A1 level students carry higher importance as they constitute the largest body in prep schools, and they are the ones who enter the prep school with the lowest scores in the proficiency exam. To fill this gap in the reviewed literature, this study targets A1 level English prep school students’ perceptions about their high school English language education.

Method

As participants, A1 level English prep school students at a technical university context were chosen in the fall term of 2018-2019 academic year². A1 level students were targeted as they are the groups of students who need to make progress from A1 level to B2 level in almost eight months, which is quite challenging. The state university where the research was conducted mandates compulsory prep school education for students whose departments are 30% or 100% in English. The students were informed about the study, and data were collected by the researcher from prep students who participated voluntarily. The online questionnaire was conducted almost at the end of the fall term, so students had the notion of what a prep year was and what difficulties they faced resulting from their prior language learning experience. Before the actual questionnaire, a pilot testing was done with 20 students. After the comments received after pilot testing, it was revised, and some items were added while some of them were removed. The questionnaire consisted of 19 items requiring short answers and an open-ended question that asked students’ suggestions to improve the overall quality of English language lessons at high school (see the appendix). The questionnaire was administered in Turkish and their responses were translated into English by the researcher and a colleague crosschecked the translations for the accuracy. While analyzing the quantitative data, frequency and percentage were taken into consideration. For the qualitative data in the open-ended question, content analysis was done by two raters. Similar suggestions were grouped under the same theme (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005). Cohen’s kappa was used to check the agreement between the raters (Cohen, 1960) and .72 was the kappa which indicated agreement in the content analysis.

² As the data were collected in the academic year of 2018-2019, this study does not require Ethics Committee Approval.

The participants' profile

Only A1 level university prep students were chosen to participate in this study. The students took the proficiency exam in September and were placed in A1 level based on their scores. The class sizes ranged between 25 and 28 students. A total number of 521 A1 level students participated in this study. 58.8% of the participants (n=305) were male while 41.5% of the participants (n=216) were female. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 24 and over. 50.5% of the participants (n=263) were 18 years old and 30.9% of the participants (n=161) were 19 years old. 58.2 % of the participants (n=303) graduated from Anatolian High School. 13.2% of the participants (n=62) graduated from Science High School. In Turkey, students with higher scores from secondary schools and nationally administered test prefer Science High Schools and Anatolian High Schools. There are also Vocational High Schools that mostly, students with lower grade averages from secondary school tend to choose. In this context, 6% of the participants (n= 31) graduated from vocational schools. A high number of the participants (n=229) had their high school education in Istanbul. Apart from Istanbul (n=229), the distribution of cities show that they had come from different cities such as Izmir (n=23), Kocaeli (n=19), Bursa (n=14), Antalya (n=13), etc.

Results

The findings were presented below in the order of the questions that were asked. In Turkey, it is taken for granted that people have been learning English for many years but have difficulty in expressing themselves in English. With this idea in mind, the participants were asked how long they had been studying English as a lesson when they started university. 43.2% of the participants (n=225) had been learning English for 9 years when they started prep school at university. 25.3% of the participants (n=132) had been learning English for eight years when they started prep school at university. As Akcan et al. (2017, p. 678) underline "the term effectiveness still remains one of the most controversial and contested concepts". The more one is exposed to English lessons doesn't guarantee a successful outcome. This finding can be supported from the reviewed literature as Dogancay-Aktuna (1998, p. 32) maintains, "many of the graduates of public high schools can only be categorised as false beginners, even after English language instruction for 3–6 hours a week throughout high school".

The participants were also asked whether they had enrolled in a language course to improve their English before prep school. 11.5% of the participants (n=60) mentioned that they did while 88.5% of the participants (n=461) said that they didn't. In another question, the participants were asked whether their teachers of English graduated from a degree related to English language teaching. This question will bring important insights as different subject teachers may give English lessons due to teacher deficiency in some areas and they probably lack the necessary subject knowledge. Four hundred and forty participants mentioned that their English language teachers had graduated from a related department such as English Language Teaching, Translation Studies, English Language and Literature, American Language and Literature, Linguistics, etc. while 12.5% of the participants (n=65) stated that they had not. 1.3% of the participants (n=7) stated that they did not know while 1.7% of the participants (n=9) participants said that it changed from year to year. This finding can be supported by the report by the British Council (2013) which has underlined that 80+% of English language teachers in Turkey have the necessary skills to teach English effectively. This may indicate that teachers of English in Turkey have the potential and competence to teach English, but the outcome is not what has been expected.

In another question, the participants were asked whether they had mandatory English lessons at high school. 81% of the participants (n=422) said that they did while 19% of the participants (n=99) said that they didn't. The participants were also asked whether they had any elective English lessons at high school in addition to their mandatory English lessons. 29.9% of the participants (n= 156) said that they did while 70.1% of the participants (n=365) said that they didn't.

A question was asked to see whether English language lessons were delivered in accordance with the curriculum at high school. Frequencies and ratings included: always (5), often (4), some of the time (3), rarely (2), and never (1). Table 1 presents the participants' responses.

Table 1. Whether English lessons were delivered in accordance with curriculum at high school

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Always (5)	104	20%
Often (4)	211	40.5%
Some of the time (3)	123	23.6%
Rarely (2)	56	10.7%
Never (1)	27	5.2%

20% of the participants (n=104) mentioned that English language lessons were always delivered in accordance with the curriculum. For 40.5% of the participants (n=211), the lessons were often delivered in accordance with the curriculum. On the other hand, 5.2% of the participants (n=27) mentioned that the lessons were never delivered in accordance with the curriculum. 10.7% of the participants (n=56) said that the lessons were rarely delivered in accordance with the curriculum.

Another question was asked to understand whether English lesson hours at high school were used to get prepared for the university entrance exam instead of covering English related materials. During their education at high school, students don't understand that being successful in the university entrance exam does not guarantee that one is going to start the department. The student must also pass the English proficiency exam for EMI (English-Medium Instruction) programs (Aslan, 2017). However, students are likely to demand to study for their coming university exam during English lesson hours. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Whether English lesson hours at high school were used to get prepared for the university entrance exam

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Always (5)	66	12.7%
Often (4)	100	19.2%
Some of the time (3)	155	29.7%
Rarely (2)	97	18.6%
Never (1)	103	19.8%

It was reported that for 321 participants, the lesson hours were used to get prepared for the university exam in the rating scale changing from always to some of the time. This indicates that the pressure of entering an undergraduate program makes it difficult to enhance their English and consequently, they remain limited in their English proficiency and start university with low English levels.

The participants were asked to consider the adequacy of English language education at high school.

Table 3. The adequacy of English language education at high school

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Very adequate (5)	11	2.1%
Somehow adequate (4)	47	9%
Neutral/Undecided (3)	128	24.6%
Not very adequate (2)	166	31.9%
Inadequate (1)	169	32.4%

It can be seen from Table 3 that most of the participants found English language education at high school inadequate. From the reviewed literature, Umunc and Raw (2017) support this view and state that

while class hours devoted to English increase as learners move up through the school system, their self-confidence in their language ability decreases because they believe that practical abilities are considered less important than completing a series of predetermined tasks in order to pass examinations (p. 138).

This is in line with the British Council's report (2013) that underpins that the present classrooms are highly teacher-centred and students are expected to answer teachers' questions, complete the mechanic exercises in the book and pass a grammar-based test. Also, it would be better to bear in mind that university entrance exam is likely to have a negative impact in the smooth flow of lessons.

The participants were also asked to assess the adequacy of the coursebooks used in English language lessons at high school. From Table 4, it is clear that most of the participants found coursebooks that were used at high school inadequate. This finding is in line with the report by the British Council (2013) stating that official textbooks and curricula tend to disregard varying needs and levels of students. It is understandable as

naturally, the author of those coursebooks who have made decisions and choices about the contents of the books do not or cannot consider the needs, wants, goals or interests of our students (Tavil, 2006, p. 50).

Table 4. The adequacy of the coursebooks used in English language lessons at high school

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Very adequate (5)	30	5.8%
Somehow adequate (4)	81	15.5%
Neutral/Undecided (3)	133	25.5%
Not very adequate (2)	115	22.1%
Inadequate (1)	162	31.1%

In another question, the participants were asked to give their opinions about the adequacy of their English language teachers' teaching performance at high school. This is an important question as "unique power in educational setting is the teacher applying education program, affecting students' learning and decreasing the negative effects of the environment" (Dinçer, Takkaç and Akalın, 2010, p. 240). Table 5 reports those findings.

Table 5. The adequacy of their English language teachers' teaching performance at high school

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Very adequate (5)	55	10.6%
Somehow adequate (4)	119	22.8%
Neutral/Undecided (3)	172	33%
Not very adequate	107	20.5%
Inadequate	68	13.1%

The number of participants who found their English language teachers' performance adequate and inadequate is almost the same. It should be noted that the participants come from different schools in different cities and have taken lessons from different English language teachers.

The participants were asked to assess to what extent English language lessons were difficult or easy at high school.

Table 6. To what extent English language lessons were difficult or easy at high school

Frequencies	Number	Percentages
Very difficult (5)	33	6.3%
Somewhat difficult (4)	83	15.9%
Neutral /Undecided (3)	242	46.5%
Somewhat easy (2)	121	23.2%
Very easy (1)	42	8.1%

While 6.3% of the participants (n=33) thought English language lessons were very difficult at high school, 8.1% of the participants (n=42) considered English language lessons very easy. It can be seen that language classrooms do not constitute a homogenous group of learners.

The participants were asked about the strongest side of English language lessons at high school. The responses were given in Table 7.

Table 7. The strongest side of English language lessons at high school

The strongest side of English language lessons	Number	Percentages
English language teachers who taught the lesson	149	28.6%
Class activities such as role plays, dialogues, games, etc.	60	11.5%
Weekly hour allocated to English language lessons	35	6.7%
Coursebooks	25	4.8%
Technological appliances (cassette recorder, laptop, etc.)	17	3.3%
Curriculum	12	2.3%
No good side	223	42.8%

It is interesting to note that 42.8% of the participants (n=223) complained that there was no good side of English language lessons at high school. It can be inferred that they had negative perceptions towards English language lessons at high school. This is understandable as they find themselves in a vicious circle in which they repeat the same content. From the reviewed literature, similarly, Demir-Ayaz et al. (2019) argue that

the 9th graders take courses of A1 and A2 level, but with more complex vocabularies and structures compared to the 8th grades. This may make the language learning process complicated and tough as everything is clear and standard in the CEFR; the curriculum has some points that do not match the principals of the CEFR (p. 43).

28.6% of the participants (n=149) considered English language teachers as the strongest side of the lessons.

Also, the participants were asked to consider the weakest side of English language lessons at high school. Table 8 reports their replies.

Table 8. The weakest side of English language lessons at high school

The weakest side of English language lessons	Number	Percentages
Curriculum	154	29.6%
English language teacher who taught the lesson	112	21.5%
Class activities such as role plays, dialogues, games, etc.	90	17.3%
Coursebooks	73	14%
Weekly hour allocated to English language lessons	47	9%
Technological appliances (cassette recorder, laptop, etc.)	9	1.7%
No weak side	36	6.9%

For 29.6% of the participants (n=154), the curriculum has been identified as the weakest point of English language lessons at high school. 21.5% of the participants (n=112) thought that English language teachers who taught the lesson are the weakest point. Although most teachers have the necessary skills, “the teaching of English as a subject and not a language of communication” is the current situation observed in schools.

In another question, the participants were asked which language skill or component is neglected in English language lessons at high school.

Table 9. Which language skill or component is neglected in English language lessons at high school

Neglected language skill or component	Number	Percentages
Speaking	364	69.8%
Writing	42	8.1%
Vocabulary	39	7.5%
Listening	38	7.3%

Grammar	24	4.6%
Reading	14	2.7%

69.9% of the participants (n=364) thought that speaking skill was neglected in English language lessons at high school. As Dinçer, Takkaç and Akalın (2010, p. 235) emphasize, “in spite of its being mostly taught language and its being widespread in Turkey, using the language as a communication tool by the learners is unfortunately inadequate”. For 8.1% of the participants (n=42), writing is also neglected. It can be seen that reading skill is the least neglected one for the participants. These findings can be supported by the British Council’s report (2015, p.28) as it was suggested to “raise competences with regard to contemporary English language teaching methodologies and outcomes. In particular, these should focus on teaching English as a tool of communication, (as opposed to teaching ‘grammar’)”.

At the end of the questionnaire, an open-ended question which aimed to reveal participants' suggestions to improve the quality of English language lessons at high school was included. These suggestions will set out to answer the second research question of this study. The participants' replies were categorized through content analysis by the two raters. Similar replies were grouped under the same theme. Table 10 reports students' suggestions:

Table 10. The participants' suggestions to improve the quality of English language lessons at high school

Suggestions	Number	Percentage
Speaking should be given more interest	127	24.4%
Better teachers should be recruited	62	11.9%
The curriculum/system should be renewed	47	9%
Lessons should be more fun and more entertaining activities should be done	39	7.5%
There should be more focus on writing skill.	27	5.2%
The importance of language learning should be explained and language awareness should increase	24	4.6%
Better books should be used	22	4.2%
Lessons hours should increase	19	3.7%
There should be more focus on vocabulary teaching	18	3.5%
University entrance exam preparation tests should not be done in English lessons.	15	2.9%
English language lessons should be divided into levels in accordance with CEFR	13	2.5%
There should be more focus on listening skill	11	2.1%
Native language teachers should be employed	10	1.9%
Foreign films should be watched in lessons	8	1.5%
There should be prep class before high school	7	1.3%
Teachers should not humiliate or make fun of students when they make a mistake	6	1.1%
Turkish should be given more attention	5	0.9%
The number of students in the class should decrease	4	0.8%

Lesson hours should decrease	2	0.4%
Students should go abroad through exchange programs	2	0.4%
English language lessons should be elective	2	0.4%
English lessons should be abolished	1	0.2%
Graded readers should be read	1	0.2%
More serious assessment and evaluation system should be chosen	1	0.2%
No suggestion/Eliminated answers	48	9.2%

It is evident that the problem is multifaceted and related to various factors (Alagozlu, 2012). 127 participants suggested that speaking should be the focus of attention in high school language classes. They indicated that they could not find enough opportunity to practise their speaking skills. 62 participants argued that more competent teachers should be recruited in terms of language proficiency, classroom management, etc. The participants' suggestions are in line with Dinçer et al.'s (2013, p. 3) framework, students want their teachers to have the following qualities such as "motivating students, sparing time for students when they ask for help, being enthusiastic for teaching, having positive attitudes towards students, responding to students' needs and providing a stress-free classroom atmosphere". Foreign language teaching conditions cannot be improved unless the qualities of EFL teachers are improved (Zamani and Ahangari, 2016). From the participants' suggestions, it can be inferred that some students were negatively affected by their English language teachers. 6 participants mentioned that teachers should not humiliate them in front of their classmates when they mispronounce a word or make a mistake. They further noted that this situation distorted their psychology to a certain extent.

Furthermore, 10 participants suggested that the MoNE should hire native language teachers to maximize the language input and output of learners. This finding is in line with Coskun's (2016) study as similarly, the participants in his study suggested that native English speakers should be recruited to teach conversation lessons at school. The amount of first language in a language class is a debatable issue in this study as it is in the reviewed literature. The participants in this study mentioned that grammatical explanations can be given in Turkish in a booklet distributed to the students at the beginning of the semester and lessons should be delivered in English to help them improve their communication skills in English. They complained that their English language teachers spoke Turkish rather than English in the lesson.

Also, it can be seen that university entrance exam preparation affected English language classes negatively. It hindered the way the lessons were conducted. 47 participants asserted that the curriculum should be changed, and more focus should be given to productive skills. 39 participants held the belief that English language lessons should include more fun elements and entertaining activities. This is in line with British Council's report (2013) as it was found out that

whereas 80% of the 5th graders profess that they enjoy their English classes, this ratio declines steadily year-on-year to 37% for the 12th grade students. The most significant reasons for not enjoying English classes are that the students find them 'boring' or that they experience difficulties coping with the subject (p. 42).

Twenty-four participants believed that more efforts should be shown to raise awareness of the importance of English to students and public in general. Similarly, the report by the British Council

(2013, p. 70) suggests to create a campaign and elaborates that “the campaign may link English to the world of work, enable parents to better support their children’s learning, provide resources for learners at all levels”.

Twenty-seven participants attach importance to writing skills. 22 participants suggested that better coursebooks that serve students’ needs should be used. 19 participants showed the necessity of increasing class hours. As the class hours are quite limited, teachers cannot allocate equal time for each skill. Activities take a long time and teachers are forced to catch up with the curriculum. This finding is in line with a previous study done by Aysin (2012). In his study, the teachers who were interviewed stated that

the weekly session was not enough to include several group or pair activities that would make the class a more appealing environment. Besides, many participants complained that the number of class sessions was not enough to work with each student one on one (Aysin, 2012, p. 4465).

Fifteen students stated that class hours should not be used for university entrance exam preparation. For the participants, asking some questions in foreign language at the university exams can be a solution to this problem. This will be an extrinsic motivation for high school students, and they will be more willing to focus on English lessons. 7 participants suggested the authorities to bring back the prep school year before high school which was abolished in 2005. Through an intensive study year, students will be able to learn English thoroughly. 4 students recommended that the number of students in the class should be decreased so that more time can be allocated to each student for practice.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

In the midst of discussions around effective English language teaching and learning at university, this article has focused on the situation at high school level in Turkey from university students’ perspectives. This study considers that high school education and higher education are two levels that cannot be separated from each other. Given that students in Turkey have been learning English for many years, it is imperative to give an ear to their perceptions about English language education at high school in Turkey because a growing number of students start from the lowest level at prep schools every year. It is clear that there is a discrepancy between the expectations and reality. According to MoNE, students are supposed to complete B1 and even B1+ at the end of 12th grade, but this seems not to be the case. Improvements are urgently needed. Although the context of this study is Turkey, the findings can be illuminating for other countries that have been teaching English in Kachru’s (1985) expanding circles to enhance their students’ competitiveness in the highly demanding world. The findings of the study might inform teacher educators, practicing teachers and curriculum developers. High school curriculum planners should work in collaboration with schools of foreign languages at higher education. As indicated by the report by the British Council (2013),

the failure to learn English before the end of high school also affects the students’ language performance in higher education, and impacts negatively the teaching costs and the learning quality in the higher education institutions in which the medium of instruction is English (p. 52).

As for other implications of this study, it is advisable for curriculum planners to take students’ needs and demands into consideration as the participants argued that speaking was not regarded as central in the high school curriculum. It is needless to say that speaking plays a key role in communication. Therefore, more importance should be attached to skills that students will need in their real lives. The

findings also illuminated the fact that university entrance exam affects the delivery of high school lessons negatively including English language lessons as it measures students' success based on whether they have chosen the correct option or not in the exam. In this regard, English language teachers are also ignored especially in the 12th grade and students are left free during the class hour to get prepared for the university entrance exam. Also, there needs to be a progression from high school to higher education in terms of language level as the participants complained that the same grammar items are repeated every year without making progress in speaking, writing, listening skills. This situation causes anger and disengagement among students. The results show the necessity that the curriculum should also be revised. Furthermore, the MoNE should take the necessary steps to reduce the class size and the workload of overworked teachers who are expected to fuel the motivation in their students. In parallel with the changes in approaches and trends in language teaching, language teachers in Turkey should adopt new methods and techniques in their classes. To achieve this end, in-service trainings should be offered in cooperation with the faculties of education at universities. Last but not least, coursebooks emerged as inadequate components identified by learners and this piece of finding should inform the decision-makers and coursebook evaluators to review their policies.

Foreign language teaching is likely to be on the agenda of Turkey in the future, too. Turkey will continue to search for ways to enhance the quality of foreign language teaching. In this respect, all the stakeholders' views are of great importance. To provide a fuller picture, high school principals and teachers should be included in future studies. Further research can target English language teachers' perspectives regarding the delivery of English language lessons at high school. Listening to teachers' voices is of higher importance as they are at the heart of education in the implementation of the English program. Similar studies can be done not only with students at universities but also in other levels of education.

As this study focuses on students' opinions rather than their actual behavior or actual delivery of the lessons, classroom observations can be made to see the actual delivery of the lessons in different high schools. Furthermore, the data were limited to A1 level students. A2 level and B1 level university students' prior experiences should also be under scrutiny.

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Appendix

Survey questions

1. Gender
 2. Age
 3. The type of high school you graduated
 4. The city in which you had your high school education
 5. How long have you been studying English as a lesson before university?
 6. Have you attended a course before preparatory school at university?
 7. Were your English language teachers at high school graduates of ELT or similar discipline degree?
 8. Did you have mandatory English language lessons at high school?
 9. In addition to mandatory English lessons, did you have any elective English language lessons at high school?
 10. Were English lessons delivered in accordance with the curriculum at high school?
- always (5) often (4) some of the time (3) rarely (2) never (1)
11. Were English lesson hours at high school used to get prepared for the university entrance exam?

always (5) often (4) some of the time (3) rarely (2) never (1)

12. Can you rate the adequacy of English language education at high school?

very adequate (5) somehow adequate (4) neutral/undecided (3)

not very adequate (2) inadequate (1)

13. Can you rate the adequacy of the coursebooks used in English language lessons at high school?

very adequate (5) somehow adequate (4) neutral/undecided (3)

not very adequate (2) inadequate (1)

14. Can you rate the adequacy of your English language teachers' teaching performance at high school?

very adequate (5) somehow adequate (4) neutral/undecided (3)

not very adequate (2) inadequate (1)

15. To what extent were English language lessons difficult or easy at high school?

very difficult (5) somewhat difficult (4) neutral /undecided (3)

somewhat easy (2) very easy (1)

16. What was the strongest side of English language lessons at high school?

- English language teachers who taught the lesson
- Class activities such as role plays, dialogues, games, etc.
- Weekly hour allocated to English language lessons
- Coursebooks
- Technological appliances (cassette recorder, laptop, etc.)
- Curriculum
- No good side

17. What was the weakest side of English language lessons at high school?

- English language teachers who taught the lesson
- Class activities such as role plays, dialogues, games, etc.
- Weekly hour allocated to English language lessons

- Coursebooks
- Technological appliances (cassette recorder, laptop, etc.)
- Curriculum
- No weak side

18. Which language skill or component is neglected in English language lessons at high school?

- Speaking
- Writing
- Vocabulary
- Listening
- Grammar
- Reading

19. What are your suggestions to improve the quality of English language lessons at high school?

Note: The questionnaire was administered in Turkish.