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## Pre-service teachers' perceptions on foreign language teaching issues

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### Abstract

Foreign language learning has always been an issue on the agenda of language teachers. Some find the problem in the teaching of grammar while some others believe that language learning can be improved properly without the tradition. Although functional and communicative syllabuses improved by blended learning claim to teach language thoroughly, learner, teacher or the material; one of the parts of the tripod has always been complaining about one or the other two not to create the necessary involvement into the learning atmosphere. This paper focuses on the observations of pre-service teachers on the foreign language learning problems after they have attended the school experience course in different secondary and high schools. Their answers were classified and analysed and the possible reasons were explained. Further recommendations were added to the end of the study to enlighten the research to be carried on from this study.

Keywords: Language learning issues; foreign language teaching; pre-service teachers.

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## **1. Introduction**

The global world has increased the need to have a lingua franca throughout world. Personal attempts to improve mutual understanding is not sufficient for the worldwide communication. For second language, the term acquisition is favored over learning. As acquisition naturally takes place in the communicative contexts, the national education policies of the inner and expanding circles of the World Englishes do not feel the necessity to improve their curriculums. But for the outer circle where English language has been considered as a foreign language, proficiency has been supported and improved by the school curriculum. It is believed that schools help the learners to develop their foreign language skills. As learners do not have the opportunities to practice the foreign language outside the classroom, teachers try to create contexts or situations quite feasible for communication.

This leads all countries to improve their foreign language teaching programs. Foreign language learning have been controversial all over the world through years. The problems teachers encounter while teaching or learners have while learning a foreign language are the subjects of many books, articles etc. Where the problems originates is a matter of debate too; some claim the teaching methods, some the material, learners or vice versa. This paper tries to observe the problems before the foreign language teaching from the eyes of pre-service teachers. It is also aimed to carry the argument to a different aspect; an alternative approach conventional debate.

### **1.1. The Foreign language teaching portrait of Turkish National Education system at public schools**

Foreign language education begins at the second year of primary school education at public schools in Turkey. Courses are 2 hours a week at 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades at primary schools, 3 hours for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and 4 hours for 7 and 8 year students. For high school students the course is 3 for the first year and 2 for the each other year students. They follow a course book which has been selected by Ministry of Education. Teachers use interactive boards mounted in each classroom of almost all schools by the application of Fatih project which is defined as the gate way to the future in education that focuses on the use of interactive boards, software, tablets in all subjects at school curriculum. Public schools are also supported by Z-Kutuphane (Enriched Library) and Z-Ders Kitabı (Enriched Course Book) Teachers have been trained by in-service training institutions for more effective teaching for the last 10 years. Teachers use interactive software to teach English more communicatively.

## **2. Literature view**

Language learning or teaching has been discussed in the educational context for years. The reason why learners have difficulties in learning a foreign language has been attached to different factors in different countries of the world. In this part some researches through the world have been included to show the commonness of the problems this study focuses on. The first is about the Iranian the foreign language learning problems. It has been stated as the lack of proper a course planning, the selection of the course books, wrong policies in teacher education and not meeting the real needs of the learners Eslami, 2010; Karimkhanlouei, 2012, Akbari, 2016). In other study in her research in primary school setting, (Erkan, 2016) has found that the issues foreign language teaching have faced are the overcrowded classrooms, the lack of sufficient language teaching class hours, the teaching of English by the teachers of other subjects, the lack or wrong use of materials or technology in language classrooms and the wrong method choice while teaching students. Saricoban (2012) has analysed foreign language teaching history in Turkey and she divided the history into three periods as Tanzimat period, republican Turkey period and Education reform from 1997 up to now. She has stated the problems arise from the traditional structural language teaching methods, teacher education planning at universities (2012, p.2646). In her research about the renovation foreign language learning in higher education, Jaleniauskiene (2014) claims that the use project based language learning activities will

prepare the learners to the real life outside the classrooms. In other study conducted by Al-Nasser (2015), the results show that problems are similar to global ones indicating methodology, curriculum, technology as a language teaching material, anxiety of students against learning a new language are the barriers of foreign language learning. Problems are not for the modern world; Powell (1937) states traditional dull text books kill students' motivation, and teachers should choose interesting subjects for foreign language teaching classrooms. Pronunciation and spelling as well as hard structural grammar difficulties have also been mentioned to generate obstacles in foreign language learning (Ahamed, 2013) The study conducted by Noom-Ura (2013) to answer the language learning issues had found that English language teaching problems in Thailand do not differ from the other countries listing the issues as teachers, students, curricula and textbooks, assessment and other factors. The issues are not different in Indonesia (Faridi, Bahri & Nurmasitah, 2016), Oktay (2014) had a detailed study about foreign language teaching in Turkey. Her study mentioning the above stated issues has also found that program types are not suitable in Turkish context, students are not mentally ready to learn a language school administrators are giving importance to language learning and homework assignments are not helping the learner to learn a language. So the study tries to define the problems in foreign language learning in the eyes of pre service teachers. Next section mentions the methodology of the research.

### **3. Methodology**

The participants for this study have been the fourth year students (pre-service teachers) of Balıkesir University Necatibey Education Faculty English Language Teaching Program. They have been trained to teach English as a foreign language at public or private schools. They take their education for four years. The courses they have taken through their education are about the nature of foreign languages and approaches and methods in language teaching as well as the fundamental courses such as linguistics, foreign language testing and contextual grammar courses. Last year of their education they take the school experience course. The participants are 23 preservice teachers taking the school experience I Course. School experience course is a two semester course; the first one is observation the second term is application. For the first term course the organization is as follows; preservice teachers (fourth year students) are attached to a public school in groups of six by the faculty coordinator, each group is tutored by an academic from the university and a teacher from the school they have been attached to. The courses are 4 hours a week. They are given 12 tasks for a term and each week one task is completed and reported to the academic consultant. The tasks are:

- 1- Preparing the Term Plan
- 2- A day of a Teacher in School
- 3- A Day of a learner in the School
- 4- Course Organization and Phases
- 5- Teaching Methods and Techniques
- 6- Latest Trends and Values in Education
- 7- Evaluation of Student Activities and Studies
- 8- Course Management and Classroom Control
- 9- School Organization Structure
- 10- School-Community Relations
- 11- Class Guidance Services

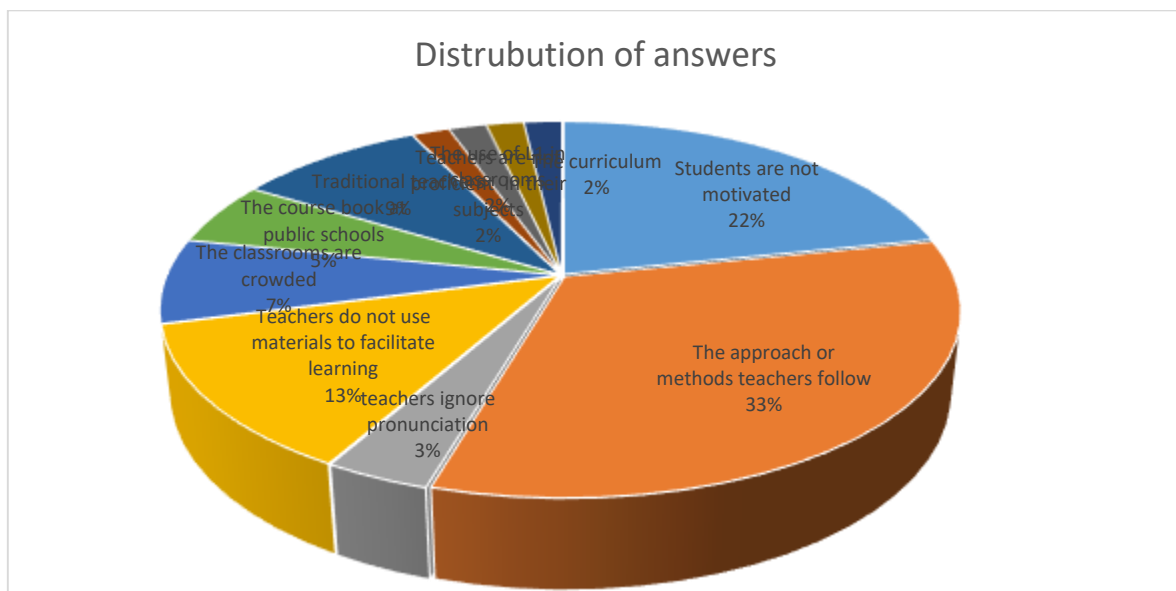
### 12- Evaluation of School Experience Studies

The preservice teachers taking the School Experience course create their reports based on their observation. An interview has been applied to the participants after they have completed their reports. They have been interviewed by the main question: What are the issues of foreign language teaching in Turkey? The reason of directing this question to the participants was to see the perspective of the pre-service teachers as observers, and to see if problems can be seen before the in-service training.

Their answers have been categorized and analyzed. The frequency of the answers were calculated. The results have been studied in the next section.

### 3. The Results

**Figure 1. Preservice teachers' responses about the issues of Foreign Language Learning**



As shown in Table, eleven problems concerning foreign language teaching/learning have been stated. The problems observed by the pre-service teachers are:

#### 3.1. Students are not motivated

It was reported that the students taking English courses are not eager to learn and they don't feel they might need English in their real lives. Because the courses are not relevant or interesting for the students.

#### 3.2. The approach or methods teachers follow

The way teachers prefer while teaching has been seen as the block before learning, they believe that what hinders learning instead of facilitating learning is the choice of the traditional teacher

centered approaches. They state the learner centered approaches both motivate and facilitate learning.

### **3.3. Teachers ignore pronunciation**

Students who are not trained for the correct pronunciation have difficulties in using the language as they cannot understand the spoken English or express themselves

### **3.4. Teachers do not use materials to facilitate learning**

Students learn better if they are instructed properly with the use of materials. Materials assist learning as they present authentic contexts for the learners and contribute inductive learning.

### **3.5. The classrooms are crowded**

The other problem has been thought to be the crowded classrooms. Turkish public schools are overcrowded as the number of students is more than 40 which makes language learning tough for learners. It is not desirable to find a seat for quest or new students.

### **3.6. The course book at public schools**

The content and the methodological design of the course books used at public schools have been stated as one of the problems causing learners to learn the language items deductively.

### **3.7. Traditional teachers**

Teachers from behavioristic school are into grammar teaching and ignore communicative language learning. Students memorize the grammar rules but they cannot use the language outside classroom in real contexts.

### **3.8. Teachers are not proficient in their subjects**

Teachers who have not majored in English language teaching have been giving English courses at public schools this situation has been stated as the other reason why students can't learn English for communication.

### **3.9. The use of L1 in classrooms**

The use of L1 for the participants is making the classroom a place where students translate the English sentences into Turkish so this technique is again not communicative but rule based.

### **3.10. Because students do not take an intensive course (Preparation Course)**

The idea that the more the better about language teaching still keeps its place among the pre-service teachers, they believe that intensive course hours will remove the obstacles in foreign language learning.

### **3.11. The curriculum**

The type and content of the curriculum for pre-service teachers is nor making language learning easy or comprehensible. It has many topics beyond learners' interests and needs.

## **4. Conclusion**

The results of the study show that language learning problems are much or less the similar throughout the world in the outer and expanding circle where English has been taught as a foreign language. Language teachers have constantly been criticized for not being sufficient and efficient persons in the language classrooms. The methods and approaches teachers choose in their teaching a foreign language have also been blamed for not being communicative enough to make the learners use the language they have learnt in natural settings. Course books are attacked for the similar reasons. The unsatisfactory course hours is another hardship in foreign language learning. What has been found in this study is that surprisingly enough in-service and pre-service teachers or

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theoreticians all meet at the same points in foreign language teaching issues. Descriptions or findings are more or less the same but problems are still the same. The suggestions that can emerge from this survey can be; reorganizing the foreign language in-service teacher training curriculum and organizations, decreasing the number of students in the public classrooms, choosing interesting and relevant topics to include into the classroom syllabus, getting the students to feel the need and awakening their consciousness about the daily use of a foreign language, and increasing Erasmus and youth programs to promote language knowledge and communication. It is very obvious that learners getting involved in the learning process will be more successful and language learning will not be a waste of time but a tool contributing them to communicate in verbal and written delivery.

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