



## English teachers' understanding of the new English language teaching program and their classroom implementations\*

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### Abstract

Recent changes in Turkish educational system have increased the importance of teaching English, following a global trend to introduce foreign languages at earlier stages of the language teaching program. However, putting the new language program successfully into practice can be challenging. In this regard, this study attempts to investigate teachers' understanding and their instructional practices on curriculum innovation in teaching English to young learners. For this aim, basic components of the new English Language Teaching Program (ELTP) are taken as the criteria to shed light on teachers' beliefs with reference to 4+4+4 education reform introduced in 2013 and the implementations of this reformist program in young learners' foreign language classrooms. In this way, 232 EFL teachers who taught 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades in Turkish state schools participated in the study. The data were collected through a questionnaire composed of three parts in an attempt to find teachers' opinions about the starting grade for language instruction, their understanding about the new language teaching program and the implementations of this program while teaching YLs. Results indicate that teachers share almost the same opinion that foreign language instruction should start at the first grade of the education system. Despite the fact that they have mostly developed theoretically appropriate beliefs about TEYL, teachers, regarding their understanding about the new ELTP, cannot transfer their beliefs into their practices, especially with reading and writing skills in question.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a widespread belief that *the younger is better* in second or foreign language learning (SLL/FLL). This claim is evidenced by the increasing number of child language learners all over the world. Early language learning (ELL) has taken its place in many countries' curriculums such as Poland, Turkey, Germany, France, Brazil, Japan, etc. (Çelik & Karaca, 2014). International empirical

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research shows that a person who starts FLL early has generally higher level of proficiency than those who begin at a later age (Penfield, Taylor, & Snow cited in Gawi, 2012) (see Blondin et al., 1998; Clyne, Jenkins, Chen & Wallner, 1995; Enever & Moon, 2009; Long, 1990; Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2001).

Regarding the crucial role of age in language acquisition, it is widely believed that due to longer exposure the outcomes of the learning process is better when foreign language (FL) instruction starts at an early age (Enever & Moon, 2009; Genesee, 2014). Therefore, L2 and FL acquisition and learning research so far has demonstrated that the process of L2 learning by school age is easy and quick and it will result in very high levels of proficiency through exposure to the language (Genesee, 2014) (see, Harley, 1986; Johnstone, 2009; Long, 1990).

### *1.1. Literature review*

There has been a global trend towards introducing English in the early stages of schooling to provide greater access to this language (Gimenez, Tanaca, Peres, & Oliveira, 2013; Klippel, 2008; Nikolova, 2008; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000; Paul, 2003). With the impact of globalized expectations for higher level of proficiency, this trend has been experienced in many parts of the world. As Gimenez et al., (2013) highlighted, as a result of this reality, *increasing number of young children are learning English in various contexts around the world.*

Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project, conducted by a group of researchers, was a result of this global interest and aimed to “provide a detailed insight of the policy and implementation processes for early foreign language learning (FLL) programmes in Europe ...” (Enever, 2011, p.9). The findings of the project made it clear that there was a global trend in encouraging instructive language systems to get young learners (YLs) to start learning English at an early age. In the preface of the ELLiE research report, the representative of the British Council points out the fact that early exposure to a target language in schools around the world has been a global trend in education policies over recent years, which is “a result of parents’ demands and expectations, and of the desire of educational authorities to increase language skills and intercultural understanding” (Enever, 2011, p.1).

As regards the ELL policies of the countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Djigunovic, 2012; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012) it seems that there is a consensus building an attempt to lower the starting age for language learning (Damar, Gürsoy & Korkmaz, 2013). Tinsley and Comfort (2012) questioned the age to start a foreign language education in their study and reported that “the two most common models of language learning in primary education are to: introduce the new language at the beginning of compulsory education or start after just two years, commonly at age eight.” (p. 6). As it is stated in their study the former one tends to be more common than the latter in developed countries. The countries differ from each other in terms of compulsory FL education they offer in primary school. For example, English is introduced at age six in Finland, Croatia, France, Bangladesh, Italy, Norway, Malta, Spain Sweden; at age eight in Bulgaria, China, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Korea, Romania and Taiwan; at around age nine in Slovenia, Denmark, Hungary, Argentina and Lithuania (Enever & Moon, 2009; Eurydice, 2008; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012). Rationales behind introducing language in early stages of education are directly related to “a country’s international aspirations and the desire to prepare children to engage successfully in international environments” (Tinsley & Comfort, 2012, p.6).

### *1.1.1. Teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools in Turkey*

Globalization, promoting a world-wide spread of English, has affected the language policies and programs all around the world (Hu, 2007). Many countries have revised their FL policy according to global spread of English. However, the introduction of English language in the curriculum of public primary schools is a relatively recent development in Turkey (Kırkgöz, 2008). As a result of the 1997 education reform, EFL is offered as a standard compulsory school subject at fourth grade (Kırkgöz, 2008).

Over the last decade several changes affecting not only the learners but also teachers and teacher training process have been made in FLE curriculum (Gürsoy, Korkmaz, & Damar, 2013). Accordingly, “Teaching English to Young Learners” course was introduced into the curriculum to help pre-service teachers develop ways and knowledge of TEYLs (Kırkgöz, 2008) and in addition, an in-service English Language Teacher Training and Development Unit (INSET) was established to provide in-service training for practicing English teachers. As stated by Fullan (1993), an effective implementation of educational changes requires teachers act as mediators to transmit these changes through their teaching to their students. Therefore, teachers’ understanding of the reasons and theoretical considerations underlying these changes are necessary. However, the findings obtained from the studies examining the extent the teachers adopted the proposed curriculum indicated that it was not effectively implemented in classrooms and that teachers’ practices showed variation (İnal, 2009; Kırkgöz, 2008, 2009).

Based on the comprehensive curriculum studies, the primary EFL curriculum was revised in 2005 following the principles of CEFR and offered theoretical information on various aspects of ELT along with innovative ideas about how to teach YLs English at different grades (Ersöz et al., 2006). Despite the efforts to improve foreign language teaching (FLT) policy, the practice of FLT has never been devoid of criticism. Considering some problems about the implementation of the 2005 curriculum, Kırkgöz (2009) points out that “Turkey needs to resolve existing incongruence between the idealized macro policy objectives and their realizations in practice at micro level teaching situations” (p. 681). According to Arslan (2012, p. 96) we can eliminate the differences here by finding appropriate answers to the questions on “FL teachers, available resources, materials used, tasks and activities applied, language skills aimed at, and assessment followed to be able to improve FLE in the Turkish context”. From this point of view, present research aims to find out English teachers’ beliefs regarding the methodological aspects of TEYL as reflected in the English Language Teaching Program – ELTP (MoNE, 2013), which has been developed as a result of 4+4+4 education system (2012) and their implementations in YLs FL classrooms. With respect to the ELTP, the principles guided the new program should be made explicit.

### *1.1.2. An overview of the new innovation: 4+4+4*

The new curriculum includes changes both in the former two-tier education system and in FLE (Gürsoy et al., 2013). While compulsory education is increased from 8 years to 12 years, starting age both for primary school (5.5 years of age) and for FLL (6.6 years of age, second grade) has been lowered (Damar et al., 2013; Gürsoy et al., 2013). According to the regulation, second and third graders receive two hours and fourth, fifth, sixth graders receive three hours compulsory FL courses weekly in primary education (Arslan, 2012).

In the new ELTP many changes are based on the development of interactional and communicative competence in English. The principles of the ELTP were collected under three sections: Instructional design, instructional materials and assessment in language teaching. Within the framework of these principles, the main emphasis is given to listening and speaking skills over reading and writing skills, which are introduced at the third grade only at a word level; thus, reading and writing tasks at lower

grade levels are limited with 10 words. The well-recognized fact that directs the curriculum designers to put emphasis on oral skills is that most students in Turkey graduate from schools without the ability to engage in successful communication in the target language. Therefore, it is known that the curricula which prioritize grammar, reading and vocabulary do not meet the needs of the current language learners (Damar et al., 2013).

### *1.1.3. As a matter of successful implementation of innovation*

Given the complexity and unpredictability of the innovation process, “teachers’ understanding of the principles of an innovation and their background training” determine the degree of implementation of a curriculum innovation (Kırkgöz, 2008, p.1860). Carless (1998) states that in order to implement a curriculum innovation smoothly, some certain conditions need to be met. To start with, teachers should have adequate knowledge of theoretical principles; secondly they should become aware of the application of the proposed change.

Addressing the curriculum innovation, Wagner (1991) maintains that the philosophy of an innovation and teachers’ theories should be with one accord, or else, innovation will not be implemented in the way curriculum planners have thought. At the management stage of the curriculum innovation, aside from a modification in the teachers’ teaching behavior a major change in their beliefs is necessary (Wagner, 1991 cited in Kırkgöz, 2008). Therefore, teacher training and support are needed in certain ways for instance, “to learn new concepts, new ways of presenting content and new ways of interacting with students (Vandenberghe, 2002 cited in Kırkgöz, 2008, p.1860).

In a nutshell, putting new regulations into practice can be demanding as the teachers are those who are to adopt new ideologies and implement them in their teaching (Kennedy, 1996). Such responsibility “puts the teachers under strain where the changes involved present major shifts in beliefs and practices, and can threaten successful implementation unless necessary logistic and professional conditions are met” (p. 78). Therefore, TEYL requires language teachers’ preparation in linguistic, educational and methodological domains (Damar et al., 2013). In decision making process, current resources, the teachers’ professional readiness, their theoretical knowledge and beliefs and their current practical implementations affect the expected outcomes as well as theoretical considerations (Gürsoy et al., 2013). When it comes to its application into practice, there are numerous factors playing a role in its implementation such as “school administrators, facilities, classroom resources and materials, teachers, class size, parents, and the students themselves” (MoNE, 2013, p.4).

## *1.2. Research questions*

This study aims to shed light on the practicing English teachers’ beliefs about the methodological aspects of the new ELTP from a broader perspective by putting the new curriculum’s characteristics, content as well as the aims under the microscope. With this aim in mind this study tries to find answer to the following questions in reference to the new ELTP (MoNE, 2013).

1. What are the EFL teachers’ opinions about the starting age of FLL?
2. What are the teachers’ beliefs regarding the methodological aspects of the new ELTP?
3. To what extend do the teachers implement the requirements of the new ELTP?
4. Are there any differences between the teachers’ beliefs and their in-class practices with young learners depending on gender, teaching experience, experience in TEYL and the number of students in classes?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample / Participants

As the focus of the investigation was on English language instruction for YLs EFL teachers teaching 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades in Turkish state schools were targeted. Convenience sampling and chain-referral sampling methods were used to collect data. EFL teachers (N = 232) from different parts of Turkey contributed to the study. Table 1 represents the participants' gender, age, years of experience and years of experience at the primary school level.

**Table 1.** Description of the participants

	Female-Male	Female-Male	Female-Male	Female-Male	Female-male
Age	21 - 26	27 - 36	37 - 46	46+	
	35 12	115 11	34 7	15 3	
Total	47	126	41	18	
Years of experience	0 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 15	16 - 20	21+
	53 7	71 12	45 6	15 6	15 2
Total	60	83	51	21	17
Experience in primary school	0 - 1	2 - 5	5+		
	41 9	63 10	95 14		
Total	50	73	109		

### 2.2. Instruments

Using a survey-type research design a quantitative approach was adopted for the investigation, and the beliefs and classroom experiences of TEYL teachers were of primary concern. The data were collected through a questionnaire designed as a five-point Likert scale, which consists of three parts. The items in the questionnaire were designed to elicit the beliefs about the new ELTP and in-class practices of the participants concerning the issues involved in implementing English language instruction for YLs. The items related to belief were prepared regarding the theories of TEYL as well as the new ELTP content. The items related to in-class practices were prepared regarding the underlying methodology of the ELTP.

Ten experts from Uludağ University were consulted for the content and face validity of the instrument. Lawshe (1975) technique was implemented for the content validity of the instrument. Accordingly, experts were asked to rate each item as “essential, useful but not essential or not necessary” (Yurdugül, 2005). Thus content validity ratio (CVR) for each item was calculated. According to Veneziano and Hooper (1995) for ten experts CVR should be equal or bigger than 0.62 at  $\alpha = 0.05$  level. Consequently, necessary modifications were done according to expert opinions. As a result, while the first part, aiming to gather demographic information via eight closed-ended questions and an open-ended question that aims at finding teachers opinions about the starting age/grade for language learning remained the same, the second part of the instrument contained 25 statements investigating teachers' beliefs about TEYL in regard to the ELTP and third part consisted of 42 statements investigating teachers' in-class practices. The instrument was then piloted on 32 EFL

teachers. Finally, it was distributed to 232 teachers. The questionnaire found reliable with alpha values of .72 for the second part and .82 for the third part.

### 2.3. Data collection procedures

Having obtained the necessary permission from the Provincial Directorate for National Education, the primary state schools in Bursa were visited. In addition, the participants from different parts of the country were asked to fill out the on-line version of the questionnaire and asked to share it with their available colleagues as well.

### 2.4. Data analysis

The data gathered by the questionnaire were analyzed by using SPSS 20. Frequency analysis was used for the analysis of the demographic information. For the open-ended question following the item of starting age, content analysis was implemented by grouping the opinions of the participants. Then the similar answers were tallied. For the second part of the questionnaire including 25 items investigating teachers' beliefs about TEYL and the third part of the questionnaire including 42 items investigating teachers' in-class practices descriptive statistics including mean and frequency analysis was used. In order to identify the differences between the teachers' beliefs and their in-class practices, dual comparisons were made by Independent Samples Test for the 'gender' variable. Regarding the variables 'teaching experience and the number of students' multiple comparisons were made by one-way ANOVA test as the results of the Levene test showed homogeneity of the variances. Kruskal Wallis test and Mann Whitney-U test were also used because the variances in the "teachers' belief" (second) part were not homogenous regarding the variable 'experience in primary school' for the research question 4.

## 3. Results

The first part of the questionnaire revealed consistent results favoring the start of compulsory language education at primary school. Based on the frequency analysis, most of the participants (93%) stated that teaching a FL should start at the first (62.4%) and second grades (30.6%) in primary school. Furthermore, most of the participants of (93%) were in favor of "the younger, the better" idea by stating their reasons in the open-ended question. The analysis of their responses indicates that they think children learn languages easily, quickly and more effectively at early ages. Another question asked to the participants was about their awareness of the new ELTP. As far as the teachers' knowledge about the features of the new ELTP was concerned, the results revealed that they are not aware of its requirements ( $M = 2.59$ ), and they are not eager to be informed about it ( $M = 2.48$ ). Moreover, they claimed that they were not sure whether the ELTP has taken children's characteristics and developmental features into consideration ( $M = 3.26$ ) and whether they need training to put the emphasized features of the program into practice ( $M = 3.39$ ). On the other hand, when the opinions regarding the starting age/grade was analyzed in terms of teachers' experiences in teaching, 93.3% of the novice teachers with 0-5 years of experience and (67.67%) teachers with 5+ year teaching experience stated that it should start at first and second grades.

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to identify the teachers' understanding of the features of the new ELTP. The mean scores of the answers pointed out that teachers support some of the appropriate methodology regarding TEYL as reflected in the ELTP, whereas they have either negative or neutral opinions on the other features. Teachers' positive (A3, A4, A10, A14, A17, A18, A19, A23, A24), and negative beliefs (A6, A7, A11, A12, A16) as well as the items they are dubious about (A1,

A2, A8, A9, A13, A15, A20) are given in Table 2. The teachers had moderately positive opinions about the appropriate assessment type (A5, A21, A22, A25).

**Table 2.** Descriptive results of the teachers' understanding about the new curriculum

Item Statements	M	SD
A1 Curriculum takes children characteristics into account	3.26	1.12
A2 I need training to put the emphasized features of curriculum into practice	3.43	1.16
A3 Listening- speaking as primary skills	4.52	.76
A4 Reading-writing as secondary skills	4.14	.93
A5 We need more grammar practice in primary school*	3.75	1.12
A6 Students should not write voc. items *	2.73	1.30
A7 Students should not have an Eng. Notebook*	2.79	1.22
A8 Students should not write grammar rules*	3.41	1.26
A9 All skills should not be taught equally*	3.10	1.24
A10 Use of activity-based teaching not traditional one	4.58	.68
A11 Children can learn without writing*	2.80	1.23
A12 There should not be lots of drilling*	2.00	.92
A13 Children do not need direct teaching of rules*	3.27	1.21
A14 Like the fact that curriculum focuses on functions rather than grammar	3.90	1.00
A15 The activity and text types suggested by the new ELTP are appropriate for children	3.15	1.13
A16 The course book is not good enough	4.28	.93
A17 Allocated time for language instruction is limited	4.18	.99
A18 Teaching English requires expertise.	4.09	.93
A19 I need to learn activities/games suitable for YL	4.17	.95
A20 Children can assess themselves	3.20	1.09
A21 Making portfolio assessment is more suitable for children	3.65	.98
A22 Pen and paper test are not the best way to assess children*	3.61	1.04
A23 Oral skills should also be assessed	4.14	.84
A24 We should aim for interactional competence	4.35	.64
A25 We should not aim for grammatical competence*	3.65	1.06

\*Reverse items

With regard to the third part of the questionnaire which is about the teachers' in-class practices regarding the principles of the new ELTP (Table 3), it can be concluded that although the participants generally had positive thoughts towards certain aspects of theoretically appropriate TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) methodology, which are reflected in ELTP (MoNE, 2013), the results regarding their classroom practices showed otherwise in terms of their implementation. For instance, although the participants ( $M = 4.52$ ) favored the priority of listening and speaking skills, they sometimes ( $M = 3.29$ ) implemented the listening skill in their classroom practices. Regarding the speaking skill, teachers' in-class practices showed that they moderately put emphasis on speaking activities ( $M = 3.84$ ) through dialogues ( $M = 3.97$ ), interactional activities ( $M = 3.77$ ) and role-play or drama activities ( $M = 3.53$ ). As for the writing skill, although the participants considered writing as a secondary skill ( $M = 4.14$ ), they stated that they sometimes have the students write the newly learnt vocabulary items on their notebooks ( $M = 3.14$ ); use writing ( $M = 3.19$ ) and reading activities ( $M = 3.46$ ). In parallel with their idea of activity-based teaching, the teachers claimed to use a variety of learning activities ( $M = 3.96$ ) in their classes. The frequency of their use differed from rarely to

sometimes: such as musical activities ( $M = 3.65$ ), TPR activities ( $M = 3.72$ ), short-simple poems ( $M = 1.98$ ), story-telling ( $M = 2.58$ ), hands-on activities ( $M = 3.51$ ), authentic materials ( $M=3.13$ ).

Teachers' in-class practices show that they use whole class activities ( $M = 3.69$ ), pair-group work activities ( $M = 3.62$ ), and individual activities ( $M = 3.07$ ) at a moderate level. When it comes to the assessment of students, they preferred to use teacher observation and evaluation ( $M = 3.68$ ) in addition to pen and paper tests ( $M = 3.45$ ), project and portfolio assessment ( $M = 3.18$ ) at a moderate degree as well. However, they claimed to use self/peer evaluation rarely ( $M = 2.75$ ).

**Table 3.** Descriptive results of the teachers' implementations of the new ELTP

Item statements	M	SD
B1 I use a variety of learning activities	3.96	.83
B3 I let Ss write newly learnt vocabulary several times	3.14	1.37
B4 I use listening activities offered in the book	3.29	1.32
B9 I use dialogues that are appropriate for students' level	3.97	.89
B12 I use musical activities	3.65	1.15
B13 I use TPR activities	3.72	1.07
B14 I use reading activities	3.46	1.07
B15 I use speaking activities	3.84	.96
B16 I use writing activities	3.19	.97
B20 I use short-simple poems	1.98	1.06
B21 I use story-telling	2.58	1.06
B22 I use hands-on activities	3.51	1.12
B23 I use authentic materials	3.13	1.15
B24 I use role-plays and drama activities	3.53	1.09
B25 I prefer individual activities	3.07	.97
B26 I prefer whole class activities	3.69	.88
B27 I prefer pair-group work activities	3.62	.93
B28 I use interactional activities	3.77	.83
B37 I use project and portfolio assessment	3.18	1.08
B38 I use self and peer evaluation	2.75	1.18
B39 I use teacher observation and evaluation	3.68	1.06
B40 I use pen and paper tests	3.45	1.10

Taking the gender variable into account, no statistically significant difference was found between female and male participants' understanding of the ELTP  $t(230)=0,310$ ,  $p>0.05$  and their classroom implementations  $t(230)=1.811$ ,  $p>0.05$ . Prior to the application of the t-test, the variances were tested for homogeneity using Levene test and the result indicated the homogeneity of variances for their understanding of the ELTP ( $F=.049$ ,  $p=.825$ ) and for their implementations ( $F=.50$ ,  $p=.480$ ).

Regarding the years of experience of the teachers, the results of the Levene test showed that variances of groups were homogenous for the teachers' understanding of the ELTP ( $L=1.289$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) and for their implementations ( $L=1.013$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). One-way ANOVA test results showed no statistically significant difference in the teachers' classroom implementations regarding their teaching experience ( $F(4-227)=0,840$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). However, as for their understanding of the features of the ELTP, a significant difference was found among the teachers regarding their teaching experience ( $F(4-227)=7.175$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the novice

teachers ( $M= 74.22$ ) and the teachers with more than 6 years of experience  $M$  (6-10 years)=71.80;  $M$ (11-15 years)=71.27;  $M$ (16-20 years)=65.10;  $M$ (21+years)=67.52). According to the results, the mean scores of the groups decreased as their experience in teaching increased.

As for the experience in primary school variable, the results of the Levene test showed that while the variances of groups were not homogenous for the teachers' understanding of the ELTP ( $L=3.148$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), they were homogenous for the teachers' implementations ( $L=.082$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). According to the One-way ANOVA results the teachers' implementations did not significantly differ with regard to their teaching experience in primary school ( $F(2-229)=0.184$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). However, Kruskal-Wallis test results revealed a statistically significant difference in the teachers' understanding of the ELTP regarding their experience in primary school  $\chi^2(2) = 21.237$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . According to the results, which show the multiple comparisons of the groups through Mann-Whitney U Test, among all the participants, there were significant differences between teachers with 0-1 year of experience and with 5+ years of experience in primary school ( $U=1697$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and between teachers with 2-5 years of experience and 5+ years of experience in primary school ( $U=2684.5$ ;  $p<0.01$ ). The results revealed that there was not a significant difference between teachers with 0-1 year of experience and with 2-5 year of experience in primary school ( $U=1650$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

Finally, with regard to the number of students, the variances were found to be homogenous for the teachers' understanding of the ELTP ( $L=0.377$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) and for their implementations ( $L=1.876$ ,  $p>0.05$ ), and no significant difference was found in the teachers understanding of the features of the ELTP ( $F(3-228)= 1.095$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) and in their implementations ( $F(3-228)=0.122$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The present research is significant in that, by focusing on teachers' ideas, as one of the key features of a successful curriculum innovation, it gives insights about how conversant the teachers are with the new ELTP, and to what extent they implement appropriate TEYL methodology in their classrooms. The results can shed light into the outcome of this educational change. In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that policy amendments would generate positive outcomes if the present infrastructure needs are determined regarding the teachers' professional readiness in TEYL, their theoretical backgrounds and beliefs as well as their in-class experiences.

With regards to the first research question and according to the results obtained, the majority of teachers are in favor of an early start in primary school, which is also parallel with the recent change in the education system and EU recommendations (Enever & Moon, 2009; Gürsoy et al., 2013; Tinsley & Comfort, 2012). The result can be explained by the growing needs for FLL at an early age. Teachers support the idea that an early introduction of a FL leads to a higher level of language proficiency (Pufahl et al., 2001). Therefore, it is important to theoretically address the idea of the superiority of young learners over late learners fueled by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Ellis, 1985; Gürsoy, 2011; Lenneberg, 1967). As it is stated in the previous literature, maturational changes account for the superior performance of the young language learners on certain areas especially in pronunciation and intonation (Johnstone, 2002). In order to activate such inherent capacities in FLL it becomes important to meet certain conditions, such as FL exposure, the amount of time devoted to FLL, indirect language learning opportunities, focus on oral interactional competence, etc. (Giannikas, 2014; Johnstone, 2002). They can pick up a language effortlessly, successfully and quickly because the language they are learning is cognitively less complex (Clark, 2000). As they "tend to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their own world" (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2004, p. 27), language is a powerful tool for understanding the world around them. Their active, creative invention of language is also

explained by their curious, enthusiastic and highly motivated, less inhibited nature. In this sense, learning a FL as early as possible has led to several advantages for YLs in terms of their cognitive and social development and development of intercultural identity. “Early language learners become aware of their own cultural values and influences and appreciate other cultures, becoming more open towards and interested in others” (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p.7). Moreover, low anxiety (Moon, 2000) and enthusiasm for learning are other features of YLs that justify an early start.

One striking finding of the present research is that the teachers’ responses indicated limited knowledge of the ELTP and its methodological background, yet when they were asked whether they would like to be informed or receive training about it they display unwillingness to do so. The result symbolizes a vicious cycle by emphasizing the importance of professional development. The teachers seem to have limited concern regarding the changes in the program, although they are one of the most important agents in this modification. Thus the finding calls for further research so as to find out the reasons of this hesitation.

In response to the second part of the questionnaire, it can be claimed that on the theoretical basis the teachers developed appropriate beliefs about TEYL methodology in some respects, yet they are not sure in most of the other aspects. Moreover, in contrast to positive views on several of the features of the ELTP, their classroom practices indicate limited transfer of this knowledge to classrooms. Although the vast majority of them have positive thoughts about the priority of listening and speaking skills over reading and writing skills, they are doubtful about placing less importance on writing skill that they show a tendency towards using it. In fact, as stated in the previous literature that reading and writing should be regarded as secondary skills to be taught, because “children often cannot read and write at all yet, or not with much confidence” at the beginning of FL instruction (Şevik, 2012, p. 328). In addition, as it is the case in the language acquisition process, the view of following natural order has its own importance. Since children acquire their mother tongue by listening to everything surrounding them, and then they try to imitate and start to speak, and then, they can learn how to read and write on a phased basis and little by little (NR, 2010).

Regarding the emphasis of the ELTP on meaningful learning opportunities, the teachers claimed to use some traditional teaching methods such as drilling, or writing activities that lead to rote memorization and grammar exercises to uncover some important points. As stated by Borg and Burns (2008, p.458), “teachers base their instructional decisions on their own personal theories, and such theories are formed largely through experience and grounded in teachers’ understanding of their teaching contexts”, which results in serious discrepancies and contradictions among teachers’ beliefs and their in-class practices. Considering these controversial points among teachers, it can be concluded that the teachers’ level of information about the new ELTP can be considered as an important indicator of the fact that the ELTP was not appropriately implemented by the teachers.

Regarding the third part of the questionnaire, although almost all of the teachers put emphasis on the supremacy of listening and speaking skills, the number of teachers who focused on listening activities in their classes pointed out a lower frequency of use. The decline between their beliefs and implementations points out to some problems and require efforts to think about the reasons behind the lack or limited transfer of their beliefs into their classrooms. However, their focus on speaking activities was higher compared to listening activities. Engaging children in speaking activities such as dialogues, interactional activities, role-plays or dramas and developing meaning collaboratively by using classroom interactions of all types (whole class, pair-group work activities) are necessary to assist their communicative competence as recommended by MoNE (2006). However, it is important to bear in mind that listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides necessary input for the learners. Therefore, necessary importance should be devoted to the development of listening skill as it is the first step in the natural route of language acquisition (NR, 2010). Considering the

differences in teachers' beliefs and implementations, limited teaching hours or central examination system may be some of the reasons to explain them.

The teachers also valued the activity-based teaching rather than the traditional one; however, their in-class practices indicated that they occasionally vary the activity types. However, providing enjoyable and motivating learning opportunities for children is essential so that children develop experiences with the language by means of games, songs and fun activities (Moon, 2000; NR, 2010). Given the in-class activities that the teachers provided, it is clearly seen that the types of activities were limited to only certain types, however, others such as story-telling and using poems were not sufficiently utilized. Further research on the topic is necessary to uncover the reasons of such discrepancies.

Speaking about the types of assessment that teachers used in their classes, they found the use of portfolio assessment more suitable for YLs. They also thought that traditional methods are not the best ways to assess their performance. However, their implementations were not consistent with these results. While the ratio of using project and portfolio assessment; and self and peer evaluation showed a decrease, the use of traditional assessment techniques showed parallelism with their beliefs. Self-assessment is emphasized in the ELTP (MoNE, 2013) to encourage learners to monitor their own progress along with the other assessment types such as project and portfolio assessment, self and peer evaluation, teacher observation and evaluation, and pen and paper tests. Similarly, the importance of observation and documentation, and self-evaluation by portfolio assessment is also emphasized in Nuremberg Recommendations (NR, 2010). Along with many other, the teachers' practical knowledge about the assessment types offered by the ELTP, their perceptions about the difficulties of the implementation of such types of assessments, and the central examination system directing teachers to use pen and paper tests could be some of the reasons of the situation.

One of the most important findings of the present study is related to the differences between the teachers' beliefs regarding their experience in teaching in general and their experience in teaching primary school." Results revealed that there was a significant difference between the novice teachers and the experienced teachers in terms of their understanding of the features of the ELTP. The teachers who graduated from the university recently seemed to be more knowledgeable about the theories of TEYL as well as relevant practices. The teachers' beliefs about the appropriate methodology to be used with YLs decreased as their experience in teaching increased. In this sense, it can be suggested that the government institutions assist professional development of the in-service teachers to support them throughout their profession.

The majority of the teachers found the allocated time for language instruction limited, which brings a big challenge both for teachers and students to achieve the learning goals of the ELTP. Considering the fact that the exposure received in an EFL context is not significant when compared to ESL settings (Munoz, 2010), the amount of the instruction that YLs receive may not be enough to create any significant change in an EFL setting (Çepik & Sarandi, 2012). Hence, the frequency of English lessons might also be some of the issues that policy makers might project on. This is because instruction time significantly correlates with outcomes (Unsworth, de Bot, Persson & Prins, 2012), and "early language introduction is effective only when instruction hours are used in an efficient way (Mayo, 2003 cited in Çepik & Sarandi, 2012, p.3202).

## **5. Conclusions**

The current study aims to delve into English teachers' ideas regarding the ELTP, their beliefs about appropriate teaching methodology for YLs and their classroom implementations. The controversies in

theoretical knowledge and practice indicate a need for further investigation to understand the reasons behind the findings. The results of the study are important in that it sheds light into the necessary conditions for successful curriculum implementation. These findings can hopefully inform policy makers and other stakeholders about the kinds of beliefs teachers hold and how these are reflected in their in-class practices. “Teachers are not simply implementers of educational innovations that are handed down to them by policy makers, but they interpret, modify and implement these innovations according to their beliefs and the context where these teachers work” (Chang, 2011; Keys 2007; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Spillane et al., 2002; Woods, 1996 cited in Orafi, 2013, p.15), therefore, it is important to gain insights for curriculum developers, policy makers and other stakeholders by investigating how teachers’ beliefs influence the way teachers carry out these innovations (Orafi, 2013). As Goh (1999) states “innovators must take steps to ensure that after investing so much time and money in disseminating the innovation, the final and most crucial stage of implementation is not left to chance” (p. 18). Therefore, teachers should be provided with the necessary support, especially in the form of in-service training about the new ELTP, its contents and its effective implementation in real classrooms. They need to be informed about the rationales and principles that lie behind the practices which teachers are asked to implement. As cited by McLaughlin and Mitra (2001) “Absent knowledge about why they are doing what they are doing, implementation will be superficial only, and teachers will lack the understanding they will need to deepen their current practice or to sustain new practices in the face of changing contexts” (p. 307). Thus an essential part of in-service training is to make teachers aware of the assumptions that underlie what they do and then to review those assumptions regarding new perspectives and practices offered by the ELTP.

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## İngilizce öğretmenlerinin yeni İngilizce öğretim programına dair algı ve sınıf içi uygulamaları

### Öz

Dil öğretim programlarında yabancı dil öğretiminine eğitim sisteminin daha erken basamaklarında yer verilmesi yönündeki küresel anlayışın benimsenmesiyle Türk eğitim sisteminde yapılan son değişiklikler İngilizce öğretiminin önemini arttırmıştır. Fakat, yeni bir dil öğretim programının uygulanmaya konması zorlayıcı olabilir. Bu çalışma çocuklara İngilizce öğretimini esas alan yenilikleri dikkate alarak İngilizce öğretmenlerinin program hakkındaki algılarını ve sınıf içi uygulamalarını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla öğretmen görüşlerinin değerlendirilmesi ve onların çocuklara yabancı dil öğretirken gerçekleştirdikleri sınıf içi uygulamaları ortaya koymak için, 2013 yılında 4+4+4 eğitim sistemiyle uygulamaya konulan yeni İngiliz dili öğretimi programının temel esasları dikkate alınmıştır. Çalışmanın verileri devlet okullarında 2., 3., 4., 5., ve 6. sınıfları okutan 232 İngilizce öğretmeninden anket yoluyla toplanmıştır. İlgili anket üç bölümden oluşmakta olup, katılımcıların yabancı dil öğretimine başlama yaşı (sınıf düzeyi) hakkındaki görüşlerini, yeni dil öğretim programı hakkındaki algıları ve sınıf içi uygulamalarına dair bilgi toplamayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, katılımcılar yabancı dil öğretiminin eğitim sisteminin ilkököl 1. sınıf aşamasında başlaması yönünde görüş birliğinde olduklarını göstermiştir. Katılımcı öğretmenlerin çoğunlukla çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi konusunda teorik

olarak uygun görüşlere sahip olmalarına rağmen, özellikle yeni İngilizce öğretim programının okuma ve yazma becerleri söz konusu olduğunda aynı görüşü sınıf içi uygulamalarına yansıtmadıkları görülmüştür.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* İlköğretim İngilizce dil öğretimi; yabancı dil öğretim programı; yabancı dil eğitimi uygulamaları; çocuklar; İngilizce dil öğretimi.

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