

## The Implementation of an Intensive English Language Program in the Fifth Grade in Turkey: A Qualitative Evaluation

### Türkiye’de Yabancı Dil Ağırlıklı Beşinci Sınıf İngilizce Dersi Öğretim Programının Uygulanması: Nitel Bir Değerlendirme

Ali DİNCER \*  Hatice Kübra KOÇ \*\* 

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative evaluation study aims to investigate the implementation process of a current educational reform on teaching English to young learners in Turkey, the Intensive English Language Program in the Fifth Grade, from English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers’ viewpoints. Seven EFL teachers at pilot schools in the city-center of Erzincan were interviewed twice. The results of the first round of interviews indicated that despite the challenges arising from the pilot program, the teachers had positive attitudes regarding the potential advantages of the program. However, the final interview results painted a different picture in that although the main principles of the policy were seen as beneficial for young learners, the teachers faced a variety of challenges, such as a heavy compulsory curriculum in terms of content, lack of professional development support on the new program and scarcity of suitable language teaching materials. Based on both these problems and the benefits of the program, the teachers offered several suggestions for improving the quality of the program; these targeted elements including poor design of the program and unsatisfying professional development support. This study takes a snapshot of the implementation of the current EFL reform and presents suggestions for policymakers and teachers.

**Keywords:** intensive English language program, young learners, language policy, EFL teachers’ viewpoints.

**ÖZ:** Bu nitel değerlendirme araştırması, Türkiye’de çocuklara İngilizce öğretimi üzerine geliştirilen güncel eğitim reformlarından biri olan Yabancı Dil Ağırlıklı Beşinci Sınıf İngilizce Dersi Öğretim Programı uygulamasını, yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin gözünden değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, Erzincan ili şehir merkezindeki pilot okullarda görev yapan yedi farklı İngilizce öğretmeni ile uygulama sürecinde iki kez görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmelerin ilk turunda elde edilen sonuçlar; pilot uygulama kendi içerisinde bir takım sorunlar doğursa da, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin programın potansiyel avantajlarını göz önünde bulundurarak olumlu tutumlar geliştirdiğini göstermektedir. Bununla beraber, son görüşme bulguları tamamen farklı bir resim ortaya koymaktadır; bu sonuçlara göre, uygulamanın temel prensiplerinin çocuklar açısından faydalı görülmesine rağmen İngilizce öğretmenleri program süresince içerik açısından yoğun müfredatın uygulamasında, mesleki gelişim kapsamında yapılan eğitimlerin eksikliği ve uygun dil öğretim materyallerinin yetersizliği gibi konularda bir takım zorluklarla karşılaşmıştır. Öğretmenler, belirtilen bu problemler ve ayrıca programın faydalı yönlerini dikkate alarak, uygulanan programın kalitesini arttırmak amacıyla bir takım öneriler sunmuştur. Bu önerilerin temelinde programın zayıf olan tasarımı ve çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi konusundaki mesleki gelişim desteği eğitimlerinin yetersizliğini hedef aldığı görülmüştür. Bu çalışma, mevcut yabancı dil eğitimi reformlarının değerlendirilmesi açısından genel bir bakış açısı ortaya koyarken öğretmen ve eğitim program düzenleyicilerine bir takım öneriler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** yoğun İngilizce dersi öğretim programı, erken yaşta öğrenenler, yabancı dil politikaları, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin görüşleri.

\* Corresponding Author: Asst. Prof. Dr., Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University, Erzincan, Turkey, [adincer@erzincan.edu.tr](mailto:adincer@erzincan.edu.tr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0732-3975>

\*\* Asst. Prof. Dr., Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University, Erzincan, Turkey, [kubra.tuncarslan@gmail.com](mailto:kubra.tuncarslan@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2483-2330>

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*“Research seeks to prove; evaluation seeks to improve...”* Michael Quinn Patton

## Introduction

Within the last two decades, English has become the lingua franca all over the world, which means it is a contact language or tool of communication among people possessing different first language backgrounds and sharing different cultural norms (Seidlhofer, 2001, 2005). Consequently, millions of non-English speakers have been learning English and coming into contact with English in tandem with recent technological developments (Block & Cameron, 2002; Thomason, 2001). Moreover, teaching and practicing English have been taken more seriously due to the pervasiveness of English outside of English-speaking countries, and education policies across the world have gradually earmarked much more effort, time, and money for helping students to become efficient language learners (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

The education policy changes regarding the lowering of the starting age for language learners have been primarily affected by two main assumptions: (1) that children learn languages better and more easily than adults and (2) that a longer period of formal education leads to higher language proficiency (Enever & Moon, 2009). An expanding stream of literature in the field of language teaching supports these assumptions (e.g., Bland, 2015; Gürsoy & Çelik-Korkmaz, 2012; Johnstone, 2002; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Nikolov, 2002). With the “uncritical acceptance of the view that early is better” (Enever & Moon, 2009, p.6), Turkey, like all countries, has experienced a number of policy changes regarding language teaching in national education in this century, and teaching English to young learners has recently become the focus of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey within this evolutionary process (Altan, 2016; İnal, 2006; Kırkgöz, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Kırkgöz, Çelik, & Arıkan, 2016; MoNE, 2013, 2017).

As a means to address the policy changes in foreign language education for young learners in Turkey, a reform was introduced in 1997, and English as a foreign language (EFL) is offered as a standard compulsory school subject in the fourth grade at the elementary level (Kırkgöz, 2008). In that reform, fourth- and fifth-grade students were required to attend two 40-minute-lessons per week that were based on mainly English language grammar and communicative skills. Since the students in those grades were defined as young learners, the courses were planned around game-like activities, communicatively supported tasks, and interactive activities. However, the general framework of that curriculum was criticized by the authorities because of not completing all of the tasks effectively by both learners and teachers (Kırkgöz et al., 2016).

As for chronological order of curriculum research in a Turkish EFL context, the primary school curriculum for English language teaching was revised in 2005 following the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) about how to teach young learners English at different levels (Ersöz et al., 2006). In that curriculum, the main principles were based on the constructivist approach and Communicative Language Teaching criteria. Additionally, multiple intelligences theory was also integrated into new tasks since it was thought that an effective teaching environment could be supported via different activities for young learners. Considering the problems with the implementation of the 2005 curriculum, Kırkgöz (2009b) stated

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). At the same time, Turkey’s English language teaching system needed to be reformed in a more effective way for both English teachers and young learners.

In 2012, representing a new point of view for all educational systems in primary school education in Turkey, a new kind of educational innovation, namely, 4+4+4 education system, was offered by the MoNE (MoNE, 2012). According to that new system, English language teaching for young learners in Turkey was improved. In the new system, the compulsory education requirement increased from 8 years to 12 years, and the starting age both for primary school (5.5 years of age) and language teaching (6.6 years of age, in the second grade) was lowered (Gürsoy, Çelik-Korkmaz, & Damar, 2013). According to the regulation, second and third graders received two hours of English instruction per week, and fourth, fifth, and sixth graders have received three hours of weekly compulsory language teaching (Arslan, 2012). Within that new framework, the main emphasis was on the more communicative listening and speaking skills rather than on reading and writing skills. Accordingly, assessments of young learners in the courses also developed, with elements such as performance-based assessments, productive activities, and portfolio studies introduced.

In addition to that innovation in the Turkish education system, in 2017, the MoNE stated that the current language teaching approach should aim to teach English effectively to young learners. After a pre-pilot study as a part of the current reform, in January 2017, the MoNE announced its new English language curriculum reform would be implemented starting with the 2017-2018 academic year. In this new curriculum, the MoNE (2017) has increased the number of units in English courses for fifth-grade students as part of an effort to turn the grade into a foreign language preparation year. It is believed that since the program is a new approach to improving young learners’ language learning proficiency, current issues with the new curriculum, teachers’ needs and challenges, and the effectiveness of the new curriculum for young learners must be discussed in an academic way. Accordingly, this article aims to explore the needs and ideas of EFL teachers in the new system and the challenges that they might face a scientific way.

### **The Intensive English Language Teaching Program for the Fifth Grade**

The intensive English language teaching program for the fifth graders was first introduced by MoNE in 2017 and applied in selected pilot public lower elementary schools after then. With this new reform, weekly course hours for fifth graders in the selected pilot schools were increased from three hours to 15 hours in a week. According to the published report of the program (MoNE, 2017), the program has been designed in accordance with the principles of CEFR and focused much on building learner autonomy and problem-solving skills with a communicative approach in English language teaching. It is also in parallel to the national English Language Teaching Programs from the second to eighth graders published by MoNE in 2017. Unlike some previous changes based on the classification of grammatical forms, the new program has less emphasis on grammar and has been organized with an integrated approach to enhance all language skills with various communicative activities. Then, the content of the program has been heavily broadened and included 40 units with various themes related to daily use of English. New

themes and cultural elements have been added to the new curriculum to improve young learners' cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills. As for the new themes, more global and international issues have been incorporated into the units, and idioms and proverbs have been presented in the activities. As for another innovation, the assessment of young learners has been enhanced with the help of productive activities and task-based homework. As Altan (2017, p. 769) said "everything seems alright on the paper." It is also noted that the success of the program "is inevitably dependent upon the analogous approach in teachers' instructional choices, measurement repertoire and in learners' practice." (MoNE, 2017, p. 3).

As for the related literature in this field, since the current reform is a new procedure in Turkey, there is limited research on the needs and implementation of this system (e.g., Aksoy, Bozdoğan, Akbaş, & Seferoğlu, 2018; Dilekli, 2018; Erdem & Yücel-Toy, 2017). According to recent research on the needs associated with the foreign language-oriented fifth-grade English language teaching curriculum, Erdem and Yücel-Toy (2017) have reported problems based on the size of classes, the lack of a prepared curriculum, and the lack of a coursebook. In their study, Erdem and Yücel-Toy also pointed out that according to English language teachers who participated in the pilot project, students' readiness and the CEFR are the most important factors that should be considered while preparing the English curriculum for foreign language-oriented fifth-grade students. In another study, Dilekli (2018) found that EFL teachers complained about the overloaded curriculum and problems with a limited duration because of that heavy curriculum. Similarly, Aksoy and colleagues (2018) have stated that the new program needs to be revised in terms of the quality of materials and technological requirements, they have also clarified that in-service teacher training based on the new program can be designed as for a suggestion to develop language teaching in further academic years.

However, to analyze the new system's advantages and disadvantages, researchers require significantly more studies in this field. Thanks to the following research on this issue, solutions for the problems with the system, the needs of both teachers and students, implementations and future adjustments can be enhanced in related literature. This study aims to identify English teachers' viewpoints regarding the practical aspects of the English curriculum for foreign language-oriented fifth-grade students as reflected in the current system. The main motivations for studying English language teachers in this context are that EFL teachers' experienced difficulties while teaching young learners and that teaching English to young learners requires specific pedagogical skills, knowledge of teaching methods, the effective use of materials, an understanding of individual differences, and collaborative learning (e.g., Aksoy et al.; 2018; Bayyurt, 2012; Haznedar, 2003, 2012; Kırkgöz et al., 2016). Therefore, correctly identifying the ideas and suggestions of participating EFL teachers could allow researchers and the MoNE to easily and effectively overcome the problems regarding this innovation. Accordingly, a new strategy or policy for teaching English effectively could be adapted for Turkish young learners.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study aims to explore EFL teachers' viewpoints regarding the new foreign language teaching system for young learners. It puts language teachers' views, program implementation challenges and possible suggestions for improvement under the microscope from the perspective of EFL teachers. The following research questions in reference to the education policy change (MoNE, 2017) guided the study:

1. What are EFL teachers' viewpoints on the intensive English language program in the fifth grade?
2. What are the challenges with the implementation of the intensive English language program in the fifth grade?
3. What are solutions to the challenges with the implementation of the intensive English language program in the fifth grade?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, which is an in-depth investigation of a specific real-life project, policy or a program and enable readers to understand the case in focus by unravels its complexity (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2009). In line with Merriam's (1998) case study approaches (i.e., descriptive, interpretative and evaluative), evaluation research perspective was accepted in the study. According to Saldana (2011), evaluation research allows researchers to systematically examine the quality, benefits, and effectiveness of a new program or policy to help authorities redesign current and future endeavors by offering constructive recommendations for improvement. Evaluation research questions whether an educational intervention has worked and provides insight into the effectiveness of the intervention by examining the implementation at different stages (Dane, 2011). Within this framework, this qualitative evaluation study examines the new educational policy change regarding teaching English to young learners in Turkey and investigates language teachers' experiences with program implementation overtimes with two waves: at the beginning and end of the program.

#### **Participants**

For the pilot application of the program, totally eight EFL teachers in four public schools in the city-center of Erzincan, Turkey were determined as the universe of this study. However, one of the teachers could not participate in the study due to her health problems. Seven teachers were identified via a purposeful sampling strategy. According to Creswell (2004), with this approach, participants are selected because of their distinctive characteristics or experiences with the central phenomenon. The teachers who were officially assigned by the provincial directorate for national education to implement the intensive English language program for fifth graders during the 2017-2018 school year were chosen as the study group, and their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Demographics of Participants*

Teacher	Gender	Graduation degree	Age	Years of experience
T1	Female	MA	30	8
T2	Female	BA	34	11
T3	Female	BA	23	1
T4	Female	BA	25	3
T5	Female	BA	29	6
T6	Male	BA	33	10
T7	Male	BA	28	2
			<i>M</i> =28.86 <i>SD</i> =3.68	<i>M</i> =8.33 <i>SD</i> =3.59

*Note: T: Teacher, MA: Master's degree, BA: Bachelor's degree.*

Table 1 shows that all of the teachers had a BA, but one teacher also had an MA, and they ranged in age from 23 to 34 years. Their language teaching experience was moderate and ranged from two to 11 years.

### **Instrument**

An interview protocol including open-ended questions, was prepared by the researchers to collect data about teachers' views of the program both at the beginning of the implementation stage and at the end of the school year. As for the instrument development process, firstly, the related literature was reviewed, and it was seen that there was not any specific data collection tool was developed for the aim of reflecting EFL teachers' viewpoints on the new English language teaching program for the fifth-grade students. Accordingly, relevant contents and related terms were included in the data collection instrument as an item pool. After getting three experts' opinions who have been studying in this department, interview questions were designed by the researchers. There was no pilot testing for the instrument due to the limited number of participants and the new application on the program.

In this manner, the first interview protocol included 11 questions related to their expectations for the new program, the problems they anticipated and ways to improve the program. Details for each category are as follows: (1) teachers' expectations and attitudes toward the new program (e.g., "What are the expectations and anxieties you have regarding the program?"), (2) teachers' challenges regarding the new program (e.g., "Have any informative meetings or in-service trainings been provided?"), and (3) suggestions for the development of the program (e.g., "What do you think about the applications of the program for the future?").

The second interview protocol included quite similar questions but was designed for the program evaluation at the end of the year. It had 11 questions about to what extent their expectations had been met, what challenges they faced during implementation, and what suggestions for program improvement in the following years they had. Sample questions are as follows: "What kind of experiences did you have during the process?",

“What were the difficulties you faced in the process?”, “Can you give some examples of these difficulties?”, and “Do you have any advice on how the program could improve?”.

### **Data Collection, Analysis and Presentation**

For the data collection process, the researchers first obtained consent from the Provincial Directorate for National Education. Later, they contacted eight teachers from all four public schools determined by the MoNE to participate in the pilot. They were informed about the aim of the study, protecting their anonymity and rights to withdraw anytime during the interviews. Seven teachers agreed to be volunteers to take part in the research. The first interview session was held in November 2017. The second interview session was completed between May and June 2018. The interviews were recorded by the second researcher at the teachers’ schools at times determined by the teachers, and the interviews lasted approximately 10 to 40 minutes.

The verbal data were transcribed verbatim, and a qualitative data analysis program (NVivo 12) was used for data elimination and thematic extraction. For the qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis served as a flexible means of identifying, analyzing, and reporting the main patterns within all the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, there are six steps of thematic analysis (i.e., familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report). By following the six-step guide, the first researcher first analyzed the data to identify similarities and differences across the datasets, and later the common threads in the interview data were reviewed by both researchers.

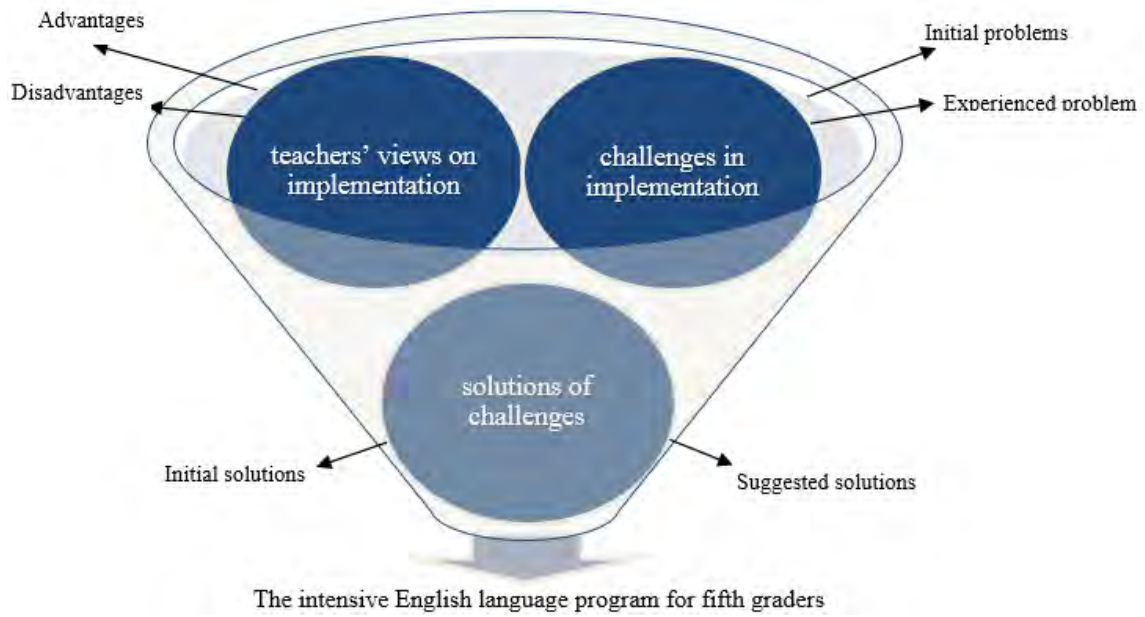
In terms of the presentation of the findings, thematic maps for each question were drawn based on the two interviews. To indicate the data in each, three different writing styles were used. The category names in *‘italics’* refer to data from the first interview session, the category names in ‘underlined’ categories refer to data from the second interview session, and the category names in **‘bold’** font refer to data from both interview sessions. Furthermore, sample teacher excerpts related to each category are given after each figure. The letter ‘T’ indicates the teacher, and the number indicates the number of participants in the demographic details table.

For ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, based on the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Shenton, 2004) four common criteria (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) were adopted in qualitative research. For credibility, the researchers for credibility conducted an appropriate method for research, the examination of the previous research, familiarity with the culture of participants, and ensuring honesty in informants. For transferability and dependability, a sufficient explanation of the interview content, process and analysis procedures were presented for future investigators. For confirmability, two researchers joined the data analysis process and also took expert opinion during the analysis. They used a qualitative data analysis program to show the emergent themes in the interviews.

### **Findings**

Based on the research questions, a thematic map was drawn that illustrates the main themes and categories for each one of them shown below.

**Figure 1.** EFL Teachers’ Experiences with the Implementation of the Program

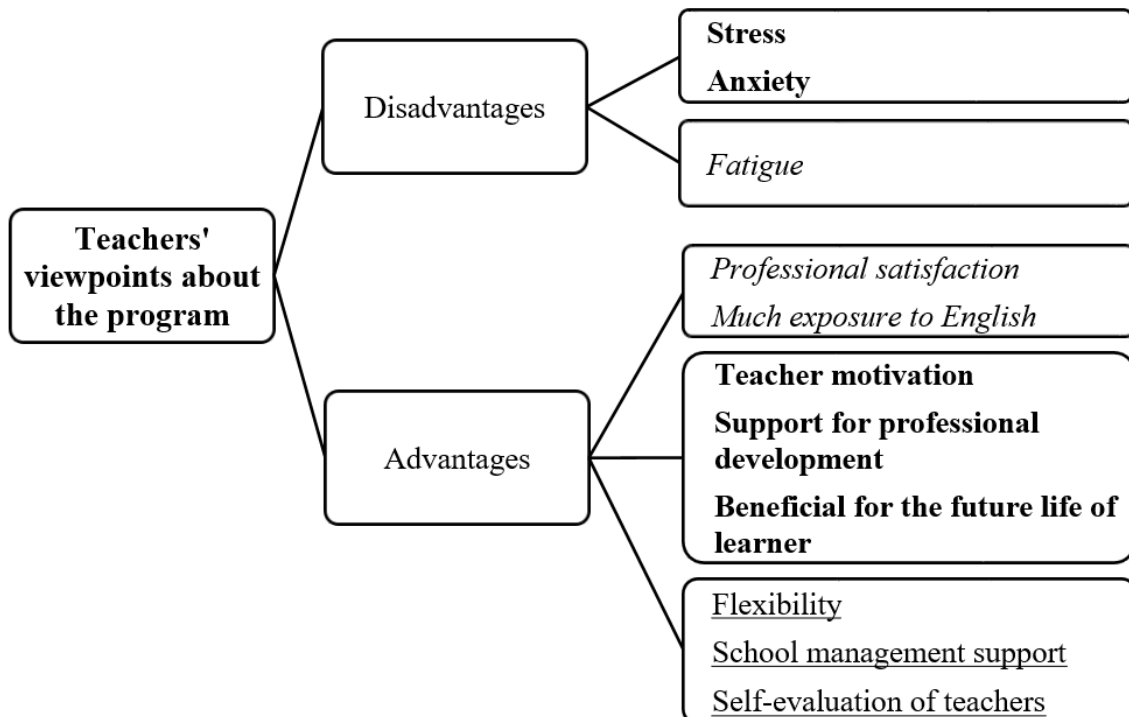


As seen in Figure 1, each theme regarding EFL teachers’ experience with program implementation of the new education program for young learners has two main categories.

**EFL Teachers’ Views Regarding the Intensive English Language Program**

Figure 2 presents the findings from both interview sessions for the first research question on EFL teachers’ opinions about the program.

**Figure 2.** EFL Teachers’ Viewpoints about the Implementation of the Program





As the figure demonstrates, the main disadvantages of the program were found to be stress and anxiety for teachers. Seven teachers stated at the beginning of the autumn semester that they felt anxious and stressed because of the new themes, curriculum, and the lack of information about the new program. As T4 stated in response to the question about ideas on the program, *“I felt nervous at the beginning of the semester because I didn’t know anything about the program, and also there have been lots of new themes and units. So, I think that the curriculum and program are too heavy to apply with young learners, and it made me nervous.”* Additionally, all of the teachers indicated that they felt stressed at the beginning of the semester and the current program made them more anxious about the application of the program. As T4 stated, *“There is just one English teacher to teach in one class, and there is no support by policymakers on the program, so it makes me stressed because of the heavy curriculum and confusing elements in the program.”* As Figure 2 highlights, teachers expressed similar problems at the end of the year: Teachers, again, stated that they felt anxious and stressed regarding the program. However, apart from the first interview data, the teachers complained about fatigue at the end of the spring semester because the course book for the new program had not been supplied by the MoNE. Instead, the teachers were asked to use the curriculum announced online by the MoNE, and teachers had to design their own materials during the semester. They stated that the lack of course-book had left them very tired; it was coded as a disadvantage of the program according to the teachers. For instance, T2 indicated that *“I am the only English teacher in my school, and since the school is in a small village, I do not have enough sources to design my courses, and I had to create all of the activities by myself. I had to work at least 10 hours for each one of the weeks to design the courses, and after a while, I felt consumed because of it.”*

As for the advantages, six participants stated at the beginning of the program that it could be useful for professional satisfaction and significant English exposure for teachers. Additionally, the data from both interview sessions indicated all participants believed that the new program could increase teacher motivation, support professional development, and be beneficial for the future lives of learners. However, for the second interview session, some new perceptions were coded as positive perceptions; these included flexibility, school management support, and the self-evaluation of teachers. In this regard, five teachers stated that the school management was very helpful and an advantage for the new program and that they were supported during the program by the school management. For instance, T3 expressed that *“School management always supports us while designing courses and it also supplies financial support for the materials. Additionally, the management informed parents about the new program, and it makes progress easier for us.”* Moreover, all of the teachers stated that they were flexible while designing courses and assessing learners during the program and being flexible increased teacher autonomy in the process.

### Challenges with the Implementation of the Program

The findings for the second research question about challenges with implementation are shown below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** EFL Teachers' Challenges Regarding the Implementation of the Program

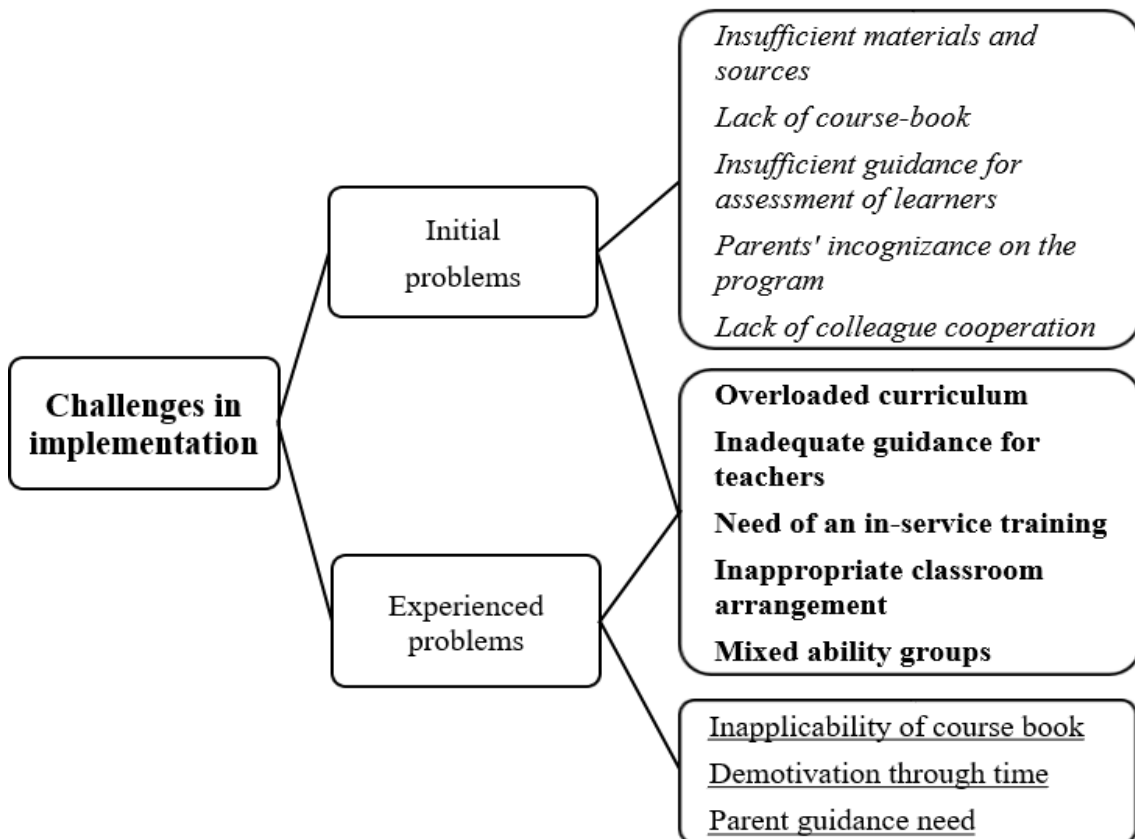


Figure 3 illustrates that the teachers' initial problems were mainly related to the lack of a course book, insufficient materials, and sources, inadequate guidance on the assessment of learners, a lack of colleague cooperation, and parents' unfamiliarity with the program. All of the teachers stated that they did not have a course book or any other supplementary program materials at the outset and they were just informed about the new curriculum; therefore, they had to develop their own materials during the first semester. All of the participants said that this process was very time-consuming and challenging. For instance, T2 who taught in a rural secondary school said, "I am the only English teacher in this school, and I don't have a chance to design activities with my colleagues, so I have to design all of the courses by myself, and it is very challenging for me. If I get a course book, I can improve the language skills of students more easily." Additionally, the teachers had problems with the assessment process for students since they were not informed about the evaluation criteria for the new program. As for a sample excerpt from the first interview session, regarding this topic, T1 said, "We don't know anything about the evaluation process, how can we assess language skills? Do we need to analyze them one by one or in an integrative way? In the grading system developed by the MoNE, there

*will be three exams for each of the semesters, but how can we evaluate students via just written exams? Is it logical for this new program? I have not decided on my own criteria yet, but I want to evaluate all of the skills one by one by preparing different types of exams for language skills. But we need guidance for assessing students effectively.”* In addition, at the beginning of the autumn semester, six teachers complained about a lack of colleague cooperation and stated that they needed to share their experiences with their colleagues from the other pilot schools since the program was taking place for the first time. According to T4, *“I think we can share our activities and lesson plans with other colleagues from different schools via social media or open-access platforms because we don’t have a course book, and we try to design everything individually. If we share our own materials with each other, it gains time for us, and we can see some different ideas on the new program. Therefore, it can be very useful for all of us. But, unfortunately, we can’t do it, and now I don’t know what other teachers do in their courses or which kinds of materials they are using in their lessons.”*

Furthermore, common problems were experienced at both the beginning and end of the academic year. The majority of the teachers stated that one of the largest problems was the overloaded curriculum. As, T4 put it, *“In the new curriculum, there are 40 units, and some of the themes given in these units are too confusing and abstract for young learners. I think it is impossible to complete all of the units in one year, so it should be narrowed in terms of the cognitive abilities and needs of young learners.”* As for the other major problem during the academic year, the majority of participants stated that they needed professional development training or a seminar to prepare them for the new program. At the end of the study, T5 pointed out that *“There should be a training program at the beginning of the semester to inform us about the process and new program. Since there was not an informative activity, we had to design our courses in terms of our own knowledge and materials. Also, there wasn’t any kind of information about the assessment, and again, we had to prepare our own evaluation exams.”* Accordingly, during the year, all of the teachers reported that their initial problems were not solved; they indicated that if the program is used in future academic years, those problems must be solved by the MoNE.

Moreover, at the end of the spring semester, teachers stated that they experienced several problems with the new program such as the inapplicability of the course book, decreasing motivation, and parents’ need for guidance. As for course book, it should be indicated here that at the beginning of the spring semester, the course book specifically designed for the current program was delivered by the MoNE and the teachers believed that course book was not suitable for the cognitive level of young learners. Therefore, their problems with the material and course book were not solved during the spring semester, and they again had to design their own activities and materials. Additionally, the teachers specified at the end of the year that the problems with the new program decreased their motivation in terms of the teaching process. Lastly, four teachers stated that parents should be informed about the new program and that parental support was necessary to complete the program successfully; accordingly, T1 stated that *“Parents should know the details of the program, and they should support learners both financially and psychologically because parent guidance is very significant for me. If they support*

*the process, getting suitable materials and collecting homework can be easier for me.*” Hence, parental guidance represented a problem for the teachers in this program.

### Suggestions for Program Challenges

The third research question was about the EFL teachers’ proposed solutions for the problems with the program. The findings are shown below in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** EFL Teachers’ Suggestions for the Challenges Regarding Implementation

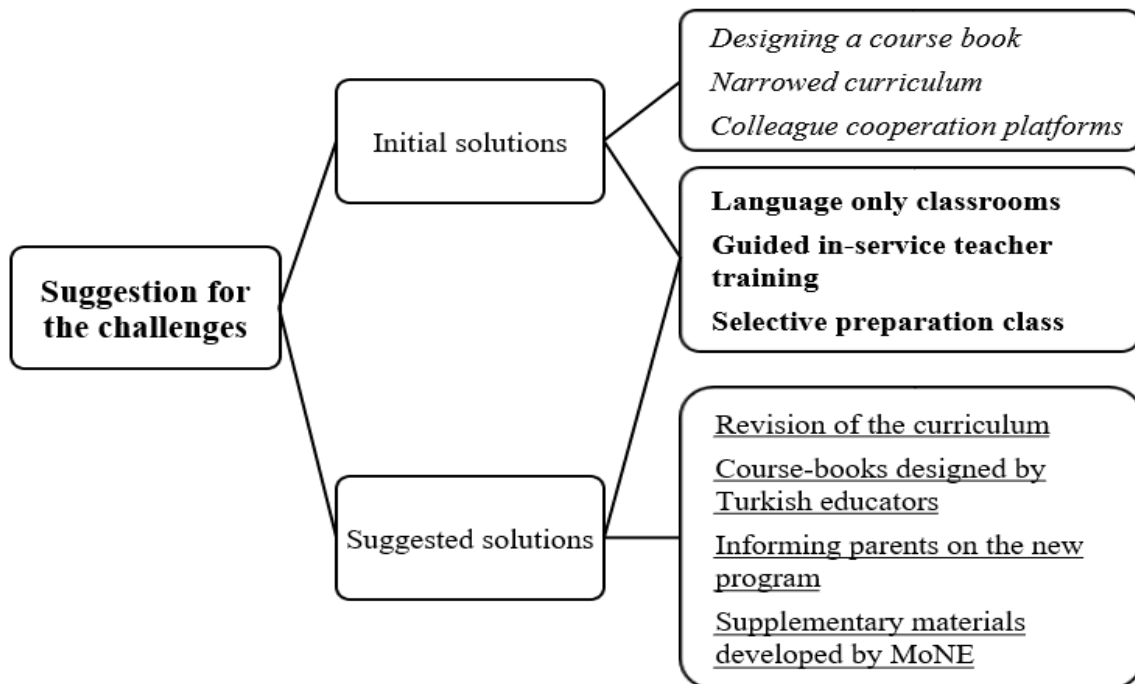


Figure 4 shows that the teachers’ initial solutions for problems centered on the course book, the curriculum, and colleague cooperation. Since they had not yet experienced the whole process at the beginning of the program, they could only make suggestions about the course book and curriculum. In that regard, all participants stated at the beginning of the study that the units and themes in the curriculum should be narrowed for future applications. According to T4, *“There are some idioms or proverbs which I don’t know the meanings in the units, so it is impossible for me to teach them to learners. Also, there are some chapters that are irrelevant for young learners since they consist of many abstract terms for learners, and those are not suitable for the mental abilities of young learners.”* Again, three participants suggested colleague cooperation programs in the form of open-access platforms due to the lack of suitable materials.

On the other hand, both rounds of interviews indicated that the participants believed that there should be an English-language-only classroom for this program to create a more attractive teaching environment for young learners. In addition, all of the teachers thought that there should be guidance for EFL teachers on the new program with respect to units, assessments, homework, and activities via an in-service teacher training program. Lastly, five participants suggested that the new program should be voluntary for both teachers and learners. They indicated that parents or learners should volunteers to

participate in the program and that, only those students should take part; otherwise, learners might face problems and handicaps.

The teachers also provided solutions for the future application of the new program, since teachers completed the academic year. Their final suggestions were seen as more realistic and significant for this study. The teachers stated their ideas for the second time the end of the spring semester, all teachers thought the curriculum should be revised for the needs, cognitive abilities, and level of young learners for future applications. Accordingly, four teachers stated that the course book used for the pilot study was not relevant for their students and a new course book prepared by Turkish educators might be more beneficial for learners. Moreover, they suggested that parents might be informed about the new program at the beginning of the autumn semester and their guidance for the program can be solicited in this way. Last, they demanded significant supplementary support from the MoNE on teaching young learners.

### **Discussion**

This study has explored the viewpoints of EFL teachers on the implementation of an intensive language program for fifth graders in Turkey. Three research questions about EFL teachers' opinions, challenges, solutions for program and implementation were asked, and the findings have been discussed for each research questions.

The first main point concerns the EFL teachers' attitudes and opinions toward the new program. The findings indicate that most teachers had positive perceptions of the program. At first glance, many EFL teachers have positive attitudes and opinions about that current program, in general (Çakır, 2017). Accordingly, they think that the program has many advantages for both language teachers and students; for example, it motivates both learners and teachers, increases self-evaluation and professional development, and is beneficial for the future lives of young learners. Similarly, Aksoy and colleagues (2018) also named the advantages of the program and reported that it is effective for increasing language learning motivation and the academic success of students. This study has highlighted that the program indeed motivated the teachers, as they used the program extensively and improved their teaching skills. In the literature, similar findings on improvements in teachers' self-evaluation and teaching skills in terms of the constructivist approach have been reported by Vural and Şenel (2018), who studied teachers' ideas about the new program. Considering the benefits, the new program for fifth graders represents a new perspective on foreign language teaching in Turkey since it gives young learners an opportunity to effectively acquiring English skills early in their educational life. According to the oft-cited importance of language learning at young ages (e.g., Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002; Brown, 2007; Pinter, 2017), an early language learning experience guarantees later success.

In addition to these positive perspectives, teachers' professional development is another issue that must be emphasized. Young learners are highly dependent on their teachers during the learning process (Bland, 2015), and therefore, teacher training and professional development must be a part of the teaching process in early childhood education. Teachers' continuing professional development plays a significant role in improving the quality of teaching (Daloğlu, 2004). As stated by Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, and Mckinney (2007), professional development is far from just attending courses, it is a

lifelong learning process and a means of personal development for teachers today. Especially for young learners, teachers' professional development and experiences are vital in terms of the creation of a sufficient classroom environment for teaching English (Yazıcı & Genç-İlter, 2018). Moreover, because of the changing and developing needs of modern life, teachers have to improve themselves professionally to ensure a meaningful and modern educational environment for their learners. As the teachers in this study stated, the new program boosts teachers' professional development regarding language teaching and, accordingly, enhances the learning environment for young learners. Hence, the new intensive language program has advantages in terms of effective English language learning and teaching in Turkey.

On the other hand, all of the teachers stated that they felt stressed at the beginning of the program and their anxiety level was higher than normal due to the new application of the program. High anxiety levels in teachers can negatively influence the effectiveness of the teaching process (Aydın, 2016; İpek, 2016; Williams, 1991), and so the teachers' statements regarding their anxiety represented a negative perception since their teaching process might have been negatively affected. The teachers reported problems due to the lack of a course book and guidance on the new program, and those problems made them more anxious as they began the implementation of the program.

The second research question considered challenges with implementation and the weaknesses of the new program. The teachers faced challenges at both the beginning and end of the implementation process. Common programs reported at the end of the study were the lack of materials, the classroom environment, the insufficient curriculum, and the lack of professional guidance for teachers. Consistent with the literature (Aksoy et al., 2018; Erdem & Yücel-Toy, 2017), the teachers experienced issues because of classroom sizes and a lack of suitable materials. Similarly, Aksoy and colleagues (2018) have stated that the lack of adequate program materials was a disadvantage of the process since teachers had to improve their materials during the year, a task that proved highly time-consuming and challenging for them. Another disadvantage of the program was the inadequacy of the current curriculum both Aksoy et al. (2018) and this study have indicated that the curriculum presented problems for teachers. Similar findings might be due to the heavy and confusing program curriculum. Regarding the lack of teacher guidance, the teachers experienced many problems at the beginning of the semester. They struggled to decide how to assess their learners and how to design their courses effectively because of the lack of effective teacher guidance. Additionally, the teachers complained about parental guidance, mixed ability groups of learners, and an inadequate classroom environment for English language teaching. As for classroom environment, the use of various teaching activities, techniques, visual materials, and tasks to teach a foreign language has a substantial influence on young learners (Çakır, 2004). Moreover, teaching a foreign language requires both theoretical and practical knowledge of the teaching process (Widdowson, 2012). Accordingly, mixed activities, literary works, songs, and games can help students to develop their speaking skills; these make their pronunciation better and encourage greater motivation for language learning (Klancar, 2006). Therefore, the classroom environment and materials should be designed with the needs of young learners in mind.

As for the last research question on the EFL teachers' proposed solutions for challenges regarding program implementation, the teachers called for professional development support on program implementation. The teachers in the study had limited support concerning the program and needed professional guidance on curriculum details, assessment, homework, and activities appropriate for the learners' level to use the curriculum in an effective way. Teachers need training to combine theory and practice, not intellectually superficial seminars (Borko, 2004). Professional development training is not a one-time panacea for all deficiencies in education and training; it must be accepted as a long-term strategy, and teachers should regularly participate in continuing education to stay up to date with the latest changes in modern life (Bayrakçı, 2009; Fraser et al., 2007). Additionally, the teachers suggested that the classroom environment and materials, especially the course book, should be revised for their learners and that parents should be informed at the beginning of the autumn semester about the program. Learners are more successful at acquiring English if the classroom features a range of attractive activities (Dörnyei, 2001), and the teachers suggested that the program might be optional for fifth graders.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

As a developing country, Turkey has experienced various reforms and innovations in teaching English as a foreign language for a long time. As for the latest reform regarding English teaching policies, an intensive foreign language program for the fifth grade was piloted in public secondary schools across the country in the 2017-2018 academic year. Starting from the 2018-2019 school year, the program has become optional for secondary schools, and if school administrations want to offer a preparation class for fifth graders, they can introduce the program (MoNE, 2017). Since this reform is quite recent, much research is needed to evaluate it to better understand potential goals and expectations. Considering the qualitative nature of the study, it has some limitations regarding the limited number of participants in focus and one type of data collection strategy. Then, taking more teachers' viewpoints in this implementation process and investigating these teachers' experiences with various data collection strategies such as observation, think-aloud or teacher diaries would be helpful for a more thorough understanding of what is lived and experienced in the class for further research. In sum, this small-scale qualitative study offers a snapshot of the implementation of the program in a small city in Turkey. This picture suggests that the new education reform benefits young learners despite problems with its implementation. The intensive English program has increased learners' awareness of English language learning, motivated them to study languages, and improved communicative competence to some degree via the longer course hours and communicative activities. However, to achieve better outcomes, teachers, as the key educational policy implementers, need to be listened carefully, and the policy change process should incorporate them. To improve program implementation, the curriculum should be revised, supportive language teaching materials should be developed, and professional development programs for teaching English to young learners should be jointly developed by language experts and language teachers participating in the program. These changes to the intensive English language education reform would boost, Turkey's ranking in international English proficiency indexes and equip future generations with improved conversational English skills.

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