

## Primary school teachers' views on Syrian Students' Turkish and math skills and the confronted challenges

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### Abstract:

*This research attempts to reveal the views of the primary school teachers, having Syrian students in their class, on these students' Turkish and mathematics skills and the challenges they have confronted in the classroom. The research used a mixed research method and 347 primary school teachers who met the criterion of having Syrian students in their classes participated in the research. Quantitative data were gathered through a five-point Likert type questionnaire consisting of 27 questions, and qualitative data were collected with eight open-ended questions. Descriptive statistical methods were used during quantitative data analysis and descriptive analysis for qualitative data. The research findings revealed that Syrian students' reading, reading comprehension and problem solving skills were not sufficiently developed due to the lack of speaking Turkish. In the same vein, there were communication problems with students and parents due to the language barrier which affects Syrian students' choice of friends and their success in classes. Another research finding suggested that Syrian students were at a satisfactory level in operational skills that do not require verbal knowledge, especially in mathematics lesson. In addition, the parents were identified to be indifferent to the students' lessons and they did not help with their homework. The participants' common view was that Syrian students should receive Turkish education in separate classes (preparatory class) in order to solve the language problem before schooling.*

### Keywords:

Refugee education, refugee children, Turkish skills, math skills, primary school teachers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Due to reasons such as famine, hunger, civil war, human rights violations, economic and political problems in the world, people leave their countries and migrate to other countries. Therefore, the lives of children uprooted from their countries are interrupted and various problems such as abduction, rape, early marriage, child labor, and staying away from school are encountered (Boyden, de Berry, Feeny, & Hart, 2002; McBrien, 2005). Education serves as one of the substantial factors in restoring the feeling of normalcy and returning to a normal life for children who have been uprooted from their country (Peterson, 2011, Talbot, 2015). Besides, education is required to build a peaceful future and to gain a hopeful approach about the future (Sinclair, 2001; IIEP-UNESCO, 2011; Talbot, 2015). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2000) states that education is not only a profound human right, but also one of the fundamental factors for the healing of refugee children. In this regard, it is essential for refugee children to have educational opportunities.

### *Second language acquisition and identity*

Refugee children need language support so that they can communicate with others, learn the language of the host country and develop a sense of belonging. Language is a factor that can support or prevent the integration of refugee children (Cerna, 2019). Refugee children often attach importance to the acquisition of that country's language for their future success in the new country (Pryor, 2001). However, language proficiency may vary significantly across different dimensions. For instance, children may be competent at colloquial and spoken language, while they may be far behind in academic language (McBrien, 2005). Cummins (1981) explained this by advocating that Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive / Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are qualitatively different skills. Cummins (1981) stated that BICS includes skills such as pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar that are needed in everyday communication situations. Most refugee students can rapidly develop these skills in about two years after the first exposure to the second language. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) focuses on proficiency in the academic language or language used in the classroom in various content areas. In addition to language acquisition, students need to develop skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring during the development of academic competence. Therefore, it takes at least five years for students who acquire a second language to develop the CALP. Language skills are essential not only for academic success, but also for students with immigrant or refugee backgrounds to develop a sense of school belonging (Cerna, 2019). It may be useful to encourage refugee students to express their opinions and participate in class discussions in order to help them form their personal identity (Mosselson, 2006).

Creating and reconstructing identity plays a significant role in the integration of refugee students into schools and communities. Schools are places for socialization and thus

having a responsibility to help refugee students understand the new country and become a part of it (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996). If refugee students cannot balance their own culture with that of the host country, it may be difficult for them to adapt to the new country (Nakeyar, Esses, & Reid, 2017). Therefore, combining the culture of the host country with their own culture is paramount in the refugee students' adaptation and learning process (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996).

### *Models of refugee education and applications in Turkey*

The increasing refugee or asylum-seeking population due to these forced migrations entails the countries to take measures and develop education policies. In this regard, countries have adopted different integration models to ensure the integration of migrants and refugees. Assimilation and multiculturalism models are two main models among these models (Choquet, 2017). The assimilation model is built on a universalist policy that attributes the same rights to everyone regardless of their differences, based on the principle of equal dignity for its citizens considering cultural and religious differences (Choquet, 2017). The multicultural model, on the other hand, is based on a policy of difference based on a universalist assumption: all citizens should have the right to live according to their culture and religion (Choquet, 2017). The aim of both models is to ensure that all citizens are equal, but differ in the way they are encouraged.

In this context, countries embrace three different models to adapt refugee students to their current education system (Tsioupis & Paidá, 2020). The first of them is a separate site, where refugee students are placed for different periods, and a separate school model (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Short, 2002; Short & Boyson, 2012). While this model is implemented for middle school and high school students in the USA and at the local level (in Malmö city) in Sweden for refugees aged 13-15. The second model used especially for 7-9-year-old refugee students is Direct Immersion model, in which students are directly admitted to the current education system (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). In this model, the new student is directly placed in one of the existing classes, with or without the support of second language (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). The third model for refugees is a separate classroom or in-school program. In this model, students who have insufficient language skills to participate in normal classes are taught in a class called transition class, preparatory class, or admission class (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Short, 2002; Short & Boyson, 2012). According to the European Commission report published in 2019, 42 European countries adopted the separate classroom model for the students with migrant background (Cited in: Tsioupis & Paidá, 2020).

The separate model is put into force for primary and secondary school students in Turkey by establishing "Temporary Training Centers" (TTC) (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Short, 2002). A model of separate sites, Temporary Training Centers in Turkey (TTC) were opened inside and outside the camps in the Syrian border provinces. A program of Arabic and Turkish education was implemented in these centers.

The opening of these centers was later left to the approval of the governorships (MoNE, circular numbered 2014/21) and their number was increased. However, Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES) was implemented in 2016 with a view to adapting refugee students to the education system and help them learn languages. Thanks to this project, the number of students enrolled in public schools increased, the need for TTCs decreased and these centers started to close. School age children in Turkey are given the right to register directly to the state schools (Ministry of Education, Circular No. 2014/21) and placed in an appropriate class considering their age, and the second model was applied. According to the Immigration Administration General Directorate of September 2020 data, there are 1.197.124 Syrian school children in Turkey (5-17 years). 770.924 of these children are enrolled in the e-school affiliated to MoNE and FSIMS (Foreign Student Information Management System) (General Directorate of Lifelong Learning, 2021). These data indicate that direct immersion model is widely used in Turkey. Adaptation classes were opened in schools in Turkey within the scope of PIKTES in order to ensure the adaptation of refugee students to the education system and to help them learn a language (MoNE, circular 2019/15). Adaptation classes can be opened with at least ten students at each grade level, if there are no ten students, the multigraded class is provided as such: 3th and 4th grades in primary schools; 5th and 6th grades; 7th and 8th grades in secondary schools (MoNE, 2019/15 circular). Turkish teachers are assigned in these adaptation classes and these teachers conduct Turkish lessons. Branch teachers are assigned for other branch courses, but if there is no branch teacher, Turkish teachers also carry out the branch courses (MoNE, 2019/15 circular).

### *Problem statement*

Different models used around the world and in Turkey facilitate refugee students to adapt to the current education system and to reach the school. However, the studies conducted on the education of refugee or asylum-seeking children demonstrate that these children also encounter various obstacles and problems when they reach school (Aldaraghme, 2020; Aydın & Kaya, 2019; Avcı, 2019; Block, Cross, Riggs & Gibbs, 2014; Boylu & Işık, 2020; Gencer, 2017; McBrien, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Of all the problems, the language barrier is the leading one (Aydın & Kaya; 2015; Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006; Dolapçioğlu & Bolat 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2015; Khawaja, & Howard, 2020; Özkale & Yanpar-Yelken, 2020; Papapostolou, Manoli & Mouti, 2020; Ünal, Taşkaya, & Ersoy, 2018; Yohani, 2010). In addition to language problems, refugee students have various problems such as academic failure (Çelik, 2019; Khawaja, & Howard, 2020; Yurdakul & Tok, 2018), peer problems (Samara, El Asam, Khadaroo, & Hammuda 2019), adaptation problems (Dolapçioğlu & Bolat 2019; Gün & Baldık, 2017; Lerner 2012; Levent & Çayak, 2017; Samara et al., 2019; Uzun & Bütün, 2016), discrimination (Heckmann, 2008; Levent & Çayak, 2017; Mcbrein, 2005; Uzun & Bütün, 2016) and non-communication (Aydın & Kaya; 2015; Çimşir & Baysal 2020; Dolapçioğlu & Bolat, 2019; Gün & Baldık,

2017; Levent & Çayak, 2017; Uzun & Bütün, 2016). Besides, studies showed that refugee students had low Turkish language proficiency and experienced problems in their reading and reading comprehension skills, which negatively affects their academic achievement (Aydın & Kaya, 2015; Aykırı, 2017; Boylu & Işık, 2020; Çimşir & Baysal, 2020; Hamilton, Lunenburg, Slate & Barners, 2021; Stathopoulou and Dassi, 2020). Some of the researches revealed that parents, just as refugee students, also had problems in communicating and supporting their children due to the language barrier (İstanbul Bilgi University Children's Studies Unit (ÇOÇA), 2015; Oikonomidou & Karam, 2020; Tsioupis, & Paidia, 2020).

Schools need to take some precautions and interventions in order to solve or minimize these problems and to ensure students' learning. Still, no improvement was observed in some of the refugee students' academic achievement despite the measures (Kaplan et al., 2016). If students are not progressing with the attempts made in such situations, the issues need to be revised and evaluated in depth (Khawaja & Howard, 2020). There is limited information about why refugee students, who perform significantly lower than expected performance and have difficulty in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills, experience difficulties in these issues (Khawaja & Howard, 2020). A review of literature indicated few studies dealing with the skills of refugees in Turkish and mathematics lessons (Aldaraghme, 2020; Biçer & Özaltın, 2020; Boylu & Işık, 2020; Demir & Alyılmaz, 2020; Tiryaki & Oğraş, 2020) and this subject has been found worth researching. Aldaraghme (2020) searched the problems of refugee students in Turkish speaking skills; Biçer and Özaltın (2020) analyzed the Turkish language skills of Syrian students and their adaptation to school; Boylu and Işık (2020) examined the situations encountered in the learning process of refugees who learn Turkish in provinces where Syrian refugees are intensely populated, and in their teaching Turkish; Demir and Alyılmaz, (2020); Tiryaki and Oğraş (2020) sought teachers' views on the teaching process of Turkish lessons to Syrian students. This research, unlike the studies mentioned above, dealt with the primary school teachers' views regarding Syrian students' Turkish and mathematics skills and the challenges they have confronted. The starting point of this research was the deficiencies and problems related to Turkish and mathematics skills that the researcher observed in the Syrian students in her classroom and school while working as a teacher at a primary school with 1906 students (405 Syrian students) in 2019. Thus, it was wondered about whether other primary school teachers with Syrian students in their class had similar problems as well, and it was considered as a topic worth researching.

### *Purpose of the study*

This research attempts to examine the primary school teachers' views on Syrian Students' Turkish and mathematics skills and the challenges they have confronted. In line with this aim, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are the primary school teachers' views on Syrian Students' Turkish skills?

2. What are the primary school teachers' views on Syrian students' math skills?
3. What are the primary school teachers' views regarding the challenges they have confronted with Syrian students in the classroom?

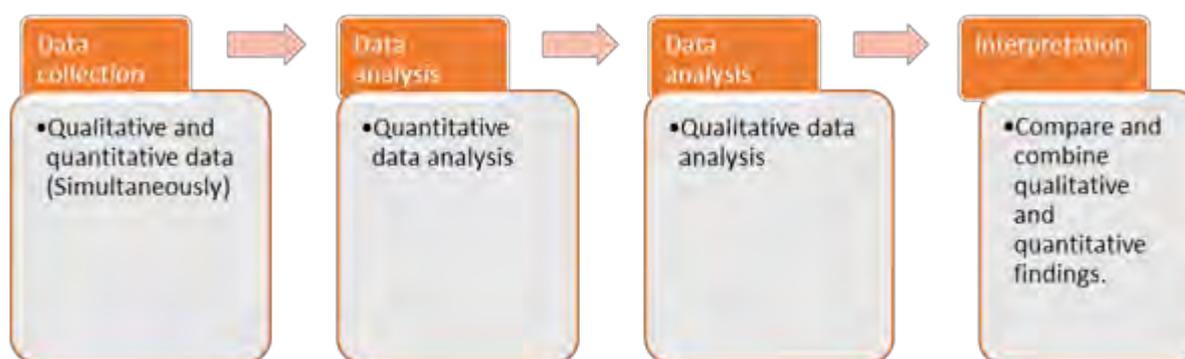
### *Significance of the Study*

The research findings are paramount in terms of revealing the status of Syrian students in Turkish and mathematics lessons and finding solutions to the problems experienced on this subject. In line with unveiling the current level of Syrian students, students' needs are also identified to gain the skills of these courses. In this regard, teachers' sharing of their experiences and recommendations will serve as an example to their colleagues who teach Syrian students. The findings will provide information to schools, teachers and those concerned in order to increase the quality of education offered to Syrian students, to develop curricula and to improve their cultural adaptation as well as academic performance.

## METHOD

### *Research Design*

Having a descriptive research design, the research used a mixed research method. This research method is conducted by using quantitative and qualitative methods together in line with the principles of pragmatist philosophy in order to examine the research problem comprehensively and multidimensionally (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Mixed research as a method focuses on the collection, analysis and integration of both qualitative and quantitative data; thus, it provides a better understanding of the research problem than any method used alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007: cited in Creswell & Plano Clark, 2014). The reason for choosing the mixed method in this research was to obtain information from more participants regarding the level of skills that Syrian students should acquire in Turkish and mathematics lessons; the reasons why these skills are sufficient or insufficient and the problems experienced are examined in detail and in depth with qualitative data. In this regard, the research welcomed the convergent parallel design, one of the mixed research designs. This design entails that the researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data in the same phase (simultaneously), but analyzes the two data types independently, and interprets the findings together (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2014). In this research, quantitative and qualitative data weigh equally. During the data collection process, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously; the data were analyzed independently in the analysis phase, and then the findings were combined and interpreted and the results were obtained in the discussion phase (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Research Process regarding Convergent Parallel Design

### *Instrumentation and data collection*

The quantitative data were obtained by administering the questionnaire called "Problems confronted by Syrian students during their educational process" to primary school teachers. The questionnaire, developed by Ergen and Şahin (2019), is a five-point Likert type and consists of 27 questions. Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was performed for the reliability coefficient of the data collected with the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis is used in cases where items are scored by the grading method (Can, 2018). The reliability coefficient was not included in the study conducted by Ergen and Şahin (2019). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was determined as .65 in the present research. If the Cronbach's alpha value is  $0.60 < R^2 < 0.80$ , it is considered highly reliable (Yıldız & Uzunsakal, 2018). The level of reliability indicates that the questionnaire can be used. The scoring of the questionnaire is as follows (Ergen & Şahin, 2019):

- (a) "totally disagree" between 1.00-1.49;
- (b) "less agree" between 1.50-2.49;
- (c) "moderately agree" between 2.50-3.49;
- (d) "mostly agree" between 3.50-4.49 ;
- (e) "totally agree" between 4.5-5.00

Qualitative data were collected with 8 open-ended questions prepared by the researcher in order to obtain in-depth data and support quantitative data. For the validity of the open-ended questions, the views of two experts with doctoral degrees in educational sciences were consulted and corrections were made in line with their recommendations. The views of 30 teachers working at 15 different schools were taken in written and the collected data were analyzed through using a descriptive analysis method.

## Participants

This research was conducted with teachers having Syrian students in their classrooms in schools located within the central districts of Adana during the 2019-2020 academic year. Criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used in the research. The criteria were determined as having at least 1 Syrian student in the class and working as a teacher in the central districts of Adana. The research was conducted with 347 primary school teachers who met this criterion and who accepted to be volunteers. The current mean of the classes in which these teachers work was 27; the mean number of Syrian students in the classroom was 6. Table 1 depicts information regarding the demographic characteristics of the teachers.

Table 1

*Demographic Information regarding Teachers (N = 347) (Quantitative Part)*

Variables	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	244	70.3
	Male	103	29.7
Seniority	0-5 years	20	5.8
	6-10 years	27	7.8
	11-15 years	82	23.6
	16-20 years	65	18.7
	21 years and over	153	44.1
Graduation Faculty	Education Faculty	246	70.9
	Faculty of Science and Letters	21	6.1
	Other faculties with four-year license	67	19.3
	Training Institute/Education College	13	3.7
Grade Level	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	86	24.8
	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	72	20.7
	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	103	29.7
	4 <sup>th</sup> grade	81	23.3
	Adaptation class	5	1.4
Doing Postgraduate Education	Yes	27	7.8
	No	320	92.2
In-Service Training for Syrian Students	Yes	177	51.0
	No	170	49.0

Table 1 demonstrates that 244 are females and 103 are males out of 347 teachers. 20 of these teachers had 0-5 years of seniority; 27 of them had 6-10 years; 82 of them 11-15 years; 65 of whom had 16-20 years and 153 of them 21 years or over seniority. 246 of the teachers graduated from education faculties, 21 from science and letters faculties, 67 from others with four-year license, and 13 from training institutes or Education colleges. Considering the grade levels, 86 of the teachers taught the first classes; 72 of them the second classes; 103 of them the third classes; 81 of them the fourth and 5 of whom taught the adaptation

classes. While 27 of these teachers received postgraduate education, 177 of them participated in in-service training for Syrian students.

The distribution of teachers' gender, seniority, graduation faculty, grade level, postgraduate education and in-service training for Syrian students was taken into account with a view to reflecting the diversity of the participants for quantitative data at a maximum level. Table 2 displays the demographic characteristics regarding the teachers from whom qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions.

Table 2

*Demographic information regarding teachers (Qualitative Part) (N = 30)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	16	53.3
	Male	14	46.7
<b>Seniority</b>	0-5 years	4	13.3
	6-10 years	1	3.3
	11-15 years	8	26.7
	16-20 years	4	13.3
	21 years and over	13	43.3
<b>Graduation Faculty</b>	Education Faculty	20	66.7
	Faculty of Science and Letters	2	6.7
	Other faculties with four-year license	5	16.7
	Training Institute/Education College	3	10.0
<b>Grade Level</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	5	16.7
	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	5	16.7
	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	12	40.0
	4 <sup>th</sup> grade	4	13.3
	Adaptation class	4	13.3
<b>Doing Postgraduate Education</b>	Yes	3	10.0
	No	27	90.0
<b>In-Service Training for Syrian Students</b>	Yes	18	60.0
	No	12	40.0

Table 2 depicts that the qualitative data were gathered from 16 female teachers and 14 male teachers. 4 of these teachers had 0-5 years of seniority; 1 of them had 6-10 years; 8 of them 11-15 years; 65 of whom had 16-20 years and 13 of them 21 years or over seniority. 20 of the teachers graduated from education faculties, 2 from science and letters faculties, 5 from others with four-year license, and 3 from training institutes or Education colleges. Considering the grade levels, 5 of the teachers taught the first classes; 5 of them the second classes; 12 of them the third classes; 4 of them the fourth and 4 of whom taught the adaptation classes. While 3 of these teachers received postgraduate education, 18 of them participated in in-service training for Syrian students.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods were used during quantitative data analysis. Descriptive analysis was preferred in the analysis of qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions. In descriptive analysis, the collected data are analyzed, summarized and interpreted by taking into account the predetermined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In this regard, a framework was initially created for analyzing the data based on open-ended questions; themes were determined in line with this framework. Afterwards, the data were read, coded and organized according to the thematic framework. The elicited data were supported by direct quotations and explained through making associations and comparisons among the findings.

**Ethics Committee Certificate:** This study was approved by the Hitit University Ethics Committee with the decision dated 27.02.2020 and numbered 2020-14.

## RESULTS

This section covers the findings related to the quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

### Findings regarding quantitative data

The descriptive analysis results of the primary school teachers' responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
Descriptive Analysis Results related to Questionnaire Items

Items	$\bar{X}$	S
1. I think Turkish reading comprehension skills are sufficient.	1,93	0,96
2. I think Turkish writing skills are sufficient.	2,12	0,96
3. I think Turkish listening comprehension skills are sufficient.	2,05	0,92
4. I think Turkish speaking skills are sufficient.	2,20	0,86
5. I think problem solving skills are sufficient in math class.	2,21	1,00
6. I observe they have problems in one-to-one studying.	3,32	1,11
7. I observe that elder students have adaptation problems.	3,82	1,12
8. I observe that they use violence among themselves.	3,72	1,27
9. I observe that they use mutual violence with Turkish students.	3,13	1,25
10.I observe that their games include violence.	3,40	1,31
11.I observe that Syrian students choose their friends among themselves.	3,91	1,09
12.I observe that they are more absent than other students.	3,75	1,28
13.I think that the material available in the school (projection etc. equipment) is sufficient for visual expression.	3,06	1,37
14.I think the financial resources of the school are sufficient.	1,88	1,04

15.I think the financial participation of parents is sufficient.	1,68	0,92
16.I think the participation of parent meetings is sufficient.	1,93	0,97
17.I think parents take care of their students enough.	1,86	0,87
18.I observe that parents use violence against their children.	2,52	1,9
19.I think parents' Turkish knowledge is sufficient.	1,47	0,78
20.I think parents are helpful enough with their children's homework.	1,49	0,72
21.I think Syrian guides are sufficient.	2,19	1,17
22.I think the activities of the school guidance service are sufficient.	3,01	1,19
23.I think Syrian students should receive education in separate classes.	3,72	1,38
24.I think it would be appropriate to include parents in parent education.	4,47	0,83
25.I think it would be appropriate to create funds by transferring resources to schools.	4,20	1,15
26.I think it is appropriate to combine with other classes after mainstreaming.	3,84	1,26
27.I think it is appropriate for the elder ones to receive education in separate classes.	4,14	1,08

Table 3 displayed the mean of the questionnaire items, indicating that the questionnaire items were not responded at the level of "totally agree" and "totally disagree". The teachers were identified to less participated in I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I14, I15, I16, I17, I19, I20, I21; while they participated in I6, I7, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12, I13, I18 and I22 at a medium level; lastly, they mostly participated in I23, I24, I25, I26 and I27. Accordingly, teachers were of the view that Syrian students' Turkish reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, speaking skills and their problem solving skills in math lesson were insufficient. Besides, the findings suggested that teachers did not consider the financial resources of the school, the financial participation of the parents, the participation of parents in the meetings, the parents' help with their students and their homework, and the Syrian guides sufficient. As is observed in Table 3, teachers stated that Syrian students have problems in one-to-one studying and that elder students have adaptation problems; Syrian students use violence among themselves and with Turkish students and their games include violence; parents use violence against their children. The teachers also noted that Syrian students choose their friends among themselves, they are more absent than Turkish students and school guidance services are sufficient. The teachers also mentioned that Syrian students and elder students should receive education in separate classes, that they could be combined with other classes after mainstreaming, that it would be appropriate to create funds by transferring resources to schools and to include parents in parent education.

### *Findings related to Qualitative Data*

With the purpose of supporting the data collected through the questionnaire and obtaining more in-depth data, the written opinions of 30 teachers from 15 different schools were taken with eight open-ended questions, and these data were analyzed with

descriptive analysis. The primary schools these teachers work are in the neighborhoods where families with lower socio-economic status live, and they work at public schools in the neighborhoods where Syrians mostly migrate. The class size mean of the teachers is 26, and the mean number of Syrian students in their class is 10. The families of the Syrian students live in the districts of Seyhan and Yüreğir, which are the central districts of Adana, in the neighborhoods where migrant families are settled. Some of the adults in these families are working in jobs related to their professions, some in wage jobs, while some are unemployed. These families generally have low or middle income levels.

In this section, the findings obtained from the descriptive analysis are presented according to the thematic framework based upon open-ended questions.

### *Views on reading skill*

The teachers were asked “What are your views regarding the reading skills of Syrian students in your classroom?”. The responses were coded under the theme of views on reading skills and presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Teachers' views on reading skills

Upon analyzing the primary school teachers' views on Syrian students' reading skills in Figure 2, the majority of the teachers believed that Syrian students' reading skills are insufficient (f:18). In discordance with this finding, some teachers stated that there is no problem in students' reading skills (f:5), some students are good while some are insufficient (f:3). In addition, the identified problems included students' difficulty in combining sounds (f:2) and incorrectly vocalizing letters (f:1). The teachers contemplated that the biggest reason why the students' reading skills are insufficient and undeveloped is due to lack of using Turkish language (f:11). Moreover, the lack of parental support, the duration of students' residence in Turkey, their preference not to use Turkish out-of-school and receiving education in the same classes with the students at different levels were identified to affect students' reading skills. Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**FT12:** *I think they cannot read at a sufficient level. They have difficulty in understanding what they read. They are reading slowly and inaccurately. Letter and syllable mistakes are commonly made.*

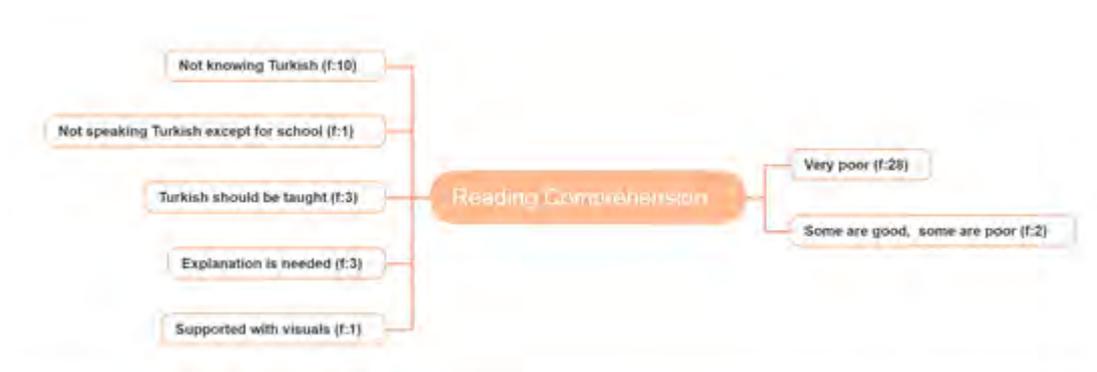
**FT8:** *There is no positive progress since they do not speak Turkish; parents, students and teachers cannot get along with each other and they do not come to school regularly.*

**MT2:** *Even though they were in the 2nd grade, their reading skills did not develop as they could not receive family support and also they mostly did not speak Turkish in the family.*

**MT6:** *There are those who can read but do not speak Turkish. I mean they don't understand what they read. The reading levels of the others are usually at a low level.*

### Views on reading comprehension skill

The teachers were asked “What are your views regarding the reading comprehension skills of Syrian students in your classroom?”. The responses were coded under the theme of views on reading comprehension skills and displayed in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Teachers' views on reading comprehension skill

As is seen in Figure 3, primary school teachers envisaged that Syrian students had poor reading comprehension skills (f:28). Different from this finding, the teachers indicated that some of their students comprehended what they read and that some of them had very poor reading comprehension skills (f:2). They listed the reasons for the poor reading comprehension skills as the lack of knowing Turkish (f:10) and not speaking Turkish out-of- school (f:1). The teachers concluded that Turkish should be taught (f:3), texts should be supported with visuals (f:1), and explanations should be made regarding the text or sentence (f: 3) in order to ensure the Syrian students' improvement in reading comprehension skills. Some of the teachers expressed their views as following:

**MT10:** *Those who have insufficient Turkish speaking skills, who have not developed vocabulary yet and who can express themselves with a limited number of words were identified to have difficulties and problems in their reading comprehension skills. In order for the reading and comprehension skills to develop, the student's Turkish must be developed sufficiently, and activities are carried out in the classroom.*

**FT9:** *They do not understand most of what they read since they do not know the meaning of the words.*

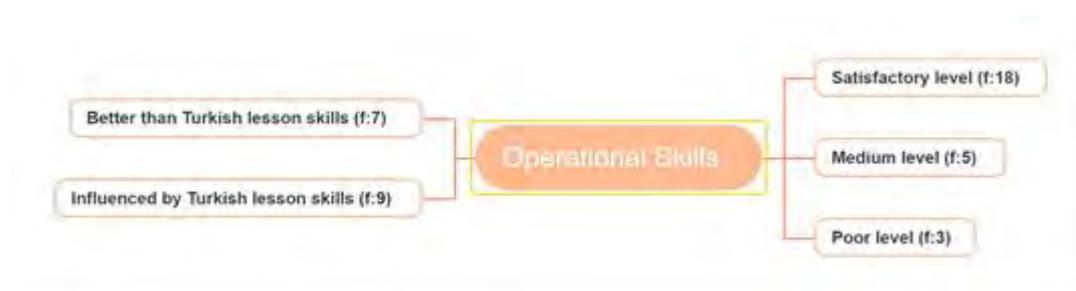
**FT6:** *Since they do not speak Turkish, they cannot make sense of what they read.*

**MT2:** *Reading comprehension skills are not developed as reading skills are undeveloped.*

**MT3:** *They have difficulties because they do not know most of the Turkish words' meanings.*

#### *Views on operational skills (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) in mathematics class*

The teachers were asked "What are your views regarding the mathematical operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) of Syrian students in your classroom?". The responses were coded under the theme of views on the operational skills in mathematics and depicted in Figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Views on operational skills (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) in mathematics lesson.

According to Figure 4, teachers were found to consider that Syrian students' operational skills were at a satisfactory level (f:18). In addition, some teachers believed that Syrian students' operational skills were at a medium (f: 5) or low level (f: 3). Teachers stated that students' operational skills were affected by those in the Turkish course (f: 9) and that they were better than their reading and reading comprehension skills (f:7) in the Turkish course. Some of the teachers voiced their views as follows:

**MT5:** *Their operational skills are better than reading and understanding.*

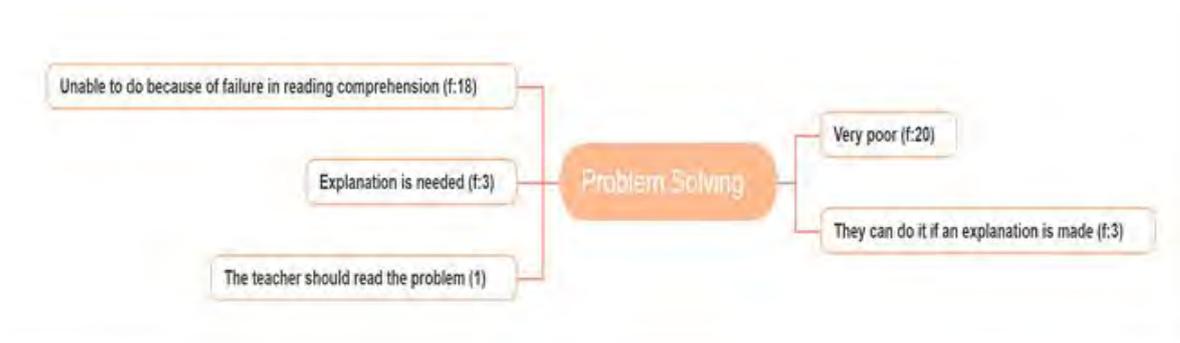
**MT1:** *I observed that they have intermediate level skills... Yet, they are better than reading comprehension.*

**FT13:** *They are doing operations at a class-level that are not based on instructions.*

**FT10:** *They are more successful in mathematics lesson. They're doing operations.*

#### *Views on problem solving skill in mathematics class*

The teachers were asked "What are your views regarding the problem solving skills of Syrian students in your classroom in math lesson?". The responses were coded under the theme of views on the problem solving skills in mathematics and depicted in Figure 5.



**Figure 5:** Views on problem solving skill in mathematics lesson

As is seen in Figure 5, teachers indicated that students' problem solving skills were very poor in mathematics lesson (f:20). They also stated that the students were incapable of solving the problem since they could not understand they read (f:18). The teachers recommended that the students could understand the problem when their children read or explained the problem (f:3). Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**MT10:** *Syrian students with insufficient vocabulary were found to also have problems in problem solving skills in mathematics lesson. The main problem here is that I am reading but I do not understand or I understand but I cannot express it. The inadequacy of comprehension-expression skills is a problem.*

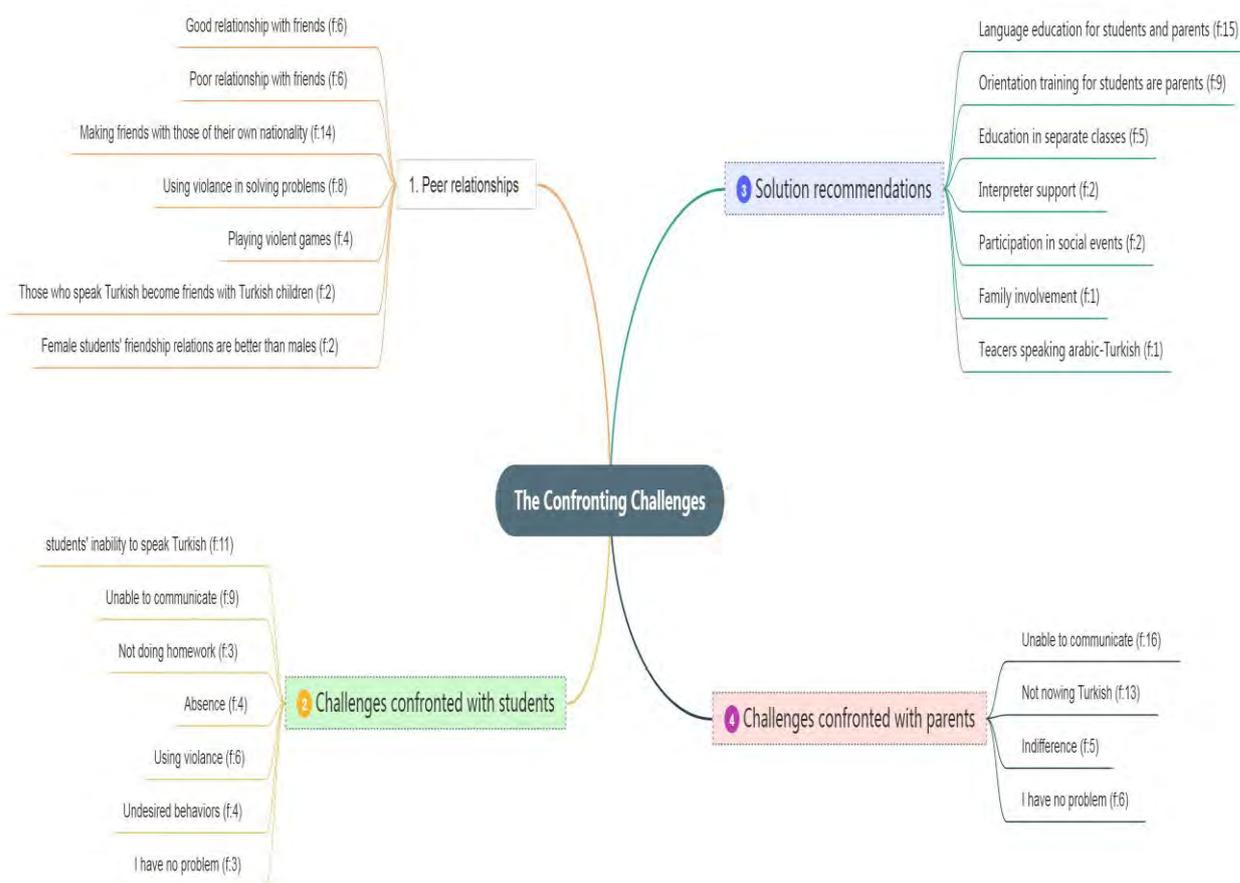
**MT2:** *Since their reading and comprehension skills in Turkish are undeveloped, they are normally not sufficient in problem solving.*

**FT1:** *They have difficulties in solving problems due to their poor Turkish expressions and understanding. However, they solve it directly when I read and explain the problem.*

**FT9:** *Success in problem solving is very low due to their limited vocabulary.*

### *Views on the confronted challenges*

The teachers were asked "What are the challenges you have confronted with Syrian students in your classroom?". The responses were coded under the theme of views on the confronted challenges and shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6:** Views regarding the confronted challenges

As seen in Figure 6, there are four sub-themes in the theme of the challenges teachers confronted with Syrian students: peer relationships, problems with students, problems with parents and solution recommendations. Considering teachers' views on peer relationships; some teachers mentioned that the students had good relations with their friends (f:6), while others stated that they did not have good relations (f:6). The biggest challenge encountered in the theme of peer relationship is that students preferred to be friends with those of their own nationality (f:14). Furthermore, playing violent games (f:4) and using violence in problem solving (f: 8) were also among the problems. Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**FT3:** *Generally, they make friends among themselves or if they have elder brothers or sisters at school. If there is a problem, they solve it with their own method (beating).*

**MT10:** *Syrian students generally play games with each other and think that they are not liked or excluded by other students at the school. Their games usually include violence. In fact, even in the adaptation class where all Syrian students are present, students cannot play games together. Their games contain disservice.*

The most common problems were students' inability to know Turkish (f:11) and unable to communicate (f:9) in the sub-theme of the challenges confronted with the student. Besides, not doing homework (f:3), absence (f:4), using violence (f:6), and engaging in undesired behaviors (f:4) were the other challenges confronted by teachers. On the other hand, there are also teachers who stated that they did not experience any problems (f: 3). Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**MT3:** *Since they do not know Turkish well, they have difficulty in understanding the lesson and doing the activities. Their education is disrupted as we cannot fully communicate with the parents. Their absence is medium and over.*

**FT11:** *Inability to do their homework properly. Not listening to me in class. I think this may be due to the fact that they don't understand me.*

Considering the sub-theme of the challenges confronted with parents; the problems of not communicating (f:16) and not speaking Turkish (f:13) were found to be mostly experienced. Parents' indifference to their children (f:5), and the lack of their support were among the challenges confronted by the teachers. On the other hand, six of the teachers mentioned that they did not have any problems with parents. Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**MT10:** *The parents of Syrian students are by no means included in education. They do not take sufficient responsibility for their children's education. Families do not attend school meetings and do not follow their students' progress. Parents who cannot express themselves in Turkish do not come to school to ask about their children's progress.*

**MT11:** *I haven't almost experienced any problems. I can even say that they are much more caring and respectful than my other parents.*

**MT1:** *We could not communicate because of the language problem. I tried to talk to a few people through an interpreter.*

Upon analyzing the sub-theme of solution recommendations provided for these challenges experienced by teachers; the following recommendations were presented: language education (f: 15) and orientation training for students and parents(f: 9), education in separate classes (f:5), interpreter support (f: 2), participation in social activities (f: 2), family participation (f:1) and appointment of teachers who know Arabic-Turkish (f:1). Some of the teachers expressed their views as follows:

**MT1:** *First of all, students and parents should be included in orientation training. Before starting school, they should be taught Turkish at least at a level for understanding simple words and commands... During the lessons, there should be interpreters in classes during Turkish lessons...*

**FT5:** *Before starting primary school, they must take Turkish language lessons for at least one year. 1st Grade Primary School is too late to learn Turkish. Syrian students should take compulsory Turkish learning lessons one year before they start primary school.*

**FT14:** *They should definitely return to their own classes after learning literacy-comprehension in another separate classroom.*

## DISCUSSION

This research attempts to reveal primary school teachers' views on Syrian Students' Turkish and mathematics skills and the challenges they have confronted. The research used a mixed method in order to obtain in-depth and detailed data.

The quantitative findings showed that Syrian Students' Turkish reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension and speaking skills were not sufficient. The qualitative findings support this finding. Most of the teachers assumed that Syrian students' reading skills were insufficient. The biggest reason for the students' inadequacy regarding reading skills may be due to the fact that students do not know Turkish. Besides, the lack of parental support, the duration of students' residence in Turkey, not speaking Turkish out-of-school school, and receiving education in the same classes with the students at different levels also affect students' reading skills. The qualitative findings on reading comprehension skill demonstrated that Syrian students' reading comprehension skills were very poor. They stated that the reason for the poorness of this skill is that the students did not know Turkish and they do not speak Turkish out-of-school and thus the teachers recommended that they be taught Turkish, the texts be supported with visuals and explanations be made about the text or sentence in order to improve it. Likewise, Aykırı (2017) also concluded in his interviews with primary school teachers that Syrian students had trouble in understanding what they read. In the interviews performed with fifteen foreign students attending primary school, Çimşir and Baysal (2020) noted that students mostly encountered problems in Turkish lessons, which require reading, reading comprehension and language skills. In this regard, Boylu and Işık (2020) examined the problems encountered in teaching Turkish to the students living in provinces where Syrian students are densely populated, and concluded that the use of Turkish out of school negatively affects the Turkish learning process, as the people in the provinces where the students live, know Arabic. This result is line with those of this research. In the study conducted with 120 teachers in Greece, Stathopoulou & Dassi (2020) determined that refugee students had a low literacy level. Similarly, Aydın and Kaya (2015) interviewed seven teachers and a school principal and hence emphasized that Syrian students started school without having Turkish education and therefore they did not have Turkish proficiency, affecting their success in other courses.

One of the findings obtained from the quantitative data was that problem solving skills were not sufficient in mathematics lesson. Qualitative findings supported the result in a way that Syrian students' problem solving skills were very poor and this was due to their inability to understand what they read. Teachers also mentioned that when the teacher reads or explains the problem, the students can solve the problem as they understand it. Even though the Syrian students' problem-solving skills were very poor,

that the processing skills in the mathematics course were at a good level is among the qualitative findings. Furthermore, the primary school teachers asserted that Syrian students' math processing skills were better than their reading and reading comprehension skills in Turkish lesson. In a similar sense, Aydın and Kaya (2015) put forward that Syrian students' success in other courses was affected due to the lack of their Turkish proficiency. The results in the same study referring that Syrian students understood numerical lessons much better and they were more successful in these lessons despite having difficulties in language lessons also support the findings of this research. In this context, Çimşir and Baysal (2020) also confirmed that Syrian students had problems in Turkish lessons because they require more reading, reading comprehension and language skills and that they had less difficulty in mathematics lesson than Turkish. Besides, Aksakal (2017) certified that Syrian students had difficulty in verbal lessons that require to know Turkish, yet they were more successful in lessons such as mathematics and physical education that language knowledge keeps in the background.

The quantitative findings suggested the financial resources of the school, the financial participation of the parents, the participation of the parents in the meetings, the parents' help with their students and their homework as well as the Syrian guides were considered as inadequate by the teachers. Similarly, qualitative findings revealed that parents were indifferent to their students, they did not help with their homework, and they had communication problems due to the lack of knowing Turkish. Parallel to these findings, the report announced by Istanbul Bilgi University Child Studies Unit (ÇOÇA) (2015) in order to share the interviews with teachers and administrators revealed that Syrian parents had poor relations with the school and had limited communication with teachers and administrators due to the language barrier. Likewise, Tsioupis & Paidá (2020) interviewed fourteen Refugee Education Coordinators affiliated to the Greek Ministry of Education and found that refugee parents had little or no communication with their children's school and teachers. Family support is of great importance for Syrian students to adapt to school and to be successful in their classes. Refugee parents had a decisive role in raising their children's awareness related to the necessity of school education and connecting them with their children's school (Tsioupis, & Paidá, 2020). Oikonomidou & Karam (2020) emphasized that family support cannot be underestimated when it comes to refugee-background children, and that parents' support is required to guide their children's academic learning. In this regard, it is essential that refugee parents make an explanation on the necessity of their children's school enrollment and attendance, and engaging refugee parents in their children's schooling in the long run (Tsioupis, & Paidá, 2020). The language barrier has a significant place in the low participation of refugee parents. However, the lack of support or opportunities provided by schools to parents may also have an effect on this situation. To illustrate, a handbook was prepared in New Zealand to facilitate the adaptation of refugee students and to increase parental involvement, and some refugees were used as resource persons to inform families

regarding homework and the functioning of the school (Ministry of Education Auckland, 2016). The New South Wales Department of Education has taken some measures to help schools strengthen their ties with parents of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and to develop parent / school partnerships. One of these measures offers a special program for Pacific Communities and Youth Partnerships that includes homework support (MIPEX, 2015). In this regard, parents can be provided language support with the participation of people who know Arabic-Turkish in Turkey. In addition, providing information about the functioning of the school and how to support students can be helpful in ensuring school-family cooperation.

According to quantitative findings, teachers witnessed that Syrian students had problems in one-to-one study and that elder students had an adaptation problem; moreover, Syrian students used mutual violence among themselves and towards Turkish students, they used violence in their games, and that parents used violence against their children. Teachers also declared that Syrian students chose their friends among themselves, they were more absent than other students and that the school guidance service is sufficient. These findings are also confirmed by the qualitative data referring that the biggest problem in the peer relations dimension was to choose friends with those of their own nationality, as well as having problems in playing violent games and using violence during problem solving, absenteeism, as well as communicating. Likewise, Lerner (2012) concluded that refugee students who were placed in classrooms with the direct immersion model in the USA encountered problems in adapting to the classroom due to the language barrier. Bulut, Kanat-Soysal, and Gülçiçek (2018), in their study, interviewed with fourteen primary school teachers who conduct Turkish lessons, and identified that Syrian students' schooling without acquiring sufficient language skills causes communication problems. What is more, a study conducted with refugee children and adolescents in Canada revealed that 86% of refugee adolescents (12-21 years old) experienced some form of bullying such as mockery, social exclusion, physical bullying, unfair treatment, racist insult, and intellectual disdain (Wesley Urban Ministries, 2014). The studies conducted by international organizations found that the drop out level of the refugee students with low skills was higher than other students (OECD, 2016), and refugee children did not attend school five times more than non-refugee children (UNHCR, 2016).

Considering the quantitative findings, the teachers were of the opinion that Syrian students and older students should receive education in separate classes, that they can be multigraded with other classes after this education, that it would be appropriate to create funds by transferring them to schools and to include parents in parents' education. In qualitative findings, on the other hand, teachers suggested training in separate classes to solve problems, establishing preparatory or adaptation classes, providing language training to students and parents, providing interpreter support along with increasing social activities. Providing refugee students an opportunity for getting education in different grades intramural program is one of the models implemented in both Turkey and

different countries. However, teachers believed that this practice should be more widespread. Similar findings emerged in various studies. To illustrate, Çelik (2019) emphasized that orientation training should be provided for Syrian students; Aykırı (2017) recommended to give education in separate schools or classes. Akin to the teachers' recommendation on establishing adaptation or preparatory classes for language teaching, UNHCR (2015) advised that these students be taught Turkish with the practice of Turkish preparatory class or summer school. UNHCR (2015) stressed that not only students but also parents should learn Turkish and they should be informed about the system. Accordingly ÇOÇA (2015) endorsed that language courses should be opened within the Public Education Centers in schools and interpreters should be assigned in schools so as to strengthen the relations between Syrian parents and the school. Similar to the teachers' proposal for increasing social participation, Biçer and Özaltın (2020) advised that activities should be organized to ensure both Turkish and Syrian students' participation; moreover, UNHCR (2015) favored organizing exhibitions and special day celebrations in order to warrant the harmony of Syrian students and to draw attention to the common aspects of different cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The research findings revealed that Syrian students' reading, reading comprehension and problem solving skills were not sufficiently developed due to the lack of speaking Turkish. In the same vein, there were communication problems with students and parents due to the language barrier which affects Syrian students' choice of friends and their success in classes. The common opinion of the participants was that Syrian students should receive Turkish education in separate classes (preparatory class) in order to solve the language problem before schooling. Language proficiency is a factor that will facilitate or prevent Syrian students' adaptation to the school and the culture of the host country. It is important for them to learn to speak Turkish in terms of communication; however, it is not enough to achieve academic success. Hence, the development of Syrian students' Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) along with their Cognitive Academic Language Competencies (CALP) should be taken into consideration, and studies should be conducted to examine and measure these skills independently.

Over and above, the participants thought that Turkish education should be enabled to solve the communication problem between the students and their parents. At that point, it is of paramount importance to offer Turkish training programs and open courses with a view to promoting both Syrian students and their families. This training can be effective both in facilitating students' adaptation to classes, increasing their success in classes and solving communication problems together with reducing the burden of teachers in the classroom. Turkish education as a foreign language can be given as a separate preparatory class within the schools, or it can be provided in weekend courses at Public Education Centers.

Research findings showed that parents were indifferent to students' lessons and they did not help with their homework. This problem may have resulted from parents' not knowing Turkish and having insufficient knowledge about the education system. Without the parental support, it is quite difficult for students to be successful in their school life. School-parent and teacher-parent cooperation is vital for the student to reach the desired level in the lessons and to gain the fundamental skills and values. In this context, it is a must to enroll parents in parent education, as suggested by the participants. It will also be useful to inform parents about the Turkish education system. At this juncture, briefings can be planned by the guidance services of schools as short meetings, weekday or weekend seminars.

One of the research results was that Syrian students were at a good level in operational skills that do not require verbal knowledge, especially in mathematics class. Nevertheless, they did not have the same success in problem solving questions that necessitate reading comprehension. Participants believed that when the problem is explained, students can understand and solve it. Teachers' professional skills and their approach towards students play a significant role in this case. Teachers can explain the problem for their students, and they can help them understand and solve the problem by concretizing it through drawings, visuals or figures, diagrams etc.

This research focused on Syrian students' skills in Turkish and mathematics lessons. Similar studies can be conducted for different courses. Besides, students' and parents' views on this situation of Syrian students can be examined, and different studies can be carried out with the views of the school's counselors.

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