

Teaching English in Turkey: Dialogues with teachers about the challenges in public primary schools

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Abstract

Teaching English in Turkey has its own potential problems due to the lack of authentic language input. Turkey is a foreign language context. This hinders learners in their mastering English in a short time. Moreover, other problems caused by poor instructional planning contribute to this process negatively. With these potential hindrances, the present study aims to seek what other challenges incapacitate primary schools for teaching/learning of English. Conducted with 20 primary school teachers working at public schools in Turkey, data were collected using a semi-structured interview. Results show that poor institutional planning is the main cause of challenges experienced by English language teachers. Besides this, instructional and socio-cultural/economic problems are the other challenges for teaching English.

Keywords: *Teaching English, Turkey, public primary schools, challenges*

Introduction

English is the world language and serves as the lingua franca for business, education, political and technology contexts. English, as a foreign language in Turkey and regarded as one of the most important skills to gain, has been taught at earlier stages in primary schools since 1997. Serving for this purpose, English language teaching departments at universities are popular and enlarging their capacities to train more language teachers nowadays.

However, teaching a language in a foreign context such as Turkey has some potential difficulties. Inevitably, such challenges should be uncovered to find solutions for the improvement of the situation. Thus, the constant communication with the learners and teachers as being the immediate agents of problems is one of the main duties of the Ministry of National Education. For researchers in the field of English language teaching and training the basic duty is to observe, find, identify and determine these

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problems through dialogues with English language teachers regarding the classroom situations. Hence, they are the ones who are able to generate some suggestions and solutions to the difficulties experienced by English language teachers and students contributing to the ease of connection of the Ministry to the schools.

With the purpose on this duty in mind, the present paper tries to report some of the major current challenges in teaching English in Turkish public primary schools.

The authentic voices of English language teachers from a variety of experience and socio-economic school background they work for will be displayed in this paper.

Literature Review

It is a well-known fact that English language teaching/learning is problematic in Turkey (Aktas, 2005; Isik, 2008; Oguz, 1999; Paker, 2007; Tilfarlioglu & Ozturk, 2007). We have been hearing those who have been learning English at schools for years; yet, many couldn't reach the desired communicative level to follow even basic level of conversations unless they enroll at private language schools or visit an English speaking country exclusively. Being Turkey is a foreign language context for English language learning is one of the main reasons for such unsuccessful results. There are some other reasons which are outlined by Aktas (2005) such as the efficacy of language teachers, student interest and motivation, instructional methods, learning environment and learning materials.

To start with the efficacy of language teachers, they must be skillful enough to monitor student performance and expert in instructional designs (Met, 1999). Moreover, they must be a model for the use of the target language and teach language learning strategies explicitly. All in all, they must form the most appropriate atmosphere to make the learning at its best. How well-educated and how much experienced the teachers are are often regarded that they would provide the most effective language instruction. Recently, it is found that teacher success is rooted in their being reflective rather than having worked for long (Richardson, 2005).

As for the motivation and interest of the students, we know that motivation is one of the key components to success for language teachers (Dörnyei, 2001; Ellis, 1994). Teachers often believe that their job is to motivate students by creating classroom tasks that are interesting and engaging and by using authentic materials to stimulate further interest in the target language, as Winke (2005) states. The trend in motivation research has been replaced with detailed lists of teachers' practices rather than what motivates learners.

The third reason stated by Aktas (2005) is the instructional method. It is relevant to the educational background and experience of the teacher. A balanced instructional approach is vital since too much focus on meaning

fails to create the knowledge of structure necessary for anything beyond the most basic conversational skills. As Norris and Ortega (2000) believe that teaching structures implicitly are effective but not the over reliance on structure, which will cause boredom among the students. It should be kept in mind that students would like to communicate in target language instead of learning about it all the time. "There are many ways to draw attention to the form of a language (whole words, sentence structures, stress, and intonation patterns), depending on the student's aptitude, motivation, and previous experience and on the educational and learning goals of the student and the teaching program" (Zurawksy, 2006, p. 2).

The learning environment and learning materials are also a reason for an indispensable part of instructional methods of a teacher. If a learner cannot put the learned component in the target language, it affects the motivation and thus success of the learner. VanPatten, Dvorak and Lee (1987, p.2) clearly put the difference between a first language (L1) and foreign language (FL) context as "... FL learning is essentially limited to a classroom within L1 environment." This is why; a foreign language teacher should use the appropriate teaching materials which addresses the communicative competence of learners to create an atmosphere where they would feel close to a target language. Hutchinson (1987) defines the qualities of a good material as having an interesting text, an enjoyable activity and opportunities for learners by providing their potential knowledge and skills. Good materials also help the teacher and the learner in organizing the teaching/learning process providing various activities to maximise the chances of learning. They embody a view of the nature of language and learning.

Aim and the Research Question

This study aims to identify the problems encountered by English language teachers teaching at public primary schools in Turkey. Thus we aim to answer the question; *what are the problems associated with teaching English in Turkish public primary schools that are experienced by English language teachers at these schools?*

The present study has the purpose of forming a preliminary investigation for the further large scale analysis. Furthermore, it is strongly believed that this study contributes to the recent knowledge about the general trends in policy and decision-making in English language teaching in the Ministry of National Education, Turkey.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are 20 English language teachers, including fourteen females and six males working at public primary schools in Turkey. The study excluded the teachers working at private primary schools as usually the conditions of those schools for English language teaching are

different from those in the public schools as the private schools keep their student numbers low and provide more opportunities for language learning. It is also believed that the higher socio-economic status of students in those schools would counter many of the problems encountered by public school students and thus teachers.

Data collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol. Participants were asked to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ 1. How many years have you been working at public primary school?

RQ 2. What is the socio-economic status of your school?

RQ 3. What are the challenges in teaching English at your school?

Interviews were collected either with face-to-face procedures or through e-mailing the questions directly to the participants between January-March 2009. Six participants were interviewed face-to-face and 16 participants were emailed. Face-to-face interviews lasted for about twenty minutes.

Analysis

In the data analysis procedure, descriptive and content analysis techniques were applied. Data were examined by the researcher and an expert from the field to validate and confirm the reliability of the study. For reliability purposes, the items were grouped as “Agree” and “Disagree” and a consensus for all items was determined. Consequently, inter-rater reliability was calculated through utilizing Miles & Huberman’s (1994) formula (Reliability = Number of Agreement / Total Number of Agreement + Disagreement x 100). As a result, p level was found 88, which was accepted as reliable.

Results

Demographic Analysis (RQ1 and RQ2)

As an answer for RQ1, it was found that participant teachers had a variety of years of experience at public schools with an average of three years. Yet, for a more detailed analysis, they are categorized as novice teachers (1-3 years of experience), socialising teachers (4-6 years), and experienced teachers (more than 6 years). According to this framework, 30% of the participants were novice, 40 % were socializing and 30% were recorded as experienced. The distribution of the participants seems quite balanced in terms of experience.

Table 1 displays the distribution of participant teachers in accordance with their schools and students’ socio-economic background. The answers to RQ2 revealed that most of the participants (60%) work at low socio-economic schools. A few teachers (10%) stated that they work in the city centres with the high socio-economic background students.

Table 1 Socio-Economic Status of the Schools that Participants Work

Teacher Types	Socio-Economic Level of the Schools							
	Low		Middle		High		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Novice	6	30	--	--	--	--	6	30
Socialising	5	25	3	15	--	--	8	40
Experienced	1	5	3	15	2	10	6	30
Total	12	60	6	30	2	10	20	100

As can be seen from the Table 1 above, in practice, more experienced teachers (25%) work at middle and high socio-economic schools, whereas socialising and/or novice teachers work mostly for low-income schools. In theory, it is well-argued that low-income schools demand more experienced teachers to find practical solutions for the challenges (Bennett, 2008; Choy, 2009). However, in Turkey the situation is the opposite.

Challenges and Problems (RQ 3)

As an answer to RQ 3, participants' statements revealed that they experience challenges at public schools in three categories, (a) institutional, (b) instructional, and (c) socio-economic. *Institutional challenges* constitute problems caused by lack of prior organization and lack of support by either the school management or the Ministry of National Education. *Instructional challenges* are the problems that hinder teachers in providing effective learning environments. *Socio-economic challenges* come from the lack of parental understanding about the importance of learning a foreign language.

Institutional Challenges. The participants defined two main categories of problems that are caused by their institutions: *Lack of support* and *lack of understanding the nature of language teaching*. They found their institutions were unsuccessful in *providing the basic infrastructure* for teaching communicative English and unwilling to solve the problems brought by teachers. They also put the heavy burden on teachers through *heavy workloads* with *crowded classrooms*. Not recruiting enough number of English language teachers and building more schools complicated the matters, which in turn affected classroom instruction negatively. The subcategories of these main problems are listed in the Table 2.

Table 2 Institutional Challenges

Theme	Category	Descriptive Data	
		<i>f</i>	%
Lack of Support	1. <i>Providing the basic infrastructure</i>	20	100
	2. <i>Unwilling to solve problems</i>	16	80
Lack of Understanding the Nature of Language Teaching	1. <i>Heavy Workload</i>	20	100
	2. <i>Crowded Classrooms</i>	12	60
	3. <i>Extracurricular Activities</i>	15	75

Lack of Support. Ministry of National Education and schools have failed to support the English language teachers in *providing the basic infrastructure* and being *willing to solve problems*.

Providing the basic infrastructure: Recently, the Ministry of National Education has adopted a student centred communicative computer module, called DynEd © (2006). It supports the classroom learning with a self-study time through internet-based computer software (Ministry of National Education, n.d. 2). It was prepared with a group of 50 scientists consisting of language educators, ICT technologists, neurologists and artists supported by companies such as DynED International Inc., Oxford University Press, Longman, Prentice Hall, BBC, Stanford University, Apple, IBM, SONY, and NEC. It provides both visual and audio English language input. The infrastructure of the software provides a monitoring opportunity to the teachers and parents for the learner development. It interactively includes problem-solving, analysing, synthesizing skills with a great emphasis on listening and pronunciation skills, which are some of the strong points of the program.

With this act, the Ministry of National Education adopted a communicative and authentic language teaching philosophy. However, the problem starts with the lack of infrastructural support. Since DynED is internet-based software, the schools need a strong infrastructure for internet access. At this point, three major problems emerge in line with participant answers:

- schools do not have a computer laboratory
- schools do not have internet access
- schools have computer laboratory; yet, not used for language classes but only for computer classes.

To quote from Participant 1 and 2 may present the situation clearly. Participant 1 exemplified the lack of internet connection at the school and how school management was uninterested in quote A.

“I kept my students at school after classes for 3 days. I was motivating them for using DynEd. I know that they don’t have computers at home, swanted them to use the school computers. The first day, we waited, waited, and waited for the internet connection. I sent them home saying ‘no way today! But tomorrow is gonna be OK!’ Neither the next day nor the day after next one could we manage to connect to the internet and use DynEd. The school management didn’t solve the problem either. I was embarrassed and unhappy for my students. I question then how these students are gonna learn the real English.” Quote A, Interview on January 27, 2009.

Participant 2 on the other hand explained how a school management had advocated the use of computer laboratory only by the computer instructor in quote B.

“My school, unlike the rest of the country, had a well-developed language laboratory. Yet, until we managed to set up DynED system, the

school management catered the room for computer instructors. I tried to talk with my manager. No, it didn't work. I think the school management doesn't believe that English is an important school subject compared to computer classes." Quote B, Interview on January 29, 2009

Unwilling to solve the problems: Regarding the lack of institutional support, participants all agree that school managements are not willing to solve their problems in instructional matters. Only three (15%) out of 20 participants stated that they have the strong support from their head teachers in the issues regarding learning and teaching. The rest of the participants verbalized that the managers do not forward their complaints to the upper official managerial levels in Ministry of National Education. The school managers are eager to be one of the nominated one in the area as "unproblematic, running perfectly" school. Participant 3 thought that this was due to the apprehension of the manager to be declined in duty and/or degraded by the Ministry in his position.

"Of course they never forward our complaints. They want to be the best school in the area. Everyone knows the problems, but they never react or act on it. Their upper level managers do not want to hear the problems, either. I don't feel like talking about problems any more. I started to play three monkeys: dumb deaf and mute because I know that I will be labelled as the problem person but not the managers." Quote C, Interview on January 28, 2009

Lack of Understanding the Nature of Language Teaching. In addition to lack of institutional support, teachers do not receive professional development from their schools on how a foreign language should be taught. A lecture-type class is implicitly imposed on English language teachers by limiting their use of technology as described in Quote B, above. It is well-known that foreign language is not only a class hour that will be spent on some activities from the textbooks or teacher provided activities. As Participant 4 elaborates on this issue in quote D, school management do not believe that it is necessary to master English in schools.

"I believe that school managers should be taught how important English learning across a global world. They still think that English is a foreign language which is too foreign for Turkey." Quote D, Interview on February 27, 2009

Heavy Workload: Most of the English language teachers teach 20 or more class hours at schools. Some of them are the only English language teacher in their school. Therefore, they feel burnt-out and ineffective to put their energy into their classes. Furthermore, they have extracurricular duties such as dealing with disabled students, counselling learners and managing their social problems. Participant 5 exemplifies the issue with her incapability of controlling some disabled students in classroom in quote E.

"Ministry decided to integrate disabled students into our classrooms. This might be a good idea giving the message to them and their families that disability is not to be humiliated by our society. Nevertheless, I don't know how to handle them. Each has different level of disability. I have never educated or given a thought about them before. They are highly disruptive and I don't know what to do with them. They actually don't learn. I usually

isolate them, which gives me a sick idea about my professional capability.”

Quote E, Interview on January 26, 2009.

Participant 6 refers to extracurricular activities he had been given. He was not willing to do these but he was not given an alternative. This is the usual case in public schools, Ministry orders and so the school managements execute.

“...as if it is not enough delivering 35 hours a week. I have to deal with my students’ personal problems. I have to spend another class hour with them asking about their difficulties in life. I cannot solve them. Just listen and listen. I myself am incapable of organizing my life with this little time and the money I earn, how could they think I can solve others? Ministry of Education orders and schools don’t have a saying about it. Managers only say you have to do it, so do it! So be it, I say.” Quote F, Interview on January 29, 2009.

Crowded Classrooms: In Turkey, most of the primary schools are overpopulated. Especially, after the law of 8-year-compulsory primary education in 1997, schools received more and more students. Currently, classes usually have 40 students; nonetheless it is also well-known that this number may go up till 60.

Participant 7 pinpoints how crowded classrooms obstruct the communications among students. She also puts her dilemma forward by implying that her language teaching philosophy and the practice do not match.

“This is a language class. They have to be able to communicate. I cannot control the class, nor can I provide a serene atmosphere for a real conversation. I only lecture and I hate this. I do something that I don’t believe but I have no other solution.” Quote G, Interview on February 25, 2009

Instructional Challenges

The participants described the instructional challenges in three main categories: *A busy curriculum, inappropriate textbooks, and an unsatisfactory placement test.* As for the curriculum, the participants stated that it was full of unrealistic learning goals for the readiness of learners and lack of flexibility in application. Inappropriate textbooks were another dimension of instructional challenges, which encompass the lack of supplementary materials and incompatibility with the realities of the English learning and teaching context of Turkey. Unsatisfactory placement test was described as grammar-oriented and mechanical. Instructional challenges identified by participant teachers are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Instructional Challenges

Theme	Category	Descriptive Data	
		<i>f</i>	%
Busy Curriculum	1.Unrealistic Learning Goals	20	100
	2.Lack of Flexibility	7	35
Inappropriate Textbooks	1.Lack of Supplementary Materials	20	100
	2.Incompatibility with the Realities of English Learning and Teaching in Turkey	13	65
Unsatisfactory Placement Test	1.Grammatically-oriented	20	100
	2.Mechanical	20	100

Busy Curriculum. The new curriculum is based on communicative language learning method in the framework of integration of structural, situational, topic-based, conceptual/functional, process-/task-based and skill-based approaches (Ministry of National Education, 2006, p.2). The curriculum prepared by a team of leading academics in the field of English Language teaching also adopts the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) system (levels from A1 to C2). It advises applying cooperative and supportive group-work techniques in classrooms through the new curriculum. The textbooks used in public schools were also re-written with the adoption of new curriculum.

Unrealistic Learning Goals and Lack of Flexibility: Despite being theoretically and philosophically ideal, all participants (see Table 3 above) complained about the new English language curriculum, which was employed in 2006 after a one-year pilot. The reasons were the new curriculum being busy and inflexible. Participant 8 clearly describes them in the following Quote H.

“The new curriculum... Awful. The idea behind might be good but not applicable. First of all, the learning goals are so many. They are not realistic. They have to ask for our opinions while developing the curriculum. You cannot teach them all in 4 hours a week. It is so stressful.... I cannot teach one component in a week, but according to the syllabus I have to deal with the new topic in the coming week. My students cannot cope up with the pace. Me, neither. Most of the time, I tell the management, I do in line with the syllabus but actually I don’t because I know that when the ministry inspector visits the school (who doesn’t speak a word of English), he checks what I write into the notebook of daily lesson plan... doesn’t even care about what I do in classes. I act as if I do but, this is inevitable with this new busy curriculum.” Quote H, Interview on 18 February, 2009

Inappropriate textbooks. Participants also mentioned the textbooks being poorly developed in terms of the material supplements. They also added the difficulty of EFL context in reinforcing the learning goals due to the lack of real need for communication in Turkey.

Lack of Supplementary Materials and Incompatibility with the realities of the English learning and teaching context of Turkey: Participant 9 mentions in Quote I below the unrealistic learning goals by elaborating on the

incompatibility with the learning goals and the lack of supplementary materials with the compulsory textbook provided by the Ministry to be used in classes.

“The textbook is a must to use but there are not any supplementary materials except from the listening CDs. You have to use listening CDs provided by the book... they arrived so late to school. I don’t have the necessary electronic equipment to use the CDs in the classroom or at school. Thus, I cannot accomplish learning goals in listening comprehension. These students have basic level of English but they cannot use it because it is an EFL context. There is no reinforcement outside the classroom... with the 4 hours a week impossible to achieve them all. Language is for communication but I cannot do it due to the poor support.” Quote I, Interview on 20 February, 2009

Unsatisfactory Placement Test. With the adoption of the new curriculum and textbooks, a new placement test (named as SBS in Turkish language) was put into action in Turkey. The selection procedure of primary school students for high school education was being done through an exam at the end of 8th grade until 2008. However, in 2007 Ministry of National Education settled a new program for selection. They developed triangular selection criteria including school subject grades, behaviours score and the placement test score (Ministry of National Education, 2008, p.4). Moreover, the selection is based on the average of these three criteria for 3 years (6th, 7th and 8th grades). The placement test evaluates the foreign language skills of learners in three languages (English, German and French) with 13 questions for the 6th graders, 15 questions for the 7th graders and 17 questions for the 8th graders.

Grammatically-Oriented and Mechanical: The participant teachers were unhappy about the content of the new placement exam. They described it as grammatically-oriented and mechanical. A backwash effect of the test was that it negatively contributed to their choices of the methods employed in classes. They were in a dilemma between being a communicative teacher and satisfying the parents and the school management with the success rate of their students. Participant 10 criticizes the exam in many ways in the following quote J.

“This placement test kills my motivation. The new curriculum says I should be using communicative teaching methods but they test my students with a grammatical-oriented mechanical test. I have to teach them to be successful in the test because of the parents. There are some pictures in the questions. They don’t print them in colour so my students cannot read the pictures. Sometimes, pictures are misleading. It is clear that the exam is still under evaluation. However, these students are judged by these undeveloped non-finalized versions of the SBS. I feel guilty when I spend a bit more time on speaking or listening because these are not tested in SBS. Doing something but knowing that you should be doing the opposite is worse.” Quote J, Interview on 28 February, 2009

Socio-Economic Challenges

All the participants described the socio-economic challenges as the lack of support from the families. Working with low socio-economic level students, teachers were challenged by the parental understanding of the importance of English classes. Lack of such support is also reflected in unreturned homework assignments, which, in turn, slows the pace of student learning. Participant 11 illustrates the lack of parental support in quote K.

“Teaching English to low socio-economic level students are also difficult for the lack of their parent’s understanding why English is important. I somehow manage my student s to acquire the importance and the beauty of language learning but the parents (...) They don’t support their kids in homework. It is not only because they cannot speak the language but because they don’t believe it is necessary. They don’t see anyone speaking English in their immediate environment. I don’t think they have ever heard someone speaking English, either. Then, the school, teacher and student triangle is never complete. I am trying my students have fun at school. This is not enough when it comes to assignments. When they don’t do their homework, I have to spend extra unplanned time in class to reinforce their learning, which puts my class back according to syllabus timeline.” Quote K, Interview on 25 February 2009

Discussion

The findings show that English language teachers experience three main challenges while working in Turkey: (a) Institutional, (b) Instructional) and (c) Socio-economic. Although it seems that these categories are distinct and displayed accordingly, a close examination reveals that they are interconnected, indeed, and affect one another inevitably. Below is the Figure displaying the circular interrelations between each category.

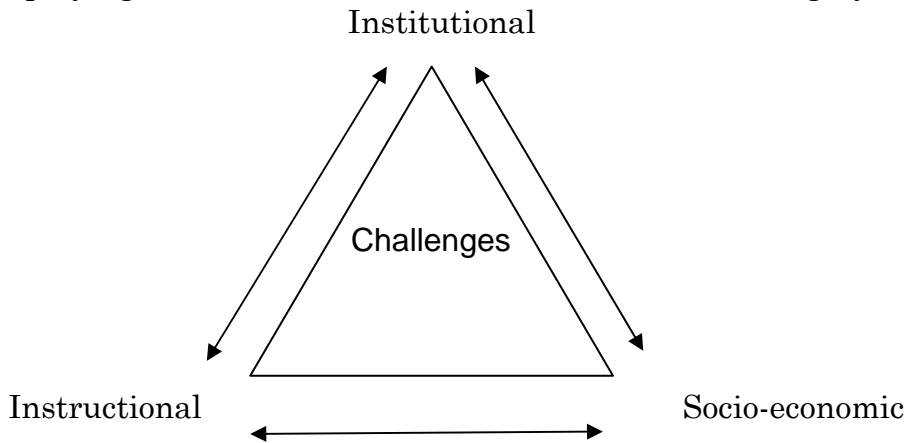


Figure Challenges of Teaching English in Turkey

In the relevant literature, Isik (2008) labels the problems similarly under two categories as institutional and instructional. He discusses institutional problems are due to the poor planning resulting in malfunctioning curriculum and thus methodology. In addition to this, instructionally flawed approaches have doubled the negative effect with the lack of appropriate materials and infrastructure. These findings strongly support the findings

of the present study. Lack of institutional support generated the instructional problems, which, in turn, minimized the effective use of the newly developed curriculum (Paker, 2007). Similarly, instructional problems such as the incompatibility between the teaching and testing approach reduced the effective application of curriculum. Lack of parental support also resulted in ineffectual instructional outcomes. Therefore, these challenges cannot be evaluated separately.

This study has revealed that the higher the socio-economic levels of the parents are, the higher the awareness of the importance of learning a foreign language is. (Akalin & Zengin, 2007). As it has been found in our study, Tilfarlioglu and Ozturk also (2008) discovered that ELT teachers were negatively affected by very crowded classrooms and the heavy workload. They also uncovered that most of the English language teachers in Turkey found the textbooks were designed ineffectively and the schools lacked ICT supporting materials such as videos/CDs, projectors and computers (Paker, 2007). Therefore, ELT teachers were more inefficient in teaching listening and speaking skills in classes than grammar and reading.

It is clear from the findings that challenges derive mostly from the new policies in foreign language teaching and testing. Recent adoptions and establishments in foreign language teaching policies affect classrooms and thus cause new challenges. As also suggested by Isik (2008), lack of infrastructural planning seems to be the main cause.

Compared to the previous studies conducted in Turkey in identifying problems and challenges of English language and/or foreign language teaching, this study is highly consistent with the relevant literature. However, it also reveals some newly emerging problems due to the new policies put into practice after 2006: the placement test (SBS) and DynEd, self-study internet-based learning material. The incompatibility between the test content and curriculum affects teaching negatively. Similarly, having spent a huge budget, time and energy, the poor accessibility of DynEd seems not fully benefited by the users due to the lack of infrastructure. As a result, it seems that the good will turns into a bad result due to the poor planning in Turkey.

Conclusion

The present study displayed the most recent evaluation of the state of English Language teaching in public primary schools in Turkey. The problems and challenges identified by the school teachers in three dimensions are highly interrelated. It seems that one problem results in another through a chain reaction, which causes ineffective teaching and learning activities with the waste of time. It is well documented that foreign language teachers start over from the beginning during each academic year (Oguz, 1999). They re-teach what they had taught the previous year due to the limited use of English language in context and learners *do* forget what they learn.

In this study, new problems have been identified as emerging due to the new policies since 2006 for foreign language teaching. Besides others previously identified and affirmed by this study, these emerging difficulties faced by learners and teachers are important because they should now inform changes in the policy and decision-makers in the field of education at a national-scale to improve the conditions.

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