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Investigating the Written Assessment Practices of Turkish Teachers of English at Primary Education

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Abstract

Problem Statement: Since the late 1990s, Turkey has witnessed two major curriculum reforms in English language teaching at the primary level education. However, the situation of the assessment practices of the teachers has been unclear due to lack of relevant research, particularly in Turkish context.

Purpose of Study: This study aims to investigate the written assessment practices of young English language learners in Grades 4-5 in state Turkish primary schools with a focus on comparing the question types posed by the teachers prior to and following the 2005 curriculum innovation in English language teaching (ELT) in primary education in Turkey.

Method: In order to identify the teachers' written assessment practices, 100 written examination papers were collected from 25 teachers who had been teaching in grades 4 and 5 since 1997, the papers were analyzed with regard to the question types based on the categorization suggested by Brown and Hudson (1998), and descriptive statistics was used in comparing the question types.

Findings: As a result, no major differences were found between the types of questions directed to 4^{th} and 5^{th} graders prior to and following the 2005 curriculum innovation.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Additionally, constructed response question types grew noticeably in number, particularly when the examination papers prepared for 4th and 5th graders were compared prior to and after the 2005 curriculum innovation.

Keywords: Primary teachers of English in Turkey; Grade 4 and Grade 5, Language assessment practices, Question types

Introduction

Young learners are children in the early stages of their schooling between the ages of seven and twelve (Slattery and Willis, 2001). As for young language learners (YLLs), they are those who are learning a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) during the first six or seven years of formal schooling between the ages of five and twelve (McKay, 2006).

The need for assessment and documentation of the language ability of YLLs has been increasing in the wake of the growth in interest for teaching English to young learners in many countries. But, how are the written assessment needs of YLLs really being catered for? Are we attending to the special assessment needs of our YLLs? In order to address such critical questions, an investigation into the written assessment practices of teachers engaged in teaching EFL/ESL to YLLs becomes inevitable.

The Process of Assessment and Student Responses

Assessment can be done at various times during a teaching and learning process for *formative* and *summative* purposes.

Formative assessment is a procedure that regulates teaching to ensure the active student participation (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). By actively involving the students in this process, the teachers gain an opportunity to meet individual students' needs (Brown, 2004) by trying alternative assessment procedures, e.g., portfolio, self-assessment, and performance assessment.

Summative assessment is used to see how well learners have achieved at a particular time, focusing on the product or outcomes of learning. Sit-down examinations, conventional 'pencil and paper tests', end-of-unit tests constitute examples.

Regarding responses required in classroom assessment, Brown and Hudson (1998) propose three categories *'selected response'*, '*constructed response'* and '*personal response'*. *Selected response* requires examinees to choose from a number of

options provided to them. True-false, matching and multiple choice items can be posed to examinees in assessment of such kind. In *constructed-response*, examinees are not provided options; instead, they are expected to fill in blanks, to write an essay, and to provide short and long answers to yes-no questions and question word questions, respectively. Finally, *personal-response* requires self-and/or peer assessment or portfolio assessment.

Assessment of Young Language Learners

Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment as the systematic collection, review and, use of information about education programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development. Similarly, to Rixon (2012), assessment is "any systematic way of finding out about people's levels of knowledge or skills, in our case the people are Young Language Learners" (p.1). Assessment serves several functions: it acts as a diagnostic tool that provides feedback to the teacher about student progress and their attainment of curriculum objectives; it helps the teachers determine students' strengths and weaknesses to guide the teacher in making educational improvements, and it helps teachers and educational authorities judge the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Rea-Dickens, 2000).

The characteristics of YLLs and the implications of these for the assessment of their language ability are discussed widely in the 'young learner' literature (see Halliwell, 1992; Cameron, 2001). On the basis of this discussion, there appears to be consensus that assessment procedures for YLLs should, at least, meet the following requirements:

• Tasks should be appealing and interesting to the age group, including elements of fun.
• Many types of assessment should be used with YLLs.
• The activities used in assessment should be good learning activities in themselves.

The main implication of this for the teaching and assessment of the YLLs is that there should be connection between the learning and assessment processes. Moreover, as argued by McKay (2006), a special approach to the assessment of YLLs is needed because of the special characteristics of growth and literacy that they bring to language learning and assessment.

Several studies have been conducted in the area of YLLs assessment. Altay (2007) investigated test types with the aim of addressing the question of what makes a

test pragmatic and how pragmatic tests can be formed. Schulz (2009) examined instructional writing strategies and assessments for English language learners in elementary classroom. Doğandere (2006) looked at YLLs' perspectives towards assessment. Fisher and Frey (2007) studied formative assessment techniques for YLLs. Malakolunthu and Vasudevan (2012) identified teacher evaluation practices in Malaysian primary schools.

Besides these studies, few studies have been conducted to investigate the development of various test types for YLLs. Fleuquin (2003) provided a detailed account of the development of the classroom-based achievement EFL test for YLLs in Uruguay. Included in the question types were multiple choice and cloze test items and some writing tasks. In another study, Hasselgreen (2000) focused on the assessment of the YLLs English ability in the context of Europe and by reference to the Council of Europe's recommendations and its material in the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Language Portfolio. In this particular study, questions are raised as to how far the special needs of YLLs are being catered for by assessment practices in European schools with a special focus on Norwegian schools.

Despite the afore-mentioned studies, the assessment practices of the English language teachers, particularly one that investigates the types of questions posed to YLLs in written examinations remains an under-researched area. For this very reason, the present study sets out to investigate the types of questions and their distribution over the written examinations administered to 4^{th} and 5^{th} graders prior to and following the curriculum innovation in 2005 at state primary schools in Turkey.

Assessment in Turkish Primary Education

Since the late 1990s, Turkey has witnessed two major curriculum reforms in English language teaching (ELT) at the primary level education; the former of which was introduced in 1997 and the latter in 2005. In 1997, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MNE) conducted a major reform, which primarily required the implementation of innovative approaches, namely the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in foreign language instruction in primary and secondary education. The starting age to learn English was lowered from twelve to nine, and the English language started to be taught in primary schools in grades 4 and 5 to YLLs.

Assessment has remained as an integral part of the Communicative Oriented Curriculum (COC). After 1997, 4th and 5th graders are required to have two written tests each term, as recommended by the MNE. The passing grade is 2 out of 5 (top grade). According to COC guidelines, general goals for assessment offered by MNE are as follows:

- Assessment should be performed in an indirect manner, particularly at lower grades; and
- Tests and written examinations should evaluate curriculum objectives (Kırkgöz, 2007a:180).

In addition, the teacher is expected to develop a detailed assessment sheet on which to record each pupil's performance on various tests. It is stated that students should be graded on their performance on written, spoken, and practical examinations, homework assignments, and projects by the teacher, the only assessor.

After the second curriculum innovation in 2005, MNE suggested alternative assessment techniques such as portfolio, peer and self-assessment to complement the formal assessment practices with less quantitative ways in assessing language-learning outcome of YLLs (Kırkgöz, 2007b). Despite the MNE's recommendation of alternative assessment techniques, written 'paper and a pen' examinations have sustained their popularity in the Turkish education system, as in many other countries.

Research Objectives

The present study investigates whether the written examinations designed for 4th and 5th graders prior to and after 2005 differ with respect to question types. It primarily seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. Do examination papers designed for 4th graders between 1997–2005 differ significantly from those designed after 2005 with regard to question types?
2. Do examination papers designed for 5th graders between 1997–2005 differ significantly from those designed after 2005 with regard to question types?

Method

A total number of 100 written examination papers were collected from 25 primary schools to determine the question types used by the teachers in their assessment of YLLs of English in Grades 4-5 in Turkish state primary schools.

Participants

The participants were 25 EFL teachers working at 22 state primary schools in Adana. They were selected among those who had taught English as EFL since 1997, at the earliest. The reason why the researchers set such a criterion for participant selection is that the study mainly intends to reveal whether there is a significant difference between the EFL examination papers prepared before 2005, and those prepared after 2005 with respect to question types administered to 4th and 5th graders. As a consequence, the least experienced teacher taking part in this study had taught EFL for 9 years. Each participant provided four examination papers.

Data Analysis

Based on the categorization suggested by Brown and Hudson (1998), the researchers analyzed questions on the English examination papers into two main categories: *Selected-response items* and *constructed-response items.* Personal-response items were not included in this study since the study focused merely on sit-down examinations administered to 4th and 5th graders. A few types of questions were added to the constructed-response category proposed by Brown and Hudson (1998), which were unscrambling, question-word-question, antonym/synonym, labeling and yes-no question. Descriptive statistics was used in comparing the question types.

A total of 14 question types were identified, in the present study, as reported below:

Constructed Response Items

Constructed response items (CRI) encountered in papers is illustrated below:

Yes/No (Y/N) Questions

These types of questions mainly require examinees to provide a positive or negative answer. Only 10% of the questions in this category were contextualized by means of an illustration as in the example:

E.g. Are these birds?  (Posed to 5th graders, 2006)

Question Word Question (QWQ)

These questions types are intended to assess learners' knowledge about a certain subject-matter.

E.g. How old are you? (Posed to 4th graders, 2006)

E.g. What is the weather like today?  (Posed to 5th graders, 2007)

Comprehension Question

These types of questions are designed to see whether learners understand and analyze the information given in a passage.

e.g. "Her name is Aylin. She is 11 years old. She has got a brother and a sister."

Q: Has Aylin got a sister? _____ (Posed to 5th graders, 2008)

Completion

In these question types, a sentence is given with some missing words, and/or grammatical items or a dialogue is posed with a missing part, and the students are expected to complete it appropriately. Such questions are mainly used to assess learners' competence at morphological, semantic and pragmatic level.

E.g. There are flowers _____ the vase.  (Posed to 5th graders, 2007)

E.g. A donkey has got four _____.  (Posed to 5th graders, 2008)

Transformation

In this group, three types of questions were identified: The first group asked the learners 'to transform an affirmative statement into a negative or an interrogative statement'. The second group involved 'transforming singular nouns into plural and vice-versa'. The third type required learners to 'transform a given tense into another'.

E.g. Make questions. "Engin is a student". (Posed to 5th graders, 2003)

Unscrambling

In these types of questions, the learners are given scrambled words, and are asked to write appropriate sentences using the words given.

E.g. Put the words into correct order

"Goes-father-fishing-weekend-my-every"

Translation

Translation questions mainly ask YLLs to translate a particular word or a short expression from English into Turkish.

E.g. *çanta* _____ strawberry _____

Labeling

These types of questions are usually intended to assess YLLs' knowledge at the word level, and they are usually expected to provide labels for a given object or a case.

E.g. Write the name of the animals. (Posed to 5th graders, 2004)



……. …… ……

Antonym/Synonym (Ant/Syn)

Learners are required to supply antonym or synonym of a given word.

E.g. Write the antonyms for the words. (Posed to 5th graders, 2004)

cold x ……. old x …….

tall x ……. poor x ……

Selected Response Items

Selected Response Items (SRI) encountered in papers is illustrated below:

Multiple-choice (MC)

These questions involve identifying the correct answer among a number of choices. It has been found that the teachers preferred this question type to find out whether the learners can distinguish between specific words, auxiliaries or pronouns.

E.g. Jeremy is ____ actor. a) a b) an c) the d) much (Posed to 5th graders, 2005)

Matching

These question types ask the learners to match questions with appropriate answers and/or words with their synonyms, etc.

E.g. Match items in Column A with those in Column B. (Posed to 5th graders, 2007)

Column A	Column B
A bar of	milk
A bottle of	jam
A jar of	chocolate

True false (T/F)

These questions are generally accompanied by a picture.

E.g. It is a table.  (Posed to 4th graders, 2008)

Choose from

Examinees are expected to choose from two given options.

E.g. Circle the correct form of the verb. (Posed to 5th graders, 2006)

E.g. He doesn't **like / likes** ice-cream.

Circle the odd/correct word out

Learners are asked to circle a particular word among several options.

E.g. cars mice legs books footballs (Posed to 5th graders, 2004)

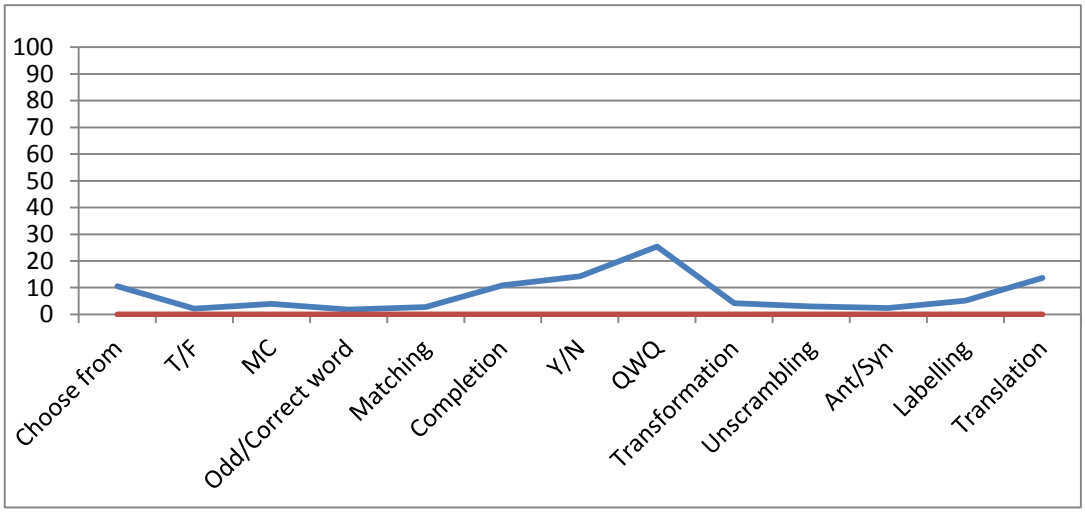
Findings

Findings from Grade 4 Examination Papers

Initially, the 52 papers prepared for 4th graders were examined regarding the question types. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of questions posed to 4th graders prior to 2005.

Figure 1

Distribution of question types posed to 4th graders before 2005



As seen in Figure 1, CRI overrode SRI items in the examination papers used prior to 2005. Namely, 21% of the items directed to 4th graders before 2005 were SRI items while approximately 79% of the items belonged to the CRI group. In other words, items requiring sentence completion, Y/N answers, labeling, transformation and translation appeared more frequently than the ones which involved 4th graders to choose among a particular number of options presented to them. Constituting over 25% of the items, QWQs were the most frequently used items while T/F items appeared to be the second (14.2%) and translation items (13.6%) the third in distribution. 10.88% of the items required examinees to supply missing part/s of a statement or a dialogue while 10.57% asked YLLs to choose from two options. Labeling constituted over 5%, transformation 4.23%, MC 3.93% and unscrambling 3.02% of the items. Finally, Ant/Syn, T/F and Odd/Correct word out were the least frequently posed items to 4th graders prior to 2005.

Figure 2

Distribution of question types posed to 4th graders after 2005

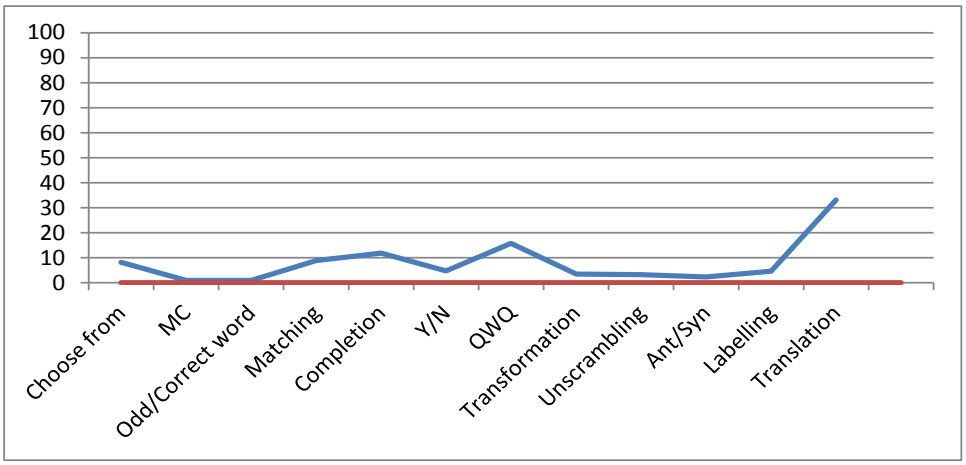


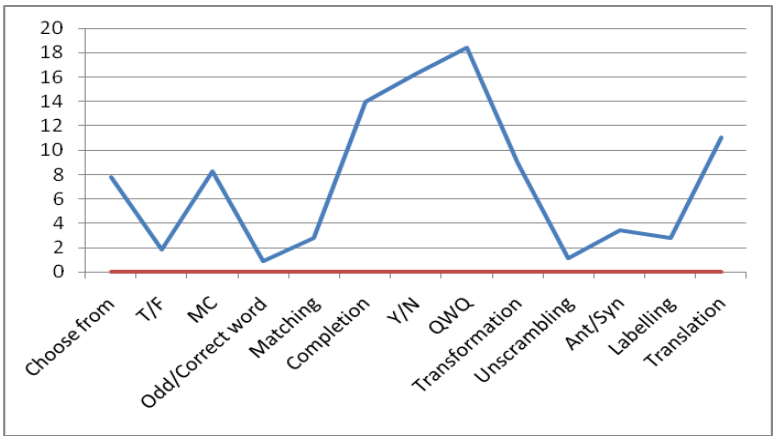
Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of questions posed to 4th graders after 2005. As depicted in the figure, CRIs significantly outnumbered SRIs on the examination papers prepared for 4th graders after 2005. More specifically, over 81% of the items on the papers were those involving students to complete sentences (11.84%), to transform given phrases (3.49%), to find antonym/synonym of a given word (2.28%), to label objects (4.55%), to translate between L1 to L2, or vice versa (33.08%), to provide answers to Y/N or QWQ (15.78%). Approximately 19% of the items required YLLs to choose among possible answers.

Findings from Grade 5 examination papers

Figure 3 displays distribution of question types over EFL examination papers prepared for 5th graders before 2005.

Figure 3

Distribution of question types posed to 5th graders before 2005

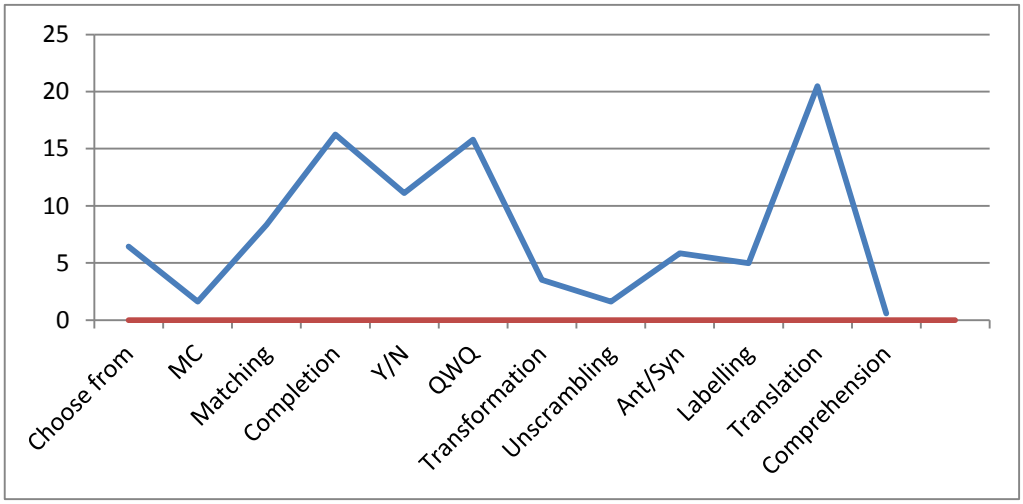


As seen in Figure 3, QWQs were the most frequently asked questions (18.39%) while Y/N questions were the second (16.32) and completion items (14.02) occupied the third in distribution. 11.03% of the items required examinees to translate between L1 and L2 whereas approximately 9% of the items involved transformation of statements. MC (8.28%) and Choose From items (7.82%) constituted similar percentages posed to 5th graders in papers prepared before 2005. Approximately, 3.45% of the questions asked examinees to provide antonym/synonym of a given item while 2.76% required labeling and 2.76% matching. Occupying less than 2% of the items, T/F (1.84%), unscrambling (1.15%) and Odd/Correct word out (0.92%) appeared to be the least frequently posed question items.

Figure 4, below, presents the results obtained from analyzing EFL examination papers prepared after 2005 for 5th graders.

Figure 4

Distribution of question types posed to 5th graders after 2005



It was found that CRIs noticeably grew in number particularly when the papers were compared with those prepared before 2005. As illustrated in Figure 4, CRIs constitute approximately 84% of the items asked to 5th graders after 2005 while SRIs comprise slightly more than 16%. Comprising over 20% of the items, translation was the most frequently employed question type. Completion items (16.23%), and QWQs (15.79%), appeared to be the second and third most frequently asked questions. Over 11% of the items required examinees to provide a positive/negative response while 8.33% involved matching. Choose from, Ant/Syn and labeling constituted 6.43%, 5.85% and 4.97%, respectively while those requiring transformation made up 3.51% of

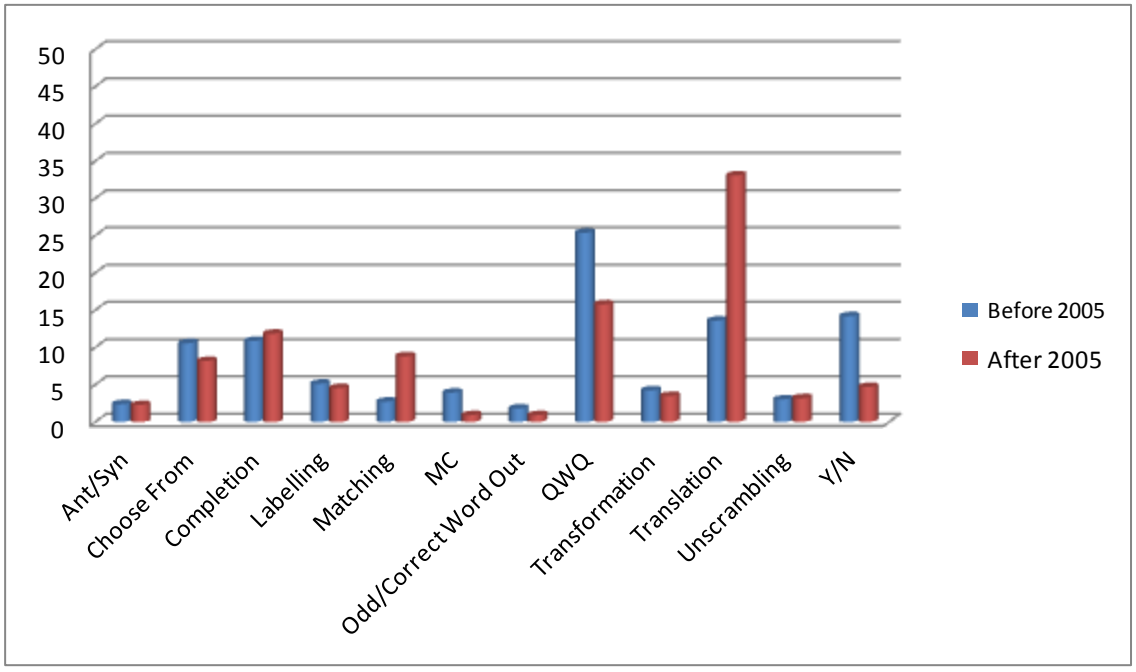
the items. MC and unscrambling items occurred at approximate frequencies on the papers (1.61%). Finally, comprehension items were the least frequently posed items to 5th graders after 2005.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the written assessment practices of 25 primary school teachers of English in Turkey in order to compare the question types posed by the teachers teaching EFL in grades 4 and grades 5 prior to and following the 2005 curriculum reform. One hundred written examination papers were analyzed regarding the question types based on the categorization suggested by Brown and Hudson (1998). No major differences were found between the types of question directed to 4th and 5th graders before 2005 and 2005 onwards.

Figure 5

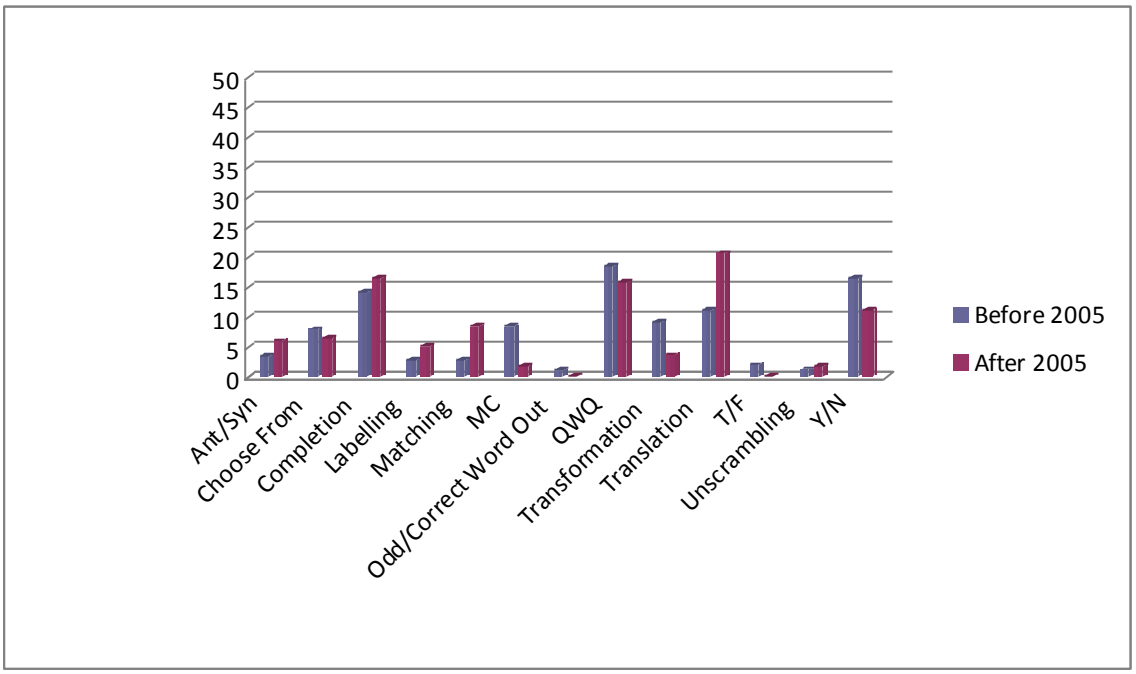
4th Graders before and after 2005



As Figure 5 shows, overall, CRIs significantly outnumbered SRIs after 2005 compared with examination papers prepared for 4th graders prior to 2005.

Figure 6

5th Graders before and after 2005



A similar finding is obtained for 5th graders. As Figure 6 demonstrates, CRIs exceeded SRIs on the examination papers prepared for 5th graders after 2005. Namely, at the primary level, items requiring Turkish YLLs in grades 4 and 5 to do transformation, sentence completion, translation and respond to questions appeared more after 2005.

Another significant finding of the study is that the questions posed to learners after 2005 accompanied more pictures and illustrations to provide YLLs with more contextualized information, compatible with CLT.

As acknowledged by McKay (2006) assessment of young learners is still young and needs to be attended immediately. Given the critical shortage of research in this area, the present study is an effort to contribute to the literature on examining the written question types posed by the ELT teachers in Turkish primary schools.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study reported in the paper was conducted to gain an understanding of the written assessment practices of a group of ELT teachers in Turkish primary education. The results of the study give insights into the question types posed by the ELT teachers in Turkish primary schools. However, owing to the small number of teachers involved

in the study, the results need to be interpreted with caution; thus, for a more comprehensive picture of the written assessment practices of foreign language teachers, further studies conducted with a larger number of teachers are recommended to triangulate the conclusions drawn from the present study.

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İlköğretim Okullarında Çalışan Türk İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Yazılı Değerlendirme Uygulamaları Üzerine Bir Çalışma

Özet

Araştırma Konusu: 1990'ların sonlarından itibaren, Türkiye'de ilköğretim okullarındaki İngilizce öğretiminde iki önemli reform gerçekleşmiştir. Ancak, alanda bu konuyla ilgili çalışma yapılmamış olması sebebiyle değerlendirmelerin öğretmenler tarafından ne şekilde uygulandığı belirsizdir.

Araştırmanın Amacı: Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de devlet okullarında okuyan 4. ve 5. sınıf öğrencilerine 2005 yılı İngilizce öğretimi müfredat değişikliği öncesi ve sonrasında uygulanan yazılı değerlendirme sınavlarının bu sınavlarda yöneltilen soru türleri bakımından incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır.

Araştırma Yöntemi: 1997 yılı itibariyle 4. ve 5. sınıflarda İngilizce derslerine giren 25 öğretmen tarafından yazılı değerlendirme aşamasında kullanılan 100 sınav kağıdı toplanmış ve söz konusu kağıtlar, Brown ve Hudson (1998) tarafından soru türlerine yönelik geliştirilen kategoriler esas alınarak incelenmiştir. Soru türlerinin karşılaştırılmasında betimsel istatistikler kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular: 4 ve 5. sınıf öğrencilerine 2005 yılı müfredat değişikliği öncesi ve sonrasında yönlendirilen sorular arasında tür bakımından önemli bir farklılığa rastlanmamıştır. *Sonuç ve Öneriler:* Söz konusu öğrencilere yöneltilen kurgu-yanıt soru türlerinin ilgili değişikliği takip eden yıllarda önemli oranda arttığı sonucu ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Türkiye'deki ilköğretim İngilizce öğretmenleri, 4. sınıf ve 5. sınıf, dil değerlendirme uygulamaları, soru türleri.