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**Attitudes of Students towards English as a Foreign Language: Ardahan University, The Example of Social and Technical Vocational High Schools**

*Mustafa ÖZDEMİR<sup>1</sup> & Dilara KUTSAL ÇÖRDÜK<sup>2</sup>*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper is aimed to obtain the data whether the variations such as gender, age, type of graduation, types of transition to higher education, education programs, and educational backgrounds of their parents have an effect on students' learning process positively or negatively. The research focuses on English as there are no German courses at the relevant university. A questionnaire and open ended question were used for students attitudes towards learning English. The study consists of 264 students in total who study in Social and Technical Sciences Vocational High School in Ardahan University/Turkey, held on the 2017-18 Academic Year. The results indicated that students give importance to learning English; however, it is understood that there are some reasons why they are not satisfied with learning or eager to learn English. The underlying reasons contribute English lecturers on how to behave towards learners and what kind of methods they should use.

**Key Words:** Attitudes, Foreign Language Learning, Social Factors, Gender, Age, Ardahan Social and Technical Vocational High School students.

**1. Introduction**

A language is a communication tool for human beings and it cannot be thought separately from individuals. Language shapes people's way of life. Throughout the history, people share their thoughts, ideas, customs, and traditions through a common language. It is used for different purposes in many aspects (Eifring & Theil, 2004). Although countries have own language, why English become dominant over other countries and how does it expand to all over the world in the process of time?

There are many reasons why English is widespread. People speak English on purpose of trading, military services, missionary activities besides spreading other countries through colonization in the earlier era. As many countries were not powerful after the World War II, The United States remained powerful in the areas of education, science, and politics. This power enabled The United States to reshape the world through establishing of the United Nation. On the other hand, English is used for technological information along with the advancement of computers and other technological devices. Moreover, these countries earn an extra income by providing materials for teaching the English

<sup>1</sup> Assoc.Prof.Dr., Kafkas University, [sevtegin@yahoo.com](mailto:sevtegin@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> Lect., Ardahan University [dilarakutsal@ardahan.edu.tr](mailto:dilarakutsal@ardahan.edu.tr)

language to other nonnative countries so that they are benefited from it. (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997; Kachru, 1986; Rohman, 2005). Thus, English is a widely accepted common language around the world. It is spoken in Britain, Ireland, Australia, the USA, New Zealand, South Africa, and several Caribbean countries, etc. as a mother tongue; however, it does not mean that the English language is used globally as it is spoken in mentioned countries. It is because English is used in many fields such as the desire for commercial, cultural or technological contact, and political, historical tradition, expediency, apart from being an official use in some countries such as Singapore, India, Ghana, Nigeria, and Vanuatu that English is spoken commonly around the world (Crystal, 1997, pp. 4-5).

Language acquisition and learning require repetition and studying systematically as much as being patient and willing. Learning a foreign language is a challenging process for nonnative speakers because learning a foreign language in non-natural environments is not as easy as pie compared to its natural environment. There are external and internal factors which affect individuals' learning process besides learning in a natural or non-natural environment. One of these relevant factors is individuals' attitudes towards foreign language learning (Ellis, 1994, pp.197-201).

It is clearly seen that individuals have different social backgrounds when the responses they gave in open-ended questions were evaluated. For example; teachers' attitudes towards learners in primary and secondary schools, the way of teaching practices, classroom settings, students' physiological problems, students' material and moral troubles, differences in their learning velocity etc. These factors lead individuals to have different attitudes towards certain circumstances in the learning process.

A certain number of individuals who have different attitudes learn a foreign language in the same classroom; therefore, their attitudes also affect each other positively or negatively as much as their learning process. Some learners are shy and anxious when they answer a question or they are asked to speak while others feel self-confident and are willing to speak or do given tasks. When taking these circumstances into account, this study is significant in the aspect of revealing the underlying reasons for major behavioral differences of learners. Discovering students' attitudes help teachers how to treat students effectively or decide what kinds of methods teachers should develop in the classroom.

Based on the view mentioned, the aim of this paper is to identify the attitudes of learners towards foreign language learning regarding how they give reactions against certain conditions, how they feel and behave when they are asked to do a task, how they think or in what way their utterances appear in a classroom. There has not been any study regarding students' attitudes towards foreign language learning before at the university in which the relevant study was conducted; therefore, this study will be a first in the aspect of determining learners' attitudes towards foreign language learning. It will be handled whether there are any similarities among other studies carried out by other universities in Turkey or not. The research questions mentioned above are aimed to be answered in this study:

1. Are there any distinctive factors such as the types of high school they graduated, gender, age, and the types of transition to higher education, education programs, and educational backgrounds of their parents that affect learners' attitudes towards learning the English language in Social and Technical Vocational High School?
2. What are the main reasons that students feel anxious about learning a foreign language?
3. Are there any differences among departments they attend regarding their awareness of learning a foreign language?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Attitudes

Attitudes are natural reactions against certain conditions encountered in daily life. As Gardner (1980, p.267) states, attitudes is "the sum total of a man's instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic." Then how do the attitudes form? What kinds of conditions influence individuals' attitudes? Is it possible to turn a negative attitude to a positive attitude? Negative attitudes may turn into positive attitudes or vice versa. Positive attitudes contribute learners' success and encourage them to be more eager to learn. (Karahana, 2007, p.84; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009) Sometimes negative attitudes motivate learners to study more or to get the higher grade at school (ibid 200; Lennartsson, 2008).

### 2.2. Social Factors

According to Ellis (1994, pp.197-201), attitudes of an individual are formed by social factors such as gender, age, social class, ethnic identity. Social factors influence individuals' learning process positively or negatively (Ellis, 1994, pp.197-201). According to other studies, these factors also include socio-economical context, linguistic background, affective factors and cognitive factors (Montero, Chaves, & Alvarado, 2014).

### 2.3. Age

Saddeghi (2013), citing Snow (1993) and Taylor (1990) clarifies that when learners learn the first language earlier, their performance are better (Montero, Chaves, & Alvarado, 2014). As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. Young learners are more tend to be educated compared to adults. However, it is indicated that older learners have the greater analytic ability to understand grammatical rules better than young learners (Saville-Troike, 2006, pp.82-84; Lennartsson, 2008, p.5).

### 2.4. Gender

Women and men incline to use their linguistic knowledge differently. Although they use the same phrases or vocabulary, their meanings they mention are sometimes different. Women are more open to different forms and use them in their speech compared to men. (Edlund et al., 2007, p.56; Lennartsson, 2008, pp. 5-6). Moreover, according to Edlund et al. (2007, pp.56-60), there are a lot of stereotypes. For example; women talk more than men and men are more humoristic than women.

Ellis (1994, pp.202-204) states there are also studies that show that men do better than women or there are few differences between women and men. Women are more eager to learn a new language and this attitude affect their learning process positively. (Lennartsson, 2008, p.6)

### 2.5. Socio-Economical Context

Social background of learners is one of the significant factors that occur differently in learners. In accordance with Williams and Burden (1997) cited by Pishghadam (2011), Internet, computers, pictures, paintings, books and dictionaries, learners' relationships with teachers, parents, siblings, and peers have a huge impact on individuals' learning process (Montero, Chaves, & Alvarado, 2014, p.439). Individuals have different experiences and as a result of their experiences; they have different attitudes and personalities. The desired goal for Individuals who have different cultural and social

experiences may vary; therefore, teachers should be aware of the fact that learners have different backgrounds so that learners can show positive attitudes towards learning. With regard to this, teachers should be conscious that social class cannot be thought separately from individuals and they should show different approaches to each learner to gain better results.

On the other hand, it is stated by Arikan (2011) that higher socio-economic enable individuals to have higher academic success. Arikan (2011) reveals that academic achievement is influenced considerably by social class, housing, and access to resources (Montero, Chaves, & Alvarado, 2014, p.440).

## 2.6. Linguistic Background

The truth of having a linguistic background of the native language for learning a new language is undeniable. When there are linguistic similar characteristics between the native language and the target language, individuals understand the linguistic structures easily and use the target language effectively; however, when there are not any similar characteristics between the native and target language, then the interferences appear and learning or acquiring the target language become difficult and take time. This is called as the Native Language Effect. There is no doubt that teachers' role in discarding negative interferences of the native language and facilitating positive development for learning a new language is very crucial. (Montero, Chaves, & Alvarado, 2014, p. 440-441 )

## 2.7. Related Studies

In Izmir, the research carried out by Çakıcı (2001) consisted of 427 (272 females, 155 males) students who were freshman the attitudes of the freshmen towards English within the scope of common compulsory courses and reveals whether the students' attitudes indicate significant differences with regard to their sex, their departments and the types of high schools from which they have graduated. According to results conducted by Çakıcı (2001), half of the students had a negative attitude towards the English course. There was not an important difference between the attitudes of the students and their gender. But the attitudes of the students towards English within the scope of common compulsory courses differed crucially according to their departments. The attitudes of the students indicated important differences with regard to the kinds of high schools from which the students have graduated, as well (ÇAKICI, 2007).

Kırkız (2010) investigated in Izmir the relationship between the attitudes of Elementary school 8th grade and Anatolian High School 11th grade students towards English lesson and their academic achievement and to discern whether the two groups vary significantly in terms of their attitude towards English attitudes of Elementary School 8th grade students were more positive than that of Anatolian High School 11th grade students. The results also showed that there was a moderately positive relationship between the academic achievement and attitudes of both groups (Kırkız, 2010).

Another study related to attitudes of first and second-year students towards "English I" and "English II" courses as a common compulsory course in terms of some variables was conducted by Memduhoğlu and Kozikoğlu (2015). The study included 300 first and second-year students in Faculty of Education at Yüzuñcü Yıl University in Van. The results revealed that the attitude of the students towards English was positive and didn't change in terms of gender, grade level, department and type of school they graduated (Memduhoğlu & Kozikoğlu, 2015).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was sought to identify the attitudes of learners towards foreign language and to examine whether there was any alteration in their attitudes depending on their age, gender, and the types of school they graduated, the types of transition to higher education, education programs, and educational backgrounds of their parents or not conducting a questionnaire. Moreover, apart from the questionnaire, it was aimed to attain the underlying reasons for their positive or negative attitudes they have by asking open-ended questions.

#### 3.1. Participants

In this study, the participants were comprised of the students who study different programs in Social and Technical Sciences Vocational High School in Ardahan University.

Although there are 370 students enrolled in Social Sciences Vocational High School and 165 students from Technical Vocational High School in total, the total number of the students who attended the questionnaire was 264 which included 144 males and 122 females.

#### 3.2. Instruments

The method used in this study was a questionnaire. It divided into two sections: in the first section acquires some information about learners' background to find out whether any relationship between their background information they give and their attitudes and in the second section, there are 25 questions regarding attitudes towards English language learning. In this research, 5-point Likert items were used (Definitely Disagree = 1 and Definitely Agree = 5). Some of the questionnaire items were retrieved from a study entitled Foreign Language Anxiety and Performance of Language Learners in Preparatory Classes conducted by Özkan Demirdaş and Derya Bozdoğan (2013).

On the other hand, students were asked to make inquiries about what the main reasons for negative perceptions and behaviors they have towards learning English by asking open-ended questions to learners.

#### 3.3. Data collection procedures

Firstly, the questionnaire was conducted at the end of the first term. Permission was taken to conduct questionnaire to learners in both Social Sciences Vocational High School and Technical Sciences Vocational High School.

Secondly, the students were meticulously informed about the questionnaire's objectives and the importance of the questionnaire. Then, the questionnaire was handed out and after finishing the questionnaire, the students were asked to check their answers whether there were any missing or invalid answers.

Thirdly, open-ended questions were asked to the students regarding the reasons why they had negative perspective and prejudice towards learning English. To reduce their fear of giving honest answers towards questions, they were ensured that there would be no any positive or negative feedback to them. According to their responses, all the principle reasons were evaluated and gathered.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Two types of data gathering methods were applied: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative data were obtained by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In SPSS program, descriptive analysis was used. In the study, Cronbach's alpha this implies a higher acceptable reliability as this value is close to 1. On the other hand, in qualitative data, a content analysis method was used. The responses were elicited by considering underlying reasons of problems.

## 4. RESULTS

The data were obtained through the questionnaire and open-ended questions.

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 demonstrates that items 1 received the highest mean scores (mean= 4,3826). Items 3,4,6 which are based on students' anxiety towards the English language received the higher scores (overall mean= 3,5000). Item 19 shows that students might start to have positive attitudes towards the English language after they were accepted to Vocational High School. (mean=3,9924). Items 14,16,17, and 25 implies that students have troubles and for this reason, they do not study the English language properly after school, teaching English in the early or late hours of the day do not affect learners' attention towards lesson, students are satisfied with their educational program and this does not affect their learning the English language negatively. (overall mean= 2,4000).

### 4.2. Quantitative Results

Table 2 indicates that 48 female and 30 male students definitely agree and 21 female and 38 male students agree on being aware of the importance of learning English. When it is considering whether there are any differences between male and female, the differentiation remains close. No matter how old they are, students consider that learning a foreign language is very significant.

Table 3 and 4 shows 50 female students and 52 male students agree that they are worried about failing in the English course. There are not any differences considering their gender.

The findings in Table 5 state that 109 students are worried that they cannot pronounce the word correctly. However, 44 students do not agree with this view. Table 6 demonstrates that 97 students feel anxious about not being able to write sentence structures in a correct way and 59 students show their disagreement. As a result of this, when they are asked to do a task, they hesitate to give answers not to make mistakes in the learning process.

### 4.3. Qualitative Data Analysis and Open Ended Questions

There are 264 students attended to questionnaire; however, 99 students wrote answers to the open-ended questions.

Students were asked to give the answer why they are afraid of making mistakes and the reasons of their prejudices towards learning English. According to their responses, main reasons are as in the following:

- The teacher was very angry and authoritative; therefore, when I made mistake, he would be angry at me.
- The lesson was boring because I was not satisfied with his/her teaching methods. In our English lessons, the teacher was not an English teacher. The teacher was the lack of having professional competence.
- Generally, teachers were changing every year; for this reason, I didn't adopt or adapt to the teacher and his/her teaching methods.
- Every year, the subjects started from the beginning, therefore, I didn't improve myself efficiently.
- The content of teaching was mostly based on grammar not speaking, writing or listening; therefore, I am afraid of speaking, writing or making mistakes.
- I'm afraid my friends make fun of me when I make mistakes.
- I didn't have English lesson in high school; therefore, I am not good at English.
- The number of students in the classroom was very high; therefore, I was not able to participate in the activities properly.
- In addition to these responses, the principle reasons also include in family problems, negative conditions in the place where students grew up, psychological problems they have.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Students' attitudes towards learning English

The results of the questionnaire and open-ended questions indicate that there are not any differences considerably between female and male regarding their attitudes towards learning English. No matter what type of high school they graduated, their gender, their age, the program they study at the Social and Technical Vocational High School, the majority of the students are aware of the significance of learning English. The study conducted by Çakıcı (2001) results showed that there was not an important difference between the attitudes of the students and their gender. Another study carried out by Memduhoglu and Kozikoglu (2015) also indicated that the attitude of the students towards English didn't change regarding their gender, grade level, department, and type of school they graduated.

Although the participants are aware of the importance of learning English, they feel themselves insufficient in speaking, writing, and listening skills. The main reason why they are afraid of making mistakes in the classroom is that they had bad experiences with their primary or high school teachers. Learners responded that when they made mistakes, teachers' attitudes towards them were not good; therefore, students did not want to participate in class activities. This led them not to learn or participate in tasks eagerly. As Chambers (1999:41) explains "There are so many factors which may contribute to a pupil's attitude. Some of these are in-school factors and the responsibility of the classroom, the teacher-pupil relationship, and pupils' perceptions of the relevance of the target language to them. Others are in-school factors but related rather the school management and society. Still, others are factors external to the school: gender, age, home background, general lack of interest in learning."

The majority of the students stated that they had English course from a different teacher who was not a branch teacher in primary, or high school. The attitudes of students are affected by the shortcomings in the curriculum, ineffective teaching methods, and techniques used, poor materials, limited time

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allocated to the English course and the features of the foreign language teacher (Wilkins, 1974). Accordingly, the students might lack basic skills such as grammar knowledge, speaking, listening, writing as much as pronunciation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study reveals Social and Technical Vocational High School students' attitudes towards learning the English language in terms of gender, age, and the types of high school they graduated, the types of transition to higher education, education programs, and educational backgrounds of their parents. In this study, the results indicate that although they are aware of the significance learning the English language, they feel themselves insecure and they are afraid of making mistakes in learning process; at that point, they feel anxious about prior skills such as speaking and writing.

Students have different educational backgrounds and they come together after graduating from different types of high schools. The majority of students lack knowledge about the English language in the class; therefore, learners are afraid of being ridiculed by other students when they make errors (Gholami, Rahman, & Mustapha, 2012). According to Gholami's view, the social context leads to attitudes which appear in learners as motivation that connect with other personal characteristics. In this case, lecturers should take an active role not to discourage some learners in this process.

Considering their learning process in the classroom, one might clearly aware of the fact that there are many deficiencies among students in using their native language primarily. It is known that individuals' native linguistic competence should be well enough to learn a foreign language. Comparing similarities or differences between native and the target language helps to learn. However, when it is the case, they have difficulty in comprehending the target language's sentence structures linguistically while they learn a new language (Brown & Lee, 2001).

According to the students' responses to open-ended questions, they stated some reasons prevent them from studying the English language efficiently. For example; financial troubles they have, the difficulties they have in dormitories or houses they stay at, psychological problems they should cope with etc. Especially in the winter season in Ardahan, students have trouble reaching at school by bus; this problem also causes learners not to concentrate on lesson.

To sum up, in line with the results of the questionnaire and open-ended questions, students don't know how to study the English language efficiently. They are not to be aware of how to take notes, study or practice. Lecturers should recognize the condition and know the students' English level. According to this, lecturers should start teaching English from the desired level to encourage learners. Lecturers should reinforce learners to pronounce the words correctly, to speak without feeling anxiety, or to write effectively. Moreover, classroom settings should be compatible with teaching goals. Lecturers should gain learners' attention by using different materials and by conducting different methods. Williams and Burden (1977: 88) suggest that "it is undoubtedly true that learners bring many individual characteristics to the learning process." Thus, teachers must be aware of the importance of individual differences in learning a language (ÇAKICI, 2007).



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## Tables

Table 1:

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Graduation	264	1,00	6,00	2,1894	1,30301
Age	264	1,00	4,00	1,5568	,81139
Gender	264	1,00	2,00	1,5379	,49951
Type	264	1,00	2,00	1,1439	,35169
Program	264	1,00	2,00	1,2311	,42231
Mother	264	1,00	4,00	1,7083	1,19972
Father	264	1,00	4,00	1,6212	,89808
I am aware of the importance of your English course.	264	1,00	5,00	4,3826	,89858
I worry about making mistakes in my English class.	264	1,00	5,00	3,3068	1,23656
I overcame the prejudice to the English course at the vocational high school.	264	1,00	5,00	3,6515	1,22387
I'm even thrilled about what I know best about exams.	264	1,00	5,00	3,4167	1,41980
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	264	1,00	5,00	2,8485	1,29629
I am excited to write words correctly in English exams.	264	1,00	5,00	3,2727	1,32304
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a language class.	264	1,00	5,00	3,6212	1,31693
I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language classes.	264	1,00	5,00	3,5985	1,28673
Even if I am well prepared for a language class, I feel anxious about it.	264	1,00	5,00	3,2083	1,38094
I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	264	1,00	5,00	3,8788	1,12375
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	264	1,00	5,00	2,7462	1,37605
I worry that I cannot pronounce the word correctly.	264	1,00	5,00	3,3220	1,31333
My family has no effect on learning a foreign language.	264	1,00	5,00	3,4015	1,43482
I do not have much interest in English for I study in a program which I do not like.	264	1,00	5,00	2,3371	1,42626

When I am on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	264	1,00	5,00	3,4356	1,30647
English classes in the early hours of the day reduce my attention.	264	1,00	5,00	2,2765	1,26493
English classes in the late hours of the day reduce my attention.	264	1,00	5,00	2,4091	1,23912
I get more excited when I speak English in crowded classes.	264	1,00	5,00	3,5303	1,34780
The role of the instructor is important when I like English in vocational high school.	264	1,00	5,00	3,9924	1,32823
The branch teacher taught English in primary school.	264	1,00	5,00	3,2008	1,42807
The branch teacher taught English in high school.	264	1,00	5,00	3,5303	1,34498
I was not satisfied with the teaching of my English teacher in primary school.	264	1,00	5,00	3,0644	1,51030
I was not satisfied with the teaching of my English teacher in high school.	264	1,00	5,00	2,9053	1,46263
My interest towards English reduced due to some negative reasons I experienced in primary and high school	264	1,00	5,00	2,6932	1,44631
I cannot study English properly because of the troubles I have.	264	1,00	5,00	2,5076	1,38978
Valid N (listwise)	264				

Table 2:

I am aware of the importance of the English course.			Age				Total
			18-20	21-24	25-30	31+	
Definitely Disagree	gender	Female	4	1			5
		Male	0	1			1
	Total	4	2			6	
Disagree	gender	Female	3	1		0	4
		Male	2	2		1	5
	Total	5	3		1	9	
Neutral	gender	Female	3	1			4
		Male	7	1			8
	Total	10	2			12	
Agree	gender	Female	21	8	2	0	31
		Male	38	13	2	4	57
	Total	59	21	4	4	88	
Definitely agree	gender	Female	48	24	3	3	78
		Male	30	32	2	7	71
	Total	78	56	5	10	149	

Table 3:

		I worry about making mistakes in my English class.					Total
		Definitely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Definitely agree	
graduation	Vocational High School	8	22	25	40	19	114
	Anatolian High School	7	9	12	25	9	62
	Imam Hatip High School	3	5	1	7	7	23
	Regular High School	5	16	7	19	9	56
	Open High School	0	3	1	1	2	7
	University	1	0	1	0	0	2
Total		24	55	47	92	46	264

Table 4:

I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language classes.		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Definitely disagree		7	16	23
Disagree		14	30	44
Neutral		10	12	22
Agree		50	52	102
Definitely agree		41	32	73
Total		122	142	264

Table 5:

		I worry that I cannot pronounce the word correctly.					Total
		Definitely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Definitely agree	
graduation	Vocational High School	14	15	16	53	16	114
	Anatolian High School	9	7	7	30	9	62
	Imam Hatip High School	5	4	2	4	8	23
	Regular High School	8	16	3	18	11	56
	Open High School	0	2	1	3	1	7
	University	0	0	0	1	1	2
Total		36	44	29	109	46	264

Table 6:

		I am excited to write words correctly in English exams.					Total
		Definitely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Definitely agree	
graduation	Vocational High School	15	24	12	45	18	114
	Anatolian High School	8	10	7	26	11	62
	İmam Hatip High School	3	5	2	8	5	23
	Regular High School	6	20	4	13	13	56
	Open High School	0	0	2	3	2	7
	University	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total		32	59	27	97	49	264

Table 7:

		I was not satisfied with the teaching of my English teacher in primary school.					Total
		Definitely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Definitely agree	
Graduation	Vocational High School	25	14	20	22	33	114
	Anatolian High School	13	19	6	8	16	62
	İmam Hatip High School	9	3	3	3	5	23
	Regular High School	11	9	10	17	9	56
	Open High School	1	1	2	1	2	7
	University	1	0	0	0	1	2
Total		60	46	41	51	66	264

Table 8:

		I was not satisfied with the teaching of my English teacher in high school.					Total
		Definitely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Definitely agree	
graduation	Vocational High School	22	26	20	19	27	114
	Anatolian High School	16	18	7	11	10	62
	Imam Hatip High School	9	4	4	0	6	23
	Regular High School	10	13	8	16	9	56
	Open High School	2	0	2	2	1	7
	University	1	0	0	0	1	2
Total		60	61	41	48	54	264