



The Views/Suggestions of In-service ELT Teachers on Children's English Language Learning Experiences in Preschools

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Abstract

As an increasingly researched field, the teaching of English to very young learners has been widely discussed globally for many years. In Turkey, numerous studies have focused on material design, teaching instruments, effective teaching methods, and classroom management within the context of English language teaching in preschool education. However, a gap exists in the literature regarding the outcomes of this process—specifically, the effects of early childhood English language teaching on primary school students. Since the role of the teacher is a key component of effective English language instruction, this study explores the perspectives of primary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding English instruction in preschool education. In this qualitative study, 36 EFL teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data was analyzed using content analysis. The findings reveal that in-service primary school EFL teachers generally acknowledge the critical importance of English language instruction at an early age. However, they also identified challenges stemming from unsystematic and insufficient English language teaching practices in preschool education in Turkey. Additionally, they suggested that English language teaching should be made compulsory in preschool education.

Keywords:English Language Teaching, Preschool Education, Primary School EFL Teachers, Very Young Learners

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Introduction

In today's increasingly interconnected and globalized world, English has solidified its status as the dominant foreign language and the de facto international medium of communication. Particularly in developing and digitalizing societies, English functions not only as a practical tool for global interaction but also as the language of science, technology, and international collaboration (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). As such, the ability to use English proficiently is now regarded as a key component of global citizenship. In light of this reality, there is a growing consensus in the literature that foreign language acquisition, particularly English, should begin at an early age. Early exposure to a second language is strongly associated with long-term linguistic success. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) argue that "when language learning begins earlier, it can go on longer and provide more practice and experience, ultimately leading to greater fluency and effectiveness" (p. 428). Likewise, empirical evidence suggests that children who begin learning English at a young age demonstrate greater communicative competence, improved social interaction skills, and enhanced metalinguistic awareness (Al-Yaseen, 2021). Moreover, early foreign language education contributes significantly to children's cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic development (Demirezen, 2003; Krashen, 1973; Mirici, 2001).

Neurological research indicates that approximately 72% of cognitive development is completed by the age of six, underscoring early childhood as a crucial period for language acquisition (Cameron, 2003; İlter & Er, 2007; Krashen, 1973). During this sensitive developmental window, children exhibit a heightened capacity to acquire near-native pronunciation and intonation, as well as to develop listening and speaking skills with greater naturalness compared to later stages. In recognition of this, numerous countries have revised their educational policies to integrate English language instruction into preschool and early primary education curricula. Turkey, aligning with global trends, has acknowledged the importance of introducing English at earlier stages of formal education. Since the early 20th century, foreign language education in Turkey has undergone significant changes in response to evolving pedagogical priorities and societal needs. A notable milestone occurred in 1997, when English was officially introduced as a core subject from the primary school level onwards. Under the 4+4+4 education reform model, English became part of the curriculum starting in the second grade.

Despite these advancements, however, the implementation of early English language education in Turkey continues to face several challenges. These include limited instructional hours (typically two hours per week), a shortage of qualified English teachers (especially in public schools), inadequate instructional materials, an overloaded curriculum, and a general lack of motivation among both educators and learners (Arslan, 2009; Canbulat & İşgören, 2005; Koydemir, 2001; Kozikoğlu & Arkalı, 2024; Mutlu, 2017; Solak & Bayar, 2015). These persistent issues have hindered the effectiveness of early English language instruction, despite its acknowledged importance in national education policy.

Problem Situation

The integration of English language instruction into early childhood education has garnered substantial interest in recent decades, largely due to its demonstrated benefits for cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. However, the success of early language education is heavily dependent on the presence of a well-structured curriculum,

pedagogically trained educators, and consistent instructional practices aligned with developmental needs. In the Turkish educational context, while English is officially introduced in the early grades of primary school, there is no standardized framework for English language instruction at the preschool level (Tunçarslan & Tarakçıoğlu, 2013). As a result, children's exposure to English prior to entering formal schooling varies significantly, often depending on the type of preschool attended or the socio-economic background of the family. This inconsistency leads to a wide spectrum of language proficiency among students entering the first years of primary school. Consequently, primary school English teachers face the challenge of addressing the needs of students with highly diverse levels of prior English experience.

These disparities may result in both opportunities and obstacles. On the one hand, early exposure can facilitate smoother transitions into formal language learning. On the other hand, uncoordinated and unsystematic instruction may create confusion or reinforce misconceptions about the target language. Teachers, who are directly responsible for implementing the national curriculum, are uniquely positioned to observe the impacts of these early experiences. While numerous studies have explored the cognitive and linguistic benefits of early language acquisition, relatively limited attention has been given to the practical implications of inconsistent and unsystematic language exposure during the preschool years, particularly from the perspective of primary school educators. This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding the voices of teachers who observe firsthand the long-term effects of early English instruction in real classroom settings. By doing so, the research not only offers context-specific insights relevant to the Turkish education system but also contributes to the broader academic discourse on the importance of coherent policy and curriculum design in early language education.

Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the perceptions of primary school English teachers regarding the advantages and challenges associated with students' prior exposure to English in preschool settings that lack a structured and uniform curriculum. Primary school English teachers were selected as the focus of this study due to their critical role in consolidating and building upon the foundational language skills acquired during early childhood education. Given that the transition from preschool to primary education marks a significant shift from informal to formal language instruction, these teachers possess firsthand experience in addressing the disparities caused by unstructured early exposure (Borg, 2006). Their unique pedagogical position allows them to identify both the benefits and the obstacles students face when prior exposure to English varies widely in quality and consistency (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Moreover, primary educators' insights are invaluable for assessing the effectiveness of current curricula and informing future policy decisions aimed at creating a cohesive and systematic approach to early foreign language education (Cameron, 2003; İler & Er, 2007). Therefore, involving primary school teachers is essential for developing an empirically grounded understanding of early language acquisition challenges within the Turkish educational context. The findings aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of unsystematic early language instruction and offer insights for future policy development in the field of early foreign language education in Turkey.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching English to Very Young Learners

It is universally recognized that educational methodologies must be meticulously adapted to the developmental characteristics of learners at different life stages. Therefore, precise identification and understanding of target learner groups are indispensable in the effective design and implementation of instruction, especially in foreign language education. In formal education systems, preschool constitutes the foundational phase, with learners in this cohort commonly classified as “very young learners” (VYLs). Although various definitions exist, the scholarly consensus generally situates VYLs within the age range of 2 to 5 years (Ellis, 2014). In contrast, children aged 6 to 11 years are categorized as “young learners” (Ellis, 2014). While these two groups share certain developmental traits characteristic of early childhood education, they exhibit distinct cognitive, affective, and linguistic differences that critically shape their foreign language acquisition processes.

VYLs predominantly acquire language through active, contextualized interaction with their immediate surroundings, necessitating timely and consistent feedback mechanisms (Piaget, 1970). Given the seminal role of social interaction in language development (Vygotsky, 1962), the quality of the classroom environment and interpersonal exchanges between learners and educators is pivotal for effective foreign language acquisition at this stage. Furthermore, VYLs are distinguished by heightened energy levels and sustained engagement during learning activities (Tarakçıoğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014). Their developmental profile also includes shorter attention spans and a pronounced curiosity about their environment, setting them apart from older young learners (Değirmenci-Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). These characteristics, while advantageous in fostering exploratory learning, can also pose pedagogical challenges, such as susceptibility to distraction and fluctuating motivation (Yıldız & Savaşçı, 2024). Nevertheless, the intrinsic curiosity and social boldness of VYLs facilitate dynamic peer and teacher interactions, which are crucial in sustaining their language learning momentum (Stakanova & Tolstikina, 2014). In sum, despite inherent challenges, VYLs manifest significant potential for foreign language acquisition when pedagogically nurtured in appropriately designed learning environments.

Empirical studies have identified multiple impediments in the delivery of English language instruction to VYLs, including low learner motivation, abbreviated attention spans, scarcity of developmentally appropriate teaching resources, limited instructional time, ineffective classroom management, insufficient parental involvement, and the absence of a cohesive and standardized curriculum (Akdoğan, 2010; Malik, Humaira, Komari, Fathurrochman, & Jayanto, 2021; Moore, 2010). The literature unequivocally underscores that meaningful foreign language acquisition in early education hinges on well-structured curricula supported by high-quality materials. Despite this consensus, the Turkish preschool context reveals a notable absence of compulsory English language programs and a lack of a unified national curriculum guiding early language instruction. Although English exposure in preschools is often motivated by contemporary global demands and parental aspirations, such initiatives frequently lack systematic planning and implementation. This unsystematic approach warrants critical examination to ascertain its efficacy and to identify areas for pedagogical improvement.

The Role of Teachers in English Language Teaching

Over the past four decades, educators' beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive frameworks have been extensively studied across educational disciplines, highlighting their profound influence on instructional practices and student outcomes. Teachers' beliefs and cognition function as interpretative lenses through which classroom dynamics and learner progress are understood (Vartuli, 1999). Vartuli (1999) posits that virtually all classroom phenomena can be elucidated by examining teachers' pedagogical beliefs, positioning educators as central agents in shaping the learning experience.

Within the domain of foreign language education, teachers adapt their instructional strategies to accommodate learners' diverse needs, interests, and cognitive-affective profiles (Wallace, 1991). This adaptive process is deeply informed by teachers' prior experiences, pedagogical knowledge, and belief systems. Notably, experiential knowledge frequently exerts a more substantial influence on instructional decisions than theoretical or formal pedagogical training (Farrell & Guz, 2019). Furthermore, a robust positive correlation exists between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, underscoring the integral role of teacher cognition in effective language teaching (Borg, 2003). Teachers' positionality within the classroom fundamentally shapes learners' language acquisition trajectories across all educational stages.

In primary education contexts, teachers serve as both role models and authoritative figures in the learning process. Kubanç and Selvi (2022) emphasize that English language acquisition among young learners is significantly influenced by both general primary school teachers and specialist English language instructors. Given that English language teachers typically receive targeted and specialized training during their undergraduate education, their role in fostering young learners' linguistic development is particularly critical, notwithstanding constraints such as limited instructional hours (Şevik, 2009). Consequently, insights from English language teachers regarding learners' prior language knowledge, interests, and experiential backgrounds are invaluable for designing curricula and instructional approaches that are both responsive and effective.

Despite this importance, there remains a conspicuous gap in the literature addressing English language teachers' awareness and perceptions of their students' pre-existing foreign language knowledge, particularly knowledge gained during early childhood education. Such awareness is pivotal, as it enables teachers to tailor instructional materials, activities, and syllabi to the actual needs and capabilities of their learners. In this context, the present study aims to explore the extent of in-service primary school English language teachers' awareness regarding their students' prior English knowledge, specifically in vocabulary, language skills, and pronunciation. It is posited that such awareness will empower teachers to develop more targeted, practical, and impactful syllabi that effectively support young learners' language development. To fulfil this objective, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do in-service primary school English language teachers think about teaching English in early childhood education (in preschools or kindergartens)?
2. According to in-service primary school English language teachers, what are the benefits and challenges of learning English unsystematically in early childhood years?

3. To what extent are in-service primary school English language teachers aware of their students' prior knowledge and experiences of English?
4. Do in-service primary school English language teachers design their courses regarding students' current/previous English knowledge?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the perceptions, awareness, and experiences of in-service primary school EFL teachers concerning English language instruction during early childhood. The phenomenological approach is particularly suited to capturing individuals' lived experiences and subjective interpretations within a specific context (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2018). Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their perspectives authentically and in depth (Patton, 1980). Thematic analysis was subsequently utilized to identify and organize emergent themes and sub-themes, thereby facilitating a comprehensive and systematic interpretation of the data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all in-service primary school EFL teachers working in Erzincan, Turkey. Due to logistical constraints inherent in accessing the entire population, convenience sampling was employed. This non-probability sampling technique, widely recognized in qualitative research, involves selecting participants based on their availability, willingness, and accessibility (Creswell, 2012). Convenience sampling enabled efficient recruitment of a sufficient number of participants without imposing stringent demographic selection criteria.

A total of 36 in-service primary school EFL teachers, representing diverse public schools in XXX, participated in the study. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample, including gender distribution, educational qualifications, and teaching experience.

Table 1

The Demographic Features of the Participants

The number of T	Gender	Graduation Degree	Years of Experiences
36 T	Male 6	BA Degree (6)	1-5 years (2)
			5-10 years (4)
	Female 30	BA Degree (29)	1-5 years (4)
		MA Degree (1)	5-10 years (18)
			10-15 years (8)

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

The sample predominantly consisted of female teachers (83%), most of whom held a bachelor's degree. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 15 years, with the majority having between 6 and 10 years of experience.

Data Collection Instrument

Consistent with phenomenological research practices, semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit rich, detailed data reflecting participants' thoughts, perceptions, and experiences (Büyüköztürk et al., 2018; Dursun, 2023). The interview protocol, developed by the researcher, comprised 12 open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' perceptions of early childhood English education, their awareness of students' prior knowledge, and their instructional practices tailored to young learners' proficiency levels.

The development of the interview instrument involved a comprehensive review of the literature concerning EFL teachers' roles in early childhood language education. Subsequently, an initial item pool was formulated and refined through consultations with two subject-matter experts to ensure content validity and clarity. The interview questions were categorized into three main domains: (1) perceptions and attitudes toward early childhood English teaching (e.g., "What are your thoughts on the current early childhood English teaching practices in Turkey?"), (2) awareness of students' prior English exposure (e.g., "How do you assess whether your students have received English instruction prior to primary school?"), and (3) pedagogical strategies for addressing varying student proficiency levels (e.g., "How do you adapt your teaching activities to accommodate students with prior English knowledge?").

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

Following ethical approval and obtaining informed consent, data collection was conducted during the 2023–2024 academic year. The researcher visited various primary schools in the city center of XXX, providing participants with detailed information about the study's purpose and ensuring confidentiality. Each participant completed the semi-structured interview, lasting approximately 35–40 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and follow-up questions were posed to clarify or deepen responses when necessary. To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., T1, T2).

Data analysis adhered to rigorous qualitative content analysis procedures (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to immerse fully in the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, with input from three experts to enhance the reliability and validity of the coding process. These codes were then clustered into higher-order themes and sub-themes, aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. Throughout this process, relevant literature was revisited to contextualize and interpret the findings appropriately.

The analytical procedure was guided by the four-phase framework proposed by Dörnyei (2007), summarized in Table 2:

Table 2*Data Analysis Phases*

Phases	Analysis Process
Step 1	Transcribing the collected data
Step 2	Coding and determining the themes
Step 3	Focusing on codes/themes and data presentation
Step 4	Interpreting data and discussing on results

This systematic approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on early childhood English education, thereby contributing valuable insights to the field. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and pedagogical practice.

Ethical Issues

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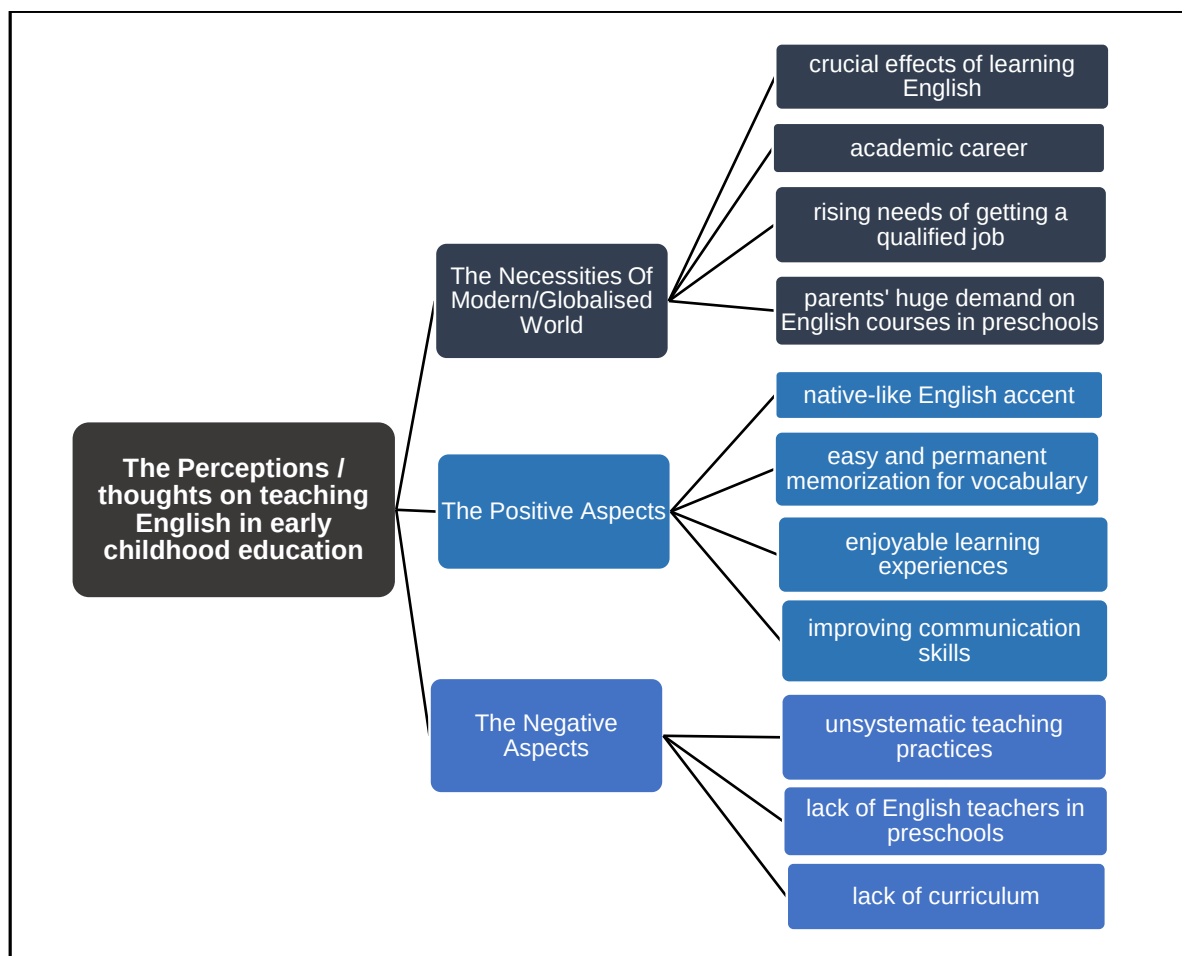
Findings

Findings of the Research Questions

Over the course of three weeks, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 in-service primary school EFL teachers to explore their perceptions and experiences related to early childhood English language teaching (ECELT) in Turkey. Following transcription and content analysis procedures, the data were coded and organized into three main thematic categories aligned with the interview form: (1) Teachers' perceptions and beliefs about ECELT, (2) Awareness of learners' prior English knowledge, and (3) Teachers' instructional practices for diverse language levels. These categories are presented below with interpretive analysis supported by illustrative quotes.

The EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Thoughts Towards English Teaching in Early Childhood

Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the growing importance of early foreign language education in a globalized world. As shown in Figure 1, three key themes emerged: (a) the demands of the modern/globalized world, (b) perceived benefits of early English instruction, and (c) concerns regarding current implementation practices.

Figure 1*The Codes/Sub-Codes Regarding the Perceptions and Thoughts*

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed three core codes that reflected the participating teachers' perceptions of early childhood English language teaching (ECELT): (1) the necessities of the modern/globalised world, (2) positive aspects, and (3) negative aspects (see Figure 1).

Necessities of the Modern/Globalised World

A majority of the participants emphasized the increasing importance of early foreign language education due to global demands and societal expectations. They argued that English has become a prerequisite for academic advancement and professional success, echoing findings from previous studies on the instrumental motivations for learning English in early years (Copland et al., 2014; Nikolov, 2009). Teachers also frequently mentioned that parents are now more conscious of these global trends and are thus strongly invested in their children's early English learning.

As one participant stated: "Learning a foreign language is essential in today's world. Unfortunately, we didn't learn English at an early age. But now, even knowing English is not enough—children need to learn at least two foreign languages to secure a qualified job, and one of them must be English." (T6)

Another teacher reflected on the increasing parental pressure on schools to offer early English instruction: "Parents are highly motivated for their children to learn English. Many private preschools are obligated to offer English just to meet parental demands. I've even heard of schools offering French as well. Parents want to ensure a bright career for their children, though they may not know the right pedagogical methods for early language learning." (T19)

Some teachers also expressed concern that starting English in second grade, as mandated in the Turkish curriculum, is too late to take full advantage of children's natural language acquisition abilities: "English should be taught as early as possible. Beginning in second grade is too late. Preschool years offer the best window for language development." (T32)

These findings reinforce arguments in the early language learning literature, which support the idea that younger learners have cognitive and neurological advantages when acquiring foreign languages (Muñoz, 2006; Pinter, 2011).

Positive Aspects of Teaching English in Early Childhood

The second sub-theme relates to the perceived benefits of ECELT. An overwhelming majority of the teachers (n = 31) expressed strong beliefs in the advantages of introducing English at an early age. These included improved vocabulary retention, more native-like pronunciation, enhanced listening and speaking skills, and the ability to learn through play and songs—strategies well-supported in young learner pedagogy (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002; Cameron, 2001).

One participant noted: "Teaching English in preschool is both enjoyable and effective. Through games and songs, children learn naturally and don't forget easily." (T5) Another teacher shared a personal observation regarding accent acquisition: "It's very useful. Children can develop a native-like accent with the right teaching. My 4-year-old son remembers songs and pronounces some words even better than I do." (T11)

Participants frequently emphasized that early learning creates a positive association with the language, which can lead to higher motivation in later stages of education. This aligns with SLA research emphasizing the role of affective factors, such as motivation and attitude, in successful language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). However, a few teachers cautioned that the effectiveness of ECELT depends heavily on the quality of instruction. Without appropriate pedagogy and trained teachers, the advantages may not be fully realized.

Negative Aspects and Challenges in Practice

Despite their overall support for early English instruction, nearly all participants also voiced concerns regarding its implementation. The most frequently cited issues were the lack of trained EFL teachers in preschools, the absence of a standardized curriculum, and disparities in students' prior English knowledge upon entering primary school.

One teacher described how unqualified instruction can lead to persistent errors: "English is often taught by preschool teachers with no language teaching background.

As a result, children may learn incorrect pronunciation or sentence structures, which are difficult to correct later.” (T4)

Another teacher highlighted the inconsistency in preschool content and the resulting challenges in first and second-grade classrooms: “There is no standardized curriculum. Some children come knowing only colors and numbers, while others know animals and body parts. This creates chaos in my classroom when I try to teach a mixed-level group.” (T9)

A third participant shared a first-hand account of the resource gap in preschools: “When I worked at a private preschool, I had no curriculum or materials. I relied on simple songs and games like ‘Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes.’ I knew it wasn’t enough, but there were no other options.” (T17)

These reflections reveal a critical disconnect between policy goals and actual classroom practices. The concerns echo broader findings in the literature about the lack of institutional support and structured curricula in early English programs, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011; Yıldırım & Kirkgöz, 2016).

In conclusion, while EFL teachers in this study generally viewed ECELT as beneficial and necessary, they also acknowledged significant systemic barriers that hinder its effective delivery. These include unqualified personnel, the absence of unified standards, and variability in preschool experiences—factors that demand urgent policy and curriculum reform for ECELT to be successful and equitable.

The EFL Teachers’ Awareness of Prior Knowledge of Primary School Students

The in-service primary school EFL teachers were then asked about their awareness of the prior knowledge and proficiency levels of their students in English language courses. They were questioned about their perceptions, awareness, and experiences regarding the prior knowledge of students who had been taught English in preschools or kindergartens, their views on the varying levels of primary school students in English courses, the effects of English language instruction in preschools or kindergartens on the current knowledge of primary school students, and whether they recognized the effectiveness of early English language teaching in their own teaching practices. They were also asked about their positions on teaching primary school students who had received English instruction during early childhood education. The data collected from these questions were analyzed during the data analysis phase, and the main codes and sub-codes for this section are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

The Codes/Sub-Codes Regarding the Awareness of EFL Teachers on Prior Knowledge of Students

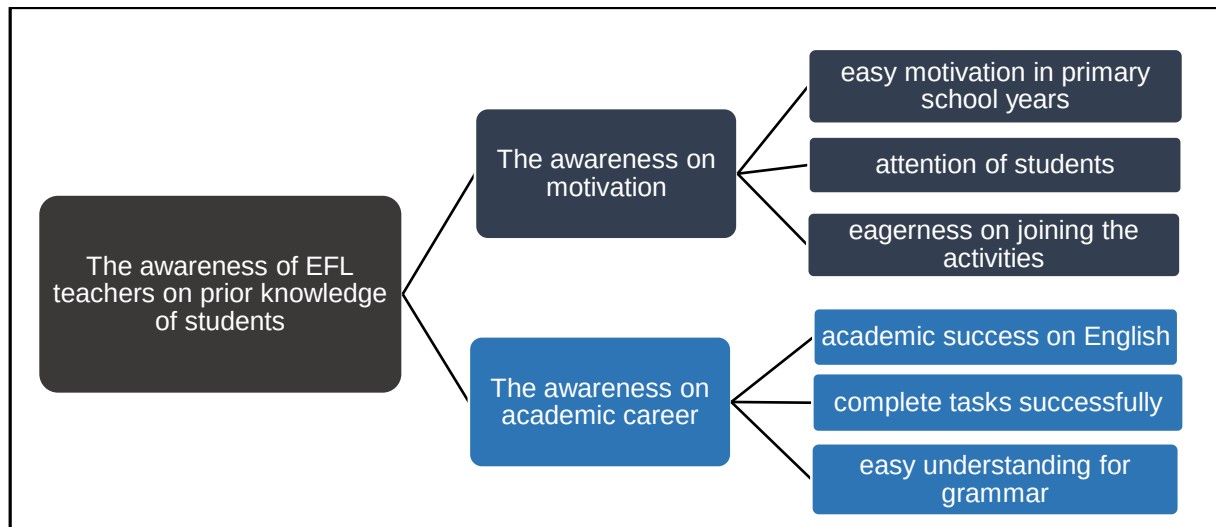


Figure 2 presents two major thematic codes that emerged regarding the participants' awareness of their students' prior knowledge: (1) *awareness of motivation* and (2) *awareness of academic advantage*. These themes highlight how in-service primary school EFL teachers perceive the impact of early English language learning experiences on students' readiness, motivation, and academic performance in the primary classroom.

Awareness of Motivation

The majority of participating teachers emphasized that students who had received English instruction during early childhood education tend to display higher levels of motivation in formal primary English classes. Teachers consistently reported that these students are more eager to participate in lessons, more responsive to classroom tasks, and more comfortable engaging with English. This finding aligns with existing research emphasizing the motivational benefits of early language exposure (e.g., Brewster et al., 2002; Nikolov, 2009), which suggests that young learners who experience language learning in playful, low-stress environments often approach future language instruction with greater enthusiasm and confidence.

Teachers in this study described how students with early English learning backgrounds required less extrinsic motivation and were generally more willing to engage in communicative tasks. These students were often able to recall familiar vocabulary and concepts, which facilitated smoother transitions into the formal curriculum and created a sense of achievement. Several teachers noted that this early start cultivated positive attitudes and reduced language anxiety—both critical factors for long-term motivation. For example:

T6: *"Students can be motivated easily because they are ready to learn English thanks to their prior experiences in the classroom. I don't need to struggle to motivate my students who had English courses during their preschool years. I can easily recognize them and just focus on developing their academic skills."*

T8: *"I can easily identify the students who took English before primary school—they already know basic terms like numbers and colors. I don't have to work on motivating them. They're ready to speak and engage. I just need to enhance their communicative competence."*

T22: *"These students stand out especially in listening tasks. They remember familiar content and participate actively. Sometimes, they get bored in second grade because the topics are repetitive for them, but their eagerness to learn new material is still strong."*

Awareness of Academic Advantage

In addition to motivation, participants widely acknowledged the academic benefits of early English instruction. They observed that students with prior exposure to English performed more effectively in classroom tasks and acquired new structures and vocabulary more easily. These students demonstrated enhanced listening comprehension, quicker response times, and a greater willingness to produce language orally. This supports findings in second language acquisition literature, which highlight the cognitive and linguistic advantages of early language learning, particularly in areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary retention, and fluency (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Pinter, 2011).

Importantly, teachers pointed out that these advantages created noticeable disparities in the classroom. Students with no prior exposure to English often required more support and time to catch up, highlighting the inequality that can stem from varied access to early childhood education. Several teachers also commented on the role of parents in providing additional learning opportunities, suggesting that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in early language development—a finding echoed in research on early childhood language equity (Collins, 2010). As participants stated:

T8: *"My students who had English in preschool are much more successful, especially in listening. They remember what they learned and perform better in class activities. I believe they are better positioned for future academic success in language learning."*

T4: *"I try not to label students, but there's a clear gap. Some students come with a strong foundation—thanks to private lessons, apps, or support from their parents—while others only start learning English here. Those with prior exposure need minimal help; they're already prepared to grasp new content. For many others, primary school is their only chance."*

These insights suggest that while early English education fosters motivation and academic success, it also highlights issues of access and equity. Without a unified policy or curriculum, disparities among students' early experiences can lead to unequal outcomes in the classroom. This underscores the need for a more coordinated and inclusive approach to early language education in Turkey, one that considers both pedagogical effectiveness and social fairness.

The EFL Teachers' Experiences on Designing Their Course for Different Levels

Lastly, the in-service primary school EFL teachers were asked about their experiences in designing courses for their students, considering the different levels of learners. They were questioned about their experiences in developing new and original

activities for students who had received English instruction in preschools or kindergartens, their practices regarding the varying levels of primary school students in English courses, material design processes, efforts to enhance their teaching environment, and the effects of early English language education on primary school teaching practices. The data collected from these questions were analyzed during the data analysis phase, and the main codes and sub-codes for this section are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

The Codes/Sub-Codes on the EFL Teachers' Experiences for Designing Their Courses

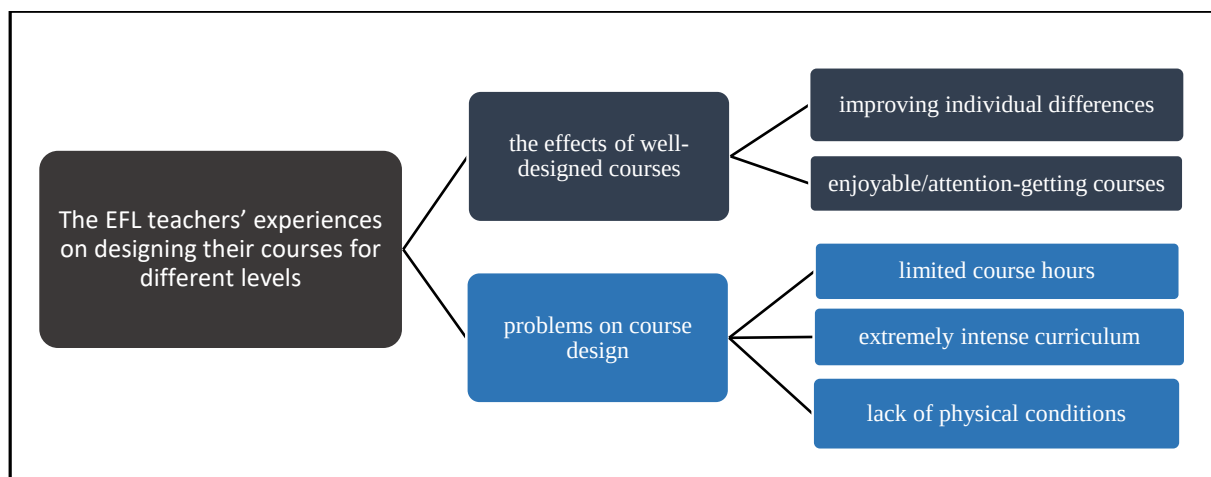


Figure 3 illustrates the participants' experiences in designing courses for students with varying proficiency levels within the same classroom, categorized into two themes: (1) *the effects of well-designed courses* and (2) *challenges in course design*.

The Effects of Well-Designed Courses

The participants predominantly emphasized the critical importance of course design in English language lessons, particularly the role of engaging and attention-capturing activities tailored for primary school students. Almost all teachers highlighted that well-structured courses effectively address students' individual differences and diverse learning styles. They noted that incorporating a variety of activities, supported by technological tools and multimedia resources, enhances motivation among energetic young learners and accommodates different learning preferences, such as visual and kinesthetic modalities. For example:

T5: *"I believe we should incorporate enjoyable activities for primary school students because they are very energetic and want to be active throughout the lessons. Fortunately, there are numerous resources available online, including games and songs, which support various language skills."*

T12: *"...some students learn best through visual materials, while others are kinesthetic learners. I try to design my lessons to accommodate different learning styles based on their prior knowledge, but to be honest, it is not an easy task."*

T31: *“Designing activities is fundamental to teaching in primary schools. It is impossible to create a single lesson plan that engages all students equally. While some students enjoy listening activities, others prefer reading tasks. As a teacher, I strive to create an effective learning environment by considering individual differences and students’ prior knowledge. However, particularly with mixed-level classes such as second graders, designing appropriate activities is quite challenging due to their diverse backgrounds.”*

Challenges in Course Design

Despite acknowledging the importance of well-designed courses, many participants identified significant challenges when attempting to cater to mixed-level classrooms. Specifically, 28 teachers pointed to constraints including inadequate physical facilities, limited weekly course hours, and a dense curriculum that restricts flexibility for creative or differentiated activities. Although these obstacles were widely recognized, none of the participants claimed they were incapable of designing their courses effectively. Rather, they emphasized the difficulty of balancing curriculum requirements with the need for engaging and suitable materials. Additionally, the wide range of student proficiency within the same grade emerged as a major challenge in developing differentiated instruction. Illustrative statements include:

T2: *“I understand the need to channel my students’ energy during lessons, but with only two hours per week, incorporating games or interactive activities interferes with the curriculum. Managing young learners during games is difficult, so I primarily rely on the coursebook. Even though I am aware of the varying proficiency levels, I cannot tailor activities for those who had English exposure in early childhood.”*

T16: *“Even if I want to design activities beyond the coursebook, classroom conditions limit me. With about 35 students in a class, playing games is almost impossible. Classroom management is challenging, and the administration strictly enforces quiet classrooms. Consequently, I stick to coursebook-based and paper activities. Although some students are ready for advanced themes due to prior knowledge, finding original materials is difficult, and at times I feel burnt out.”*

T28: *“While university courses teach material design, in practice, it is nearly impossible to regularly implement games, songs, or arts and crafts activities. We mostly follow the coursebook and try to cover all the curriculum themes. I know this is not ideal, but we have no alternative. The limited course hours and lack of time to prepare materials for diverse learners make differentiation very difficult. I recognize different proficiency levels in my classes, but I cannot do much to address these differences.”*

Conclusion, Discussion and Implications

Discussion Of Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to explore the perceptions and views of in-service primary school EFL teachers regarding the teaching of English in early childhood education. Initially framed as, “What do in-service primary school English language teachers think about teaching English in early childhood education (in preschools or kindergartens)?”, the study’s findings revealed a unanimous emphasis on the critical importance of early childhood as a

pivotal period for language learning and teaching. All participating teachers acknowledged the significant role that early childhood education plays in fostering English language acquisition. This consensus is unsurprising given that EFL teachers, by their professional orientation, are acutely aware of the pedagogical and developmental benefits associated with early foreign language learning.

Corroborating these findings, Reynolds et al. (2021) emphasized that the beliefs and attitudes of both pre-service and in-service English teachers substantially influence the design of language programs. Their study similarly underscored a shared conviction among teachers regarding the essential nature of introducing English to very young learners. Furthermore, Ekuş and Babayiğit (2013) investigated the perspectives of EFL teachers alongside in-service primary school educators, uncovering a common agreement on the advantages of teaching English at an early age. Their research also highlighted the recognized necessity of initiating English instruction by the second grade of primary school, a finding echoed by Çelik and Işık (2019), who concluded that both teacher groups appreciate the pedagogical benefits of early foreign language exposure.

Additionally, Kubanç and Selvi (2022) reported similarly positive attitudes among primary school and EFL teachers toward teaching English to young learners during primary education. These convergent findings across studies illustrate a robust professional consensus on the value of early English language teaching. The present study further extends this consensus by focusing explicitly on preschool and kindergarten settings, an area less explored in the literature. Unlike previous studies centered on primary school contexts, this research specifically investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching English at the pre-primary level. The results aligned with the widespread assumption that "children are better language learners than adults" (Cameron, 2003; Ellis, 2008; Eyres, 2007; Krashen, 1982; Pinter, 2006), reinforcing the universal belief in the cognitive and linguistic advantages of early foreign language education.

In addition to pedagogical considerations, participants highlighted the growing influence of parents in Turkey, noting an increasing demand for early foreign language instruction within formal education frameworks. Teachers emphasized the pressing needs of the modern era, particularly regarding communicative competence and native-like pronunciation, which very young learners are uniquely positioned to develop. These reflections were often personalized, with teachers referencing their own young children or toddlers, illustrating a genuine and heartfelt endorsement of early childhood English education. In sum, in-service primary school EFL teachers expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions about early English teaching in preschools and kindergartens. Nevertheless, they also identified numerous challenges and systemic issues impacting the effective implementation of such programs in Turkey, which will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections.

Discussion of Research Question 2

The second research question explored the perceived benefits and challenges associated with unsystematic English learning during early childhood. Formulated as, "According to in-service primary school English language teachers, what are the benefits and challenges of learning English unsystematically in early childhood years?", the analysis

surfaced several salient themes reflecting teachers' nuanced understandings of this complex issue.

Regarding benefits, teachers noted that early exposure to English significantly enhances children's communicative abilities and fosters greater motivation toward language learning in subsequent educational stages. These early learners often outperform peers in primary school, particularly in grasping new grammatical concepts and effectively engaging with instructional materials. Such findings echo established literature emphasizing the efficacy of early language learning (Collins, 2010; Contesse, 2009; Moon, 2000; Savari, Rashtchi & Keyvanhar, 2023; Tavi & Söylemez, 2008; Tavi & İşısağ, 2009). Specifically, research supports that preschoolers acquire vocabulary, pronunciation, and communicative competence effectively through play-based methods such as games and songs (Tavi & İşısağ, 2009). Moreover, vocabulary retention is enhanced when introduced within meaningful contexts (Tarakçıoğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014). Despite their limited attention spans, young children display a remarkable eagerness to learn aligned with their cognitive developmental stages (Monney, 2000), underpinned by an innate language acquisition capacity (Reilly & Ward, 2003). Compared to older learners, young children exhibit superior aptitude in foreign language acquisition alongside native language proficiency. Teachers' observations in the current study reinforced these perspectives. Many reported being able to distinguish students' varying levels of prior English exposure, particularly in the second grade when formal English instruction begins. Such differences were evident during basic classroom activities and listening comprehension tasks, highlighting the tangible benefits of early language instruction.

Conversely, the participant teachers identified significant challenges impeding early English teaching in Turkey. Chief among these were the absence of a standardized preschool English curriculum, a shortage of qualified teachers specialized in early childhood EFL education, and the lack of a cohesive educational framework tailored to preschool settings. Kozikoğlu and Arkalı's (2023) recent study echoes similar concerns for primary education, including insufficient instructional time, inadequate materials and facilities, cognitive readiness issues among learners, and limited parental support. Though primarily focused on primary schools, these systemic shortcomings appear equally relevant for preschool education as revealed in the present findings.

Nearly all teachers reported that English learning in preschools tended to be unsystematic and inconsistent, resulting in heterogeneous language backgrounds among students entering primary school. This lack of curriculum standardization reflects the fact that English is not currently compulsory at the preschool level in Turkey. Nevertheless, extant literature strongly advocates for early English instruction as a necessary component of language education (Cameron, 2003; Değirmenci-Uysal & Yavuz, 2015; İter & Er, 2007; Krashen, 1982; Moore, 2010; Tavi & İşısağ, 2009). Therefore, the findings support calls for the development and implementation of a systematic, compulsory English curriculum for pre-primary education. Participants voiced concerns that without structural reform, the potential advantages of early English learning will remain underrealized due to fragmented and informal teaching practices.

Discussion of Research Question 3

The third research question addressed the extent of in-service primary school EFL teachers' awareness of their students' prior English language knowledge and experiences. Posed as, "To what extent are in-service primary school English language teachers aware of their students' prior knowledge and experiences of English?", the data indicated that almost all participants demonstrated keen awareness of students' background knowledge. They reported being able to readily distinguish differences in learners' prior exposure to English, which they linked closely to variations in student motivation and academic achievement.

Specifically, teachers noted that students who had received early English instruction exhibited higher levels of enthusiasm and performed better academically compared to peers without such exposure. This insight highlights the tangible impact of early language education on later academic outcomes, underscoring its educational value despite current implementation challenges.

The findings hold important implications for enhancing pre-primary education's effectiveness. They suggest that EFL teachers are both capable and willing to assess students' prior knowledge as a foundation for differentiated instruction. Moreover, these results reinforce the argument that early English instruction, even when inconsistently delivered, positively influences learners' subsequent language development. To maximize these benefits, the study advocates for the formalization of early English education through a standardized curriculum, which could optimize student readiness and learning continuity.

While literature on teachers' views regarding preschool English education in Turkey remains sparse, several studies have addressed teacher perceptions during primary school years (Çelik & Işık, 2019; Ekuş & Babayiğit, 2013; İltis & Er, 2007; Koydemir, 2001; Kozikoğlu & Arkalı, 2023; Kubanç & Selvi, 2022; Mutlu, 2017; Şad & Sarı, 2019; Şevik, 2009; Yıldız, 2012). A recurring theme across these studies is the acknowledgement of the critical role early language teaching plays in learner success, a view confirmed and expanded in this research. Furthermore, Reynolds et al. (2021) highlighted that teachers' beliefs and awareness are key factors in the successful implementation of early foreign language education. Consistent with this, the current study demonstrates that participating teachers are both perceptive and reflective regarding their students' prior English experiences.

Discussion of Research Question 4

The final research question explored the extent to which in-service primary school EFL teachers design their English courses based on students' existing or prior English knowledge. The question was phrased as, "Do in-service primary school English language teachers design their courses based on students' current or previous English knowledge?" The predominant theme emerging from the data was that teachers face considerable challenges in curriculum and material design, despite recognizing the pedagogical importance of tailoring instruction to students' backgrounds.

Almost all participants reported difficulties such as limited instructional time, an overloaded curriculum, and inadequate physical resources, which collectively constrained their ability to develop and implement engaging, student-centered activities. This resonates with Çakır's (2004) assertion regarding the critical role of well-designed teaching materials and activities in early English instruction. Research by Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988)

similarly advocates for the integration of colorful visuals and captivating imagery to stimulate young learners' motivation, while Phillips (2001) emphasizes the centrality of games and enjoyable tasks in formal English education for children.

Nevertheless, EFL teachers in this study admitted struggling to produce effective teaching materials tailored to the diverse proficiency levels and needs of their students. The pressure to adhere strictly to mandated curricula, coupled with insufficient time and support for material development, emerged as persistent barriers. These findings align with Kozikoğlu and Arkalı's (2023) identification of time constraints and limited course hours as significant obstacles for EFL teachers. Similarly, Kubanç and Selvi (2022) reported that EFL teachers tend to rely on traditional methods rather than innovative, interactive approaches, and Çelik and Işık (2019) highlighted deficiencies in available resources, further hampering instructional quality.

Taken together, these studies and the present research underscore the gap between teachers' awareness of best practices and their practical capacity to implement them. Despite acknowledging the importance of differentiated course design, EFL teachers continue to face systemic and logistical challenges that limit their effectiveness in meeting students' diverse needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The increasing significance of teaching English in early childhood education has been emphasized in various global contexts over the years (Ellis, 2008). Within this framework, there have been numerous studies and educational reforms concerning early English language education in Turkey, particularly in relation to practices observed in Europe (Mirici, 2015). The present study, however, aimed to investigate the potential effects of these practices by exploring the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers working in public primary schools, who are directly exposed to the outcomes of unsystematic English language teaching in pre-primary education.

To achieve this primary research objective, the study focused on examining the views and perceptions of in-service primary school EFL teachers regarding English language teaching in preschools and kindergartens. A qualitative research design was employed, specifically utilizing a phenomenological model, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the teachers' experiences. The descriptive narrative method was used for data analysis, enabling a thorough understanding of the underlying patterns in the responses. The study sample comprised 36 EFL teachers currently working in public primary schools located in the city center of XXX city, Turkey. These participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews developed by the researcher, focusing on the teachers' perspectives on the effects of early English language education in pre-primary settings. The collected data were then analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques, and the findings were organized and categorized into relevant codes and sub-codes aligned with the study's research objectives.

The findings of this study revealed that in-service primary school EFL teachers primarily emphasized the necessity of English language teaching in early childhood education. They highlighted several advantages, including a native-like accent, increased motivation, academic success, the ability to improve grammar during primary school years, and enhanced communicative skills among young learners. However, they also pointed out

the challenges and common problems associated with the unsystematic teaching practices in pre-primary schools in Turkey. These challenges included the disparity in students' background knowledge, the lack of a common curriculum, and linguistic mistakes resulting from insufficient numbers of qualified teachers in preschools.

According to the EFL teachers, English language instruction should be conducted exclusively by qualified English teachers (Ekuş & Babayiğit, 2013). In line with this perspective, the participants in this study argued that English language teaching in preschools and kindergartens should be organized and led by EFL teachers, despite the fact that preschool teachers are primarily responsible for presenting activities to young learners in Turkey's pre-primary education settings. As a result of the unsystematic nature of early English language teaching in preschool education, students may encounter difficulties with correct pronunciation, basic themes, and linguistic structures. These issues are readily observable by primary school EFL teachers once the students enter the classroom.

In addition to the findings regarding the common views of EFL teachers on English language teaching in preschool education, it was observed that the teachers were aware of their students' prior knowledge and background information through indicators such as motivation and class attendance. Consequently, it can be concluded that offering English courses in a systematic manner during early childhood education may enhance young learners' foreign language acquisition during their primary school years. One of the key outcomes of this study is the recommendation for the introduction of compulsory English language education in pre-primary education in Turkey.

Finally, the EFL teachers reported challenges in designing courses that accommodate the varying levels of students within the same grade. They indicated that they struggled to provide effective and engaging activities due to limited course hours, inadequate physical conditions, and the demanding nature of the current curriculum for primary school students. As a result, students who began learning English in preschool education may become disengaged when confronted with the same content in primary school, leaving little opportunity to advance their language skills through integrated language tasks. This can be considered another major challenge for EFL teachers in primary schools.

The participant teachers also highlighted the significant influence of parents on early childhood English language education. They pointed out the inequality in English language teaching in Turkey, noting that some parents support their children's foreign language learning through private courses or private preschool education, while others do not have access to such opportunities. In light of this, the EFL teachers reiterated the importance of establishing a systematic and compulsory English language curriculum in pre-primary education in Turkey. It is recognized that in some countries, English is introduced as a mandatory subject in early childhood education (Nikolov, 2009), and the positive effects of early English language teaching have been observed in these contexts (Pinter, 2006). In conclusion, the positive perceptions of primary school EFL teachers underscore the necessity of conducting English language teaching in a systematic manner, within a unified curriculum, to enhance the foreign language learning skills of young learners in Turkey.

The present study sheds light on the new perspectives in the field of English language teaching in early childhood education, extending beyond preschool education to primary school education. The findings of this study emphasize the necessity of implementing compulsory English language teaching in pre-primary education in Turkey.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the Ministry of National Education should design a unified curriculum for English language teaching in preschool education to avoid unsystematic teaching practices. Additionally, the study proposes that English language teaching in preschools should be conducted exclusively by qualified EFL teachers. The proficiency of EFL teachers can be further enhanced through in-service training programs or specialized courses on teaching English to very young learners during their undergraduate studies. In conclusion, the importance of early language learning is essential for increasing the effectiveness of programs in this field. By addressing the challenges of English language teaching and formalizing the initial stages of education in Turkey, the success of these programs can be significantly improved.

Recommendations for Further Studies

The present study is limited to a sample of EFL teachers working in public primary schools in a specific city in Turkey. For future research, the sample can be expanded to include a larger number of EFL teachers from various cities or school grades. Furthermore, the data collection process in this study relied solely on a semi-structured interview form. Future studies could incorporate a wider range of data collection tools to enrich the field data. Lastly, while this study focused primarily on the views and perceptions of the EFL teachers, future research could explore specific teaching experiences and examples to better understand the underlying causes of the challenges and main issues in the field.

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