

**EVALUATING FOR DEVELOPMENT:
STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN ELT PREP YEAR EVALUATION**
(Gelişim İçin Değerlendirme: İngilizce Hazırlık Sınıfını Değerlendirmede Öğrenci Katılımı)

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ABSTRACT

This study, being a pilot phase of a much larger scale research project, will present the findings of a study carried out to identify the problems of students majoring in the ELT Department, Faculty of Education, Çukurova University. The starting point for the study was the previous data (Bada and Okan 2000), which revealed the fact that a majority of the students in this programme (164 students out of 230, %73.1) was not pleased with their progress in learning English. A considerable number of the teaching staff (16 out of 23, %69.6) has also stated their concerns in a similar vein. In an attempt to find the possible reasons for such dissatisfaction, a pilot study was designed in which students in the preparatory programme of the same Department were asked to identify the problems. The study follows the hypothesis that learners' awareness of their needs as well as their problems is a prerequisite of the learner-centred classroom and needs to be taken into account in syllabus design or in any other further improvements in the programme.

Key words: Language Education, Evaluation in ELT, Language Awareness

ÖZ

Büyük ölçekli bir araştırma projesinin pilot çalışmasından elde edilen verileri sunan bu yazı, Çukurova Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalı'nda okuyan öğrencilerin sorunlarını saptamak amacıyla hazırlanmıştır. Çıkış noktasını bu programa kayıtlı öğrencilerin ve öğretim elemanlarının önemli bir çoğunluğunun (230 öğrenciden 164'ü, %73.1; 23 öğretim elemanından 16'sı, %69.6) öğrencilerin ulaştıkları İngilizce düzeylerinden memnun olmadıklarını saptayan bir çalışma oluşturmaktadır (Bada ve Okan 2000). Bu durumun nedenlerinin bulunmasını amaçlayan bu çalışmada yalnızca Hazırlık programına yönelik bir araştırma yürütülmüş ve öğrencilerden programla ilgili değerlendirme yapmaları istenmiştir. Öğrencilerin kendi gereksinimlerinin farkında olmalarını sağlamanın ve bu gereksinimlerin program düzenlenmesinde göz önüne alınmasının öğrenciyi merkez alan bir yaklaşımın ön koşullarından biri olduğunu savunmaktayız.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Dil eğitimi, İngilizce eğitiminde değerlendirme, dil farkındalığı

INTRODUCTION

It is essential that the process of evaluation should form a major part of the design and implementation of any language teaching programmes. Richards et al. (1985) define evaluation as "the systematic gathering of information for purposes of making decisions." Brown (1989) finds this definition too broad and suggests his own: "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of the curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within a context of particular institutions involved."

As the quotation above indicates, evaluations of programmes can provide information whether for example, particular approaches or techniques are suitable under a specific context; whether certain textbooks or materials are appropriate or inappropriate to attain specified objectives, effective or not in terms of meeting students' needs in learning a second language. Typically, in attempting to evaluate the effectiveness and to promote the improvement of any educational programme there are two types of approaches: *formative evaluation*, which usually takes place during the development of a programme. The purpose is to gather information that will be used to improve the program by identifying areas of strength and weakness. "It seeks to form,

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inform, and direct the innovation, rather than simply evaluate the outcomes” (Williams and Burden 1994: 22).

Summative evaluation, on the other hand, generally takes place at the end of a programme. The purpose for gathering the information is to determine whether the programme was successful and effective. The problem with this type of evaluation is that it can provide no information about why the programme works or not, what can be done to make it work better.

As Weir and Roberts (1994) argue, it is possible to think of these types of evaluation as overlapping phases, that is, formative and summative dimensions can be integrated. Such evaluations can provide information about “the results of a programme as well as an understanding of how these results came about –that is, with processes and activities during implementations as well as with end products” (p.15).

Williams and Burden (1994) suggest a third approach of evaluation: illuminative evaluation. In this, evaluation arises from a broader perspective where there is less concern with measurement and prediction and more with description and interpretation. A variety of information-gathering techniques is used in order to enable the evaluator to “gain insights into all aspects of the system in which the innovation takes place, to understand the questions raised by the different participants... to understand the background and culture of the project, the politics, the aims of the different participants, and the hidden curriculum, and the opinions of everyone involved” (Williams and Burden 1994: 23).

This paper adopts a development-oriented evaluation, which is formative in nature, since it intends to improve the educational quality of the ELT programme while it is in progress. It is guided by the concerns of students only: by the identification of their language learning

difficulties in terms of four language skills as well as by the identification of what is working and not working well for them (for example, parts of the course, materials or teaching). Discovering students’ perceptions of classroom teaching/learning activities, it is believed, would lead to the introduction of more effective means and to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the prep year which can help both groups involved (students and teachers) to take any steps necessary to readjust the content of the programme.

Therefore, this paper focuses on learners’ ability to:

- specify their language learning difficulties in terms of four language skills;
- state which factors are important for effective learning;
- make recommendations to improve the situation.

The above issues are emphasized because, as stated before, it is essential to resort to students’ views in identifying the problems in the language learning process and in suggesting solutions to these problems. In this way, students will take charge of their own learning, being aware of their capabilities and needs. Once the perceptions of the students are discovered, the next step would be to make the teachers aware of these perceptions so that they can plan and implement alternative practices in the classroom.

THE STUDY

The study is designed as a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. It is qualitative because, as Seliger and Shohamy put it, it is concerned with providing insights into “phenomena that occur naturally, without the intervention of an experiment or an artificially contrived treatment” (1989: 118). It attempts to “present the data from the

perspectives of the subjects or observed groups, so that the cultural and intellectual biases of the researcher do not distort the collection, interpretation, or presentation of data" (Jacob, 1987 cited in Seliger and Shohamy, 1989: 118). The study is also quantitative in that the data obtained are processed quantitatively in terms of frequency orders.

Participants:

The study involved four classes of 66 prep students in the ELT Department, Faculty of Education, Çukurova University. The participants consisted of 38 females and 28 males aged between 18 and 22.

Data Collection:

In order to elicit students' insights into the programme, data were collected from two sources: questionnaires, and letters written to the teachers.

Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was adopted from Weir and Roberts (1994). It comprised items eliciting students' difficulties in relation to 1) listening to and understanding spoken English, 2) reading and summarizing written material, 3) writing ability, and 4) speaking ability. The percent of students choosing each option on the rating scale (a lot of difficulty, some difficulty, very little difficulty, no difficulty) for each section was calculated. Additionally, the questionnaire investigated the factors the students considered the most important for effective language learning.

Letters:

All the participating students were asked to write letters to their skill teachers. They were allowed to write about anything, their difficulties, teacher behaviour, the content of lessons and materials used, suggestions to improve the lessons etc. All students were assured that their letters would remain

confidential and encouraged to be as honest as possible. Since students preferred not to fill in the comment space on the questionnaire, the letters were extremely useful in explaining some of what the questionnaire revealed.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, first, the data obtained from the questionnaire is presented under two subtitles: learners' awareness of difficulties and factors for effective language learning. Then, the letters are analysed to introduce students' recommendations to improve the language learning process in the prep year.

Learners' awareness of difficulties:

All the learners were asked to state their difficulties with reference to the four skills. In the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked questions related to skills of listening to and understanding spoken English. As Table 1 illustrates, the students seem to have the biggest difficulty in understanding informal language (54.6% when a lot of difficulty and some difficulty considered together). The reason might be that in classrooms outmost care is taken by the teachers to use standard and formal English. Therefore students do not have many opportunities to hear informal English. On the other hand, a majority reports that they do not have any problems in understanding what is being talked about (40.9% and 22.7%). It is also evident that they feel comfortable with understanding spoken instructions. What it seems that when it comes to understand spoken description or narrative they acknowledge having some difficulty (43.9%) while 10.6% report having a lot of difficulty.

Table 1. Listening to and Understanding Spoken English

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Understanding spoken narrative	7	10.6	29	43.9	23	34.8	7	10.6
Understanding spoken instructions	4	6.1	27	40.9	21	31.8	14	21.2
Understanding informal language	19	28.8	17	25.8	23	34.8	6	9.1
Understanding what's being talked about	5	7.6	15	22.7	27	40.9	15	22.7

In the same section students were asked further questions regarding their level of difficulty in terms of understanding spoken English. When asked how much difficulty they have in understanding their teachers or other students when they talk very fast or quietly, the number of those who report having difficulty appear to be less than those

who do not (43.9% and 56.1%; 33.3% and 66.7% respectively). Differences in accents also seem to be posing no difficulty for students. Almost equal number of students (50% and 47%) reported having difficulty or no difficulty in understanding spoken English when more than one person is speaking, as in group discussions.

Table 1.2. Listening to and Understanding Spoken English

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
They talk very fast	13	19.7	16	24.2	19	28.8	18	27.3
They speak very quietly	7	10.6	15	22.7	13	19.7	31	47.0
Their accents are different	13	19.7	12	18.2	26	39.4	15	22.7
More than one person is speaking	12	18.2	21	31.8	18	27.3	13	19.7

As seen in Table 1.3 below, students report having no difficulty in recognising where sentences end and begin. But in

recognising individual words, up to 50% of the students say they have difficulty while 12.1% agree with them.

Table 1.3. Listening to and Understanding Spoken English

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Recognizing individual words	8	12.1	33	50.0	23	34.8	2	3.0
Recognising where sentences end and begin	1	1.5	12	18.2	27	40.9	25	37.9
Understanding what the speaker say is saying and linking to what s/he has said earlier	5	7.6	25	37.9	24	36.4	12	18.2

The questions in the last part of this section deal with aspects of note taking. From Table 1.4 below we can infer that being able to write down, quickly and clearly, all they want to causes great difficulty for a majority of the students. 34.8% said they had a lot of

difficulty while 37.9% reported having some difficulty. Thinking and using suitable abbreviation is another aspect which students find problematic since 62.1% of students said they have either a lot of difficulty or some difficulty.

Table 1.4. Listening to and Understanding Spoken English

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Recognising what is important and worth noting	8	12.1	16	24.2	29	43.9	10	15.2
Being able to write down, quickly and clearly	23	34.8	25	37.9	12	18.2	6	9.1
Thinking of and using suitable abbreviation	9	13.6	32	48.5	17	25.8	6	9.1
Organising the notes you take down so that you can understand them when you read them later	4	6.1	17	25.8	18	27.3	24	36.4

The second section of the questionnaire is devoted to the questions on reading and summarising written material. As Table 2 below shows, students seem to find little or no difficulty in the areas of reading such as getting the main information from a text, search reading, reading quickly, and making

notes from textbooks. What causes difficulty for the students are reading carefully to understand all the information in the text, critical reading to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic, and reading texts where the subject matter is very complicated.

Table 2. Reading and Summarising Written Material

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Reading carefully to understand all the info in text	10	15.2	29	43.9	19	28.8	8	12.1
Reading to get the main info from a text	6	9.1	13	19.7	28	42.4	19	28.8
Search reading	4	6.1	22	33.3	31	47.0	8	12.1
Critical reading to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic	7	10.6	34	51.5	19	28.8	5	7.6
Reading quickly	8	12.1	16	24.2	28	42.4	13	19.7
Making notes from textbooks	2	3.0	14	21.2	28	42.4	19	28.8
Reading texts where the subject matter is very complicated	20	30.3	27	40.9	15	22.7	2	3.0

As Table 3 illustrates, a majority of the students express either little or no difficulty in writing grammatically correct sentences and using a variety of grammatical structures. However, the problem seems to arise when it comes to using these grammatical structures because a significant number of students (33.8%) acknowledge this fact. Using appropriate and a wide range of vocabulary in writing apparently cause a great deal of

difficulty for students since 66.6% of them chose either a lot of difficulty or some difficulty. The same picture is displayed for using a wide range of vocabulary because even a higher percentage 77.2% state that they have problems in this area. When we have an overall look at Table 3 it seems that apart from handwriting and tidiness, all aspects of writing process pose problems for students.

Table 3. Writing Ability

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Writing grammatically correct sentences	4	6.1	15	22.7	34	51.5	13	19.7
Using a variety of grammatical structures	5	7.6	17	25.8	34	51.5	10	15.2
Using appropriate grammatical structures	2	3.0	21	31.8	31	47.0	10	15.2
Using appropriate vocabulary	9	13.6	35	53.0	19	28.8	3	4.5
Using a wide range of vocabulary	23	34.8	28	42.4	13	19.7	1	1.5
The subject matter	6	9.1	27	40.9	27	40.9	5	7.6
Expressing what you want to say clearly	8	12.1	20	30.3	28	42.4	10	15.2
Arranging and developing your written work	5	7.6	25	37.9	28	42.4	8	12.1
Spelling	6	9.1	21	31.8	19	28.8	20	30.3
Punctuation	7	10.6	19	28.8	24	36.4	16	24.2
Handwriting	5	7.6	8	12.1	17	25.8	34	51.5
Tidiness	5	7.6	6	9.1	23	34.8	28	42.4

Regarding speaking ability, a significant number of students find it hard to give oral reports or short talks (62.1%). Related to that, students also acknowledge the fact that expressing their opinions in discussions is one of the problematic areas in speaking. Interestingly, students seem to be more confident in asking other students questions and answering questions asked by other

students. What is evidently harder for them is to communicate with the teacher. When the percentages are compared it is seen that students regard directing questions to the teacher as more difficult than to other students. Likewise, answering questions asked by the teacher is harder than those asked by fellow students.

Table 4. Speaking Ability

	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Giving oral reports or short talks	15	22.7	26	39.4	19	28.8	5	7.6
Asking teachers questions	3	4.5	21	31.8	20	30.3	22	33.3
Asking other students questions	2	3.0	15	22.7	26	39.4	23	34.8
Answering questions asked by teachers	5	7.6	21	31.8	32	48.5	8	12.1
Answering questions asked by other students	2	3.0	18	27.3	24	36.4	21	31.8
Working with other ss using Eng to communicate	4	6.1	13	19.7	33	50.0	14	21.2
Expressing your opinions in discussions	10	15.2	26	39.4	20	30.3	10	15.2
Explaining your opinions when they aren't understood in discussions	11	16.7	25	37.9	25	37.9	5	7.6
Expressing counter-arguments to points raised by other ss in discussions	7	10.6	28	42.4	21	31.8	8	12.1

Factors for effective language learning:

In the questionnaire, the students were asked to state which factors they considered the most important for effective language learning. They were given four options they could mention and rank in order from 1 to 4,

(1= most important 4= least important) but were also reminded that they could add more if necessary.

* the language teacher;

* frequent contact in your environment with people speaking the target foreign language;

* extensive use of the foreign language in the classroom;

* the natural linguistic environment where the foreign language is spoken.

The findings we obtained from this section reveal that students lay emphasis on two factors: the natural linguistic environment where the foreign language is spoken and the language teacher. The students apparently believe that the most effective way of learning English is to live in the country where that language is spoken. The students also seem to be dependent on the teacher in learning English. It would be interesting to see if this degree of dependency will fall or increase as they develop their proficiency in English, which is one of the issues to be covered in the main study.

Recommendations from learners:

The students were asked to suggest what could be done to improve the preparation year. As they stated their recommendations in the form of a letter written to their skill teacher, the answers covered a wide a range of suggestions directed to the teacher himself/herself.

Most of the learners emphasise that they would like to be informed about the content of the lesson before the term starts before they feel ill prepared in the high school for university education. They assert that teachers should be aware of this fact and make their demands in the classroom accordingly. The following extract illustrates this point.

I had no idea about the content of this lesson at the beginning of the term. In the high school, we did neither listening nor speaking. Then, the teacher used to make us listen to the tape and we would look at the transcripts given at the end of the coursebook. Therefore, I had a lot of difficulty this year. You put a tape-recorder in the middle of the classroom

and wanted us to listen to the tape. You never asked if we had any problems to start with. You kept saying we are not speaking in the lesson but did not wonder why we don't.

The students also express their preference for a variety in the language classrooms in terms of materials and activities. Most of them feel the lessons would be much more lively and motivating if the teacher could bring in extra materials and divert from the pre-specified pattern of the textbook.

I want different activities. We always start with looking at the paragraphs in the textbook and then write our own paragraph. It is really boring. Once, the teacher had brought into the classroom different materials while working on enumeration. That was really nice.

We are university students but it is just like a high school. Lessons should be lively, motivate students to work more. It is not late for anything. We can change everything together starting from now on.

You are not using the blackboard. No examples. No notes taken by us. There is only the textbook. Your teaching is totally based on the textbook. That's why I fail in the exams. The questions in the exams are very difficult. I feel desperate. Whatever I do, I cannot succeed. Prep year is a real pain.... plus visa exams.

Please do something to make the lesson more enjoyable. As it is I cannot help but fall asleep in the class. You read the subject and do the exercises. That is not enough and very boring.

The students' suggestions also correspond to their expressed difficulties and needs with reference to the four language skills. The results of the questionnaire indicated that students find it difficult to participate in the lessons; they hesitate to take part in the discussions. The following selections from the letters also display this problem.

As I feel I am not very good at speaking, I hesitate to participate in the discussions. Other students are much better than me so just as I prepare to say something, they do before me. I do not like this situation. I used to be a very successful student in the high school; so being behind of others makes me depressed.

I simply cannot speak in the class. I feel better if the topic is given before and had time to think about it.

I enjoy the lessons. Our teacher's performance is really good. What I do not like is that from time to time the teacher interrupts our speech. That makes me forget everything. I cannot focus on the topic again.

One important point, which arose from the letters, is the anxiety the students feel for the final exam. They all fear that they might fail this exam and be asked to leave the school. There are numerous references in the letters to this point. More importantly, it seems that the teachers are using this exam as a threat, undoubtedly, to make the students work harder. However, I believe that such a high level of anxiety may hinder them from being successful in the exam.

I believe we have got to be realistic for our own good. And I write this with a fear in my heart that I might be asked to leave the school. Believe me, all my friends are really scared that they will fail the prep programme and leave. Even the thought of it make me upset.

Most important of all, teachers threaten us with the final exam. That makes us uneasy about it. It is the major source of concern for us.

We are constantly told that we cannot pass the final exam if we do not study this, if we do not do this homework etc. I am here to learn something. I AM WORKING HARD. I hope I can do it.

No matter how difficult the passage is I can understand it in the class. But in the exams I say to myself "you do not understand

anything so do not waste your time." Perhaps I need to spend some effort, develop my vocabulary. Otherwise I won't be able to take the final exam.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined students' perceptions about their own language learning difficulties in terms of four language skills. Students reported having the most difficulty with oral presentations, note taking, using appropriate and a wide range of vocabulary in writing; and relatively little trouble with understanding spoken English and reading. They indicated that they function fairly well in getting the main information from a text, search reading and making notes from the books.

One theme that emerged consistently from both the results of the questionnaire and students written comments was students' lack of confidence in their speaking abilities. Students appeared convinced that they could not express their opinions in discussions. In response to this finding, teachers should focus on convincing their students that they both comprehend and communicate better than they think they do and that their own perceived limitations may not be as crucial as they think. For instance, it can be helpful to tell students that instructors find students' lack of participation in class discussion more troubling than their pronunciation or nonnative accents.

It is generally agreed that note-taking skills are essential for success in language learning. Students in this study expressed considerable problems with note taking although they stated they could follow lectures. These were connected with being able to write down, quickly and clearly, all they want to, and thinking and using suitable abbreviation. To develop these skills, teachers should spend time helping them by the use of authentic listening materials and encouraging them to ask instructors for clarification.

Students can also be taught strategies on how to use abbreviations in lecture note taking.

It is clear from students' letters that they were totally preoccupied with a concern about passing the final exam and reported a high level of anxiety. From their statements, it has emerged that pressure of the possibility of being expelled has a great impact on their performance. It is apparent that students need help to overcome this feeling of tension and anxiety. In my opinion, a workshop in the early weeks of prep year, complemented by counseling meetings could be very helpful for the students deal with their sense of frustration. Students could be encouraged to discuss their anxiety openly so that they could see that they are not the only ones going through this process. Probably, the first thing to do is to help them develop a basic confidence and competence in learning and using English and the teachers should

provide assistance to students in interpreting and evaluating their performance.

From the analysis of the letters it has also emerged that students are dissatisfied with teachers' staying close to their textbooks and their reluctance to adopt a more student-centred approach in which students would have more say in classroom practices. They strongly prefer a break with the set routines and practices and instead varied activities and interesting, supplementary materials.

There is no doubt that for a fuller picture of problems at any education programme, one should consult a larger number of student informants and teaching staff as well. Still, this study, being a pilot study, highlights a number of problem areas, which students felt were causing most difficulty in learning English.

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