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Teaching English to Young Learners: Through the Eyes of EFL Teacher Trainers

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Abstract

Turkey has recently changed the English language teaching (ELT) program for primary schools. The new changes required an earlier start for language learning, which are promising in terms of the importance given to foreign language teaching. However, the implementation of these changes requires readiness on the part of the teachers and preparation for the universities to compensate for the pre- and in-service training needs. Involvement of teacher trainers and teachers in the language teaching process is important for a successful implementation of a language policy. Thus, this study aims to investigate the teacher trainers' views about the starting age for L2 learning, and the appropriate methodology for teaching English to young learners. *A survey-type data collection method was used.* 72 EFL teacher trainers from seven different public and private universities contributed to the study. The results revealed that EFL teacher trainers prefer language education to start at the first stage of primary school and even earlier during pre-school, which are in line with the recent changes in the curriculum. The trainers emphasized the importance of appropriate methodology and assessment techniques that are in accordance with the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children.

Keywords: *children, ELT, foreign language teaching, teacher education, teacher trainer, young learners*

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Introduction

Early start to English language teaching/learning has become a phenomenon since the second half of the last century. The enthusiasm for “the younger the better” has always been high; however it has sometimes met critical evaluations (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Saez (2001; Nikolov, 2002). In response to the evaluations, ‘intellectual readiness of young learners’ and ‘the critical period hypothesis’ (CPH) have always been the most cited issues used to support the claims of early language learning in academic debates. Although there are large amounts of empirical findings, the benefits of early language learning are still questionable: some academicians support the CPH (Dekeyser and Larson-Hall, 2005; Long, 2005; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson, 2001), whereas others claim that there is not such a critical period (Bialystok, 2001; Birdsong, 2005; Moyer, 2004). It is clearly seen that there is not any firm conclusions about young learners’ early start to foreign language (FL). On the other hand, there is an agreement that young learners learn languages in a different way than older learners and have some advantages over the older ones who start later. What is much more clear is that the reasons for an early start need to be understood well before introduction and implementation of early language learning (ELL) programs. According to Paradis (2004) and Johnstone (2009), there are several advantages of an early start: first, young learners acquire languages with greater ease, especially the sound system, and develop implicit competence since they can rely on natural acquisition processes. They are undeniably better at acquiring the sounds and rhythms of the target language. Then, they have lower affective filter than older learners do and they are also more intuitive and less anxious. Moreover, they have more time to learn the target language and larger capacity to gain awareness about the potential intercultural identity. Finally, if they start earlier, they will make use of the ultimate benefits for improvement over time. Thus, ‘the younger the better’ assumption is strengthened through the beliefs that younger children learn better and that a longer exposure leads to greater proficiency by the end of the education process (Enever and Moon, 2009).

The educational arguments about the issue both by educators and linguists dates back to 1960s (Calabrese and Dawes, 2008; Johnstone, 2009). With the widespread use of English in international settings, during the late 1980s and early 1990s teaching English to young learners (TEYL) was included in the European language programs and became a major policy. Social and economic benefits targeted by parents have also influenced the introduction of English at early levels as a response to economic globalization (Enever & Moon, 2009, Tinsley and Comfort, 2012). Moreover, the attempts to develop intercultural competencies

and life-long learning have put early language learning in a central position in most of the global language programs.

As for the early language learning policies of the other countries in the 21st century (Djigunovic, 2012; Tinsley and Comfort, 2012), there seems a consensus about lowering the starting age for language learning. Tinsley and Comfort (2012) found out that in developed countries there are two trends of the integration of FL instruction in the primary school curriculums: they either introduce the FL at the very beginning of compulsory education, that is pre-school, or start just after two years, around the age of eight. Countries with compulsory FL in primary education differs from each other: i.e Finland, Croatia, France, Bangladesh, Portugal, Norway, Oman, Italy, Malta, Spain, Sweden and Singapore introduce English at age six on starting school, and Bulgaria, China, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Greece, Korea, Romania and Taiwan at age eight, and Slovenia, Denmark, Hungary, Argentina and Lithuania at around age nine (Enever et al., 2009; Tinsley and Comfort, 2012; Eurydice, 2008) .

In the 1950s English was integrated to the curriculum for the first time through schooling and policy making by the Turkish government (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998). Although the spreading effects of the globalization have been felt in Turkey; it was not until 1997, when early language learning had become a compulsory component of the primary school curriculum. With the 1997 education reform in Turkey, Turkish Ministry of Education (MNE) and the Higher Education Council (HEC) in unison made changes in both the education system and English Language Teaching (ELT) policy (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Gürsoy, Çelik Korkmaz, & Damar, 2013). This was the first time when English as a foreign language (EFL) was included in the program of the 4th and 5th grades (i.e nine-ten years of age) as a compulsory subject. This new curriculum aimed to increase language learners' awareness, help them develop positive attitudes to FLL, and increase their motivation in language learning (MNE, 1997; Kırkgöz, 2008). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was first introduced in the ELT programs in Turkey with this new curriculum. Learner centeredness, the facilitator role of the language teacher and teaching language in a context were the other key components introduced by the 1997 curriculum (Damar, 2004; Gürsoy et al., 2013). Concurrently, curriculum changes were also made in the ELT departments of the education faculties to respond the training needs of prospective teachers. A new course "Teaching English to Young Learners" was placed in the program to help prospective teachers develop appropriate skills and knowledge for young learners' classes.

After several changes in FLE curriculum within the last 15 years, a new educational reform was made in 2012 named as the 4+4+4 education reform. As well as the changes in the tier system, the new curriculum offers considerable changes in language education. The starting age both for schooling (from 7 to 5,5 years of age) and FLL (from 9 to 6,6 years of age/second grade) was lowered (MNE, 2013). In the new FLE curriculum, there have been many changes mostly related to the need for developing communicative competence in English. The curriculum was organized in three axes: Instructional design, instructional materials, and assessment in language teaching. Within these axes, the recent curriculum emphasizes listening and speaking over reading and writing. Thus, in the second grade literacy skills are not included. Reading and writing is introduced at the third grade only at a word basis. Children are expected to read and write no more than 10 words. In sixth grade, children are allowed to read up to 25 words but write as much as 10 words. The reason for this strong emphasis on oral skills relies on the fact that most students in Turkey graduate from schools without the ability to interact successfully in the target language (MNE, 2013). However, the globalization forces communication and fluency to individuals. English is no longer spoken with native speakers but with people from other L1 backgrounds for a variety of purposes. Curricula that emphasize grammar, reading, and vocabulary do not compensate with the needs of the current language learners.

Moreover, the recent curriculum emphasizes intercultural communication and suggests the integration of cultural content to the thematic units. Intercultural awareness has been integrated in several units at different grade levels as part of communicative skills and functions. Value judgments, attitudes, and beliefs develop at an early age (Gürsoy, 2010). Therefore, helping children develop positive attitudes to different cultures should be considered as an important aspect of TEYL. The new English Language Teaching Program (MNE, 2013) also proposes the use of four different assessment techniques as opposed to single use of pen and paper tests. Accordingly, suggested assessment types are project and portfolio assessment, self and peer evaluation, teacher observation and evaluation, and pen and paper tests including listening and speaking skills (MNE, 2013).

However, no matter how carefully the new curriculum was planned, effective language learning depends on classroom practitioners' knowledge and skills. TEYL necessitates linguistic, educational, and methodological preparation of the language teachers. Changes in a TEYL curriculum should satisfy the teachers' need for the profound qualifications regarding

interactional and communicative competences (Komorowska, 1997). Regarding the effectiveness of TEYL, the quality of the teaching force as well as the training provided to the prospective teachers become key considerations. In sum, as Tinsley and Comfort (2012, p. 27) states, an early start to FLE can only be beneficial through some key concerns: sufficient time allocation, qualified and 'sufficient number of well-trained teachers', 'age-appropriate pedagogy', and 'a suitable curriculum context'.

It is no doubt that teachers and prospective teachers should be trained in order to put the emphasized features in the curriculum into practice. As Calabrese and Dawes (2008) state, training teachers for early language teaching is a vital issue and being effective teachers is based on the extent to the training provided by the teacher trainers, as one of the stakeholders of the language education process. Teacher trainers' views about the proposed content of a curriculum are essential to meet the needs and requirements of the program with appropriate teacher education. Trainers' knowledge about appropriate methodology and ideas about the starting age are influential in teacher training. The transfer of relevant knowledge and skills are critical, as these will be implemented by the prospective teachers. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the teacher trainers' views about the starting age for L2 learning, and the appropriate methodology for TEYL. To the researchers' knowledge this study is one of the first that investigates teacher educators' views in the development of TEYL curriculum.

Method

The current study aims to report on one of the aspects of a larger study that investigates the views of prospective teachers, teacher trainers, and practicing teachers by focusing on the teacher trainers ideas related to the current efforts to lower the starting age for FLE.

In 2012, with the introduction and implementation of the new education reform (4+4+4) in Turkey, new questions emerged about EFL teacher trainers' views on the underlying principles and theories of early language learning, their opinions about the appropriate age to start L2 education, and their beliefs about TEYL. The academicians' views about current practices are important to see the match between theory and current practice. Thus, the study uses a survey type research design to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL teacher trainers' views about the starting age for L2 learning?
2. What are the EFL teacher trainers' beliefs about using appropriate methodologies in teaching L2 to young learners?

Participants

The study uses convenience sampling. 72 EFL teacher trainers from seven different public universities in different parts of Turkey contributed to the study.

Data Collection

The data for the study is collected via a questionnaire, which is identical to the one used in the first phase of the current study by the researchers (Gürsoy et al. 2013). However, the former questionnaire had three parts with a section about teaching practices of the teachers. The questionnaire used in the present study consists of two parts. The first part has 14 closed-ended questions and an open-ended question that aims at finding EFL teacher trainers' views about the starting age/grade for language learning. In the second part, there are 16 close-ended items investigating EFL teacher trainers' beliefs about TEYL. When designing the questionnaire child development theories, as well as children's natural instincts, characteristics, and learning styles are taken into consideration. (see, Djigunovic, 2012; Enever, J. & Moon, J., 2009; Halliwell, 1992; Johnstone, 2009; Paradis, 2004) .

Instrument

The questionnaire, which is prepared by the researchers, has a five-point Likert scale. For the content and face validity of the instrument, it was given to five experts (Lawshe, 1975) in an ELT department of a large public university in Turkey. The experts were asked to evaluate the items of the questionnaire with the help of a checklist. The questionnaire was then revised and some items were removed upon the experts' disagreement. Three of the items were indicated as relevant but unnecessary to measure the targeted construct. With the extraction of these items the content validity ratio was increased to 100%. Later on, it was piloted on eight EFL teacher trainers and some additional revisions were made to establish face validity.

Each part of the questionnaire was found reliable. In that, the analysis revealed a Cronbach's alpha score of $\alpha = .756$ in the first part and $\alpha = .718$ in the second part.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was made via SPSS 13. For the analysis of the demographic information, frequency analysis was used, in addition to means and standard deviations. To

analyze the open-ended question, content analysis was implemented. First of all, trainers' answers regarding the starting grade were grouped and then the recurring themes under these groups were identified.

Results

In order to investigate the teacher trainers' perspectives with regard to the most appropriate time to start FLT, descriptive statistics of 14 items in the first part of the questionnaire including mean and frequency analysis was used and the results were presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Descriptive results of the teacher trainers' views about the starting age of foreign language teaching

Items	Agree %	Disagree %	No idea %	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
5- First tier+ usefulness	94.4	5.6	0	4.70	.618
1- First tier+ starting time	91.5	8.4	0	4.60	.726
10- First tier + important basis	93	7	0	4.56	.711
12- First tier+ readiness	91.5	7	1.4	4.40	.820
9- Pre-school + fruitful	86.1	13.9	0	4.37	.925
6- Language course hours	78.2	15.9	5.8	4.26	1.158
4- Second phase + late	84.1	14.4	1.4	4.26	1.038
13- First phase + useless	4.2	81.7	14.1	4.19	1.440
3- Pre-school + starting time	70.4	26.8	2.8	3.97	1.218
11- Pre-school + time consuming	9.7	70.9	19.4	3.83	1.574
2- Second tier+ starting time	12.9	67.2	20	3.61	1.525
14- Second tier+ readiness	22.5	64.8	12.7	3.60	1.314
7- Intensive prep-classes	57.2	30	12.9	3.47	1.369
8- Second tier+ unsuccessful	50	45.9	4.2	3.41	1.084

The highest mean in Table 1 ($M= 4.70$) indicates that the teacher trainers in this study mostly agreed (94.4 %) that teaching a FL in the first tier of the new 4+4+4 system would be useful. The result of item 13 supports this finding, as 81.7% of the participants disagreed that teaching a FL in primary school would be useless. When the starting age of FLT is taken into account, the mean scores of their answers revealed the following order; first tier ($M= 4.60$), pre-school ($M= 3.97$), and second tier ($M= 3.61$). Most of the participants (91.5%) believed that FLT should start in primary school and 93 % of them stated that early foreign language teaching (primary school phase) provides an important basis for children's language learning. Moreover, the majority of the participants (91.5%) agreed that children become ready to learn a FL in the first tier of their education.

Some recurring themes in the qualitative part was related to the benefits of acquiring L1, literacy development, affective factors, pronunciation, and cognitive development. The participants who thought that FLT should start in primary school stated that children's native language development is mostly completed and they become more ready to learn another language in terms of their cognitive development. Some of them believed that starting to write and read in L1 helps children to learn another language and also they emphasized the importance of starting in early ages in terms of having positive attitudes towards learning another language. The teacher trainers who prefer primary school agreed on the expression "the earlier the better"; however, they have some doubts about pre-school period as it can be understood from the following statement:

"We do not have English teachers equipped with teaching methods and techniques appropriate for children at pre-school ages. Our teachers generally are being trained to teach literate children."

The teacher trainers who argued that FLT should start in primary school reported that children at these ages would be more successful academically than pre-school children.

With regard to starting FLT in pre-school period, 70.4% of the teacher trainers reported their agreement and only a few of them (9.7%) reported that it is time consuming. Moreover, majority of them (86.1%) stated that it would be fruitful to teach a FL in pre-school period. In the open-ended part of the questionnaire, some of the themes that were identified are related to the critical period hypothesis, children's characteristics, affective factors, the use of appropriate methodology. The teacher trainers who explained their reasons

for an early start by emphasizing the importance of the critical period for learning a language agreed that children at these ages are luckier in terms of gaining native-like accent and pronunciation. Furthermore, some argued that pre-school children are more enthusiastic, tolerant, curious, motivated, and ready besides having less resistance and psychological barriers to learn new things. Another reason is about teaching methods and techniques as it is seen in one of the following expressions of the teacher trainers:

“Lots of English teachers in Turkey now teach English theoretically with patterns and rules. Thus, children in Turkey cannot improve speaking and listening skills. Pre-school children cannot learn a language directly through rules; therefore, teachers cannot teach directly. If foreign language starts in pre-school period children have an opportunity to acquire a FL naturally just like they learned their native language.”

Regarding the secondary school period, most of the participants (84.1%) agreed that it is late to start FLT at secondary school. Only a few of the participants (12.9%) stated that FLT should start in secondary school. However, they were dubious about whether children in secondary school would be successful in learning a FL. Some themes that were frequently seen in the answers were advantages of acquiring an L1, cognitive development, and affective factors. The results obtained from the open-ended part of the questionnaire revealed that the participants think that children should master their L1 acquisition first. Children at these ages are more ready in terms of cognitive development and affective factors, thus, they have more motivation to learn. Moreover, one of them stated that FL course should be elective in Turkey, as everybody does not need to learn a FL.

In the qualitative part of the study, most of the teacher trainers emphasized the importance of the way TEYL is implemented in addition to the starting age. Table 2 presents the teacher trainers' beliefs about how to teach YLs.

Table 2.*Descriptive results of the teacher trainers' views about teaching young learners*

Items	Agree	Disagree	No idea	M	SD
	%	%	%		
18- Visual and Kinesthetic Activities	100	0	0	4.80	.396
17- Activity-based Language Teaching	100	0	0	4.77	.417
16- Contextualized Language Teaching	98.5	1.5	0	4.77	.513
19- Enjoyable Classroom Environment	100	0	0	4.73	.446
23- Developing Positive attitudes	95.5	0	4.4	4.64	.876
24- Performance-based Assessment	97.1	3	0	4.60	.601
26- Using L2 & Body Language	86.5	12	1.5	4.35	.882
29- Education System & Pen-paper exams	92.5	3	4.5	4.35	.916
15- Listening and Speaking	91.1	9	0	4.32	.725
22- Activities are time consuming	0	83.8	16.2	4.19	1.458
20- Grammar-based Language Teaching	3.1	86.1	10.8	4.18	1.236
21- Teaching Grammar via Worksheets	77.6	16.4	6	3.95	1.198
28- Using Turkish	4.5	82.1	13.4	3.95	1.296
25- Assessing Pupils via Pen-Paper Exams	10.3	73.5	16.2	3.69	1.329
27- L1 Equivalence	29.9	62.7	7.5	3.65	1.135

The results presented in table 2 revealed that the teacher trainers reached a consensus on how to teach YLs. All of them (100%) agreed that language should be taught through visual and kinesthetic activities, activity-based language learning should be implemented, and classroom environment should be enjoyable. Nearly all of them stated that language should be taught in a meaningful context (98.5%); it is important to develop positive attitudes towards learning another language (95.5%); performance-based assessment should be implemented rather than pen-paper exams (97.1%) although they thought that education system directs teachers to use pen-paper exams (92.5%); language should be taught by using simple English and body language (86.5%); and language teaching should focus on listening and speaking (91.1%). Moreover, although 86.1% of the participants disagreed that language teaching should be grammar-based, 77.6% of them believed that grammar should be taught via worksheets rather than games and activities. As to the use of L1, 82.1% of the teacher trainers

disagreed that children would not be able to understand lessons taught only in English. On the other hand a few of them agreed (29.9%) that L1 equivalence of what the teacher says should be given.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the current study are invaluable as it gives insights about EFL teacher trainers' ideas about early FLT and learning. As the most recent ELT curriculum, namely 4+4+4, requires substantial changes, trainers' perspectives around the lowering age of FLT and underlying theories and principles of TEYL seem very crucial. Their ideas hold importance, as they are responsible for the training of qualified EFL teachers for early FLE environments. Moreover, their perspectives will reflect and improve both the content of the courses they implemented and prospective EFL teachers' professional development.

As for the age at which compulsory language learning begins, the majority of the trainers are in favor of an early start in primary school, which is consistent with earlier studies (Gürsoy et al. 2013; Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek et al. ,2006; Çelik-Korkmaz, 2010; Tinsley and Comfort, 2012). The participants' perspectives regarding the state of TEYL in MNE's new 4+4+4 curriculum in Turkey are consistent with the EU recommendations to start FLL at the pre-school or primary school (Enever & Moon, 2009). This inclination of EFL teacher trainers to start FLL in the first phase of the primary classroom show supportive evidence for the new education curriculum, which offers compulsory FLT at around the age of seven at the second grade. Moreover, teacher trainers show a tendency towards a very early start in pre-school period. Their responses indicate high consistency with the recent literature about the issue. On the issue, the report prepared by European Commission (2011) highlights the importance of early start of FLE in pre-school period explaining that children at early ages learn the language in an unconscious way through their intuitions. Caccavale (2007) also notes that pre-school learners exposed to the sound system of the target language can learn to 'segment words in their native language' (p. 34) at ease and the explicit training of the ear in language classes is also beneficial to discriminate different sounds in different languages. This also provides a clear evidence for the participants who feel hesitations for starting FLE at pre-school period concerning the literacy of children. Either pre-school or first tier of the primary school, learning a foreign language as early as possible can pave the way for developing an intercultural identity, positive attitudes toward the target language and its culture as well as the sound system of the language to be learned.

Another issue that participants feel hesitations about teaching FLs at early stages is the lack of well-trained teachers to give instruction at these levels. In the recent literature it is claimed that an early start is not solely enough for success in FLE and the importance of well-trained teaching staff, the amount and quality of input provided by teachers and continuity of FLE education in secondary school are the invaluable determinants for achievement in the long run of language development (Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006; Enever and Moon, 2009; European Commission, 2011; Tinsley and Comfort, 2012). This also leads us to a common challenge in training teachers who are competent both at the language pedagogy and methodology appropriate for early language learning.

With regard to appropriate methodology, trainers stated that TEYL is realized through visual and kinesthetic activities in a contextual manner, and classroom environment should be enjoyable. They also noted that it is important to implement contextual, meaningful, and activity-based lessons in YLs' classes to develop positive attitudes towards learning another language. Accordingly, most of the recent research also claims that the use of child-centered activities which support holistic development of the child with music, dance, stories and songs provide natural opportunities for children to nurture positive attitudes towards the new language (Trujillo-Saez, 2001; Calabrese and Dawes; 2008, Enever et al., 2009; Moon, 2000, NR, 2010; Tinsley and Comfort, 2012).

Teacher trainers' views on language development mostly focus on listening and speaking rather than grammar. Their focus on listening and speaking is consistent with the other TEYL research, which claims the importance of communication skills in the YL curriculum due to the felt need for communication in a globalized world economy (Qiang, 2009; Lee, 2009; Cameron, 2002) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as emphasized several times by EU (European Commission, 2011). Thus, listening and speaking focus of TEYL curriculum realized through child-centered activities will enhance the interpretation and relevance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches for FLT to young learners. Yet, one conflicting result is that although the trainers consider grammar secondary to TEYL, they have traditional views about teaching it. Thus, the majority argue that grammar teaching should be done via worksheets. Such point of view seems to be a reminiscent of earlier grammar-based approaches to language teaching. When child-adult differences are considered activity-based teaching should be applied to all aspects of teaching. Children have limited cognitive abilities, lack abstract thinking, learn indirectly, and are meaning-focused. Therefore, grammar shouldn't be thought in isolation without a

context. Worksheet type of grammar activities emphasize accuracy more than meaning and lead to explicit learning, which makes it cognitively difficult for children to retain information. Even though the trainers' views are consistent with the theory of TEYL, when it comes to grammar teaching their ideas seem to change.

Another important finding that is worth mentioning is related to the use of L1 to clarify meaning with YLs. Almost one third of the participants agreed that the teacher should provide L1 equivalence of what has been being taught. Even though this constitutes the minority of trainers the finding is striking as it indicates trainers' beliefs about providing comprehensible input as well as their ideas about methodological and pedagogical issues. Trainers' ideas, beliefs, and experiences are important as they are mostly reflected in the training process. Hence, it could be argued that training on TEYL requires expertise in the field that involves knowledge about child development, children's characteristics, and appropriate pedagogy and methodology.

As for the sort of assessment appropriate for YLs, participants state that children should be assessed based on their performances rather than pen-paper exams. However, they also stated that education system directs teachers to use this kind of assessment. Trainers' responses related to the assessment type is supported by the previous literature and also realized in the 2013 ELT program for primary schools. As such, Tinsley and Comfort (2012), claim that research investigating the types of appropriate and efficient assessment for evaluating YLs' performance in learning a FL has been relatively inadequate. They (2012) also state that pen and paper tests do not reflect the appropriate methodology to language learning and young learners should not be assessed via systems designed for older learners (p. 76). Hence, language tests are not appropriate for a TEYL curriculum in which listening and speaking skills are emphasized. Since listening and speaking skills are difficult to assess (Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006), performance-based assessment is highly recommended for YLs.

Trainers' views related to early language instruction are mostly supported by the previous literature. When their responses are compared with the new curriculum (MNE, 2013) it is seen that the main principles underlined are either suggested or supported by the participants. Moreover, the participants' emphasis on performance-based examination is realized in the current curriculum as it emphasizes the use of various assessment techniques as opposed to the solitary use of pen-paper tests.

In conclusion, trainers views about early language learning and beliefs about TEYL is in accordance with the basic premises of the newest language curriculum. The findings are important so that the majority of academicians seem to agree with the changes made. As the participants are responsible for the training of prospective teachers who will use the curriculum it will no doubt effect the quality of education. Moreover, the results can be interpreted as an indication of acceptance of the principles of the curricula as well as the future practices related to TEYL.

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