

# ***Bir Eylem Araştırması: İlkokul Öğrencilerine İngilizce Öğretiminde Sorgulama Tabanlı Öğretim Modeli<sup>1</sup>\****

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## ***Öz***

Sorgulama-Tabanlı öğretim modelinin İngilizce öğrenme üzerindeki etkileri uzun süredir tartışılmaktadır. Bu tez, sorgulama-tabanlı öğretim yaklaşımının İngilizce öğrenme üzerindeki etkilerini araştıran bir eylem araştırmasıdır. Çalışmanın asıl amacı, öğrencilerin İngilizce öğrenirken, öğrenme sürecine katılmalarını sağlamak ve öğrenmenin sorumluluğunu alan ve sorgulama tekniğini sosyal hayatında kullanabilen, hayat boyu öğrenmeyi prensip edinmiş bireyler olarak gelişmelerine yardımcı olmaktır. Çalışmanın ilk amacı öğrencilerin, sorgulama tabanlı dil öğretiminin olumlu etkilerine olan yaklaşımlarını belirlemektir. İkinci olarak ise, sorgulama tabanlı öğretim modelinin uygulanmasında öğretmenlerin ve öğrencilerin karşılaştığı zorlukları belirlemek amaçlanmıştır. Çalışma, 2018-2019 akademik eğitim öğretim yılında İstanbul’da özel bir kolejin ilkökul bölümünde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcı öğrenciler, yaş ortalaması 8 olan, İngilizce dil seviyeleri genel olarak başlangıç düzeyinde olan 16 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Veri toplama aracı olarak, araştırmacı günlüğü, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve öz değerlendirme yönergeleri kullanılmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları, sorgulama tabanlı öğretim yaklaşımının öğrencilerin İngilizce dilini edinimine katkıda bulunduğunu göstermiştir. Bulgular ayrıca sorgulama tabanlı öğretim yaklaşımının öğrencilerin anlamlı öğrenimine, böylece ilgi alanları, beklentileri, yetenekleri ve ihtiyaçları baz alınarak hazırlanmış aktivitelerle İngilizce edinimine aktif şekilde katılım sağlamlarına katkıda bulunduğunu göstermiştir. Öğrenciler, öğrenmeyi oluşturabilmek için anlamlı ve ucu açık sorular sormayı öğrenmişler, aktif bir şekilde grup çalışmalarına katılarak

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birbirlerinden öğrenme ve birbirlerine öğretme deneyimi yaşamışlardır. Öğrencilerin, hedef dildeki yetersizliklerine rağmen, ilgi alanlarına göre planlanan dersler sayesinde derslere katılımları büyük ölçüde artmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin birtakım konularda zorluk yaşadığını da göstermiştir. Bunlar, ilk olarak öğrencilerin sınıf arkadaşlarıyla iş birliği yaparak çalışmasında görülmüştür. Öğrencilerin, kişisel hayatlarında oldukça gerekli olan iletişim becerilerine sahip olmadıkları, ana dillerinde dahi birbirleriyle iletişim kurmakta zorlandıkları, dolayısıyla İngilizce dilinde de aynı zorluğu yaşadıkları görülmüştür. Fakat, gruplama stratejilerinin ve çalışma istasyonlarında yapılan grup çalışmalarının yardımı ile, öğrencilerin çoğunun bu tutumu olumlu bir şekilde değişiklik göstermiştir. Öğrenciler, grup çalışmasını ve birlikte bir şeyler üretebilmeyi sevmişlerdir. Gözlemlerime dayanarak, öğrenciler için hazırladığım öğrenme ortamının barışçıl, objektif ve güvenli oluşu öğrencilerin, hedef dili kullanırken ve fikirlerini paylaşırken kendilerini rahat ve özgüvenli hissetmelerini sağlamıştır. İngilizce dilini kullanmada sorun yaşayan en utangaç ve iletişime kapalı öğrencilerde dahi, programın son haftasında kayda değer olumlu değişiklikler gözlenmiştir. Bu sonuçlara ek olarak, İngilizce öğretmenin de dersleri planlama konusunda zorluklar yaşayabildiği görülmüştür. Sorgulama tabanlı öğretim modelinin etkinliği ancak iyi bir planlama ile mümkündür. Tek bir İngilizce dersinin planlanması, organize edilmesi ve materyallerinin hazırlanması uzun saatler alabilmektedir. Araştırma sonuçları, sorgulama tabanlı öğretim modelinin en deneyimli öğretmenler için dahi zorluk yaratabileceğini göstermiştir. Sonuçlar ayrıca, öğretmenlerin rolünün öğretmekten ziyade, rehberlik etmek olması gerektiğini, öğretmenlerin, sınıflarında merak duygusunu teşvik eden rol modeller olmaları gerektiğini, dolayısıyla geleneksel yöntemleri kullanan öğretmenlerin bu anlayışı benimsemekte zorluklar yaşayabildiğini göstermiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Sorgulama-tabanlı öğretim modeli, çocuklara İngilizce öğretimi, dil öğretiminde yaklaşımlar

## **An Action Research Study: Inquiry-Based Instruction in English Language Teaching To Young Learners**

### **Abstract**

The effects of Inquiry-Based Instruction in English language teaching have been discussed for many years. This action research study was an attempt to implement Inquiry-Based Instruction in teaching English to young learners in order to teach English using a student-centered, inquiry-based approach which helps learners take the responsibility of their learning and become life-long learners in a long process. The purpose of my action research was threefold. The first purpose was to identify the students' views regarding the benefits of Inquiry-based Instruction. Secondly, it aimed to find out the difficulties the students and the teacher experience in Inquiry-based Instruction. The study was conducted in the second term of 2018-2019 academic year at a private primary school in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants of this study were 16 second grade students at average age 8 with different abilities and levels of competence but basically in beginners language proficiency level. The data collection instruments used for the present study were the researcher's diary, semi-structured interviews, self-assessment rubrics for learners and assessment rubrics. The findings of the study revealed that the implementation of Inquiry-Based Instruction in English language teaching facilitates the learners' ability to acquire the new language and to direct their learning. The findings also revealed that Inquiry-Based Instruction engages the learners in meaningful learning, so that they can get involved actively in acquiring English language based on their interests, attitudes, expectations, abilities and needs. The students learned how to ask meaningful questions in order to inquire and construct new understandings. They got involved actively in pair work and group work activities in centers, learned from their peers and taught their peers. Although they had beginner level English language proficiency, their participation in the activities that were planned based on their interests increased considerably. The results of my study also revealed that the students have difficulties in working collaboratively with their classmates. They don't know how to communicate with each other even in their mother tongue as they lack the communication skills which are vital for our social lives. However, with the help of grouping strategies, and the center group

studies, their attitudes changed positively. They enjoyed working in groups and creating something together. I observed that the learning environment I prepared for them was so peaceful and safe that they felt comfortable while sharing an idea or using the target language. Even the shy learners who didn't want to say even a word in English, tried to make sentences and do presentations voluntarily in the eighth week. The results showed that the language teacher may have difficulties in the stage of planning and crafting the lessons. The effectiveness of the Inquiry-Based Instructed teaching is only possible with a good planning. It may take long hours to plan, organize and prepare the materials for a single lesson. The results also revealed that teaching English using Inquiry-Based Instruction might be difficult to implement even for the most experienced teachers as it requires a lot of reading, preparation, material development and hours of planning. It also revealed that as it requires teachers to shift from teaching to facilitators who encourage curiosity and the need to know in their classrooms, teachers who are used to traditional way of teaching may find it difficult to change their perspective.

**Keywords:** Inquiry-based instruction, teaching English to young learners, approaches in language teaching

## **INTRODUCTION**

In most of the state schools and private schools in Turkey, language teachers rely solely on textbooks as a guide to teach English. As an experienced teacher, I observed that language teachers focus on the mastery of content in a book which is usually grammar instead of giving attention to the students' background, interests and different learning styles. As a result, the students don't feel that they are involved in the learning process as they have no choice or responsibility in their learning. Furthermore, language teachers usually aren't aware of the importance of development of language skills and nurturing thinking skills. Teachers usually tend to give what is known instead of fostering the students' curiosity. As we all know, children love to ask questions and it gives us a great opportunity to construct knowledge through their inquiry. Inquiry-based learning is based on questions that are interesting to students. We need to bring in concepts from real life situations to the classroom that foster the students' curiosity and make them ask questions (Murdoch, 2015; Barell, 2008).

As an experienced English language teacher with 12 years in teaching, I strongly believe that my very first aim must be to prepare our students to the world outside and to teach them how to learn. For this to happen, the best way to create a fruitful, discussion-based environment is making reading and inquiring as the center of our teaching. Reading is the only way for the students to be familiar with concepts, ask questions, make predictions and talk about them (Murdoch & Wilson, 2008).

Inquiry-based Instruction (IBI) in language teaching gives opportunities to students to think. They come up with questions and make connections with their own lives. This helps them gain a deep understanding and prepare them for the real life outside. To make significant changes in our classrooms, we need to create a concept-based learning environment with the help of literature which equip students to involve learning environment actively (Murdoch, 2015). In today's world, how to learn and make sense of the data mess around students is more important than memorizing facts. A shift from the transfer of data from the teacher to the student, to a deeper understanding is needed. The emphasis is needed to be more on what students know than how students learn. In this regard, Inquiry-based Instruction puts the learners at the heart of an active process of learning (Exline, 2004). Inquiry-Based Instruction can be conducted in many disciplines. Using Inquiry-Based Instruction helps learners become active, independent, autonomous life-long learners who can deal with problems in their lives. Inquiry-Based also helps learners to develop a range of transdisciplinary skills that they will need throughout their lives (Clyde & Hicks, 2008). These skills can be sequenced as communication skills, social skills, self-management skills, research skills and critical thinking skills (Alberta Education, 2010). Inquiry-Based Instruction promotes learner autonomy and student-centeredness. EFL teachers ask open ended questions to foster curiosity, therefore research. Teachers act as facilitators who change roles as students or guides from time to time (Hamston & Murdoch, 1996). Researchers claim that inquiry and problem-solving give opportunities to learners to gain metacognitive strategies. Brown (1994) has noted that learning through inquiry helps students to be better language learners (as cited in Arauz, 2013). Following this line of argument, we conducted an action research study to identify the students' views regarding the benefits of Inquiry-based Instruction. The second aim was to find out the difficulties the students and the teacher experience in Inquiry-based

Instruction. More specifically, this study aimed to encourage learners to be actively involved in the learning process and foster in the students a love of learning English throughout their lives. One way to achieve these purposes was to conduct an eight weeks strategy training and explicitly teach the right strategies and techniques to foster the students' learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study is designed as an action research study. Action Research (AR) is defined as an attempt “to identify a ‘problematic’ situation or issue that the participants- who may include teachers, students, managers, administrators, or even parents- consider worth looking into more deeply and systematically” (Burns, 2010, p.2). Burns states that action research is “a very valuable way to extend our teaching skills and gain more understanding of ourselves as teachers, our classrooms and our students” (p.2). In this study, qualitative data collection instruments were used. These included the researcher’s diary, semi-structured interviews conducted with the participant students, video recorded lessons and student self-assessment rubrics. These tools were quite helpful to see where I am and how I should craft my next lessons. The feedbacks of my students and the video recordings of my lessons helped me to see what was happening in the classroom and what I needed to do to work on my weaknesses as a teacher.

### **The context and the participants of the study**

The study was conducted in the second term of 2018-2019 academic year at a Private School in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants of the study were 16 second graders who have different abilities and levels of competence. These students take 8 hours of English in a week and their English language proficiency level is beginner.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

During the observation process, my aim was to observe and find out what worked well and what did not work in Inquiry-Based Instructed English teaching. To achieve this aim, I kept a researcher diary to observe my students’ performances and the strong and weak sides of the procedures I used in my lessons. I conducted self-assessment rubrics and semi-structured interviews with two randomly selected students after each

class during 8 weeks. I presented the data that emerged from these data collection instruments using descriptive analysis.

During the reflection process, I identified the effectiveness of my activities used in lessons through my observations in my diary and the feedback of my students in interviews. My research also attempted to determine the students' views regarding the benefits of Inquiry-based Instruction. In addition to finding out the difficulties the students and the teacher experience in Inquiry-based Instruction.

### **Instructional Intervention**

I conducted my study by teaching in a second grade during eight weeks. It covered two lesson hours a week and totally eight weeks. The lessons were in eighty minutes format which means we had two lessons back to back. The aim of having block lessons was not to interrupt the ongoing inquiry in my classroom. The classroom contained sixteen students with different abilities and levels of competence.

Eight different strategies were taught to the students during these eight weeks. Those were: *inquiring, making predictions, brainstorming, retelling, storyboarding, making connections, visualization and reflection*. The procedure was as stated in the following:

- Introducing the classroom agreements using *Whole Brain Teaching Strategies* (Biffle, 2013) together with the learners, introducing the *Prediction* strategy using the story (Picture walk, cover reading), Brainstorming and defining new concepts by drawing a concept map in a whole class conference. Focusing on the sub-concept “Me”. Introducing am/is/are implicitly in mini lessons.
- Introducing the story by fostering the students' receptive thinking and speaking skills. Encouraging the students get curious and ask questions. Brainstorming and defining new concepts by drawing a concept map in a whole class conference. Focusing on the concept “Family”. Introducing have/has implicitly in mini lessons. Teaching the learners to make choices and work in small groups.
- Introducing some Group Work Strategies to respond to literature. Introducing how to ask open-ended questions. Brainstorming and defining new concepts by drawing a concept map in a whole class conference.

Focusing on the concept “Friendship”. Introducing some adjectives and likes/dislikes implicitly. Introducing group work centres. Working in small groups for a deeper understanding of the concept. Assessing the learning.

- Think aloud statement, a simple discussion to foster learners’ thinking skills. Brainstorming and reaching new concepts drawing a concept map in a whole class conference. Focusing on the concept “Location” and teaching parts of the house implicitly.
- Introducing a grouping strategy which is Visualization. Guiding learners into deeper inquiry using the reader “Me on the map”. Introducing group work centres, working in small groups. Assessing learning.
- Reaching the concept of “Location” with the whole class. Working on the sub-concept of neighborhood. Teaching the words about neighborhood. Encouraging learners making connections with the book. Making an anchor chart using the same book. Working in small groups in centres giving choices to learners using Choice Board Strategy.
- Brainstorming and defining new concepts by drawing a concept map in a whole class conference. Focusing on the concept of “Responsibility” and talking about the rules in our city. Teaching the words about the topic and the concept “Responsibility” and teaching should/shouldn’t implicitly in mini lesson. Letting learners choose a centre to work in using choice board strategy Working in small groups in centres. Sharing and reflecting with others. Assessing learning.
- Brainstorming and defining new concepts by drawing a concept map in a whole class conference. Focusing on the concept “Problems and Solutions” and talking about the Earth using the story book “Me on the Map”. Getting learners inquire the problems of the Earth. Making an anchor chart. Introducing the centres using choices board. Working in small groups in centres. Sharing and reflecting with others. Assessing learning.
- Revision. Thinking, sharing, reflecting. Assessment of learning.

Materials: “Me on the Map” by Sweeney (1995), “Where do I live?” by Chesnow (1995). The genre is realistic fiction. The stories consisted of the concepts on the transdisciplinary unit “Who we are” and were helpful for students for deeper thinking and understanding.



## **FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS**

Inquiry-Based Instructed English teaching and learning has a long history. It was initiated with the work of Dewey (1938) and continued with Bruner (1966), Gardner and Vygotsky (1978). A great number of research findings have revealed that inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning a foreign language facilitates the learners' ability to develop a deeper understanding of the world through concepts and develop skills that will help them to become autonomous life-long learners. Dewey (1980) argues that the mankind's tomorrow rests on the "widening spread and deepening hold of the inquiring mind" (as cited in Murdoch, 2015, p.11). Inquiry-Based Instruction provides opportunities for learners to:

- Develop essential skills which they will need for the world individuals live, communicate and work.
- Learn to deal with problems and find solutions
- Cope with changes and challenges to new understandings
- Shape their search for answers, today and in their future lives (Alberta Learning, 2004).

Therefore, this study was based on the belief that the students become autonomous learners by inquiring, summarizing, questioning, predicting, clarifying rather than rote learning and memorization. In the light of this, students are taught using different inquiry-based strategies to help them acquire these essential skills through certain concepts decided in lessons. Following the argument above, the case study that I conducted indicated that Inquiry-Based Instructed teaching strengthened the participant learners in many ways. Their engagement in learning English increased considerably. As Murdoch (2015) argues, Inquiry-based Instruction is a methodology that engages learners in meaningful learning, so that they can get involved actively in acquiring English language based on their interests, attitudes, expectations, abilities, reflections, needs and so on.

After the first week of the program, I crafted my lessons according to the learners' needs, interests, abilities. Therefore, the learners' engagement aroused because leaving the choices to them and letting them have a voice in the lessons made them feel responsible for their learning journey and feel valued and happy. At the end of the program, the participant learners

took the control of their own learning. As the lessons were student-centered and the tasks were crafted based on the learners' interests and needs, they became more eager to learn English through collaboration, co-operation and interaction just as Short (1996) states that Inquiry-Based Instruction is a student-centered approach that puts the collaboration among students in the center of learning.

It's been proven long ago that learners internalize the target language when they learn actively, and by doing just the way they acquire their mother tongue. This old saw supports this belief: "Tell me I'll forget, show me I'll remember, involve me, I understand". As Richard, Church and Morrison (2011) state, thinking starts with wondering and asking questions, therefore learning happens through deep thinking. In my research, Inquiry-Based Instruction helped the learners start to think deeply through asking good questions without any worries and fears.

At the beginning of the study, I conducted the student observation rubric to all learners and the semi-structured interviews with three voluntary learners. The results of these instruments revealed that not only the learners had an emotional barrier towards learning English but they also lacked the thinking skills and the language skills needed for learning a language. As Erickson, Lanning and French (2017) have noted, we live in a time when we are faced with complex problems; so that we need to acquire the abilities to analyze, problem solving, evaluate, collaborate, plan and act responsibly. Therefore, in schools, young generation is required to learn these essential skills for twenty-first century living. The findings of this study show that Inquiry-Based Instruction helps the learners develop these skills not only in learning English but also in learning other disciplines or in their daily lives.

During the interviews, the learners told that they always memorized isolated words, wrote them down hundreds of times, but never thought about them to understand and learn permanently. At the end of the study, the results showed that the learners loved seeking for the answers and finding out the information themselves rather than memorizing words and structures. As Murdoch (2015) points out, in inquiry-Based Instructed lessons, learners are let to find out the answers rather than giving answers directly to them.

The results achieved from the interviews during the implementation of the study showed that the Inquiry-Based Instructed English lessons helped the learners find out the learners' weak and strong sides in learning English and empowered them to improve their weaknesses. The most profound finding was that this implementation fueled the love for learning and wonder deep inside their heart. As Kabat-Zinn says, "the spirit of inquiry is fundamental to living mindfully" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, as cited in Murdoch, 2015).

A great deal of authentic contexts and activities were used in the program. This helped the learners to see how learning applies to real life which is quite different than the use of random worksheet exercises such as fill-in-the-blanks texts. Murdoch (2015) also states that "learning happens best when situated in real contexts and authentic purposes" (p.19). The learners in the program had the opportunity to read books, making connections with their lives, making predictions and practice the target language using those real-life contexts.

The action plan was completed according to the timeline. The activities and the resources were appropriate with the learners' needs and interests. However, I couldn't conduct a deeper inquiry with the class, due to the students' limited vocabulary knowledge and low level of language proficiency. I also admit that the eight weeks-time for getting the learners used to a learning approach which is totally different from the one they were used to was not enough. Nonetheless, it was a good beginning for getting them to think and ask questions to learn beyond the facts. There were 16 students in the lessons and each of them had a different ability, background and level of language competence. During the eight-week implementation of Inquiry-Based Instruction, all of them learned many vocabulary items, concepts and structures which they would be able to use in their future lives and gained skills that they could apply to other disciplines.

Murdoch defines inquiry learning as "an approach that demands higher order thinking which challenges the student continually and where tasks are designed to prompt students to question, predict, gather, analyze and reflect" (Murdoch, 2015, p.15). The results of my study revealed that the participant learners' thinking has moved to a higher level and they reached the answers through asking questions, making predictions and connections.

The results of my study also proved that Inquiry-Based Instruction empower EFL learners in different ways, just as Short and Burke (1996) and Murdoch (2015) claim. As the lessons are more student-centered and crafted according to their needs and interests in real life situations, they can find the opportunity to make connections with the world and take the control and the responsibility of their learning. As Murdoch (2015) states, in inquiry-based Instruction, learning happens through “investigation which in itself is driven by powerful questions often framed by authentic context and real-life problems and purposes” (p. 15). Vygotsky supports the idea to develop self-regulated learners who can take the responsibility of their own learning and thinking in today’s world (Neff, 2019).

Inquiry-based Instruction allows an active participation of students in acquiring the language (Cook, 2008). In the light of the data collected from the students, it can be concluded that learning happens when the students participate in the lessons actively and collaborate with others, learn from one another and improve the ability to think related to their own thoughts.

Memorizing words and structures are not important skills of today’s world. What is needed is to give the right skills to the students to be able to use the language for communication in the world where individuals live, learn, communicate and work.

To conclude, I observed the positive effects of Inquiry-Based Instruction on the learners’ attitudes towards English language learning.

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