



An Analysis of Theses Written on Teaching English to Young Learners in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This review study examines all the master's and doctoral theses completed on teaching English to young learners (TEYL) between the years 2014 and 2020 in Turkey. Eighty theses and dissertations indexed in the Turkish National Theses Database were included in the study. The tendencies in the theses in terms of sub-subjects covered, research designs applied, sampling methods used, research contexts targeted, and overall findings were identified and discussed. This paper provides an account of recent graduate research in TEYL to be a reference for researchers and supervisors in the field by presenting the results of a conceptual and descriptive analysis of the theses. Furthermore, by interpreting the tendencies in research methodology and over/under-studied areas in the field, the study reveals possible gaps and research opportunities in the field of TEYL.

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Statement of Publication Ethics

Hereby, we consciously assure that this material is the authors' own original work; the paper is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere; the paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner; and all the authors have been personally and actively involved in substantial work leading to the paper and will take public responsibility for its content.

No ethical committee approval was required for this study. Data collection did not include human subjects.

Authors' Contribution Rate

All the authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Introduction

There is a worldwide trend of introducing foreign language(s) to young learners in schools (Garton et. al., 2011; Enever, 2011). Due to its current popularity and status globally, English is the first ranking language among the languages included in the curriculums for young learners. Parallel to this increasing interest in an early start to English language learning, the body of research on teaching English to young learners is also growing and it has been debated a lot in the past years.

The term ‘young learners’ comprises “a range of learners who share commonly accepted characteristics such as having short attention spans and learning holistically” (Kırkgöz, 2018, p.172). Yet, in the discussions of who is referred as young learner, it is seen that there are different views and various age ranges of young learners (YL) exist in the literature. While for some scholars, YLs are accepted as those between five and twelve years of age (Cameron, 2001), others categorize it as six to eleven (Phillips, 1993) or five to ten (Harmer, 2001). As all these categorizations target a broad age group, and this may yield danger of overlooking the discrepancy among children’s cognitive, physical, psychological, and linguistic characteristics, a further division was made as “very young learners (VYLs)” referring to those younger than six (Ellis, 2014).

In many Asian and European countries, there is a recent tendency to give central importance to TEYL and introduce it at early ages in primary schools (Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2006; Spolsky & Moon, 2012). Turkey, being one of these countries, has witnessed a shift in this regard. The latest educational reform in Turkey released in 2012 has been one of the major factors influencing TEYL in Turkey. Twelve years of compulsory education (4+4+4, referring to four years for primary, secondary, and high schools) was initiated, and the start age of English instruction was lowered to the second year of primary education. Students started to take two hours of English a week in the second grade as of the 2013-2014 academic year.

This shift yielded new discussions because age is a leading factor that shapes the overall instruction and approaches in language teaching. There is no doubt that due to the differences in physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills, teaching language to a six-year-old would differ from teaching language to an eleven-year-old student. This situation has also been highlighted by Kırkgöz (2018) that primary school children are not only “less cognitively aware”, but they are also in the ongoing process of “developing literacy in their first language.”

There are several motivations behind the attempt to integrate language teaching in the curricula at a younger age. In addition to the major factor of globalization (Copland & Garton, 2014), another propelling force to pull down the start age of English instruction is related to age and language learning. There is a widespread belief of “the early the better” which takes us back to the discussions of Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) rooted in the field of SLA. In a nutshell, it is claimed that there is a cutoff age in puberty and language learning is easier at a younger age because cortical connections can easily be formed until this cutoff age. Thus, learning a language after puberty is basically foreclosed. Discussing the evidence for and against CPH is beyond the scope of this paper but it should be noted that its impact on language teaching was immense.

Motivated by all these recent discussions and mounting attention on TEYL as an area of investigation, this study aims to analyze theses written in the field of teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in the last six years in Turkey. To our knowledge, there is no study evaluating theses concerning TEYL directly. Therefore, this study is based on this gap in the literature and aims at contributing to the field by carrying out a systematic review of theses to reveal recent tendencies and to illuminate future directions of graduate research into TEYL. It is important to carry out systematic reviews in certain periods since “an understanding of trends in dissertation research can show what issues, theories, and methodologies young researchers and their faculty mentors are interested in” (Drysdale, Graham, Spring & Halverson, 2013; p. 91). Such reviews have the potential to uncover the state of research carried out by new researchers. Hence, the study attempts to present a complete picture of graduate research on TEYL in Turkey.

Carrying out a content analysis of theses published in the National Thesis Center, the study answers the research questions below to determine the trends, gaps, and current situation of TEYL by focusing on the subjects (participants), methods, techniques used, and applications in the thesis under investigation.

1. How has the distribution of theses published by Turkish researchers changed through the years?
2. What is the tendency among the theses written in the field of teaching foreign languages to young learners in the last six years in Turkey?
 - a. What are the (sub)topics studied in the theses?
 - b. What are the research designs employed in the theses?
 - c. What are the sampling methods used in the theses?
 - d. What are the research contexts that the studies were conveyed?
 - e. Who are the participants in the studies under investigation?

By finding answers to these research questions, the study can provide an overall picture of TEYL in Turkey and is expected to help researchers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, teachers, and other potential beneficiaries to see the contemporary situation, limitations, problems, future directions, and possible suggestions in this field.

Methodology

The study was carried out in descriptive research design to evaluate the graduate research in the field of TEYL. Given the aim of the study, the general survey model was used and document analysis of the theses was done. Survey model is employed when the aim is to describe a current situation by identifying specific features related to it (Büyüköztürk, et. al., 2012). By aiming at generating interpretive explanations based on a collection of graduate studies on TEYL, this study was designed to extend the existing knowledge and provide a holistic view on TEYL by examining the target studies. For this purpose, the theses on TEYL were collected based on certain criteria, and categories/patterns were found with the help of a computer software for qualitative analysis. The stages

followed to carry out this study are: (i) Setting the criteria: to reach all the relevant theses, the criteria were set to serve the relevant purpose and to ease the access of target theses. The criteria were finding the Turkish and English theses on YL and language teaching prepared in both master and doctoral programs in Turkish universities and limiting the year of publication between 2014-2020. (ii) Analysis: At this stage, the theses collected were analyzed based on predetermined categorizations. (iii) Interpretation: as the last stage, to reach an in depth understanding of the phenomenon, the findings were discussed, analyzed, and interpreted. All these stages were carried out in a cyclical process as further explained below.

Data collection and analysis

We electronically surveyed all theses and dissertations found on the National Dissertation and Thesis Database of Council of Higher Education (CoHE) that addressed TEYL. We searched some keywords that included “teaching English to young learners, teaching children, and young learners.” The most inclusive one that listed all the theses addressing an aspect of teaching English to young learners was “young learners.” The other two keywords were observed to restrict the search to only some of the theses. The relevant theses and dissertations published in Turkey between the years 2014-2020 were found and stored for research purposes.

Once all relevant theses were obtained, each thesis was subjected to the content analysis. The data of the present study was gathered through a form that was adapted from Paper Classification Form (PCF) by Çiltaş, Güler, and Sözbilir (2012) and the Educational Technologies Publication Classification Form (ETPCF) by Göktaş et al. (2012). It includes descriptive information such as the name of university and the type of departments where the theses were written, year of acceptance, type of the program (master or doctoral), title, research topic(s) covered, sub-subjects, research methods employed, data collection tools utilized, participants (study group), and data analysis methods. Each thesis was coded according to these eleven categories using a software program for qualitative analysis. The researchers worked cooperatively in the process of classification of the theses to reach a consistent coding. It should also be noted here that the statements were taken as they were declared in the theses and no comments were included in the coding process by the researchers. For instance, if there were no clear statements including the sampling method in the theses, no inferences were made about the sampling method used in the procedure and this was coded as ‘no sampling method specified’ in the code list. An independent third rater who is an expert in the field cooperated to discuss the discrepancies. Based on these discussions, discrepancies were resolved.

All research questions were extracted from the theses to determine the topical trends. We adapted a pattern established by Emerson et al. (1995) for coding the theses based on the research questions. The topics, sub-topics were grouped into categories and the categories were further grouped into broader categories. The number of each topic and sub-topics were counted by tallying. This was a cyclical process and was carried out by both researchers firstly on their own and then together.

Results

Overall, our data included seventy-four Masters' thesis and six dissertations (M.A and PhD) written on teaching English to young learners. They were prepared in 33 different state and private universities in Turkey. The departments that the theses were written are Educational Technologies (n=1), Pre-School Education (n=3), Curriculum and Instruction (n=5), and English Language Teaching (n=71). The tendency among the thesis collected is investigated and it is reported by answering the research questions.

Distribution of theses

Distribution of theses changed through the years. Table 1 illustrates the years theses were written in and the type of thesis as M.A. and PhD.

Table 1. Distribution of theses and the type of the theses according to years

Year	No of the theses	Type of the theses
2014	11	10 M.A., 1 Ph.D.
2015	18	18 M.A.
2016	16	13 M.A., 3 Ph.D.
2017	12	11 M.A., 1 Ph.D.
2018	10	10 M.A.
2019	4	4 M.A.
2020	9	8 M.A., 1 Ph.D.
TOTAL	80	74 M.A., 6 Ph.D.

It is seen that 2015 was the year with the highest number of theses prepared and there is a recent decrease in the number of studies conducted. Additionally, there is a big difference between the number of dissertations and master's theses written in total.

Distribution of sub-subjects studied in the theses

It is observed that the focus of the theses on YL was varied. 17 sub-subjects were identified. The findings concerning sub-subjects are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of sub-subjects studied in the theses

Sub-subjects	n
Young learner (YL) Vocabulary	20
The use of a specific teaching method/technique	18
The use of a specific material	17
Program/coursebook/course evaluation and development	10
YL language skills	10
Attitude / Perception	9
Language acquisition	6
YL teacher qualifications	6
The role of Portfolio	5
YL assessment	5
YL motivation	5
YL teacher education	5

YL grammar	2
Language learning strategies	2
YL pronunciation	2
Intercultural competence	1
Teacher beliefs & practices	1

As shown in Table 2, the most common areas covered were vocabulary (n=20), the use of a specific teaching method/technique (n=18), the use of a specific material (n=17), YL program/ coursebook/ course evaluation and development (n=10), YL language skills (n=10), and attitude/perception studies (n=9). Language acquisition, teacher qualifications, portfolio, assessment, motivation, teacher education, grammar, language learning strategies, pronunciation, intercultural competence, and teacher beliefs/practices are under-studied sub-subjects in teaching English to young learners in the last five years.

Further analysis of some sub-subjects yielded sub-categorizations of the themes found. For example, the theses that were written on the use of a specific language teaching method/ technique for young learners were geared towards game-based teaching (n=8), drama (n=4), Total Physical Response (n=2), Content and Language Integrated Learning (n=1), brain-based teaching (n=1), on-line differentiated reading (n=1), and the use of songs (n=1). Studies on language skills included theses on skills such as speaking (n=4), reading (n=2), writing (n=2), listening (n=2). Language acquisition as a sub-subject covered issues such as input-based instruction (n=1), age effects (n=2), social-emotional stability (n=1), focus on form instruction (n=1), and corrective feedback (n=1).

Research designs employed in the theses

The next research question is on the research design employed in the theses collected. As seen in Table 3, various research designs were employed in the theses under investigation.

Table 3. Distribution of research designs employed in the theses

Research design	n
Mixed method	25
Quasi-experimental	14
Qualitative	12
Quantitative	8
Case study	8
Action research	6
Experimental	5
One group pretest posttest design	1
Conversation Analysis	1

The most common design used is mixed method (n=24). It is followed by quasi-experimental methods (n=14). The next most common was qualitative design (n=12). Other research designs employed were quantitative (n=8), case study (n=8), action research (n=6),

experimental (n=5), One group pretest posttest design (n=1) and conversation analysis (n=1).

Sampling methods used in the theses

The findings related to the question of how researchers chose their samples are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of sampling methods used in the theses

Sampling method	n
Sampling method not specified	22
Convenience sampling	20
Random sampling	14
Purposive sampling	9
Cluster random sampling	3
No sampling method	4
Stratified sampling	1
Nonprobability sampling	1
Momentary time sampling	1
Total	75

The number of theses in which the sampling method was not specified is twenty-two. The most common sampling method used was convenience sampling (n=20) which was consecutively followed by random sampling (n=14), purposive sampling (n=9), cluster random sampling (n=3), stratified sampling (n=1), nonprobability sampling (n=1), and momentary time sampling (n=1). Some of the theses stated that no sampling method was used in the study because all samples were included (n=4). The restricted theses (n=5) were not included in the analysis regarding the sampling method.

Participants (Study Groups) in the theses

Table 5 illustrates the participants (study groups) in the theses analyzed.

Table 5. Distribution of participants in the theses

Participants	n
Young learners	67
Young learner teachers	22
Parents	3
Pre-service teachers	3
(Young learner) teacher educators	2

When the participants in the target studies are grouped according to their age levels, it is found that there are young learners (n=67), young learner teachers (n=22), parents (n=3), pre-service teachers (n=3) and young learner teacher educators (n=2). The young learners are further grouped into very young learners (n=11), young learners (n=20) and older young learners (n=36). Some of the theses included multiple participant groups. Some of the theses studied with multiple participant groups.

Research contexts of the studies

When the theses were examined in terms of the research contexts, the following findings that are shown in Table 6 were obtained.

Table 6. Distribution of research contexts

Research context	<i>n</i>
Primary school	44
Secondary school	15
Kindergarten	11
Higher Education	4
Not specified	1
Total	75

The studies investigated were conducted in mainly four different settings: primary school ($n=44$), secondary school ($n=15$), kindergarten ($n=11$) and higher education ($n=4$). It is seen that primary school was dominant as the target context. One of the theses did not specify the research context. The restricted theses ($n=5$) were not included in the analysis.

Discussion and Suggestions

This study offers a detailed analysis of eighty theses and dissertations written on teaching English to young learners in Turkish universities between 2014 and 2020. The distribution of theses over the years shows that there is a slow decrease in the number of theses through 2020. Although there seems to be a variation on the topics studied, a considerable number of thesis and dissertations were written on similar topics which are vocabulary teaching, using songs, games, and teaching of a particular skill. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that the number of studies in the following sub-subject areas should be increased:

- Assessment of young language learners
- The teaching of grammar to YLs
- Language skills development in YLs
- Intercultural competence in YLs
- The use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in YL EFL classes
- YL teacher beliefs and practices

Gaining insights into the assessment of YLs, which is a critical issue in young learner education due to the age properties and the risk of discouraging children from learning languages is crucial. Therefore, graduate work that focuses on assessment is needed in the field of TEYL. Among the researchers who focused on assessment of young learners in their theses, Özdemir (2017) examined the effect of portfolio on self-assessment; Fişne (2016) examined an integrated language testing program for the 4th grade young learners with an attainment-based perspective. As for teacher perspectives in assessment, Ayas (2014) investigated teachers' conceptions and practices concerning assessment in English for young

learners and Çakır (2020) analyzed teachers' beliefs and practices on the assessment of 4th grade EFL students in Turkey, Italy, and Finland. However, the number of theses that focus on assessment is only a few. What is more, a variety of sub-topics related to assessment needs to be focused on within theses. For instance, graduate students can particularly investigate self-assessment, in-class assessment, and authentic assessment the use of which are convenient for the nature of child learning and recommended both in the CEFR (CEFR, 2001) and English language curriculum (for grades 2-8) in Turkey (MoNE, 2008).

The teaching of grammar to YLs can be another focus of graduate research that will well inform the field. Even though the teaching of grammar for very young learners and young learners in the kindergarten and primary schools is not recommended, older young learners in the lower secondary schools still deal with grammar. There were only two theses by Bayrak (2017) and Göksu (2014) that study grammar teaching with a language acquisition point of view. The former is a master's thesis and investigated the effect of input-based instructions, while the latter is a doctoral dissertation and studied the effect of corrective feedback through the focus on form instruction. However, there is still a need for theses that scrutinize how grammar is dealt within the classes and in the textbooks in older young learner contexts to contribute to the field. More specifically, for the teaching of grammar to (older) young learners, there is a great need to explore the implementation of action-oriented approach. Action-oriented approach serves the very nature of children's language learning since it "views learners as users of a language, primarily as 'social agents', i.e., members of society who have tasks to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (Council of Europe, 2001; p. 9). Therefore, theses can investigate how to employ action-oriented approach in the teaching of grammar on the side of the teachers, the learners, and in terms of the teaching/learning process in YL contexts.

Development of language skills in young learners was studied in ten theses since 2014; however, the language skills were dealt with individually. For instance, Gülşen (2018) studied the effects of online differentiated reading on reading comprehension skills and learner autonomy; Doğar-Kayadelen (2018) examined peer editing in YL writing classes; Çelik-Korkmaz (2016) investigated the effects of multi-sensory language teaching on learners' listening and reading skills; and Alpaslan (2015) focused on digitalized learning activities to promote speaking skills. Overall, theses studied the effect of an implementation on the development of an individual language skill. Therefore, it will contribute to the field if researchers notice the gap and study the development of language skills in an integrated way in YL contexts.

Although there has been a growing interest in the intercultural competence as a research topic in language teaching in general, the development of intercultural competence is under studied in graduate research in the field of TEYL. The one and only thesis was by Yurchak (2016) who examined the role of culture in a young learner context by investigating perceptions of teachers, parents, students, and administrators towards intercultural competence. Teacher practices in developing intercultural competence in YLs, the place of

intercultural competence in YL materials, and young learners', teacher candidates' and YL teachers' awareness on interculturality and intercultural competence can be explored in graduate research. Additionally, the use of CLIL and YL teacher beliefs are other topics that are under studied in the theses that focus on TEYL.

A detailed analysis has shown that there are important sub-subjects which have not been dealt within any of the theses written. For instance, even though the use of task-based language teaching and storytelling has been strongly recommended for teaching English to YLs (Bayyurt, 2010; Cameron, 2001; Haznedar, 2010 among others) and there are a majority of best practices about them, there are no theses written on these subjects. Additionally, values education through EFL classes has not been studied in the theses written up to 2020 despite it is strongly suggested in the English language curriculum for grades 2-8 (MoNE, 2008)

When the focus and scope of the theses were investigated, it is seen that there is a recent tendency to conduct studies on the issues related with technology use in language teaching for YL. For instance, there are theses written on digital storytelling (Canlı Bekar, 2019); Education Information Network, EBA (Pehlivan, 2020); Web 2.0 tool VOKI (İstifanoğlu, 2020). We assume that such studies integrating technology will attract more attention particularly on distance education. Upon the breakout of the pandemic and closure of schools, distance education has become the new getaway. Schools all around the world have shifted to distance education suddenly. Some of the institutions were experienced and easily adapted to the news system, yet there were also schools which had to go through hard times to get used to this new system. YLs is one of these student groups who faced various problems and troubles in this changing context. Therefore, we believe that urgent studies on YLs' language learning in distance education are needed. Studies focusing on issues such as recent implementations of integrating technology in YL classrooms, challenges faced, interaction in online meetings, classroom management issues, pedagogical suggestions, educational practices, classroom management, applications and methods from actual settings, motivating and engaging YLs in online learning, YLs' needs in distance education, learner involvement, YL language teachers' training on skills for using technology, developing effective materials and resources are anticipated to be published in the coming days. There is also a gap of research found on how instructors perceive and use technology in pedagogical settings (Tatar & Yıldız, 2010). Therefore, YL contexts as a pedagogical setting can be explored in terms of instructors' perceptions and use of technology.

As for the research design employed in the theses; there is a tendency towards the mixed method research design. The reason for this tendency can be owing to the strengths of combining both the qualitative and quantitative research designs. By doing this, the weaknesses of using only one type of research design have been avoided. It is also noted that the number of other research types such as case study, action research or conversation analysis is limited. For instance, a recent thesis by Öztürk (2020) employed conversation analysis (CA) methodology and utilized video-recorded data and provided invaluable results on how interaction is realized in language classrooms "by the interactants to achieve social

actions through taking, sharing, and allocating turns, co-constructing actions in sequences of talk, repairing trouble in talk-in-interactions in any other interactional contexts” (Walsh, 2002).

In terms of data collection procedures, as Güngör and Ekşi (2019) suggested, video/audio recorded classroom interactions, YL classroom observations, and diaries/journals can provide valuable insights on teaching English to YL. Such various data can enable gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening in real classroom settings in terms of classroom interaction, teaching practices, students’ motivation etc.

Another issue noticed is the lack of theses with larger-scale, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary perspective with a broader view of the phenomenon. Carrying out such studies can contribute to the continuity and sustainability of the overall discussions on YL and language teaching. We analyzed a master’s thesis which investigated foreign language teachers’ beliefs about assessment of young language learners and their practices of assessment in language classes in Turkey, Italy, and Finland (Çakır, 2020). Learning about common problems that YL teachers are struggling with in three different countries in the world or realizing the variation in the assessment types used provide insights for both YL teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and material developers.

When the sampling methods of the theses were analyzed, it was found that twenty-two studies did not specify how the sampling process was carried out. In the theses with information on the choice and inclusion of the participants, there is a tendency towards convenience sampling and random sampling. Although we believe in the robustness of studies with smaller participants groups, we think that it would be a valuable contribution if studies on YL in Turkey could also focus on diverse geographical regions with larger data. There is a tendency towards primary and secondary schools as research contexts in the theses written. The number of theses that use kindergartens and universities (ELT departments with future YL teachers) as research contexts should be increased and various stakeholders such as pre-service teachers, YL teacher educators, and very young learners should be included in the theses as participant groups.

Conclusion

This study provides an analysis of eighty master’s theses and dissertations written between the years 2014-2020 at Turkish universities. By showing an overall picture and revealing the tendencies and distributions of categories such as research methods used, topics covered, and participants, this review sheds light into potential new dimensions for research on YL. In the light of available research findings, it seems that YL remains a popular topic for master’s level studies. Graduate research in YLs’ language learning is not high in quantity and it is decreasing yearly. If the number of PhD level studies increase, the field will become more diversified. Additionally, there is still an accumulation on certain topics such as vocabulary learning or employing a language teaching approach. We

recommend increased research in all aspects of language teaching to YL instead of focusing on teaching of one skill or just vocabulary teaching. By showing the tendencies of sub-themes in the theses, we identified possible areas for future research opportunities with YL such as the assessment of young language learners, developing intercultural competence, the use of CLIL, storytelling and tasks in YL classes, and YL teacher beliefs and practices. Carrying out studies using qualitative methods is another suggestion. New data collection tools must be developed. Mixed method studies that help gathering more data from various settings in a longer period can be utilized. We see a need for more research which is carried out in actual classrooms with video-recordings. It should also be noted here that collecting data in young learner contexts needs great care. In developing data collection tools and in designing research projects, researchers should take Pinter's (2011) discussion of ethical and methodological issues with children into account and pay attention to understand how children differ from adults as research participants. Pinter (2011) emphasizes the importance of developing child-friendly instruments and inviting children's active participation and warns against the methodological challenges and the risk of using different de-contextualized tests. Pinter (2011) mentions the following lines as the starting point of exploring methodological issues in research with children:

Underlying all research are the researcher's own beliefs and assumptions about children and childhood. You, as a researcher engaged in projects with children, will have to think about how your own understanding and conception of 'childhood' and 'children' will influence the way you approach children, the way you talk to them and the kinds of roles and responsibilities you may assign to them (p. 202).

This study is significant in that it provides an updated, general picture of the topic YL in the field of language teaching in Turkey. It helps the target audience of educators, teacher candidates, researchers, and theses supervisors to see the existing body of research and better understand the future directions of TEYL. Although this research provides important inspiration and recommendations for future research based on existing research in the field of TEYL, it is limited in the sense that it only focuses on graduate level theses. Therefore, there is also a need for a review of research published in journals to have a complete understanding of research carried out in Turkey in the field of TEYL.

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