## DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS OF BEGINNER LEVEL EFL STUDENTS: AN ACTION RESEARCH WITH 7<sup>TH</sup> GRADE TURKISH STUDENTS

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# ABSTRACT

In foreign language teaching, there are a lot of components that need to be handled. According to the objectives of the curriculum or the need of the learners, the priorities are determined. In the beginning stages of learning a foreign language, speaking is generally regarded as a skill which many learners have difficulty from the outset. On the other hand, listening to an English-speaking person and understanding is a more crucial skill that needs to be developed since the problems in that area will hinder the learning process. In this action research, the problem of seventh grade Turkish EFL students in listening to each other during play-acting is handled by adding a pre-listening activity before act-outs. The effect of this treatment is tested by comparing the scores from the act-outs with pre-listening stage and without pre-listening stage. The findings show that the students' listening comprehension is positively affected from the treatment.

Key Words: Foreign language teaching, listening comprehension, play-acting

# ÖZET

Yabancı dil öğretiminde, ele alınması gereken birçok bileşen vardır. Programın hedeflerine ya da öğrenenlerin gereksinimlerine göre, öncelikler belirlenmektedir. Yabancı dil öğretiminin başlangıç aşamalarında, konuşma becerisi, birçok öğrenenin en başından beri güçlük yaşadığı beceri olarak değerlendirilir. Diğer yandan, İngilizce-konuşan bir konuşucuyu dinlemek ve anlamak ise geliştirilmesi gereken çok daha önemli bir beceridir çünkü bu alandaki sorunlar öğrenme sürecini aksatacaktır. Bu eylem araştırmasında, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen 7. sınıfta okuyan Türk öğrencilerinin canlandırma etkinliği sırasında birbirlerini anlama problemleri ön-dinleme etkinliği ile giderilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu uygulamanın etkisi ise ön-dinlemeli ve dinlemesiz oyun canlandırmalardan alınan skorlar karşılaştırılarak bulunmuştur. Araştırma bulguları, öğrenenlerin dinlediğini anlama

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yabancı dil öğretimi, dinlediğini anlama, canlandırma

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In the area of language teaching, many theories about the teaching and learning of a language have been proposed. Some methods and techniques lost their impact and replaced by new methods and techniques. Grammar-translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, and natural-communicative approaches are the ones which we can encounter the history of language teaching methodology (Thanasoulas, 2002; Rodgers, 2001; Nunan, 1997). In Communicative Language Teaching which has been favored in the last years, development of communicative, as opposed to merely linguistic, competence, is emphasized. Lessons which have focus on all of the components of communicative competence, not only grammatical or linguistic competence, and which engages learners in the pragmatic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes take place. Role-plays, simulation or other communicative activities gain importance. Because of the greater emphasis on speaking, listening and other skills are neglected in some extent. This is illustrated in a good way by Nunan who says "Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking".

As a skill generally overlooked it should be emphasized much more in the beginning stages of learning a foreign language. At those stages, learners are mostly dependent on listening as in the first language acquisition. If they have problems in terms of listening, the learning process will be affected negatively. The present state in primary schools in Turkey points out that some students have great difficulty in understanding English. In order to come up with a solution for students having problem in listening comprehension, the effect of playacting is tested with 7<sup>th</sup> grade students in this study. The participants of the study are expected to prepare a scenario in pairs or in groups three times a term and necessary feedback on accuracy, spelling, and pronunciation is provided by the teacher. The reason for using such an activity is to make the process more fun. As Livingstone (1983) said, students, especially younger learners, enjoy acting out sketches or short plays for their peers or parents (p.7). Although the activity may not resemble a real speech situation, it is an activity which offers opportunities for real use of the language. Another benefit of this activity is that such kind of plays contextualize the language in real or imagined situations in and out of the classroom and foster a sense of responsibility and co-operation among the students. It is assumed that the students will enjoy acting out such sketches or short plays for their peers and develop a positive attitude towards language learning. As a result, it is aimed at finding a solution for the problem of understanding the target language in this action research.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Two dominant views of listening have took place in language pedagogy over the last twenty years: bottom-up processing view and the top-down interpretation view (Carter and Nunan, 2001). The bottom-up processing model assumes that listening is a process of decoding the sounds that one hears in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts. According to this view, phonemic units are decoded and linked together to form words, words are linked together to form phrases, phrases are linked together to form utterances, and utterances are linked together to form complete meaningful texts. In other words, the process is a linear one, in which meaning itself is derived as the last step in the process. Top-down view suggests that the listener actively constructs the original meaning of the speaker using incoming sounds as clues. In this reconstruction process, the listener uses prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening takes place to make sense of what he or she hears. Context of situation includes such things as knowledge of the topic at hand, the speaker or speakers, and their relationship to the situation as well as to each other and prior events. Nunan states that both of these strategies should be improved and some features of an effective listening course are presented. For example, the use of authentic texts, including both monologues and dialogues, schema-building tasks which precede the listening, the importance of knowing what they are listening for and why, giving opportunities to progressively structure their listening by listening to a text several times, and personalizing content are emphasized.

Mashori (2004) talks about the distinction between 'hearing' and 'listening'. 'Hearing' refers to the listener's ability to recognize language elements in the stream of sound and, through his knowledge of the phonological and grammatical systems of the language, to relate these elements to each other in clauses and sentences and to understand the meaning of these sentences. 'Listening' refers to the ability to understand how a particular sentence relates to what else has been said and its function in the communication.

Listening is also defined in a simple way by Yagang (1993) as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This ability involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning. He also identifies four sources for the difficulty in listening: the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. The message may be the reason behind the difficulty because it cannot be listened to at a slower speed cannot predict what speakers are going to say, or it may include a lot of colloquial words and expressions, ungrammatical sentences because of nervousness or hesitation. The accent of the speaker; redundant utterances such as repetitions, false starts, re-phrasings, self-corrections, elaborations, tautologies, and apparently meaningless additions; pace, volume, pitch, and intonation are the factors related to the speaker. Being not familiar enough with clichés and collocations in English; lack of sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language; lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials and psychological and physical factors are among the ones related to the listener. Background noises may be an example fort he source of difficulty related to physical setting. Thus, live-listening involving an interaction, dialogues may be more difficult than listening to a speaker on news or oral presentation. Similarly, Underwood (1989; cited in Chen, 2005) talks about major listening problems and organizes them in seven class: lack of control over the speed at which speakers speak, not being able to get things repeated, the listener's limited vocabulary, failure to recognize the "signals," problems of interpretation, inability to concentrate, and established learning habits. Dunkel (1991) also discussed the factors that influence success or failure of comprehension of first or second language messages.

Özel (2007) gives information about how listening work and mentions the complexities of listening comprehension in a foreign language. In the foreign language unlike in mother-tongue, learners have limited linguistic knowledge (decoding of the linguistic message; learner's evolving system of the target language); general situational knowledge (language independent; based learner's knowledge of language use in human communication in general); language-specific situational knowledge (what would be said/heard, in the target language, in the specific situation, e.g., leave-taking); general background knowledge (real-world knowledge; factual knowledge; learner's knowledge of the target culture(s) and this make the listening process complicated.

There are many studies which investigates these factors in different contexts. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) investigated the listening comprehension of 388 high-intermediate listening proficiency (HILP) and low-intermediate listening proficiency (LILP) Chinese students of English as a foreign language. Results showed that level of listening proficiency played an important role in the comprehension of the L2 lecture. Both HILP and LILP EFL students benefited from their prior knowledge, but only HILP students benefited from speech modification.

Goh (2000) described 10 real-time listening comprehension problems faced by a group of ESL learners and compared the differences between learners with different listening

abilities. He suggested the direct strategy which aimed at improving perception and strategy use the indirect strategy which aimed at raising learners' metacognitive awareness about L2 listening. He also (2002) examined how a group of ESL listeners processed and managed information through specific tactics that operationalised broad strategies. The findings of the study revealed that the strategy–tactic distinction was useful for a better understanding of qualitative differences in the application of broad strategies and the hierarchic relationships between strategic behaviours during listening.

Bacon (1992) tries to find out how gender differences affect the inclusion of authentic listening and the teaching of listening strategies in the FL curriculum. It was found that men and women adjusted their strategies differentially to the difficulty of the passages and men and women judged their level of comprehension differently.

In addition to defining the problems, Yagang (1993) suggests some solutions to help students master the difficulties. Here are some of these suggestions: Trying to find visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams associated with the listening topics, designing task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills subconsciously, selecting short, simple listening texts with little redundancy for lower-level students and complicated authentic materials with more redundancy for advanced learners, providing background knowledge and linguistic knowledge, such as complex sentence structures and colloquial words and expressions, as needed, closing the gap between input and students' response and between the teacher's feedback and students' reaction in order to keep activities purposeful, helping students develop the skills of listening with anticipation, listening for gist, interpretation and inference, listening for intended meaning, listening for attitude, etc., by providing varied tasks and exercises at different levels with different focuses. He also suggests a variety of exercises, tasks, and activities appropriate to different stages of a listening lesson (pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening).

According to Rees (teacher and material writer in British Council), in our first language we rarely have trouble understanding listening, but it is one of the harder skills to develop in a second language - dealing at speed with unfamiliar sounds, words and structures. He says "Many students are fearful of listening, and can be disheartened when they listen to something but feel they understand very little. It is also harder to concentrate on listening if you have little interest in a topic or situation. Pre-listening tasks helps in generating interest, building confidence and facilitating comprehension. Sui and Wang (2005) support the remarks of Rees and they believe that the passive recorder become an active participant with the knowledge which pre-listening activities have offered because students' anxiety level will be lowered and they will be more confident of bearing certain purposes in mind in advance, and having the competence to decide what they want to do with the text. Zhang (2006) believes that knowing the context of a listening text and the purpose for listening greatly reduces the burden of comprehension.

Vandergrift (1999) explains how listening comprehension can enhance the process of language learning/acquisition, how listeners can use strategies to facilitate that process, and how teachers can nurture the development of these strategies. He suggests incorporating prelistening and post-listening and states that if used consistently, this sequence of teaching strategies can guide students through the mental processes for successful listening comprehension.

Studies show that learners comprehend more of a text if they are familiar with the text from experience or they have known something about the topic before or they know in advance what the listening passage concerns (Lingzhu, 2003). Pre-listening activities help to activate students' prior knowledge, build up their expectations for the coming information and sometimes even give them a framework of the coming passage. In this way we can help our students to comprehend better.

Mueller (1980) focused only one factor which may affect listening comprehension positively and investigated the effects of contextual visuals on recall measures of listening comprehension. Subjects were selected and randomly assigned to an experimental condition (Before, After, No Visual) as intact classes. This study reveals that appropriate contextual visuals can enhance listening comprehension recall for beginning college German students. The effect of visuals on the process of comprehension and on the thing which is comprehended is seen.

### **III. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

In this action research, the problem of seventh grade Turkish EFL students in listening to each other during play-acting will be handled by adding a pre-listening activity before actouts and by limiting the vocabulary used in the scenarios. This solution is preferred because it is believed that pre-listening activity will activate their schemata to some extent, and prepare students for the coming input. Also, some problems in recognizing some words or the possible problems due to unknown vocabulary will be diminished to some extent. As a result, this action research aims at finding whether pre-listening activity before plays and wordlimitation in preparing scenarios enhance listeners' comprehension or not and tries to answer these questions:

1- Do seventh-grade Turkish EFL students perform differently in listening comprehension test after watching the plays with pre-listening and without pre-listening activity?

2- What do seventh-grade Turkish EFL students prefer: the plays with pre-listening and without pre-listening activity? What are the reasons behind their preferences?

3- Do seventh-grade Turkish EFL students believe that word-limitation in play-acting affects them positively or negatively?

#### **IV. METHOD**

#### **1** Participants

Participants of the study are thirty-one seventh-grade students studying EFL at a primary school in Turkey. They are all native speakers of Turkish and majority of them are 13 years of age. All have four years of English language learning at primary school. It can be said that the participants of the study are homogeneous with regard to nationality, language background, educational level and age.

#### 2 Materials

Instruments of the study are five words which are pre-determined by the teacher to make students use in their scenarios (see Appendix A) and four scenarios written by the students in cooperation with the teacher and acted out in the lesson (see Appendix B). Two of the scenarios have a pre-listening activity which includes the presentation of the characters in the play, short information about the event, and the meaning of some words which may not be known by the listeners (see Appendix C). Besides, immediate recall is used to observe the differences in their comprehension of the plays with a pre-listening activity and without a pre-listening activity. Lastly, a questionnaire consisting of only two questions is used in order to learn students' opinions about the treatment (see Appendix D). The blackboard or OHP (if possible) is used for showing the material prepared by the students for the pre-listening stage. The program 'SPSS 15.0 for Windows' is used for statistical analysis.

#### **3** Procedure

The structures 'prefer' and 'would like' and five words (come, drink, afraid or fear, problem, window) are instructed as obligatory and all groups are expected to use them in their scenarios. But they are free in adding other words and structures. One week is given for the preparation of this three-or four minute- play-acting and teacher gives feedback to groups for the accuracy of their sentences and intonation and pronunciation. As different from their

previous play-actings, these groups also prepare a material which includes the presentation of the characters in the play, short information about the event, and the meaning of some words which may not be known by the listeners to show it to their friends by writing on the blackboard as a pre-listening activity. After the presentation of this material, students who are going to listen are reminded that after watching and listening to the play, they are going to write what they've heard and understood so they should pay attention to the conversation, the things said in the play. After first group has completed their act-outs, students listening to them write the things they remembered from the play. A second group is called to the board but their OHP presentation is not shown and they are asked to start their roles. After second group has completed their act-outs, students listening to them write the things they remembered from the play. All students finish their act-outs in the same way and two questions in the questionnaire written on the board and students are asked to write their answers on a blank sheet.

Although all students finish their act-outs during two-hours of lesson time, four plays are chosen to use in the statistical analysis of this research and immediate recalls written for these plays are scored by the researcher. These four plays are chosen due to the similar difficulty and length of the scenarios and two of them are without pre-listening activity (Ghost-Play 1 and Robbery- Play 2) but two of them are with pre-listening activity (Friends-Play 3 and Film-Play 4). For scoring, four scenarios are divided into idea units with another English teacher. Three points are given for the recalls which include most of the idea units of the play (more than half); two points are given for the recalls which include half of the idea units.

#### 4 Data Analysis

First of all, the test of Kolmogorov-Smirnov was used to learn whether scores of students for each play were normally distributed or not. As scores of students for each play were not normally distributed, nonparametric tests were applied. The Friedman Test was used in order to find out whether there were significant differences among the plays, whether students' scores differed from one play to another. Later, the test of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks was used to find out which plays significantly differed from one another. In the questionnaire consisting of two main questions, it is looked at the support of students for using such a prelistening activity, whether they think it is useful or not and their ideas related to word-limitation. The percentage of students who support the changes and who don't support the changes is found.

## V. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Mean and median scores are presented in Table 1 and it is seen that students generally get higher scores from the plays 3 and 4; that is, from plays with a pre-listening activity but there is not too much difference between Play 3 and 4. The scores in the plays with pre-listening activity and between the plays without pre-listening activity don't differ from each other. Yet, students' scores from four plays were compared by using Friedman Test in order to find out whether there were any significant differences among the scores in four plays. Results shows that there was a significant difference among the plays (p<0.001). As a significant difference was looked for by comparing the plays in pairs (Play 1xPlay 2; Play 1x3; Play1xPlay 4; Play 2xPlay 3; Play 2x Play 4; Play 3x Play 4) by using Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test with Benforoni Correction. It was found that there wasn't a significant difference between Play 2xPlay 1 (Z=-1.155, p<0.992) and between Play 3xPlay 1 (Z=-0.333, p<2.956). However, significant differences were found between Play 3xPlay 1 (Z=-3.578, p<0.004); Play 4xPlay 1 (Z=-3.624, p<0.004); Play 3xPlay 2 (Z=-3.416, p<0.004); Play 2x Play 4 (Z=-3.947, p<0.004).

	GHOST Play 1	ROBBERY Play 2	FRIENDS Play 3	FILM Play 4
Median	2.00	2.00	3.00	3.00
Minimum	1	1	1	1
Maximum	3	3	3	3
Mean	1.74	1.74	2.65	2.68
Std. Deviation	0.656	0.764	0.629	0.548

Table 1Descriptive Statistics

These findings provide the necessary evidence to answer the first research question. In the direction of the findings, it can be said that students' listening comprehension is positively affected from the treatment and they performed differently in the test after watching the plays with pre-listening and without pre-listening activity. To be able to answer second and third research questions, students' answers to two questions in the questionnaire were evaluated. It is clearly seen that students like the plays with pre-listening activities. Thirty students from thirty-one students prefer the plays with pre-listening activities to the plays without pre-listening activities. While %97 of the students supports the use of pre-listening activity, only %3 of the students doesn't support it. On the other hand, word-limitation is supported by twenty-six students from thirty-one students. Although it doesn't reach to high percentages as the use of pre-listening stage, %84 of the students supports the word-limitation.

When it is look at the reasons for preferring the use of pre-listening activities or for supporting the use of word-limitation, similar reasons are generally given by most of the students. They generally state that writing information related to the play helps them in understanding the play. They also say that the words written on the blackboard and the presentation of the characters, the summary help them following the play without difficulty (see Appendix E). One student Ş. D. even says that if the summary and words weren't written on the board, he would not understand anything and he would not want to watch. Some students compare the plays with pre-listening and the other without pre-listening and say that they understood better in the ones with a presentation on the board but not in the other plays. Some students say that they can improve their vocabulary knowledge by this way. Only one student doesn't prefer the use of pre-listening because he thinks that everything can be understood in the play and there is no necessity to give information about the play on the blackboard but the characters may be presented before the play.

The ones who support the word-limitation say that it helped them while writing the scenarios because sometimes they can get lost while trying to create a scenario. Some of the students say that it was like a consolidation and they may not forget these words and use them in daily life when necessary. Also, some students say that they helped them in understanding the plays because everybody was using them and they were ready to hear these words. However, the emphasis isn't generally on its effect on understanding each other's plays but on the writing process of the scenarios. Its effect on students' listening comprehension is not mentioned so much as in the pre-listening treatment. The students who don't support the word-limitation generally state that these obligatory five words limited their creativity and imagination; they could create better plays without word-limitation.

The findings of this study support the positive effect of pre-listening treatments (Lingzhu, 2003; Vandergrift, 1999; Zhang, 2006). If the students have prior knowledge about the thing they're going to listen, their comprehension and their attitudes change in a positive way. In addition, the pre-listening activities are like triggers, especially for the students who are at the beginning level and they prevent these students from losing their ways in the act-

outs. The students who have the necessary prior knowledge can make sense of what they hear as stated in top-down view of listening.

# VI. CONCLUSION

It is mostly possible to overcome the students' problem in understanding each other in play-acting by the use of pre-listening stage. The positive comments of the students show that the use of pre-listening stage help them in understanding and make them more motivated during these play-actings. Although word-limitation is supported by the majority of the class, its effect is too limited in understanding when compared to the use of pre-listening. Thus, it may be used in some such kinds of plays but it may not be used all the time. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that play-acting is an enjoyable activity which helps students improve their speaking and listening skills and activating students' background knowledge is a helpful strategy to be used in foreign language classes and it is like a prerequisite for beginning level students. Different ways can be followed in order to activate students' prior knowledge in listening or reading activities, so effectiveness of different techniques can be searched in further studies.

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# Appendix A

1-come 2- drink 3- afraid or fear 4- problem 5- window Appendix B

#### FRIENDS

Benu: 1×1/ho is H? Feyma: I'm Seyma Bonu: Wielcome Bonu: Who is it? Seyma: Thork you. Bonu: Who is it? Seyma: I'm seegrep Bonu: Who is it? Seyma: I'm weeke Benu: Welcome Meeve: Thorks Bonu: What would you like to denk? Aleeve: Thorks Bonu: Welcome Meeve: Yes. Meeve: I have a peoblem Meeve: Yes. Meeve: I have a peoblem Meeve: My cola is too cold . But like it waem Bonu: Okay Seyma: I 'm veey based Feyma: I 'm veey based Som: Okay Bonu: Okay Bonu: Okay Bonu: I peeper elt chalet to dismosted Seyma: I 'm veey based Soma: I'm veey based Soma: Dia is too all of the amusement poe Bonu: Okay Bonu: I peeper elt chalet to dismosted Seyma: I'm u u Meeve: Jes, jes Meeve: I want to go to the amusement poe Bonu: Okay Bonu: I peeper elt chalet to dismosted Seyma: I'm u u Seyma: I'm u Seyma: I'm u u Seyma: I'm u Seyma: I

# Appendix C

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= CHARACTERS =
Bonu, Zeynep, Seyma, meere =7Friends
=Place=
House and anwsement poek
= Overview:
Tour ferends meet and go to a anusement poek
work .
unservent poeks luna poek
dismay train; koeku treni
elfchalet, peerli kösk
get ongey: kizabilie
worm; ilik
```

Characters Isra, Mergem, Sayta Striends Place House

Three frends come together and start watching a frim.

bring = getirmek turn off = kapatmak det's = Haydi afraid = korkmak

# **Appendix D**

Oversen

**Question 1:** Tahtaya oyunun karakterlerinin, özetinin yazılıp bilinmeyen kelimelerin verilmesini mi yoksa hiçbir şey olmadan oyuna başlanmasını mı tercih edersiniz? Neden? ( Do you prefer seeing the characters, summary and new words of the play on the board or starting the role-plays without these?Why?)

**Question 2:** Beş zorunlu kelime verilmesi sizi nasıl etkiledi? Diğer oyunlar da olmasını ister misiniz yoksa istemez misiniz? Neden? (How did giving five obligatory words affect you? Do you want to have such words in other plays or not? Why/Why not?

**Appendix E** 

Tohtaje yoziluoni tercin ediyorun çonku bilnedrginiz bir kaline alyor ve tiyotro Sohnedi balunuyor moziluyordu kalinelari bildriinizde gayet coh gunel antaarını kalinelare gerince bez keline voil di oro gare hazırladık barce etkiledi cinku 5 keline aluenaya bir tac keline bulunur barit alundu ana 5 kaline bulundığu için tiyotra han biçinil han de cok güzel alduğuna inanyarını bu ralplayar de yoptiğiniz akin güzel aldu barce çonku burların etki azyle cok güzel tiyotrala bir yaptığınız seyler bara alumlu geldi harkevede alumlu geldirgini düzünüyorun çünkü harkev anladı ve hazladık bu ralplayerda alumlu yanuclar verde artık bayle yophanız gereklirgini disünüyorun hap de bayle sımasını fistiyanı tasekviler'i...

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Tahteya bilgilerin youlmasını tercih ederim. Güntü bilmediğinniz kelimeler olabilir ve tahtaya yozıldığındı kelimelerin onlomnı onlomiş oluruz. Beyle duncada tiyatroler daha onlavılır ve eğlenceli hole gelir. İzlediğim seyi onlomak bona zevk verir. Jeni seyler eğrenmiş elurum. Vermiş olduğunuz beş telimeşe gelime bence pek bir elumsuz etkisi olmadı. telimesiz yopsiyalik olaha sectrut, geniş eynerdik. Ama bu kelimelerek beynimizi biraz yormanıza yordancı ada diye düşünüşerum.

leria guntarindan faela birgey antonadia. Ama Earollorn, Yunuslarin ayunlarından çok keyif aldım. Bilmediğim ketimeleri tahtabaktim. dan

# 5 kelime vernerisin byvik foydas older lünki aklimzab herren bir gyva ger-Geklesti Kelime vrihmerey di konnyu düşü menniz läzimdi Grünlerce roller estalemenniz gerekirdi:

