

Have we remained strangers to English? University Students' Views of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

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The delivery of instructional practice in the teaching of English at Turkish primary and secondary schools is considered problematic for a variety of reasons. This qualitative study aimed to explore this situation from the perspective of pre-service teachers enrolled in eight programmes at the faculty of education at a Turkish state university assuming that the participants would provide valuable insights based on their fresh language learning experiences and their emerging pedagogical content knowledge. For this reason an open-ended survey was developed. Seven hundred and sixty-two pre-service teachers responded, and semi-structured interviews with six participants were conducted. The results show that a considerable number of the participants appreciated the learning of English as valuable for their personal and professional development, but the actual use of English in their own lives was limited. Pointing to a variety of reasons for ineffective instruction of English in Türkiye, the participants stressed flawed methodology, neglect of skills-based instruction and lack of extracurricular activities as hindrances to strengthen the learning of English in Türkiye. The results call for improvements in teacher education and attempts to disseminate the importance of extracurricular activities to strengthen instructional practices and the status of English in Türkiye.

INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Türkiye is not satisfactory (Arık, 2020; Çapan, 2021; Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021; Kürüm, 2024; TEPAV, 2014). Although English is generally recognized as the lingua franca for communication in the globalised world (Rose & Galloway, 2019) and, therefore, proficiency in English is accepted as a prerequisite to benefit from and contribute to economic, scientific, and social development, Türkiye belongs to the group of low proficiency countries, ranking 65th among 116 countries according to the results of a standardised international test taken by around 2.1 million adults (English First, 2024). Various studies conducted in the context of the Turkish educational system support this finding pointing to “the reality ... that very few students are able to achieve even basic communicative competency even after about 1,000 hours of English lessons” (TEPAV, 2014, p. 83). This observation is associated with a variety of reasons linked to both institutional factors referring to formal language instruction and typically restricted opportunities of using the language in countries where English is not the environmental language (Bolitho & Rossner, 2020).

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Against this backdrop, this study attempted to reveal the English learning perceptions and practices of pre-service teachers studying at the faculty of education of a Turkish state university. Employing a survey with open-ended questions and interviews, the study aimed to shed light on the current situation of English language teaching (ELT) from the perspective of a group that gains from rather fresh experiences in secondary schools and is in the process of acquiring pedagogical content knowledge, which would add a dimension to existing studies on the situation of ELT in Türkiye. The following sections review recent studies on formal instruction and extracurricular opportunities as well as challenges of English learning in Türkiye.

Problems in Formal Instruction

A growing body of research shows that the Turkish educational system suffers from interacting unfavourable conditions that impede the successful delivery of ELT. For one thing, teachers and learners are faced with crowded classes, a low number of lesson hours and teaching materials, that are perceived as inappropriate for teaching and learning English (Çapan, 2021; Çolak, 2023; Küçükbesleme & Öztürk, 2024; Maden, 2024; Yücel et al., 2017). Demir-Ayaz et al. (2019), for example, found out in their study with high school teachers and learners that unsuitable equipment of schools (e.g., lack of language labs and libraries) along with overcrowded classes and limited class hours that do not allow sufficient language practice are perceived as detrimental to arrive at effective instructional practice. A further problem reported is the prevailing equipment of classes with fixed seating arrangements that do not encourage teachers and learners to engage in pair or group work as validated forms in communicative language teaching (CLT) (Yıldız, 2020).

Regarding instructional materials, Aydın (2024) notes that local coursebooks to be used at secondary schools follow grammar-driven approaches and contain inauthentic samples of English with limited exposure to language used for communicative purposes and, thus, diminished opportunities of practice, thereby neglecting learner needs for English to be used beyond classrooms. In a similar vein, other studies point to the insufficient preparation of learners to practise the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021), to engage in activities simulating international communication (Atar & Cahit, 2020; Guerra et al., 2020; Rathert, 2023) or to be equipped with 21st century skills (Güney et al., 2024) when locally produced coursebooks are used.

Connected to the problems in teaching materials, methodological approaches that teachers base their classroom instruction on have been identified as critical. Teachers often do not follow validated methods that are supported by the principles of CLT (i.e., to teach for communicative purposes by engaging learners in communicative activities); instead, they stick to grammar-focused and coursebook-led instruction (Çapan, 2021; TEPAV, 2014; TEPAV, 2015; Yücel et al., 2017). In short, English instruction delivered at Turkish schools suffers from transmission-based teaching that does not prepare learners to navigate in the globalised world (Altan, 2017; Kurt, 2024).

This problem has been explained with the washback effect of examinations and insufficient teacher education and development. The implementation of major exams (e.g. LGS, YKS, YDS) in multiple-choice test format not only reinforces non-communicative language instruction, but also prohibits the measurement of learners' abilities to use language in communicative situations, and even reduces English proficiency to a key to enter a higher education institution (Polat, 2020). As Maden (2024) adds, there is no compulsory English test as part of the nationwide university entrance exam, even though English is taught from primary to high school, which furthermore diminishes the status of English. Both the test format and the comparative insignificance of English contradict state school curricula that ask teachers to teach

communicative skills following the principles of CLT (Küçükbesleme & Öztürk, 2024; Tuzcu Eken, 2021).

There have been attempts to strengthen the position of English in the Turkish educational system by, for example, starting instruction in Grade 2, implementing English as medium of instruction in tertiary education or adjusting language teacher education (Çakır, 2017; Kırkgöz, 2007, 2009; Köksal & Ulum, 2018; Yaman, 2018). However, the implementation of innovative practices that are likely to lead to higher English proficiency of Turkish learners is challenged by several constraints closely linked to teacher education. Pre-service teacher education is perceived as too theory-driven and insufficient to prepare teacher candidates for the teaching practice (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019), and reducing them to technicians whose role is to transmit language rules to their learners (Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2019), even though there are attempts to provide them with a more practice-oriented first teaching experience (Mutlu-Gülbağ, 2024; Simsek-Rackelmann, et al. 2024).

Moreover, in-service teachers need to be better supported to put curricular innovations into practice (Tekir & Akar, 2019). An example is the introduction of technology in classrooms within the framework of the FATİH project that was not sufficiently prepared through teacher development to familiarise teachers with the use of this kind of technology (Karakaş, 2021, p. 77; TEPAV, 2014). Yıldız and Savaşçı (2024) made similar observations in their study on teachers' challenges in teaching English to young learners as some teachers report that they are confronted with their own unfamiliarity of implementing educational technology into their teaching, and learners who are distracted from lessons because of digital media. The interviewed English language teachers in Demir-Ayaz et al.'s (2019) study expressed their demands for attending international workshops and seminars to get informed about recent trends in ELT methodology. As a further critical aspect, it has been noted that the importance of English may not be recognized by school principals (Çelik & Kasapoğlu, 2014).

These issues are connected to more fundamental challenges the teaching profession in Türkiye is faced with as shown both in large and small scale studies. Comparative international studies reveal that the low cognitive abilities of Turkish teachers are linked to lower student performance (Hanushek et al., 2019). Efforts to implement more inquiry-based in-service programs and to move away from the traditional top-down approach to training appear conducive to dealing with prevailing challenges, but they need to be strengthened (Ceylan & Comoglu, 2024; Özer & Suna, 2023; Şahin, 2025). In their recent study with 13 ELT teachers located in urban and rural areas in Türkiye, Bütün Ikwuegbu and Harris (2024), showed that all their study participants tended to reflect at a technical level (i.e., how a faced challenge in the ELT classroom can be tackled using simple options that are sparingly informed by pedagogical concerns), while only a few engaged in practical reflection (more elaborate plans to arrive at an intended goal by, for example, trying out different techniques) or emancipatory reflection (thinking of multiple solutions to language learning problems by, for example, end-of-year shows with their learners serving the practice of language skills instead of memorising and learning rules). Teachers' ability to engage in critical reflection trained in self-assessment session helps them raise "awareness about their pedagogical knowledge, behaviours, and their role in the teaching and learning context" (Almacioglu & Yalcin Arslan, 2024, p. 488), so that they can engage in instructional practices that are more likely to facilitate language learning as they are calibrated against learning objectives and the learning environment.

The circumstances summarised above are unlikely to help learners acquire English successfully as teaching is constrained by problematic learning environments and grounded in flawed

methodological approaches so that it exerts negative effects on learners. Since the assessment practices in centralised language exams do not adequately cover the mastery of language skills, learners consider the use of language for communicative purposes, that is by speaking, writing and listening, in particular unimportant, which leads to a decrease in interest in English among learners (Aydın, 2024). Several studies confirm this reporting that learners have no incentives to learn English, their motivation to learn English is reduced (e.g. Çapan, 2021), or they are demotivated by unconvincing instruction (Yetkin & Özer-Altinkaya, 2024). For example, Niğdelioğlu (2018) reports that high school students associate the learning of English with negative feelings because it is perceived as challenging and boring even though they recognize the significance of English as a tool to be used in a variety of communicative situations. This perception is corroborated through the feeling that there is little progress when students enter different levels of schooling as the same grammar points are overly repeated without focusing on skills development (Çapan, 2021). In line with this observation is the learning loss generated through long summer holidays in which learners do not engage in language learning (Kayır & Özçelik, 2018).

What is more, learners are affected by the fear of making mistakes and to be derided for their low performance, especially as they believe their accents do not meet native-speaker standards (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021). While, on the other hand, students who receive more intensive instruction in English develop more positive attitudes towards English (Akyol, 2019), language learning experiences are often disappointing for many students because they remain at a “anlıyorum ama konuşamıyorum” (“I can understand but I can’t speak”) level (Kırkiç & Boray, 2017, p. 17).

Extracurricular Language Learning and Use

Türkiye is an EFL context that does not provide learners with extended opportunities to use the language outside classrooms (Yaman, 2018). In spite of its visibility in popular culture, the instrumental function of English is limited to the areas of formal education, tourism and internationally operating businesses, so that exposure to and production of English are of minor importance to large parts of Turkish society (Arık, 2020; Zok, 2010). However, generalisations about the role of English in Türkiye need to be avoided. For example, the exposure to social media or cultural artefacts of some kind (cf. Arik & Arik, 2020) differs between generations as well as urban and rural areas, which indicates that opportunities to exposure to and use of English vary, and the ongoing globalisation with its advancements in technology have initiated dynamic developments that prospectively generate greater opportunities to exposure to English outside classrooms in Türkiye (Saeed, 2024).

More closely related to formal instruction, extracurricular activities (Albayrak & Şener, 2021) and opportunities to learn the language in exchange programmes (Solak & Bayar, 2015; Yaman, 2018) indicate that language learning not confined to classrooms can compensate for the shortcomings of the current delivery of English in formal instruction. However, benefitting from extracurricular activities is not a matter of fact, especially for learners coming from families with lower socio-economic status, as these groups do not have the financial resources to take advantage of out-of-class learning activities (for example, offered in private schools) or have not developed awareness of the significance of English as a necessity to pursue career opportunities in the globalised world (Tok, 2010; Tosun, 2022).

Social media have been recently inspected to figure out their potential for foreign language learning (Reinhardt, 2022). A growing body of research points to the transformative nature of social media (and devices necessary to use them) as they can be integrated into formal instruction, thus blurring the distinction between curricular and extracurricular language learning (Matsumoto, 2021; Reinhardt, 2024). Some studies in the Turkish context (Birgün &

Polat, 2023; Bozavlı, 2017; Koç & Ayık, 2017; Taş & Uğurlu, 2019; Tuğlu, 2023) explored the integration of social media for language learning purposes indicating that learners, rather than focusing on the structure of the language, engage in learning by using the language, thereby appreciating the entertaining and motivating nature of this resource. However, learners, teachers and parents may not have developed an understanding of the potentials of social media as learning materials because they perceive them rather as tools for entertaining than for the assumed serious issue of language learning (Bozavlı, 2017; Blume, 2019).

The Study

The overview shows that the situation of English as a foreign language in Türkiye is not satisfactory, and problems are related to a variety of factors. While there is a body of literature in the field, the current study was driven by the intention to extend and refine insights gained in previous studies in terms of scope, participant selection and methodological approach (cf. Cash, 2018, p. 89). First, the study draws on a data collection tool that combines various aspects of the research interest in concern ranging from the responders' incentives and current practices to learn English to their views on instructional practices in formal instruction and out-of-school opportunities along with their recommendations. Second, to explore the situation in more depth, this study intended to reveal the views of pre-teachers studying at a Turkish university in various academic departments. Among the participants were ELT pre-service teachers who have a direct connection to educational concerns. The views of pre-service teachers in other disciplines were considered valuable because they have experiences as language learners, they can reflect on the topic with their increasing pedagogical knowledge, and English may be relevant for them when they consider participation in international student exchange programmes or postgraduate studies. The study therefore aimed to contribute to the understanding of English learning in Türkiye from the perspective of university students with different backgrounds – an area that has not been researched extensively yet. Third, the study draws on an examination of the views of a large sample of study participants (n=762) through collecting qualitative data that is both analysed qualitatively and converted into quantitative values—based on the assumption that the sample would allow some generalisation (Cash et al., 2022; Hochwald et al., 2023; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What role does English play for the pre-service teachers?
 - a. What do they do to improve their English?
 - b. What areas of language use (skills) do the participants find important for their own learning?
2. If any, what challenges do the participants identify in the teaching and learning of English in Türkiye?
3. What do they suggest to address identified challenges?
4. If any, what are the differences in the views between participants whose studies are related to English (ELT students and English Preparatory students) and whose studies are not related to English?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design as the data collected were in the form of narrative responses (Creswell, 2009). It is a survey study (Julien, 2008) that employs open-ended questions on a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to explore the views of pre-teacher students on the situation of English language teaching in Türkiye. The study was supported by a research programme for undergraduate students by TÜBİTAK.

Participants and Context

Employing a purposeful sampling strategy, the participants were pre-service teachers and English preparatory students (upcoming ELT pre-service teachers) at a Turkish state university. It was assumed that the participants were information-rich cases that would provide explanatory answers to the research questions (Patton, 2014). Approximately 1850 students enrolled in the faculty of education and 100 students in the English Preparatory programme were invited to participate in the study.

Seven hundred and sixty-two students (591 female and 171 male) participated in the survey. The mean age of all participants was 21.3. Of these, 81 participants were enrolled in the Science Teaching programme, 129 in the Mathematics Teaching programme, 101 in the English Language Teaching programme, 80 in the Pre-school Teaching programme, 68 in the Psychological Counselling and Guidance programme, 80 in the Primary School Teaching programme, 100 in the Social Sciences Teaching programme, 93 in the Turkish Language Teaching and 30 in the English Preparatory programme. Regarding the years of undergraduate education, 30 participants were preparatory students, 230 freshmen, 182 sophomores, 171 juniors and 149 seniors.

Furthermore interviews were conducted with six students who agreed to take part. Table 1 gives an overview of the interview participants.

Table 1

Interview participants

Participant number	Sex	Age	Department	Study year
1	female	18	English	English Preparatory Programme
2	female	21	Pre-school	3
3	female	21	Primary	3
4	male	21	English	2
5	male	36	English	4
6	female	22	English	4

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data was collected with two data collection tools in two stages. The first data collection tool was a questionnaire that had been developed for this study. The language of the instrument was Turkish. Based on the research aim and informed by studies on the situation of English teaching in Türkiye, the authors started to generate questions. With an awareness of the need to keep the number of questions low because too many questions would negatively influence the participants' willingness to respond, piloting encompassed the following steps: The views of

two academicians in the faculty of education on an early draft were gathered. The modified questionnaire was then delivered to ten students who would not participate in the study to test whether the questions were intelligible and elicited explanatory data. After further modifications had been made, the questionnaire was evaluated by an academician in the department of Turkish Language Teaching. Additionally to the questions related to the research questions, the questionnaire asks for information about sex, age, enrolled programme, year in the undergraduate programme and proficiency level based on self-evaluation. The questionnaire was delivered online over Google forms. The administration of the faculty of education and the school of foreign languages declared they would share the link to the questionnaire over various channels used by the target population (e.g., WhatsApp groups used to communicate information delivered by the faculty/school of foreign languages). The piloted version of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix A.

The second data collection tool was a semi-structured interview. The aim of the interview was to undertake a deeper qualitative investigation by examining cases. Adopting a sequential approach of mixing qualitative methods (Hennink et al., 2020), the interview questions were generated based on the preliminary results of the questionnaire. This means that the analysis of the data generated in the questionnaire started during the data collection, as the researchers were able to identify recurrent themes that appeared to be significant for the research interest and should be explored in individual semi-structured interviews. Even though a thoroughly conducted piloting of the interview guide was not possible, two members of the faculty of education were consulted to evaluate and review the questions. Participants who considered attending the interview were given the opportunity to provide contact information in the questionnaire. All participants who provided contact information were contacted by the researchers, and six participants finally agreed to participate in the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were administered over a videoconferencing tool (Zoom). The interviews were conducted in Turkish. The interview questions are presented in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

In this study, written and recorded data were collected. Recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim following simple transcription conventions proposed by Dresing et al. (2015, pp. 27-33). To analyse the data, content analysis was employed. The data analysis was performed in several steps. First, the student-researchers and the supervisor repeatedly read through the data to get familiarised with the content. Then inductive coding was applied. Structural coding, i.e., coding with a focus on the research questions was performed (Saldaña, 2009, pp. 66-67). At later stages initial codes were assembled to coding categories and emerging codes tested. Finally, the established coding categories were grouped into themes. Frequencies for coding categories were counted to compare views of ELT students (in the preparatory and the undergraduate programme) with those of other disciplines (Syed & Nelson, 2015, p. 384).

To consider validity and reliability in data collection and analysis procedures, the following steps were taken considering that the study was supported within a programme for undergraduate student research. The supervisor (the third author) introduced the two student-researchers (undergraduates in the English Language Teaching programme at the university) to coding procedures at the beginning of the data analysis. They coded parts of the data together, and the students then coded other parts of the data set individually. Results of these individual coding sessions were compared in feedback sessions under the guidance of the supervisor. The collaborative sessions also covered the generating of coding categories and themes. Apart from introducing the student-researchers to qualitative analysis, the individual coding with following

sessions to compare results also strengthened the reliability of the study results because inter-rater reliability was catered for. The coding procedures applied to both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview data. It should be noted that also the piloting of the questionnaire (see above) was performed in close collaboration between the supervisor and the student-researchers not only to introduce the undergraduate students to research procedures but also to determine the validity of the instrument.

Regarding the administration of the semi-structured interview, the supervisor provided training sessions to the student-researchers. The training covered issues like avoiding leading questions, establishing rapport, showing empathy, thanking interviewees for participation at interview beginning and end, ethical issues, and active listening instead of reading a list of questions.

The Ethics Committee approval for this study was provided by the Institutional Review Board in Social Science and Humanities at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University (Number: E-72321963-903.99-191736, Date: 18.01.2023).

RESULTS

These sections are organised in the following way. After displaying the results on English language proficiency based on self-assessment, the participants' current use of English is shown. This is followed by the participants' incentives to use English. Then, the pre-service teachers' views on current problems of ELT in Türkiye are explored along with their recommendations on how to address identified problems. In the sections, frequencies are shown in figures along with voices from the questionnaire and the interviews to exemplify views of the participants. P refers to participants in the online survey, I to participants in the semi-structured interviews; numbers are research internal ID numbers.

Reported English Language Proficiency

To arrive at an understanding of the language proficiency of the pre-service teachers, the participants were asked to report their language proficiency. The results are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Reported Language Proficiency (All Participants)

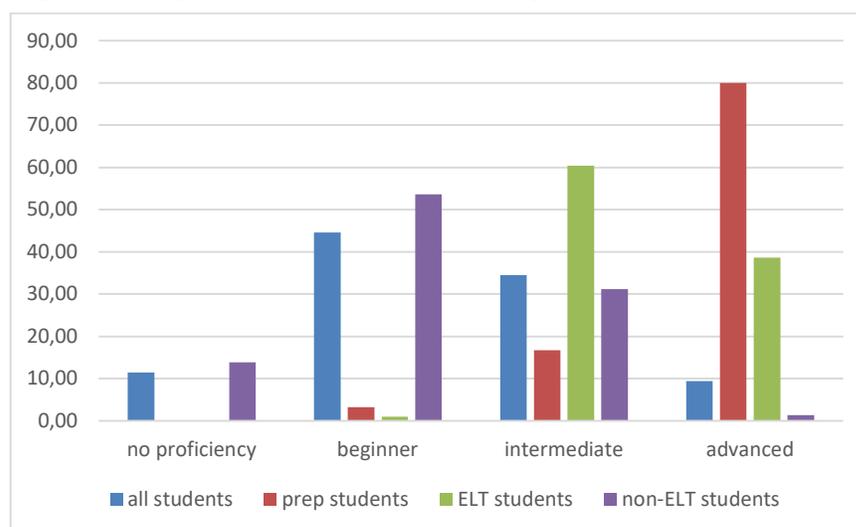


Figure 1 shows that the pre-service teachers' reported proficiency strongly related to their majors. While the English preparatory students and ELT students expectedly reported higher

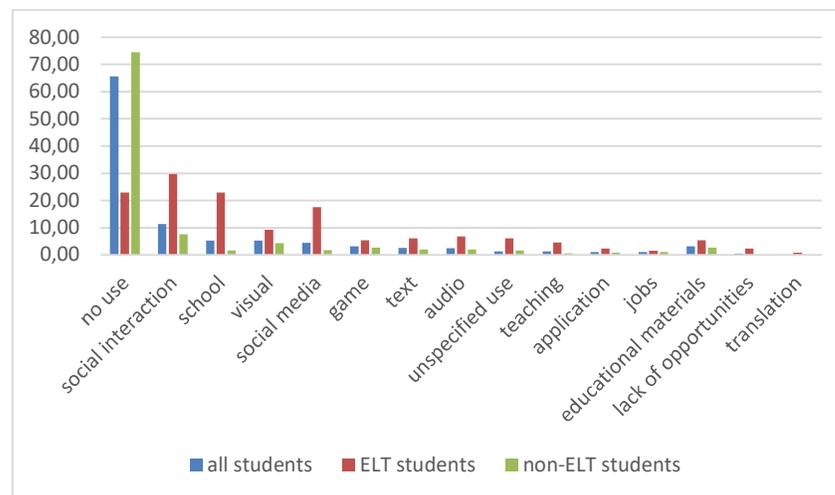
levels of proficiency, around 50 percent of the students in other departments identified themselves at beginner level and around $\frac{1}{3}$ of this group at intermediate level. All students who stated that to have no proficiency came from this group. It is noteworthy that more than 60 percent of all pre-service teachers reported language proficiency not higher than beginner level.

Current Use of English

Figure 2 shows the reported use of English. The data analysis revealed 15 different uses (or non-uses) of English among the participants. The participants were able to report more than one use.

Figure 2

Current Use of English Reported



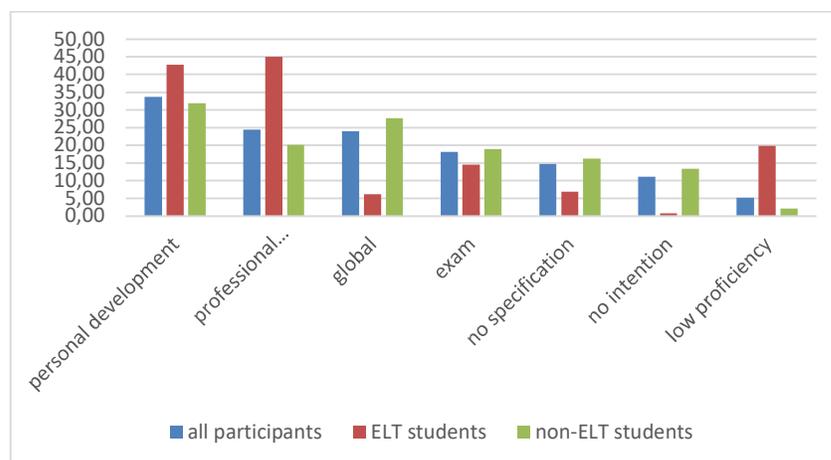
As shown in Figure 2, more than 70 percent of the non-ELT students did not use English. This corresponds to the proficiency levels reported (Figure 1). The ELT students (both students enrolled in the English Preparatory Programme and majoring in ELT) differed significantly as only approximately 20 percent stated that they do not use English, while they used English for some kind of social interaction including social media, audio sources (e.g., podcasts, songs), games and videos (e.g., YouTube). However, the reported uses were rather low with only social interaction and social media mentioned by more than 10 percent. Also, uses to learn or practise the language (applications and educational materials) were rather infrequently mentioned.

Reasons for Improving English

Asked for their reasons to improve their English, the pre-service teachers referred to seven domains in their responses. A participant's multiple answers were possible. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Reported Reasons for Improving English



Asked for reasons to improve their English, the participants stated that they wanted to develop personally and professionally. Given the fact that English was going to be a part of their future profession, it is not surprising that the ELT students—compared to the other students—highlighted not only their need to develop professionally but also were apparently more aware of their need to reach a proficiency level conducive to fulfilling their professional duties adequately:

I will become an English language teacher and want to become a qualified teacher in this field. I think it is important to speak the language proficiently when teaching it. (P12)

Another ELT pre-service teacher linked this view to the domain of personal development:

I would like to speak more fluently. There is no end to learning the language, we can develop ourselves continuously. That is because English is not our mother tongue and it is an area of life-long learning. (P13)

This connection of improving English to address both needs to develop personally and professionally was also stated by a pre-service teacher majoring in Turkish:

It is necessary for academic advancement. Moreover, I also believe that language learning is useful for my plans to travel abroad in the future. (P33)

It is interesting to note that more non-ELT students referred to the need to improve English as it is the global language. A student majoring in the Psychological Counselling and Guidance programme reflected on this stating:

Under today's conditions, having proficiency in English is as important as in our mother tongue. Knowledge of the general culture, academic advancement, travelling abroad and the likes require improvement in English. (P163)

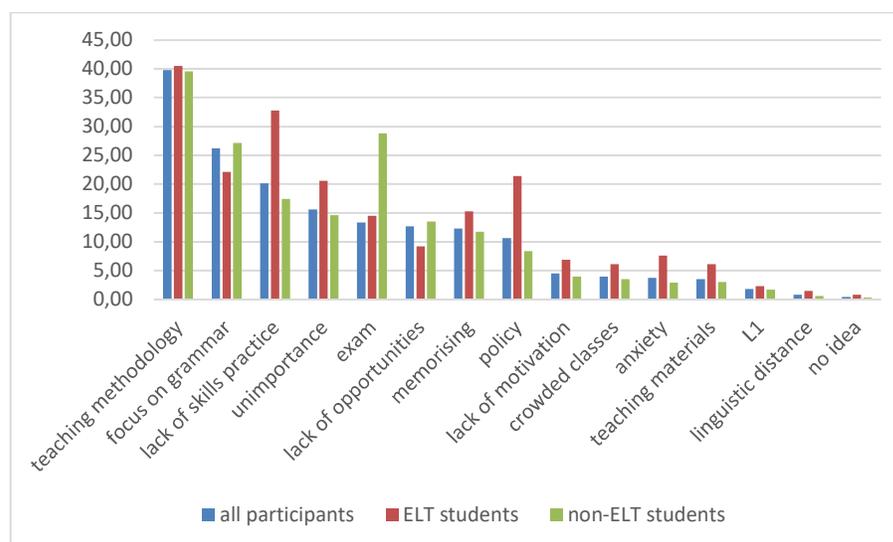
Against the backdrop of the reported language proficiency and the current use in the data, it seems plausible to assume that the incentives the participants had did not lead into the actual practice of English to develop personally or professionally.

Reported Reasons for Current Problems of ELT in Türkiye

Figure 4 shows the reported reasons for challenges in the successful delivery of English education in Türkiye. A variety of reasons were reported, but many of them were rather infrequently mentioned.

Figure 4

Reported Reasons for Current Problems of ELT in Türkiye



Examining the reasons for shortcomings in the promotion of English language learning in Türkiye, the majority of both groups referred to shortcomings in the delivery of English teaching in formal instruction, that is, inappropriate methodology, a focus too strong on grammar and too insufficient on the skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading, as well as memorising. A preservice teacher summarised this saying that *there is a lack of practice and everything remains theoretical* (P102), so that learners *try to pass exams by memorising what they have learned from coursebooks* (I3). An ELT student even reported that she had never practised speaking until university (I6). A pre-service teacher in the Psychological Counselling and Guidance programme summarised this reporting that in

the lesson, only basic grammar information is transmitted. Practically, we don't do any speaking. The students do their homework using Google Translate. Without consolidating the grammar knowledge, we learn heavy grammar at high school but I don't remember any of this content... I think there are serious problems in the methods applied. It is tried to teach English like mathematics or physics. (P146)

As some of the participants stated, this situation was due to unqualified teachers who follow teaching practices that do not consider the need for inductive grammar teaching (P151) and, consequently, demotivate students in crowded classes (P163) or create classroom atmospheres in which opportunities of speaking English are provided but learner contributions *are ridiculed so that one decides to remain silence and not to speak* (I2). An ELT student described how the low level and uncommunicativeness of the English taught in class has an impact on teachers and then again on their teaching:

Teachers' proficiency is sufficient to teach the language... The teachers know English, but over the years, their skills, I mean, for instance, speaking, writing, deteriorate as they do not activate them... and this has a negative impact on their proficiency... This causes problems for students as they learn wrong pronunciation of words, for example, and can't get rid of it. (I4)

As a general observation, it is clear that the participants were aware of the fact that identified challenges do not emerge in isolation but are interconnected. In the following excerpt, the

participant elaborates on the interplay of crowded classes, examination and memorising, which violates intended outcomes of implementing speaking exams to make instruction and assessment more communicative:

We are conducting very short speaking exams. Because there are too many students at school and the number of lesson hours is too restricted, we are forced to give our students dialogues before the exam. Because of exam anxiety they memorise the dialogues at home and attend the exam. Memorising is something that I don't like at all. Why? They do not learn [the language] deeply. A student doesn't learn but memorises. It has a negative effect on the acquisition of English or German. (I5)

This voice of this ELT student (I5) with experience as a teacher of German as a foreign language at state schools points to the problem of not furthering the learners' proficiency in spite of receiving lessons from Grade 2 to 12 due to unfortunate conditions. In the same direction, a pre-service teacher enrolled in the Social Science Teaching programme recalled her own English learning history:

I want to improve my proficiency but it doesn't work by learning grammar only. Throughout my life as a learner, I see that all learners receive English lessons, but the outcome is getting stuck at beginner level. I have tried to learn English not at school but based on my own efforts. I gave up hope at high school ... one needs to find out why the children want to learn English but can't speak it. (P449)

The participant voiced her desperation about the dominating grammar-based teaching that does not allow learners to proceed, as it ignores learners' intentions to actually use the language for communicative purposes. Indeed, a student from the Pre-School programme shared her frustration that

in many countries learners start to speak and write in English quite successfully... While in other developed countries learners manage to communicate in English, in our country even undergraduate students can't speak English and - including me - push English into the background. (P355)

Considerably less than the ELT students, non-ELT students pointed to current forms of examination as hindrances to improve the proficiency of language learners. On the other hand, more than 20 percent of the ELT students rendered language learning policies influential on current problems, while this was considered by less than 10 percent in the other group.

It is noteworthy that some students connected current problems with the status of English in Türkiye. A pre-service teacher enrolled in the Primary School programme noted that

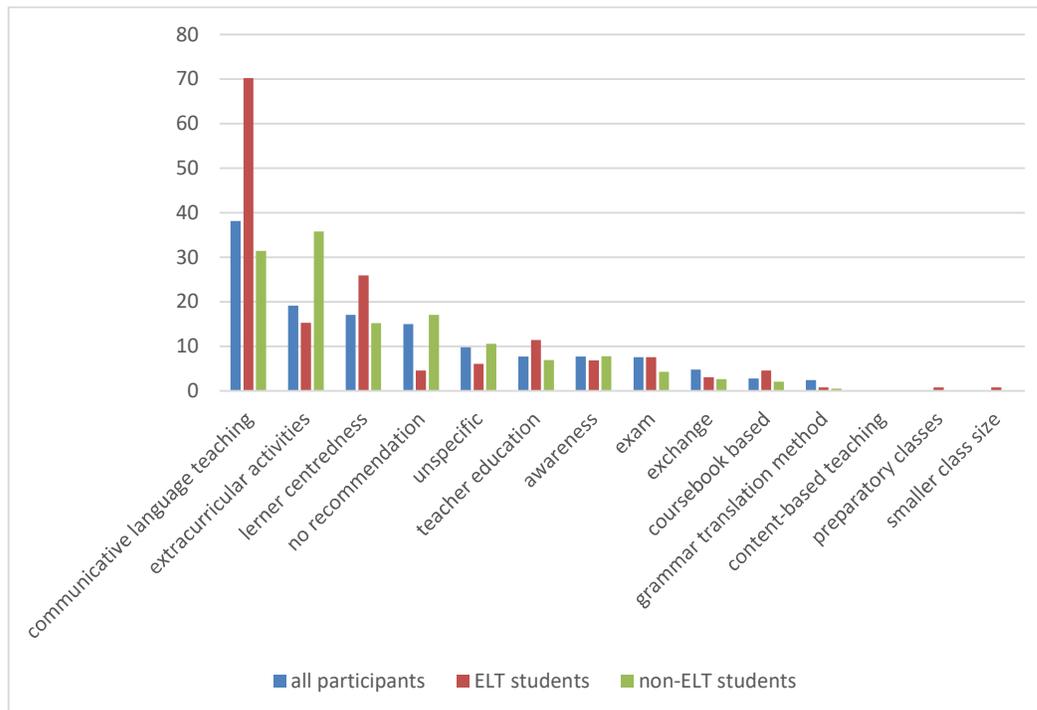
learning English, because it is not used as a second language in our lives, is not considered a compulsory task... For that reason no one gives importance to English in education (P624)

Recommendations to Address Identified Challenges

In line with the reasons for current problems of ELT in Türkiye identified by the participants, the responses call for teaching methodologies calibrated against the validated principle of CLT. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Recommendations to Address Current Problems of ELT in Türkiye



It is notable that the participants, especially the ELT students, pointed to the need to foster teaching practices based on CLT; related to these recommendations are calls for learner-centeredness and coursebook-based instead of coursebook-led deliveries of instruction and content-based teaching, as this method belongs to the group of CLT methods. Fewer answers in this direction by non-ELT students can be explained with their lower familiarity with methods in foreign language instruction. Several participants pointed out that the skills of speaking and listening needed to be given priority as well as the use of films and songs as well as gamification as components in instruction in order to reduce coursebook-driven and exam-focused teaching practices.

By nature, the call for CLT-informed instructional practices is connected to teacher behaviour in the classroom. An interview participant narrated her high school experience:

For example, when I asked my teacher for help he followed a method that I now understand is good as he didn't help me but said, 'find it out, find the answer yourself, go and do search on your own'. For that reason, I didn't like my teacher. And for that reason, the lesson was ineffective... At that time I found his methodology wrong but I think it wasn't the method, I just didn't like the way he said that... but now I find it more reasonable. (I1)

Her narration pinpoints the challenge that validated teaching methods that foster learner autonomy and discovery learning may provoke resistance when they do not align with conventionally applied and therefore expected teaching and learning traditions. It should also be noted that, especially in the interviews, the participants referred to teachers in their own learner history that either encouraged them to take up the endeavour of learning English through supportive behaviour or discouraged them by sticking to grammar-based teaching or having learners memorise content to pass exams.

The second most frequently expressed recommendation was the fostering of extracurricular activities, to which the call for more exchange programme opportunities can be associated. However, recommendations concerning the wider institutional context (exams, preparatory classes, class size) were rather infrequently considered. Of these voices, the following comment of an ELT student summarises perceptions expressed in the data:

The ministry of education needs to allocate a larger budget and decrease the class sizes. If we want to strengthen English teaching, we need to abstain from considering English as an examination-based school subject and, instead, give students the perspective that it is a tool for communication. (P513)

To achieve a situation in which English is transformed into a tool for communication and its status at schools, one of the interviewees (I5, an ELT student with experience of teaching German at state schools) reflected on the possibilities to establish preparatory classes at middle schools and delivering classes in arts, music and physical education in English, that is to utilise forms of Content and Language Integrated Learning to address current problems.

Both given suggestions and narrated experiences point to the value out-of-class opportunities for learners beyond classroom walls but not necessary outside the school context:

I think of something that I believe is more related to young adults. There are these speaking clubs that I've seen a lot. They are more for learners older than 18 but for younger learners, for example 8 graders, a library could be established or a speaking club... where they can meet once a week under the condition of only speaking English. (I3)

Several participants also pointed to social media and applications to enrich language instruction and to widen opportunities for language learning. This is in line with the participants' reports on how they improve their English (Figure 2). Yet, reference to learning by making use of digital technology does not dominate the responses on the participants' initiatives to improve their own proficiency or their stated recommendations.

Finally it should be noted that there was a considerable number of students who had no recommendations or stuck to unspecific answers, such as *more effective teaching* (P157). This result along with the other responses reflect the complex situation of ELT in Türkiye along with the challenge of finding solutions to address it.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the current situation of ELT in Türkiye based on the views of pre-service teachers enrolled in eight programmes at a faculty of education and an English language preparatory programme in a Turkish state university. Based on 762 responses in a survey with open-ended questions and six semi-structured interviews, the study revealed that, in spite of rather high self-reported language proficiency, English does not play an eminently significant role for the participants as a tool for communication in their academic studies or social life. Expectedly, ELT students (those enrolled in the faculty's programme and in the preparatory programme) stated, along with higher proficiency levels, that they used English more than students in the other programmes. The fact that more than 60 percent of the non-ELT students reported no use of English suggests that the role of English in Türkiye is still too restricted to exert an impact as an engine to develop Turkish learners' proficiency in English (Arik & Arik, 2020; Yaman, 2018). Accordingly, each of the incentives to learn English to develop professionally and personally was stated by less than 50 per cent of the pre-service teachers, and the significance of English as a global language (Rose & Galloway, 2019) was not recognized by the study participants, surprisingly even less by ELT students, maybe because

they took it for granted. In line with Kır and Temiz (2024) and in the light of the other results pointing to the perceived weaknesses of ELT practices in Türkiye, it can be assumed that exactly these limitations in the English language education prevent pre-service teachers from developing an awareness of English as a global language.

In their explanations for identified shortcomings of teaching English at Turkish schools, the participants referred to ill-informed methodological approaches, as also documented in other studies (e.g., Altan, 2017; Çapan, 2021, Yıldız, 2020; Yücel et al., 2017). A specific focus was on the neglect of teaching skills, especially on the teaching of speaking (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021). Both participant groups, non-ELT and ELT teacher candidates highlighted these issues in their responses, and it can be concluded that their progressing expertise as students in the faculty of education helped them to spot these pedagogical issues.

It is clearly evidenced in the data that learning English is constrained as it is reduced to a subject that needs to be memorised to be presented in exams. This shortcoming makes it necessary for those who learn English to pass multiple-choice exams that test solely vocabulary, grammar and reading to learn English later again, this time for oral and written communication in out-of-school contexts; this finding is even more concerning as Turkish learners have received a large amount of instruction in primary and secondary schools (Maden, 2024). The pre-teachers' views also corroborate the insight that mainly grammar and reading-focused instruction, in particular with the aim of passing tests, does not effectively facilitate language learning as the language is not internalised through communicative practice (García, 2014; Levine, 2020), so that it is not surprising to read in the data that the same content is started from again and again at the beginning of a school year. Accordingly, the frustrating experience of ongoing repetition of lesson contents without considerable progress was rather frequently reported by the participants (cf. Çapan, 2021). Based on their enhanced familiarity with CLT, the ELT pre-service teachers more often highlighted the lack of CLT-informed practices in current English language teaching in Türkiye.

In line with these voices, there were instances in which the participants criticised the coursebook overreliance in current instructional practices at Turkish schools along with the neglect of digital, authentic media to be utilised both in and outside the classroom that impedes deep learning (Gerlach & Lüke, 2024; Kırmızı Ayyıldız & Akkuş Çakır, 2022). This necessitates augmenting teacher agency to enact teaching practices that are grounded in pedagogical consideration (Almacioğlu & Yalcin Arslan, 2024; Bütün Ikwuegbo & Harris, 2024).

Corresponding to the identified reasons for current problems of ELT in Türkiye, the participating pre-service teachers—considerably more pronounced in the ELT pre-service teachers' responses—called for the application of techniques associated with CLT. It is also obvious that the responders highlighted the role of teachers to arrive at more effective and engaging language instruction (Butzkamm, 2005), and they issued concerns about the language proficiency of ELT teachers in Türkiye (cf. Rezalou, 2024). Indeed, some pre-service teachers pointed out that lack of expertise in enacting skills training leads to low teacher proficiency in English, which, in turn, has a detrimental impact on their learners' proficiency (TEPAV, 2014, 2015). That said, institutional conditions and the wider educational framework as evidenced in examination conventions seem to direct English teachers towards instructional practices that jeopardise the enactment of CLT-informed instruction and coerce them into transmission-based teaching (Altan, 2017; Demir-Ayaz et al., 2019; Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2019; Yıldız, 2020). Recently, Simsek-Rackelmann et al. (2024) pointed to pre-service teachers' experience of being

exposed to mentor teachers who stick to traditional, grammar-focused instruction during the teaching practicum, which may guide them towards imitating “undesired teacher behaviours and sustain them in their teaching, continuing the cycle” (p. 15).

The importance of extracurricular activities (i.e., out-of-class or out-of-school activities) was considerably referred to by non-ELT students, however to a lesser extent by the ELT students (Albayrak & Şener, 2021). While the potential of non-educational sources to contribute to language learning, in particular social media, was mentioned by the participants, it seems that the affordances of such kinds of extracurricular opportunities is not well recognised by the participants. In short, the data suggests that the ongoing turn in the conceptualisation of (digital and non-digital) non-educational materials and activities as a potential to facilitate language learning needs to be disseminated to all stakeholders in education including learners, pre- and in-service teachers, principals, parents and teacher educators (Reinhardt, 2022, 2024; Zhang et al, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Against the background of the results of this study, three main recommendations are made. First, it is recommended to strengthen the teaching of English in Türkiye by stronger efforts in pre-service and in-service training to help teachers apply CLT-informed instructional practices. As CLT is driven by the conviction that the ability to use language for communication is best acquired when learners are involved in activities in which they have to use language for communication, this recommendation seems inevitable. This includes the need to shift away from coursebook-based teaching, and pre-service and in-service teacher training that shows teachers ways of making their instruction more communicative, thereby motivating learners who, in turn, motivate their teachers (Kaya & Ergül, 2025).

Second, extracurricular activities should be fostered (Albayrak & Şener, 2021; Tuğlu, 2023). This includes activities organised by teachers at school but also the promotion of in particular digital non-educational sources that learners can benefit from to improve their English. Maybe surprisingly, given the age group of the study participants, the responses did not extensively report on the utilisation of social media (videos, social media over which communication with international speakers with English as the lingua franca can be realised) (Reinhardt, 2022). It is the task of educators in pre-service and in-service training to make teachers aware of the potential of sources that have been designed for entertaining purposes to facilitate language learning (Blume, 2019; Matsumoto, 2021; Rathert & Cabaroğlu, 2024; Reinhardt, 2024).

Third, as a considerable number of the study participants—students enrolled in programmes in a faculty of education—reported that they did not use English, academic teachers at university, also ones who do not teach in departments related to English language teaching, can promote the status of English by using sources in English in their own teaching. Connected to this issue, as the value of academic exchange programmes was comparatively rarely mentioned by the study participants, serious attempts to disseminate and expand such kinds of programmes is indicated given their value to address, for instance, speaking anxiety and lack of speaking proficiency (Çınar & Altay, 2025) or to advance the proficiency of teachers along with strengthening their teacher identities (Akkuş Çakır & Ünlü, 2024) as problems highlighted in the data. However, current economic challenges in Türkiye seem to thwart measures in this direction (Tok, 2010; Tosun, 2022). Yet, particularly given the dominating role of English in academia and beyond, advancing the status of English through instructional materials in English and internationalisation of teaching and learning practices in primary, secondary and tertiary education seems inevitable (Rose & Galloway, 2019).

These recommendations need to be evaluated considering the limitations of this study. For one thing, the study drew on self-reports that were taken as a proxy to inform about the reality of English language teaching and learning in Türkiye (cf. Brinkmann, 2013). By nature, self-reports are filtered through the responders' perceptions and, therefore, may not render a full and accurate account of the situation under investigation, and they cannot replace studies in which the teaching and learning realities are directly observed. Nevertheless the researchers believe that the high number of participants in their study reduces the danger of drawing a distorted picture of the situation in Türkiye.

Furthermore, it would have been preferable to have more responses from senior students (19.6 percent of the participants in this study). The teaching practicum is part of the 4th grades higher education curriculum for students enrolled at faculties of education in Türkiye. Receiving more data from this group and putting it in relation to related studies (e.g., Simsek-Rackelmann et al., 2024) would enrich insights into the situation of ELT in Türkiye as views based on observations experiences during the practicum would add additional perspectives to the field of concern.

Finally, the study was conducted with a cohort studying at one university. Providing views of pre-service teachers from other universities, especially from those where English is used as the medium of instruction would strengthen and possibly modify the results presented here.

In spite of these limitations, the researchers believe that the current study is informative as it reports on valuable views of participants who were informed by both their rather fresh English language learning experiences and their developing pedagogical content knowledge.

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Appendix A

1. Günlük hayatınızda İngilizce kullanıyor musunuz? Cevabınız evet ise hangi durumlarda kullandığınızı açıklayınız.
2. İngilizce öğrenmek ya da mevcut seviyenizi geliştirmek istiyor musunuz? Neden?
3. Ülkemizde, ilköğretimde başlayıp liseden mezun olan bir öğrenci, yaklaşık 1300 saat zorunlu İngilizce eğitimi almaktadır. Ancak yapılan araştırmalara göre, öğrencilerin büyük bir kısmının bu eğitimin sonucunda İngilizce iletişim becerilerinin yetersiz olduğu görülmektedir. Sizce bunun nedenleri neler olabilir?
Vereceğiniz cevapta lütfen okulda aldığınız eğitim ile ilgili okul şartları (örn. fiziksel ortam, sınıf mevcudu, öğretmen, materyaller) ve ders programı dışındaki İngilizce kullanma imkanlarını dikkatine alınız.
4. Ülkemizdeki İngilizce öğrenimini güçlendirmek için çözüm önerileriniz nelerdir?

Appendix B

1. Öğrenim hayatın boyunca İngilizce dersine giren öğretmenleri düşünmeni istiyorum.
 - a. İyi bir İngilizce öğretmenin var mıydı? Lütfen anlatır mısın?
 - b. Dersi verimli geçmediği bir öğretmenin var mıydı?

2. Hangi öğretmenın ders anlatım teknikleri senin için daha uygundu? Hangi öğretmende dersi daha iyi anladığını düşünüyorsun? Neden? Hangi dersler senin için verimsiz geçti? Neden?
3. Genel olarak, İlköğretim ve ortaöğretim boyunca aldığın zorunlu İngilizce dersleri senin için verimli miydi?
 - a. Öğretmen dışında neler İngilizce dersleri verimli kıldı?
 - b. Öğretmen dışında neler İngilizce dersleri verimsiz kıldı?
4. İngilizce öğrenirken dinleme, konuşma, yazma ve okuma becerilerini geliştirmek için nasıl çalışmalar yaptın veya hala yapıyorsun?
5. (ELT öğrencilerine) Üniversite eğitiminin seni gelecekteki mesleğimize iyi hazırladığını düşünüyor musunuz?
6. Sence İngilizce öğretmenlerinin İngilizce seviyesi yeterli mi?
7. Sence İngilizce öğretmenlerinin kullandığı metotlar uygun mu?
8. Verilerinizi analiz ettiğimizde İngilizce kullanım imkanlarının olmamasının büyük bir sorun olduğunu gördük. Kahramanmaraş'ta diyelim ki bir 8. sınıf öğrencisinin İngilizce kullanabilmesi için nasıl fırsatlar yaratabilirsiniz?
9. Verilerimiz sınav sisteminin daha etkili bir dil öğretimi için engel olarak algılandığını göstermektedir. Katılıyor musun? Hangi modifikasyonları önerirsiniz?