



From Perceptions to Policy: Unpacking Systemic and Socio-Ecological Roots of False Beginner Identity in University Level EFL Education in Türkiye

Algıdan Politikaya: Türkiye’de Üniversite Düzeyinde Yabancı Dil Eğitiminde Sözde Başlangıç Düzeyi Öğrencisi Kimliğinin Sistemik ve Sosyo-Ekolojik Kökenleri

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Abstract: False beginner learners—students who are (re)placed in beginner-level English despite years of prior study—are often miscast as lazy or incapable. This study re-examines false beginner identity in university level EFL education in Türkiye through Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological lens by focusing on how multi-level conditions and their accumulation over time shape learner trajectories. Drawing on qualitative data from 130 students in pre-sessional English programs, thematic analysis reveals patterned misalignments across levels—macro (exam-driven incentives that sideline English), exo (curricular recycling, limited differentiation), micro (demotivating peer/family cultures and test-passing over communicative use)—with effects accumulating over time. Rather than a learner deficit, false-beginner status appears as an ecological product of cross-level fragmentation. Policy and practice implications include aligning assessment with CEFR-referenced communicative outcomes, implementing diagnostic placement that respects prior learning, and adopting spiraled, skill-based curricula with task-based, digitally supported exposure. The study also outlines a socio-ecological alignment framework (SEAL) which specifies coordinated actions across policy signaling, progression architecture, pedagogy, proximal supports, and continuous improvement. This reframing positions learner stagnation not as personal failure but as evidence of systems in need of structural coherence and cultural reevaluation.

Keywords: False beginner, ecological model, EFL, language policy, learner perceptions

Özet: Sözde başlangıç düzeyi öğrencileri—yıllarca İngilizce dersi almalarına rağmen üniversitede yeniden başlangıç seviyesine yerleşenler—çoğu zaman tembellik ya da yetersizlikle damgalanır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de üniversite düzeyindeki yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenme bağlamında sözde başlangıç kimliğini Bronfenbrenner’in biyoekolojik merceği ile ele almakta; çok düzeyli koşulların zaman içinde birikerek dil öğreniminin seyrini nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce hazırlık programlarına kayıtlı 130 üniversite öğrencisinin verilerine dayanan tematik analiz, düzeyler arasında uyumsuzluk örüntülerini-makrosistem (İngilizceyi ikincilleştiren sınav teşvikleri), egzosistem (müfredat tekrarı, sınırlı farklılaştırma), mikrosistem (akran/aile kültürlerinin motivasyonu düşürmesi ve sınav odaklılık) göstermekte ve bu etkilerin zaman içinde biriktiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, sözde başlangıç durumunun bireysel eksiklikten ziyade ekolojik bir ürün olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Politika ve uygulama önerileri; CEFR ile hizalanmış iletişimsel çıktılarla değerlendirmenin uyumlandırılması, önceki öğrenmeyi dikkate alan tanılayıcı yerleştirme, sarmal/beceri-temelli müfredat ve görev-temelli, dijital destekli iletişimsel etkileşim ve anlamlı kullanım fırsatlarının ders tasarımına entegrasyonunu içermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca politika sinyalleme, ilerleme mimarisi, pedagoji, yakın çevre destekleri ve sürekli iyileştirme eksenlerinde eşgüdümlü eylemleri belirleyen bir Sosyo-Ekolojik Hizalama Çerçevesinin (SEAL; *Socio-Ecological Alignment Framework*) ana hatlarını çizmektedir. Bu yeniden çerçeveleme, dil öğrenimindeki durgunluğu bireysel başarısızlık değil, yapısal bütünleşme ve kültürel yeniden değerlemeye ihtiyaç duyan sistemlerin yansıması olarak konumlandırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sözde başlangıç düzeyi öğrencisi, ekolojik model, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, dil politikası, öğrenci algıları

1. Introduction

“False beginner” status—where learners who have received years of prior English instruction are nonetheless (re)placed in elementary-level classes and are described as beginners—has been repeatedly documented in university-level EFL

education, including in Türkiye (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Thomas, 2006; Turanlı, 2009). In applied linguistics usage, false beginners typically display fragments of prior knowledge (e.g., basic grammar terminology, alphabetic decoding, formulaic expressions) without stable control over foundational communicative competencies. Crucially, the label indexes a mismatch between accumulated exposure and functional proficiency rather than a complete absence of prior learning (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Although such learners are often portrayed as unmotivated or under-talented, a growing body of work points to structural explanations such as policy priorities, curricular (mis)alignment across educational stages, assessment regimes marginalizing communicative competence, and socio-cultural valuations of English that shape learner trajectories and identities (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Pavlenko & Malt, 2011; Schmid & Jarvis, 2014; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012; Zhang & Yusof, 2024).

To foreground these systemic rather than individual-deficit accounts, this article adopts Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective to theorize how multi-layered environments jointly configure the conditions under which false-beginner identities are produced, stabilized, or potentially dismantled (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Tudge et al., 2009). These environments include families and peer cultures (microsystem), school/classroom practices and institutional routines (exosystem), and national discourses and high-stakes policies (macrosystem), unfolding over time (chronosystem). It also draws on the "language policy-as-practice" lens to connect learner experience with how policies are interpreted and enacted in situated settings rather than merely written in official texts (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). Together, these perspectives enable a socio-ecological reframing of the problem: rather than asking why learners "fail," the study asks how nested systems come to recycle learners back to the beginning.

1.1. Background and Conceptual Framing

Research on stagnation and apparent regression in additional language learning has moved beyond purely cognitive explanations (e.g., forgetting, interference) toward contextual and institutional determinants (de Bot, 1997; Schmid & Jarvis, 2014; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). In the Turkish EFL ecology, English has historically occupied an ambivalent position, valued symbolically yet often peripheral in accountability structures. This has yielded classroom practices that prioritize grammar explanation and testable form over cumulative communicative development (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Schöpfer-Grabe, 1998). When curricula lack vertical articulation, cohorts repeatedly "restart" from alphabetic or beginner content, which normalizes cyclical beginnings and erodes agency (Schöpfer-Grabe, 1998; Turanlı, 2009). Within Bronfenbrenner's terms, this pattern reflects misalignment *across* systems: macrosystem signals (e.g., stakes attached to English) shape exosystem routines (e.g., syllabus design, placement), which feed into microsystem cultures (e.g., peer ridicule for speaking, limited family affordances), with effects compounding over the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge et al., 2009).

1.2. Research Gap

Despite frequent institutional encounters with false-beginner cohorts in Türkiye's university preparatory programs, the phenomenon has seldom been theorized through an *explicit* socio-ecological lens that connects learners' narrated experiences to (a) national assessment priorities and language policy discourses, (b) institutional placement/track practices and curricular recycling, and (c) family/peer meaning-making around English. Prior studies either document classroom-level difficulties or discuss policy in the abstract, which leaves the *linkages* that bind macro-signals, exo-practices, and micro-cultures into a self-reproducing cycle under-specified. (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Schmid

& Mehotcheva, 2012). Thus, addressing this gap can reposition learner voice as evidence about how policy is *lived* (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007).

1.3. Aim and Research Questions

Responding to this gap, the present study investigates how Turkish university students *perceive* the systemic and socio-ecological conditions that underwrite their recurring placement in beginner-level English. It also explores how these perceptions might inform policy and institutional design. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and policy-as-practice, the study asks:

1. Which systemic (exosystem/macrosystem) and socio-ecological factors do students identify as shaping their false-beginner status in university-level EFL learning?
2. How can these learner accounts inform targeted reforms (policy, curricular alignment, assessment, and support structures) for more sustainable progression?

By articulating cross-level dynamics and centering learner interpretations, the study reframes false-beginner identity as an *ecological product* rather than an individual shortcoming by laying conceptual groundwork for the analysis, discussion, and policy recommendations that follow.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design with a phenomenological orientation to understand how students *experience and make meaning of* recurring beginner placement in English despite long prior exposure (van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology prioritizes lived experience and meaning structures, differing from similar methods like grounded theory, which seeks to inductively build a substantive theory through constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2. Participants and Context

Participants were 130 first-year university students enrolled in pre-sessional EFL learning programs at two competitive state universities in Türkiye. All had received English instruction during primary and secondary education but were placed into elementary-level courses following university placement testing. A purposive, maximum-variation sampling strategy was used to capture heterogeneity in perceived causes and experiences across academic departments, prior school types, and gender. The two institutions were selected because they share a selective intake and a common preparatory purpose while drawing from different regional catchments. Although a sample of 130 is larger than is typical for interview-based phenomenology, the present dataset comprised short, open-ended written narratives, which are suitable for qualitative thematic analysis at larger scale. Thematic sufficiency was monitored during analysis, and the full corpus was retained to examine negative cases and to check the resonance of themes across subgroups, while avoiding any implication of statistical generalization (Singer & Couper, 2017; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

2.3. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were gathered using a semi-structured written questionnaire containing two broad, open-ended prompts designed to elicit personal and external attributions for restarting English at university after long prior study. To minimize language-related barriers and allow authentic expression, prompts were administered in Turkish during scheduled class

time, and participation was voluntary following informed consent procedures facilitated by instructors. The two prompts were intentionally broad so that responses could naturally invoke microsystem issues (such as family, peer culture, and learner stance) and exo- or macrosystem issues (such as classroom routines, institutional placement practices, and policy signals). There was no formal pilot due to timetable constraints; however, two EFL instructors reviewed item wording for clarity and coverage. For transparency and future replication, an expanded six-prompt protocol aligned with ecological levels is provided in the Appendix A: SEAL Narrative Protocol (SEAL-NP) which is not used in the present dataset but may be helpful for future studies.

2.4. Data Analysis

The analysis followed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) procedures in six iterative phases: familiarization with the corpus, generation of initial codes, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and naming, and analytic reporting. Responses were translated into English with attention to preserving pragmatic meaning. Coding proceeded in a hybrid manner. A deductive scaffold indexed Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels so that excerpts could be situated at micro-, exo-, and macro-levels as appropriate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Although the bioecological model includes a mesosystem, we treated mesosystem relations (e.g., home–school–peer links) as cross-level connections rather than a separate analytic category. Chronosystem, in turn, was addressed by analyzing patterns of accumulation over time. Inductive coding then captured emic content emergent from the data. Inductive themes were subsequently mapped to the ecological scaffold, and excerpts were flagged as cross-level where linkages were explicit. Two analysts independently coded an initial tranche in order to develop a shared codebook, after which the codebook was iteratively refined as coding progressed. A third researcher acted as a peer debriefer on challenging excerpts. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and negotiated agreement, and an audit trail of codebook versions and decision memos was maintained. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, emphasis was placed on analytic transparency rather than on mechanical reliability coefficients. Nonetheless, areas of disagreement and their resolution were documented (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Participants received study information, anonymity assurances, and the right to withdraw at any time. Their written informed consent was obtained. The study involved adults in a non-intervention educational context and followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011).

3. Findings

Participants' responses revealed that their repeated re-entry into beginner-level English classes was not simply a consequence of individual aptitude or effort, but a reflection of interlocking systemic, institutional, and social forces. These factors are best understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model, which organizes learners' environments into macro-, exo-, and microsystemic domains. Each level uniquely contributes to the learners' experience, but together they form a reinforcing system of stagnation. Tables 1 through 4 summarize the data across these domains, and the narrative elaborates on each thematic grouping. The study presents themes top-down (macro → exo → micro) to reflect how system signals materialize as institutional routines and shape proximal cultures. Temporal accumulation is synthesized in subsection 3.4.

3.1. Macrosystem-Level Perceptions: Educational Ideologies and Systemic (Mis)alignment

Learners recurrently located causes at the system level, especially in the signaling produced by high-stakes tests and wider social narratives. Many participants perceived that the university entrance examination (UEE) ecosystem deprioritized English, which encourages strategic neglect across secondary schooling: *“They told us to study for the university exam. English was not part of that, so we all ignored it.”* (P07). In parallel, students noted that English was often perceived as a prestige skill, relevant only for elites or international travelers: *“In my town, people think English is only for rich people who go abroad. It’s not for us.”* (P54)

These ideologies fostered a widespread belief that English was culturally distant and practically unnecessary, particularly in regions where access to qualified teachers or language-rich environments was limited. Table 1 below summarizes the institutional and systemic challenges that reflect this macrosystemic positioning.

Table 1

External Educational Factors

Subcategory	Representative Statements	Frequency (f)
Institutional & Instructional Challenges	Same content repeated every year; lack of synchronization	55
Performance-Based Pressures	System prioritizes UEE performance over real learning	40
Type of School	Public high schools teach English superficially	20
Teacher-Related Issues	English teachers were unmotivated, unsupportive, or ineffective	20

Note. Counts are descriptive (for transparency) and not used for statistical inference; qualitative prevalence terms are used in the narrative.

Table 1 underscores macrosystem pressures most often named by students, particularly Institutional & Instructional Challenges (f=55) and Performance-Based Pressures (f=40). These frequencies point to system-level signals that deprioritize communicative competence and license curricular repetition across years. In turn, they configure the institutional routines examined at the exosystem level in Section 3.2.

3.2. Exosystem-Level Perceptions: Institutional Practices and Curriculum Delivery

In the exosystem, participants pointed to curricular repetition, lack of differentiation, and resource poverty. Many students shared how English was taught in a rote, test-driven manner, which often caused restarting every year with the same basic topics regardless of prior knowledge: *“Each year, English started with the same topics: the alphabet, greetings, basic grammar. I felt like we were going in circles.”* (P31). Moreover, some students described inadequate or unengaging classroom materials, which rarely extended beyond the textbook: *“We only had grammar books—no videos, no conversations, no interaction.”* (P19)

Teacher quality was also variable. Some participants reported that their English teachers lacked subject-specific training or motivation. Additional exosystemic influences—especially regarding social materials and peer interactions—are also reflected in Table 2, which highlights the environmental conditions in which English learning occurs.

Table 2

External Environmental Factors

Subcategory	Representative Statements	Frequency (n)
Family Environment	My family couldn’t help me; they didn’t speak or value English.	17
Peer Influence	My classmates made fun of English or discouraged practice.	12
Learning Materials	Only low-quality books were used; no interactive resources.	6
Societal Attitudes	Society doesn’t take English seriously; it’s seen as unimportant.	16

Note. Counts are descriptive (for transparency) and not used for statistical inference; qualitative prevalence terms are used in the narrative

Table 2 summarizes environmental constraints that co-occur with exosystem practices—most notably Family Environment (n=17) and Societal Attitudes (n=16), alongside Peer Influence (n=12) and Learning Materials (n=6). These conditions translate distal priorities into everyday teaching, reinforcing repetition and limiting meaningful differentiation. Unsurprisingly, they inform the microsystem dispositions detailed in Section 3.3, where visible use of English is often discouraged.

3.3. Microsystem-Level Perceptions: Family, Teachers, and Peer Culture

In learners' immediate environments, responses underscored emotional, behavioral, and motivational barriers. Many students shared how their families neither supported nor valued English learning, reinforcing systemic disregard: *"My parents never learned English, so they couldn't help me. They said, 'Focus on math instead.'"* (P72)

Several students pointed to peer-based ridicule and a broader classroom culture of avoidance or sabotage when it came to English participation: *"When I tried to speak English in class, my friends laughed and said I was showing off."* (P10)

Learners also expressed internalized defeat, formed through years of passive instruction, lack of practice, and repetition-induced disengagement: *"I memorized grammar just to pass the class. I never tried to speak it."* (P46)

These patterns are captured in Tables 3 and 4, which reflect both students' internalized beliefs (attitudes) and their observable behaviors (practices).

Table 3

Individual Attitudinal Factors

Subcategory	Representative Statements	Frequency (n)
Cognitive Attitudes	English is forgotten quickly; it's better to start from scratch.	11
Evaluative Attitudes	I didn't care about English in school; I disliked the subject.	50
Behavioral Attitudes	I studied English only for exams and avoided real practice.	10

Note. Counts are descriptive (for transparency) and not used for statistical inference; qualitative prevalence terms are used in the narrative

Table 4

Individual Practical Factors

Subcategory	Representative Statements	Frequency (n)
Lack of Effort & Revision	I didn't study English regularly or revise what I learned.	40
Lack of Practice	I never practiced English outside the classroom.	20
Limited Use of Tools	I didn't watch films or read books in English.	20
Low Readiness	I lacked basic knowledge and exposure.	8
Lack of Motivation	I wasn't keen or motivated to learn English.	6
Procrastination	I postponed learning English, thinking I would start at university.	5

Note. Counts are descriptive (for transparency) and not used for statistical inference; qualitative prevalence terms are used in the narrative

Read together, Tables 3 and 4 show that negative evaluative attitudes (n=50) and lack of effort and revision (n=40) dominate the internal landscape. These micro-level patterns reflect the internalization of exo- and macro-level constraints, consolidating minimal engagement and test-proximal habits. This consolidation provides the bridge to Section 3.4, where the compounding effect of cross-ecological misalignment over time is made explicit.

3.4. Cross-Ecological Insight: The Compounding Effect of Misalignment

While the findings across ecological layers reveal distinct challenges, they also illustrate a compounding, cross-level effect. In the current reporting, mesosystem denotes links across immediate settings. These links are integrated as cross-

level connections in this synthesis rather than in a standalone subsection. For example, when grammar-heavy instruction and annual restarts (exosystem) meet limited encouragement or know-how at home and peer sanctioning of visible English use (microsystem), and are amplified by national signals that English is low-stakes or “for others” (macrosystem), learners experience a cumulative drag across years (chronosystem). This layered misalignment leads to demotivation, self-doubt, and a cycle of restarting: *“In every school I went to, we started English from the beginning. Teachers thought we knew nothing. After a while, I started believing that too.”* (P)

Accordingly, the problem is systemic rather than individual: macrosystem incentives that sideline communicative competence tend to materialize as exosystem routines (re-beginning syllabi, form-focused pacing) which then shape microsystem cultures (ridicule for speaking, weak family affordances), reinforcing avoidance over time. Breaking this loop requires synchronous action across levels—macro policies that value and assess communicative growth, exosystem placement/progression that recognizes prior learning and embeds guided digital exposure, and microsystem supports (family/peer mentoring, classroom norms legitimizing use)—so that home, school, and society align vertically instead of resetting learners to the beginning.

4. Discussion

Consistent with the bioecological framing, our results indicate that the persistence of “false beginner” identity in university-level EFL education in Türkiye reflects the *interaction* of forces distributed across macro-, exo-, and micro-systems over time, rather than a deficit located in individual learners. At the macrosystem, the perceived low stakes of English in the university entrance ecosystem and the broader social narrative that English is “for others” appear to license long-term strategic neglect. This aligns with accounts of how national discourses and accountability structures shape local practice and learner identity (Doğançay-Aktuna & Kızıltepe, 2005; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). The participants’ narratives mirror international observations that when communicative competence is marginal in selection systems, learners encounter attrition-like outcomes despite years of exposure (cf. Pavlenko & Malt, 2011; Schmid & Jarvis, 2014) and that ecological stigmatization of English can dampen sustained engagement (Zhang & Yusof, 2024).

At the exosystem level, students described curricular recycling (annual “restarts”), limited differentiation, and textbook-only routines. These institutional patterns concretize macro signals and produce classroom cultures where accumulation is fragile. Repetition without vertical articulation erodes learners’ sense of progress, a mechanism consistent with research on curricular misalignment and the normalization of starting over (Schöpper-Grabe, 1998; Turanlı, 2009). The international literature similarly documents that form-focused, test-proximal instruction can crowd out opportunities for cumulative communicative development, which reinforces the perception of perpetual beginning (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005).

The microsystem dynamics —family valuation, peer norms that sanction visible use of English, and classroom affect— suggest that proximal processes “inherit” distal priorities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Where lessons do not normalize interaction, peer ridicule becomes more likely; where families cannot scaffold English use, out-of-class practice remains rare. These patterns resonate with Turkish studies showing that social context and learner mindsets strongly shape engagement trajectories (İşpınar Akçayoğlu & Özer, 2021) and with policy-as-practice views that learners *live* policy through everyday interactions (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). In short, macrosystem signals cascade into exosystem routines and, in turn, shape microsystem cultures, which collectively recycles learners into beginner identities.

A theme underplayed in prior work is technology-mediated exposure. In our corpus, references to digital resources were present but largely ad-hoc or unsupported by programs. When guided and embedded, however, mobile-assisted and autonomous learning can strengthen motivation and retention (Kic-Drgas & Kılıçkaya, 2024). From an ecological standpoint, technology is not merely a tool at the micro level; it becomes an exosystem design choice (how institutions scaffold use) with macrosystem implications (signals about what counts as learning). Thus, integrating structured, CEFR-aligned digital tasks into curricula can function as a *counter-pressure* against curricular recycling and limited out-of-class exposure described by participants.

The chronosystem—time—helps explain how these forces sediment into identity. Years of “re-beginning,” constrained opportunities for meaningful use, and repeated signals that English is peripheral collectively produce what learners describe as *internalized defeat* and strategic minimalism (e.g., studying to pass but not to use). This temporal layering is consistent with bioecological accounts of developmental pathways shaped by recurrent proximal processes (Tudge et al., 2009). It also clarifies why one-off classroom innovations may be insufficient without corresponding policy and institutional shifts that persist across educational transitions.

Finally, the analysis contributes two conceptual clarifications. First, *false beginner* identity should be read as an ecological product: a label indexing systemic misalignment rather than individual inability. Second, *policy-as-practice* reframes learners as interpreters and agents within systems. Participants’ accounts are not merely complaints; they are situated readings of how policy and curricula are enacted. These clarifications set up the practical argument we advance in the next section: interventions must be multi-level (policy signaling, vertical curriculum, assessment design, teacher development, structured technology integration) and sustained over time to dismantle the cycle of “restarting.”

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

Grounded in the socio-ecological analysis, the findings point to change levers that must be coordinated across policy signals, institutional routines, and proximal learning environments. The aim is to interrupt the cycle of annual “restarts” and enable cumulative development without departing from existing program structures. In keeping with the original text, we emphasize two pillars: diagnostic placement mechanisms that respect prior learning and the development of spiraled, skill-based curricula. The former routes learners to support that fits their profiles; the latter prevents curricular recycling by revisiting core skills at rising complexity (Bruner, 1960; Harden, 1999; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Because assessment systems shape priorities, alignment with CEFR descriptors is essential for signaling progression targets and for validating communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2020).

To operationalize these directions while staying faithful to the paper’s scope, we retain the SEAL Framework (Socio-Ecological Alignment for Language) as a practical blueprint. Within SEAL, “Spiral Integration” functions as the progression mechanism that prevents curricular restarts. To support implementation, Appendix B presents adopt-and-adapt exemplars. In narrative terms, SEAL asks stakeholders to (i) recalibrate policy signaling so that communicative outcomes matter; (ii) build a diagnostic-to-progression architecture that identifies gaps and routes learners into short bridge modules; (iii) normalize task-based, resource-embedded pedagogy in classrooms; (iv) provide proximal supports that cultivate agency; and (v) commit to term-by-term improvement using transparent indicators of progression. Specifically, SEAL operationalizes as five design moves:

- Policy signaling and assessment alignment (Macrosystem): Integrate or formally recognize CEFR-aligned communicative outcomes in selection/progression ecosystems, and publish institutional progression

dashboards (e.g., A2→B1→B2 transitions, performance on exit tasks) so incentives move from short-term test strategies to sustained proficiency growth.

- **Diagnostics and progression architecture (Exosystem):** Implement multi-stage diagnostics (entry/mid/exit) tied to CEFR descriptors. Use results to assign targeted bridge modules (e.g., listening-in-noise, pronunciation for intelligibility, academic writing) rather than defaulting to whole-cohort restarts. Addressing this issue requires diagnostics *and* the development of spiraled, skill-based curricula that foster gradual mastery; a brief design note is below, and full exemplars are provided in Appendix B.
- **Task-based, resource-embedded pedagogy (Exosystem ↔ Microsystem):** Use TBLT cycles (pre-task → task → report) so form is taught in service of use (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Make digital exposure (leveled readers/podcasts, corpus-informed vocabulary, platform-tracked practice) part of the core syllabus; use analytics for differentiation rather than leaving technology as an optional add-on.
- **Proximal supports and learner agency (Microsystem):** Establish peer-mentoring circles, provide family-facing guidance on supporting practice without English proficiency, and routinize self-regulation (goal setting, spaced retrieval, reflection dashboards). These supports counteract local norms that sanction visible use of English.
- **Evidence and improvement over time (Chronosystem):** Monitor CEFR gains, retention/persistence, and self-efficacy each term; iterate through design-based improvement cycles so small wins accumulate and practices stabilize.

Brief design note—spiraled, skill-based curricula (pointer). A spiral returns to listening, speaking, reading, and writing at increasing complexity with explicit links to prior learning, preventing the perception and reality of “starting over.” For adopt-and-adapt models, we provide three practitioner-ready exemplars—a two-semester CEFR spiral (A2→B1), a within-term weekly micro-spiral, and short diagnostic bridge modules—each with aims, task sequences (TBLT), feedback moments, and assessment checkpoints. See Appendix B for details and ready-to-use templates (Council of Europe, 2020; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

6. Conclusion

This study reframes persistent *false-beginner* status in university-level EFL education in Türkiye as a product of cross-level misalignment rather than learner deficit. Macrosystem signals (assessment priorities and social valuations) materialize in exosystem routines (curricular recycling, limited differentiation, under-used technology) and are reproduced in microsystem cultures (family valuation, peer norms, classroom affect), which sediments across the chronosystem into identities of “starting over.” Centering learner voice made these mechanisms visible.

To act on these insights, we outlined the SEAL Framework (Section 5) and pointed to spiral-curriculum exemplars (Appendix B). Together, they specify how policy signaling, diagnostic-plus-spiral progression, task-based pedagogy, proximal supports, and continuous improvement can be coordinated to interrupt the restart cycle and enable cumulative development. The voice of learners should thus inform not only classroom practice but policy design, positioning them as stakeholders in a system that can—and should—support sustained progression.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is grounded in students' self-reported, open-ended narratives about being (re)placed in beginner-level English at university. Such accounts are invaluable for accessing lived meanings but inevitably reflect perceived rather than directly observed practices. Our design is cross-sectional, which captures a single moment in students' trajectories; yet a bioecological perspective implies that identities sediment over time, as macrosystem signals filter through exosystem routines into microsystem cultures. In addition, cross-level mechanisms were inferred from converging patterns rather than measured via linked policy, institutional, and classroom datasets. The two-prompt instrument privileged breadth (i.e., wide coverage of personal vs. external attributions) over depth obtainable through classroom observation or interviewing. Finally, the context—two state universities—supports analytic generalization to similar settings but does not warrant population-level claims.

Future work should therefore follow learners longitudinally across transitions (late secondary → university prep) by combining CEFR-aligned diagnostics with observation and interview to model how selection policies and public discourses are enacted as institutional routines and proximal experiences over the chronosystem (Council of Europe, 2020). Comparative multi-site studies -varying placement architectures, resource profiles, and regional catchments- can isolate organizational conditions that interrupt the restart cycle (e.g., where diagnostics feed into targeted bridging and spiral progression rather than annual restarts). In parallel, design-based research should iteratively pilot the SEAL components (Section 5) by evaluating packages that pair diagnostic placement with spiraled, skill-based pathways and task-based pedagogy (Ellis, 2003; Bruner, 1960; Harden, 1999; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Because our findings underscore that policy is *lived* in practice, policy-as-practice inquiries (e.g., ethnographic/realist approaches) can trace how formal texts become classroom routines and how learners interpret those routines (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007).

For practitioners seeking immediate guidance, we provide brief, implementable examples of spiraled curricula in Appendix B (two-semester CEFR spiral, a within-term weekly micro-spiral, and short diagnostic bridge modules). This includes aims, task sequences (TBLT), feedback points, and assessment checkpoints. These exemplars are intended to be adopted or adapted within existing credit and timetable structures (Council of Europe, 2020; Ellis, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author utilized a Generative AI tool to assist in polishing the language, refining the grammar, and enhancing the overall clarity of this manuscript.

Ethical Statement

The study received ethical approval from the Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee (GOKA) (Decision No: GO 2025/1782, dated 18.06.2025). The study involved adult participants in a non-intervention educational context. All participants received comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, assurances of anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained

from all participants prior to data collection. The research was conducted in full accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011).

Author Contributions

As the sole author, Yusuf Emre Yeşilyurt was responsible for all aspects of this research, including the study's conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data analysis, and the writing and final revision of the manuscript.

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Appendix A

SEAL Narrative Protocol (University-Level EFL)

Purpose and scope

This protocol elicits how students who, despite many years of English study, are (re)placed at beginner level at university explain that outcome. Each prompt corresponds to the analytic ecological levels used in this study—macro, exosystem, micro (in this order). Mesosystem relations (school–home–peer links) are not coded as a separate category; they are recorded as cross-level connections. The chronosystem (time) is treated as an accumulation dimension across experiences. To maximize clarity and authenticity, responses should be written in Turkish. Target completion time is 15–20 minutes (about 5–8 sentences per prompt). This protocol was used with the current dataset and is provided for transparency and future replication.

Administration notes

Provide a brief study information sheet; remind participants there are no right/wrong answers; emphasize anonymity; obtain written consent. Administer during class time, in a quiet, individual setting. Do not coach or lead. If time is limited, prioritize Prompts 1–4.

Prompt 1 — Chronosystem (learning history over time)

Describe your English learning journey from primary school to the present. Identify turning points that helped or hindered you (e.g., teacher changes, school transitions, exam years, moving city). Explain how these moments relate to your placement at beginner level at university. Focus on specific experiences and timing.

Prompt 2 — Microsystem (family and peers)

Explain how your family and close friends affected your English learning. You may discuss encouragement or discouragement, resources or constraints at home, and peer reactions when you tried to speak. Give concrete examples of situations that made English easier or harder.

Prompt 3 — Classroom and teaching (exosystem: school/class practices; links to micro)

Describe how English has been taught in your classes. Explain how courses typically start each year; the balance among grammar–vocabulary–speaking–listening; placement practices; and the nature of assessment. Indicate whether topics repeated across years and how this affected your motivation and progress. Where relevant, refer to school–family–peer interactions (mesosystem connections); these will be noted as cross-level links.

Prompt 4 — Institutional conditions (exosystem: program rules and resources)

Explain how school/university policies and resources influenced your English learning. Address placement tests, passing criteria, class size, contact hours, teacher accessibility, materials and technology (e.g., language lab, apps, online platforms), and support options (e.g., clubs, study hall). State which factors enabled or hindered your progress.

Prompt 5 — Society and policy (macro: exams and public meanings)

Explain how national exams, media discourses, and societal views of English affected your learning. With concrete examples, discuss whether English is part of high-stakes exams, how important or “elite” English is considered in your context, and how this shaped your priorities.

Prompt 6 — Cross-level interactions and solutions (integrative)

Explain how the above factors combined to produce your “restart” situation. Propose at least one specific, actionable change for each level: personal/family (micro), class/school (exosystem), and policy/society (macro). Considering the time dimension, indicate what could work in the short/medium/long term.

Optional brief incident narrative (if time permits)

Describe one incident that best represents your experience with English (e.g., a classroom moment, an exam, family or peer reactions). Explain why it matters and what it shows about your situation.

Short follow-up probes for the researcher (clarification only, non-leading)

If a response is very brief or ambiguous, the administrator may ask:

- “Could you give a specific example?”
- “When did this happen?”
- “How did this affect your placement or motivation?”

Data handling and ethics (participant-facing)

Your responses are anonymous and used only for research. You may skip any question and may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Analysis note (researcher-facing)

Begin with inductive content coding, then index excerpts to ecological levels (macro, exosystem, micro). Mesosystem relations are not a separate code family; mark them as cross-level connections. Treat the chronosystem as accumulation over time and report it in the synthesis. Reporting order will be macro → exosystem → micro. Maintain an audit trail (codebook versions, decision memos). Report prevalence using qualitative terms (e.g., “many,” “several,” “some”) to avoid implying statistical precision.

Appendix B

Practical Examples of Skill-Building Language Courses for University Students in Türkiye

Purpose

This appendix provides practical, ready-to-use examples for English language programs. These models are designed to put the recommendations from Section 5 into action. Each example is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), focuses on learning through real tasks, and helps prevent the problem of students having to “start over” each year. It does this by repeatedly covering the same core skills, which makes them more challenging each time. These models assume students will be tested when they start, in the middle, and at the end of the course. They can be adapted to fit your university’s schedule.

What is Inside

- **Example 1:** A Two-Semester Plan to Go from A2 to B1
- **Example 2:** A Weekly Plan for Building Skills Within One Semester
- **Example 3:** Short Support Courses for Specific Skill Gaps
- **A Guide for Program Managers:** How to Manage Student Progress and Ensure Quality
- **Ready-to-Use Templates:** Including a weekly schedule, task instructions, feedback forms, and student progress trackers.

Example 1 — A Two-Semester Plan to Go from A2 to B1

Goal

The aim here is to help typical first-year university students advance from the A2 to the B1 level over two 14-week semesters. This is achieved by having them practice with different types of texts and tasks that gradually become more complex, require more independence, and involve more sophisticated communication.

Core Principles:

- **Skills are Revisited Every Week:** Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are practiced every week, with each task becoming slightly more difficult or broader in scope.
- **Learning Through Tasks:** Each week is built around a cycle: preparing for a task, doing the task, and then presenting or discussing the results. Grammar and vocabulary are taught as needed to complete the task successfully.
- **Aligned with European Standards (CEFR):** Learning goals and grading criteria are based on CEFR descriptions, and tests assess a combination of skills.
- **Regular Testing:** Tests at the start (Week 1), middle (Week 7), and end (Week 14) of the semester help place students in the right groups and identify who might need extra support.

Sample Semester Structure:

- **Weeks 1–4 (Building a Solid A2 Foundation):**
 - **Listening:** Short announcements, campus information (Focus: getting the main idea, listening for keywords).
 - **Speaking:** Simple, everyday conversations (Focus: using common phrases, starting a turn).
 - **Reading:** Short notices and emails (Focus: scanning for information, understanding the purpose).
 - **Writing:** Simple, structured sentences (Focus: connecting ideas, making sentences flow).
- **Weeks 5–9 (Expanding Skills with Guidance):**
 - **Listening:** Short, simple lectures (Focus: using templates for note-taking).
 - **Speaking:** Expressing and justifying opinions in pairs (Focus: using phrases to show your stance).
 - **Reading:** Short opinion articles (Focus: identifying the author's arguments).
 - **Writing:** Paragraphs and short emails/reports (Focus: using templates for different text types).
- **Weeks 10–14 (Combining Skills for B1-Level Tasks):**
 - **Listening:** Discussions with multiple speakers (Focus: following who is speaking and what they mean).
 - **Speaking:** Problem-solving discussions and mini-presentations (Focus: being polite and managing conversations).

- **Reading:** Reading multiple texts on one topic to synthesize information (Focus: comparing and contrasting ideas).
- **Writing:** A short argumentative report of 180–220 words (Focus: planning and revising your work).

Typical Weekly Schedule:

- **Session 1 (New Material & Strategies):** Introduce model texts or audio, teach a relevant learning strategy, and briefly review language from the previous week.
- **Session 2 (Guided Practice & Feedback):** Students complete tasks that move from highly structured to more open-ended. The teacher gives targeted feedback on clarity, functional grammar, and vocabulary.
- **Session 3 (Task Performance & Reflection):** Students complete a realistic task, get feedback from peers and the teacher, and write in a log about what they improved and what they need to work on next.

Focusing on Language for Communication:

- **Grammar:** Tenses for telling stories versus writing reports; using words like 'should' or 'might' to express opinions; building more complex sentences.
- **Vocabulary:** Common academic and service-related words; useful phrases for expressing opinions and summaries.
- **Pronunciation:** Word stress, speaking in "thought groups," and linking words for clearer, more natural speech.

Using Digital Tools (as a core part of the course):

- A weekly online article or podcast is assigned at three different difficulty levels.
- Vocabulary lists are provided through an app (based on frequently used words), with targets for review.
- Data from learning platforms is used to create flexible groups and give more targeted feedback.

Assessments and Checkpoints:

- **Initial Assessment (Week 1):** A language test (speaking, writing, listening/reading) based on CEFR levels.
- **Mid-Semester Check-in (Week 7):** A low-pressure task that combines skills, with feedback based on the learning goals.
- **Final Assessment (Week 14):** A final test that combines skills (e.g., listen and take notes, then give a spoken report; or read several texts and write a short summary).
- **Reporting:** Each student receives a report showing their progress (e.g., from low A2 to high A2) and suggesting a focus for the next semester.

Grading Criteria Highlights (Based on CEFR):

- **Speaking:** Variety and accuracy of vocabulary/grammar, coherence, ability to interact, and clarity.
- **Writing:** Completing the task requirements, organization, vocabulary precision, grammar, and mechanics.
- **Listening/Reading:** Completing the task (main idea, details, inference), using strategies (note-taking), and understanding different accents.

Adapting to Different Student Needs:

- Provide materials at different difficulty levels.
- Give students a choice between two tasks that lead to the same learning outcome.
- Assign short, focused exercises based on their test results (e.g., practicing past tense or linking words).

Example 2 — A Weekly Plan for Building Skills (Within One Semester)

Use this model if you can't change the whole year's curriculum but want to see immediate improvements.

Weekly Pattern (for a class that meets three times a week):

- **Monday — New Material & Strategy (45–90 min):**
 - Present a model (e.g., a 3-minute talk and a short article) and focus on a specific strategy (e.g., note-taking, using transition words).
- **Wednesday — Guided Practice & Targeted Feedback (45–90 min):**
 - Students do structured practice; the teacher provides quick, one-on-one feedback on 1-2 priorities for each student.
- **Friday — Task & Reflection (45–90 min):**
 - Students do a realistic task (e.g., a problem-solving discussion followed by a 1-minute oral report) and reflect on their learning.

Example Weekly Theme: “Studying Effectively at University”

- **Listening:** An advice podcast on studying, using a chart for note-taking.
- **Speaking:** In pairs, decide on a solution to a time-management problem and give a mini-presentation.
- **Reading:** A short blog post and a university policy page, comparing their purpose and tone.
- **Writing:** An action-plan email (120–150 words) using connecting words and phrases to show their opinion.

Techniques to Build on Previous Learning:

- **Quick Review (10 min):** Start each class by reviewing vocabulary, phrases, or connectors from previous lessons.
- **Bi-weekly Review Task:** Every two weeks, assign a task that combines themes from the past two weeks.
- **Forward-Looking Feedback:** Each piece of feedback should include one specific goal for the student to work on next week.

Example 3 — Short Support Courses for Specific Skill Gaps (4–6 weeks)

These are short, extra courses for students who are identified through testing as needing help with a specific skill. They take this module in addition to their main class.

3A. Listening in Noisy Environments (4 weeks)

- **Who is it for?** Students who struggle to understand lectures or take notes, especially with background noise.
- **Goals:** Recognize transition words, organize notes better, and tolerate moderate background noise.

3B. Pronunciation for Clearer Speech (5 weeks)

- **Who is it for?** Students whose speech is difficult to understand.
- **Goals:** Improve word stress, speak in phrases (thought groups), and produce key sounds correctly.

3C. Short Academic Writing Tasks (6 weeks)

- **Who is it for?** Students who have trouble organizing their writing or fulfilling task requirements.
- **Goals:** Write a clear email request, a short report, and a problem-solution paragraph using appropriate academic language.

3D. Grammar for Meaning (4 weeks)

- **Who is it for?** Students who make persistent grammar errors that block communication (e.g., with tenses or pronouns).
- **Goals:** Choose the right grammar structures to achieve their purpose (e.g., to tell a story, report facts, or state an opinion).

3E. Vocabulary Building (4 weeks)

- **Who is it for?** Students with a limited vocabulary.
- **Goals:** Learn 6–8 important new word families each week, use common word pairings (collocations), and establish a routine for vocabulary review.

Badges: Each module awards a digital badge upon completion. Successful completion allows the student to return to the main course pathway with new learning targets.

A Guide for Program Managers

Scheduling & Staffing:

- Keep the main classes together. Offer the short support courses at fixed times, like lunchtime or late afternoon.
- Use teachers who are trained in task-based teaching and CEFR-based assessment.

Using Test Results to Guide Teaching:

- Initial tests create student profiles and flag those who need extra help.
- Teachers can see a dashboard showing class and individual student progress.
- Mid-term results help decide if students need to be regrouped or moved into or out of support courses.
- Final results inform placement for the next semester and help evaluate the program's success.

Adapting to Different Student Needs:

- Provide texts and tasks at different difficulty levels and allow students to choose prompts.
- Use data from online platforms (like reading speed) to identify students who need support.
- Have low-tech options ready, like printed books, teacher-recorded audio, and physical flashcards.

Ensuring Teaching Quality:

- Standardize grading criteria using sample student work at the start of each term.
- Hold brief meetings mid-semester and at the end to discuss students who are on the borderline between levels.
- Ask students to rate their own confidence to supplement test data.

Ready-to-Use Templates

(The following are descriptions of templates you can create.)

- **Template 1: Weekly Lesson Schedule (for your syllabus)**
- **Template 2: Task Instructions (for students)**
- **Template 3: Feedback Form (for teachers)**
- **Template 4: Fields for a Student Progress Tracker**
- **Template 5: Referral Form for Support Courses**

Suggested Minimal Resources

- **Texts/Audio:** Short texts about campus life or university policies, public mini-lectures, and online articles/podcasts at different levels.

- **Tools:** A vocabulary app that uses spaced repetition (like Anki or Quizlet), simple note-taking templates, and short pronunciation video clips.
- **Printables:** Cards with learning strategies, lists of transition words, and templates for different types of writing.

Expected Results & How to Monitor Them

Programs that use these models should be able to see:

1. How many students successfully move from A2 to B1.
2. Improved scores on tests that combine multiple skills.
3. Fewer students being placed back into beginner levels the following year.
4. Improved student confidence in their English skills.