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**Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Very Young
Learners: A Case from Turkey**

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Abstract

The study aims to describe and analyze the current system at preschools in Turkey in terms of teaching English to very young learners as a foreign language. The research was carried out by using the descriptive research model. The data was collected via observations and an interview conducted on the preschool English teachers. The researchers made observations at two private preschools in Edirne and analyzed the current system in terms of teaching English to very young learners; to achieve this, they analyzed and described the teaching methods applied in English classes; they also described the activities, the techniques and the materials used to teach English as a foreign language in private preschools.

Key Words: English, very young learners, preschool

1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching has gained a lot of importance due to globalization all over the world and the English language has become the dominant international language. The English language gained the status of international language (Nunan, 2002; Crystal, 2003) and it became the most commonly taught second language all over the world (Rixon, 1992).

As it is stated in Brewster and Ellis (2002), using English has become a growing trend among people. People can easily interact with other people and experience other cultures through travel and technology by using English. There is strong belief that young children learn

language better and easily. Thus, if we want our children to learn sufficient English and speak it fluently, we should introduce English to children at early ages.

Learning English at early ages helps learners raise awareness towards their own and other languages, encourages them to develop a positive attitude to language learning and to foreign cultures, motivates them to communicate and contributes to their social development. As Brewster and Ellis (2002) stated, it also improves children's learning awareness which is a way to realize why and how they are learning the second language. Children become more aware of materials and strategies such as noticing, observing, analysing, and comparing which help them develop their cognitive skills during their language learning process. Children also learn various words during the lesson and use them while they are interacting with others. So they improve both socially and linguistically while learning a foreign language.

In the late 1980's "English for Young Learners" emerged as a new area of study (Cameron, 2005). The applications and studies carried out until 1990s especially focused on teaching foreign languages at primary schools, but after then the views to teach English at preschool period started to gain importance (O'Neil, 1993).

The goal of preschool education is to prepare children for primary school by developing them physically, mentally and individually. It also helps children develop their social and linguistic skills in early childhood. Learning a foreign language should start at the preschool age. Research revealed that children can learn two or more languages simultaneously without inter-lingual interference. They do not need to wait until their first language is good enough to learn a second language. Young children have advantages of second language learning such as better pronunciation and less inhibition (Finney, 1996). Listening comprehension and pronunciation benefit most with an early start of language education yet younger children also have disadvantages to learn the grammar of the L2 as being slower than older learners (Cameron, 2005).

There are certain differences between children and adults in terms of their levels of readiness, reactions towards language teaching activities, and motivation, so the teaching methods to teach young learners should be different from the ones used to teach adults. Children who start learning a foreign language very young may face with the spoken language only for several years as they have not learnt to read and write yet; spoken language is the medium to introduce the new language to young learners (Cameron, 2005).

2. Situation in Turkey

In Turkey, preschool education, which is optional, includes the education of children in the 3-5 years of age group. Preschool education in Turkey is given mainly in kindergartens, preparatory classrooms, day nurseries, by various ministries and institutions, and by the Ministry of Education most of all. The children can benefit from these institutions part-time or full-time. Nowadays, more importance is attached to preschool education in Turkey and the government is trying to open preschools almost in all the cities in the country.

In order to achieve this, the government has started to increase the number of institutions where preschool teachers are educated and it has also started to encompass preschools into eight year primary school program. Teaching English to young learners gained importance in

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1990s in Turkey and English took its place in the syllabuses of the 4th grade and beyond public primary schools (MNE).

Later, private schools under the inspection of Ministry of Education started to teach English at younger ages extending to 3-4 years. In Turkey, Turkish students start learning English at their fourth year at public primary schools whereas private primary schools start teaching it at earlier ages and more and more private preschools offer English classes nowadays.

There are mainly two types of preschools in Turkey: Public preschools and private preschools. The both types generally share common characteristics and objectives. Both aim to bring up physically, cognitively, socially and linguistically developed children.

On the other hand, they also have some differences in terms of the education they give and their curriculums. For instance, in private preschools, English is taught as a foreign language whereas it is not given a place in public preschools. Teaching English to young learners at private preschools is not programmed by the National Ministry of Education; it prepares the curriculum for the 4th grades of primary school and the beyond.

Therefore, private preschools prepare their own syllabus themselves and each of them differ from the others in terms of their course subjects, teaching methods and techniques, teaching materials, physical conditions and many more other variables. Since there is no monopoly in private preschools in terms of teaching English as a foreign language, the current system in such educational institutions need to be discovered and analyzed to better describe the present situation of teaching English to very young learners in preschools in Turkey.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose of the study

The study aims to analyze the teaching of English as a foreign language at preschools in Turkey in terms of the teaching methods and techniques applied in the class, and activities and materials used during teaching.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study are 15 preschool students; 5 girls and 10 boys in Beykent private preschool and are 13 pre-school students; 3 girls and 10 boys in Edirne College preschool. They are in the same age group (aged from 5 to 6) and they are all beginner level students studying at private preschools in Edirne-Turkey. 3 preschool English teachers also participated in the study by teaching English to the participants and answering the interview questions.

3.3 Research Questions

The study raises the following questions:

1. What are the most used teaching methods to teach English to very young learners in preschool classes?

2. What kinds of classroom activities are mostly used to teach English to very young learners?
3. What teaching materials are used in preschool English classes?

3.4 Procedure

In order to conduct the study, qualitative research model and descriptive design model were used. Two preschools in Edirne were observed in order to find out how English teaching takes place in preschools and how this affects children's attitudes towards foreign language learning.

As English is not taught in public preschools as a foreign language in Turkey, the researchers observed only private preschools. The study is limited to two private preschools in Edirne-Turkey.

The researchers observed both of the preschools for two times a week. They visited Edirne private preschool on Monday from 9:40 to 10:20 a.m. and on Wednesday from 11:20 to 12:00 a.m. and they also visited Beykent private preschool on Tuesday from 9:40 to 11:10 a.m. and on Friday from 10:30 to 11:10 a.m. Each lesson lasted for 40 minutes. The researchers observed one group aged from 5 to 6. The researchers made totally 8 weeks' observation which consisted of 32 sections. One of the Jenny Dooley and Virginia Evans's books "Happy Hearths" is used in both of the private preschools. For the data collection, classroom observations and interviews (in Appendix) conducted on the teachers were used. The observations were also video recorded by the researchers for further data analysis. The data collected via the observations and the interviews were analyzed and interpreted and finally some suggestions were recommended for teaching English more effectively as a foreign language in preschools in Turkey.

3 Data Analysis

3.1-Reports from classroom observations at private preschools

During the observations in the private preschools in Edirne, the approaches and the methods the teachers applied in English classes, the techniques, activities and materials used, and the classroom designs were analyzed.

In Beykent private preschool, a syllabus was designed by a special team of teachers from Beykent Schools, a chain of private schools, seeking to fulfil the objectives such as meeting students' needs and developing them physically, socially and cognitively. In Edirne College, a syllabus was also designed by the preschool teachers working in this school. The English teachers working at these preschools are quite experienced with more than two years of experience in preschool English teaching.

In Beykent College, there are two preschool English teachers. One is a native speaker of English and the other one graduated from Marmara University, Department of English

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Language Teaching. Both are quite experienced with more than two years of experience in preschool English teaching in Beykent College.

Two English teachers are also employed by Edirne College. One graduated from Dumlupınar University, Department of English Literature, and the other one graduated from Atatürk University, Department of English Literature. They are also quite experienced in teaching English to very young learners. One of them has been working in Edirne College for 6 years and has two years of experience in teaching English at preschool. The other one has been teaching in this school for 11 years and has eight years of experience in teaching English to very young learners.

During the teaching process, the teachers at both private preschools mostly applied two basic approaches- Total Physical Response (TPR) and Audiolingual Method (ALM) - to teach English to very young learners. As it is stated in Richards and Rodgers (2002) total physical response is a method, developed by James Asher and is way of teaching language through physical actions. It is an attempt to respond to oral commands physically. Besides the method of TPR, audiolingual (ALM) method is also commonly applied for language teaching in the preschools. ALM is a way of learning language by improving habits based on acquiring the language patters, helping the learners to respond the stimuli accurately through shaping and reinforcement (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). These two methods are commonly applied by the pre-school teachers while teaching their learners the new words, some structures and the classroom language.

The teachers applied some teaching and learning techniques such as repetition, recasting, questioning, explicit correction during the conversations with students. Here are some examples from this effective and productive teaching:

Questioning

During the game, the teacher divided the classes in to two groups and asked the names of the objects.

T: What is this? (The teacher showed an orange ball to Group B)

St: Rengini mi söyleyim? (Should I tell its colour?)

T: No. What is this?

St: ball.

T: Yes, it is a ball. What colour is it? (The teacher reformulated the sentence and asked a new question)

St: It is orange.

Recasting

The teacher taught the new word of “snowman”

T: What is this? (The teacher showed the picture of a snowman and asked)

St: Snowman

T: Yes, it is a snowman

St: It is a snowman. (repetition)

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Clarification request

The teacher tried to teach the difference between “he and she”

T: Who is he?

St: He is Barkın.

T: Who is she?

St: He is Dilara. (*Dilara is a girl's name*)

T: Excuse me what?

St: She is Dilara.

The teachers used various activities during the lessons. Besides using the very comprehensive activities in the text books, the teachers also prepared some other activities which made the teaching-learning process enjoyable and effective. They tried to develop the children cognitively, socially, and linguistically therefore they designed their activities by taking the students' developmental process into consideration. Moreover, individual learner differences, learners' expectations, their learning styles, classroom environment, and students' needs during their activity choice were also taken into account.

For instance; as it is given in figure 1, the teacher designed a role playing activity. To conduct the activity, she first let the children sit comfortably and watch a video named “In a cottage in a wood”. While the children were watching the video, she designed the classroom. Following this, she and the researcher acted the story of “In a cottage in a wood” for two times and chose some children from the class to act out the story.

Every child in the class took part during the role playing activity so they learned to be a part of a group and learned how to act together by interacting with one another. Then, the teacher integrated the role playing activity with a story telling activity. As shown in figure 2, the children sat on the cushions in the corner area of the class and listened to their teachers. While they were listening to their teachers, they uttered the words that they learned before. They also learned some new words and structures as “cottage”, “rabbit”, “the old man”, “please help me”, “live together” and while they were learning these new words, they tried to guess the meanings from the physical actions in the plot of the story.

Thus these activities also developed the children linguistically and cognitively. The teacher also used songs, games, rhymes and chants during the language teaching process. Songs, rhymes, chants and games are ideal vehicle for language learning and they constitute an effective source to the teachers (Brewster& Ellis: 2002). They are generally used “as warmers, as a transition from one activity to the next, closers, to introduce new language, to practice the language, to revise the language, to change the mood, to get everyone's attention, to channel high level of energy” (Brewster & Ellis, 2002, p.168).

For instance, it was observed in the classes that, the teachers used a song as a warmer at the beginning of the lesson so that the children not only could become relaxed but also could remember or learn some new words from the words of the songs (shown in figure 3). Besides this, the teacher used games to practise the words the children learned (shown in figure 4). The teacher prepared a card games activity. She stuck the back of the flash cards on the board and wanted the students to guess the words so they learned the meaning of the words with an

enjoyable activity; and they learned how to ask their teacher for permission, and how to make guesses as well.

Thus, all these activities developed the children socially, linguistically and cognitively. The teachers also prepared drawing activities. Children express their feelings through art "reflect their thoughts and emotions through their choices of colour, texture, and media" (Dodge et al, p 317). By drawing activities, the students developed their cognitive skills by representing their ideas on paper and when they verbalized their drawings they developed their language skills. They also strengthened their fine motor skills by cutting the papers, gluing and colouring the pictures.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

These kinds of activities help the pre school teachers to teach the children any necessary vocabulary, structures, help them to develop their students language learning skills as speaking, listening, pronunciation, They help the learners to listen and practice by joining in an enjoyable activity and also help them to develop socially by performing in the activity as a whole class, in groups or in pairs.

The material choice is an important part of learning and teaching process. The teachers selected their materials according to the aims of their teaching programme, syllabus that provide guidelines to them and their students' needs and levels. The text books had various visual materials. The teachers also used some extra visual or audiovisual materials such as DVDs, CDs, flashcards, puppets, play dough, crayons, data show and tape recorder in order achieve permanent learning.

The classroom environment is also an essential factor in teaching and learning process. It must be cosy and relaxing and must be designed for supporting the teaching and learning process. The schools observed were recently built and their language classrooms were reasonably well equipped. They were warm, and large enough for students to move around and receive enough daylight. There were also various teaching aids available in the classroom such as data show, a board, posters, cushions, a platform for puppet show, and a tape recorder.

3.2-Interview Results

After the lessons were observed by the researchers, the English teachers were interviewed about how they teach English to very young learners. The answers of the teachers to the interview were as follows:

Miss Karataş from Beykent College answered the interview questions as follows:

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- “Every teacher follows the curriculum prepared by Ministry of Education to teach school subjects, yet we also have objectives prepared by EF schools and that is more intensive or suitable for teaching a foreign language to our students.”

-“Yes, we use a syllabus while teaching English.”

- “Firstly, I mostly use communicative language teaching as it is suitable for students to speak.”

-“I use different kinds of activities during the lessons because the children may get bored easily if I use the same activities all the time.”

-“The objectives of EF schools, characteristics of children and their needs affect my activity choice.”

-“I use different techniques to hold the learners’ attention”, “An awareness of range of available techniques will help us to exploit materials better and manage unexpected situations.”

-“I mostly use cooperative learning and I conduct group work activities; I prefer activity based learning.”

-“I use a CD player, CDs, DVDs, puppets, toys, the over head projector, and the computer during the lessons.”

-“The design of the classroom changes depending on the activity type”

-“I mostly use the over head projector and the computer in the class and I also use the CD player while singing songs or listening to stories.”

Here are Mrs Göy’s answers from Beykent College:

-“We use our own curriculum prepared by EF schools.”

-“I generally apply Total Physical Response (TPR) and Audiolingual Method (ALM) while I am teaching to very young learners.”

-“I prefer wide range of activities as classroom games, pantomiming, holding up cards, cutting and colouring activities because I believe all these activities are good ways of catching young children’s attention; they make children feel comfortable in the classroom and help them develop their eye-hand coordination.”

-“I generally pay attention to learner differences, learners’ expectations their learning styles, classroom environment, student’s needs while choosing my activities. Moreover, I take the age and the level of the students into account.”

- “I use some teaching techniques such as questioning, repetition during the lessons besides, I also use games and storytelling techniques.”

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-“I mostly use games and storytelling.”

-“I usually use puppets, toys, CDs in kindergarten and in the upper grades I use worksheets, flash cards, posters, and masks.”

-“I design my classroom depending on the activities. I design a room corner where the children can relax and play during the lesson and I pay attention to the seating arrangements according to the activity type.”

-“I mostly use a CD player and CDs.”

Miss Karahan from Edirne College answered the questions as follows:

-“Actually, we don’t follow any preschool curriculum.”

-“I have books to follow but I usually use supplementary materials.”

-“I use flashcards, puppets, posters, CDs while teaching, visual materials affect the students learning process positively.”

-“The activity should be entertaining .It should make students learn while having fun.”

-“I mostly use TPR in my English lesson.”

-“I use flashcards, puppets, posters, CDs.”

-“There aren’t any English classes for preschool students in our school, yet I design my own English classes.”

-“I use technology in the class. There are computers in our classrooms and we sometimes use CDs during English lessons.”

4. Results and Findings

The interview results from the private primary school English teachers indicate that the private schools do not use the curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education. They use their own curriculum prepared by a special team working in the same educational institution. The preschool teachers generally apply Total Physical Response (TPR) and Audiolingual Method (ALM) while they are teaching to very young learners. They generally pay attention to individual learner differences, learners’ expectations, their learning styles, classroom environments, and students’ needs while choosing their activities.

Moreover, they attach importance to the age and the level of the students and their concentration to fulfil the classroom activities effectively They prefer wide range of activities as classroom games, pantomiming, holding up cards, cutting and colouring activities because they believe that all these activities are good ways of catching young children’s attention, make children feel comfortable in the classroom and develop their eye-hand coordination.

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All their activity choice depends on objectives they have to achieve, besides this they take notice of the needs and expectations of each and every pupil in their class. They generally model short conversations with the help of the puppets and use warming-up activities to motivate the children. They usually use puppets, toys, CDs in the kindergarten and in the upper grades they use worksheets, flash cards, posters, and masks.

They design their classrooms parallel to the activities they use in the class; for example, they design a room corner where the children can relax and play during the lesson and they pay attention to the seating arrangements in the class as it should allow children to communicate with each other and develop them socially. They generally integrate technology in their classes to teach the target language properly and help the learners communicate in that language.

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

In this study, the researchers analyzed the practice of English language teaching in private preschools in Turkey. As English as a second language is only taught in private preschools, the researchers had to restrict their observations to private preschools. They observed the English lessons in two private preschools, made an interview with their English teachers and analyzed the methods, approaches, techniques, activities, materials, classroom designs provided by these private schools. In the light of the study, it is found that second language teaching raises student's awareness towards their own and other languages and their cultures, develops them cognitively, socially, linguistically and physically. Beside these, it affects the students' further language learning process and their success towards learning other languages.

The teachers applied limited numbers of methods such as TPR or ALM as the children are at beginning level and illiterate. They generally used various activities in their classes as games, storytelling, role playing in order to enliven the learning process and make the learning permanent. Furthermore, as the student can easily get bored during the lessons, the teachers employed various teaching materials in order to motivate them towards the language learning process.

In the study, it is found that the teachers in both private preschools are quite experienced in teaching English to very young learners. They can easily descend to the children's level in their classes and they are willing to teach English to their students. As they interact positively with their students and build up trust with them, the children also build trust to the new language. Moreover, the physical conditions of these two private preschools are ideal for children to support their teaching and learning process. There are lots of teaching materials provided by the schools to foster the learning process. Thus, the learning process becomes more enjoyable, effective and permanent.

In the light of the findings of the study, it is suggested that second language teaching should also be introduced to students in public preschools as well since early second language teaching enables the students' versatile development. It is clearly noticed that early English learning helps children develop various skills and learning strategies. It helps them adapt the languages easily and transfer their knowledge. It is also suggested that the private primary

school teachers should employ more various activities such as finger plays and card games in order to make lessons more motivating and enjoyable. They should assist their students while they are developing their creative abilities by using the language so that their students can raise awareness towards the second language, they can facilitate their further achievements towards other languages and lead to permanent language learning.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Interview questions for the private primary school's teachers

1. Do you follow any primary school curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education?
2. Do you use any syllabus while teaching English?
3. Which methods and approaches do you use while teaching English?
4. What kind of activities do you use during English lessons? Why do you use them?

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5. What criteria affect your activity choice?
 6. What kind of techniques do you use in your English lessons?
 7. Which techniques do you use most in your English lessons?
 8. What kind of materials do you use in your English lessons?
 9. How do you design your English lessons?
 10. Do you use technology in your English classes? Give an example.
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