EFL Students' Expectations in Higher Education Level English Preparatory Schools in Turkey

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Abstract

In Turkey, higher education level language preparatory school provides one year language education for students who go into the higher education and do not have the necessary language proficiency and skills. For most students, language education, more specifically English, in these institutions is seen as a unique opportunity to improve their language skills due to program content and duration. The purpose of this study is to explore what students expect from EFL classes and overall language education provided in two higher education level preparatory schools and to what extent their expectations are met. The study is in qualitative case study design. Data was collected through a web-based questionnaire from 218 preparatory school students in two higher education departments. The thematic analysis of the data revealed that the main areas where students expect improvement and change are the physical layout of the building and curriculum content. On the other hand, the students' expectations from academic staff seem to have been met considerably. The findings of the study can be valuable for both policy-makers, administrators and other practitioners to understand students' needs better and tailor their educational program accordingly.

Keywords: EFL students; English preparatory school; student expectation from EFL classes; higher education; language education; Turkey.

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1. Introduction

The importance of language learning has been a widely discussed topic, and as global interaction evolves with the developments of our time, the demand for language learning becomes higher. Correspondingly, the approaches and methods of teaching languages are being developed by the specialists in the field. While a great deal of improvements and changes have been done in the area of ELT, learners' expectations are also changing and have become more demanding in line with the higher demands of their professional or social environments.

When language learning in Turkey is considered, the results of various research show that despite the amount of time and effort put on language learning, the goals that have been set cannot be achieved [1, 2, 3]. Constant changes and different practices have been applied to achieve the goal of foreign language learning in the last decades in Turkey. Today, learners start learning English at the age of 7 or even 5 depending on the parents' choice. Until these learners start their higher education, they have at least 11 years of language education. However, the results of the exams done in higher education institution show that a great number of learners are on the level of elementary in English. Considering the huge amount of time the learners spend on learning languages until university, these results are unexpected and not even close to meet the expectations.

However, with the language education provided in language departments of higher education institutions, English level of Turkish EFL learners can reach up to a certain level. Almost all universities have foreign languages departments in Turkey and most students need to take a one-year English (in certain universities, there are other languages depending on the medium of teaching in universities and departmental requirements) preparatory class and get a passing grade in English Proficiency exams accepted by the universities. It means that learning English becomes a priority for most of the learners for the first time. As learners have no other lessons than English in preparatory class, this period of tertiary education becomes a unique opportunity to improve language skills and, ultimately, show the proficiency in the target language based on the standards and requirements of the higher education institution. Students in higher education are also aware of the importance that English has in contemporary world [4].

It is obvious that learners develop their own beliefs of language learning as they start their education life at an early age and these beliefs are brought into classes. Learners' perceptions may sometimes override language teachers' approach when they are totally ignored. Learners' attitude is one of the keystones of language learning [5]. A thorough understanding of students' expectation when they first enroll at university may benefit language educator and increase success in teaching [6]. When Turkish EFL learners start their higher education, they have enough learning experience to develop their own expectations and perceptions that teachers and administrators in these departments should consider in their choice of curriculum, pedagogy and teaching style. However, this consideration necessitates an overall analysis of learners' expectations from the foreign languages departments in higher education institutions, lecturers and lessons. In this study, we wanted to explore what students expect from EFL classes and overall language education provided in two higher education level preparatory schools and to what extent their expectations are met.

2. Materials and methods

A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore potential areas where students' demands are not met. Due to the problems in language education in primary, secondary and high school levels of most state schools, preparatory school at universities are seen as a unique opportunity to learn foreign languages with an intense program. Therefore, the cases in this study can help policy makers as well as researchers and practitioners in the field gain an insight into young adult language learners' needs and expectations regarding the issue.

2.1. The Setting and participants of the study

We conducted the research in two different departments. Both of them were foreign languages departments in higher education settings. The students who failed to get the required passing grade and those who did not take the English proficiency exam at the beginning of the semester had to get a one-year preparatory class. These students were the participants of the study. In both departments, students were grouped into classes based on their scores in placement tests at the very beginning of the semester. In our study, there were students from elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The total number of students in both universities was 1500. For the study, we selected students from different levels and classes randomly. In total, we included 250 students.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

We collected the data a month after the academic year began so that students could get used to the building, the academic staff and the curriculum. Data was collected through a web-based questionnaire. From 250 participants, 218 of them responded to our questionnaire. Two open-ended questions (1. Could you please describe your dream language school? 2. To what extent does the education provided in this department meet your expectations?) were asked to the students. They were also asked to detail their answers as much as possible. Instead of giving them a structured questionnaire, we delivered an open-ended one where the students had the freedom to elaborate on their responses. Data was analyzed through the use of inductive thematic analysis. The participants first read all student responses collected from digital questionnaires in order to get familiar with the content. Each researcher examined the responses for emerging codes and categories along with sample quotations from the participants. Then, all researchers met to compare and discuss upon their individual analysis. Following the first meeting, the participants met two more times at regular intervals. In the final meeting, emerging themes were accepted by the consensus of all three researchers.

3. Results

The analysis of participants' responses to the questions led to three main themes. These themes are presented in Table 1. The emergent themes suggest that there are three main areas where students' expectations are most voiced.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Building	• A more colorful language environment
	• Class size
Curriculum	• More speaking, less grammar
	• Exam stress, tight schedule
	• Beyond language activities
	• Materials
Academic Staff	• Caring and motivating instructors
	• Need for native speakers

3.1. Theme one: Building

One fundamental finding of the study was that students want a distinct, colorful language environment. The participants often stated that it is crucial that the building itself must be a motivating factor. Instead of nearly empty walls, traditional classroom settings, the building needs to be redesigned to include lots of activities, visuals and technology that also allow for updating. Detailed participant responses reveal that students expect to be exposed to the language all the time. As they have limited options to interact with the target language outside the school, the students stated that they need a more authentic language learning environment that will support and ease their language learning experience.

In my opinion, a dream language school shows itself as soon as you see it. The whole building must provide a unique experience. I want to see huge screens that broadcast in English. I want to see catchy visuals and boards. I want to feel that I am walking on a street in the UK. For now, all I see is empty walls.

The department building is not really different from my old, ugly high school building. We were unfortunate considering our previous language learning experience in state schools. From a university department, my expectations were high. It is crucial for us to love the language. Along with other things, building design must be appealing. A few old-fashioned posters do not make me love it.

The participant responses indicate that students' expectations about the building are not met in these departments. It is evident that they see a more colorful, well-designed building as an opportunity to learn more and a source of motivation. Considering that the higher education level preparatory school is their most serious

language learning attempt both generally and academically, they expect an environment that attracts them.

The second theme, class size, refers to crowded classes. The increasing number of students in the preparatory schools under study made the classes overcrowded. The participants often addressed to the situation as a big drawback.

Yes, it is exciting to think that we will go into huge classes with hundreds of students in our departments but not in preparatory school. I am not an expert in the field but it seems abnormal to me to have 25-30 students in a language class. In my dream language school, there are 10-12 students who always have the chance to speak, interact and enjoy the class.

The participant responses suggest that there is a need to reduce class size. Crowded classes are often considered as a disadvantage in that they have less chance to practice. One student response illustrates the situation with a specific case:

In our writing classes, our instructor would like to give feedback to all of us. Because of the schedule and high class size, he cannot allocate a lot of time. Instead of giving us comprehensive feedbacks, he can just focus on major mistakes. If there were ten students, I would learn more.

3.2. Theme two: Curriculum

Under this theme, student responses refer to a number of crucial expectations and problems in these departments. First of all, most students stated that speaking is the most important area in language learning that needs constant practice and improvement. Therefore, they want to get involved in more speaking sessions. It seems that the participants prefer a more communicative language learning experience where they have the chance to converse in the target language both with their peers and their instructors.

I can see that our instructor wants us to talk. However, I don't find it enough. In my dream school, speaking about recent, trend topics becomes the main purpose of the education.

Personally, I can learn the grammar and vocabulary by myself. But, speaking is a big problem. No one around me speaks English. The class is my only chance to practice speaking.

Some of the participants also stated that they spend too much time with grammar teaching and vocabulary. They suggest that they get ready for the class outside the school by means of teacher-guided assignments and the class sessions be more discussion-oriented.

I think we can be given assignments about the topic. If there is a reading passage or a grammar subject, we can be given some web links or worksheets to study in advance. Then the instructor gives a brief teaching on things we don't understand. The rest of the class can be allocated for more speaking, more discussion and more communication.

This particular response (similar ones were given by a large number of students) specifically indicates that the students want less in-class teaching. The majority of students stated that they do not want to spend this one-year education with heavy grammar, vocabulary learning or similar things as it seems that they do not have many options to communicate in target language outside the class.

Another reason why students were so focused on speaking was that they see speaking the ultimate goal of language learning regarding their future careers. They often stated that they want to feel confident and sure about their speaking skills in their professional future jobs.

Being able to speak English fluently is an important strength in business interviews. For my major, which is business administration, it is even more important than a high GPA. Otherwise, it is futile to seek a good career.

The second sub-theme, exam stress, refers to students' considerations about English proficiency exam that they take at the end of the academic year. Most of the students, especially those in elementary or pre-intermediate levels, were worried about failing in the exam. This anxiousness was given as a constant disturbance that led to a lack of motivation. The student responses also indicate that exam stress increased also by a tight schedule. Because language education given in state higher education institutions is limited to one year (in the next year, student can get proficiency tests several times or they are required to provide a valid score in equivalent national or international language proficiency exams. However, they are not allowed to attend prep school program more than a year in state universities), they reported that they were under constant stress. Because there is a lot to cover in all skills especially for those who start from the elementary level, the program was reported to be quite intense and heavy. The combination of these two factors led to increasing stress levels for the students.

So far, I have been a good student. I attend all the classes, study daily and do my assignments. However, proficiency exam is my nightmare. When I talk to students from the previous year, they say that it is almost impossible to pass it.

We learn so much, really much. Our instructors would like to prepare us for our departments. In my department, the medium of teaching is English. I can understand them and I know there is this proficiency exam, but the classes are progressing really quickly. I sometimes feel overwhelmed. What if I fail?

Another sub-theme is beyond-class activities. A great majority of the students reported that fixed class hours may be helpful but not enough for their language education. The expectation is that prep school provides extracurricular activities including speaking clubs, drama studies, further vocabulary sessions, movie sessions etc. Most of the students stated that their school did not provide these opportunities. However, they see these activities as a fundamental part of their language learning experience and expect to participate in such activities.

We have 24 hours class weekly and we can only cover the basics. What I need is more than this. I want to join some student clubs. I want to act, get assistance in my writing tasks and practice more. Otherwise, I think it is not enough for me.

I like movies but just watching movies in English with subtitles does mean much to me. If there were organized

extra classes, that would be great. Our instructors would choose appropriate materials for us.

The last sub-theme under curriculum is the materials. Though a lot of participants reported that they liked the books, cost becomes a problem. They stated that it is an advantage to study with world's leading international publication companies, but the high prices of the books become a big burden for many of them. Contrary to national publications, these books were reported to provide a rich array of materials from extra sources and videos to online tools. The colorful content and interesting topics were seen as a motivating factor. However, it was also reported that not all activities were as appealing.

This is the first time I have used such nice books. But some of the activities are not for Turkish students.

Yes, we need to buy these books and yes they are chose by the experts in the fields. However, they are far too expensive.

Some of the students also reported that the preparatory school education must also include area-specific language education. These students suggested that after a comprehensive general and academic language education, they should also be delivered language education for their fields.

I know there are some time constraints here but my expectation was to see some specific English for my department. I will study engineering soon and I will be dealing with lots of specific terminology. A brief introduction to the basics would make me more ready for my major.

3.3. Theme three: Academic Staff

A great majority of the participants frequently reported that they were pleased to have qualified instructors. The students responded that compared to their English teachers in primary, middle and high school, those in the preparatory school were more qualified, knowledgeable and motivated. The participant responses also revealed that those students who saw their instructors as caring and encouraging enjoyed the classes more and reported that they were more willing to participate in in-class activities.

One thing that I feel lucky about my instructors. They have a high profile. They want to teach and they do their best.

A small group of students who stated their discontent with their instructors reported that teacher support in language learning process is crucial and without it, they feel stuck in the middle. These students, unlike the others, stated that their instructors should be changed periodically.

Even though, the majority of the students considered non-native instructors in EFL classes as highly qualified, there were still a considerable number of students who believed that native speakers could enrich their language learning experience. Because most of the students came from state schools where native teachers of English are not recruited, they expect to have one in higher education level prep schools.

It is not because our instructors are not qualified. But native speakers of English can help us know the culture and people. It would make the education better.

I would feel more confident if I see myself communicating with a native speaker.

4. Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore student expectations regarding the preparatory school English education they were receiving and examined in what areas their expectations were not fully met. Based on the findings, we identified three main areas where improvements are necessitated: building, curriculum and academic staff.

The first thing that needs attention is the building. The participants in the study frequently indicated that they expected a richer environment where they could be more exposed to the language so that their learning process is supported by many other channels. Language is a means of communication, but curriculum adopts a more systematic approach to the language learning and the whole process can turn into a boring, mundane experience. Therefore, it is essential to reveal the fun in language learning in environments where students are relaxed and motivated.

It is suggested that students should also be exposed to the language outside the classroom [7, 8]. Most of the time, the role of school building in the attempts to increase educational quality is ignored. There is a common misunderstanding that the quality of the school building is not really significant in academic performance [9]. A stimulating environment, areas for collaborative learning, the integration of interior and exterior areas in the school building, and visuals can play an important role in learning [10]. In language learning, it is also suggested that students should be provided real-life settings to use their language and they should not have anywhere to hide from the language [11]. For example, appealing visuals that are related to students' learning can serve as learning tools with which students can interact with little or no effort [12].

Considering these benefits, increasing school usability regarding language learning and creating peripheral learning environments can be a positive strategy to meet students' expectations and contribute to their positive language learning experience.

Another major area that is indicated by the participants is the curriculum. Though there are several sub-themes, it seems that students opt for a more communicative approach where speaking is given priority. Certain studies indicate that students experience more anxiety in foreign language classes [13]. If not dealt with, the anxiety can increase and lead to less participation and unwillingness to communicate in the target language [14]. Therefore, more focus on speaking classes in these departments may meet students' expectations. In the study, students often indicated that there is not enough room for speaking due to the tight schedule and time constraints. Also, most EFL classes are still teacher-centered, which limits the meaningful interaction and reduces students' interests and efforts [15]. Adopting an EFL curriculum where teaching is based on lectures, homework, tests and grades can prevent students' gaining autonomy [16]. Therefore, a more student-centered learning environment can be the answer for students' demands in these departments. Instead of traditional classroom settings,

students can be encouraged to study lesson contents at home through digital web-based materials and books and class hours are spared for assignments to students' understanding of important concepts [17]. In our case, this can allow for more time to initiate discussions and increase the time spent for more in-class communicative activities. Flipping the classroom in this way can also contribute to students' critical thinking skills and can make face-to-face time more effective in class [18].

Considering beyond class activities, the participants stated that they feel the need for extracurricular activities in their EFL experience. Some studies in the literature indicate that there is a significant relationship between involvement in these outside-the-class activities and proficiency in foreign language [19, 20]. Providing more learning opportunities beyond the class can turn language learning experience into an entertaining one. This may also be helpful to students in reducing exam anxiety, which was another problem area in our case.

The effect of class size can be a real impediment offering fewer opportunities for teachers to utilize quality teaching methods [21]. The teachers find teaching large number of students unfavorable as it can undermine their efforts to elevate the level of language learning in their classes [22]. It is also pointed out that large class size can also hinder students from improving their oral skills [23]. Considering these, the student expectations on class size is justified. However, meeting student expectations regarding class size may require considerable financial resources and may not have an easy solution. Therefore, investing in more flipped classrooms and creating outside-the-class activities for further exposure to the language as well as improving building usability for language learning purposes may reduce the negative effects of large classes and lessen students' disturbance.

One area where student expectations are met is the academic staff. Most students stated that they were pleased with the qualifications of their instructors. Instructor support during the language learning process was given a crucial component in their EFL classes. However, it is also indicated that native teachers of English can be a real advantage in both getting familiar with the target culture and gaining self-confidence. Materials used in EFL classes are also cited as one of the strengths of the education delivered in these departments though the cost of the books can become a major problem for some students.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study were limited to the setting and the participants in the study. However, it provides some crucial implications for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers in the field of EFL. Though further research is needed to examine the overall situation in higher education preparatory classes in Turkey to outline the general trend, the findings of this study show that student expectations from language education in preparatory schools are not fully met regarding the building and certain aspects of the curriculum. On the other hand, a more positive picture is available considering the academic staff.

It seems that problem areas indicated in this study need attention mostly from school management and the curriculum designers. Investing in improving building usability is more related to the management in that it may require financial sources. Curriculum development, on the other hand, is more to the researchers and practitioners. Taking student expectations into account in language learning classes may contribute a lot both to

the motivation and language proficiency of the students. Though the problems seem varied, they are actually interconnected to each other. It means that improvement in one of them can contribute to all. Further research can focus on comprehensive quantitative and mixed-method studies that include students from various higher education preparatory classes in Turkey.

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