



Investigating problems of English literature teaching to EFL high school students in Turkey with focus on language proficiency¹

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Abstract

Introduction of English literature as a separate school subject into Turkish high school curriculum has revealed a huge number of problems during its practical applications: students' low levels of proficiency in English, teacher incompetence, low motivation, lack of confidence, limited resources, lack of materials etc. Given the great extent and multi-sided dimension of the new experience, with the constant interference of a variety of external factors, the focus of this study was narrowed down to identify mainly the primary source of problems in EFL-contextualized English literature teaching. To this purpose, two instruments of data collection were used: a teacher questionnaire and English language proficiency test. Analysis of the questionnaire has revealed that, according to English teachers, student-related problems, and particularly students' low proficiency levels, constitute the most important source of problems. The language proficiency test was applied to see whether this finding confirmed or not the teacher opinion about low proficiency levels of students. The test has revealed students' real levels of proficiency in compliance with the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). It showed that about half of the students' proficiency levels were significantly lower than expected, in this way partly confirming the teacher opinion on low proficiency levels, as the proof of the general inadequacy of students for studying English literature at levels prescribed by the national curriculum. The study has been led to conclude that there is an urgent need to re-adjust English literature curriculum so as to take into account students' real levels of proficiency, and to review or reconsider it in such ways as to prioritize linguistic competence development over the literary.

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Keywords: English literature teaching; student-related problems; English language proficiency; linguistic and literary competence; curriculum development

1. Introduction

Course designers always have to reflect upon issues that are likely to have effect on the practical implementations of what they design. In this respect, in the case of English literature course, designed for study by EFL students, it is important to see if students' proficiency levels in English comply or

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not with the curricular standards in order to ensure the sustainability of the program. Among the problems in EFL literature teaching - low motivation, lack of confidence, inadequate teaching methods, exam stress, underqualified teachers, insufficient in-service training - students' proficiency levels have been always standing out as the most critical (Abdullah, T. et al, 2007; Arvidson & Blanco, 2004; Buyukyavuz & Inal, 2008; Brown, 2000; Cetintas, 2010; Ganakumaran, 2002; Karci & Vural, 2011; Katz, 2001; Krishnasamy, 2015; Mwape, 1984).

According to Krishnasamy (2015), unless the program reflects students' real levels of proficiency it risks producing "a mismatch between the text selected and students' language ability" which would inevitably have a negative effect on the course implementation (p.139). Certainly, there is no doubt that students should have sufficient command of English to ensure they can keep up with the pace and workload of the English literature program. After all, English literature *is* a serious academic discipline. The contention rises when decision-making is required on the issue of what should be the proficiency levels of students to make them eligible to study English literature. Kapinga (quoted in Mwape, 1984, p.15) conducted a research on EFL high school students in which she described her students as being seriously anxious about learning English literature which they perceived as "too difficult to comprehend and ... understand independently without the assistance of their teachers". Kapinga suggests that the study of English literature should be pre-conditioned by "the mastery of English language itself". The similar views go even as far as to suggest that English literature should be studied exclusively by students well advanced in English, and not by beginners. Nevertheless, considering the widespread popularity, for various reasons, of English literature all over the world, and particularly in EFL contexts, it is not likely that such radical views will be ever accepted and applied. Quite on the contrary, there is a prevailing opinion in line with Mwape's (1984) argument that English literature should be "accessible to all students in school" because it is "not always contingent upon student's proficiency in English" (p.19-20). The scholar remarks that "the weak L2 student probably needs literature more than the more proficient L2 learner" and that the solution to the dispute of linguistic barriers lies simply in making English literature curricula "avoid prescription of books beyond the average student's ability" (p.20). English literature, it is argued, is immensely resourceful and can provide for any level of proficiency: beginner, intermediate or advanced.

In Turkey, the levels of high school students' proficiency in English are predetermined by the national curriculum for English language produced by the Ministry of National Education. In compliance with the principle of continuity, Turkish students, passing from primary to secondary education, are expected to pass from A2 to B1 level according to the generally recognized CEFR standards. However, no study has undertaken so far to look into whether high school students in Turkey are really B1 proficient and capable to undertake a study of English literature required for this level.

In addition to proficiency levels, while motivation and self-confidence are considered important aspects in terms of their effect on student performance, field knowledge and teacher training are equally important in terms of their effect on teacher performance. In a study by Katz (2001), English teachers thought themselves professionally incompetent in teaching English literature, blaming for this the pre-service training they had received for its primary focus on English language teaching in disregard of English literature. Ganakumaran et al (2003) assert that teachers' lack of training in English literature bears responsibility for the failings in curricular implementations. Keeping in same vein, Karci and Vural (2011) argue that, let alone English literature, teachers often do not even think to be qualified to teach English language, hence, Turkish students' poor command of English language. Cetintas (2010) further contributes to the debate remarking on the deplorable state of in-service training courses for English teachers which explains the poor quality of English studies in Turkey.

1.1. Research questions

In the light of the above statement of the problem, the study seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the most serious problem of English literature teaching to Turkish high school students from the point of view of English teachers?
2. Are Turkish high school students really B1 proficient as required according to the national curriculum?

2. Method

2.1. Sample / Participants

The present study was conducted on 108 English teachers employed at state Anatolian High Schools (AHS) in seven regions of Turkey, as shown in Table 1, and on 131 students of 9th grade (class “A” and class “B”) at two state Anatolian High Schools in Ankara, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Teacher Participants

Characteristics	N	%
Regions of Employment		
Mediterranean	17	15,7
Eastern Anatolia	12	11,1
Aegean	15	13,9
South Eastern Anatolia	9	8,3
Central Anatolia	29	26,9
Black Sea	16	14,8
Marmara	10	9,3
Total	108	100

Table 2. Student Participants

School	District	Students	Class
Esenevler Anatolian High School	Ankara/Altındağ	33	9A
		32	9B
Ayhan Sümer Anatolian High School	Ankara/Çankaya	32	9A
		34	9B
Total		131	4

2.2. Instruments

The study used a self-completed questionnaire and a language proficiency test as its main research tools as these are the most frequently used tools in applied linguistics providing a large amount of statistically processable information in the shortest time (Dornyei, 2007). Though the study mainly used quantitative research method, an element of qualitative research was added to enhance the findings of the former. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) describe such approach as “design validity” of the study while Dornyei (2007) terms it as “data triangulation” involving the use of multiple methods, sources and perspectives. The study aimed both at the qualitative data to represent the micro-perspective of the views of individual participants and at the quantitative data to represent the macro-perspective of the views of an average participant on the same issue.

In order to ensure the reliability of the datasets, the draft questionnaire was piloted on a small group of teachers at five high schools in different regions of Turkey. For the six items of the questionnaire the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value was found at 0,625 (Table 3) and it was possible to declare the questionnaire reliable.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics: Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient Values for 3-Point Likert Scales Questionnaire (pilot study)

	Scale Mean	Scale Variance	Total item score correlation	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Item 129	12,13	3,158	0,323	0,625
Item 130	11,83	2,928	0,451	
Item 131	11,96	3,085	0,450	
Item 132	11,50	3,739	0,223	
Item 133	11,38	3,375	0,491	
Item 134	11,63	3,549	0,240	

N= 24 (α) = 0,625 Number of Variance = 6

The dataset was analyzed on 3-point Likert scales, as shown in Table 4, with mean scores calculated using the formula for rating scales known as “Gap Width = Sequence Width/ Group Count” to determine score intervals as $4/5=0,80$ (Tekin,1996).

Table 4. 3-Point Likert Scales Score Intervals

(3) Serious Problem	2,44 – 3,00
(2) Moderate Problem	1,67 – 2,43
(1) Not at all Problem	1,00 – 1,66

The proficiency test titled ‘*English Unlimited Placement Test*’ was retrieved online from the website of the Cambridge University Press (CUP, 2015). In compliance with the legal regulations about study ethics, all references to the name of the provider as well as the name of the test were removed prior to the administering. The test aimed to measure students’ proficiency levels in English according to the first four CEFR levels - A1, A2, B1, B1-B2 - as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. CEFR Levels for Proficiency in English

	Starter	Elementar y	Pre- intermediate	Intermedi ate
CEFR levels	A1	A2	B1	B1-B2
Written test score	0-15	16-35	36-55	56+

2.3. Data collection procedures and analysis

All statistical operations for analysis of quantitative data were based on computer package program (version 20.0) SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Six items of the questionnaire, represented in Table 3 and numbered 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, were designed with the purpose of gathering quantitative data to provide an answer to the first research question. Teachers were asked to rate these items about different problems of English literature teaching.

In addition to providing data for each item, a grouped-item data was also provided by assigning all items to three main categories: student-related problems, teacher-related problems and external problems. The purpose was to ensure a broader perspective on the issue of problems. Thus, item 129 (insufficiency or lack of training in literature teaching) and item 131 (teachers lacking self-confidence in teaching literature) were placed under the category of teacher-related problems; item 132 (low language proficiency levels in students) and item 133 (students' low motivation in learning foreign literature) were placed under the category of student-related problems; and, finally, item 130 (unavailability of materials to teach literature) and item 134 (poorly equipped libraries) were placed under the category of problems related to external factors.

Item 135 was designed as an open-ended question asking teachers to make a written statement of their beliefs and thoughts on the issue of problems in English literature teaching. The purpose was to gather data to see whether it matched or not the findings supplied by the quantitative dataset. The content analysis technique was used to process what was provided by the open-ended question.

The language proficiency test was applied to answer the second research question about whether students were indeed B1 proficient in English. The test contained 60 multiple-choice questions, 20 for each level, from Starter to Intermediate, as shown in Table 5. A teacher guide was provided with answer keys and tables and was used to interpret the scores. Combined percentages of students' scores were also calculated to present a summary version of the results.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Teacher questionnaire

Table 6 demonstrates the mean scores of teacher responses about problems of teaching of English literature. Teachers rated their opinions on 3-point Likert scales.

Table 6. Mean Scores of Teacher Responses on Problems of English Literature Teaching

Problems of English Literature Teaching		Mean	St.D
Problems	129 Insufficiency or lack of training in literature teaching	2,45	0,689
	130 Unavailability of materials to teach literature.	2,33	0,723
	131 Teachers lacking self-confidence in teaching literature	2,22	0,789
	132 Low language proficiency levels of students.	2,62	0,559
	133 Students' low motivation in learning foreign literature	2,60	0,655
	134 Poorly-equipped libraries	2,45	0,702

Analysis of the mean scores of teacher responses on problems of English literature teaching revealed that teachers considered students' low language proficiency levels to be the most serious problem. However, it was also found that students' low motivation in learning foreign literature was also considered as important problem, though rated lower than students' low proficiency levels. Teacher responses additionally revealed that teachers rated their own lack of confidence as a moderate problem.

Table 7 shows the mean scores and percentage results for the grouped-item data analysis of three categories of problems.

Table 7. Mean Scores and Percentages of Teacher Responses on Problems of English Literature Teaching

Categories	Problems	Mean	St.D.	(%)
Teacher-related problems	129. Insufficiency or lack of training in literature teaching	2,33	0,61	49%
	131. Teachers lacking self-confidence in teaching literature			
Student-related problems	132. Low language proficiency levels in students	2,61	0,51	73%
	133. Students' low motivation in learning foreign literature			
External factors	130. Unavailability of materials to teach literature	2,39	0,61	54%
	134. Poorly equipped libraries			

The results show that items grouped under student-related problems - low proficiency levels in English and low motivation in learning a foreign literature - received the highest score and were thus interpreted as serious problems of English literature teaching. Teacher-related problems, on the other hand, received a lower score and were thus interpreted as moderate problems. Problems related to external factors were rated between student-related problems and teacher-related problems.

The open-ended item contained teachers' written statements about their beliefs and views of the problems of English literature teaching. Below are given some examples of these statementsⁱⁱ:

"I'm sorry to inform you it is almost impossible to teach literature to students in state schools because they lack reading even in their native language but this can be possible in private schools. Thank you..."

"Students may lose their self-confidence and motivation in learning English if they feel unsuccessful especially because of their low language proficiency levels."

"Students' lack of knowledge about the literature is another serious problem."

"There may be prejudices. I'm not sure that people are ready to make their children take English literature lesson because different culture is a suspicious thing for them. To motivate the people, we should tell them that literature is something that makes us rich and satisfied. English literature is an opening gate to world, and studying it is a great pleasure."

"In our school, there is no language class now. ... students and their parents give more attention to the digital lessons. (mathematics, chemistry, physics)"

"The students are too reluctant to learn foreign languages. They are unaware of the importance of the foreign languages. Their focus is on other lessons rather than English. They prefer to study and learn the lessons such as Maths, Physics and Chemistry instead of foreign languages."

"I have been teaching English literature for two years. The main problem is students' low motivation in learning foreign literature. Yet, some of the students are really interested in literature. I didn't have any difficulty choosing a book of literature."

"Teachers need training to teach English literature no matter if they graduated from Education or Literature Faculties, and that is a mammoth task for the Ministry of Education."

"We should teach the English literature courses like we teach Turkish literature. There's no need to teach eras, names of movements, styles that writers used, approaches etc. Instead we should read four or five simplified popular books from English or American Literature. We need to teach students to enjoy English literature, not to memorize approaches or disciplines."

"University entrance exam is the most serious problem in foreign language teaching efforts and achievements."

"Crowded classes, no question in YGS or in all parts of LYS, and students' lack of knowledge on importance of learning literature."

"Hours of English lesson are very limited. There must be a prep-class in high schools."

"The attitudes of authorities towards language learning is a serious problem."

"The number of the lessons isn't enough for the teachers to have good environment conditions for teaching English literature effectively..."

Based on these statements, it appears that teachers commented on multiple problems of English literature teaching referring to such aspects as students' low language proficiency levels, lack of language skills, low motivation, cultural prejudices, lack of training, university entrance exams etc. All the aspects commented upon by teachers are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Content Analysis of Teacher Responses to the Open-Ended Item

	Problems	Comments N
1.	Low language proficiency levels	1
2.	Lack of reading skills	1
3.	Lack of speaking skills	2
4.	Lack of self-confidence	2
5.	Low motivation	5
6.	Lack of prior literature knowledge	2
7.	Cultural prejudices about foreign literature	1
8.	Lack of student awareness of the importance of learning literature	2
9.	Different preferences of subjects of study	2
10.	Lack of training	1
11.	Wrong choice of teaching methods	2
12.	Insufficient number of lessons	2
13.	University entrance exams	2
14.	Crowded classes	1
15.	Attitudes of authorities	2
	Total	28

As Table 8 shows, among the diverse views represented by teacher comments, low motivation of students to study English literature comes forth as a serious problem. There were also made a few comments on students' lack of speaking and reading skills as well as on low proficiency levels, which can be all summed up as roughly referring to language proficiency.

To make statistical results of the qualitative dataset more meaningful and comparable to the findings of the quantitative dataset, the procedure of grouping items under three general categories was also applied to 15 items presented in Table 8. Thus, low language proficiency levels, lack of reading and speaking skills, low motivation, lack of self-confidence, lack of prior literature knowledge, lack of student awareness of the importance of learning literature, different preferences for subjects of study and cultural prejudices were assigned to the category of student-related problems. Lack of training and wrong choices of teaching methods were placed under the category of teacher-related problem. And finally, university entrance exams, insufficient number of lessons, crowded classes and attitudes of authorities were grouped under the category of problems related to external factors. As shown in Table 9, it appears there were more references to student-related problems than to teacher-related problems and external factor-related problems taken together.

Table 9. Content Analysis of Group-Based Problems of English Literature Teaching

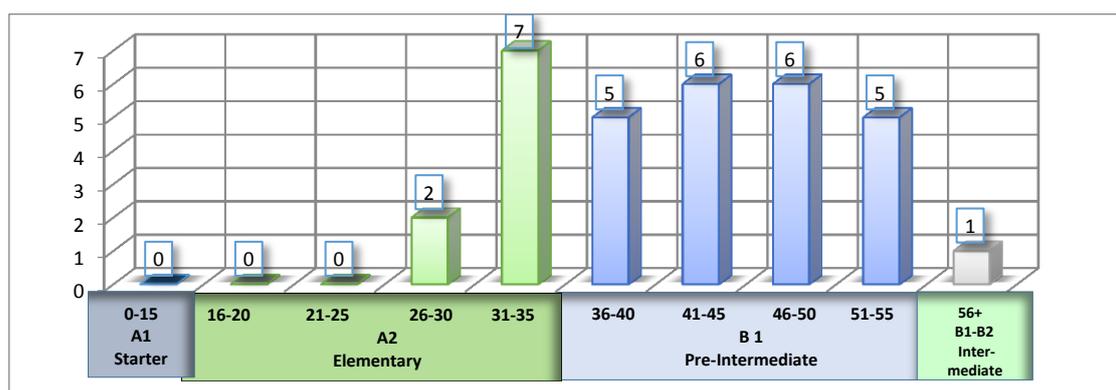
Problem Type	Number of Comments	Percentage
Student-related	18	64%
Teacher-related	3	11%
External	7	25%
Total	28	100%

The majority of teachers (64%) seem to agree that the most serious problem faced by English literature teaching is student-related. 25% of teachers made references to external factors such as university exams and insufficient teaching materials. And only 11% of teachers supported the view that teacher-related factors were the major source of problems in English literature teaching.

In the light of the above, it appears that the findings of both quantitative and qualitative datasets generally overlap and, therefore, confirm the argument of a number of studies that student-related problems, particularly low proficiency levels, constitute the most serious problems of English literature teaching in EFL contexts. (Abdullah & al, 2007; Arvidson & Blanco, 2004; Buyukyavuz & Inal, 2008; Brown, 2000; Cetintas, 2010; Ganakumaran, 2002; Karci & Vural, 2011; Katz, 2001; Krishnasamy, 2015; Mwape, 1984)

3.2. English Language Proficiency Test

The analysis of data provided by the proficiency test revealed significant differences between students' proficiency levels. Students from one school appeared to have higher scores than students from the other school. The majority of students from the first school were found to be B1-proficient (CEFR pre-intermediate level), as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 for classes 9-A and 9-B.

**Figure 1.** English proficiency levels of 9-A students from Ayhan Sümer AHS

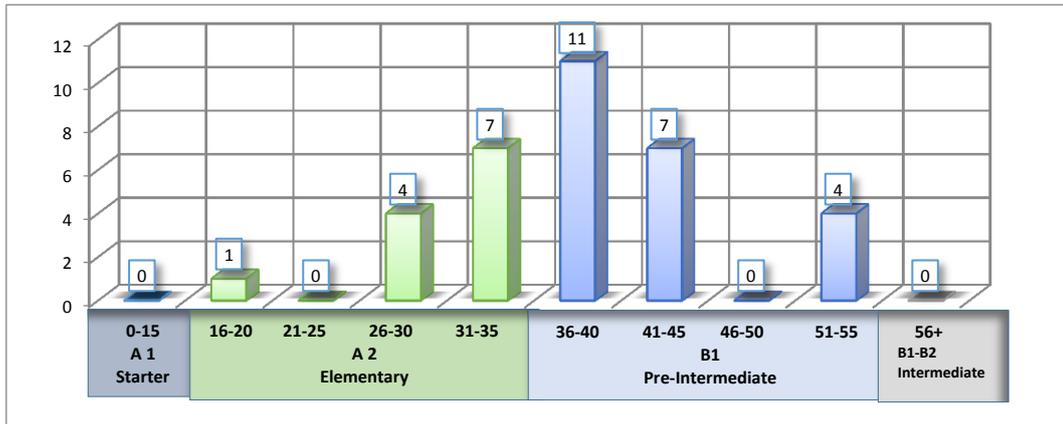


Figure 2. English proficiency levels of 9-B students from Ayhan Sümer AHS

Figure 3 shows combined percentage results of English proficiency levels of students from Ayhan Sümer AHS. 67% of the students from this school were placed at B1 level, whereas 32% of students were placed at A2 level, and only 1% was placed at B1-B2 levels.

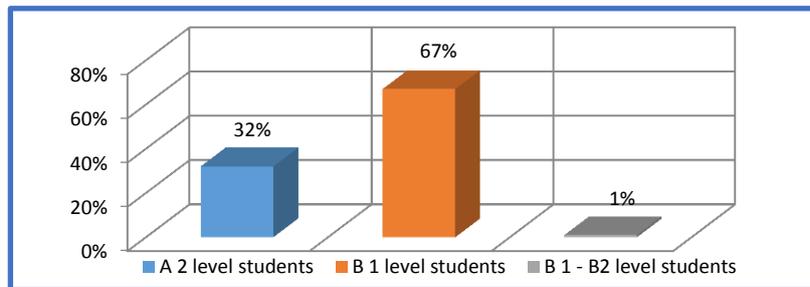


Figure 3. Combined percentage results of English proficiency levels of students from Ayhan Sümer AHS

As for the students from the second school, the study found that the majority of them received scores significantly lower than the students from the first school. As shown in Figure 4 for class 9-A, and in Figure 5 for class 9-B, the majority of students from this school were placed at A2 level (CEFR elementary level).

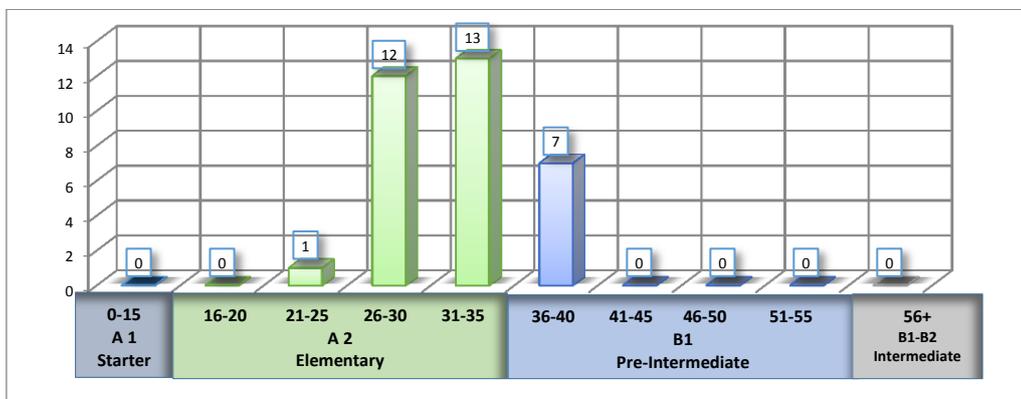


Figure 4. English proficiency levels of 9-A students from Esenevler AHS

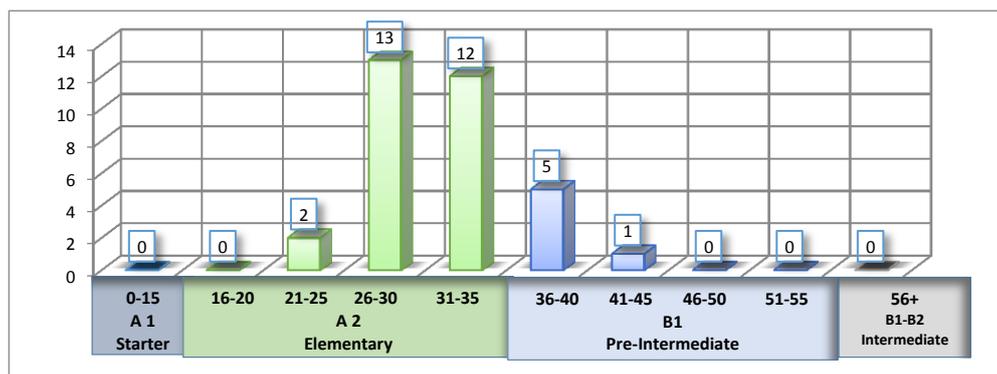


Figure 5. English proficiency levels of 9-B students from Esenevler AHS

Figure 6 shows combined percentage results of English proficiency levels of students from the second school. Accordingly, 80% of all the students who participated in this study from this school were placed at A2 levels and only 20% of students were placed at B1 levels.

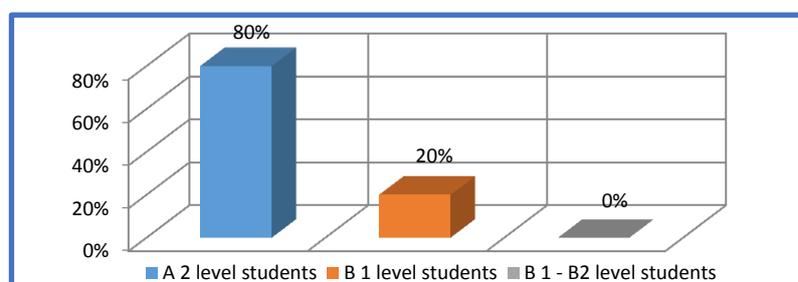


Figure 6. Combined percentage results of English proficiency levels of students from Esenevler AHS

Based on the results of the test, it can be argued that, although studying in the same type of school - Anatolian High School (AHS) - students from different AHS schools appear to demonstrate a significant difference in English proficiency levels, one school being at B1 level while the other at A2. It is interesting that there is even a striking consistency of results between different classes of the same AHS school, class A and class B demonstrating the same level of proficiency. Since only part of the students were found at B1 proficiency level, while the others at A2, it can be argued that not all high school students in Turkey are B1 proficient as required by the regulatory standards of the national curriculum. Hence, it can be suggested that a considerable number of high school students in Turkey do not meet curricular requirements for English language proficiency.

4. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the current study. First of all, it appears that the major source of problems in English literature teaching at Turkish high schools can generally be ascribed to students, mostly to their low proficiency levels. The fact that only some of the students were found to meet proficiency level requirements of the national curriculum leads this study to suggest a re-adjustment of high school English literature curriculum to align it with CEFR A2 proficiency levels. This could certainly have implications for all the phases of curriculum developing process: identifying aims and objectives, defining teaching methodology, designing teaching materials, program assessment etc. It would also be better if English literature course designers looked into new and more efficient ways to improve students' proficiency levels, in which they could employ

different literature teaching strategies designed for language classroom. The aims and objectives of the newly revised English literature curriculum need to be defined and formulated from the perspective of prioritizing the development of linguistic competence over literary.

Given the fact that students' linguistic competence was found as low as elementary A2, it seems rather unrealistic and self-defeating to expect from them achievement of literary competence, which is by itself an achievement of rather high cognitive order (Chomsky, 1957). Unable to understand what they read because of language barriers, it is impossible for them to develop such literary skills as appreciating aesthetic values of a literary text, meaningful interpreting of literary texts, drawing moral values, understanding complex metaphorical deviations etc.

Program assessment and teaching methodologies could be reconsidered to incorporate such methods, strategies and techniques which would first target development of students' linguistic competence rather than their literary competence. English literature course designers need to provide learning materials suitable for as low as elementary levels of proficiency. English literature is very helpful in this respect as it provides ready-made materials - original or adapted - that can appeal to any level of proficiency. There are plenty of texts made up of very simple storylines, plots, easy grammar and simple vocabulary. Children books, short stories, picture books, fables and fairy tales of uncomplicated nature are obvious examples. Incorporating them into the course content could suggest an interesting experience and a source of motivation for students and teachers as well. The sad experience of English teachers with regard to English literature teaching in Turkey should be compressed into service to acknowledge that unless our students get first a good command of English language they will never be able to come to terms with such great authorities as William Shakespeare, Scott Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde, William Blake or Charles Dickens.

5. Further research

With students' proficiency levels as low as A2, further research might be needed to investigate whether it is possible, and to what extent, to teach English literature at this level at all. On the other hand, an experimental study could be suggested to see if there is any positive relationship between studying of English language and English literature in Turkish high schools. It might also be appropriate to investigate the issue of problems of English literature teaching from the point of view of students in order to see what they think about this issue. In other words, a general student survey could be suggested to bring more light into issues which constitute the main concern of the study.

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Yabancı dil yeterliliği başta olmak üzere Türkiye’de lise öğrencilerinin okumakta olduğu İngiliz edebiyatı dersi öğretiminde ortaya çıkan sorunların araştırılması

Öz

İngiliz edebiyatının bundan birkaç yıl önce Türkiye’de lise müfredatına bir ders olarak girmesinin ardından bu dersin öğretiminde birtakım sorunlar yaşanmaya başlamıştır. Ortaya çıkan bu sorunların farklı nedenleri bulunmaktadır: öğrencilerin yabancı dildeki yetersizlikleri, öğretmenlerin mesleki yetersizlikleri, düşük motivasyon düzeyleri, kısıtlı kaynaklar, program ve materyal eksiklikleri. Yaşanan bu sorunların farklı nedenlerden kaynaklanmasına bağlı olarak (öğrenci, öğretmen, dış faktörler ve benzeri), bu çalışmanın temel amacı, bu dersin eğitimini zorlaştıran en önemli sorunu bulup tespit etmektir. Bu problemlerin tespitinde yöntem olarak branş öğretmenlerinin görüşlerine başvurulmuştur. Bu amaçla, iki veri toplama aracı kullanılmıştır: öğretmen anketi ve yabancı dildeki yeterlilik testi. Öğretmenlerden alınan görüşler çerçevesinde, öğrencilerden kaynaklanan sorunlar arasında, özellikle yetersiz yabancı dil düzeyleri, bu dersin öğretiminde en önemli sorunu teşkil etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, öğretmenlerin görüşlerini teyit etmek amacı ile lise öğrencilerinin yabancı dildeki gerçek düzeylerini tespit etmek için İngilizce yeterlilik testi uygulanmıştır. Yabancı Diller için Ortak Avrupa Çerçeve Anlaşması (CEFR), Türkiye’de, öğrencilerin yabancı dil düzeylerinin tespitinde referans belgesi olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu testin sonuçlarına göre öğrencilerin bir kısmının İngilizce’deki düzeylerinin CEFR standartlarının altında olduğu görülmektedir. Böylece, öğretmenlerin görüşleri genel olarak teyit edilmiş bulunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, öğrencilerin yabancı dildeki seviyelerinin milli müfredatta belirtilen ölçütlerin altında kalması İngiliz edebiyatının eğitimini zorlaştıran başlıca bir sorun olarak tespit edilmiştir. Bu çerçevede, İngiliz edebiyatı programının öğrencilerin gerçek düzeyleri dikkate alınarak yeniden yazılması gerekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, İngiliz edebiyatı dersine giren lise öğrencilerine edebiyat bilgilerinin öğretilmesinden ziyade temel İngilizce bilgilerinin öğretilmesi gerekliliği vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: İngiliz edebiyatının eğitimi; problem tespiti; yabancı dildeki yetersizlik; dilsel yetenek; edebiyat yeteneği; program geliştirme

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ⁱ The article is based partly on Ph.D. thesis “Suggested Framework for Designing Syllabus for the Elective Course ‘English Literature’ in High Schools”, Gazi University, Educational Sciences Institute, ELT Department

ⁱⁱ Teachers’ comments are given in original form.