

The Challenges Facing English Language Teachers in Turkey

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: April 09, 2021

Accepted: June 17, 2021

Published: August 31, 2021

Volume: 12 Issue: 4

Advance access: July 2021

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Key words:

English Language Teachers,
Challenges,
School Environment,
Students,
Community and Parents,
Teachers' Skills,
Curriculum,
Age,
Years of Teaching Experience,
Teaching Sector

ABSTRACT

This study, which utilized a mixed-methods design, aimed at investigating the challenges facing English language teachers in Turkey. Moreover, the study explored the probable effects of age, years of teaching experience, and teaching sector (i.e. state vs. private) on English language teachers' perceptions of challenges in terms of school environment, students, community and parents, teachers' skills, and curriculum. The data were gathered from 153 English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Turkey via a questionnaire, including both open-ended questions and close-ended items on Likert-scale format. Many teachers complained that emotional support from the school principal is not enough, and classes are crowded, too. Those who worked in villages even complained about the problems of school buildings and environments. Half of the respondents believed that parents are unaware of the importance of English language and they do not cooperate with English language teachers. The majority of the teachers maintained that they need many training programs, such as workshops on using specific aids for teaching English language. The majority of the Turkish teachers of English complained that pressure from curriculum demands inhibits creative and innovative language teaching. In addition, they lack enough time and facilities to meet the requirements of the curriculum. Moreover, some teachers complained that the curriculum lacks sufficient attention to Turkish EFL learners' oral communication skills. Teachers' age, years of teaching experience, and teaching sector did not significantly affect the teachers' perceptions about the challenges. A set of recommendations is presented in this paper which can contribute to tackling the challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers usually face many challenges which can have a direct effect on the teaching and learning process (Al-Amrat, 2011). These challenges stem from the teacher, the students, and the educational system (Ozsevik, 2010). The Turkish educational context has some features, "such as large class sizes, inadequacy of instructional materials, high-stakes testing system, lack of professional support" (Sali & Kecik, 2018, p. 118), which can cause various challenges for the teachers of English in Turkey.

In Turkey, even though Ministry of National Education decided on a shift from the traditional form-focused language pedagogy to meaning-focused one based on communication in 2006, not all teachers have adopted the new regulations, and the majority of them have kept employing the old-fashioned methods, such as grammar-translation and memorization. (Haznedar, 2010, as cited in Kara, Ayaz, & Dünder, 2017). Similarly, Uysal (2012) argued that although English teachers in Turkey know about the communicative

methods of language teaching, they cannot use them due to practical or institutional problems, such as crowded classes, lack of time to prepare communicative materials, loaded curriculums, technology and equipment deficiencies. Uysal (2012) also pinpointed that in-service education programs "in Turkey lack systematic planning and scientific research on training needs of teachers due to the non-functional organizational structure and under qualified personnel of the Ministry of Education's in-service training department." (p. 19). Likewise, Ülgü and Er (2016) remarked that in Turkey there has been "planning problem in terms of education which in turn influences language teacher education" for the last three decades (p. 684). Furthermore, Mahalingappa and Polat (2016) argued that English language teacher education programs in Turkey suffer from a noticeable shortcoming, which is an absence of "a comprehensive, current, and consistent conceptual framework that is informed by current L2 learning and teaching as well as teacher education research ... Second, there seems to be a lack of focus on a background in linguistics and SLA" (p. 8). Moreover, the programs do

not support the teachers by any feedback or evaluation system (Bayrakcı, 2009; Özer, 2004; Uysal, 2012). Additionally, in Turkey, teachers at public schools cannot freely select their own course books, which can cause some challenges (Kara et al., 2017) because the English Language Teaching (ELT) course books in Turkish schools are poorly developed, mainly grammar and reading based, and lack supplementary materials to meet the needs for communication (Kizildag, 2009). Given all the mentioned points, it can be clear that ELT teachers in Turkey are faced with several challenges.

As for the literature, Korukcu (1996) found that teaching methods, classroom management, lesson planning, and motivating learners were the major problematic areas for the novice EFL teachers in Turkey. Similarly, Akcan (2016) found classroom management, implementation of the communicative approach in classrooms, unmotivated students and learners with learning disabilities as challenges novice EFL teachers face in Turkey. Recently, Sali and Kecik (2018) described the challenges which novice EFL teachers perceived. Challenges related to classroom management included providing and maintaining classroom discipline, setting teacher roles, establishing rapport with learners, instructional planning and managing lessons. Additionally, challenges pertinent to foreign language teaching and learning consisted of teacher's knowledge of language and teaching, teacher's use of language teaching techniques and materials, especially in terms of putting theory into practice, lack of learner proficiency in English, lack of learner motivation and interest for English, dealing with individual learner differences, inadequacy of language teaching course books, and learner parents. Moreover, challenges related to the school context were large class sizes, inadequacy of school materials/equipment, expectations and attitudes of the school administration of language teaching, heavy teaching load, time allocated to English in the curriculum, and learners coming from deprived backgrounds. More recently, Karabuğa and Ilin (2019) considered the challenges faced by the EFL teachers in a Turkish education context as for the practice of lesson study (LS) in the field of language teacher development. The results found teachers' concerns about LS practice both before and after practicing the model. Their concerns were mostly about time, increasing responsibility and effort.

Although the above-mentioned studies were done in the context of Turkey, their focus was on novice teachers' challenges. To the best knowledge of the researcher of the present study, no research has been published which explored the challenges faced by Turkish Turkish EFL teachers with various years of experiences. As a result, this study sought to address the following questions:

1. What challenges do EFL teachers face in Turkey from their own perspective?
2. Do EFL teachers of state and private sectors vary significantly in terms of their perceptions of the challenges?
3. Is there any significant difference in the challenges facing EFL teachers in Turkey due to their ages?
4. Is there any significant difference in the challenges facing EFL teachers face in Turkey due to their years of teaching experiences?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 153 Turkish teachers of English who have taught in either state-run or private sector schools in Turkey. Table 1 provides a summary of participants' background characteristics.

Instruments

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire, which was designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire incorporated the adapted items which had already been developed by (Al-bdeerat, Alqarraleh, & Altakhaineh, 2020). The author of the present study carefully thought about the original items in the questionnaire to improve them in terms of wording, clarity, and contextual factors because the original questionnaire was designed for the context of Jordan and the targets of the questionnaire were the female teachers, but this study was conducted in Turkey and sought to explore the challenges facing both male and female English teaches. Moreover, in order to pursue the whole challenges facing English teachers in Turkey in terms of teachers' skills, curriculum, school environment, as well as community and parents, five open-ended questions were added to the original questionnaire. Therefore, quantitative data were obtained via close-ended questions with response on Likert-scale format. Qualitative data were acquired through open-ended questions.

The questionnaire included six sections. The 1st section provided biodata about the participants' gender, age, years of teaching experience, age group teaching at the time of the study, sector (i.e. state – private), and highest degree completed. The 2nd section incorporated seven close-ended items on Likert scale and one open-ended question, investigating the EFL teachers' perceptions of their challenges in terms of school environment. The 3rd section, including two close-ended and one open-ended question, explored the teachers' challenges as for the students. The 4th section, incorporating four close-ended items and one open-ended question,

Table 1. Participants' background characteristics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	110	71.9
	Male	43	28.1
Age group teaching	Children	45	29.4
	Teenagers	57	37.3
	Adults	51	33.3
Sector	State	106	69.3
	Private	47	30.7
Highest Degree	Bachelor's degree	73	47.7
	Master's degree	45	29.4
	PhD	35	22.9
Age	Mean	33.46	
	SD	7.877	
Years of teaching experience	Mean	10.12	
	SD	7.282	

investigated the teachers' problems regarding the community and parents. The 5th part, including nine close-ended items and one open-ended question, explored the teachers' troubles in terms of their own skills. Finally, the 6th section, incorporating one close-ended item and one open-ended question, investigated the teachers' challenges as for the curriculum. The participants needed to read the open-ended statements and select one of the options of <1.Strongly Disagree>, <2.Disagree>, <3.Agree>, and <4.Strongly Agree>. The described questionnaire is available in the Appendix.

Data Collection Procedure

Before the study was carried out, the questionnaire was piloted with a similar group of ten teachers. Reliability of the questionnaire, estimated via Cronbach Alpha, was .705, indicating an acceptable of internal consistency (Pallant, 2013).

The questionnaire was distributed to 181 EFL teachers in Turkey. The participation of them was voluntary and solicited via online Google Form. They were informed that by completing and returning the questionnaire, they had consented to participate in the study. They responded to the questionnaire anonymously. Out of 181 teachers, 153 teachers completed and submitted the questionnaire. The quantitative data were analyzed by calculating frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviations. In addition, the 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' answers were transformed into 'No', while the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' answers were transformed into 'Yes' because the main focus of the study was to discover whether or not the participants were confronted with each challenge. The open-ended questions were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Answer to Research Question 1

School environment

As for the challenges in terms of school environment, Table 2 shows that about two-thirds of the teachers complained that emotional support from the school principal is not enough, and classes are crowded, too. Although over half of the teachers (57.5%) stated that school buildings and environments are suitable, 42.4% disagreed. Half of the respondents said that school facilities are not suitable. Regarding the answers to the open-ended question, 3 teachers who taught in villages in Turkey stated that the classes are usually cold in cold seasons and the school building is deprived of a library, canteen, and even clean toilets. They believed that a fully equipped school would attract both the students and the parents. Even though over half of the participants mentioned that supervisors are knowledgeable and helpful and the English language teachers' opinions/suggestions are also taken seriously, over 40% of the rest did not agree. All the above-mentioned findings of this study corroborate Sali and Kecik's (2018) results who only focused on seven novice teachers of English in public primary and secondary schools in Turkey.

Students

Based on Table 3, more numbers of the teachers were satisfied with the students' level of interest and state of lesson understanding. However, the answers to the open-ended questions indicated that those who found the mentioned points as challenges believed that Turkish EFL learners know English just as a subject to study in order to pass or get higher marks and they usually complain that they do not know what they can do with it in the future. The problem of Turkish EFL learners' lack of motivation and interest was also already found in Korukcu's (1996), Akcan's (2016) as well as Sali and Kecik's (2018) studies.

Additionally, a few teachers of the private sector complained that teenaged students are often not self-disciplined; for example, they are often late for classes or assignments; they come and go whenever they like and disrupt the teaching process because they believe when they pay for education, they can have such special rights. Maintaining discipline in class is an issue under the category of classroom management, which was also reported as a challenging issue in other studies done in the context of Turkey (Akcan, 2016; Korukcu, 1996; Sali & Kecik, 2018).

Community and parents

Based on the responses shown in Table 4, although half of the EFL teachers in Turkey complained that parents are unaware of the importance of English language and do not cooperate with English language teachers, a vast number of EFL teachers stated that parents show positive attitudes towards

Table 2. Challenges in terms of school environment (percentages in parentheses)

School Environment	Yes	No	Mean	SD
School buildings and environments are not suitable.	65 (42.5)	88 (57.5)	2.39	.933
Emotional and psychological support from the school principal is not enough.	95 (62.1)	58 (37.9)	2.75	.891
Classes are crowded.	96 (62.7)	57 (37.2)	2.73	.851
School facilities are suitable.	76 (49.6)	77 (50.4)	2.52	.874
The classroom is always clean.	100 (65.4)	53 (37.4)	2.71	.857
English language teachers' opinions / suggestions are taken seriously.	80 (52.3)	73 (47.7)	2.46	.795
Supervisors are knowledgeable and helpful.	88 (57.5)	65 (42.5)	2.56	.751

Table 3. Challenges in terms of students (percentages in parentheses)

Students	Yes	No	Mean	SD
Students are interested in learning English.	91 (59.4)	62 (40.6)	2.53	.770
Students understand what is being taught.	97 (63.4)	56 (36.7)	2.59	.721

Table 4. Challenges in terms of community and parents (percentages in parentheses)

Community and Parents	Yes	No	Mean	SD
Parents show positive attitudes towards English language teachers.	113 (73.9)	40 (26.2)	2.78	.788
Parents are unaware of the importance of English language.	75 (49.1)	78 (50.9)	2.60	.884
Parents cooperate with English language teachers.	75 (49.1)	78 (50.9)	2.45	.786
English language teachers are respected by the community.	119 (77.8)	34 (22.3)	2.88	.668

English language teachers in Turkey and English language teachers are respected by the community.

Teachers' skills

According to Table 5, although over half of the participating teachers believed that English language teachers have good knowledge and experience with a variety of teaching methods and are well-prepared to teach English at all levels in school, the majority of them maintained that teachers need many training programs; for instance, they need to attend workshops on using specific aids for teaching English language. The teachers in Sali and Kecik's (2018) study also expressed a need for more receiving training. The following are some excerpts from the teachers' responses to the open-ended question in the current study, which can clarify their viewpoints:

"Graduates of English language translation and literature departments are appointed as English teachers. They don't know how to teach. They haven't studied teaching. I strongly believe that they do not have any pedagogical knowledge. This is a big problem. Graduates of ELT department should be appointed as English teachers."

"Teachers think that the text book is the syllabus, and they expose students to limited materials. They usually aim at finishing the topics in the text book. However, they ignore teaching and testing listening, writing and speaking tasks in the text books. Thus, they create negative washback effect either deliberately or indirectly."

"Most of the teachers in state school do not teach and assess English communicatively through four language skills."

Uysal (2012, p. 19) already argued that "systematic planning and scientific research on training needs of teachers" must be done in order to improve the EFL teachers' conditions in Turkey.

Curriculum

Based on Table 6, the majority of the Turkish teachers of English complained that pressure from curriculum demands inhibits creative and innovative language teaching. The following are two excerpts from the teachers' responses to the open-ended question, which can clarify their viewpoints:

Table 5. Challenges in terms of teachers' skills (percentages in parentheses)

Teachers' Skills	Yes	No	Mean	SD
Teachers are well-prepared to teach English at all levels in school.	76 (59.2)	72 (47.1)	2.52	.779
There are no conferences related to English language teaching and learning via which teachers get practical tips.	68 (44.4)	85 (55.6)	2.42	.792
Teachers need to attend workshops on using specific aids for teaching English language.	143 (93.5)	10 (6.6)	3.22	.573
Teachers need many training programs.	145 (94.8)	8 (5.2)	3.26	.547
English language teachers have good knowledge and experience with a variety of teaching methods.	96 (62.8)	57 (37.2)	2.72	.807
English language teachers have knowledge of the language's systems (phonetics, morphology, phonology, and syntax).	128 (83.7)	25 (16.3)	3.01	.664
English language teachers are eager to teach.	79 (51.7)	74 (48.3)	2.54	.752
English language teachers collaborate with each other.	123 (80.4)	30 (19.6)	2.95	.729
EFL teachers have team spirit.	116 (75.9)	37 (24.2)	2.92	.712

Table 6. Challenges in terms of Curriculum (percentages in parentheses)

Curriculum	Yes	No	Mean	SD
Pressure from curriculum demands inhibits creative and innovative language teaching.	124 (81)	29 (19)	3.00	.819

"Teachers must not use extra material except from coursebook determined by authorities. They always warn us about this issue. We are not free to determine about the coursebooks or adapt mandatory curriculum."

"Focusing only on the unit and weekly content is similar to preparing students for exams. The student cannot always be motivated by doing the textbook or the tasks brought by the teacher, which indicates that the teacher is not motivated, either. The teacher should be able to work freely and teach by using any game, extra relevant tasks as well as group or

individual activities, of course without going too far from the plan of the curriculum.”

In addition, there were teachers who complained that they lack enough time and facilities to meet the requirements of the curriculum. The teachers in Sali and Kecik's (2018) study also pinpointed this issue. The following are two excerpts from the teachers' answers to the open-ended question in the present study.

“It would be better for a teacher to have lessons of one or two, maximum three subjects a day, such as grammar-speaking or grammar-writing. Preparation of too many subjects a day takes a lot of time. The situations such as having 8 lessons of grammar, speaking, writing, listening, reading and integrated skills lessons a day should be avoided.”

“Meeting the demands of the curriculum is wishful thinking if they do not educate teachers, increase amount of teaching time and school facilities. Curriculum demands without giving. They only force teachers to finish the books even if the learners do not understand anything.”

Moreover, some teachers complained that the curriculum lacks sufficient attention to Turkish EFL learners' oral communication skills. The teachers in Akcan's (2016) research also asserted this challenge. The following are two excerpts from the teachers' answers to the open-ended question in the current study.

“Dozens of instruction and exercises on grammar structure and unnecessary words and subjects are the main problems of the curriculum.”

“Enhancing the speaking skill is always ignored in Turkey. I try to focus on pronunciation and let students use language as much as they can, but the curriculum is based on grammar and vocabulary teaching. I wish one day students would be able to speak English.”

Several studies already revealed that the old-fashioned grammar-based teacher-centered English teaching approach has been the main challenge of speaking English in Turkey (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Gençoğlu, 2011; Güney, 2010; Karaata, 1999; Koşar & Bedir, 2014; Ozsevik, 2010; Toköz-Göktepe, 2014), which is in line with teachers' statements.

The Answer to Research Question 3

The 2nd research question examined whether the EFL teachers of state and private sectors vary significantly in terms of their perceptions of the challenges. An independent-samples t-test was conducted. Because the Sig. value for Levene's test was .631, larger than .05, the first row of the t-test table (Equal variances assumed) was referred to. There was no significant difference in mean scores for teachers in state sector ($M = 2.7350$, $SD = .27219$, $N = 106$) and teachers in private sector ($M = 2.6799$, $SD = .27787$, $N = 47$); $t(151) = 1.148$, $p = .253$.

The Answer to Research Question 3

The 3rd question investigated whether there were any statistically significant differences in the challenges facing the EFL teachers due to the teachers' age. To answer this ques-

tion, the teachers' ages were categorized into three groups (i.e. Group 1: 20 – 27, Group 2: 28 – 37, and Group 3: above 38 years old) and then, a one-way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted to explore the impact of age on teachers' perceptions about the challenges they face. The Sig. value for Levene's test was .241, greater than .05, so the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met. Then, it was found that there was not a statistically significant difference among the three groups: $F(2, 150) = 1.379$, $p = .255$. Similar result was found by Al-bdeerat et al., (2020) for the context of Jordan.

The Answer to Research Question 4

The 4th question investigated whether there were any statistically significant differences in the challenges facing the EFL teachers due to their teaching experience levels. To answer this question, the teachers' years of experience were categorized into three groups (i.e. Group 1: below 7 years, Group 2: 7 – 14, and Group 3: above 14 years) and then, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted to explore the impact of years of teaching experience on teachers' perceptions about the challenges they face. The Sig. value for Levene's test was .519, greater than .05, so the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met. Surprisingly, no statistically significant difference was found among the three groups: $F(2, 150) = 1.812$, $p = .167$. This finding was not expected because it is expected that the more experienced the teachers get, the more they will be able to meet challenges and resolve problems (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). What has been found in the current study for the context of Turkey is opposite of what Al-bdeerat et al., (2020) found for the context of Jordan. The experienced teachers in Jordan reported fewer challenges than the novice ones.

Although previous researchers in Turkey investigated the challenges facing novice teachers, the results of the present study suggest that EFL teachers in Turkey repeatedly experience most of the challenges during their years of teaching English in Turkey. Therefore, as Sali and Kecik (2018) suggested EFL teachers in Turkey, even from the pre-service programs, need to be aware of these troubles and challenges; they also should be prepared to handle them. One way to achieve this is by providing them with real classroom problems rather than inauthentic classroom situations common in teacher education textbooks (Maistre & Pare, 2010). In this way, the pre-service EFL teachers can analyze real examples of challenges facing novice and experienced teachers to figure out what they would do if they were in those teachers' problematic situations. Such an investigation can increase the novice EFL teachers' knowledge of educational strategies by providing them with models of how to think about and tackle the problems professionally (Kleinfeld, 1990).

Furthermore, not supporting Turkish teachers of English by any feedback or supportive evaluation system, as was indicated in previous studies in the context of Turkey (Bayrakçı, 2009; Özer, 2004; Uysal, 2012) can hinder the important issue of tackling some challenges. Therefore, like Farrell (2003, 2006) Akcan (2016) as well as Sali and Kecik (2018), this study advises school administrators, mentors, and policy

makers in Turkey to provide teachers with more pedagogical and affective scaffolding in the form of systematic constructive feedback to enhance their teacher development process. In addition, the existence of EFL teacher reflection groups, supported by a group facilitator, in which the teachers are provided a way to regularly and systematically reflect on their experiences in a supportive, collegial environment, free from evaluation can be very helpful in handling the challenges (Farrell, 2016) because as Ashraf and Rarieya (2008) argued, "Undertaking an inquiry into their practice through verbally sharing, discussing, questioning and reasoning about their teaching experiences, either with their peers and/or a reflective coach." (p.270) can help teachers overcome their challenges.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide information for the English language teacher education programs in Turkey to prepare pre-service teachers to work effectively with English language learners. It is recommended that more effective strategies be adopted to tackle the challenges EFL teachers face in Turkey. Conducting more training courses to enhance teachers' ability to confront the challenges and obstacles of the English language teaching process is also highly recommended. As the final remark, although the findings of the present study are insightful, collecting more data and doing more research on the personal, social, and psychological challenges faced by English language teachers are needed to help them handle or adapt to the problematic realities of their work.

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APPENDIX

The Challenges Facing EFL Teachers

Part 1: Biodata

- 1- Gender (Female – Male)
- 2- Age
- 3- Years of teaching experience
- 4- Age group teaching at the time of the study (Children – Teenagers – Adults)
- 5- Sector (State – Private)
- 6- Highest degree completed (Bachelor's degree – Master's degree – PhD)
- 7- Additional international teaching certificates (if you have):

Part 2: School Environment

1. School buildings and environments are not suitable.
2. Emotional and psychological support from the school principal is not enough.
3. Classes are crowded.
4. School facilities are suitable.
5. The classroom is always clean.
6. English language teachers' opinions/suggestions are taken seriously.
7. Supervisors are knowledgeable and helpful.
8. If you've faced any other challenges in terms of school environment, mention please. You can use our native language, if you wish.

Part 3: Students

9. Students are interested in learning English.
10. Students understand what is being taught.
11. If you've faced any other challenges in terms of students, mention please. You can use our native language, if you wish.

Part 4: Community and Parents

12. Parents show positive attitudes towards English language teachers.

13. Parents are unaware of the importance of English language.
14. Parents cooperate with English language teachers.
15. English language teachers are respected by the community.
16. If you've faced any other challenges in terms of community and Parents, mention please. You can use our native language, if you wish.

Part 5: Teachers' Skills

17. Teachers are well-prepared to teach English at all levels in school.
18. There are no conferences related to English language teaching and learning via which teachers get practical tips.
19. Teachers need to enhance workshops on using specific aids for teaching English language.
20. Teachers need many training programs.
21. English language teachers have good knowledge and experience with a variety of teaching methods.
22. English language teachers have knowledge of the language's systems (phonetics, morphology, phonology, and syntax).
23. English language teachers are eager to teach.
24. English language teachers collaborate with each other.
25. EFL teachers have team spirit.
26. If you've faced any other challenges in terms of teachers' skills, mention please. You can use our native language, if you wish.

Part 6: Curriculum

27. Pressure from curriculum demands inhibits creative and innovative language teaching.
28. If you've faced any other challenges in terms of curriculum, mention please. You can use our native language, if you wish.