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Understanding Challenges in English Language Learning Among Turkish Students: Insights from Students and Teachers

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges Turkish preparatory school university students encounter while learning English. The aim was to explore the perspectives of both teachers and students to better understand their experiences and offer insights into the possibilities of change. Despite numerous studies focusing on the challenges, the impressions of stakeholders seem to have been neglected. To fill the gap in the field, 5 teachers and 5 students from different universities were interviewed to collect data. Template analysis method was put into use to analyze the collected data. The findings revealed linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and methodological challenges. The linguistic challenges stemmed from the differences between Turkish and English in terms of grammar and phonology, while cultural challenges included a lack of authentic materials belonging to the native culture. Also, some students showed reservation towards cultural immersion. Socioeconomic challenges were linked to parental educational levels, and methodological challenges were associated with the washback effect that decision makers and teachers are accustomed to because of the assessment methods. Furthermore, disparities between curricula and exams were highlighted. To overcome these challenges, the necessity of change in assessment and methodology was emphasized.

1. Introduction

In an era dominated by globalization, the desire to find a common language spoken by everyone has gained importance. English, as a lingua franca, is now an inseparable tool for communication in this interconnected world of the 21st century. As Collins (2010) points out, “Non-English-speaking countries have no choice but to learn English in order to remain competitive on an international level” (p. 97).

With the advancement of technology and the internet, the exponential growth of English has further accelerated. As a result, proficiency in English is no longer a desirable skill, but a necessity for individuals who long for engaging with the global community. On the other hand, accessing international knowledge and being able to compete in the progressively interconnected job market can only be achieved through learning English.

As to Turkish students, the journey of learning English has its own peculiar challenges. Despite the years of English learning until the tertiary level, students still struggle with having intelligible conversations in English. Some of these challenges can be listed as cultural, economic, linguistic, and pedagogical. In his study on Turkish EFL teachers’ difficulties in implementing communicative language teaching, Ozsevik (2010) emphasizes that Turkish students frequently struggle with linguistic challenges while learning English due to the wide differences between the two languages, and this challenge requires a sophisticated teaching approach.

The linguistic impediments faced by Turkish EFL students are complicated. Turkish, with its distinct linguistic structure and syntax, leads to unprecedented obstacles in acquiring English language skills. Turkish is an agglutinative language, which means that the affixes are added at the end of a word and change its meaning. Due to this obvious difference as well as the word order between English and Turkish, it is hard not to tell that it poses a great challenge for Turkish students to master in English. Yalcin’s study (2010) on identifying the most recurring mistakes produced by Turkish students shed a light on this challenge.

Cultural factors further compound these challenges, as language is profoundly interconnected with cultural nuances and expressions. It is a fact that ‘culture’ contains beliefs, ideas, values, and knowledge. According to Adaskou (1990), culture encompasses various elements, ranging from literature, music, fine arts, films, and plays. In his study, he advocates for

the incorporation of the target language's cultural elements to enhance the language learning process. Based on what is highlighted in the researcher's study, it can be concluded that teaching culture and language must go together for optimal learning outcomes.

Economic factors, on the other hand, play a crucial role in shaping the orbit of English language education in Turkiye. As highlighted in the study of Kim et al. (2014) focusing on the English proficiency among low-income families, those who do not achieve proficiency by the first grade are more likely to have less educated parents than those who do. Although the study was not conducted in Turkiye, in the Turkish context, families lacking proper education or socio-economic status often struggle to convey the cruciality of foreign language learning to their children. Eventually, students run to come across difficulties with language learning when they reach university. Pehlivan and Aslan (2023) found that the education level of student parents, especially mothers, as well as their occupational status have a positive effect on students' academic life. From this point of view, it can be deduced that students with well-educated mothers learn the target language vocabulary significantly sooner than their classmates with less educated parents.

Furthermore, the teaching methods employed in Turkish EFL classrooms show another layer of complexity. It is an undeniable fact that employing effective methodology in classrooms is a vital element for a better English learning environment. Therefore, analyzing current methodologies employed in English learning classrooms will likely provide valuable insights into the impediments faced by Turkish prep school students.

In the subsequent chapters of the study, there will be a detailed exploration of these challenges, focusing on the perspectives of both students and teachers. The exclusive focus on preparatory school context has arisen from the increasing number of universities in Turkiye. The aim of focusing both on teachers' and students' perspective is to determine whether the challenges are acknowledged by both groups, and if so, how these challenges are perceived by these stakeholders. By shedding light on the ongoing problems related to language learning in university preparatory schools, which has scarcely been examined to date in the Turkish university context, the study intends to contribute to the discourse on language education and offer some possible recommendations that may help mitigate the challenges currently faced by Turkish preparatory school university students.

2. Literature review

Türkiye, playing the bridge role between Asian and European continents, is one of the primary destinations for world trade. Its unique location and a population of more than 80 million people put English teaching into an essential role. As mentioned in the introduction part, English language learning has become an important tool as a global lingua franca, and its significance extends to various educational, professional, and social domains.

However, the process of acquiring proficiency in English is not uniform across the world. Turkish students, like learners in many non-native English-speaking countries, encounter specific challenges in their English language learning journey. This literature review aims to identify these challenges, offering insights into linguistic and cultural challenges, the influence of economic factors on access to quality language education, and the complexities associated with teaching methodologies in Turkish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms.

2.1 Historical Context of English Language Education in Turkey

The historical context of English language education in Turkey is rather complex and relatively new. The adaptation of English language teaching had to go through several socio-political transformations. The roots of English language instruction in Turkey can be traced back to the early 19th century, during the Ottoman Empire. The Tanzimat Period is considered as a significant milestone in the Turkish education system's Westernization (Kirkgoz, 2005). Up until then, due to religious purposes, mainly Arabic and Persian languages were taught. According to Solak and Bayar (2015), the main focus of attention was to teach the structural characteristics of these languages. Isik (2008) indicates that the main aim was to grasp and translate Arabic and Persian books into Ottoman Turkish. He firmly advocates that this traditional way of language teaching is still affecting today's language teaching practices inside classrooms.

It was found in Tarhan's (2003) study that Robert College, which was an initiative of an American missionary, Cyprus Hamlin, was founded in 1863 and employed audio-lingual method, which was different from the customed teaching methodology, in the borders of Türkiye for the first time. However, during that time English was primarily taught to a select group of elites, often within the confines of foreign embassies, where diplomatic relations and trade necessitated

linguistic competence in English. However, it was going to take a long time to be introduced to broader population.

The course of English language education took a dramatic turn with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under the visionary leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk's commitment to modernization and Westernization brought significant educational reforms, including a renewed emphasis on English language instruction. Recognizing the importance of English as a global lingua franca, Türkiye sought to integrate English into the Turkish education system. Despite the fact that French was the primary foreign language taught at schools during the early years of the young republic, with the initiative of the American Marshall Plan Aid, English became the most widely taught foreign language across the country. As Büyükkantarcıoğlu (2004) explains, English, as well as French and German, has been included in the curricula of state-run Turkish schools since the early 1920s. However, recognizing its importance as a lingua franca emerged following the end of the Second World War. English was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools, which can be seen as a crucial milestone in the history of English language education in the country. This move aimed to equip Turkish citizens with the necessary skills to engage with the international community, promote cross-cultural understanding, and facilitate economic and political interactions with Western nations.

Table 1

Chronological Change in Priorities Given to Foreign Languages in Turkey (Adapted from Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998, p. 28)

<u>Priority given</u>	<u>Pre 1773</u>	<u>1773-1923</u>	<u>1923-1950</u>	<u>1950-1980</u>	<u>After 1980s</u>
1	Arabic	Arabic	French	English	English
2	Persian	Persian	English	French	German
3	Turkish	French	German	German	French
4		English	Arabic	Arabic	
5		German			

Throughout the mid-20th century, the landscape of English language education in Turkey continued to evolve. As English proficiency became a prerequisite for access to higher education and promising career prospects, there was a burgeoning demand for English language courses. Due to the increasing demand for English speaking people, the number of schools providing English medium of instruction as well as private language schools and institutes came out to meet this demand in the mid of 1980s, (Ozsevik, 2010) offering specialized English language instruction. Furthermore, the importation of English language textbooks and the recruitment of native English-speaking teachers became commonplace. The government's education policies, which periodically revised to adapt to changing needs and global dynamics, have also played an important role in shaping English language experience in Turkiye. For example, in 1997, the Turkish education system went through fundamental changes which were brought by MONE (Ministry of National Education) to reshape the English language education across the country.

These reforms were introduced as “The Ministry of Education Development Project” to be able to promote more efficient language learning process both in state and private schools across the country. The number of the years of compulsory primary education went from 5 to 8. Furthermore, English subject was introduced from grade 4 upwards. The aimed idea was to expose students to English longer than before to help them acquire the language more successfully (MONE, 2001). The 1997 curriculum states that the main objective of this reform was to equip students with the basic communicative skills by incorporating the four skills with the purpose of engaging the students in successful communication in the target language (MONE, 2001). For this reason, the 1997 curriculum can be considered as a turning point in English language teaching in Turkiye since it was the first time in Turkish history that the idea of the communicative approach was embedded in the ELT (English Language Teaching) curriculum (Kirkgoz, 2005).

2.2 Linguistic Challenges

It is a well-known fact that the mother tongue interference while learning a foreign language is a common phenomenon across the world. Interference occurs when the original language's surface structure is automatically transferred to the target language through habit (Dulay et al., 1982). As Çelik and Bayraktar Çepni (2020) point out, learners whose mother tongue have linguistic structures that differ from the target language may have difficulty preventing mother-tongue interference. Khuen (2012) refers to this issue as a major problem in foreign language acquisition. He mentions that the difficulties with pronunciation and sentence formation in English poses a

considerable impediment in improving speaking and writing skills. Maniruzzaman (2010) conducted research in the Bengali context and contributed to this notion by saying that the differences in terms of sentence structure, pronunciation, stress, and intonation may “seriously retard the learning of EFL by the Bengali-speaking learner” (para. 2).

Yalcin (2010) examined various argumentative essays written by students in a Turkish university’s ELT department to determine the kind and frequency of mistakes. The study was conducted with 34 participants, 17 first-year and 17 third-year students, to investigate if the grades of students would make any difference in terms of the frequency and type of mistakes. The results revealed that the most common error type produced by students was article error (31.4%), followed by verb (25%), noun (16.6%), pronouns (12.8%), and others (14.2%). The frequency of article and verb usage mistakes differed significantly from the other error types. However, there was no significant variation in mistake frequency during the two-year period. She also stated that the pupils' target language output appears to have the influence of their local language, in this context, Turkish.

Abushihab (2014) analyzed 62 second-year undergraduate university students who were studying English literature or in related departments in a Turkish university and detected the most common errors that Turkish students tend to produce. He categorized these grammatical errors as morphological, articles, verbs, and active and passive tenses. Reportedly, these challenges mainly stem from the fact that English and Turkish belong to different language families. He also points out that due to the fact that tenses in Turkish are relatively different from English, the students struggle with grasping the Present Perfect tense since there is no equivalent of this tense in Turkish.

Furthermore, pronunciation is a crucial aspect of a language for intelligibility. Turker (2010) states that improper pronunciation may hinder a speaker’s ability to clearly communicate words to their listeners, which automatically reduces understanding and lowering overall communication quality. Jenkins (2010), on the other hand, takes a different approach to target pronunciation and arguing that in order to facilitate meaningful communication exchanges between native speakers and non-natives, native speakers should lower their expectations and demonstrate tolerance when confronted with non-natives' lack of proper pronunciation.

From this point of view, it can be deduced that mother tongue interference is a common challenge in foreign language learning, especially for learners like Turkish students whose native language has distinctive characteristics compare to English. This interference manifests itself in

difficulties such as pronunciation, sentence construction, which eventually has a huge impact on overall proficiency. Abushihab's (2014) error analysis of English learners' writings demonstrates recurring issues which is an obvious influence of their native language. Also, pronunciation accuracy is crucial for effective communication. Since Turkish is a language which is mostly spoken as it is written, it influences the way language learners in Turkiye adapt themselves to phonological competency.

2.3 Cultural Challenges

The term culture encompasses countless of different features such as ideas, values, beliefs, or knowledge. As mentioned in the introduction part, language is not an isolated construct but rather an embodiment of a culture. With the advent of social constructivism in education, sociocultural learning has become a vital element in language teaching. The dissonance in terms of cultural elements between Turkish students' native context and the target language's cultural elements can lead to tangible challenges when it comes to learning the language thoroughly. Furthermore, the established classroom culture in which the teacher takes an active role with authority, may clash with the communicative language teaching methodology.

Widdowson (1993) states that a child acquires the semantic and syntactic systems together with his cultural knowledge. Also, it is vital to learn the language code of another community. Jiang (2000) indicates that unless the students are introduced to the culture of the target language, it is very probable that the exposure to the language will resemble an empty frame of the language.

Ellis (2015) states that students who are interested in learning the cultural and social of their native country are more likely to become competent in the target language compared to those who neglect it. From this point of view, it can be inferred that the immersion in the target language's culture may help students be surrounded by authentic materials in the target language, which automatically will improve their competence in the target language. Therefore, it is vital that students should be given enough support to immerse themselves in the cultural knowledge of the language they are learning.

Hayirli (2019) conducted a thorough research to unearth the cultural challenges Turkish students are coming across while learning English. In order to accumulate neutral data, he interviewed foreign English teachers teaching Turkish students. According to one of the anonymous teachers, because the education system is very unbalanced, the established classroom culture also affects the language classrooms. It is indicated that due to the fact that students are

accustomed to learning basic knowledge, their ability of analyzing or collecting data is lacking, which in return affects their overall competence in the target language's culture.

Thus, sociocultural learning, which is influenced by the relatively new concept of social constructivism, can be seen as a crucial point in language learning. Differences between students' native culture and the target language's culture may lead to challenges in perfecting the target language. The established classroom culture in Turkiye, which mainly expects the teacher to be the authority, is therefore seemingly conflicting with the necessities of communicative teaching methods. Based on the reviewed literature, the lack of sufficient exploitation in different cultural elements of the target language may result in different challenges in language immersion. These may include difficulties in real-life situations such as inability to understand cultural nuances and fully integrating into the target language community.

2.4 Socioeconomic Challenges

As evidenced by numerous studies in the field, the socio-economic background is one of the most important factors affecting English language learning process. For instance, research by Pace et al (2017) found a correlation between lower socioeconomic status and decreased proficiency in vocabulary, phonology, and syntax. The socio-economic status is merely dependent on the economic strength of a family, their education level as well as the social status of the family. On the other hand, families coming from a higher socioeconomic status are able to provide better opportunities as well as guidance. Even though the literature provides valuable insights into linguistic and cultural barriers, there is a lack of precise research regarding the influence of economic factors, such as family income, on the availability of high-quality language education in Turkiye. However, Mirza (2001) found that the higher a family's socioeconomic position, the greater the likelihood of their children learning English. According to anecdotal evidence, economic inequality can have a significant influence on a student's learning experience in English.

The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report (2003) showed that students whose families had higher socio-economic status and higher qualifications performed substantially better at in the language proficiency tests. A similar study also conducted by Nikolov (2009) and found a strong link between students' achievement in English and parents' level of education. It is indicated in the study that educated parents provide better insights into the cruciality of education that greatly brings success for students. Furthermore, Kormos (2013) indicates that families who have stronger financial capabilities have access to more types of institutions (such as

private schools or universities as well as language schools) which brings more opportunities for students to master the target language.

Insufficient financial means may lead to insufficient availability of high-quality educational resources, such as technology, supplemental materials, and textbooks (Altun, 2006). From this point of view, it can be deduced that unavailability of important supplements may lead to unfair competition between students coming from higher classes and financially disadvantaged students. Students may occasionally be unable to pay for private tutoring or English language classes, which restricts their access to immersion learning settings. These financial limitations may also have an impact on study abroad options, depriving students of worthwhile immersion experiences in another language.

In the reviewed literature, socioeconomic status reveals itself as a critical determinant influencing foreign language learning as can be inferred from the literature. Lower socioeconomic status is associated with lower proficiency in various language elements. Factors such as family income, education level, and social status appear to play crucial roles in shaping opportunities and guidance. Additionally, educated parents are depicted as a gateway to pass down the cruciality of education to their children while also creating various chances in terms of different educational institutions. The last but not the least, financial constraints hinder study abroad options that deprives students from gaining valuable immersion experiences in English.

2.5 The Role of Curriculum

One of the main challenges faced by Turkish students is highly associated with the national curriculum and the standardized testing methods. The washback effect, to simply put, the influence of the assessment practices, particularly high-stakes tests, has been identified as a huge impact on teaching practices. Canlı and Çakır (2022) conducted research to explore the potential negative washback effect of English placement examinations in Türkiye. They found that the effects of university assessments for aspiring English teachers continue to influence the language learning experience of future generations. Due to these established language learning and language teaching experiences, English teachers feel intrinsically obliged to the adoption of the focus on the form approach. This places significant emphasis on grammar and vocabulary instruction, which inevitably overshadows communicative competence.

On the other hand, the curricular alignment with grammar-centric assessments perpetuates a gap between language policy and actual classroom practices (Akkakoson, 2018). Consequently, Turkish students may graduate with solid grammar skills but struggle in real-world communication. Köksal and Şahin (2012) drew the attention to the policy makers and authorities and questioned the inconsistency between the imposition of curriculum and their practical implementation in actual classrooms. This contradiction is linked with the assessment methods that determine students' future.

There are consequences outside of the classroom for the wide use of grammar-focused evaluations. Present assessment methods focus mostly on grammar and reading comprehension, ignoring speaking, writing, and listening abilities (Çelik & Bayraktar Çepni, 2020). This unbalanced emphasis on assessments could unintentionally undervalue the growth of crucial communication skills, making it harder for Turkish students to become functionally proficient in English.

Many Turkish EFL instructors use a form-focused approach, which is tightly linked to the country's curriculum and assessment procedures. The intended language policy and the realities of classroom instruction frequently diverge as a result of this alignment (Akkakoson, 2018). Teachers are forced to choose between helping students prepare themselves for grammar-based exams and following the curriculum's grammar-focused objectives, which puts them in a dangerous situation.

Başok (2017) conducted interviews with English teachers to detect the possible discrepancies between the national curriculum that adopts communicative language teaching method (CLT) and the realities in the classrooms. He interviewed three ELT teachers and found out that even though CLT was the main language teaching method in the curriculum for the grade levels that they were teaching, due to the language tests that mainly focus on testing students' grammatical knowledge, they feel like they must teach in line with the language tests. They also indicated that they receive complaints when they tend to incorporate more communicative lesson plans into their teaching since the tests are mostly focusing on the students' grammatical and vocabulary knowledge.

Çelik and Bayraktar Çepni (2020) also underline the repetition of the same rules every year. In their study, one of the participants complain about the resemblance of the topics conducted in their lessons, confined only to similar grammar rules every year. The interviewees link their failure in language attainment to these ineffective practices. The idea of memorization is also very

definitely underlined, which are easily forgotten in a very short time. This can be linked with the fossilized teaching practices customised with the teaching of Arabic and Persian languages throughout the Ottoman Empire period that Işık (2008) mentioned. Furthermore, Solak (2015) reached a conclusion after conducting multiple interviews that the materials employed in language classes are mostly written by a Turkish author and neglect students' interests and levels. It was highlighted that choosing suitable materials for students may enhance their aptitude in English learning.

The challenges that are still felt today are seemingly closely tied to the national curriculum and standardized testing methods, particularly the washback effect of high-stakes exams. This emphasis on grammar and vocabulary instruction, which is highly influenced by assessment practices, leads to a disconnection between language policy and classroom realities. Owing to this imbalance in assessments, methodologies employed in actual language classrooms mostly revolve around the orbit of grammar and vocabulary teaching while unintentionally neglecting speaking, listening, and writing skills. Also, even if English teachers get away from the accustomed teaching practices, they still feel obligated to align with the assessment methods in order not to cause students to fail in their exams. In essence, there seems to be a need for a more balanced approach to ELT where communicative competence is placed alongside grammar proficiency to foster holistic language development among students.

2.6 Turkish Preparatory Schools

Foreign language teaching at universities in Türkiye is provided by preparatory programs. The main goal of these programs is to bring students up to at least B2 level in foreign languages. The prep-class education in Türkiye offers two kinds of programs, optional and compulsory prep-class education. Students who plan to continue their education in departments where the medium of instruction is English must take exemption exams to determine their English level. If their level of English falls below the level, they must complete a one-year prep-school program.

British Council (2015) conducted a study on English teaching in preparatory schools in Türkiye and found that students enter preparatory school with lacking English proficiency as well as low level of motivation. According to the study, the motivational problems stem from the repetition of the same grammar rules over the years. It is also indicated in the study that while other emerging G20 countries such as China, South Korea, India and Russia have initiated adjusted

alterations to increase the quality of existing institutions, Türkiye has focused on the number of universities and an unprecedented student number. Since the quantity is seen by the policymakers as the primary target to improve, the quality often tends to be neglected. Aligning with British Council's research, Tosun (2020) highlighted the serious expansion of Turkish higher education system since the year 2000. He stated that there was an average 38% increase of number of students at public universities during the four-year period that his study was being conducted. He also underlined that this phenomenon reduced the quality of teaching, and the educational structure was negatively affected.

Moreover, Armağan, Bozoğlu and Güven (2016) did a study on the expectations of students in pre-school in higher education and reached the conclusion that students desired for a better language learning environment in addition to changing the curriculum content. Yükselir (2018) conducted a case study about the perceptions of students on optional preparatory programs and concluded that based on the findings of the interviews and questionnaires, preparatory programs should prioritize writing, listening, and speaking skills over grammar to be able to boost students' confidence in real-life communication.

Turkish preparatory schools aim to elevate students' foreign language proficiency for university study. However, students coming with poor English abilities and motivation, as well as the concentration on quantity over quality in educational changes, seem to create tangible impediments.

2.7 Rationale of the Study and Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, the pursuit of English language proficiency among Turkish students is both a necessity and a challenge. Being in a pivotal location in this growing interconnected world, Turkish students, who are wishing to attain degrees and be a part of the world trade, are undoubtedly obliged to pick up English. However, there are certain challenges that are quite peculiar to Turkish students. Although many studies have been conducted to reflect on these impediments, there are limited insights into the perspectives of both students and teachers. This study sought to address this research gap by exploring the challenges both teachers and students have along the way of teaching and learning the target language, and shed light on linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and curricular factors that shape their experiences.

In line with the above aims, the study aimed at answering a main research question through the exploration of three sub-questions, respectively:

1. What are Turkish preparatory school students' main challenges of learning English as perceived by the students and their teachers?
 - 1.1. What specific linguistic and cultural challenges do Turkish preparatory school students encounter when learning English?
 - 1.2. How do socio-economic factors, such as family educational background, influence Turkish preparatory school students' access to quality English language learning?
 - 1.3. What challenges do Turkish preparatory school students experience in connection with the teaching methodologies employed in the EFL classrooms?

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Methods

To be able to get a better overview on the impediments Turkish preparatory students experience while learning English, qualitative research method was employed in the form of interviews with both students and teachers. As Dörnyei (2007) indicates, obtaining perspectives of the participants through interviews enables researchers to attain deeper insights into the matter they are examining. In the case of the challenges Turkish students encounter, directly hearing from the participants was deemed more elucidative compared to questionnaires and other means of data collection. In this manner, the perspectives of both teachers and students were examined.

Template analysis was utilized to analyze the collected data based on the guidelines proposed by King (2012). According to him; “template analysis is a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analyzing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study” (p.426) The structure of the analysis was based on the impediment categories that were identified in the literature. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, and to minimize misinterpretation or loss of nuance during translation, third party applications were initially utilized. Subsequently, during the data analyzation process, the researcher made sure that the content was coherent and in accordance with the aim of the research.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of a total of ten individuals, comprising five students and five teachers. The aim was to represent a diverse range of universities in Türkiye. On the other hand, to be able to offer a comprehensive perspective on the challenges faced by Turkish students, the selection included participants from both private and state-run institutions.

3.2.1 Students

The student participants included two males and three females, and the age of the participants was between 18 and 19 since the typical demographic profile of preparatory school students in Turkish universities are usually among this age range. Each student was enrolled in a different university. The aim was to ensure a varied representation across different academic environments. All the students studied in public schools and started learning English as of third grade in primary school. The interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue. The participants' background data can be found in Table 2. Pseudonyms are used for each participant.

Table 2

The Students' Background Data

Pseudonym	Language proficiency	Type of school	Age	City
Caner (M)	A2	Private university	18	Istanbul
Gözde (F)	A2	Private university	19	Istanbul
Mehmet (M)	A2	Private university	18	Istanbul
Ayşe (F)	B1	State-run university	18	Istanbul
Oğuz (M)	B2	State-run university	18	Istanbul

3.2.2 Teachers

The teacher participants were selected from various universities across Türkiye, which encompassed both private and state-run universities. Five teachers, four females and one male, participated in the study. Their teaching experiences in the field ranged from 3 to 8 years, which can be considered sufficient to be able to provide valuable insights into the challenges their students are facing. They represent different age groups and all of them have a degree in teaching EFL. However, only three of them have a master's degree, as the requirement for an MA degree to become English teachers at the university level was introduced in 2019. Teachers who began

their careers prior to this regulation were exempted. Besides, it is important to note that the interviewed students were their actual students. The teachers' background data are summarized in Table 3. Pseudonyms are used for each participant.

Table 3

The Teachers' Background Data

Pseudonym	Teaching experience	Type of school	Age	City
Sevda (F)	4	Private university	32	Istanbul
Asmin (F)	3	Private university	29	Istanbul
Seyda (F)	8	State-run university	36	Istanbul
Nadin (F)	6	State-run university	33	Istanbul
Salih (M)	4	Private university	30	Istanbul

3.3 The Instrument

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. In the semi-structured interviews, pre-determined set of questions that aimed to examine the existing challenges were asked. The interview protocol consisted of 15 questions that were tailored specifically for each group (students and teachers) and focused on different aspects of language learning and teaching experiences. The formulation of interview questions was developed in the process of an extensive review of existing literature on English learning challenges in Turkiye. To establish rapport with the participants and to create a comfortable environment, warm-up questions were included at the beginning of each interview. Following the interviews, the recorded sessions were transcribed, and the ambiguous or unclear responses were reformulated to enhance clarity. The English translations of the student and teacher interview guides are included in Appendix A and B, respectively.

3.4 Data Analysis

As previously mentioned in the research methods section, the data were subjected to template analysis (TA), following the guidelines proposed by King (2012). The researcher worked on the establishment of a priori categories based on the literature review as well as by relying on his prior experience in the field. The collected data were systematically analyzed to extract key themes related to the research questions, focusing on the cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and methodological impediments to learning English. Codes were assigned to each segment of data representing each theme and sub-theme.

Table 4*The A Priori Categories Used in Data Analysis*

Category	Description
Linguistic challenges	Difficulties arising from differences between Turkish and English
Cultural challenges	Factors related to cultural differences between Turkish and English-speaking contexts impacting learning
Socio-economic challenges	Possible barriers for English learning related to available resources and socio-economic background of families
Methodological challenges	Challenges associated with teaching methods and approaches used in English instruction

3.5 Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Due to the researcher's location, the interviews had to be conducted via Microsoft Teams. Each interview session was recorded to ensure accurate documentation of the participants' responses. The participants were individually interviewed, and the appointments were determined based on their availability. The interviewees were selected based on their willingness to take part in the study.

To ensure the ethical conduct of the study, careful steps were taken. Prior to the interviews, the interview questions were analyzed by the researcher's supervisor to ensure participant comfort and clarity. The questions that were ambiguous and could potentially hinder collecting the aimed data were reworded. The participants were guaranteed that the confidentiality of their identities would be respected. The participants were assured confidentiality and their right to opt out of the study any time.

The interviews took place between February and March 2024. Each of the interview lasted around 30 minutes. Each session was video recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Taking the importance of anonymity into considerations, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. In addition to this, the educational institutions attended by the participants were kept confidential to maintain anonymity. It is important to note that in order to meet the quality assurance, the researcher cooperated with an expert and received feedback on the instrument as well as on the coding of the data and the interpretation of the results.

Interviews were conducted with participants in their native language, Turkish, to ensure clarity. The idea behind was to make sure the students could understand the questions well and articulate their thoughts more precisely. However, it was observed that some of the responses were lengthy and less concise during the interviews. As a result, the translation of the interview questions took quite a long time. To maintain the integrity of the participants' responses, a meticulous translation process was conducted.

3.6 Limitations

It must be noted that the study involved only a small size of participant, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population in Türkiye. Also, the responses collected from the participants may have been influenced by their desire to present themselves in a favorable light. Efforts were put into effect to mitigate bias during data collection and analysis. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, the possibility of researcher bias in interpreting data also exists. To minimize this possibility, the researcher discussed the data with experts to safeguard the validity of the data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Linguistic Challenges

4.1.1 Teachers' Views

In this section, the focus lies on exploring the linguistic challenges encountered by Turkish preparatory school students in learning English. The data collected through interviews with teachers revealed various linguistic challenges, ranging from grammar, vocabulary, syntactic difficulties, and pronunciation. One of the participants, Salih, responded to the question aimed at identifying the linguistic challenges students encounter, stating:

That's a tough question. In terms of grammar, I believe articles and prepositions challenge students the most. It can be really hard for students to grasp their correct usage. At the A1 level, students often struggle with English sentence order. As they progress, vocabulary accuracy becomes a major challenge. In Turkish, one word can have multiple meanings, however in English, there are often multiple words for one meaning.

This presents quite a challenge since students are prone to be victimized by syncretism.

The challenges stated by the participant align with what Khuen (2012), Abushihab (2014) and Yalcin (2010) underlined in their studies. Turkish, being an agglutinative language and acquired by students unconsciously at a very young age, presents difficulties for them as they try to consolidate the usage of the target language. Furthermore, mother tongue interference, which is highlighted by Celik and Bayraktar Cepni (2020), seems to be a recurring phenomenon in Turkish language classrooms. Turkish is considered as a polysemic language, which means one word may convey multiple meanings in different contexts. Since students are accustomed to expressing themselves with a limited range of words imposed by Turkish, it poses them a challenge to break out of this comfort zone and communicate in the foreign language with variety of different words. Şeyda, working at a different private university, contributed to the issue about linguistic challenges from a different perspective. She indicated that: “Students often begin by memorizing grammar rules, but they do not prioritize crucial skills like listening, speaking, and writing. Their constant use of Turkish reflects this problem directly.” It can be concluded that while mother tongue interference persists, the fossilized technique, where learners put too much importance on grammatic structures and rules over production skills, further exacerbates this issue.

In addition to this, all respondents indicated that almost all students struggle with pronunciation, which can be considered as a language barrier for meaningful conversation. Three participants stated that students avoid speaking with the fear of being judged by their peers if they mispronounce a word. One participant underlined the fact that English has a complex system of vowel sounds, while Turkish has a simpler system that employs only eight vowels. This undoubtedly results in pronunciation difficulties within the English learning sphere. Besides, hesitation in speaking due to pronunciation disparities leads students to speak less, making it tough for educators to bring a more communicative environment into their classrooms.

4.1.2 Students’ Views

The challenges underlined by the interviewed teachers were echoed by all the student participants. In spite of years of language learning in middle and high school, all students expressed that they still struggle with comprehending certain grammatical structures. For example, Caner (A2) said:

There are some grammatical features that I find difficult. For example, we are learning Present Perfect now. But I must say I still haven’t figured how and where to use it. Also, pronunciation is quite difficult.

Caner's struggle with understanding the usage of Present Perfect Tense matches up with what Abushihab (2014) found out with while he was analyzing the common errors Turkish students make. Since Turkish language doesn't have an equivalent tense, students have difficulties to identify when and how to use it. As indicated above, despite years of exposure to these elements, learning grammar still gives them the impression of an 'unexplored desert'. This primarily stems from the lack of practice since students see English as a school subject for years rather than an essential life skill. Besides, all the participants highlighted the challenge when it comes to verbally expressing themselves. They all pointed out that the pronunciation is the biggest hinderance, aligning with the responses collected by teacher participants. Although it was not explicitly underlined by all student participants except for one, the fear of criticism or being judged for making mistakes also appears to prevent them from practicing the language. This fear may diminish the overall language competency among students as they may not recognize that making mistakes is the pathway to improvement.

4.2 Cultural Challenges

4.2.1 Teachers' Views

One of the fundamental needs that must be met to create a fostering English learning environment is conveying cultural elements of English. Raising awareness about cultural differences and ensuring that students acknowledge the cruciality of being familiar with the target language's culture brings positive impact on English learning. In the context of Turkish preparatory school classrooms, this importance appears to be overlooked. Three out of the five teachers interviewed indicated that there is insufficient emphasis on the cultural elements of the target language. One of the respondents said:

It's difficult to say that the cultural aspects of the target language are effectively integrated. In my experience across various university preparatory school departments, what I can say is that the units covering cultural elements are rather ordinary and inefficient. Also, I have never been to a workshop that emphasized the importance of cultural teaching.

This response is a clear indicator of the ongoing challenges in Turkish preparatory school classrooms. It's not only the neglect of incorporating cultural elements into teaching practices that

seems to be the matter, but also the apparent lack of awareness of its importance, as suggested by this response. One of the participants who works in a private university indicated that the materials are prepared by a department within the university, and since the university's departments are majorly related to business, the units revolve around successful business figures and their achievements in business setting. However, one participant working at a state university underlined that only imported materials are employed within the university, and they are quite effective in conveying cultural elements of the target language.

From this point of view, it is important to recognize the benefits of integrating such cultural elements into the learning process. Understanding the cultural subtleties that are peculiar to the culture of the language may enhance students' communicative competence. Furthermore, this may help teachers to cultivate global citizenship as well as intercultural competence among students. Chirciu (2020) conducted research and concluded that the integration of real-life issues into language classrooms, such as women's issues, religious wear, and gender bias, leads students to develop critical awareness about the world and convey a deeper understanding of different perspectives. It is implied that while enhancing students' language skills indirectly, they also develop a sense of solidarity with those disadvantaged people around the world, opening the gates to become global citizens. Moreover, incorporating cultural elements into language instruction can enable students to be able to have authentic communication with foreigners when they step into real-world interactions regardless of their background. Therefore, it would be important for educators and policymakers to emphasize and employ cultural elements in Turkish preparatory school classrooms. Aside from being a pedagogical necessity, it is also a vital step to help English learners become a part of this interconnected world.

4.2.2 Students' Views

In this section, the participants' perceptions of the target language's culture are discussed. Mehmet, studying in a private university, responded to the question on whether their familiarity with the target language' culture has increased since joining the preparatory school as follows:

I believe that despite our efforts to protect ourselves, American culture's dominance is increasing worldwide. I think I'm quite familiar with it through series, movies, or social media. However, I can't say that my familiarity has increased since starting preparatory school.

Mehmet underlined that the ongoing globalization of the world through mass media is contributing to our awareness of the target culture. Besides, his response shows that the cultural elements employed in actual English learning classrooms are inadequate since his familiarity with native speaker culture seems to have been achieved through his own endeavors. On the other hand, Gozde (A2), studying in a private university, expressed the following: “No, it hasn't increased. Personally, I prefer my own culture and traditions more, but that doesn't mean I dislike other cultures, of course.” This response implies a layer of reservation towards the target language’s culture because the respondent got into a comparison between the two distinct cultures. Rather than embracing the target language’s cultural elements as a necessary aspect of mastering the language, the respondent sounds distant to Anglo-Saxon cultures in some degree and seeing them like something that needs to be compared to her culture.

However, the other respondents answered in a rather mild manner by expressing their familiarity towards the culture of the languages. They indicated that the globalization and the social media brought similarities into almost all cultures, and Turkish culture is also being affected by this. In terms of the cultural elements that employed in their classes, four out of five respondents reported inadequacy.

The participants’ varied perceptions of the target language’s culture displayed a rather complex issue. Mehmet’s acknowledgement of the influence of American culture indicated that new generations are becoming more and more aware of their surroundings, emanating from the mass media. Conversely, Gozde’s preference for her own culture over the target language’s culture suggests a different perspective which is shaped by her personal identity and values. Also, her inclination to compare these two distinct cultures reflects a common tendency among language learners, which may lead to a resistance to learning the language. However, the reached consensus among the majority of participants regarding the inadequacy of the adaption of cultural elements requires a close scrutiny. Based on what was stated previously about the benefits of implementing authentic materials, it can be concluded that when educators prioritize the use of more authentic cultural elements in their lessons, students may be able to identify the differences between their own culture and other cultures more effectively, which in return may help them become more tolerant and sensible towards others.

4.3 Socioeconomic Challenges

4.3.1 Teachers' Views

To better understand the socioeconomic impediments that students encounter while learning English, various questions were directed to teacher participants. Considering the teachers' possibly limited knowledge about the socioeconomic background of their students, the focus presented itself with a special regard to the facilities provided by their institutions. All participants stated their universities provide all the necessary materials. However, Asmin, working at a private university, stated overcharge of the materials prepared within the university that students are obliged to buy. As highlighted by the participant, students are sometimes reluctant to buy the weekly materials because of the high prices. She mentioned that in order not to cause any tensions, she sometimes shares the materials online so that students would not fall behind their peers. However, she indicated that such sharing is strictly forbidden to boost the sales.

However, all participants confirmed the availability of strong internet connection across their campuses. In addition to this, all interviewed teachers stated that if they suspect inadequacy with the materials, they provide supplementary resources to reinforce recently covered language elements. Besides, four out of five teachers underlined that since technology is now accessible for everyone, inadequacy of facilities for language learning is not a matter of escapism anymore as it used to be. Rather than the facilities, they all underscored that their students have difficulties with motivation. Despite the abundance of resources provided by their institutions, as reported, students don't take initiative and study independently. This lack of motivation is attributed to students' limited autonomy, which is closely associated with the conventional classroom culture where the teacher is the sole authority responsible for all the learning procedures.

4.3.2 Students' Views

The results collected from the student participants showed similarities with the studies conducted by PISA (2003) and Pace et al. (2017). Multiple questions were directed to students to understand if there is a correlation between their families' socioeconomic background and the students' English levels. The participants were asked to give information about their parents' financial and education level. Furthermore, the students were asked whether they had ever been to a foreign country or not. Gozde (A2), studying at a private university, stated that it was her second year repeating the preparatory school, meaning that she failed in the first year. She also said that her

family's financial status is better compared to many other families in Turkiye, and that there is no one in her family who can speak a foreign language. On top of that, she indicated that her father is a high school graduate, and her mother is unschooled. When asked if she had ever been to a foreign country, she replied:

No, unfortunately. I was in a folklore group in primary school, and our group was going to travel to Germany for a competition. But my family didn't want me to go, they were too afraid to send me there without my family's presence. But I would like to travel to America, the idea of going there has always fascinated me.

Although a family's financial power could be a determining factor in providing better opportunities for education, apparently, it does not have a direct impact on students' overall language achievement. A cautious conclusion that could be drawn from Gozde's case is that her family's excessively cautious attitude towards her might have potentially influenced her judgment towards learning English. Without the opportunity to communicate with foreigners, she might not have fully understood the importance of learning English. Traveling abroad or meeting foreigners may help students to acquire higher motivation and greater determination in terms of language learning. Thus, Gozde's case appears to be an unfortunate chain of events, plunging her into the deep ocean of challenges as she attempts to learn English in her second year of preparatory school.

The same questions were directed to a student studying at a state university, and the collected responses reveal a different aspect of this question. Oguz (B2) stated that her father is working at a bank, and his mother is an elementary school teacher. In terms of his family's financial power, he indicated that they would be considered as middle class. Furthermore, he reported that although his English level was enough to pass the exemption exam from the preparatory school, he decided not to take it to be able to enhance his production skills. When asked if he had ever been to a foreign country, he said that he had been to Europe with his family in his middle school years, but due to the economic downturn hitting Turkiye after the pandemic, he could not consider travelling. Regarding the question if there is anyone in his family who can speak English, he replied:

In my immediate family, both my brother and I can speak English, and my father and my mother are not entirely unfamiliar with the language. Within my extended family, this number increases.....

As it can be inferred from his responses, the families' education levels along with their attitudes towards the outer world can possibly have a substantial influence on shaping their children's perspective and motivation towards English learning. In Oguz's case, having English speaking members within the family could have potentially presented itself as a driving determinant to catch up with the fitted status quo. His exposure to English-speaking family members and past travel experiences might have helped him to take a proactive approach to language learning. This finding revealed itself as a matching reality with what Kormos (2013) put forward concerning the importance of a family's educational background with regard to learning English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, it's noteworthy that the situations of other participants shared similarities with Gozde's case. The other three participants reported on their families' relatively uneducated background despite having strong financial status. Besides, they all underlined that they all struggle with English in addition to having only A2 level proficiency except for one participant (B1). The gathered information supports the idea that factors contributing to success in learning a foreign language are multifaceted; having strong financial status is not solely adequate to support the educational life of children since different factors such as motivation, awareness of the significance of foreign language learning and autonomy also play a significant role. As Dörnyei (2005) underlined, the factors that determine the success of learners in mastering a second language consist of many factors such as language aptitude, motivation, and other personal factors. As reported, without ensuring these determinants in language teaching, it might be difficult for a language learner to master in the language.

4.4 Methodological Factors

4.4.1 Teachers' Views

The most intricate challenge revealed by this study appears to be related to the teaching methodologies employed in the classrooms. Although MONE (1997) took several steps to revolutionize language teaching policies in Türkiye to improve communicative competence, practices within the classrooms suggest a markedly different reality, particularly stemming from the assessment methods. The negative washback effect appears to have been playing a crucial role in shaping the country's teaching practices although the curricula put a strong emphasis on communicative competence. In Türkiye, prospective English teachers are expected to go through several assessments starting as of high school. All these exams are firmly focusing on grammar

and vocabulary assessment, overlooking communicative competence including listening skills. Individuals, who are used to being evaluated according to their written capacity, tend to maintain this habit in their own classrooms after they graduate. Furthermore, the assessment policies within institutions seem to be another contributing factor to this issue. Salih, teaching at a private university, responded to the question which aimed at exposing any possible discrepancy between the curriculum and the assessment policies as follows:

If you are not going to reveal my identity, (laughs here) no, not at all. Okay there are multiple activities for listening, speaking etc. But I don't think they are enough. The priority in the materials is grammar and vocabulary. Students have to take weekly quizzes, and the scores are recorded as a passing grade. Under these circumstances, students don't feel obliged to pay extra attention to speaking.

As Salih highlighted, the imposed assessment policies have a notable impact on students' perception of the target language since students are inclined to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over other skills. As all participants underlined, this primarily stems from the conditioning that they were exposed to throughout their school years. They all agreed on the fact that almost all students struggle with being part of the learning process where they also need to contribute, except for those students who have got their formal education in private institutions where the medium of instruction is exclusively English. Conversely, students, who have got accustomed to being evaluated through their grammar and vocabulary skills in their entire school years, find it quite challenging to adapt to a communicative classroom. As it can be inferred, this also indirectly affects the assessment policies. When asked about the weighting in assessment, Şeyda, working at a private university said:

I can say that only writing and speaking exams consist of open-ended questions. While this may seem somewhat traditional, multiple-choice questions prepared professionally also contribute to students' learning. I must say, 30 percent is allocated to production, while 70 percent is allocated to the traditional way of assessment.

This response suggests that the tendency toward traditional, or multiple-choice questions is quite high in the assessment process. The heavy influence of the traditional way of assessment may lead students to think that instead of concentrating on production skills, mastering multiple-choice or similar questions may help them pass exams. This frame of mind may possibly overshadow their communication skills. Şeyda's perception of the feasibility of multiple-choice

questions may also be another indicator of the negative washback effect, as the participant advocated the usefulness of these assessment methods.

Furthermore, during the interviews, an unexpected phenomenon was discovered: grade inflation. Grade inflation, to simply put, is awarding students with better grades for variety of different reasons despite them not meeting the criteria of assessment. Chowdhury (2018) states that grade inflation may mislead students in their perception of academic performance, leading them to think that they are successful and competent enough in the subject. Furthermore, it may deteriorate their work ethic since they may believe that they do not need to study hard to achieve their goals. Based on what was put forward by Chowdhury, we can conclude that grade inflation does not contribute to academic achievement; on the contrary, it may create a more profound impediment for students' future lives.

Moreover, when the participants were asked to reflect on whether their students get enough space to produce the language, one response from a teacher working at a private university was as follows:

Not really. Our implicit aim is to prepare them for exams which often results in compromise. For instance, during speaking exams, we sometimes allow students to pass despite their insufficient output. Even if we don't, their families sometimes get in touch with the school administration to ask for a passing grade. This is not acceptable in a state university.

Although this may not be applicable to other private institutions, it highlights a phenomenon of students' entitlement where they expect high grades and passing exams without meeting the criteria. This multifaceted chain of factors appears to be influencing the motivation of the teachers as well. With insufficient authority over the materials and curricula, participants indicated that they often find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Furthermore, the inability to introduce sufficient communicative methods into their classrooms causes teachers to seemingly struggle with failing their students due to obvious deficiencies, influenced by several factors. However, the participant's confession about having to pass students despite not meeting the required criteria undoubtedly requires a closer scrutiny. The interviewees' remarks on state universities where such acts do not get the nod bring into question the reliability of education in some private universities. Other participants, working at other private institutions, also indicated that the emphasis on grammar and vocabulary is substantially higher than on productive skills.

Participants working in state universities also highlighted that their classroom practices are affected by students' accustomedness to grammar-translation methods. They indicated that it is sometimes quite difficult to engage students in speaking activities. However, as reported, communicative methods are equipped more, and students get to have more chances to express themselves. The course materials used in these two universities reportedly align with the universally accepted curricula in terms of their communicative aspects. In terms of training workshops, four out of five teachers stated that there are no compulsory teaching training workshops held in their institutions. As reported, this inadequacy may cause teachers to routinize their teaching practices, mostly reflecting the methods and knowledge they have accumulated in their educational careers.

To sum up, the findings correlate with what Canlı and Çakır (2022) highlighted about the negative washback effect, and its intense impact on today's language teaching practices. Çelik and Bayraktar Çepni's (2020) remarks on the repetition of the same rules throughout primary and high school years bring to mind the negative washback effect as well. Besides, incorporating compulsory teaching training workshops and conducting them periodically emerged as an important necessity to build and maintain efficiency in language teaching. It is evident that overcoming these issues requires a holistic approach, starting from renewing the exam system which prospective teachers are to take to become English teachers. Incorporating production skills into the university entrance exam will oblige the policymakers, current teachers, and examinees to familiarize themselves with communicative aspects of language learning.

4.4.2 Students' Views

The perceptions of the student interviewees regarding the methodologies employed in their classrooms showed similarities to those of the teachers. Three out of five students indicated that the emphasis placed on grammatical features throughout their educational life influenced their approach to learning languages, and it was admitted that this issue is still affecting their learning experience. When asked if they have sufficient opportunity to express themselves in English, a student (A2) studying at a private university replied:

No. Our teachers emphasize the importance of speaking with foreigners all the time. But I don't know anyone. Sometimes while walking on the street, I try to speak to myself in my head. Also, we sometimes try to speak English and discuss about

topics with our friends. But I think I have this anxiety that when I try to speak, I get hesitant.

It can be inferred from the response that some communicative aspects of English are present in the lessons. However, unfamiliarity with more communicative classroom methods, possibly caused by prior negligence of the adaptation of communicative teaching methods in primary and high schools, appears to be causing hesitancy when students are asked to perform speaking. It was indicated by the participants that this hesitancy is also resulting in a lack of motivation towards learning the language.

In addition, when asked about their perceptions of the teaching methodologies employed in the language classroom, one participant, studying at a private university, highlighted the focus on exam preparation, and she complained about the extensive grammar they are expected to deal with. Besides, she stated that the allocated time for words that are not useful in daily conversations is making their learning process less enjoyable. The responses collected from other participants matched with these findings. When they were asked to comment on the amount of time allocated for productive skills in each lesson, the responses ranged from 5 minutes to 15 minutes out of a 45-minute lesson. This clearly shows that teacher authority remains high and prevalent in Turkish preparatory schools, as the amount of time allocated for students to express themselves and contribute to lesson is relatively low, especially in the context of a communicative teaching approach.

Almost all participants found the employed methodologies outdated and conventional. Four out of the five participants see English as a school subject rather than an important skill that needs to be acquired. This issue seemingly stems from the accustomedness to the grammar-translation method and the washback effect underlined by Canlı and Çakır (2022).

To sum up, in spite of the participants' acknowledgement of the necessity of communicative language skills, their experiences revealed barriers to achieving fluency and confidence in speaking. The over-emphasis on traditional grammar-focused methodologies appears to hinder their ability to engage in meaningful communication. As reported from both teachers and students, this negligence also fosters anxiety and hesitancy while trying to speak. On top of that, the motivation of students for learning English faces impairment due to these outcomes. The pervasive focus on exam preparation appears to be exacerbating this issue. Therefore, it

appears that systematic changes would be welcome to help foster more dynamic and student-centered classrooms in Turkish preparatory schools.

5. Conclusion

This paper focused on the exploration of some of the challenges confronted by Turkish preparatory school students in their journey to acquire proficiency in the English language. Through an in-depth analysis of literature backed by qualitative interviews collecting the perspectives of stakeholders, namely students and teachers in preparatory schools, a variety of different challenges hindering students' proficiency were identified. The qualitative interviews enabled the researcher to investigate the opinions and experiences of the participants thoroughly. With the help of literature and collected data through the interviews, the researcher was able to underscore some blazing challenges encountered by students. The challenges are listed as linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and methodological. Although language teaching in Türkiye has gone through various transformations throughout history, as has been found, the effects of conventional classroom practices are still profoundly felt in today's language teaching practices.

In terms of linguistic challenges, the participants reported that due to the fact that both English and Turkish belong to distinct language families, they have difficulties with various grammatical features. Two of the student participants stated that the meaning of Present Perfect is extremely difficult to digest since there is no equivalent tense in Turkish. Besides, the phonetic nature of Turkish, where words are typically pronounced as written, poses challenges for students in accurately pronouncing English. Some of the participants associated this challenge with further impediments, indicating that it contributes to reluctance in speaking among students, as they are afraid of being judged by their peers, or possibly, by their teachers.

The adaptation of different cultural elements of English is reported as lacking in Turkish preparatory school classes. Three teacher participants stated that the materials needed to be followed are prepared within their universities, and therefore cultural elements are scarcely adjoined. This was linked as an obstacle with language immersion. Only one teacher participant replied to this question positively, saying that the materials used in the department are imported and they contain many cultural references that help students maintain their cultural competence in the target language. Furthermore, the positive feedback collected from the majority of students

(four out of five) regarding their cultural awareness of the target language indicated that this aspect is less concerning than previously thought compared to other impediments addressed in this paper.

The socioeconomic challenges presented themselves as a remarkably complex phenomenon stemmed from various factors. Because the perspectives of teachers would not provide sufficient information regarding students' socioeconomic background, the study focused on the facilities provided by institutions. All teacher participants highlighted the abundance of resources and their accessibility. However, when consulting students' perspectives to identify the socioeconomic challenges they may face, it was found that financial stability is not solely a determining factor in language achievement. Three out of five participants depicted their families' financial background as decent; however, their educational background was portrayed as weak. These three participants indicated that they struggle with English, and their English levels were sufficient to address the issue (A2). Furthermore, one participant noted that despite his family's modest income, their satisfactory educational background emphasized the importance of learning English. As a result, this participant demonstrated a relatively higher competency in English, achieving a B2 level. In light of this, a cautious conclusion can be drawn that awareness of education can sometimes yield better outcomes than financial resources alone.

Based on the examination of stakeholders' perspectives on the methodologies employed in language classrooms, several critical issues were identified. The discrepancy between intended communicative teaching policies and actual classroom practices, fueled by the negative washback effect from assessment methods, came to light from the collected data from the participants. As teachers seem to have been influenced by their educational backgrounds and institutional assessment policies, they often find themselves prioritizing grammar and vocabulary teaching over communicative competence, which perpetuates a cycle that hinders students' language competence and engagement. Besides, one participant mentioned grade inflation, which has the potential to demotivate students to genuinely engage with the language. Students' views on English as a school subject rather than a vital skill exacerbate the phenomenon. While the primary scope of this study was not on motivation, the variables identified from the challenges appear to be causing significant motivational difficulties among students. This was voiced by several participants in the study. Students, on their part, expressed frustration with outdated teaching methods that primarily focus on grammar and vocabulary, which reportedly lead to disengagement

and reluctance to participate in in-class activities. It was also found that the reported amount of time allocated for speaking activities is considerably low for a language classroom.

The findings of this study point to pedagogical and policy implications alike. Firstly, regarding linguistic challenges students struggle with, dedicating specific lessons or activities to highlighting the apparent differences between Turkish and English may help students comprehend these language features, providing them with ample practice opportunities to internalize some grammar elements such as the Present Perfect tense. Besides, implementing pronunciation drills and exercises focusing on English phonetics may help students enhance their pronunciation skills. Fostering a non-judgmental classroom environment where students feel comfortable while speaking seems like a vital step for a fruitful language environment. Based on the findings of the research, teachers must encourage peer collaboration more to boost students' confidence in verbal communication in the target language.

Secondly, despite the fact that cultural challenges are not so significant as this research revealed, another pedagogical implication related to cultural challenges would be to integrate more cultural elements and contexts into language learning materials. Utilization of authentic materials such as movies, literature, music and other means of media may help students see the diverse cultural aspects of English-speaking countries. Providing teacher training workshops for the purpose of conveying the importance of cultural competence for language learners may help teachers promote cultural sensitivity in classroom interactions.

Thirdly, in order to minimize the socioeconomic impediments students face, implementing mentorship programs and academic support initiatives may be a fruitful step towards ensuring equal opportunities for academic success, regardless of socioeconomic background. Also, involving parents in these programs may raise awareness about foreign language learning and enhance the overall academic competency of students. Finally, these findings underscore the urgent need for a reform of language teaching practices in Turkish educational institutions. So as to clear off the negative washback effect, the assessment policies evidently require an update, incorporating more communicative goals. Besides, compulsory teacher training workshops can be employed to enable teachers to keep up with contemporary teaching methods. Only through such holistic reforms can these long-lasting challenges be effectively addressed.

Moreover, the study exposed a discrepancy between the materials employed in some state funded universities and private universities. This may lead to a visible differentiation between the

level of students who graduate from their universities. Furthermore, it can also be linked to the findings published by Tosun (2020) which highlighted the boom in the quantity of universities established in the past twenty years. As the number of universities increase, the quality of education has been overshadowed. Instead of focusing on quantity, the policymakers should prioritize quality to ensure that students have mastered their academic achievements.

Further research is required to fully understand the complexities of these challenges and identify actionable steps accordingly. In the future, it would be useful to broaden the scope of the current research by triangulating the findings with observational data and curricular document analysis. Although the initial plan was to include various curricula employed in Turkiye to get a broader perspective, due to time constraints this remained as a future research plan. Furthermore, I aim to do further interviews with students and teachers in other regions of Turkiye to have a more representative sample regarding this issue. It is important to bear in mind that the results of this present study must be interpreted cautiously, and the mentioned limitations should be taken into consideration by readers.

Table 5

Themes for each category

Category	Key words
Linguistic challenges	Grammar, pronunciation, linguistic differences between English and Turkish
Cultural challenges	Lack of authentic materials, student reservation towards foreign cultures
Socio-economic challenges	Unschooling family background, lack of foreign country experience, motivational problems
Methodological challenges	Prevalence of the grammar-translation method, the negative washback effect, lacking production skills

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Appendices

Appendix A

The English Translation of the Student Interview Guide

Dear _____

Thank you for participating in this interview. As it was explained earlier, I am interested in the challenges preparatory school students encounter while learning English. In this interview, I would like to focus on your experience, which means, there are no good or wrong answers. The interview should take about 35-40 minutes, depending on how much we talk. This interview is voluntary. Therefore, you can opt out anytime for any reason or decide not to answer any questions. Everything you say is anonymized, so everything shared within the interview will be handled confidentially.

As a final question, can the interviews be recorded? The recording will not be shared with anyone.

Thank you for your assistance.

Questions for students

- 1- Could you share your experience learning English in the university preparatory school thus far?
- 2- What influenced your decision to study in a department where the medium of instruction is English?
- 3- Do you enjoy learning English? Did you enjoy it during your time in high school? If so, what aspect of learning English did you find most enjoyable?
- 4- What is the most enjoyable side of learning English?
- 5- Which aspects of learning English do you find most challenging? If you had to name the top three challenging areas, what would they be (e.g., speaking, grammar), and why do you find them challenging?
- 6- According to your experiences, what is the most apparent difference between English and Turkish? How does these differences affect your language learning?
- 7- In what ways do you think economic factors affect or have affected your experience learning English?
- 8- Have you ever had the opportunity to travel abroad?
- 9- Can any of your family members speak English? How was your attitude towards English before you actually started learning it?

- 10- Do you feel you have sufficient opportunity and time to express your ideas in English?
- 11- Does your teacher encourage peer-to-peer or group interaction to practice English? If so, how much time is typically allocated for these activities in a 45-minute lesson?
- 12- What is your perception about English or American cultures? Do you think your familiarity has increased since joining the prep-school?
- 13- Have you encountered any situations where cultural differences affected your understanding? If so, could you share those experiences?
- 14- How do you typically reinforce and practice your English language skills outside of the classroom? Do you feel these methods are adequate?
- 15- What is your perception of the teaching methodologies employed in your English classes? Are they primarily focused on exam preparation or on enhancing everyday language competency?
- 16- What advice would you offer to teachers to better support students facing linguistic, cultural, or economic challenges in learning English?
- 17- Would you like to add anything?

Appendix B

The English Translation of the Teacher Interview Guide

Dear _____

Thank you for participating in this interview. As it was explained earlier, I am interested in the challenges preparatory school students encounter while learning English. In this interview, I would

like to focus on your experience, which means, there are no good or wrong answers. The interview should take about 35-40 minutes, depending on how much we talk. This interview is voluntary. Therefore, you can opt out anytime for any reason or decide not to answer any questions. Everything you say is anonymized, so everything shared within the interview will be handled confidentially.

Questions for teachers

- 1- Can you provide an overview of the teaching methods and approaches you use in your English classes?
- 2- How do you assess the linguistic needs of your students at the beginning of the course?
- 3- Do you think the cultures of the target language are incorporated into the materials sufficiently? Have you ever encountered any cultural disparities?
- 4- In your experience, what are the most common linguistic challenges students face when learning English?
- 5- Is the curriculum that needs to be followed adequate to meet students' needs in terms of the four skills in the target language?
- 6- Do students get enough space to produce the target language?
- 7- How is the assessment conducted in your English classes? In terms of weighting, how much emphasis is placed on production (e.g., speaking, writing) compared to traditional testing methods (e.g., multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank)?
- 8- How do you accommodate students from different economic backgrounds in your teaching practices?

- 9- Have you noticed any particular challenges students face due to their economical background?
- 10- What strategies do you employ to ensure all students have access to necessary resources regardless of their economic situation?
- 11- How do you balance traditional teaching methods with newer, communication-oriented methods?
- 12- How do you incorporate real-world contexts and experiences into your English language teaching?
- 13- How do you encourage student engagement and participation in English language learning, especially for those facing challenges?
- 14- How do you collaborate with other faculty or support staff to ensure students facing challenges receive appropriate assistance and support?
- 15- What support or resources do you feel would be helpful for you as a teacher to better address the needs of students facing linguistic, cultural, or economic challenges?

