



Uçak, E. (2013). Opinions of students and teachers on using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners' classrooms in Turkey. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 1(1). 54-60.

<http://iojet.org/index.php/IOJET/article/view/44/64>

OPINIONS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ON USING DIFFERENT FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING ACTIVITIES IN YOUNG LEARNERS' CLASSROOMS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

Current study has been conducted to find out what kindergarten students and their teachers think about using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners' classrooms in Turkey. It also examines which activities (songs, games, drawing) are favored most by the students and what kind of interaction patterns (individual, pair, and group) the students and teachers of young learners favor most. It also compares the opinions of pre-school and primary school students and teachers on the activity types. 52 kindergarten students, 31 primary school students and 10 teachers of young learners participated in this study. The students were interviewed one by one and the teachers were asked to answer a questionnaire including 12 statements. According to the results, both the teachers and the students agree with using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners' classrooms. Students like game most, then drawing and lastly songs. It was also found that there is a difference in the opinions of pre-school and primary school students on the activity types. As for ideas of the teachers, there is not a statically significant difference between the opinions of pre-school and primary school teachers on the activity types. Lastly, the results indicated that both teachers and students prefer pair and group work activities to individual activities.

Keywords: young learners, activity types, interaction patterns

1. Introduction

As English has become the international language, teaching English as second/foreign language has gained more importance. As a result of this, the questions whether foreign language education should start at earlier ages appeared and a great deal of research has been conducted to be able to answer these questions. Ur (1996) says that in a situation, where there are as many teachers and teaching hours as you want, by all means start as early as you can.

Teaching English to young learners is a new field in Turkey. Until 1998 students took their first English course at 6th grade. In 1998 by means of the education reform, English started to be taught from 4th grade and with the new education system 4+4+4 it has been decided that foreign language education should start in the second year of primary school. However, this is true for state schools. In private schools, foreign language education starts in kindergarten.

According to Cameron (2001) "In many societies, teaching children is seen as an extension of mothering rather than as an intellectual enterprise. However, primary teachers need to understand how children make sense of the world and how they learn". As Cenoz (2003) states teaching young learners is quite different from teaching teenagers or adults. First of all, they have a short attention span; they can easily get bored after 5-10 minutes (Harmer, 2007), so it becomes really difficult to control them. Secondly, as Ur (1996) says "Most adults are learning voluntarily, have chosen the course themselves, often have a clear purpose in learning (work, travel, etc.) and are therefore likely to feel more committed and motivated; whereas most children have little choice in where, how or even whether they are

taught". Actually they do not learn a language on purpose. When they are told that they are learning a language, it means nothing to the children (Bekleyen, 2011). Thirdly, Harmer (2007) says that they learn from everything around them: they learn indirectly rather than directly and he adds that they understand mostly when they see, hear, touch and interact rather than from explanations.

As young learners are different from adult learners, teaching young learners necessitates different methodologies. As they have a short concentration span, they always want change. As they are naturally curious, anything new attracts children's attention (Ekşi, 2009). Ur (1996) states that monotonous, apparently pointless activities quickly bore and demotivate young learners: older ones are more tolerant of them. Because of this, teachers should have a rich repertoire of activities to help young children receive information from a variety of sources and plan a range of activities for a given time period (Harmer, 2007).

Şensoy and Özad (2007) conducted a study to be able to find out the attitudes of teachers toward using different activities while teaching English to young learners in pre-school and in the first and second year in primary schools in North Cyprus. They also tried to find out whether there are differences in the attitudes of preschool and primary school English teachers. According to the data obtained they found that both pre-school and primary school teachers are in favor of using different activities while teaching English to young learners and there is no significant difference between the responses of pre-school and primary school teachers. However, they did not search for opinions of the students. Therefore, current study has been conducted to explore opinions of both students and teachers on using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners' classrooms in Turkey.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The students that participated in the present study were 52 from kindergarten whose ages were 4 to 6 and 31 from the primary school whose ages were 6 to 8. Both the kindergarten and the primary school were private school. Because of this the children had wealthy parents. Almost all of the fathers and more than half of the mothers had license degree. The kids were born and raised in İstanbul.

The teachers who participated in the present study were 10. All of them were female. 4 of them were from kindergarten and the others were from the primary school. 3 of teachers were native speakers of English. One of them was from the U.K. and the other two were from the U.S.A. The other teachers were native speakers of Turkish and they learned English as a foreign language in Turkey.

2.2. Settings

The kindergarten was in Pendik in İstanbul. It was a private school which was converted from a duplex villa. It had a small garden which included a park for the kids. There were 6 classes in the school. Each class includes approximately 10 children. There was a class for 6 year-olds, 2 classes for 5 year-olds and 3 classes for 4 year-olds. The classes were large enough for students to move and go around. The classes were colorful and cheerful.

The primary school was in Pendik in İstanbul, too. It was also private. It was a large and crowded school which included both primary school students and elementary school students. It had a huge garden. The classes were large enough for students to move and go around. The classes were colorful and cheerful as the students were still young learners although they were not as colorful as the ones in the kindergarten.

2.3. Data Collection

The teachers were distributed a questionnaire consisting of 12 Likert-scale type questions prepared by Şensoy and Özad (2009) so as to determine what they think about using different kind of activities with young learners. The questionnaire consisted of five choices ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The teachers chose the one that was most suitable for them. As it included only 12 questions it took maximum five minutes of the teachers to complete it.

As the students were very young learners they were not given a written questionnaire. They were asked orally by the researcher to find out what they think about different kind of activity usage and which activities they like most (games, songs or drawing). They were also asked whether they like studying individually, with pair or with groups to be able to find what kind of interaction they favor most.

2.4. Research Questions

This study has been conducted to find out the answers to these questions;

1. What do the teachers and students think about using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners' classrooms in Turkey?
2. Which activities (songs, games, drawing) are favored most by the students?
3. Is there a difference in the opinions of pre-school and primary school students and teachers on the activity types?
4. What kind of interaction patterns (individual, pair, and group) do the students and teachers of young learners favor most?

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

Data was collected from both teachers and students for this study. The data collected from teachers was analyzed in two steps. First, the data was examined in terms of the averages of the questionnaire items. Then the answers of preschool and primary school teachers were compared with the help of independent sample t test. As for the teachers' interaction pattern preference, the researcher observed the teachers during class hours to be able to find out what kind of interaction patterns the teachers of young learners favor most.

Data collected from students was analyzed in three steps. Firstly, which activity type (game, song, and drawing) was favored most by the students was calculated with the help of frequency. After that the frequency of preschool and primary school students' activity type choice was compared. Lastly, whether students like individual, pair or group work most was examined.

Table 1. *Means of teachers' Responses*

Questionnaire Items	Means
1. English should be taught through songs.	4,4000
2. English should be taught through using language in games.	4,4000
3. English should be taught using symbols.	4,5000
4. Drawing should be used while teaching English.	4,4000
5. Realia should be used while teaching English.	4,5000
6. Pair and group work should be used when teaching English.	4,6000
7. Animation should be used while teaching English.	4,3000
8. Description of photographs should be used in teaching English.	4,0000
9. English should be taught through picture books.	4,0000
10. English should be taught using books that have pictures and some writing.	4,2000
11. Drama should be used in teaching English.	4,5000
12. English should be taught through reading books.	4,1000

The results indicate that the teachers Strongly Agree or Agree with using a variety of activities while teaching English to young children. In other words, they are positive about the use of songs, language in games, visual symbols, drawing, realia, and picture books.

They agree rather than strongly agree with the use of animation, description of photographs and books. Actually young learners like moving all the time. It is really hard for them to sit down and focus on something. While watching animation, some students get bored after about ten minutes while some students want to continue watching it.

Description of photographs is used in the other courses of young learners, too. Because of this, in time, students see the same or familiar photographs and they may get bored. Some students may react “I know this” or sometimes describing the photograph may necessitate the knowledge of previous course. If the child was absent in the previous course, s/he could not participate in the lesson.

According to the teachers, young learners do not like sitting down and listening to something carefully. Although the teacher shows pictures in the book or visualize the story with the help of gestures, showing the photographs in the book to each child is really hard in crowded classrooms. Some students may be out of the circle in time. Such things create classroom management problems for teachers. This may be the reason why teachers agree rather than strongly agree with the use of animation, description of photographs and books.

Teachers strongly agree with use of games, songs, pair/group work activities, drama, realia and drawing. According to the teachers, all of the students involve in games, songs, pair/group work activities and drama because every student is active during such kind of activities. Teachers favor drawing too as nearly all of the students like drawing and involve in drawing activities. Teachers also make use of realia as the students are really interested in concrete objects that they can touch and examine.

Table 2. Comparison of the means of primary and pre-school teachers' responses

Questionnaire Items	preschool	primary school
1. English should be taught through songs.	4,3333	4,4286
2. English should be taught through using language in games.	4,3333	4,4286
3. English should be taught using symbols.	4,3333	4,5714
4. Drawing should be used while teaching English.	4,3333	4,4286
5. Realia should be used while teaching English.	4,3333	4,5714
6. Pair and group work should be used when teaching English.	4,6667	4,5714
7. Animation should be used while teaching English.	4,0000	4,4286
8. Description of photographs should be used in teaching English.	3,6667	4,1429
9. English should be taught through picture books.	4,0000	4,0000
10. English should be taught using books that have pictures and some writing.	4,6667	4,0000
11. Drama should be used in teaching English.	4,3333	4,5714
12. English should be taught through reading books.	4,0000	4,1429

On nearly all the items in the questionnaire, there is a great similarity between the means of the responses given by the two groups (pre-school and primary school teachers). In other words, the results indicate that teachers' views on teaching English to very close age groups of young learners show similarities.

Only for the item 7 (Animation should be used while teaching English) there is a statistically significant difference between the ideas of pre-school and primary school teachers (sig. ,000 < ,005). As it has been stated before, kindergarten students may get bored while watching animation and may create classroom management problems, however for primary school children animation may be enjoyable and like a free time activity after taking difficult courses like math etc. This may be the reason why primary school teachers favor using animation.

According to the observation of the researcher both pre-school and primary school teachers favor both pair and group work activity although primary school teachers generally prefer pair work to group work. The classes were more crowded in the primary school than the ones in the kindergarten. So, group work activities may create chaos in the classes of the primary school. This may be the reason why primary school teachers use pair work activities most of the time.

As the age of the students was between 4 and 8, a questionnaire was not given to the students. The researcher just observed them during the lesson and asked questions to be able understand what they think about the usage of different kind of activities. With the help of the observation of the researcher and the answers of the students, it can be said that students like different kind of activities and they get bored when the teacher use the same kind of activity for a long time.

Table 3. *Frequency of activity choice of students*

activity		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	game	42	53,2	53,2	53,2
	song	16	20,3	20,3	73,4
	drawing	21	26,6	26,6	100,0
	Total	79	100,0	100,0	

According to the table 3, students like game most, then drawing and lastly songs. To be able to see whether there is a difference between the ideas of pre-school and primary school students, table 4 and 5 was drawn.

Table 4. *Pre-school students*

activity		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	game	14	36,8	36,8	36,8
	song	9	23,7	23,7	60,5
	drawing	15	39,5	39,5	100,0
	Total	38	100,0	100,0	

Table 5. *Primary school students*

activity		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	game	28	68,3	68,3	68,3
	song	7	17,1	17,1	85,4
	drawing	6	14,6	14,6	100,0
	Total	41	100,0	100,0	

According to the table 4 and 5, pre-school children like drawing most, then game and lastly song although the number of students who like drawing (15) is very close to the number of students who like games (14). Primary school children like games most (28), then song (7) and lastly drawing (6). There is a significant difference between the choice of game and other two activities. This may indicate that primary school children are longing for games. Although they are still very young, they are responsible for studying hard, learning how to read and write, solving mathematical problems and doing homework. This may be the reason why they do not want to do something more with pencil even if it is for drawing.

Table 6. *Interaction patterns*

interaction		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	pair work	9	11,4	11,4	11,4
	group work	65	82,3	82,3	93,7
	individual	5	6,3	6,3	100,0
	Total	79	100,0	100,0	

According to the table 6 students enjoy group work activities most, then pair work and lastly individual. As it has been stated before both pre-school and primary school teachers strongly agree with using activities that necessitates student interaction. So, it is good that both students and teachers share the same idea in terms of interaction patterns.

4. Limitations

The current study was conducted with very young learners. Although the researcher tried to simplify her language by making clear and short sentences, there may be some students especially from 4 year-olds who did not understand the questions and answered the question according to the thing s/he remembered. For example the researcher asked “Which one do you like most in English classes, games, songs or drawing?” the teacher may have said “drawing” not because s/he liked it most but as s/he remembered it. Although the researcher asked the question again by changing the order of activity types when she suspected that the student did not understand the question to be able to hinder such a problem, there may have been some misunderstandings that she could not realize. Additionally, the students were not interviewed in isolation. Although the kindergarten students did not intervene in each other’s answers, some primary school students from second graders commented on their friends’ answers and tried to affect their answers. Although the researcher warned the students to share their own idea no matter what the others think or say, they may have been affected by their friends. Lastly, the first graders were not homogeneous in terms of age. There were some students who were 5.5 years old because of the new 4+4+4 regulation. However, as they were first graders, their answers were analyzed in the category of primary school. This may have affected the results to some extent.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

52 kindergarten students, 31 primary school students and 10 teachers of young learners participated in this study. The students were asked orally to be able to find what they think about the use of different types of activities, which activity type (game, song, and drawing) and what kind of interaction pattern (individual, pair, group) they like most. The teachers were asked to answer a questionnaire including 12 statements to be able to find out what they think about the use of different kinds of activities with young learners. According to the results, both the teachers and the students agree with using different foreign language teaching activities in young learners’ classrooms in Turkey. Students like game most, then

drawing and lastly songs. Also it has been found that there is a difference in the opinions of pre-school and primary school students on the activity types. While pre-school children like drawing most (15 students), then game (14 students) and lastly song (9 students), primary school children like games most (28), then song (7) and lastly drawing (6). On nearly all the items in the questionnaire, there is a great similarity between the means of the responses given by the two groups (pre-school and primary school teachers). As for ideas of the teacher, there is not a statically significant difference between the opinions of pre-school and primary school teachers on the activity types. Only for the item 7 (Animation should be used while teaching English) there is a statistically significant difference between the ideas of pre-school and primary school teachers (sig., 000 <, 005). While primary school teachers use animation most of the time, pre-school teachers do not favor it that much. According to the results both teachers and students prefer pair and group work activities to individual activities. Although both pre-school and primary school children favor group work activity most, the teachers of primary school prefer pair work to group work.

Different results may be obtained if this study was conducted again by interviewing students in isolation to be able obtain more reliable answers from the students. Additionally, conducting the research again in homogenous first grade classes in terms of age may change the results.

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