



| Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi |

## Perceived Language Learning Difficulties by Preparatory School Students: A Case Study

### Hazırlık Öğrencilerinin Dil Öğrenmeyi Zorlaştıran Faktörlere İlişkin Algıları–Bir Vakıf Üniversitesi Örneği

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1. Foreign Language Learning
2. Difficulties in Foreign Language Learning
3. Descriptive Research
4. Preparatory School Students

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

1. Yabancı Dil Öğrenme
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#### Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the difficulties that students of English as a foreign language experience in the language learning process. The study also reveals the relationship between language learning difficulties students experience and their achievements, gender and academic levels. The study group of this descriptive study consisted of 340 preparatory unit students. The "Foreign Language Learning Difficulties Scale" developed by Özmat (2017) was used for quantitative data and a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was used as a qualitative data source. According to the results of the study, it was determined that the difficulties that preparatory students have at the highest level in the language learning process are related to learning resources, and the difficulties they experience at the minimum level are related to the learning environment (physical and psychological). It was determined that the students had moderate difficulty stemming from the teaching-learning process and from themselves. The qualitative results of the research also support the results obtained from the scale. It was observed that students did not experience much difficulty related to disciplinary or classroom management issues. In addition, students stated that they needed more student-centered practices in class. There was no significant relationship between students' difficulty level, achievement test and gender. It was determined that the difficulties experienced by the students studying at lower levels are higher than the students studying at higher levels. According to the results of the research, suggestions were made for language learning processes and foreign language teaching in preparatory schools.

#### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin dil öğrenme sürecinde yaşadıkları zorlukları belirlemektir. Çalışmada aynı zamanda öğrencilerin yaşadıkları zorluklar ile başarıları, cinsiyetleri ve hedef dil düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiler de ortaya koyulmuştur. Betimsel nitelikli bu araştırmanın çalışma grubunu 340 hazırlık birimi öğrencisi oluşturmaktadır. Nicel veriler için Özmat (2017) tarafından geliştirilen "Dil Öğrenmeyi Zorlaştıran Faktörler Ölçeği" ve nitel veriler için araştırmacılar tarafından geliştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre, hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin dil öğrenme sürecinde karşılaştıkları en yüksek düzeyde zorlukların öğrenme kaynakları ile ilgili olduğu, en az düzeyde yaşadıkları zorlukların ise öğrenme iklimi (fiziksel ve psikolojik) ile ilgili olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Öğrencilerin, öğretme öğrenme sürecinden ve kendilerinden kaynaklanan zorlukları orta düzeyde yaşadıkları belirlenmiştir. Araştırmanın nitel sonuçları da ölçekten elde edilen sonuçları destekler niteliktedir. Öğrencilerin, sınıf ortamına yönelik disiplin ya da sınıf yönetimi bakımından zorluk yaşamadıkları görülmüştür. Buna ek olarak öğrenciler, öğrenci merkezli etkinliklere daha fazla ihtiyaç duyduklarını belirtmiştir. Öğrencilerin yaşadıkları zorluk düzeyi ile başarı testi ve cinsiyet değişkeni arasında anlamlı bir ilişki görülmemiştir. Alt kurlarda öğrenim gören öğrencilerin yaşadıkları zorlukların üst kurda öğrenim gören öğrencilere göre daha yüksek düzeyde olduğu belirlenmiştir. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, dil öğrenme sürecine ve hazırlık okullarındaki yabancı dil öğretimine yönelik önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

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## INTRODUCTION

For a long time, linguists have been accumulating a considerable amount of information about the nature of language, and this knowledge has had important pedagogical implications for teachers of foreign languages (Scott, 1965). In addition to the methodological improvements in the field, the social and psychological processes in language learning have been attracting substantial attention (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Zhang et al., 2020) because of the potential effect on learner achievement.

In Turkey, studies on English language proficiency levels indicate a lower-than-expected level of language proficiency (The Economic Policy Research Foundation Turkey (TEPAV), 2013; EF, EPI, 2015). Regarding how challenging language learning can be, identifying the social, psychological or pedagogical challenges included is important to better the language proficiency levels of learners. Thus, it can be said that there are many factors which affect teaching and learning a foreign language and these factors require further and deeper analyses to be managed.

McDonough et al. (2013) listed some of the factors affecting language learning, which are (i) what the goals of language learning are and the place of the target language in the home culture; (ii) the teacher's role and qualifications; (iii) the role of educational management; (iv) efficiency of resources and the number of students; (v) allocated time, techniques, methods and assessment techniques; and (vi) learner-related issues such as their proficiency levels, age, interests, motivation, attitude, goals, need, learning styles and strategies.

Chen (2010) found that belief and attitude in learning a language strongly affects the motivational levels of learners, which leads to the final achievement levels. Similarly, Liu and Cheng (2014) pointed out a strong negative correlation between anxiety and motivation, thus, achievement. Chou (2014) focused on the in-class methodologies with results showing that songs, games and stories that keep learners active improve their skills and motivation. Ma et al. (2019) similarly underlined the importance of willingness to communicate in language learning motivation. De Paepe et al. (2019) aimed to present the limitations and opportunities in L2 Dutch courses. The constraints were stated as mostly pertaining to curriculum design while the main opportunities would pertain to teacher qualifications, learner skills and attitudes. Another very recent study, Zhang et al. (2020), stressed the importance of learner motivation and L2 learning to determine whether any difficulties caused by motivational factors existed.

In the Turkish context, Demirtaş and Erdem (2015) discovered that the greatest challenges were the inadequate number of hours allocated in the curriculum. Likewise, Kandemir and Tok (2017) emphasized a need for more teaching hours and an update in the resources used. Özmat (2017) studied the factors that make learning English difficult in secondary and high schools. She classified the factors that affect language learning into four groups: the challenges related to (i) learning/teaching resources, (ii) learning/teaching processes, (iii) learners and (iv) teaching and learning atmosphere.

In Turkey, most universities, whether or not they are English-medium, provide their students with a full-year intensive language program prior to students commencing their studies. Because of the wide-spread existence of these 'preparatory schools of English' and because of the intense efforts to improve them, this study has selected a preparatory school of English as the research context. The aims of this study have been set to determine the perceived difficulties in learning English for preparatory school students and to compare their perceptions of the difficulties they have with their exam scores in their academic levels defined according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In this study, possible strategies to overcome perceived difficulties can be determined, and suggestions for the teaching of English as a foreign language process associated with determined difficulties and exam results in higher education can be provided. The results of this study will contribute to English language policy making and curriculum studies for the preparatory schools of universities and for instructors of English in higher education.

What makes this study a considerable and trustworthy one in terms of implications is its effort to analyze students' perceptions of language learning difficulties (PLLD). Considering the limitations of perception studies as well as their advantages, the academic achievement scores of learners were also analyzed with regard to their PLLD scores. In addition to depicting the preparatory school context, this study can provide insights into the different phases of language learning and teaching processes as the points of difficulties can undoubtedly be regarded as points of improvements for higher education institutions with intensive language preparatory education.

To this end, this study addresses the following research questions in order to determine the levels of difficulty of preparatory school students and the relationship with their English exam scores.

1. What is the level of language learning difficulty of preparatory school students in the language learning/teaching process?
  - i. What are the perceived difficulties related to learning-teaching resources?
  - ii. What are the perceived difficulties related to the learning-teaching process?
  - iii. What are the perceived difficulties related to the students themselves?
  - iv. What are the perceived difficulties related to the learning-teaching atmosphere?
2. Is there a relationship between PLLD scale scores and students' achievement test results?
3. Is gender a significant factor in determining the PLLD scale scores of the students?
4. Is there a significant difference between the PLLD scale scores of the students in the A2, B1 and B2 levels?

## METHOD

This research is a case study, which by its nature focuses on one phenomenon in one specific context. In other words, the main purpose of a case study is to analyze a specific situation in a certain context deeply (Saruhan & Özdemirci, 2016). Thus, the researcher can have a deeper understanding of the topic in a specific setting. Furthermore, according to Woodside (2010), the purpose of a case study is to describe and understand an individual person, group or organization on which the research concentrates.

### Design of the Study

In this study, a mixed-methods approach which covers quantitative and qualitative data has been followed to gather the data. On the one hand, the *quantitative* approach enables the researcher to obtain numerical findings regarding the data gathered, which helps to produce statistical findings. With the help of such data collected and explained in numbers, quantitative research focuses on the explanation of a specific situation (Muijs, 2014). On the other hand, the main purpose of the *qualitative* approach is to extract the hidden meanings of people's utterances, attitudes and behavior. In this approach, as Hogan et al. (2009) claims, culture, society and behavior are investigated in many dimensions with the analysis of people's words and/or behaviors by the researcher.

### Participants

The participants of this study were the students of an English preparatory school at a private university in Ankara, Turkey. A total of 340 students participated in the study that corresponds to 54.1% of the total number of students. With regard to gender, 43.2% (n = 147) of the students who participated in the study were male and 56.8% (n = 193) were female. The participants were from three different academic levels defined in line with CEFR, namely A2 (8.5%; n = 29), B1 (47.9%; n = 163) and B2 (43.5%; n = 148).

### Instruments

Two instruments were applied in this research to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data for this study was taken from Özmat's (2017) language learning difficulties scale focusing on PLLD in English language learning in secondary schools and high schools. The scale is one dimensional and as the research occurred at a higher education institution, the items directly relating to secondary and/or high school were not taken into account. The scale consists of two sections with the first section focusing on the demographic information of the participants and the second part consisting of 30 items requiring responses in a five-level Likert scale in the second section.

The one dimensional scale items were grouped in order to interpret the data effectively and in an organized manner. The items were grouped as *Difficulties related to learning materials*, *Difficulties related to the teaching and learning process*, *Difficulties related to the students themselves* and *Difficulties related to the learning environment*. While the content validity of the instrument had been assured by the expert opinion by Özmat (2017), the internal consistency of the items was computed on SPSS in the current study. The value of 0.90 (Table 1) suggests that the instrument has a high level of internal consistency.

**Table 1: Internal consistency level of PLLD scale**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.90	30

As indicated in Table 1, Cronbach's Alpha reliability co-efficient was found to be 0.90. Conventionally, it is suggested that in social sciences a value between 0.60 and 0.80 is acceptable (Green et al., 1977; Spector, 1992). This indicates that the reliability of this research instrument is well above the accepted level.

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 30 items of PLLD scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .89 and the Barlett's test of sphericity was found to be significant ( $df = 435, p < .001$ ) showing that the correlation matrix produced by the items was factorable. Principle components analysis with oblique rotation (Direct Oblimin) was used and the results showed that one-factor structure explained 27.11% of the variance. All of the items had loadings higher than the cutoff value of .30.

The instrument used to gather qualitative data was a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. The form was checked by receiving expert opinions from two faculties in language teaching departments. In the analysis part, to present the data in an objective manner and for internal reliability, direct quotations and individual samples were presented.

The form consisted of two open ended questions about the language learning difficulties that students encountered. The first question asked about the difficulties students encountered and the second question aimed to personalize some of the causes of the difficulties the students mentioned. That is, the aim of the second question was to indicate the problems that the learners would attribute to themselves.

The aim of the qualitative section was to determine the possible difficulties that learners might not have had the opportunity to indicate in the scale.

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### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In this study, the data were collected in two forms, namely quantitative and qualitative. Additionally, the participants completed a consent form and all the instruments and forms were approved by the ethics committee of the university at which this study was conducted. While the quantitative data were analyzed on SPSS 25.0, a statistical package tool to analyze numerical data in social sciences, content analysis was applied to interpret the qualitative data.

The instrument used in this research was designed using a five-level Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low level difficulty) to 5 (very high level difficulty). During the analysis, the range between the levels was accepted as 0.8 determined by the formula:  $(5-1)/5 = 0.8$ .

With regard to the quantitative data, different types of analyses, such as descriptive statistics, correlation, independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were executed for different aspects of the data based on the research questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and after being transcribed by the researchers, content analysis was applied to the qualitative data. The main objective of content analysis is to provide the researcher with new insights related to a certain context (Krippendorff, 2004). The analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted and presented in the findings section.

## **RESULTS**

### **Quantitative Findings on the PLLD Level of Preparatory School Students**

In order to determine the language learning difficulties of preparatory students, the mean, frequency and percentage values (Table 2) of the PLLD scale were examined. Although the scale is one-dimensional, the items were grouped in order to present the findings in an organized manner.

Table 2: Language Learning Difficulty Scale

Factors that Make Learning English Language Difficult	Disagree		Slightly Agree		Moderately Agree		Agree		Strongly Agree		M
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
<i>Difficulties related to learning materials</i>											
1-The reading texts in our English course books are not interesting.	35	10.3	66	19.4	134	39.4	80	23.5	25	7.5	<b>2.98</b>
2-The reading texts in our English course books do not include topics about daily life.	68	20	84	24.7	112	32.9	50	14.7	26	7.6	<b>2.65</b>
3-I do not like reading texts because there are too many unfamiliar English words.	68	20	81	23.8	94	27.6	67	19.7	30	8.8	<b>2.74</b>
11-I am bored when we do listening practice because the topics are not interesting.	61	17.9	66	19.4	110	32.4	54	15.9	49	14.4	<b>2.89</b>
<i>Difficulties related to the teaching and learning process</i>											
5-We do not do any reading practice on how to understand a text with the guidance of a teacher.	195	57.4	55	16.2	54	15.9	26	7.6	10	2.9	<b>1.83</b>
6-I have difficulty in writing a paragraph as we do not practice often enough in English lessons.	162	47.6	74	21.8	56	16.5	29	8.5	19	5.6	<b>2.03</b>
7-It is not clearly explained how to connect the topic and supporting sentences in a writing process.	161	47.4	94	27.6	53	15.6	19	5.6	13	3.8	<b>1.91</b>
10-There is no focus on listening strategies or how to understand a recording in English lessons.	153	45	77	22.6	67	19.7	30	8.8	13	3.8	<b>2.04</b>
13-I don't make an effort to speak English because we are allowed to speak Turkish in English lessons.	165	48.5	66	19.4	53	15.6	30	8.8	26	7.6	<b>2.08</b>
15-We are not given any methods to improve our spoken fluency in English	138	40.6	92	27.1	58	17.1	35	10.3	17	5	<b>2.12</b>
18-Our English lessons do not include pronunciation classes.	124	36.5	97	28.5	65	19.1	33	9.7	21	6.2	<b>2.21</b>
21-We are not given any strategies to help us remember new English vocabulary.	121	35.6	69	20.3	70	20.6	49	14.4	31	9.1	<b>2.41</b>
<i>Difficulties related to the students themselves</i>											
4-I don't like reading as I cannot understand a text without teacher guidance.	97	28.5	92	27.1	79	23.2	48	14.1	24	7.1	<b>2.44</b>
8-I cannot make a sentence while writing a paragraph as I struggle with even basic grammatical topics.	131	38.5	108	31.8	65	19.1	24	7.1	12	3.5	<b>2.05</b>
9-I have difficulty in writing a paragraph as I lack confidence without teacher guidance.	101	29.7	90	26.5	81	23.8	42	12.4	26	7.6	<b>2.42</b>
14-I don't want to speak English because I always have to translate from Turkish first, so it takes me a long time to make sentences.	60	17.6	60	17.6	79	23.2	75	22.1	66	19.4	<b>3.08</b>
16-I don't believe I can speak English because I want to speak fluently without making a mistake.	60	17.6	59	17.4	90	26.5	69	20.3	62	18.2	<b>3.04</b>
17-I don't feel confident in speaking English.	79	23.2	70	20.6	81	23.8	59	17.4	51	15	<b>2.80</b>
19-I have difficulty in speaking English as I don't know enough vocabulary.	62	18.2	73	21.5	94	27.6	61	17.9	50	14.7	<b>2.89</b>
20-I don't know how to learn new English words.	126	37.1	78	22.9	68	20	33	9.7	35	10.3	<b>2.33</b>
22-I'm not interested in learning English.	216	63.5	57	16.8	46	13.5	11	3.2	10	2.9	<b>1.65</b>
23-I don't allocate any time to learn English out of the classroom.	93	27.4	83	24.4	94	27.6	49	14.4	21	6.2	<b>2.48</b>
24-I always fall behind in English lessons due to gaps in my knowledge from previous grades.	141	41.5	76	22.4	67	19.7	29	8.5	27	7.9	<b>2.19</b>
25-I dislike English lessons because I don't like my English teacher.	257	75.6	47	13.8	28	8.2	7	2.1	1	3	<b>1.38</b>
30-I lack confidence in learning English because I have always received low grades in the past.	212	62.4	42	12.4	43	12.6	21	6.2	22	6.5	<b>1.82</b>
<i>Difficulties related to learning environment</i>											
12-I avoid speaking in English because when I do, my friends make fun of me.	167	49.1	66	19.4	58	17.1	23	6.8	26	7.6	<b>2.04</b>
26-Strong and hardworking students dominate the lessons so I don't want to participate.	219	64.4	62	18.2	34	10	15	4.4	10	2.9	<b>1.63</b>
27-I dislike English lessons because our teacher is usually angry and indifferent to us.	279	82.1	31	9.1	25	7.4	4	1.2	1	3	<b>1.29</b>
28-I don't enjoy learning English because our lessons are generally boring and monotonous.	127	37.4	87	25.6	68	20	37	10.9	21	6.2	<b>2.23</b>
29-I can't learn English because of discipline issues in our class.	241	70.9	47	13.8	30	8.8	14	4.1	8	2.4	<b>1.53</b>
<b>Total</b>											<b>2.34</b>

\*\*\* 1.00-1.80 = very low level difficulty; 1.80-2.60= low level difficulty; 2.60-3.40 = medium level difficulty; 3.40-4.20 = high level difficulty 4.20-5.00 = very high level difficulty

Table 2 shows that the total mean value of the PLLD scale of the preparatory school students is low. It can be said that students have these difficulties at the low level.

As for the difficulties related to learning materials, it can be said that the students have these difficulties at the medium level ( $M = 2.98$ ). For example, 23.5% of the students stated that the reading texts in their books were not interesting for them ( $n = 80$ ). 39.5% of the students moderately agreed with this difficulty. The students also stated that they are bored when they do listening practice because the topics are not interesting ( $M = 2.89$ ). 15.9% of the students agreed and 14.4% of the students strongly agreed with this statement. 36.4% of the students stated that they do not like reading texts because there are too many unfamiliar English words. The students had this difficulty at the medium level ( $M = 2.74$ ).

With regard to the difficulties related to the teaching and learning process, the students had all these difficulties at a low level ( $M = 2.07$ ). For example, 57.4% of the students disagreed with "We do not do any reading practice on how to understand a text with the guidance of a teacher." Similarly, 48.5% of the students strongly disagreed with "I don't make an effort to speak English because we are allowed to speak Turkish in English lessons." 47.6% of the students had "I have difficulty in writing a paragraph as we do not practice often enough in English lessons" at a low level ( $M = 2.08$ ). The students also disagreed with "We are not given any methods to improve our spoken fluency in English." They had this difficulty at a low level ( $M = 2.12$ ). Only 9% of the students stated that they were not given any strategies to help them remember new English vocabulary. 35.6% of the students strongly disagreed and 20.3% of the students disagreed with this statement.

For the difficulties caused by the students themselves, the students had these difficulties at a low level ( $M = 2.35$ ). For instance, a few students stated that they cannot make a sentence while writing a paragraph as they struggled with even basic grammatical topics ( $M = 2.05$ ). Similarly, some students indicated that they did not like reading as they could not understand a text without the guidance of the teacher ( $M = 2.44$ ). On the other hand, some difficulties related to the students themselves were experienced at a medium level. For example, the students had "I don't want to speak English because I always have to translate from Turkish first, so it takes me a long time make sentence" at a medium level ( $M = 3.08$ ). 19.4% of the students strongly agreed and 22.1% agreed with this statement. Similarly, 38.5% of the students stated that they could not speak English as they wanted to speak it fluently and without making mistakes ( $M = 3.04$ ). In addition to these, 41.2% of the students stated that they did not feel confident in speaking English. In other words, the students had this difficulty at a high level ( $M = 2.80$ ).

32.6% of the students stated that they had difficulty in speaking English as they did not know enough vocabulary. The students had this difficulty at a medium level ( $M = 2.89$ ). On the other hand, 80.3% of the students disagreed with "I'm not interested in learning English." In other words, the students had this difficulty at a very low level ( $M = 1.65$ ). Similarly, 65.9% of the students disagreed with "I always fall behind in English lessons due to gaps in my knowledge from previous grades." In addition to these, 89.4% of the students disagreed with this statement: "I dislike English lessons because I don't like my English teacher" ( $M = 1.38$ ).

For the difficulties regarding the learning environment, the students had these difficulties at a very low level ( $M = 1.45$ ). For example, only 6.5% of the students stated that they could not learn English because of discipline issues in their classes. In other words, 70.9% of students strongly disagree with that statement. Students had this difficulty at a very low level ( $M = 1.53$ ). Similarly, 64.4% of the students strongly disagreed that strong and hardworking students dominated the lessons. In other words, the students had this difficulty at a very low level ( $M = 1.53$ ). In addition to these, 91.2% of the students disagreed with this difficulty "I dislike English lessons because our teacher is usually angry and indifferent to us." In other words, the students had this difficulty at a very low level ( $M = 1.29$ ). Likewise, 63% of the students disagreed with "I don't enjoy learning English because our lessons are generally boring and monotonous."

### Correlation between the Achievement Test Results of the Students and their PLLD Scale Scores

In order to see the relationship between the students' achievement test results and their PLLD scale scores, their correlation coefficient was calculated. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Correlation between the achievement test results and PLLD scores**

		Achievement Test Results	PLLD Scores
Achievement Test Results	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.377**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	340	340
PLLD	Pearson Correlation	-0.377**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	340	340

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table shows that there is a negative linear correlation between the achievement test results of the students and their PLLD scores; however, a correlation coefficient of  $r = .377$  was calculated. Based on the convention suggested by Cohen (1998), such a value for a correlation coefficient is very close to a medium effect size. That is, only a limited amount of variance can be explained between the variables.

### The Relationship between the PLLD Scores of the Students and Gender

Before the t-test, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was applied to check the homogeneity of variances. The value over 0.05 shows that the group variances can be treated as equal and the data is suitable for a t-test with the difference between them not statistically significant. The results of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in this study ( $p = .295$ ) supports the use of a t-test.

The results of the t-test on gender and PLLD scores are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Independent samples t-test: Gender and PLLD scores**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PLLD	Male	147	2.2161	0.62530	-0.618	338	0.538
	Female	193	2.2572	0.59464			

The t-test results show that gender is not a factor that affects the difficulties learners experience. There is no significant difference in the PLLD scores of the male students ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) and female students ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ;  $t(338) = -0.618$ ,  $p = .538$ ). These results suggest that gender is not a differentiating criterion with regard to the experienced level of difficulty while learning English.

### PLLD Scores of the Students in Different Levels

To determine whether students studying in different academic levels (i.e., A2, B1 and B2) have different levels of PLLD scores, a one-way ANOVA was applied with results shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: One-way ANOVA – PLLD scores and levels**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.491	2	3.245	9.220	0.000
Within Groups	118.625	337	0.352		
Total	125.116	339			

According to Table 5, a one-way ANOVA ( $F(2,337) = 9.220$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was applied and a statistically significant difference between the groups based on the level of the students was found. However, the one-way ANOVA provided a broader picture of the sample. In this respect, so as to see in detail how the students studying at the A2, B1 and B2 levels differed from each other, the multiple comparisons of these levels are referred to in Table 6.

**Table 6: Multiple comparisons of the students studying in different levels (Dependent Variable: PLLD Scores, Tukey HSD)**

(I) Level	(J) Level	Mean Diff. (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
A2	B1	0.42405*	0.11957	0.001	0.1426	0.7055
	B2	0.51714*	0.12048	0.000	0.2335	0.8008
B1	A2	-0.42405*	0.11957	0.001	-0.7055	-0.1426
	B2	0.09309	0.06736	0.352	-0.0655	0.2517
B2	A2	-0.51714*	0.12048	0.000	-0.8008	-0.2335
	B1	-0.09309	0.06736	0.352	-0.2517	0.0655

\*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As it can be seen on Tables 6 and 7, the Tukey post hoc test reveals that the PLLD scores are statistically significantly higher among the A2 level students ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) than among the B1 students ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and B2 students ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the B1 and B2 students ( $p = 0.352$ ).

**Table 7: Descriptive statistics of students studying in different levels**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
A2	29	2.6678	0.62713	0.11646	2.4293	2.9064	1.13	4.07
B1	163	2.2438	0.62262	0.04877	2.1475	2.3401	1.17	3.90
B2	148	2.1507	0.55213	0.04538	2.0610	2.2404	1.10	3.87
Total	340	2.2394	0.60752	0.03295	2.1746	2.3042	1.10	4.07

### Qualitative Findings on the Language Learning Difficulties Level of Preparatory School Students

Apart from the qualitative findings, the quantitative results indicate a number of important factors that affect foreign language learning processes. The qualitative findings can be analyzed in two different tables: responses related to difficulties about the teaching/learning processes and those pertaining to the students themselves.

### Findings on the Difficulties related to the Teaching and Learning Process according to the Student Interview Forms

In terms of difficulties in the teaching and learning process, the students' responses were analyzed. The theme, codes, frequency and percentages are presented in Table 8.

**Table 8: Theme, codes and frequency of responses related to teaching/learning processes**

Theme	Codes	40	
		f	%
Teaching and Learning	Inadequate number of activities	8	20
	Ineffective teaching strategies	9	22.5
	Classroom management problems	2	5
	Administrative issues	15	37.5
	Ineffective and/or uninteresting material	3	7.5
	NA	3	7.5

As can be seen from Table 8, the responses include administrative issues and teaching strategies. 37.5% of the students stated that they had administrative problems (about the system of the school or the large scale applications of some tasks). These are issues related to school management and classroom methodologies.

"...while constructing the classes, level could be considered more. Even at the same level, this makes understanding the lesson very difficult. Especially, the fact that language department students and the other departments are in the same class is a disadvantage and the other department students should be shuffled among themselves..."

In addition, the number of activities was a point addressed in the responses with 22.5% of the students stating that they needed more exercises in some or all of the components of the course. An example response is "I need more listening and speaking practice."

These findings are compatible with the scale in this study. The number of criticisms on classroom management or the materials' being uninteresting or dull is similar to the findings in the scale.

Some of the direct sample quotations from the students are presented below:

"...I think that enough listening exercises are not done in the class and the ones done are not effective and I think enough time is not allocated..."

"...Because there are students who repeated their levels many times, this affects the flow of the lesson and my psychology a lot. Especially, I am of the opinion that language students should be placed in a different class. I also think that students who repeat many times should be placed in a separate class..."

### Findings on the Difficulties related to the Teaching and Learning Process according to the Student Interview Forms

In terms of the difficulties in the teaching and learning process, the students' responses were analyzed. The theme, codes, frequency and percentages are presented in Table 9.

**Table 9: Theme, codes and frequency of responses related to the students themselves**

Theme	Codes	40	
		F	%
Students themselves	Unwillingness	2	5
	Lack of Background	1	2.5
	Personality Traits	9	22.5
	Learning Difficulties	11	27.5
	NA	17	42.5

According to Table 9, when the issues regarding the students themselves are considered, it can be observed that students attribute the difficulties to their own personality traits and learning difficulties with 27.5% of the students mentioning that their problems were caused by their own learning difficulties. An example is “[Because I feel so much stress and pressure, I am having a lot of difficulty in speaking English, so I withdrew myself myself indeliberately and though I know vocabulary and grammar, my speaking skill is almost zero.”

However, it should also be noted that 17 students did not respond to the question on problems caused by the self.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This research was designed to determine the factors and the reasons that make the English language learning difficult for preparatory school students. According to the PLLD scores, it was found that students have these difficulties in the low level (Table 2). As for the difficulties related to learning materials, the students stated that they did not find their reading texts in their books interesting. They also stated that they were bored when they did listening practice because the topics were not interesting. Likewise, students stated that they did not like reading texts because there were too many unfamiliar English words (Table 2). These findings are compatible with the results of Özmat’s (2017) study on the factors that make learning difficult for secondary and high school students. She found that both 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students had difficulty with their reading skills because the textbooks were too long to understand and the students would encounter numerous unfamiliar words in them. The results of the interview in this study indicated a difference from Özmat (2017). The findings show that none of the participants indicated that the length and difficulty of the materials were incompatible with their English proficiency levels and that the learners very rarely indicated issues regarding the topic or the content of the materials (7.5%). This can be attributed to the level-based system at the university that this research was conducted. Students are placed in their classes according to their onset levels at the beginning of the academic year and every eight weeks, they would either pass their level to proceed to the following (higher) level or repeat the current level. This helps the materials and objectives to be more compatible with each individual student. Demirtaş and Erdem (2015) also found that the greatest challenges were the inadequate number of hours allocated in the curriculum. Likewise, Kandemir and Tok (2017) emphasized a need for more teaching hours and an update in the resources used. In this study, similar results appeared from the interviews. The criticism was directed not at the inadequate number of hours allocated to language teaching but to the inadequate number of materials provided. This concept of ‘materials’ refers to the in-house materials produced by the instructors themselves and by the materials unit. As the in-house materials have been very compatible with the achievement tests applied in this institution, the students desired to be able to practice more for the exams. This can be explained with the term ‘backwash.’ The very close similarity between the materials and the exams had the students value in-house materials very much. The materials and classroom applications used in the classroom are apt to extensive changes in academic success as suggested by Chua and Lin (2020), which showed how the intensity and variety of tasks provided to learners might increase their final achievement. Moreover, the positive effect of integrating different types of materials and technology in teaching was reported in Solak and Cakır (2015).

Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that the learning resources in a preparatory school curriculum need to be reorganized as do the teaching and learning materials in terms of meeting the needs, levels and interests of students.

As for the difficulties related to the teaching and learning process, students had all these difficulties in the “low” level (Table 2). It was observed that students generally disagreed with the difficulties in the PLLD scale. For example, more than half of the students (57.4%) disagreed with “We do not do any reading practice on how to understand a text with the guidance of a teacher”. Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that preparatory school students are satisfied with the guidance of teachers in the teaching process. It can be also concluded that English teachers are aware of the language teaching strategies for teaching various language skills.

Similarly, nearly half of the students (48.5%) strongly disagreed with “I don’t make an effort to speak English because we are allowed to speak Turkish in English lessons.” On the other hand, the findings of this research are not compatible with the results of Özmat’s (2017) study in which the same scale was used for different ages. She found that both secondary and high school students had these difficulties related to the teaching and learning process at a high level. According to Özmat (2017), secondary and high school students did not know how to improve reading or speaking skills. In this study, participants did not mention such

concerns; rather, it was interesting to find that they suggested new ways and methods to practice some skills in class. An example student response suggests that “speaking practices should be increased in number and also should be strengthened by adding some games. The difference between Özmat (2017) and this study can be attributed to two factors, the first of which is the age difference of the participants. In Özmat (2017), the participants were children while in this study, a mostly young-adult group was studied. The second important difference may be the fact that this study was conducted in a university context in which every student passed a large-scale university exam and was found eligible to be a university student. Therefore, they can be considered to be ‘select students’ with better studying and learning backgrounds. In summary, the difference can be accounted for the student profile.

Thus, it can be said that the students in the preparatory school consider themselves to be aware of the strategies on how to be successful in different skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) in the learning and teaching process with their instructors. It may also say that students are taught language learning strategies and are guided by their teachers in learning these skills.

With regard to the difficulties caused by students themselves, it was found that the students had these difficulties in the low level (Table 2). Despite the overall low level of difficulty stated, there were some considerably higher points of difficulty that were observed in the results. For example, the students stated that they did not want to speak English because they always had to translate from Turkish first, so it took them a long time to make sentences (medium level). Similarly, the students stated that they could not speak English as they wanted to speak it fluently and without making mistakes. In addition to these factors, the students stated that they did not feel confident in speaking English. These findings are compatible with the findings in the interview as the students stated the inadequacy of both the quantity and the variety of speaking exercises. While some students related this to classroom activities and atmosphere, the others related it to the medium of instruction in the classroom.

Similar findings were reported by Mai (2019), showing that the most important factors that would hinder learner participation in class activities pertained to the limited variety of speaking activities and students’ unwillingness to communicate in class, that is, students’ personal reasons. The results of this are in line with studies that indicate further problems of learners in the same areas. Kurtulus and Arsal report that “The findings of both the students and professor interviews showed that, though the students passed the preparatory class, they were inefficient in speaking and communication in English” (Kurtuluş & Arsal, 2019, p. 1012).

On the other hand, the students disagreed with “I’m not interested in learning English.” Likewise, they disagreed with “I dislike English lessons because I don’t like my English teacher.” Thus, it can be said that students have positive attitudes towards learning English and English teachers, which contrasts with the results of Özmat’s study (2017). Masgoret and Gardner (2003) stated that the positive attitudes of students are related to their effort to learn a new language and their motivation. They found that there was a correlation with positive attitudes toward learning a foreign language and success in learning a language.

In Kozikoğlu and Kanat (2018), which looked for students’ speaking anxiety and attitude towards English lessons, “it was found that the students’ attitudes towards English courses and their engagement in English courses were at a high level and students’ English speaking anxiety was at moderate level”.

As for the difficulties regarding the learning environment, the students stated that they had these difficulties at the very low level (Table 2). For example, far more than half of the students (70.9%) stated that they disagreed with “I cannot learn English because of discipline issues in our class” (very low level). In contrast to this result, Özmat (2017) found that high school students had high levels of discipline issues in learning English, which was a reported handicap for their learning.

The findings of the interview showed results similar to the scale results. In only one of the responses, a concern about classroom management was mentioned. Moreover, the students state that they do not think that strong and hardworking students dominated the lessons. In addition, the students disagreed with both “I dislike English lessons because our teacher is usually angry and indifferent to us” and “I don’t enjoy learning English because our lessons are generally boring and monotonous.” This finding is compatible with the interviews. Only 7.5% of the participants claimed that the lessons were monotonous.

According to these findings (Tables 2 and 8), it can be said that students did not think that they had many discipline issues or management problems in their classes. They were mostly content with the atmosphere and management in class. The analysis of both the scale and the interview uncover very few concerns about discipline issues.

It was found that the relationship between the PLLD scores and the students’ achievement test scores was not strong (Table 2), from which it can be concluded that those scoring high in the achievement test may have also experienced a certain type and level of difficulty, and the low-achievers may have experienced some sort of difficulty, but may have been unable to express these difficulties properly or simply may not have been aware of them.

Gender was found not to be a differentiating factor with regard to the PLLD scores (Table 4), from which it can be inferred that no discriminating level of difference exists between male and female students’ PLLD scores. The results of Özmat (2017) show that there was no meaningful relationship between gender and PLLD scores of secondary and high school students, which is in line with this finding.

No significant difference was found between the B1 and B2 level students; in contrast, a significant difference was observed between the A2 and B1 and B2 level students (Table 7). It can be concluded that the PLLD scores tended to be higher with the low level students. At the same time, in the relatively high B1 and B2 levels, the students would perceive a lower level of difficulty while learning English, as indicated in their PLLD scores.

## SUGGESTIONS

Language learning can be a very challenging process for learners as well as for practitioners. Knowing the causes of these challenges can be of great help in any decision-making process and it can ease the process of language learning and teaching for all parties. The main aim of this study is to shed light on some of the important problems learners indicate so that necessary adjustments can be made, among many of which include some of the important implications and suggestions of this study as follows:

The results indicate that students experience a medium level of difficulty in terms of learning materials (Table 2), which calls for a revision and improvement in the learning materials chosen and developed. While teaching English as a foreign language, students' interests and materials' difficulty levels should be carefully adjusted. The lexical sophistication levels of reading texts should be carefully analysed before being used in class.

In terms of the problems regarding the students themselves, it is highlighted that students have self-confidence problems in speaking in English courses because they feel the need to translate to Turkish and they do not feel confident. They also state that they have insufficient vocabulary knowledge to be able to speak in the target language (Table 2). This problem indicates a strong need for more practice in productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing) in class and/or out of class (i.e., extracurricular exercises), which can help them to broaden their active vocabulary knowledge and gain the fluency to *switch* to the target language. An increase in practice can help them to gain self-confidence in English as well. Moreover, the learning and teaching environment should be designed so as to lower the speaking anxiety of learners.

The study also suggests that the higher the academic level of students, the lower the level of difficulty they experience (Table 7). This shows that the low level group of students requires more effective remedies. Among these remedies may be professional development studies provided to instructors to be able to cope with the difficulties that lower level students have.

According to the results of the interview, the students stated the need to receive information about school rules and regulations more frequently and directly (Table 8). Student representatives can take a more active role in strengthening communication between students and administration.

For further research, similar studies can be conducted in different preparatory school contexts to find and observe common problems and work on them in a more collective manner. Moreover, instructors, managers and other stakeholders can be included in the scope of such studies to have more perspectives in the findings. Additionally, experimental studies on the possible solutions to overcome the problems stated can be of help for language practitioners and curriculum designers.

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## Statements of publication ethics

We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

## Researchers' contribution rate

The study was conducted and reported with equal collaboration of the researchers.

## Ethics Committee Approval Information

For the purposes of this research, the participants completed a consent form and all the instruments and forms were approved by the ethics committee of the university at which this study was conducted. Ethical consent was obtained from Çankaya University Ethical Committee, No: 90705970/ 605, Date: 05.27.2020.

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