

Students' Perceptions of Optional English Preparatory Program: A Case Study in a Turkish University

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Abstract

Teachers' methods, students' perceptions in the prep-class and the literature review related show that determining language teaching methods and taking students' needs and perceptions into consideration in prep-classes could considerably affect the language learning process. Thus, this current study aims to examine the expectations of Turkish prep-class students who studied for one-year in optional prep-classes. A mixed methods convergent design was employed, using an adapted needs analysis questionnaire and unstructured interviews. The sample consisted of 110 graduate prep-class students from different departments in a state university. The results indicate that the majority of Turkish prep-class students think enrolling in the prep-class program is necessary; however, they lost their motivation for some reasons due to learning processes, systems or subjective factors. Besides, they expressed that materials were not suitable enough to improve their level of English and, in general, the prep-class program failed to meet their expectations in relation to program content and language learning processes. Regarding the four language skills, they expressed that productive skills should be given much more importance rather than receptive skills. In conclusion, instructors should try to motivate students more with the help of a variety of authentic materials and technological facilities and they should create an atmosphere in which productive skills are improved. Furthermore, the study suggests that the continuation of language learning processes should be ensured throughout the undergraduate program period, not just in the prep-class and makes some practical recommendations for researchers and educators.

Keywords

Perceptions; need analysis; optional English preparatory program; prep-class students

Introduction

In student-centered approaches, needs analysis can be considered one of the main prerequisites for language learning. Nunan (1993) states that needs analysis is a combination of many procedures to collect data about learners and communication tasks in the syllabus design.

Taking Turkey's prep-class education into account, there are two kinds of prep-school programs, compulsory and optional prep-class education. If the necessary requirements such as academic staff, classroom design, materials are met and permission from the Higher Education Council of Turkey is taken, the universities have the opportunity to launch compulsory and/or optional prep-class programs in their institutions.

British Council (2015) conducted a study about the state of English in higher education in Turkey and in relation to prep-class education. The report reached the conclusion that motivation as a central part of learning drives is rather low thereby making little learning which can be seen in a number of studies about prep-class students in Turkey. Akdoğan (2016) conducted a needs analysis study of university students and stated that university students thought prep-class education is necessary. Akyel and Özek (2010) conducted a language needs analysis in an English medium university in Turkey and suggested the need for encouragement of the students to use effective language learning strategies in prep-class education. Armağan, Bozoğlu and Güven (2016) conducted a study about EFL students' expectations in prep-school in higher education in Turkey and concluded that students expected an improvement and change in classroom environment and curriculum content. In addition to these studies, Kırkgöz (2009) also investigated students' and lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of foreign language instruction and suggested that a skills-based curriculum remains inadequate to prepare students effectively for their academic departments. Özkanal and Hakan (2010) examined university English preparatory program in Turkey. The researchers stated that the students were satisfied with the preparatory program and instructors, yet they also claimed that the physical conditions of the school were not very good.

In the light of the previous studies together with quantitative and qualitative research tools, the researcher aimed to provide a deeper understanding about the perceptions of the optional prep-class students in a state university. The rationale behind choosing optional prep-class students is to see whether these students gain success in learning English. In relation to this research, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of optional prep-class students in a state university?
2. How do students view optional prep-class education?

Methodology

Participants

This study tries to investigate the perceptions and evaluations of Turkish prep-class students who studied for one-year in optional prep-classes in a state university in Turkey. The number of participants were primarily 125 undergraduate students; however, 15 students did not participate in the study later and they were excluded from the study as they did not complete the questionnaire properly. The participants were 65 female and 45 male students studying in different departments and different grades in the target university. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 24.

Instruments

Questionnaire

In this study, quantitative and qualitative research designs were applied in order to get more accurate and reliable data in relation to the expectations of Turkish prep-class students in a state university in Turkey. The questionnaire used in the study was adapted from Keşmer (2007). The questionnaire includes 45 items originally, but 5 items were omitted from the questionnaire as they are irrelevant to this research and 40 items were administered to the participants. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire were calculated by using statistics available in Table 1. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as a measure of the internal consistency and homogeneity of the questionnaire items related to perceptions and needs regarding the optional prep-classes.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient values by items

Item	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Item 1	129,35	492,595	,701	,925
Item 2	130,63	588,419	-,892	,941
Item 3	129,00	503,596	,667	,926
Item 4	129,82	502,756	,764	,926
Item 5	128,83	502,676	,619	,926
Item 6	128,80	489,813	,828	,924
Item 7	129,25	493,935	,713	,925

Item 8	129,62	499,046	,596	,927
Item 9	129,50	516,124	,499	,928
Item 10	130,00	550,092	-,301	,934
Item 11	130,06	523,088	,277	,930
Item 12	129,65	511,843	,558	,927
Item 13	129,91	540,707	-,107	,932
Item 14	129,96	513,962	,458	,928
Item 15	130,31	513,371	,540	,927
Item 16	130,06	511,143	,558	,927
Item 17	129,47	512,398	,575	,927
Item 18	129,88	517,408	,469	,928
Item 19	128,85	517,325	,407	,929
Item 20	129,62	529,614	,193	,930
Item 21	129,28	514,388	,688	,927
Item 22	129,35	510,283	,752	,926
Item 23	129,58	496,631	,717	,925
Item 24	129,09	510,946	,602	,927
Item 25	128,99	509,422	,504	,928
Item 26	129,39	493,745	,817	,925
Item 27	128,95	496,878	,756	,925
Item 28	129,01	499,587	,700	,926
Item 29	129,04	495,870	,734	,925
Item 30	129,08	495,232	,735	,925
Item 31	129,35	544,669	-,199	,933
Item 32	129,06	489,143	,719	,925
Item 33	129,75	504,866	,379	,930
Item 34	130,62	537,339	-,020	,931
Item 35	130,18	570,040	-,521	,939
Item 36	129,58	497,402	,831	,925
Item 37	129,34	499,033	,693	,926
Item 38	128,99	490,064	,896	,924
Item 39	129,25	493,586	,732	,925
Item 40	128,75	483,769	,853	,924
Questionnaire	Mean±Std. Deviation	N of Items	Variance	Cronbach Alfa
	132,80± 23,177	40	537,171	,930

Though the “Corrected Item-Total Correlation” values of the items 2, 10, 13, 31, and 35 in the questionnaire are negative, these items do not change “Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted” values and Cronbach Alfa coefficient of the questionnaire is 0,93.

Interviews

The interview consisted of three open-ended questions and ten participants were selected among the total number of students randomly. The researcher held the

interviews in different times and the interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes per person. In case the students do not understand the questions properly, the researcher translated and asked the questions in Turkish language. The interviews were recorded and analyzed through coding, categorizing and finding themes. The interview questions of the study were as follows:

1. What are your perceptions and evaluations regarding the prep-class program?
2. In what ways can your interests and approach to preparatory school be improved?
3. What kind of needs should be taken into consideration for your long-term needs?

Data collection and data analysis

The data were collected through a questionnaire and unstructured interviews during the spring semester in 2017-2018 academic year. The questionnaire was administered to 110 participants (65 females and 45 males) who graduated from preparatory program in the target university. The participants are studying in different departments. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, the participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and they participated in the study voluntarily. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire in accordance with the guidance of the researcher in different times and settings with three intervals. It took almost 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire. After completing to fill out the questionnaire, the students were interviewed by using three questions in relation to the research topic. In case the students do not understand the questions correctly, the researcher translated them into Turkish, if and when necessary. The students answered the questions in Turkish in order to express themselves clearly. After collecting the data, the researcher expressed his gratitude to all of the participants as they gave their feedback about the topic.

As for the analysis of the study, 5 different statistical analyses were used to analyze the collected data. With the help of SPSS for Windows 22.00 statistical package, these analyses were as follows:

1. Arithmetic mean score
2. Standard deviation

3. Frequency
4. Percentage analysis
5. Cronbach Alfa coefficient

Questionnaires applied to the students were of 5-Likert type and the calculation of the intervals is given below.

Calculation of intervals for the questionnaire:

Number of options = 5

Number of intervals = 5-1 = 4

Interval coefficient = 4:5 = 0.80

Intervals and their meanings are given in Table 2, based on mean score comparisons.

Table 2. Arithmetic Mean Scores and Their Meanings

Intervals	Meaning
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree
2.61 – 3.40	Neutral
3.41 – 4.20	Agree
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree

Findings

Findings related to the general distribution of the responses given to the questionnaire items related to their perceptions and needs regarding the optional prep-classes by the graduates of the preparatory class participating in the study are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Findings related to the responses that have higher means

Questionnaire items		f	%	\bar{X}	Meaning
3. Preparatory courses were interesting to me.	Strongly Disagree	4	3,6	3,80	Agree
	Disagree	13	11,8		
	Neutral	14	12,7		
	Agree	49	44,5		
	Strongly Agree	30	27,3		
5. I can be said to be an active student in preparatory classes.	Strongly Disagree	4	3,6	3,97	Agree
	Disagree	14	12,7		
	Neutral	13	11,8		
	Agree	29	26,4		
	Strongly Agree	50	45,5		
6. I believe that the English preparatory education will enable	Strongly Disagree	11	10,0		
	Disagree	6	5,5		

me to get promotion in my career in future.	Neutral	1	,9	4,00	Agree
	Agree	46	41,8		
	Strongly Agree	46	41,8		
19. During the English preparatory education, grammar teaching was given more importance than other language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing).	Strongly Disagree	1	,9		3,95 Agree
	Disagree	11	10,0		
	Neutral	20	18,2		
	Agree	38	34,5		
	Strongly Agree	40	36,4		
25. The materials used in grammar course were enough in number.	Strongly Disagree	0	0		3,81 Agree
	Disagree	24	21,8		
	Neutral	14	12,7		
	Agree	31	28,2		
	Strongly Agree	41	37,3		
27. The language teacher of the speaking skills course was efficient in teaching.	Strongly Disagree	7	6,4		3,85 Agree
	Disagree	8	7,3		
	Neutral	16	14,5		
	Agree	42	38,2		
	Strongly Agree	37	33,6		
38. Reading skills course raised my level of competence in English.	Strongly Disagree	13	11,8		3,81 Agree
	Disagree	0	0		
	Neutral	7	6,4		
	Agree	65	59,1		
	Strongly Agree	25	22,7		
40. I believe that students' opinions should be also taken into account in the curriculum development of the English preparatory.	Strongly Disagree	13	11,8		4,05 Agree
	Disagree	4	3,6		
	Neutral	10	9,1		
	Agree	20	18,2		
	Strongly Agree	63	57,3		

Based on the findings, it is clear that items 3, 5, 6, 19, 25, 27, 38 and 40 have higher means compared to other items. When examined in detail, the students think that pre-class education is necessary and they believe that learning English will enable them to have a good career in the future. In relation to language skills, it seems that grammar teaching outweighs the other skills and improving their reading skills also contributed to their overall English proficiency level. Last but not least, students believe that their opinions should be taken into consideration while while designing the curriculum.

Table 4. Findings related to the responses that have lower means

Questionnaire items		f	%	\bar{X}	Meaning
2. I think one-year (two semesters) English preparatory education is a waste of time.	Strongly Disagree	30	27,3	2,17	Disagree
	Disagree	61	55,5		
	Neutral	2	1,8		
	Agree	4	3,6		
	Strongly Agree	13	11,8		
7. The English preparatory education motivated me to use English for Specific Purposes.	Strongly Disagree	11	10,0	2,45	Disagree
	Disagree	46	41,8		
	Neutral	47	42,7		
	Agree	5	4,5		
	Strongly Agree	1	,9		
15. During the English preparatory education, listening skills were given more importance than other language skills.	Strongly Disagree	17	15,5	2,49	Disagree
	Disagree	38	34,5		
	Neutral	40	36,4		
	Agree	14	12,7		
	Strongly Agree	1	,9		
16. During the English preparatory education, speaking skills were given more importance than other language skills.	Strongly Disagree	15	13,6	2,52	Disagree
	Disagree	37	33,6		
	Neutral	44	40,0		
	Agree	14	12,7		
	Strongly Agree	0	0		
18. During the English preparatory education, writing skills were given more importance than other language skills.	Strongly Disagree	10	9,1	2,51	Disagree
	Disagree	47	42,7		
	Neutral	45	40,9		
	Agree	3	2,7		
	Strongly Agree	5	4,5		
34. I was bored in lessons since the texts were too long.	Strongly Disagree	13	11,8	2,18	Disagree
	Disagree	68	61,8		
	Neutral	25	22,7		
	Agree	4	3,6		
	Strongly Agree	0	0		
39. Writing skills course raised my level of competence in English.	Strongly Disagree	34	30,9	2,44	Disagree
	Disagree	31	28,2		
	Neutral	14	12,7		
	Agree	25	22,7		
	Strongly Agree	6	5,5		

It is obvious that items 2, 7, 15, 16, 18, 34, 37 and 39 have lower means compared to other items. Students think that English preparatory program do not motivate them for their undergraduate courses. Additionally, they believe that listening, speaking and writing skills were not given much importance compared to other skills. Thus, it is

clear that items related to productive skills are the problematic areas for students participated in the study.

In unstructured interviews, thematic analyses were administered and main themes and sub-themes were determined. The main themes on the basis of preparatory program are given in Table 4.

Table 5. Themes regarding students' views about the prep-class education

Themes		N
Language skills	Productive skills (writing, listening and speaking) rather than grammar	16
	More emphasis on speaking, less emphasis on grammar	17
Materials	Authentic materials	13
	Language activities	10
	More technology	11
Instructors	More disciplined staff	17
	Lack of native speakers	12
	Need for only English-speaking instructors in the class	14

Taking the students' views about the perceptions of the prep-class education into account, it can be said that preparatory program is necessary in accordance with students' views, but they can not cope with this learning task, which demotivated them.

One of the participants stated that:

"I want to learn English, I'm trying to do my best to follow the courses, but I can't see any progress in my English level, so I'm disappointed".

In relation to language skills, listening, speaking and writing courses should be given more importance than grammar teaching. Some of the participants made it clear that:

"In my opinion, listening and speaking lessons do not improve us as they should have. They should be given more emphasis and number of these classes should be increased".

Furthermore, they also said that the instructors should never use Turkish language in language classes. The participant claimed that: *"The teacher wants us to speak English, but they mostly use Turkish in classes"*.

Besides, they want to have native speakers in classes, especially for speaking courses, if it is possible. Some of the participants made such remarks:

"We would like to see native speakers of English in our classes, other universities offer language courses guided by native speakers of English, yet we do not have any".

In relation to the effective teacher in preparatory program, Arıkan, Taşer and Saraç-Süzer (2015) stated that 'effective teacher is a friendly, young, enthusiastic, creative and humorous person whose gender is not important' (p. 1). Moreover, the participants taking part in the interview suggest that they would like to have authentic materials, that is, they want to read texts and topics related to Turkish culture.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, students' perceptions and evaluations from optional preparatory program were examined by using the mixed method research design through questionnaire and interviews. The results of the present study are compatible with the previous studies on the perceptions and language skills of the prep-class students in state universities (Akbulut, 2016; Akyel & Özek, 2010; Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2006; Çakır, 2007; Gözüyeşil, 2014; Kırkgöz, 2009; Yükselir, 2014). According to the findings, students believe that the prep-class education is necessary. However, they think that the language learning process is difficult because of some factors such as difficulties in language learning, materials, classroom environment and individual differences.

The findings of the questionnaire and interviews indicated that preparatory programs should give more importance on the writing, listening and speaking skills rather than grammar. Moreover, feedback about students' writing should be given properly and more time be allocated on the writing process in the classes. Thus, it can be said that language instructors can make the class more active and courses more enjoyable by using some authentic materials and technology-based activities. They should also make the students more active and should never use Turkish in the class. Based on the findings of the study, some suggestions can be made such as;

- The instructors can teach grammar in an implicit way.
- Listening, speaking and writing courses can be given more emphasis and importance with extra activities both in and outside classrooms.
- Less code-switching can be recommended in the class.
- More group discussions and task-based activities can be integrated into the lessons.

All in all, it can be concluded that the expectations of the students are not fully met due to the factors mentioned above.

As for the limitations of the study, there were only 110 participants from different departments in a state university and the scope of the study was restricted to one questionnaire and unstructured interviews. Further research is needed to examine this topic with more participants and in different or more settings from various preparatory programs in higher education in order to get more comprehensive views.

Notes on the contributor

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