

# ENGLISH TEACHING OBSTACLES IN TURKEY: EFL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** Bu çalışma, EFL (Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce) öğretmenlerinin Türkçe öğretiminde karşılaştıkları engelleri ortaya koymayı, sorunları incelemeyi ve çözüm önerileri getirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu makale, aynı araştırmacı tarafından yazılan “Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce (EFL) Öğretmeninin Bakış Açısı: Türkiye’de Öğretmenlik” tezinin bir bölümüdür. Çalışmanın katılımcıları farklı milletlere mensup, Türkiye’de İstanbul’da İngilizce öğreten dört yabancı İngilizce öğretmendir. Veri toplama aracı olarak araştırmacı tarafından katılımcılardan açık uçlu yanıtlarla hazırlanan soruların olduğu nitel bir yöntem kullanılmıştır. Çalışma, Türk okullarında bulunan önemli engeller olarak öğrencilere verilen uygun olmayan öğretim materyallerini, işbirliği yapmayan okul yönetimlerini ve öğrencilerin uygunsuz davranışlarını tespit etmiştir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İngilizce öğretmenleri, öğretim engelleri, Türk öğrenciler, Çözüm önerisi.

This study aims to present obstacles faced by EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers in teaching Turkish students, examining the problems, and putting forward solutions. This article is a partial chapter of the thesis “English as A Foreign Language (EFL) teacher’s perspective: Teaching in Turkey” written by the same researcher. The study participants are four foreign EFL teachers who are from different nationalities but were teaching English in Istanbul, Turkey. The data collection was done using a qualitative method where the instruments were questions prepared by the researcher with open-ended answers from the participants. The study concluded that major obstacles found in Turkish schools are caused by unfit teaching material given to students, uncooperative school administrations, and students misbehaving.

**Keywords:** EFL teachers, teaching obstacles, Turkish students, Solution suggestion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Teaching is the highest form of understanding” - Aristotle.

The introduction of English language teaching into Turkish education has been going on for some time despite its limitation on the teachers and students. The study of English is starting from the kindergarten level to the university level (Cangil, 2004). English is an obligatory lesson from the beginning years of primary to undergraduate. The students are taught English almost every day throughout the years but unfortunately, does not help them to be fluent in English language skills. Although English is the second most favored language to study in Turkey, it is still dubious. English does not seem to be getting

closer to becoming a second language. (Zok. D, 2010). Despite the well-known popularity among Turks, English speaking is still not close to being categorized as satisfactory.

Dağtan, E., & Cabaroğlu, N. (2021) stated in their journal that the distress situation is seen in spoken English in both formal and informal circumstances of Turkish people. Additionally, there were many attempts to help the students within the school frameworks namely hiring foreign teachers but still not effective enough in achieving target English proficiency. Students can be successful in learning English without additional help but oftentimes, additional English courses are preferable for students who are from a better economical background.

In Turkey, there are more foreign EFL teachers hired than in an official institution. It is due to the high demand for extra English courses by Turkish students that they prefer to learn from foreign teachers outside their formal school. Parents and students realize that only depending on school education alone will not help them to learn English faster and better. Language schools are not very strict in hiring foreign teachers, and credentials in most institutions are not needed. It indicates that foreign EFL teachers' prospects to be hired in language schools are higher than in formal institutions. In some high prestigious language schools, teachers' credentials are the mandatory requirement to be accepted. Nevertheless, in terms of benefits such as salary, health insurance, and reliable administration, formal schools are better than language schools. Language schools in Turkey are known to treat foreign EFL teachers unfairly, hiring illegally and not paying salary on time is a usual occasion that happens in the language schools. With this in mind, foreign EFL teachers are adamant about not working in Turkey claiming the risks are worth taking to experience a new culture and gain challenges in a new place.

According to (Gediköğlu, 2005; Paker, 2007; Zengin, 2008), there are some challenges and difficulties in teaching Turkish students. English is implemented since elementary education but it does not help Turkish students to learn English effectively. This issue decreases students' interest in learning English because not only that the lessons not interesting but also most students could not afford extra courses outside of school. The insufficient education system has caused a huge problem in the learning process in Turkey. (Aktas 2005) pointed out some obstacles found caused by the mismatched education system which are the teacher's lack of teaching materials, the unmotivating learning environment, and students' behavior.

The irrelevancy of foreign language teaching recent policy adoption has caused obstacles to teachers and students. Some new policy adoptions are the placement test called (SBS) and DynEd, internet-based learning material managed through self-study. The recent adoptions are completely different from the current implemented curriculum in most schools. Thus, a targeted goal of motivating students in English learning is not achieved (Kizildag, A. 2009). (Bayır and Tekel, 2021) stated in their research paper that one of the main issues of the Turkish education system is the dependence on exams and memorization. The method surrounds memorizing the lessons without fully understanding the material. This issue caused students to be less creative and less expressive towards their idea and become passive in-class participation activities. The material given to the students is also not recent and up-to-date, meaning there hasn't been a significant improvement applied in the system.

Another challenge that is commonly faced by the EFL teachers is students' indiscipline towards the teacher and school rules which mostly occurred in the private schools. Four types of student misbehaviors are mentioned by Siyes (2009), which are; lack of self-attitude, ill-mannered towards their peers, and lastly misbehavior towards teachers and the school. Above all four disciplines, lack of proper attitude inside the class is the most common in terms of occurrence. Students show a lack of respect in the academic aspect where they purposely refuse to finish the task given by the teachers and disrespect classroom rules like speaking without being asked. Punctuality is not being paid attention to by the students, entering the class later than the actual time given.

Büyükyavuz and İnal (2008) pointed out in their article that in Turkey, specifically in the state schools, students coming from different backgrounds and English levels of understanding are put in the same classrooms. This indicates that the learning activities are not productive and lead to a slow teaching process. Most of the students who study in public schools come from a low economical background and are not capable of taking extra English courses outside of school time, whereas in most private schools the main issue is students' discipline.

Teachers' lack of teaching qualifications and the limitation of proper electronic devices for the teaching activities are mentioned by Gediköğlu (2005) as the common issue found in Turkish schools. The occurrence of this issue is mainly found in the Turkish rural area where the limitation of the teaching and learning materials has caused significant problems. The

mismatch of the teaching materials with the Turkish culture is another issue expressed by Çelebi (2006). This problem leads to miscommunication between foreign EFL teachers and students. Students admitted to having difficulties in relating to the topic being taught in general with the current culture irrelevancies books. Additionally, Özmat, D. & Senemoğlu, N. (2021) wrote about students' responses to the course books, where they said that the books are not interesting and boring. The books are also filled with mostly grammar activities than listening and speaking, they said they would not remember things being taught soon after they leave the classrooms.

This caused students to be passive inside the classrooms, they were not exposed to speaking and listening activities which made them choose to be silent and afraid of making grammatical mistakes. As a result, students would spend their time thinking before speaking and are hesitant about their thoughts. Özmat, D. & Senemoğlu, N. (2021) added other reasons in their article that due to the students' lack of confidence, they would not participate or simply answer the questions given by the teachers inside the class. Students added their other problem of being passive in participating in-class activities is overcrowded classrooms, often other students would ridicule each other when making mistakes in speaking English. Public shaming between peers inside the classroom is unavoidable, often it could be uncontrollable by the teachers.

This article research aims to find out the types of obstacles faced by EFL teachers while teaching in Turkey in the span of the Turkish education system, culture, and society.

## 2. METHOD

### a. Research Design

A qualitative method will be used in this article. The purpose is to acknowledge some obstacles that occurred in teaching English faced by foreign EFL teachers in Turkey. In this study, the participants were four foreign EFL teachers who were coming from different backgrounds and are currently teaching English in private schools in Istanbul. The decision to only select foreign EFL teachers is because according to Turkish law, only Turkish teachers can be employed in public schools, and foreign teachers are employed in private schools.

### b. Participants

This study identifies participants using judgment sampling. This sampling exists on the occasion of the participants being chosen for insertion of the study that is based on the researcher's component judgment. Frey, B. (2018). The chosen participants are selected based on representative samples from the researchers' knowledge and professional judgment.

The study is participated by four foreign EFL teachers and is conducted in Istanbul. The participants were coming from different backgrounds in terms of nationality and the students they are teaching. One teacher is currently working in a kindergarten in Istanbul, one is in primary, and two are working in high school. The research interview was done through Zoom call under the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic that was preventing the interview in person.

### c. Data Collection Process

The data collection process was done using two different instruments; questions prepared by the researcher and the interview. The answers were then transcribed to assess similarities and differences between the respondents. The study is done by firstly handling the questions to the participants, which is considered a productive technique to induce thoughts, reactions, and manners before giving responses to the interviewer. Questions containing open-ended answers and not limited to anything. Questions for the study were selected based on the research questions and the background of the participants.

The researcher specifically selected the questions due to the intention of the study and the research questions. The questions were designed to stimulate the participant's thoughts to be elaborated. The participants were given the questions before the interview to help them prepare their comprehensive responses and be comfortable answering. The questions were prepared explicitly to avoid discernment and bias in the research process, they aim to be unprejudiced and objective. The study then will implement a qualitative method to be used. Questions are mentioned below:

- What are the obstacles faced by the EFL teachers when teaching Turkish students and what are the solutions?
- How do EFL teachers solve the problem occurring in teaching Turkish students?
- What are the contributing aspects to success in teaching EFL?

### 3. FINDINGS

Participants responded to the research questions and elaborated on some obstacles they encountered during their teaching time in Turkey. Participants then offered solutions to overcome the issue. Below is the discussion of the research.

- What are the obstacles faced by the EFL teachers when teaching Turkish students and what are the solutions?

The unfit education system has indeed contributed to some issues faced by both teachers and students in the learning process. Teachers have exhibited apprehensions about the teaching process and are afraid that it will cause further issues to the students in Turkey if not reviewed properly. The first participant admitted to having faced many obstacles and said it was the system to be the cause, not the teaching itself. At the school she's working, the system was designed to make the teachers work more on arranging the students instead of teaching them. Often the arrangements would exhaust the teachers and cause them to lose motivation to teach.

Richardson (2005) stated that, in the class, the most important person is the teacher. It is because a teacher is a key to the teaching and learning process, a teacher has the power to control the classroom. Unfortunately, if the teacher's energy were spent only arranging students, they would have less enthusiasm to teach. Thus, the students would not reach a productive studying process.

The second participant complained about the disorganization and mismanagement of the school he's currently working at. He said the system that is implemented is incompetent and results in miscommunication not only between the teacher and the student but also in the school environment. One significant example is the school's teaching materials are outdated and are not relevant to the recent study development.

A similar study was conducted by (Aktas 2005), stating that several schools in Turkey have indeed abandoned the significance of dispensing recent learning materials for the school. As a result, education in Turkey is no longer becoming a priority, especially in many prestigious private schools. (Bayır and Tekel, 2021) pointed another obstacle. They said that not only the lesson materials are outdated but the system is revolving around students' memorization of books.

The third participant shared a concerning answer regarding obstacles he encountered. He experienced physical harassment by the student when refusing to change the exam's grade. According to him, the school's deficiency in supporting teachers causes unpleasant obstacles to foreign EFL teachers. The occurrence of this problem happened mostly in private schools in Istanbul where schools charge high amounts of tuition to parents resulting in high expectations from them. Consequently, students have less respect for teachers. Regulation 27090 aimed for Middle School through High School published in the newspaper on December, 24th, 2008 stated that if students get caught offending, sexual harassment, physical harassment towards anybody, defamation, violence, carrying weapons, drugs infusion, and school materials' misconduct, then expulsion is a consequence to be taken. Lozano. R and Kizilaslan. I (2013).

- How do foreign EFL teachers solve the problem occurring in teaching Turkish students?

The school management's lack of physical and mental support for teachers has caused unpleasant situations for teachers. As a result, teachers admitted to having difficult time-solving problems inside the classroom they often faced. Due to this reason, it is obvious that misbehaviors done by the students are a casual and common situation in Turkey. Teachers agreed on having mutual understanding and support from the school management can help overcome the issue of disciplining the students.

According to the first participant, teachers often consult the problems they faced in the class with the school management but there have been fewer to no solutions provided to solve the problems. She also mentioned that the school she's working at would focus more on finishing the lesson plan than solving the current problem and it sometimes piled up causing bigger problems for others.

The third participant responded with an answer that is similar to what Sternberg, R. J., & Lubart, T. I. (1999) mentioned in their research that patience is not only needed in solving problems inside the class. He advised that is better not to raise their voice when dealing with difficult students because when they replied, there's going to be an unpleasant debate between teachers and students. Voice raising might work to warn younger students but it sometimes does not work in teaching older students. A similar answer is also shared by the fourth participant. This confirms that indiscipline in private schools is appallingly common. Being creative and possessing a high level of patience is crucial for foreign EFL teachers when facing difficulties while teaching.

- What are the contributing aspects to success in teaching EFL?

The foreign EFL teachers must show role models act and provide engaging activities for the students to increase their interest in learning. The different approaches implemented in the class when teaching students depend on teachers' preferences. In most situations, it has to be specifically designed to fit the students' learning styles. Finding a parallel method that's appropriate to apply to all students in the class is not easy and rather challenging. The first participant recommends being connected to the students before teaching them. She mentioned, since her students are kindergarteners, that it is important to get to know the students and understand what they need then create fun and engaging learning activities. But for the older ones she responded that it is important for them to know that teachers care and genuinely respect them, this creates connection and mutual understanding in the beginning. Through this, teaching would not be stagnant, but fun and memorable.

There is numerous effective approach to learning activities that can increase students' motivation to learn and focus on studying once teachers found the key to taking their attention. Zurawksy (2006, p. 2). The teachers must be knowledgeable in their position to have control in supporting the students in the classroom.

The third participant argued that the unfit education system is not the only root of the problem as to why Turkish students are still unable to speak English fluently despite having studied them since primary education. According to him, Turkish people are generally nationalist and most of them prefer to only speak their language over any other languages. He added that since the education system is not appropriate, it will not be sufficient to only rely on schools' English lessons. It must be accompanied by extra courses outside of the school and as the world is shifting to the technology, learning English can also be achieved through watching online streaming services (Netflix, HBO, Apple TV, etc.) and finding online websites to meet foreigners and practice English for the people who aren't capable to travel abroad.

The fourth participant suggested being engaged with the students before starting the teaching process, he believed that mutual understanding will create a successful teaching and learning process which will motivate students to learn more. He said that it is crucial to know what the students are interested in learning, from there then the teacher will be able to create fun and engaging teaching activities. Foreign EFL teachers must be able to be creative, especially when teaching in a country where different culture is significant, creating lesson plans that are productive and align with the culture to be relevant to the student's background. Creativity assists humans to be collaborative and united. (Richards, 2007). Miscommunication often becomes an undeniable occurrence between teachers and students inside the classroom, but through creativity, a connection can be formed to collaborate and unite them to reach the target lesson.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are major obstacles faced by foreign EFL teachers in teaching English in Turkey. Drawing the parallel answers from the participants, major obstacles are; the unsuitable and mismatched education system, recalcitrant school administrators, and disciplining the students. Participants suggested solutions which include being knowledgeable and possessing a high amount of patience in the class. Being innovative in creating exciting lesson activities and being connected with the students. It is also important for the foreign EFL teachers to do deep research before deciding to work in Turkish schools to avoid having uncooperative school administrations and facing unpleasant obstacles when trying to solve problems about the students.

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