

Dilemmas in Teaching English in Multigrade Classrooms: Classroom Teachers' Perceptions on English as a Foreign Language Course

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Abstract: The Higher Council of Education in Turkey (CoHE) has mandated the inclusion of a course titled 'Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools' in the curriculum of classroom teacher education in 2018. Although there are some attempts to release coursebooks based on the predetermined curriculum for that course, these attempts and the curriculum are generic and largely uninformed of the needs and views of actual practitioners. Hence, the present study examined in-service classroom teachers' views on possible content to include in the abovementioned course. Moreover, the present study investigated perceived needs and deficiencies of classroom teachers in teaching English in their classrooms. Designed as a qualitative study, the present study collected data from 33 multigrade class teachers through an open-ended questionnaire. The present study revealed that multigrade class teachers perceived their own proficiency in English to be too low to teach it. Furthermore, the results pinpointed that teachers perceived their students' L1 level as an obstacle for effectively teaching them English. Finally, the present study implied that designing a curriculum responsive to particular needs and requirements of multigrade classes might be a viable solution to improve the quality of foreign language teaching in multigrade classes.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretimi, birleştirilmiş sınıflar, sınıf öğretmenleri, ders içeriği gereksinim, eksiklik

Birleştirilmiş Sınıflarda İngilizce Öğretiminde İkilemler: Sınıf Öğretmenlerinin Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Dersi ile İlgili Görüşleri

Öz: Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK), 2018 yılında Sınıf Öğretmenliği Lisans Programına 'İlkokulda Yabancı Dil Öğretimi' başlıklı bir dersi dahil etmiştir. Her ne kadar bu ders için önceden belirlenmiş ders içeriklerine dayalı ders kitapları yayımlama girişimleri olsa da, bu girişimler ve ders içerikleri geneldir ve bu dersi veren öğretmenlerin ihtiyaçlarına tam olarak cevap vermemektedir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışma sınıf öğretmenlerinin yukarıda belirtilen derse dâhil edilebilecek olası içerikler hakkındaki görüşlerini incelemiştir. Ayrıca, bu çalışmayla sınıf öğretmenlerinin sınıflarında İngilizce öğretimi konusundaki ihtiyaçları ve eksiklikleri araştırılmıştır. Nitel bir çalışma olarak tasarlanan bu çalışmada, birleştirilmiş sınıflarda görev yapan 33 sınıf öğretmeninden açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan anket aracılığıyla veri toplanmıştır. Çalışma, birleştirilmiş sınıflarda görev yapan öğretmenlerin İngilizce öğretme konusunda kendi yeterliliklerini çok düşük seviyede algıladıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, sonuçlar öğretmenlerin öğrencilerinin ana dil düzeylerinin etkili bir şekilde İngilizce öğretiminin önünde bir engel olarak algıladıklarını göstermiştir. Sonuç olarak çalışmada, ders içeriklerinin birleştirilmiş sınıflarda görev yapan öğretmenlerin özel ihtiyaç ve gereksinimlerine cevap verecek şekilde tasarlanmasının yabancı dil öğretimi kalitesini artırmak için uygun bir çözüm olabileceği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

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1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language is one of the top-ranking educational goals in Turkish schooling system. Several attempts have been made to help students go beyond gaining mere knowledge of grammatical structures and vocabulary to practically use this knowledge for communication in various contexts. As part of these attempts, the Turkish government has adopted an 'earlier, better' approach because more recent movements, including the Educational Reform (MoNE, 1997) and the 4+4+4 model (MoNE, 2012), have all placed sound emphasis on integrating English into the primary school curriculum as early as possible. Accordingly, teaching English currently starts in the second grade in primary school with two class hours weekly.

Initial optimism about the 'earlier, better' approach notwithstanding, the integration of English into primary school curriculum has brought about further problems mainly because of crowded classrooms, limited teaching time and lack of appropriate instructional materials (Bozavlı, 2015; Haznedar, 2010). More importantly, lack of qualified teachers appears to be a critical obstacle in that there is an insufficient number of English language teachers to teach all students from second to fourth grades. That is why, classroom teachers are required to teach the English classes, particularly in rural areas where multigrade classes are common. Ironically though, classroom teachers lack not only formal qualifications in teaching English as a foreign language but also proficiency levels sufficient for teaching it. To partly fill in this gap, the Higher Council of Education in Turkey (CoHE) has added a new course titled 'Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools' to the updated curriculum of primary education (CoHE, 2018) with the assumption that prospective classroom teachers will teach English to their students.

Several researchers (Aslan, 2008; Karıcı & Akar-Vural, 2011; Yurdakul, 2018) documented a dearth of studies on teacher perceptions about teaching English in Turkish primary schools. Similarly, there have been several calls (Pan & Akay, 2015; Ünal et al., 2016) for in-depth studies unearthing insider views about possible problems, perceived deficiencies and needs of classroom teachers during teaching English in their classrooms. As the updated program itself is quite a new one, and the curriculum enforced by CoHE for the new course is largely generic, it is of critical importance to delve into actual practitioners' perceptions about teaching English in multigrade classes. Therefore, the present study investigated perceived problems, needs and deficiencies of in-service multigrade class teachers along with challenges they encountered during teaching English in their classrooms. With this regard, the present study also intended to hint on possible content to include in the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course based on multigrade class teachers' views.

2. Literature Review

Multigrade classes refer to the classrooms where students from different grades are combined into the same classrooms due to reasons such as insufficient number of students, geographic or economic status and insufficient number of teachers for each grade (Köksal, 2009). In this kind of classrooms, learning should be supported across grades (Little, 2006a). Also, the heterogeneity of the classes should be taken into consideration in the process of preparing the curriculum (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). Multigrade classes are common not only in developing countries like Peru (Little, 2006a) but also in developed countries such as Australia, Austria, England, Finland, France, and the United States (Brown, 2010; Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Kazu & Aslan, 2012; Little, 2006a). In other words,

they are not peculiar to Turkey. In spite of multigrade classes' being common all over the world, most of the countries seem to have problems regarding guiding the management, administration, financing, curriculum provision, deployment and training of teachers of multigrade schools (Buaraphan et al., 2018).

When taking the relevant literature into consideration, it is seen that there are studies revealing advantages (Barbetta et al., 2019; Gürel et al., 2014; Köksal, 2005; Little, 2006a) and disadvantages of multigrade class practices (Köksal, 2005; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007; Palavan, 2012; Sağ, Savaş & Sezer, 2009). Conceived as an unwanted reality of the Turkish educational system (Yurdakul, 2018), multigrade classes harbor various inconveniences which hinder effective teaching and learning. Previous research (Abay, 2006; Köksal, 2009) pinpointed that multigrade class teachers suffered from a divided time and attention phenomenon due to the need to teach different grades simultaneously. In addition, multigrade class teachers lacked training and experience in teaching multigrade classes, which in turn aggravated the process of finding and designing appropriate materials for their classrooms (Akdağ & Taşkaya, 2016; Dursun, 2006).

In multigrade classrooms, classroom teachers are obliged to teach a foreign language or a second language not only in Turkey but also in most of the countries where multigrade classrooms exist like Nigeria and Chile (Agu, 2015; Arriagada Cruces, 2015; Şevik, 2009). In the new 4+4+4 education model in Turkey, English as a foreign language should be taught from 2nd grade onward (MoNE, 2015) and be instructed for two hours a week by English language teachers or classroom teachers. In multigrade classrooms, English is taught by classroom teachers from 2nd grade to 4th grade. Therefore, teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes yields further contingencies because classroom teachers' language proficiency levels may be no better than their students' proficiency levels in some cases (Şevik, 2009). Moreover, their pedagogical content knowledge may prove to be a limitation for effective foreign language teaching in multigrade classes.

There have been a limited number of studies on multigrade classroom teachers' views about teaching English in Turkish context (Karcı & Akar-Vural, 2011; Şevik, 2011; Ünal et al, 2016). Ünal et al. (2016) conducted a study to find out the opinions of 11 multigrade classroom teachers about the foreign language teaching methods and techniques by semi-structured interview. Ünal et al. (2016) indicated that multigrade classroom teachers had to resort to some additional resources because they could not understand the main English coursebooks, which they (ibid.) deemed as risky for ensuring student learning. Likewise, Karcı and Akar-Vural (2011) found that multigrade class teachers used either no additional materials or easily accessible materials without fine-tuning those materials according to their students' needs because they had not received any pre-service or in-service training on teaching a foreign language in multigrade classes. In addition, they explained that they did not have sufficient time to teach English in their classes.

Şevik (2011), who writes in a similar vein revealed classroom teachers struggled with the teaching of English since they did not have the chance to get training regarding teaching English to young learners during their pre-service education. Also, as he pointed out in his study, the teachers were not provided with in-service training. Şevik highlighted the critical importance of in-service training for multigrade teachers who do not have any qualifications in the field of English language teaching and called for the urgency of equipping classroom teachers with necessary skills related to English language teaching. Otherwise, he claimed

there might not be much expectation of success not only from the teacher but also from the students in the process of English language learning and teaching under these circumstances.

As for the studies conducted in other countries, Arriagada Cruces (2015) carried out a study on teachers working at five different multigrade rural schools in Chile in order to investigate teachers' views about teaching English as an L2. The findings of the study revealed that classroom teachers struggled to teach English as an L2 in their multigrade classrooms using traditional language teaching methods because they did not have any kind of special training on teaching English as an L2, showing parallelism with the findings of Şevik's (2011) study. Arriagada Cruces (2015) emphasized the urgency of trainings related to teaching English for teachers working at these rural multigrade schools to cater to the needs of L2 classes and increase the quality of language education. In addition, Agu (2015) emphasizes the dramatic approach to English language teaching in multigrade classes rather than traditional language teaching methods as significant contributors to students' effective language learning in multigrade classes.

It is quite clear that there is an abundance of research showing that classroom teachers struggle to teach English in their multigrade classrooms without being provided with pre-service and in-service training (Arriagada Cruces, 2015; Karcı & Akay-Vural, 2011; Şevik, 2009; Ünal et al., 2016). In other words, as Nunan (2001) claimed in his study, the implementation of English as a foreign language in the second grade and onwards in multigrade classrooms has proceeded often without adequate funding, teacher education or the provision of the resources.

In the light of the facts mentioned above, the present study aims to explore classroom teachers' perceptions about teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes as well as their perceived needs and deficiencies in teaching a foreign language in order to shed light on what content the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should follow. In this regard, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the multigrade class teachers' perceptions of foreign language education in primary schools?
2. What are the instructional methods and techniques multigrade class teachers use for teaching English as a foreign language?
3. What are the materials multigrade class teachers use for teaching English?
4. What are the problems multigrade class teachers encounter in practice?
5. What are the solutions multigrade class teachers make use of to solve the problems they encounter in their classrooms?
6. What is the multigrade class teachers' perceived proficiency in teaching English as a foreign language?
7. What are the multigrade class teachers' suggestions about how to improve foreign language education in primary schools?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This descriptive study adopts a qualitative research design to provide an account of the perceptions of the Turkish classroom teachers concerning teaching an English course in their multigrade classes.

3.2. Participants

Thirty-three Turkish classroom teachers participated in the study. All of the participants were chosen among the teachers who teach in multigrade classes at state primary schools located in different counties in Şanlıurfa. Convenience sampling was used in the process of selection of the participants. Table 1 demonstrates the demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic profiles of classroom teachers

Components of Classroom Teachers' Demographic Profile	Categories of Each Demographic Profile Component	N	Percentage
Gender	Female	20	60.6%
	Male	13	39.4%
Age	22-30	30	90.9%
	31-40	3	9.1%
Undergraduate Area of Study	Classroom teaching	33	100%
Teaching Experience	1-5 years	30	90.9%
	6-10 years	1	3.0%
	11-15 years	2	6.1%
English Language Teaching Experience	1-5 years	31	93.9%
	6-10 years	2	6.1%

Regarding the demographic profiles of the participants as given in Table 1, thirteen of the participants were male (39%), while twenty of them were female (61%). All of the participants graduated from the department of classroom teaching in different universities in Turkey. Most of the teachers (90.9%) had 1-5 years of teaching experience; one of them (3%) had 6-10 years of experience, and 2 (6.1%) of them had 11-15 years of teaching experience. As for English language teaching experience, almost all of the classroom teachers (93.9%) had 1-5 years of experience whereas just two of them had 6-10 years of experience. All of the participants were supposed to teach English to 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students in multigrade classrooms. None of the participants had the chance to take a course related to teaching English to young learners during their university life. Nor had they participated in different educational activities, such as seminars, conferences, and private courses, regarding teaching English to young learners.

3.3. Data Collection

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire including two parts. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions related to the demographic profiles of the participants. The second part involved seven open-ended questions prepared by the researchers on the basis of the relevant literature. These seven questions investigated teachers' opinions about a) foreign language education in primary schools, b) instructional methods/techniques and c) materials they used in their classrooms, d) problems they encountered in the classrooms, e) solutions for those problems, f) the extent to which they thought they could teach English as a foreign language successfully, and g) suggestions about effective foreign language education in primary schools. Expert opinion regarding the questions in the questionnaire was obtained from two experts in the field of English Language Teaching and an expert in the field of Primary School Education.

The questionnaire was applied to thirty-three classroom teachers working in multi-grade classes at state schools in Şanlıurfa at the end of the spring term of the 2017-2018 academic year. The questionnaire was distributed to the classroom teachers who are supposed to teach English to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students. It nearly took thirty minutes to answer the open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire were analyzed by means of employing descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages. Content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from the second part of the questionnaire. Two separate coders who held PhDs in English Language Teaching and were experienced in qualitative data analysis conducted the content analysis independently. They were equally empowered to carry out all the coding, sorting and categorizing activities. At the end of independent coding, the independent coders held a meeting to resolve possibly controversial codes and determine the final version of the codes and themes. Finally, common themes for each question were categorized as the result of the data analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceptions about Foreign Language Education in Primary School

The analysis of the participants' responses to the question about their perceptions of foreign language education in primary schools revealed that the multigrade class teachers held mostly positive attitudes towards teaching/learning English in primary schools (See Table 2). Referring to possible advantages of an earlier start, a large number of participants posited that it would be easier to teach a foreign language in earlier years of primary school. Yet, the teachers' responses underlined two points of consideration for success in teaching English as a foreign language. Firstly, one of the participants emphasized that despite the importance of foreign language teaching in primary schools, teachers should "keep their students' level in their mind while planning and conducting a foreign language class" (Participant 5). Similarly, another pair of the participants highlighted that teachers should principally teach from simple to complex, which they explained as "generally teaching from simple to difficult makes learning last longer" (Participant 10). Nevertheless, some of the participants reported negative attitudes towards foreign language education in primary schools. Apparently, these teachers maintained that "in multigrade classes, where they had to teach a lot of students from different levels, teaching English would not be effective enough" (Participant 4). Another participant justified her negative attitude by criticizing that "Foreign language education in schools is limited to grammatical knowledge. It is based on memorization and does not yield any benefits in terms of speaking and comprehension. In fact, it is inadequate in practice" (Participant 26).

Table 2.

Perceptions of multigrade class teachers about foreign language education in primary school

Positive	Negative
earlier, better student level	crowded classrooms
from simple to complex	theory-orientedness

4.2. Instructional Methods and Techniques

The analysis of the participants' responses about the instructional methods and techniques they used in multigrade classes for teaching English as a foreign language distinguished three types of teachers; namely traditional, constructivist and no methodology knowledge. Traditional teachers explained that they mostly employed presentation, ask-answer and memorization as the main methods and techniques while teaching English in the multigrade classrooms. The constructivist teachers, however, referred to more modern instructional techniques, which were broadly associated with constructivism. The constructivist teachers referred to a wider range of instructional methods and techniques including experiential learning, drama, realia, visuals, games, concept and vocabulary maps, and brainstorming (See Table 3). Nevertheless, a smaller number of teachers claimed that they did not know any specific methods or techniques for teaching language in primary schools. These teachers implied Lortie's (1975) notion of "apprenticeship of observation" as their point of reference for structuring their foreign language teaching as one of them stated that "I simply think of my own learning English and try to teach like my English teachers in the elementary school" (Participant 22).

An important finding regarding instructional methods and techniques used for foreign language teaching in multigrade classrooms was that a large number of participants irrespective of their categories (i.e., traditional or constructivist) relied on their classroom teacher education for their choice of methods and techniques. More specifically, they asserted that they had not received any specific training or personally read any books or articles on foreign language teaching methodology. Instead, they used the methods and techniques they used for classroom teaching in general. One of the participants clarified this point by stating that "I learned how to use these techniques at university" (Participant 7).

Table 3.

Instructional methods and techniques used in multigrade classrooms

Traditional	Constructivist	No Methodology Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation • ask-answer • memorization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experiential learning • drama • realia • visuals • games • concept and vocabulary maps • brainstorming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • past learning experiences

4.3. Instructional Materials

The present study investigated the materials teachers used for teaching English specifically because there were no instructional materials exclusively designed for teaching in multigrade classes and thus, the participants' responses to this question might give curriculum designers and materials developers insider views about how to handle such a deficiency in teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes. Evidently, the participants' responses revealed intriguing findings about the instructional materials actually used in multigrade classes (See Table 4). A large number of the participants confirmed that they mainly used

pre-determined materials including the coursebook and worksheets suggested by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Regarding possible reasons for using no extra materials, some of the participants pointed out that they “taught in a village school and were in dire need of materials... did not have opportunity and resources for accessing additional materials” (Participant 20). Furthermore, a small group of participants highlighted that they used audio-visual materials during teaching English including music/songs, videos, cartoons, games and flashcards. The participants’ responses unearthed that flashcards were particularly instrumental for foreign language teaching because almost all of the participants referred to use of flashcards in their classrooms. Two of the participants reported that they used technology (i.e., computer and smart board) for teaching English. Yet, it was surprising to note that computers and smart boards were eligible in multigrade classes because these classes are considered to be located mostly in disadvantaged, rural areas. Finally, only one of the participants stated that she developed her own materials. However, she did not give details about what kind of materials she developed and what criteria she took into consideration while developing them as she merely noted that “I develop activities and materials for each unit” (Participant 2).

Table 4.

Instructional materials used in multigrade classes

Pre-determined	Audio-visuals	Technology	Self-developed*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coursebook • worksheets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • music/songs • videos • cartoons • games • flashcards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • computer • smartboard 	<p><i>* No details about type of materials</i></p>

4.4. Problems in Multigrade Classes and Possible Solutions

The present study probed into actual problems multigrade class teachers encountered in practice and strategies they employed to solve such problems. The participants’ responses to this question were salient as stories of actual problems, and the solutions for them might prove quite informative in helping prospective teachers develop a comprehensive repertoire of functional strategies to solve problems of teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes. First and foremost, most of the participants emphasized that the idea of teaching in multigrade classes itself was a major problem as conducting lessons that would appeal to interests of students from different grades as well as fulfilling the requirements of the formal curricula of all four grades seemed to be barely possible for a teacher. The participants’ responses unraveled that the intensity of the program, limitations on time, lack of materials and lack of practice were the leading problems deriving simply from the practice of teaching English in multigrade classes (See Table 5). Regarding the problems caused by the very nature of multigrade teaching, one of the participants exemplified that “doing all the things at once like teaching English as well as maths, Turkish, etc. appropriate for different grade levels is the biggest problem for me” (Participant 13).

Table 5.

Problems of foreign language education in multigrade teaching

Multigrade teaching	Field teacher	Student-related factors	Contextual factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intensity of the program • time limitation • lack of materials • lack of practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of training • Linguistic differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student readiness • Lack of motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety in ethnic background • L1 interference • Attendance

Another major problem encountered in multigrade classes proved to be lack of specialized teachers. More specifically, urging classroom teachers who had no specialization or qualification in the field of English language teaching to teach English classes seemed to be too big a challenge for classroom teachers and thus, reduced the possibility of effective foreign language teaching in multigrade classes. Similarly, the participants posited that lack of training along with linguistic differences between English and Turkish in terms of structure, pronunciation and orthography of both languages caused drastic problems in practice. One of the participants summarized her lack of training in foreign language teaching by noting that “Foreign language education is not satisfactorily covered at university. That is why we are not qualified enough to do this” (Participant 2).

In addition, the participants pointed out that student-related factors aggravated the difficulty of teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classrooms. They claimed that students’ readiness and motivation to learn English were too low, which in turn made students “view learning English as futile. They are not motivated to learn it and also think that English is difficult” (Participant 7). Last but not the least, the participants’ responses revealed that contextual factors played a pivotal role in the problems they encountered in foreign language teaching. The participants proposed that as students in multigrade classes were mostly from different ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Arabic and Kurdish), it was difficult for teachers to communicate the learning points not only in English but also in the main means of communication, that is, Turkish. One of the participants exemplified this problem as she recounted that “I strive to teach new vocabulary firstly in Arabic, then in Turkish, and finally in English” (Participant 17). Similarly, the participants reiterated that the students’ L1 was a major hindrance in learning English because it negatively interfered with their learning. Eventually, student attendance featured to be another problem as students in multigrade classes mostly worked in field works and could not attend the classes regularly. Two of the participants criticized that they had to make extra efforts to have such students keep pace with their peers, which was time-consuming for the teachers.

As to possible solutions teachers suggested for solving the abovementioned problems, the participants’ responses mainly comprised three options (See Table 6). The first option was ignorance, which implied that some of the participants preferred to ignore problems as long as these problems did not interrupt the flow of teaching English. One of the participants accounted for this option by refusing any responsibility as she reasoned that teaching English was not her own “field of specialization and thus, could not do anything with some problems such as mispronunciations” (Participant 19). A larger majority of the participants emphasized that in order to handle students’ difficulty in mastering learning points, multigrade teachers should be ready to concretize the lesson by employing various alternatives including more practice, drama, using visual materials/videos/cartoons, daily life tips, games, and using L1.

A smaller number of participants directly ascribed certain role to the teacher practices. They stated that teachers should make extra preparations before foreign language classes and ask veteran English teachers for help about how to deliver the content more effectively and handle students' problems in learning English more aptly.

Table 6.

Solutions for problems of teaching foreign language in multigrade classes

Ignoring	Concretizing the learning points	Teacher practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • refusal for mistakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more practice • drama • using visual materials • videos • cartoons • daily life tips • games • using L1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extra preparations for lessons • help from veteran teachers

4.5. Perceived Proficiency in Foreign Language Teaching

The present study examined the multigrade class teachers' perceived proficiency in teaching English as a foreign language in order to hint on how classroom teachers who were mandated to teach English felt about teaching a subject, which was not their primary field of specialization. Based on the demographic information, it was realized that none of the participants had received any training, courses or certificates on teaching English to young learners, nor had they taken any formal test of English to test their proficiency level. Accordingly, a great majority of the participants admitted that their proficiency level in English was insufficient to teach it. In the same vein, seven participants viewed their proficiency in teaching English to be at a basic level, which one of the participants outlined as "teaching numbers, colors and greeting phrases" (Participant 3). In contrast, only two participants reported moderate proficiency in English as they "presume that I can teach in accordance with the level of 1, 2, 3, and 4 graders" (Participant 25).

4.6. Suggestions for Foreign Language Teaching in Primary School

The present study revealed interesting findings about multigrade class teachers' suggestions about how to improve foreign language education in primary schools, particularly in multigrade classes. The analysis of the participants' responses pointed to three categories of suggestions, that is, suggestions about practice, teachers and school infrastructure (Table 7). Regarding practice-related suggestions, the participants premised that multigrade classes were largely different from normal classes and thus, a differentiated curriculum that would address learning interests and needs of students at different grades should be followed in these classes. Moreover, the participants argued for a stronger emphasis on practice than theory as one of the participants illustrated that "teaching practice in the multigrade classrooms should engage students in practicing instead of learning theoretical knowledge of English" (Participant 18). Similarly, using authentic materials, visuals, games and technology as well as better coursebooks were among the practice-related suggestions that the participants deemed essential for success in foreign language teaching in multigrade classes. With respect to teacher-related suggestions, there was an unequivocal call for assigning

English language teachers for teaching English because the participants acknowledged that as English language teachers had pedagogical content knowledge, they would better serve students' needs in English and address their learning problems. Moreover, the participants emphasized that multigrade class teachers essentially needed training (such as in-service seminars, workshops, courses) on not only English but also how to teach it as a foreign language to young learners. In cases where such training was not possible, the participants pinpointed that they should have a mentor with whom they could discuss problems in teaching English and practical solutions to solve them. One of the participants described the features of an ideal mentor as “an experienced field teacher who have taught English to primary school students, especially in public schools and rural areas” (Participant 8). Regarding the school infrastructure, the participants emphasized that foreign language teaching in multigrade classes should be enhanced by providing basic instructional materials including “computer, projector, interactive boards, vocabulary cards, internet access, etc.” (Participant 12). Also, almost all the participants commented that crowded classrooms were one of the main problems of multigrade classes and thus, reducing the number of students in these classes might positively contribute to the success of teaching English as a foreign language in these classes.

Table 7.

Suggestions for foreign language teaching in primary schools

Practice-related	Teacher-related	School infrastructure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differentiated curriculum • student needs/levels • practice vs. theory • authentic materials • visuals • games • better coursebooks • technology use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • field teachers • training for teachers • mentoring • openness to self-update 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • materials • less crowded classrooms

5. Discussion

The present study investigated multigrade class teachers' perceptions about teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes as well as their perceived needs and deficiencies in teaching a foreign language in order to shed light on what content the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should follow. The results indicated an overwhelmingly positive view in multigrade class teachers about teaching English as early as possible. With the caution about teaching from simple to complex structures according to learners' level, the participants' positive view about an ‘earlier, better’ approach confirmed arguments about various benefits of an earlier start such as better pronunciation, increased awareness about linguistic differences and openness to cultural diversity (Bozavlı, 2015; Haznedar, 2012; Solak, 2013). Yet, the present study also implied that more emphasis on practicing English as a foreign language as opposed to merely teaching/learning grammar in less crowded classrooms might foster effective foreign language teaching as this would largely ameliorate teachers' concerns about theory-oriented foreign language teaching in crowded classrooms. Echoing the participants' negative views about theory-oriented foreign language teaching in crowded classrooms, several researchers (Özkan et al., 2018; Yıldırım & Tanrıseven, 2015)

criticized that the foreign language teaching program in Turkey fell short of promoting communicative practice in English because it conceived language more like an academic requirement and a subject to be mastered than a means of communication. Hence, the present study suggested that the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should emphatically stress the need for employing more communicative activities which would engage learners in practically using English in various contexts, as highlighted in Agu's (2015) study.

Furthermore, the present study revealed a clear lack of pedagogical content knowledge in multigrade class teachers for teaching English as a foreign language. The results showed that without any training on foreign language teaching, multigrade class teachers relied solely on their knowledge in primary school education in order to select the instructional techniques and materials that they reported using for foreign language teaching. More intriguingly, there was no reference to any specific foreign language methodology. Consonant with Butler's (2004) and Arriagada Cruces' (2015) findings about drastically low levels of foreign language proficiency (particularly in the use of active language skills) among classroom teachers in Chile, Taiwan, Korea and Japan, the present study evinced various reasons favoring assignment of specialized foreign language teachers for teaching English in multigrade classes. Firstly, specialized foreign language teachers had hands-on experience in learning English as a foreign language and thus, might better help learners handle challenges of learning it. Specialized foreign language teachers also had expertise and methodological knowledge in teaching English. Moreover, specialized foreign language teachers had vast experience in teaching English to students of different ages and were more knowledgeable about what possible problems learners of specific ages might have.

Nonetheless, the abovementioned lack of specialized foreign language teachers made it inevitable for classroom teachers to teach English in multigrade classes (Mirici, 2001). To partly retaliate this deficiency, the present study accorded with calls (Bozavlı, 2015; Genç & Kaya, 2011) for providing classroom teachers with a comprehensive training on teaching a foreign language. As possible content for such training, the present study proposed that the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should necessarily provide prospective classroom teachers with knowledge of English teaching methodology including detailed vignettes of how to use various instructional methods and techniques. Given that participants of this training would be classroom teachers, it was also deemed essential to improve prospective classroom teachers' awareness about teaching English specifically to young learners (Genç & Kaya, 2011; Tatar, 2010). Illustrating the need for awareness about specific techniques to teach English to young learners, Haznedar (2010) pointed out that a large majority of teachers (even specialized English language teachers) barely used instructional techniques appropriate for young learners. Moreover, the present study underlined that such training should inform prospective classroom teachers about material development as previous studies (Karcı & Akar-Vural, 2011; Köksal, 2009; Mirici, 2001) revealed teachers' deficiency in developing appropriate materials for teaching English to young learners. In the same vein, the participants' perceived lack of proficiency in English was congruent with findings of Kawanami and Kawanami's (2012) study, in which only 5% of the Japanese class teachers perceived their proficiency level as sufficient for teaching English, while the remaining 95% unequivocally viewed their proficiency as insufficient. To help multigrade class teachers improve their proficiency levels in English, the present study confirmed the suggestion made by several researchers (Pan & Akay, 2015; Şevik, 2009) about offering classroom teachers ample opportunities to gain a functional mastery of English in order to effectively teach it as a foreign language in their own classrooms.

Besides, the present study further contributed to the controversy about teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes. In accordance with previous studies (Abay, 2006; Akdağ & Taşkaya, 2016; Köksal, 2009), the present study premised that several factors such as the intensity of the program, time limitation, and lack of materials and practice aggravated the difficulty of teaching English in multigrade classes per se. Based on the participants' suggestions, the present study hypothesized that designing a curriculum responsive to particular needs and requirements of multigrade classes might be a viable solution to improve the quality of foreign language teaching in multigrade classes. Regarding the curriculum for multigrade classrooms, the participants' call for a differentiated curriculum was worth noticing. Enabling learners to focus on the same general topic/theme but with different learning tasks according to their level (Joyce, 2014; Pridmore, 2007), a differentiated curriculum featured as a promising option to ensure that all learners in a multigrade class gain from the teaching learning practices in the classroom.

In the same vein, coursebooks specifically designed for teaching foreign language in multigrade classes might also yield promising results (Karcı & Akar-Vural, 2011; Ünal et al., 2016). More importantly, operationalizing a mentoring system in which a specialized English language teacher would help and guide multigrade class teachers (Ekuş & Babayigit, 2013) featured to be a noteworthy suggestion to minimize the perceived difficulty of teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes. Likewise, Joyce (2014) underlined that if coordinated well, this support system can help multigrade class teachers handle the challenges they encounter in the classroom more successfully. Finally, the results of the present study connoted with the ongoing debate about L1 use in teaching a foreign language. In line with the growing interest in using L1 for certain functions including giving instructions and teaching complex grammar/vocabulary (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Gulzar, 2010), the present study concluded that Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should elaborate on pros and cons of using L1 in teaching English as a foreign language and convey prospective classroom teachers that an optimal amount of L1 use might facilitate foreign language teaching in multigrade classes.

6. Conclusion

Attempts to integrate foreign language teaching into the Turkish primary school curriculum have gained momentum in the last three decades. However, lack of specialized foreign language teachers paradoxically required classroom teachers who had no formal training on teaching foreign language to teach English particularly in disadvantaged areas. Accordingly, the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course surfaces as a potential way to minimize negative consequences of such a paradox by familiarizing prospective classroom teachers with specifics of teaching English to young learners. With this regard, the present study probed into perceptions of multigrade teachers, their perceived needs and deficiencies in foreign language teaching so as to provide curriculum designers and material developers with insider views about possible content to include in this course.

The present study highlighted that positive views about an 'earlier, better' approach notwithstanding, multigrade class teachers needed opportunities to improve their own proficiency in English. Furthermore, they deeply lacked pedagogical content knowledge, which would foster their awareness about instructional methods and techniques as well as material development for effectively teaching English to young learners. Based on this lack of content and pedagogical content knowledge in multigrade class teachers, the present study implied critical content to be integrated into the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary

Schools course curriculum. First and foremost, the course should provide pre-service classroom teachers with training about effective English language teaching methodologies with an emphasis on communicative and functional uses of the foreign language (English) instead of theoretically presenting the grammatical structures and a vast amount of vocabulary to be memorized. Along with offering content to improve pre-service classroom teachers' own proficiency in English, the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should also specify crucial characteristics of teaching English to young learners because the pre-service classroom teachers are arranged to teach English particularly to young learners.

Considering the lack of specialized foreign language teachers per se, the present study suggested that the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course should also promote pre-service classroom teachers' awareness about various mentoring systems. Given that matching a specialized foreign language teacher with a multigrade class teacher might make considerable contributions to resolve multigrade class teachers' problems in teaching English as a foreign language. In addition, an increased awareness about operational mentoring systems might ensure a safe survival for pre-service classroom teachers during the early years of their career. Another practical implication of the present study spoke to the need for integrating content about foreign language materials development into the Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools course curriculum. To cope with the dearth of materials specifically tailored for teaching English as a foreign language in multigrade classes, pre-service classroom teachers will vastly benefit from extensive knowledge about how to locate foreign language resources, adapt them to the specific context to their own classrooms and develop new materials from scratch in cases where they cannot find appropriate materials. In brief, sound planning seems necessary for the efficiency and high quality of foreign language education in multigrade classrooms. In that way, the challenges classroom teachers face in the process of teaching English can be turned into advantages.

Nevertheless, one should notice that the results were bound to the specific context of the present study. Similarly, any conclusion deriving from the results have to be tentatively interpreted due to the small number of participants. Moreover, the data in this study were elicited only through self-reports. Hence, prospective studies which include additional data collection tools particularly direct observations of teachers' practices might yield more informative results.

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