Exploring Primary School Students' Perceptions of English through Their Drawings[1]

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Abstract

English holds a lingua franca status all around the world today and foreign language education in most countries is primarily based on English. As a result of this high popularity of English language, primary school students now take English course as of Grade 2 in state schools in Turkey. Furthermore, private schools mostly offer English course as of Grade 1 or even kindergarten. This recent policy of low-age exposure to English has its roots in the 'critical age' principle. This qualitative study aims to explore the perceptions of primary school students ranging from Grade 2 to Grade 4 as to English through students-generated drawings. 268 students from three different primary schools (state) in Samsun, Turkey participated in the study and were asked to simply draw about English. Drawings here constitute the major data collection tool for the study and are intended to uncover the feelings or opinions of this low-age group of students about English. The collected drawings were handled through content analysis; and then the gathered data were coded and categorized as different images for the notion 'English'. Objects, interaction, English class, English course book, English teacher, etc. are among the most frequently depicted images. The qualitative findings of this study may be quite important considering the need to see the reflections of the recently-offered early English courses on young English language learners.

Keywords: *English, young learners, primary school, perception*

İlkokul Öğrencilerinin İngilizceye Yönelik Algılarının Çizimler Aracılığıyla İncelenmesi

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Öz

İngilizce bugün dünyanın her yerinde bir ortak iletişim dili statüsüne sahiptir ve çoğu ülkede yabancı dil eğitimi birincil olarak İngilizce üstüne kuruludur. İngilizcenin bu şekilde yüksek bir statüye sahip olması sonucu bugün Türkiye'de ilkokul öğrencileri artık devlet okullarında 2. sınıftan itibaren İngilizce dersi almaya başlıyor. Ayrıca, özel okullar çoğunlukla 1. sınıf ve hatta anaokulu seviyesinde İngilizce dersleri sunmaktadır. Bu erken yaşta İngilizceye maruz kalma politikasının kökleri 'edinim eşiği' ilkesine dayanmaktadır. Bu nitel çalışma, 2. ve 4. sınıf arası ilkokul öğrencilerinin İngilizceye yönelik algılarını öğrencilerin yaptıkları çizimler üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmaya Samsun'da bulunan üç farklı ilkokuldan (devlet) toplam 268 öğrenci katıldı ve katılımcılardan sadece İngilizce denince akıllarına ilk gelen şey(ler)i çizmeleri istendi. Bu bağlamda çizimler, çalışma için temel veri toplama aracını oluşturmaktadır ve bu sayede erken yaş grubundaki öğrencilerin İngilizce hakkındaki duygularının ya da fikirlerinin ortaya çıkarılması amaçlanmıştır. Toplanan çizimler içerik analizine tabi tutulmuş ve daha sonra elde edilen veriler kodlanıp 'İngilizce' kavramı için farklı imgeler olarak sınıflandırılmıştır. Nesneler, karşılıklı etkileşim, İngilizce dersi, ders kitabı, İngilizce öğretmeni vb. en sık çizilen imgeler arasındadır. Bu nitel çalışmanın bulguları, erken yaşta sunulan İngilizce derslerinin İngilizce öğrenen çocuklar üstündeki yansımalarını görme bağlamında oldukça önemli sonuçlar ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İngilizce, çocuklar, ilkokul, algı*

Introduction

Today English language holds a 'lingua franca' status all around the world; and having a good command of it is widely viewed as a quite important qualification. Kachru (1985) put forward a significant framework as to the role English undertakes in different countries and categorized countries where English is somehow used in three concentric circles: inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle. While the inner circle covers countries where English is used as the native language (L1), outer circle includes countries in which it is used as a second language (ESL) and expanding circle encompasses countries where it is learned and used as a foreign language (EFL). Turkey can be categorized in the expanding circle, which means that English is learned in our country, not acquired.

The status of English in Turkey has always had a rising trend especially during the period following Turkey's NATO membership and candidacy for the European Union (Demirpolat, 2015). When we look at the historical background of language teaching policy in Turkey, it dates back to the times of the Ottoman Empire when Arabic and Persian were taught as the primary foreign languages. French gained importance during the late periods of the Empire and over time in the republican period English changed balances and attained an unprecedentedly strong status in Turkey (Çakır, 2017).

Considering our recent history, the Education Reform in 1997 brought an 8-year compulsory primary education system and English began to be taught from 4th grade on (Haznedar, 2004). Before that it had been offered as of secondary education. A new curriculum for teaching English was put into effect in 2006 and this introduced a communicative approach to English language teaching (ELT), contrary to the former structure-based philosophy (Haznedar, 2010). A new educational system was adopted in 2012-2013 and a 4+4+4 system replaced the former 8-year system. Under this new system that brought schooling age to 5 (on the basis of voluntariness), English course began to be offered from 2nd grade on (Bayyurt, 2014). This '2nd grade' implementation is still in effect following the recent curricular revision in 2018. This implementation is based on the *critical age principle* by Lenneberg (1967) and Krashen (1982)

who both stressed 'the sooner the better' principle in terms of acquiring/learning a second/foreign language for young children.

It is known that Turkey does not give a positive impression in view of English language teaching and English proficiency levels. The results of the research on English language teaching in state schools in Turkey conducted by the British Council and TEPAV (2013) indicated problems like inadequate performance of the English language teachers, over-dependence on course books, teacher-centeredness, and omission of the individual differences in language classes. A more recent source of data as to current condition of ELT in Turkey has come from the 2017 English Proficiency Index (https://www.ef.com.tr/epi/regions/europe/turkey/). The results reveal that Turkey, with 47.79 points, ranks 62nd out of 80 countries involved in the study and has been placed in the 'very low proficiency' category. Our rank is 26th among the 27 European countries. The data of the previous years also indicate a rather poor English proficiency level.

To handle the major problems encountered in ELT in Turkey and enhance the general English language proficiency among Turkish people, the curriculum reform in 2013 introduced some ground-breaking novelties and the philosophy and approach adopted at that time are maintained in the 2018 revised version. The following paragraph introduces the rationale of the new curriculum in a clear way (MoNE, 2018):

> To provide a high-quality English language education for primary and lower secondary students in Turkey, a periodic revision of the courses is essential to maintain an up-to-date and effective curriculum. Furthermore, the recent changes in Turkish educational system, which entailed a transition from the 8+4 educational model to the new 4+4+4 system, have led to an immediate need for the redesign of current curricula. With respect to English language education, in particular, this system mandates that English instruction be implemented from the 2nd grade onward, rather than the 4th grade; therefore, a new curriculum accommodating the 2nd and 3rd grades was necessary, which led the preparation of the previous version of this curriculum. The present revision, not a drastic one, primarily aims at updating the curriculum with regards to the views obtained from the teachers, parents and academicians. This objective shaped the nature of the second revision. Basically, the curriculum was reviewed and revised in line with the pedagogic philosophy of both basic skills and values education, which has been a minor revision in that the English language education

curriculum focuses on developing the language skills and proficiency without any concrete course content. (p. 3)

It is obvious that the revised version of the curriculum (2018) adopts most of the features of the former one (2013) and attaches great importance to the onset of English courses as of 2nd grade. The foremost addition it has brought is the integration of values education (friendship, justice, honesty, self-control, patience, respect, love, responsibility, patriotism and altruism) into the syllabi of all grades covered (2nd-8th). Just like the 2013 curriculum, the current one takes the age-related characteristics of the target learners into consideration and specifies the language skills to be focused and main activities to be employed for each grade.

Table 1. Model English Language Curriculum (For 2nd-8th Grades)

Levels [CEFR*] (Hours / Week)	Grades	Skill focus	Main activities/Strategies
1 [A1] (2)	2	Listening and Speaking	TPR/Arts and crafts/Drama
	3	Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing°	
	4	Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing°	
2 [A1] (3)	5	Listening and Speaking Limited Reading° Very Limited Writing°	Drama/Role-play
	6	Listening and Speaking Limited Reading° Limited Writing°	
3 [A2] (4)	7	**Primary:** Listening and Speaking **Secondary:** Reading and Writing	Theme-based ∞
	8	**Primary:** Listening and Speaking **Secondary:** Reading and Writing	

(MoNE, 2018, p. 10)

As its clear in Table 1, English lessons delivered to 2nd graders who are 6-7 years old are solely focused on listening and speaking skills through Total Physical Response (TPR), arts and crafts, and drama activities. According to Cameron (2001), "for young learners, spoken language is the medium through which the new language is encountered, understood, practiced and learnt" (p. 18). That the priority is given to listening and speaking for very young learners complies with the natural order (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in which human beings acquire their mother tongue. The English lessons for 3rd and 4th graders

also prioritize listening and speaking skills and then introduces very limited reading and writing. This oral-based approach through TPR, arts and crafts, and drama activities aims to let English lessons leave a positive impression on young leaners by constructing a 'play world' for them (McKay, 2006). Language learning and teaching process should be established on a contextual, meaningful and interactional basis (Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1978). To this end, the curriculum presents a communication-based framework in line with the action-oriented approach adopted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (MoNE, 2018):

> As the CEFR considers language learning to be a lifelong undertaking, developing a positive attitude toward English from the earliest stages is essential; therefore, the new curriculum strives to foster an enjoyable and motivating learning environment where young learners/users of English feel comfortable and supported throughout the learning process. Authentic materials, drama and role play, and hands-on activities are implemented to stress the communicative nature of English. At the 2nd and 3rd grade levels, speaking and listening are emphasized; while reading and writing are incorporated in higher grades as students become more advanced. Throughout each stage, developmentally appropriate learning tasks provide a continued focus on building the learner autonomy and problem-solving skills that are the basis for communicative competence. (p. 3)

The current curriculum obviously aims to lay a correct infrastructure for the students in terms of English language proficiency. It intends to introduce the English language to them in an interactional and enjoyable way. If young learners develop a negative perception about the English lessons, it will be difficult for them to break this bias towards English. According to Moon (2000), "Children don't come to their English lessons as blank sheets of paper. They already have some views and attitudes towards learning English" (p. 15). Accordingly, helping young learners to develop positive attitudes towards English lessons as of 2nd grade is quite important for the next years.

There have been some studies in Turkey that focuses on the attitudes of young learners towards English lessons. For instance, Kızıltan and Atlı (2013) investigated the attitudes of 4th grade students towards English and English lessons through two different questionnaires and found that the participants possessed positive attitudes. A more recent study by

Arda and Doyran (2017) explored the 3rd grade and 7th grade students' attitudes towards English language learning in a comparative way. The data collection tools for the study were a questionnaire, opinion bubbles in which the participants were expected to draw a face (smiling, sad, etc.) and a short interview. The results of the study revealed that 3rd grade students held more positive attitudes towards learning English.

This study aims to explore the perceptions of primary school students ranging from Grade 2 to Grade 4 as to English through students-generated drawings. It intends to bring a significant contribution to the existing relevant literature in that it is the first study that aims to reveal the perceptions of very young learners including 2nd graders about English. Furthermore, this study is unique in that the perceptions of very young learners are explored through students-generated free drawings. Thus, the findings are expected to shed light upon the current reflections of the implementation of the 2013 English curriculum and present significant projections about the future application of the revised version of the curriculum adopted in 2018.

Methodology

This study that aims to reveal the perceptions of primary school students about English through students-generated drawings adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design. Creswell (2007) states that a phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). 268 students (130 male-138 female) who take English lessons in three different primary (2nd-4th grades) schools (state) in Samsun constitute the participants of the study. The participants were asked to simply draw about 'English'. Drawings here constitute the major data collection tool for the study and are intended to uncover the feelings or opinions of this low-age group of students about English. According to Hurlock and Thomson (1934), "for the young child, drawing is a language, a means of expressing ideas, in which symbols and conventional forms are used" (p. 127). Under this framework, children's drawings can be employed as a means to reveal young children's opinions and experiences about something (Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009). Even though this 'drawing'

technique is not commonly used as a data collection tool especially in the ELT field, it has been a significant means to reveal the inner thoughts of children following the famous *Draw-A-Scientist Test* by Chambers (1983). Therefore, it can also be used in ELT studies especially when young learners are involved.

While collecting the data, the participants were asked to draw on a piece of paper what they thought of when they heard 'English'. They were given half an hour and asked not to write down their names and numbers so that anonymity during the analysis of the drawings was ensured. The collected drawings were handled through content analysis; and then the gathered data were coded and categorized as different images for the notion 'English'. During the coding and categorization period, the opinions of a visual arts expert and another ELT expert from Ondokuz Mayıs University were taken. 268 drawings were produced by the participants and 28 of them were eliminated because their contents were not found adequate to be analyzed and categorized by the researcher and the two experts consulted. The remaining 240 drawings were analyzed in terms of their content and the analysis revealed some categories through which the perception of the participants about English could be interpreted. As this study focuses on the general perceptions of young learners about English, variables like gender and grade difference have not been considered.

Findings

The content analysis conducted on the drawings made by the participants yielded 12 different categories: *Objects, Interaction, An English Class, English Course Book, School, English Teacher, Numbers, A Random List of English Words or Structures, Multiple Component Description, England, English Dictionary,* and *Tourists*.

Table 2. Categories Yielded by the Content Analysis

No	Categories	Frequency
1	Objects	72
2	Interaction	43
3	An English Class	32
4	English Course Book	26
5	School	16
6	English Teacher	13
7	Numbers	12
8	A Random List of English Words or Structures	8
9	Multiple Component Description	6
10	England	4
11	English Dictionary	4
12	Tourists	4
	Total	**240**

Table 2 above makes it clear that the category with the highest frequency is 'objects'. It is followed by 'interaction' and 'an English class'. Sample drawings under the yielded categories (in frequency order) are presented and discussed below.

Objects

72 of the drawings made by the participants go into this category, which makes it the biggest one under this study. It can be seen that the drawings describe objects or things with their signifiers in English and Turkish. This means that the students who made drawings for this category think of English as 'vocabulary'. There are some spelling mistakes in the drawings; however, it is not a problem for these young learners. 'Teacher' was written as 'tcir' by one of the students, which implies that English is learned in an oral-based way by the students. As vocabulary constitutes an important part of English proficiency, it can be evaluated as a positive thing for the students to draw objects with their signifiers.
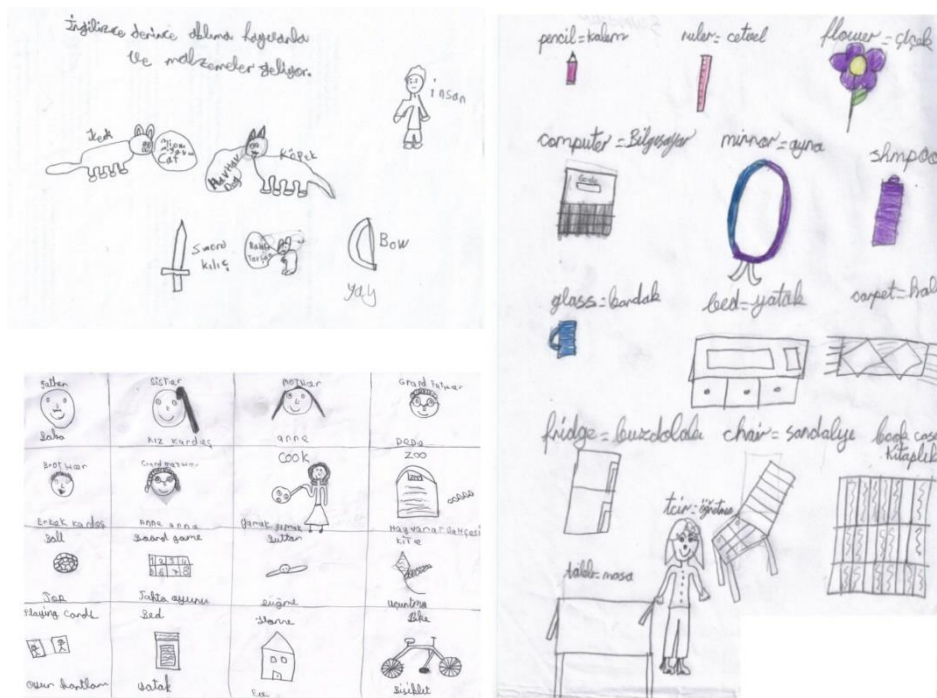
Figure 1. Sample Drawings for the 1st Category 'Objects'

Interaction

43 of the drawings go into the 'interaction' category. Communication is the number one aim of using languages and interaction is the most common form of communication. The drawings under this category include dialogues between people, be it in English or Turkish. Actually, the language used in the dialogues is not so important because what matters here is the 'interactional' perception of the young learners involved in the study. One of the drawings is quite ironic in that the student depicted a dialogue in which one of the interlocutors asked the other the question the student was asked by the teacher: 'İngilizce deyince aklına ney geliyor?' Another drawing covers a 'difficult' attempt to communicate: 'Ben seni anlamıyor. Sen Turkish biliyon?' Several of the drawings cover dialogues in which the interlocutors introduce one another. One interest-

ing drawing depict two men looking at each other with no utterances. This illustrated non-verbal communication is also quite important in terms of 'interactional' perception about English.

Figure 2. Sample Drawings for the 2ⁿᵈ Category 'Interaction'

English Class

32 drawings are placed in the 'an English class' category. In the drawings the students depict a classroom setting in which an English language teacher delivers English lesson. Some of the drawings illustrate an interactive classroom atmosphere and one interesting drawing depicts an English language teacher introducing himself to the class in English under the English flag and in Turkish under the Turkish flag.
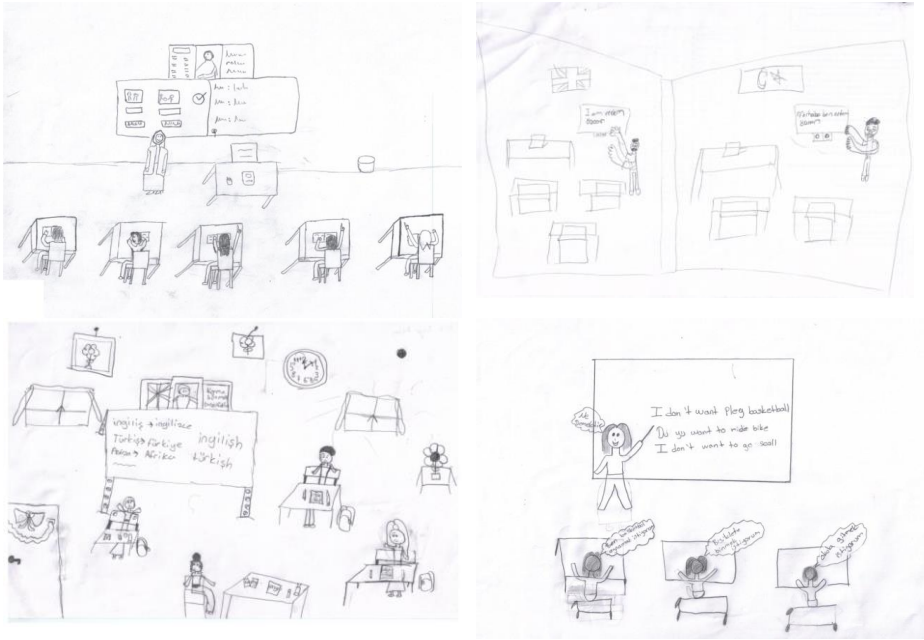

Figure 3. Sample Drawings for the 3ʳᵈ Category 'An English Class'

English Course Book

There are 26 drawings in this category and the students here depict the English course book they use in English classes. This category is important in that it reveals a significant level of importance attached by the students to the English course books.

Figure 4. Sample Drawings for the 4th Category 'English Course Book'

School

There are 16 drawings in this category and they generally illustrate a school building with a garden. Indeed, the drawings here do reveal neutral perceptions about English because the students relate it to school. This may be interpreted as an implication of the English as foreign language (EFL) context of Turkey, which means that it is mostly learned at school. Briefly, it is hard to decide whether such drawings should be considered as positive or negative reflections of perception about English.

Figure 5. Sample Drawings for the 5th Category 'School'

English Teacher

13 drawings have been put into this category. Although the current trends in ELT emphasize learners and learning process, we cannot disregard the key role English language teachers undertake especially in EFL settings like that of Turkey. As most English language teachers in our country have gone through English learning stages similar to those experienced by their students now, they constitute 'successful role models' for the students. That the first thing the students thought of about English is their English language teacher does not mean that they see their teachers as a strict authority or the sole source of information. On the contrary, they have illustrated teachers in a way that they express a positive role for them. This finding is quite important in terms of noticing the 'rapport' between the students and the teachers in English classes.

Figure 6. Sample Drawings for the 6ᵗʰ Category 'English Teacher'

Numbers

12 drawings go into this category and the covered ones illustrate numbers up to 10 or 20 in English. This category is also related to the vocabulary aspect of learning English. Therefore, students' perception of English as vocabulary items can be considered as a positive reflection of the English lessons.
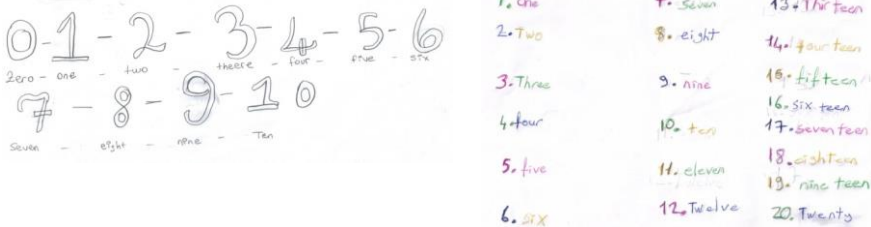

Figure 7. Sample Drawings for the 7ᵗʰ Category 'Numbers'

A Random List of English Words or Structures

8 drawings have been categorized under this title. It is also possible to evaluate this category in relation with the vocabulary dimension. As it is clear in Figure 8 below, the drawings here illustrate some random lexical items. As vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of learning a foreign language, this category also reveals a positive perception about English.
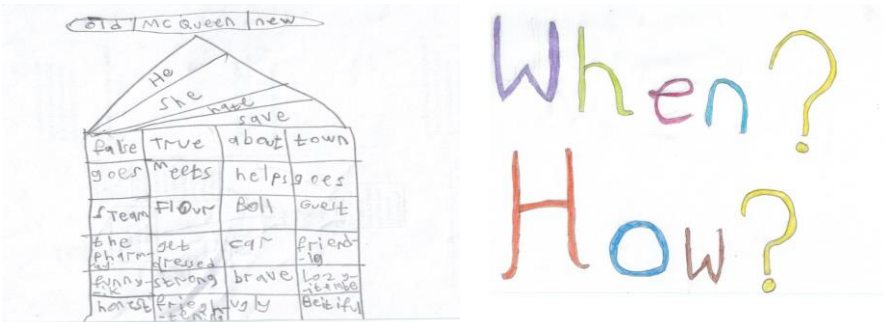

Figure 8. Sample Drawings for the 8ᵗʰ Category 'A Random List of English Words or Structures'

Multiple Component Description

6 drawings have been put under this category. The drawings here cover a combination of various components that are specific to other categories. For instance, one of the drawings depict '*İngilizce öğretmeni, İngilizce kitabı, İngilizce defteri, İngilizce yazılar, İngilizce projeler*' while another one illustrate a heart-shaped mind map that covers items like '*İngilizce konuşmak, İngilizce anlatmak, İngilizce yazmak, İngilizce oyun oynamak*, and so on'. This category is important in that it shows us a multi-faceted perception about learning English. Components like '*İnglizce oyun oynamak*' and '*İngilizce projeler*' are highly meaningful in view of the objectives set by the current curriculum.
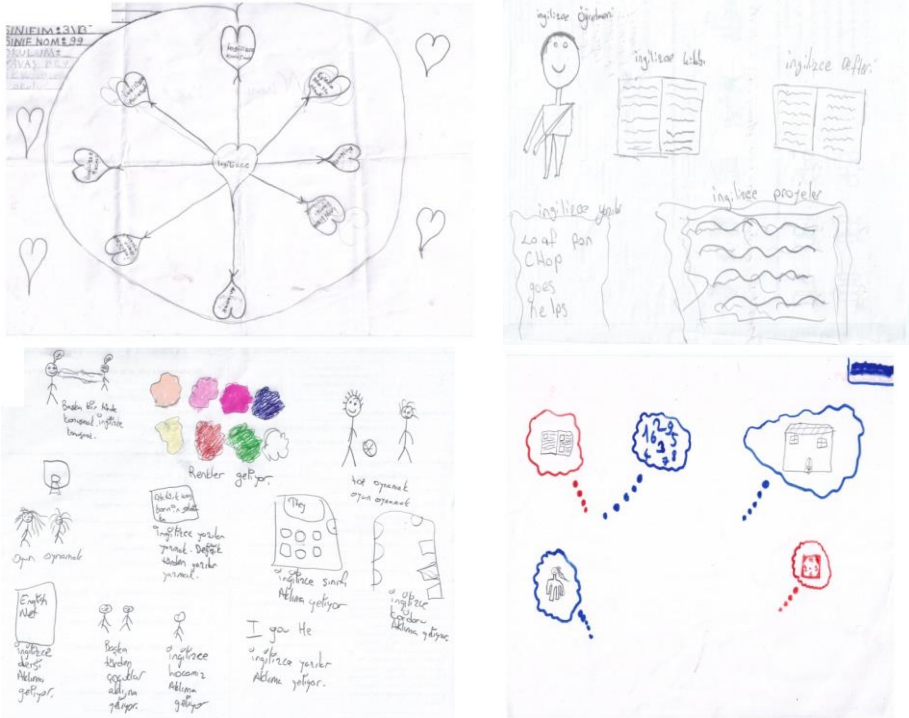

Figure 9. Sample Drawings for the 9th Category 'Multiple Component Description'

England

4 drawings go into this category. The drawings here reveal a country-language matching by the students. The English flag is also depicted in the drawings under this category. These all are signs of the students' awareness of a foreign language and the country it belongs to, which is crucial in terms of intercultural competence and communication.

Figure 10. Sample Drawings for the 10ᵗʰ Category 'England'

English Dictionary

4 drawings are covered in this category that is also related to vocabulary aspect. While the first drawing below illustrates the cover of an English dictionary with an accompanying English flag, the other depicts a sample page with entries from an English-Turkish dictionary. The vocabulary dimension covered in this category renders it quite valuable in terms of student perceptions.
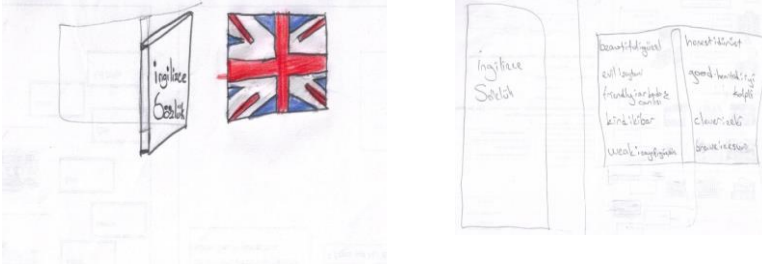
Figure 11. Sample Drawings for the 11ᵗʰ Category 'English Dictionary'

Tourists

This last category covers 4 drawings. The sample drawing below illustrates a group of tourists that have gotten off a bus and walking towards a hotel in Turkey. This category reveals a tourist-language matching and is quite important in terms of intercultural competence and communication just like the 'England' category.

Figure 12. A Sample Drawing for the 12ᵗʰ Category 'Tourists'

Conclusion

In this qualitative study, we aimed to explore the perceptions of young learners (2ⁿᵈ, 3ʳᵈ, and 4ᵗʰ graders) towards English. 2ⁿᵈ and 3ʳᵈ graders began to take English lessons following the system and curriculum re-

form in 2013. Accordingly, this study undertakes an important role in that it intends to show the tangible reflections of the current ELT system in Turkey through the eyes of very young learners who have contacted the English language under this system. As students transfer the positive or negative perceptions they develop towards a specific subject to the future times, it is of vital importance to pave the way for a positive learning experience at the very beginning (Moon, 2000).

The student-generated drawings yielded under this study point out various perceptions about English; and fortunately none of them covers a grammatical aspect. Instead, they include aspects like vocabulary, interaction, English class, school, course book, English language teacher, England, tourists, and so on. Considering that the curriculum in effect now prioritizes listening and speaking skills for primary school students in a play-based manner, the messages uncovered by the analysis of the drawings indicate that the implementation of the curriculum goes in the right direction. There is no negative message about English. Furthermore, the absence of grammar in the drawings can be regarded as the most important finding of this study because the grammar-based English lessons have been blamed for the poor English proficiency in Turkey for long years. Accordingly, the findings of this study show that things began to change in 2013 and this lets us look at the future of ELT in Turkey from a far more optimistic perspective. In addition, the biggest share taken by the vocabulary-related categories and the subsequent interaction category clearly shows that young learners now see English from a correct point of view and this will enable them to possess unprecedented advantages for their English learning experiences in the coming years. The plus awarded by the findings of this study to the 2013 and 2018 curricula is also so promising in that the future versions of the English curriculum can be built upon these positive experiences and attain better levels.

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