WEIMARER BEITRÄGE
Volume 72 Issue 1 (2026)

CHALLENGES FACED BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS WHILE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT
Today, it is believed that learning a foreign language at an early age has gained much greater importance due to the necessity or obligation of foreign language learning. Consequently, as foreign language education at the elementary level has become increasingly important, it is recognized that English education accepted as a common language has become even more essential at this level. However, certain challenges or issues may arise during the teaching of English at the elementary school level. Therefore, within the scope of this research, the challenges faced by elementary school English teachers while teaching the foreign language and the effects of their anxiety levels on issues such as health and motivation were analyzed. The analyses conducted within the scope of the study yielded significant findings.
Keywords: English Language Instruction in Elementary Schools, Challenges in English Education at the Elementary Level, English as a Foreign Language, Anxiety Levels of Elementary School English Teachers

Introductıon
Today, foreign language learning and education rank among the most important issues. In this context, people aim to gain advantages or ease in education, career, communication, and professional life by learning a new language. Consequently, learning a new language enables people to learn about other cultures and communicate easily with others.
Since English is recognized as a common language worldwide, it ranks among the most widely studied languages as a second language. Consequently, teaching English at an early age and in the early stages of education makes the process of acquiring a new language much easier. Therefore, English education in elementary school has gained even greater importance due to its inclusion in early-stage instruction.
Teachers play a crucial role in English education within primary education. In particular, the young age of the children and the challenges that arise in the educational process necessitate that primary school English teachers pay much closer attention. While it is possible for students to acquire more lasting knowledge of English at an early age, it is also inevitable that teachers will face greater challenges. This is because educating or helping young children, who often struggle with concentration, to focus on learning is much more difficult compared to older students. Similarly, it is believed that the style of instruction, methods, and materials used require much greater care at the primary education level.
Given the significance of the problems English teachers face in primary education, this study examines issues related to the subject. Consequently, the study aims to investigate the effects

of the anxieties and stress experienced by English teachers while teaching at the elementary school level on their health and motivation. Additionally, the study aims to identify measures that can be taken to reduce the anxiety and stress experienced by English teachers at the elementary school level. Among the study's secondary objectives is the contribution of significant information to the relevant literature.

1. CHALLENGES FACED BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS

The acceptance of English as a common language and the belief that teaching it at an early age is more effective have led to English education at the elementary school level becoming much more important. However, the challenges faced by eleamentary school English teachers result in negative effects on teachers in terms of stress, anxiety, and motivation. For this reason, all details related to the subject have been examined under subheadings.

1.1. Foreign Language Education

In the 21st century, with the advancement of technology, people have been able to reach individuals in other countries much more easily through mass communication tools. As a result, people can communicate with individuals in other countries in a much more practical and comfortable manner. Particularly as globalization continues to strengthen, the diminishing importance of international borders and people's ability to connect with others in different countries using transportation have increasingly highlighted the importance of foreign language teaching and education. Since over 200 languages are spoken worldwide and it is not feasible for people to learn all of them, certain languages have been adopted as common languages. Today, English, which is accepted as a common language, is the most widely used language in the world. It is well known that proficiency in English is the first criterion encountered by job seekers in both the public and private sectors. Therefore, it is evident that individuals seeking to advance their careers must learn English. At the same time, it is recognized that knowing English has become a necessity for communicating comfortably and expressing one's thoughts clearly on a global scale (Bayraktar, 2014, pp. 23–24).

1.2. English Education in Primary Education

In the 2000s, changes were made in line with the European Union integration process as part of the European Language Portfolio project. According to this project, it was found that starting foreign language learning at an early age yields much more effective results in language instruction. Additionally, teaching multiple languages rather than a single foreign language can also be effective. In relation to this issue, the Ministry of National Education has granted permission for foreign language instruction in private pre-school institutions since 2001. Although efforts to teach multiple foreign languages have been insufficient, English has emerged as the foreign language taught at a rate of 97% (Demirel, 2012).

Particularly in Europe, the rise of the concepts of multiculturalism and multilingualism has created a need to regulate foreign language learning and teaching to a certain extent. Decisions made in Europe regarding this matter have highlighted the importance of foreign language education and necessitated the necessary care within the primary education level (Aksu Ataç, 2008, p. 1).

In Europe, the aim has been to foster mutual understanding, demonstrate respect for different cultures, preserve cultural and linguistic differences, ensure the harmonization of curricula, and establish certain standards for language instruction. In this context, these initiatives have

emphasized that learning English at an early age or at the primary education level is far more important worldwide (Demirel, 2005, p. 80).

With globalization, knowing English or being able to speak it proficiently has become much more essential on an international scale. For this reason, learning English has evolved from a mere need into a necessity (Crystal, 2012).

Due to the importance of English, learning it at an early age and related educational programs have gained significant popularity. In this regard, in Turkey, English language education was first introduced in the fourth and fifth grades of elementary school in 1997 (Şevik, 2009, 377–401).

1.3. English Teaching Programs in Primary Education

With the extension of compulsory education to eight years and the closure of preparatory classes in Anatolian high schools, a significant gap emerged in foreign language education. To address this, the Ministry of National Education enacted a law in 1997 to make English instruction mandatory in the first stage of primary education, aiming to make English teaching much more effective. Some features and characteristics of the program, which ensures that English instruction begins in the fourth grade of primary education, are as follows (MEB, 1997, pp. 1243–1292);

- Activities and games should be the primary focus in the classroom, and students should learn while having fun.
- It is not recommended to address the language structures students will use through a purely descriptive approach.
- The fundamental concepts and topics to be taught to students must be selected from the curriculum.
- The use of audio or visual materials is expected, in accordance with the school's resources.
- The Foreign Language course must be conducted in a student-centered manner.
- At the beginner level, the process must be carried out without explicitly informing the student of the evaluation criteria, both in writing and orally.
- Assessment tools should be prepared in accordance with all the objectives of the English course.
- Teachers must develop an evaluation rubric for exercises and homework assignments.
- It is recommended that the rubric developed by teachers include topics such as listening comprehension tests, picture description, matching exercises, and reading comprehension assignments.

In the 2013–2014 academic year, English education was first introduced in second-grade elementary schools. English education at the elementary school level is considered to have begun in 1997. Consequently, elementary school second, third, and fourth grades do not feature an elementary English education program focused on listening and speaking skills (Ekuş and Babayiğit, 2013, pp. 40–49).

In second grade, artistic activities such as songs, drama, specific games, puppets, and question-and-answer techniques are frequently utilized to develop skills like speaking and listening. At the same time, the curriculum clearly emphasizes that the purpose of foreign language education in second grade is to help children develop a love for English. In this context, second-grade

elementary education typically focuses on themes such as fruits, vegetables, numbers, objects used in the classroom, or animals. Consequently, strategies have been developed to ensure that the knowledge learned in second grade is actively used both inside and outside the classroom. The themes applied in English education in third-grade elementary schools are as follows (MEB, 2018);

- Family and kinship relationships (3rd Grade)
- Greetings (3rd Grade)
- Emotions (3rd Grade)
- Games and toys (3rd Grade)
- Home and City (3rd Grade)
- Vehicles (3rd Grade)
- Nature (3rd Grade)

In the fourth grade of elementary school, efforts are made to develop students' basic attitudes toward English. In this context, topics such as food and drink, leisure activities, clothing, occupations, physical and personal characteristics, countries, and nationalities are emphasized. Additionally, activities are designed around these themes and supported by personal and visual materials. This makes it easier for students to pronounce topic-related words correctly. It is believed that the earlier English education begins, the better the fluency and pronunciation will be. Consequently, it is believed that the longer the duration of education, the more proficient the language acquisition will be. For this reason, it is argued that English education at the primary school level has taken on a much more significant role (Enever and Moon, 2009, pp. 5–21).

1.4. Challenges Faced by Elementary School English Teachers

When considering the implementation process of language education, it is believed that language instruction at an early age is far more effective. Consequently, ensuring that the implementation of language education is as effective as the experiences gained at an early age is also considered highly important. This is because it has been observed that teachers face certain challenges when teaching English to groups of young students. To keep young students engaged in class despite their short attention spans, a significant amount of planning for resources, ideas, and activities is expected. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult for teachers to maintain the focus or attention of elementary-level children on their English education (Mcllvain, 2012).

Although English instruction is directed toward early age groups, there are observed discrepancies between official policy goals and teachers' actual practices. This situation can lead to difficulties for teachers at the primary education level (Kırkgöz, 2010).

With the updates made to teacher training programs in Turkey, it is noted that only two courses related to language instruction for children are offered over a period of 4 to 8 semesters . This indicates that English teachers begin teaching English starting in the second grade of elementary school. Consequently, factors such as changes in the implementation of curriculum programs and the insufficient number of courses are among the challenges faced by elementary school English teachers (Süer et al., 2019, pp. 1927–1928).

It is evident that English teachers working at the elementary level face numerous structural and pedagogical challenges. In particular, the inherent difficulties of teaching a foreign language to

young children lead teachers to encounter various problems. It is believed that the process becomes more difficult when lesson plans are developed without considering students' sensory and cognitive developmental characteristics. Additionally, factors such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials, and the intensity of the curriculum at the elementary level limit teachers' ability to develop effective teaching strategies (Yıldız and Arslan, 2020, pp. 78–92).
It has been observed that while English teachers at the primary education level generally wish to apply a communicative language teaching approach, they remain under the pressure of an exam-oriented system. This situation leads to a conflict between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their practices and negatively affects their professional satisfaction (Kırkgöz, 2018, pp. 1–15).

1.4.1. Stress

The stress experienced by English teachers generally arises from workload, time constraints, and institutional expectations. In particular, performance evaluation systems and parental expectations cause teachers to feel under constant scrutiny. In the long term, this situation can lead to burnout syndrome among elementary school English teachers. Consequently, studies on elementary school English teachers reveal that the elements of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment—are experienced much more intensely during the early years of the profession, particularly in terms of emotional exhaustion. For this reason, new elementary school English teachers must be much more resilient (Demir, 2021, pp. 45–60).

1.4.2. Lack of Motivation and Job Satisfaction

A lack of motivation is among the most significant factors directly affecting teachers' professional performance. In particular, low pay policies, limited career advancement opportunities, and a lack of professional development opportunities reduce or weaken teachers' intrinsic motivation. Research in the relevant literature indicates that, from the perspective of self-determination theory, failure to meet teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to a loss of motivation. Consequently, according to studies conducted on elementary school English teachers, it is observed that supportive school environments increase teachers' motivation, whereas a repressive and authoritarian management approach significantly reduces the motivation of elementary school English teachers (Çelik, 2022, pp. 112–130).

1.4.3. Anxiety Level and Psychological Effects

English teachers may experience professional anxiety due to their perceptions regarding language proficiency and classroom performance. This situation particularly highlights the anxiety of not possessing sufficient language proficiency among teachers whose native language is not English. Consequently, it can limit teachers' classroom interactions and reduce the quality or nature of communication established with students (Horwitz, 1996, pp. 365–372).
Performance anxiety also increases when teachers perceive students' failure during English instruction as an individual shortcoming. The anxiety resulting from this situation is not viewed solely as a personal issue; it also emerges as a reflection of systemic pressures (Aydın, 2019, pp. 567–575).
Numerous studies in the literature have examined factors that influence or trigger anxiety during the foreign language teaching process. These studies suggest that there are multiple factors

contributing to English teachers' anxiety during instruction (Keavney and Sinclair, 1978, pp. 273–290).

Among the key studies clearly demonstrating that English teachers experience teaching anxiety in the classroom is the research by Coates and Thoresen (1976). Additionally, it is noted that the primary cause of the participants' tension in the study was the relationship between teachers and school staff (Türkmen, 2019, pp. 73–74).

In another study on the anxiety levels of English teachers, it was observed that teachers experience anxiety or stress due to tasks such as lesson preparation, presentation, transitions between lessons, assessment, classroom management, giving instructions rather than setting goals, and demonstrating knowledge of best practices (Wood, 2000).

In a study on the anxiety of prospective English teachers, the primary factors contributing to anxiety were found to include the inability to teach the subject correctly, being evaluated academically by mentor teachers, making grammar and vocabulary mistakes, using the allotted time inefficiently, choosing inappropriate materials, failing to answer students' questions correctly, failing to convey information, and not knowing the textbook's content. Additionally, it was noted that anxiety-inducing factors can be categorized into cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural groups. Among emotional factors, the following have been identified: teacher candidates' fear of losing control of the classroom during lessons, intolerance or indifference, difficulty in adopting the teacher identity, fear of speaking in front of a crowd, and reasons such as a lack of tolerance, safety, and respect. In terms of socio-cultural factors, elements such as students' negative attitudes, overcrowded classrooms, the school's socio-cultural environment, excessive noise in the classroom, and students' lack of interest stand out (Tüfekçi, 2018, pp. 389–404).

Another factor highlighted as significant in English teachers' anxiety is anxiety about speaking a foreign language. It is viewed as a critical factor that can affect teachers' instructional performance, students' motivation to learn a language, and the language acquisition process. For this reason, understanding anxiety in foreign language teaching and evaluating its effects is considered highly important for improving language teaching practices and developing teacher education (Şahin Toptaş, 2023, p. 1341).

1.4.4. Health-Related Challenges

The teaching profession also entails significant risks regarding physical and psychological health. Standing for long periods and the constant need to speak can lead to difficulties for teachers. Additionally, tensions experienced during classroom management pose a risk of causing physical fatigue and voice problems. Beyond this, the psychological burnout experienced by teachers is among the most common health issues. Psychological problems such as chronic stress, anxiety, and sleep disorders are frequently observed among elementary school English teachers. According to research on this topic, stress levels among teachers are found to be significantly higher than those in other occupational groups. Additionally, a decline in teachers' overall quality of life and a threat to their professional sustainability are among the significant findings resulting from these studies (Johnson et al., 2005, pp. 178–187).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Within the scope of this study, the challenges faced by teachers and their levels of anxiety and stress in English education at the elementary school level were examined. In this context, the

study analyzed the anxiety, stress, and low motivation observed in terms of health, as well as negative situations experienced by teachers. Details such as the study's purpose, significance, and methodology—which constitute the research methodology—are discussed under subheadings.

2.1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the challenges faced by teachers in English education or instruction at the elementary school level. Additionally, the study aims to examine the challenges, anxiety, stress, or health issues, as well as the loss of motivation experienced by elementary school English teachers during instruction. Furthermore, one of the study's sub-objectives is to contribute a significant body of knowledge to the relevant literature.

2.2. The Importance of the Study

Since the study examines the challenges faced by elementary school English teachers, the topic holds significant importance within the field of foreign language education. Furthermore, while a review of the literature reveals a prevalence of sources addressing the challenges faced by elementary school English teachers, the scarcity or absence of studies examining these challenges from the perspective of health-related factors such as anxiety, stress, and motivation is notable. This situation has led the study to gain even greater importance and become more significant for the literature. Consequently, the aim of contributing a significant resource to the literature underscores the importance of the research.

2.3. Research Method

A literature review method was employed within the scope of this study. In this context, sources obtained from the existing literature related to the subject were compiled and appropriately evaluated through an automated review process. As a result of the primary sources obtained from the literature, important findings and conclusions related to the subject were derived.

3. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Within the scope of the research, the challenges faced by elementary school English teachers were examined from the perspectives of anxiety, stress, low motivation, and various health or psychological factors. In this context, highly significant conclusions and results related to the subject were obtained.

According to the results obtained in the study, it was observed that early English education is highly important. This is because starting foreign language education at an early age facilitates learning in later years and fosters positive habits. Consequently, it was determined that the importance of early education has made English learning and instruction at the elementary school level even more critical.

The study noted that the turning point regarding early English education in Turkey was the decisions made by the Ministry of National Education in 1997. In 1997, the Ministry emphasized the importance of early English education, adopted models from Europe, and decided to introduce English education starting from the fourth grade of elementary school. This policy underwent a change during the 2013–2014 academic year, with a decision made to begin English education starting in the second grade of elementary school. Consequently, while the decision had positive effects within the scope of English education, it was observed to have caused some negative outcomes from the teachers' perspective.

One of the primary challenges primary school teachers face when teaching English to students is the difficulty in capturing students' attention or maintaining their focus. This is because it is generally much more difficult for young children to focus on a lesson or pay attention compared to older students. For this reason, it has been observed that primary school teachers experience significantly greater stress when it comes to keeping students engaged in the lesson. Additionally, teachers often face pressure due to excessive expectations from parents or the school administration.

Anxiety and stress are among the primary issues faced by elementary school teachers. It has been noted that teachers, particularly those early in their careers, may experience anxiety regarding public speaking, interacting with children, curriculum implementation, securing teaching materials, and deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar. The risk that such situations may lead to teacher burnout or professional exhaustion is also among the significant findings.

At the elementary school level, the primary challenges faced by teachers include a lack of materials and strategies for teaching English to students. Teachers may face difficulties, particularly due to the limitations imposed by the curriculum and the fact that students' individual comprehension abilities may vary compared to their peers. Additionally, overcrowded classrooms and the limitation of class time to just two hours per week contribute to an increased workload for teachers, leading to anxiety or stress as a result of this pressure, and even a loss of motivation.

Among the health-related issues faced by elementary school English teachers, it has been observed that factors such as standing for long hours, spending time in crowded and noisy environments, and being worn down by students can lead to psychological or physical health problems.

When examining factors such as anxiety, stress, low motivation, and health problems experienced by teachers in elementary-level English education within the scope of this research, the primary recommendations include raising teachers' awareness and implementing certain innovations in the curriculum. In particular, situations such as a lack of materials and insufficient educational tools further exacerbate anxiety among teachers. Additionally, conducting instruction in overcrowded environments, the scarcity of weekly class hours, and delivering English education in schools lacking institutional structure increase the pressure on teachers. To alleviate such pressures and manage the process in a more positive manner, all stakeholders have a role to play, and it is expected that necessary initiatives will be taken in every relevant area.

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