

THE ROLE OF STARTING AGE TO LEARN ENGLISH IN YOUNG LEARNERS' ATTITUDES¹

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Abstract

In 2012, when the compulsory education in Turkey was increased from 8 years to 12 years, which is called as the 4+4+4 compulsory education, with an aim to catch up with the changing world, the foreign language curriculum of the primary and secondary schools was also modified and developed. Up to that time, students would start to learn English in the 4th grade, which is almost equivalent with the age of 10. Since then, the students have been starting to learn English in the 2nd grade, which is approximately equivalent with the age of 8. This study aims to find out the attitudinal differences of students who have started to learn English at 2nd grade and the ones who have started to learn English at 4th grade towards English. For the purposes of the study, a quantitative research was carried out. The study was conducted with 290 3rd grade students and 395 5th grade students in eight different state schools in Mezitli district of Mersin in the academic year of 2014-2015. Data were collected by means of a Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale. The study results revealed that students who have started to learn English at 2nd grade show more positive attitudes towards English than the ones who have started to learn English at 4th grade. The study also demonstrated that female language learners have more positive attitudes towards English than male language learners.

Key Words: *Attitude, language attitude, English as a foreign language, young learner.*

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Introduction

With the continual globalization of the world and the great developments in technology, it becomes more than a necessity to learn a foreign language. Day by day, the needs of people about knowing another language apart from their mother tongue and the desire to open up and reach to the further locations of the world out of their own spaces remind them of the essentiality of learning a foreign language, especially English, as it is considered to be the most common lingua franca all over the world (Thomason, 2001). Hence, English is no longer accepted as a compulsory school subject; rather it is seen as a key to open the gates of the fields, ranging from business to daily life. As in other nations and societies around the world, in Turkey, learning English has gained much importance especially in recent years. However, though many of the private schools had already been providing their students with a facility to start learning English at earlier grades, between 1997 and 2012 when the compulsory education was 8 years, the students in state schools could not get the same opportunity although compulsory foreign language learning used to begin in the 4th grade. The students had three foreign language classes per week in the 4th and 5th grades, and, four classes in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. In 2012, the compulsory education was increased from 8 years to 12 years, which is called as the 4+4+4 compulsory education, and since then the students in Turkey have been starting to learn English in the 2nd grade, which is approximately equivalent with the age of 8. The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students have two English classes per week while the 5th and 6th grade students have 3 classes, and 7th and 8th grade students have four English classes per week. This change and development can be considered to be in the same line with many linguistic researchers, who stand for the claim “the earlier is better” (Hall, 2008, Karahan, 2007, Moyer, 2004, Spolsky, 1969). They share a common claim that if the learners start learning a foreign language at an early age, they will accordingly be exposed to the target language more, which results in the more effective and productive language learning. Hence, in accordance with the exposure time, the starting age is considered as one of the key factors in foreign language learning, which complies with the new change of the onset age in foreign language learning. This change brings the discussion with itself as whether and how it will create a difference in students’ attitudes towards English. Since attitude is considered as one of the influential factors in foreign language learning (Baker, 1995, Gardner & Masgoret, 2003, Storm, 2007, Atchade, 2002), it is worth to take into the consideration the role and effects of the attitudes in the foreign language learning context.

Attitude

Since a student’s attitude is a complementary part of learning, it, then, should become a major component of second language learning pedagogy (Gajalakshmi, 2013). Attitudes of learners have been considered as the set of beliefs they have towards the target language group, culture and in the case of classroom learning towards their teachers and the learning (Atchade, 2002). In his study, Oroujlou (2011) aims at making foreign language teachers aware of the fact that the language learners do not just communicate or solve the problems of their learning but they are “whole persons with hearts, feelings, beliefs, identities” (p.995), and he finds a strong link between the performance of the learners and their attitudes. Baker (1995) also explains three reasons why attitude is a central explanatory variable. First of all, he says that attitude is a term in common usage, which is supposed to be part of terminology system of many individuals. Common terminology provides bridges between research and practice, theory and policy. Second, a survey of

attitude provides social indicators of changing beliefs and the measurement of the health of the foreign language policy implementation. Last, its sustained and proven efficacy ensures a valuable construct in theory and research, policy and practice.

Learners may have positive or negative attitudes towards English, yet both of them have great impacts on their language achievement and the whole language learning process (Hosseini, 2013). While positive attitudes of the learners facilitate their language learning, negative attitudes can cause the motivation of the learners fall and accordingly threat the learning process (Storm, 2007). However, it is not necessarily true that learners who have negative attitudes towards English will proceed these attitudes throughout the process of their language learning, indeed their negative attitudes can be turned out to be the positive ones (Oroujlou, 2011). If their negative attitudes turn into the positive ones, the participation of the learners will increase; hence they begin to make great use of the learning sessions by modifying their learning styles (Rifai, 2010).

Classroom Activities and Language Attitudes

The type of task can be determining factor in a language attitude study. Learners may develop different attitudes towards four main skills and different tasks; that is, listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, the course book activities, and teaching games. In his study, Bain et. al. (2010) ask the learners to evaluate themselves in regards of different tasks and their difficulties, namely, vocabulary and spelling, grammar, conversational language, writing, translating, understanding spoken language, reading, and difficulty relative to other subjects. In the study, he finds out a direct and strong relationship between foreign language success of the learners and their different attitudes towards the tasks.

Starting Age and Language Attitudes

The starting age of learning becomes one of the key factors in determining the foreign language achievement. There are many studies that take the starting age of learning a foreign language into consideration (Karahan, 2007, Gonzalez, 2003, Munoz, 2010, Hall, 2008, Johnstone, 2002, & Spolsky, 1969). In accordance with the results of their studies, many of the researchers consider the earlier onset of second language acquisition as advantageous while the others do not strongly support this claim and think that the older starters may take more advantage of the acquisition process. Most of the researchers, whose beliefs are in favour of the earlier start of acquisition, tend to support their ideas via a common claim. They think that if the learners get in the acquisition process earlier, they will have the chance to get more amounts of input and they will be exposed to the target language much more than the older starters (Hall, 2008, & Moyer, 2004). The critical age issue is also discussed through a different point of view. It is argued that while the older starters may be advantageous at the beginning of the acquisition process as they learn and advance faster, the early starters are more advantageous in the long run although they are slower at the beginning (Gonzalez, 2003, Munoz, 2010, Johnstone, 2002).

Purpose and Research Questions of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the influences of this new regulation on students' attitudes towards English. The study also aims at finding the differences of language attitudes of the students who have started to learn English at 4th grade and the ones who have started to learn English at 2nd grade.

Related to aforementioned aims, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there an attitudinal difference between young learners starting learning English as a foreign language in the 2nd and 4th grades in terms of:
 - a. attitudes towards general English,
 - b. attitudes towards learning English?
2. What activities do young learners favour most?

Methodology

Participants

The scope of this study is limited with 3rd and 5th graders in public primary and secondary schools in Mezitli district of Mersin, Turkey. The ages of 3rd graders are between 8 and 9; the ages of 5th graders are between 11 and 12. Since the aim of this study was to find out the attitudinal differences of the students who have started to learn English at 4th grade and the ones who have started to learn English at 2nd grade, it was suitable for conducting the study on 3rd and 5th graders rather than 2nd and 4th grades as students need to develop language attitudes towards English as time goes by. A year of language learning was considered as suitable and hence 3rd and 5th graders were included in the study. In the end, the scope of the study is young learners since the ages of young language learners are defined as between the ages of 6 and 12 (Rixon, 2012).

This study has been limited with 3rd and 5th graders in only four public primary schools and four public secondary schools, which comprises approximately 20 % of the total population in Mezitli. Cluster random sampling method was used to select the schools. After assigning all the schools in Mezitli a number, four primary and four secondary schools were selected. All the 3rd and 5th graders in these schools constituted the sample of this study. The distribution of number of students in these schools is presented in Table 2. Names of the schools were kept confidential to protect anonymity of the participants.

Table 1. The Distribution of Number of Students

School Names	Female Students	Male Students	Total
<i>Primary Schools</i>			
School 1	23	35	58
School 2	40	31	71
School 3	25	25	50
School 4	61	50	111
TOTAL	149	141	290

Secondary Schools

School 5	62	54	116
School 6	41	39	80
School 7	21	34	55
School 8	80	64	144
TOTAL	204	191	395

As is seen in Table 1, the participants of this study are 290 3rd graders attending public primary schools and 395 5th graders attending public secondary schools in Mezitli district of Mersin, Turkey.

Instruments

For the purposes of the study, a Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale, developed by the researcher of this study, was administered to the 3th grade and 5th grade students in order to collect data. Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale is a Likert type self-report assessment instrument which is “used primarily to measure the affective domain of children” (Salam & Yahaya, p.2). Smiley questionnaires are suitable for young learners since they include visual scales which young learners can effectively identify (Djigunovic, 2012).

Piloting the Scale

The smiley questionnaire was piloted on November 18th in 2014 with five random classes of 3rd grade English learners at Faris Kokulu Primary School in Mezitli district of Mersin. The total number of the students who filled in the questionnaire was 128. In each class, the researcher introduced herself, made a brief explanation of the questionnaire, and made them aware of the two sections in the questionnaire. The piloted scale had 22 Likert-type and one open-ended type of items. The 22 items were subjected to Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) to check the reliability of the scale and to identify the number of factors that would emerge. Based on the factor analysis, three questions were excluded from the data because they loaded on more than two factors. As a result, the questionnaire had 19 Likert-type questions with two sub-scales: Attitudes towards general English and attitudes towards learning English.

Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale

The smiley questionnaire consisted of two sections and 20 items, one of which is an open-ended question. As we deleted one item considering the correlation co-efficiency and two items after factor analysis, the item numbers in the final questionnaire had to be changed.

In the first section, we asked students questions about their gender, as the only demographic information, grade, and the time span they have been learning English. The second section consisted of, 20 questions which aimed to measure students' attitudes towards general English and learning English. Under the subscale of general English, it was aimed to measure students' feelings about English, how much they love English and

learning it. It was also aimed at checking students' ideas about the difficulty of English and their own language learning process. Under the subscale of learning English, it was aimed at checking students' feelings and ideas about four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), classroom tasks and activities, the necessity of learning English and their mood in English classes.

In the questionnaire, there are five questions for measuring students' attitudes towards general English and fourteen questions for measuring students' attitudes towards learning English. Under the subscale of students' attitudes towards general English, there are:

- Five questions for checking students' attitudes towards general English

Question 1: What do you feel about learning English?

Question 2: How much do you love English?

Question 3: How difficult do you think English is?

Question 12: How good are you at English?

Question 14: How difficult do you think learning English is?

Under the subscale of students' attitudes towards learning English, there are:

- Four questions for four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)

Question 6: How much do you love listening in English?

Question 5: How much do you love speaking English?

Question 10: How much do you love reading in English?

Question 11: How much do you love writing in English?

- Two questions for vocabulary learning

Question 4: How much do you love learning new words in English?

Question 13: How much do you wonder about the new English words?

- Six questions for classroom tasks and activities

Question 4: How much do you love learning new words in English?

Question 7: What do you feel about singing in English?

Question 8: What do you feel about the games you play in English?

Question 9: What do you feel about doing English homework?

Question 15: How enjoyable do you think English classes are?

Question 16: How necessary do you think learning English is?

- Two questions for course book activities.

Question 17: How enjoyable do you think the activities in English course book are?

Question 18: How attractive do you think the topics in English course book are?

- The last question was an open-ended question which asked for the three favourite classroom activities of the students in English classes.

Question 20: What are three of your favourite activities in English classes?

The questionnaire was conducted in the students' native language 'Turkish.'

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure started with deciding on the schools in which the study would be conducted. Four primary and four secondary schools were decided on. The researcher wrote a permission letter to the District National Education Ministry to get allowance for conducting the study. The researcher visited each school in person, and distributed the questionnaires to the sampled classes. Since the instructions have an important role for the sake of the reliability concerns, the researcher gave the instructions to each sampled group.

Data Analysis

As is aforementioned, in order to collect data, a language attitude questionnaire was developed for the study, consisting of 19 Likert and one open-ended type of questions. The quantitative data were analyzed through Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS), and the qualitative data were analyzed through making use of the frequencies of the activities. To analyze the research question 1.a and 1.b descriptive statistics and T-test were used. For the research question 2, frequencies of the activities were used to determine the number of popular activities of students.

Results

As is aforementioned, the data from the Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics in the SPSS program. In accordance with the factor analysis, the questions that stand for the same claims and that were loaded to the same factor were categorized under two main titles: 1. Attitudes towards general English, 2. Attitudes towards learning English.

Learners' Attitudes towards General English

This factor includes the questions investigating young learners' feelings about English, ideas about the process of their own learning and the degree of difficulty in learning English. Learners' attitudes towards general English were investigated through 5 questions. The frequency and percentage rates of the responses are demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 2. Learners' Attitudes towards General English (3rd Graders & 5th Graders)

Questions	Percentages									
	3 rd	5 th	3 rd	5 th						
Q1	72.4	43.3	21.3	37.4	3.5	10.8	1	5.1	1.7	3.3
What do you feel about learning English?	very good		good		no idea		bad		very bad	
Q2	73.4	47.3	19.6	30.9	0.3	4.9	4.2	11.5	2.1	5.4
How much do you love English?	like very much		like		no idea		like a little		don't like at all	
Q3	37.1	11.5	39.9	46.3	14	14.8	6.3	18.9	2.8	8.4
How difficult do you think English is?	very easy		easy		no idea		difficult		very difficult	
Q12	62.6	36.2	25.9	40.5	6.6	12.6	1.7	7.7	3.1	3.1
How good are you at English?	very good		good		no idea		bad		very bad	
Q14	45.5	17.2	32.5	36.9	10.1	7.7	7.3	27.7	4.5	10.5
How difficult do you think learning English is?	very easy		easy		no idea		difficult		very difficult	

It is clear from the research findings of the first component that attitudes of both 3rd graders and 5th graders are positive and they feel very good about English. Yet, in this cluster, the rate of every question of 3rd graders' is higher than the ones of 5th graders'. While most of 3rd graders feel very good about English and they love it very much, the rate is lower among 5th graders. Nearly half of them feel very good about English and they love it very much. This finding supports Karahan's (2007) study in which she found out that the ones whose starting age of language learning is earlier consider English more pleasant than the one other group.

This situation can be more clearly observed in the results of the questions exploring students' opinions about the difficulty of English. While 3rd graders consider English and learning English as very easy, 5th graders think that both English and learning English is easy. This can arise from the fact that as children grow up and the onset age of learning English rises, they will have to face more troubles and with the pace and acquisition level (Spolsky, 1969). Since children in younger ages have the higher advantage to make use of their grammatical and receptive phonological abilities (Hall, 2008), they find it much easier to learn a foreign language.

Table 3. T-test Results on the Difference between 3rd Graders and 5th Graders in terms of Their Attitudes towards General English

	mean	s.d.	t	p
3rd graders	4.34	.711	9.22	.000
5th graders	3.74	.92		

In Table 3, the positive t value (9.22) indicates that the mean of responses for the 3rd and 5th grades yields a significant difference in terms of their attitudes towards general English. It is clear from the statistical analysis that 3rd grade students have higher values of attitudes than 5th graders, which could stem from the fact that the earlier children start to learn English, the more effective will their language learning process be in comparison to the older starters (Hall, 2008, & Moyer, 2004).

Learners' Attitudes towards Learning English

In this study, learners' attitudes towards learning English were also investigated through their feelings about four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), classroom tasks and activities, their ideas about the necessity of learning English, and their mood in English classes.

Table 4. Learners' Attitudes towards Learning English (3rd Graders & 5th Graders)

Questions	Percentages									
	3 rd	5 th	3 rd	5 th						
Q4 How much do you love learning new words?	82.5	59.3	11.5	25.8	2.8	4.6	2.1	6.6	1	3.6
	like very much		like		no idea		like a little		don't like at all	
Q5 How much do you love speaking English?	65.4	50.1	23.8	26.6	4.5	6.6	4.2	10.7	2.1	5.9
	like very much		like		no idea		like a little		don't like at all	
Q6 How much do you love listening in English?	77.6	53.2	13.3	27.6	3.8	7.4	3.5	9	1.7	2.8
	like very much		like		no idea		like a little		don't like at all	
Q7 What do you feel about singing in English?	66.8	47.6	24.1	28.4	3.5	14.1	2.4	3.8	3.1	6.1
	very good		good		no idea		bad		very bad	
Q8	74.5	51.9	16.4	27.9	4.9	12.8	1.7	4.9	2.4	2.6

What do you feel about the games you play in English? Q9	very good 61.5	45	good 25.5	36.3	no idea 5.2	6.4	bad 2.4	5.9	very bad 5.2	5.4
What do you feel about doing English homework? Q10	very good 56.6	45	good 29.7	28.9	no idea 5.6	7.7	bad 4.2	12.5	very bad 3.8	5.9
How much do you love reading in English? Q11	like very much 61.5	44.2	like 25.2	32.5	no idea 5.6	7.2	like a little 3.8	9.5	don't like at all 3.8	6.6
How much do you love writing in English? Q13	81.1	63.2	13.3	24	2.1	4.1	1.7	5.9	don't like at all	
How much do you wonder about the new English words? Q15	81.8	50.9	11.2	29.9	1.7	4.6	2.8	7.9	1.7	2.8
How enjoyable do you think English classes are? Q16	86.4	77.2	9.1	10.7	2.8	4.1	.3	4.3	not at all	6.6
How necessary do you think learning English is? Q17	78.3	42.7	12.6	34	3.1	5.6	2.1	9	1.4	3.6
How enjoyable do you think the activities in English course book are? Q18	71.8	42.4	20	27	2.9	4.7	2.5	8.5	3.8	8.7
How attractive do you think the topics in English course book are? Q19	70	45.9	21.1	32.1	2.9	6.5	3.2	8.3	not at all	
How comfortable do you feel while learning English in class?									2.9	7.3

The second component of the questionnaire was attitudes towards learning English which included the questions searching for the opinions and feelings of the respondents about four main skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and classroom tasks and activities in English classes. Research findings indicated that, in the results of each question, though attitudes of both 3rd graders and 5th graders towards learning English are positive, the rate is higher in attitudes of 3rd graders as in attitudes towards general English. In four main skills, both 3rd and 5th graders stated that they love listening, speaking, reading, and writing very much. Yet, the big difference in the rate of attitudes indicated that 3rd graders have much higher positive dispositions towards these skills. As Bain et. al. (2010) suggest, this finding reflects parallel results with the findings of students' attitudes and feelings towards general English and the difficulty of it. As is stated before, Bain et. al. (2010) claim that there is a direct relationship between foreign language achievement and their attitudes towards skills and tasks.

The findings showed that the most popular skill among students is listening. However, the attitude scales vary between 3rd graders and 5th graders. While 77.6 % of the 3rd

graders stated that they like listening very much, 53.2 % of the 5th grades told that they like it very much. This finding supports the claim of Kızıltan & Atlı (2013) that learners favourite receptive skills more and they have higher positive dispositions for them. The second favourite skill was speaking. While 65.4 % of 3rd graders like speaking very much, the percentage is 50.1 % among 5th graders. This finding contradicts with the common bias in our culture that Turkish people are incapable of speaking English. Since speaking confidence plays an important role in the development of learners' speaking skills (Boonkit, 2010), language teachers should create opportunities for them to speak the target language and help them accelerate the process of developing speaking skills.

According to the findings, both 3rd graders and 5th graders like writing very much. However, while the rate was 61.5 % among 3rd graders, it was 44.2 % among 5th graders. The attitudes of students towards reading skills were also positive among both groups. While 56.6 % of 3rd graders like reading in English very much, the percentage was 45 % among 5th graders. These findings showed that at the beginning of their language learning process students develop positive attitudes towards four main skills. Yet, the ones that start learning English earlier develop much higher positive attitudes than the ones start learning later.

The research findings showed that both 3rd graders and 5th graders develop positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning though the rate is higher among 3rd graders as in all areas of language learning. This may arise from the fact that children are very curious about learning the meanings of new words (Kızıltan & Atlı, 2013).

It is clear from the research findings that both 3rd graders and 5th graders consider English classes as very enjoyable. The percentage was 81.8 % among 3rd graders and 63.2 % among 5th graders. It is the same with the activities in English course book as students think that they are also very enjoyable. Yet, the attitude scales of 3rd graders were much higher than the ones of 5th graders. While 78.3 % of 3rd graders think that the activities in the English course book are enjoyable a lot, the percentage is 42.7 % among 5th graders. It is very obvious that students also develop positive attitudes towards English classes and the activities in their course book as they do towards general English. This finding supports Rahimi's claim that there is a close relationship between the textbook attitudes and overall foreign language attitudes (Rahimi, 2012).

Based upon the research findings, both 3rd graders and 5th graders have positive attitudes towards English games, songs, and homework. Yet, as in all other areas, the attitude rates of 3rd graders were much higher than the ones of 5th graders. Both learner groups are young learners, hence when we consider the ages of the participants, it is very usual for them to have high positive dispositions towards games and songs in English. It may arise from the fact that by the help of games, learners have the very chance of speaking and using the language rather than merely study it, and for this reason games help and encourage language learners to sustain their interest and work (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). Besides, songs are also capable of adding interest to the classroom routine and accordingly improve students' motivation (Millington, 2011).

Research findings also showed that both 3rd graders and 5th graders think that it is necessary "a lot" to learn English. It can be easily seen that learners are aware of the importance of learning English. Positive attitudes of the students can be determining factor in this since positive attitudes of learners help them to develop and sustain their intrinsic motivation (Hosseini, 2013).

According to the findings, 97.9 % of 3rd graders stated that they feel comfortable “a lot” while the percentage is 45.3 % among 5th graders. This huge difference shows, in a sense, the anxiety and concern status of the learners. Nearly all of the 3rd grade learners feel very comfortable in English classes and have minimum debilitating anxiety and worries (Dörnyei, 2005) in their language learning process. 5th grader also feel very comfortable but with a much higher percentage.

Table 5. T-test Results on the Difference between 3rd Graders and 5th Graders in terms of Their Attitudes towards Learning English

	mean	s.d.	t	p
3rd graders	4.55	.60	7.60	.000
5th graders	4.13	.78		

As is shown in Table 5, the positive t test value (7.60) points put that there is a significant difference in responses of 3rd and 5th graders in terms of their attitudes towards learning English.

Learners' Favourite Activities

Table 6. Favourite Activities of Students

Activities	3 rd Graders			5 th Graders			TOTAL
	Male	Female	Tot	Male	Female	Tot	
Playing Games	59 43%	65 44%	124 43%	70 38%	64 31%	134 34%	258 38%
Singing Songs	39 28%	50 34%	89 31%	22 12%	57 28%	79 20%	168 25%
Speaking	22 16%	25 17%	47 16%	51 27%	51 25%	102 26%	149 22%
Writing	29 21%	33 22%	62 22%	37 20%	44 22%	81 21%	143 21%
Reading	16 12%	10 7%	26 9%	41 22%	65 32%	106 27%	132 20%
Learning Words	11 8%	14 9%	25 9%	28 15%	60 30%	88 23%	113 17%
Listening	11 8%	3 2%	14 5%	14 8%	25 12%	39 10%	53 8%
Puzzle	9 7%	10 7%	19 7%	13 7%	18 9%	31 8%	50 7%
Painting	14 10%	18 12%	32 11%	--	5 2%	5 1%	37 5%
Watching Videos	7	13	20	5	2	7	27

	5%	9%	7%	3%	1%	2%	4%
Cut & Paste	4 3%	12 8%	16 6%	--	--	--	16 2%
Drama	--	1 1%	1 0.3	1 1%	3 1%	4 1%	5 1%

The findings from the open-ended question in the questionnaire were analyzed via making use of the frequencies of the activities. However, we had to eliminate some of the statements since they were not considered as “activity.” This probably aroused from the fact that the participants were young learners and they could not distinguish activities from the other things that they did in English.

According to the findings of this analysis, the most popular activity of learners is playing games in English. It is in the same line with the results of the questionnaire. As is aforementioned, language learning through teaching games forms a crucial part in the language learning process of young learners. They like to take part in using the language without a feeling that they are merely studying. Hence, playing English games provide an important motivation source for them. Singing songs is the second popular activity among students. As children already love to listen and sing songs either in their mother tongue or in a foreign language, it was a normal result for the study. While singing, they also have the chance to practice a new sound without producing the same level of boredom (Millington, 2011).

It was also found out that students love to speak English. It was again in the same parallel with the results of the questionnaire as most of the students stated that they like speaking English very much. These results may suggest that learners are aware of the necessity and importance of speaking skills. Therefore, language teachers should try to provide more alternative situations and activities for the learners to develop their speaking skills, and make them feel comfortable with their language use (Boonkit, 2010). Another popular activity of the students was writing. While writing is considered to be the most difficult one among four main skills (Tangpermpoon, 2008), the results seem to be favourable. As young learners are potentially energetic and motivated, teachers need to take the advantage of it. Hence, through the process of writing, teachers may help students realize the importance of writing and provide them with a chance to self-correct their own writing mistakes to raise their awareness in L2 writing (Tangpermpoon, 2008). Learning vocabulary was also one of the most popular activities among students. As is aforementioned, young learners are naturally curious and keen on knowing the meanings of new words. Their love to sing English songs can be also dedicated to their wish of knowing and using new words in English (Athi, 2008). The other popular activities of students were painting, watching videos, cut and paste activities, reading, listening, and watching videos.

Discussion

Discussion of the findings are provided under the subtitles attitudes towards general English, attitudes towards learning English, gender differences in attitudes of students, and favourite activities of students in English classes.

Discussion of Attitudes towards General English

According to the factor analysis, the first component of the questionnaire was 'attitudes towards general English' which included the questions exploring the opinions of the respondents of general English. The questions in this cluster were similar in that they all aimed at finding out feelings and ideas about general English and difficulty of it.

It is clear from the research findings of the first component that attitudes of both 3rd graders and 5th graders are positive and they feel very good about English. Yet, in this cluster, the rate of every question of 3rd graders' is higher than the ones of 5th graders'. While most of 3rd graders feel very good about English and they love it very much, the rate is lower among 5th graders. Nearly half of them feel very good about English and they love it very much. This finding supports Karahan's (2007) study in which she found out that the ones whose starting age of language learning is earlier consider English more pleasant than the one other group.

This situation can be more clearly observed in the results of the questions exploring students' opinions about the difficulty of English. While 3rd graders consider English and learning English as very easy, 5th graders think that both English and learning English is easy. This can arise from the fact that as children grow up and the onset age of learning English rises, they will have to face more troubles and with the pace and acquisition level (Spolsky, 1969). Since children in younger ages have the higher advantage to make use of their grammatical and receptive phonological abilities (Hall, 2008), they find it much easier to learn a foreign language.

Discussion of Attitudes towards Learning English

The second component of the questionnaire was attitudes towards learning English which included the questions searching for the opinions and feelings of the respondents about four main skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and classroom tasks and activities in English classes. Research findings indicated that, in the results of each question, though attitudes of both 3rd graders and 5th graders towards learning English are positive, the rate is higher in attitudes of 3rd graders as in attitudes towards general English. In four main skills, both 3rd and 5th graders stated that they love listening, speaking, reading, and writing very much. Yet, the big difference in the rate of attitudes indicated that 3rd graders have much higher positive dispositions towards these skills. As Bain et. al. (2010) suggest, this finding reflects parallel results with the findings of students' attitudes and feelings towards general English and the difficulty of it. As is stated before, Bain et. al. (2010) claim that there is a direct relationship between foreign language achievement and their attitudes towards skills and tasks.

The findings showed that the most popular skill among students is listening. However, the attitude scales vary between 3rd graders and 5th graders. While 77.6 % of the 3rd graders stated that they like listening very much, 53.2 % of the 5th grades told that they like it very much. This finding supports the claim of Kızıltan & Atlı (2013) that learners favourite receptive skills more and they have higher positive dispositions for them. The second favourite skill was speaking. While 65.4 % of 3rd graders like speaking very much, the percentage is 50.1 % among 5th graders. This finding contradicts with the common bias in our culture that Turkish people are incapable of speaking English. Since speaking confidence plays an important role in the development of learners' speaking skills (Boonkit, 2010), language teachers should create opportunities for them to speak the target language and help them accelerate the process of developing speaking skills.

According to the findings, both 3rd graders and 5th graders like writing very much. However, while the rate was 61.5 % among 3rd graders, it was 44.2 % among 5th graders. The attitudes of students towards reading skills were also positive among both groups. While 56.6 % of 3rd graders like reading in English very much, the percentage was 45 % among 5th graders. These findings showed that at the beginning of their language learning process students develop positive attitudes towards four main skills. Yet, the ones that start learning English earlier develop much higher positive attitudes than the ones start learning later.

The research findings showed that both 3rd graders and 5th graders develop positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning though the rate is higher among 3rd graders as in all areas of language learning. This may arise from the fact that children are very curious about learning the meanings of new words (Kızıltan & Atlı, 2013).

It is clear from the research findings that both 3rd graders and 5th graders consider English classes as very enjoyable. The percentage was 81.8 % among 3rd graders and 63.2 % among 5th graders. It is the same with the activities in English course book as students think that they are also very enjoyable. Yet, the attitude scales of 3rd graders were much higher than the ones of 5th graders. While 78.3 % of 3rd graders think that the activities in the English course book are enjoyable a lot, the percentage is 42.7 % among 5th graders. It is very obvious that students also develop positive attitudes towards English classes and the activities in their course book as they do towards general English. This finding supports Rahimi's claim that there is a close relationship between the textbook attitudes and overall foreign language attitudes (Rahimi, 2012).

Based upon the research findings, both 3rd graders and 5th graders have positive attitudes towards English games, songs, and homework. Yet, as in all other areas, the attitude rates of 3rd graders were much higher than the ones of 5th graders. Both learner groups are young learners, hence when we consider the ages of the participants, it is very usual for them to have high positive dispositions towards games and songs in English. It may arise from the fact that by the help of games, learners have the very chance of speaking and using the language rather than merely study it, and for this reason games help and encourage language learners to sustain their interest and work (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). Besides, songs are also capable of adding interest to the classroom routine and accordingly improve students' motivation (Millington, 2011).

Research findings also showed that both 3rd graders and 5th graders think that it is necessary "a lot" to learn English. It can be easily seen that learners are aware of the importance of learning English. Positive attitudes of the students can be determining factor in this since positive attitudes of learners help them to develop and sustain their intrinsic motivation (Hosseini, 2013).

According to the findings, 97.9 % of 3rd graders stated that they feel comfortable "a lot" while the percentage is 45.3 % among 5th graders. This huge difference shows, in a sense, the anxiety and concern status of the learners. Nearly all of the 3rd grade learners feel very comfortable in English classes and have minimum debilitating anxiety and worries (Dörnyei, 2005) in their language learning process. 5th grader also feel very comfortable but with a much higher percentage.

Discussion of "Learners' Favourite Activities"

Students' favourite activities were searched with an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire and analyzed through the content analysis. According to the findings of this analysis, the most popular activity of learners is playing games in English. It is in the same line with the results of the questionnaire. As is aforementioned, language learning through teaching games forms a crucial part in the language learning process of young learners. They like to take part in using the language without a feeling that they are merely studying. Hence, playing English games provide an important motivation source for them. Singing songs is the second popular activity among students. As children already love to listen and sing songs either in their mother tongue or in a foreign language, it was a normal result for the study. While singing, they also have the chance to practice a new sound without producing the same level of boredom (Millington, 2011). It was also found out that students love to speak English. It was again in the same parallel with the results of the questionnaire as most of the students stated that they like speaking English very much. These results may suggest that learners are aware of the necessity and importance of speaking skills. Therefore, language teachers should try to provide more alternative situations and activities for the learners to develop their speaking skills, and make them feel comfortable with their language use (Boonkit, 2010). Another popular activity of the students was writing. While writing is considered to be the most difficult one among four main skills (Tangpermpoon, 2008), the results seem to be favorable. As young learners are potentially energetic and motivated, teachers need to take the advantage of it. Hence, through the process of writing, teachers may help students realize the importance of writing and provide them with a chance to self-correct their own writing mistakes to raise their awareness in L2 writing (Tangpermpoon, 2008). Learning vocabulary was also one of the most popular activities among students. As is aforementioned, young learners are naturally curious and keen on knowing the meanings of new words. Their love to sing English songs can be also dedicated to their wish of knowing and using new words in English (Atlı, 2008). The other popular activities of students were painting, watching videos, cut and paste activities, reading, listening, and watching videos.

Discussion of Gender Differences and Language Attitudes

The research findings showed that the attitudes of female learners towards general English are more positive than the ones of males'. The mean score of female learners was 4.07 while the mean score of male learners was 3.91. The situation is the same with attitudes towards learning English. The mean score of female learners was 4.40 while the mean score of male learners was 4.19. This finding supports the common claim that female language learners have more positive attitudes towards language learning than males (Anderson, 2005, Bağçeci, 2014, Bilaniuk, 2003, Ghazvini, 2011, Henry & Apeltgren, 2008, İnal, Evin, & Saracaloğlu, 2005, Karahan, 2007, & Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011).

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that a great majority of students have positive attitudes towards general English and learning English though 3rd graders showed much higher positive attitudes than 5th graders. Hence, it can easily be said that this study showed the importance of the starting age of language learning and its effects on learners' attitudes towards English. Therefore, the finding of this study supports the "earlier is better" claim (Spolsky, 1969). The study also demonstrated and supported the common claim that female language learners have more positive attitudes than male ones (Anderson, 2005, Bağçeci, 2014, Bilaniuk, 2003, Ghazvini, 2011, Henry & Apeltgren, 2008, İnal, Evin, &

Saracaloğlu, 2005, Karahan, 2007, & Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011). Despite being in a lower attitude rate than females, males also showed positive attitudes towards English. Hence, it is essential to sustain students' positive attitudes towards general English and learning English through necessary changes by the help of the findings of this study. Authorities can take into consideration the responses of the students in the development of the language learning curriculum or language teachers can make use of the tasks and activities which students show higher positive attitudes in order to change the negative attitudes of students into positive ones. Since, as is mentioned in Chapter 2, English curriculum and classroom activities which were adapted for the needs and individual differences of the students can change negative attitudes of students and build positive ones.

Limitations of the study

For the aims of the study, in order to investigate the attitudinal differences between students who start learning English at 2nd grade and 4th grade, only a Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale was applied as a data collection instrument.

Another limitation of the study was that, in the questionnaire of the study, students' attitudes were checked through questions related only to classroom tasks and activities, hence other factors which may affect attitudes of students could not be investigated.

Suggestions for Further Studies

The current study proposes beneficial findings for the investigation of students' language attitudes. However, since the data collection instrument of the study was limited only to a Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale, the other data collection instruments could not be applied, which might provide much more effective results for the study. Hence, in further studies, researchers can benefit from the other data collection instruments, such as interviews or small group meetings/discussions and give the participants a chance to express themselves and mention about their language learning process in their own words.

Moreover, though the reliability and validity of the questionnaire was high, the study was conducted only in a district of Mersin. Hence, there need to be more studies to develop more reliability and validity in different regions of Turkey.

Furthermore, since in the questionnaire of this study, students' language attitudes were investigated through the questions related only to the classroom tasks and activities, in the further studies, researchers can take into consideration other factors which may affect language attitudes of students, such as the role of teachers, parents, or culture.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Smiley Face Language Attitude Scale

Gender: Female

Grade:.....

Male

ESL Timespan:.....(year)

*Please tick the box of the answer you find yourself on each question.

1. What do you feel about learning English?



Very good



Good



No idea



Bad



Very bad

2. How much do you love English?



Like very much



Like



No idea



Like a little



Don't like at all

3. How difficult do you think English is?



Very easy



Easy



No idea



Difficult



Very difficult

4. How much do you love learning new words in English?



Like very much



Like



No idea



Like a little



Don't like at all

5. How much do you love speaking English?



Like very much Like No idea Like a little Don't like at all

6. How much do you love listening in English?



Like very much Like No idea Like a little Don't like at all

7. What do you feel about singing in English?



Very good Good No idea Bad Very bad

8. What do you feel about the games you play in English?



Very good Good No idea Bad Very bad

9. What do you feel about doing English homework?



Very good Good No idea Bad Very bad

10. How much do you love reading in English?

				
<u>Like very much</u>	<u>Like</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>Like a little</u>	<u>Don't like at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11. How much do you love writing in English?

				
<u>Like very much</u>	<u>Like</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>Like a little</u>	<u>Don't like at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. How good are you at English?

				
<u>Very good</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>Bad</u>	<u>Very bad</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. How much do you wonder about the new English words?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14. How difficult do you think learning English is?

				
<u>Very easy</u>	<u>Easy</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>Difficult</u>	<u>Very difficult</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. How enjoyable do you think English classes are?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

16. How necessary do you think learning English is?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

17. How enjoyable do you think the activities in English course book are?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

18. How attractive do you think the topics in English coursebook are?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19. How comfortable do you feel while learning English in class?

				
<u>A lot</u>	<u>To some extent</u>	<u>No idea</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. What are three of your favourite activities in English classes?

1.....
 2.....
 3.....