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AUTHORS: Gamze ÖNER,Enisa Mede

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Evaluation of A1 level program at an English preparatory school in a Turkish university: a case study

Gamze Öner¹

Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul-Turkey

Enisa Mede²

Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul-Turkey

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of stakeholders namely, students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator enrolled in an English Preparatory School in relation to their perceptions of the A1 (beginner level) program designed for repeat students at a foundation (non-profit, private) university in Istanbul, Turkey. A sample of 47 students repeating A1 level program, 5 EFL instructors, 1 level coordinator and 1 program administrator participated in the study. The quantitative data were collected through a needs analysis questionnaire administered to the participating students while the qualitative data were obtained by semi-structured interviews carried out with all stakeholders of the program. The findings of the study revealed that although the program is perceived to be effective in general, there are particular components that need to be revised and emphasized. In the light of these findings, certain curricular recommendations are made to be taken for consideration in the following academic years.

Keywords: EFL, program evaluation, case study, preparatory school

¹ Bahcesehir University, Language Preparatory School, Istanbul, Turkey. Email: gamze.onr@gmail.com

² Bahcesehir University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Department of English Language Teaching, Istanbul, Turkey. Email: enisa.mede@gmail.com

Introduction

Evaluation has gained much attention particularly in language education by providing a detailed feedback on how a particular curriculum is perceived by all stakeholders involved in a program. It is important for language education programs to have a structured evaluation system which aids to improve the quality of instruction (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005; Lynch, 1996; Peacock, 2009).

Periodically evaluating and revising existing language education programs are of great value for stakeholders as the ongoing program evaluation paves the way for developing effective curricula (Soruç, 2012). Gereade (2005) sees program development as an ongoing process which needs to be continually evaluated in order to determine whether the plans for the teaching process are effective or not. Richards (2003) states that program evaluation focuses on collecting information about a program to understand how the program works, enabling different kinds of decisions to be made about the program, such as whether the program responds to learner needs, whether further teacher training is required for instructors working in the program and whether the students are learning sufficiently from it.

Two common goals of program evaluation were identified by Lynch (1996) as evaluating a program's effectiveness in absolute terms and/or assessing its quality against that of comparable programs. To achieve effectiveness and quality in a program, it is crucial that there is a structured evaluation system established.

As it is evident, needs assessment is fundamental for program design and evaluation because without a social or educational need (or some other kind of need), there obviously is no need for a program (Fatihi, 2003; Richards, 2003; Soruç, 2012; Yılmaz, 2004). As Brown (1989; 1995) points out that program evaluation should be viewed as the drawing together of many sources of information to help examine selected research questions from different points of view, with the goal of forming all of this into a cogent and useful picture of how well the needs of the learners are being met. Therefore, taking the needs of all the stakeholders into consideration is a crucial step to be implemented in language program evaluation.

Program evaluation in language education

Evaluation is a central component of the educational process. In a general sense, educational evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decisions alternatives (Stufflebeam, 1971, p. 43). It is a systematic description of education objectives and/or assessment of their merit or worth (Hopkins, 1989, p. 14).

According to Worthen and Sanders (1998), some view evaluation as primarily scientific inquiry, whereas others argue that it is essentially the act of collecting and providing information to enable decision-makers to function effectively. Frechtling (2007) elaborates on this idea emphasizing that the difference between these two viewpoints might be due to the dimensions of the evaluation related to its design (experimental, quasi-experimental,

regression discontinuity), intent (advocacy versus objective assessment), philosophical underpinnings (quantitative versus qualitative), and others.

Parallel to these common definitions, Cronbach (1991, p.236) classifies the following three types of decisions that require evaluation:

1. Course improvement: deciding what instructional materials and methods are satisfactory and where change is needed.
2. Decisions about individuals: identifying the needs of the pupil for the sake of planning his instruction, judging pupil merit for purposes of selection and grouping, acquainting the pupil with his own progress and deficiencies.
3. Administrative regulation: judging how good the school system is, how good individual teachers are, etc.

Regarding program evaluation, Topkaya and Küçük (2010, p.52) define 'program' as an organized and planned set of related activities directed toward a common purpose or goal. Mackay (1994) indicates that in the field of language teaching, the term 'program evaluation' is used to a wide variety of activities, ranging from theory-driven research to informal investigations carried out by a single classroom. Lastly, Lynch (1997, p.2) specifies an educational program as a series of courses linked with some common goal or end product.

From these common perspectives, it can be stated that the primary aim of language program evaluation in education is to collect information about student and teacher performance with in-class interactions. Similarly, the aims might also include pointing out strengths and weaknesses of certain activities in a program (Tunç, 2010). To wrap up, various different aspects of a language program may be the main concern of the evaluation process.

Based on the discussions above, whatever the purpose underlying the evaluation process is, in order to understand how the program works, how teachers reflect it in their daily practices and whether it addresses students' needs, it is essential that programs be evaluated regularly and that informed policy decisions be made based on research.

Literature review on program evaluation in education

In this section, studies on program evaluation in different educational contexts will be introduced. Then, studies carried out in language preparatory programs in Turkey will be briefly discussed. Finally, the evaluation design of the present study will be presented.

To begin with, Lee (2002) aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a music-based curriculum using both Chinese and English songs with ten adopted pre-school Chinese children and their American parents. Based on the data gathered from journal entries, parent interviews, reviews of videotaped records of class activity, written and verbal parent-teacher correspondences, the participants showed significant progress in acquisition of musical skills, language skills and cultural awareness.

Yıldız (2004) focused on the evaluation of the Turkish Language Teaching Program for Foreigners at Minsk State Linguistic University (MSLU) in Belarus. The aim of the study was to find out the discrepancies between the current status and the desired outcomes of the Turkish program at MSLU. Based on the data analysis collected from questionnaires and interviews, the existing language program partly met the needs of the learners due to the fact that the Turkish language proficiency among the current students, former students and the university authorities was higher than expected.

In Marcinkoniene's (2005) study, the ways of improving course programs and promotion of language acquisition at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) by taking the theoretical background of educational evaluation traditions, course-specific aspects and assessment criteria into consideration were emphasized. Data were gathered through a questionnaire, which was administered to 234 first and second-year students to evaluate their expectations, achievements and attitudes towards the program along with the role of course materials. The results of the study helped the participants become more critical and encouraged the learners and the teachers to take evaluation more seriously.

Finally, Nam (2005) attempted to reveal the development of communication-based English language instruction in a Korean university context by evaluating/critiquing a specific college English program at Pusan National University (PNU). The findings reported that even though students mostly seemed to have rather negative opinions, instructors shared positive opinions about the effectiveness of the new curriculum.

Apart from the language program evaluation studies carried out in international contexts, there are a limited number of evaluation studies in English preparatory programs at Turkish universities.

One of the most recent studies was conducted by Soruç (2012) who aimed to investigate the context and program of an English Preparatory School in Istanbul. The findings obtained from learners' needs assessment survey and interviews indicated that the program was satisfactory for their language skills in general. This study highlighted the importance of needs analysis playing a significant role in making curricular decisions or redesigning language preparatory programs.

In a different study, Yılmaz (2004) identified the English language needs of students in voluntary preparatory classes of Gaziosmanpaşa University by emphasizing to what degree these preparatory classes have met those needs. The participants were 40 students, who were enrolled in the preparatory program, 81 former students, 7 instructors and the director of the program. The instruments used for the data collection process were three different questionnaires and a structured interview. The results showed that although students were largely satisfied with the program, there were particular areas to be improved. Specifically, students needed the broader use of materials and methods in classroom instruction. It was also found that there was a particular need for speaking and listening skills, which were considered to be weak in the program.

Sarı (2003) evaluated the English teaching program implemented at Gülhane Military Medical Faculty with 230 students, 25 doctors and 7 teachers. The data were collected

through two questionnaires administered to the students and teachers, a structured interview conducted with doctors and random written student reports. The results showed that reading and speaking skills gained priority in the program. Besides, the common language goals were reported as translating the medical material, talking to foreigners, getting an overseas assignment and following lectures.

Gerede (2005) explored the outcomes of a curriculum renewal project implemented at Anadolu University, Intensive English Program. 135 first year students of five English medium departments in 2004 and 129 first year students of the same departments in 2005 were the participants of her study. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. So as to identify which curriculum met the language needs better, data were compared. The findings reported that there were some important distinctions between the two curricula regarding meeting the language needs of the students.

Muşlu (2007) evaluated the writing curriculum at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages (AUSFL). She focused on materials, process-genre approach, journal writing, portfolios, project work and the writing competition. The participants were 48 writing course instructors who taught to different proficiency levels at the university. Significantly, as a data collection instrument, the questionnaire was only given to the teachers in order to identify their views on the writing curriculum. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with 40% of the teachers for further thoughts. The results revealed some problems with the course packs and supplementary materials which were taken into consideration for the redesign of the existing program.

After the evaluation of the Preparatory Program of Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Özkanal (2009) suggested a new preparatory program model. The data collection instruments were two questionnaires and an interview conducted with 354 students (either enrolled in the program, former or studied at the faculties) and 27 instructors. The findings showed that there were challenging issues in technical English that needed further attention.

Finally, in her study, Mede (2010) aimed to design and evaluate a Language Preparatory Program for student teachers enrolled in the English Teaching Program at a private Turkish university. Based on the obtained data from the pre-needs analysis questionnaires and focus group interviews, identifying the language needs of the learners was emphasized as the major step to be taken before designing a preparatory program. As for the evaluation of the program through post-needs analysis questionnaires, focus group interviews and pre- and post-proficiency exam scores, she concluded that the program met the student teachers' perceived language and learning needs as well as increased their language proficiency.

Considering the relevant literature, it seems that evaluation should be a systematic process of language education programs, which basically and primarily needs to be parallel to learner needs. This study, therefore, is conducted for evaluative purposes and aims to involve students in the decision-making process by bringing out and shedding light on their language needs.

Context of evaluation

In our globalized world where English is an international tool for communication, teaching English is becoming a research field that is worthwhile exploring within language education. The need for intensive English education is the main concern of most universities both in national and international contexts.

Considering Turkish context, due to the existence of numerous English medium universities, language preparatory programs have been designed to meet the general language needs of students before they start their undergraduate program at various disciplines. Specifically, what is commonly observed with regard to the mission statement of these university preparatory programs in Turkey is that they aim to enable students to follow their departmental courses with a sufficient language proficiency level and to use English in their professional lives.

After the students are placed at different universities according to their university entrance exam scores, they are required to take the language proficiency exam. If they pass the exam with an average of 60, they have the right to continue their education in their prospective departments. However, if they fail the exam, they take a placement exam which determines their level of English proficiency. Mostly, these levels are based on the Common European Framework (CEFR), which aim to provide transparency in language acquisition, in the application of language and in the language competency of students in Europe. According to this framework, the students are placed in six different levels according to their language proficiency namely, A1 (breakthrough or beginner), A2 (way stage or elementary), B1 (threshold or intermediate), B2 (vantage or upper intermediate), C1 (effective Operational Proficiency or advanced), and C2 (mastery or proficiency) levels.

As the major purpose of English language preparatory programs is to prepare students for their future departmental courses at various disciplines by helping them develop the language skills and strategies effectively, the identification of their language needs should be placed at the heart of such programs. It is apparent that at this stage, students' learning styles and strategies have already been formed, and their needs and wants have also been set depending on their previous educational experiences. As Yılmaz (2004) states in his study, without these important analyses, a program's real needs, goals, and objectives, may be misidentified and students, teachers and institutions end up wasting valuable time and energy. However, "needs are not static; but rather, changeable" (Soruç, 2012, p. 36). Thus, this situation causes problems and poses obstacles regarding the learning process. Taking this into consideration, program evaluation should be the main concern so as to identify whether the needs are generally met in the implemented curriculum and to decide the existing flaws that make language education diverge from its crucial goals and objectives. These common goals contribute to the investigation of how a particular program can be improved and developed through systematic evaluation.

Based on these overviews, the aim of the present study is to evaluate the existing A1 (beginner) level program offered to the repeat students by the English Preparatory School at a foundation (non-profit, private) university in Turkey. Specifically, it attempts to evaluate the existing program by identifying the perceptions of all stakeholders (students, EFL instructors,

level coordinator and program administrator) in relation to the emphasis given to the development of the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary as well as the effectiveness of the program on the three dimensions namely, content, materials and activities. Finally, the study explores the potential problems of the existing program which would lead to certain implications for its redesign. The following research questions guided the research design of this study:

1. What are the overall perceptions of the students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator about the importance of the development with respect to the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary in the A1 program?
2. What are the overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the effectiveness of the following dimensions of the existing program:
 - a. content
 - b. materials
 - c. activities
3. What are the overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the potential problems experienced in this program?

Methodology

Research design

In light of the aforementioned discussions on needs analysis and program evaluation, this study embodied mixed-method research design based on the main assertion of using qualitative and quantitative research methods together as a superior realization and appreciation of research questions rather than one or the other method alone (Creswell and Clark, 2007). While the quantitative data were provided through a needs analysis questionnaire, the qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews. The two strands of data collection and analysis were conducted independently with equivalent precedence.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted at the English Preparatory School at a foundation (non-profit, private) university in Istanbul, Turkey. At the beginning of the educational year, students take the proficiency exam (with an average of 60), the TOEFL exam (with an average of 74), IELTS (with an average of 6) or YDS (with an average of 60) in order to start the undergraduate program at their prospective departments. However, if they fail the proficiency exam, they are required to take the placement exam that measures their level of English proficiency to be studied in the preparatory school.

The placement of the students are fixed according to the standardized levels of CEF, namely, A1 (breakthrough or beginner), A2 (way stage or elementary), B1 (threshold or

intermediate), B2 (vantage or upper intermediate), and C1 (effective Operational Proficiency or advanced) levels. Therefore, the academic year in this program is comprised of a total of 5 eight-week modules and 5 levels. Students enrolled in the program are required to complete each module successfully with an overall grade of at least 65% before they can advance to the next level. The assessment components include vocabulary checks, one midterm exam, one end of module exam, homework, one speaking and two written exams. In each level, they receive a total of 24 hours of English instruction, which consist of main course (14 hours) and skills (10 hours). The basic subjects of English (grammar and vocabulary) are focused on in the main course. As for the skills instruction, four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are the main focus. This particular English Preparatory Program aims to complete the language learning process in a 12-month-period.

Within this study, a total of 47 repeat students, 5 EFL instructors, 1 level coordinator and 1 program administrator enrolled in the A1 program participated in this study. The participating students were 28 females and 19 males with the age ranging from 18 to 20 years old. They were all of Turkish nationality coming from high socio-economic families. The reason behind choosing this particular group of students was due to the fact that this particular level represents a starting point on developing a learning strategy that is unique for every student. Therefore, it is quite important to help them improve their language skills, and safely journey through other levels through a needs-based curriculum.

As for the participating EFL instructors, they were all females with the age range of 35-40 years and with the same nationality (Turkish). They were offering main course and skills courses in the A1 program of the preparatory school. As for the level coordinator, she was a 35-year-old Turkish female with the experience of 11 years as the coordinator of this particular program. Finally, the program administrator was a 39-year-old Turkish male with the experience of 8 years as the administrator of the preparatory program.

Data collection instruments

For the purposes of this study, data were gathered through a needs analysis questionnaire administered to the A1 level repeat students and semi-structured interviews carried out with the same group of students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator enrolled in the existing program. As for the quantitative aspect of the study, a questionnaire was given to the 47 A1 level repeat students to identify their language needs. Besides, for the qualitative aspect of the study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 6 students, 5 EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator about their perceptions of the language needs of the students.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire, adapted from Özkanal (2009), was administered to 47 repeat students studying at the A1 level preparatory program. The questionnaire comprised three parts. As for the first part, the aim was to get personal demographic information (gender, age, department and proficiency level). Besides, in the second part of the questionnaire, the participating students were asked about their perceptions on the effectiveness of the program about the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary. Finally, in the third part of the

questionnaire, the perceptions of the students towards the content, materials and activities of the A1 program were evaluated. The questionnaire was based on a 4-type Likert scale ranging from *1-very important* to *4-unimportant* and *1-quite efficient* to *4-inefficient*. Before the questionnaire was administered to the participants, it was piloted with 19 randomly selected A1 students. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated as .97, which suggested that the scale had an acceptable concordance (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

Semi-structured Interviews

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were prepared in accordance with the questionnaire. The draft interview forms were submitted for expert opinion regarding their content validity, and necessary amendments were made based on the evaluation of the two experts in the field of language program evaluation. The questions focused on the perceptions of the stakeholders with regard to four language skills, grammar, vocabulary as well as the effectiveness of content, activities and materials of the A1 program. The questions also focused on whether the existing program meets the language needs of the students and what the strengths and deficiencies of the program are.

For the interview, 6 students, 5 EFL instructors, 1 level coordinator and 1 administrator of the A1 program were chosen as the representative of the whole group through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2015). The interviews were scheduled in convenience of the interviewees and each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, for the first research question of this study, the data were gathered through needs analysis questionnaire administered to the A1 level repeat students, while the semi-structured interviews were carried out with all the stakeholders of the program: students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator. In an attempt to analyze the quantitative data, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were estimated to identify the students' perceptions about the emphasis given to the development of the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary.

As for the semi-structured interviews, the findings were analyzed according to pattern coding based on Boğdan and Biklen's (1998) framework. First of all, the interviews were transcribed. Then, the conceptual themes were identified through reading each participant's transcripts by two raters who were experts in the field of language education. As for the next step, the identified conceptual classifications were categorized under specific headings. The supporting quotes from some of the participating students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator were discussed under the related headings. To achieve the intercoder reliability, Cohen's kappa was calculated. The kappa measure was .87, which indicated high agreement between the raters (Cohen, 1960).

In addition, for the analysis of the second research question which aimed to evaluate the overall perceptions of the A1 level repeat students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator on the effectiveness of the content, materials and activities prepared for the A1 program, the questionnaire administered to the students were analyzed again through

descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) whereas the semi-structured interviews carried out with the all four groups of participants were analyzed by following the same framework (Boğdan & Biklen, 1998).

For the third and last research question of this study, the guidelines identified by Boğdan and Biklen (1998) on pattern coding were followed to find out the potential problems experienced in the existing program.

Results

As it will be discussed in this section, the findings about the evaluation of A1 program on the overall perceptions of students, EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator by focusing on the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary, the effectiveness of the program in relation to content, materials, activities and lastly, the potential problems experienced in the existing program are reported considering each research question.

The overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary in the A1 program

In an attempt to find out the overall perceptions of the A1 level repeat students towards the focus on four skills, grammar, and vocabulary in the existing program, data were first collected from the needs analysis questionnaire. The following table reports the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each item:

Table 1

The Focus on Four Skills, Grammar and Vocabulary in the A1 Program

Items (N=47)	M	SD
1. Listening	1.51	0.62
2. Speaking	3.49	0.71
3. Reading	1.55	0.58
4. Writing	1.55	0.68
5. Grammar	1.66	0.73
6. Vocabulary	1.23	0.52

According to the results displayed in Table 1, the participating students perceived the development of the following language components: listening (M=1.51, SD=0.62), reading (M=1.55, SD=0.58), writing (M=1.55, SD=0.68), grammar (M=1.66, SD=0.73), and vocabulary (M=1.23, SD=0.52). However, the only disagreement was related to the speaking skill (M=3.49, SD=0.71), which was perceived as being given less importance in the existing program.

Furthermore, to provide support for the quantitative data, the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews carried out with the stakeholders revealed similar findings.

First of all, when the A1 level repeat students were asked about their perceptions with respect to the importance of the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary in the existing program, they all agreed that more emphasis should be given particularly to the speaking skill as shown in the excerpts below:

'The program focuses particularly on reading, writing and listening skills together with grammar and vocabulary. However, speaking is very important for our studies in the faculty. Therefore, there should be more emphasis on speaking'. (Student 1, interview, October 14, 2014)

'In my opinion, speaking is the most important skill while learning a language. However, I am not comfortable while speaking and I think we should be more involved in speaking tasks'. (Student 4, interview, October 14, 2014)

Furthermore, parallel to the perceptions of the participating students, the EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator shared similar viewpoints as it can be seen below:

'In the program, speaking skill is underdone especially in lower levels where the emphasis is more on grammar and vocabulary. Instructors are expected to do speaking for only 2 hours in A1 level per week, which is obviously not adequate to help learners with their speaking performance. (EFL Instructor 2, interview, October 20, 2014)

'We try to emphasize all four skills together with grammar and vocabulary in the program. However, in the curriculum reading, writing and listening stand out as the most emphasized skills'. (Level Coordinator, interview, October 28, 2014)

'Although all four language skills are given importance in the A1 program, because of the pacing and the workload, some of the skills are automatically prioritized by the teachers and level coordinators but the general aim is to try to improve all of the four skills of the students'. (Program Administrator, interview, November 26, 2014)

In brief, the obtained findings revealed that although the students receive instruction on the development of the language skills as well as grammar and vocabulary in the A1 program, the speaking skill needs more emphasis. In other words, the students should be engaged in speaking tasks more frequently, so that it will make them become more comfortable while using the language and help them follow their courses once they start their undergraduate courses.

The overall perceptions of stakeholders about the effectiveness of the content, materials and activities in the A1 program

As for the answer to the second research question aiming to reveal the overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the effectiveness of the content, materials and activities in the A1 program, data were gathered from the needs analysis questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

To begin with, in reference to the quantitative results, the overall perceptions of the participating students were reported by providing descriptive statistics for each item (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Effectiveness of the Content in the A1 Program

Items (N=47)	M	SD
1. All courses are consistent with each other.	1.70	0.65
2. Content provides information about departmental subjects.	1.98	0.73
3. Content is incentive.	1.94	0.76
4. Content is catchy.	2.23	0.75
5. Content is enjoyable.	2.36	0.87
6. Content is useful.	1.70	0.62
7. Content mostly focuses on grammar.	1.98	0.73
8. Content mostly focuses on the speaking skill.	3.06	0.76
9. Content mostly focuses on the listening skill.	1.96	0.72
10. Content mostly focuses on vocabulary learning.	1.83	0.89
11. Content mostly focuses on the reading skills.	1.77	0.69
12. Content mostly focuses on the writing skills.	1.85	0.62
13. All courses are consistent with each other.	1.72	0.61

According to the findings displayed in Table 2, all courses were generally considered to be consistent with each other quite efficiently (M=1.70, SD=0.65). Similarly, the participants agreed that the content provides information about departmental subjects quite efficiently (M=1.98, SD=0.73). In addition, the content was considered to be incentive quite efficiently (M=1.94, SD=0.76), catchy slightly efficiently (M=2.23, SD=0.75), enjoyable (M=2.36, SD=0.87) and useful (M=1.7, SD=0.62) as well.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that the program content mainly focuses on the reading skills (M=1.77, SD=0.69), vocabulary (M=1.83, SD=0.89), writing skills (M=1.85,

SD=0.62), listening skills (M=1.96, SD=0.72), and grammar (M=1.98, SD=0.73). As in the previous part of this study, the only language skill that was perceived to be given less importance in the program was the speaking skill (IT-8., M=3.06, SD=0.76) in an orderly fashion. A possible reason behind this finding might be due to the fact that students mostly face difficulties when they try to speak in English and thus, require more practice in this particular aspect of language.

As for the support to the quantitative data, the qualitative findings were obtained from the semi-structured interviews carried out with all groups engaged in the A1 program.

About the question on the effectiveness of the content of A1 program, the students agreed that it is catchy, enjoyable and comprehensible as shown in the following comments:

'The content is really enjoyable. I enjoyed the subjects and activities covered in the class'. (Student 2, interview, October 14, 2014)

'I think content is comprehensible and the subjects are interesting'. (Student 6, interview, October 14, 2014)

In a similar fashion, the other participating groups of the study shared positive viewpoints about the sufficiency and effectiveness of the A1 program content as it can be seen in the following excerpts:

'In terms of content, what is provided by the A1 program is sufficient and effective'. (EFL Instructor 5, interview, October 20, 2014)

'Very much so! We have plenty of materials sufficient for our students' language development'. (Level Coordinator, interview, October 28, 2014)

'Yes, the content is sufficient, catchy and enjoyable for A1 level learners'. (Program Administrator, interview, November 26, 2014)

On the other hand, the students indicated that there should be more focus on the speaking skill. Specifically, they said that they need to be engaged more in speaking tasks, which would help them improve their performance in English. The following comments verify these findings:

'I think that there should be more focus on the speaking skill in the program. We should be engaged more in speaking tasks which will help us to improve our speaking skill'. (Student 3, interview, October 14, 2014)

‘The content of the program should focus more on speaking. There should be more speaking activities to help us speak English better’. (Student 5, interview, October 14, 2014)

To wrap up, the obtained findings revealed that the content of the A1 program was perceived to be efficient by the stakeholders. The only component that needs to be given more attention to was speaking by engaging students more in speaking tasks which would aid with their English performance.

Apart from the overall perceptions of the participants about the content of the existing program, descriptive statistics were estimated to investigate the perceptions of the students towards the effectiveness of the materials used in the A1 program (see Table 3).

Table 3

The Effectiveness of the Materials in the A1 Program

Items (N=47)	M	SD
1. Reading texts	1.79	0.62
2. Speaking materials	3.19	0.74
3. Writing materials	1.83	0.63
4. Listening materials	1.83	0.63
5. Online materials	1.79	0.62

Based on the results reported in Table 3, reading texts (M=1.79, SD=0.62) and online materials such as Itslearning, English Central, My English Lab and Quizlet (M=1.79, SD=0.62) were perceived to be quite sufficient equally by the A1 students. Similarly, they considered writing materials (M=1.83, SD=0.63) and listening materials (M=1.83, SD=0.63) to be sufficient as well.

On the other hand, similar to the previous section, speaking materials (M=3.19, SD=0.74) were the only ones perceived not as effective as the other materials in the program.

Furthermore, qualitative findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews complemented the numeric data, which are described in the following section of the study.

As for the responses to the question about the effectiveness of the materials used in the program, all students agreed that apart from the speaking materials, the materials designed and developed for the A1 level repeat classes were effective. Some of the participating groups made the following comments related to this issue:

‘I think the materials given on weekly basis are effective and sufficient in general. But we need more practice in speaking’. (Student 2, interview, October 14, 2014)

‘As I mentioned beforehand, materials are effective except for the speaking materials which should be revised in the program’. (Student 4, interview, October 14, 2014)

On the other hand, the EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator agreed that the materials of the existing program were quite sufficient and effective for A1 level repeat students. However, apart from the program coordinator, the EFL instructors and level coordinator shared similar views on more integration of the speaking skill as it can be seen in the following excerpts:

'We have a lot of materials for all the levels actually. We have plenty of worksheets and weekly packs for A1 students which are quite effective. However, there should be more practice in speaking'. (EFL Instructor 4, interview, October 20, 2014)

'We have plenty of sufficient materials for A1 students which are very sufficient for their language development. But, I think that it would be better to integrate more speaking practice in the program'. (Level Coordinator, interview, October 28, 2014)

'I believe that the materials are quite sufficient for A1 learners. They helped them improve their language skills effectively'. (Program Administrator, interview, November 26, 2014)

In brief, the quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that while the materials used in the A1 program are considered to be sufficient and efficient by the participating groups, only the speaking materials needs more integration by providing students with the opportunity to practice the use of language and improve their English performance.

Finally, same statistical analysis was provided for the effectiveness of the activities used in the A1 program. The following table displays the perceptions of the students on this issue.

Table 4

The Effectiveness of the Activities Used in the A1 Program

Items (N=47)	M	SD
1. Role-play	2.55	0.90
2. Group work	1.94	0.76
3. Pair work	1.91	0.65
4. Games	2.34	1.04
5. Question-Answer	2.00	0.75
6. Matching	1.91	0.74
7. Filling in the blanks	1.89	0.63
8. Lecturing	1.79	0.65
9. Discussion	2.32	0.95
10. Presentation	2.32	0.95

Based on the findings displayed in Table 4, it can be indicated that while lecturing ($M=1.79$, $SD=0.65$), filling in the blanks ($M=1.89$, $SD=0.63$), pair work ($M=1.91$, $SD=0.65$), matching ($M=1.91$, $SD=0.74$), group work ($M=1.94$, $SD=0.76$), question-answer ($M=2$, $SD=0.75$), and presentation ($M=2.32$, $SD=0.95$) activities were perceived to be effective in the program, discussion ($M=3.42$, $SD=1.71$), games ($M=3.54$, $SD=1.73$) and role-play ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.70$) needed more attention in the existing program.

Similarly, the interview findings emphasized that the students needed to be engaged more in discussions, games and role plays in the A1 program, which are perceived to be more fun as it can be seen in the following excerpt:

‘We need to be engaged in role-plays, games and discussions, which are more fun’.
(Student 3, interview, October 14, 2014)

Parallel to the perceptions of the participating students, excerpts from the EFL instructors, level coordinator and program administrator agreed upon the same issue. Even if there is variety in the activities, the element of joy is missing, which should be addressed thoroughly in the program as it can be seen in the following comments:

‘Most of the activities are sufficient for students’ learning. It would be good to add some role plays and games which will make the learning process more enjoyable’. (EFL Instructor 4, interview, October 20, 2014)

‘Actually we have various activities in the program but the thing is they are missing the element of joy such as playing games which needs more emphasis’. (Level Coordinator, interview, October 28, 2014)

‘Activities are sufficient for A1 level learners. They learn how to learn and improve their language skills’. (Program Administrator, interview, November 26, 2014)

In brief, the gathered findings revealed that although the activities of the A1 program were considered to be generally sufficient by the participating groups, more enjoyable activities such as role plays, games and discussions needs to be added to the existing curriculum, which will make the learning process more fun.

The Overall Perceptions of the Stakeholders about the Potential Problems Experienced in the Existing Program

As for the overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the potential problems experienced in the A1 program, data from the semi-structured interviews will be summarized in the following part of this study.

First of all, when the students and instructors were asked about their perceptions on this issue, they agreed that they were not provided with the sufficient input regarding speaking skills. To put it simply, they stated that they needed to be engaged more in speaking tasks such as debates and role plays, which would help them improve their performance in English as illustrated below:

‘The preparatory program is generally effective in terms of language proficiency. However, more emphasis is needed particularly for speaking skills. We need more practice so that we can improve our performance in English’. (Student 1, interview, October 14, 2014).

‘In my opinion, speaking is one of the most difficult language skills to learn. That’s why; there should be more emphasis on speaking by engaging the students in various speaking activities such as debates and role plays.’. (EFL Instructor 5, interview, October 20, 2014).

In addition, the program instructors emphasized that they have time concerns due to pacing, which restricts the time for practice. Some of the instructors made the following comments:

‘There is not enough time to practice since pacing is a restrictive issue for us’. (EFL Instructor 1, Interview, October 20, 2014)

‘In addition to the problem regarding speaking, another problem is pacing. Due to time concerns we don’t have enough time for practice’. (EFL Instructor 3, interview, October 20, 2014)

Similarly, the program administrator raised the problem of pacing indicating that the students might not get enough practice due to the time concerns. He said:

‘In one year, we try to bring the students up to a level where they can study English in their departments. To achieve this goal, we do not really allocate enough time and practice for each level. That’s actually a deficiency’. (Program Administrator, interview, November 26, 2014)

Finally, parallel to the results discussed in the previous section of this study, the level coordinator highlighted the absence of the element of joy as a potential problem in the program which needs more emphasis in the existing program. Specifically, if students are engaged in activities such as games and role plays, language learning may become more enjoyable. Considering this point, she made the following comment:

‘I think the most important thing that is missing from the A1 program is the element of joy. If we add more activities like games or role-plays language learning may become more fun for students’. (Level coordinator, interview, October 28, 2014)

In summary, based on the perceptions of all the stakeholders engaged in the A1 program, it is clear that speaking skills should be integrated more by engaging students in enjoyable activities such as games and role plays. The pacing problem should be also reconsidered in the existing program, which would provide students with the opportunity of more time to practice. By addressing these problems, the language learning instruction will be more effective in the existing program.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a language education program designed for A1 (beginner level) students at a foundation (non-profit, private) university in Istanbul, Turkey.

The first research question attempted to investigate the overall perceptions of the stakeholders about the importance of the students’ development on the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary in the existing program. The data gathered from a questionnaire administered to A1 level repeat students revealed that while they feel more competent in relation to reading, writing, listening skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary, they reported that there should be more emphasis on the speaking skills in the program. Supporting the quantitative data, the qualitative results obtained through the semi-structured interviews revealed that all participants of the study shared similar viewpoints, that is, more emphasis should be given to the speaking skills. These findings were in accordance with Yılmaz’s (2004) study on English language needs analysis of preparatory class students which reported that the particular need for speaking and listening aspects of the existing program needs to be redeveloped. This study, therefore, basically and primarily indicated the significance of the role of needs in language teaching and needs analysis throughout the language preparatory program evaluation process.

Furthermore, the second research question of this study aimed to find out the overall perceptions of all the stakeholders about the effectiveness of content, materials and activities in the existing program. The data were collected from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The data regarding the program content indicated that the content was perceived to be efficient by all the stakeholders engaged in the A1 program. However, as in the previous section, more attention needs to be given to speaking component to improve the students’ performance in English. Similarly, although the materials used in the A1 program were considered to be generally sufficient and efficient by the participating groups, the speaking materials still need to be integrated more by involving students in various speaking tasks to improve their use of English. In addition, similar to stakeholders’ perceptions of materials,

more enjoyable activities such as role plays, games and discussions should be implemented in the existing program so as to make the learning process more enjoyable.

These findings related to the second research question, echoed Cronbach's (1991) three types of decisions that require evaluation. More specifically, it is crucial that in order to improve courses, there should be a particular decision about what instructional materials and methods are satisfactory and where change is needed. In application of this theory into the findings of the present study, all the components (content, materials and activities) of the A1 program could be considered as subjects to be modified.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study were in harmony with Soruç's (2012) study on the renewal of the language preparatory program which indicated that speaking materials, role-play, discussion, and presentation activities were perceived to be insufficient by the students. Therefore, enriching classroom activities, particularly speaking, role-play, discussion and presentation activities is one of the most prominent suggestions that was made and emphasized in the study.

Additionally, the related findings were in accord with Yılmaz's (2004) study which revealed that most students were unhappy with both the activities and the materials used in the listening and speaking classes. Specifically, the students complained about using the speaking, listening and pronunciation textbooks, which they found inefficient, instead of using audio-visual materials.

Finally, the third and the last research question of this study attempted to identify the overall perceptions of the participating groups about the potential problems experienced in the existing program. The data were obtained qualitatively through semi-structured interviews in which all parties were asked to state the potential problems they experience in the existing program.

First, the participants shared some problems related to the speaking skills not given much emphasis in the existing program along with the problems of pacing and element of joy. Particularly, they believed that the instruction of the speaking skills is underdone by the A1 program. Finally, the students believed that they should be engaged in more enjoyable activities and more time should be allocated to practice.

Similarly, these findings were in harmony with Nam's (2005) study on the perceptions of Korean College students and teachers about communication-based English instruction which indicated that the students perceived the texts and course materials to be dull and monotonous. Specifically, textbooks were expected to include more interesting and authentic materials such as songs and movies.

Considering all these problems, it is seen that there is a certain need to integrate the speaking skill thoroughly in the existing program by engaging students in more enjoyable activities. In order to provide students with the opportunity of more practice, the pacing problem should be taken into consideration as well.

To conclude, the current study is in accordance with the previous research which shed light on the fact that the programs should undergone systematic evaluation considering learners' needs. From this perspective, it could be said that there can be certain curricular

component(s) that is underdone by educational programs and in order to identify and redevelop any of these curricular components, needs analysis should be applied while designing and evaluating a language program.

Pedagogical implications

The above findings of this study lead to some descriptive and practical implications for language program evaluation. First of all, the results provided insights into the perceptions of the stakeholders engaged in the A1 program which suggested that there should be more practice in speaking and effective use of language incorporating the element of joy and balancing the pacing in the existing program.

To summarize, the findings on the contributions and the problems of this particular program, can help and guide the upcoming program evaluation studies with a fostering perspective to evaluate existing language education programs and/or restructure them according to the pre-identified needs and outcomes.

Limitations

Although the present study revealed some interesting and significant findings, they should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive due to following limitations. First, due to the heavy workload of the participants and time limitations, the researcher had to constrain the data collection instruments to the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A different data collection instrument such as observation could have added more indepth information. The lack of an external evaluator might also be considered as another limitation of the present study. Involving an external evaluator could have added new dimensions to the study. Finally, the target group was A1 level repeat students. The results could have been different if A1 level fresh start students were involved in the study. Despite these limitations, the present study is significant for the field of program evaluation in language education since it provides foundation for the further research.

Recommendations for further research and conclusion

This study has several recommendations to be taken for consideration for further research. First of all, it is likely that the perceptions are believed to vary across contexts. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate the present study by evaluating similar language education programs. Second, based on the perceptions of all stakeholders, a further study could be conducted on textbook and material evaluation in the existing program. Finally, different data collections instruments and data analysis procedures could be used with the same group of participants to investigate the effectiveness of this particular research design.

Overall, this study serves as an example of a systematic evaluation in language education by emphasizing the involvement of all stakeholders engaged in the program. By doing so, this study has contributed to literature in the field of language program evaluation and underlined the need for further research in similar contexts.

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