

## THE PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH TEACHERS ABOUT THE ENGLISH LESSONS IN THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM OF TURKEY

### LAS PERCEPCIONES DE LOS PROFESORES DE INGLÉS SOBRE LAS CLASES DE INGLÉS EN EL SISTEMA EDUCATIVO ACTUAL DE TURQUÍA

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#### **Abstract**

This study aims to clarify the perceptions of English teachers who work in private schools or state schools about the English lessons in the current education system. By using a questionnaire, data was collected from 35 English teachers; 16 of them were state school English teachers and 19 of them were working at different private schools. Data derived from the participants were analyzed by using SPSS. In the light of the results, the perceptions of the English teachers were presented in relation to the items placed in the questionnaire and the results were explained by comparing the perceptions of state and private school teachers. The results showed that the English teachers working in private schools have more positive perceptions than the English teachers working in state schools about the English lessons taught in the current education system.

**Key Words:** Foreign language; education policy, history.

#### **Resumen**

Este estudio tiene como objetivo aclarar las percepciones de los profesores de inglés que trabajan en escuelas privadas o escuelas públicas sobre las clases de inglés en el sistema educativo actual. Mediante el uso de un cuestionario, se recopilaron datos de 35 profesores de inglés; 16 de ellos eran profesores de inglés de escuelas estatales y 19 de ellos trabajaban en diferentes escuelas privadas. Los datos derivados de los participantes se analizaron mediante SPSS. A la luz de los resultados, se presentaron las percepciones de los profesores de inglés en relación con los ítems colocados en el cuestionario y los resultados se explicaron comparando las percepciones de los profesores de escuelas públicas y privadas. Los resultados han mostrado que los profesores de inglés que trabajan en escuelas privadas tienen percepciones más positivas sobre las clases de inglés en el sistema educativo actual que los profesores que trabajan en las escuelas públicas.

**Palabras clave:** Lengua extanjera, política educativa, historia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an important process that aims to improve people. Educational activities should be evaluated in a planned and systematic way to run this process efficiently (Demir et. al., 2013 Solhi

Andarab, 2019). Many regulations and changes in different areas have been done to bring effectiveness in education system. English language teaching is one of those areas. Işık (2008) states that despite so many efforts and resources, English language teaching hasn't reached to the desired point yet (Celik & Yavuz, 2018). For this reason, different regulations and changes have been brought to English language teaching through the history. Some of them have had positive effect on English Language teaching, some not.

4+4+4 Education Policy is one of those regulations. With this policy, necessary 8-year continuous education system was converted into 4+4+4 discontinuous education system. The first 4 years refer to primary school, the second 4 years refer to secondary school and the last four years refer to high school (Güven, 2010). English started to be taught at the second year instead of the fourth year of the Primary school. The effect of age factor lies under this change; because, it is believed that the earlier foreign language teaching/learning starts, the more effective it will be (Abrahamson & Hytenstam, 2009; Perani, et al., 1996; Mekkaoui & Mouhadjer, 2019)

Undoubtedly, among the most important addressees of English language teaching are English teachers. Regulations and changes in education system are the concern of teachers in the first order as the changes and regulations are implemented by them. The thoughts of teachers are non-ignorable for the development of language education; Evaluating students and teachers' perceptions in learning-teaching processes can provide great benefits (Gelisi & Kazykhankyzy, 2019). So, this study aims to reveal the perceptions of private school and state school teachers about the English lessons of primary and secondary schools in the current education system of Turkey.

## **2. THE CHANGES AND REGULATIONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION THROUGH THE HISTORY**

English Language Education has passed through different stages through the history. Sarıçoban (2012) addresses three periods of foreign language education which consists of Tanzimat Period (1839-1876), Republican Turkey (1923-1997) and 1997 Education Reform. 4+4+4 Education Policy which started to be implemented in 2012 can be considered as another period of the regulation of foreign language teaching.

As stated in Sarıçoban (2012), English as a foreign language started to take place in Turkish education system in Tanzimat period (1839-1876) which refers to the westernization process and renewal efforts. French used to be taught as a foreign language in that period because of the close relations with France. As another step of renewal efforts, Robert College was founded by Cyrus Hamlin in İstanbul in 1863 and it was the first educational institution which used English as a medium of instruction (Sarıçoban, 2012). Foreign language used to be taught by anyone who knew foreign language in the Imperial period. Teacher training for foreign language teaching started in The Schools of Teachers (Darulmuallimin) in 1848 for the first time (Işık, 2008). Tanzimat period was followed by Republican Turkey (1923-1997); different reforms were done in terms of national, social, cultural and educational levels by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of republic. In that period, Middle East Technical University, Boğaziçi University, Medicine Faculties of Hacettepe and Cerrahpaşa Universities were

higher education institutions that started to teach in English (Çelebi, 2006). With 1997 education reform, Ministry of National Education regulated the curriculum of Primary schools. English began to be taught in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school instead of 6<sup>th</sup> grade (that is, at the age 10, rather than at the age 12). This decision was based on a belief in the necessity of beginning English at early ages (Gunes, 2011).

On the other hand, the ratio of English among other foreign languages was 22,30% in 1943-1944; but this ratio increased to 97,49% in 1998-1999 academic year (Genc, 2003). As it is seen English has had more and more important role in our education system through the years. This increasing importance led the authorities to the new regulations through the history. In 2012 Ministry of National Education did another regulation in education system named 4+4+4. English began to be taught at the second year of the Primary School instead of 4<sup>th</sup> year to reach the advantages of early ages. As cited in Han (2004), Lenneberg states that there is a period during the human life span from infancy to puberty (age 2 to 13) that is critical to language learning, during which learning is successful and after which it is marginal. For this reason, Ministry of National Education decided to increase the duration for Foreign Language Education (FLE) and make the students start FLE at an earlier age in order to reach the advantages of the starting to learn a Foreign Language at an early age (Bayyurt, 2013).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to reveal the perceptions of English teachers about English lessons in secondary and primary schools in relation to the current education system which has been 4+4+4 since 2012. This research was conducted at six state schools and four private schools in Diyarbakır. Thirty-five English teachers who teach in primary and secondary schools were included in this study (See Table 1 for the profile of the participants).

Number of Teachers		
Gender	Male: 11	Female: 24
Occupational Experience	1-5 years: 14	6-10 years: 10
	11-15 years: 8	15+ years: 3
Type of School	State School: 16	Private School: 19

Table 1. The profile of the participants

A Likert scale prepared by the researcher was used for data collection process. Mazanek and others (2018) also used a 5 point Likert type scale in his study. Before the preparation of the scale, an interview was done with two English teachers in order to indicate the key points that would take place in the scale. Those teachers were not included in the study in order not to affect the reliability of the scale. The reliability coefficient was revealed by means of Cronbach's Alpha value by using SPSS. The results showed that the instrument used for the research is a highly reliable tool (Cronbach's Alpha value = ,909). To collect data, the questionnaires were implemented to the teachers in the schools where they were working and in a face-to-face environment.

## 4. RESULTS

The data collected from the scales were analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS. In this section, data gathered from the state school teachers and private school teachers will be compared in relation to the items included in the likert-scale. For each item of the questionnaire, there were five options (totally agree, agree, no idea, disagree, totally disagree). The results will be presented through the graphs in which the similar choices are combined; the results for totally agree and agree; and the results for totally disagree and disagree will be presented together.

### 4.1 An Item-based Comparison of the perceptions of state and private school teachers

As the first item of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked whether they believe in that teaching English at an early age is effective for the learners or not; because the reason behind the current foreign language education policy was to benefit from the positive effect of early ages. As seen in Figure 1, the advantages of starting to learn English at an early age are believed by nearly all of the language teachers. The ratio of state school teachers who believe the effect of early ages in terms of teaching English was 100% and this ratio was 91, 6% for the private school teachers. In fact, the advantages of starting to learn a foreign or second language at an early age are commonly known and believed. This item was included in the questionnaire in order to see whether the English teachers are aware of this point which lies behind the current English teaching policy.

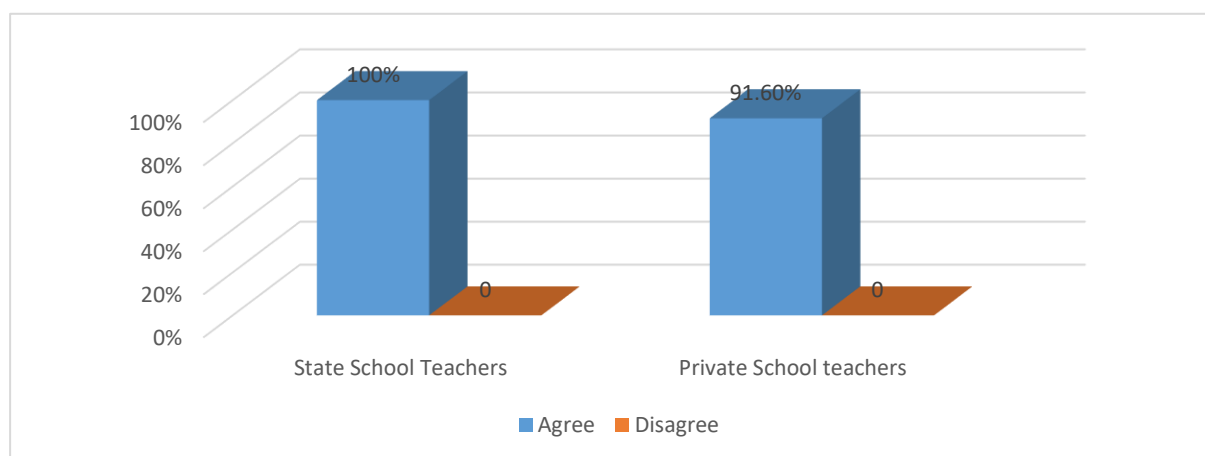


Figure 1. Teaching English in the second year of Primary school is useful for language development in terms of learners.

The second item was about the physical structures of the schools. The English teachers were asked whether the physical structures of the schools are appropriate for teaching English at an early stage or not. The results present the differences between two groups for this item. Only 12,5% of the state school teachers agree that the physical structures of the schools are appropriate for teaching English at an earlier stage, whereas this ratio 63,1% for the private school teachers. 87,5 of state school teachers disagree with this idea, on the other hand 21,1% of the private school teachers disagree (See Figure 2).

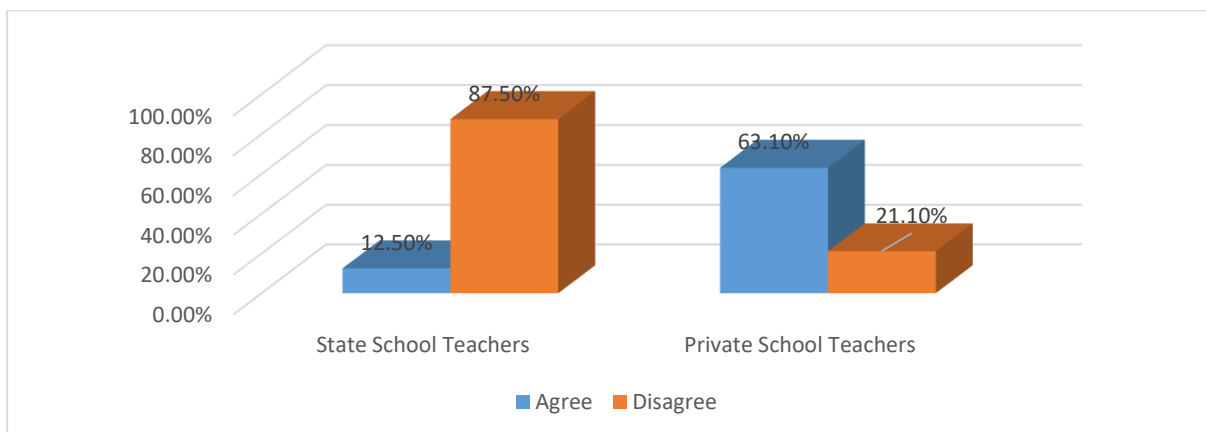


Figure 2. The physical structures of the schools are appropriate for teaching English at an earlier stage.

As another item, the teachers were asked whether the class size (the number of the students) is appropriate to implement the current curriculum in an effective way. Interesting results are revealed in terms of the class size (the number of the students). As seen in Figure 3 given below, none of the state school teachers see the class sizes as appropriate for the implementation of the new system in an effective way and 81,3 % of them see this issue as problematic. On the other hand, 73,7 % of the private school teachers think that the class sizes are appropriate and only 5,3% of them disagree with this idea. As stated previously the data were collected from 16 teachers working in six different state schools; none of the teachers of six different state schools indicate a positive perception related to the class size. Students in most of the state schools are taught English in crowded classrooms; this may hinder the effectiveness of language education (see Figure 3).

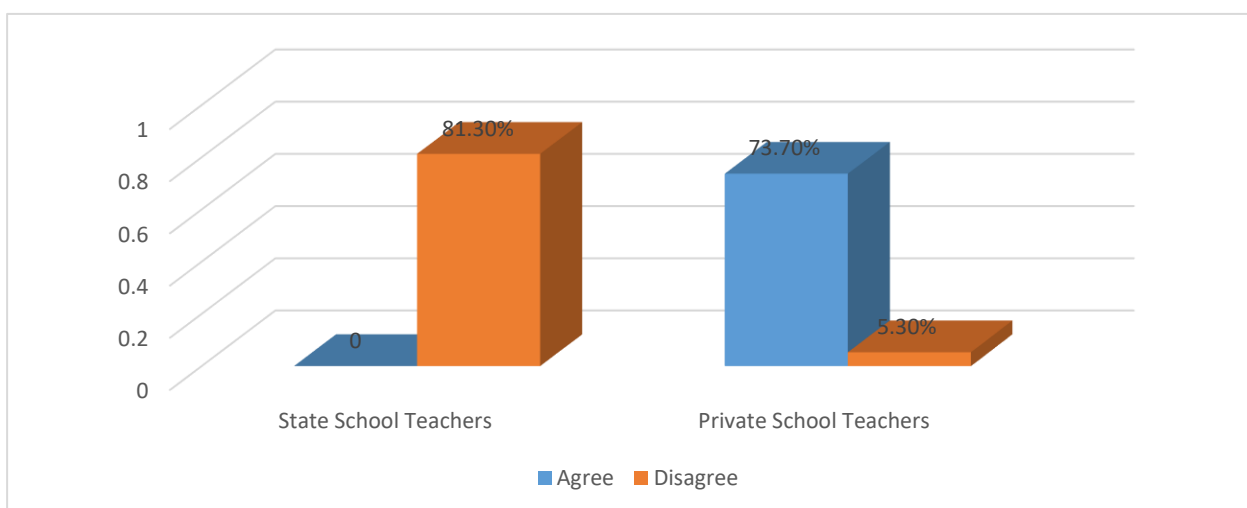


Figure 3. The class size (the number of the students) of the primary schools is appropriate to implement the current curriculum in an effective way.

Another important issue related to the English lessons is related to the class hours. The teachers were asked whether the class hours for English are adequate or not. As seen in Figure 4 given below, interesting results are presented for the issue of whether the class hours are sufficient or not. 100% of the state school teachers think that the class hours for English are not sufficient, but 52,6% of the private school teachers think that the class hours are adequate for teaching English. This may be because of the foreign language teaching policy of the private schools; they have more class hours for English than the state schools. In the state schools, the students in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades have 2 hours of English in a week; this increases to 3 hours for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and 4 hours for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The state school teachers need to complete the subjects placed in the curriculum in those class hours; so, all of the state school English teachers state that the class hours are not adequate for teaching English.

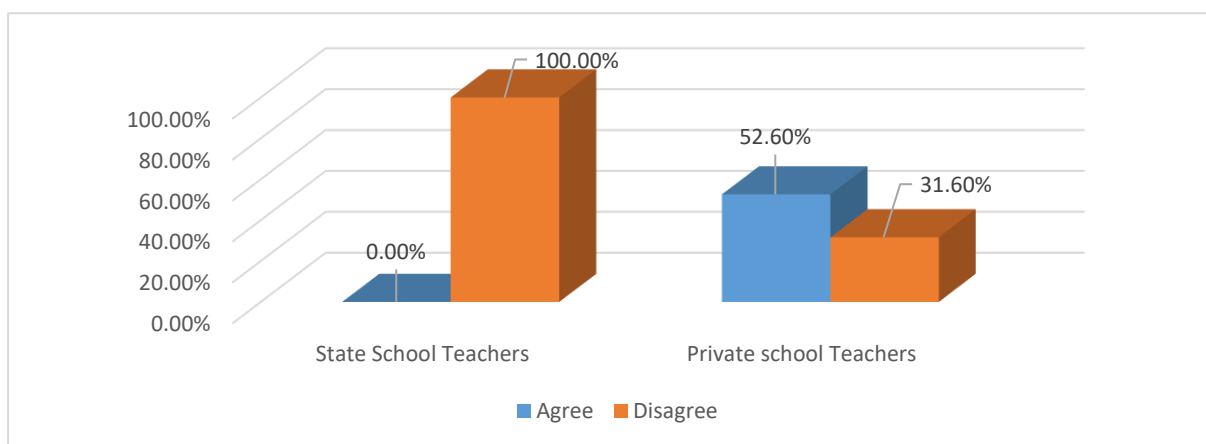


Figure 4. The class hours for English lessons are sufficient.

As 5<sup>th</sup> item of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked whether they have adequate time to conduct supplementary activities in addition to the ones placed in the curriculum. As it is seen in Figure 5, only 12,5% of the state school teachers think that they have adequate time for supplementary activities and 88,5% of them do not agree with this item. On the other hand, 52,6% of the private school teachers think that they have time for additional activities in addition to those in the curriculum. As stated above, private schools have more class hours for English; so, it is more probable to find time to do additional activities to reinforce what is taught.

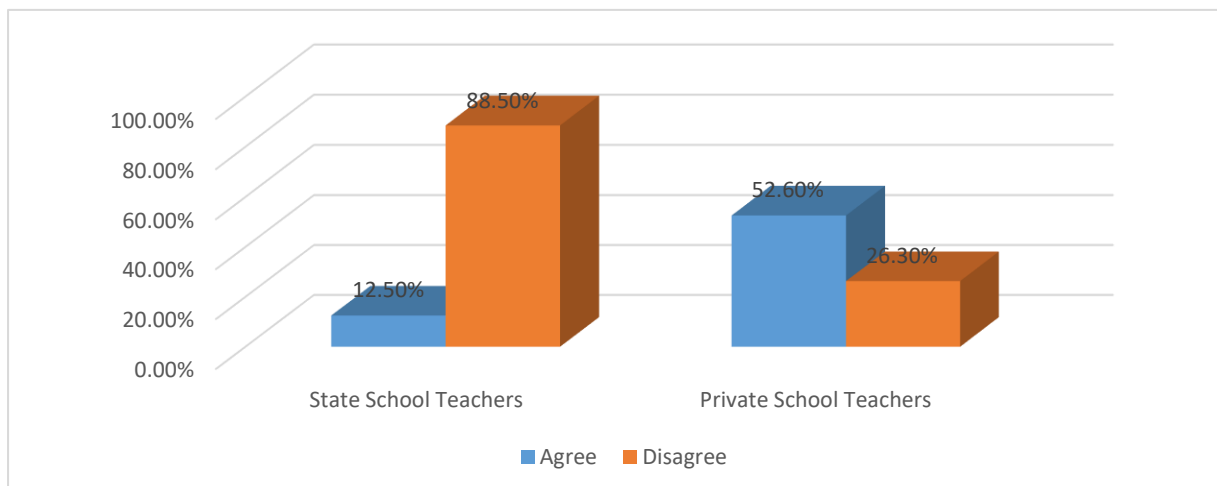


Figure 5. English teachers have adequate time to conduct supplementary activities in addition to the ones placed in the curriculum.

The next item was about the basic language skills. While teaching a foreign language, it is important to have the knowledge of language as a whole; that is, all of the language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) should be included in the curriculum and given adequate importance. Within this study, the teachers were also asked whether the content of the current curriculum provides opportunities to improve all of the language skills or not. The results show that a bigger number of private school teachers have positive perception than the state school teachers about including all of the language skills into the curriculum.

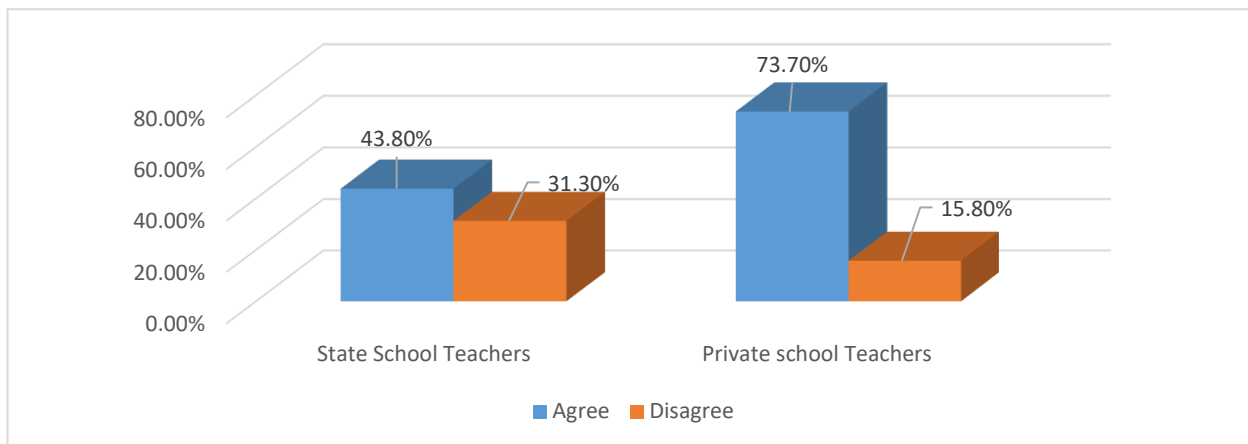


Figure 6. The content of the current English curriculum provides opportunities to improve all of the language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening).

The seventh item of the questionnaire was about whether the content of the current English curriculum is appropriate for the level of the students or not. The ratio of teachers who believe in that the content of English curriculum is appropriate for the level of the students is not low for both groups. 62,6% of the state school teachers and 79% of the private school teachers agree with this idea. As seen the ratio of private school teachers who agree with this idea is higher than state school teachers'; this may stem from the level of private school students. They are thought to be better at English because of the intensity of English Language education.

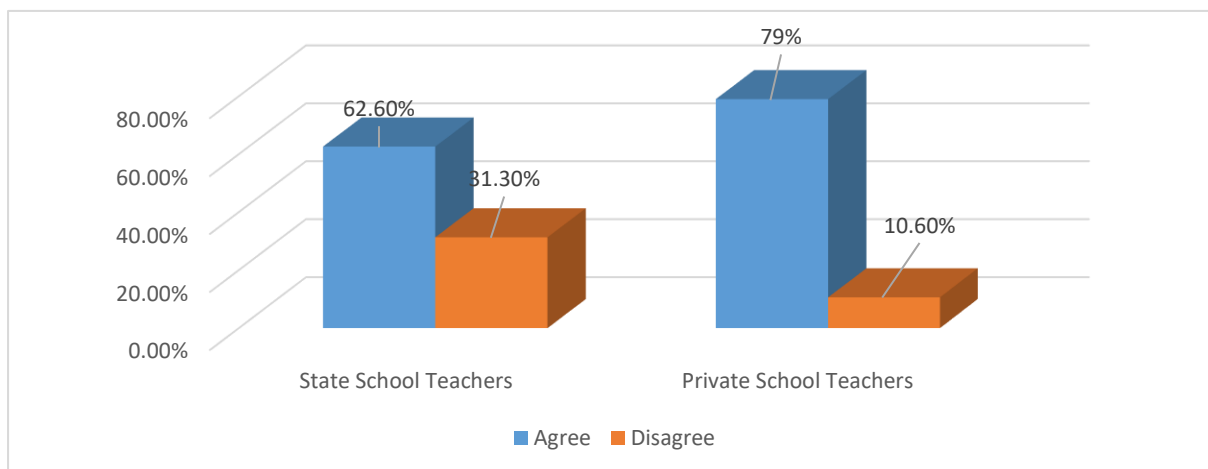


Figure 7. The content of current English curriculum is compatible with the level of the students.

The 8<sup>th</sup> item was about whether English Language teachers have required knowledge and skills for implementing the content of the current English curriculum or not. The results show that 43,8% of the state school teachers and 63,1 of the private school teachers think that English language teachers have required knowledge and skills for the implementation of the new curriculum. On the other hand, 43,8% of the state school teachers and 21% of private school teachers disagree with this idea. The ratio of state school teachers who disagree with this item is higher than the private school teachers.

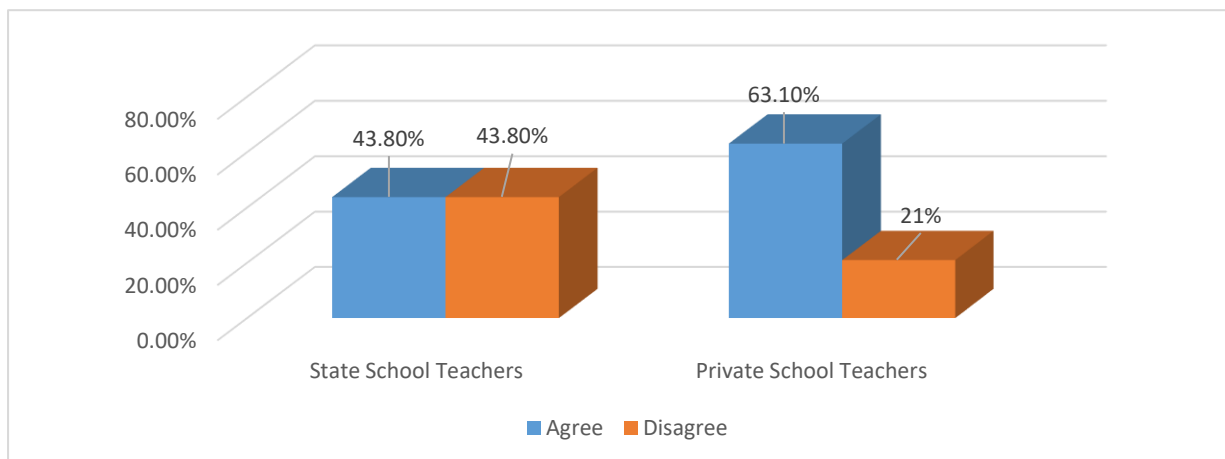


Figure 8. English teachers have required knowledge and skills for implementing the content current curriculum.

As the last item of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked whether they think that the students do not have any difficulties to keep up with the lessons prepared according to the current English curriculum. 31,3% of the state school teachers and 47,4 of the private school teachers agree with this item. What is interesting with the results of this item is that 62,5% of the state school teachers disagree; this means that more than half of the state school teachers think that the students have difficulties in terms of the English lessons. There may be different background factors that influence their learning; these factors may be either related to students' own personal life or related to the school itself such as crowded classrooms, teacher's way of teaching or the deficiency of materials. The ratio of private school teachers who disagree with this item is 31,6%. The difference between state and private school teachers can be based on the level of the students; as indicated before, the levels of the private school students may be better than the state school students because of the intensity and quality of the language education. The students in private schools have more English classes and use various materials for English education. All these may affect students' learning English.



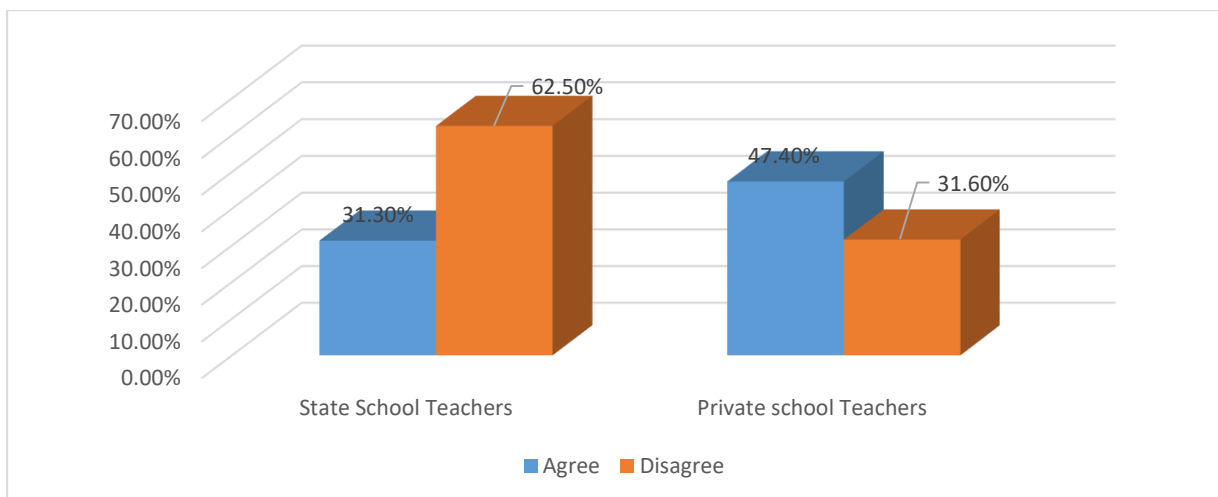


Figure 9. The students do not have any difficulties to keep up with the lessons prepared according to the current English curriculum.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study is to reveal and compare the perceptions of state school teachers and private school teachers in terms of the English lessons in the current education system of Turkey. The results show English teachers working in private schools have more positive perceptions than the state school teachers about the English lessons in the current education system which has been 4+4+4 since 2012-2013 academic year. The points about which the state school teachers mostly indicated negative perceptions are as following: Class size (the number of the students), class hours for English lessons, schools' physical structures, language skills which are included in the curriculum and teachers' finding adequate time to do additional activities in addition to those stated in the curriculum.

The biggest difference between the perceptions of English teachers occurred in terms of the class size; none of the state school teachers indicated a positive opinion for this item whereas the ratio of positive perception was 73,7% for the private school teachers. This result directs us to think about the number of the students in English classes at state schools. It should not be forgotten that English is a language that is used for communication; it may not be possible to practice language skills especially the speaking skill in overcrowded classrooms which seem to be a big problem for the state schools. As another item of the questionnaire which may be related to the class size, the teachers were asked whether their students have problems to keep up with the content of the lessons or not. 62,5 % of the state school teachers think that their students have problems in terms of keeping up with the lessons; whereas the ratio is 31,6 for the private school teachers. This may be related to the class size (the number of the students). It may be difficult to be aware of the weaknesses and strengths of the students in an overcrowded classroom and additionally, each student may not have the equal opportunity for attending the lesson and having feedback. All these may affect students' learning or catching the subjects.

Another big difference between two groups was seen in terms of the class hours; none of the state school teachers think that the class hours are adequate for teaching English. This result may be relatable to the result of the item which asks whether the teacher have adequate time to do additional activities in addition to those in the curriculum. As indicated before, the students have 2 hours for English lesson in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades and 3 hours in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and 4 hours in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. None of the state school teachers think that these class hours are adequate for teaching English and doing additional activities in order to reinforce what is taught.

As for the physical structures of schools, the perceptions of the state and private school teachers vary again; only a small rate (12,5%) of state school teachers think that schools' physical structures are appropriate for teaching English at earlier grades and this rate is 63,1% for the private school teachers; it is higher as expected. But the role of physical structures of learning environments should not be ignored especially for the young learners. The belief behind the current foreign language education policy was related to the advantages of learning a foreign language at early ages. If the required learning environment is not provided for the young learners, then the policy may not serve its purpose.

As a result of another item, 40% -difference was seen between the teachers of two groups in terms of the item asking whether all of the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) are included in the curriculum or not. 43,8% of the state school teachers and 73,7% of private school teachers indicate a positive perception about this item. More than half of the state school teachers have negative perception. Indeed, when the English curriculum of 2018 is looked through, it is seen that English language teaching is based on listening and speaking in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades of the primary school. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, the focus is on speaking and listening again; reading is added in a limited way. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, listening and speaking are primary skills again and reading and writing are stated as secondary skills. When the English curriculum is considered as a whole for primary and secondary schools, it is seen that teaching all of the language skills is promoted. On the other hand, when the curriculum is considered for a certain grade of primary or secondary school, it is possible to state that the focus is on certain language skills.

The teachers were also asked whether they think that the English teachers have required knowledge and skills in order to implement the current English curriculum; 21% of the private school teachers disagreed with this item, whereas the ratio was 43,8% for the state school teachers who disagreed. The education system for teaching English as a foreign language has been regulated to reach the best. It may not be very easy to be adapted; so, some of the teachers may have difficulty to implement the curriculum as it is required. For example, the English curriculum of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades of the primary schools is based on listening and speaking skills for which the use of technology is required; some of the teachers may have difficulty in terms of using technology. Technology is very effective in language learning (Uzunboylu & Ozcinar, 2009; Ceker & Keser, 2019; Tavoosy & Jelveh, 2019; Tajgozari, 2019). The researcher demonstrated the ease of learning English with the flipped learning method in technology (Yavuz & Ozdemir, 2019).

As seen, there are big differences between the perceptions of private school teachers and state school teachers especially about the issues mentioned above. That is no doubt that all these issues affect the students' foreign language learning. It may be difficult to catch the same level for the students in private and state schools. In fact, private schools' having better conditions in terms of foreign language education and private school teachers' having more positive perceptions about English lessons are expected, but there is something else which should not be ignored: In order to study at a good high school, all of the students have the same examination at end of the secondary school regardless of their type of primary or secondary school.

### 5.1. Suggestions

Considering the results, the following suggestions can be stated:

- Class size (the number of the students) is seen as a big problem for teaching English. The number of the students in an English class should be appropriate for providing the students with practicing the language skills; the number of students in overcrowded classrooms should be decreased.
- The class hours for English lesson may be increased both in primary and secondary school in order to provide English teachers with having more time to reinforce what is taught.
- Schools' physical conditions should be improved in order to teach English to the young learners in an effective way.
- The teachers may be provided with more in-service teacher trainings in order not to have difficulty or problems for the implementation of English curriculum.
- In order to provide a balance between state and private school students, their conditions for foreign language learning should be close to each other as they will have the same examination at the end of the secondary school.

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