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Theme-Based Instruction and Integrated Curriculum in the Shadow of Turkey's 2023 Education Vision

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Theme-Based Instruction and Integrated Curriculum in the Shadow of Turkey's 2023 Education Vision*

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on teachers' perceptions of the theme-based instruction (TBI) and integrated curriculum models favoured in the 2018 updated curricula of Turkey and sheds light on the integrated curriculum design models by establishing connections with Turkey's 2023 education vision. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, using a survey study design. Data were collected from 72 English language teachers in 34 cities. It was concluded that, within single disciplines curriculum models have been adopted. As teachers considered student and parent participation in curriculum preparation unnecessary, the Ministry's vision will require a substantial change in their mind set. TBI and curriculum integration training and professional course books are required to meet the demands of the updated curricula and the 2023 education vision of Turkey.

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Effective teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has been a concern for Turkey since the 1920s, and has gained momentum especially with the move to join the European Union. However, in spite of reforms to better students' English language levels, Turkey continues to rank very low for English proficiency, especially for students' speaking skills. In the 2013 English Proficiency Index (EPI), Turkey ranked 41st out of 60 countries (TEPAV, 2013); according to the 2018 EPI index, it ranked 73rd out of 88 countries (EF EPI, 2018). The TEPAV (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey) report pointed out critical factors that accounted for the low-level proficiency of Turkey. According to the report, students could not successfully communicate in English and in a teacher-driven classroom setting, as they focused on answering grammar-based structured questions to be successful in grammar-driven tests. In addition, curricula and textbooks did not take students' needs and expectations into account, which caused students to disengage from language in the subsequent years of their schooling.

Taking into account the factors noted by the report, and to make its students better at learning English, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey initiated a curriculum reform movement in 2017 and, in 2018, the updated curricula covering English grades 2–8 and 9–12 were implemented throughout the country. In the curricula, theme-based instruction (TBI) was emphasized, characterized as:

> [A] highly contextualized language learning environment; language usage and lexis centred around the topic; and skills and activities integrated by the theme selected, with the topic of instruction (e.g. scientists, geography, responsibilities at home, etc.) serving as a connecting thread and targeting meaningful, situation-based learning (MoNE, 2018, p.10).

In the curriculum for grades 2–8, ten units were provided with interrelated themes. It was stated in the curriculum that themes which were familiar to young learners of English were chosen so, themes such as family, friends, animals, holidays, leisure activities and so on were adopted. For grades 9–12, it was stated that the ten units were prepared based on the opinions of students who were surveyed. Thus, in both English curricula, themes were determined and used as connecting threads for various language functions, and TBI was highlighted.

1.1. What is Theme-Based Instruction and Why Does it Matter?

TBI, which emphasizes a contextualized learning environment, may be defined as an approach under the broader category of content-based instruction (CBI) (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). It has been indicated that, despite their variation in form and focus, all CBI approaches are basically theme-based. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003) define a theme-based course as a process where various activities are linked through their content, while the teaching of language skills is integrated with the theme.

It is considered that teaching integrated around a theme is suited to the way children naturally learn, and vocabulary items can be learned easily because the theme provides a meaningful context (Cameron, 2001). According to Alptekin, Erçetin, and Bayyurt (2007), TBI is an effective method to teach English, firstly because it allows students to focus on meaning rather than form, and secondly because the learning environment that TBI offers provides students with rich resources to serve as a medium for learning.

Stoller and Grabe (1997) indicated that all CBI is fundamentally theme-based. Therefore, TBI, which is an efficient method of aligning language and content, was used interchangeably with CBI in the present study. Theme-based CBI is effective in EFL contexts, and its use will escalate as teachers consider their students' needs and interests more, because learner motivation is likely to enhance when students learn about something by using language rather than merely concentrating on linguistic structures (Davies, 2003).

1.2. Integrated Curriculum

As Beane (1991) stated, genuine learning involves interaction with the environment in such a way that what we experience becomes integrated into our system of meanings. According to Parker (2005), to allow this integration, the interdisciplinary or integrated curriculum draws together knowledge, perspectives and methods of inquiry from more than one discipline to develop a more powerful understanding of a central idea, issue, person or event. The integrated curriculum is also referred to as interdisciplinary teaching, thematic teaching or synergistic teaching (Malik & Malik, 2010). Wortham (1996) stated that an integrated curriculum crosses subject areas, and several combinations can be achieved, the intention always being to construct meaningful bridges to show connections in development and learning. According to Wortham, curriculum integration is often achieved through the design of integrated thematic units or through study of a topic. However, Beane (1991) warns that we must be careful to integrate curricula. Firstly, integration implies wholeness and unity rather than separation and fragmentation. Secondly, real curriculum integration occurs when young people confront personally meaningful questions and engage in experiences related to those questions—experiences they can integrate into their own system of meaning.

Beane (1991, p.12) sets out the key features of the vision of an integrated curriculum:

- It compels us to work with young people in ways that give them a powerful voice in curriculum planning. The theme and activities emerge from the original questions and concerns of the students rather than the interests of a teacher or the manipulation of subject areas.
- Since meanings are created by students rather than imposed by adults, students use their knowledge and skill to search for answers to their own questions and concerns, rather than to concentrate on preparing for a next course or grade, passing exams, preparing for some occupation, or gaining some cultural capital.
- It is knowledge-rich. They share the common experience of powerful themes that call for in-depth study and the use of important concepts.
- Curriculum presents an authentic integration of affect and cognition.
- It is proposed as virtually the entire middle school curriculum. It is not scheduled alongside traditional subject courses.

In the literature, various categorizations are offered for integrating curricula. Wraga (1993) categorizes interdisciplinary curricular organization as open or true core, pre-structured core, broad fields, fusion and correlation. Parker (2005), on the other hand, categorizes interdisciplinarity using the concepts of fusion and infusion. Drake and Reid (2018) categorize curriculum integration as fusion, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. Fogarty's (1991) model of categorization singles out as it comprehensively analyses each subcategory within three major categories. The model demonstrates a thorough structuring and picturing of each model so that comparisons could be made easily both at major and minor categories: the model shown in Figure 1 was therefore followed in the present study.

The fragmented model suggests that the curriculum is organized around separate disciplines where there is no integration; alternatively, various units are linked within a single course (connected model) or cause-effect integration is achieved within a single course (nested model). Thus, there is either no integration or there is partial integration among units within a single discipline. Fogarty (1991) suggests five ways to integrate learning across several disciplines: teachers may arrange topics so that similar units build on one another (sequenced model); share content (shared model); are linked thematically across departmental teams (webbed model); are harmonized with technology by learning

through all disciplines (threaded model); or are fully blended, finding the overlapping skills, concepts and attitudes (integrated model).
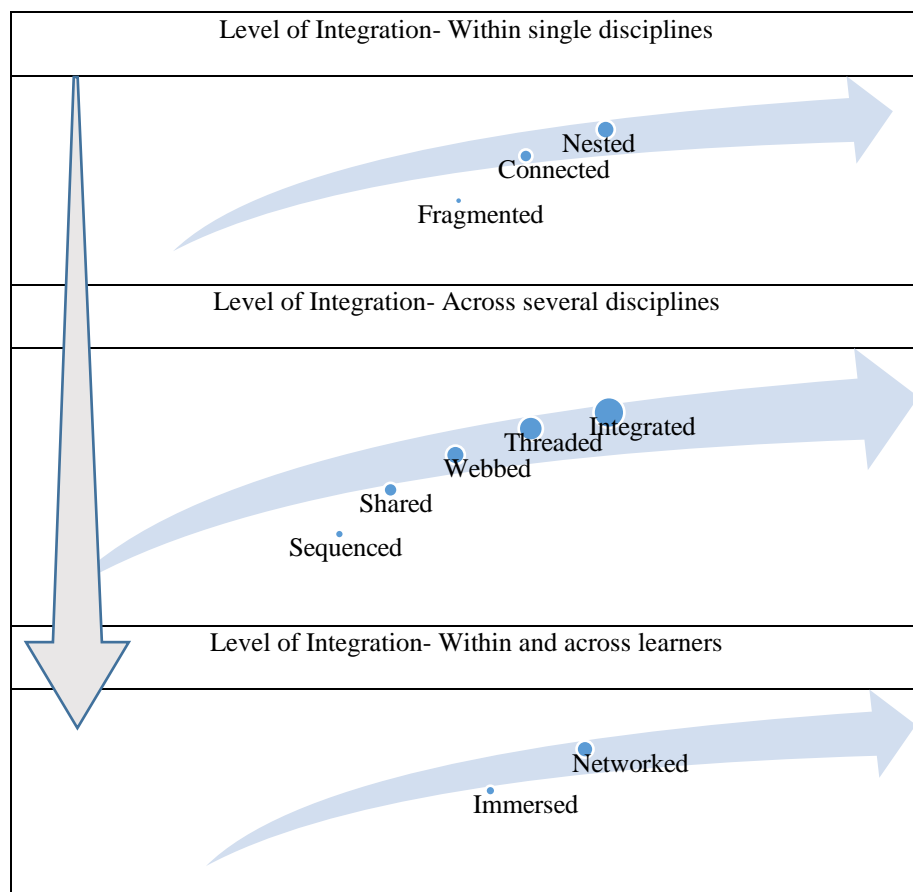

Figure 1. Ten ways to integrate the curriculum (Adapted from Fogarty, 1991, p.62)

All of this requires integration between or among various courses. The third layer of Fogarty's model, looking at integration within and across learners, suggests that integration may be achieved within learners with no outside intervention (immersed model), or that learners may direct the integration process themselves through their interest, awareness and self-motivation (networked model). This level of integration requires that learners and participants (stakeholders in education) are heard and are directed to establish the links among courses themselves.

1.3. MoNE's 2023 Vision

A new vision document shaping the Turkish education system and showing the path to be taken by the Ministry in the coming years was published in 2019. The vision document foresees critical changes in the structure of the Turkish education system. While the document suggests numerous changes from early childhood education to the training of school principals, the philosophy behind these changes and how they impact on English language teaching education need to be explored.

The vision document regards learning as the personal responsibility of the student. Thus, it considers the curriculum a document to be shaped by taking into account the needs and expectations of the students along with the differing realities of various districts and schools, rather than a system of compulsory enforcement of pre-determined objectives to be implemented by all schools uniformly. The vision

promotes schools' decentralized role, requiring teachers to work in cooperation, and considers assessment in terms of an ecosystem to support various learnings of individual students rather than imposing high-stakes tests. The vision document puts teachers at the centre of all learning, stating that the curriculum, materials, technology use and education policies depend primarily on the competencies, attitudes and dedication of teachers. Thus, the vision expects teachers to improve their capacities through in-service trainings (INSET) and graduate studies.

The new 2023 vision also sheds important light on the future construction and philosophy of English language teaching, and promises improvements related to curriculum integration and TBI in English language teaching.

The new vision document (MoNE, 2019, p.66-70) foresees that:

- Integration of English with such courses as maths, science, social studies and visual studies will be achieved and, in this way, students will transfer their knowledge in English to other disciplines.
- Foreign language needs and skills of students will be differentiated according to school and programme types.
- The same curricula will not be implemented nationwide. Instead, differentiated curricula will be used.
- Course hours will be flexible depending on the needs of the local schools.

It is further stated that foreign language education will be carried out via a student-centred approach, using differentiated instruction in various grades. Teachers, as the primary vehicles for transformation, will be afforded more flexibility in their use of learning materials to better meet the needs of their students. In addition, the vision document states that multiple assessments—including alternative assessment methods, such as projects will be utilized particularly at the primary level.

2. Related Literature

Wraga (1993) stated that the Eight-Year Study conducted by the Progressive Education Association in the 1930s yielded important results, noting that graduates from schools using integrated methods performed better than their counterparts following traditional content-centred programmes. Similarly, Vars (1991) indicated that students following integrated programmes performed as well as or better in achievement tests than their counterparts studying more traditional, separate subject programmes. In another study (McBee, 2000), results indicated that students had a more positive attitude towards learning when the model of instruction is based on integrative methods of teaching. The study by Kim, Andrews, and Carr (2004) reported that students following integrated programmes achieved better in terms of standards and competency areas than those following the traditional course-oriented curriculum. In another notable study by Alptekin et al. (2007), results indicated that the English proficiency level of young EFL learners following an integrated syllabus was better than that of those following a grammar-syllabus for reading and writing. An experimental study by Kızıltan and Ersanlı (2007) showed that language development in young learners was better in the pilot group using TBI than the control group who followed traditional instruction. Researchers concluded that theme-based CBI is an effective method, especially for young learners who are processing their first language acquisition. A further study found that children had positive opinions of theme-based teaching: the majority of students in the study thought that activities were better integrated and organized when using TBI (Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks, 1995). Jiang (2017), in a case study on the impact of a theme-based advanced Chinese intensive programme, concluded that TBI has positive impacts on improving language proficiency, preparing students for academic and professional language use, cultivating strategic language learners, and revitalizing Chinese teaching at a better level.

The literature is therefore rich with empirical studies on the effectiveness of TBI (Alptekin et al., 2007; Kızıltan & Ersanlı, 2007; Lonning, DeFranco, & Weinland, 2010; Schubert & Melnick, 1997) and the integrated curriculum (Hargreaves & Moore, 2000; Kim et al., 2004; McBee, 2000; Wraga, 1993). However, there are few studies, if any, which have reported teachers' understanding and perceptions of TBI, or the link between TBI and integrated curriculum design models. Based on the previous empirical studies, this study seeks to provide a detailed analysis of teachers' interpretations and their suggestions on the use of TBI by establishing connections with integrated curriculum design models. Hence, this study aims to demonstrate TBI within integrated curriculum design models.

Research Questions
1. What are teachers' understanding and perceptions of TBI?
2. What are teachers' suggestions on using TBI?
3. Based on teachers' understanding and suggestions in relation to TBI, how are interdisciplinary curriculum design models to be used?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology and is based on a survey study design. A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data from a sample drawn from a predetermined population. The information was collected at just one point in time (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

3.1. Data Collection Tools
3.1.1. Document analysis

For this study, the MoNE's 2018 updated curriculum acted as the main document, along with course books and supplementary materials/resources provided by the MoNE. Data collected from the document analysis were embedded into the findings from the online questionnaire.

3.1.2. Structured online questionnaire

For the structured online questionnaire, a snowball sampling method was used, through which voluntary participants in various Turkish provinces were targeted. The respondents were English language teachers working at primary, secondary, and high schools in Turkey. The structured questionnaire, consisting of two sections, was designed based on the updated English curriculum. The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic information on the participants, as well as the type of school they worked at and whether they had participated in any INSET. The second section of the questionnaire was designed to collect the teachers' opinions to reveal their understanding of TBI and their suggestions regarding its use, on which interpretations of the use of interdisciplinary curriculum design models were based. The draft questionnaire was sent to three academics in the field of English language teaching to verify the suitability of the questions. Fine-tuning was based on the experts' suggestions, and the questionnaire was then piloted with five English language teachers working in Ankara.

Table 1.
Participant Demographics for the Structured Online Questionnaire

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	27	37,5
	Female	45	62,5
Age	0–25	7	9.7
	26–40	47	65
	41–50	16	22
	51 and above	2	3
Type of school	Public	65	90,3
	Private	7	9,7
Level of school	Primary	11	15,3
	Secondary	31	43,1
	High	30	41,7
Teaching Experience	0–5 years	18	25
	6–10 years	14	19
	11–15 years	17	24
	16 years and more	23	32
In-service curriculum training attended in the last three years	Yes	35	49
	No	37	51
In-service training attended	Educational technologies	14	40
	English language teaching	6	17
	Teacher candidacy	3	9
	Special education	5	14
	Occupational health and safety	7	20

There were eight items in the first section of the questionnaire, and five open-ended questions in the second section. The open-ended questions were:

1) How do you define theme-based instruction?
2) Do you think that theme-based instruction is a useful method in English language teaching? Why/why not?
3) Do you think that theme-based instruction is adequately reflected in course books and materials used in classes? Why/why not?
4) Do you think that students' and parents' opinions should be gathered before or during the curriculum development process?
5) How do you think theme-based instruction can be more effectively incorporated into the process of teaching English?

3.1.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a period of two months. First, document analysis was carried out on the main MoNE curriculum documents and the online questionnaire developed based on the data gathered. The questionnaire was subsequently sent online to all English language teachers working in various cities in Turkey to be completed on a voluntary basis.

3.1.4. Data analysis

Data regarding teachers' opinions were analysed by content analysis. A qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, was used for content analysis, and a pattern-coding method utilized (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In terms of ethical codes, questions were carefully structured so that none of the participants could be negatively affected.

4. Findings

First, descriptive statistics of the study participants were presented; then, answers to the open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis. The thickness of the arrows in Figures 2–6 is indicative of the density of participant opinions.

4.1. Descriptive Data

Questionnaire respondents were 45 female teachers and 27 male teachers. This is expected, as most working English language teachers in Turkey are female. In terms of age, the majority of participants belonged to the 26–40 age category and were mostly teachers in public schools. This was relevant for the study, as the compulsory MoNE English curriculum had to be closely followed by public schools. Teachers also showed fairly equal distribution in terms of experience. The largest number of participants had 16 and more years of teaching experience, which was good for the study, as these teachers had deeper knowledge and experience with various curricula in the Turkish educational context. While 49 per cent of teachers had participated in an INSET programme in the last three years, 51 per cent had not done so. When the type of INSET programme was considered, it was seen that the majority of teachers had participated in training on educational technologies, whereas only 17 per cent had participated in INSET focused on English language teaching. It was seen that there were participants from 34 different Turkish provinces: This matters because the teaching ecosystem in different cities may be different, and so gathering the opinions of teachers from numerous cities is important to provide diversity.

4.2. Data Regarding Content Analysis

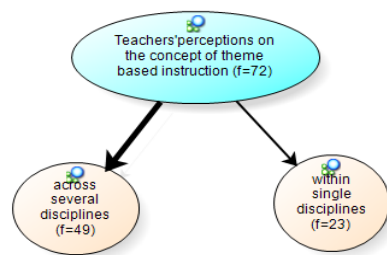Answers to the open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis and presented under five headings.

Figure 2. Teachers' perceptions of the concept of theme-based instruction

4.2.1. Teachers' perceptions of the concept of theme-based instruction

Noteworthy descriptions from individual teachers include the following:

Within single disciplines:
"Concentrating on a special theme during a lesson"
"Teaching vocabulary and linguistic structures together by means of dialogues or readings based on a topic"
"It seems to me like part by part teaching—for instance, our theme today is 'meetings and greetings' or 'our memories'

"Objectives based on a theme"
"Teaching based on a topic"
"Teaching grammar topics implicitly through a theme"
Across several disciplines:
"Teaching a topic in relation to other disciplines, like the interdisciplinary approach; providing freedom to students in content selection"
"To me, it sounds like content-based learning. Different disciplines are linked together around a theme; thus, permanent learning occurs by more stimuli"
"Teaching language through topics and themes rather than grammatical structures and aligning different courses' content within the same theme"
"Interdisciplinary cooperation…embracing the same topic within different disciplines"
"Stressing the same topic in various courses based on the same theme"
"Studying the same topic in various courses based on students' own learning techniques"
It can be seen that most of the teachers considered curriculum integration and defined the concept of TBI across several disciplines. They asserted that TBI should relate to universal topics by using a theme through various courses. To do that, alignment of course content is a necessity. On the other hand, some teachers thought of TBI within a single discipline. They considered TBI as the teaching of grammatical structures or vocabulary around a theme, which provided the context for language teaching.
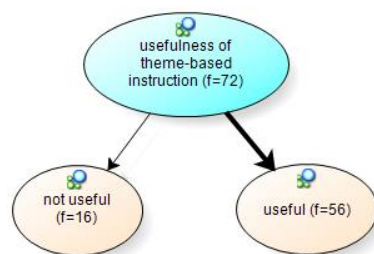
4.2.2. Teachers' opinions of the usefulness of TBI

Figure 3. Teachers' opinions of the usefulness of TBI

Noteworthy statements from individual teachers include the following:

Useful:
"Learning topics that students will relate to their real life and that foster lifelong learning is both effective and useful."
"I think such themes as healthy living, career choices or dealing with obesity are interesting for the students at high school level."
"Students have the chance to reflect what they learn in other courses in learning English, so I believe that TBI is very useful."
"Students like learning through topics which are appealing and interesting to them."
"Students learn vocabulary within a meaningful context, so I believe that TBI is useful."
Not useful:
"Students who cannot understand a concept in their mother language have to deal with the same concepts in English, and this causes students to get lost."

"I think the chosen themes and vocabularies are not appropriate for the level of the students. The theme usually dominates the language and becomes an end, not a means. As the vocabulary is too difficult, students cannot understand texts."

"I am bored as a teacher with the content of some units, so I skip the parts that I find boring. If the content is not appealing to me, how can it be for the students?"

It can be seen that most of teachers considered TBI effective and useful. They believed that with the help of TBI, more meaningful learning can be provided and content can be made more appealing to the students. On the other hand, a limited number of teachers believed that TBI is not useful for the students as they stated that the selected themes were not appealing and were too challenging for the students.

4.2.3. Teachers' opinions regarding the effective use of themes in course books and materials
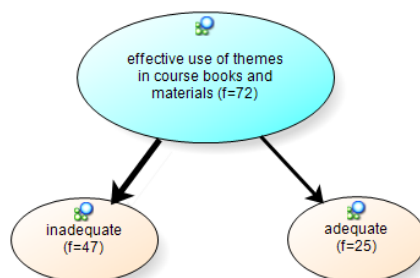

Figure 4. Teachers' opinions regarding the effective use of themes in course books and materials

Noteworthy statements from individual teachers include the following:

Adequate:
"Each unit in our course books has a theme. For instance, there is a unit on the theme weather and nature, and vocabulary, reading, speaking and writing activities are all around that theme."
"When we look at the books, we can see that English topics have a connection with science books."
"We have units in our books structured around a theme-based fundamental question."

Inadequate:
"On the surface, books seem to have themes, but in reality students do not work on topics of interest to them. Teachers should be supported with extra materials that are more appealing to students."
"Topics are not related among units and in general they are organized independently to teach linguistic structures."
"Activities that comprise the themes should be designed to attract the attention of students. Readings should be both fun and informative. In addition, the same themes should be covered in other courses so that TBI can be effectively implemented."
"In the latest course books, I did not come across TBI. In the past, at least we had a unit about Atatürk, in the 10 November week."
"Topics in English course books are not related to other courses' content. Books that are distributed by the MoNE are boring and not attractive for our students."

It can be seen that most of the teachers found course books and materials inadequate in terms of TBI. They put forward that themes were not appealing for the students and simply served to teach various linguistic features; thus, they had no relation to other courses or disciplines. On the other hand, a limited number of the teachers stated that units in the books were structured around themes and these were useful to teach language in context.

4.2.3. Teachers' opinions regarding student and family participation in curriculum development and materials preparation
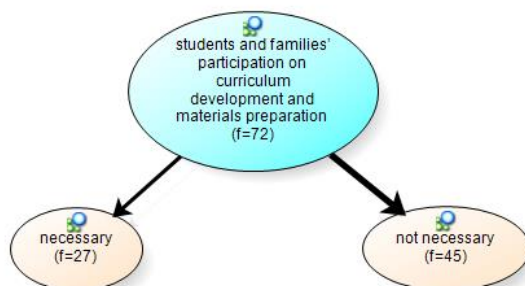

Figure 5. Teachers' opinions regarding student and family participation in curriculum development and materials preparation

Noteworthy statements from individual teachers include the following:

Necessary:
"Parents know their kids' interests better than teachers or managers. Thus, they should take active roles in the preparation of the curriculum and course books. In addition, when they are part of the process, they take more responsibility for students' learning.
"Students' interests need to be taken into account for both theme and activity selection, so students should take an active part in the preparation of books."
"Curriculum developers and book writers should gather students' opinions and write materials accordingly. For instance, in the personalities unit, celebrities of interest to student could be used."
Not necessary:
"As parents are not conscious enough of the importance of foreign language learning, I believe that they should be kept away from such important decisions."
"Parents' contribution is impossible because differences in their educational backgrounds, social status or values will make a consensus impossible. If, for instance, a theme such as values is discussed, contrasting views may turn out to be chaotic."
"I think students and families should not take part in this process, as their awareness and affective traits will not allow this."
"The curriculum is an important issue which cannot be led by parents or students."
"As parents and students are ignorant of curriculum matters, I think they should not have a role in it."

It can be seen that most of the teachers regarded the participation of students and parents in preparation of the curriculum or course books not necessary or even harmful. They thought that parents and students were not sufficiently knowledgeable, conscious or aware of the importance of English language learning, and thus considered their participation in these processes unnecessary. On the other hand, a limited number of teachers stated that the teaching and learning process is for students, and parents know their children's interests better than teachers or administrators, so they should take part in curriculum decisions.

4.2.4. Teachers' suggestions on the use of TBI

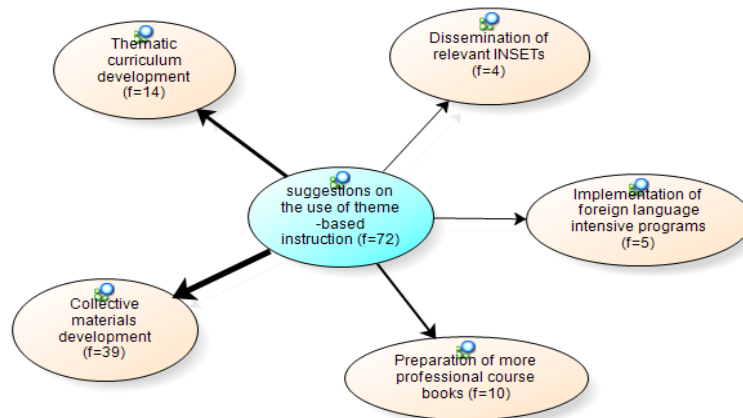
Figure 6. Teachers' suggestions on the use of TBI

Noteworthy statements from individual teachers include the following.

Collective materials development:
 "It can only be possible if teachers prefer to work more rather than sitting around doing nothing during seminar weeks. It can be a great job, but will obviously be demanding for the teachers."
"As teachers cannot change the order of units or objectives in the curriculum, it will be very difficult to find common themes in various courses to cover the common objectives in the curriculum. Yet, some common themes can be found between two courses and materials can be collectively prepared."
"If teachers can work cooperatively to create materials, it will be a great job. In this way, students will learn better and remember the content throughout their whole lives."
 "A model developed by the geography teacher to teach land forms can be used by the English language teacher when teaching concepts or vocabulary."
"A social studies and an English language teacher can work cooperatively to create materials on countries and flags and be used in the two courses concurrently."
Theme-based curriculum development:
"The topics that are covered in English could be covered in other courses concurrently. For instance, if the theme is planets in the second unit of 7th grade English, the same theme could be covered in the science course in the previous week. When students are faced with the same topic in different courses, then they will learn the content better."
"In order for real TBI to occur, an interdisciplinary curriculum where various courses are related and aligned is required. In addition, teachers of various disciplines should have the tendency and willingness to work in cooperation. Otherwise, teachers will go on working within their own separate disciplines."
 "If the theme in English is technology, the same theme can be covered perfectly in social studies, Turkish, maths and science courses. When themes are related among various courses, students will obviously be more successful."
"For instance, in English, if the topic is 'passive structures', then in the history course, the conquest of İstanbul can be mentioned. Another example can be the relationship between the weather theme in English and weather conditions in the geography course."

Preparation of more professional course books:
"Curriculum and course books should be prepared according to the socioeconomic and demographic qualities of different regions. I work at a science high school and the books and materials used for the English course are well below the level of my students."

"I think TBI is beneficial. However, as the curriculum is full of vocabulary and grammar structures, it is impossible to implement TBI in its real sense.

"TBI would be especially useful at the primary school level. However, activities in our course books do not provide such an instruction."

"When the course is based on grammar teaching, students do not pay attention to the course. For thematic teaching, on the other hand, our course books and materials do not provide adequate content. Topics in various units are not aligned and related, let alone a relationship among various courses' content."

Implementation of intensive foreign language programmes:
"CLIL [content and language integrated learning], which was implemented 20 years ago in Anatolian high schools, was a successful method. At that time, my students had the chance to get into research. Graduates of today are far away from any kind of research because of the foreign language barrier. I am yearning for the curriculum of 20 years ago. At least, the qualified elementary and high schools should be given the opportunity to implement the CLIL curriculum."

"With the implementation of intensive foreign language education at our school, we have more time to teach English. This way, we can align various courses' content with our English courses in the 5th grade. However, in the majority of other schools, it is impossible to implement theme-based instruction because of the limited number of English course hours."

Dissemination of relevant INSET:

"First of all, INSET should be delivered to teachers on how to understand and implement the curriculum, as well as the use of TBI. Many teachers are not aware of the changes/updates in the curriculum."

"INSET on how to implement TBI should be organized, but this INSET should not be theoretical—rather, it should be practical, for in-class use, and include all course teachers from various disciplines."

It can be seen that teachers mostly suggested the development of collective materials and a theme-based curriculum for more effective TBI in foreign language teaching. They urged that the curriculum should be prepared thematically across various courses, and that teachers of different disciplines should cooperate to prepare collective materials to use as part of their courses in or around the same weeks. In addition, some teachers stated that course books should be more professional in terms of the use of TBI, and that the activities for students should be more striking and appealing. A number of teachers stated that the use of intensive foreign language programmes in their schools yielded successful results. Thus, they suggested that more schools should implement intensive English language education. Finally, some teachers stated that INSET should be offered so that teachers could be more aware of the curriculum updates; however, they warned that the INSET should be practical rather than theory-oriented.

4.3. Use of Interdisciplinary Curriculum Design Models according to Teachers' Understanding and Suggestions for Theme-Based Instruction

The majority of teachers believed that students and parents should not take an active role in the development of the curriculum and course books and design of materials. In addition, the common curriculum prepared for each course separately by the MoNE and the separate disciplines framework adopted by many teachers suggest that while TBI is favoured in the English language curriculum, within

single curriculum models integration is adopted and implemented widely at the classroom level. On the other hand, teachers suggested the use of a sequenced model of integration, where they may arrange topics so that similar units coincide. Thus, it may be deduced that TBI is welcomed by teachers; however, certain improvements are needed to transform teachers' understanding and implementation to target higher levels of integration.

5. Discussion

Findings reveal that the majority of teachers defined TBI as a linkage or alignment among various courses and their content, using the terminology "interdisciplinary" or "multidisciplinary" teaching. It is promising to see that a majority of teachers defined TBI as a model of integration "across several disciplines", where the objectives and content of different courses are aligned to allow students to make connections among courses. However, it is also noteworthy that a significant proportion of the teachers defined TBI as the linkage of units within one specific course only. They considered alignment as bringing up similar units or themes within the scope of one specific course to teach the content of that separate discipline. Thus, how they effectively perceived TBI was as a model of integration within single disciplines, which is the most basic step in curriculum alignment.

It seems that the new MoNE vision will require a substantial change of mind set on the part of teachers who defined TBI as a model of curriculum integration within single disciplines. In the long run, what the MoNE seeks is a model of integration across several disciplines. On the other hand, it is worth noting that neither the participants in the study nor the MoNE vision emphasized TBI as a model where integration is achieved within learners with no outside intervention (immersed model), or the integration process is achieved by students themselves through their interest, awareness and self-motivation (networked model). In this sense, it can be inferred that even MoNE's vision for the short run falls short of targeting the highest level of integration model.

The findings of the present study indicate that teachers mostly considered TBI as a useful and effective method to teach English. They stated that their students learned better through TBI and related activities. This finding supports previous research on the efficiency of an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum which stated that when teachers are well equipped to teach with integrated methods, student achievement is better (Hinde, 2010). On the other hand, a number of teachers who considered TBI neither useful nor effective will have to provide other effective methods in the light of the MoNE vision, which will obviously require teachers to use TBI or related methodologies in future years.

Although the majority of teachers welcomed TBI as a useful and effective method, the research demonstrates that most teachers considered compulsory course books or materials inadequate in terms of TBI. They stated that the themes were not carefully selected or aligned within each specific course book, and there were no links among the units of various course books at different class levels. It is, of course, necessary for course book writers to take into account the expectations of the curriculum and design activities effectively. In the updated 2018 MoNE curriculum, it was clearly stated that:

> Materials developers are encouraged to follow this model in the design of integrated resources that can be tailored to meet the needs of students in a diverse range of contexts with respect to school type, sociocultural outlook and economic status, thus allowing classroom teachers greater discretion in the selection of appropriate activities and learning materials (p. 9).

Considering teachers' opinions, it is obvious that the MoNE should carefully track the course book writing process so that the 2023 vision can be better actualized. However, as Cortazzi and Jin (1999) warn, when a textbook is seen as the sole authority, less experienced teachers, and perhaps some whose native language is not English, may rely on textbooks and fail to look at them critically. In this regard, it is important to note that less than half of the participant teachers stated that they had attended any INSET

programme in the last three years, and among this group, only a few had participated in INSET on English language teaching. As Parker (2005) states, when and how to integrate themes or topics requires adequate training as well as skilful teaching. Considering that teachers lack experience with interdisciplinary programmes, and given the discipline-based nature of most college courses (Vars, 1969), it is clear that teachers must be supported with INSET on how to use TBI better, as well as how to integrate various courses and their content to target advanced levels of curriculum integration.

One very striking finding of the present study was teachers' opinions regarding student and parent participation in the curriculum development process. The majority of teachers considered curriculum planning as an important job to be undertaken only by professionals without taking students' and parents' opinions into account. Teachers stated that students and parents are not fully aware of the curriculum and that there are ideological fluctuations or camps among parents as the prime reasons to keep them away from any curricular decision. Vars (2001) points out that curriculum integration is a student-centred approach and students' voices need to be heard while planning learning experiences. As Vars (2001, p.15) indicated:

> This way, students from the very beginning can join with their teachers to help ensure that mandated competencies are addressed. When students understand the standards that are to be met during any particular year, they can suggest many creative ways to address them. Integrative curriculum, the problem area approach, and teacher student planning are all likely to be unfamiliar to students' families. It is essential to keep them informed of plans as they evolve and to solicit their support and suggestions.

As Fogarty's (1991) ten models of integration indicates, students and parents should have a voice in the curriculum decision process. This is especially important for construction of the ideal integration category "within and across learners", where the emphasis is directly on integration within learners themselves with no outside intervention. Thus, the new 2023 vision of the MoNE will require a substantial change of mind set in teachers' thinking about students' and parents' competencies.

Teachers' suggestions on the more effective use of TBI revealed a need for better collective materials and thematic curriculum development. However, as Vars (2001) states, this is not easy, since teachers already have a heavy burden of team cooperation without full-scale curriculum integration. Teachers in the present study stated that cross-departmental teams should work in harmony to prepare collective materials. However, they also warned that many teachers do not have a habit or willingness to work collaboratively. Thus, establishing a culture of collaborative materials preparation seems to be a challenging task for both teacher educators and the MoNE in the years to come.

The MoNE's 2023 vision offers optimistic ways to integrate curricula. However, curriculum planners need to be careful in aligning different courses and should offer INSET to provide teachers with collaborative learning/teaching environments. As Parker (2005) warns, choosing a topic simply for the sake of integration hinders learning, so integration should not be considered as an end in itself. Some of the participant teachers said that they needed INSET on how to use TBI more effectively. The striking finding that only a few of teachers had participated in INSET on English language teaching calls for an immediate measure to offer numerous and effective INSET on TBI and curriculum integration. Being equipped with an effective teaching methodology is an essential requirement for better dissemination.

As Beane (1991) states, the subject approach has dominated curriculum planning for so long and is so intensely rooted in our schooling patterns that it has crippled our mind set to envisage something else. In addition, the heavy reliance on high-stakes testing and expecting each student to reach the same pre-determined level of performance remains a serious threat to curriculum integration, which aims to cater for individual differences rather than paper and pencil tests.

6. Conclusion

Teachers are mostly familiar with the concept of TBI and they defined it under several models of curriculum integration. However, they considered course books and materials inadequate, stating that the themes did not appeal to the students and served only to teach various linguistic features; thus, there was no relationship with other courses or disciplines. Although teachers found TBI useful, they thought that students and parents should not take an active role in curriculum and course book preparation processes. Thus, they suggested that the curriculum should be prepared thematically, not isolating different courses, but warned that teachers have neither a habit nor a willingness to prepare materials together. In a nutshell, the long history of effective experiences of TBI implementation in certain schools and the opinions/suggestions of teachers in the present study indicate that TBI could be effectively incorporated into curricula and course books as long as certain changes are made at the ministry level and reflected at the classroom level. The MoNE's 2023 vision will require substantial enhancement of the desire to use TBI and integrated curriculum models. As indicated by the suggestions of teachers in the present study with regard to the use and dissemination of the sequenced model of integration, improvements need to be targeted to reach advanced levels of integration where learners themselves direct the integration process by taking into account their interests, awareness and self-motivation. All teachers across different disciplines in schools should be provided with INSET that will exemplify how to align different course contents and how to prepare materials in coordination. Language teachers, in addition, should be encouraged to prepare materials collectively with teachers of other courses in their schools. As the new 2023 vision of the MoNE suggests, more flexible curricula should be prepared according to needs and realities of various regions, and schools and teachers should be flexible enough to choose and adapt alternative materials to teach English via TBI. Textbooks should be designed in accordance with themes and topics in order to create curricular coherence with other courses. As very important stakeholders in the education process, parents and students should be heard in the development of the curriculum and course books. Finally, within and across learner models of curriculum integration should be targeted in the long run. As this will be a slow and lengthy process, continual step by step improvement needs to be adopted.

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