Evaluation of the Learning Outcomes in the Revised EFL Curriculum: A research on Outcome Verbs

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Abstract

EFL curricula for primary and secondary education in Turkey were revised based on the 2012 educational reform, and issued to the institutions of primary and secondary education affiliated to the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in 2017 to be put into practice the following academic year. This study was motivated to examine the revised primary EFL curriculum with a focus on the outcome statements with respect to verb choice. Accordingly, seven sets of data were compiled from these statements identified for 2nd to 8th grades in the document, and a total of 376 outcome statements were analysed. The results demonstrated that active verbs that are recommended for writing learning outcomes constituted 14% of 403 verbs in these statements while over 41% were comprised of vague verbs that should be avoided in writing learning outcomes such as *understand* and *know* as they make the statements hard to evaluate. The findings were discussed and outlined in detail, and a couple of practical implications were offered for curriculum designers based the findings reported in this research.

1. Introduction

Identified with such unique skills as soft skills (e.g. communication, IT and numeracy) and hard skills (e.g. entrepreneurship, life-long-learning and competitiveness), 21st century witnessed several developments and changes around the world. Turkey, like other countries, could not remain indifferent to these changes and restructured its educational system in consonance with the constructivist approach in 2004 (Ünsal et al., 2019). Accordingly, all course curricula including EFL for primary and secondary education were updated taking the related principles of the approach into consideration.

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Namely, the new EFL curriculum were grounded on such objectives as 'promoting learners' communicative proficiency in English by fostering integrated development of language skills with a particular emphasis on speaking and listening; addressing students' individualized learning styles and interests; integrating content and language integrated learning into the ELT curriculum to allow for certain cross-curricular topics to be learned in English' (Kırkgöz, 2009, p. 80).

The country witnessed another substantial change in its educational system in 2012, which entailed a transition from the 8+4 educational model to the 4+4+4 system (MoNE, 2017). Based on the new system, the starting age to foreign language instruction was lowered from 9 to 7. In parallel with the requirements of the transition, the existing curricula were redesigned considering the cognitive and social development of the target audience, and announced on the official website of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in 2017. The revised EFL curriculum mainly covers a rationale statement, key competences, suggestions for testing and evaluation, suggested techniques for the assessment of language skills, suggestions for practice and learning outcomes to be attained at the end of the course for each grade. As the new curricular model was constructed with a specific focus on communication in the target language, the communicative approach was adopted in teaching foreign languages, which necessitates 'the use of the target language not only as an object of study, but as a means of interacting with others; the focus is not necessarily on grammatical structures and linguistic functions, but on authentic use of the language in an interactive context in order to generate real meaning' (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards, 2006; cited in MoNE, 2017). It is also noted in the document that 'use of English is emphasized in classroom interactions of all types, supporting learners in becoming language users, rather than students of the language, as they work toward communicative competence' (CoE, 2001). Accordingly, the communicative skills such as listening, speaking and spoken interaction are emphasized over other language skills. This is especially mirrored through the quantity of the learning outcomes that are designed to improve learners' communicative rather than reading and writing skills. Namely, approximately 50% of the outcome statements fall into the categories of spoken interaction and spoken production, followed by listening (30%), reading (14%) and writing (7%). Furthermore, no learning outcomes related to reading and writing skills appear in the sections for 2nd, 3rd and 3rd grades while those related to writing skill do not emerge till the second half of the section for 6th grade.

1.1. Review of literature

The relevant literature highlights the significance of using active verbs in writing effective and easy-to-measure outcome statements (Bingham, 1999; Fry et al., 2000;

Jenkins & Unwin, 2001; Osters & Tiu, 2003; Adam, 2006; Declan, 2006). More specifically, it is postulated that ambiguous verbs such as *understand, know, be aware* and *appreciate* should be avoided in learning outcomes (Bingham, 1999) since the key word is 'do' and the key need in drafting learning outcomes is to use active verbs (Jenkins & Unwin, 2001; Fry et al., 2000). Likewise, Osters and Tiu (2003) advocate that concrete verbs such as *define, apply* or *analyse* are more helpful for assessment than other verbs such as *be exposed to, understand, know* and *be familiar with*. In this vein, Jenkins and Unwin (2001) propose the use of certain verbs to specify different sorts of outcome, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Verbs for different sorts of outcomes (Jenkins & Unwin, 2001, p. 3)

Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Arrange	Classify	Apply	Analyse	Arrange	Appraise
Define	Describe	Choose	Appraise	Assemble	Argue
Duplicate	Discuss	Demonstrate	Calculate	Create	Assess
Label	Explain	Dramatise	Categorise	Collect	Attach
List	Express	Employ	Compare	Compose	Choose
Memorise	Identify	Illustrate	Contrast	Construct	Compare
Name	Indicate	Interpret	Criticise	Design	Estimate
Order	Locate	Operate	Differentiate	Formulate	Evaluate
Recall	Recognise	Practice	Discriminate	Manage	Judge
Recognise	Report	Schedule	Distinguish	Organise	Predict
Relate	Review	Sketch	Examine	Plan	Rate
Repeat	Restate	Solve	Experiment	Prepare	Score
Reproduce	Select	Use	Question	Propose	Select
State	Translate	Write	Test	Write	Support
**	**	**	**	**	**

In a more recent research, Adelman (2015) contends that the verbs '*ask, consider, practice, question, read, think, comply, consult, act,* and *discuss* may all be default verbalizations of assignments or classroom interactions or learning directions, but are intermediary processes, not outcomes' as they 'describe routine activities of teaching (behavioural commands/requests/prods) and learning' (p. 16). He goes on to state that 'a learning outcome statement does not ascribe "ability" to do or demonstrate something' as one does not know a student has the "ability" to do anything until the student actually does it, for which point we use verbs that indicate what the student actually did' (p. 13). Hence, he recommends the use of verbs that allow practitioners to evaluate students' achievement such as *identify, categorize, differentiate, design, disaggregate, reformulate*, or *evaluate*. Moving from these viewpoints, the identified outcome statements in the

revised EFL curriculum were expected to include the above-mentioned active verbs, some of which are provided in Table 1, and those identified by Adelman (Ibid).

The literature review on learning outcomes indicates that the studies have been mostly conducted on how to write effective learning outcomes –based on certain taxonomies and content (Janssen & Rijlaarsdam, 1996; Scroggins, 2004; Hanushek & Wossmann, 2005; Zumbach et al., 2008; Um & Plass, 2010; Eitel et al., 2013; Gezer & İlhan, 2015; Seemiller, 2016; Zorluoğlu et al., 2016; Göçer & Kurt, 2016; Ünsal & Korkmaz, 2017). In the Turkish context, the revised curricula for different courses were evaluated from various perspectives ranging from teachers' views (Batdı, 2017; Gürsoy et al., 2017; Aksoy et al., 2018; Yalçınkaya, 2018; Birgül & Nacakcı, 2019; Ünsal et al., 2019), content and implementation (Demir & Akar-Vural, 2017; Deveci & Çepni, 2017; Aydın et al., 2018; Güneş-Koç & Kayacan, 2018; Tarman & Kılınç, 2018, Doğan & Burak, 2018) to overall analysis (Altan, 2017; Erarslan, 2018), and assessment and evaluation (Duruk et al., 2017; Sarıgöz & Fişne, 2018). Outcome verbs, which constituted the major focus of the present study, were investigated in a very limited number of research mostly with the focus on alignment with the learning taxonomies (Stanny, 2016; Diab & Sartawi, 2017) and educational practices (Hutchings, 2016; Wagenaar, 2018; Schoepp, 2019). It is observed that they were conducted especially in the scope of higher education. Examining the learning outcomes in the revised Turkish curriculum for primary education in Turkey, Avşar and Mete (2018) reported a limited diversity in outcome verb choice and repeated inclusion of most outcomes into the curriculum.

1.2. Statement of the problem

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has previously analysed outcome statements in the revised EFL curriculum for primary education in Turkey in terms of the recommended verbs for the construction of learning outcomes. Hence, in order to bridge the research gap, this study attempted to examine the revised curriculum in concern to see to what extent they include the suggested verbs for student learning outcome articulation (Adelman, 2015).

2. Method

2.1. Data collection and analysis

The document analysis method was exclusively employed in the current research as it required analysing the revised primary EFL curriculum. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen, 2009). The documents in concern are (i) public records (the official, ongoing records of an organization's activities; e.g., student

transcripts, mission statements, annual reports, policy manuals, student handbooks, strategic plans, and syllabi), (ii) Personal Documents (first-person accounts of an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs; e.g., calendars, e-mails, scrapbooks, blogs, Facebook posts, duty logs, incident reports, reflections/journals, and newspapers) and (iii) Physical Evidence (physical objects found within the study setting; e.g., flyers, posters, agendas, handbooks, and training materials) (O'Leary, 2014). Accordingly, seven sets of data were compiled from outcome statements in the revised EFL curriculum for 2nd to 8th grades that were available on the official website of MoNE (2017) at the time of data collection. Figure 1 illustrates their distribution over grades.
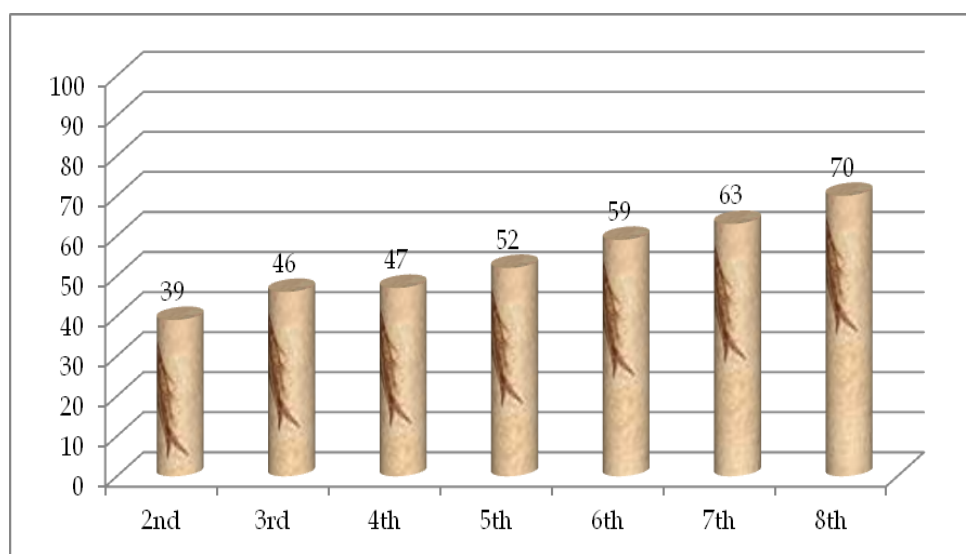

Figure 1. LOs in the revised primary EFL curriculum

403 verbs included in 376 outcome statements in the revised curriculum were simultaneously coded by the researchers based on the list proposed by Adelman (Ibid) who contends that 'writing verb-driven outcome statements requires an expanded vocabulary, along with a typology matched to the cognitive activities at issue' (p. 17). The categories of productive active and operational verb groups suggested by Adelman (Ibid) are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Active verbs for student learning outcome articulation (Adelman, 2015, p. 17-18)

CATEGORIES	VERBS
A. Verbs describing student acquisition and preparation of tools, materials, and texts of various types (including digital and archival)	*access, acquire, collect, accumulate, extract, gather, locate, obtain, retrieve*
B. Verbs indicating what students do to certify information, materials, texts, etc.	*cite, document, record, reference, source (v)*
C. Verbs indicating the modes of student characterization of the objects of knowledge or materials of production, performance, exhibit	*categorize, classify, define, describe, determine, frame, identify, prioritize, specify*
D. Verbs describing what students do in processing data and allied information	*calculate, determine, estimate, manipulate, measure, solve, test*
D1. Verbs further describing the ways in which students format data, information, materials	*arrange, assemble, collate, organize, sort*
E. Verbs describing what students do in explaining a position, creation, set of observations, or a text	*articulate, clarify, explicate, illustrate, interpret, outline, translate, elaborate, elucidate*
F. Verbs falling under the cognitive activities we group under "analyze"	*compare, contrast, differentiate, distinguish, formulate, map, match, equate*
G. Verbs describing what students do when they "inquire"	*examine, experiment, explore, hypothesize, investigate, research, test*
H. Verbs describing what students do when they combine ideas, materials, observations	*assimilate, consolidate, merge, connect, integrate, link, synthesize, summarize*
I. Verbs that describe what students do in various forms of "making"	*build, compose, construct, craft, create, design, develop, generate, model, shape, simulate*
J. Verbs that describe the various ways in which students utilize the materials of learning	*apply, carry out, conduct, demonstrate, employ, implement, perform, produce, use*
K. Verbs that describe various executive functions students perform	*operate, administer, control, coordinate, engage, lead, maintain, manage, navigate, optimize, plan*
L. Verbs that describe forms of deliberative activity in which students engage	*argue, challenge, debate, defend, justify, resolve, dispute, advocate, persuade*
M. Verbs that indicate how students valuate objects, experiences, texts, productions, etc.	*audit, appraise, assess, evaluate, judge, rank*
N. Verbs that reference the types of communication in which we ask students to engage	*report, edit, encode/decode, pantomime (v), map, display, draw/diagram*
O. Verbs, related to modes of communication, that indicate what students do in groups	*collaborate, contribute, negotiate, feed back*
P. Verbs that describe what students do in rethinking or reconstructing	*accommodate, adapt, adjust, improve, modify, refine, reflect, review*

The expert opinion was elicited from a faculty member with specialisation in curriculum and instruction. The research findings were reported via statistics and discussed in the following section.

3. Results

The initial findings of the study indicated that the learning outcomes used in the revised EFL curriculum for primary education unexceptionally begin with the expression "*Students will be able to ….*". This finding largely coincides with the existing literature (Jenkins & Unwin, 2001; Caffarella, 2002; Jackson et al., 2003; Adam, 2006). The following outcomes were extracted from each grade for exemplification.

*Students will be able to **match** written letters with the sounds produced.* (Gr 2)

*Students will be able to **recognize** the physical qualities of individuals.* (Gr 3)

*Students will be able to **understand** short and clear utterances about requests.* (Gr 4)

*Students will be able to **talk about** daily routines.* (Gr 5)

*Students will be able to **describe** people doing different actions.* (Gr 6)

*Students will be able to **ask** questions related to the frequency of events.* (Gr 7)

*Students will be able to **express** obligations, likes and dislikes in simple terms.* (Gr 8)

Adam (2006) advocates that 'this formulation of learning outcome statements has a number of benefits as it focuses the writer of the learning outcomes on precisely what skills, abilities and knowledge will be acquired' (p. 6). According to him, these statements are typically characterised by the use of active verbs. However, the present findings have shown that slightly over 14% of the outcome statements in the revised curriculum include this sort of verbs while approximately half of them contain verbs that should be avoided in the writing process of outcome statements as they refer to future abilities of the students (Adelman, 2015). Hence, this particular finding of the research obviously contradicts with Bingham (1999), Fry et al. (2000), Jenkins and Unwin (2001), and Osters and Tiu (2003) who favoured the use of active verbs in drafting outcome statements. Figure 2 displays their proportion to all outcome verbs in the curriculum at stake.
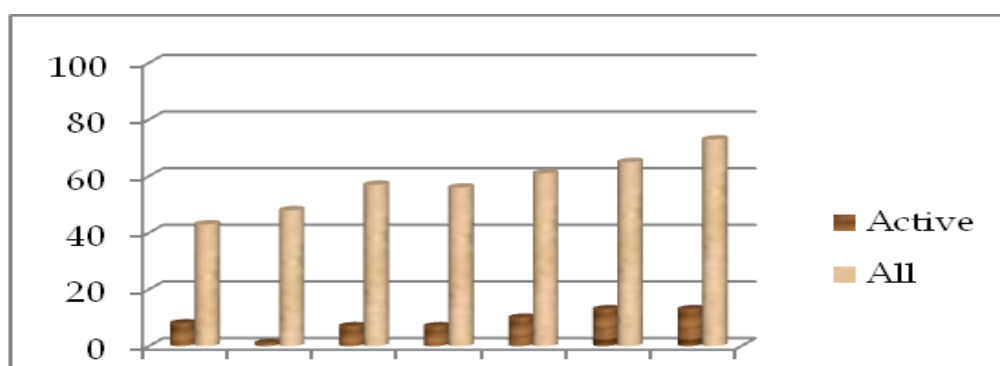
Figure 2. Active verbs in primary EFL outcome statements

As seen in Figure 2, active verbs constituted a limited quantity of all outcome verbs regardless of grades and some fluctuations were found in their distribution across grades. Namely, they seem to constitute 20% of the outcome verbs identified for 7th grade, followed by 2nd grade (19%), 8th grade (18%), and 6th grade (16%) whereas they represent 13% and 12% in those for 5th and 4th grades, respectively. It was striking to see that only one active verb was used in learning outcomes for 3rd grade (2%). Figure 3 presents the distribution of the verbs in concern across the revised curriculum.
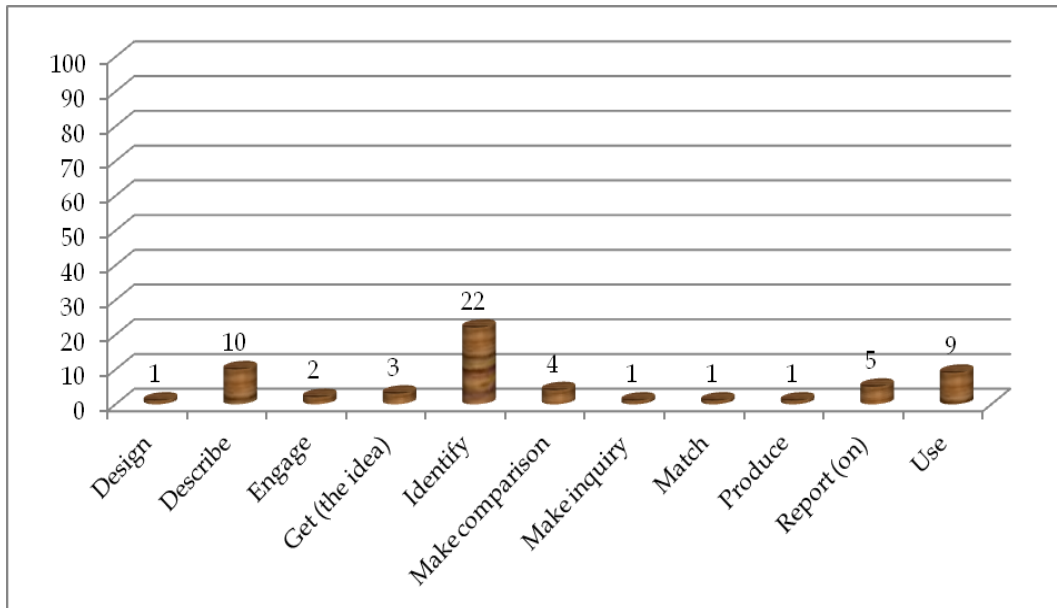

Figure 3. Recommended outcome verbs in the revised EFL curriculum

As outlined in Figure 3, *identify* was the most frequently used verb in the revised primary EFL learning outcomes, followed by *describe, use* and *report.* The two most

frequented verbs fall into the category of 'verbs indicating the modes of student characterization of the objects of knowledge or materials of production, performance, exhibit' while *use* belongs to the verb category that 'describes the various ways in which students are required to utilize the materials of learning'. The verb *report*, on the other hand, is classified to the verb group that 'references the types of communication in which students are asked to engage'. Nonetheless, these verbs could not be found in the revised curriculum at a desired level. More interestingly, the findings showed that no outcome verbs in the revised curriculum fell into half of the recommended verb categories by Adelman (Ibid): (i) verbs indicating the modes of student characterization of the objects of knowledge or materials of production, performance, exhibit, (ii) verbs describing what students do in processing data and allied information, (iii) verbs further describing the ways in which students format data, information, materials, (iv) verbs describing what students do in explaining a position, creation, set of observations, or a text, (v) verbs that describe forms of deliberative activity in which students engage, (vi) verbs that indicate how students valuate objects, experiences, texts, productions, etc., (vii) verbs describing what students do when they "inquire", and (viii) verbs that describe what students do in rethinking or reconstructing. Figure 4 provides the most frequented ten verbs in the primary EFL outcome statements.
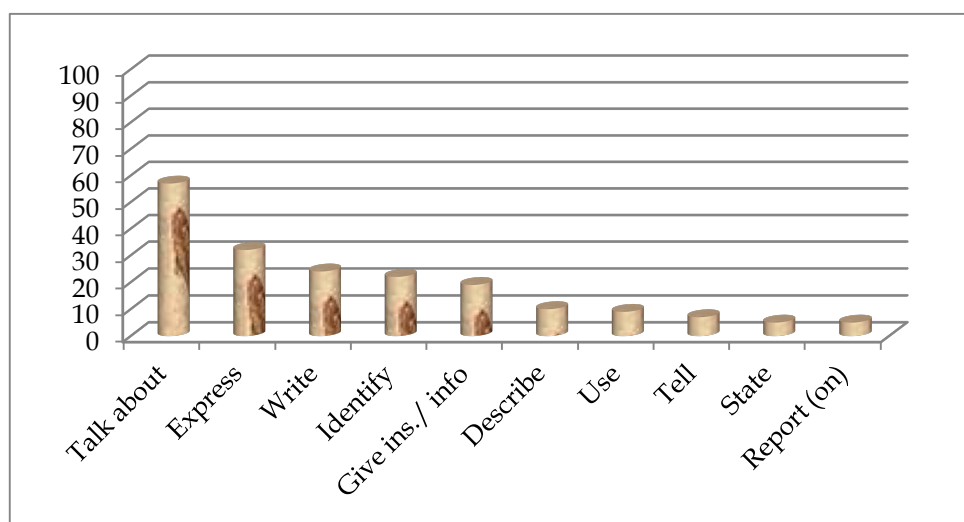

Figure 4. Top ten outcome verbs in the revised primary EFL curriculum

Figure 4 illustrates that only four out of top ten verbs belong to the recommended verb list for learning outcomes: *describe, identify, report* and *use*. The following were extracted from EFL curriculum of various grades to illustrate outcome statements with these verbs.

*Students will be able to **identify** certain pet animals.* (Gr 2)

*Students will be able to **describe** the weather conditions.* (Gr 4)

*Students will be able to **report on** appearances and personalities of other people.* (Gr 7)

*Students will be able to **use** various simple expressions to state the feelings and personal opinions about places and things.* (Gr 6)

As mentioned earlier, the majority of the outcome verbs used in the revised curriculum falls into the category that should be avoided according to Adelman (2015) who contends that they are 'default verbalizations of assignments or classroom interactions or learning directions, but are intermediary processes, not outcomes' (p. 16). The sample outcomes containing these verbs are presented below.

*Students will be able to **understand** common expressions about abilities.* (Gr 2)

*Students will be able to **recognize** information about other people.* (Gr 4)

*Students will be able to **follow** how a simple process is described in oral texts.* (Gr 7)

*Students will be able to **read** short and simple texts, such as personal narratives about repeated actions.* (Gr 6)

In the light of this finding, it could be concluded that the outcome statements were mostly designed in contradiction with Bingham (1999), Osters and Tiu (2003), McLean and Looker (2006), and Adelman (2015). The distribution of the verbs, which are specified as "to avoid" in the related literature, across grades are demonstrated in Figure 5.
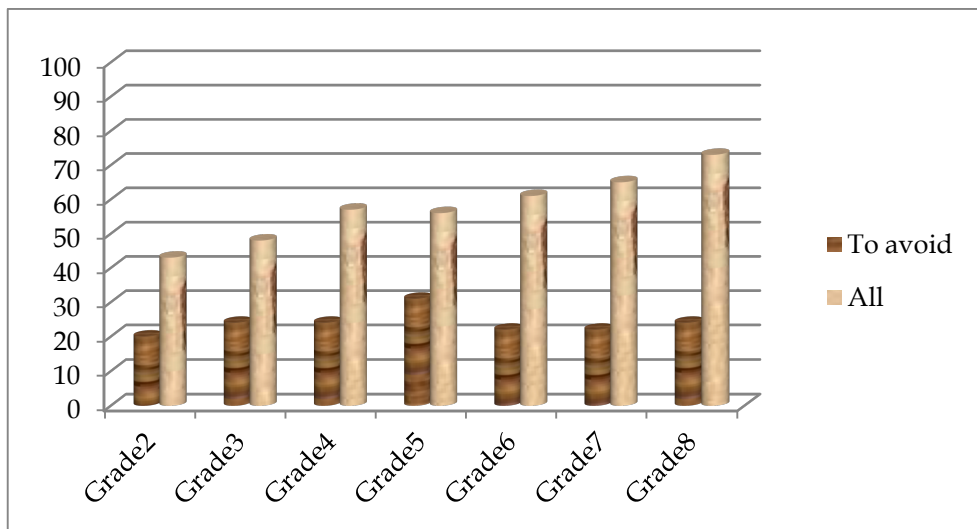
Figure 5. Outcome verbs to avoid in the revised EFL curriculum across grades

As depicted in Figure 5, the outcome verbs to avoid comprised over 40% of all verbs in the revised curriculum. They were mostly found in 5th grade (55%), followed by 3rd grade (50%), 2nd grade (47%), 4th grade (42%), 6th grade (36%), 7th grade (34%) and 8th grade (33%). Figure 6 provides the distribution of such verbs across the revised curriculum.
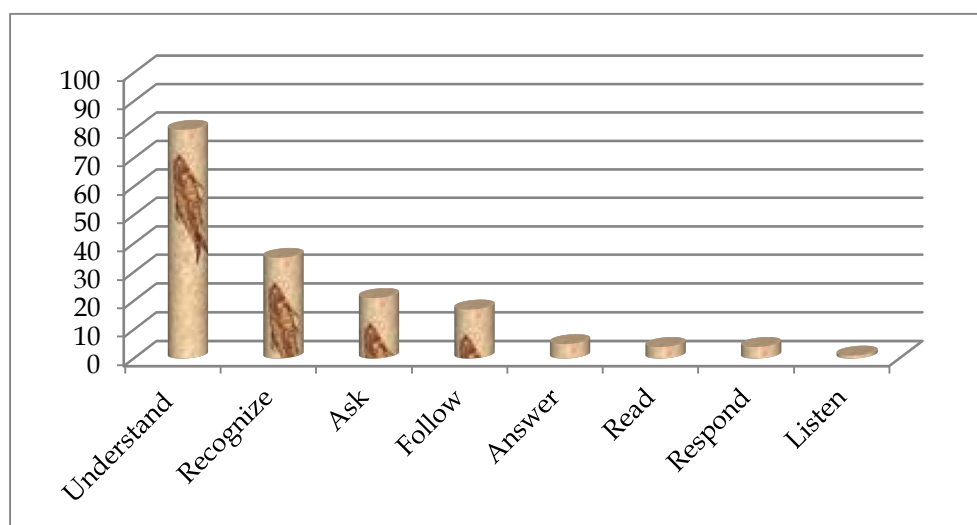

Figure 6. Outcome verbs to avoid in the revised primary EFL curriculum

As shown in Figure 6, the findings indicated that the verb *understand* was the most frequently employed verb representing approximately 50% of the verbs in this category, followed by *recognize* (20%); *ask* (13%) and *follow* (10%). Quite significantly, *understand* was increasingly used in the last four years (5th to 8th grades) when cognitively more demanding outcomes appeared in the primary EFL programme, which could be threatening when considering that it is unclear and subject to different interpretations in terms of what action it is specifying (American Association of Law Libraries, URL 3, & British Columbia Institute of Technology, 1996), and that it tends to focus on the process students have gone through rather than the final outcome of that process UCE Educational and Staff Development Unit, URL 7). The finding largely overlaps with Schoepp (2019) who previously reported 'that the quality of learning outcomes is quite poor, and that a great deal of work is required until most outcomes would be aligned with internationally accepted best practices' (p. 615).

The subsequent section offers discussion, conclusion and recommendations based on the research findings as well as suggestions for further directions based on the limitations of the current research.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As noted earlier, learning outcome statements should focus on student behaviour and include some certain action verbs to explain what students are expected to demonstrate at the end of the course (http://www.gavilan.edu/research/spd/Writing-Measurable-Learning-Outcomes.pdf). The present study has revealed that only 14% of the outcome statements included active verbs, which are extensively recommended while writing learning outcomes in the related literature, and that over 41% of the verbs were constituted by those to avoid in the primary EFL outcome statements, which makes it hard to evaluate learning outcomes. This might be attributed to the mismatch between the general philosophy of the revised curriculum and the assessment and evaluation practices of MoNE. To be more precise, even though various types of CEFR-based techniques are suggested 'to cover four language skills and implicit assessment of language components' in the curriculum document (MoNE, 2017, p. 7), the high-stake exam administered by MoNE at the end of primary education does not evaluate the students' communicative proficiency in English. To be even more precise, the latest Secondary School Entrance Exam included 10 multiple test items that merely required the examinees to read and comprehend the given situations/ tables/ figures and to choose among four items accordingly (The exam and the answer key are available at the official website of MONE https://www.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2019_06/02125953_2019 _SOZEL_BOLUM.pdf). Besides, from the viewpoint of Adelman (Ibid), these statements could be considered objectives rather than learning outcomes. Hence, EFL curriculum designers could be recommended to avoid using the expressions that makes learning outcomes harder to measure, to employ such concrete verbs as define, apply or analyse (Osters & Tiu, 2003), and to elicit expert opinion from those with specialisation in the field of curriculum and instruction as well as measurement and evaluation in education while creating outcome statements.

e.g. *Students will be able to understand the names for colours of things. (Existing outcome*/ G 2)

Students will paint the shapes in the instructed colours. (Recommended outcome)

Alternatively, in-service training programmes on writing effective learning outcomes (e.g. seminars, workshops and courses) could be organized at educational institutions by MoNE.

This study was primarily limited to the investigation of the revised EFL teaching programme for primary education in Turkey. So, it could be extended to scrutinize the ones for secondary and higher education in the country and/ or abroad. It was also limited to the analysis of rationale and outcome statements regarding mood, modality and active verbs in the teaching programmes in concern. Hence, further research could

be conducted on teaching programmes of other courses such as Mathematics, History and Science.

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