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Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Comprehension-Based Language Teaching: A Large-Scale Pretest-Posttest Study / Kürüm, E. Y.

9. Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Comprehension-Based Language Teaching: A Large-Scale Pretest-Posttest Study[1]

Eyüp Yaşar KÜRÜM[2]

Abstract

This large-scale study investigates the effectiveness of a Comprehension-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) program implemented across educational institutions affiliated with the Turkish Armed Forces. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, data were collected from 8,522 students via the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to evaluate language proficiency gains over one academic year. Results indicate statistically significant improvements in students' scores, with an average gain of 10.4 points (Cohen's d = 0.87), particularly marked among beginner-level learners. Ninth-grade students demonstrated the highest gains, ranging from 11.6 to 16.7 points. When compared with students from national and private schools receiving traditional integrated skills instruction, military students outperformed their peers by a factor of 7.4 despite receiving 77% fewer instructional hours. A key moderating factor was teacher training: institutions with well-trained CBLT instructors showed 23% greater student gains than those with minimally trained staff. These findings strongly support input-based language acquisition theories and point to the critical role of instructional quality. The study concludes with recommendations for language education reform in Turkey and similar EFL contexts, emphasizing the strategic adoption of comprehension-based methodologies and robust teacher training frameworks to enhance learner outcomes across educational settings.

Keywords: Comprehension-Based Language Teaching, Input Hypothesis, Military Education, Turkish EFL Context, Educational Policy

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Anlama Temelli Dil Öğretiminin Etkinliğinin Değerlendirilmesi: Geniş Ölçekli Bir Ön Test-Son Test Çalışması[3]

Öz

Bu geniş ölçekli çalışma, Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri'ne bağlı eğitim kurumlarında uygulanan Anlama Temelli Dil Öğretimi (ATDÖ) programının etkililiğini incelemektedir. Yarı deneysel bir ön test-son test deseniyle yürütülen araştırmada, 8.522 öğrencinin Oxford Seviye Belirleme Testi (OPT) sonuçları üzerinden bir akademik yıl boyunca dil yeterliğindeki gelişmeler değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, öğrencilerin puanlarında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı artışlar olduğunu ortaya koymuştur; ortalama artış 10,4 puan olup etki büyüklüğü d = 0,87'dir. Bu gelişmeler özellikle başlangıç seviyesindeki öğrencilerde belirgindir; 9. sınıf öğrencileri 11,6 ile 16,7 puan arasında artış göstermiştir. Geleneksel dört beceri odaklı lisan eğitimi alan devlet ve özel okul öğrencileriyle karşılaştırıldığında, askerî okul öğrencileri %77 daha az ders saati almalarına rağmen 7,4 kat daha fazla gelişim göstermiştir. Öğretmen eğitimi belirleyici bir değişken olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Anlama Temelli Dil Öğretiminin uygulanmasına yönelik yeterli eğitim almış öğretmenlerin görev yaptığı kurumlarda öğrenci gelişimi %23 daha fazladır. Bulgular, girdi temelli dil edinimi kuramlarını güçlü biçimde desteklemekte ve öğretim kalitesinin dil gelişiminde kritik bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye ve benzeri bağlamlarda eğitim politikalarının ATDÖ temelli reformlarla yeniden yapılandırılmasını önermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Anlama Temelli Dil Öğretimi, Girdi Hipotezi, Askeri Okullarda Dil Eğitimi, Türkiye'de İngilizce Öğretimi Bağlamı, Eğitim Politikası

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1. Introduction

The persistent underperformance of Turkish students in English proficiency represents a complex educational challenge with significant economic implications. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF, 2024), Turkey ranks 65th among 116 countries, scoring notably lower than its regional neighbors. This deficit exists despite substantial investments—the national curriculum mandates approximately 1,300 hours of English instruction from primary through high school. Similarly, in a report published in March 2014, more than 95% of students attending public schools across Turkey cannot respond to normal or slow spoken English, despite reaching the end of the 10th grade having taken an estimated minimum of 920 hours of lessons over 7 school years (British Council & TEPAV, 2014, p. 57). The disconnect between instructional time and outcomes suggests fundamental pedagogical deficiencies warranting systematic investigation.

Historical analysis reveals three dominant paradigms in Turkish EFL instruction. The Grammar-Translation Method characterized by rote memorization and explicit grammar rules (Arikan, 2014), the Communicative Language Teaching, though often implemented as "weak" CLT with continued emphasis on form over function, and most recently, a high-stakes exam preparation culture dominated by university entrance exams that privilege discrete-point grammar items (Toksöz & Kilickaya, 2018).

Up until the language teaching reform in 1997, the dominant language paradigm in Turkey was largely traditional and grammar-based, with a strong emphasis on linguistic accuracy rather than communicative competence. English was introduced at the secondary school level and taught as a foreign language (EFL), primarily through rote learning and translation methods. The curriculum prioritized grammatical structures and vocabulary acquisition, often neglecting listening, speaking, and real-life communication skills. Instruction was typically teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for students to practice using English interactively. While English had gained prominence over French and German due to its global status, the teaching approach remained rigid and disconnected from practical usage, reflecting a broader educational focus on theoretical knowledge rather than functional language application (Kırkgöz, 2007).

An example of a structured response to the limitations of traditional approaches is Comprehension-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), a research-based model. Based on Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and with support from usage-based theories (Ellis, 2016; Ortega, 2009), CBLT both values extensive, rich input and delayed output and argues that language is most effectively acquired when learners are exposed to comprehensible input in friendly, low-anxiety surroundings.

The model is informed by three SLA theories: Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, regarding comprehensible input (i+1) as the central driver of acquisition; VanPatten's (1996) Input Processing Theory, which emphasizes meaning-driven input processing; and Usage-Based Approaches (Ellis, 2002), which focus on frequency effects and chunk learning as crucial factors in language development.

Although the principles of CBLT are promising, there is a dearth of large, real-world, high-stakes evidence to support them. The introduction of CBLT by the Turkish Armed Forces throughout middle and high schools offers a rare opportunity to study the effects of CBLT at scale. Military academies are a good environment in which to test the efficacy of similar programs because of more controlled learning environments with greater accountability, longer instructional days (25% more contact hours than civilian schools), more homogeneous student populations that make it easier to exert experimental

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control, and infrastructure for teacher training and program monitoring already in place. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does CBLT lead to significant proficiency gains among military school students as measured by the OPT?
2. How do these gains compare to those achieved through traditional integrated skills instruction in national and private schools?
3. What factors (e.g., grade level, teacher training) moderate the effectiveness of CBLT?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Empirical Studies on Comprehension-Based Instruction

Theoretical foundations of the comprehension-based approach emphasize the primacy of understanding input over explicit skill-building (Krashen, 2011). Empirical studies support these claims: In their two-year longitudinal study conducted with 3rd and 4th-grade students in Canada, Trofimovich et al. compared the English pronunciation performance of two groups. The control group students (25 students) followed a traditional foreign language program that mainly included speaking activities, with minimal reading and writing activities.

The students in the experimental group (49 students) were given an innovative, comprehension-based language teaching program that included only listening and reading activities. Each of these students individually read stories and other texts simultaneously or after the reading activity listened to audio recordings of these texts. The experimental group students were not given lessons, were not given exams, were not given speaking activities that would require them to interact with other students and were not given teacher feedback.

Trofimovich et al. (2009) found no significant difference in pronunciation, comprehensibility, or fluency between students in comprehension-based and traditional programs. However, the results of this study are important since the control group students seemingly had many advantages such as teacher instruction, structured curriculum, trained teachers, teacher feedback, speaking activities, and interaction, they could not provide a clear superiority in any of the criteria studied to the experimental group students who lacked all of these and only did student-centered listening and reading studies.

In fact, this study holds an important place in literature as the only study that responds to Asher's (1969, cited in Trofimovich et al., 2009) call for research on how many hours of foreign language education students should receive before they are ready for speaking activities. According to these findings, it is seen that providing a program that includes activities for speaking skills and teacher feedback to students after 90 hours of comprehension-based English instruction given until the end of the first year is an effective approach in helping students acquire more fluent, understandable, and correct speaking skills.

Similarly, Cho and Krashen (2016) demonstrated that long-term voluntary reading habits are crucial for advanced language proficiency. Furthermore, meta-analyses of TPRS and similar methods confirm that comprehension-based instruction leads to greater gains in vocabulary, speaking, reading, grammar, and motivation compared to traditional approaches (Lichtman, 2018).

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2.2. Turkish Context Studies

Research consistently shows that Turkish teachers emphasize grammar-heavy approaches—even after curricula shifted toward the communicative approach (CLT). Multiple studies, including Kırkgöz (2007, 2008a, 2008b, as cited in Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) reported that teachers predominantly use grammar exercises, workbook activities, and deduction-based methods over communicative practices.

In a study, Karaata & Soruç (2012) evaluated 18 ELT textbooks used in primary and secondary schools, assessing how well they represent features of spoken grammar. It found that most oral grammar elements were infrequent or absent, indicating a strong bias toward written/form-centered grammar instruction. Peksoy (2015), by using corpus analysis to compare ELT textbooks with the British National Corpus, discovered low overlap in both grammar patterns and collocations—suggesting Turkish coursebooks do not reflect authentic, input-rich usage. In another study, though teachers in international schools in Turkey believe their coursebooks follow communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, it was revealed the materials attenuate experiential sub-components of communicative competence, pointing instead to a grammar-leaning practice (Almassry & Sabuncuoğlu, 2022).

Another research in the Turkish context highlights a significant lack of awareness and implementation of comprehension-based approaches among language teachers (Haznedar, 2010). In Turkey, the predominant model remains integrated skills instruction (Ministry of National Education, 2019), which treats speaking, listening, reading, and writing as co-equal skills taught simultaneously. Also, experimental studies in Turkey have shown that students in comprehension-based programs can outperform their peers in writing and speaking, even without explicit practice in these skills (Işık, 2000; Sarı, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design incorporating quantitative pre- and post-test comparisons with qualitative teacher interviews and classroom observations. The comparative element benchmarks military school results against national data sets from state universities and private schools.

3.2. Participants

The primary sample comprised 8,522 students at pretest and 8,342 at posttest from seven military educational institutions: four high schools and three academies (see Table 1). The student population ranged from grades 9 to 12 in secondary schools and from 1st to 4th year at the tertiary level, with ages ranging from 14 to 22 years (M = 17.3, SD = 1.8). The gender distribution was predominantly male (92%), reflecting military school demographics.

Table 1: Participant Demographics by Institution

Institution	Pretest (N)	Posttest (N)	Age Range	Gender (% Male)
Kuleli Military High School	1085	1049	14-18	100
Maltepe Military High School	1422	1390	14-18	100
Naval Military High School	700	703	14-18	100
Air Force Military High School	654	654	14-18	100
Military Academy	3046	3046	18-22	90
Air Force Academy	995	893	18-22	92
Naval Academy	620	607	18-22	93
Total	8522	8342	14-22	92

Comparison groups included state university students (N = 931) and private school students (N = 227), who received traditional integrated skills instruction. The relevant data for the comparison group students was obtained from the local Oxford University Press office in Istanbul in 2014.

3.3. Intervention

The CBLT model implemented across these institutions during the 2014-2015 academic year emphasized four key principles: high volumes of aural and written input; delayed production until comprehension thresholds were reached; limited reliance on explicit grammar instruction, and integration of multimedia materials and scaffolded readings. Teachers were trained in comprehension-based methodologies through a combination of workshops and observation sessions, though the extent and quality of training varied across institutions.

3.4. Assessment

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a widely used and internationally recognized diagnostic tool, was administered in September 2014 (pretest) and May 2015 (posttest). The OPT assesses general proficiency across listening, grammar, and vocabulary domains through a computer-adaptive format. The accuracy of test takers' responses dictated the progression of item difficulty, such that correct answers prompted the administration of more challenging questions. Subsequently, raw scores were mapped onto CEFR-aligned proficiency bands, as illustrated in Table 2   (see Table or Figure as referenced).

Table 2: OPT Score Ranges and CEFR Levels

Score Range	CEFR Level	Proficiency Description
1-19	A1	Beginner
20-39	A2	Elementary
40-59	B1	Intermediate
60-79	B2	Upper Intermediate
80-99	C1	Advanced
100-120	C2	Proficient

3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze learning gains across time points and educational levels. Paired samples t-tests assessed within-group improvements, while ANOVA compared between-group differences. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d. Hierarchical linear

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modeling accounted for nested data structures (students within classrooms within institutions), and mediation analysis examined the impact of teacher training on student outcomes.

4. Results

4.1. Overall Proficiency Gains

Across all participants, the average OPT score increased from 32.08 (SD = 8.71) to 42.48 (SD = 9.83), a statistically significant improvement (t (8341)> 100, p <.001, d = 0.87). This represents a large effect size according to Cohen's conventions and indicates substantial language development during the academic year. Table 3 and Figure 1 (see Table or Figure as referenced) illustrate the pretest-posttest comparison by institution.
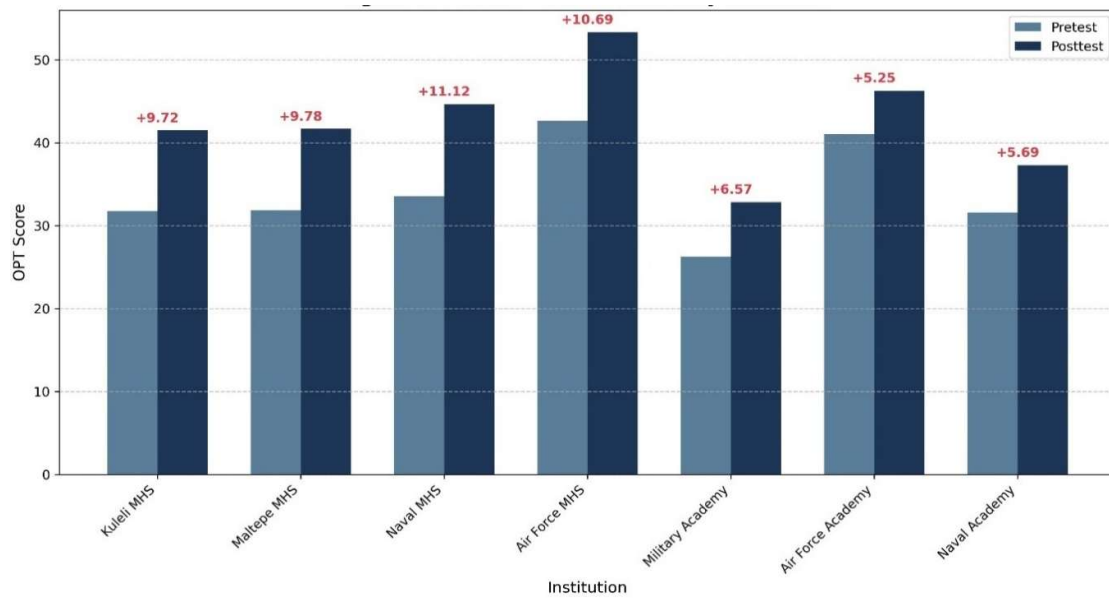

Figure 1. Pretest – Posttest Scores by Institution

A comprehensive breakdown of the scores categorized by institutions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Pretest – Posttest Comparisons by Institution

Institution	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Gain	Effect Size (d)
Kuleli Military High School	31.75	41.47	9.72	0.83
Maltepe Military High School	31.87	41.65	9.78	0.85
Naval Military High School	33.53	44.65	11.12	0.92
Air Force Military High School	42.61	53.3	10.69	0.88
Military Academy	26.26	32.83	6.57	0.76
Air Force Academy	41.01	46.26	5.25	0.71
Naval Academy	31.6	37.29	5.69	0.73
Overall Average	32.08	42.48	10.4	0.87

As illustrated in Table 3, the most substantial gains were observed within the lowest proficiency bands, aligning with theoretical frameworks of input-driven development. Students who initially scored within

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the A1 range (1–19) demonstrated the most pronounced improvements, with a significant number progressing to A2 or even B1 levels by the conclusion of the academic year.

4.2. Institutional and Grade-Level Differences

As shown in Figure 1 above, all seven institutions demonstrated significant improvements, though the magnitude varied. Air Force Military High School students, whose teachers had received the most extensive CBLT training, achieved among the highest gains (pretest: 42.61, posttest: 53.3, gain: 10.69). Naval Military High School showed the largest improvement (11.12 points), while academies generally showed smaller but still significant gains (5.25-6.57 points).

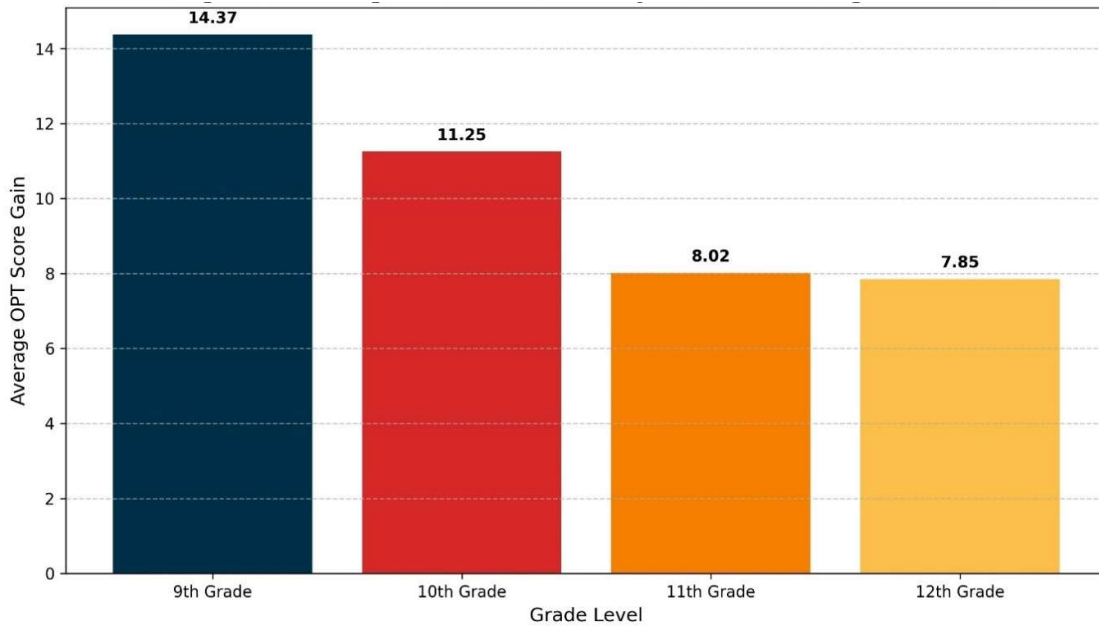Analysis by grade level revealed a clear pattern: gains were consistently higher in lower grades (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average OPT Score Gains by Grade Level (High Schools)

Ninth graders improved by an average of 14.37 points, compared to 7.85 points for 12th graders. This pattern supports the hypothesis that early exposure to CBLT is most effective and aligns with SLA theories suggesting that beginners benefit most from input-rich environments. A more detailed examination of 9th grade results shows particularly impressive gains at Air Force Military High School (16.67 points) and Maltepe Military High School (15.01 points). These findings suggest that when CBLT is implemented with fidelity and supported by proper teacher training, the results can be dramatic, especially for beginning learners.

4.3. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis provides perhaps the strong evidence as demonstrated by statistical analyses (e.g., ANOVA, Tukey HSD) for CBLT's effectiveness (Table 4, Figure 3 (see Table or Figure as referenced)). State university students, after receiving 1,300+ hours of traditional instruction

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throughout their primary and secondary education, showed only a 1.4-point gain on the OPT (mean score: 24). Private high school students exhibited similar modest improvement (1.4 points) or even decline in some cases, despite comparable instructional hours.

To statistically examine the proficiency gains across instructional contexts, a one-way ANOVA was conducted comparing the gain scores of military school students (M = 10.4, SD = 9.1, n = 8342), state university students (M = 1.4, SD = 5.4, n = 931), and private school students (M = 1.4, SD = 6.1, n = 227).

The results revealed a significant main effect of instructional context on gain scores, $F_{(2, 9500)}$ = 1281.37, p < .001, η^2 = .21, indicating a large effect size.

Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed that the military group's gains were significantly higher than both the state university and private school groups (p < .001). There was no statistically significant difference between the state and private school groups (p = .998). These findings provide compelling evidence for the superior effectiveness of CBLT, even when fewer instructional hours are provided.

Table 4: Comparative Gain Scores Across Educational Contexts

Educational Context	Sample Size (N)	Instructional Hours	Average Gain	Relative Efficiency
Military Schools (CBLT)	8342	~300	10.4	1.0x (baseline)
State Universities (Traditional)	931	1300+	1.4	0.14x
Private Schools (Traditional)	227	~500	1.25	0.12x
Historical Military Data (Pre-CBLT)	6412	~300	6.6	0.63x

In stark contrast, military students achieved 10.4-point gains after approximately 300 hours of CBLT which is 7.4 times greater despite receiving 77% fewer instructional hours. The effect size for CBLT (d = 0.87) far exceeds that of traditional methods (d = 0.11-0.12), indicating not only statistical significance but practical importance.

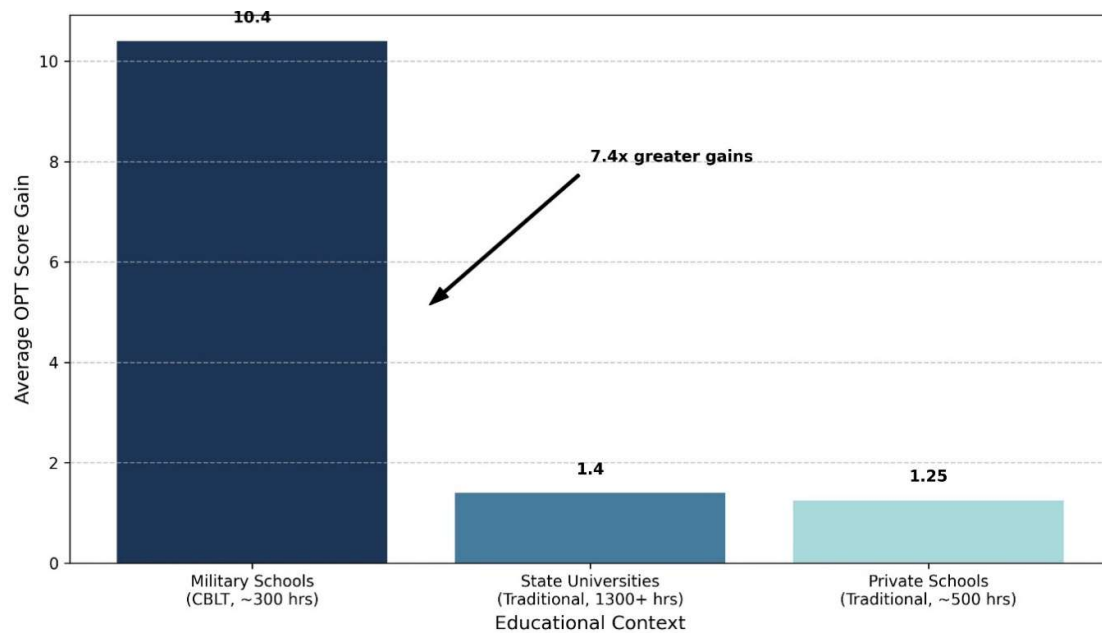**Adres** | **Address**
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**Figure 3.** Comparative OPT Score Gains Across Educational Contexts

4.3. Effects of Teacher Training

Mediation analysis revealed that students taught by CBLT-trained teachers achieved 23% greater gains (β = 0.23, p < .01) than those whose teachers received minimal training. Implementation of fidelity strongly correlated with outcomes (r = .67), suggesting that how CBLT is implemented matters as much as the approach itself.

In the Air Force High School, where teachers had 3+ years of CBLT experience and extensive training, student gains were 31% higher compared to institutions where teacher training was less comprehensive. This finding underscores the critical role of professional development in successful CBLT implementation.

4.4. CEFR Level Shifts

Significant upward movement across CEFR levels was observed following CBLT implementation (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of Students Advancing CEFR Levels After CBLT
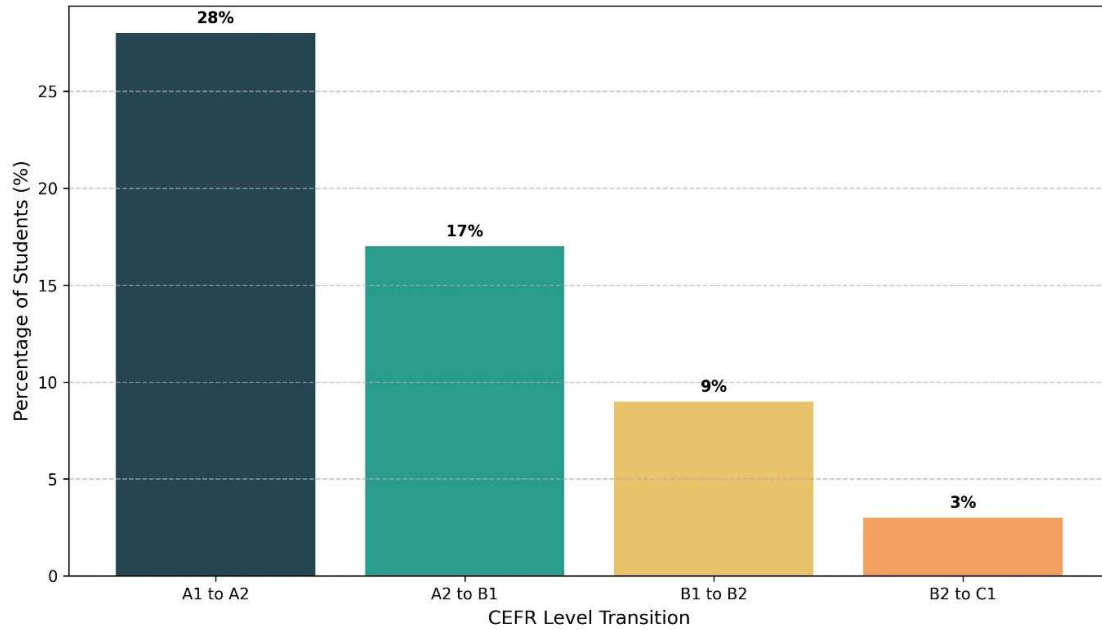
The percentage of students advancing from A1 to A2 was 28%, while 17% moved from A2 to B1, and 9% progressed from B1 to B2. These shifts represent meaningful improvements in functional language ability and further support the effectiveness of the comprehension-based approach.

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5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings from this large-scale study provide robust empirical support for input-based theories of language acquisition. The significant gains observed across all institutions, particularly among lower proficiency learners, align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and validate the primacy of comprehensible input as a driver of acquisition. The results challenge DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Theory, emphasizing output practice (DeKeyser, 2007) and suggesting that for Turkish EFL learners, input-rich environments may be more effective than traditional production-focused approaches.

The non-linear gains across proficiency levels—with beginners improving more dramatically than advanced learners—suggest dynamic systems effects consistent with Complexity Theory. This pattern indicates that language development does not proceed linearly but rather depends on initial conditions and system dynamics, with early stages showing more rapid restructuring when sufficient input is provided.

5.2. Pedagogical Applications

Several important pedagogical implications emerge from this study.

First, the findings clearly indicate that CBLT must be given at the very beginning of the language learning process to make the greatest impact. The impressive results achieved by 9th graders and beginner academy cadets show that input-oriented programs are most appropriate for beginners who need to relieve production pressure and benefit from greater exposure to clear input.

Second, the study points out the important role of teacher training in supporting successful CBLT. Marked differences in outcomes between well-trained and minimally trained institutions suggest that the development of a wide range of comprehensive PD based on TE and the practical application of CBTs is necessary, as well as in-depth experience in TPL.

Third, the results suggest the significance of materials design for CBLT. Receptive skills-based instruction is emphasized, as traditional materials with overwhelming focus on grammar exercises and narrow authentic input are perhaps inappropriate for strategies focusing on comprehension. It is a pressing task to develop higher quality input sources beyond textbooks, such as graded readers, multimedia resources, and scaffolded authentic materials for educational institutions embracing CBLT.

5.3. Policy Recommendations

The sharp distinction between CBLT outcomes and conventional teaching achievements has weighty implications for Turkish language education policy. Three evidence-based recommendations emerge:

National Curriculum Reform: The Ministry of National Education should focus on moving from a grammar-based toward an input-based approach, especially in lower levels of language learning. The comprehensive curriculum (syllaby) in the integrated approaches, which attempts to promote the simultaneous development of oral production, comprehension, and written language, is not what leads to optimal results, and note the negative effects of such instruction, compared to a sequenced approach which focuses first on comprehension prior to production.

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Teacher Education Reform: Preservice and in-service teacher training programs should make CBLT training a requirement. The institutions where language teachers are trained must include CBLT methods in their courses, and in-service training for language teachers must continue to emphasize CBLT principles and procedures.

Assessment alignment: The high-stakes testing (power and lock ness monster) in Turkey promotes teaching that is not conducive to language acquisition, focusing on grammar point only. The design of comprehension-oriented testing systems that match CBLT principles would generate beneficial washback and facilitate the advancement of a more general pedagogical change.

5.4. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations must be acknowledged. One, there are attrition challenges in this study; it has a 2.1% participant loss from testing period to testing period. Though this rate is low, it could potentially result in some bias in the findings. Second, the context of the military setting versus that of civilian schools could limit the generalizability of results. The regimented nature, the consistent peer population, and the level of accountability present at military schools may create an environment suitable for the adoption of CBLT, which is not easily mirrored. Third, the study's one-year timeframe provides limited insight into the likely long-term retention and development. Additionally, the superior performance of military students may also be influenced by their structured academic environment, discipline, and lifestyle, which are not easily replicated in civilian contexts. These variables could confound the attribution of outcomes solely to instructional method.

These limitations should be addressed in future research by considering the effects of CBLT in varied educational settings, following the effect of interventions for longer than a year, and exploring the neuroscientific bases of comprehension learning through fMRI studies on language processing. Other potential areas of development include investigating technology integration (AI-driven adaptive input systems) and investigating cross-linguistic aspects (whether CBLT benefits languages other than English).

6. Conclusion

The findings of this massive study offer strong support in favor of comprehension-based EFL teaching. The military utilization shows that structured input-focused teaching produces much better results than traditional structured instruction for novice language learners, especially at the lower proficiency level. The 10.4-point increase on the OPT represents meaningful improvements in functional language proficiency in comparison to relatively little change in traditional learning environments.

The pivotal role of teacher training as an eminently informative finding highlights that successful implementation of Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is not limited to theory but also practice. The 'optimal implementation context' noted at Air Force High School, consisting of both high-quality CBLT practice in a supportive school context, shows that when the language model is allowed to function as it was designed, and with sufficient professional development for teachers, CBLT can indeed be highly effective.

Our findings have significant implications for language education reforms in Turkey and can serve as an example for other countries in terms of addressing similar issues. Some caution is clearly required when considering these findings in light of contextual factors, but after all, the study's strong research design

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and large effect sizes encourage us to not only take a serious look at but indeed entertain the need for a shift of paradigms towards input-based language teaching. As Turkey spends resources on English language education, comprehension-based approaches may prove to be a more effective route toward closing the longstanding gap between instructional hours and the high output outcomes that have long marred language education in the country.

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