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## The topics students have difficulty in understanding and learning in history course

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### Abstract

The aim of this research is to find out which historical themes and subjects the students have difficulty in understanding and learning and to define the reasons for them. In the research, the survey prepared by researchers who have taken students' essays, the education program of history lesson and experts' opinions as basis is used as instruments of the data collection and also focus group interview is conducted with participants. The research has been implemented with 131 students in twelfth grade of public high schools, which are affiliated to the Ministry of National Education, in Aksaray and Ankara. In conclusion, it is determined that the students find such historical themes and subjects as migration, natural disasters, daily life (or people's way of life), antiquity civilisations, the rise of Ottoman empire easy to learn. However, they have difficulty in understanding and learning such subjects as regional history, peace treaties, World and European history, Turkish and World history after 1938.

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### 1. Introduction

Starting from primary school till the end of high school, special importance is attached to history lesson (Paykoç, 1998). History course education program for high school was renewed in 2007 in line with the primary and high school program development reform in our country. The history programs for ninth and tenth grades have been issued in 2007 and 2008, respectively and the programs for other grades have gradually been put into effect.

The new program of history education envisages significant alterations and innovations. As stated in the program "A new student-centered approach which balances knowledge and skills and which helps students interact with their environment paying attention to their own lives and individual differences is intended to be implemented" (MEB, 2007).

As it is understood from the objective of the program, the new program history education puts the student in the center. It is a remarkable change because it is stated that students who remain indifferent to the lesson forget the topics which they have difficulty learning and they get bored and are unwilling to learn (Sözer, 2005; as cited in Şimşek, 2006). However, the opposite is observed when students are interested. As stated in modern education approaches, the programs which take students' interests and potential into consideration are highly likely to be successful (Şimşek, 2006). Students' success, involvement, competency in lessons increase students' motivation and interest.

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Within the context of history lesson, there are some points, which aren't explained to or debated with students, but only presented for memorization. This situation not only makes history lesson unfavourable but also causes a decline in the process of knowledge production (Işık, 2008). History lesson is not about memorizing old information patterns, but being able to make contribution to the formation and continuation of history by making universal values reusable upon searching, analysing and understanding humanity (Ata, 2002).

History teachers participating in the in-service training seminar in July 2010 stated that new history education program cannot be applied properly because of strict curriculum and insufficient time. Also, a research on "which subjects must be removed from the history books" was conducted with the participants. History teachers, who complain about the strict curriculum and time constraints, added some topics to the curriculum rather than eliminating some of them (Meydan, 2010). This situation forms the origin of the study. In the history lessons, is it possible and appropriate for education to apply the new training program and configuration approach properly by taking the students' ideas into consideration? Can history education in high schools be changed based on the students? It is expected that this research, prepared on the basis of this problem in high school history education, can help the field of history by revealing the topics students have difficulty in and the reasons behind them.

The aim of this research is to find out the historical themes and subjects students have difficulty in understanding and learning, and to define the reasons why they have difficulty in these. In this context, the problem statement of the research is stated as "What are the historical themes and subjects that students in the twelfth grade of high schools have difficulty in understanding and learning?"

The sub-problems of this problem are as follows:

- 1) What are the historical themes that high school 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have difficulty in learning?
- 2) What are the historical topics that high school 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have difficulty in learning?
- 3) What are the reasons behind these difficulties experienced in history lessons?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The findings of the research have been obtained from 131 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in public high schools that are affiliated to the Ministry of National Education in Aksaray and Ankara. The objective of focusing on high school 12<sup>th</sup> class students is that so far they have had an experience about the history course in their education-instruction process. The research has been completed in 2010-2011 academic year in fall term.

### 2.2. Data Collection Tool

A questionnaire prepared by the researchers is used as a tool for data collection. This questionnaire has three parts and the first part includes 11 items of historical topics. The students are asked to determine whether they find these historical topics easy or difficult. As the twelfth item, under "other" title, the students are expected to state if there is any other subject they find difficult in addition to the 11 items defined by the researchers. In the second part of the questionnaire, historical periods are listed in fifteen items and the students are again asked to state whether they have difficulty in those historical topics in a rating scale. In the sixteenth item, the students are asked to state any other topic they find difficult in addition to the items presented by the researchers. In the last part of the questionnaire, the reasons why the students have difficulty in some themes and topics in history course are listed in twelve items. The students are asked to mark the suitable items among those reasons and to write the other reasons-if there are any- under "other" title.

After the implementation of the questionnaire, focus group interview is conducted with students to effectively describe the historical themes and topics students have difficulty with. Focus group interview is applied to 12 volunteer students. A girl and a boy from each class participated in the interview.

### 2.3. Analysis of Data

Descriptive methods aim at presenting the existing situation of the problems on which people do research. Descriptive data generally uses observation, questionnaire (survey), interview and some tests as data collection tools. (Balci,2001; Kaptan,1973). In this research, descriptive analysis is used with the aim of stating the results and what the collected data shows about the research problem.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Findings related to the Historical Themes and Topics in History Lessons that 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students have Difficulty in Learning

The first sub-problem determined based on the problem statement of the research is intended to determine the historical themes in the history lessons that 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have most difficulty in learning. The findings related to the first sub-problem are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Range of the Historical Themes that the Students have Difficulty in Learning**

		Easy		Difficult	
		F	%	F	%
1	Government history	62	47,3	69	52,6
2	Daily life	97	74	43	32,8
3	Interstate relationships	54	41,2	77	58,7
4	Scientific developments	70	53,4	61	46,5
5	Things the governors, heroes and scholars did	58	44,2	73	55,7
6	Works of art of related periods	52	39,6	79	60,3
7	Wars	61	46,5	70	53,4
8	Peace settlements and treaties	37	28,2	94	71,7
9	Economic activities of related periods	80	61	51	38,9
10	Immigration and natural disasters	101	77	30	22,9
11	History of regions and places	35	26,7	96	73,2

In Table 1, the frequency and the percentage distribution of the historical themes in the history lessons that students find easy and difficult in learning is shown. According to this table, the easiest historical theme to learn is the “immigrations and natural disasters” with 77 percent. The theme that students find the most difficult is the “history of regions and places” with 73.2 percent. It is remarkable that the percentage of the theme that the students find difficult is close to the percentage of the theme that the students find easy. When the total percentages are considered, the percentage of the easy themes is 47.4 percent, while that of difficult themes is 52.5. The fact that the percentages of the themes specified as easy and difficult are close to each other is yet another significant finding. None of students specified a theme in “Other” section.

The second sub-problem determined in line with the problem statement of the research is intended to determine the historical subjects in the history lessons that 12<sup>th</sup> grade students find difficult. The findings related to the second sub-problem are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. The Range of the Historical Subjects that the Students have Difficulty in learning**

		Easy		Difficult	
		F	%	F	%
1	Ancient Civilizations	99	75,5	32	24,4
2	Early Turkish States and Tribes	89	67,9	42	32
3	History of Islam	88	67,1	43	32,8
4	Early Islamic Turkish States History	75	57,2	56	42,7
5	Seljuk Empire History	54	41,2	77	58,7
6	The History of Anatolian Principalities	53	40,4	78	59,5
7	Anatolian Seljuk Empire History	59	45	72	54,9
8	The Rise of the Ottoman Empire	91	69,4	40	30,5
9	The Growth of the Ottoman Empire	67	51,1	64	48,8
10	The Decline of The Ottoman Empire	62	47,3	69	52,6
11	Ottoman Modernization and Dissolution Period	59	45	72	54,9
12	European and World History in Middle Ages and Modern Times	31	23,6	100	76,3
13	The War of Independence	49	37,4	82	62,5
14	Ataturk’s Reforms and Revolutions	68	51,9	63	48
15	Turkish and World History after 1938	37	28,2	94	71,7

In Table 2, the frequency and the percentage distribution of the historical subjects in the history lessons that students find difficult is shown. According to this table, the historical subject that the students find easy is “Ancient Civilizations” with 75.5 percent. The subject that the students find difficult is “European and World History in Middle Ages and Modern Times” with 76.3 percent. When the total percentages are considered, the percentage of the easy topics is 49.9 percent, while that of difficult topics is 50.0. It is highly remarkable that the percentages of the topics that the students find easy and difficult are almost the same. The fact that the percentages of the themes specified as easy and difficult are close to each other is yet another significant finding. In “Other” section, students added such topics as “some topics in Revolution History, Recent History and Life of Atatürk” and mentioned that they find these topics difficult as well.

In the focus group meeting with students, students give answers supporting these findings. As an answer to the question “What themes and subjects do you have difficulty in learning in the history lesson?” Student A says; “...in my opinion; the most difficult subject is History of Europe. I have difficulty in learning our own history; I can’t recall most of the topics that I learned. So we don’t need to learn History of Europe. Student B says; “I like Egyptians; I find pleasure in learning their history. For this reason; the easiest subject is ancient civilizations for me. I always wonder, too many years ago, how they put the stones on top of each other without technology. I wonder! So I read encyclopedias at home sometimes, I watch documentaries on television, so I find it easy.” Student C says; “... I don’t understand peace settlements and treatments. The relationship between the treaties and the wars is so complicated for me.” Student D says; “...the decline of the Ottoman Empire is complicated for me. For example, modernization” Students expressed the historical themes and topics that they have difficulty in understanding and learning and they added that the themes and topics they cannot visualize in their minds are especially difficult. In addition, students said both in the “other” section and during the group meetings that they learn history more easily as long as the history lessons are taught by documentaries, films or other visual materials.

### 3.2. Findings related to the Reasons why High School 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students have Difficulty in Learning Historical Themes and Topics in History Lessons

The third sub-problem determined in line with the problem statement of the research is intended to determine why 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have difficulty in learning historical themes and subjects in the history classes. The findings related to the sub-problem are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The Reasons Why the Students have difficulty in learning Historical Themes and Topics

	F	%
1 The topic and the period are not recent	41	31,2
2 Events are not taught in chronological order	13	9,9
3 Events are related to many other facts and become complex	99	75,5
4 Events and periods have a complex structure	72	54,9
5 The scene of events cannot be seen and examined	55	41,9
6 Ideas of the people related to the events are not considered	31	23,6
7 Concepts belonging to the events and periods are not known	44	33,5
8 A long period of time is explained in a really short time	67	51,1
9 Maps, pictures, photographs, graphs films etc. are not used in history lessons	52	39,6
10 Events and periods are not related to the present time	49	37,4

The frequency and the percentage distribution related to why the students have difficulty in learning the historical themes and topics are given in Table 3. As it is seen in the table, the students have difficulty in learning the historical topics because “Events are related to many other facts and become complex” with 75.5 percent and because “Events and periods have a complex structure” with 54.9 percent, “A long time period is explained in a really short time” with 51.1 percent and “The scene of events cannot be seen and examined” with 41.9 percent. Considering the historical themes the students have difficulty in learning are “History of regions and places” and “Peace settlements and treaties”, it is quite normal that they have cited such reasons as “Events and periods have a complex structure”, “A long period of time is explained in a really short time” for not being able to learn these themes. Considering the historical topics the students have difficulty in learning are “European and World History in Middle Ages and Modern Times” and “Turkish and World History after 1938”, it can be said that the reasons like

“Events are related to many other facts and become complex” and “The scene of events cannot be seen and examined” can explain why they cannot learn these topics.

In the focus group meetings, the students stated that it is important to relate events to topics. They also mentioned that the intricate relation between the topics and teachers’ efforts to make this relation clear further make the events incomprehensible and hard to learn. In the “other” section in this part, the students attributed the reason for difficulty in learning to “teaching”. The fact that only lecturing method is used and that the teachers do not make use of technology and expect students to memorize the information are listed as the reasons for difficulty in learning. In this context, the students emphasized that when they are not interested in the lesson, it becomes harder to learn and they find the lesson boring. They added that to be able to prevent this, the lesson has to be made enjoyable. The students also stated that teachers do not teach according to the chronological order and they continually get back to the previous topics because of the organization in the book which has a lot of details and subtitles. The students concluded that all these factors lead to difficulty in learning for them.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, what kind of historical themes and subjects students have difficulty in understanding and the reasons behind this problem are put forward. In the end of the study, subjects, which are easy and difficult for students to learn, are determined. The themes and subjects which are easy for students to learn are “immigration and natural disasters, daily life of ordinary people, ancient civilizations and the Rise of Ottoman Empire”; on the other hand, the issues and themes, which are difficult for students to learn are “history of regions and places, peace and treaties, European and World History, history of the Turks and the World after 1938”. The fact that the themes and topics which are difficult for students to learn are not arranged in textbooks taking students’ interest into account, the fact that historical events take place in textbooks comprehensively and also the lack of visual expression while presenting history lessons explain why students have difficulty in understanding these historical themes and topics.

When students express why they have difficulty in learning these issues and themes, they also emphasize the teaching methods in history lessons. This situation is important in terms of using various teaching methods and planning lessons taking individual differences into consideration. In addition to this, students state that history lessons help understand today and they claim that history should be learned “even through memorization” despite all the difficulties they experience.

Students use such expressions as “boring, uninteresting and monotonous” for history course. Besides, most of the students have described history lessons as difficult to understand and learn. To change this bad image of the history lesson in the eyes of students, history lessons should be made more interesting and understandable rather than forgettable.

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