

An analysis of main idea questions included in Turkish course exams*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the main idea questions included in Turkish course exams. The study was carried out with a non-intervention research model. The research analyses were carried out on 178 questions which were determined to be the main idea questions among 1,432 questions in 238 exam papers from 138 schools. It was observed that there were no main idea questions in approximately half of the exam papers examined in the study. The main idea questions in the exam papers were asked with 10 different question stems. More than half of the main idea questions examined were open-ended. An expository text type was used in the majority of the main idea questions. Examination of the main idea questions revealed that in most of them, the main idea was explicitly included in the text. Moreover, it was seen that in the texts used for main idea questions, the main idea was mostly included at the end of the text. This situation casts doubt on the extent to which the exams applied in schools are adequate in terms of preparing students for international exams. For this reason, curriculum development studies should be included that will serve to make teachers more competent in increasing the quality and quantity of main idea questions in Turkish exams and to improve students' ability to find the main idea, scaffolding models should be designed and made familiar to teachers and students.

Keywords: Turkish course, Turkish course exam, main idea, main idea instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the key elements of reading comprehension, the importance of which is undeniable, is the ability to find the main idea. Teaching students how to identify and understand the important ideas in texts draw considerable interest in studies conducted on reading (Jitendra, Chard, Hoppes, Renouf & Gardill, 2001). The ability to identify the main idea is accepted as a prerequisite for comprehension of a text (Lord, 2015), and students at every grade level, including primary school, secondary school, high school, and even university, are expected to find the main idea of a text they read. It is accepted that this skill is at the center of reading comprehension (Van den Broek, Lynch, Naslund, Ievers-Landis, Verduin, 2003) and is a critical element in the development of reading comprehension (Goldman, 2012; Vaughn, Klingner, Swanson, Boardman, Roberts, Mohammed & Stillman-Spisak, 2011). For this reason, this skill is included in curricula, textbooks, and exams and students are expected to be successful in this regard. Main idea questions are asked in school exams and joint exams to determine the capacity of students to grasp the main idea in the text they read. By using both open-ended and multiple-choice questions, the aim is to see whether students have grasped the main idea that is intended to be emphasized in the text. In this way, an attempt is made to evaluate the student's ability to make inferences, and to distinguish insignificant details from the important idea that is intended to be emphasized in the text he/she reads, since the skill of determining the main idea requires the ability to focus on the main idea that is intended to be given in the text by separating the important information from the less important details, that is, to find the essence of the text.

This skill is defined as a strategic process that can be developed by understanding the features of the text (Dickson, Simmons & Kame'enui, 1998), and studies conducted in the literature (Van den Broek et al., 2003; Brown, 2018) indicate that the features of the text are effective in students' understanding of the main idea of the text they read. Elements such as the type, structure, length, and degree of difficulty of the text mediate in understanding the text and finding the main idea. In the literature, text types are generally evaluated under two main headings, namely expository and narrative, and studies report that expository texts are more difficult to understand than narrative texts (Pilten, 2007; Uğur, 2017; Williams, 2018). The fact that each genre has its structure, and that students encounter fictional texts from the preschool period onwards, makes students more familiar with the narrative text structure, and this enables them to be more successful in this type of text. While students' ability to recognize the contextual and formal structural features of text types makes it easier for them to correctly understand and summarize the text in a short time (Dilidüzgün, 2013), their difficulty in recognizing the text structure causes them to have difficulties in understanding the text and finding the main idea (Williams, 2006; 2018). Since success in reading comprehension and determining the main idea is affected by the text structure, knowledge of the text structure helps students to understand the main idea (Jitendra et al., 2001). Information about how the text is organized allows students to process the text from whole to part (top-down) in the process of creating meaning (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). For example, to find the main idea of a story, first of all, in text comprehension studies, elements such as the plot, characters, setting, time, etc., which are the super structural features of this genre, should be identified correctly, and their role and effect in the whole text should be comprehended (Uğur, 2017). Similarly, for an expository text, the text structure (e.g., description, sequence, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, listing, explanation) (Meyer & Freedle, 1984) needs to be identified. In this way, the organizational framework of the text is used, and this helps students to remember the text and form the main idea. Indeed, studies show that knowledge of the text structure is effective for reading comprehension skills (Akhondi, Malayeri & Samad, 2011; Meyer & Ray, 2011), and identifying and remembering the main idea and important points of the text (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Since the main idea is closely associated with the text structure, it is accepted that teaching text structure supports the comprehension process (Meyer & Freedle, 1984; Williams, 2006), and studies show that students who receive text structure training can identify the main idea better (Stevens, Park & Vaughn, 2018;

Stevens, Vaughn, House & Stillman-Spissak, 2020; Williams, Kao, Pao, Ordynans, Atkins, Cheng & DeBonis, 2016).

In addition to text type and structure, another factor affecting success in finding the main idea is whether the main idea is given explicitly or implicitly in the text. The main idea can sometimes be given explicitly and sometimes implicitly in the text. This preference varies depending on whether the author wants to clearly place the main idea in the text or merely to allude to it. Just as authors can give the main idea in any part of the text as a single sentence, they can also give it by referring to it implicitly. Akyol (2006) states that sometimes, the main idea is expected from the reader himself/herself by giving several hints, without being given either explicitly or implicitly. Therefore, this situation requires the reader to know the features of the text and to utilize the hints given in the text. While creating their texts, authors utilize the criteria of textuality, which ensures that a linguistic product is a text, and while writing their texts, they use the criteria of coherence, cohesion, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). While intentionality expresses the author's ability to reveal the message he/she wishes to convey to the reader in a text, acceptability refers to the author's purpose, in other words, after revealing the main idea of the text, his/her ability to present this idea appropriately for the target audience with clear and understandable evidence (Mert, 2011). It is expected that the texts used in lessons and exams (for teaching purposes) will also meet these criteria. Therefore, teachers and question writers should also select texts in this direction, because working on a text that does not meet the criteria of textuality makes it difficult to extract the main idea from the text, and the student might confuse the supporting ideas in the text with the main idea (Kanık-Uysal & Akyol, 2019). For students to be able to see the message that is intended to be conveyed in the text, they should be able to distinguish the supporting ideas from the main idea. If this is not clearly stated in the text by the author, the reader is required to activate his/her thinking skills at the analytical level, and to first divide the text into parts and then arrive at the whole, in other words, to use his/her inductive thinking skills (Brookhart, 2010). This enables the ability to determine the main idea to be evaluated in the category of high-order skills. In addition to not being explicitly given in the text, another variable that is effective in enabling this ability to represent high-order thinking skills is the type of question with which it is evaluated and what is expected from the student. While this skill is being evaluated, multiple-choice and open-ended questions are usually included in exams. Researchers state that it is difficult to prepare multiple-choice question items that measure high-order cognitive skills (McMillan, 2015; Nitko & Brookhart, 2016), but that this is not impossible (Brookhart, 2010). Brookhart (2010) states that the expression used in the question item and the behavior expected from the student are effective in bringing the main idea questions up to a level that can represent high-order thinking skills. For example, instead of the question item "What is the main idea of this text?" she suggests the use of the question item "State the main idea in your own words and support it with evidence from the text." All these show that the skill of determining the main idea is mediated by the type, structure, difficulty, and length of the text, the case of giving the main idea explicitly or implicitly, and the question types.

The fact that finding the main idea is one of the higher-order skills that students will have difficulty in developing on their own (Çetinkaya, Ateş & Yıldırım, 2013) highlights the need for teaching students strategies related to how they should behave in which situations. Moreover, as the texts differ, the strategies that are beneficial for analyzing and understanding them also differ (Fielding & Pearson, 1994), and therefore, strategy instruction, which shows students when to apply which strategies, should be included in classrooms. Indeed, studies conducted in the literature (Brown, 2018; Kirnik, 2017; Stevens et al., 2018; Stevens et al., 2020) show that strategy instruction effectively supports understanding of the main idea.

When the literature is examined, it can be seen that in research conducted on the main idea, studies have been carried out on subjects such as strategy instruction (Boudah, 2014; Brown, 2018; İliter, 2018; Kirnik, 2017; Pilten, 2007; Stevens et al., 2018; Stevens et al., 2020), students' success in finding the main idea (Çetinkaya et al., 2013; Eser, 2017), and the level of inclusion of main idea activities in curricula and

textbooks (Afflerbach & Walker, 1992; Beerwinkle, Owens & Hudson, 2021; Jitendra et al., 2001; Kaya, 2021). However, no study has been found which aims to examine the main idea questions in exam papers in terms of different variables. This study is considered important in terms of observing how the subject of the main idea, which is one of the most frequently included types of reading comprehension questions in exams, is reflected in Turkish course written exams, and what is expected from students. For this reason, this study aims to describe the main idea questions in Turkish course exams in terms of the type and length of the text, whether the main idea is given explicitly or implicitly in the text and the type of question. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What is the percentage of main idea questions included in Turkish course exam papers?
2. What is the distribution of
 - a. question types used in main idea questions?
 - b. texts that include main idea questions in terms of genre?
 - c. texts that include main idea questions in terms of length?
 - d. the main idea in texts in terms of being given explicitly or implicitly?
3. In which part of the text is the main ideas that are explicitly given in the text?

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, in which Turkish course written exam questions were examined, a non-intervention research model has been adopted. In these studies, in which the dataset is not generated within the scope of the research, a dataset suitable for the research is obtained and analyses are carried out on this dataset. The data of this study consist of first and second written exam papers for the eighth-grade Turkish course. The dataset used in the study has the characteristic of not being generated during the research process. Since the research data are in the form of documents, the document analysis method has been adopted in the analysis of the research data. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating both printed and electronic materials (Bowen, 2009). As with other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires the examination and interpretation of data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Documents contain texts and images recorded without the intervention of a researcher. As well as official documents, minutes of meetings, and newspapers, documents can be private documents, diaries, or letters. In addition, photographs, videos, art objects, and films are also included in this scope (Creswell, 2017). Since the aim of this study is to examine how the main idea, which is one of the key indicators of reading comprehension, is reflected in Turkish course written exams, the exam papers constitute the document examined within the scope of the study.

Participants and Procedure

The data source of this study consists of the first and second "exam questions and answer keys" prepared for the eighth-grade level of the Turkish Course in the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year by Turkish teachers employed in secondary schools in a medium-sized province in the Black Sea region. While determining the participants of the study, the maximum variation sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used. In maximum variation sampling, the aim is not to generalize, but rather, by sampling different situations related to the problem, to provide the researcher with richer information about the situations (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz & Demirel, 2012). To ensure maximum variation within the scope of this study, teachers employed in different districts (20 districts in the province where the data were collected) and different types of schools (secondary schools and imam hatip secondary schools) were included in the study. There are a total of 199 secondary schools in the specified province, but three of these schools that were newly opened were not included in the study, while 10 of them were excluded because they are private schools. After obtaining the necessary permission from the Provincial Directorate of National Education, data were obtained through

the Measurement and Evaluation Centre (MEC). In the first stage, the incoming data were examined by the researchers by preparing a checklist, and missing documents were requested again from schools via the MEC and delivered to the researchers. After a process that was repeated twice from the schools via the MEC, Turkish course exam papers were obtained from 138 schools. Information on the data sources that were examined during the research process is seen below.

Table 1. Distribution of data sources

District	Number of Schools	Number of Exam Papers	District	Number of Schools	Number of Exam Papers
Codes	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	Codes	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
D1	38	67	D11	4	6
D2	2	2	D12	6	10
D3	9	15	D13	2	2
D4	1	2	D14	5	6
D5	3	6	D15	6	13
D6	2	4	D16	6	8
D7	7	13	D17	3	6
D8	13	26	D18	3	5
D9	1	2	D19	4	6
D10	5	7	D20	18	32
Total	81	144		57	94

Data Analysis

The first stage (open coding): The research analysis was carried out with a computer-based analysis program. Based on the analysis, 238 exam papers were uploaded. First of all, the exam papers were examined one by one, and questions that were determined as main idea questions were coded with the "main idea question" code. Following this examination, 178 of the 1,432 questions examined were coded as main idea questions.

Table 2. Number of Turkish course exam papers with/without main idea questions

	Number of Exam Papers	Number of Questions
Exam papers without main idea questions	116	1,254
Exam papers with main idea questions	122	178
Total	238	1,432

The next part of the analysis after this stage was conducted on the questions coded with the main idea code.

Second Stage (Coding Based on Answers to Sub-Problems): Each main idea question coded in the first stage of the analysis was coded one by one based on the answers sought in the sub-problems of the study. In this process, seven different codes were assigned to every main idea question. In this context, the appearance of the codes made based on the sub-problems of the study is as follows:

Table 3. Codes used based on the sub-problems of the research

	Codes
First sub-problem	What is/Which is the main idea of the text? What is/Which is the main idea intended to be conveyed in the text? What is/Which is the message intended to be given in the text? What is/Which is the idea intended to be emphasized in the text? What/Which conclusion can you draw from the text? What is/Which is the overall judgment that can be made about the text? What/Which lesson can you draw from the text? Which sentence in the text is the main idea sentence?

Second sub-problem	What is emphasized in the text? At the beginning of the text At the end of the text Throughout the text
Third sub-problem	Included explicitly in the text Included implicitly in the text
Fourth sub-problem	Total number of sentences in the text
Fifth sub-problem	Narrative Discourse Essay Poem
Sixth sub-problem	Multiple choice Open-ended (with long answers)
The status of the main idea questions in the exam papers	Number of main idea questions/Number of questions in the exam

Third Stage (Description of Levels of Reasoning): In the analysis of the third sub-problem of the study, the answers expected from the students to the questions based on inferences in the text were classified based on their degree of difficulty. In this process, the question "What degree of difficulty is the inference expected from the student in this text?" was directed at the questions examined. In this context, the inference expected from the student was coded at the simple, medium, and advanced levels of difficulty. The reasoning behind this coding process is explained below.

Table 4. Explanation of coding based on the degree of difficulty of inferences

Code	Explanation
Inference with a low degree of difficulty	The student can make the expected inference following a one-step reasoning process.
Inference with a medium degree of difficulty	The student can make the expected inference following a two-step reasoning process.
Inference with a high degree of difficulty	The student can make the expected inference following a reasoning process consisting of at least three steps.

Stage Four (Coding Expressed with Descriptive Statistics): After the coding was completed during the analysis process, the coding was summarized using descriptive statistics. The codes, which are the answers to each sub-problem, were tabulated by summarizing them as frequencies and percentages.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

One way to ensure credibility in qualitative research is to explain in detail the number and characteristics of the participants, how they were selected, and the data collection tools and analysis techniques used in the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This information is explained in detail under the Method heading of the study. To fulfill the transferability requirement of the research, it is recommended that detailed description and sample selection strategies should be used (Merriam, 2009). A maximum variation sampling method was used in the study. In this way, a study group with which a rich dataset could be accessed was worked with to answer the research questions. The study group consisted of a group of teachers who worked in 20 different districts, one of which is the central district, with a wide variety of characteristics in terms of place of duty and years of service. Within the scope of the detailed description, direct quotations for each sub-category are presented in the Findings section. All research analyses were performed on in vivo codes. In this way, the data themselves directly constitute the most basic unit of analysis. To increase credibility in qualitative research, an expert review strategy is recommended (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2014). Two researchers (a Turkish subject area expert and a curriculum development expert) carried out the research analyses together. Inter-coder reliability was calculated as .94.

Role of the Researchers

One of the important question items used in national and international joint exams is questions aimed at finding the main idea. The ability to determine the purpose of writing a reading text and to find the message that the author wishes to give is one of the basic reading comprehension skills that should be fostered in students. Questions such as how the question items prepared for measuring this skill are handled in the exams carried out in schools, the extent to which these question items are included, etc., were regarded as a problem situation that should be answered by both researchers, and accordingly, it was decided to carry out the study. One of the researchers works in the field of Classroom Education and the other works in the field of Turkish Education. The two researchers have experience both as teachers and lecturers. The researchers have published a study (Kanık-Uysal, Akın-Arıkan, Acar-Erdol, Bayrak-Özmutlu & Akyol, 2022) on the questions included in Turkish course exam papers. Their experience and observations obtained from that publication have enriched their perspective on this study. The mutual exchange of information during the analyses of the questions was also useful for the interpretation and discussion of the results. The detailed analysis conducted on the question items by the two researchers revealed the need for measurement and evaluation in Turkish education. As a result of the analyses, they discovered that the main idea questions used in school exams were not up to the standard of national and international joint exams, and they decided to plan new studies on how to solve this problem.

Research Ethics

Ethics committee approval is not required as the document analysis technique was used in this study.

FINDINGS

Findings Regarding the Rate of Inclusion of Main Idea Questions in Turkish Course Exam Papers

In this sub-problem, the aim is to examine the rate of inclusion of main idea questions in Turkish course exam papers. Findings related to this sub-problem are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The rate of inclusion of main idea questions in Turkish course exam papers

	<i>f</i>	%
Exam papers without main idea questions	116	48.7
Exam papers with main idea questions	122	51.3
Total	238	100

It can be seen that 116 of the 238 exam papers examined within the scope of the study did not include any questions aimed at measuring the ability to find the main idea. The examination findings regarding the number of questions included in exam papers with main idea questions are seen in Table 6.

Table 6. The number of main idea questions in Turkish course exam papers with main idea questions

Number of main idea questions	1st question		2nd question	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Total number of questions in exam papers				
Between 0-10 questions	10	7.8	0	0
Between 11-19 questions	77	60.2	2	1.6
Between 20-30 questions	35	27.3	4	3.1
Total	122	95.3	6	4.7

The table shows that there were at most 2 main idea questions in the exam papers examined in the study. It can be seen that there were 2 main idea questions in only 6 exam papers among exam papers examined.

Findings Regarding the Distribution of Question Stems Used in Main Idea Questions

In this sub-problem, the aim is to examine the distribution of the question stems used in the main idea questions. Findings related to this sub-problem are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Distribution of question stems used in main idea questions

The question stems from the main idea questions	f	%
What is/Which is the main idea of the text?	73	57.1
What is/Which is the main idea intended to be conveyed in the text?	21	16.4
What is/Which is the message intended to be given in the text?	15	11.7
What is/Which is the idea intended to be emphasized in the text?	6	4.7
What/Which conclusion can you draw from the text?	1	0.8
What is/Which is the overall judgment that can be made about the text?	3	2.3
What/Which lesson can you draw from the text?	4	3.1
Which sentence in the text is the main idea sentence?	4	3.1
What is emphasized in the text?	1	0.8
Total	128	100

It can be seen that the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers were asked with 10 different question stems. More than half of the questions directly asked what the main idea of the text was. Examining the stems of the questions in which the main idea was not asked directly, it can be seen that the main idea is discussed as the idea/main idea intended to be emphasized/conveyed, the message intended to be given, or the conclusion, overall judgment or lesson to be drawn from the text. Direct quotations related to the analysis performed based on this sub-problem are shown below.

Table 8. Direct quotations related to question stems used in main idea questions

The question stems from the main idea questions	Direct Quotations
What is/Which is the main idea of the text?	What is the main idea of the text above? Write briefly (D9/E1).
What is/Which is the main idea intended to be conveyed in the text?	Which of the following is the main idea intended to be conveyed in the paragraph above? (D8/E2).
What is/Which is the message intended to be given in the text?	What is the message intended to be given in this passage? (D10/E1).
What is/Which is the idea intended to be emphasized in the text?	Which of the following ideas is intended to be emphasized in this passage? (D20/E1)
What/Which conclusion can you draw from the text?	What conclusions can you draw from the text? (D19/E1)
What is/Which is the overall judgement that can be made about the text?	Which of the following is the overall judgement that can be made about this passage? (D1/E2)
What/Which lesson can you draw from the text?	What lesson can you draw from the text? (D8/E1)
Which sentence in the text is the main idea sentence?	Which sentence in the text is the main idea sentence? (D20/E1)
What is emphasized in the text?	What is emphasized in this text? (D3/E1)

Findings Regarding the Distribution of Question Types Used in Main Idea Questions

In this sub-problem, the aim is to examine the distribution of question types used in teachers' main idea questions. Findings related to this sub-problem are seen in Table 9.

Table 9. Distribution of question types used in main idea questions

Question types	f	%
Multiple Choice	45	35.2
Open-Ended	83	64.8
Total	128	100

As can be seen, the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers were structured as multiple choice or long answer types. More than half of the questions were open-ended. Direct quotations related to the analysis performed based on this sub-problem are shown below.

Table 10. Direct quotations related to question types used in main idea questions

Question types	Direct Quotations
Multiple Choice Questions	Which of the following is the main idea intended to be conveyed in this passage? A. A hard-working person does not understand how time passes. B. The sweetest gain is the one achieved through a person's effort. C. A portion of one's gains should be allocated to those in need. D. Saving money is more difficult than earning money. (D3/E2)
Open-Ended Questions	What is the main idea intended to be conveyed in the text? Write in sentence form. (5 marks) (D2/E1)

Findings Regarding the Distribution of Texts with Main Idea Questions in Terms of Genre

In this sub-problem, the aim is to examine the distribution of texts with main idea questions in terms of genre. Findings related to this sub-problem can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11. Distribution of texts with main idea questions in terms of genre

Texts with main idea questions		f	%
Expository	Discourse	51	39.8
	Essay	29	22.7
Narrative	Story	45	35.2
	Poem	3	2.3
	Total	128	100

It can be seen that four different text types were used in the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers. In the largest number, story and discourse types were used. Direct quotations related to the analysis performed based on this sub-problem are presented below.

Table 12. Direct quotations related to main idea questions in terms of genre

Texts with main idea questions	Direct Quotations
Story	A research officer is sent to a construction site to find out what workers engaged in heavy work think about their jobs. The officer approaches one of the workers and asks, "What are you doing?" "Can't you see? I'm breaking the rocks with primitive tools and assembling them as ordered. This is a job worse than death," the worker replies angrily. The officer walks quickly away and hesitantly asks a second worker the same question. The worker replies, "I am trying to shape the rocks so that they can be placed following the architectural plan. It's a heavy job but I have to look after my wife and children. It could have been worse." The officer asks a third worker, "And what are you doing?" The worker raises his arms to the sky and says, "I am building a palace." The interesting thing is that these three workers are all doing the same job. (D3/E1)
Discourse/Conversation	Children grow very fast. The next thing you know, he is 24-25 years old. He has always lived with you until this age. He even went to university in the city where he lived. His breakfast was ready, he went to school, and he came home. His dinner was also ready in front of him every evening. There was everything at home, the bills were paid, and the house was cleaned. He grew up on an easy street, without any responsibilities. But it's not his fault, because you didn't give him any responsibility. Now he has graduated from university, and he has been appointed to a distant city. Now you are wondering what he will do there on his own. Let the young people learn about life. Of course, start this during childhood. Let him go to the supermarket and find out the price of bread and pasta sometimes. Let him go to the market one day and see how expensive life is. Let him go to school

Essay	<p>himself, and become familiar with public transport. Let him pay the bills sometimes, but not online. Let him handle the official business himself. Otherwise, young people turn into fish out of the water at the age of twenty-five. He is starting his career, yet he still does not want to take any responsibility. When he gets married, he will not be able to get out of his parents' shadow. To prepare your children for the future, teach them about life now... As Samuel Johnson said, "The future is purchased by the present" (D3/E2).</p> <p>Learning a foreign language should begin at a young age. The innate language learning mechanism in our brain works actively until the age of 12. This means that after the age of 12, we have difficulty learning a foreign language. Furthermore, we are more inclined to learn a foreign language at an early age than as an adult. In line with this information provided by modern research, the tendency to learn foreign languages at an early age is increasing day by day. Many parents have begun sending their children on courses from the age of 5-6 so that they can learn a foreign language (D1/E2)</p>
Poem	<p>"İnsan vardır fark edilmez sūsünden Kimi farksızdır koyun sūrūsünden Her gördüğün şekle aman kapılma İnsan belli olmaz görüntüsünden."</p> <p>(There are humans, inconspicuous due to their guise, Some are indistinguishable from a flock of sheep. Don't be taken in by every shape you see. You cannot recognize a man by his appearance.) (D1/E1)</p>

Findings Regarding the Distribution of Texts with Main Idea Questions in Terms of Length

This sub-problem aims to examine the distribution of texts containing main idea questions in terms of their length. Findings related to this sub-problem can be seen in Table 13.

Table 13. Distribution of texts with main idea questions in terms of length

Number of sentences in texts	f	%
3-5 sentences	31	24.2
6-11 sentences	42	32.9
12-17 sentences	31	24.2
18-23 sentences	15	11.7
24-29 sentences	9	7
Total	128	100

The length of the texts used in the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers ranged between 3 sentences and 29 sentences. The highest number of texts consisted of 6-11 sentences.

Findings Regarding the Distribution of Texts with Main Idea Questions in Terms of Giving the Main Idea Explicitly or Implicitly

In this sub-problem, the aim is to examine the distribution of the explicit or implicit expression of the main idea in the texts. Findings related to this sub-problem are shown in Table 14.

Table 14. Explicit or implicit expression of the main idea in the texts

Expression of the main idea in the texts	f	%
Explicitly Included in the Text	78	60.9
Implicitly Included in the Text	50	39.1
Inference with a low degree of difficulty	41	32
Inference with a medium degree of difficulty	7	5.5
Inference with a high degree of difficulty	2	1.6
Total	128	100

In the majority of the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers, the main idea was explicitly included in the text. In the great majority of the questions that required inferences to be made from the text, students were expected to make an inference with a low level of difficulty. Direct quotations related to the analysis performed based on this sub-problem are shown below.

Table 15. Direct quotations related to the explicit or implicit expression of the main idea in the texts

Direct Quotations	
Implicitly included in the text	
Inference with a low degree of difficulty	<p>An eagle's egg rolled from its nest and mingled with chicken's eggs. When the eaglet, which was born among chicks, grew a little and went to feed, it saw the eagles flying in the sky and wanted to be like them. When it told its friends that it wanted to fly like the eagles, it always got the same answer: "Don't be silly, you're a chicken, give these dreams up." The eagle, which came to the end of its life years later, died not like an eagle but like a chicken. What is the main idea of this story?</p> <p>a. The mistakes we acknowledge cloud our abilities. b. To achieve success, we must seek help from our friends. c. The way to success is through hard work D. No matter who we keep company with, we should not stray from the truth. (D2/E1).</p>
Inference with a medium degree of difficulty	<p>By the sea, there was a beautiful city where people lived in peace and happiness. In this pleasant place, most people made their living by fishing. The inhabitants of this city were tolerant, public-spirited people. One day a man arrives. He tells the fishermen that he is very hungry and has no money. The fishermen immediately help the man. They give him some big fish and bread. The man thanks them heartily and leaves. The next day, he comes to the fishermen again with the same excuse. But they do not get angry at all. They put fish and bread in the man's hand. This goes on for days. This man is also a humorous, sociable, and friendly person. In this way, he becomes friends with everyone there. Of course, he still obtains his food from the fishermen. One day, he goes to another fisherman to whom he has never spoken before. The other fishermen watch them. After a long talk, the man leaves without getting anything. The next day, he comes to the fisherman with whom he spoke the day before, with a few supplies in his hand. They go out to sea and return in the evening. That day, the man says goodbye to everyone there and leaves. The fishermen had got used to his friendship and become very upset and angry with the other fisherman. They say, "It's because of you that he has gone. What did you say, what did you do, who knows?" "I corrected a mistake you made," the fisherman replies. "What have we done wrong? We did better deeds and gave him food to fill his stomach," they say. The fisherman answered spiritedly, "You would have fed him with this kindness for three months, maybe three years, maybe even ten years. And then what would happen? But I gave him something to feed him for a lifetime: the fine arts of fishing. This is what will keep him alive." At that moment, everyone fell into a deep silence (D1/E/1).</p>
Inference with a high degree of difficulty	<p>"İlim ilim bilmektir, ilim kendin bilmezsin, Sen kendini bilmezsin, Ya nice okumaktır." (Science is knowing things, Science knows you. If you don't know yourself,</p>

Explicitly Included in the Text	<p>What is the point of studying?) (D15/E1). Learning a foreign language should begin at a young age. The innate language learning mechanism in our brain works actively until the age of 12. This means that after the age of 12, we have difficulty learning a foreign language. Furthermore, we are more inclined to learn a foreign language at an early age than as an adult. In line with this information provided by modern research, the tendency to learn foreign languages at an early age is increasing day by day. Many parents have begun sending their children on courses from the age of 5-6 so that they can learn a foreign language. (D1/E2)</p>
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Findings Regarding the Part of the Text where the Main Idea is Included

This sub-problem aims to examine in which part of the text the main idea is located. Findings related to this sub-problem can be seen in Table 16.

Table 16. The part of the text where the explicitly given main idea is included

	<i>f</i>	%
At the beginning of the text	21	16.4
At the end of the text	72	56.3
Throughout the text	35	27.3
Total	128	100

It can be seen that in the texts examined in which main idea questions were used, the main idea was mostly located at the end of the text. Apart from this, the main idea was included throughout the text or at the beginning of the text. Direct quotations related to the analysis performed based on this sub-problem are presented below.

Table 17. Direct quotations related to the part of the text where the main idea is given

Direct Quotations	
At the beginning of the text	<p>The first condition of being fortunate is that one has a talent. Everyone certainly has a talent for something. To be fortunate, you have to begin by trying to improve that talent. You may meet a man who has worked for years but could not be successful in the job he has held. This could be called unfortunate. One day, this man gets his hands on a handcart. Gradually, he increases his capital and becomes rich. This time everyone watches him enviously, saying "what a lucky man!" However, this man is neither unfortunate nor fortunate. He is merely a man who knows how to manage his talent by struggling in life. (D3/E)</p>
At the end of the text	<p>One day, while walking in the forest, a man saw a butterfly trying to come out of its cocoon. He watched the butterfly for hours as it struggled to get out of the small hole in its cocoon. Then the man thought that the butterfly had given up trying to get out of the cocoon and that it had no strength left. He thought that he could help the butterfly so that it could come out easily, and he enlarged the hole in the cocoon so that it could emerge more easily. In this way, the butterfly was easily able to come out of its cocoon. But it wasn't ready to emerge yet: its body was still dry and its wings were still crumpled. The man believed that the butterfly would gather its strength, spread its wings and fly away. But the butterfly had emerged from its cocoon prematurely. No matter how hard it tried, it could not fly and continued to crawl on the ground with crumpled wings. The man had wished to help the butterfly with good intentions, but what he didn't know was that the butterfly's struggle to escape from the cocoon would enable the fluid in its body to reach its wings so that it could fly when it came out of the cocoon at the right time. Efforts and struggles made while life is flowing prepare us for the next stage of our life and enable us to gather the necessary strength. If you wish to fly with your wings, you have to work hard and struggle with difficulties. (D12/E1.)</p>

Throughout the
text

When childhood is mentioned, first of all, love comes to mind, then compassion. A child without love, without compassion, is unimaginable. Love and compassion are its sap. Love is more important than its mother's milk. However, one must be consistent in giving love; the child should not be spoiled. If it is brought up in this way, it will be subjected to emotional violence and suffocated, which damages the child as much as physical violence. This harms its personality development and causes a loss of self-confidence. For this reason, the child should neither be put in place of the flower in the pot nor should it be exposed to traumas. However, this requires knowledge, experience, expertise, and a responsible, contemporary mind. Above all, it requires a loving heart. Love is not given without love. Giving it depends on the conditions of our upbringing and our outlook on the world. (D7/E2)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the aim has been to examine the main idea questions included in Turkish course exams. For this purpose, a total of 238 exam papers and 1,432 exam questions were examined. Analyses were made on 178 questions which were determined to be main idea questions, and based on seven sub-problems. It was observed that 116 of the 238 exam papers did not include any questions aimed at measuring the ability to find the main idea. It was determined that only six of the 122 exam papers with main idea questions included 2 main idea questions, while the others contained only one main idea question. It was seen that the 128 main idea questions examined in the Turkish course exam papers were asked with 10 different question stems. More than half of the questions directly asked what the main idea of the text was. Over half of the main idea questions examined were open-ended. Four different types of text were used in the main idea questions, and story and discourse were the most frequently used types. Considering the text lengths, it was revealed that the length of the texts used in the main idea questions varied between 3 sentences and 29 sentences. The analysis revealed that in the majority of the 128 questions, the main idea was explicitly included in the text. In addition, it was observed that the main idea was mostly located at the end of the text.

In the great majority of the exam papers examined, it was determined that one main idea question was asked and that the open-ended question type was used in more than half of these questions. These findings indicate that while main idea questions were asked in approximately half of the exam papers, none were asked in the other half. One of the reasons that may have affected this situation can be considered as students' difficulty in finding the main idea, while another may be teachers' failure to teach this skill. Indeed, studies have shown that students have difficulties in this skill (Bahap-Kudret & Baydık, 2016; Kanık-Uysal & Gültekin-Pala, 2022; Kırnık, 2017; Kuşdemir & Katrancı, 2016; Özdemir & Kiroğlu, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2011) and that teachers cannot adequately support their students in this regard (Beerwinkle et al., 2021; Çetinkaya et al., 2013; Jitendra et al., 2001). Furthermore, the fact that grading the open-ended question type is difficult and takes a lot of time may also have affected this result. Since it is more difficult and troublesome to ensure reliability in open-ended questions (McMillan, 2015; Nitko & Brookhart, 2016), teachers may avoid including this question type in their exams. In the study conducted by Karatay and Dilekçi (2019), it was concluded that Turkish teachers believed that the grading they made in open-ended questions was not reliable. It can be thought that teachers who do not include open-ended main idea questions in their exams are in a state of avoidance behavior due to this situation. However, in exams such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), open-ended questions are used, and the ability to find the main idea is emphasized (Akyıldız, 2009). Utilizing these questions, students' reading comprehension, inference, and analysis skills are tested, since the ability to determine the main idea of a text requires the reader to analyze the text, make correct inferences from the text, and in this way, to find the main idea that is intended to be emphasized in the text, in other words, to find the essence of the text.

The fact that teachers gave weight to open-ended questions in the examined Turkish exams can be considered a positive result, as experts state that open-ended questions should be used to activate and measure higher-order thinking skills (Brookhart, 2010; Nitko & Brookhart, 2016). However, more than half of the open-ended questions used in the exam papers directly asked what the main idea of the text was. When examining the stems of the questions in which the main idea was not directly asked, it was seen that the main idea was discussed as the idea intended to be conveyed, the message intended to be given, or the conclusion, the overall judgement, or the lesson to be drawn from the text. Some of these question items have the potential to lead students to have misconceptions. For example, questions such as i4) "What/which conclusion can you draw from the text?" and ii) "What/Which lesson can you draw from the text?" may mislead students. Students who believe that they are to write their personal views for these questions may answer the question by including their comments instead of using their ability to read the author's purpose and intention, in other words, to analyze the text. This situation leads to the contradiction that every answer given to these questions must be correct and that there is no wrong answer. To overcome this contradiction, these expressions should be avoided in question items, and at the same time, correct and adequate guidance should be given to students about how to answer the questions that will be asked, since students are asked the question, "What is the main idea of the text?" which is a stereotyped expression in Turkish lessons, books, and written exams, but students are not taught how to find this. Whatever the concept of "main idea" is in his/her mind, the student responds to this question item in the same way, and cannot use a strategy regarding what kind of path he/she should follow in which text.

Finding the main idea sentence that is directly included in the text is not the same as finding the main idea in a text in which it is given implicitly and requires the student to use thinking processes at the analytical level. These two must be taught with different strategies, and measurement and evaluation studies should be carried out for this purpose. For example, the question "Which is the main idea sentence in the text?" and the question "What is the main idea of the text above? State the main idea in your own words and support this with evidence from the text." require the use of different thinking skills. Students need to be given cognitive support to use these thinking skills and to transfer them to different texts, in other words, to cope with this cognitive load. Cognitive support means supporting students by giving hints, reminders, incentives, and examples to enable them to learn independently (Slavin, 2017). Cognitive support, which is one of the key concepts of the teaching process based on Vygotsky's social learning theory, means that a more competent peer or adult assists the student, and the responsibility is transferred to the latter as time progresses (Daniels, 2001). When students become competent in using the strategy, they can perform this skill individually. In the main idea instruction process, cognitive support should be provided to students by their teachers, and this responsibility should be gradually transferred to the students. Leaving students alone with the instruction to read the text and then answer the text comprehension questions, or expecting students to find the main idea only by asking them text-based questions without spending enough time on text comprehension studies, causes the process to become even more difficult. Result-oriented text-processing studies without the inclusion of reading strategies further increase the cognitive load of students.

Another result obtained in this study was that texts in the form of stories, discourses, essays, and poems were used in the main idea questions. About 57% of the texts were expository, 40% were narrative, and 2% were poetic texts. These findings are similar to the conclusions made in the study by Öztürk, Tağa, and Ünlü (2015). In the study, in which the texts used in written exams, textbooks, and central exams were examined in terms of genre, it was determined that expository texts were mostly used in all three sources, followed by narrative texts and poetic texts, respectively. In the teacher interviews, in which the reason for these findings was investigated, the participating teachers expressed the reasons for their preference for using expository texts as the concern for teaching students something at the same time and the fact that this type of text is more convenient for preparing questions. Due to teachers' beliefs in this direction and the fact that this type of text is included more in textbooks, the inclusion of this text

type in exam papers was reflected as a natural result. It is seen that similar results were obtained in the study by Özbay and Çeçen (2012) examining Turkish textbooks in terms of themes and genres. This situation reveals that literary and academic texts are used in both textbooks and exam papers instead of texts that students encounter in their daily lives (news, tweets, real-life problems, etc.). However, international joint exams such as PISA attempt to develop and test students' daily life skills by using different types of texts (tables, graphs, diagrams, maps, information boards, forms, announcements and advertisements, invoices and receipts, etc.). Sefer (2015) stated that countries that are successful in this exam make text-type classifications by considering the language skills used in daily life and reflecting this in their curricula. In the study conducted by Ören, Konuk, Sefer and Saritaş (2017) on the examination of 2006, 2012, and 2015 Turkish course curricula in terms of text types, it was also concluded that the text types included in the curricula were more general and limited than the text types used in PISA and that the texts in PISA were more related with daily life and more detailed. These studies and the level of success achieved in PISA revealed the need to update the curriculum in this respect, and by taking a step in this direction, different text types were included in the 2017 Turkish curriculum (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2019a). However, the results obtained in this study reveal that the different text types included in the curriculum have not yet been reflected on exam papers. This situation can be considered as an indication that teachers do not yet have sufficient knowledge for preparing questions about these texts or for preparing questions aimed at these texts. To increase the competence of Turkish teachers in this area, different types of texts and question archives for these texts should be created and put at the disposal of teachers.

It was concluded that in most of the main idea questions in the examined Turkish exam papers, the main idea was explicitly included in the text and given at the end of the text. Moreover, it was observed that these questions were mostly prepared for short texts consisting of 6-11 sentences. In the great majority of questions that aimed at texts in which the main idea was given implicitly and that required inferences to be made from the text, students were expected to make inferences with a low degree of difficulty. These findings reveal that an attempt was made to measure the ability to find the main idea through short and easy texts at the basic level, even at the 8th grade level of secondary school. It is thought that the curriculum and sample exam papers were effective in these results. Previous studies have shown that higher-order learning outcomes are not sufficiently included in the Turkish curriculum (Bayrak-Özmutlu, 2020; Büyükalın-Filiz & Yıldırım, 2019; Söylemez, 2018) and that there are no higher-order questions in exam papers (Çintaş-Yıldız, 2015; Kanık-Uysal, 2022; Kanık-Uysal et al., 2022). However, questions that measure higher-order comprehension skills should be asked in exams. Questions are the place where thinking begins and the student activates his/her thinking processes in parallel with the expected task description and cognitive load. Students should encounter texts and questions that require higher-order thinking and inference skills so that they can become aware of such an expectation from them. They can use the correct strategy and find the correct answer by controlling their text comprehension processes to answer the question. However, students encounter these questions, which they have not encountered during their school lives, and for which they are not held responsible in school exams, in international joint exams. This lack of prior knowledge and preparedness also causes students to fail exams such as PISA and PIRLS. Indeed, the results obtained in the exams (MoNE, 2019b; Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012) and the conducted studies (Bakioğlu & Yıldız, 2014; Bozkurt, 2016; Batur, Ulutaş & Beyret, 2018; Demirel & Yağmur, 2017) reveal that students in Turkey cannot achieve sufficient success in these exams and cannot activate their higher-order thinking skills. In the 2018 PISA report (MoNE, 2018), students are expected to be able to make inferences on the meaning of long texts in the cognitive process of "integrating and generating inferences", and to determine by whom, when, and for what purpose the text was written in the cognitive process of "evaluation and reflection". Students' determination of the author's purpose is accepted as one of the higher-order thinking processes considered at the evaluation stage for the PISA exam, and while they are expected to demonstrate this skill for long texts, it was seen that half of the Turkish course exams did not include any main idea questions and that in exams in which they were included, an attempt was made to evaluate them with similar question items and short texts. Moreover, it was observed that in most of these texts, the main idea sentences were given explicitly at

the end of the text and that even in the texts in which they were given implicitly; there was an expectation only of a low-level inference ability. All these results reveal that Turkish course exams and international exams do not overlap in terms of the ability to find the main idea and that the exams administered in schools are inadequate in terms of preparing students for central exams.

To overcome all these problems, teachers need to be trained to give the right support to students at all stages, beginning with the instruction process in class and including the assessment and evaluation step. For this purpose, Turkish teachers should undergo pre-service and in-service training to acquire the necessary knowledge in terms of strategy instruction and question preparation competencies. In addition, to develop students' ability to find the main idea, scaffolding models should be designed and made familiar to teachers and students.

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