



Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language at the Primary School Level

Tuğba Aksaç ^a

^aPromoting Inclusive Education for Kids in the Turkish Education System, İstanbul, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

This scoping review analyzes the multilayered challenges faced by Syrian refugee children learning Turkish in Turkish primary schools. Utilizing the Arksey and O'Malley methodology and PRISMA-ScR standards, the academic literature from 2011-2025 was thematically examined. The findings indicate that the language barrier (e.g., difficulties in the four basic skills and cognitive concept acquisition) is not only the primary issue but also a catalyst that triggers other crises. These linguistic problems intersect with deep psychosocial trauma (PTSD) and crises of "belonging" stemming from war and migration. In the school environment, this manifests as ethnically-based peer bullying and "multi-way exclusion." These individual and social problems are exacerbated by structural issues such as "unsystematic" education policies based on a perception of "temporariness" and the isolationist legacy of Temporary Education Centers (TECs). The study argues that while interventions like PIKTES focus on linguistic problems, sustainable integration will not be possible unless the underlying layers of trauma and social exclusion are addressed. A transition to "trauma-sensitive school" models and holistic social cohesion programs is recommended.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 October 2025; Accepted 17 November 2025


KEYWORDS Syrian refugees, primary school, teaching Turkish as a second language, language barriers, psychosocial challenges, peer bullying, education policy, scoping review

Introduction

Following the start of the civil war in Syria more than a decade ago, Türkiye has become the country hosting the world's largest refugee population, providing refuge to approximately four million Syrians (Akyuz et al., 2018; Culbertson & Constant, 2015). The demographic structure of this population has had a profound impact on Türkiye's social and educational infrastructure, as nearly half of the registered Syrian immigrants are children under the age of 18 (Başaran, 2021). This situation has introduced a new and critical phenomenon for the Turkish education system: "refugee education" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018).

Initially viewed as "temporary guests" (Akyuz et al., 2018) and managed with emergency solutions such as Temporary Education Centers (TECs) (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022), this situation has evolved into a "full integration" strategy (Unutulmaz, 2019) as the crisis has become protracted (Unutulmaz, 2019; Rushing, 2023). At the heart of this strategy lies the necessity for Syrian refugee children, especially those starting the first grade of primary school, to learn Turkish as a foreign language, which is the foundation of their entire academic and social life (Taş et al., 2022; Culbertson & Constant, 2015).

However, the current academic literature indicates that the main obstacle to this process is the "language problem," which stands as the primary factor triggering all other issues (Tümer, 2018). It is accepted that the language problem causes other social, psychological, and academic problems and "forms the basis for solving every problem" (Tümer, 2018). This issue extends far beyond a simple difficulty in learning grammar. Research reveals

CONTACT Tuğba Aksaç  tugbaaksac@outlook.com  Promoting Inclusive Education for Kids in the Turkish Education System, İstanbul, Türkiye

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by The Primary Education Journal

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which allows for immediate free access to the work and permits any user to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search or link to the full texts of articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software or use them for any other lawful purpose even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited.



that these children experience "serious problems" (Taş et al., 2022) in the four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—due to the profound phonetic, etymological, and structural differences between their native language, Arabic, and the target language, Turkish (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taş et al., 2022). More importantly, language inadequacy directly impedes "basic concept development" (e.g., color, letter, number/counting, shape, direction-location) (Kılıç et al., 2022), which is critical in primary school, thus fundamentally affecting the children's cognitive and academic development.

In addition to linguistic difficulties, these children are grappling with severe psychosocial problems, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and crises of belonging as a result of their experiences with forced migration and war (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taş et al., 2022; Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). In the school environment, this vulnerability manifests as peer bullying (Başaran, 2021) and social exclusion (Serttaş & Erci, 2021; Rushing, 2023). School counselors conceptualize this situation as a complex "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) that involves not only refugee children but also local students. All these individual and social problems are further deepened by structural issues such as "unstable" (Akpınar, 2016) and "unsystematic" (Akpınar, 2016) education policies, the structural pains created by the transition from TECs to public schools (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022), and the "lack of sufficient support" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) for teachers to cope with these complex problems.

Although the existing literature often addresses these problems separately (e.g., language skills (Taş et al., 2022), psychosocial effects (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025), bullying (Başaran, 2021)), there is a need for a holistic mapping that shows how these multiple crisis areas (linguistic, psychosocial, social, structural) intersect and feed into one another. The purpose of this article is to present a scoping review that synthesizes the existing academic literature on the challenges faced by Syrian refugee children learning Turkish in primary schools in Türkiye, following the methodology developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005).

This study seeks to answer the following main research questions:

1. According to the existing literature, what are the main linguistic, psychosocial, and social challenges faced by Syrian primary school students in learning Turkish?
2. How do education policies and school structures (e.g., TECs, PIKTES) affect these challenges?
3. What are the intersections and causal relationships between these challenge areas (language, trauma, exclusion, policy)?
4. What are the main research gaps in the existing literature?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a scoping review design to map a broad, complex, and multidisciplinary topic (education, sociology, psychology, linguistics) such as the challenges of Syrian refugee children of primary school age learning Turkish in Türkiye (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This design is based on the methodological framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which aims "to rapidly map the key concepts, main source types, and evidence types in an existing research area" (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

The primary reason for choosing this method is related to the nature of the topic. While systematic reviews typically assess the quality of evidence for a narrow and specific question (e.g., "Does intervention X improve Y?"), the aim of this study is to examine the *scope, nature, and range* of existing evidence (including quantitative (Kılıç et al., 2022), qualitative (Akyuz et al., 2018; Tümer, 2018; Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018), and policy analysis (Unutulmaz, 2019) studies) in a *broad and heterogeneous* field like "challenges of Syrian refugee children" and to identify *research gaps* (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This objective aligns perfectly with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) definition of a scoping review.

Reporting Standard and Process

The planning, execution, and reporting of this study were structured by considering the methodological enhancements by Levac et al. (2010) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020). This approach aims to ensure the study is "rigorously conducted, transparent and trustworthy" (Levac et al., 2010). The study protocol (PRISMA-ScR Item 5) (Tricco et al., 2018) was developed by the authors of this article.

Study Selection Criteria and Data Synthesis

The dataset for this scoping review (PRISMA-ScR Item 6) (Tricco et al., 2018) consists of academic articles published in peer-reviewed journals, theses, and policy reports published by international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, RAND Corporation) covering the years 2011-2025 on Turkish language learning, psychosocial status, social integration, and related education policies for Syrian refugee children at the primary school level in Türkiye.

The data collection and synthesis process (PRISMA-ScR Items 10, 13, 18) (Tricco et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020) is presented in the "Findings" section of this article and was carried out using a two-stage approach:

1. Document Analysis: Each source included in the study was examined using the "analysis of written materials about the phenomenon or events targeted for research" (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013) approach, as defined by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013).
2. Thematic Analysis: The thematic analysis method, also used in qualitative studies in the field (e.g., Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025), was utilized in the analysis of the data. In this process, the data from the selected sources were repeatedly read, coded, and grouped under main themes such as "Linguistic Barriers," "Psychosocial Challenges," and "Structural Problems."

Findings

The literature synthesized as a result of this scoping review reveals the challenges faced by Syrian primary school students in the process of learning Turkish under five main and interrelated themes.

Theme 1: Linguistic Barriers and Academic Competency Problems

The most fundamental and widespread challenge in the educational integration of Syrian refugee children has been reported as the language barrier (Tümer, 2018; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018). The findings show that this barrier is not just a superficial communication problem, but a deep structural issue that also affects cognitive development.

- Deficiency in Basic Language Skills (4 Skills): Studies based on the opinions of teachers, parents, and students have determined that Syrian refugee children experience "serious problems" in acquiring and using basic Turkish language skills (Taş et al., 2022). These problems are observed in all four basic language skills:
 - Listening: It was concluded that children have problems explaining the text they listened to, determining its subject, and answering questions about what they heard (Taş et al., 2022).
 - Reading: Due to the phonetic, etymological, and structural differences between the native language (Arabic) and the target language (Turkish) (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taş et al., 2022), it was observed that children could not read by paying attention to punctuation, emphasis, and intonation; they merely "vocalized" the texts without understanding or comprehending them (Taş et al., 2022).
 - Writing: It was reported that first-grade primary school students experienced serious difficulties in writing appropriate letters and numbers, forming meaningful and orderly sentences, leaving appropriate spaces between words, and using punctuation marks (Taş et al., 2022).
- Delays in Cognitive and Conceptual Development: The language problem is not limited to communication but also directly affects the children's basic cognitive development. A scale development study conducted by Kılıç et al. (2022) revealed that these children had difficulty acquiring basic concepts such as "color, letter, number/counting, size comparison, shape, direction-location" (Kılıç et al., 2022). This finding indicates that the children are below the basic cognitive "readiness" level required for primary school and that the language barrier makes it impossible to close this gap.
- Sources of Barriers: The literature identifies the reasons for these linguistic difficulties as multidimensional. The most prominent reasons are the structural differences between the two languages (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taş et al., 2022) and the students' "thinking that Turkish is very difficult" (Taş et al., 2022). In addition, the fact that their parents also cannot speak Turkish (Taş et al., 2022) and the students' "inability to receive support from their social environment and family" (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025) constitute significant obstacles. Furthermore, motivational factors such as "their basic needs like shelter, food, and clothing not being met" (Taş et al., 2022) and "their reluctance to learn Turkish, thinking they will return to their country soon" (Taş et al., 2022) also negatively affect language learning.

Theme 2: Psychosocial Challenges and the Effects of Trauma

The findings clearly show that the difficulties Syrian students experience in the language learning process cannot be considered separately from their psychosocial problems (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025).

- **War and Migration-Related Trauma:** At the root of the learning and behavioral problems experienced by Syrian refugee students lie "post-traumatic histories" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). It is stated that many students have suffered or continue to suffer from "poor health conditions, anxiety, insecurity, hypervigilance, concentration problems, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) (Taş et al., 2022). International studies also confirm high levels of PTSD, depression, and anxiety in unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) (Alefesha & Al-Jamal, 2019).
- **Impact of Trauma on Learning:** These psychosocial problems directly sabotage the language learning process. Students experiencing PTSD who experience "emotional dysregulation" (Zembeli et al., 2024) leads to "behavioral problems" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) in the classroom and a decline in school performance. Negative feedback from teachers in response to this low performance or behavioral problems (Zembeli et al., 2024) creates a vicious cycle that further complicates the student's social integration.
- **Identity and Belongingness Tension:** According to teacher opinions, although learning Turkish reduces students' adjustment difficulties (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025), it is stated that "students' tendency to protect their own culture is high" (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025). This situation points to a tension between "belongingness" and "alienation" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). The fact that students feel the need "to be accepted by their friends" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) while simultaneously trying to remain attached to their own culture (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025) complicates their learning motivation and psychological well-being.
- **Need for "Trauma-Sensitive Schools":** A systematic review (Zembeli et al., 2024) examining the international literature on "trauma-sensitive school" (Zembeli et al., 2024) concepts that can respond to these deep psychosocial needs revealed that most of these concepts were developed in the USA, rarely target refugee students *directly*, and the evidence for their effectiveness is weak (Zembeli et al., 2024). The need for implementation and the methodological gap in countries like Türkiye, which have a high refugee population (Zembeli et al., 2024) but may have more limited financial resources (Zembeli et al., 2024), is evident.

Theme 3: Social Integration, Exclusion, and Peer Relations

Linguistic and psychosocial difficulties manifest directly as social exclusion and peer bullying in the school environment (Başaran, 2021).

- **Peer Bullying:** Syrian immigrant children are exposed to "behaviors involving exclusion, othering, and bullying" at school (Başaran, 2021). This bullying, unlike general childhood fights, is based on a specific ethnic foundation. One of the most striking findings is the use of the word "Syrian" as an "insult" or "labeling expression" among children (Başaran, 2021). Other reported bullying behaviors include "making fun of their clothes," "forcing them to collect trash," "beating, hitting," "excluding them from games," and "fighting" (Başaran, 2021).
- **Relationship Between Language and Exclusion:** The language barrier emerges as both a cause and a consequence of social exclusion. The inability to speak the language creates a "power imbalance" (Başaran, 2021) between immigrant and local students. The fact that the Syrian student is put in the wrong "because they cannot express themselves well" (Başaran, 2021) in arguments, is ridiculed for mispronounced Turkish words, and is even the "first person to be accused" (Başaran, 2021) in incidents like theft, shows how language inadequacy reinforces social isolation.
- **Concept of "Multi-way Exclusion":** A study conducted with school guidance counselors (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) revealed that exclusion is not unidirectional (local students -> refugee students). According to this finding, termed "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023), exclusion also occurs among refugee students themselves and between different groups. More importantly, this situation is combined with increasing "behavioral problems" and "violence" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) among local students as well. This finding indicates that schools are facing a "school crisis" that requires responding not only to the needs of refugees but "both refugee and local students" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) and coping with

"conflicts between Syrians and locals" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023).

Theme 4: Education Policies and Structural Problems

Individual, psychosocial, and social challenges are framed and often deepened by the structural characteristics and shortcomings of Türkiye's refugee education policies.

- "Temporariness" and "Unsystematic" Approaches in Policies: Türkiye's approach to Syrian refugee education evolved from "almost complete neglect" (Unutulmaz, 2019) between 2011-2014 to a "full integration" (Unutulmaz, 2019) strategy after 2016. However, despite this evolution, policies are criticized for a "lack of stable policies" (Akpınar, 2016) and an "unsystematic" (Akpınar, 2016) approach. The fundamental problem is the prevailing perception of refugees as "temporary guests" (Unutulmaz, 2019) in policies (Rushing, 2023). Akpınar (2016), in an analysis based on United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criteria (access, integration, quality, protection, etc.), argued that Türkiye's efforts were "inadequate" (Akpınar, 2016) and that the Ministry of National Education's (MoNE) "lack of a refugee education policy" (Akpınar, 2016) was effective in this.
- The Dilemma of Temporary Education Centers (TECs): Before integration policies, Temporary Education Centers (TECs) (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022; Save the Children, 2016; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) were established, providing education in the native language (Arabic) and using the Syrian curriculum (Save the Children, 2016). Although these centers were established with the positive aim of ensuring children did not drop out of education (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022), findings in the literature show that this practice turned into a structure that *hindered* integration. A qualitative study by Arık Akınal and Güzel (2022) revealed that students in TECs "experienced isolation from Turkish society" and therefore felt "anxious about their social cohesion" (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022). These "isolated educational institutions" (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022), when they were closed in 2019 (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022) and the transition to public schools (Akyuz et al., 2018; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) began, caused children to be caught unprepared both linguistically and socially.
- The Cost of Integration: Pressure on the Local System: The strategy of closing TECs and fully integrating children into public schools (Unutulmaz, 2019) encountered serious difficulties such as "problems of the existing national education system," "lack of resources (human, financial, infrastructure)" (Unutulmaz, 2019), and "overcrowding of classrooms" (Culbertson & Constant, 2015). The national exam-oriented system (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) caused linguistically inadequate refugee students to be unable to follow the curriculum; this situation created "psychological discomfort" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) for local students and their families, fueling negative attitudes towards refugees and social conflicts (e.g., allegations of polygamy) (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023).

Theme 5: School Climate, Interventions, and Inadequacies

Despite interventions developed in response to structural problems, challenges at the classroom and school level (meso-level) persist.

- Systemic Intervention: The PIKTES Project: The "Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System" (PIKTES) (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020; European Commission, 2021), carried out by the MoNE and funded by the European Union (EU), stands out as the most important structural intervention to support the integration process into public schools. The components of PIKTES aim to respond directly to the problems identified in the previous themes:
 - "Turkish Language Education" (Inclusion Classes) (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020; European Commission, 2021) (Response to Theme 1).
 - "Catch-Up Education" for children who have fallen behind in education and "Back-Up Education" for those who cannot follow the curriculum (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020; European Commission, 2021) (Response to Theme 1).
 - "School guidance and psychosocial support" (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020) (Response to Theme 2).
 - "Teaching materials" and "social cohesion activities" (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020) (Response to Themes 3 and 5).

An impact evaluation of the PIKTES I project revealed that students participating in the project showed "statistically significant improvements in school attendance rates" (European Commission, n.d.).

- **Challenges Faced by Teachers:** Despite macro-level projects like PIKTES, teachers in the field state that they "do not receive adequate support" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018). The main problems faced by teachers in the study by Taskin and Erdemli (2018) were grouped under three headings: (1) "Language barrier" (inability to communicate with students), (2) "Cultural problems" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) (e.g., different perceptions of school rules, indifference of families (Tümer, 2018)), and (3) "Discipline problems" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) (largely trauma-induced behavioral problems mentioned in Theme 2). Teachers demand "in-service seminars" and "reduction of class sizes" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) to cope with these problems.
- **Inadequacy of Teaching Materials:** It has been determined that the materials used in teaching Turkish (Biçer & Demir, 2020) also have significant shortcomings. The study by Biçer and Demir (2020), based on teacher opinions, showed that the materials were inadequate in terms of "suitability for the student, practicality, and suitability for multiple learning" (Biçer & Demir, 2020). Most importantly, it was stated that the materials "fell short in providing cultural transfer" (Biçer & Demir, 2020) and could not sufficiently develop "basic language skills" (Biçer & Demir, 2020).

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis of Challenges Faced by Syrian Refugee Students in Learning Turkish

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Findings and Challenges	Related Sources
Theme 1: Linguistic Barriers & Academic Competency	1.1. Four Basic Language Skills	Inability to understand what is heard, leaving questions unanswered; phonetic, emphasis, and punctuation errors; serious deficiencies in letter and sentence writing.	(Taş et al., 2022)
	1.2. Cognitive & Conceptual Development	Delay in the development of basic cognitive concepts for primary school, such as color, number/counting, size, shape, direction-location.	(Kılıç et al., 2022)
	1.3. Sources of Barriers	Linguistic differences between Turkish-Arabic; lack of family support; low motivation (expectation of return).	(Yıldız & Kılınc, 2025)
Theme 2: Psychosocial Challenges & Trauma	2.1. War & Migration-Related Trauma	High rates of PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, concentration problems, insecurity.	(Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023; Alefsha & Al-Jamal, 2019)
	2.2. Impact of Trauma on Learning	Emotional dysregulation, behavioral problems, low academic performance, conflict with teachers.	(Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023; Zembeli et al., 2024)
	2.3. Identity & Belongingness Tension	Psychosocial tension between the need for "acceptance" (belongingness) and the tendency to "preserve one's own culture."	(Yıldız & Kılınc, 2025; Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023)
Theme 3: Social Exclusion & Peer	3.1. Ethnically-Based Peer Bullying	Use of the word "Syrian" as an insult; mockery, exclusion, physical	(Başaran, 2021; Serttaş & Erci, 2021)

Relations		violence.	
	3.2. Social Consequences of Language Barrier	Being put in the "guilty" position due to inability to express oneself, power imbalance, isolation.	(Başaran, 2021)
	3.3. "Multi-way Exclusion"	Not only the exclusion of refugees, but also increasing violence among local students and deterioration of the school climate.	(Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023)
Theme 4: Education Policies & Structural Problems	4.1. Perception of "Temporariness" at Policy Level	"Lack of stable policies," "unsystematic" approach, perception of "temporary guests."	(Unutulmaz, 2019; Rushing, 2023)
	4.2. Inadequacy According to UNHCR Criteria	Found to be "inadequate" in standards of access, integration, quality, and protection.	(Akpınar, 2016)
	4.3. Isolationist Effect of TECs	Native language education (Arabic) delaying integration; creating "isolation" from Turkish society and "anxiety."	(Arik Akınal & Güzel, 2022; Save the Children, 2016; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018)
Theme 5: School Climate & Interventions	5.1. Teacher Inadequacies	Teachers being inadequately supported in the face of language barriers, cultural differences, and discipline problems.	(Taskin & Erdemli, 2018)
	5.2. Material Problems	Teaching materials not being suitable for students, failing in cultural transfer and basic skills.	(Biçer & Demir, 2020)
	5.3. PIKTES Project	Systemic intervention (language, catch-up, psychosocial support). Achieving "statistically significant" improvement in attendance rates.	(European Commission, n.d.; Global Compact on Refugees, 2020; European Commission, 2021)

Discussion

The findings of this scoping review reveal that the Turkish learning experience of Syrian primary school students takes place within a multilayered network of challenges that are deeply interrelated and mutually reinforcing. In this section, the intersections between the themes presented in the findings section and the theoretical and practical implications of these intersections are discussed.

Intersection 1: The Catalyst Role of the Language Barrier and the "Causal Chain of Harm"

The findings show that the language inadequacy defined in Theme 1 creates a "causal chain of harm" that acts as a catalyst for all other challenges. This chain operates as follows:

1. Linguistic Failure (Theme 1): The student fails in basic literacy in the first grade (Taş et al., 2022) due to structural differences between Turkish-Arabic (Yıldız & Kılınç, 2025; Taş et al., 2022) and basic cognitive concept deficiencies (Kılıç et al., 2022).

2. Academic Labeling (Theme 2): This academic failure and associated "emotional dysregulation" (Zembeli et al., 2024) lead teachers to give "negative feedback" (Zembeli et al., 2024) to the student and label them as having a "behavioral problem."
3. Social Exclusion (Theme 3): The student is excluded and bullied by their peers (Başaran, 2021) with the "Syrian" (Başaran, 2021) label because they cannot express themselves (Başaran, 2021), look different, and are academically unsuccessful.
4. Psychosocial Deepening (Theme 2): This social exclusion deepens the student's psychosocial trauma (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) and "belongingness" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) crisis, which they already carry due to war and migration.
5. Negative Feedback (Theme 1): Increased psychosocial stress (e.g., anxiety, concentration disorder) (Taş et al., 2022) further reduces the student's capacity to learn the language (Theme 1).

This vicious cycle confirms how closely language learning is related to the "affective state" (Tümer, 2018) and that the problem is not only technical-linguistic but also a deep psychosocial and affective problem (Yıldız & Kılınc, 2025).

Intersection 2: The Importance of the "Meso-Level" (School Climate)

The findings, combined with international comparative literature (Hammoud et al., 2022), reveal the critical importance of "meso-level" factors (i.e., school climate) in integration. Hammoud et al. (2022), in their study comparing Türkiye, Lebanon, and Australia, suggested that "meso-level" (school factors) effects on the social integration of refugee children may be stronger than "macro-level" (country's legal status, e.g., path to citizenship) effects.

This is a revolutionary finding in terms of policy. It shows that steps like granting citizenship to refugees (a macro-policy) will not solve integration alone; the real struggle is waged *inside the school* (meso-level). In the specific case of Türkiye, this means that the school climate (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023), the fight against peer bullying (Başaran, 2021; Serttaş & Erci, 2021), teacher attitudes (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018), and coping with "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) may be as important as, or even more important than, language teaching (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020). The emphasis by Özel and Erdur-Baker (2023) on increasing violence among local students (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) and the deterioration of the school climate also confirms that the problem has evolved from the "integration of refugee students" to the "social health of the entire school."

Intersection 3: Policy Paradoxes (TECs and "Temporariness")

When Türkiye's education policy (Theme 4) was built on "temporariness" (Unutulmaz, 2019; Rushing, 2023), even well-intentioned interventions (like Temporary Education Centers-TECs) produced negative outcomes. TECs (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022; Save the Children, 2016) were established to "protect" children and provide "native language education," but as the findings (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022) show, they sabotaged long-term social integration (Akyuz et al., 2018) by creating "isolation" and "anxiety." This situation is a concrete reflection of "permanent temporariness" (Rushing, 2023) in education.

Furthermore, the contradiction between the existence of huge-budget projects like PIKTES (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020; European Commission, 2021) and the statements from teachers in the field that they are "unsupported" (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) and materials are "inadequate" (Biçer & Demir, 2020) shows that macro-level interventions (PIKTES) are not effectively reflected in micro-level (in-class) practices or are insufficient in the face of the complex reality on the ground.

Intersection 4: Necessary but Insufficient Intervention (PIKTES and Trauma)

PIKTES, as seen in the findings (European Commission, n.d.), has been a successful intervention in solving measurable and logistical problems such as "school attendance" (response to Theme 1). It has lightened the linguistic load on the system by offering language education (European Commission, 2021) and catch-up training (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020). However, the deep psychosocial (Theme 2) and social exclusion (Theme 3) problems revealed by this scoping review require an intervention beyond the current structure of PIKTES.

Although the literature points to the need for a "trauma-sensitive school" (Zembeli et al., 2024), there is no evidence regarding either its applicability or effectiveness in the Turkish context (Zembeli et al., 2024). The "psychosocial support" component (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020) of PIKTES carries the risk of being

inadequate in the face of this deep and structural trauma (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). While the system focuses on language teaching (Theme 1), unhealed trauma (Theme 2) and systemic bullying (Theme 3) problems continue to remain as the main underlying obstacles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This scoping review has revealed that the challenges faced by Syrian refugee children learning Turkish in Turkish primary schools are far more complex than an isolated linguistic problem. The findings show that these challenges exhibit an intertwined four-layered structure:

1. Fundamental Layer (Individual/Psychological): Unhealed psychosocial trauma stemming from war and migration (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023).
2. Second Layer (Linguistic/Cognitive): Failure in basic language and concept acquisition triggered by trauma and linguistic differences (Turkish-Arabic) (Kılıç et al., 2022; Taş et al., 2022).
3. Third Layer (Social/Meso-Level): Peer bullying, ethnically-based exclusion, and "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023; Başaran, 2021) caused by linguistic inadequacy and cultural differences.
4. Fourth Layer (Structural/Macro-Level): Unstable education policies based on the perception of "temporariness" (Unutulmaz, 2019; Akpınar, 2016), the legacy of isolationist practices like TECs (Arık Akınal & Güzel, 2022), and teacher/material inadequacies (Biçer & Demir, 2020; Taskin & Erdemli, 2018).

Current interventions (especially PIKTES) (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020) have largely focused on the second layer (Language) and have achieved significant successes here, such as in school attendance (European Commission, n.d.). However, as long as the first (Trauma) and third (Social Exclusion) layers are not adequately addressed, it does not seem possible for linguistic integration to be permanent and successful.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the following recommendations have been developed for policymakers, school administrators, and researchers:

Recommendations at the Policy Level

1. Transition from "Temporariness" to "Systemic Integration": Türkiye's refugee education policy must abandon the "temporary guest" (Unutulmaz, 2019) assumption and develop a "stable" (Akpınar, 2016) and permanent refugee education and integration policy compliant with UNHCR standards (Akpınar, 2016).
2. Making PIKTES Permanent: Successful interventions like PIKTES (Global Compact on Refugees, 2020) should be removed from a project-based status and transformed into a permanent structural part of the MoNE (e.g., a special directorate) with a sustainable financing model.
3. Investment in Teachers: Teachers (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) should be provided not just with general seminars, but with practical, continuous, and accredited mandatory in-service training on trauma pedagogy, bilingual education, and cultural competence.

Recommendations at the Practice Level

1. Transition to a "Trauma-Sensitive School" Model: Schools must not only be places that teach language, but also "safe spaces" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). "Trauma-sensitive school" (Zembeli et al., 2024) models should be adapted to the Turkish context; guidance services (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) should be specialized in this regard, and proactive screening and intervention programs for psychosocial trauma should be developed.
2. "Holistic School" Social Cohesion Programs: Interventions should focus not only on refugee students but on the *entire school climate*. To prevent "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) and peer bullying (Başaran, 2021), "mutual adaptation" (Hammoud et al., 2022) programs (e.g., joint social activities, peer mentoring) that include local students and families (Serttaş & Erci, 2021; Hammoud et al., 2022) should be made mandatory.

3. Culturally Sensitive Material Development: Teaching materials (Biçer & Demir, 2020) should be updated to include not only technical language teaching but also "cultural transfer" (Biçer & Demir, 2020) and bilingual (Arabic-Turkish) (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018) approaches.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Impact Evaluation: There is an urgent need for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies focusing on the impacts and outputs of PIKTES (European Commission, n.d.) *other than* "school attendance" (e.g., reducing peer bullying, psychosocial recovery, long-term impact on academic achievement).
2. Investigation of the "Meso-Level": Building on the work of Hammoud et al. (2022), qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted comparing the impact of "school climate" (meso-level) on integration in different school types (public, private, imam hatip) within Türkiye.
3. Experiences of Local Students: Research has largely focused on refugee students. To understand the phenomena of "multi-way exclusion" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) and increased "violence" (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023) among local students (Theme 3), studies examining the experiences of local students and their families are needed.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Ethics statement

N/A.

Consent

N/A.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Notes on contributor

After graduating from Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Guidance and Psychological Counseling department, Tuğba Aksaç is doing a master's degree in the same field at Istanbul University - Cerrahpaşa. He currently works at a Piktes school in Istanbul where Syrian refugee children are educated. He lives in Istanbul, Türkiye.

ORCID

Tuğba Aksaç  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7001-8096>

Authors' Contributions

Tuğba Aksaç  Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing.

References

- Akpınar, E. (2016). Turkey's progress toward meeting refugee education needs the example of Syrian refugees. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 16(66), 179-198. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2016.66.10>
- Akyuz, B. M. A., Aksoy, D., Madra, A., & Polat, E. (2018). *Evolution of national policy in Turkey on integration of Syrian children into the national education system*. (Background paper ED/GEMR/MRT/2018/P1/18/REV prepared for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, *Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*). UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000266069>
- Alefesha, H. M. N., & Al-Jamal, D. (2019). Problems and challenges of teaching EFL to Syrian refugees in Jordan. *European Journal of Educational and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 64-76. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/235>
- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Arık Akınal, A. N., & Güzel, Y. (2022). The role of temporary education centers on Syrian refugee students' socio-cultural adaptation. *Adıyaman Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 12(2), 522-545. <https://doi.org/10.17984/adyuebd.1113518>
- Başaran, K. D. (2021). Akran zorbalığının Suriyeli göçmen çocukların psikolojik iyi oluş halleri üzerine etkisi: Türkiye, Lübnan ve Ürdün örneklerinde literatür taraması. *Sosyal Çalışma Dergisi*, 5(2), 245-257. <https://dergipark.org.tr/pub/scd/issue/63319/881656>
- Biçer, N., & Demir, S. (2020). Suriyeli öğrencilere yönelik Türkçe öğretiminde materyal kullanımı. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (19), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.751949>
- Culbertson, S., & Constant, L. (2015). *Education of Syrian refugee children: Managing the crisis in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR859>
- European Commission. (2021). *Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the 2021-2022 multi-annual action plan in favour of the Republic of Turkey for the Facility for Refugees*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/C_2021_9699_F1_ANNEX_EN_V2_P1_1644011.PDF
- European Commission. (n.d.). *FRIT education sector report (Vol. II)*. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/36d0939c-91dd-45bf-b5fe-23b710d33188_en?filename=Vol%20II%20-%20Sector%20Report%20-%20Education.pdf
- Global Compact on Refugees. (2020). *Promoting integration of Syrian kids into the Turkish education system (PIKTES)*. <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/promoting-integration-syrian-kids-turkish-education-system-piktes>
- Hammoud, M., Shuayb, M., & Crul, M. (2022). Determinants of refugee children's social integration: Evidence from Lebanon, Turkey, and Australia. *Social Sciences*, 11(12), 563. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11120563>
- Kılıç, B. G., Çetin, A., Akpınar, E., & Yıldız, S. S. (2022). Suriyeli iki dilli çocukların temel kavram gelişimlerinin incelenmesi. *Millî Eğitim*, 51(236), 3471-3488. <https://doi.org/10.37669/milliegitim.1087132>
- Levac, D., Colquhoun, H., & O'Brien, K. K. (2010). Scoping studies: advancing the methodology. *Implementation Science*, 5(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-5-69>
- Özel, D., & Erdur-Baker, Ö. (2023). Struggles of refugee-receiving schools in Turkey. *Social Sciences*, 12(4), 231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12040231>
- Peters, M. D. J., Marnie, C., Tricco, A. C., Pollock, D., Munn, Z., Alexander, L., McInerney, P., Godfrey, C. M., & Khalil, H. (2020). Updated methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews. *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 18(10), 2119-2126. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-20-00160>
- Rushing, C. (2023). *Analyzing trauma and language barriers for refugee students*. UW Tacoma Digital Commons. https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=med_theses
- Save the Children. (2016). *Comparative assessment: Turkish curriculum and Syrian curriculum in Temporary Education Centres*. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/comparative-assessment-turkish-curriculum-and-syrian-curriculum-temporary-education-centres>
- Serttaş, Z., & Erci, B. (2021). Determination of social exclusion among young Syrian refugees living in Turkey. *European Journal of Environment and Public Health*, 5(1), em0067. <https://www.ejeph.com/download/determination-of-social-exclusion-among-young-syrian-refugees-living-in-turkey-10908.pdf>
- Taş, H., Çetkin, E., & Karataş, Z. (2022). Challenges and solutions of Syrian refugee children in the process of acquiring basic language skills. *Educational Policy Analysis and Strategic Research*, 17(2), 70-101. <https://doi.org/10.29329/epasr.2022.461.5>

- Taskin, P., & Erdemli, O. (2018). Education for Syrian refugees: Problems faced by teachers in Turkey. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 18(75), 155-177. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2018.75.9>
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., & Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 169(7), 467-473. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850>
- Tümer, M. A. K. (2018). Suriyeli mülteci çocuklara Türkçenin yabancı dil olarak öğretiminde karşılaşılan sorunlar. *OPUS Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(15), 1442-1479. <https://doi.org/10.26466/opus.443945>
- Unutulmaz, K. O. (2019). Turkey's education policies towards Syrian refugees: A macro-level analysis. *International Migration*, 57(2), 235-252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12476>
- Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2013). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri* (9. baskı). Seçkin Yayıncılık.
- Yıldız, S., & Kılınç, S. (2025). Suriyeli öğrencilerin Türkçe öğrenim sürecinin etkilerine yönelik öğretmen görüşleri. *Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 21(2), 522-538. <https://doi.org/10.17860/mersinefd.1452960>
- Zembeli, P., Hock, M., Schiess, K., & Kucharz, D. (2024). Trauma-sensitive school concepts for students with a refugee background: A review of international studies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1321373. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1321373>