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Foreign language education policies in turkey

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Abstract

Knowledge of foreign languages and in particular of English is an indispensable part of the modern world. And the only way to bring Turkish up to the level of the communicational requirements of the modern world is through the interaction of knowledge of English with the derivational convenience provided by the Turkish language reform. Therefore, we aimed to have a look at English in the educational system in Turkey by focusing on its past and current status and discussed its future importance as a world language in our country.

Keywords: Foreign language education, policy, ottoman period, republic, Turkey

1. Introduction

Turkey is located at the intersection of Asia and Europe and in proximity to the Middle East and Africa. This strategically important status requires many responsibilities for Turkey. It acts as a cultural bridge between West and East when its geopolitical location and its status are taken into consideration, and this makes the learning of English particularly important for Turkey in order to reach international communication, together with following the developments which English is widely used. Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952 and still has some negotiations with European Union (EU) with the expectation of a full membership. Due to the political reasons, governments in Turkey have adopted some policies to spread and enhance learning and teaching of English, so, from this perspective English is the most prestigious foreign language in Turkey. Therefore, in order to understand the Turkish educational context, it is essential to present a historical overview of English teaching in Turkey.

2. History of English Language Teaching

It is recognized that the introduction of English language into the Turkish education system dates back to *The Tanzimat Period*, the second half of the nineteenth century, which marks the beginning of the Westernization movements in the education system (Kirkgoz, 2005). This period is succeeded by the *Republican Turkey* which covers the period between 1923 and 1997. The third milestone in the history of English teaching in Turkey is considered to be the phase that started with the *1997 Education Reform* which brought about drastic changes and developments in the educational system, and in particular the teaching of English in Turkey.

2.1. Tanzimat Period (1839-1876)

The Tanzimat period refers to the period dating back to second half of the nineteenth century during the Ottoman times. This period plays an important role in education because it shows the beginning of the Westernization movements. As a natural result of teaching the sciences by using French materials and teachers, French gained

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importance. Early attempts to teach a western language developed as a result of a need to transfer military technology from the west in the eighteenth century. Close relations with France had long been established, during the times of Suleiman the Magnificent. In the context of the attempts for the renewal and modernization of the Ottoman institutions, particularly the military structure, the teaching of French first started in military training institutions in 1773. Later, French was included in the curricula of the Medical School (*Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Adliye-i Şahane*) and the School of Political Sciences (*Mekteb-i Mülkiye*). The successful attempts observed in the teaching of French were in the *Mekteb-i Sultani* (*Galatasaray Lisesi* or *Lycee de Galatasaray*) which was opened in İstanbul in 1867.

Missionary schools started to flourish with the changes in education system in Ottoman Empire. Robert College was the first educational institution that used English as the medium of instruction. It was founded by Cyrus Hamlin in İstanbul in 1863. The ultimate purpose of the establishment of this school is to give education in American style. Robert College and Its sister college, American College for girls, were the first ones established outside USA (<http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert-Lisesi>). On their foundations, the Boğazici University was established in 1863. First, these missionary schools initially accepted Armenian, Bulgarian, Jewish and Greek students.

2.2. Republican Turkey (1923-1997)

Atatürk as the founder of the republic associates initialized a series of reforms after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. He made reforms on national, social, cultural, and educational levels to establish an independent and modern nation, among which the *Turkish Language Reform*, underlining the Kemalist principles, was highly successful in achieving the objectives set for the purification, standardization, authentication, and modernization of the Turkish language (Büyükkantarcıoğlu, 2004, p.38). These policies aimed to implement the purification of Turkish from other foreign language elements. This led to make the language standard for written and oral communication. Every individual could learn how to read and write easily and have equal access to educational opportunities. Education was made accessible to everyone and unified with Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat*) in 1924. All schools at different levels, including Islamic charities and minority groups (called as *Tekke*, *Zaviye* and *Medrese*) were unified with this act. Also, the alphabet was changed from Arabic to Latin in 1928 and schools were secularized. In 1932 Turkish Language Association (*Türk Dil Kurumu*) founded by Atatürk to accelerate linguistic objectives through a set of language planning policies. Therefore, Turkish as the national language could meet the communicative and educational needs of the society and illiteracy level in society could be reduced. As part of the Turkicizing project, the medium of instruction was Turkish until 1953, when the school was made a “college” together with the other *Maarif* schools. In all of these schools, science and mathematics have been taught in a foreign language in addition to the intensive language and literature teaching as a separate subject, to this day, since according to the *Treaty of Lausanne* humanities cannot be taught in a foreign language in these schools. The *Maarif* colleges are now run by a national foundation, The *Turkish Education Foundation* (TED). “A new mentality, outlook and value system was introduced in Turkish society and education that undoubtedly played one of the most important roles in the transformation of the new country” (Eskicumalı, 1994, p.101). Due to the fact that there were no clear goals and principles, Atatürk emphasized the need to improve education. For this reason, foreign experts were invited to Turkey during the first decades of the new Republic to adopt western culture and scientific ideas. They took the charge of reforming education and the government allocated one-fourth of its educational budget to consultation. One of these experts was John Dewey.

2.3. 1997 Education Reform

In 1997, Turkish educational system underwent a number of fundamental changes regarding the foreign language teaching (FLT) policy at all levels of education. These changes were resulted from the MONE’s efforts to reform Turkey’s ELT practice which had long been neglected. The reform was introduced as “The Ministry of Education Development Project” and aimed at promoting effective English teaching in both public and private schools in the country. The innovation which took place in 1997 primarily extended the duration of compulsory primary education from 5 to 8 years. So, with the new project three-year middle school education was embedded into primary education. Another innovation adopted by the MONE was the introduction of English from Grade 4 upwards. The

main incentive behind this innovation was to expose students to English longer than before so that they could acquire it more successfully (MONE, 2001). The MONE lists the objectives of the new English curriculum for Grade 4 and 5 as follows: (a) raise pupils' awareness of a foreign language, (b) promote a positive attitude towards learning English language, (c) increase pupils' interests and motivation towards learning English language, (d) establish classroom situations in the context of games so that pupils can have fun while learning English, and (e) set up dialogues and meaningful contextualized learning activities (Kocaoluk & Kocaoluk, 2001). The 1997 curriculum states that the main objective of the secondary level foreign language education is to improve the basic communicative skills of the learners through the integration of the four skills so that learners can be engaged in successful communication in the target language (MONE, 2001). This reform brought about numerous positive changes. Education faculties placed more emphasis on the teacher training courses. Following the endorsement of the new curriculum, teacher training departments were reshaped, increasing the number of methodology courses, as well as extending the practicum studies including School Experience course. This way, teacher trainees had more opportunities to observe the actual teaching practices, thereby receiving more practical and hands-on experience in schools. Furthermore, English language teaching departments felt the need to add a new course at the undergraduate level: *Teaching English to Young Learners*. This was an essential step in that prospective teachers would be better qualified as to meet the distinct needs of young learners (Grade 4-5 students) and adolescents (Grade 6-8 students).

Similar to the 1997 curriculum, the current FLT curriculum adopts a communicative view to ELT, highlighting the importance of meaningful communication for learning English more effectively, and also underlining the role of the teacher as facilitator of the learning process. The goals and objectives to be achieved are given with their corresponding structural items, illustrated with topics, functions, sampled tasks or projects, following a functional-notional and skills-based model. Learners are expected to acquire the linguistic and communicative competence through songs, plays, and drawing-coloring activities in which permits shift from more teacher-centred approaches to more learner and learning-centred approaches to improve learner autonomy via projects and strategy training. A further major innovation is assessment. Traditional "paper and pencil" tests are replaced with "performance-based assessments." In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Portfolios are more authentic and realistic. They focus on documenting a student's language progress and performance, so they enable both teachers and parents to discuss and review the child's development.

2.4. Foreign Language Teaching Improvement Project

General and special proficiencies for FLT have been determined by MONE (2008): *I. The Planning and Regulation of English Teaching Process*: (a) *Scope*: English teaching-learning process, planning, development of appropriate regulatory environments, material preparation and utilization of applications. (b) *Proficiencies*: (1) Appropriate planning to make the teaching of English, (2) Arranging appropriate learning environments for teaching English, (3) Using appropriate materials and resources of English teaching process, (4) Using appropriate methods and techniques of English teaching process, and (5) Using of technological resources in teaching English. *II. Improvement of Language Skills*: (a) *Scope*: English language teachers' theories of learning and teaching, language skills, approaches and techniques to use in developing activities for the arrangement, taking into account the needs of students include English language correctly and effectively use. (b) *Proficiencies*: (1) Helping students develop effective language learning strategies, (2) Providing students to use English in a clear and understandable way, (3) Improving students listening skills (4) Improving students speaking skills, (5) Improving students reading skills, (6) Improving students writing skills, and (7) Making applications taking into consideration the students who need the special education and students with special needs in English teaching. *III. Monitoring and Evaluation of Language Development*: (a) *Scope*: Practices for identifying, monitoring and evaluation of the development of students in the process of teaching English. (b) *Proficiencies*: (1) Determining the objectives of assessment and evaluation practices for the teaching of English, (2) Using testing and evaluation tools and methods in teaching English, (3) Interpreting of testing results for determining students' language development and providing feedback, and (4) Reflecting testing results for determining students' language development to applications. *IV. Cooperation with School, Family and Society*: (a) *Scope*: Fulfillment with families to support the teaching of cooperation, community leadership, being the center of culture and learning of the school and applications for the ceremony, and organizations at school. (b) *Proficiencies*: Cooperation with family for the improvement of students' language skills: (1) Cooperation with

related institutions, organizations and individuals about the importance of using a foreign language, (2) Making students aware of the importance and meaning of national holidays and ceremonies, and provide active participation, (3) Making the management and organization of national holidays and ceremonies, (4) Cooperation with society bringing the school into a center of culture and learning, and (5) Making communal leadership. *V. Providing Professional Development in the Field of English:* (a) *Scope:* Teacher professional development practices to support the teaching process fulfillment. (b) *Proficiencies:* (1) Determining professional competences, (2) Providing personal and professional development for teaching English, (3) Taking the advantage of scientific research methods and techniques for the professional development, and (4) Projecting the researches for the professional development into practices. However, these proficiencies were not enough. Hence, "Foreign Language Teaching Improvement Project was organized by MONE and it was declared in March 2011. This four-year term will cost about 1.5 billion TL and covers the creation of a national language policy. In this Project there are lots of innovations that vary from opening English cafes at schools, televising popular cartoons and children's films with subtitles to distributing educational kits. These innovations also will include pre-school period. During the Project, native speakers will be employed to work in collaboration with Turkish English Language Teachers.

2.5. Problems

On the problems of teaching foreign languages in our country Işık (2008:18) points out the importance of foreign language teaching methods and planning. (a) *Methods:* It dates back to the Ottoman period during which the *Grammar Translation Method* (GTM) was used to translate French into the written Ottoman Turkish (*Lisan-i Osmani*) (Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004, p.39). A comparatively wider interest in the learning and teaching of English in Turkey developed after World War II. The post-war social, cultural, economic, technological, and political developments in the world also had their impact in Turkey, which gradually intensified the need to learn English. Demircan (1988:22) writes that until 1941 the method for teaching languages was the grammar translation method, based on "reading comprehension and translation" because of the dominance of Arabic. With the change of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin, methods used in language education were also changed. Then, useful, every day English was given emphasis as the major content of English lessons. Therefore, *Direct Method* (DM) was used. Later on, American schools implemented the practices of *Audiolingualism* (The ALM) at that time in which dialogues heavily used through imitation and repetition in order to present students with new vocabulary and structures. Furthermore, teachers rely on heavy use of repetitive drills until the students are able to produce the structural patterns spontaneously. To make our students communicatively competent the introduction of communicative language teaching was first initiated in the 1980s when the ELT syllabus was attempted to be revised to integrate communicative language teaching into the curriculum. The second change in the ELT policy concerns 1997 primary level ELT curriculum. The new curriculum is a much more comprehensive and elaborate in many aspects compared with the previous one: (a) how much English and the mother tongue to use in the English language classrooms, (b) a detailed step-by-step illustrated lesson reflecting the philosophy on which the revised curriculum is based, (c) a sample lesson plan illustrating how young learners' acquisition of L2 can be facilitated through the use of games, stories, songs, dramatization and model materials, and (d) sample tests based on the communicative view to ELT (Kırkgöz, 2007, 225). However, it has not been prescriptive in the implementation of these decisions. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that, today, in most foreign language classrooms, the methods suggested by the imported foreign course books are made use of, combined with the intuitive decisions of teachers. These issues have been stated by Işık (2008:19) that the foreign language teaching process is mostly directed by central countries such as the USA and the UK where those course books are written. The satellite countries such as our country and others where those course books are used to comply with their system unwillingly. In addition to these problems, the most important one is that the academic content for foreign language teaching has been agreed upon by experts in the Ministry of National Education (MONE) not by field studies that search for the real needs of our learners. (b) *Planning:* In-service teaching is planned by a team of foreign experts and educators around a table. For Primary and elementary Education the British Council and for Anatolian High Schools and Universities the American Cultural Organization have contributed to those planning activities. However, there is lack of qualified academicians in this project. Moreover, in in-service teaching programs the international publication houses take the first ground, which we believe that these plannings have been realized by not taking our

students' needs into account. Besides, it seems that there is a lack of coordination between MONE and the Council of Higher Education (HEC). The decisions have usually been made by not relying on these facts but by the political opinions of the party in power and the individual opinions of the bureaucrats (Işık, 2008). In fact *Talim Terbiye Kurulu* is responsible for *Foreign Language Teaching Policy and Its planning*. In this committee, the members are always appointed by the political party in power, he says. Therefore, it seems difficult to stabilize foreign language teaching policies in our country. Işık concludes, because of these reasons, in our country, any appropriate foreign language teaching policies have not been formed in accordance with our country's needs and facts yet.

3. Conclusion and Discussion

Language policy in relation to English has implications for language planning. These implications are designed to promote the quality of language acquisition and they result with economic, social and cultural development of the country. As Bamgbose stated "no matter how desirable language policies may be, unless they are backed by the will to implement them, they cannot be of any effect" (2003, p.428). Therefore, as policy makers in practice teachers have crucial responsibilities for implying the policy issues into practice. Foreign language teachers should be professionally competent and well-trained in order to close the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. However, it is not enough to have competent and well-trained teachers to imply the policy issues in practice. Curricula, textbooks, teaching methods and approaches that are determined by language policy makers affect the success of foreign language education of Turkey.

Today, Turkey's current language policy has been much improved because the 1997 curriculum revision, textbook updating, teaching methods and teacher training facilities particularly in primary schools and higher education. The ongoing reforms have led to great improvements. Especially, students graduate from private schools and universities with English medium instruction are luckier than the other students. However, English medium instruction is widely debated at the national level. So, some universities prefer to deliver courses in Turkish because students find studying through the medium of English difficult, it creates a real challenge for them. There are three major problems about English medium instruction: (a) it reduces students' ability to understand general concepts, thereby leading to superficial learning, (b) it draws away learners from their own culture and language, and (c) it causes learners to think that their English level is too low to be proficient in English in the academic environment (Kırkgöz, 2007, p.227).

Given the fact that English has now become significant part of foreign language teaching, the Turkish government has taken a number of initiatives and is continuing to do so, notably in revising the curriculum, teaching methods, teacher training and teacher education institutions. In response to the changing economic and political situations of the country, the government has increasingly been concerned with educating its citizens who will be able to adopt and learn new language skills at different levels in their educational lives. Although, resources and efforts have been expanded on the provision of English at the level of primary and higher education, policy objectives are not in concert with instructional practices.

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