

A Critical Overview of English Language Education Policy in Turkey

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Abstract

The present chapter which sets a critical perspective delves into the English language education (ELE) policy in Turkey in the light of the innovations that have been proposed by the ministry of education (MoNE) at macro level. The study covers a wide range of topics that shed light into the following issues: history of ELE in Turkey, factors affecting ELE namely; geographical and social dimensions, globalization and internationalization. Moreover, the innovations that have been proposed for ELE and their reflections in practice are also discussed from a critical stance. As a final issue, the problems that have been experienced as a result of the implementation of innovations and possible solutions that might help overcome those hardships are explained from a critical point of view.

Keywords: English Language Education, Language Policy, Foreign Language Curriculum Innovations

Introduction

The idea that English is expanding quickly all around the world has become a fact. According to estimates, the number of people who speak English as a first, second, or foreign language rose from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion in the last decade (Crystal, 2006). Globalization, economic progress, internationalization, technical advancement, and the spread of international education are the most frequent causes of this rise in international arena (Coleman, 2011; Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2012; Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf Jr, 2013).

In our country, Turkey, Turkish is the mother tongue, the official language, and the language of teaching. By being a non-English speaking setting, English has the status of a foreign language that is taught in schools and is primarily utilized in the government and business sectors, particularly in written communication. In order to achieve rapid development in a variety of fields such as economy, education, and trade, Turkey has been in continuous search to deepen her ties with the outside world since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The genuine growth of the English language in Turkey appears to have begun in the 1950s as a result of the growing influence of American economic and military might. Despite the fact that French was the language of choice in diplomacy (as well as in many other contexts, such as the educational system, the arts, and literature, and even in the Turkish language reform and purification movement), English steadily started to challenge French in this regard. As a result, Turkey felt pressure to improve its access to English in order to advance technologically and in trade relations.

In order to understand and make sense of the current state of English language teaching in Turkey, it is crucial to present the historical development of English language education in our country.

History of English Language Education in Turkey

Turkish speakers first came into touch with the English language during the 1530s trading era between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. Throughout decades of trade, trading partners did not learn each other's languages; instead, they relied on the Greek, Jewish, and Armenian minority in Istanbul and Izmir to serve as translators (Demircan, 1988; Lewis, 1982). Although they allowed their subjects in the Balkans and the Arab peninsula to speak their original tongues rather than being forced to speak Turkish (Brosnahan, 1973), the Ottomans were not intolerant of other languages. Some English traders with closer ties to Turkey are said to have attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to learn some Turkish written in the Arabic alphabet. Few records of Muslim Turks attempting to learn a foreign language exist prior to the eighteenth century (Lewis, 1982). However, French started to be utilized as the official language of trade and diplomacy during the eighteenth century. As a result of not being able to locate an acceptable English-speaking translator, the British Ambassador was forced to draft a treaty with the Ottoman Turks in French in 1809 (Issawi, 1981).

In 1830, the Americans and the Ottoman Empire signed a commercial pact, which marked the beginning of relations with the United States. As a result, the Empire allowed missionaries to open schools, and in 1863 Americans founded the private Robert College, which graduated its first Turkish Muslim student in 1903 (Davison, 1961, as cited in Bear, 1985). The Tanzimat Period of Turkish history, beginning in the second half of the 18th century, is when English language teaching was first implemented in Turkey, is also when the educational system began to become more westernized. However, English wasn't taught in public schools until 1908. But since there were few schools and most Turks were illiterate, it was primarily the children of the Ottoman Empire's ethnic minorities who got instruction in English and other languages in religiously linked, typically Protestant, institutions.

The second institution offering instruction in English to pupils was Üsküdar American College, which was founded in 1871.

The first English-medium secondary school with state funding, known as an Anadolu (Anatolian) Lycee, opened its doors in 1955. In response to mounting parental pressure, the state started to build more of these schools. While there were 12 Anadolu Lycées in 1974–1975, the number increased to 23 in 1982–1983 education year. The Law of Foreign Language Education, No. 2923, dated October 14, 1983, gave legal approval to the opening of new Anadolu lycées. In addition to these institutions, on April 12th, 1994, a new law on foreign language instruction in secondary and high schools was approved by the Ministry of Education, allowing the opening of Super Lycées within conventional Turkish high schools. Due to the requirement that applicants have the highest secondary school CGPA (4.00), these schools have been instrumental in the dissemination of English in Turkey. However, at the basic education level, it wasn't until 1997 that the English language was introduced to the fourth and fifth grades of primary schools. The introduction of the eight-year obligatory school system in 1997 brought about some notable developments in Turkey's foreign language instruction. This law made it required that public primary school pupils begin learning a foreign language in the fourth grade (Atay, 2007).

More recently, in response to the demands of the global economy, Turkey implemented a significant curriculum overhaul in 2012. There have been numerous debates on the new education reform (4+4+4), which converts the present eight years of obligatory education into 12 years by splitting the education period into four years of elementary school, four years of secondary school, and four years of high school. One of the most dramatic modifications was made in the foreign language education, in addition to the new system offering several innovations, such as the three-tiered education. The age for studying English as a foreign language (EFL) has been dropped to second grade as a result of this innovation.

Factors Affecting Spread of English as a Foreign Language and Language Teaching in Turkey

It is a well-known fact that foreign language education cannot be decontextualized from global, technological, geographical, sociological and international dimensions. Therefore, it is highly probable that these issues are effective in the development of foreign language education in a society.

The spread of English has been accelerated by globalization, which Appadurai (2001) defines as a multi-directional process involving flows of ideas, ideologies, people, goods, images, messages, technologies, and techniques. This is because countries have needed to use English as a lingua franca to advance their international trade, business, and economies (Kachru & Smith, 2019).

In addition to the influence of globalization, information technology and Turkey's status as an EU candidate have encouraged the nation to modify its English language curriculum in order to meet EU criteria (Akinoğlu, 2008; Akşit, 2007; Kırkgöz, 2008). In terms of geographical dimension, with 97 percent of its 814.578 km² total land area in Asia and 3 percent in Europe, Turkey holds a critical strategic geopolitical position in the world and acts as a bridge between the two continents. English is the language that non-native English speakers (NNES) use the most frequently as a lingua franca for communication, making it a crucial instrument for globalization and internationalization. The English language has been becoming more and more crucial for trade ties, for essential industries like tourism, for intercultural dialogue, and for individual career prospects. As a result, Turkey changed its foreign language policies in response to globalization movements by reforming the way English is taught. Additionally, globalization and technological development have drastically altered how we study and instruct English as a second/foreign language in the twenty-first century (Block & Cameron, 2002; Burns & Coffin, 2001; Warschauer, 2000). We, as the language educators, have been inspired to rethink international language use, foreign language learning, and foreign language instruction as a result of rapidly developing information technology and the global network society (Crystal, 2001; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002).

Turkey has been the birthplace of numerous powerful civilizations throughout history due to its position at a geographic crossroads. Having borders with eight countries and being encircled by three seas, give English a strategic and geopolitical significance that cannot be overstated. Having such an important position in the world, Turkey began working closely with Europe on economic, educational, political, and cultural issues in the 1960s (Kırkgöz, 2005, p.159). Being a NATO member since 1952 has also a significant role in the spread of English as a foreign language.

All these above-mentioned factors resulted in several innovations in foreign language teaching policy of our country as it was the case in all facets of education. There appeared a broad desire for curriculum reform due to the 21st century's increasing educational standards (Frey & Whitehead, 2009; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). In the following section, these innovations in English language education policy of Turkey will be discussed from a critical point of view.

English Language Education Curriculum Innovations

Countries develop criteria and impose these standards through curricula and education programs to increase the diversity and excellence of pupils, depending on their local education policies and the needs of the society (Cheung & Wong, 2012). Education programs follow a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation as curriculum are updated to reflect the changing demands and requirements of the global community (Harmer, 2003; Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009; Topkaya & Küçük, 2010). The aspects of curriculum are intimately related and interactive, affecting the other phases rather than being a linear process, with a number of factors involved in each stage (Cheung & Wong, 2012).

With regard to the teaching English, Turkey has undergone three significant curricular reforms in the end of 20th and in the beginning of 21st Centuries: The first ELT curriculum innovation occurred in 1997; the second reform took place in 2005 when additional changes were made to the ELT program as part of the government's enterprise to align instruction with EU standards (Kırkgöz 2007);

and the most recent curriculum innovation was implemented in 2012 and put into effect in the 2013–2014 academic year.

The 1997 Curricular Innovation in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

The 1997 curriculum, which raised the length of obligatory education to eight years with the ultimate goal of expanding students' exposure to primary education, marked the beginning of Turkey's first thorough curriculum change (Güven, 2008). The 1997 curriculum modified the whole educational system, with the exception of tertiary education, and made considerable reforms to the teaching of foreign languages as well (Topkaya & Küçük, 2010).

In order to meet EU standards for foreign language education and to foster the development of global citizens who can communicate in English other than their mother tongue, English language instruction, which had previously been offered in secondary schools before the 1997 innovation, was lowered to fourth grade in primary education. In other words, when the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) began a significant renovation of the pre-existing educational system in 1997, Children today were forced to take English at the elementary school level. This legislation mandated the first-ever yearly attendance of 64 hours of English instruction for fourth and fifth graders, and 160 hours (five 40-minute lessons per week) of instruction for students in grades six through eight.

In accordance with the behaviorism, the 1997 ELTP updated language teaching methods, encouraging the application of inquiry, repetition, role-playing, drills, and repetition instructional approaches in addition to material that is based on structure and vocabulary (Dönmez, 2010; Örmeci, 2009). It also established the groundwork for a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) strategy for teaching English, in addition to involving younger students in the process. According to this concept, acquisition was given top priority. Younger pupils' ages and the need to promote motivation and a positive attitude toward acquiring English language skills were taken into consideration when using games and other engaging activities to teach them the language (Kocaoluk & Kocaoluk, 2001).

The introduction of CLT resulted in a change in instruction from the teacher-dominant paradigm to student-centered teaching (Kırkgöz, 2007). Therefore, The instructor was seen as a learning facilitator who catered to the students' diverse learning styles and helped them develop their conversational English abilities (Kocaoluk & Kocaoluk 2001). The MoNE, who has historically assumed full responsibility for the development and delivery of all national curricula as well as the publication of textbooks and the dissemination of official information to school administrators and teachers, has frequently been criticized for its failure to effectively carry out these tasks. In this regard, research showed a discrepancy between theory and practice on how the planned curriculum was applied. This issue was mostly attributed to teachers' inability to effectively transfer theory into practice (Kırkgöz, 2008).

In a more intensive manner, in his study, Erarslan (2018) demonstrated the results of the studies all of which focused on the evaluation of 1997 reform in language education. Results showed that when the targets and outcomes are taken into account, one of the shortcomings of the 1997 reform was that, generally speaking, the curriculum's objectives were either barely or never attained (Er, 2006; Erdoğan, 2005; Harman, 1999). It was noted that the new program's affective goals had been more successfully attained than its cognitive goals when comparing the achieve ability of intellectual, emotional, and psychomotor components (Arbaş & Tok, 2004; Büyükduman, 2005). More precisely, the results show that speaking and listening goals were not met because language skills were not fairly integrated into the curriculum (Büyükduman, 2005; Er, 2006; Erdoan, 2005; Mersinligil, 2002) and that listening appeared to be the slowest growing skill (Yanık, 2007).

The reasons stated by the teachers in some studies evaluating the 1997 reform for the 4th and 5th grades in 1997, are large classes, lack of resources, lack of training in teaching English to young learners, and the lack of seminars that assisted teachers in doing so (Büyükduman, 2001, 2005). Many other researchers came to comparable conclusions (see Er, 2006; Erdoğan, 2005; Mersinligil, 2002; Yüksel, 2001).

However, in several of these studies, the amount of content was also criticized since it gave teachers and students alike too much work to accomplish (see Erdoğan, 2005; Mersinligil, 2002).

Briefly, findings from the studies that assessed the 1997 ELTP demonstrate that neither the goals nor the students' psychomotor, affective, or cognitive development were aided by the goals in helping language learners communicate in their daily lives because of some major reasons as explained in the previous paragraph.

As a result of these drawbacks and problems, the ELT curriculum was updated in 2005 to address these concerns and enhance the English language teaching strategy recommended by the 1997 curriculum.

The 2005 Curricular Innovation in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

A Turkish team of curriculum experts redesigned the elementary ELT curriculum in 2005 (MEB 2006). The curriculum adopted worldwide trends by incorporating other Western-derived educational approaches, boosting the communicative aspect of language teaching in addition to creating a dramatic pedagogical shift in the classrooms. The 2005 curriculum allows students to learn “non-language cross-curricular subjects like geography, music, and sports using English by incorporating a “constructivist approach” to teaching and learning, “active learning,” “use of tasks,” “multiple intelligences theory,” and “content and language integrated learning.”” Additionally, performance-based assessment was implemented to provide an update for the evaluation system suggested by the EU (Kırkgöz, 2007, 2012). The 2005 teaching program increased the communicative aspect of learning language while also highlighting the importance of a constructivist approach to instruction. It was an attempt to match Turkey's ELT curriculum with the standards established by the EU for language instruction.

In addition to the changes in primary education curriculum, ELT policy underwent a significant number of modifications at the secondary education level too. Turkish Ministry of Education decided to discontinue the one-year English language preparatory program (ELPP) that was offered in

Anatolian, Super English Language High Schools, and the majority of private institutions with rigorous English language programs. In order to ensure consistency in ELT across all types of schools, the period of education in all secondary schools was also extended from three to four years, and English language instruction was expanded across the curriculum (Kırkgöz, 2007). Nationwide displeasure over the cancellation of the English language preparation course was declared.

The 2013 Curricular Innovation in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

In 2012, a changeover from the previous educational model—which consisted of 8 years of primary education followed by four-year secondary education—was made in favor of the new “4 + 4 + 4” model, in which each four-year period of education is equivalent to 8 years of primary, elementary, and secondary education. A result of this structural change, educational programs must now be revised. The starting age at which English is to be taught was lowered from grade 4 to the current grade 2 as a result of this language planning aim. English classes now last longer, and the materials have been updated.

Given that English instruction must now begin in the second grade rather than the fourth and that the age at which students enter each grade has been effectively decreased within a year, teaching a younger group of students was one of the most crucial components of trying to adapt the English language teaching methodology to the new educational model (Çelik & Karaca, 2014).

Instead of teaching distinct points in each unit, with the new program a spiral curriculum, as suggested by Bruner's (1960) cognitive theory, has been implemented to help students' past knowledge be reinforced and encourage meaningful communication. With this purpose following issues were fore fronted; (a) Use of daily language (“Chocolate?” instead of “Do you want some chocolate?”), (b) Emphasizing individual and cultural diversity (Çelik & Erbay, 2013), (c) incorporating families in their children's language learning in order for it to be integrated into practices at home (Enever, 2011).

Employing Internet technology as widely and extensively as is practical considering that it is well-known to many students and has been demonstrated to have beneficial effects on learning. In light of these developments, it was decided that the proposed education system should also take into account the fundamental components of the contemporary Turkish educational system, such as large classes, a workload of more than 20 hours per week for teachers, the recent technological tools like tablets for students, and the requirement to train students for general courses.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the behaviorism, the 1997 ELTP modified language teaching methods, promoting the utilization of inquiry, repetition, role-play, drills, and memorization teaching methods besides content based on syntax and vocabulary (Dönmez, 2010; Örmeci, 2009). However, multiple investigations and assessments revealed that it had some major weaknesses despite being one of the first detailed improvements in the Turkish educational system (see Büyükduman, 2005; Harman, 1999; Mersinligil, 2002; Zincir, 2006). It goes without saying that it was unacceptable to educate children in the digital age using such behaviorist methods that overlook their potential for creation, reconstruction, and communication.

It was only in place until 2006, after which another significant curricular revision took its place. A fresh thorough alteration in all primary school topics as well as ELTP was implemented in 2006 as a result of the 1997 education reform's failure to achieve its goals. The 2006 ELTP adopted the constructivist theory of learning, which has the qualities of learning where learners have the responsibility, to promote student autonomy, as opposed to the 1997 version, which accepted behaviourism (Topkaya & Küçük, 2010; Yörü, 2012). The 2006 ELTP sought to provide students with the English communication skills they needed, and because of the reason that learning theory mandated that students build their own knowledge, it utilized a process-oriented curriculum that included classroom activities that stimulated students' cognitive, affective, and social development, (e.g. problem-solving, pair work, and

group work) (Örmeci, 2009; Topkaya & Küçük, 2010). All these improvements suggested a well-modified ELTP that considers learners' being the agents of language learning process by gaining them increased autonomy and responsibility.

English was taught to students as young as seven years old for two hours each week as a result of structural adjustments made by the 2013 ELTP (Ekuş & Babayit, Erarslan, 2014; MoNE, 2013). Additionally, it separated the educational system into three segments, each lasting four years: elementary, intermediate, and secondary. It was developed on the ideas and features of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in addition to outlining communication fluency (CEFR). For this reason, oral skills like speaking and listening are prioritized in primary school while reading and writing skills are progressively emphasized at the secondary school level. To increase language acquisition at the highest level, the 2013 ELTP employs an action-oriented method of instruction and promoting teamwork to use a variety of classroom tactics, including such Total Physical Response (TPR), drama, or game-based activities (Yeni-Palabıyık & Daloğlu, 2016).

Since there was little time to prepare for this change and there were arguments before it was legalized, the emergence of the system was actually heavily criticized and the motives for starting such a substantial educational shift were regarded to be ideological instead of motivated by an authentic need (Gün & Atanur, 2014). To conclude, the ELTPs of 1997, 2006, and 2013 show that, despite the claims made about the first two ELTP revisions from 1997 and 2006 being communicative, it was reported that classroom practices remained traditional and grammar oriented in implementation. The 2013 ELTP showed a favorable shift in testing and assessment practices, and instructors who took part in evaluation studies said alternative assessment was a strength even though they claimed to be unaware of the testing and assessment components of the new ELTP. Overall, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the first two ELTP revisions were a failure in terms of language instruction in primary schools because the 2006 ELTP appears to have repeated the same flaws in the program design even though it

was purported to have been introduced as a remedy for the problems with the 1997 ELTP. Although the most recent ELTP modification appears to have brought about a number of advances in the way it approaches language, other program design-related elements remain flawed. These shortcomings may be a result of the MoNE's top-down program design policies. Furthermore, it appears that despite the fact that a number of assessment studies were carried out evaluating the educational systems in Turkey, MoNE did not take their conclusions into account as required (Yapcoğlu, Kara, & Sever, 2016). Additionally, when developing the curricula, teachers—who are the actual program implementers—were not adequately considered and their knowledge of the ELTPs was lacking. When all these elements are considered, any ELTP modification that replaces an earlier one shares identical flaws and produces comparable outcomes.

In light of this, it's important for all parties involved, including the teachers, to work closely together and communicate in order to be able to strengthen the program's components while reducing their flaws. In the end, this might be able to stop such program modification failures in the future.

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