

Strategies to Encourage the Use of English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

The studies on multimedia-based content development are being carried on in accordance with the updated curricula used at schools. In fact, Turkey is still trying to become a full member in good standing of the EU (European Union), but full membership depends on a number of factors such as education and human rights which are currently being addressed (McIsaac, Askar & Akkoyunlu, 2000). Accordingly, educational targets are defined in five-year National Development Plans embracing the needs of individuals and industry, and service sectors in parallel with technological developments. In the same vein, national census is also reckoned in developing these targets so that the schools are to meet the needs of future citizens who are able to use new technologies in interactive educational settings.

Keywords: Materials Development and Design Policies, Ministry of National Education, English language teaching.

Introduction

Panorama to the Role of English as a Foreign Language in Turkey

English as a foreign language is one of the subjects taught in almost all of the government- and privately-sponsored schools in Turkey. Besides its alternatives, mostly German and French, the majority of the students take English courses within the hours of exposure ranging from 2 to 10 per week under the cloak of recent amendments made upon the ongoing education system. Being aware of the fact that even a petty amount of English knowledge is necessary to get ahead in life, Turkey has been developing strategies to encourage the use of English as a foreign language with a much longer exposure beyond all classroom applications and methods in use. Since, for Graddol (2006) nearly a third of world population is all expected to be trying to learn English at the same time. In Turkey, thousands of English language teachers and millions of learners of English are stipulated to be the main components of the foreign language education. Correlatively, the uneven distribution of English among those learners and the lack of opportunities harassing the principle of equality of opportunities in education entail the commitment of governmental organizations (e.g., Ministry of National Education) to this issue in order to break down the barriers in foreign language education.

However, the challenge in Turkey is urgent and huge albeit for the aforementioned commitment laced with professionalism by the government, and energy and effort laid out by the teachers of the field. Additionally, it is due to the fact that poor

English skills among learners may yield to slowness in growth in the long term though the economic growth of the country is robust. To add more, Turkey's noteworthy progress is supposed to suffer from falling behind the world standards as a result of problems arose by those with less concentration of English language skills though it is a relatively small section of the whole population. Seeing that Turkey pampers many of its citizens to participate fully in the burgeoning economy, English as a mega-language, language with a world status, mushrooms binary functions for the country within the scope of both education and economy. The spread of English, nourished by globalization, scientific inventions, technological innovations, economy, diplomacy and internet, has actually accelerated worldwide since World War II, thence it takes place in the curriculum of educational institutions all over the world (Dogançay-Aktuna, 1998; Oral, 2010). As a result, the language norms have come under question within the scope of world Englishes (Bamgbose, 2003; Jenkins, 2009; Kachru, 1986, 1992). In relation to this, Turkey belongs to the category of expanding circle countries in Kachru's (1986, 1992) framework of the concentric circles of World Englishes with respect to the use and status of English.

Claiming that circles are leaking, Canagarajah (1999) refers this circle as the 'periphery' one in which it houses a whole new way to view what native speaker actually is. By any means, English is taught as one of the foreign languages in the school curriculum unlike the ones in which English is accepted as the official or co-official language. Accepted as the foreign language that is to be taught in the school curriculum, English, as a foreign language, spreads all over the country by taking part in daily life via media, television, internet, tourism and trade, and other related areas. Despite the influence of global developments on the spread of English through the media, internet, trade and tourism, and the popularity of English in secondary and higher education, followed by the major educational reform in 1997, English language teaching in the curriculum of Turkish primary schools is a relatively recent phenomenon (Kirkgöz, 2007). That is why the changes after the initiation of the 1997 educational reform and the government's provision of teacher training opportunities have played a significant role as a requirement for new foreign language learning and teaching materials, innovations for foreign language learning and teaching process together with the continuance and sustainability desired to be kept throughout this more pragmatic nature in education highlight the impediments to teachers becoming researchers in the same breath (Borg, 2010).

As a recent step, in 2010, MONE initiated 'FATİH Project' (Fırsatları Attırma ve Teknolojiyi _yilestirme Hareketi) to enable equality of opportunities in the educational system, and cater all educational institutions with innovative technological devices (notebook, projector, internet connection, etc.) that appeal to more senses inside the classroom in pre-, primary and secondary schools. At the very same, training activities and courses for teachers are still on to make effective use of information technologies in classroom activities. One more to say, the studies on multimedia-based content development are being carried on in accordance with the updated curricula used at

schools. In fact, Turkey is still trying to become a full member in good standing of the EU (European Union), but full membership depends on a number of factors such as education and human rights which are currently being addressed (McIsaac, Askar & Akkoyunlu, 2000). Accordingly, educational targets are defined in five-year National Development Plans embracing the needs of individuals and industry, and service sectors in parallel with technological developments. In the same vein, national census is also reckoned in developing these targets so that the schools are to meet the needs of future citizens who are able to use new technologies in interactive educational settings.

The General Directorate of Innovation and Educational Technologies

Materials development and design by MONE is conducted by GDIET (my acronym for General Directorate of Innovation and Educational Technologies) in Turkey. With a vision to become ‘the center of excellence’ in the educational system of the information era, and a mission to become such a foundation with great contribution to the country in order to lace its education system with optimal technologies on the path to information society processing, GDIET follows the core values which can be listed as:-

- a. People-oriented
- b. Innovative
- c. Economical
- d. Contemporary
- e. Sustainable
- f. Transparent
- g. Professional
- h. Participative
- I. Perfectionist.

Furthermore, according to the countries that are member, or on the process of full membership to the EU, there are objectives are to be accomplished in order to reach higher educational standards. These include reducing the dropouts in education, developing cyber-literacy, increasing the share of expenses for education per capita, enriching educational environments with technological equipment and different types of materials, making use of student exchange programs accredited by EU, developing policies for service industry in consideration with increasing the share of economy and employment in national income, evaluating acquired knowledge and skills at the end of the process and the like. To reach the aforementioned aims, GDIET, at first, supports educational institutions with technological equipment. To develop and design all kinds of visual, audio-visual and computer-oriented materials, GDIET draws a four-year strategic plan. In addition to providing services for formal education, GDIET provides opportunities for distance education in order to ensure equality of opportunities in education. At the very same, it is the general directorate which plans, applies and evaluates the host-system exams. In recent years, GDIET has been implementing e-content, e-learning and e-transformation services to keep up with the standards of the developed countries in the world.

Another important feature of GDIET that is to be highlighted is that MONE runs all these tasks mentioned above by means of an online information-sharing platform based on social networking, content management system and educational informatics called 'Education Informatics Networks (EIN)'. That is why EIN is accepted as the 'common store' for all inside the country. For instance, the works of a teacher from Ankara may function as a model for other teachers around the country, or a workshop held in a university may become a source of inspiration for a primary school in Izmir. Besides, all the ebooks, e-encyclopedias, e-learning activities, e-curricula, eprojects and information networks for schools are stored within this system. GDIET conducts these applications in an intercalary time of the given curricula with the aim of improving the quality of service continuously. To keep the background of information technology services of the schools up-to-date, GDIET works in cooperation with other related institutions. As it is an important part of GDIET's responsibility to make all these applications be accredited by related international institutions, it works in collaboration with institutions or foundations from different countries all over the world. Providing maintenance and security for the use of information technologies at schools, GDIET eventually evaluates the process within the frame of internal control components in the end as a substantial part of credibility and/or reliability.

The keystones of Materials Development and Design by GDIET

In Turkey, MONE has the control over administration of the school curricula and syllabi for primary and secondary levels. At the policy level, there are some criteria that are to be taken into consideration for choosing the type of materials to develop or design for the educational environments. Firstly, within the criteria defined by the EU, and the e-transformation action plans and government policies designed by Lisbon Criteria which is later replaced by EU 2020 Strategy, labeled as 'Creating Value by Basing Growth on Knowledge', Life-Long Learning has become the center of education systems all over the world. That is why the importance of e-learning and distance education has been enlightened so far. Moreover, to be able to have a hand on universal knowledge, learners are to have opportunities to enhance their professional and individual skills. Hence, by using that acquired knowledge, they are to make use of related job opportunities within the scope of uprising information economy. In that sense, unemployment around the world will not be triggered at a larger scale. As a result of globalization, English has become the center of international communication. That is why Turkey's political and economic ambitions are shaped accordingly.

The increasing quality of the services is another significant element to necessitate equality of opportunities in education. Thus, the problem of inequality of opportunities in education is to be solved by the emergence of innovative and alternative technological products, tools or materials to be used in educational settings. As mentioned, MONE organizes the process of materials development and design for primary and secondary grades in Turkey. Accordingly, GDIET pursues the decision-making process for materials development and design procedure in compliance with some basic principles. In

the great scheme of these principles, it can be alleged that every technological development and its probable results are to be pursued by experts appointed by GDIET. These experts are to present the materials with its pluses and (probable) minuses by graphics and data gathered. If there is any need, modifications are to be done according to the latest and sudden changes which appear as an offspring in the framework of the technology around the world.

As a last step, after the acceptance of usage, related material is to be traced and evaluated during the process as to the performance-based criteria via strategies developed or quality control mechanisms established beforehand. Consequentially, it can be asserted that there are many political, socio-cultural, technological and environmental factors underlying materials development and design process. As a basis, teachers have a crucial role in implementing educational changes within the school system since 'it is the teachers who are responsible for passing on the changes through their teaching to their students' (Fullan, 1993:4). That is why alongside this process, MONE is to create such policies not only at macro level but also towards teacher development opportunities to set up a substructure for the changes molded by the aforementioned criteria.

The Selection of English Language Teaching Materials

With retrospect to the aims of foreign language teaching, it is seen that making learners be able to speak in simple sentences within a vocabulary range of 1,500 words, and to comprehend what is read at an appropriate level with the help of dictionary (Demircan, 1988) was one of the major aims in the history of Turkey in foreign language teaching. Seeing that it was not satisfactorily achieved, MONE rang the bell and made some educational reforms one of which accepted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the basic concept for foreign language teaching. It is stated by Richards and Rodgers (2001: 151) that CLT marks the beginning of a major paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century, whose ramifications continue to be felt today, and its general principles of communicative language teaching are today widely accepted around the world. Thompson (1996) puts forward that CLT is by no means the final answer but whatever innovations emerge, they will do so against the background of the changes brought about by CLT. Accordingly, as a result of these amendments, the stated objectives of MONE curriculum for English at primary level are to:

- (1) Raise pupils' awareness of a foreign language,
- (2) Promote a positive attitude towards the learning of the English language,
- (3) Increase pupils' interest and motivation towards the English language,
- (4) Establish classroom situations in the context of games so that pupils can be entertained while learning English,
- (5) Set up dialogues and meaningful contextualized learning activities, and
- (6) Help pupils to develop appropriate strategies (Kocaoluk & Kocaoluk, 2001).

The curriculum for secondary grades seems relatively more complex with the objectives as follows

- (1) Being able to comprehend the acquired foreign language when spoken at normal speed,
- (2) Being able to speak comprehensibly,
- (3) Reading and comprehending what has been read easily,
- (4) Enabling the expression of thoughts in writing, and
- (5) Helping the learners to become useful citizens in the area of tourism, and in terms of international relations by developing the power and desire to improve their acquired language skills on their own after school (Demircan, 1988).

In the light of these, meaning is accepted as the primary and teaching is centered on communicative functions, rather than merely on linguistic knowledge (Brown, 2001). With a view to the role of the teacher, a facilitator or guider of the learning process is emphasized. The curriculum is designed in a learner centered and eclectic way laced with activities for different learning styles. In this sense, with a much more emphasis on the development of learners' communicative competence, the curriculum signifies the importance of communicative activities in which learners have the opportunity to take an active part during the language learning process. That is why pair or group work activities are of great importance. As such kind of an interaction seems crucial for the acquisition of the foreign language that is to be taught, various language games are involved in the foreign language learning process to provide opportunities for exchanging, transforming and shaping the acquired knowledge. According to these tenets, MONE composes regulations with a standard number of weekly teaching hours and content of the programs. MONE also coordinates the compiling of English textbooks for all levels in primary schools (Kirkgöz, 2007).

Although the choice is in the hand of the local schools, MONE lists the approved text or course-books. Lately, MONE has been supporting the schools financially and providing textbooks for all recipients of compulsory education at the very beginning of the school year. With a view to the textbooks, it is seen that simple language, colorful pages with minimal texts and short dialogues enriched with real-life communication are included for primary grades whereas more complex language with longer dialogues are used for secondary grades. Since older children are expected to have already developed familiarity with the foreign language, and to possess expanded foreign language literacy skills, reading texts and other learning activities featured in the books demands greater maturity (Kirkgöz, 2006). Therefore, both local culture and cultural values are brought into the classroom atmosphere by means of textbooks. For instance, famous Turkish athletes, singers, politicians, authors etc. are used as a reference thinking that learners might be familiar with. To raise awareness, some historical and touristic places are also included into the textbooks as an authentic way of foreign language learning. Alongside all the textbooks, course books and supportive books used, MONE designs today's text/course books and work books with CD-ROM for each year and issues by means of various publishing (Sek, Pasifik, Atlantik, Doku, Dikey etc.). At the beginning of the school year, learners are catered by the text/course and workbooks without any charge.

At the very same, a software application called DynEd® (Dynamic Education) is being used at schools for foreign language teaching. By that way, different subjects with various titles are being explored by certain age group of learners from different proficiency levels. Learners are expected to benefit from teacher-led studies followed by computer-based self-study work either online or offline. Combining traditional learning and contemporary multimedia technology, the software also pursues behavioral learning patterns of learners as well as evaluating their progress with automatic written feedback. Ultimately, it provides a numerical efficiency value as a 'Study Score' for both individual and class performance. DynEd® is awarded with BESSIE (Best Education Software Award) by chosen as the best retail software, and EDDIE (Educational Software Review Award) by chosen as an outstanding educational software for foreign language learning besides being awarded on behalf of Turkish Ministry of National Education's Seal of Approval for the year 2013.

FATIH Project: Chalk vs. tablet

Turkey has initiated FATIH Project with the aim of enabling equal opportunities in education and improving technology at schools for the efficient usage of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) in educational settings by garnishing 620,000 schools of pre-, primary and secondary education with tablets and LCD Smart Boards. "Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology", abbreviated as FATIH in Turkish, is stipulated to be one of the most significant educational investments of Turkey. The acronym 'FATIH' is a word play about the conqueror of Istanbul, Fatih Sultan Mehmet, with the purpose of ushering in a new age in the history of Turkish education system. According to this project, the tablet computers which are distributed to the students have previously been loaded with ebooks. In addition to books, tablets include class lessons, sounds, animations and graphics. Both teachers and students are restricted from entering all websites. Only websites which have been deemed harmless and selected by educators and specialists and passed through the Ministry of National Education's filtering system are granted for access.

Teachers are able to check on their own tablets whether a student is following the course. If a student is found straying from the lesson, teachers have the capability to lock a student's computer. Besides, in-service trainings for teachers are held in order to provide effective usage of ICT equipment installed in the classes. With regard to this, educational e-contents are formed according to the current teaching programs for ICT-supported education. In this context, FATIH Project is comprised of several subcomponents concerning the effective use of ICT for education, supplementary equipment and software substructure for learning, management of educational e-contents, in-service training programs for teachers etc. With a view to the budget of this project, FATIH Project that has been carried out by the Ministry of National Education has also been supported by the Ministry of Transport. It has been planned that FATIH Project will have been finalized in five years. The pilot stage was conducted with Samsung® and General Mobile® with the budget adjusted by the State Materials Office.

The project is accepted as a token for the largest single allocation of resources to education in the history of modern Turkey. Consequently, this project is seen as a bold step with a potential to revolutionize the education system of Turkey. Because it is emphasized by the authorities that Turkey has set grandiose targets for 2023 which is the centennial celebration of the Republic of Turkey. In parallel with this, it has been planned to make giant investments, and to leap forward in various areas of strategic importance. Here, we see the importance of education as one of the important steps. However, much debate has been revolving around the questions regarding the necessity of implementing such a billion-dollar project, at a time when there are still imbalanced conditions in every aspect of Turkish education system. The last but not least, the aftermath of university entrance exams and language of the education are still blur as well as the fate of dershanes (cram schools) and training programs for teachers. Henceforth, it is questionable whether Turkey's FATİH Project is a plan to conquer the digital divide, or it is just a technological leap of faith.

Conclusion

MONE has struggled and made many dramatic changes, regulations and innovations for an education complying with much better standards in Turkey. These include many steps from

1951's Movie Center to 1998's GDIET. However, despite all fundamental regulations and innovations, the expected results could not be taken, and the existing ones were not satisfactory enough. This tragic result was in fact due to a number of reasons. On another account, educational policies are at the focal point in determining foreign language educational policies in order to define current and future needs for foreign language teaching and learning. Within this perspective, Els et al. (1984: 158) suggest the questions, "Does the community consider it important that all its members know a foreign language, or is this considered necessary only for certain professional domains?, How many languages, and which languages, are felt to be necessary?, How great is the demand for each individual language?, Does everyone need the same skills, or the same level of command per skill?, Is there a stable needs pattern?"

In Turkey, however, the regulations and innovations were basically made with the effect of globalization and educational systems in the west which were thought to be successful. In the passing time, the innovations were held in the circle of EU and Lisbon Criteria. Consequently, as an indication of this imported framework, authentic and original solutions and innovations which were parallel with Turkish context and culture could not take place. That is to say, the innovations were just like the imitations of their western samples. Theoretically, the innovations and projects were to seem promising. But, when it comes to the practicality, most was done in 'Turkish style'. For instance, in-service training programs for teachers were mostly made haphazardly in which vast number of teachers got almost no training but trainers got lots of money, and/or teachers attended those programs enforcedly; not for professional development. Another example was DynEd® which was accepted as one of the most successful and effective software of

online foreign language learning. In Turkey, DynEd® was mocked as ‘Dayı Net’ (a Turkish wordplay meaning as ‘Uncle Net’ in English) by the teachers of English. In addition to this humiliation, the syllabus in language books and DynEd® software was not complying with each other.

The resulting divergence of teacher and learner beliefs and expectations can spell trouble for language courses as the teacher-learner gap widens and becomes increasingly difficult to close as the course progresses (Davies, 2006). Henceforth, this project was - somehow- doomed to fade away for teaching English in a Turkish context. When the issue is held in a sociological perspective, the density of young population in Turkey has negative effects on national education policies. Masses of young population are thought to have compulsory education which is a must in civilized societies. However, it is natural that these masses of young population will be a problem for perfect education. It is uncontrolled, always changing, and there is a continual struggle to adapt to the new educational system with exams and changing curricula. On the other hand, being the ‘center of excellence’ is an objective directed by MONE which includes simply a general notion that everyone will most generally be either a doctor or an engineer due to economic reasons.

However, it seems not possible for all the students due to the fact that societies are also in short of qualified personnel for related services. That is why Turkish education system does not seem to pay special attention to the concept of self-realization (Lee, 2002) which implies the free will of learners with a chance to develop themselves autonomously. In this sense, materials development and design process covers some basic points. Hedge (2000) classifies them into four as social, educational, pupil and teacher variables. Nation and Macalister (2010) discuss these factors as environment analysis with three major elements: learners, teachers and situation. Holliday (1994, 2005) is primarily concerned with the need for methodology to be appropriate to its socio-cultural context, not inappropriately transplanted from a different –and often more privileged- system. Others, of course, arise from decisions taken far removed from a teacher’s day-to-day professional life, perhaps at Ministry level, or at an earlier point in the country’s educational history (McDonough, Shaw & Masuhara, 2013).

Although there are multiple factors, either internal or external, that can affect sustainability and permeability in education, it is to be taken into account that Turkish education system has undergone numerous changes within. It is also assumed that a discrepancy may arise between the macro-level policies and their micro-level implementation phases in putting policies into practice. In this sense, the foreign language teachers should be made to interpret the policies properly, and school principals, middle-level managers, and students’ parents should get involved in this process (Koksal & Sahin, 2012). To add with, these changes are still on the stage from the closure of dershanes to the abolishment of the ongoing hostsistem exams as mentioned earlier. Keeping a monotonic structure is surely to be ignored albeit for the upheavals that blossom each year. In this sense, having a dekho at the history of Turkey will definitely help researchers, initiators and government officials to take smart steps in the field of education by having knowledge of Turkey’s own framework or systematic patterns.

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