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General Overview of Recent Changes in English Teaching Programs in Turkey

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Abstract: The present article discusses the issues related to recent changes in the English teaching programs in Turkey, the challenges faced in teaching process and curriculum implementation. There was an attempt to give general overview of new educational reforms and English teaching programs in Turkey.

Keywords: foreign language education (FLE), educational reform, curriculum changes, teaching young learners, in-training service, assessment.

Nowadays complying with all changes is getting difficult day by day. It is necessary that instructors, being responsible for educating students, follow the developments, overcome the lacks and bring modern approaches into classrooms; and this could only be achieved through different professional development programs.

According to Gürsoy et al. (2013), Turkish foreign language education (FLE) curriculum has gone through several changes for the past 15 years. The changes involved recognition of English as a compulsory subject, an increment in the duration of FLE (foreign language education) as well as the approach to instruct English. In interest of these endeavours a new educational reform is made in 2012, which is introduced as the 4+4+4 education reform. The new curriculum not only offers changes in the previous two-tier education, but also in FLE. With this curriculum innovation, compulsory education is increased from eight years to 12 years. Moreover, starting age for primary school has been 66 months of age (5.5 years of age) instead of 72 months, and the duration of each tier; primary, secondary, high school is determined as four years (Gürsoy et al., 2013). MoNE sets two aims for the new education system: Increasing the average duration of education and making necessary organizations to meet individuals' interests, needs, and abilities (MoNE, 2012). According to the new curriculum the starting age for FLL is lowered to 6.6 years of age (second grade). Curriculum changes and renovations not only affect the learners but also teachers and teacher training process as well. Hence, implementation of a new curriculum is an effortful process.

For an effective implementation of a curriculum, it is important to take into consideration teachers' understandings of the reasons and theoretical considerations underlying these changes. However, the results of studies conducted to find out the extent the teachers adopted the proposed curriculum revealed that it was not effectively implemented in classrooms and that teachers' practices showed variation (İnal, 2009; Kırkgöz, 2008; Kırkgöz, 2009, as cited in Gürsoy et al., 2013).

Gürsoy, E., Korkmaz, S.Ç., & Damar, A. E. (2013) investigated English teachers' ideas towards the starting age for FL learning, how it should be conducted with young learners, and what their current practices were when teaching children. The data for the study is gathered from 203 primary school English teachers from seven different regions of Turkey via a questionnaire. According to the findings, the majority of the teachers are in favor of an early start in primary school, which is consistent with an earlier study (Çelik Korkmaz, 2010, as cited in Gürsoy et al., 2013), and think that secondary education would be too late to start FLE. There are many reasons for adhering to the opinion, as it supports the recent education system, which requires FLE to start at second grade. It can also be interpreted as the teachers' readiness for teaching YLs at an earlier age. Moreover, 80.7% indicated that FLE should start at the pre-school, which requires teaching a FL to very young learners (VYLs). The 4+4+4 curriculum and the teachers' ideas are consistent with the EU recommendations to start FL at the pre-school or primary school (Enever & Moon, 2009). There was another reason for supporting the idea of learning English from young age, since YLs are more advantageous in learning the sounds of the FL by pointing out the critical period

(Ellis, 1985; Gürsoy, 2011). Çetintaş (2012) argues that L2 learning should start as early as possible for phonetics of the language to be learned.

Referring to teacher's beliefs about TEYL, most of the teachers revealed that FL teaching in primary school should be mainly based on listening and speaking rather than grammar; within a context through visual/kinesthetic activities, songs, and games rather than worksheets (handouts). However, the Wilcoxon signed rank test results revealed that there are significant differences between the participants' beliefs and their implementation. Gürsoy et al., (2013) state, that teachers are in favor of the recent changes in the curriculum; however, some teachers might need some in-service training regarding the use of appropriate techniques with YLs. These in-service training courses should involve practical tips to implement theoretically sound language teaching to children.

We can assume that organizing in-service training courses for teachers is not enough for successful implementation of a language policy. It is important for educational institution's administration to support instructors in order to help with providing equipments, teaching resources, techniques, etc. Moreover, hiring a native speaker professionals, who could assist with lesson planning, assessment, test compiling and others would facilitate English language teachers' labour.

Another change in the ELT policy is related to the recent revision of the 1997 primary level ELT curriculum by a team of Turkish experts to adapt it to EU standards (Kirkgoz, 2007). In many aspects, the new curriculum is a much more comprehensive and elaborate version of the previous one. An interesting component of the recent curriculum is that a detailed theoretical information is provided on various aspects of the ELT including, curriculum design issues, selection of appropriate teaching materials for different grades, the distinction between language acquisition and language learning and how young learners (Grade 4–5 students) and adolescents (Grades 6–8 students) learn foreign languages, which is a crucial point to take into account when teaching both age groups (Ersöz et al. 2006, as cited in Kirkgoz, 2007). In addition, the recent curriculum also highlights a communicative view to ELT, underlining once more the role of the teacher as the facilitator of the learning process. According to Kirkgoz (2007), 'the goals and objectives to be achieved for each grade are given with their corresponding structural items, illustrated with topics (famous cities), functions (describing locations), sample tasks or projects (naming some famous buildings) students are expected to carry out, following a functional-notional and skills-based model'. The linguistic and communicative competence learners are expected to have acquired by the time they have completed each grade is also provided. The recent document proposes different kinds of activities to be used in ELT for Grades 4 to 5 students including songs, plays, games and drawing/coloring activities through the active involvement of the learners in the learning process. The curriculum of Grades 6 to 8 encourages learner autonomy through giving students projects to complete and strategy training so that learners can have opportunities to learn according to their own individual styles and preferences. While highlighting the role of promoting learners' communicative proficiency in English, another major innovation of this language policy has been at the level of testing/assessment. Traditional 'paper and pencil' tests, extensively employed in Turkish state primary schools (Kirkgöz 2006, as cited in Kirkgoz 2007) are no longer considered to be an appropriate assessment tool. Instead, performance-based assessment is proposed through implementing portfolios, which is claimed to be more congruent with the principles of the communicative language teaching. Portfolio assessment, an example of authentic assessment, focuses on documenting a student's language progress and performance. It enables teachers and parents to discuss and review the child's development on a concrete basis and is intended to complement the traditional product-oriented Turkish assessment system. The revised curriculum now calls for more performance-based assessments that align with the current views of curriculum development, more accurately reflecting children's language acquisition process. Overall, the suggested evaluation device in the recent curriculum document is based on the European Language

Portfolio (Kirkgoz 2007). Along with this proposal, the new curriculum also highlights the necessity of training teachers in effectively implementing this new assessment.

The data collected from Kirkgoz's (2007) study appears to support the assumption that the updated curriculum provides more comprehensive guidelines to teachers on the following issues:

- how much English and the mother tongue to use in the English language classroom;
- a detailed step-by-step illustrated lesson reflecting the philosophy on which the revised curriculum is based;
- 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
- sample tests based on the communicative view to ELT.

It is appropriate mention here about the importance of the role of school administrators in carrying out a new educational reform. All individuals – instructors, students, parents, administration – play a role in adapting to curriculum. The most significant place take the last group of people, i.e. administration. Fullan (2001:1; as cited in Çelik, S. & Kasapođlu, H., 2014) states that it is the school principal who is central in “promoting or inhibiting change” from a leadership perspective. Trail (2000:2) highlights the importance of the principal in facilitating educational reform, noting that, as experienced teachers who have significant insight into the issues that teachers face in the classroom, principals “must position themselves as guides and as models, helping teachers who, in the face of significant change, must become learners themselves”. In this respect, she asserts that principals have the responsibility to work with teachers in adapting to new materials and instructional practices, at the same time guiding their ongoing professional development. Other responsibilities of administrators' as resource managers are hiring the staff, designating the use of materials and classroom space in order to create a positive teaching and learning environment.

It can be concluded that teaching English at all levels of education in the countries of Kachru's expanding circle, Turkey in particular, has increasingly been a real challenge. Given the fact that English has now become a 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” (Kirkgoz, 2007:226). In response to the changing economic and political situations of the country, the government has increasingly been concerned with educating its citizens, particularly its youth, who will be able to adapt and learn new language skills at different levels in their educational lives so that they can contribute to Turkish society. As Kirkgoz states, Turkey is ‘experiencing a period of change and innovation in ELT systems, particularly in primary-level education, to achieve its aim of catching up with the European system of language education and adapting its existing system to new educational norms, particularly in the ELT curriculum and the assessment system’(2007:227). All changes of a curriculum in foreign language teaching contribute to instructors' professional skills, such as lesson planning, coursebook designing, selecting resources, preparing worksheets, etc. Moreover, they foster teachers' self improvement and working hard to comply with a new curriculum.

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