

Bridging the Gap between Policy and Practice in Teaching English to Young Learners: the Turkish Context

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Acquisition of a foreign language, particularly English, has received great interest not only worldwide but also in the Turkish context since the late nineties with the widespread influence of the English language as a lingua franca (Ersöz et al., 2006; Kırkgöz, 2009). The Turkish nation has therefore given special emphasis to learning English since acquisition of sound knowledge of English is deemed essential for Turkish citizens to secure a good status in their careers and also to cater to the emerging demand for citizens who know English for the nation's social, economic and political reasons (Ersöz et al., 2006). However, successful outcomes to this end may be stressful or the whole process may result in loss of time, energy and money (Moon, 2005) unless such a task is taken seriously (Cameron, 2003) and also if such factors as sufficient time, relevant materials, appropriate syllabus and professional English language teachers who know how to teach English to young learners fail to be satisfactorily provided. This article therefore aims to discuss the major factors that affect the quality of foreign language education in Turkish state schools and also attempts to offer some possible solutions to its improvement with specific reference to teaching English to young learners.

The Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has issued new polices, updated foreign language curricula, introduced new course books and employed foreign language teachers in order to meet such an increasing demand for language learning (Kırkgöz, 2009). To this end, in the Turkish context, new foreign language teaching policies have been implemented with the idea that the younger the learners are exposed to a foreign language, the easier the whole language learning process would be and the more

positive gains would be made in the long run (Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Reed, 2003). In 1997 teaching a foreign language was first introduced at the primary school level as early as at the age of 9 for 4th graders instead of 6th graders in the Turkish context. With this policy change English language teaching (ELT) curriculum incorporated communicative language teaching with the major aim of developing students' communication skills with regard to speaking, listening, reading and writing (Kirkgoz, 2007; MoNE, 1997). Moreover, in 2006, the curriculum was revised in line with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages and offered theoretical information and also innovative ideas as to how to teach young learners English, proposing new activities for teachers, and including lesson plans to implement (Ersöz et al. 2006). The 2006 curriculum, Ersöz et al. (2006, p.23) state, reflects "mixed syllabus" type, integrating various types of syllabi such as "the grammatical/structural syllabus, the situational syllabus, the topical/theme-based syllabus, the notional/functional (communicative) syllabus the procedural/task-based syllabus and the skills-based syllabus in order to "... promote the learner's ability to use the language correctly and appropriately." According to the 2006 foreign language teaching policy, 4th and 5th graders have 2 hours of compulsory and 2 hours of elective English language courses per week and are expected to go through A1-Breakthrough and reach A2-Waystage level as Basic Users before graduation from the 8th grade. Such a policy requires the teaching of four language skills communicatively through a number of interactive activities and tasks such as games, songs, stories, passages, visuals aids, dramas, inter alia. Such a curriculum, in line with the aims stated by the CEFR, can be

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considered “theoretically and philosophically ideal” (Kızıldağ (2009, p.196).

Despite the efforts to improve foreign language teaching in Turkish state schools with policy changes and new course book designs, the practice of foreign language teaching has never been devoid of criticism. While Kızıldağ (2009) regards the curriculum ideal, she also finds it “busy and inflexible.” Among some of the major factors leading to such criticism come from “the efficacy of language teachers, the provision of student interest and motivation, and provision of instructional methods, learning environment and learning materials” to Aktas (2005) cited in Kızıldağ (2009, p.189), poor quality of foreign language instruction offered, the qualifications of foreign language teachers, inadequacy of teaching hours, and also the type of foreign language teaching materials for Kirkgoz (2007), the ineffective textbooks and lack of materials such as videos/CDs, projectors and computers according to Paker (2007). Işık (2008, p.15) also lists “[t]he ever-existing traditional method and language teaching/learning habits and the defects in language planning” as some of the major reasons for the problem. Moreover, a study conducted with a group of ELT teachers by Arıkan (2011, p. 306) may also suggest that “pupils appear to be passive learners since teacher-centred activities continue to be used” in most language classes and in the same study ELT teachers also reported “smaller class size, newer technologies, and a rich variety of print materials” as essential to improve English language teaching in their schools. Kırkgöz (2008, p.1867) also mentions some teacher related problems as “[t]he major characterizing feature of these teachers was their tendency to put greater emphasis on the delivery of knowledge about the language, less emphasis on encouraging pupils’ active participation in the lesson, and the development of their communicative abilities.” In addition, Yanık (2007, p. iv) specifies “the lack of materials and resources, the course-book, the learners, the classroom environment and the curriculum” being some of the major factors related to implementation of ELT programmes. In their study Tilfarlioglu and Ozturk (2007) also point out the dissatisfaction ELT teachers have with teaching 4th and 5th graders English at

elementary level and further highlight the lack of or little emphasis given to speaking skill in their courses. The current practice, therefore, seems to imply that such a policy has largely failed to educate language learners in Turkish state schools.

Probably as a response to such criticism raised by a number of ELT researchers in Turkey, the Ministry of National Education, with another attempt to improve foreign language education, has redesigned foreign language teaching policy in 2012, involving second graders (6 year-old-children in state primary schools) in foreign language courses for two hours a week as of 2013-2014 academic year (MoNE, 2012); thereby, adding another two years to this process. According to the regulation, second, third and fourth graders in primary education are expected to receive at least two hours compulsory foreign language courses weekly and it can also be possible to offer optional language courses up to 18 hours for fifth graders in secondary schools (MoNE, 2012). However, despite all these policy changes to improve the quality of foreign language education, some problems still remain at its implementation, and Kırkgöz (2009) points out that “Turkey needs to resolve existing incongruence between the idealized macro policy objectives and their realizations in practice at micro level teaching situations” (p.681). To be able to resolve this dichotomy some questions need to be answered regarding foreign language teachers, available resources, materials used, tasks and activities applied, language skills aimed at, and assessment followed to be able to improve foreign language education in the Turkish context.

At the outset of this discussion, we need to first examine the role of starting early in foreign language education. In Second or Foreign language education, the optimum age to start learning a foreign language can be as early as possible, as language learning can pose a number of difficulties for learners beyond the puberty period (Brewster et al., 2011; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Cameron, 2003). However, such an early start is not a guarantee to learn another language but it can help reach positive outcomes in the long run when many other factors affecting this process are

carefully considered; namely, such learners' characteristics as motivation, aptitude, learning styles and personal traits, right language input offered, appropriate materials followed, language teaching philosophy adopted, inter alia. Thus, an understanding of the basic characteristics of young learners by English language teachers and also application of various tasks and activities in language classes are of high importance for a successful early start in Turkey as well.

In addition, English language teachers need to be conversant with the nature and process of language learning young learners go through in order to contribute to such an endeavour. In the Turkish context, young learners are those children who are 6 years old or older in their primary education. When the characteristics of these children are examined, we see that children at this stage among others possess certain characteristics, Brewster et al. (2011, pp. 27-28) specify, as children "have lots of physical energy ... have wide range of emotional needs ... are developing conceptually ... learn more slowly and forget things quickly, tend to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their own world, get bored easily, are excellent mimics, ... can be easily distracted but also very enthusiastic." To Scott and Ytreberg (1990, pp.5-6) for children "words are not enough" as there should be activities including "movement" and "senses."

Considering such peculiar characteristics of young learners, the aims of foreign language instruction should be realistically determined in the Turkish context and we also need to bear in mind that a child's foreign language learning should be seen as a 'process', not only a 'product' (Brewster et al., 2011). Rather than trying to deliver a lot of structural components through course books, any language program designed for children first needs to turn language classes into positive learning atmospheres, where children get 'an appetite to learn' through interesting and fun activities (Brewster et al., 2011). Another important aim should be to develop their 'communicative competence'; that's to help them acquire classroom and everyday English which will help them communicate in the target language. Recognizing that some language learners in Turkish schools might

graduate from secondary or high schools with only a few words and some common phrases in English due to form-focused instruction, how ideal would it be to expect language learners to develop their communicative competence?

It would be up to the language teachers to realise all these policy issues. Thus the foremost important factor to improve foreign language education in Turkey concerns provision of professional English language teachers and requires a number of questions to be answered; namely, 1. Are all language teachers fully equipped with professional knowledge and expertise in teaching young learners, as well as adolescents and adults?; 2. Do language teachers know how to apply language teaching methods, particularly communicative language teaching method, task based learning, and content based instruction?; 3. Do language teachers know how to teach four language skills as well as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?; 4. Are language teachers conversant with foreign language teaching curriculum proposed by the Ministry of National Education policy and also with the CEFR criteria?; 5. Do language teachers know about alternative assessment techniques as well as principles of language exams and tests?

Another important issue to improve foreign language instruction concerns language learning materials followed: 1. Are course materials appropriately designed to reach the objectives specified in the curriculum?; 2. Are course materials varied and suited to young learners?; 3. Are teachers provided with supplementary materials such as handouts, audio and visual materials?

Foreign language teaching textbooks, full of routine grammar, vocabulary, speaking and reading activities, are provided by the Ministry, and may be strictly followed by many language teachers, leaving no time for students' genuine practice of the language. However, textbooks would not suffice to train foreign language learners, and alternative language teaching materials need to supplement these course-books. Textbooks can serve as guides, and teachers should be encouraged to activate language learners through a number of in-class and out-class

activities, tasks and supplementary materials. Such an idea would entail use of visual materials, audio materials, handouts, readers, and stories among many language teaching resources. Concerning young learners, we therefore need to ask: 1. Should we really start with a textbook?; 2. If we need to start with a textbook, what would be the features of the textbook?; 3. Should the textbooks start with focus on form or on meaning?.

Another concern would be about priority given to language components in language instruction. Should we regard language learning as a process or a product? If it is regarded as product, grammar would heavily fill the courses; otherwise, all language skills would receive equal importance if we consider language learning as a process. Thus, a crucial decision lies at the centre of whether linguistic competence or communicative competence is to be included in language programs for young learners. When we look at language learning as a process, we see that creation of a lively and encouraging learning atmosphere would be the main focus of language teaching, and it is vitally important that young learners be involved in a variety of activities fostering their language skills. Hence, development of learners' communication skills as indicated in all foreign language teaching policies of the Ministry of National Education can be realised through learning-centred approach, involving learners actively in a variety of activities in language classes rather than through traditional grammar-based activities.

In addition to course materials, we need to ask and answer a number of questions as to tasks and activities included in textbooks and applied in language courses: 1. Are tasks and activities learning centred or teacher dominant?; 2. Are course activities and tasks varied or limited to textbooks only?; 3. Do tasks and activities employ routine grammar and vocabulary activities or are communicative tasks, games, songs, stories, etc. employed as well? Based upon the above discussion, classroom activities may, therefore, include Total Physical Response (TPR) activities; songs, chants and nursery rhymes, story-telling, dramas and role plays, games, and such activities as listen and draw,

match, categorise, identify, fill in the gap, find the missing information, inter alia. Among these activities, first come listening activities that prepare learners for the comprehension stage. Listening activities should receive primary importance in the early stages since young learners need abundant exposure to the target language in context. Children can also improve their comprehension more effectively by playing language games, singing songs, saying rhymes and listening to stories and following simple instructions. Through these activities learners can also retain good pronunciation in English since these learners are at a stage to pick up native-like pronunciation. Specifically the first courses can mainly involve Total Physical Response (TPR) activities so that learners can get the right input in the language. TPR activities included at the initial stages basically for the 4th graders are likely to make students learn classroom routines and conventions. Teaching children vocabulary for basic concepts such as numbers, colours, and food, teaching formulaic language such as simple greetings, routines, classroom language, teaching a few rhymes and songs can also contribute to their listening and speaking skills. Listening to or telling stories would also be very beneficial to improve learners' listening and speaking skills, and increasing learners' motivation in language classes. Teachers can develop students' awareness of sound-letter correspondence in English by focusing on how letters are represented in speech. Teachers can also suggest simple readers suitable for the age level. In addition, young learners can be asked to write the words and sentences they learn with an aim to improve their spelling and writing in English (Brewster et al., 2002).

All such activities included in course materials or applied by language teachers have potentials to offer fun, variety and richness in teaching English to young learners. Application of a variety of language learning activities also fits the characteristics of young learners, is likely to avoid monotony course books bring to language classrooms, and provides good language practice to improve learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills.

Class size is another important issue which largely affects the practical application of what has been suggested so far in this paper. The larger the number of students in each class, the less chance the learners will have to participate actively in in-class activities, and thus, it is less likely that language teachers will be able to apply a number of techniques and activities. Therefore we need to ask if language classes are suitable to apply various language learning activities and if language classes are ideal in number with not more than 15 students in each one.

A look at the current foreign language teaching policy shows achievable objectives; however, the problems seem to lie in its implementation. Frequent policy amendments as to foreign language education would therefore reach positive outcomes once professional language teachers adopt appropriate methodology, follow suitable materials, apply relevant activities and tasks, and focus on acquisition of language skills in small language classes with relevant language teaching resources.

Before concluding this paper, it would be better to reiterate that foreign language teachers need to receive proper education prior to teaching young learners since young learners inherit unique features in learning; language teachers need to know how to teach not only such language components as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also all language skills; more opportunities for practice need to be given to language learners through games, plays, stories, role-plays, inter alia; language teachers need to know how to apply various language activities and tasks; supplementary materials need to be used to practice various language components; alternative assessment techniques such as project work and portfolios need to be used as well as quizzes, tests and exams; language classes should not have more than 15 students; and language classes should be equipped with language learning technology and other language learning resources. Ideas suggested in this paper can possibly help avoid some of the limitations foreign language education has faced in Turkey.

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