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Article in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* · October 2016

DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.065

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International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language,
GlobELT 2016, 14-17 April 2016, Antalya, Turkey

The Problematic Interaction between the Mother Tongues, the National Language and Foreign Language Instruction in Turkish Education

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Abstract

In Turkey, English language learning results have been generally poor. More than a quarter of Turkish citizens and foreign residents do not speak the standard Turkish language as their native tongue. This paper evaluated the weaknesses in the current system in light of this phenomenon and linked them to the poor results in English language learning. Relevant literature on the failure of English and other language programs in Turkey and other countries with similar multilingual populations was examined. Teaching Turkish as a second language and English as an additional language and development of appropriate curricula, methods and materials were recommended.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of GlobELT 2016

Keywords: Instructional medium problems; native language; national language; English language teaching

1. Introduction

On 27 May 2011 in an address to a Council of Higher Education (YÖK)-organized International Conference on Higher Education, “New Directions and Problems,” former Turkish State President Abdullah Gül remarked:

On the subject of foreign language instruction, I do not know of a country as unsuccessful as ours. I say this openly. I say this for primary instruction and for university education as well. All of us know how embarrassed students have been,

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students whom we deemed qualified, when they have gone abroad. Our biggest disadvantage on the international platform is the youth's ignorance of a second language. Those who know a second language are very few. Is it possible to continue this way? (Council of Higher Education, 2011, translated from the Turkish by the author)

Gül's statement epitomizes a popular perception. As for an academic assessment, the recent (2013) report of British Council/Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) *Turkey National Needs Assessment of State School English Language Teaching* bleakly noted:

5. Turkey is yet to catch up with competitor economies in its level of English language proficiency. Turkey consistently ranks very low on various measures of English language speaking. For example, the 2013 English Proficiency Index (EPI) developed by English First puts Turkey 41st out of 60 countries.
6. In 2012, the average total Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of both native Turkish speakers and residents of Turkey was 75 over 120, similar to countries which do not have a Latin alphabet, such as Sudan and Ethiopia. (TEPAV, 2013, p. 15)

Many underlying problems were outlined. The following summarized findings from the report are critical:

- The teaching of English as a subject and not a language of communication was observed in all schools visited.
- Students fail to learn how to communicate and function independently in English. Seating arrangement to organise students into pairs and groups for independent, communicative language practice in everyday classroom contexts.
- At present, official textbooks and curricula fail to take account of the varying levels and needs of students.
- Teachers interviewed stated they have little voice in the process and practice of teaching English.
- As a result of the repetition of a similar curriculum from grade to grade, and teachers' obligation to follow the curriculum, students self-assess their level of English lower as they progress through the education system. (TEPAV, 2013)

Over the last few decades, English language instruction has been added to the primary school curriculum. Although this was evidence of a serious effort on the part of the Ministry of Education (MoE) to promote the teaching of English language skills to school pupils, it was also recognition that English instruction had hitherto been inadequate in producing a successful outcome. Moreover, at the level of higher education in recent decades, there has been evidence of great effort to reinforce English language instruction after the proven successful models of the intensive Preparatory Year English Programs (PYEPs) at Middle Eastern Technical University (METU/ÖDTÜ) and Bosphorus University (BU/BÜ). A few newer private and public universities where the primary medium of instruction (MOI) is English and where there are also strong PYEPs have also met with success. However, after a few years, most of the other state universities have drastically scaled back their PYEPs, and the shrinkage may continue. Apparently, most students in such programs believe that the benefits are dubious and are not worth the investment of an academic year and its accompanying material costs while faculty either do not want to teach courses in English or such course offerings have not met with any student response (Peachy, 2014). Whether or not the PYEPs are successful, their past and present existence has been a *de facto* admission that most matriculating university students have not mastered the English language skills expected of students who have undergone eight to ten years of primary and secondary English instruction.

Thus, popular and academic perceptions of English language teaching in Turkey have been and still are largely negative. The increasing efforts of the MoE and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in fortifying foreign language instruction have led to the inescapable conclusion that, despite the devotion of great resources over many years, foreign language instruction has met with little success. This failure begs the question: *Why has foreign language instruction been failing in Turkey?*

This study has attempted to answer this question and to provide practical suggestions and recommendations to remedy the situation.

2. Research method

The research method was one of logical analysis. The etiology of the failure of English programs in Turkey was examined and then compared with cases presented in the literature concerning countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, China and India. First, the signs and symptoms of the syndrome were explored and verified. As reflected in a series of the author's research laid out in presentations and articles, his linguistic knowledge and teaching experience in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia were drawn upon along with the opinions and observations of colleagues and professional acquaintances, specifically from Turkey, and generally from abroad, whose mother tongue is not the national language (Peachy, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Peachy & Şen, 2012). Second, the sparse literature available on the hypothesized systemic failure was reviewed and evaluated for plausibility and probability. Thirdly, proposed solutions were enumerated and assessed for logicity and practicality. Finally, suggestions for action and further research were proposed and presented. Throughout the process, inductive and deductive reasoning was employed, proceeding from one premise to the next to erect a thesis, a diagnosis, a prognosis and a therapy to remedy the failure and effect a revitalization of the language education process in Turkey and other countries with similar difficulties and dilemmas.

3. Analysis and discussion

In answer to the research question, “*Why has foreign language instruction been failing in Turkey,*” the hypothesis of this research is that the choice of *Türkçe* as the **sole** medium of instruction in the Turkish education system is one of the important factors causing the failure of foreign language instruction. President Abdullah Gül, in his Council of Higher Education talk mentioned above, also expressed his assessment of the status of Turkish, i.e. *Türkçe*. He remarked:

Unfortunately in this field, we are not sufficiently successful. Before everything else, it is necessary that everyone know his or her own language very well. It is not possible for one who does not know his or her own tongue very well to learn the language of success. *You* know how well the students whom you have been training know *Türkçe*. From this point of view, I think that we give special attention to this subject. (Council of Higher Education, 2011, translated from the Turkish by the author)

And just this month came this headline of a column published in the *Hürriyet Daily News*, “We have hit rock bottom in education.” That is the context of this study on foreign language instruction in Turkey. Columnist İsmet Berkan, speaking of the *Yükseköğretime Geçiş Sınavı-Lisans Yerleştirme Sınavı - YGS-LYS* (Transition to Higher Education Examination-Graduate Placement Exam) noted sadly:

On average, high school senior students were able to answer only 19.31 of the 40 questions in Turkish. Out of the more than 2 million students who took the science test, almost 750,000 did not answer even one question correctly. In other words, out of three students who took the test, one of them received zero in science. Some 500,000 students answered maximum (*sic*) three questions correctly. This is more than half of all the participants. (Berkan, 2016)

So how are the words of the former president and the columnist relevant in connection with language studies? Berkan actually makes it clearer in his preceding paragraph:

Hitting rock bottom was more visible first in math and science, but it is now quite apparent that our system has difficulty in teaching our children our mother tongue. They cannot comprehend what they have read and express themselves properly in their mother tongue. (Berkan, 2016)

Essentially, Berkan has provided the same evaluation as Gül.

Notice the phrase, “in their mother tongue.” An English equivalent to mother tongue is native language. Both in Turkish are *ana dili*. The mother tongue or the native language is the language of one's mother, the tongue that she teaches to her child from birth to the time the child begins schooling. Just what is the mother tongue in the Republic of Turkey? That is *not* a rhetorical question. A rhetorical question would be, “What is the national language? That

question has a clear answer—*Türkçe*. Since the 1920's, the national language of Turkey has been *Türkçe*. Unfortunately, not all the citizens and other residents of Turkey know or speak it. *Türkçe* began as a dialect of Istanbul, where it has been spoken as a mother tongue by most of the population there for one or two centuries. Yet about 20% of Turkey's nearly eighty million citizens speak a Kurdish or other Western Iranian dialect as a *mother* tongue. Another 2-4% speak a dialect of Arabic as a mother tongue. At home, another 2-3% speak other languages like Circassian, Lezgian, Georgian, Abkhazian, Greek, Ladino, Armenian, Hemshin, and Syriac. Now, most of the nearly 3 million Syrian refugees speak a Levantine Arabic dialect. That is, at least 25%, maybe as much as 30% of the **citizens** and **non-citizen residents** of Turkey speak a non-Turkic language as their mother/native tongue.

To add to the problem of different mother tongues, much of population who are Turk, do not speak the official *Türkçe*; they speak various Turkic dialects or languages, the most prominent group of which is Azeri. Most spoken dialects and Turkic languages of Anatolia are closer to Azeri than they are to the official *Türkçe*. This is illustrated below by translating, according to location, a few English sentences:

English:	I am going .	Are you going ?	Where do you want to go?	I haven't said I didn't go.
Istanbul:	Gidi y orum.	Gidi y or musun?	Nereye gitmek isti y orsun?	Gitmediğimi söylemedim.
Akçakoca:	Gidi y om.	Gidi y on?	Nereye gitmek isti y on?	Söylemedim gitmiyom.
Kars:	Cidiraem	Cidisaen?	Hara istirsaen cidaen?	Soyleymaemişæem citmaedim.

The differences are grammatical, syntactical and phonetic. One may prefer to belittle the differences by calling them accents or dialects, or boost and promote them by calling them different Turkic languages. **However**, such differences do have implications for the choice of a medium of instruction, and the appropriateness of such a choice, especially for English language teaching (ELT). Succinctly, English is not a *second* language for millions of citizens and other residents of the Republic of Turkey who constitute as much as half the population living in Anatolia and Rumelia. If English *is* targeted *and* learned, it becomes a *third*, or even a *fourth* language, and thus will have an impact on the way it is most successfully learned (Klein, 1995).

In North America, there is a variety of English called African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This dialect is recognized as presenting problems for some of the millions in the Black communities (Wikipedia, 2016). Spanish in the U.S.A. is now a recognized second language in many states and communities, but with millions of new arrivals, it remains a problem along with second generations of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Iranians and Arabs. In addition, Malaysia, Nigeria, Namibia, Singapore, Iran and Pakistan are countries with several languages and dialects that present similar cases to that of Turkey. India, where there are about two hundred languages, may be the most extreme example. (Aito, 2005; Hanafi, 2014; Wharton, 2000; SCMP Editorial, 2015; Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013; Kishore, 2015). The national language of Hindi has to compete with English as a second language, as the latter levels the playing field for those who do not speak Hindi as a mother tongue, and gives them the equal opportunity posed by learning English along with the Hindi speakers (Manivannan, 2016). In India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, for example, English competes favourably, if controversially, with the national languages of Hindi and Urdu.

The TEPAV 2013 report lists other factors discovered by its research, but these are not put with its "critical" findings. Rather, they are listed in the appendix. This author found the regional differences that were noted to be striking. It was reported that there was a

...difference between students' opinions about their English lessons across different regions in Turkey. According to this data, a significant difference can be observed between the Middle Eastern Anatolia, Western Anatolia and South Eastern Anatolia, Eastern and Western Black Sea, Aegean and Mediterranean regions. A similar pattern is also observable in the share of students experiencing adaptation problems. While students in South Eastern Anatolia, Mediterranean and Middle Anatolia experience significant adaptation problems, the share of students experiencing such difficulties is much lower in İstanbul, Western Anatolia and West Marmara. (TEPAV, 2013, pp. 116-117)

The reasons for such regional disparities were not explored. However, anyone with any knowledge of the demography or the politics of Turkey and its regions can provide a reasonable surmise, a hypothesis as to the bases of regional differences, even local differences. One logical thesis is that there are economic disparities among the regions (Gürsel et al., 2016). Poverty, naturally, would negatively affect the opportunities and attitudes of students while

affluence would have a positive, enabling effect. That issue is for economists to explore. Here, it has been noted that there are significant differences in the linguistic and cultural make-up, i.e. components of regions and localities. In the Southeast of Anatolia for example, Kurdish languages are spoken by the majority of the population in many provinces. Arabic is spoken by the majority in some districts and by the largest minority in others. In Düzce, the Western Black Sea province which this author now calls home, there are significant minority native languages, including Circassian, Lezgian, Georgian, Abkhazian, Hemshin, Kurdish, and even Armenian. Furthermore, Arabic can now be heard on the streets of Düzce as Syrian families settle there.

As one encouraging development, much academic interest has recently been given to Turkish as a second language (TuSL), and the Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center (TÖMER) of Ankara University and its branches have now begun TuSL instruction. In last year's International Symposium on Language Education and Teaching (UDES/ ISLET) 2015 conference in Nevşehir, about 90 direct and indirect presentations on TuSL were given.

In a further positive development, former Turkish Education Minister Nabi Avcı spoke in Ankara last year on the subject of the failure to teach English as a foreign language in Turkey, while at the same time praising the education system's success in teaching Turkish as a foreign language to Kurdish children.

All right, we are very unsuccessful in [teaching] English [as a second language in schools]. But there is a foreign language education area in which the Turkish education system is very successful. We teach Turkish to all Kurdish children very adequately. (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2015)

It is also important to note here that although Turkish is the official state language, English, French, Arabic and Kurdish are taught as elective courses in secondary schools if more than 10 students apply for them.

At the level of higher education, little attention has been allotted to the underlying causative factors for poor English language achievement. This author has dealt with many aspects of PYEPs in Turkey (Peachy, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015b). In recent decades, the remedy for this situation in primary, middle and high schools had been to institute university preparatory programs following the model of the historically successful preparatory programs at Boğaziçi University and METU. Students entering at least some universities seem to be generally less well prepared every year. At many universities until the 2014-15 Academic Year (AY), almost all those students enrolled in compulsory PYEPs had increasingly failed to achieve the mastery expected of programs providing about 700 class hours in preparatory academic English instruction. The 2015-16 AY saw the end of most compulsory student participation in PYEPs at a number of universities. It now seems that the Turkish Republic has put resources into an ineffective, perhaps even counter-productive endeavour.

Parallel to the preparatory program effort has been the ever increasing endeavor to begin English instruction earlier and earlier in state primary schools. In 1967, three hours per week of English instruction were given for the first three years in the state middle schools, followed by three more years in high school. At present, two hours per week of English instruction are given to grades 2, 3 and 4, three hours per week to grades 5 and 6, and four hours per week to grades 7 and eight. In high school, English instruction ranges from two hours a week to six hours a week depending on the type of school.

Hence, the problems of English language teaching and learning do not stem from lack of effort or finance, but rather, firstly, from unrealistic, inappropriate program goals, and secondly, from structural and systematic deficiencies. Unfortunately, these incongruities often go unnoticed or are ignored.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Little has emerged to dispel the perceptions of the sorry state of English language teaching in parts of the world and particularly in Turkey. The notable exceptions are some isolated examples of success at some older state universities and a few newer private universities with established, required preparatory programs. However, the reasons for the failure may be attributed to the faulty premises of the language teaching programs and thus, to their inappropriate goals and systems and the methods logically but uselessly employed to attain them. Although new universities cannot reverse past failures, they can look for models of success outside of Turkey. For example, many

school districts in the United States of America have recently discovered that bilingual education has benefits not only for speakers of minority languages such as Spanish, but also for native speakers of English. That is, students in such programs have better success rates (Barac & Bialystok, 2012), and it is reported that bilinguals' brains are physiologically better developed (Pliatsikas, 2015; Yang et al., 2015). Tuncer (2009) compared mono- and bilingual language learning strategies in a Turkish university setting, while Appel and Muysken (2014) have provided a masterful and comprehensive study of bilingualism.

In Saudi Arabia, English is the medium of instruction for the most desirable fields of study in the Faculties of Medicine, Engineering and Business. Students are only provisionally admitted to universities. Where English is the medium of instruction, they must pass the program in a period of one or two years, or they are dismissed from the university. If they want to study Medicine or Engineering, they must pass the course with an A, or a high B average. Thus, such requirements prove to be strongly motivating for students.

The failure of English language instruction in Turkey need not continue. The requirement of English as a medium of instruction at a ratio of 100% at the established older Turkish model universities like METU and the newer ones like BU are neither feasible nor acceptable at the newer state universities; hence, the foreign isolates of new success should be taken as models for extensive reforms. The pre-conditions for their success have been different systems based on the variegated linguistic backgrounds and differentiated needs and motivations of students for English as a foreign or professional language.

In conclusion, in Turkey, there is the need to recognize that (1) Turkey has many important minority languages and dialects, and (2) so that the national language of *Türkçe* cannot be the sole medium of instruction for the teaching of English to those whose mother tongue or dialect is not *Türkçe*. The bilingual movement in the U.S.A. and the experiences in other settings where instruction is given in both the mother tongue and the national language should be evaluated for suitability and applicability in Turkey. In schools where the mother tongue of many or most of the pupils is a language or dialect other than *Türkçe*, the medium of instruction for English should be the mother tongue or the local dialect, especially in primary schools. Bilingual and bi-dialectal teachers are highly suitable for classrooms with pupils who do not all speak the same mother tongue. It is also suggested that English be taught as an additional language, not as second language as is desirable in North America and Great Britain. Moreover, suitable indigenous instructional textbooks and materials that utilize the familiar culture of Turkey should be developed to further the goal of more effective English language teaching (Peachy, 2013b). English as a second language should not be a desideratum, as *Türkçe* is the second language for so many Turkish citizens and foreign refugees in Rumelia and Anatolia. First, it must be recognized that English is a *foreign* language, and then ***suitable programs at appropriate levels, times, durations and intensities*** should be set for pupils and students to meet realistic needs and to stimulate, maintain and promote motivation.

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