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THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR) AND ENGLISH PREPARATORY PROGRAMS IN TURKEY

İrfan TOSUNCUOĞLU* - Davut PEACI**

ABSTRACT

Language, especially a foreign language, is one of the most important vehicles enabling communication between people and peoples. This is well known, and its reality can not be denied in our world. The perception of a great need for English is accelerating efforts towards its effective teaching. *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is based on the socio-cognitive and action-oriented approach. The CEFR is an international standard that defines language aptitude, and it does not entail a method of assessment in itself. In this study, English Language Teaching in Turkey has been evaluated on the basis of European Union criteria for accession, emphasizing the significance of English as a global language. The study also addresses, in detail, the fact that the Turkish Ministry of National Education and the Higher Education Council have adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a guide for their foreign language teaching policies. This study holds that the matter of "Foreign Language Education" in primary, secondary and higher education is a significant factor of accession to Europe and thus is far beyond being an "internal matter". In this era, foreign language knowledge is vital in order to keep up with professional requirements and academic studies as well as with Turkey's continuing efforts to integrate with the European Union. Furthermore, the case of certain compulsory English preparatory classes having been rendered optional by law in 2014 and its effects are examined within the context of CEFR.

*  Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Karabük Üniversitesi, E-posta: irtosun@yahoo.com

**  Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Düzce Üniversitesi, E-posta: wspeachy@yahoo.com

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

With the development of technology and the increase in communication facilities, Foreign language education has become more important compared to the past. It is not only important in education and training but also in all areas of life. As it is the case for many developing countries that aim to catch up with the times and reach the level of developed countries, Turkey's cultural and commercial relations with the rest of the world are increasing. The most important common communication tool in establishing such relations is acknowledged to be English. Depending upon the increasing importance and necessity of English, it can be said that various studies on the teaching of English are being conducted, and that the subject is constantly under discussion. As a result of the proliferation of contemporary scientific and technological developments within the process of globalization, foreign language education has gained a very high level of significance for all countries.

The main aim of foreign language education is to enable students to adapt to the next stage of their studies smoothly, by virtue of the language education provided and the language skills imparted to them (Demircan, 2006). Thus, English teaching in the Turkish republic starts at the second grade of primary school and continues into higher education. The level at which foreign language proficiency especially gains importance in terms of professional life and academic studies is that of higher education. Therefore, in this era where Turkey's efforts to integrate with the European Union continue, the issue of "Foreign Language Education" is one of the important factors of concordance with Europe, beyond merely constituting an "internal matter". Due to the fact that Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe (CE) since 1949, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Higher Education Council (YÖK) have been adapting language education policy and foreign language teaching to the European system. With this aim, they have taken the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* as a guide in language teaching.

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

The CEFR defines language ability. It does not entail a method of evaluation in itself, and it is used to define students' language abilities on an internationally accepted scale. So, it does not provide a specified set of solutions, but serves as a guide by providing a range of ideas and methods. Within its descriptive framework, it shows the completion of skills, activities, and strategies. Although the CEFR was published in 2001, the relevant language studies go back to the 60s and 70s. 1960s was the golden decade of abstract functional programs and the Modern Languages Project which has started in Europe. 1990s has paved the way for creating writer groups for developing tools of evaluation with communicative and innovative reinforcements. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project has participated in the CEFR between 1993 and 1996, and it was published in 2001. Shortly after this, the CEFR was translated into more than 30 languages including Turkish, thereby aiming for transparency, standardization and uniformity in language learning as well as evaluation on a continental scale.

Problem

The preparatory classes had been compulsory in certain universities until the academic year of 2014-2015. They had been optional in some others up to that point. Until the 2014-2015 academic year in Karabük University, it was compulsory for students to complete an English Preparatory School Program (EPSP), attending for 8-9 months before proceeding to the four-year studies in their own departments and fields. However, by virtue of the law issued on 26 November 2014, participation in English Preparatory programs beginning from AY 2015-2016 was made optional except for those programs training teachers of English. In the following years after the relevant legislation, it has been seen that students generally viewed preparatory classes as unnecessary since they lost at least a year and that they did not want to pay for an extra year of university expenses. In addition, it has been observed that the motivation and levels of success for students who opted for preparatory classes decreased because peers who deemed preparatory classes a waste of time. While the number of students receiving education in compulsory preparatory classes before the legislation at the beginning of AY 2014-2015 was around 10,000, this number gradually decreased in recent years to 3,000s and then to 1,800 in the academic year of 2018-2019.

In this period of our country's efforts to integrate with the European Union, some universities' rendering of compulsory preparatory classes optional may be affecting Turkey's accession process negatively. The status of English language is one of the significant elements of uniformity with Europe, beyond just proving a domestic, "internal matter". This is because levels of CEFR proficiency are used in Turkey as a Higher Education Language Proficiency Framework within the scope of foreign language proficiency. In addition, according to Bayraktaroğlu (2015), the key of *Bologna Process* which has been accepted in order to encourage *Learning in Motion* with the ideal of *Unity in Education* or programs such as *Erasmus*, *Socrates*, *Leonardo*, *Comenius*, *Marie Curie* within the scope of *Lisbon Goals* are constituted by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* criteria.

Conclusion and Discussion

In pursuing the ideal of establishing a *Common European Culture* with the slogan of *Unity in Diversity*, the Council of Europe (CoE) has executed the *European Foreign Languages Project* beginning from 1971. The aim was to enable European citizens with different languages and cultures to collaborate easily and move freely in business, trade, social and education life. It also aimed to activate tolerance, respect and communication as well as to eliminate prejudices. The findings of this project have brought forth the '*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*'. It is applied in all the European countries' educational systems and constitutes a revolution in the field of Foreign Language Education.

The CEFR establishes a common foundation in terms of language teaching in Europe, and it has been accepted as a very useful framework by politicians, foreign language education authorities and teachers as well as curriculum and testing developers. In this study, an evaluation of the status of English Language in education has been made, beginning

from primary education up to the end of higher education. In this era, Turkey's efforts to integrate with the European Union continue. So, the issue of Compulsory English Preparatory Education is one of the important elements of concordance with Europe. It is more than a mere 'internal matter'. For this reason, Europe's goals need to be taken into account on this subject. At least the university graduates in Turkey need to be at the language level in compliance with the European Union's accession requirements. The issue of Compulsory Preparatory classes in our universities need to be put on the agenda, and within the scope of foreign language education, possible solutions need to be found for problems. In addition, students need to be motivated and supported in opting to register for English Preparatory programs.

Keywords: CEFR, English Preparatory School programs, Higher Education Council, law

AVRUPA DİLLERİ ORTAK ÇERÇEVE PROGRAMI (CEFR) VE TÜRKİYEDEKİ İNGİLİZCE HAZIRLIK PROGRAMLARI

ÖZET

Dilin, özellikle yabancı dilin kişi ve insanların birbirleriyle iletişim kurmalarına imkân veren çok önemli bir araç olduğu günümüz dünyasında her kesim tarafından bilinen yadsınamaz bir gerçektir. Bu bakış açısı içerisinde *Avrupa Dilleri Ortak Çerçeve Programı* (CEFR/ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) sosyo biliş ve eylem odaklı yaklaşıma dayanmaktadır. CEFR dil yeteneğini tanımlayan uluslararası tanınırlığı olan bir standarttır ve kendi içinde bir değerlendirme metodu anlamına da gelmemektedir. Çalışmada, dil öğreniminin dinamik, eş güdümlü, şeffaf ve hayat boyu devam eden bir süreç olarak kabul edilmekle beraber bunun yanı sıra günümüz uluslararası dünya dili olan İngilizcenin önemi vurgulanarak Avrupa Birliğine uyum kriterlerince Türkiye’de İngiliz dili eğitim ve öğretimi değerlendirilmiştir. Buna ek olarak Türk Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı ve Yükseköğretim Kurulu, yabancı dil öğretim politikalarında Avrupa Yabancı Diller Ortak Çerçeve Programını (CEFR) rehber edinmesi konusuna kapsamlı bir şekilde değinilmiştir. Yabancı dil bilgisinin mesleki yaşamda gereklilik olduğu da ifade edilerek akademik çalışmaların takip edilebilmesi açısından bunun önemi de vurgulanmıştır. Bununla beraber Türkiye’nin Avrupa Birliği ile bütünleşme çabalarının sürdüğü bu dönemde, ilk, orta ve yükseköğretimde “Yabancı Dil Eğitimi” konusu sadece bir “iç mesele” olmanın ötesinde Avrupa’ya uyumun da önemli unsurlarından olduğu ifade edilmiştir. Ayrıca bazı üniversitelerdeki Zorunlu hazırlık sınıflarının 2014 yılında ilgili yasayla isteğe bağlı olması durumu ve olası sonuçları Avrupa Dilleri Ortak Çerçeve Programı bağlamında incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: CEFR, İngilizce Hazırlık Okulları Programı, Yükseköğretim Kurulu, kanun

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most important vehicles enabling communication between people. The perception of a great need for English is accelerating efforts towards its effective teaching. On the other hand, as it is the case for people's need to be able to communicate better with people who speak their own native language, it is being observed that their need to know other countries' languages is increasing, depending on acculturation and international developments. Also English has a higher level of recognition among a myriad of foreign languages (Gökmen, 2005; Tollefson, 2013; Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; İnal, Özdemir, Kıray, & Oral, 2016; Üzülmöz & Karakuş, 2018).

In this day and age, foreign language learning has become more important compared to the past, with the development of technology and the increase in communication facilities. It is not only important in education and training but in all areas of life. As it is the case for many developing countries that aim to catch up with the times and reach the level of developed countries, Turkey's cultural and commercial relations with the rest of the world are on the increase, and the most important common communication tool in establishing such relations is acknowledged to be English. Depending upon the increasing importance and necessity of English, it can be said that various studies on the teaching of English are being conducted, and that the subject is constantly under discussion. As a result of the proliferation of contemporary scientific and technological developments within the process of globalization, foreign language education has gained a very high level of significance for the world's countries.

The purpose of foreign language education is to enable students to adapt to the next stage of their studies smoothly, by virtue of the language education provided and the language skills redounded to them (Demircan, 2006; Aktaş, 2015). Thus, English teaching starts at the second grade of primary school and continues up to the level of higher education. The level at which foreign language proficiency especially gains importance in terms of professional life and academic studies is higher education. Therefore, in this era, where Turkey's efforts to integrate with the European Union continue, the issue of "Foreign Language Education" is one of the important factors of concordance with Europe, beyond merely constituting an "internal matter". Due to the fact that Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe (CE) since 1949, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Higher Education Council (YÖK) has been adapting language education policy and foreign language teaching to the European system. With this aim, they have taken *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* as a guide for language teaching.

2. The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

The CEFR is an international standard which defines language ability and it does not entail a method of evaluation in itself. It is used to define students' language abilities on an internationally accepted scale. So, it does not provide a specified set of solutions, but serves as a guide by providing a range of ideas and methods. Within its descriptive framework, it shows the completion of skills, activities, and strategies. Although CEFR was published in 2001, the relevant language studies go back to the 60s and 70s. The 1960s was the golden decade of abstract, functional programs and the Modern Languages Project which started in Europe. The 1990s has paved the way for creating writer groups for developing tools of evaluation with communicative and innovative reinforcements. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project participated in the CEFR between 1993 and 1996, and it was published in 2001. Shortly after this, CEFR was translated into more than 30 languages including Turkish, aiming for transparency, standardization and uniformity in language learning as well as evaluation at a continental scale.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is based on the socio-cognitive and action-oriented approach. Language learning is acknowledged as a dynamic, coordinated, transparent and lifelong process. This system involves 6 levels of progression for proficiency. These are: (A1) Breakthrough, (A2) Waystage, (B1) Threshold, (B2) Vantage, (C1) Effective Operational

Proficiency and (C2) Mastery (Barın & Eyerci, 2018; British Council, 2015; Demirel, 2013; North, 2007). Each level is clear and comprehensive, but the terminology of language use and language learning has not been explained thoroughly. The CEFR consists of two main parts as a descriptive scheme and common reference levels. 34 concise and transparent scales for language ability are formulated quite positively so as to serve the needs of language users, teachers, curriculum developers and evaluators.

Beginning from the lowest level, communicative methods, innovations, definitions and indicators for levels are very important for objective testing scales (*Association of Language Testers in Europe - ALTE*) and the common quality criteria in application (*European Association of Quality Language Services - EAQUALS*). At the same time, this model contributes to the applications of foreign language teacher training, their acknowledgement at the international level and the reliable configuration of foreign language education within our national education system. It also constitutes the foundation for Turkey's activities of effectively promoting its language and culture to the outside world, endeavouring to have a place in the European Union as well as to strengthen its international relations stretching from the Far East to America.

3. CEFR Applications in Turkey

The Council of Europe (CoE) was established in France's Strasbourg City in 1949 in order to defend personal and human rights and for the Europeans to unite. Turkey has been a candidate member of the European Union since 1999. Within this process, Turkey has been carrying out reforms in order to attain full membership in the European Union. The CoE publicized the CEFR in the year of 2001. Although English and French were the original languages of the CEFR, now it is available in 40 languages.

3.1. Secondary Education

Turkey has been a member state of the Council of Europe (CoE) since 1949, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) of Turkey has been paying attention to stay concordant with the European Union in foreign language planning. (Doğan, 2007; Mirici, 2015; MoNE, 2016; Yiğit, 2010) In this way, the MoNE has been working to adapt the main items in CEFR for its own teachers and curricula. The MoNE implemented the CEFR and the ELP (European Language Proficiency) throughout the 2001–2002 Academic year in some schools in two cities (Hismanoğlu, 2013). In this sense, the new (2017) curriculum of foreign language education in Secondary Schools is said to have the descriptive and pedagogical principles and proficiency character in accordance with CEFR. The MoNE said that the latest foreign language program for high schools was implemented in the previous academic year (2017–2018). All the same, the issue of foreign language teaching programs is a very complex issue in Turkey. First of all, the student/teacher ratios are too high in various kinds of schools. Secondly, the country is located at the crossroads of the continents and so it has been trying to become a real member of the European Union (EU) as soon as possible.

3.2. Higher Education

When the implementation of the CEFR in higher education is examined, that the language preparatory programs in universities did not adapt to and match with the aims of the CEFR is exposed. Kınıs and Aydın (2008) and Gökdemir (2010) touched upon some problems and the websites of Turkish public universities' schools of foreign languages were examined and it was shown that the preparatory programs of only a limited number of these universities had been proceeding on the basis of the principles and instructions of CEFR. Peaci (2015) also demonstrated the conflict between CEFR goals and the realities of Turkish higher education.

In addition, along with the problem of CEFR not proving an established standard in preparatory programs in universities, the programs were not following the basic principles. Finally, in the AY 2014–2015, in universities where the successful completion of the preparatory program had been compulsory,

such as Karabük University, the relevant legislation (Law No. 6569, Article 28, 2014 [cited and translated in Peaci, 2015]) rendered these programs optional except for departments that were to graduate English teachers.

On the other hand, in Turkey, in order to meet the criteria established by the European Union, the education system, including primary, secondary and higher education, has been under reconstruction. The Common European Reference for Languages (CEFR) had been taken into consideration to meet the criteria in terms of foreign language education.

3.3. Preparatory Programs

While English teaching used to begin at the 6th grade before 2000s, in later years it has come to do so in the second grade, continuing up to the level of higher education. In preparatory classes, intensive foreign language education is provided, English proving the most commonplace language taught. Since foreign language learning is an international necessity and need in our era defined by the world of technology and innovation, there are preparatory programs in universities that provide students with English language education so as to have them reach the adequate academic level before they proceed to their classes in their own departments. Preparatory programs exhibit a characteristic of serving as a transitional period for students into the actual academic life in a university. Within this period of one (or two) years, students find the chance to improve their English language levels as well as to get to know university life and their own departments. According to Pinar (2003) and Ekşi (2017), education and training is possible through programs of instruction that enable a systematic and effective implementation. Hence, in order for the English teaching provided in these classes to reach its goals, the program of instruction should be prepared and implemented effectively.

According to the Higher Education Council (HEC/YÖK) Regulation Concerning the Principles to Adhere to in Foreign Language Education, when the basic aim of foreign language education and training is viewed, it is seen that it is expressed as "teaching the basic rules of the language of choice to the students, developing their foreign language vocabulary, ensuring that they can understand what they read and hear and that they can express themselves orally and in written form" (HEC, 2010). Correspondingly, the aim in preparatory programs is to provide the students with the main skills of this language.

In this program, which lasts two academic terms, students are placed heterogeneously into different classes according to the scores they each receive from the Placement and Exemption Exams and have approximately 25-30 hours of class time a week, all of which are English classes. This means that students receive more than 900 hours of class time on average in a year. According to the *Regulation Concerning the Principles to Adhere to in Foreign Language Education*, the weekly course load in preparatory classes cannot be less than 20 hours and 260 hours in total in a single term (HEC, 2010). In relation to this, the document published by the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2001 set forth six levels, determining the standards of foreign language education (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). In consequence of Turkey being a member of the Council of Europe, in all the foreign language classes, Turkish universities need to apply CEFR grading system. Currently, most of the students start preparatory classes at the level of A1+ and it is expected that they reach the level of B2 within an 8-month period (British Council, 2015, p. 7).

At the end of this intensive academic year, the aim is for all of the students deemed at the same level at the beginning of the term to reach "intermediate" level of language proficiency. Thereby, it is expected that they will follow the classes they will take in English easily and that they follow the international literature in their fields without any issues. Five types of courses are given in optional preparatory classes, including writing, reading, listening and speaking. The listening and speaking activities are carried out together in a single course, and the reading and writing activities are as well.

4. Problem

While these preparatory classes had been compulsory in certain universities until the academic year of 2014-2015, they had been optional in some others up to that point. Until the 2014–2015 academic year in Karabük University, it was compulsory for students to complete an English Preparatory Program (EPP), attending for 8–9 months before proceeding to the four-year studies in their own departments and fields. However, by virtue of the law issued on 26 November 2014, participation in English Preparatory programs beginning from AY 2015-2016 was made optional except for those programs training teachers of English. In the following years after the relevant legislation, it has been seen that students generally viewed preparatory classes as unnecessary since they lost at least a year and that they did not want to pay for an extra year of university expenses. A similar situation was encountered at Düzce University (Peaci, 2015), as well. In addition, it has been observed that the motivation and levels of success for students who opted for preparatory classes decreased because of the other students who deemed preparatory classes a waste of time. While the number of students receiving education in compulsory preparatory classes before the legislation at the beginning of AY 2014–2015 was around 10,000, this number has gradually decreased in recent years to 3,000 and then to 1,800 in the academic year of 2018–2019.

In this period of our country's efforts to integrate with the European Union, some universities' making compulsory preparatory classes optional might affect Turkey's accession process negatively. The status of English language is one of the significant factors in uniformity with Europe, beyond just proving an "internal matter". This is because levels of CEFR proficiency are used in Turkey as a Higher Education Language Proficiency Framework within the scope of foreign language proficiency. In addition, according to Bayraktaroğlu (2015, p. 126), the key of *Bologna Process* which has been accepted in order to encourage *Learning in Motion* with the ideal of *Unity in Education* or programs such as *Erasmus*, *Socrates*, *Leonardo*, *Comenius*, *Marie Curie* within the scope of *Lisbon Goals* are constituted by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* criteria.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

With the ideal of establishing the *Common European Culture* and with the slogan of *Unity in Diversity*, the Council of Europe (CoE) has executed the *European Foreign Languages Project* beginning in 1971 with the aim of enabling European citizens who have different languages and cultures to be able to easily collaborate in business, trade, social and education life within the process of free movement and to activate tolerance, respect and communication as well as eliminating prejudices. The findings of this project have brought forth the '*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*', which is applied in all the European countries' educational systems and defined as a revolution in the field of Foreign Language Education.

The CEFR establishes a common foundation in terms of language teaching in Europe, and it has been accepted as a very useful framework by politicians, foreign language education authorities and teachers as well as curriculum and testing developers. In this study, an evaluation of the status of English Language in education has been made, beginning from primary education up to the end of higher education. In this era, where Turkey's efforts to integrate with the European Union continue, the issue of Compulsory English Preparatory Education is one of the important factors of concordance with Europe, beyond merely being an "internal matter". For this reason, Europe's goals need to be taken into account on this subject. At least the university graduates in Turkey need to be at the language level in concordance with the European Union's accession requirements. The issue of Compulsory Preparatory classes in our universities needs to be put on the agenda, and solutions need to be found to possible problems within the scope of foreign language education. In addition, students need to be motivated and supported so that they register for preparatory programs by their own volition. At the same time, the *quality standards* need to be reached in line with the European Union's Lisbon Goals, and educational

activities need to be revised, taking into account the students' prospect of finding jobs in the international arena following their graduation.

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