



ISSUES RELATED TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, it aims to examine Turkish Educational Policy with regard to English Language Teaching (ELT) at primary school level and then identify positive and negative sides both at the theoretical and practical level. Secondly it attempts to make some suggestions related to primary school ELT curriculum and teacher education. The studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of primary school ELT curriculum unveiled that; though teachers are contented with the fact that English language teaching starts at earlier grades, they indicated a myriad of problems related to assessment, quality of textbooks, technical infrastructure, teaching materials, physical conditions of the classrooms, class hours, in-service trainings, and so on. In the light of detected problems, some pedagogical suggestions related to primary school ELT curriculum and teacher education were made.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Curriculum and Instruction, teacher Education.

1. Introduction

Teaching foreign language from the early years has gained importance recently. Many countries started to give foreign language education from the earlier ages. With the idea of the sooner the better, in some countries, the pupils begin to learn a foreign language from the first grade onwards. As put forward by the Critical Age Period Hypothesis, (Lenneberg, 1967) learners can acquire a language more easily during a certain age period. It is found to be quite applicable at least for some part of language learning like having native-like pronunciation and intonation. Foreign language learners beginning to learn a language early in their childhood are found to acquire a native like or at least near native like pronunciation and intonation. On the other hand, the learners who begin to learn a language in their adulthood generally do not have native like pronunciation in their second language. For these and many other reasons, there are some changes and improvements in foreign language education policy for the primary school students in Turkey, as well.

Against this background, this study aims to examine Turkish Educational Policy with regard to English Language Teaching (ELT) at primary school level, detect positive and negative sides both at the theoretical and practical level, and then suggest a new model for primary school English language curriculum and teacher education. To achieve this aim, first, the literature is reviewed, some problems are detected and then suggestions are made.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Turkish educational system

In Turkey, English teaching program is prepared according to general principles of Ministry of Turkish National Education (MONE). Until 2013, 8+4 educational model was implemented in Turkey. According to this model, English language teaching started from the fourth grade. On 11 April 2012, the new educational model, 4+4+4, was decided to be put into practice starting from 2013-2014 academic year with the aim of keeping up with the 'international standards' for education.

With this transition, English language was started to be taught from the 2nd grade, which necessitated the redesign of 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade English language teaching programs. As the students started taking English lessons at around 6-6.5 years old, the new program was designed according to needs of young learners (MONE, 2013).

While designing the new program, the principles of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) was taken into account. Accordingly, the current model:

- Promotes language learning in an authentic and communicative environment;

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- Focuses an eclectic mixture of instructional techniques;
- Adopts an action-oriented approach
- Emphasizes English as a means of communication (CoE, 2001)

Apart from these, the program tries to make young learners build a positive attitude towards learning English from the beginning, thus, an enjoyable, comfortable, and motivating environment is tried to be fostered. While teaching the language, authentic materials and hands-on activities are encouraged to be utilized like drama, role play and so on (see Table 2). L1 usage by the teacher is not prohibited but allowed to be used only when necessary like “giving complex instructions” or “explaining difficult concepts” (MONE, 2013, p. VII).

Organization of the Curriculum

At the 2nd grade, only listening and speaking skills are emphasized. At the 3rd and 4th grades, the focus is on speaking and listening; reading, writing and grammar skills are limited to the word level. English courses are implemented as two hours per week, and A1 level is aimed to be achieved according to CEFR. A1 level is designated as ‘basic user’ according to CEFR, and the learner who has A1 level can:

- Understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of concrete type.
- Introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.
- Interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help (CoE, 2001, p.24)

Table 1: Model English Language Curriculum

| [CEFR] (Hours/Week) | Grades (Age) | Skill focus | Main activities/ Strategies |
|------------------------|-----------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| | 2 (6-6.5) | Listening and Speaking | |
| [A1] (2) | 3 (7-7.5) | Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing | TPR / Arts and crafts/Drama |
| | 4 (8-8.5) | Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing | |

Adapted from (MONE, 2013)

There are 10 units for each grade, consisting of interrelated themes which are familiar to young learners like family, friends, holidays and so on. Cultural issues also included in the curriculum presenting the elements of home culture, target culture and other cultures.

For the evaluation and assessment of student progress, self-assessment is encouraged as suggested by CEFR. For this, each unit includes achievement list to be fulfilled by the students which is converted to self-assessment checklists to be assessed by the learners. It includes questions like:

- What did you learn?
- How much do you think you learned?
- What do you think you can do in real life, based on what you learned in class? (MEB, 2013, p. IV).

Students are also expected to keep a European Language Portfolio (ELP) for tracking their progress. Apart from self-assessment, teacher observation and formal assessment is also carried out by written and oral exams, quizzes, and homework assignments.

Table 2: Sample acquisitions, texts, activities and assessment types

| Grades | Vocabulary items | Communicative functions | Texts | Activities | Assessment types |
|-----------------------|--|--|--|---|---|
| 2 nd grade | Colors, Numbers, Classroom objects, Animals, Fruits, Body parts, Rooms in a house etc. | Greetings, Introducing yourself, Describing objects etc. | Advertisements, Cartoons, Illustrations, Pictures, Dictionaries, Posters, Products, Songs, Tables, Conversations, Rhymes, Songs, Maps, Stories | Arts and Crafts, Chants and Songs, Cognates, Drama/Miming, Drawing and Coloring, Flashcards, Games, Labeling, Listening, Speaking, Matching, Reordering, Story- | Quizzes or exams ELP portfolio Projects (Preparing posters, family tree, visual dictionaries, a model house, town, country, puppets, questionnaire, charts, timetables, collages and so on) |
| 3 rd grade | Family members, Kinship terms, | Making simple inquiries, | | | |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|--|--|
| | Personal and physical qualities of individuals, Buildings and parts of a city, Weather conditions, Names of vehicles etc. | Describing people, Ask and answer about the weather etc. | | telling, TPR, Questions and Answers, Synonyms and Antonyms, Communicative Tasks, Role-Play | |
| 4 th grade | Foods and drinks, Personal and physical qualities, Names of shapes, Toys, Clothes etc. | Asking for permission, Making simple requests, Expressing basic needs, Describing what people do regularly etc. | | | |

(Adapted from MONE, 2013)

2.2 Studies on Primary School English Language Curriculum

When the related literature was examined, it was detected that the number of studies concerning 4+4+4 educational model at primary level English courses are very limited. Most of the studies were conducted regarding the efficiency of second grade curriculum, yet few studies were related to the curriculum of third and fourth graders.

In 2015, Aybek made a qualitative research with eight English teachers with the aim of evaluating second grade English course. Findings indicated that teachers generally have a positive attitude towards teaching English starting from the second grade and find English curriculum acquisitions and the content as suitable for the level of students. On the other hand, some of the teachers complain about boring and same kind of activities in the textbooks, lack of physical equipments in the classrooms (e.g. projectors) and materials (e.g. CDs, flashcards, workbooks), along with lack of class hours and overcrowded classrooms.

Yıldıran and Tanrıseven (2015) also gathered teachers' opinions towards second grade ELT curriculum. According to results, although teachers have generally positive attitude towards the program, they mentioned some of the challenges for implementing it; such as inefficiency of the textbooks, crowded classes, insufficient class hours, and lack of in-service trainings.

Dinçer (2016) examined the second and third grade English curricula by collecting data through classroom observations and teacher interviews. According to results, teachers indicated that using some of the techniques and activities for teaching English is impossible or very difficult because of the crowded classes, insufficient class hours, lack of physical and technological equipments and materials, and inadequate number of activities in the course books. Classroom observations showed that some of the teachers do not focus on listening and speaking activities; instead, writing and grammar skills are focused mostly. Teachers also use performance-based assessment rather than alternative assessment techniques. It was also detected that teachers are not provided with any in-service training related to the new model before teaching.

Another research conducted by Kandemir (2016) evaluated second grade English language curriculum by collecting data through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. According to findings, although teachers find new curriculum useful and applicable, they state that updating course books by enhancing activities so as to be more enjoyable and attractive and increasing class hours are necessary for more efficient teaching and learning practices. Apart from these, teachers remonstrate about too much parent and classroom teacher intervention in classroom activities by putting pressure on teachers to make students keep notebooks and make students write.

Similar study conducted by Bulut and Atabey in 2016 with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of second grade English language curriculum by gathering teachers' ideas. According to results, most of the teachers point out that they do not have sufficient technical infrastructure for making activities effectively. They also complain about overcrowded classrooms, inadequate number of materials, and absence of in-service trainings. For the assessment, it was unveiled that teachers use classroom observations mostly rather than projects or portfolios as they lack knowledge. Moreover, it is mentioned that, evaluation forms, scales or rubrics are not provided by MONE. Teachers also add that they do not use self and peer assessment techniques as students are very young for such kind of evaluation.

Özüdoğru (2016) evaluated the second grade English language curriculum in line with the principles of CEFR as well. Data were collected through document analysis, classroom observations, and interviews. Findings indicated that second grade ELT curriculum is in line with the CEFR principles in point of affective

objectives, teaching-learning and assessment processes. However, it was concluded that enough importance is not given to listening and speaking skills, mother tongue is used while teaching the target language, teachers are not provided with in-service trainings related to new curriculum, course books are untimely distributed, weekly teaching hours are insufficient, and classes are overcrowded and technologically inefficient.

3. Pedagogical Implications

In the light of the literature above, some implications with regard to English language curriculum and teacher education for primary level education were drawn.

3.1 Suggested Model for ELT Curriculum at Primary Level Education

In this part of the paper, initially, some positive sides of the current primary level English language teaching program used in the state schools in Turkey are mentioned and some suggestions are made to improve the program. To be aware of the current situation and to improve it, primary school English teachers' opinions and experiences with the current program are investigated. As mentioned before, there are some studies having the purpose of assessing English teachers' views on primary education second grade English course (Aybek, 2015; Yıldırım & Tanrıseven, 2015). The teachers participating to these studies find the program appropriate to the language proficiency level of pupils and they mention that the program helps students develop positive attitudes to language learning. Among the problems of the current program, some challenges in the application of the curriculum because of inappropriate textbook, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient time for the program and lack of in-service training are stated.

There are some positive sides of the current program like having less grammar rules and more enjoyable and hands-on activities in the curriculum (Alptekin, Erçetin & Bayyurt, 2007). This can be influential for young learners if their limited attention span is considered. Total Physical Response (TPR) activities are said to be used in the classrooms, which is also quite positive because young learners like being active in the class. They cannot sit down and do paper based exercises for a long time. For this reason, English teachers use not only words but also mimics and movements in the classroom. To attract students' attention, more visual aids are being used in the class like videos, PowerPoint presentations. Songs and games have some place in the current program, as well. In addition to all these positive sides of the current program, it can be mentioned that teachers need and should be provided with more in service training on how to use TPR effectively in the class.

Assessment is an important part of a curriculum and it should not be intimidating especially for young learners. Traditional paper-based assessment is not used so much for the primary school learners. Instead, teachers use observation and positive encouragement techniques in the class. As a suggestion, teachers can provide more positive feedback for student accomplishments to encourage them for language learning.

Teachers use European Language Portfolio (ELP) as an assessment tool for primary school students, which is good in terms of being in line with CEFR. As a suggestion, it shouldn't be forgotten that teachers need in service training about alternative assessment tools like the portfolio usage because in some previous studies, English teachers mention that they experience some problems about the application of the portfolio. Another suggestion for the assessment part of the curriculum is that Cambridge ESOL Young Learners (Starters, Movers) can be used as international assessment tools. The application and cost may be problematic for MONE but in terms of standardization, it might be influential to use these assessment tools in the state schools. The last issue related to the assessment is that the evaluation forms, scales and rubrics should be provided by MONE to have some standards in the assessment process. Currently, MONE does not provide teachers with standard forms or rubrics, which can be a big problem in terms of having a standard.

One significant suggestion related to primary school language education is that more technology integrated activities should be added to the curriculum. For this, more technologically advanced classrooms are needed in the state schools. If it is compared to the past, technology is more integrated to the language teaching, but the technology integration should be increased by using some web-based programs. For instance, Cambridge LMS (Learning Management System) is an online education system with extra materials parallel with the course book used and RazPlus (Kids A-Z) is an online reading program together with follow up listening and critical thinking activities. These types of online programs can easily direct students' attention into the language learning and it may be more fun for the learners to learn the language. More extra materials and physical equipment in the classroom are needed in this sense.

Another issue that is important for primary school English education is the parental involvement. Since primary school students are very young learners, their parents are more involved into the education process. For this reason, a suggestion can be made here about having seminars for the parents and for the classroom teachers to inform them about the new language teaching system. If the parents understand the logic behind the current activities in language teaching classrooms, they can be more helpful to the teacher and to the school administration, as well. This is also the case for the classroom teacher.

Classroom teachers should be in touch with the English teacher. They are aware of the students' needs more than the English teacher due to spending much more time with the students. English teachers meet the students two hours in a week and it is quite a short time compared to the classroom teachers. In this sense, there is also a need for increasing the hours weekly allocated for language teaching. As mentioned, two hours weekly English lessons may not be enough to cover the entire curriculum. In the current allocated hours, teachers may not find extra time to include games, songs or fun activities into their teaching. For this reason, weekly hours for language teaching should be increased.

Related to the issue of who should deliver language instruction in the primary school, Erkuş and Babayigit (2013) interviewed 10 primary school teachers and 10 English teachers. There are different opinions about this issue, but it should be stated that definitely English teachers should teach English, but they can also cooperate with the classroom teacher.

One other suggestion is the need for revision of the course books used by MONE. Ideas of students, teachers and parents need to be taken into consideration while designing textbooks. As stated by English teachers, currently used textbooks are not prepared in line with the curriculum aims. They include same kinds of activities, lacks games and TPR based activities, and it makes them boring and unsuccessful in terms of meeting the needs of young learners. Therefore, there should be more place for games, songs and other fun activities in the textbooks. In terms of the applicability of these activities, there should be less crowded classrooms, as well.

Content Based Instruction (CBI) can be used (Bayyurt, 2012) for primary level ELT program. It is related to teaching English to the students by relating the topics or the concepts taught in English to the other fields that students are more familiar with, like teaching numbers in English by relating them to math. The main purpose is to make the topics easier to understand and to make the abstract concepts more obvious for the pupils. When the age of the primary school students is taken into consideration, making the abstract concepts clear for them is crucial. With some modifications, this model can be used for primary level students. As a result, by taking these suggestions into account, primary level English teaching program can be more learner centered and flexible (Solak, 2013).

Table 3: Summary chart of the suggestions for ELT primary school curriculum

| Suggestions to improve primary school English language education in Turkey |
|---|
| 1. Weekly hours allocated for language teaching need to be increased. |
| 2. The number of students in the classrooms needs to be decreased. |
| 3. Physical, technical and technological infrastructure of the classrooms need to be improved and teachers need to be provided with necessary materials. |
| 4. ELT teachers should be provided with in-service trainings about Teaching English to young learners, alternative assessment methods and integrating technology into teaching. |
| 5. Current textbooks need to be revised and improved especially in terms of varied and enjoyable activities. |
| 6. More technology-integrated activities should be added to the curriculum. |
| 7. Online tools and web-based programs should be integrated into lessons. |
| 8. Seminars should be held for parents and classroom teachers to inform them about the new teaching model. |
| 9. Evaluation forms, scales and rubrics should be provided by MONE to have some standards in terms of evaluation. |
| 10. Standardized international tests can be used like Cambridge ESOL Young Learners (Starters, Movers). |
| 11. Content-based instruction can be used in the primary school language education. |

3.2 Suggested Model for Primary School English Language Teacher Education

With the purpose of improving the current foreign language-teaching program in the universities, specifically for the primary school English language teacher education, some suggestions are made in this part of the paper. As a result of the interviews with 25 English language teachers to examine the effectiveness of English language teacher education BA programs in preparing teachers to instruct young learners, only 8% of English teachers consider their BA programs to be effective (Çelik & Arıkan, 2012). Among the strengths of the current program, the application-based courses are mentioned. As a weakness, insufficiency of classroom practice is stated. For the graduates of BA programs other than English Language Teaching, the certification programs are not considered enough to prepare them to teach English to the

young learners.

As the first suggestion, teacher candidates need more application and practice based BA courses, so these courses should be added to the current curriculum. The number of practicum courses should be increased. There can be at least two practicum courses: one in the first and one in the last year of English Language Teaching BA program. The practicum courses should be more to the point in the sense that teacher candidates should be sent to the school types in which they are going to teach in their career. Here it can be suggested that language teacher candidates can be specialized according to different school types (primary, secondary school, university etc.) that they are willing to teach during their teaching career. To make this specification possible, there can be some changes in the four-year BA program. The first two years of the BA program could include the general courses about language teaching. In the last two years, teacher candidates can be offered to choose a level to teach and can take courses specifically designed to prepare them to teach in that level. Training teachers according to the level they will be teaching upon their graduation (Üstünlüoğlu, 2008) is also mentioned in some previous studies. In addition, this specialization of the language teachers can be actualized during in-service training, but the content of the in-service training should be well organized and it should be in line with the needs of the teachers.

Considering the graduates of the departments other than English Language Teaching (ELT), if they are allowed to work as language teachers, there should be more intense practicum courses specifically designed for the level these teachers are going to teach. The length and the content of the current certificate programs should be revised. More compulsory in-service trainings should be organized for the other departments' graduates.

One other suggestion about the current English Language Teaching (ELT) programs is related to multicultural education. The concept of multicultural education basically requires appreciating different cultural views and involving students coming from different cultural backgrounds into the classroom without showing any hatred. A course about multicultural education can be added to the current language teacher education program. Additionally, in-service trainings or seminars on how to make students appreciate different cultural viewpoints should be carried out in the state schools.

Some other changes that should be done in the current English teacher education programs include encouraging teacher candidates to carry out action research and the continuous development of teachers with in-service trainings related to teaching English to young learners, technology integration, classroom management etc. Reflecting Common European Framework program on teacher training program should also be considered. As a last remark, language teacher candidates should be provided with more opportunities to spend time abroad and to attend to international language teaching and learning related projects.

Table 4: Summary chart of the suggestions for ELT primary school teacher education program

Suggestions to improve English language teacher education program in Turkey

1. The number of application and practice based BA courses need to be increased.
2. The number of practicum courses need to be increased and more to the point practicum courses need to be organized.
3. Language teacher candidates can be specialized according to different school types (primary, secondary school, university etc.) that they are willing to teach during their teaching career.
4. For the specialization: the first two years of the BA program can include the general courses about language teaching. In the last two years, teacher candidates can be offered to choose a level to teach and can take courses specifically designed to prepare them to teach in that level.
5. For the graduates of the departments other than ELT, there should be more intense practicum courses specifically designed for the level these teachers are going to teach. There should be more compulsory in-service trainings for them.
6. The length and the content of the certificate programs should be revised.
7. A course about multicultural education can be added to the current language teacher education program.
8. In-service trainings and seminars on how to make students appreciate different cultural viewpoints can be organized.
9. Teacher candidates can be encouraged to carry out action research.
10. The principles of CEFR need to be reflected on teacher training programs.
11. Teacher candidates should be provided with opportunities to spend time abroad and attend international language teaching related projects.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine Turkish educational policy in English language teaching at the primary school level. Reviewed literature revealed some problems encountered during the implementation of the

new curriculum. Mostly stated problems were inadequate number of class hours allocated for English lessons, overcrowded classrooms, insufficiency and inefficiency of textbooks, lack of technical, technological and physical infrastructure of the classrooms, lack of teaching materials, lack of knowledge on teaching English to young learners and alternative testing methods stemming from the lack of in-service training, too much parent and classroom teacher intervention in teaching, and use of Turkish for teaching English.

With the purpose of trying to solve the problems mentioned above, some suggestions are made related to English language teaching curriculum at primary level and teacher education. If these suggestions are taken into consideration, there can be significant improvements in the current primary school language-teaching program and the teacher education programs in the universities. The applicability or the cost of some suggestions that are put forward in this paper could be problematic, but to solve the current problems, these changes are necessary. In the light of this paper, some advancements and improvements are found to be necessary to have a better primary school language education program and teacher education program in Turkey.

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