



International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences
Vol: 10, Issue: 36, pp. (528-537).

Research Article

Received: 14.01.2019 Accepted: 24.06.2019

CULTURAL REASONS BEHIND TURKISH SPEAKERS HAVING DIFFICULTY IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative research which is conducted through in-depth interview with English language instructors in five universities in Ankara, Turkey. To be able to find cultural patterns and reasons of difficulty in learning English, interviews are limited to foreign teachers teaching English to Turkish native speakers because the point was to understand non-Turkish instructors' perspective whose culture is different from ours. Also, historical background of foreign language education and social and cultural circumstances surrounding the education system in Turkey are touched briefly. The history of Turkish people's interaction with English will also be taken into consideration. The aim of the study is to understand not only why Turkish people cannot acquire the ability to speak, read, write but also have low levels of listening skills in English. This study is not focusing on only one skill in learning foreign language since the goal is finding out the reasons of the incompetency in language acquisition with all of its aspects and coming up with reasonable solutions for the foreign language education system. At the end of this study, by taking into consideration the previous literature on the subject, some general difficulties and cultural reasons of having difficulty in learning English language will be highlighted.

Keywords: Culture, English teaching, education, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

According to EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Turkey is ranked to 62th with 47.76 score and classified as 'Very Low Proficiency'. Turkey is in the similar group with the countries like Libya, Cameroon, Cambodia, Algeria, Iraq, Angola (wikipedia, 2018). For a country who prioritize joining in EU and a geopolitically significant NATO ally and a G20 country, English is crucial to improve international communications and to sustain human mobility. To improve life quality of people in a country, develop the industry, science, technology or at least to increase tourism revenues, 'English' language is clearly a necessity. It is a world language which does not only belong to English speaking countries and the importance of it is indisputable in many aspects. So, the success rate in Turkey should be searched at certain intervals. This research has set out to find the reasons for the low levels of foreign language acquisition of people in Turkey. It tries to find the possible cultural reasons from the perspective of foreign language instructors. A lot of research has been done by studying the students, teachers who are native Turkish speakers and administrators but there is not any research held to reflect the perspective of foreign teachers who teach/ has taught English to Turkish native speakers. Therefore, only foreign English tutors are intentionally selected and interviewed. It is hoped that this study will be useful to anyone working on language teaching in a more culturally-oriented aspect in Turkey. In this way, the findings of this article will be put to good use in future planning regarding foreign language education.

Fieldwork as a method of anthropology makes the researcher obtain various data from the informants directly and observe the environment which informants experience and deal with in their everyday social milieu. According to Darnell (2015: 1), "these applied findings and theoretical constructions are ...integral to management and organization studies, to criminology and risk studies, to the studies of the environment and to cultural studies, to tourism and development. In Turkey, there are a few examples of researches done by anthropologists with an applied methodological orientation about business (Aksoy Sugiyama, 2017), health issues (Elmalı et. al., 2012) and education (Tezcan, 1980). The findings of these studies can be adopted by the ministry of education, ministry of health and by the interested parties of the private sector. In a similar vein with the previously mentioned studies, this article also attempts to reveal findings regarding English language education that can be used for further improvement of language training in the future.

Historical and Cultural Background of English in Turkey

Since the proclamation of the Republic, Turkey has always tried to be close to Western countries and their languages instead of Eastern countries. Even if Arabic language has been very effective because of Islam religion, Western languages like English, French and German were preferred as national education policy. First serious English education in Turkey started with a type of high school called "Anatolian high schools". They were giving English classes. The issue of "24 Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law" was enacted on 3 March 1924. With this law, national education activities were gathered under single roof. Arabic and Persian were taught in the educational institutions of the Ottoman Empire; besides the German, French and English. Persian was completely removed. Arabic is only taught in high schools providing religious education. English, French and

German departments were opened at the universities. In Turkey, where French is widespread, German and English were also becoming highly popular. This is also because in some private or foreign schools, education was in English like TED or Robert College. Robert College then became Boğaziçi University and together with METU (Middle East Technical University), they were first universities which offer English-based degree programs.

In this research, we are looking for possible cultural reasons behind the difficulties in learning English in Turkey if there are any. Some researches about this problem suggest that we take the system from effective countries; however, instead of copying the techniques, we must find our own methods to fit into the culture and society (Erdem, 2013; Durmuşçelebi., 2013; Acat, 2002; Işık, 2008) or we can at least adapt the techniques to our cultural patterns. While Işık (2008) points out that foreign language teacher training system is not working well, Acat (2002) argues that improved methods of teaching foreign languages in Turkey and syllabuses are from western countries, Turkish students' worldviews ignored lifestyles and learning needs. However, the priority should be to identify the element(s) that will motivate language learning. This may be due to the needs of the learner. Every system or cultural structure which is borrowed and applied to another culture must be modified according to the new culture. It's easy to say, but more research on this problem will make the adaptation easier. For example, one research suggest that language teaching planning should be conducted at country level and appropriate language teaching methods which are specific to our culture, need and language, should be developed and implemented (Can, 2014). Culture has always had an important role in teaching and learning. It could also be directly effective on motivation. You may not be able to learn a language or other cultural structure if you are not familiar with it or don't want to learn it. This study also has an assumption that lack of motivation as the result of not seeing English as important as it should be seen is one of the reasons behind low rates of success in English learning.

One of the great researches done at Arizona University in the USA points that most students learn a second language to graduate (Turner, 1974) Turner says that he is doing this research because; "I have never seen these problems discussed in any depth from anthropological view." He said that there is a link between foreign language learning and social factors. For that reason, cultural patterns for learning a new language could be important. With this, we can say that it is important to apply this approach in a different aspect to any research problem. Culture and society are important determinants of learning.

This article is not about nationalism or nation-building process but its effects on learning a language. Nationalism in some specific countries is also changing in time as many other things. For example, education in the national language could be important for a nation; also, learning a second language by the citizens could have a critical role for the same nation. "[...] national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift in time, even in the course of quite short periods" (Hobsbawm, 1992). He also points that "the phenomenon is past its peak". This article will also look for if nationalism is effective on language learning or not.

Background and The Research About Language Education in Turkey

One of the well-rounded research about language teaching education in Turkey (Durmuşçelebi, 2013) showed that; the implementation of strong language policy and language teaching programs in Turkey do not have a well-designed plan. He also suggests that Turkey's language of instruction overlapping with their actual policy development and program according to the needs of the target audience is necessary to implement better planned.

Since 2005, English preparatory school in the first year of Anatolian high schools has been canceled. Students still have a chance to go English preparatory school for a year at the university before their freshman year. It means that most people who have passed the university exam and have enrolled in the university are allowed to take this intensive English year. It is optional in many departments. However, it is mandatory in some departments like medicine and few more depending on the university. The decisions taken are taken independent from the teacher and the teacher is seen as the main responsible for the work (Haznedar, 2010)

Tosun (2012) argued that it was improper to declare the method as a single culprit because it is not the only element that influences teaching, so other elements must also be examined. These elements are the target language, student, teacher, environment and method. In this way, there is much to blame until it comes to the method as the cause of failure. He analyzed English teaching programs in Turkey and Europe in a comparative study. Turkey has proposed that the program should follow developments in the European Union countries to be successful in language education (Arıbaş, 2008). In Turkey, it can be said that there is the problem of language acquisition which is supposedly and probably originates from the need for the use of foreign language (Durmuşçelebi, 2013).

According to one research (Bayram, 2016) which conducted interviews with English teachers in high schools, the impact of the teachers and students' positive and negative behaviors and attitudes towards English are emphasized. The teachers say that the motivation of students is also very important. And lastly, the education system should be organized to ensure effective learning not only inside the class but also the in environment.

In Turkey, there is a myth that says a native speaker is a better English teacher. Maybe, culturally it's the result of the fact that subconsciously people may not be trusting the Turkish education system and its teachers. "(...) they even face discrimination in hiring or promotion practices" (Çelik, 2006). Çelik also suggests that there is a cold war between native and non-native teachers in the institutions. He argues that Turkish teachers of English have knowledge of the local culture that might guide them to better teach in accordance with the cultural expectations of the students, parents and schools. Native speakers, consciously or unconsciously, sometimes might not be sensitive to the students' culture, and this might make the students feel that their identities are threatened (Çelik, 2006). He also accepts non-natives has disadvantages and natives has some advantages. In our research we conducted interviews with only foreign teachers some of whom are natives (from Britain or

the USA). Some of them are from other countries but we intentionally selected the foreigners. We try to learn our mistakes which we can't see. That's the point of this research.

METHOD

Our problem is the cultural reasons why Turkish people have difficulty in learning English. There is also more foreign languages (like German or French) which are effective in Turkey, but we chose English which is the most common and relatively more available through private courses and in the schools. It is mandatory in primary and high schools. English language education starts in the second grade at state schools. It even starts earlier at private schools. English is also mandatory course at the universities, many universities offer one year English preparatory class before starting to undergraduate education. It is also believed that this problem couldn't be fixed till now with the point of view or approach of Turkish English language teachers. That's why, we chose a group of lecturers from universities who are actually foreigner but teaching English to Turkish native speakers. We are hoping to understand cultural and other general difficulties which are unique to Turkish native speakers. Interviews were conducted with 20 English language lecturers from preparatory schools of the universities in Ankara. Some of them also are also teacher trainers. The open-ended questions were asked to eager ones and they were recorded with their consent. The research has had some hypotheses before starting to collect field data. These are the hypotheses;

- Students don't recognize the 'importance' of learning and speaking a language. They are not aware of the advantages in everyday and professional life, for personal improvement and opportunities of language which is provided.
- They don't feel it's something to use in everyday life.
- They think they don't need to learn another language.
- They also don't like effective countries like USA or EU countries, Russia, their culture and language. People show national values like keeping Turkish everywhere and resistance to others. This article is not discussing education or doing social sciences in one's own language but whether that idea is affecting capacity of learning the other language and approach to English or not.
- The education system (primary, high or university education or educators) is not capable of teaching English to language learners.

In order to analyze the research findings in detail and determine the causes of the results, content analysis was used from qualitative research methods. In order to do so, data similar to each other was brought together. Then the effort is done to interpret them in a way that the reader can understand. Thus, qualitative information similar to each other is presented to the reader. Some results were stunning. At the end we discussed and specify the results and proposed some suggestions about what can be done to fix the problem.

RESULTS

As one teacher trainer mentioned it is very important to learn one's mother language, know correct grammar and speaking correctly. Then it will be easier to learn a new language. That's what is missing with Turkish students. Also, the research says (Çelebi., 2006) that focusing on mother tongue teaching than foreign language learning and teaching in foreign languages. One instructor (55+,F,30, Russian, Ins.) say that sentence structure is different with Turkish so it is hard for students to learn. And students aware of importance of English as international language. Among the popular problems of Turkish language; inadequacy of mother tongue teaching, language pollution, the negative effects of foreign languages, teaching in foreign languages, foreign language admiration and inadequacy of new vocabulary production can be listed. Çelebi (2006) found on their research that It is not possible for a person who does not learn their native language to learn a foreign language at the desired level. Foreign language teaching primarily requires a good mother tongue education. We must remember that according to many researches, human brain can learn a few languages simultaneously starting from childhood.

Among the negative factors that affect the learning English is the fact that the classes are crowded, there is not enough technological infrastructure, the textbooks are not sufficient, the student's positive attitude towards foreign language, interest, willingness and participation is lacking, the students should learn English culture or go to England for a short time (Bayram, 2016).

“Being born in a Muslim country, students in general are raised in accordance with Islamic values, and throughout their education they develop a Turkish national identity as well. English, (...) as a part of the national education program, makes the students adopt an additional identity, as they are exposed to a number of Western cultural contexts and issues in their English lessons... Turkish prospective English teachers were conscious of their multiple identities and preferred to regard their Turkish and Muslim identities as the primary ones” (Ece, 2009, 31).

It's clear that learning a culture is also learning a culture especially when cultural difference is huge. Students even teachers sometimes put their national identity first. In our research we try to understand if national identity and national feelings effect English learning. According to this study teacher claim that they also learn a lot from that culture, such as being more tolerable. According to Karahan, students have mildly positive attitudes towards the English based culture but they are not tolerant to Turkish people speaking English among themselves (Karahan, 2007). One instructor from Russia answered question 3 as following;

“Students have absolute level of ignorance multiplied by baseless confidence in their own superiority, which obviously fails with time. Turks are not very open to new ideas and cultures very often. They act like xenophobes, which of course effects studying a foreign language” (30,8, Russian,F,Ins.).

She is not saying Turkish students are xenophobic but here it is implied that they unconsciously do it sometimes. Interestingly, similar things and the word “superiority” have been repeated by another instructor from the same country;

“People should embrace the diversity of cultures that the idea of their own nation’s superiority prevents them from being interested in or even curious about other cultures and languages. “(55+, F,30, Russian, Ins.)

It’s clear that feeling superior makes person blind against learning new cultures/languages. In most cases, you can see words, ‘culture’ and ‘language’ are used together, interchangeably and for each other. It is for sure that language is an integral part of culture.

A simple understanding of language education should be developed in all schools with the concept of teaching as much as each student can deal with foreign language only in daily life with foreigners and continue his / her daily life abroad. The main focus of the education system should be to give an effective foreign language education to students who want to (Bayram, 2016).

“Turkish education system is very unbalanced and superficial. Students learn basic knowledge, they are not though how to think / analyze/ collect info and be critical. The educational standards are extremely low; students are over graded.” (30,F,8,Russian,Ins.).

“(…)reading, writing and exam solutions techniques and skills necessary to pass tests and quizzes. Less attention is paid to communicate and productive skills and this would as a result affect students critical thinking ability.” (37, M, 10, Iran, Ins.)

“(…) too many exams, tests (….) no thoughts of their own, moreover, being unable to express themselves clearly.” (55+,F,30, Russian, Ins.)

In addition to some similar criticisms, it can be seen that critical thinking skills are seen as very important and as mentioned in this comment, Turkish students are seen weak in this important skill. This goes well beyond English education.

On instructor (37, M, 10, Iran, Ins.) at the university suggests that first and foremost important suggestion is teaching fewer hours in preparatory schools. Five or six hours of English a day is not suggested for effective learning. He says “it is too much” and he also doesn’t see benefits of digital materials if used too much.

“Students in private institutions don’t see the benefits of English as they have enough money for university” (30,F, 8,Russian, Ins.).

“They are not interested in other countries, their cultures/languages. Turkish students limit themselves and don’t consider English as a key in their future life /communication. Turkish teachers are not motivating them as well. “ (30,8,Russian,F,Ins.).

An English teacher (64, F,34, UK, Teacher trainer) thinks that popularization of the internet and new technologies like tablets helping new generation Turks to be better in English, she also said Turkish students

are very aware of the importance of language as a world language. It could be the result of global online games and social web sites;

“Although it is a compulsory school subject, it probably is not a priority for most children or their parents – Turkish, Maths and Science will trump the learning of a foreign language, I’m sure. Exposure to authentic use of the language might also be a factor although I think this has changed a lot in the past 10 years and we might see a change in children currently in school (and thus those are lucky enough to qualify for a university place in the next decade or so). I believe it’s changing with the spread of the internet and the increase in numbers of people, including children, who are using computers and tablets much more widely. This is probably spreading to the more remote parts of Turkey, to village schools too. English is the dominant language of the World Wide Web including online games that children enjoy so exposure to English is almost certainly increasing.”

DISCUSSION and SUGGESTIONS

These are the main results and problems that have been detected;

- Lack of motivation
- Weak teachers with bad English
- Lack of practice (only grammar focused approaches, students are not able to speak)
- Poor materials (also materials not adapted to Turkish culture)
- Authoritarian and crowded classes

After giving the summary of the data gathered, the suggestions are as following;

“There are very high standards in teacher education and in the exam system. Giving more importance to English inside the family/school would be useful. There can be more variety about the materials/activities. There can be more exchange programs, international events and competitions where students can participate, where they can learn the culture of the language. There should be more projects to establish international friendships, to break the barriers and make students more interested in the world around” as suggested (30,8, Russian,F,Ins.).

This comment below is a very important shortcoming in Turkish education system. Most of times, till university education, teachers tell students to ‘be silent!’ in the class and don’t talk. When they come to the university and in the real life, we tell them to ‘talk!’, ‘why don’t you talk?’. That’s the main point she argues;

“A greater embrace of communicative methodology, which I suspect is still not fully employed in schools. There should be more emphasis on skills and on fluency. There should be teachers in the schools who are not afraid of making mistakes and of having children in their classes who will be better than them at some things to do with learning the language. And, an acceptance that a language classroom sometimes needs to be a noisy place.” (64, F,34, UK, Teacher trainer)

More research by colleagues is strongly suggested to make Turkish education system and finally a better place. It is also worth mentioning that one's commitment to their own nation affects the learning a new language. Actually any new information or tools which a person doesn't learn can actually be at the disadvantage of one's own nationalism and nation.

A simple understanding of language education should be developed in all schools with the concept of teaching as much as each student can deal with foreign language only in daily life with foreigners and continue his / her daily life abroad. The main focus of the education system should be to give an effective foreign language education to students who want to (Bayram, 2016).

Interview Questions;

Age: Gender: M / F Nationality: Experience (year):

- 1) In your opinion, what is the biggest reason or reasons why Turkish native speakers have difficulty in learning English?
- 2) Do students and teachers consider English as a world language or are they aware of the importance of English language or do they care about that?
- 3) Are (ethnocentrism) national feelings effective on the antipathy towards English language? Why? Why not?
- 4) Is Turkish education system faulty? Why? Why not?
- 5) What could be done differently than now to teach English effectively?

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