

Chapter 15

Development and Assessment of a Foreign Language Curriculum for Primary Education in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Turkish primary EFL teachers' perspectives of the nation-wide initiation of English in primary grade two and grade three classes as part of a curriculum renewal process, and aims to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences in implementing the curriculum effectively. Following a discussion of the foreign language teaching in Turkish context, the first part of the study examines the process of designing the new ELT curriculum, giving an outline of curriculum objectives. Then, the research study is presented. After that, a questionnaire survey with Likert scale items and open-ended questions is employed to explore teachers' (n=250) perspectives of the new ELT curriculum and their experiences during the implementation process. Data were analyzed statistically and qualitatively. Results indicate that teachers have positive perspectives of the new ELT curriculum, yet they express some concerns about implementing it effectively in young learner classes. Recommendations for teacher development and future research are made in the end.

INTRODUCTION

As English has come to be seen as a *lingua franca* and a means of communication in the globalized world, a substantial amount of time, effort and resources have started to be invested in incorporating English as a compulsory subject from the earliest years of education in public schooling all around the world. Turkey is no exception to this trend. As a result of this interest in teaching English to young learners, many countries, including Turkey, have undertaken curricular reform in primary education.

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According to Richards (2013), curriculum is “the overall plan or design for a course and how the content for a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved” (p. 6). Fullan (2007) identifies at least three issues that are relevant to any curriculum reform: 1) the possible introduction of new or revised instructional materials such as a textbook; 2) the possible introduction of new teaching approaches or methodological skills and activities; and 3) the possible attempted alteration of beliefs, such as pedagogical values, assumptions and theories underlying any particular new policies. It is argued that these three components are essential in order for curriculum change to produce the intended outcomes (Rahman, 2014). Hence, the recent English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum reform for primary education in Turkey involves changes in all these important components in an attempt to improve young learners’ communicative competence. Moreover, the curriculum document reflects a set of beliefs and values about what is considered to be educationally and developmentally worthwhile in terms of children’s immediate needs, their future needs and the wider society (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

In order to provide the necessary background to the foreign language curriculum in Turkey, firstly the previous primary and elementary ELT curricula that were introduced in 1997 and in 2005 successively are briefly outlined. This is followed by a short reflection of the process of the latest foreign language curriculum development for primary education in Turkey, and by relevant studies conducted in global and the local context. The methodology section of the study presents assessment of the ELT curriculum from the perspectives of the primary teachers, who are the actual implementers of the program. A survey questionnaire was administered to 245 primary ELT teachers across Turkey to find out the extent to which the teachers’ perspectives are compatible with the objectives specified by the curriculum. The questionnaire also intends to explore teachers’ experiences in implementing the primary ELT curriculum, and challenges they experience during this process.

Background

English Language Education for Young Learners in Turkey

The introduction of English in Turkish primary education and its historical development may be traced through an examination of successive stages of curriculum reforms. In Turkey, curriculum reform has been a central agenda of foreign language education as a trend observed in other parts of the world such as in Asian and European countries. Since the late 1990s, three large-scale curriculum reforms have been implemented in the public education system.

English was introduced as a compulsory subject for young learners at the elementary level (grades four through eight) in Turkey in 1997, when the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MNE) initiated a major curriculum innovation. As a result, fourth- and fifth-grade students were required for the first time to participate in 64 hours of English instruction annually (two 40-minute lessons per week), while students in grades six through eight received 160 hours of instruction (five 40-minute lessons per week). The 1997 reform laid the foundations for a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to the instruction of English (Kırkgöz, 2006; 2007), yet research revealed a gap between rhetoric and reality in terms of how the planned curriculum was put into practice (Kırkgöz, 2008a; Kırkgöz, 2008b). To address the emerging issues, the ELT curriculum was revised in 2005 in order to improve the ELT program prescribed by the 1997 curriculum (MNE, 2006).

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