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Turkey's foreign language policy at primary level: Challenges in practice

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the challenges that English language teachers in state schools have faced during the implementation of the new policy prepared by the Ministry of National Education in 1997 (T.C. Resmi Gazete;1997, p. 2). Ten Turkish teachers of English as a foreign language participated in the study. Data for this qualitative study came from the semi-structured interviews. The views of teachers on new English language teaching policy at primary level; the challenges they have faced within practice and the extend of support they have received in the process of implementation were the main issues of the interview. After the interview was transcribed, it was coded by the pattern coding strategy. The results of pattern coding revealed these codes; reasons, advantages and disadvantages of the policy, achievability, challenges caused by the crowded classroom and lack of necessary equipments, support from policy makers, administration and colleagues.

Key words: *EFL; primary education; language policy*

Language planning and policy (LPP) which is believed to be a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field (Ricento, 2000, p. 208) has been the focus of research over the past decade in the fields of linguistics, sociology, politics, postmodernism and critical theory. In recent years, researchers have dealt with constructing theories, expanding the scope of LPP inquiry in different contexts (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Spolsky, 2004). To illustrate, Spolsky (2004, p. ix) proposed a brand new model that would help interpreting LPP from a different perspective. In his model, he states that language policy is an ecological approach, which includes social, political, economic, educational and cultural factors and identifies four major forces, that is, the sociolinguistic composition, the identity associated with a language, the global spread of English, and the recognition of language choice (p. 218). They all interact, and impact language policy making in a certain context,

In the future, the field of LPP is believed to continue to grow as a result of global issues such as population migration, linguistic globalization (Sonntag, 2003), and linguistic human rights (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangass, 1995).

Foreign language policy (FLP)

In countries where English has been taught and learnt as the foreign language, Language Education Policy (LEP) has great importance. LEP is defined as "a species of language policy" (Poon, 2000, p. 118) which is related to the organization of language teaching within the formal education system aiming to enhance students' competence in their native languages or to add new languages to their linguistic repertoire as a second or foreign language education. Thus, Foreign Language Policy (FLP) is related to LEP and developed to meet a country's need for foreign languages and important issues related to foreign language instruction in school settings (Lambert, 1999) with the purpose of answering questions such as; "What to teach?", "How to teach?" and "Under what conditions?" (Van Els, 1994, p.64).

A country may need to update its FLP with the purpose of equipping citizens with the foreign language skills, which are necessary to handle demands for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication because of globalization (Hu, 2007). As Lambert (2001) summarizes, some countries tend to expand their foreign language education by introducing foreign languages to young learners. However, the importance attached to foreign language education differs from country to country. Lambert (1999) divides the countries in the world into three categories- homogeneous countries such as Turkey, where the majority of people speak the same language; dyadic countries such as Switzerland, where two or three languages coexist with equal standing; and mosaic societies such as India, where multiple ethno linguistic groups speak a variety of languages. In addition, homogeneous countries are stated to give more importance to foreign language education when compared with mosaic countries since these pay more attention to their native languages.

Foreign language policy formulation and implementation

Different procedures for foreign language policymaking have been proposed by different researchers (Van Els, 1990; Trim, 1994). Van Els (1990) proposed three different procedures for foreign language policymaking: (a) needs analysis; (b) language choice; (c) the definition of objectives. On the other hand, Spolsky and Shoamy (1997) argue that an ideal policymaking process should include needs analysis as an integral component. In needs analysis, supply and demand should be taken into account. Lambert (2001) also suggests that national needs for a foreign language can be evaluated by analyzing the adult use of the language in different and wide contexts.

Which foreign language to choose as a foreign language for a specific country is another important factor in the process of policy-making. According to Trim (1994), determining a country's attitude toward a certain foreign language depends on analysis of FLP in Europe. He also claims that a foreign language may be counted as valuable by a specific country if it (a) is a vehicle of international communication; (b) is spoken by a country or countries with which there are active relations; (c) has a positive image; and (d) is spoken by high-prestige groups such as aristocrats.

Needs analysis and language choice are related to macro-level issues although the definition of objectives is related to micro-level issues in foreign language education such as starting age, the amount of time allocated to instruction and goals to be attained (Hu, 2007).

In the light of the above mentioned research studies foreign language policy implementation needs to be done with adequate planning and well- defined policy. In some cases, language policies are implemented without doing enough planning and without a

coherent policy (Grabe, 1994). However, the success of the policy cannot be guaranteed because of the complications that may appear in its implementation.

The spread of English as an international language: The case of Turkey

In addition to the explanations related to LPP and foreign language policy, it is necessary to mention the process of the spread of English in Turkey. Language spread is defined as an increase in the number of users of a language (Cooper, 1989). In the history, the spread of English has been the most significant case of language spread. As a result, English now is stated as the most preferred language of communication worldwide (Crystal, 1987).

In the case of Turkey, after the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, modernization and westernization movements resulted in strong relation with Europe particularly with French language. After 1950s, American power with respect to economy and military started to have great impact on Turkey. As a result, English language started to spread in Turkey. Nowadays, as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and an associate member to the European Union (EU), learning of English as the main language of international communication has become particularly important for Turkish citizens (Kırkgöz, 2005).

Thus, the spread of English in the context of globalization is an undeniable factor affecting language planning and policy worldwide (Hu, 2007). Many countries have updated their foreign language policy according to the dominance of English in the world. In addition, in some countries English is seen as a language indispensable to their integration into the global community. Spolsky (2004) identifies the global spread of English as one of the sources affecting language policymaking. In fact, the spread of English has influenced foreign language policy in expanding circle countries.

Teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools in Turkey

Until 1997, compulsory education used to last five years and no place was given to foreign language teaching in public primary schools. In 1997, through act 4306, the period of compulsory education was extended to eight years (MEB, 2005). As a result, students have the chance to take primary school diplomas and start learning English as a foreign language in fourth grade. In fourth and fifth grade, students have two hours of English per week whereas sixth, seventh and eighth graders have four hours of English per week.

On the official web page of the Turkish Ministry of National Education, the aim of foreign language teaching in Turkey is stated as to give adequate education to students on basic language skills namely reading, writing, speaking and listening depending on the learners' foreign language proficiency levels. In addition, the aim of foreign language policy is explained as enabling students to read academic texts and follow technological developments in the global world and communicate with people from different countries. It was also officially stated that 'Turkey's political and economic ambitions and the nation's desire to keep up its relations with foreign countries using English, particularly with countries of the European Union, are the major motivating forces underlying the decision to introduce English to young learners' (MEB, 1997, p.606). In brief, with the new policy, young learners are provided with a longer exposure to English as a foreign language (Kırkgöz, 2009).

Objectives of ELT curriculum for primary education are defined with respect to grades 4 and 5, and grades 6, 7 and 8. The stated objectives for grades 4 and 5 are to:
- raise pupils' awareness of a foreign language;

- promote a positive attitude towards the learning of English language;
- increase pupils' interest and motivation towards English language;
- establish classroom situations in the context of games so that pupils can be entertained while learning English;
- set up dialogues and meaningful contextualized learning activities, and
- help pupils to develop appropriate strategies (Kocaoluk & Kocaoluk, 2001).

The function of English for grades 6 to 8 is to improve the students' basic communicative skills by the help of four language skills.

Challenges in practice

Today, more primary school students in the expanding circle are learning English. In Europe, approximately 26% of non-Anglophone students are learning English in primary schools (Esch, 2003). Even though the situation seems to be fascinating, Nunan (2001) points out that the reality is that English has been introduced to students at an earlier stage "often without adequate funding, teacher education, or the provision of resources" (p.605). In other words, English instruction has proceeded without sound planning (Hu, 2007). To illustrate, in the Eastern part of Asia, most of the expanding circle countries have adapted new foreign language policies and they made English language learning compulsory in primary schools, however, it has been seen that in some cases the policies have not been "fully implemented largely because of an inadequate supply of primary school English teachers both in raw numbers and skill levels" (Hu, 2007, p.18).

In the light of the literature review above, the present study aims to investigate the challenges that English language teachers in state schools face during the implementation of the new policy prepared by the Ministry of National Education in 1997 considering teaching English as a foreign language in Primary schools. In this respect the following research questions were addressed:

1. What does a group of Turkish teachers of English working at primary level think about the implementation of the new policy?
2. Has that group of Turkish teachers of English faced any challenges in practice with respect to this policy? If yes, what kind of challenges have they faced?
3. Has that group of Turkish teachers of English been supported by their administrators or colleagues during the implementation of this new policy?

A case study in Turkey

Participants

Ten Turkish teachers of English working at different state primary schools in Istanbul were chosen based on their teaching experience. For the purposes of the study participants need to have been teaching English as a foreign language in Primary schools during the first years of the implementation of the new policy.

The demographic features of the participating teachers were as follows: 9 female, 1 male teacher; their age range was between 30 and 35. All of the teachers were chosen among the ones working at state primary schools in Istanbul. However, only five of the teachers were still teaching at primary level. Three of them are working in different high schools and the other two are working as instructors at private universities. The teaching experience of teachers varied from 9 to 15 years. All of the teachers were Turkish citizens. Nine teachers

were graduates of ELT programs and one teacher was the graduate of American Language and Literature program of different universities in Turkey.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was adapted from the interview which was used in a study conducted by Hu (2007). The original questionnaire consisted of three parts including interviews with administrators, teachers and local officers. For the purposes of the present study only the interview questions prepared for teachers were adapted. This method of data collection was preferred in order to receive in-depth information and for practicality purposes. The views of teachers on the following issues were aimed to elicit: (i) the views of teachers on new English language policy at primary level; (ii) challenges in practice; (iii) the support in the process of implementation. Views of the participating teachers on the new English language policy and the challenges they have faced during the implementation process were explored through this data collection method. In order to analyze the data gathered by interviews, pattern coding strategy was applied (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis

By using the following patterns and sub-patterns, the author and another researcher coded the transcribed data to strengthen the reliability of the results.

1. the views of teachers on the new English language policy at primary level;
    a. reason for this policy
    b. advantages and disadvantages of the new policy
    c. achievability of the policy
2. challenges in practice;
    a. challenges caused by crowded classroom
    b. challenges caused by lack of necessary equipments
3. support in the process of implementation.
    a. support from policy makers
    b. support from administration and colleagues

Results

The views of teachers on the new English language policy at primary level

The first research question aimed to investigate the views of Turkish teachers of English working at primary level on the implementation of the new policy prepared by the Ministry of National Education in 1997 considering teaching English as a foreign language in Primary schools. Therefore, because of the responses that participating teachers gave to first three questions of the interview the views of those teachers were explored.

The teachers' responses to this question were categorized and analyzed as follows: reason for this policy, advantages and disadvantages of the new policy and achievability of the policy.

Reason for policy. Most teachers stated that the only reason for the implementation of this new policy is to get students to start learning a foreign language before puberty and raise the awareness of students regarding the importance of learning a foreign language at an early age. One of the teachers said:

> It is the best policy that ministry of education implemented lately. I appreciate the improvement and I think that this policy should have been implemented earlier. (Informant 9)

Another teacher stated the importance of awareness raising with respect to learning a foreign language by saying:

> Persuading students on how important learning a foreign language is easier when they are younger, because they are learning English by the help of games and songs mostly which they also apply in their native languages. (Informant 6)

They further indicated that this policy should have been decided and started to be implemented from the very first years of our republic with the revolution of national education.

Advantages and disadvantages of the new policy. The teachers indicated that there are both advantages and disadvantages of implementing this new policy at primary level. Some of the advantages were explained by one of the teachers:

> The younger the students, the more willing they are to learn a foreign language. They can be aware of their ability regarding language learning at the early stages of their education. (Informant 1)

Another teacher stated another advantage, which was about classroom management:

> As a teaching method, I generally make extensive use of games and songs to teach English to young learners, this helps students to be motivated and to concentrate easily which causes great management in the classroom. In short, I don't need to pay any extra effort to motivate them and to manage my classroom. (Informant 5)

In addition to the advantages, the teachers also indicated some disadvantages of teaching English to young learners. Lack of English teachers, negative effects on acquiring native language are the disadvantages mentioned by the teachers. One of the teachers explained these disadvantages effectively:

> Since there are not enough English teachers in our state schools, teachers from other branches are recruited to teach English to the 4th and 5th graders, and they may not teach accurate forms of pronunciation and structure of English which leads fossilization in the following years of their language education. Moreover, since the students are only 10 or 11 years old, they may not have adequate native language knowledge to learn a foreign language, also foreign language sometimes affects their native language use negatively. (Informant 7)

Achievability of the policy. When the teachers were informed about the objectives of new ELT policy (Kocaoluk and Kocaoluk, 2001) all of them showed the same reaction and claimed that it is impossible to achieve all of the objectives informed. One of the teachers' view was like this:

> If the policy makers believe that it is possible to achieve all these objectives with only two hours of instruction in a week, with the books distributed by the ministry of education and with the teachers who are not English teachers, I am ready to leave my classroom and let them teach. (Informant 10)

Challenges in practice

The second research question examined whether participants faced with any challenges in practicing the new policy and the types of challenges (see Appendix, questions 4-5). The teachers' answers to this question were categorized and analyzed as follows: challenges caused by crowded classrooms, challenges caused by lack of necessary equipments.

Challenges caused by crowded classrooms. Some of the participants indicated that the number of students in the classrooms of state schools is too much to teach a foreign language effectively. Crowded classrooms are stated to be a significant limitation in teaching young learners who need individual monitoring. They said:

> They love learning via games and role-plays, however, in a classroom full of forty young learners I cannot apply any of these activities because of discipline problems, which is of utmost importance in state schools. (Informant 2)

> In a language classroom, there should be maximum 20 students to be able to deal with each of the students and meet their needs; however, our classrooms are full of students more than 30. That is to say, it creates the biggest challenge for the teachers teaching young learners who are active learners. (Informant 4)

Challenges caused by lack of necessary equipments. Almost every participant stated that the books provided by the ministry of education who are also the policy makers, are not well-designed enough to meet the objectives aimed. In addition, since the group of students for whom this policy developed are young learners, using only course books and not integrating other equipments such as audio-tapes, CD-players, computers or projectors into foreign language lessons due to lack of budget is believed to be inadequate. Two of the teachers' indicated this:

> Even though Ministry of education is insisting on implementing the objectives they informed, and make use of DyNet system with young learners, we and our schools are not provided with any kind of technological equipment. Unfortunately, I am not able to teach songs by the help of CD-players since we do not have any. (Informant 6)

> Briefly, they want us teach to meet the needs of students from each type of intelligence but they do not support us. And when we complain about this situation, the answer is always the same; "Being a teacher means creativity". (Informant 2)

Support in the process of implementation

The third question aims to find out whether the implementers of this policy - teachers received any support during the process of implementation of the new policy. In the interview questions 6 to 8 were asked to get answers to examine this research question (see Appendix). Teachers' responses to this question were categorized under three sub-headings: support from policy makers, support from administration and colleagues.

Support from policy makers. Participating teachers said that before implementing a new policy in state school, they should be given in-service training about the expectations, objectives and the necessary methodological knowledge. However, it was also claimed that they were not provided with any training. They indicated that:

> One day our school administrator held a meeting and told us that the following year, we were going to teach 4th and 5th graders, we were given the syllabuses, books and that's it. Nothing about the suitability of the classroom settings, the necessary

additional materials, or the teachers who were supposed to teach these classes were discussed and we were expected to teach without having any resources out of distributed course books. (Informant 3)

I understand the difficulty of presenting a new policy to all teachers of English in Turkey, but at least the heads of departments should have been trained and asked to share knowledge. (Informant 7)

They further stated that due to their loaded program, teachers from other branches had to teach these classes without receiving any English language teaching education; at least these teachers should have received some in-service training.

Support from administration and colleagues. Some of the teachers indicated that the school administration has not helped them either in providing technological support or necessary resources which were the teachers' only demand. However, it was also indicated that the administration organized some volunteer workshops which aimed to train teachers of other branches on how to teach English to young learners. And these workshops were given by English Language teachers of the schools which show the colleague support. Teachers who indicate this information said:

One day, I asked my administer to provide a CD-player, since there are some songs in the course-book and which I believed would take the interest of my students, the answer he gave me was incredible; "You are the teacher, you have to find the necessary equipment" although he was a teacher and although he knows the amount of money I earn. (Informant 1)

During the breaks I heard some of the teachers of other branches who were teaching English to 4th graders, talking about the way he taught English. I could not believe in my ears. Immediately I offered my school administer to give some workshops to these teachers by the help of my 'teaching young learners' knowledge. (Informant 8)

In brief, since everything related to the challenges faced due to below stated reasons, there is no need to repeat them, however, the point of providing teachers with the basic facilities and training before implementing a newly developed policy should be underlined for many times.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the study indicated that the new policy prepared by the Ministry of National Education in 1997 considering teaching English as a foreign language in Primary schools was the outcome of top-down, assumption-based, and quick policymaking which consequently had unintended impact on poorly-resourced schools with teacher shortage. This consequence can be the result of not starting this new policy process with needs analysis in which the teachers, administration, students and even parents would be involved (Van Els, 1990; Spolsky and Shoamy, 1997). In other words, as Hu (2007) mentioned macro level issues related to language planning and policy has been ignored.

On the other hand, as Van Els (1990) proposed an important step of policy making is defining the objectives. Hovever, the findings regarding the implementation of new policy revealed that policy was issued prematurely and it brought unintended consequences as follows because of not having clear explanation of the objectives of new policy . First of all, the policy seems to be an extra burden for the budget of the Ministry of education. That is to say, since they cannot meet the needs of this policy with respect to resources, implementation of the policy cannot be done appropriately. Secondly, since the policy makers planned and

implemented this policy without taking teacher shortage in the country into consideration, unsatisfactory teaching of English as a foreign language and low quality of implementation was inevitable. Lastly, since policy makers did not plan the above mentioned results, they ignored schools with no resources and providing teachers who are not ELT teachers with the necessary in-service training to have high quality implementation. It also shows that in the absence of adequate planning, the policy may have unintended impact on educationally poor schools regarding teacher, resources and support. As mentioned by Grabe (1994) when language policies are implemented without doing enough planning and without a coherent policy, some possible deficiencies can be inevitable.

As a final remark, I strongly believe that policy making is one of the most important duties of the government, in other words, policy makers of education should pay attention on the needs of schools, teachers and students, the shortage of language teachers before developing a policy. The schools, administration, teachers and students should be supported during the implementation since implementing a policy is not the same with developing it. I also consider the importance of in-service training of the teachers before and during the implementation of new educational policies.

Implications

The present study has some theoretical implications for the field of language planning and policy. It shows that foreign language policy not only involves issues unique to foreign language learning and teaching – such as at which age students begin learning a foreign language – but also issues common to educational policy, such as the efficiency and high quality in education.

As many countries have recently started teaching English as a foreign language to young learners, the findings of this study may have implications beyond Turkey particularly for policymaking in other Expanding Circle countries that are planning to incorporate English into the primary school curriculum. As the case of Turkey reveals, an Expanding Circle country should be cautious and frugal when formulating a foreign language policy intended to promote the teaching of English in its primary schools.

Implementation of the policy should not be done without examining the feasibility of introducing English to primary level students. Finally, by considering the language teacher shortage in state schools some in-service training should be provided to teachers of other branches who are responsible for teaching English to young learners.

Limitations

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, it remains largely unknown to what extent the policy has been implemented in Turkey. Furthermore, the use of interview as the only instrument of data, the issue of generalizability remains uncertain.

Biographical information

Görsev İnceçay received her BA degree in the field of English Language Teaching from Marmara University in 2001. After working as an English teacher in different state schools for five years, she started her MA in the field of ELT at Yeditepe University. She received her MA degree in 2009. She has been doing her PhD in the same field and same university. She has also been working as an instructor at Yeditepe University ELT department for four years. She can be contacted at gincecay@yeditepe.edu.tr.

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