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Comments Of Prospective Turkish Teachers On Learning Turkish As A Foreign Language

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the views of prospective teachers of Turkish on different aspects of learning Turkish as a foreign language. 120 third-year student teachers at the faculty of education of a Turkish public university participated in the study. They were asked to answer a list of open ended questions and 15 of them were interviewed. The qualitative data were analysed with the content analysis method at the end of which some themes were obtained. The findings could be discussed under the following headings: (1) motives for learning Turkish, (2) challenges of learning Turkish, and (3) identity issues in learning Turkish.

1. Introduction

Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language (TTFL) is a currently developing field in the discipline of applied linguistics (İşcan, 2011; Ungan, 2006; Yaylı, 2004). There are a number of institutions in Turkey providing the learners with new programs, syllabi and course books. This speedy development requires a new standpoint for all who work in the field of teaching Turkish.Recent research has shown that foreigners who come to Turkey to study Turkish as a foreign language suffer from many problems (Yaylı, 2004, 2007) like orthography, pronunciation (Okatan, 2012), morphology (Şahin, 2013), general structure (Karababa, 2009), methodology (Yaylı, 2004; Yaylı & Yaylı, 2011) and culture (Bayyurt, 2011). Also the learners of Turkish as a foreign language studying Turkish in their home countries experience similar problems (Yaylı, 2007). Turkish, as an agglutinative language, offers a set of linguistic and cultural challenges in language education (Bayyurt, 2011; Karababa, 2009; Yaylı, 2007). Therefore a lot of in-depth research is necessary in order to understand the contexts and processes of teaching and learning

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Turkish as a foreign language. Developing teachers in the field of Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language (TTFL) is an important issue to tackle. Despite some graduate programs in Turkey, there are not undergraduate programs that can raise TTFL teachers. Present TTFL teachers are teachers of Turkish language or foreign language teachers with different kinds of origins. Some of those teachers do not have pedagogical proficiency in their fields as they come from various faculties as well as faculties of education, which threatens the quality of TTFL teachers. The views of practitioners and prospective teachers are really important in theory building. However, there are few studies on the views of prospective teachers of Turkish language in the field of TTFL. Demirel (2011) collected the views of the prospective teachers on the 'Teaching Turkish to Foreigners' course to find that the course is satisfactory to them despite some shortcomings. Şahin, Kurudayıoğlu, Tunçel ve Abalı-Öztürk (2013) surveyed the prospective teachers of Turkish language with a self-efficacy scale and found variables of gender and grade level of the participants affected the self-efficacy level. Therefore further research with similar participants is required in the field of TTFL. The only course about TTFL at the tertiary level is 'Teaching Turkish to Foreigners' in the syllabus of Turkish Language Education program at the faculties of education. It is a theoretical course and deals with TTFL superficially. Therefore the prospective teachers of Turkish language could develop some views in the field depending on their knowledge they gain in the mentioned course. Their views on TTFL are worth searching and could provide the literature with significant data to develop theories in the field. Hence, this study aims at looking into the views of pre-service teachers of Turkish language on learning Turkish as a foreign language and at answering the following research question: What are the views of prospective teachers of Turkish language on learning Turkish as a foreign language?

2. Method

This study has a qualitative design in which the views of the prospective teachers of Turkish language were surveyed. For the analysis of the data, qualitative content analysis was used. The findings from the study were discussed under the sub-headings derived from the qualitative data analysis.

2.1. The context and the participants

The study was carried on at the faculty of education of a public university in Turkey where prospective teachers of Turkish language have a 4-year undergraduate program. In their third year at the university, student teachers are required to study a course titled 'Teaching Turkish to Foreigners' in spring term. In this course they study the methodological and political issues related to the field of teaching Turkish as a foreign language. In a study, Demirel (2011) found that student teachers are happy to study such a course but they stated that it should be improved in some ways. The participants of the study were 120 third-year student teachers from the department Turkish Language Education. They participated in the study after they took the aforementioned course. In addition, the 15 of those participants volunteered to take part in an interview following the survey with open ended questions. The age average of the 120 participants was calculated to be 20.84 at the time of the study.

2.2. Data collection and the procedure

The qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions and a semi-structured interview. First the survey questions were prepared in the light of the literature by the researcher. Later those questions were controlled by a second researcher with expertise in the field. After the minor modifications, the participants answered the questions at the same time. With the purpose of triangulation of the data in mind, the 15 of the volunteers from the existing participants were interviewed. The interview questions were prepared by the researcher and they were checked by another researcher in the field. The semi-structured interview for each student teacher took about 25 minutes. The survey and the interview were held in Turkish language and the transcribed data were translated into English by the researcher.

2.3. Data analysis

To analyze the collected data, a qualitative content analysis was used. Before the analysis, the researcher and two other experts in the field of educational sciences agreed on a coding system. The categories were predetermined based on the research questions of the study. The responses to the open-ended survey questions and the interview transcripts were perused to obtain the target themes. These themes helped the researcher categorize the comments of the prospective teachers of Turkish language on learning Turkish as a foreign language. The theme-category match by the researcher was validated by another researcher in the field and a 100% agreement was reached after negotiation. The excerpts below were presented verbatim with pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.

3. Findings and discussion

The analysis of the data collected through open-ended questions and interviews revealed that the prospective teachers of Turkish language consider TTFL under the themes of 1) motives for learning Turkish, 2) challenges of learning Turkish and 3) identity issues in learning Turkish.

3.1. Motives for learning Turkish

The participants stated that foreigners learn Turkish for various reasons. They believe that many people from the countries of the world want to learn Turkish to study in Turkish universities. According to those participants, university education in Turkey is gaining prestige for some nations, especially Turkic republics of Asia, African and Middle East countries. Sedat, for example, said:

> I think Turkish is becoming popular in some countries of the world. I can say that it is more popular now even in Europe than before. The number of foreign students is getting higher every year. I also see some Erasmus exchange students learning Turkish at my university. (Sedat)

Also Erdi and Esra pinpointed the motives of the foreigners for studying Turkish:

> In my opinion Turkish as a foreign language will be an important discipline in the near future. People come to Turkey for education, tourism, commerce, and other reasons. We live in a global village now. Everyone wants to know everything.(Erdi)

> Ten years ago if someone had asked me what I thought of Turkish as a foreign language, I would have laughed and said "I do not think people will ever want to learn Turkish". Things have changed now. I think people are bored with learning English, French and German. They head for different ones like Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Turkish. Yes, people want to speak Turkish for a change, to show off to the others. (Esra)

When the participants are asked to state their feelings about the notion of TTFL, they try to rationalize why foreigners need to learn Turkish. While doing so, they give credit to the prestige of Turkish language, globalism and the raising communicative needs of the peoples of the world.

3.2. Challenges of learning Turkish

As stated above, prospective teachers of Turkish believe that learning Turkish is one of the new trends in language education. However, they also think that learning Turkish is not easy. Turkish has a different structure from many mainstream Indo-European languages as stated by Osman:

> Turkish is very hard to the foreigners. I have some friends studying Turkish here and they say that Turkish is too hard to learn. I think the phonological, morphological and syntactic features of Turkish are new to them. It is difficult but I know some foreign people who speak good Turkish. (Osman)

On the other hand, Zehra and Esra takes the issue from different points of view:

> If you are studying a new language the biggest challenge is the culture for you. If you cannot internalize the target culture, you cannot be proficient in any language. The Islamic culture in Turkey will be the main handicap for the learners. (Zehra)

> Turkish is not like English. You can practice English everywhere, but it is not easy to find a speaker of Turkish when you need one. You need to practice Turkish in its context. Then it is much harder than English. (Esra)

The participants of the study think that Turkish is a real challenge to the learners due to its structure, cultural issues and the lack of practice opportunities. They compare Turkish to English and conclude that there are many challenges in learning Turkish as a foreign language.

3.3. Identity issues in learning Turkish

The final issue that came up in the study was related to the challenges of learning Turkish. However, it also stands as a separate unit as it has a lot to do with identity formation processes in learning a foreign language. How the learners perceive Turkish and Turkish people could play a major role in identity formation, which was underlined by several participants:

> I think the Christian identity of the European learners could cause a clash with the expected identity of the target language speaker. We can easily see that the Europeans, Asians and people from the Middle East are very different from us. You need to feel like a Turkish person to speak the language well. (Selim)

> Language learners experience a kind of transformation. They start to act differently than before. The ones who change quickly are better learners than who cannot change. So the length of the study time is very important. (Berna)

Some participants see language learning as a period of transformation in identities. The target culture and the society determine the process of identity formation in the target language. Also the time period seems to count in the transformation process.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to survey the views of the prospective teachers of Turkish language on TTFL. Their views were discussed under three headings and direct quotations from the participants proved these issues are worth considering in the area of TTFL. The first two issues, motives and challenges, are in line with the findings from previous studies (e.g., Krababa, 2009, Okatan, 2012, Yaylı, 2004, 2007); however the third issue, identity formation, is a new point of discussion forwarded by the pre-service teachers of Turkish language. Thus, further research is required on this issue. The findings from this study could be used by the practitioners, program developers and the applied linguists. On the other hand, the study has some limitations. It was conducted in a public university; further studies could be carried out in different institutions. Also data could be collected with the help of different instruments. Findings from future studies could help us strengthen the theory in the field of TTFL.

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