The history of foreign language policies in Turkey

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Abstract

During history, language policies were shaped according to the commercial, geographical and most importantly religious reasons. This situation is true for every other country in the world as well as Turkey. Language teaching and learning in Turkey has always been an important issue since the Ottoman Empire. The countries which were in relation with the Empire had a strong effect on the choices of the foreign languages taught. People living on these lands have always tried to learn the languages of the countries they have relations with. Governments worldwide have produced specific policies covering languages in education, so have Turkey. In Turkey in order to maintain international communication and to catch up with the new developments, English has become the inevitable tool for people, especially for the young population. The aim of this study is to look at the development of foreign language studies in Turkish history and have a critical look at the issue in order to understand the reasons of the ever changing foreign language policies in Turkey.

Keywords: Foreign language policy, language planning, Ottoman Empire, History of Turkey’s education system

1. Definition of Language Policy

According to Corson(1990), a national language policy is defined as “a set of nationally agreed principles which enables decision makers to make choices about language issues in a rational, comprehensive and balanced way” (p 151). He also defines language policy as “a set of principles agreed on by stakeholders, enabling decision making about language and literacy issues in the formal education system at all levels: early childhood, primary, secondary, and the teacher education segment of the tertiary level. Another dimension to this definition is ‘the deliberate choices made by governments or other

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and nature of language planning in the area of education is one key dimension of the relationship between language and social life about which governments make deliberate choices (Liddicoat, 2004).

2. The Background of Foreign Language Teaching Policies in Turkey

Policy directives regarding language in Turkey go as far back as the Ottoman Empire. Language learning has been an important issue in the Turkish education system starting from the second half of the XX. century until today. Foreign language policies have changed according to the needs of the country and its relations with the other countries. With the beginning of the “Tanzimat Period”, one of the western languages was foregrounded. While the language foregrounded was French during the “Tanzimat Period”, it was German in the “Meşrutiyet Period”. After the Second World War English became the foregrounded language (İnandi, 1997). English is still a language which is in favor in Turkey as well as it is in the world.

2.1 Before the Republic

During the Ottoman Empire, “medrese” education was the core of the education system. The traditional language policy during the Ottoman Empire was affected by the Islamic culture. The main aim of the education policy at that time was to learn the language of Qur’an in order to educate religious people who can understand their religion better. Although the government language was Turkish, the foreign language taught was Arabic and Persian. Arabic was the language for science and Persian was the language for literature. Before the Tanzimat Period, a well-educated Turkish person was to know Arabic and Persian. Just like knowing English today, knowing Arabic or Persian meant a better job opportunities. (Demircan, 1988).

It was in the 1880s when foreign language education was put in the curriculum in schools. The first introduction of the English language into the Turkish education system started in The Tanzimat Period which marks the beginning of the westernization movements in the education system (Kırkgöz, 2005:155). In the Ottoman Empire, the first language to be taught in schools was French. French was the most important language of that century because it was the language of diplomacy, philosophy and science. With the freedom that the declaration of “TanzimatFermanı” and the “İslahatFermanı” brought, the process of westernization started. The first schools to be opened were the French, German, English, Italian and American schools (Demircan, 1988: 76).

2.2 The establishments of the Republic in 1923 to 1980s

When Turkey established the Republic, the world was under the influence of scientific and technological developments. With the use of different means of communication the countries were closer to each other. This situation led Turkey to improve and keep the pace with the other nations and this situation gained acceleration to foreign language learning and teaching. The numbers of schools teach through the medium of English increased at this time. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, modernization and westernization movements brought closer connections with Europe and the USA, which accelerated the spread of ELT in the country. English gained precedence over other foreign languages particularly French, which was previously preferred in diplomacy, education and art (Kırkgöz, 2007: 217).

In 1924, in order to nationalize the education policy of the newly established county, Atatürk combined the schools (mektep, medrese, foreign and minority schools) and formed a new language policy with “The
Unity of Education Law

With this law, all the non-national institutions were taken out of the education system and all the schools in the nation were connected to the Ministry of National Education. Persian and Arabic were taught in schools until the “alphabet reform” in 1928 (Sezer, 2003:181).

2.3 Between 1980s -1990s

The most important step that was taken in 1980 was the codification of the “Foreign Language Education and Teaching Law”. According to this law, the rules for formal training and common-public education were adjusted. After 1980, a calculation of the previous era was done and a new education policy was designed (Abay, 2003:411). The number of universities went up in 1960s and 70s as the number of universities grew up, the need for a coordinated centralized planning. As a result of this need, Higher Education reorganized its academic, institutional and administrative structure in 1981 and Council of Higher Education was established with an Act number of 2547. After the establishment of this new structure, every higher educational institute was assembled under the framework of one Council, the Council of Higher Education. Council of Higher Education has an autonomous structure which is responsible of all the higher educational organizations in Turkey. Number of schools conducting English education during this time has increased. According to surveys done by Ministry Of National Education there were 193 English-medium secondary schools in Turkey in the 1987–1988 academic years (103 private, 90 state-owned). By the 2004–2005 academic years, the number of private secondary schools reached 650, and the number of Anatolian high schools were 415. The use of English as a foreign language was also ascended in Europe and it started to become the lingua franca of the fast growing world. Even though the contributors to the 1966 Arlie House conference on the language problems of the developing nations (Fishman et al.1968) saw English as just another case of a “language of wider communication competing with other local languages” (Spolsky, 2004: 77), contrary to expectations, English continued to spread around the world as a common language in communication especially in technology, trade and education.

1997 is an important date for Turkey’s Foreign Language Policy. In 1997 The Turkish Ministry of National Education (MNE), decided to make drastic changes in the nation’s foreign language policy. The Turkish Ministry of National Education, in cooperation with the Turkish Higher Education Council, established a plan called “The Ministry of National Education Development Project”. This project is a major curriculum innovation in FLT and its aim was to promote the teaching of English in the Turkish educational institutions. At the level of primary education, the most important part is the integration of the primary and secondary education. The project extended the duration of the 5 year compulsory education to 8 years. Another important bottom-line of the reform was the introduction of English for Grade 4 and Grade 5. This is an important point in bringing the age down to 9 in order to meet the students with the second language. The application provided the students to exposure to the foreign language for a longer period of time and made English as a standardized compulsory school subject. In October 1997, English language was started to be taught to young learners (TEYLs) in Grades 4 and 5. This is an important point in foreign language learning as exposure to foreign language at younger ages would let the learners interact with the language and internalize it.
3. Foreign Language Teaching Policy in Contemporary Turkey

Education is the most significant feature for the success of a country as it is the key element for the future achievement and improvement. Every educational institution has its own responsibility on this progress however; higher education institutions are the ones which should be considered as the core because they are the places where the leaders of the future are being educated. Higher education institutions carry the responsibility of the social and economic developments of a country, transferring the cultural values to the coming generations, enlightening the society with new findings for the sake of the humanity (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995: p: 389). It is also the higher education institutes responsibility to upper the standards of the society. When Higher Education Institutes influence the individuals as students, this situation effects the social upheaval. (Bowen, 1980). As the number of educated people increase in a society, the change for the good becomes inevitable. Catching up with the new developments occurring in the world highly depends on this issue. As English is the lingua franca of the world, learning and teaching English maintain its importance as one of the important issues for the governments and precautions are being taken in order to have the learners get the best solution. In Turkey the Council of Higher Education and the educational institutions have an important role in both developing policies and practicing these policies in the areas of education.

Learning a language in today’s world is not the final objective, it is the tool for communication and interaction. In general there has been a faulty procedural practice done throughout the years. In order to learn from the previous mistakes, the old habits coming from the history of language teaching and learning should be replaced with the innovative practices. Starting from the Ottoman Empire, culture of learning a foreign language was formed with some procedural problems. These problems occurred because of the transfer from both the Western and Ottoman influences. This situation stems from the translation method in which understanding the meaning of the text is the only aim and in order to reach this goal, the learners focused on translation and grammar methods in order to understand Latin which has an analytic structure. The aim was not learning a language but it was learning about a language (İşik, 2008, 21). In today’s world language is being used as a communication tool in the fast growing world and it is the indispensable means of information exchange. In order to use the language for the sake of its practical usage a curriculum which meets these needs should be constituted by the academicians who are qualified in the field. In addition to this, as language policies typically responds to problems that are sociopolitical in nature, sociologists or political scientists may first identify the need and develop an action concordantly.

4. Conclusion

In this study English as a foreign language in the Turkish education system has been outlined in order to understand the present situation. A successful foreign language planning should be based on realistic and scientific data (Canagarajah, 2006). Data collection, environmental analysis, goal setting, planning, preapplication, response evaluation, assessment and evaluation are the steps to be taken in order to have an ongoing system (Graves, 2000). While planning a policy of a nation on an issue like FLT the responsibility should be taken by academicians who are specialized in their fields.
In this study we have looked back the history of foreign language education and then tried to comment on the issue from different perspectives and responsibilities of different Institutions.

References


