An Evaluation on English Language Education Process in Turkey from the Viewpoints of University Preparatory School Students

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Abstract: Many studies on effective language teaching process draw attention to the importance of teacher roles in this process, and give advice teachers to have prior knowledge about what their students know before beginning the instruction. This study is intended to draw an effective English language teacher profile by taking into consideration first year students' readiness levels and their experiences during their former education periods. In order to fulfill this aim, 38 preparatory class students from Tourism Vocational College Preparatory Programs, Erzincan University, were chosen at the beginning of 2009-2010 academic year. Participants were asked to write a composition on the evaluation of their prior language education experiences during their primary and high school years giving examples from English teachers who they admired most or they were not satisfied with. The analyses of the student compositions showed that some frequently experienced problems negatively affect foreign language education process. The most common of the problems were related to English teachers and English courses at schools as well as those stemming from teaching environments and teacher characteristics in Turkey.

Key Words: *Effective Language Teacher, Experience, Foreign Language Education, English Teacher*

Introduction

English language teaching has become important especially after 1980s in Turkey and from the beginning of those years its importance in national primary and secondary schools in our country has increased day by day. To reach the needs of the time and meet the aims of national educational administration, English language which is most spoken language and referred as lingua franca of modern world, has become compulsory in every step of educational curricula.

During the last three decades, primary schools, high schools and university language teaching departments have also encountered many changes about English language position in their curricula. The current situation in Turkey is as follow: English language as a foreign language is included in every curriculum of educational centres. Officially, Turkish national schools start teaching English as a foreign language in fourth and fifth grades of primary schools. In addition, some private preschool teaching institutions aim at teaching English as a foreign language to children. In spite of its being mostly taught language and its being widespread in Turkey, using the language as a communication tool by the learners is unfortunately inadequate.

In our country, it is widely asked why a foreign language has not been taught and the answer of this question has not been replied in spite of the applications and precautions done by the ministry of education yet. After the analyses of the studies on this issue (Demircan, 1988; Demirel, 1990; Gülmez, 1982; Gömleksiz, 1993; Harman, 1999; Demirel, 2003; Aydemir, 2007; Soner, 2007; Işık, 2009) foreign language teaching and learning exist as an important problem of Turkey today. One of these specialists, Soner (2007) summarizes main problems in foreign language education process in Turkey in her article and explains the reasons why ELT education is not successful in Turkey. According to her, main difficulties in ELT education stem mostly from limited number of teachers, teachers' having lack of adequate foreign language knowledge and methods, teachers' using old fashioned language approaches, students' not giving importance because of the other courses' heavy burden in school, insufficient language equipments in schools, students' lack of motivation and interest about foreign language, and students' not having chance of using the language outside the class.

Before mentioning about effective language teacher and education process, it should be better to define the concepts *"success, successful learner and successful teacher"* in education. What is success, what makes a language learner successful and how can a language teacher become successful in the class?

As a general meaning, success is to reach the aims and changes according to authority that puts the aims (Şahin, 2009). When the individual put some rules for the aims, the possibility of individuals' becoming successful becomes higher. Then the learner becomes intrinsically motivated. However, in educational settings, aims are determined before the educational process. Therefore, it can be said that learners are motivated generally in education extrinsically and students should replace extrinsic motivation with intrinsic motivation for achievement. This can be supported with proper arranged educational settings.

Nikolov (2001) replies the second question by making a study including questions about the features of successful language learners. In her study, participants listed what they thought to be necessary for a learner to be good at foreign language. According to results of this study, majority considered that one should have persistence, strong will, hard work, patience, good aptitude and memory, a good teacher, great enthusiasm and motivation towards language. Also Brown (1978) draws an effective language learner profile by looking at mostly affective factors and says that a good learner should be field independent in communication, use feedback, and have proper distance with regard to native and target cultures and self-esteem.

Successful teacher or in other words effective teacher is identified in many studies (Brown, 1978; Sanderson, 1983; Moon and Shelton, 1994; Vadillo, 1999; Çetin, 2001; Güven, 2004; Şeker et al., 2004; Malikov, 2006; Genç, 2007; Mohidin et al., 2009). All these studies used different criterion features changing situation to situation. Because there are a number of features about teacher evaluation which holds the effective teacher from different perspectives and the term *"effective"* is perceived and interpreted differently by the people. To make an evaluation of the teachers easier, Miller (1987) (cited in Vadillo, 1999, p.354) defines the qualities of effective teacher by separating in four areas: *"1) affective characteristics: enthusiasm, encouragement, humour, interest in the student, availability, mental health; 2) skills: creativity, challenge; 3)classroom management: pace, pairness; 4) academic knowledge: grammar".* In addition, Çetin (2001) and Kücükahmet (2006, pp: 145-150) categorized the ideal teacher features in different parts focusing on the mostly cited Self-Evaluation Checklist for Teachers in literature. While Çetin says that there are three divisions each of which has also subdivisions, and these are about teachers' individual characteristics, professional academic capabilities, and their attitudes towards teaching professions, Kücükahmet calling the effective teacher as democratic teacher explains the issue in four divisions by adding one more feature to Çetin's division. That feature is about teachers' knowledge on general culture.

In the light of this complexity, it is interpreted that this complex situation in the definitions is the same for the concept effective language teacher. For example, while Brown (1978) defines effective language teacher in terms of affective factors, Sanderson (1983) explains effective language teacher phenomenon mostly by approaching from the perspective of classroom activities. Brown says that a good language teacher should *"be able deal with field indepence, respond to the student with empathy, insure the presence of meaningful communicative contexts in classroom, provide optimal feedback, be sensitive to sociocultural alienation and encourage self-esteem in the student."* Sanderson's study reveals that a good language teacher should use the target language predominantly, have clear and good pronunciation, stress and intonation, make students involve in activities, be flexible with regard to objectives, explain the classroom task clearly etc. Therefore, it is not easy

to make an exact definition of the phenomenon because of the wide variety of definitions and characteristics in literature. To make a general definition and understand the concept, Arıkan and his colleagues (2008) made a study on effective English teacher by looking at Turkish preparatory class school students' perspectives. In that study, effective teacher qualities chiefly quoted by the students are respectively *"possessing good knowledge of the English language, being open to innovations, behaving friendly, motivating, being aware of student needs, being good at classroom management, witty, and lastly limiting the use of mother tongue."*

In addition to all these concepts and definitions, it can be claimed that it is not quite easy to define language learning process accurately and all knowledge. Because education is a complex experience, which has many components and each of them is very crucial for the success of education. Fundamental components of education are summarized as teacher, student, education programme and environment. These components were described in the many works (Novak and Gowin, 1984; Gömleksiz, 2002; McDonough and Shaw, 2003) and they can not be thought as separate parts. Each component is a part of a whole and affects one another. According to Fidan and Erden (1994), teacher is the person who supports and arranges learning process. In this process, the functions of teacher are to arrange learning experiences by utilizing different educational methods and techniques, and to evaluate whether desired behaviours are learned by the learners. Students are individuals who need learning and go to formal education institutions in order to meet this need. Education programme is a curriculum which shows all activities conducted for the aim of meeting the need of learner. It *"comprises the knowledge, skills, and values of educative experience that meet criteria of excellence that make them worthy of study." Environment, or in other words milieu is "the context in which the learning experience takes place, and it influences how teacher and student come to share the meaning of curriculum."(*Novak and Gowin, 1984). These four components should work in harmony and significant importance should be given to each one in order to reach desired level in education.

In this study, it is aimed to analyse language-learning experiences in Turkey in retrospect through students' own eyes by getting knowledge about their readiness towards English education according to main components of educational setting. By this study, questions why students enrolled to preparatory classes have not been able to live an ideal language learning process in their formal education period, and why they have not become successful language learners are answered from the viewpoints of them.

Methods and Research Design

The data in this study were obtained from 38 preparatory class students enrolled to Erzincan University Tourism Vocational College Preparatory Programs. At the beginning of the academic year 2009-2010, at students' first English course at the vocational school, participants were asked to write a composition on the evaluation of their prior English language experiences during their primary and high school years by giving examples from their English language teachers.

The first course was specially chosen in order to get the correct knowledge from students not affecting their thoughts about the readiness towards English. Before this activity any English language education and course have not been taught to students in the department. To access the realist data, the compositions were written in Turkish and also two other activities were carried out for this study. For two other studies, first of all students were asked to write at least 50 English vocabularies which they could write correctly on a sheet and as a second activity they were asked to write a composition about themselves in English. During these entire activities participants' names were anonymous, only the knowledge about their age and school type from which they graduated were asked. These two activities have not been included in the study; they were applied only to see students' writing skills and have an idea about their readiness for language.

The written composition is a kind of interview method which aims at getting deep information on a specific issue. Each student composition's descriptive analyses were made and these analyses were categorized according to main components of education. These are teacher, student, education programme and environment.

Results

The results of this study have two dimensions. First is about participants' school types and the second is about components of education. By looking at the findings, it is aimed to make relation between school types and students' thoughts about components of the education.

In order to determine their average age, 38 participants' ages were added and then their arithmetic mean score was calculated. Students' arithmetic mean score of age was found 20,4. Then knowledge about the participants' school types was written in table. School types' frequencies and percentages are shown in Table- 1.

School Type	Frequency (N=38)	Percentage
University	1	2,6
General High School	25	65,8
Vocational High School	9	23,7
Anatolian High School	2	5,3
Private High School	1	2,6

Table- 1: Frequencies and Percentages related to Graduated School types

Table 1 illustrates that many of the participants graduated from General High Schools which had only English courses only in their first grade in previous years. Some of the students graduated from Vocational High Schools. Vocational High Schools mainly deal with courses about a specific kind of profession and teaching English always seems at second importance. These schools include Anatolian Vocational Schools, Vocational Schools for Hotel Management and Tourism, Vocational Schools for Girls and Vocational Schools for Commerce. Two participants graduated from Anatolian High Schools. In the past, these schools had a preparatory class aiming at teaching extensive English to students. One of the students graduated from four-year faculty and the other student graduated from private high school.

In order to get knowledge about the components of education, students' compositions were categorized in four types. According to the compositions' analyses, all of the students think that they were not thoroughly taught language at their education period and they failed to learn English because of some reasons. In their compositions, some students mentioned about problems more than one so that frequency number is not equal to the number of participants. Frequencies related to components of education are shown in Table- 2.

Educational Problems Stemming from	Teacher	Education Programme	Student	Environment
	30 participants	15 participants	13 participants	10 participants

Table- 2: Frequencies related to the components of education

Table 2 related to the content analyses of the student compositions illustrates that most of the participants think that main reason of their failure in English education stems from their English teachers. The percentage of them is 78,9. Because of the drawbacks in ministry of national education and teacher characteristics, students consider the teacher as the main factor of their failures. The second important and significant problem in terms of frequencies is Educational Programme. The percentage of students who report that Educational Programme is the source of failure is 39,5. According to student quotations, problems related to educational programme stem from educational curricula, selected materials and course hours. The problem in the third order is Student factor. 34,2% of participants think that they have failed because of themselves. Students think that they have failed because of inefficient studies, inadequate practice and negligence on English courses. Lastly, 26,3% of the participants believe that teaching environment affected their language learning process negatively. These problems are related to educational setting, teaching environment and peer factor.

Discussion

A big majority of the students in this study have graduated from General High Schools. In previous years, English language as a course was taught only in first year of high schools as four hours per week and an old-fashioned book titled as "Modern English Course for Turks" which does not pay attention to four skills in language learning was used as a main coursebook of the lesson. In the following years after first grade, there was no English course in curriculum except foreign language sections. In spite of the advances in educational curricula of these schools such as English courses' becoming compulsory in second grade, third and fourth grades, English teaching is developed properly and students graduating from these schools stated negative thoughts while evaluating their prior language experiences. These schools have still common problems such as having crowded classes, being lack of sufficient number of teachers and language materials.

An average student graduates from high schools between 17 and 18 ages in Turkish education system. By regarding students' average age (20,3), it can be interpreted that these students' average is two points more than the overall Turkish average. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of them enrolled to university at their second attempt in the university entrance exam. This knowledge identifies these students have not been taught formally in educational institutions for at least four years.

In addition, the status of English course in vocational high schools is almost the same with general high schools. English courses become so-called lessons that appear as four hours a week apart from Anatolian vocational high schools de facto in educational curricula; but in reality, these courses are not so much effective because of the problems that general high school students have to cope with.

In terms of course hours, Anatolian and private high schools give more importance English courses than other types of schools (look M.E.B, 2005). These can be viewed from their curricula, their language environments, English teachers' quantity etc. In previous years, some high schools like Anatolian, Science and Teacher Training schools which had preparatory classes for extensive English evidenced fundamental changes about English courses in their curricula. As a result, their preparatory classes were abolished from their curricula, and they became four-year high schools like other types of high schools.

One student had graduated from faculty apart from foreign language departments. English courses at universities except from a few universities, which have compulsory or intentional preparatory classes, are three or four credits or a non- credit lesson. By taking into consideration of course credits, it is concluded that ineffectiveness of the courses are clear (Gömleksiz, 1993).

In order to get success in education, each of four components of education should study in coordination. As its' being difficult to distinguish one from another in definite lines (Güven, 2004), any problem related to one of these components certainly affect the others negatively in this process. When looked at the analyses of the student compositions, it seems that main reason of the failure in education is teacher factor in foreign language instruction. In addition, other three factors have affected this process with having different frequencies.

Many participants mentioned about problems with their English teachers. On supposing the role of teachers in education, it is clearly understood that problems stemming from this source would affect the whole education and the whole learners negatively. Mostly mentioned issue about the teacher factor is different branch teachers. Because of the insufficient number of trained language teachers, teachers from other branches have the permission of teaching these courses (M.E.B., 2006). Some of the participants stated this issue as follows: "As we did not have an English teacher in primary and secondary schools, teachers from different branches tried to teach English us." Another student expressed that *"Our Turkish teacher taught our English lessons in primary school." The other one says, "In my high school years, we had a number of teachers from different branches such as Religion and Physical Teacher."*

In addition, students mentioned that those teachers coming from different branches were inefficient in language teaching, so that they thought that English courses are easy courses to pass or free courses which they spent time inactively. Moreover, some students think that having an English language teacher is a luxury in high school. Student opinions are as follows: *"I met with English course firstly in my high school years and my teacher was originally French language teacher, then he was not skillful in teaching."; " In my high school years our physical training teacher taught our course so that we were talking about sports during the course."; " There was no Mathematics teacher, let alone English."*

In addition to these factors, foreign language teachers' teaching capabilities, physical and individual characteristics affected students negatively. Teachers who are unaware of the current methods in language education and insist on teaching with old-fashioned methods such as GTM, and their reluctance and disregard towards the course make students distract from learning the language. Also, teachers who regard language learning as being good at grammar and memorizing all rules and make activities entirely different from real life reduce students' motivation for learning the language. Participant opinions about these issues are as follows: *"In my high school education, our teachers used to give papers about the course before the examination, so we memorized those sheets and became successful in examinations with high marks."* Another one says, *"As our teacher had problems with classroom management and disciplining us, he always shouted and punished us. He did not get well with students, so he was totally useless in education."*

The second problem causing the failure in language education results from Educational programme in this study. Curriculum and course materials have an important place in educational programme. Many students were not taught English or did not take inadequate courses in their primary school years. Participants many of whom are students graduating from general high schools state that they took English courses only in their first year of high school, and have not taken any special course or tutor then. In spite of some students' sentences about having English courses at their second, third and fourth grades, their sentences were followed with negative explanations. When considered the new formations related to course hours in high schools' curricula, it can be said that actually curriculum in itself is one of the main sources of the failure. One student mentions about the curriculum and says that he could not understand the lessons because of the fact that his teacher was curious about following the curriculum and he performed the lesson so quickly in order to reach the program. In addition to that, students were unpleased with course books and same topics in books. One participant writes, *"I was taught same grammar topics again and again, this was very boring."*

Third component is student factor. While addressing the reasons of failures, thirteen students confessed that they did not become successful because of their negative behaviors such as pseudo-listening, not attending courses and cheating. Some of the student sentences are as follows: *"I did not listen effectively what the teacher was teaching during the course and I refused to join the courses consciously."*; *"In spite of taking English course, I did not revise what I had learnt, and then I forgot everything."*; *"My great fault was to ignore the importance of English."*

The last and the least mentioned component is environment. Foreign language environment consists physical conditions of the school, classroom atmosphere, students, social environment and family. The use of existing school facilities or vice versa, and atmosphere in which language instruction is carried out become effective in determining the success or failure. Participants mentioning about problems about environment mostly stated that their friends in the class affected them negatively and decreased their motivation to participate in the activities. Furthermore, they are not pleased with not using the language itself as a communication tool outside classes. These situations are cited in student texts as follows: *"Our teacher did not teach anything because he made us watch films and movies during the whole course."*; *"Our classes were very crowded, and then I did not get much opportunity to join the lessons."*; *"I did not have a chance of using what I had learnt in my daily life, so I forgot all."*

To sum up, the general problems discussed in the study are about the numbers of teachers, their coming from different branches, teachers' individual characteristics, their field knowledge and teaching capabilities, students' not giving importance to courses and their low motivation levels, poor curricula, insufficient course hours and materials in schools, artificial language environments and lastly negative peer factor. These problems are also mentioned a number of studies and the results are parallel with some studies (Gömleksiz, 2002; Kuzeci, 2002; Gökdemir, 2005; Soner,2007; Günday, 2007; Bağçeci & Yaşar, 2007; Işık, 2008). When overviewed all problems especially related to teachers, students' chance of being successful will certainly become higher. Because teachers have heavy responsibilities on coping with the failure in foreign language education and teacher is the most significant component in education process when each element has significantly tied up one within the other. Therefore, it is clear that in order to understand language teaching and learning process, one needs to understand teachers (Varghese et al., 2005). Because unique power in educational setting is the teacher applying education programme, affecting students' learning and decreasing the negative effects of the environment.

This study was carried out with the help of only university's one type of preparatory classes, which have students mostly getting negative thoughts about their former education, and written interview method, a qualitative research method, was used in gathering data process. Additionally, participants' compositions were analyzed according to main components of education. Therefore, there are some limitations concerned with participants, method and analyses. With a larger group including other departments' preparatory classes, mixed type method supported with questionnaires and interviews, and different kinds of evaluation criterions, more detailed results dealing with student failures in foreign language process can be gathered and then results can be generalized.

By this study, the importance of teachers' having knowledge on students' readiness for language is emphasized by the perspective of them. Because in order to determine what to teach, initially a teacher should begin to determine what their students know (Güven, 2004). In a word, to reach success in foreign language process, one should try to decrease the problems related to teacher, educational programme and environment by a consideration of students' prior language learning experiences.

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