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Büşra Delen, Gazi University, busra.delen@gazi.edu.tr

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A Look into the Past and the Present of Second Language Teacher Education Practices in Turkey

Büşra Delen¹

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalization and changing paradigms, nothing but the need for better education remains constant. Policy makers try to achieve the ultimate goal of better education with ever-changing and evolving reforms they put into practice. Turkey is no different from other countries in that sense. Second language teacher education is one of the fields that has been undergoing extensive renovations along with English language teaching for at least two decades now. This paper presents the developments in this dynamic field in relation to the ones occurring in English language teaching and the current pre-service teacher education settings in Turkey.

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Introduction

As a country placed at social and political crossroads, Turkey has always been dynamic in its policies, keeping up with what is going on around the world. The same principle can be articulated for the foreign language education policies that the country has been pursuing in its long history of language education. Turkey has its fair share of potential English language learners with its population of 78 million, which is in accordance with the globally accepted premises that “more people than ever want to learn English” and that “English learners are increasing in number” (Graddol, 2006, p. 10). With the rising numbers of English learners in the system, a parallel rise in the demand for English teachers is unavoidable,

¹ Gazi University, busra.delen@gazi.edu.tr, +90 312 202 8456

connecting the country's language education policies with its second language teacher education (SLTE) practices.

The educational evolution that Turkey has been going through seems to gather pace within the last 20 years. Reforms and renovations are the frequently used tools to bring the existing system up to par so that the goals defined can be achieved properly. However, with this plethora of educational reforms introduced in Turkey, it is particularly easy to lose track of the changes taking place not only in the general settings of education but also in English language teaching (ELT) and SLTE. Thus, this article scrutinizes the SLTE reforms adopted in Turkey in connection with the ELT reforms implemented so far and presents the latest framework for SLTE.

English Language Teaching in the Turkish Educational System

English has acquired the status of lingua franca around the world both by being an official language in many countries and by being the primary foreign language that is taught in many others (Crystal, 2003). The latter applies to Turkey, where English is a compulsory subject at various levels of education.

The spread of the language can be said to be in progress with the contact Turkish people have had with English for centuries; however, as Doğançay-Aktuna (1998) puts it, it was solidified with the rise of the American economic power both around the world and in the country. The process of English taking precedence over other foreign languages started with the goals of modernization and westernization in mind in the 1950s and accelerated as a result of commercial relations. Today, the spread of English in Turkey seems to be taking place rapidly since the language has seeped into a wide range of areas from technology to culture, which is also reflected in the educational policies of the country: English is a subject taught at various levels ranging from kindergarten to higher education. A one-year preparatory year is included in the programs offered by many universities. There are also a lot of institutions where everyone learns English (Öztürk and Atay, 2010).

The process of establishing the teaching of foreign languages on a firm footing started with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Prior to 1924, there were various educational institutions ranging both in terms of level and nationality all around the Ottoman Empire. Teaching foreign languages was taken up by a small number of foreign schools usually functioning in the larger cities of the country. Following the collapse of the Empire and the foundation of the Republic, new tendencies emerged, the first of which was the Law on the Unification of Education. According to this law, the control of all the schools in Turkey was given to the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). From 1923 to 1973, the primary- and secondary-level education comprised 11 years, the first 5 years belonging to primary education and the remaining 6 years being divided into two secondary-level stages.

1973 marked an important development in the history of Turkish education. In 1973, all the regulations of the Turkish educational system were detailed in the Basic Law on National Education (MoNE, 1973). The 1973 reform can be interpreted as the first organized text on which the policies were built later on; that is, the same law is still in effect despite certain changes made in it.

In 1983, another significant law for ELT, the Law on Foreign Language Education and Teaching was introduced, specifying the regulations regarding foreign language teaching in Turkey. With this law, MoNE was deemed responsible for all the foreign language teaching practices at primary- and secondary-level schools (MoNE, 1983).

As for basic education, between the years 1974 and 1997, primary- and secondary- level education lasted 12 years. The first stage of primary education consisted of 5 years and the second stage lasted 3 while secondary school comprised 4 years. A preparatory year, during which students were introduced to an intense English program, followed the first stage of primary education on condition that they passed a high school entrance exam.

1997 was a crucial year in terms of the changes it brought to the Turkish educational system. First of all, there was an integration of primary education and the first stage of secondary education, making the total duration of compulsory education 8 years. Thus, the preparatory year was moved to the ninth year for the students who passed the exam. The rest of the secondary education consisted of 3 years. Another major change was the inclusion of English, which had been introduced in secondary education until 1997, as a compulsory subject at the primary school level. The English curriculum was adapted accordingly; that is, it was more communication-oriented, assessment was handled differently, and the effect of the European Union regulations was evident in its content (Bilgin, 2016; Kırkgöz, 2009).

What the year 2005 had in store for ELT in Turkey was that the preparatory year was abolished, and high schools started to admit students for four years, from 9th grade through 12th grade (Kırkgöz, 2007). The preparatory year had always been ‘cherished’ by English teachers and the public since it provided ample time to teach English and cultivate language proficiency as a result of a year spent solely on language. After the abolishment of the preparatory year, English became just another subject in the selection of courses offered by MoNE.

2012 was the year when another substantial reform was implemented in the Turkish educational system. With the 2012 reform, which was famously called the ‘4+4+4 system’, the duration of compulsory education in Turkey was increased to 12 years. Furthermore, the age of beginning primary school was defined as 5.5, which was 7 in the previous system. Another change was the separation of each stage in the 12-year compulsory education; that is, the first 4 years are to be spent at primary school, the second 4 years mean lower secondary school, and the last 4 years are spared for the upper secondary school, which was previously named high school and which was not compulsory at all (MoNE, 1983; MoNE 2012).

The History of Second Language Teacher Education in Turkey

The Turkish higher education system is currently a centralized one; that is, although the universities are autonomous in their operations, the policies regarding higher education are formulated by a central authority, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), in this case. Hence, it is necessary to provide the wider framework of higher education before proceeding to SLTE.

With the significance of the role CoHE plays in the Turkish higher education system, 1981, when the council was founded, serves as a milestone. Before 1981, higher education was provided by a diversity of institutions ranging from universities to academies. Some of these schools were self-governing, whereas some of them were managed by MoNE. In that context, various teacher training institutions undertook teacher education, and the training period varied from 4 to 7 years depending on the institution. Following the Higher Education Reform, which also introduced CoHE to the Turkish academia with the goal of standardizing higher education in Turkey, the responsibility for teacher education was taken over by CoHE in 1982 (CoHE, 2007). As Grossman, Sands and Brittingham (2010) point out, CoHE plays a central role in teacher education in that it provides the main outline of the teacher education programs at faculties of education along with their content. The official recognition of these programs also lies with CoHE so that their graduates are eligible for teaching in Turkey.

After the centralization of teacher education, CoHE turned all teacher education departments into 4-year education faculties in 1990.

In 1994, the Council launched a major project called the National Education Development Project (NEDP). NEDP was funded by the World Bank, and its pre-service teacher education segment took place between the years 1994 and 1999. The project was intended to last three years in the beginning, but was renewed three times until it ended on 30 June 1999. It was carried out by CoHE in cooperation with MoNE at certain points such as the part related to the collaboration between faculties and schools. CoHE sought technical assistance and received it from the British Council after a tendering process, which included the Arizona State University as a contributor, too (CoHE, 1999; CoHE, 2007; Grossman, Onkol, & Sands, 2007).

The main goal of the project was to “increase the quality of teacher education for teachers who will teach at primary and secondary schools” (CoHE, 2007, p. 44). Thus, there were multiple dimensions to the project: curriculum development, fellowships and purchase of equipment. Curriculum development meant devising common curricula for faculties of education that placed special emphasis on teaching methodologies and that included a component themed faculty-school collaboration. This collaboration aimed “to establish faculty-school partnerships on internationally accepted standards” (Vancı Osam & Balbay, 2004, p. 748). It was supported by MoNE with a protocol signed between these two organizations for the purpose of quality improvement in teacher education. The curriculum development stage was finalized with the dissemination of the new content through seminars and workshops all around the country. The second dimension of NEDP was the fellowships that ranged from short term ones provided for study visits to long-term fellowships given for masters and doctoral degrees as well as post-doctorate positions and that were equally distributed to the 24 faculties of education in Turkey (CoHE, 1999; CoHE, 2000; CoHE, 2007). These fellowships were an investment for the future of teacher education since “the graduate students who had received project fellowships to pursue their doctoral or master’s studies abroad returned to Turkey to give twice the number of years of service to the faculty which they had been assigned” (Grossman et al., 2007, p. 143). It was aimed that the change in the system would live in the practices of the teacher educators at the aforementioned 24 faculties of education. The last dimension was the purchase of the equipment required for education in the faculties such as technological devices, books and CDs. In addition to all materials and publications NEDP produced, another important outcome of the project was the study on the standards and accreditation in teacher education. This aspect was carried out by two advisors and thirteen professors from faculties of education. At the end of a one-year long string of meetings, conferences, workshops and pilot studies, certain standards were defined for the accreditation of faculties of education (CoHE, 2007).

In the meantime, the 1997 reform in basic education, which was carried out hand-in-hand with NEDP, had considerable repercussions on higher education, specifically on faculties of education and on the practice of teacher training. One of them was the teacher shortages in the field since the 8-year-compulsory education resulted in a huge need for new teachers. Unfortunately, as Seferoğlu (2004) pinpoints, “this led to emergency strategies for teacher certification with quantity concerns and overshadowing concerns for quality of teachers” (p. 153). These strategies were to employ not only the graduates of faculties of education but also those of English Literature and Translation Studies in addition to the graduates of English-medium faculties such as engineering, arts and letters and science. They were still bound to take certain pedagogical courses from faculties of education in order to be certified as an English teacher. However, it did not change the fact that they were not trained as prospective English teachers in the first place. Another strategy to deal with the shortage was to train teachers within a distance education program in collaboration with Anadolu University, which began back in 2000 (Seferoğlu, 2004). The program stopped admissions in the 2012-2013 academic year.

Another impact of the extensive 1997 reform on SLTE was that besides reorganizing faculties of education, CoHE brought a “uniform curricula to replace the varied curricula of each teacher education program in all subject fields” (Seferoğlu, 2004, p. 152) with the goal of standardization in mind. The innovation also activated a change in teacher education departments in terms of quality and quantity of the teaching methodology courses since more emphasis was placed on the practical aspect of the curricula.

In 2006, CoHE took action to update the curricula in teacher education programs in all universities. The reason for the update was to improve the lacking aspects of the teacher education programs after the 1997 reform. It can be said that in the new curricula there was more flexibility, enabling faculties to tailor the curricula according to their specific needs. In addition, more elective courses were introduced, and the general framework of the curriculum became more adapted to the EU regulations of teacher education (CoHE, 2007).

As all basic education reforms affect higher education, the 2012 reform also influenced teacher education departments. ELT programs can be counted among the ones which were influenced the most since an essential development in the new system was that students are to be introduced to English at second grade when they are 6 years old. This meant that there would be a drastic rise in the number of English learners in the system and unlike the learners in the previous system, these new learners would be defined as 'very young learners', which raised questions on both the quantity and the quality of the English teachers that would be teaching them from the 2013-2014 academic year on (Bayyurt, 2012).

The Current Context of SLTE in Turkey

Potential English teachers in Turkey take the nationwide high-stakes university examination at two stages, the second of which offers an English test measuring the proficiency in grammar, vocabulary and reading skills. The ones who pass the exam, namely student teachers, have to take an English proficiency exam after they are placed at their universities. The ones who fail the proficiency exam study English for a year, whereas the ones who pass the exam proceed to the department as freshmen. In all English teacher education programs in Turkey, the curriculum is more or less the same. As implied before, the changes between programs occur only with elective courses. As Çepik and Polat (2014) state, "Turkish ELTE [English Language Teacher Education] programs cover competencies related to language and linguistics, SLA theories, EFL methods, foundations of learning and teaching, practicum, instruction, and educational/pedagogical subjects. These competencies are categorized into three HEC [Higher Education Council]-mandated domains: (I) Language teaching subjects, (II) General culture, and (III) Pedagogical formation" (p. 86). Coşkun and Daloğlu (2010) conducted an analysis of the curriculum and found out that 68% of the curriculum consists of courses aiming the development of pedagogical competence of student teachers while 32% is made up of courses related to linguistic competence. From 4th semester on, language teaching methodology courses such as *Teaching Language Skills I and II*, *Special Teaching Methods I and II*, *Teaching English to Young Learners I and II*, *Materials Evaluation and Design*, *Testing and Evaluation* take precedence over other courses. The senior year has two important courses: *School Experience* in the first semester and *Teaching Practicum*, both of which proceed according to the guidelines of faculty-school collaboration manual published by CoHE as one of the end products of the NEDP (CoHE, 1998).

Another path to take to become in English teacher in Turkey is to be a graduate of faculties of arts and letters, which include translation studies, English language and literature and American culture departments. The graduates of these programs have to acquire a teaching certificate by completing required pedagogical courses which are offered by faculties of education.

After a student teacher graduates from university successfully, there are certain career options for him/her in teaching. The first and most popular one is to become a teacher at public schools. The other one is to teach English at private schools. Another option is to pursue a career teaching English at preparatory schools of universities. In order to become a teacher at a public school, though, taking the Public Personnel Selection Examination, which is another nationwide exam, is obligatory. This exam consists of two sections which are taken separately. The first section focuses on various subjects such as educational sciences, Turkish, math, geometry, history, geography and citizenship. The content of the second section is specifically the aforementioned domain, language teaching subjects such as linguistics, literature and language teaching methodology. As soon as candidates get their scores, they make an application for the vacant positions the MoNE announces every year. If they are accepted to one of the positions they have applied for, they start the profession as 'teacher candidates'. The first stage of candidacy is the training stage, and they are monitored by a mentor teacher appointed by the Ministry with certain criteria in mind. The candidate follows his or her training program, attends classes with his or her mentor and 'learns the ropes'. The first performance assessment is carried out within this six-month period (MoNe, 2016a). Upon

the completion of the candidacy period of one year, the candidate sits for a written and an oral exam. If s/he is successful, the candidacy period is officially over.

MoNE takes interest not only in the career steps to be taken by its new teachers but also in the competencies they can be assessed with. Thus, defining teacher competencies has been important to ensure the professionalization of teaching in Turkey. It was undertaken by MoNE within a project that was launched with the European Commission titled “The Support to Basic Education Programme” (SBEP) in 2002. Following a series of workshops and seminars, to which the shareholders in the system such as teachers, teacher trainers, university professors and MoNE and CoHE officials contributed, the draft for the general competencies went under evaluation in 2004. The final version of general teacher competencies became effective in 2006 with 6 basic domains, 31 sub-competencies and 233 performance indicators (MoNE, 2008; Yüksel, 2012).

After the introduction of general teacher competencies, what was done was defining the area-specific ones, whose preliminary draft was prepared by the MoNE in 2004. Following the evaluation of the draft in workshops arranged by the Ministry, they became effective in 2008. There are 5 main domains and 26 sub-competencies defined for English language teachers, and each sub-competency has its own performance indicators at three levels, namely A1, A2 and A3 (MoNE, 2008).

According to the 2015-2016 statistics published by the Ministry, currently there are 993.794 teachers working at the K-12 schools in Turkey (MoNE, 2016b). Due to the rising number of teachers working for MoNE with each passing year, English teachers can be said to be in high demand as well. The number of available posts for English teachers in the most recent appointment made by the Ministry was 3.098, which was the second most ‘popular’ program among all the positions offered (MoNe, 2016c). Thus, it can be predicted that SLTE, specifically English language teacher education programs and their students will hold a great deal of attention in the near future.

Conclusion

This paper has scrutinized the SLTE practices that have been followed since the beginnings of modern higher education in Turkey. In order to grasp the current status of SLTE in Turkey, the series of reforms introduced not only in the field of SLTE itself but also the ones in ELT have been examined. The close-up study of the timeline of these reforms reveals that Turkey has come a long way in the fields of both ELT and SLTE, that it is putting in a considerable amount of effort for the professionalization of teaching and that there is still much to do regarding the improvement of SLTE programs at universities.

One of the revisions the system is in need of seems to be its adaptation to the basic educational system in place, namely the 4+4+4. As mentioned before, the quality of the English teachers recruited especially for the first stage of the system is open to question, for the reform was initiated without an update in SLTE programs all around the country although there occurred a substantial change, among many others, in the age of learners.

Another possible suggestion could be put forward regarding the senior-year training of student teachers. Due to the majority of the graduates of SLTE programs proceeding to teaching English at public schools and the relatively new candidacy system of MoNE, SLTE programs could play a more active role in the professional development of student teachers while they are still in training at their programs in universities, which might strengthen the university-school cooperation and prepare them more efficiently for the career steps they would take after graduation.

In the grand scheme of things, it would not be wrong to conclude that with the pre-eminent position of English as the lingua franca of the global world and with Turkey’s continuous dynamism, it is only natural to anticipate further change in SLTE in the future.

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