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Macro-level foreign language education policy of Turkey: A content analysis of national education councils

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate foreign language education policy of Turkey at the macro level. It gives prominence to English language teaching as it plays a major role in Turkey's education system. Data were collected through official documents which involve the national education councils organized from 1939 onwards. The documents were scanned and evaluated by means of qualitative research. In doing so, the information on foreign language education obtained from these primary sources was summarized and analysed through main themes. The results indicate that although the top-level state authorities in Turkey theoretically give importance to foreign language teaching, they show inconsistency in their decisions while translating them into practice.

Keywords: *foreign language education policy, national education councils, English language teaching*

Introduction

In Turkey, the Ministry of National Education (henceforth MONE) is responsible for centrally providing administrative arrangements and supervision related to education. Thus, the Board of Education and Discipline attached to the ministry of national education prepares the general education curriculum of Turkey. In other words, the framework of the national curriculum is designed at the macro level and implemented at the micro level. The foreign language curriculum is centrally designed and implemented by teachers as well. Therefore, foreign language education policy involves macro level policy which refers to the framework

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of the national curriculum and micro level implementation that relates to foreign language teaching practices of teachers (Wang, 2006).

Educational activities are centrally negotiated and organized in the national education councils. The councils are the highest advisory board of MONE. They examine the issues relating to education and training, and take decisions to develop the system of the Turkish national education. The regulation of them is arranged according to the Official Gazette dated 08.09.1995 and numbered 22398. The decisions taken in the general board of them are published in the official bulletin of MONE in four months. The ministry makes room for them in its programme according to the order of their precedence. Following the approval of the minister of the Turkish national education, they go into effect.

The policy makers who consist of a wide range of specialists in education have been handling the Turkish education system and putting forward their decisions at the above mentioned national education councils. The decisions taken at the macro level involve such issues as textbooks, supplementary textbooks, class hour schedules, and so forth. They are supposed to be implemented at the micro level.

This study focuses on macro-level foreign language education policy of Turkey, thereby taking into account the decisions taken in the national education councils arranged from 1939 onwards. It involves the issues with respect to foreign language teaching.

Literature review

Els (1994) makes contributions to our understanding of definitions as regards language policies in general. He contends that national foreign language education policy of a country is different from its national language and foreign language policies. Accordingly, the country maintains its own language under the umbrella of its national language policy, and benefits from its foreign language policy to maintain the position and use of foreign languages within its domain, thereby regulating the use of foreign languages in classrooms. However, according to him, foreign language education policy deals with teaching and learning foreign languages.

Spolsky (2004) states that language policy may take place at various stages including macro and micro levels. Thus, sociolinguistic contexts within language policy may consist of supranational organizations at the macro level and schools at the micro level. For example, the Council of Europe as a supranational organization consists of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which mainly presents a common basis for the arrangement of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks in the member states. It suggests what language learners have to learn so as to use a language for communication. It also describes proficiency levels which let learners' progress be measured. Furthermore, it promotes the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which aims to develop learner autonomy and self-assessment, thereby assisting language learners in supporting lifelong learning.

In parallel with Spolsky (2004), Baldauf (2005) points out that language policy and planning may take place at different levels, which involve ideas, laws, regulations, rules, and practices aimed at obtaining planned language change. That is to say, they are regarded as a macro level which is in the political process at the top, and as a micro level that is in the implementing process at the bottom. Such policy and planning may be put into practice by means of language planning documents. Kirkgoz (2009, p. 665) states that "Macro policy

decisions are determined through the analysis of official policy documents and survey findings to indicate the policy in practice”.

Shohamy (2006) asserts that decisions related to language education policy (henceforth LEP) are made by such central authorities as government agencies, parliaments, ministry of education, regional educational boards, and schools. Thus, it is not independent in many aspects. It has close contacts with political, social, and economic elements. Accordingly, LEP is put forward by political organs in top-down manner. Schools and teachers comply with these policies. Consequently, these policies are then strengthened by such factors as materials and tests. LEP is also regarded as a bottom-up process to bring about alternative language policies as it is turned into practice by formal education. The educators that consist of teachers and principals are responsible for realizing this policy in the educational context.

The language curriculum is designed by the above mentioned policy makers so that the language education policy can be implemented. It deals with decisions to be implemented in educational institutions with reference to language teaching and learning. The decisions involve these issues such as: “which language(s) to teach and learn in schools? When (at what age) to begin teaching these languages? For how long (number of years and hours of study) should they be taught? By whom, for whom (who is qualified to teach and who is entitled or obligated to learn) and how (which methods, materials, tests, etc.)?” (ibid.:76). Subsequently, the policy is translated into textbooks and other teaching materials.

On the other hand, the factors that influence foreign language education policy may change from country to country (Kirkgoz, 2009). In other words, foreign language education policy may be determined by various interest groups in some countries. For example, Mitchell (2009, p. 98) asserts that

Foreign language education policies cannot be imposed by ‘bureaucrats’ and ideologists, but require a reasonable consensus among students, parents and the wider community to take root and deliver a measure of foreign language learning. Contexts have been identified where enthusiasm for foreign language learning has run ahead of formal educational provision (e.g. for English in preschool education in Taiwan), and also contexts where existing provision has been abandoned by the student clientele (e.g. the decline of German learning in Hungary, or the failure to retain upper secondary school students in any kind of foreign language learning, in the UK or Australia). Unsurprisingly it seems foreign language education succeeds best where a social consensus supports it.

As for the factors that the policy makers are supposed to consider, four categories are put forward (Els, Bongaerts, Extra, Os, & Dieten, 1984). These categories are 1) language policy factors, 2) psychological factors, 3) linguistic factors and 4) educational factors. Language policy factors refer to political issues pursued in a country. It is assumed that these political issues need to be taken into consideration. A country, for example, may make room for languages of neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the language policy pursued by the country may be shaped according to the international organizations in which it is involved. For example, the Council of Europe may influence language policies pursued by the European countries. Psychological factors refer to the level of hardship related to different foreign languages and skills. It is assumed that if the foreign language learners study is too difficult for them to cope with, they will be discouraged from mastering it. On the contrary, given that the foreign language is easy enough to deal with, learners will be motivated and eager to learn

it. Linguistic factors concern language distance which influences teaching and learning. Provided that the distance between two languages is small, it will be easy for a learner to master the other language. As for educational factors, they refer to teaching time, foreign language skills, school curriculum, appropriate teaching materials, and well-trained foreign language teachers.

On the other hand, educational policy plays an important role in determining foreign language education policy. It determines which foreign language must take place in education and decides on the current and future needs for foreign language teaching and learning. From the perspective of these needs, Els et al. (1984, p. 158) suggest the questions, “Does the community consider it important that all its members know a foreign language, or is this considered necessary only for certain professional domains?, How many languages, and which languages, are felt to be necessary?, How great is the demand for each individual language?, Does everyone need the same skills, or the same level of command per skill?, Is there a stable needs pattern? ” Given that these questions are taken into account, a needs analysis will have great significance for determining foreign language education policy.

As for the choice of foreign languages, the English language has advantages over the other languages as it is used worldwide. That is to say, it has been regarded as a dominant foreign language studied in nearly all countries. Thus, it is not surprising that it plays a significant role in foreign language education policy.

The spread of English has accelerated worldwide since World War II, thereby finding place in the curriculum of educational institutions all over the world (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998; Oral, 2010). Globalization, scientific inventions, technological innovations, economy, diplomacy, and internet have contributed to this situation. Therefore, it has influenced foreign language education policy at the international level in many aspects. Consequently, the language norms have come under question in terms of world Englishes (Bamgbose 2003; Jenkins 2009; Kachru 1986, 1992).

Methodology

Design of the study

The study was designed to investigate the extent to which national education councils of Turkey organized from 1939 onwards have addressed foreign language education at the macro level. It sought to answer the following questions:

- To what extent the national education councils of Turkey have addressed foreign language education from 1939 onwards?
- Which national education council has put great emphasis on foreign language education in Turkey?

Data collection

Data were collected by means of official documents which consist of the decisions taken in the national education councils organized from 1939 onwards. The documents were scanned and evaluated through qualitative research. In doing so, the information on foreign language education obtained from these primary sources was summarized and analysed through main themes.

Data analysis

After the official documents which belong to the national education councils were scanned and evaluated, a coding scheme was developed to categorize the main themes (Krippendorff, 2004). Both researchers independently selected the relevant themes from the documents and reached an agreement on these themes. Accordingly, the inter-rater reliability was established. Furthermore, an expert on content analysis was consulted to validate the procedures for data analysis (Stemler & Bebell, 1999).

Findings and Discussion

Following the coding schemes, the main themes emerged as follows:

Table 1

The Main Themes Extracted from the National Education Councils

National Education Council	Main Themes
1 st , 12 th	Foreign language education in higher education institutions
1 st , 4 th , 12 th	Large class sizes
1 st	Foreign language instructions and examinations Foreign language teacher education for secondary education
2 nd , 8 th , 12 th	Textbooks
3 rd	Teacher education for Junior high schools
4 th , 8 th , 17 th	Methodology
8 th	Intensive foreign language education
8 th , 12 th	Foreign language proficiency levels
8 th , 11 th , 12 th	In-service training Teaching some subjects in a foreign language
12 th , 15 th	University entrance examinations
12 th	Teaching materials Pre-service training Communicative approach Exchange program
12 th , 18 th	Teaching all subjects in Turkish
12 th , 15 th , 17 th	The process of European Union

As Table 1 indicates above, the national education councils organized to date have put forward significant issues about foreign language education in Turkey. However, some issues have come into prominence at these councils. The findings show that large class sizes, textbooks, methodology, in-service training, and the process of European Union have been emphasized.

The former councils gave prominence to foreign language education in higher education and foreign language teacher education. When it comes to the latest councils, they have been mentioning the process of adaptation to the European Union with respect to foreign language education policy at the macro and micro levels.

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the authorities tended to set up more departments at universities for the purpose of educating more foreign language teachers. The demand for foreign language teachers was met by other means before the 1930s. The people who had knowledge of foreign languages were admitted in this way. They were the people who graduated from senior high schools teaching in foreign languages or who learnt foreign languages abroad. Moreover, the people who completed their education in the field of philology were admitted to teaching profession by following short-term initial teacher training as well. However, as the number of students increased in education, foreign language teacher education was regarded as necessary. Thus, the initial councils mainly made room for foreign language teacher education for both lower and upper education. They gave priority to this issue as there was a shortage of foreign language teachers. Furthermore, qualitative foreign language teachers were required to teach foreign languages. In other words, these councils found it necessary to initiate departments which would present foreign language teacher education, considering various pedagogic reasons.

Foreign language education at Turkish universities has long been mentioned at the councils. The authorities have been trying to encourage university students to follow scientific developments through acquiring foreign language education. However, they have put forward some problems related to this issue. For example, according to the first council on 17-29 July 1939, university students in Turkey had a problem with foreign language education due to large class sizes.

The first, fourth, and twelfth national education councils regarded large class sizes as problematic. For example, the fourth council held on 22-31 August 1949 suggested that senior high schools had large class sizes so they had to be reduced to a class of 30-40 students at most.

The second, eighth, and twelfth national education councils put forward issues about books used for the purpose of education. According to the second council held on 15-21 February 1943, it was necessary for primary and junior high school teachers to follow auxiliary books which would develop their professional knowledge and career. As for the reading books used at primary and junior high schools, the council stipulated that the reading books should be attractive to the primary and junior high school students. That is to say, they had to appeal to the eye. Furthermore, the twelfth council on 18-22 June 1988 suggested that textbooks should be arranged in line with proficiency levels.

Methodology in foreign language education was mentioned at the fourth, eighth, and seventeenth councils. The fourth national education council held on 22-31 August 1949 complained about teaching methodology in senior high schools. It suggested that the methodology pursued in these schools depended on teachers' instruction and students' rote learning. Subsequently, the eighth national education council held from September 28th to October 3rd 1970 suggested that contemporary foreign language teaching methods should be followed.

Foreign language proficiency levels of students were negotiated at the eighth and twelfth councils. The eighth council asserted that students could be assigned according to

their proficiency levels, considering their knowledge of the foreign language. The twelfth council pointed out that the system of language proficiency levels would be composed of six levels.

In-service training for teachers was mentioned at the eight, eleventh, and twelfth councils. It was handled in some respects. For example, the commission assigned to the foreign language education at the twelfth national education council suggested that an in-service training school of foreign languages should be established.

Teaching some subjects in a foreign language was discussed at the twelfth and fifteenth councils. The twelfth council pointed out that teaching some subjects in a foreign language at Anatolian high schools and similar private schools was a harmful way for Turkish education system based on Article 42 of the constitution, that is, ‘ No language other than Turkish may not be taught to Turkish citizens as their mother tongue in educational institutions ’. As for teaching all subjects in Turkish, it was put forward at the twelfth and eighteenth councils. The commission assigned to the foreign language education at the twelfth national education council suggested that Maths, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology should be taught in Turkish in all sorts of senior high schools which are in the status of Anatolian high schools and Anatolian vocational high schools.

Foreign language education policy in Turkey has recently been shaped by the policies pursued by the Council of Europe as it has been trying to be a member of European Union for a long time. This situation has long influenced Turkey’s foreign language education policy. Thus, the process of European Union took place at the twelfth, fifteenth, and seventeenth councils. For example, the seventeenth national education council suggested that foreign language education in the process of European Union membership should be given importance, and that individuals should be made to learn at least one foreign language by means of accelerated foreign language education centres and website-aided learning environment.

Conclusion and implications

The first question examined to what extent national education councils of Turkey have addressed foreign language education from 1939 onwards. The findings indicate that the councils have addressed a wide range of issues. These issues mostly relate to the problems regarded as critical. Solutions to these problems have been suggested especially by the commissions set up by the ministry of national education. The commission members have put forward their opinions about how the problems should be solved. Their opinions mainly involve the aims of foreign language teaching, foreign language teacher education, and suggestions for foreign language education curriculum. However, it is seen that most of their recommendations have failed to materialize. In other words, they have been regarded as advisory.

The second question investigated which national education council put great emphasis on foreign language education in Turkey. Of the national education councils, the twelfth council put great emphasis on it. The commission members handled it in many aspects. In doing so, they put forward the problems and solutions to them. Moreover, they handled it from the standpoint of macro and micro levels. For example, they mentioned university entrance examinations that influence foreign language teaching, teaching materials, pre-service training, communicative approach, exchange program, and so forth.

The overall evaluation of national education councils indicates that foreign language education is given importance at the macro level. This is because the authorities and specialists have wished to catch up with new technology available in the west. They have put forward their ideas related to foreign language education in Turkey. However, most of their ideas they have put forward to date have been seen as advisory. The specialists who have participated in nearly all the councils have asserted that foreign language education should take place at schools. According to them, necessary equipment and teaching methods should be provided.

There should be greater consistency in foreign language education policy. However, some decisions taken at the national education councils are regarded as inconsistent with the implementation of the top-level policy. For example, innovations with respect to the System of Language Proficiency Levels in foreign language education were made in 1988-1989 education year. Subsequently, the foreign language education was regarded as compulsory in the first grade of secondary education. However, this system was abolished in 1989-1990 academic year.

The authorities such as policy makers and senior officers make decisions on foreign language education policy at the macro level and its implementation is mainly left to teachers. The decisions taken at the macro level are supposed to be implemented at the micro level. Thus, the implementation of the foreign language education is expected to be in accord with the policies. In other words, the decisions taken at the macro level should properly be translated into practice done at the micro level.

It is assumed that a discrepancy may arise between the macro level policy and micro level implementation while transferring policies into practice. Thus, the foreign language teachers should be made to interpret the policies properly. Moreover, school principals, middle-level managers, and students' parents should get involved in this process.

The transference of policy content may encounter a number of difficulties while passing from the top-level authorities through the middle-level administrators to the bottom-level implementation. As pointed out previously, teachers receive the decisions taken at the top-level policy and try to implement them at the micro level. Given that they have difficulty in implementing them, they are likely to modify or reject them. Thus, the policy makers should enable them to have an in-depth knowledge of the policy. To avoid the undesirable side effects of the implementation, middle-level managers, principals, and teachers should also be involved with policy development.

There should be a good balance between the top-level policies and the bottom-level implementation. Such components of foreign language education policy as needs analysis, feedback, assessment, and evaluation should be emphasized at the future national education councils in order to maintain the balance between the policy and its implementation.

Limitation of the study

This study involves only national education councils as to foreign language education policy of Turkey. The decisions that have taken place in the official bulletins of MONE are excluded from the study due to space constraint.

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