Active Language Learning Processes in Turkey

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Abstract

Language is the most basic and important communication tool. In our modern world, individuals need to learn at least one foreign language. The concept that we think of when it comes to language is that it is a communication tool which consists of words, sounds and grammar, and it is universally accepted that it is the most important element in our social lives. English is the most common global communication language and its use in economic, social, political, artistic and scientific spheres has led English to be taught as a foreign language in our country, specifically Turkey. Educational systems have some responsibility to encourage learners to take part in social and cultural activities. However, learning English is a difficult task and requires a great deal of effort. Hence, active participation is among the requirements of individuals since foreign languages are different from their mother tongue. Therefore, in order to grasp the concepts more quickly, individuals need to actively participate in the process of learning a foreign language.

Keywords: active learning, educational environment, foreign language, method

1. Introduction

The importance of learning a second language in today's world is an undeniable truth. To know and practice a foreign language is seen as a symbol of power. Consequently, developing countries like Turkey encourage their citizens to learn at least one foreign language, so that they can keep up with social, economic and technological changes. The fact is that in the era in which we live, English is the most common and universal language of communication used in economic, social, political, artistic and scientific spheres, and this has also led English to be taught as a foreign language in our country. During the process of teaching English as a foreign language, the goal is to bring the knowledge of grammar along with speaking, writing, reading and listening skills to the English learners (Aydın, 2006). All the activities and practices executed for the purpose of teaching somebody a language other than their mother tongue are considered to be within the scope of foreign language teaching and learning. In this regard, multiple factors are affecting the learning process for someone who is learning a second language other than his/her native tongue. Nowadays, there is a significant belief that that learners need to do more than just listening. In other words, active learning is a key factor in learning activities and many learning models approach this issue as a salient matter. Active learning is not only listening to lectures passively. Rather, it means that apart from listening activities to help the learners, a course should include 'real life' situations and learners should be the focus of this course. Moreover, active learning engages students in two viewpoints; to engage in activities and to think about that engagement.

 In order to have a comprehensive concept of the issue under exploration, reviewing previous studies is an important phase of data collecting in research. Literature review process includes data collecting and debating over the importance and relevance of data, conducting the relationship between the problem and the data collected and classification of the knowledge (Balcı, 2005).

2.   English in Turkey

Even though English has become more desirable with each passing day in parallel to the trends around the globe especially since the 80s, many students were unable to accomplish their objectives during their years spent in English education which lasted from primary school until the end of the high school. Paker (2015) describes the situation in Turkey in terms of its English education "Unfortunately thousands of class hours are still wasted on practices of how to form a proper sentence. High grade points are taken off of student scores for even the simplest grammar mistakes made in the tests that aim only to assess grammar knowledge and no other language skills! The result is million students left out feeling, "I can't learn".

Traditional teacher-centred teaching methods like direct instruction and note taking are not sufficient and it is necessary to incorporate the activities in which students can actively participate in the classroom (Ministry of National Education/MEB, 2005). Hence, active learning can be implemented in learning environments, whereby the learners can express themselves through writing, reading, speaking and listening. Students should not think about getting marks in the courses in order to be active learners. Instead, they should be more engaged in the classroom, motivated in the activities, and work on the subject taught. In this way, it can be understood that much of what they have learned can be analysed. In other words, students can learn better by experiencing, observing, and practicing if they can actively participate in the class.

Learning English is a complex concept and this task requires a lot of effort. There has been much intensive research and many studies have been conducted in Turkey on the subject of the problems and reasons for failure in English and foreign language education, and strategies used in language teaching, as well as the fallacies made about language teaching, especially since 2000 (Işık, 2008; Köksal, 2000; Köksal & Ulum 2018; Saricoban, 2012; Topaloğlu, 2012). Also, it has been observed that the English syllabus which is currently enforced and implemented has been designed with a perspective that espouses modern approaches, puts student at the centre, emphasises on constructive teaching and values individual differences. However, this syllabus will not be effective at the level that is desired due to inappropriate learning environments and teachers who lack the competence to implement such syllabus (Özel, 2011).

3.   Approaches in Education

The recent qualitative and quantitative rise in knowledge alongside the increase in the need for individuals to acquire knowledge in a systematic manner has brought about changes and improvements in curricula and teaching approaches. Different theories on how to reconstruct education with respect to changing and growing circumstances have been established. Under the influence of these theories, the curricula have been designed to be updated through alterations of their deficiencies and disadvantages. The process of transforming the curricula

in Turkey is ongoing and adopts the latest constructivist approach within this framework. Information processing theory, neurophysiology theory and affective theories are among the new approaches in education. All these studies have contributed to the world of educational sciences in a multidisciplinary manner alongside enabling the emergence of models and theories that offer practical and effective solutions.

In brain-based learning, the educator develops an educational approach that consorts with the characteristics of the brain after the analysis, and in a way, this represents directly teaching the human brain (Caine &Caine, 2002, p.4). While brain analysis has primarily been conducted by neuroscientists and neurophysiologists, it has also become an important field of study for the educational sciences. For example, new information which has emerged from the studies conducted in the field of Psychology with the 'Theory of Multiple Intelligences' has significantly improved the healthy conduction of teaching practices. The relationship between the definition of intelligence and learning has undergone a process which started with Thurstone and Thorndike and continued with Gardner (Özden, 2005, p.106; Gardner, 2004, p.473). The idea has begun to surface that humans can possess multiple intelligences and has been reflected onto the quality of education and educational studies which favour the proposals of a new approach. In this way, the Multiple Intelligence Theory has been turned into a topic that was not foreseen by the education programs which incorporated it into their practices.

4.   Active Language Learning

The education system includes some responsibility to encourage learners to take part in social and cultural activities. Active participation in acquisition is a paramount requirement for learners since a foreign language is different from their mother tongue. Consequently, in order to grasp the concepts more rapidly, the individuals need to actively participate. People who possess listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English can be involved in projects, data collecting and can work on international platforms. As a result, it is almost impossible for people who are not proficient in English to be active participants in the global life. Active learning and related issues have been widely used by many researchers in the field of language learning and teaching facilities (Yang et al., 2019; Sabato & Hess, 2016; Bilgic, 2012; Paulson & Faust 2010). Some definitions of active learning from various sources are as follows: "To keep the students' class participation rate as high as possible and to enable learning to be actualised through students' deeds are the main objectives of active learning". (Saban, 2004, p.225).

Active learning is based on the 'student centred with active education' approaches; these approaches require students to be actively involved in their learning experiences and exercise problem solving skills, so that they can become adequate public citizens and give back the information that is infused from time to time (Moser & Hanson, 1996, s.5). Active Learning activities also help students engage in the activities based on the knowledge they have learned. Active learning should be carried out in theories of learning where the learner reflects themselves in writing and speaking. These kinds of activities provide learners with a contiguous development (Shaikh & Algannawar, 2018).

With all of its characteristics, active learning has brought about changes in learning and teaching environments, and it has switched the roles of the student and the teacher. In addition, ideas regarding innovation have entered the agenda in the field of assessment and evaluation. While the process of evaluation has gained particular importance, measuring

different skills and values using different assessment and evaluation methods have been a further focus. Active learning has become widespread in Turkey's educational system in recent years. Since the 2005-2006 School Year, all the nationwide application examples that were proposed by the education programs have been prepared according to this principle. Hence, the qualitative and quantitative research regarding this issue has risen in the field of education.

5.   Educational Environment

An educational environment can be defined as the environment that consists of factors such as personnel, tools, facilities and organizations, where the educational activities take place and the communication and interaction of learning/teaching processes occur (Alkan, 1979, p.21). Considering the environment where learning and teaching activities take place interacting within itself in physical, social and psychological aspects, it can be said that this environment should be properly designed for the learning and teaching experience of learners. The findings in educational sciences and new approaches adapted in education particularly emphasise more on learning rather than teaching. As a result, the creation of a rich environment for learning has become a priority.

School is the institution which delivers the necessary action required to reach previously designed educational goals (information, skill and attitude) within a planned and concrete period of time. In spite of the idea that learning is a lifelong experience, education in school is planned and its objectives, duration and method are apparent (Başaran, 2008, p.139). Schools aim at increasing the productivity of learning process as an organised institution. "School must gather and organise their human capital and physical resources in concordance with their administrative functions so that they can ensure organisational productivity" (Başar, 2000, p.1).

There are many settings in schools where educational activities can take place. According to Alkan (1979), these settings should be named centres, laboratories, units such as audio-visual instrument centres, libraries that not only include printed materials but also other various educational materials, educational equipment centres, teaching sources centre, consolidated teaching materials centre, educational services department, program development laboratories, educational television centres, foreign language laboratories, movie-making units, documentation centres, self-learning laboratories and computer centres. Other school settings include areas that are generally inside the school building, such as laboratories, libraries, multi-purpose halls, club rooms, playing fields and gardens although the features of such settings may differ from one school to another (Ministry of National Education/ MEB, 2012).

Student motivation, the field dominance of the teacher, in-class activities conducted in line with the teaching principles and methods are the important leading variables that affect the student's success positively or negatively (Engin, 2006). The instruction method is the most commonly used teaching approach among teachers alongside their field-related competence. However, language learning cannot be practised solely with this method, and factors such as the number of the students in classrooms, time limitations, concerns over subject coverage, low and variant levels of student readiness and the need for endorsement of theoretical knowledge induce teachers to use the instruction method. Receiving feedback and asking questions to enable students to express themselves and participate in the class are also among the most commonly used methods by teachers. However, the execution through the

demonstration method which secures the permanence of information by concretising the subject is less frequently used by teachers.

6.   Conclusions

Foreign language education is among one of the most chronic education problems in Turkey and has been continuing in the light of many unanswered questions. It has been emphasised to teachers that if a wide range of practices which aim to activate different senses and abilities of students with the help of various sources are incorporated into the classroom, this can lead the student to succeed positively. Enabling students to incorporate the use of the target language to their everyday life is among the important indicators of learning for individual-centred approaches.

It has been clearly demonstrated by teachers that if the environment surrounding the student can provide him or her with a supportive conditions regarding language learning, the student's learning experiences will improve. In order to bring about such an environment, negative factors such as apathy or ignorance should be eliminated and technological improvements and changes should be incorporated into the student's life in order to achieve positive outcomes. Hence, the student's exposure rate to a foreign language can be improved.

A study by Atmaca (2012) was designed to provide exemplary materials on how to prepare, implement and evaluate an extracurricular academic programme with the aim of improving the efficiency of the teaching methods and the durability of what is learned, and also evaluating the impact of these materials on prospective teachers of science and technology. Another interesting issue is that the students are not aware of the significance of being proficient in the English language, whereby they care more about getting good grades and passing the class rather than learning English. In addition, in developing countries like Turkey, it is almost impossible for parents and teachers to support their children in their foreign language education unless they are also proficient in that language (Paker, 2007; TEPAV, 2014). A simple educational approach should be developed which aims to improve the students' communicational skills, so that they can interact with foreigners in their daily life and live in another country without language barriers. Being able to deliver an efficient foreign language education to willing students should be the focus of the educational system.

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