



International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching
Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2018, p. 414-423

Received	Reviewed	Published	Doi Number
12.02.2018	05.03.2018	30.03.2018	10.18298/ijlet.2595

Foreign Language Learning in Turkey: A Comparative Look at Different Practices in Europe¹

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ABSTRACT

One goal of this study is to document the common practices in K-12 foreign language instruction in European countries and to compare and contrast these with the related practices in Turkey. To that end, this study examines the starting ages, duration and total teaching hours of compulsory first foreign language education, as well as the Education First English Proficiency Index scores. This study also aims to investigate teachers' opinions on common practices via focus group interviews. It is believed that this research will contribute to promoting the development of foreign language education policies in Turkey. The results reveal that the prevalent practices regarding age and duration of foreign language instruction in Turkey are similar to those in the selected European countries. However, when the compulsory foreign language instruction period across all the education levels is taken into consideration, the total hours allotted in Turkey seem comparatively high. All teachers interviewed believe that Turkey's policy of introducing second-graders to their compulsory first foreign language is a positive step. Moreover, some suggestions were made for foreign language policy makers and English language teachers that emphasize a need for improvement in timetabling and how to better address students' learning idiosyncrasies at an early age.

Key Words: Foreign language instruction, duration of education, starting age, teaching practices, K-12 education.

1. Introduction

It cannot be denied that the significance of learning a foreign language has increased in parallel with social, cultural and technological changes happening all over the world. While it is crucial that an individual learns a foreign language, learning all foreign languages is, of course, unfeasible. According to data from Eurydice (2008; 2012b; 2017) the most studied foreign language is English in almost all European countries. Indeed, throughout the European Union, the prevalence of English as a foreign language has increased and numerous efforts aimed at promoting foreign language learning can easily be observed in continental Europe and around the world.

Most of these efforts are implemented with the help of the European Union. Since the European Union represents a platform where different languages and cultures meet, a great deal of effort is made to facilitate intercultural education and language learnings (Eurydice, 2017). The Council of Europe and the European Union, which have developed a close cooperative relationship based on their shared values, have implemented many joint programs focused on responding to educational needs in the continental Europe (Eurydice, 2012c). Council of Europe programs, however, are implemented on a

¹ Part of this study was presented at the 5th International Curriculum and Instruction Congress, held in Marmaris/Turkey, October 26-28, 2017.

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wider scale than those of the European Union, since the Council of Europe has more member countries, including Norway, Russia, Switzerland, and Turkey, which have never joined the European Union (Eurydice, 2012c; Vural-Yılmaz; Tütünsatar, 2017).

In 2002, the Council of Europe set the target of 'mastery of basic skills,' by teaching at least two foreign languages from an early age. This decision necessitated considerable changes in every aspect of daily life that reflected an increased focus on plurilingualism. Since then, foreign language education has been encouraged throughout the EU, both in the form of learning at schools and/or in adult education centres (Eurydice, 2012b).

The growing mobility of people across the EU has led to greater linguistic diversity and language instruction policies have had to be adapted to accommodate the resulting multilingual needs. The promotion of multilingualism has been regarded as an important guiding principal in education (Eurydice, 2008). A study by Brumen (2009) demonstrates that several changes in school curricula have been put into practice in Europe since the 1990s. Lowering the start of the foreign language learning to the primary level was one of the most noticeable changes.

In the last two decades, there has been an increase in the duration of compulsory foreign language instruction in Europe. Between 1994 and 2011, many countries in Europe lowered the starting age for compulsory foreign language education. In 2011, educational policies in the majority of the member states of the Council of Europe complied with the recommendation of the very same organization, by teaching students at least two foreign languages during K-12 education (Eurydice, 2017).

In addition to age, issues such as the content of the curriculum, the number of weekly class hours, the length of classes, the education of teacher candidates, and continuing education of foreign language teachers matter a great deal in foreign language learning (Aktaş & Işigüzel, 2014). As in the rest of Europe, Turkey also aims to equip every student with a foreign language (Eurydice, 2017). However, over the years, English has gradually replaced the other languages in almost all high schools. Foreign language instruction at an early age was put into practice with the educational reforms of the 1997-1998 school year, which called for 5 years of compulsory foreign language education (Çakır, 2017). In this practice, state schools started to give four foreign language classes a week. Today, the first foreign language is taught from the second year of compulsory education onwards (TEPAV Project Team, 2013). In Turkey, as in other European countries, the most widespread method to learn a foreign language is by taking courses at school (Eurydice, 2012a). In a continent encapsulating a wide range of cultures and practices, there are always lessons to be learned from other countries' practices.

Issues such as the place of language learning in compulsory education, the age at which the foreign language instruction should start, how long it should last, how many foreign languages should be taught, and how to promote language skills, have stimulated much public debate. This study seeks to outline some common practices in foreign language education in countries, selected based on certain criteria such as official languages, region, being a member of the Council of Europe and so on, specifically with regard to starting age, total taught time and teachers' opinions. The purpose of this study is to examine the prevailing foreign language teaching practices in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and to compare and contrast these with the foreign language teaching practices common in Turkey. It is believed that this research will contribute substantially to the ongoing discussion by analyzing some

marked differences and similarities among the selected countries' education systems, thereby supplying basic information that may be used in the formation of education policies. The research questions that will be answered in the current study are as follows:

(1) What are the similarities and differences in compulsory first foreign language education practices in Turkey and in the selected European countries in terms of starting age, duration and minimum class hours and emphasis on major language skills?

(2) What are the opinions of language teachers on the foreign language education practices in Turkey?

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed methods approach that involves both qualitative and quantitative data collection. In order to examine the ways in which foreign language education is provided, a range of sources were examined. The primary sources as the language policies adopted in European countries and the opinions of some public school teachers of English in Turkey were examined. Interviews were conducted in order to find out more about what teachers think of the state of English language education in Turkey in terms of duration and total teaching hours.

In examining the primary sources, document review was used in the study to provide comparability between the texts. The figures were based on official documents and reports released by the authorities and the main reason why they were used was to establish the reliability of the data. Accordingly, relevant research on the indicators of the selected countries' systems were reviewed. The investigation of education systems is, however, more limited than the statement might suggest. First, it means that the data collected is current as of February, 2017. Second, it is also confined to Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey. Countries where English is the state or official language were excluded so that Turkey could be compared to only those countries with equivalent features. Third, all of these countries appear in the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), which is a valuable tool that governments use to predict educational outcomes. EF EPI is a standardized test designed to classify test-takers language skills, thereby enabling comparison between countries (Education First, 2017). Fourth, this paper only focuses on the countries which are members of the Council of Europe.

In this study, content analysis, a systematic evaluation of any form of content to objectively document patterns, was used (Given, 2008). The data was collected and studied using a descriptive analysis approach. The practices of the education systems were analyzed and included the starting age, duration, emphasis on language skills, annual class hours and EPI scores.

Focus group interviews were conducted with six English teachers in Turkey who gave their opinions on the present foreign language instruction practices in Turkey. One focus group was held with a sample of three teachers of English, working in a public primary school in Mersin. Another group interview was held with three teachers of English in a public secondary school in Mersin. The interviewees were selected because they were easily accessible to the researcher and they all had at least five years of teaching experience at public schools. While preparing the interview questions, qualitative research methods books, along with two experts in the Faculty of Education at Mersin University, were consulted. The most general questions were asked before the more specific ones and

all questions were direct, brief and simple (Given, 2008). Additionally, in an attempt to test the validity of the interview questions, a preliminary study was undertaken in which two public school teachers answered the questions. Based on the answers they provided, some of the questions were revised for clarity. Meetings with teachers were made possible through school principals. The research purpose was discussed with the teachers and assurances of complete confidentiality and anonymity were made. Discussions yielded recordings within both groups lasting between 40 and 55 minutes. Interview data was validated and made more reliable by transcribing audiotapes verbatim and establishing transcriber reliability. All participants were given a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity.

3. Findings

Findings related to the first research question, which deals with the current practices in the selected countries in terms of starting age, duration and recommended minimum class hours for first foreign language instruction as a compulsory school subject, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The starting ages and priority of skills for foreign languages instruction.

Country	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Four skills are equally important	Starting age as of 2007	Change	Starting age as of 2011	Change	Starting age as of 2016
Austria	+	+				6		6		6
Denmark					+	9		9	↓	7
Finland					+	7		7	↑	9
France	+	+				7		7	↓	6
Germany					n/a	8		8		8
Italy					+	6		6		6
Luxembourg					+	6		6		6
Norway					n/a	6		6		6
Netherlands	+	+	+			10		10		10
Poland					+	10	↓	7	↓	5
Sweden					+	7		7		7
Switzerland	+	+	+			9		9	↓	8
Turkey					+	10	↓	9	↓	7

Note: Data on starting ages were taken from Eurydice (2008), Eurydice (2012a), and Eurydice (2017). Data on the major language skills were taken from Eurydice (2017).

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According to Table 1, Poland is the only country where the compulsory education starts at five years of age. A notable observation is that Poland has considerably and steadily decreased the starting age of compulsory foreign language education over the years. In the Netherlands, students begin compulsory foreign language education at the age of ten. Turkey has progressively decreased the starting age from ten to seven. Aside from Finland, no country has increased the starting age for compulsory first foreign language instruction. While two countries make no specific mention of their priorities regarding the four major language skills in their curricula, Turkey and six other countries

emphasize all four skills equally. The Netherlands and Switzerland prioritize listening, speaking and reading skills, while Austria and France emphasize only listening and speaking skills.

Over the last three decades, a general trend towards longer compulsory schooling to guarantee the improvement of fundamental competences has been observed in almost all education systems in Europe (Eurydice, 2012b). Longer compulsory schooling, adjusting the starting age of courses and providing flexible time allocation can all affect proficiency in a foreign language. Table 2 shows the duration of instruction, minimum class hours and EF EPI rankings of Turkey and the selected European countries.

Table 2. Duration, recommended taught time and EPI rankings for first foreign language instruction in 2007, 2011 and 2016.

Country	Duration (in years) as of 2007	Duration (in years) as of 2011	Duration (in years) as of 2016	Minimum instruction time (in hours) as of 2016	EPI rankings as of 2017
Austria	12	12	8	480	10
Denmark	10	10	9	630	3
Finland	12	12	7	456	6
France	11	11	10	936	32
Germany	9	9	10	781	9
Italy	8	13	10	891	33
Luxembourg	13	13	10	2004	7
Norway	12	12	10	588	4
Netherlands	8	8	*	*	1
Poland	9	12	9	*	11
Sweden	12	12	9	480	2
Switzerland	n/a	n/a	7	*	14
Turkey	8	9	11	912	62

Note: Data on the duration and minimum instruction time were taken from Eurydice (2008), Eurydice (2012a) and Eurydice (2017). EPI rankings were taken from Education First (2017).

* Flexible time allocation

In these countries, foreign language instruction becomes mandatory at different ages during primary education. The Netherlands has actually the latest onset of compulsory education (Eurydice, 2012b; Eurydice, 2017), and one of the shortest durations in years. Turkey has increased the duration of first foreign language education by three years over the course of the last decade (Eurydice, 2012a; Eurydice, 2012b; Eurydice, 2017). The intensity of a program is determined by both the total number of hours and weekly frequency of delivery. In most European countries, the total hours of foreign language classes are over 500 per academic year. Compared to the other countries, Luxembourg, France and Turkey allocate the most annual taught time to first foreign language instruction. Even though, Luxembourg is ranked seventh, France and Turkey ranked lower. As Table 2 indicates, there is not a linear relationship between EPI rankings and duration. Poland, the Netherlands and Switzerland apply flexible time for the whole foreign language instruction process with no pre-determined total hours. The instructions show a total amount of class hours for each school year, which schools may

allocate to individual subjects as they deem necessary. Austria and Sweden require a yearly minimum of 480 hours of instruction for all grades. Despite their similar allotment, Sweden ranked second but Austria ranked 10th. Each school has the responsibility of appropriately allotting these hours to courses. As the table shows, EPI rankings and teaching time allocated do not bear a linear relationship. In the EF EPI rankings, The Netherlands came in 1st with a score of 71.45, while Turkey, despite its relatively high annual instruction time, ranked 62nd of 80 countries. Although France, Italy and Turkey's data are remarkably similar, France and Italy come almost 30 places above Turkey. Apparently, both annual taught time and duration of education fail to explain the proficiency scores on their own, since there are other contributory factors such as curriculum, teacher/student ratio, classroom set-up, teacher profile, language teaching methodologies and so on.

The investigation of the second research question revealed that the majority of the teachers think that lowering the starting age was a positive step. Some teachers raised concerns that students should be exposed to more listening activities and other teachers believe that students should start to learn a foreign language as early as possible.

"This education can start together with the compulsory schooling...it had better start with simple words." (Teacher 1 – Primary School)

"I consider this early start as a positive policy despite some lack of technologies." (Teacher 4 – Secondary School)

"I consider the start of [foreign language instruction] from the second year [of compulsory education] onwards is a positive step." (Teacher 5 – Secondary School)

The majority of teachers mentioned that an increase in the total number of foreign language classes was needed. However, they felt that such an increase would not be useful unless it was accompanied by appropriate language learning technologies.

"Some schools are not equipped with the essential gadgets and furthermore the Ministry does not provide teachers with audio CDs." (Teacher 4 - Secondary School)

"I sometimes overcome the lack of technologies by bringing my own laptop and speakers into the classroom, but a computer and speakers should always be in class inventory." (Teacher 2 – Primary School)

"4-hour-week timetable is not enough for this syllabus. The total hours need to be increased and teachers should use Internet resources in their classes. This can free them from isolated materials." (Teacher 5 – Secondary School)

The interviews targeted at revealing teachers' opinions with regard to duration and total teaching hours for foreign language education in Turkey, yet teachers emphatically stated that official textbooks, central curriculum and physical conditions at schools fail to take account of varying needs of students. Half of the teachers asked for more flexibility in the class in order to be more responsible for the students' success. All the interviewees expressed their desire for a curriculum developed from the start with teachers' desires in mind. While one teacher believed that the program should be developed centrally by the Ministry of Education, the other interviewees stated that schools should

take on the responsibility of developing their own program. All but one of the teachers sharply criticized the course books for being poor in educational quality.

“This is a program developed regardless of the needs of our students in this school. I wonder whether there are any representatives from the teachers while a curriculum is developed.”
(Teacher 5 – Secondary School)

“When compared to high school course books, primary school books are deprived of a certain approach.” (Teacher 1 – Primary School)

“We were taught skills using cassette players. I believe our students should have at least the same opportunities I had.” (Teacher 4 – Secondary School)

The conversations among the interviewees also provided useful data. None of the participants have conflicting views in terms of class size. They all complain about the challenges of crowded classes and insufficient class time which make it almost impossible give students a chance to practice pronunciation.

“So far, I have generally had 30-35 students in each class...” (Teacher 5 – Secondary School)

“I have been luckier. In general, I have had 20-25 students per class. However even sixth graders can mispronounce some of the pronouns because of crowded classes.” (Teacher 6 – Secondary School)

“Each student can have one or two turns in a day and this is not sufficient to provide feedback.”
(Teacher 3 – Primary School)

4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined key aspects of compulsory foreign language instruction in Europe, with primary focus on starting age, duration, minimum class hours, and teachers’ opinions, which were obtained only in Turkey.

There is a growing tendency in Europe to introduce compulsory foreign language learning at an early age and this is clearly reflected in recent figures. All the countries, except for Finland, have made no changes to the starting age over the years or have decreased the age when students are introduced a compulsory foreign language. As of 2016, Turkish students encounter their first compulsory foreign language at the age of seven, which is 3 years younger the 2007 starting age for compulsory foreign language education. This indicates that, with regard to starting first foreign language education at an early age, Turkey is in line with the other European countries. The interviews yielded that all the teachers believed that introducing a foreign language at an early age is a major step forward and this finding is consistent with the research results of Griva, Panteli and Nihoritou (2016). Turkey, along with six other countries, do not give priority to any individual language skill, but considers all four skills to be equally important at the start of compulsory foreign language instruction. In Austria and France, however, the emphasis is placed on listening and speaking skills. As also stated by Özdemir, Demir, Özkan and Songören (2017), one of the main problems Turkish students experience is that they do not have much opportunity to expose to the target language use in daily life. Although Turkey

gives priority to the four language skills at the start of compulsory foreign language education, at Grade 2, Turkey had better stresses the importance of oral communication skills and regards all four skills as equally important afterwards.

Additionally, Turkey was found to have the third longest duration of first foreign language instruction, after Luxembourg and France. In fact, Turkey and Luxembourg possess several distinctive statistics. Luxembourg has, by far, the highest number of yearly instruction hours of all the countries examined in the current study. Turkey, on the other hand, has the longest duration in years of instruction among the countries investigated, and it is the only country which has steadily increased the duration of foreign language instruction. While, since 2011 there has been a tendency towards shortening the duration of first foreign language instruction, Turkey and Germany are the only countries which have increased the duration. According to Capperucci (2017), in addition to increasing students' exposure time to the target language, curriculum design, subject knowledge and teachers' ability to use different teaching and learning strategies are important too.

There is a difference in overall approach in the selected European countries as they can offer either a pre-determined total taught time, a flexible allotment of an annual total time or flexible amount of unspecified taught time. Countries applying flexible time for the whole foreign language instruction make decisions regarding the allotment of hours, and thus, take more responsibility for the flexibility in the curriculum. As Aslan (2016) argued that unlike the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland, Turkey lacks flexible delivery of language teaching. Flexible instruction does not strictly prescribe how learning should take place, but offers flexibility in designing and orchestrating the learning process. Turkey is among the top three countries with the most hours of language education, with 912 total hours of compulsory education. Taking the 11-year compulsory foreign language instruction period into consideration, the total hours allotted in Turkey seem comparatively high. According to an annual study of English proficiency levels worldwide, Turkey was ranked 62nd out of 80 countries (Education First, 2017). The top three countries in EF EPI rankings were the ones with the lowest minimum yearly hours of instruction – Sweden (480 hours), Austria (480 hours), and Finland (456 hours).

Clearly, more annual taught time does not necessarily mean more achievement in foreign language instruction. Curriculum, teacher/student ratio, classroom set-up, the limitations of the EPI scoring system and so on, are all important factors that should be taken into consideration. Based on the similarities and differences among the education systems, it is improbable that a pattern can be set that can, in all cases, explain why some countries rank higher in English proficiency. However, it is quite feasible for a country, by examining the comparisons drawn among the education systems, to adjust its education policies according to their own needs.

The interviews focused on duration of foreign language learning and the number of teaching hours in Turkey, yet the participants emphatically stated that official textbooks, central curriculum and physical conditions at schools fail to take account of varying needs of students. As the interviews revealed the process of teaching and students learning conditions are key components to success. The materials teachers use, and how they use them, can greatly impact outcomes. Crucially, innovation in foreign language instruction should not be reduced to simply lowering the starting age of learners. Perhaps the most useful general conclusion to draw is that there is a need for improvement in terms of the quality of delivery in Turkey. Schools should try to keep up with the quantity demands such as

teacher-student ratio or weekly class hours, while also working towards improving the quality of foreign language teaching by adopting current approaches to tackling problems and staying up-to-date. Focusing on both quality and quantity demands indicates a mutual support.

Awareness should be raised about the process of learning a foreign language. Success does not come without a price and foreign language learning at an early age is doomed to fail without parental involvement. The amount of time allotted to listening and speaking needs to be increased, but this can be effective only if barriers in the learning environment are eliminated. Another factor regarding the failure of Turkish students to speak in English can be identified as the seating arrangement. Almost all classrooms in Turkish state schools have a furnishing-layout where language teachers fail to organize students into pairs or groups for communication activities (TEPAV Project Team, 2013). It is preferable to offer short, daily lessons instead of one or two longer weekly sessions. However, improved timetabling is not enough to guarantee positive results. Teacher training also needs to be reoriented to meet student needs and address their learning idiosyncrasies at an early age. Toköz-Göktepe (2015) also pointed that English teacher training programs in Turkey call for some revisions in order to address the needs of students. Future research should attempt to collect longitudinal data to explain the relationship between class size, language proficiency and starting age since they are all vital concerns in foreign language instruction.

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