

AN OVERVIEW OF THE REALITIES BEHIND THE ENGLISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the validity of the arguments put forward to promote the use of English as a medium of education at various levels of Turkish educational system, higher education in particular. It argues for an awareness among English language teaching professionals in Turkey of the social and cultural factors influencing the use and spread of English in the Turkish context. Then it summarizes the results of a recent survey carried out at the Middle East Technical University. The findings clearly show the difference between the rhetoric used by the proponents of this policy and the reality we are faced in English-medium classes.

INTRODUCTION

As a result of historical, economic and political reasons and the deliberate language choices made by Turkish authorities, a huge demand for more English in education has been triggered off. English has come to be seen as being synonymous with education. Enormous resources are deployed by parents for their children to be educated in a foreign language despite the fact that most of the students are automatically excluded from realizing this dream by failing in one of the numerous exams they have to take. The pressure is so great that even primary students are forced to take extra private courses in the hope that this will improve their chances of gaining access to an English-medium secondary school. This struggle continues right up to the university entrance exam when students once more have to take private swotting courses in a bid to obtain a place in one of the so-called "privileged" universities which supposedly guarantee their graduates a more prestigious position in life than regular universities can offer.

The following section will attempt to clarify some of the forces behind the spread of English as a medium of instruction and some of the ways in which it is legitimated not only in Turkey but in other countries as well.

THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ARGUMENTS FOR ENGLISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION IN TURKEY

Phillipson (1992) groups such justifications for the use of English according to whether they refer to the 'intrinsic' qualities of English (what English is), its 'extrinsic' qualities (what English has), and its functions (what English does)

He explains that

English-intrinsic arguments describe English as rich, varied, noble, well adapted for change, interesting etc. English-extrinsic arguments refer to textbooks, dictionaries, grammar books, a rich literature, trained teachers, experts etc. English-functional arguments credit English with real or potential access to modernization, science, technology, etc., with the capacity to unite people within a country and across nation, or with the furthering of international understanding (1992: 272).

Such arguments do seem intuitively common sensical. We readily tend to accept that English is a world language and that it is 'all right' to use it as a medium of instruction in our schools. However, we overlook the fact that these arguments are used to promote English and are based on scientifically unproven notions of structural and logical superiority. A possible explanation for this general acceptance in language teaching profession in particular is that the understanding of the unique social and cultural context in which language learning and teaching take place is regarded as a 'given' rather than a central concern language pedagogy should seek to investigate. Consequently, ELT has isolated itself from the rest of educational matters thanks to an artificial distinction drawn between education and language teaching. It mainly concentrates on methodological matters, e.g. which teaching method teachers should use. Other aspects, just as important as pedagogical matters, like social, economic and political issues are excluded from the curricula. As if anything to do with politically sensitive and contentious issues had to be avoided and English were to remain a purely technical exercise. To Phillipson (1992:67), such an approach serves to disconnect culture from structure and assumes that educational concerns can be divorced from social, political, and economic realities. It exonerates the experts who

hold the belief from concerning themselves with these dimensions. It encourages a technical approach to ELT, divorced even from wider educational issues. It permits the English language to be exported as a standard product without the requirements of the local market being considered except in a superficial way.

More recently though, in some universities, we have seen some positive changes in the theoretical basis of ELT programmes from the study of phonetics and grammatical theory to the study of discourse analysis, second language acquisition, classroom-based research, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

This shift from seeing linguistics as the base of a teacher's knowledge to the recognition of more social issues in language teacher education is surely appropriate and essential. It is imperative that teachers understand that the language they are teaching is more than a means of communication. It is ideologically encumbered and should be viewed as such.

Now let us look at each set of arguments used to promote English in Turkey, with examples drawn from other countries as well.

English-Intrinsic Arguments

These arguments extol the intrinsic qualities of English. To some, English is a 'linguistic miracle' (Kachru and Quirk 1981: xiv quoted in Phillipson 1992). To others, it is a 'God-given asset' (British Council Report 1983-84:9 quoted in Phillipson).

Some influential linguists, too, join in the chorus praising the qualities of English. Phillipson quotes (1992: 275):

It must be a source of gratification to mankind that the tongue spoken by two of the greatest powers of the world is so noble, so rich, so pliant, so expressive, and so interesting (Jespersen 1905: 234).

English possesses a great range of rules for the formation of new words... English, it would seem, is well adapted for development and change (Stevens 1980: 85).

Since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, you can learn it without having to subscribe to another set of values... tied to no particular social, economic, or religious system, nor to a specific racial or cultural group, English belongs to everyone or to no one, or it at least is quite often regarded as having this property (Wardhaugh 1987: 15).

After reading these statements one can easily conclude that English is so noble and beautiful that you feel deprived of something very valuable if you do not learn it. The fact is that English is advertised and sold just as French was when it was presented as a language of elegance and civility in the early years of the Turkish republic.

First of all, it is highly questionable to assert that English is neutral and that no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of it. Its ideological impact in Turkey and in other underdeveloped countries cannot be denied. As Freire (1972: 13) puts it

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Alptekin et al. (1984) also draw attention to the problem of cultural domination. They argue that "being at the receiving end of a virtually one-way flow of information from Anglo-American centers, the host country runs the risk of having its own culture totally submerged".

We should also remember that all the languages, in principle, are equals. They fulfil any function that the community demands. As Skutnabb-Kangas (1981: 3) puts it:

Considered as tools with which to handle the world, all languages are of equal worth. Every language spoken by a group of people as a mother tongue is sufficiently developed also to be able to function as a medium of instruction. From a linguistic point of view, it is not possible to describe one language (for example, Spanish or Swedish) as "better" or "more developed" than another (for example, Guarani or Same) -in that respect all languages are equal.

Edward Sapir said (1921: 22):

There is no more striking general fact about language than its universality. One may argue as to whether a particular tribe engages in activities that are worthy of the name of religion or of art, but we know of no people that is not possessed of a fully developed language. The lowliest South African Bushman speaks in the form of a rich symbolic system that is in essence perfectly comparable to the speech of the cultivated Frenchman.

Sankoff (1976: 284) also agrees that there is no evidence that in terms of the basic machinery of a language considered as a code for transmitting messages, i.e. the phonology, morphology, syntax, or even the overall semantic organization, any one language is inherently superior, more logical, accurate or efficient, or in any way preferable to any other language. Thus stereotypes such as that French is a particularly beautiful or precise language, that English is inherently better suited to scientific thinking, that non-standard English is illogical, etc., have no basis in linguistic science.

Obviously, this does not mean that there are no differences between languages. One particular language may have developed itself in its written form while another may have done so in the terminology of a specific field. As Skutnabb-Kangas states, these differences, are technical matters. And they can be solved when sufficient resources are invested in it. "The fact that in principle every language is as good as every other is thus not reflected in the pattern of use -power relations decide" (1981:4).

English-Extrinsic Arguments

English-extrinsic arguments generally refer to material (books, trained teachers etc.) and immaterial sources (knowledge, skills and expertise) available in the language.

In many underdeveloped countries, including Turkey, this argument constitutes the main justification to promote English in the educational system. The usual rationalization is that we need scientific and technological development urgently. Since our own language is not developed enough to express highly sophisticated technical and scientific processes, we use English (or French etc.) as a medium. English is the key to rapid technological progress and modernity. If we do not use English as a medium, we will be left behind with respect to scientific and technological development.

Examples to underscore this reasoning can be found all around the world. In Tanzania, for instance as in many other former African colonies, the medium of instruction in primary schools is Kiswahili, while at secondary and tertiary levels it is English. Although Tanzanian policy over the past 20 years has aimed to replace English with Kiswahili as a medium of learning at all educational levels, it has never been implemented. And the main reason officially given is that English is a world language.

Therefore, it should be maintained as a medium of instruction in order to catch up with scientific and technological innovations in the West (Rubagumya 1990).

In most African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Zaire, to mention only a few) English or French play the same role. They are perceived as the key to progress and modernity which of course reinforces the belief that no education is good enough if one of these languages is not used.

Turkey is another example of an underdeveloped country where the main consideration is the acquisition of technological skills for economic development. Thus, the knowledge of a major world language is considered as a prerequisite for scientific and technological development. From the very beginning, when French held sway in education, the basic rationalization was, and still is, that the chosen foreign language was the language of science and technology, and that if one was to catch up with developed countries and transfer technological innovations to Turkey, that language should be the medium of instruction (Doltas 1989, Eren 1963).

Such a perspective reflects a colonized mentality. As Phillipson puts it (1992: 248):

One of the legacies of colonial education was that language was perceived as a panacea for the solution of not only educational but also development problems. The argument used to promote English linked use of the master language to the promise of economic progress, enlightenment and so on, but that promised land is still for most an unredeemed promise.

English-Functional Arguments

This type of argument refers to what English does since, in addition to the resources that English has, underdeveloped countries also need what English gives access to.

In the Turkish context this argument usually runs as follows (I believe it is not very much different in other countries): Turkish students learn English because English is essential as a means of international communication. It is argued that if it is used as a medium of education, students will be able to keep abreast with what is going on in the world. They will have better access to source materials such as scientific, technological and medical journals and should they go on to study abroad, it will be easier for them to understand lectures and tutors, and of course to make themselves understood.

But how many students will realistically ever meet native speakers of English or non-native speakers who have English as their second or third language, and what percentage of the students will need English for communication purposes and how many students will go abroad to study? No one really knows.

The usual answer to this argument is that it is pertinent only with regard to the small educated elite. Thus the use of English as a medium of education in a few selected institutions creates an elite alienated from the rest of the population. The pursuit of this elitist education is in conflict with stated policies which are supposed to serve the interests of the entire nation rather than particular interests.

Obviously, most of the arguments given above try to persuade us of the superior merits of English. After all the ideal way to make people do what you want is of course to make them want it themselves, and to make them believe that it is good for them. This simplifies the role of the 'seller', who then can appear as 'helping' or 'giving aid', rather than 'forcing' or 'bargaining' with the victim (Phillipson 1992: 286).

THE REALITY

After reading all these arguments, which, to me, are totally rhetorical and do not reflect the realities of Turkey, one can wonder whether English-medium education does really work. Moved with this question, I carried out a study at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara (for more information see Akunal 1992).

Rationale for the Study

The field study was conducted to collect information from a large group of students and teachers in Middle East Technical University, Turkey, about their assessment of content-based second language instruction (CBSLI) in their university. The specific objectives of the study included:

- obtaining a description of existing CBSLI programmes at METU;
- collecting data on how second-year university students rate themselves with respect to their English language proficiency, to their academic skills, to what their attitudes are to instruction in English and to how they evaluate instructors and English medium instruction at METU;
- gathering data on instructors at METU with respect to their English proficiency, to their attitudes to teaching in English and to the problems they face when using English as a medium of instruction;
- obtaining a detailed description of the extent to which the objectives of a CBSLI programme are pursued and achieved by observing and recording real classroom activities/interaction at METU.

Setting

The METU may well be an ideal setting for this study since it is known as one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey, partly because its medium of education is English. Since its inception in 1956, the language of instruction has been English and, as an indication of the quality of education given at the university, its graduates are sought after in both public and private sectors.

The Population Surveyed

The population included instructors and second-year students in four departments in four faculties; the Department of Architecture in the Faculty of Architecture, The Department of Sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Department of Economics in the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, and the Department of Chemical Engineering in the Faculty of Engineering. The population surveyed numbered 186 second-year students and 41 instructors. Of the students 105 (56%) were male while 81 (44%) were female.

Results of the Study

The empirical data collected at METU showed that students' attitudes towards the use of English in education are guided by instrumental reasons. A vast majority of students said they chose an English-medium faculty because they believed they would have a better chance of obtaining a good job. However, given a choice between English-medium instruction and Turkish-medium instruction supported by an intensive English programme, 48% would prefer the latter.

The questionnaire data also indicated that students made very limited gains in their command of English. Students reported having difficulties with speaking and writing and even with reading and listening. Relatively large minorities said they could not manage academic tasks in English. Participating in discussions, in particular, seemed to be posing the most serious problem for students. They also acknowledged that their limited abilities in English were not transferable to non-specific tasks. There was strong evidence, for example, that students' reading ability was strictly confined to their textbooks.

Observations of immersion classes at METU also demonstrated that what we see is not an actual integration of content and language teaching as advocated by proponents of immersion methodology. It is rather a typical pattern of content teaching as seen in first language medium classrooms. The examination of lesson transcripts showed that as a result of teachers assuming the role of authoritative purveyors of knowledge, there was no discussion environment in the class and students had hardly any opportunity to produce the target language. And virtually all interaction initiated by students took place in Turkish reflecting their difficulties in producing English. In short, observation data confirmed that classroom environment did not provide opportunities for the kind of input, interaction and output in the second language which have been claimed essential to promote second language acquisition.

To sum up, the use of English as a medium of instruction in the educational system of Turkey has no conclusive theoretical and empirical support. Despite all the arguments in favour of English, I believe that instruction should be in Turkish in order to encourage individual creativity and to avoid a communication gap between intellectuals and ordinary people. I would argue that accepting English as the medium of intellectual activities and putting Turkish into a subordinate position may well contribute to arresting home-grown linguistic and intellectual developments in Turkey.

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