

## **Implementing the recent curricular changes to English language instruction in Turkey: opinions and concerns of elementary school administrators<sup>1</sup>**

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Recent modifications to the Turkish educational system have mandated that instruction in English begin in the 2nd grade, rather than the 4th grade, as was previously required. Consequently, substantial modification of the elementary (2nd through 8th grade) English language teaching program has been carried out in order to accommodate this change. Successful implementation of the new program may be significantly affected by the efforts of elementary school administrators to incorporate the restructured curriculum at the institutional level. Therefore, the researchers believe that understanding the attitudes of school principals concerning these changes may play a significant role in learner outcomes. Accordingly, by means of personal interviews, this qualitative study explores the beliefs of nine elementary school administrators concerning the teaching of English to younger students, as well as their general opinions on English language education. The results indicate divided opinions toward the requirement for English instruction, although the administrators' attitudes toward facilitating English teaching in their schools were generally positive. However, they expressed concerns about the recently replaced teaching program and indicated general agreement that revision was needed. Based on the perceptions expressed by the participants, the researchers concluded that the administrators may be motivated to promote the modified teaching program among teachers, students and parents. However, the responses of the participants also raised significant questions about school principals' underlying beliefs concerning the importance of English language education, as well as institutional issues that may warrant intervention. As a result, suggestions for additional research are made.

**Keywords:** curricular reform; educational reform; English as a foreign language (EFL); school administrators; school principals

### **Introduction**

In Turkey, as well as in countries throughout the developing world, national governments have made it a priority to provide their citizens with the quality education needed to succeed in a dynamic and competitive global society (Cogo, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Pakir, 2009; Rajagopalan, 2004; Seidlhofer, 2005; Senior, 2006; Sowden, 2012). In order to carry out this far-reaching goal in the Turkish context, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is in a continual process of evaluating its academic

programs and enacting systemic reform in order to meet the country's evolving educational needs in the face of the technological, scientific, social and political changes taking place worldwide (Çelik, 2012).

However, Fullan (1992) has argued that while educational reform may be relatively simple to enact, putting new legislation into practice can be enormously challenging. Questions of resources and staffing, as well as social and political issues, may obstruct efforts to carry out curricular changes. For instance, in terms of staffing, a recent update to the national teaching curriculum in the Republic of South Africa known as Curriculum and Assessment and Policy Statements (CAPS), which was designed to resolve issues in an earlier reform program known as the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2013), has itself proven to be problematic. Educators have cited major difficulties in implementing the modified teaching program, as public school teachers have not generally been adequately trained to deal with these changes, and current teacher education programs do not sufficiently address the updated curriculum (UNISA College of Education, 2012).

In the Turkish context, as well, Acat, Anılan and Anagün (2010) point out that even when reform is seen in a generally positive light, teachers and students alike often tend to resist efforts to carry out any alteration in the accustomed way of doing things. Overall, as Avenstrup (2007) contends, the obstacles that may be encountered in bringing about educational reform are wide-ranging, pervasive, and complex, encompassing many cultural, political, administrative and practical issues. Therefore, when it comes to putting curricular modifications into effect, strong leadership and effective management of resources is required at the ground level.

#### Role of the school administrator in carrying out educational reform

While countless individuals – from teachers, administrators and support staff to students and their parents – all play a role in adapting to curricular revisions. Fullan (2001:1) reasons that it is the school principal who is central in “promoting or inhibiting change” from a leadership perspective. In this regard, as noted by Grobler, Bisschoff and Bleeka (2012), the role of the school administrator is multifaceted. Trail (2000:2) highlights the importance of the principal in facilitating educational reform, noting that, as experienced teachers who have significant insight into the issues that teachers face in the classroom, principals “must position themselves as guides and as models, helping teachers who, in the face of significant change, must become learners themselves”. In this respect, she asserts that principals have the responsibility to work with teachers in adapting to new materials and instructional practices, at the same time guiding their ongoing professional development. As resource managers, school administrators are also responsible for overseeing the hiring of staff, as well as designating the use of materials and classroom space in order to create a positive teaching and learning environment. Furthermore, Trail (2000:2) contends that principals must act

as “liaison[s] with the various stakeholders throughout the implementation of a reform program”, including teachers, support staff, parents and students, as they work to ensure that new policies are integrated into the internal school environment, as well as enforcing them when necessary.

Similarly, Töremen and Kolay (2003) argue that school principals must assume the role of communicators as they work to clarify the objectives and expectations of the new system and prepare teachers to cope with these issues at the classroom level. Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi (2011) and Kapıkıran (2004) reinforce the notion of principals as mediators; Kapıkıran, in particular, notes that school principals bear the responsibility for motivating teachers, students and parents to view educational revisions in a positive light as they “try to balance the conflicting needs and expectations of each group” (Maforah & Schulze, 2012:236).

#### *The effect of school administrators' attitudes on the implementation of reform*

Given the significant role of the school principal in carrying out curricular reform at the institutional level, a number of researchers have noted that their attitudes toward a particular reform measure can have a significant impact on its success. Park and Jeong (2013), for instance, demonstrate that school administrators who have a positive attitude and enforce their leadership role in promoting reform can substantially reduce the resistance of teachers toward changes to the curriculum. Brown and Moffett (1999) share a similar view, pointing to the ability of school leaders to bring reduce tensions and promote cooperation in the implementation of curricular modifications. On the other hand, when principals themselves are opposed to change and hold an entrenched view of how things should be, bringing about the necessary change can be especially problematic (Moore, 2009).

#### *Curricular reform and Turkey's English language teaching program*

In recent decades, an increasing focus on the importance of developing proficiency in foreign languages has made language education a matter of great significance in the international community (Güler, 2005; Mirici, 2008). English, in particular, has received substantial attention due to its status as a universal contact language. As a result, English language instruction has been included as an important element of public schooling in countries such as Turkey for many decades (Büyükkantarcıoğlu, 2004). While English was initially introduced by the MoNE as a required subject beginning in the 6th grade, the legislation adopted in 1997 to establish an eight-year compulsory education program included the mandate that English lessons be administered from the 4th grade onward (Demirel, 2005).

This practice of implementing language instruction among younger age groups has become widespread, with nations throughout the European Union introducing foreign language lessons as early as the first grade (Eurydice, 2008). Countries such as China and Japan, as well as many others worldwide, are also undergoing a push to reduce the age at which foreign language instruction is about to begin (Duff, 2008; McCurry,

2011). Moreover, the recent passage in Turkey of an education reform bill popularly known as the 4+4+4 program (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Education, Board of Education, 2013) has extended the compulsory term of education. Under the previous system, children received a minimum of eight years of education, comprising elementary school (grades 1-5) and middle school (grades 6-8). With the recent reform, compulsory schooling has been increased to 12 years, including four years of elementary school (grades 1-4), four years of middle school (grades 5-8), and four years of high school (grades 9-12), as well as encompassing a variety of other modifications to the official public school curriculum.

Concurrent with these changes, the English language teaching program has been completely revised, and English instruction is now compulsory from the 2nd grade onward, rather than the 4th grade; in addition, the required age for registering children in the 1st grade has been reduced by one year. These changes will result in children starting English lessons three years earlier than under the previous system (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Education, Board of Education, 2013).

### Purpose of the Study

As the literature demonstrates, it is widely recognized that the success of curricular reform depends substantially on the positive efforts of public school administrators. On the other hand, when principals are opposed to a set of reforms, or they are unable or unwilling to carry them out in their schools and monitor their progress, it is unlikely that the mandated changes will be successfully applied within their individual institutions (Moore, 2009). This issue is particularly significant in the Turkish educational context, where the evolving culture of shared leadership (Brown & Moffett, 1999) does not yet play a major role and school principals maintain considerable authority and control at the institutional level (Gümüşeli, 2009). Therefore, the researchers believe that in implementing the recent modifications to the English language teaching curriculum in Turkey, it is essential to explore the attitudes of the school principals who will be responsible for carrying them out. Accordingly, this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the beliefs of Turkish public school principals with regard to implementing mandatory English instruction at a younger age?
2. What are the opinions of school principals concerning the status of English language instruction in Turkish public schools?
3. How prepared are school administrators in Turkey to enforce the updated English language teaching curriculum, as evidenced by their attitudes?

By investigating these issues, it may be possible to identify any concerns or potential problem areas and develop guidelines for addressing them appropriately, both in the context of Turkish public education and in other developing countries that are experiencing similar periods of adjustment and reform.

## **Methodology**

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach to the investigation, as the attitudes and experiences of Turkish school principals were of primary concern. Accordingly, drawing on Gray's (2004) contention that personal interviews are a highly effective means to elicit the views of the participants, a series of open-ended interview questions was applied.

### **Setting and Participants**

In order to reach those participants from whom the most pertinent information could be obtained, purposive sampling was employed (Patton, 1990, 2002). Accordingly, as the focus of the investigation was on English language instruction for younger learners, elementary school principals were targeted. A listing of all of the elementary schools (encompassing grades 1-4, in accordance with the recently implemented 4+4+4 system) in the central district of a mid-size city in northeastern city in Turkey was obtained. Because the total number of schools ( $n = 50$ ) was judged to be too large for the purposes of the investigation, 14 principals who could be conveniently accessed by the researchers and who were believed to represent the overall population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008) were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Of those who were invited, nine agreed to be interviewed. One of the respondents was female, and the remaining eight were male, with ages ranging between thirty-three and fifty-six. In terms of their education, four of the principals held masters degrees, while five had earned Bachelor of Arts degrees. All of the respondents had worked as classroom teachers for at least 10 years; in addition, they had between three and 25 years of experience working as school administrators. Before application of the interviews, the respondents were informed of the purpose of the investigation; in addition, they were advised that their identities would not be revealed, and their written consent was obtained for use of the data.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected via a series of open-ended questions that were adapted from surveys developed by Kızıldağ (2009), Özsevik (2010), and Topkaya and Küçük (2010). The questions were designed to elicit the attitudes of the participants concerning the issues involved in implementing English language instruction for young learners. In order to obtain a rich account of their experiences and allow for follow-up questions, face-to-face interviews were administered in Turkish by one of the researchers (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Each interview session lasted from 15-30 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants; furthermore, additional details were provided in writing at the request of the researchers in order to clarify some of the responses. A list of the interview questions has been translated into English and included in Appendix A.

### **Data analysis and credibility**

Following the interviews, the responses were transcribed and translated into English,

and the accuracy of the translations was confirmed by an outside expert. The researchers employed a process of iterative reading as a means to "group answers...to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990:376). In doing so, they were able to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' attitudes toward the ideas explored in the interviews. After preparing a research report, member checks were conducted in order to allow the participants the opportunity to confirm or redirect the researchers' interpretations of their responses (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

## **Results**

In order to illustrate the participants' views in a cohesive and accessible format, their responses have been synthesized according to the attitudes evidenced in the data. The results are presented here in narrative form in terms of each of the aspects of English language education explored in the interviews.

### Opinions concerning the teaching of English to young learners

Under the previous system, English language instruction began in the 4th grade; however, the newly enacted legislation stipulates that elementary school students start learning English in the 2nd grade, at about 6-6.5 years. When asked for their views on this issue, the majority of the school principals indicated support for beginning English instruction at an earlier age. Informant 5, for instance, expressed that:

The age for starting English instruction should be 6-7 years, at the most. Learning English, or any other language, should start in the first grade. Language education should not be like learning something foreign; it should be treated like learning how to read and write.

The other participants largely upheld this assertion that language instruction should take place alongside other critical areas of development, such as reading and writing; and some argued that language learning should commence at even earlier period, in kindergarten or preschool. Informant 9 explained that, from a pedagogical standpoint, "there is a critical period in language teaching, and it shouldn't be delayed. We cannot teach grammar [to young children], but speaking and practical language education might begin at the age of four." Thus, in his opinion, "it should start young; an early but gentle beginning increases its permanence. If we present English as a fun process, not as a lesson, they take it to be fun in the 2nd grade and beyond." These statements indicate an attitude that beginning English instruction at earlier grade levels might encourage learners to see the process as enjoyable, increasing their motivation as well as improving retention. However, not all of the respondents shared this perspective. Informant 6, for example, did not feel that English should be taught to elementary school children in any event:

English language instruction should start after high school or during the last year of high school. The failure of English language teaching in our country can be attributed to the fact that it starts at such an early age and continues [throughout

the educational process]. This situation creates the understanding that a person who doesn't speak English cannot be successful; cannot conduct research or be a researcher or anything like that, and this causes children to feel that their mother tongue is inferior.

According to his understanding, early instruction in a foreign language could amount to setting learners up for failure. Informant 2 supported this viewpoint, adding that "I don't think a student who cannot read and write in his own language fully and doesn't know all of its features can learn another language well."

#### Perceptions concerning the requirement for English language education

In terms of their attitudes toward mandatory English instruction, the participants generally agreed that it was an essential aspect of education. Several of the respondents considered its status as a global language as necessitating the requirement to learn English from the early stages of schooling. Informant 1, for instance, commented that:

In order to compete in this globalizing world and to get what we deserve from the opportunities the world offers, we should take the necessary measures to ensure that our citizens are educated in speaking [English]. Speaking a foreign language should be seen as a requirement.

Informant 9 expanded on this assertion, pointing out that "our aim in learning English is not to be limited by our own world, but to exist in the global world." On the other hand, some of the participants were critical of the compulsory aspect of English instruction, believing that it should instead be offered as an elective subject. Informant 2, in particular, argued that "It is important to learn a foreign language, but if it is not going to be used in the future, it should not be a requirement." Similarly, Informant 6 expressed that:

I don't think that forcing everyone to learn English...is necessary. English language education shouldn't be required for all individuals; it should be voluntary. There should be options involving different languages, and it should be left to the willingness and interest of the parents and the students themselves.

Another issue cited as a shortcoming of the current system is the assumption that all learners should meet the same set of standards, with no provision for ability level or interest. Informant 4 considered this requirement to be especially problematic; in her opinion, it fails to make room for the needs of individual students and creates what for some amounts to an unnecessary burden. As she put it:

In the Turkish National Education System, a high level of mastery is targeted. Everyone who learns English is expected to speak at an advanced level, such as understanding, interpreting and working on a scientific product. This causes problems for learners.

To mitigate this issue, she suggests that a system of ability grouping might be more effective, as it would allow learners with advanced capabilities and a higher level of motivation to pursue a more rigorous program of training, while students with little interest in a career requiring English skills could receive more basic instruction.

Informant 1 offered a similar solution, pointing out that “the extent of the language taught to a kid who will communicate in English in his village with a tourist should not be the same as that taught to a kid who dreams of himself in a foreign country.”

#### Attitudes toward the previous English Language Curriculum

Regardless of their perspectives concerning English as an academic requirement, the participants were generally critical of the recently-replaced teaching program, along with the available instructional resources and materials, and they felt that reform was necessary. As Informant 2 expressed:

The [prior] curriculum is adequate in terms of the syllabus, but I believe it is insufficient. Learners’ being unprepared, the fact that there was not enough practice, that the subjects are not supported with visuals, and that the syllabus is too dense had a negative effect on English language teaching ... the English language cannot be learned successfully simply by reading from a textbook and listening to teachers lecturing. Using the language for communication is really important in English language teaching. Formal instruction should be integrated with practice...Moreover, visuals are important; subjects can be exemplified by animations.

His perception that the previous curriculum was too crowded and that teaching materials were not adequate to support effective learning was echoed by several of the other respondents. According to Informant 3, for instance, “there are unnecessary repetitions in the [recently-replaced] curriculum, and the difficulty level is not appropriately balanced. I also believe there are too many things to do in a short time.” Furthermore, he compared the Turkish system unfavorably with that of other countries, especially those in the European Union:

When we look at Europe today, we see that people can speak a couple of languages, because they have the opportunity to visit other countries and use the languages they learn. The real problem in Turkey is that we don’t have the correct environment to use the language. Even though the materials are prepared according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards, neither the hours available for lessons nor the evaluation techniques, nor the requirements [of the prior curriculum] serve the aim of learning to speak the language.

In order to address this situation, he suggested that “the curriculum should...provide more opportunities for interaction. I think there should be some adjustments so that the curriculum is more flexible.” The lack of a communicative environment for practising English language skills was also highlighted by Informant 9, who went on to criticize the system as a whole:

I am not pleased, but the group [to whom] I give the least blame is the learners. We are all guilty. The system, the parents, the teachers, and most importantly, we administrators are guilty. We need to motivate teachers, but we generally can’t afford it. Our teachers are not qualified enough. It is not enough to have graduated



from a good university. Children cannot learn anything in a system based on memorizing; consequently, they do not like English. Parents think that their children can learn English after university, so they delay it, and then it is too late. I am not pleased with their success rate in English, but actually, I am not pleased with a lot of things.

### **Discussion**

The results of the surveys demonstrate that the school administrators were unanimous in their recognition of the need for Turkish learners to develop adequate English language skills, as stressed by Güler (2005) and Mirici (2008). On the other hand, they were somewhat divided in their opinions on the age at which instruction should begin; and they did not always agree on whether mandating foreign language instruction is appropriate in the Turkish context. Furthermore, some of the comments expressed by the participants highlight the fact that, although English language instruction has been an integral feature of public schooling for many years, there is an ongoing apprehension among certain educators that emphasizing a foreign language over one's mother tongue may be damaging in certain respects (König, 1990). On the surface, such beliefs may be interpreted as concern for the students, but König's (1990) assertion that fears about cultural corruption and linguistic imperialism often affect attitudes toward English language learning may also offer a partial explanation for this point of view. Kapıkıran (2004) cautions that such attitudes on the part of school principals may potentially undermine attempts to expand the scope of English language instruction.

On the other hand, although the respondents in this study differed in their perception of the age at which English instruction should be initiated and the manner in which it should be introduced, there were in general agreement that revision of the English teaching program had been necessary. As Töremen and Kolay (2003) point out, this acceptance of the need for reform may be seen as an important step in obtaining their cooperation; therefore, in this respect, it may be concluded that their attitudes convey a predisposition to enforce the reorganized language teaching program in their schools.

Furthermore, bearing in mind Trail's (2000) description of the school principal as a mediator who bears responsibility for negotiating the obstacles inherent in any systemic change, it can be argued that their belief in the appropriateness of the curricular modifications may affect the manner in which these individuals convey the current reform to teaching staff, parents and students (Moore, 2009; Park & Jeong, 2013). Therefore, addressing concerns such as those raised by the participants in this study may be critical in gaining the willing cooperation of administrators as they "get on board" (UNISA College of Education, 2012: para. 1) in terms of easing teaching staff and students through the transition to the updated teaching program.

### **Conclusion**

The present study was limited by the small sample size; furthermore, the investigation

was carried out within the confines of a single city, where it is likely that the principals faced similar issues with respect to the students, parents and teachers they serve. However, the concerns they brought to light relating to the curriculum, teaching materials and language requirements affect public education throughout Turkey, and therefore, it stands to reason that many of the elementary school principals in other parts of the country may share similar attitudes.

In terms of the attitudes expressed by the participants in the present, two issues stand out as especially significant. The first of these involves the principals' negative perceptions about the existing circumstances – including the inadequacies of the curriculum in use at the time of the study, the deficiencies in materials and classroom conditions, and questions respecting teachers' competence in English language instruction. These concerns suggest that the favourable attitude expressed toward the new teaching program might lie in the principals' dissatisfaction with the overall instructional environment, and that additional factors beyond curricular reform may need to be addressed through in terms of improving the conditions for learner success.

The second question raised by the participants' responses involves the concern that English language instruction in general may not be appropriate for Turkish learners, or that not all Turkish learners have the same need for developing proficiency in the English language. This view may point to a need for raising principals' awareness of the role of English and its importance to learners' success in their personal, academic and professional lives.

Broadening the current understanding of school principals' perspectives through further research may help to further illuminate areas in which principals may require additional support, such as developing their awareness of global issues related to English language instruction. Additional study may also help to pinpoint ways in which principals, as well as language teachers, can be supported in implementing the new curriculum and improving learner outcomes in English despite deficiencies such as insufficient teacher training and crowded classrooms.

As educational systems worldwide continue to re-calibrate their approach to teaching and learning, school principals in diverse situations face similar challenges in assisting teachers, students and parents through the inevitable period of adjustment. Thus, further research and cooperation on an international level may also help to ease these adjustments for the mutual benefit of all concerned.

## Note

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented by the authors (Çelik & Kasapoğlu, 2013), in February 2013, at the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Research in Education, Kyrenia, Cyprus.

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## Appendix A

### Teaching English to Young Learners – Questions for School Administrators

#### Opinions concerning age at onset of English language instruction:

1. Based on your experience, what do you think is the ideal age range for beginning English language instruction? Please explain your answer.
2. How do you think the age at which English language instruction is begun affects learner outcomes?
3. Do you think it is easier or more difficult to teach English to younger students? Please elaborate.
4. Do you think there is a need to begin English language instruction before the 4th grade? Why or why not?

#### Opinions concerning English Language Teaching (ELT) in Turkey

1. Do you think learning English is important for Turkish students? Why or why not?
2. What do you think are the main reasons for teaching English in Turkey?
3. What are your views on the current\* English language teaching system in Turkey? Is it adequate, or do you think reform is needed? Please elaborate.

#### English Language Teaching Curriculum/Materials

1. Do you think the current standardized ELT curriculum is adequate? Please elaborate.
2. Do you think the current ELT curriculum is in need of revision? Why or why not?

3. Please elaborate your opinion concerning the English language teaching materials (e.g., course books and other teaching resources) currently available.
4. In your opinion, what (if anything) could be done to improve the standardized English language teaching materials?

\* The current English language teaching program at the time of data collection; this has since been replaced by the updated curriculum.

**Adapted from:**

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