



English Language Teachers' Views on the New National Curriculum for 2nd Graders¹

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Abstract

Prior to the 2014-2015 school year, English language courses used to start at the fourth grade in Turkish primary schools. Starting in the 2014-2015 school year, second graders in Turkish primary schools started to take English language courses with the implementation of the new national curriculum for primary schools' grades 2 to 8. What made this curriculum different from previous ones was its insistence on curricular gains that were designed in consideration of communicative language teaching and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR). So far, little research has been produced collecting teachers' views on this new curriculum in practice. Hence, in this study, the views of 4 primary school English language teachers currently teaching second graders were collected and analyzed to understand the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum and the educational appropriateness of the curricular gains set for that specific level (2nd grades). Secondly, theoretical concerns and practical challenges associated with the implementation of the new curriculum are studied. Results showed that majority of these teachers had positive views on the new curriculum with its curricular gains although classroom materials and teaching hours remain problematic for them.

Key Words: Curriculum, English, national, young learners.

Introduction

Educational realities in which we live and work in the 21st century have resulted in a widespread demand for curricular reform in all areas of education (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). English was introduced as a compulsory subject for young learners at the elementary level (grades four through eight) in Turkey in 1997 and another curricular change occurred in 2005 in order to improve the English language teaching program prescribed by the 1997 curriculum (Çelik, Kirkgöz, & Arikan, 2015). However, a new curriculum is accepted by the Ministry of National Education (MNE, 2013) for 2nd through 8th graders the result of which is introducing English to young learners studying at the second grade. As stated by Kirkgöz, Çelik & Arikan (2016, p. 1210), "This curriculum was prepared following a thorough review of contemporary

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curricula used effectively in other countries, with consideration for the most recent methodological and technological developments and current, research-based practices related to the teaching of English to young learners.” Lowering the age of primary school learners so that they could be exposed to English language at an earlier age seems to have affected primary school learners’ views on learning English positively. Recent studies such as that of Asmali’s (2017, p. 65) found in a group of second graders that “young learners’ attitudes toward learning English showed that learners mostly exhibited positive attitudes toward learning English.”

In this latest curriculum, the principles of the CEFR were put into practice in a way to emphasize the development of communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and self-assessment. Accepting the CEFR is important for our national foreign language education simply because “this guideline achieves standardization in language teaching, learning and assessment by targeting the improvement of communicative and intercultural competencies, and that of learners’ autonomy” (Karababa & Saraç Süzer, 2010, p. 13).

While these administrative curricular changes show the importance given to English language education in Turkey, it equally brings challenges to various aspects of foreign language education in Turkey (Akçay, Bütüner & Arikan, 2015, p. 57). Curricular changes in Turkey are the decisions of a centralized educational system which affect all aspects of schooling from coursebooks and instructional methods to in-class as well as national examinations. These changes, no matter how applicable they seem, do not bring educational success that may satisfy the expectations of teachers as well as administrators which can be explained by Çakır (2010) as follows:

Most of the EFL coursebooks specifically designed for the students at elementary schools in Turkey are chosen by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. This ready-made materials, which unquestionably must be followed by foreign language teachers, do not always fit the needs of the learners and teachers expectations. As the writers of these course materials are mostly from Turkey, they are, as expected, unable to present the authentic language in natural contexts, which unfortunately leads to teach a pure language abstaining from the original usage. (p. 182)

Second graders are especially important for curriculum makers as well as classroom teachers simply because young learners are first exposed to English in their formal education at this grade. As Yule (2006) states, learners who have increased motivation are more likely to attain more successful results in their language learning. Hence, owing to the recognition that young learners’ motivation and positive learning experiences are of paramount significance in their present and future learning, it must be accepted that the curriculum for and instruction at this specific elementary-level grade is significantly important.

“Coursebooks still continue to be the single most important resource in the language classroom throughout the world” (Arikan, 2008, p. 71) while they are especially important for Turks because every curricular change is first reflected in the coursebooks used through changing or reprinting them. Research studies on young learners’ English language classrooms have been flourishing in Turkey for the last decade although “very few of them are empirical studies,” but the bulk of which require “further changes in policies and curricula” (Arikan, 2015, p. 77). Hence, the aim of this present study is to understand teachers’ opinions on the new curriculum with a focus on the curriculum for the 2nd graders. Specifically, this study tried to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum?
2. What is the educational appropriateness of the curricular gains set for that specific level (2nd grades)?
3. What are teachers' theoretical concerns and practical challenges associated with the implementation of the new curriculum?

Method

This study followed a qualitative research design which collected data (opinions of the participants) through interviews. Data collection process took approximately two weeks. All interviews were carried out on the phone and during the interviews, teachers' opinions were written down by the researcher in forms of notes which served as the raw data. Content analysis was used to analyze the data through multiple reading of the data. Emerging themes were categorized and coded, and a colleague compared the notes to the findings reached by the researcher to ensure that the report covered the opinions of the teachers comprehensively.

Results

Results of this study are given below under specific research questions.

1. What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum?

All participants shared positive views on the new curriculum. Participant 1 stated that *"This curriculum is applicable as a system, as a whole, on condition that students complete it from the very beginning to the end, that is, from the 2nd to the 8th grade."* Participant 1 says:

Our children acquire the things we teach easily and in an excellent manner. In that sense, our curriculum is appropriate. Of course, the results will appear in time as we put the curriculum into practice.

The major strength of the curriculum for 2nd graders rests in its insistence on learning with visuals. All participants stated that 2nd graders enjoyed learning with colorful visuals which was advocated by the new curriculum. Participant 2 stated that *"The visuals given in coursebooks are appropriate for learners' age, and the new curriculum makes teachers make use of videos and TPR activities more than anything else. These are all appropriate for 2nd graders' interest in topics."*

As for the weaknesses of the new curriculum as a document, all participants agree that the major weakness of the curriculum rests in how it is realized, that is, through the coursebooks published in accordance with the curriculum. Participant 1 points at the fact that *"all curricula depend on coursebooks in Turkey."* However, in her opinion, coursebooks sent to them for instruction *"are still following the footprints of traditional instruction as you can see when you closely compare the gains specified in the curriculum and the activities printed in the coursebooks."* Furthermore, she complains about the materials and realia she should use in her classrooms because *"materials and realia are lacking in the curriculum. In my opinion, there must be tons of materials prepared and shared with the teachers in order to put the curriculum into practice, but we don't have anything that comes with the curriculum."*

Another weakness mentioned by two of the participants was about administrators who disregard the nature of teaching English to young learners at primary schools. As these participants argue, school administrator demand that classrooms remain silent throughout a lesson because there are other classrooms in which other lessons are carried out so that their lessons are not disturbed. As one participant recalls:

One day I was singing and dancing with the students to a song my students were really enjoying. Our lesson was disrupted as the school administrator entered and said "There are other lessons, too. Please respect others' lessons, too." All the fun and energy was gone. I remained motionless until he left. We were all demoralized.

2. What is the educational appropriateness of the curricular gains set for that specific level (2nd grades)?

Three participants agreed that the gains specified in the curriculum were appropriate. However, Participant 3 stated her opinions by saying that "Only 80% of the gains are appropriate":

If you look at each gain, they are okay. But in practice, the coursebook activities are not appropriate when the gains are compared to those activities through which those gains will be realized. For example, throughout one unit, we sang and danced, played vocabulary games and completed puzzles after which a structure-based activity appeared that made my students feel lost. When I looked at the curriculum, I noticed that there actually was a gain that needed the knowledge of the structure, but still this could be delivered without such a game.

Participant 4 mentions the problem of lacking dialogues in the coursebooks as an important problem which makes the curriculum game-based rather than communication-based. For him, "The words to be taught are nice and appropriate and the visuals corresponding to them are meaningful, but there are almost no real-life dialogues. Even children at that age should be taught a foreign language for communication." Despite this negative comment which is understandable and acceptable, these results suggest that the gains specified in the curriculum are found to be appropriate for the level of the 2nd graders.

3. What are teachers' theoretical concerns and practical challenges associated with the implementation of the new curriculum?

For Participant 1, as she repeatedly claims, "continuity is key." Therefore, although she thinks that this curriculum is "appropriate" for her 2nd graders, "breaking away from the curriculum in the future years of education will definitely spoil everything." Participant 3 gives an example to this break away by mentioning the 5th grade curriculum which contains "tenses" within its content. For him, "students do not understand the concept of the Simple Present Tense although the coursebook has activities that require knowledge of the tenses. This theme pointed at the importance of studying the curriculum from a wholistic perspective.

Speaking of putting the curriculum into practice, Participant 1 starts talking about her experiences related with the curriculum in practice. She argues that it is not what is actually written on paper, but what matters is how it is applied:

In the curriculum for 2nd graders, reading and writing skills are delayed because the main skills to develop are listening and speaking. It is good, but parents are complaining by saying “How can they learn without reading and writing?” or “A class without a notebook? Where do they write what they learn?”

Infrastructure is the major concern of all participants. Participant 1 summarizes her overall experiences related with what surrounds the curriculum at school as follows: “*What matters is the infrastructure and we definitely lack that.*” Similarly, Participant 2 argues that she is teaching at a village school in which “*OHPs and adequate loud-speakers are non-existent.*” Participant 4 also states that administrators make the realization of the curriculum very difficult. His narrative of an event shows the difficulty he faced as follows:

Our loud-speakers are very old and useless. You feel as though a motor car is driving in the classroom when you listen to a text. One day, I was trying to do a singing and acting activity as suggested by the curriculum and all of a sudden, our school’s principal opens up the door in the middle of the activity and yells out “There are other classes at work, please be quiet.” Students sat down right away, all my energy drained and I didn’t want to continue teaching at all.

Conclusions and Suggestions

According to Wood and Attfield (2005, p. 138), the most important aspect of curricula prepared for young learners is to understand the beliefs surrounding “what is considered to be educationally and developmentally worthwhile in terms of children’s immediate needs, their future needs and the wider society.” However, when the fact that written curricula are put into practice by teachers who work as curriculum realizers, the importance of their opinions and the nature of their classroom experiences becomes obvious. Hence, in this particular study, English language teachers’ opinions on the English language curriculum for 2nd grades were collected and analyzed so as to give feedback to Turkey’s national curriculum for young learners. Results showed that all participants shared positive views on the new curriculum although they raised their concerns about the coursebooks which, in their opinions, are curricula in action. The fact that coursebooks are curricula in action is also supported by previous research within the context of this present study (Arikan, 2008) since “coursebooks present a smooth running curricular program for the teaching of the essential and necessary items of the language taught with which one cannot lose his or her way as a teacher” (p. 71). Similarly, infrastructure is the major concern of all participants which shows that unless classrooms’ physical structures and technological tools are upgraded, the end result will not be satisfactory.

Although this bulk of feedback is necessary to improve all curricula, young learners’ immediate and future needs along with those of the wider society remain to be unknown. Future studies should focus on these needs and opinions of all parties as well as those wider perceptions of our societies in relation to all social and cultural aspects of foreign language teaching. While doing that, teachers’ experiences and opinions must be studied carefully while the mechanics of foreign language teaching must be recorded along with the work of the materials designers as “materials designers must ensure that these resources can effectively serve as bridges between the program and the actual teaching context; and classroom teachers, with support from school administrators, must take an active stance in applying the suggested activities in the classroom” (Kirkgöz, Çelik, & Arikan, 2016, p. 1210).

Despite the importance of these instructional and materials-based suggestions, one pressing need seems to be the need for in-service training in primary schools because recent research shows that primary school English language “teachers are not satisfied with their in-service teacher-training activities and that in-service training does not fulfil their needs” (Koç, 2016, p. 455). Knowing that majority of pre-service English language teachers are graduates of English Language Teaching (Teaching of English) departments in Turkey, BA programs must ensure that pre-service teachers are educated in a way to cope up with the demands of teaching English at all school. While doing that, it must also be considered that primary school English language teachers “need more detailed, critical inquiry-and observation-based, and technology-and practice-oriented education in teaching young learners and managing young learners’ classrooms” (Çakır & Güngör, 2017, p. 255).

This study has many limitations the most important of which is the small sample size. However, because it aims to collect data on a newly accepted curriculum about which few studies exist, this attempt should be seen as a valuable contribution to the field within the context of Turkey and in other countries where national curricula are put into practice in primary schools. However, future research should involve more parties along with teachers to understand various aspects of curricular issues affecting young learners’ English language classrooms.

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