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Mustafa Kemal Şen
MA in the English language and literature
Kütahya Dumlupınar University
ORCID ID 0000-0001-8714-0193
mkemal.sen@dpu.edu.tr

THE FIRST GENERATION OF THE NEW ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM: ARE WE STILL SUCCESSFUL?

Abstract. Scientific and technological advancements, global trends and societies' needs lead policymakers to change foreign language teaching policies. Turkey made its latest reform in English Language Teaching Program in 2013 and a generation has already been educated with the new program since then. In this context, this study aimed to evaluate this program over the very first generation through the eyes of implementers, namely the language teachers in the field. For this purpose, a study group was formed with 16 language teachers who have at least 10 years of experience and teach at primary level public schools in Kütahya Province, Turkey. Their views regarding the major changes (age, methodology, materials, and assessment) offered by the new program were collected through semi-structured interviews. The design of this research was qualitative. The data obtained at the end of the research were analyzed using descriptive analysis technique. The researcher transcribed the interviews, examined them and determined the sub-themes. In order to ensure the reliability of the research, the opinions of another expert in the field were asked. The results show that although there are still certain problems they are facing, the majority of the English language teachers agree on the policies, support the new program, and think we are on the right road to teach / learn English.

Keywords: curriculum evaluation; English Language Teaching Program; English language teachers; foreign language education; language policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an interdisciplinary academic field, foreign language policy and planning are often described as the combination of official decisions and prevailing public practices related to language education and use (McGroarty, 1997). Since it is fed and affected by a number of factors, it is doomed to be updated according to the needs of a nation (Brecht & Walton, 1993). The first quarter of the 21st century has globally witnessed serious changes regarding language teaching policies due to social, political, technological and most importantly economic reasons (Boucher-Yip, 2019; Demirsu, 2020; Eurydice, 2017; Gürsoy, Korkmaz & Damar, 2017; Kahraman, 2012; Saville & Eugenio, 2016; Sharif, 2020). The Head Council of Education and Morality of Turkey (2017) emphasized the need for change at a press conference: "*Sociocultural, scientific and technological developments in the world and in our country have changed the qualifications that students should have as productive members of society in the future. As a result, the existing curricula have been renewed to meet the requirements of the age, the changing needs of the individual and society, in line with the innovations and developments in learning and teaching theory and approaches*." When the history of English language teaching in Turkey was investigated, it was found that it dates back as far as the second half of the 19th century, also called *the Tanzimat Period* in Turkey (Alabaş, 2019; Kırkgöz, 2005; Küçükoğlu, 2013; Sarıçoban, 2012). However, in the modern sense Kırkgöz (2009) divides English in Turkish foreign language education into two period; the first of which is from 1983 to 1996 and the second is from 1997 to present. In this second period that covers the last 25 years, Turkey has launched three reforms (in 1997, 2006 and 2013) in its language teaching program and changed its approach each time (Erarslan, 2019).

In 1997, it was the first time the language program was based on communication; however, the curriculum was still built on behaviorism with such techniques as lecturing, question-answer, and memorization (Karaağaç-Tuna, 2018). In the curriculum which was prepared in 2006, constructivism was adopted and it was more learner-centered, task-based and process-oriented where learners were guided to construct meaning with their peers and teachers through activities

such as dramatization, student conversation, stories, and so forth (Topkaya & Küçük, 2010). Finally, the New English Language Teaching Program (NELTP) (2013, revised in 2018) was based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR) and therefore defines its philosophy as follows: *"As no single language teaching methodology was seen as flexible enough to meet the needs of learners at various stages and to address a wide range of learning styles, an eclectic mix of instructional techniques has been adopted, drawing on an action oriented approach in order to allow learners to experience English as a means of communication, rather than focusing on the language as a topic of study."*

Among the latest three English curricula, there are other major differences apart from language teaching methodology; age, materials and assessment. Until 1996, English language education started at 6th grade. With the reform in 1997, it started at 4th grade. It remained the same until 2013, when a transition from the 8+4 educational model to the new 4+4+4 system in Turkish educational system and English instruction was implemented from the 2nd grade onward. Çakıcı (2016) assumed that this regulation is a very important step for Turkey's foreign language education system considering the critical period hypothesis and the tendency for early foreign language education in the world.

Another major change was seen in the materials that have been used in English language education including text books, technology and other supplementary materials. When English language education started to be given to 4th graders and onwards in 1997, the only resource was text books which were purchased by students from the bookstores or the former students. Those books did not include any listening tapes or CD-rooms, which caused listening skills to be neglected. After the reform in 2006, the text books were provided by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and distributed to all students free of charge. Together with the text books, MoNE sent language teachers a pack of teacher's resources including teacher's book, a CD-room of the listening tracks, posters and so on. Following the latest reform in 2013, MoNE launched *Fatih Project* (Project to Increase Opportunities and Improve Technology). This project involves equipping schools and classrooms with the internet, smart boards, printers, sound systems, cameras, projectors and so forth. Also, within the scope of this project, each student and teacher has been given a tablet computer with enriched e-books. Moreover, MoNE has developed an online platform named *EBA* (Education Informatics Network) and uploaded a huge amount of data including the text books, videos, games, exercises, worksheets, other digital appliances and even online courses during Covid-19 pandemic (MoNE, 2020).

The last major change brought by the NELTP is the testing and evaluation approach. It is theoretically based on the CEFR, in which a variety of assessment and evaluation techniques are employed. In addition to formal evaluation techniques such as written and oral exams, quizzes, homework assignments and projects, this new approach emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy and self-assessment (MoNE, 2013; 2018). Besides, it suggests testing techniques for the assessment of individual and integrated language skills and also explains how to use these instruments in the program booklet (MoNE, 2018, p. 5–7).

Another testing instrument that should be taken into account especially influential on 8th graders is the High School Placement Exam (HSPE), which has involved English section since 2009. Over the years, the number of the items and type of the questions have changed. In 2009 (MoNE, HSPE), for example, there were 17 questions, most of which are at sentence-level and measure only vocabulary knowledge. Also, the instructions of the questions, characters in dialogues, and even the places were all Turkish. This situation led learners to focus more on memorizing the target vocabulary. In 2019 (MoNE, HSPE), however, there were 10 questions whose instructions are in English. These items include graphs, tables, paragraphs, dialogues and visuals that require students to use higher level cognitive skills like comprehension, analysis and interpretation as well as language skills.

As an essential step of curriculum development, any new program needs evaluation (Gümüşeli, 2014; Madison Public Schools, 2006; Nichols et al., 2006). A common evaluation technique is to ask stakeholders' (policymakers, administrators, teachers, students,

parents and etc.) views. When the studies on curriculum evaluation are investigated, it can be understood that teachers' views are highly valued as they try to implement the program and experience teaching / learning process with their students. In addition, Bianco, Hornberger and McKay (2010) regard teachers as language planners because of their roles from setting the learning environment to literate practices and metalinguistic reflection, observation and analysis. For this reason, it could be claimed that teachers are those who can notice the strengths and weaknesses of any program in the first place.

After each of the last three reforms in English Language Teaching Program was announced, plenty of studies were conducted based on teachers' views. Erarslan (2019) in his integrative literature review research mentions 17 articles or thesis on 1997 English program and a total of 27 studies in relation to 2006 English program. In these studies, it was determined that there were various hindrances that influence teaching / learning process negatively and thus the programs in 1997 and 2006 were not a success. As for the NELTP, it was determined that over 20 studies were published. Some of these studies were done right after the declaration of the program and therefore based on immediate views or predictions. Others were about the problems or challenges that teachers were facing. The gap in literature is that the students who were at 2nd grade in 2013 completed their 8th grade in June, 2020 and there is no study, to my knowledge, evaluating the program over the very first generation. In this context, the aim of this study is to evaluate the NELTP together with the changes it has brought over the very first generation through the eyes of implementers, namely language teachers in the field. This research tries to seek answers for the following questions:

- *What do language teachers think about the four major changes brought by the NELTP?*
- *What is their overall evaluation of the current English language teaching success in Turkey?*

2. METHOD

The design of this research is qualitative. Qualitative research is exploratory and often adopted to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations (Dörnyei, 2007).

2.1. Participants

NELTP was started in 2013 and the participants should be experienced enough to monitor the changes, draw conclusions and even compare to the former curriculum. For this reason, purposeful sampling strategy was followed to form the study group. It involved 16 English language teachers with at least 10 years of experience at primary schools in Kütahya Province.

2.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. Before the interview form was constructed, field experts and teachers were consulted. It is composed of two sections; personal data (gender, age and experience) and questions (2 basic questions). The first question is about what teachers think about the four major changes (methodology, age, materials and assessment). The second question asks teachers' overall evaluation regarding the NELTP. Before collecting data, all the ethical and institutional permissions were taken. Also, at the beginning of the interviews, participants' consent was asked. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were performed online using software *Zoom* or *Whatsapp*.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained at the end of the research were analyzed using descriptive analysis technique. The researcher transcribed the interviews, examined them and determined the sub-themes. Then, in order to ensure the reliability of the research, the opinions of another expert in the field were asked. Upon comparing the numbers of consensus and disagreement, the coding consistency between the researchers was calculated by Miles and Huberman (1994) formula (Reliability = consensus / consensus + disagreement) and 87% agreement was reached. In the scope of the research, participants' names were kept confidential and a code was given to each participant.

Finally, the answers for the second research question were analyzed through frequency analysis.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings with regard to each research question are presented. The views of interviewed teachers on the NELTP are classified based on the codes extracted from their responses. Table 1 shows the teachers' views on four major changes that NELTP has brought considering the first generation who has been educated with it.

Table 1 – Teachers' views on four major changes

Central themes	Sub-themes
Methodology	CEFR
	Learner-centered approach
	Skill development
	Congruence between theory and practice
	Objectives
Age	Readiness level
	Motivation
	Attitude
Materials	Integration of technology
	Access to resources
	Creativity
	Course books
Assessment	Self-evaluation & Peer-evaluation
	Projects, Assignments & Portfolios
	Effect of High School Placement Exam

As shown in Table 1, four major changes were presented as central themes and the codes were presented as sub-themes. The first central theme is methodology.

3.1. Methodology

The teachers' opinions in relation to methodology covers adopting CEFR and its advantages, learner-centered approach, skill development, the congruence / mismatch between theory and practice, and the objectives. It was understood that nearly all teachers in the study group embrace CEFR and here are the most striking examples:

T4. "While the whole Europe is embracing CEFR, it would be strange for us to ignore it. The descriptors of each stage are rational and doable."

T12. "What I like about CEFR is that it is popular. I've realized that many parents somehow heard of it. If the curriculum weren't built on it, most probably they would criticize us for not following the world."

T13. "CEFR focuses on communication and therefore prioritize speaking. I am happy with this program."

It was determined that implementing a learner-centered approach has changed teacher's role in the classroom. Some teachers explained their new role as follows:

T1. "The new program is learner-centered. We are always trying to get our students to read, listen, speak and write. It wasn't the case before."

T6. "As the new program is learner-centered, I feel that my mission in the classroom is to encourage and motivate them."

Another sub-theme of methodology is skill development. The teachers stated the program is constructed to develop four basic skills. Listening and speaking are paid more attention and allocated more time especially in 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade, which is highly supported and appreciated. Here are two prominent excerpts:

T10. "Because they (students) started English when they were at 2nd grade, they have become better speakers of English. The new program has contributed a lot to the development of their

speaking skill."

T14. "In this curriculum, there are 10 units/themes for each grade. There were 16 units before and we had trouble to complete them on time. With this program, we have a chance to spend more time on students' language skills."

As for the congruence between theory and practice, there was a disagreement between the teachers. Some teachers said they put into practice most of what is written in the curriculum, whereas others expressed that they cannot execute the program as aimed. The most common problems they complaint are the learner differences, lack of necessary equipment, and time constraints.

T3. "The new curriculum seems good theoretically, but not in practice. All of my colleagues and I often skip listening sections."

T5. "I think there is a mismatch between theory and practice. The curriculum is prepared for all schools, teachers and students. However, there are differences from one to another."

Another disagreement between the teachers was detected in terms of the objectives in the program. Those who do not think the objectives are not appropriate defended that some objectives and themes are not realistically prepared, so it is impossible to follow out in the classroom particularly in crowded classes. Two conflicting views about objectives are presented below.

T7. "I like the objectives and themes in this new program. They usually include real-life topics like daily routines and public buildings. In such units, I witness that students participate actively."

T16. "The objectives are too mechanical. They seem like copy-paste to me. In such units as Democracy or Experiments, how can I get students to speak or write?"

3.2. Age

The second major change was seen in students' starting age to English course. With the NELTP, students start learning English at the age of 7 (at 2nd grade). All the interviewees agreed that this was a positive step as they observed that students had a positive attitude, high motivation and readiness level.

T2. "It's good for them (learners) to start at an early age. They are highly motivated and their readiness level is optimum."

T9. "Some students start learning English at nursery school; even at the age of 3. Getting them to wait till 4th grade was not a good idea. I support this policy. I think it would be better if it started at 1st grade."

T15. "When I compare these students to those in the previous years, their attitude towards English is more positive. They don't refuse to learn or rebel against me."

3.3. Materials

The instructional materials have also changed remarkably after the NELTP. The biggest change was seen in the integration of technology and access to boundless resources, which is pleasing for the teachers. The participants said they have taken the advantage of interactive whiteboard in their classroom and are still learning to use new appliances.

T11. "We have a smart board in the classroom. The software of the course book is uploaded. I can play the listening tracks and videos."

T4. "I search for rhymes and songs for my students and we chant altogether."

T15. "I follow some English teachers on social media. They inspire and teach me how to develop new materials for my students."

T12. "Ministry of Education has formed 'EBA' (Education Informatics Network) and is uploading day by day a huge amount of data and resources. We can make use of them when we have extra time."

Naturally, the course books were renewed after the NELTP was declared by MoNE. In the following years, the books were enriched with extra activities. Several teachers pointed out that they are still having some problems with the course books. Fast articulation of the listening tracks, insufficient exercises or explanations and advanced vocabulary use are among these problems.

T8. "There are certain problems with the course books, but I am still in favor of them because we don't import them anymore."

T6. "The objectives can't be realized by the course books alone. We need extra materials and it's easy for us to reach them."

3.4. Assessment

The last major change brought by the NELTP is assessment. As CEFR suggests, self-assessment was included in the program to improve learner autonomy. Besides, other assessment techniques like peer-evaluation, projects and assignments were introduced. The majority of the teachers said self-evaluation and peer-evaluation is not applied because written exams are compulsory. These exams consist of different types of questions and aim to measure listening, reading and writing. None of the teachers mentioned a speaking assessment. When the participants' opinions were asked about the central High School Placement Exam (HSPE), contradicting views came up as follows:

T14. "The exam has a positive effect on students. The questions are directly related to the content and require more than comprehension."

T3. "This exam includes 6 courses and English determines one's success."

T9. "What has been taught and what is asked in this exam is totally different, which is a disadvantage for students."

3.5. Overall Evaluation

As a second question, the teachers' overall evaluation of the NELTP was asked. Table 2 demonstrates the frequency of the responses.

Table 2 – Teachers' Overall Evaluation of the New Program

Themes	**f**
Successful	3
Partially successful	11
Unsuccessful	2

As indicated in Table 2, the greater number of the teachers think English language education in Turkey is partially successful. The following statements reveal that the interviewees agreed that right steps have been taken and we could be successful in the long run.

T14. "Yes, we are successful. It doesn't mean that all students are fluent speakers of English, but it means that we provide students the necessary learning environment."

T4. "I can't say we are fully successful now. But I can say that we, as teachers, are learning and we are getting better. Think how many of us could use a smart board, or how often we used to speak English a decade ago."

T1. "Things are changing, so are we. We are getting better, but there is still a long way to go."

T5. "We aren't successful. The students' profile and needs as well as the equipment in all schools in Turkey must be revised again and then a new program must be prepared."

4. DISCUSSION

Since the goal of this study was to reflect language teachers' views on the NELTP after the first generation, it drew several conclusions based on four major changes and overall evaluation, and in some cases, it yielded different results from the previous studies that were carried out in different years after the curriculum reform. That is, it is important to evaluate a teaching program at initial stage, during and after the implementation to monitor developments closely.

When the findings in relation to the methodological change that the NELTP instructed were examined, it was understood that the participants knew about the CEFR, the key competences and

the philosophy and goals of the program. Karabacak (2018) and Özüdoğru & Adıgüzel (2015) determined that English teachers could align the curriculum in terms of its goals and content, which had parallel results with this study. On the other hand, in literature there are several studies revealing that teachers did not have much knowledge about the methodology of the NELTP (Alkan & Arslan, 2014; Bayraktar, 2014; Bulut & Atabey, 2016; Çakıcı, 2016; Erarslan, 2019; Karaağaç-Tuna, 2018; Kaya & Ok, 2016; Şahenk-Erkan, 2015). This situation might be resulted from the fact that English course are instructed not only by those who graduated from English Language Teaching Department, but also the ones that have a degree in English Language and Literature, Translation & Interpretation as well as Primary School Education for 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades. Since these departments do not offer ELT courses, the teachers graduated from these departments could have lack of knowledge about the methods and approaches in ELT (Kandemir & Tok, 2015; Özüdoğru & Adıgüzel, 2015; Yaman 2010; Yörü, 2012)

There has been a growing interest in foreign language teaching at early stages in the European context (Grivaa, Semogloua & Geladaria, 2010) and Turkey lowered this age from 10 to 7 with the NELTP (2013). Based on the assumptions stated by Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967), it is now commonly believed that that younger learners can acquire a foreign language better than adults do. It was concluded that the participants of this study all embraced this hypothesis and observed that young learners develop a positive attitude and have a high level of readiness and motivation. The previous studies on the NELTP had similar results indicating that teachers are contented with the fact that English language teaching starts at earlier grades (Güneş & Karaazmak, 2017; Yıldıran & Tanrıseven, 2015).

Instructional materials in ELT refer to a variety of things which can be used by teachers and learners to facilitate the learning, and the keys to have influence on what goes on in the classroom (Brown, 1995; McDonough, Shaw & Mashura, 2013; Richards, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). Once the NELTP was started in Turkey, MoNE also launched *Fatih Project* (Project to Increase Opportunities and Improve Technology) and provided both teachers and learners a variety of resources including tablet computers, enriched e-books and so forth. The teachers in the study group confirmed that they are delighted to have these opportunities and capable of integrating technology in language classroom. The group also mentioned the course books are not sufficient alone and therefore they compensate this gap with extra materials, sometimes using their own creativity. When the related research was studied, similar and contrasting results were determined. In some studies, it was discovered that the inclusion of technology in language classes collected much appraisal from the teachers (Güven & Vural, 2017; Yaman, 2018). In other studies, however, it was revealed that language teachers have lack of technological infrastructure or materials in their school (Bayraktar, 2014; Merter, Şekerci & Bozkurt, 2014). These two studies were carried out one year after the *Fatih Project* was started; therefore, the services might not be supplied until then.

Assessment has a critical role in the process of teaching and learning (Lam, 2015) and assessment literacy has been an indispensable part of teachers' professional development programs (Popham, 2009). The NELTP is mainly based on the CEFR, in which various types of assessment and evaluation techniques are utilized. However, the findings of this study indicated that some of the assessment techniques introduced by the NELTP particularly self-evaluation that forms the basis for learner autonomy are not employed by the teachers. In this aspect, the findings in this study are congruent with the previous research (Erarslan, 2018; Güneş & Karaazmak, 2017; Ölmezer-Öztürk & Aydın, 2019; Sarıgöz & Fişne, 2018) However, why language teachers do not make use of those techniques needs to be discussed. The previous research clearly expresses that they are not competent in using those techniques, but the participants of this study stated that although they know such techniques, they do not adopt them because the execution of formal written exams is an obligation. Demirpolat (2015) also reached similar findings and therefore urged that assessment techniques in the NELTP must not be sacrificed for the sake of formal written exams.

When the study group was asked to make an overall evaluation of the current situation in Turkey, an overwhelming majority of the teachers said they found it partially successful. They also stated that they are pleased with the latest advancements and it is going to be better in the future.

Köksal and Şahin (2012) investigated the national education councils since 1939 and determined that in-service training, methodological updates, teacher education and textbooks have always been discussed by MoNE and Sarıçoban (2012) concluded that ongoing reforms have led to great improvements.

5. LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this study is the demographic properties of the study group. All the participants graduated from ELT Department, are teaching in urban schools, and have job experience between 10 to 15 years. Having a degree in other aforementioned departments, working in rural areas and having a longer job experience and being digital immigrants might yield different results.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the present study, the following suggestions can be put forward:

- In-service training on the methodology, material use, and assessment of the NELTP should be provided to language teachers, especially to those who do not have a degree in ELT. Apart from seminar periods of the education year, these trainings can also be arranged online or through sample videos on *EBA* at regular intervals.
- To make self-evaluation and other assessment techniques functional, certain regulations should be made by MoNE for all schools.
- Teacher's books were abolished in 2015. They could be prepared and distributed to teachers again and they could include tips and explanations for how to do the activities in different settings.
- It should be taken into account that foreign language teaching will be successful on condition that it is continuous. Therefore, students' development over the years from the 2nd to 8th grade could be monitored through online portfolios, evaluation grids or yearly exams.

We envisage further research in studying Turkish learners' interest in the new English Language Teaching Program.

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Мустафа Кемаль Шен. Перша генерація нової програми навчання англійської мови: чи успішне її впровадження? У статті наголошено, що науково-технічні досягнення сьогодення, світові тенденції та потреби суспільства змушують політиків змінювати політику викладання іноземної мови. Зазначено, що Туреччина запровадила останню реформу програми викладання англійської мови в 2013 році, і з того часу підростаюче покоління вже вчиться відповідно до нових вимог цієї програми. У цьому контексті представлене дослідження мало на меті оцінити успішність цієї програми протягом першого покоління виконавців програми, а саме викладачів англійської мови, які безпосередньо реалізували на практиці нововведення. Для цього було створено навчальну групу з 16 викладачів англійської мови, які мають принаймні 10 років педагогічного досвіду та викладають у державних школах початкового рівня в провінції Кютах'я, Туреччина. Їх думки щодо основних змін (вік, методологія, матеріали та оцінка), запропонованих новою програмою, були зібрані за допомогою напівструктурованих інтерв'ю. Отримані результати узагальнено на основі використання методики описового аналізу. У дослідженні також була використана експертна оцінка. З'ясовано, що, хоча існують певні проблеми у навчанні іноземної мови за новою програмою, більшість викладачів позитивно оцінюють нову програму навчання англійської мови в країні.

Ключові слова: оцінка навчальної програми; мовна політика; навчання іноземних мов; програма навчання англійської мови; викладачі англійської мови.

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