A look at the Turkish and English Language in Turkey from the perspectives of tertiary undergraduate students

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Abstract

As English became the established language of science, technology and trade its use as the medium of instruction at tertiary education has increased in Turkey. The accelerated and sustained dominance of English has mainly led to dissatisfaction with English language proficiency level of learners and concerns about the future of the native language. This study aims to to gain a deeper understanding in the tertiary education students’ perceptions regarding their English language proficiency and the future of their native language, explore the perceptions of undergraduate students and report on an integrated and problem solving based learning oriented case study at an English for Academic Purposes.

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1. Introduction

The ultimate goal for having English-medium higher education is to become fully competent in academic and general English and thus be able to meet the multifaceted challenges of science, technology, and marketplace (Al-Sultan, 2009; Gustav, 2007; Brumfit, 2004; OECD, 1995). However, this “Englishization” as Coleman (2006) names it, has mainly led to dissatisfaction with English language proficiency level of learners studying at English-medium higher education (Ahuoğlu; 2007; Arslan, 2007; Ay, 2007; Cabau-Lampa, 2007; Demir, 2007; Er, 2007; İşık, 2007; İnan, 2007; Öztürk & Çeçen, 2007; Coleman, 2006; Hult, 2005; Nunan, 2001; Shepherd, 2000) and worries about the future of the native language (İslar, 2007; 2001; Crystal, 2000). It is pointed out that if the English competency level of the higher education students is not adequate enough to understand the lectures at higher education then it would not be realistic to expect these students to construct their own understanding of knowledge in their field of study. It has been reported in some studies that faculty tended to overlook the language issues in the written submitted coursework (Leki, 2006) and adjust their own language by either adopting conversational style lecture (Leki, 2006; Dudley-Evans, 1994) or conducting their lectures in the native language or by combining it with English (Morell, 2007) but most importantly being wary of dealing with language issues (Raisanen and Gomez, 2008). Bearing in mind that there is a direct correlation between the L1 proficiency of the learner and acquisition of the L2 and the learning of the content knowledge, the inadequate English language competency level of learners

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could have negative impact on the learners’ competency level in the native language (Köksal, 2003). The inexorable increase in the use of “killer language” (English) as Price (1984) describes it, can make the native language dead or degrade its prestige (Coleman, 2006; Hyland, 1997 cited in Evans and Gren, 2007; Ostler, 2005; Tardy, 2004; Garcia and Ruis, 1998; Ongstaad, 1992) leading diglossia and endangerment of cultural identity and national unity. EAP and Integrative Approach are seen as means to overcome these problems (Humphreys, 2005). One of the important means to actualize the integrative learning is the problem-based learning approach for real world problems that require multiple perspective, modes, and solutions (Huber and Hutchins, 2004; Brookfield, 1986). This way the undergraduates would be guided to put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that will prepare them to make informed judgments (Jaschik, 2007; Wood and Head, 2004; Albanese, 2000; Rothblatt, 1993). Within the light of these studies, the present study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the tertiary education undergraduate students studying at EMU and TMU and prospective English language teachers about these concerns and present a case study where integrative and problem-based learning were employed at an EAP course.

2. Design of the study

This study was carried out in three stages: The first stage consisted of administering questionnaire, consisting of 64 questions, to 350 sophomore students to identify the perceptions about their English language proficiency and concerns, if any, about the future of the native language and interviewing 65 of these sophomores to further explore the findings from the questionnaire. The second stage consisted of visiting 26 classes at to mirror the classroom language of written and verbal interaction. Instructors from International Trade Management Vocational School and English Language Teacher Education collaborated to team teach an EAP course to explore the impact of problem-solving approach during the third stage of the study. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed first at department level separately and then by all of the departments combined for each university. The breakdown of students’ ratings was tabulated and the percentages were computed. Then, Co-corelation and Verification factor analysis were used to carry out further analysis of the findings. The qualitative data was coded according to the categories of interest to the study and comments selected for their representativeness or potential insight were noted and presented. The same qualitative data analysis procedures were applied at the second and third stage of the study.

3. Results

The findings of the study gathered via questionnaire and interviews lend itself to six themes: The reason for the preference to study at an English-medium university, their perceived L1 and L2 competency, the extent which universities fulfill their roles and responsibilities in language competency and attitude towards Turkish (native)-medium university with intensive English language training, classroom observations and the case study. These themes will be used as headings to report the findings.

3.1. Reason(s) for undergraduates’ preference to study at an English-medium university

The results of the data gathered via questionnaire from the undergraduates from English-medium tertiary education have shown that 95.5% of the students’ main reason to study at the English-medium university was its medium of instruction. 79.8% of the students studying at a Turkish-medium university stated that they would have studied at an English-medium one if they had the opportunity. The participants indicated that the sole reason for an undergraduate to prefer to study at an English-medium university was “employment” opportunity. One of the students during the interview said “in today’s world we have come to such a point that it would not be surprise to see a requisite for MA degree and English language knowledge for even a blue-collar work”. Therefore, it could be said that the reason for studying or wanting to study at an English-medium higher education institution or abroad is instrumental.
3.2. The undergraduates' perceived competency in Turkish and English language

The number of undergraduates from EMU and TMU perceiving their English language competency level as "average" was more than the ones who perceived their competency as either poor or high. The number of undergraduates who perceived their competency level as poor was higher among the ones from the Turkish-medium university. Majority of the English language student teachers perceived their competency level as "high". Competency in productive skills –writing and speaking- was the item that undergraduates felt either incompetent or fairly competent. All the participants believed that their exposure to English at secondary schools and at tertiary education was fairly limited. They stated that they face difficulty in interacting with their professors both verbally and written at their field of study. This is an important issue especially at EMUs since the results of the data gathered shown that there is a positive correlation between EAP end of course grades and their CGPA (pearson correlation=0.696 and pearson chi-square=129.487).

The perception of undergraduates about their competency level in Turkish was, as expected, higher than in English. However, they did point out that they were facing difficulty in writing especially in using the certain genre in formal writings. Interestingly, they also said "if an individual's level of competency in the native language is limited, this would not only have an impact on their competency level in L2 but also impair the thinking process since language and thinking skills are inseparable partners.

3.3. The undergraduates' perception about the extent to which the universities fulfill their roles and responsibilities in terms of improving their English and Turkish language proficiency

More than half of the EMU undergraduates were not pleased to be at an EMU. However, the interesting issue was this percentage was higher among them the ones who perceived their competency in English as high (78.7%). Apart from the student teacher participants of the study, the undergraduates did not believe that the EAP courses fulfilled their needs (81.5%). The reasons for their perception were the overlap between the English language courses starting from the primary school to university, out of context vocabulary studies, the limited scope and duration of the course and being structure oriented mainly. They were seeking for more emphasis on productive skills, speaking and writing courses being offered at technologically well designed amphitheaters and topic covered being linked to real-life and self-access centers are available for self-development. Another issue they pointed out was the use of native language especially at the courses of their field of study. They said "if all the lecturers insisted on using English at all times then we have no other choice but to improve our challenge”. Almost all of them stated that they wanted to be challenged. The students did not believe that the Turkish language courses fulfilled their needs either. They perceived these courses as the repetition of their studies in primary and secondary schools. They said that the courses offered at the university should promote the learners creative and critical use of the language skills.

3.4. The undergraduates’ attitude towards Turkish as the medium of instruction with intensive English program rather than English-medium of instruction

There were three issues that all the undergraduates agreed on. The first is the importance of English language as the “world language” and the belief that high proficiency in English is one of the major requirements of globalization. They believed that it would be unrealistic to ignore this fact. The second one is that Turkish language is deteriorating and thus impairing the national and cultural identity and preventing the Turkish language from becoming “scientific” language. They, however, did not believe that English-medium instruction was the cause of this deterioration. The last issue was that, Turkish-medium instruction with intensive English program would be beneficial. However, there seemed to be a problem here since they accept the importance of English, they are not totally against English-medium instruction but they also believe that Turkish language is deteriorating and that this has negative impact on national and cultural identity. When undergraduates were asked about this paradox during the interviews their responses and proposal was very interesting. They, first of all, stated that self-development, national and international identity, development of civic rights, and becoming a good citizen could only be achieved
via L1 since no matter how proficient an individual is, it still would not be the like the L1 proficiency and then quoted Conficius:

If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about the helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything.

Their proposal, in terms of the language of instruction in education, was noteworthy. They said that the sole focus of the first year of the universities should be on Turkish language and English language preparation, especially on improvement of skills in both languages. The freshman year courses should all be “introduction to...” courses and the medium of instruction should be Turkish. Since university is “building on knowledge” in a specific discipline the basic knowledge of the undergraduate students should be sound. The metaphor was “you cannot build a high rising building on a poorly constructed ground”. Once the sound basis of knowledge is formed and the language competency is high than the courses could be English during the following years. Having identified the undergraduates’ perception of their English language competency the next step was to visit one class from each department to see how this incompetency is dealt with. This is the second stage of the study.

3.5. The results of the second stage of the study

This stage of the study was only carried out at the English medium university. The aim was to observe the use of English-language during the courses therefore each of the 26 professors courses were observed for two 50 minute sessions. The common procedure applied in all classes is that the professors start the class by speaking in English. The instructional technologies they use are also in English. If they need to write on the board they all write in English. Once the presentations are over, which usually took 10 - 15 minutes, and then the language switches to L1. The reasons for this switch is said to be due to belief that if the professors would insist on using L2 then the students’ specialization in their field of study would be hindered. This actually contradicts with the students’ perception since the students believe that if all the professors insist on using English as the medium of instruction then not only their specialization but also their English would improve. However, it was also seen that the language used was neither L1 or L2 since there were sentences like “...integral (pronounced in the Turkish manner) sayı (numbers) or eğer resetlererseniz sorunu aşarsınız (you can overcome the problem by resetting it). It was interesting to note that some of the courses of English language teacher education were only carried out in Turkish and all their instructional technologies were in Turkish too. For a teacher, to work at a government school, passing the Public Sector Recruitment Test designed in Turkish is a must. Therefore, these professors claimed that they were enhancing the employment opportunity of these prospective teachers. However, what actually was happening is that due to the limited proficiency in both languages students were trying to close the gap by mingling the two languages and pronouncing Turkish like it was English and/or English as if it was Turkish. Next, a new culture that does not have any background or linkage to any society is created. This then distorts not only the culture and values but also the identity, and sense of belonging. The language used for asessment varied from one instructor to another. Some professors employed both languages as a medium of instruction but their examination questions were in English and did not accept any answers written in Turkish. These professors disregarded errors in the language used. Some of these, however, accepted the answers written in Turkish but took off certain percentage as a compromise. Some of the professors who were using Turkish as the medium of instruction were designing the questions in English and expected the anwers in English yet did not deal with the language errors. Others, meanwhile, had the exams in Turkish as well. It seems like there is a hidden curriculum here. Each instructor has developed his or her own strategy and the assumption underlying is to bypass the language proficiency problem.

3.6. The results of the third stage of the study

An interdisciplinary, problem-based oriented case study was carried out during the third stage of the study. The underlying assumption for such practice is “if the higher education instructors –both EAP and content- focus on “how EAP can be taught” so as to create an optimal learning environment then improvements in the competence level of undergraduate students could be achieved since life itself is integrated, interdisciplinary and the interlocutor and the nature of knowledge has to be understood”. 21 International Trade Management EMU
freshman students and 17 student teachers taking the ELT Methodology course were first informed about the study and then given problem statements related to finance and students were asked to work in groups of four (2 from each department). The student teachers were familiar with “problem-based learning” approach while the other students were familiar with the content (finance) of the problems prompted and hence were expected to learn from each other. None of the students had been exposed to problem-solving approach in English language courses including tertiary education. They were asked to discuss the problem among themselves, take notes of differing and interesting points of view, and to decide on the implications of the solutions. Having completed solving the problem prompted they were to reflect their perceptions about their experience. They described this process as beneficial since the variety of views stemming from uniqueness of each person’s experience, perception, understanding and conceptualization inspired them to discern solutions as well in a relatively shorter period. Although the students emphasized the importance of problem-solving approach as a medium of instruction, the integrated work was the foci of their attraction. The students believed that the cooperation with students from different disciplines enriched the source of variety of perceptions and thus optimized the learning environment. One of the students wrote

I always thought of myself as inquiry minded intellectual with a broad view. But this study has shown me that I am not as broad minded as I think I am. I would never have thought in million years that I would be working on a problem of finance with an English language teacher.

The undergraduates perceived the problem-based approach and integrative work as a means to enhance not only to improve their language competency but also their self-development and self-esteem. They believed that English training provided at primary, secondary and tertiary education is the repetition of the same things. They pointed out that English language programs could well employ this approach and since the classes are multidisciplined it would be quite easy to include integrative and problem-based approaches. They also believed that instead of general English EAP could be employed at the preparatory school and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) during freshman. (The students did not actually use the technical terms EAP and ESP but provided their descriptions). They also emphasized the gap between the freshman English programs and the English used in their disciplines. They also pointed out that the integrative approach enhanced their socialization skills and enabled to look at their field of study as a stranger. They did however point out that such a practice was new to them and the time allocated for such a study needed to be longer. As the students pointed out the problem-based learning encouraged them to question which they do not practice as often as desired. This is an important learning issue since we learn and retain 10% of what we hear, 15% of what we see, 20% of what we both see and hear, 40% of what we discuss, 80% of what we experience directly or practice doing, and 90% of what we attempt to teach others (Kovalik, 1997)

4. Conclusion

Although the number of participants of this study is not broad enough to make generalizations, it is believed that the results of the present study could contribute to the current literature since the study proposes a solution to a persistent weakness of learning-teaching issues at EAP courses at tertiary education. Since language is the service to the other subjects at English-medium universities and the assessment results do not tell whether undergraduates are learning or what they have learnt at an EAP course is sufficient enough for them to function in their field of study the reflected perception of the users of the service, undergraduates, need to be identified. Problem-based learning requires learners to identify a problem from the real-life to work and integrative learning values the outside the classroom learning experience. Although it was not possible to actualize these in this study it was seen that a good collaboration between content and language teachers based on confidence and respect could be very appealing in terms of motivating learners. Moreover, it could be employed as one of the means to overcome the asymmetric power dominance at a classroom setting. As seen in the words of Conficius language learning and teaching is a very important issue.

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