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Mother tongue instruction policies towards Turkish migrant children in Europe

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Abstract

Immigration is a very important phenomenon in every member state of the European Union. In the case of Turkey, there has been a migration flow to European countries since 1960’s with the bilateral agreements with which the people migrated are now the permanent settlers with their descendants. 50 years has passed since that time, and the third and fourth generation Turkish children are being raised. Migration and language are clearly linked issues. Because the language of instruction in the schools is different from the language spoken at home, some arrangements must be done for these children in these bilingual situations. As many research suggest that mother language acquisition is the prerequisite for learning the language of instruction, the policies the host countries and the sending countries apply for this situation is worthy to be investigated. In this study, a brief overview of the mother tongue instruction policies of Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden are made.

Keywords: Mother tongue instruction; Turkish; Turkish children; Germany; The Netherlands; Sweden; Denmark

1. Introduction

Immigration is a very important phenomenon in every member state of the European Union. In the case of Turkey, there has been a migration flow to European countries since 1960’s with the bilateral agreements with which the people migrated are now the permanent settlers with their descendants. 50 years has passed since that time, and the third and fourth generation Turkish children are being raised.

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Alabai (2008: 361) states that 8% of Turkey’s population live as Turkish migrants all throughout the world.

Migration and education are clearly linked issues. As a result of permanent immigration, the Turks in European countries have had many cultural and social problems among which the educational ones are very important (Çalışkan, 2008: 192). Because the language of instruction in the schools is different from the language spoken at home, some arrangements must be done for these children in these bilingual situations. As many research suggest that mother language acquisition is the prerequisite for learning the language of instruction, the policies the host countries and the sending countries apply for this situation are important for the success of the pupils.

According to Yağmur (2010) language policies of West Europe and the situation of Turkish instruction in European countries is a complex issue. First of all, regulations for mother tongue instruction has been continuously changed and secondly there is not compatibility among European Union countries. What describes the mother tongue policies is ambiguousness and inconsistency.

2. Germany

Post-war immigration made Germany a multilingual society. Today, the proportion of children with an immigrant background is approximately one in four and in German urban areas the proportion of immigrant-minority children in schools is around one third with at least 100 immigrant-minority languages spoken by these children. Due to the traditional self-conception of the German nation-state there is not enough data about the number of speakers of languages other than German or the number of languages spoken by them. Although more than 50 years passed, Germany considered itself to be a non-immigration country and by implication a monolingual country. This is indicative of the language education policies for immigrant-minority children. The situation shows the fact that educational policies were based on the dictum ‘Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland’ – Germany is no immigration country. This is why the country did not develop a systematic integration policy. This belief in not being a country of immigration principle also affected policies in the field of education as the legal status of immigrant children was decisive for eligibility for different types of educational measures aimed at supporting immigrant children’s academic advancement in school (Gogolin, 2005: 133-134).

After Council Directive of 25 July 1977 on the education of the children of migrant workers; German Federal Cultural Ministers (KMK) arranged a regulation on 26.10.1979 which is still binding. The aim of the regulation is stated as; to earn the foreign student the skill of learning German and the ability of graduating from the German schools, at the same time to preserve and develop the mother tongue knowledge of the student and so being helpful in preserving language and cultural identity (İleri, 2003: 7). Taking into consideration this regulation which is valid for the whole Federal German Republic, all other states have prepared their own regulations (İleri, 2003: 9).

According to Gogolin (2005: 135-137) since 1964, ‘foreign children’ in West Germany were in principle guaranteed the same educational opportunities as German children. But if it was considered beneficial for this aim, teaching of their languages of origin could be provided in addition to the regular curriculum. The so-called ‘mother tongue teaching’ should, according to the relevant decrees, contribute to the social integration of the students “for the duration of their stay in the Federal Republic of Germany” while at the same time “preserving their linguistic and cultural identity”. The underlying agenda of these recommendations was, similar to the policies in other European immigration countries and the official European Community policy in those days, a ‘rotation-perspective’ (that they would eventually go back to their countries).
Yalçın (2008) states that the practice of Turkish mother tongue instruction is performed in two ways. In the first practice; the responsibility and control on Turkish Republic’s Consulate General’s education attaché and the courses taught by the Turkish teachers who have been appointed to Germany from Turkey for 4-5 years of work. These courses are made according to Turkish National Education Curriculum. Miera (2008) says; these courses were offered on the assumption that the migration was temporary and that the immigrants would eventually return to their countries of origin; so the efforts were made to ensure they remained fluent in their mother tongue (http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/immigrant/evidence/Germany.html). However, migrants are remaining in Germany, and this has led some states to prohibit mother-tongue instruction because it is viewed as a hindrance to integration (http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/immigrant/evidence/Germany.html). In the other practice (states like: Nordrhein-Westfalen, Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz) the curriculum of the mother tongue instruction, the appointment of the teachers, the control and the responsibility of mother tongue instruction relies on German Culture and Education Ministries. However, in some German states, there are limitations in mother tongue instruction with some of the political parties (Yalçın, 2008).

Turkish mother tongue instruction is done since 1975 in German primary and secondary schools (Yalçın, 2008). But although the migrant associations and education and science union (GEW) have insisted on making the migrant students’ mother tongue instruction to be compulsory starting from the 1st year of school in the schools’ curriculum, this request has not been actualized (İleri, 2003: 9).

Nevertheless, there is evidence of some cities making strides in this area with Hamburg, for example, having proposed bilingual teaching in its schools not simply as a means to facilitate the learning of German, but as a way of preserving and enhancing Turkish students’ cultural identity (Gogolin and Reich 2001; Miera 2008 in http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/immigrant/evidence/Germany.html). Another good practice started in Hessen developed under Frankfurt Model called KOALA Project (http://www.koala-projekt.de/, Nakipoğlu-Schimang, 2011: 96) is a good example of mother tongue instruction carried with parallel German lessons since 1995. In this project German class teachers and the Turkish mother tongue teacher makes team teaching. The project is also done in Portuguese and Serbian languages. The project is followed largely by North Rhine-Westphalia. The aim is avoiding semi bilingualism of the migrant/minority children, enhancing their cultural identity while strengthening and helping them in the both languages.

3. Netherlands

The Netherlands like the other European countries has over the past few decades rapidly developed into a multi-ethnic society and the changes in population have been particularly noticeable in education (Rijkschroeff et. al., 2005). Hablemitoğlu (2008: 72) states that Netherlands is the second country after Germany among EU countries in terms of having dense Turkish population.

Sevinç (1999: 43) states that giving instruction in the mother language started in 1951 for the Indonesians because they were thought to return back to their countries as contemporary migrants. Sevinç (1999: 44) quotes from Yank (1997) that mother tongue instruction started with the organization of the Italian and Spanish Embassies in 1967 whereas Turkish mother tongue instruction was first introduced in 1973.

Yağmur (2005) states that OALT (Onderwijs in Allochtone Levende Talen = education in non-indigenous living languages) was made possible in primary schools from 1974-2004 under the previous acronym OETC (Onderwijs in Eigen Taal en Cultuur = education in own language and culture), later on renamed as OET (without the Culture). With recent anti-immigrant movements in the Netherlands, the cabinet
proposed abolishing OALT in primary schools because it was “in contradiction with the policy of integration of immigrant children” and all efforts should be focused on Dutch only. Neither the newly elected parliament, nor the Dutch society resisted to these changes except for some immigrant groups but it did not mean much for the mainstream politics. The Ministry of Education announced the abolition of OALT at the start of the 2004/2005 primary school year. The budget for promoting ONST in secondary schools was also cut, although ONST would remain a legal option in secondary schools (Yağmur, 2005). Aşıt (2005) says that more than 55,000 Turkish children do not have the opportunity to learn Turkish at schools. Because of the new regulation approximately 1,400 mother tongue teachers were unemployed and most had to work in other jobs.

Turkish academics like Prof. Dr. Mehmet Aşıt, Dr. Kutlay Yağmur and many others have formed the “The Netherlands Turkish Education Association” and the campaign “Hand in Hand for Turkish” (the website: http://www.turkce-icin-el-ele.nl/) for retaking the Turkish mother tongue instruction into the school curriculum.

According to Yağmur (2005) the Netherlands had been famous with its pluralistic approach; however, after September 11, the dominant discourse in Dutch politics has become anti-pluralist. The provision of mother-tongue teaching in primary schools was stopped in 2004 and students’ ethnicity was dropped as an indicator for extra funding for both primary and secondary schools (Shewbridge et al., 2010).

In the Netherlands Dutch policy makers, politicians, opinion-leaders in the media, and even some ‘educational specialists’ identify the use of home language as the underlying barrier before a successful acquisition of Dutch (Yağmur, 2005). Canatan (2007) states that although the Netherlands was as willing and positive as Sweden at the beginning, in the recent years the trend was first diminishing and then abolishing the mother tongue instruction.

4. Sweden

Sweden has both the largest population in the Nordic region (close to 9 million) and the greatest proportion of persons with foreign background (8.9%) (Swedish integration board 2005: Boyd, 2005).

Axelsson (2005: 108) points out that mother tongue instruction in public schools for children of migrant background since the middle of the 1970s has been firmly established. Taguma et al (2010: 39) also indicate that legislation in Sweden (according to the education levels, demands and available sources) guarantees: Mother tongue assistance/support at pre-school; mother tongue tuition at compulsory school (if certain criteria are met); mother tongue study guidance for those who need extra support in their mother language.

According to Wirén (2009) state financed mother tongue tuition in the educational system was introduced in 1977 with its ground in the integration policy that declared the right for immigrants to keep and develop their original culture and language. By that time reform municipalities were mandated to offer mother tongue tuition to foreign background students. In the early nineties the educational system was decentralised and there had been a major shift in educational politics, going from a centralised state control to a governing by municipalities (not decided by the school). The change in the economic conditions also affected the practice of mother tongue tuition: In order to participate, the students are required to have a basic knowledge in their mother tongue and the language must constitute a daily spoken language. The municipalities are not forced to offer the tuition for mainly two reasons: the case of
less than five students within the municipality, and lack of teacher competence. As a result of these developments, instruction in immigrant languages dramatically lost importance.

Axelsson (2005: 112) gives information about a recent report from the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) “More Languages, More Opportunities” (2002) that gives an overview of the development and current state of mother tongue instruction:

- Ten years ago, 60% of multilingual children received mother tongue assistance at pre-school. In 2002, the respective figure was 13%.
- At compulsory comprehensive schools, the percentage of students entitled to and receiving mother tongue instruction has fallen from 60% to 50%.
- Most mother tongue instruction is given in the afternoon – at the close of the regular school day.
- Only 10% of Sweden’s municipalities arrange instruction in minority languages in particular subjects.

Boyd (2005) claims that although previously, some bilingual instruction was available in certain languages in certain municipalities, now most instruction in languages other than Swedish takes place after school on a voluntary basis. However, “study help” (a good practice that provides help with other subjects in the mother tongue of the student, either in the classroom during the ordinary lesson, or at another time or place) by teachers of other mother tongues is available in many schools. Other instruction in languages other than Swedish takes place on a provisional basis.

5. Denmark

Denmark’s immigrant population is one of the smallest in Western Europe, but it is made up of highly diverse groups coming from about 200 different countries. Immigrant students with a non-Danish mother tongue make up 10% of the student population in Denmark, representing many countries, cultures and languages. The largest groups come from Turkey, the Middle East, Iran, the former Yugoslavia and Pakistan and according to the national and international studies those with a non-Danish mother tongue face the greatest challenges in achieving good education outcomes (Nusche et. al., 2010: 7).

Turks started arriving in Denmark in the early 1970s as part of the guest-worker program (Jørgensen, 2010) and currently form the largest immigrant group (Liebig, 2007).

Nusche (et. al. 2010: 35) point out that mother tongues are not recognized and valued in the school system because Denmark does not provide mother tongue instruction to immigrant students. Children’s proficiency in their mother tongue is not assessed at any point in the education system, and they are not supported or encouraged in improving or using their mother tongue. There is lack of information about students’ language backgrounds. Even in schools with a high proportion of immigrants, different mother tongues are often not seen as a positive and normal aspect of school life, on the other hand they are seen more as a problem than a resource or richness. Today, students are allowed to take their mother tongue as an elective subject in secondary education, but they rarely do. Schools do not encourage students and it was also reported by students and parents that employers do not value knowledge of non-European languages. In a discussion with a group of 20 VET students enrolled in an institute outside Copenhagen, the OECD review team was told by one student that he would never mention on his CV the fact that he knew Turkish; the others agreed (Nusche et. al., 2010: 35).

Only in the municipality of Copenhagen, information on children’s mother tongues is included in administrative registers. Through the complete exclusion of immigrant languages in school life, the
education system is missing a chance to affirm immigrants’ additional knowledge and cultural and linguistic background in a positive way, as an opportunity and not just a challenge (Nusche et. al., 2010: 35).

According to Boyd (2005) government includes one party which has had a xenophobic policy which resulted in less money being allocated to instruction in Danish for immigrants and Danish as a second language during the past several years. Denmark has a relatively de-centralized school system, (compared for example to Sweden), so it is difficult to generalize about how this instruction is organized.

Interestingly; whereas the municipal authorities must provide mother-tongue teaching to pupils from Greenland and the Faroe Islands and to pupils whose parents are EU or EEA citizens, they can provide voluntary mother-language teaching to pupils from other countries and can charge a fee for this service. (http://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/citizenship/citizen_in_denmark/7+school+and+education.htm). This may be thought to be something discriminative to the third country nationals.

According to Danish radio survey, 11 out of 20 of the largest municipalities in Denmark do not offer minority children any mother tongue education while five municipalities demand payment. The government’s reason is; small children must learn the Danish language from the very beginning and that many minority children were coming to school with no knowledge of Danish. This means that parents must pay if they wish their children to learn their mother tongue. This is in conflict with EU wide analysis undertaken by the Technological Institute in Denmark which confirmed earlier claims that mother tongue learning helps the whole educational process of minority children (Quraishy, 2005).

6. Conclusion

Learning the mother tongue is the most important element of preserving cultural identity and the must to become proficient in a second language. In this respect host countries should guarantee that the mother tongue is being taught at all levels of education and within suitable environments and facilities and by professionals (http://abdigm.meb.gov.tr). However, when we look at the current practices, this right of these children seems not be actualized completely. As in all the other migrant/minority population in Europe the Turkish case is very important because Turkish population is very high. It is important that some new measures be taken by the host and the sending country.

As Yağmur (2010) summarizes; except for some states, Germany puts the responsibility of the mother tongue instruction to the migrant’s/minority’s country. Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark gives the responsibility to the educational agencies in the country. As the quality of the mother tongue classes is generally low, the attainment levels and the demand diminishes every year. Söhn (2005: 2) states what is striking about the Dutch and the Swedish case is that after general support for mother tongue teaching in both countries in previous decades because governments have made different decisions in the new millennium: Sweden still supports mother tongue teaching, while the Netherlands abolished it altogether in August 2004.

Also suggested by Yağmur (2010) if some benefit is expected from the mother tongue courses and therefore the success in instruction in the schools, the negative practices towards the mother tongue instruction should be given up. It is thought that instead of abolishing or limiting the mother tongue (which is the source of richness in the multicultural countries) instruction, it should be supported. It should not be forgotten that the success of the permanent population (supported by effective mother tongue instruction) with migration background would be a positive contribution to the host countries.
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