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GLIMPSES OF HISTORY OF EFL TEACHING IN TURKEY

In Turkey, the official language and the language of education is Turkish. However, among the foreign languages offered in the education system, it is English that is currently the only language taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of education; it has the status of a Foreign Language (EFL), and German and French are offered as elective subjects in the curriculum of some schools [1].

The beginning of English medium instruction and teaching English as a foreign language in the Ottoman Empire began with the arrival of the American missionaries as early as 1820. During the Tanzimat period the number of American missionary schools considerably increased. In 1840, there were only 6 schools with 84 students; by 1870 – 233 schools and 5880 students. Although these schools had Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Jewish students initially, Turks began to be drawn to American schools because speaking English resulted in good jobs. Another reason for the increasing popularity of these schools among the Turks was the dissatisfaction of the people with the inefficient education offered in Turkish mektep (school) [2, p. 41–42].

It is recognized that the first institution teaching through the medium of English was Robert College, an Anglo-American private secondary school founded in 1863 by Cyrus Hamlin, an American missionary, with the financial support of Mr. Robert, a philanthropist. Cyrus Hamlin came to Turkey in 1838 and started a seminary in Istanbul in 1840. Later, the idea to start a Christian College emerged. Cyrus Hamlin was said to be a person who “made his bread from stone” [2, p. 44]: it was the quality of the bread which had been baked by Cyrus Hamlin for the wounded British soldiers that drew Mr. Robert’s attention and led to their acquaintance, out of which grew Robert College. Cyrus Hamlin could live in Turkey for 35 years and adapt to the environment he was in to make the best of it. His careful observations about the Turks (“The Turks will better bear very vigorous treatment directly to them, than about them.”; “The Ottoman Turks never, or very rarely, study foreign languages. They pay too little regard to foreign opinions.” [ibid]) remain important until now. In fact, he was the one whose approach reflected the later principles of ethnically oriented EFL training system considering ethno-cultural peculiarities of the trainees the comprehensive study of which gives the basis of private EFL teaching methods.

With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, modernization and westernization movements brought closer connections with Europe and the USA, which helped accelerate the spread of ELT in the country, and English gained precedence over other foreign languages particularly French, which was previously preferred in diplomacy, education, and art [1, p. 217–218].

The 1950s marked the first phase of the spread of English through schooling, and the first Anatolian high school offering a higher level of English language proficiency was open in 1955.

During 1980s, English became very prominent, and the number of schools offering English education increased (in 1987–1988, there were 193 English-medium secondary schools (103 private, 90 state-owned); by the 2004–2005 school year, the number of private secondary schools reached 650).

In accordance with 1997 Education Reform, duration of primary education increased from the previous 5 to 8 years which stipulated the earlier English learning for Grade 4 and Grade 5 students and shifted the introduction of EFL from secondary to primary schools in order to provide a longer exposure to the foreign language [1, p. 220]. The objectives of English curriculum were to raise pupils' awareness of a foreign language, promote a positive attitude towards English learning, increase pupils' interest and motivation towards the English language, etc.

A number of steps were taken to promote the English language teacher development policy (seminars, training workshops, access courses, distance learning teacher education programs).

At Turkish universities, there is a major requirement for researchers – to publish in international journals in order to gain academic promotion. In addition to publications mainly in English, Turkish academics are required to take centrally administered English tests [1, p. 219].

According to the latest education reforms, ELT curriculum highlights a communicative view with corresponding structural items, illustrated with topics, functions, sample tasks or projects; assessment of students' skills is proposed to be made through implementing portfolios claimed to be more congruent with the principles of the communicative language teaching and focused on documenting a student's language progress and performance [1, p. 225].

Although the current infrastructure for ELT has been much improved in Turkey, there are some challenges in ELT practice, and the efficacy of receiving a higher education in English used as the primary medium of instruction is widely debated at the national level. As a result of criticisms, some university departments preferred to deliver courses in Turkish on the grounds that students find studying through the medium of English difficult. According to one of the surveys, a vast majority of the students (67%) stated that they experienced difficulties because of studying through the medium of English. The students mentioned three major problems: instruction in English reduces their ability to understand general concepts and leads to superficial learning; a feeling of being distanced from one's own culture and language because of studying through the medium of English; perceptions of their low level of English in the academic environment [3, p. 677–678].

Historical facts of EFL teaching in Turkey and challenges in ELT practice have to be undoubtedly taken into account when teaching English to Turkish students and use of English as the primary medium of instruction.

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