

The Function of “Turkish Language” Course in Colleges in the Teaching of Turkish as a Mother Tongue in Turkey

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Abstract

In Turkey, in order for the individual to use his native language correctly and efficiently, courses such as “Turkish, Turkish Language and Literature, Language and Expression” are taught throughout school life. This process of learning the native language continues with the course named “Turkish Language” in universities and it is given to all students in their first year in all faculties for two semesters. The specialty of this course is that students who begin the university have to take it compulsorily. This practice began with the foundation of Higher Education Council in 1981. The aims of teaching this course include presenting information about the general linguistic structure of Turkish, improving written and spoken expression of the individual in his native language, and raising young people with the awareness of native language. The course is given by Turkish language lecturers. However, there are some problems for both teachers and students related to the content of the course and its being compulsory. Recently, there have been debates among academicians about whether this course should be taught or not. Some academicians think it does not contribute to learning of native language and it must be removed. One of the other debate topics is about that the course can be selective instead of compulsory. In this paper, the aim of the course, its content and problems will be discussed with researches done before and surveys made with students. After all, the contribution of the course to native language will be evaluated with this data.

Keywords: Turkish, mother tongue teaching, courses of Turkish language

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Introduction

What is a mother tongue? “Mother tongue is the language learnt from the mother and close family members at first, then from the environment that one comes into contact with, the language that exists in the subconscious and forms the strongest tie that an individual has with the society.” (Aksan, 1975; 427)

When a child first starts learning a language, he or she acquires the vocal structure of the tongue which consists of sounds, emphases and tones characteristics of that language. This vocal structure is usually the structure of the mother’s language, and is deeply imprinted upon the developing child’s tongue. These characteristics are very difficult to change, and for some, even impossible.

The official language of Turkey is Turkish. The majority of Turkish citizens speak Turkish as their mother tongue, but there are also people who speak other languages, most prominently Kurdish, but also Arabic, various Turkic languages, Balkan languages, Laz, Circassian, Armenian, Caucasian languages, Greek and other languages. Most people whose mother tongue is not Turkish learn their first language in their families, and then learn Turkish as a second language at school or at work because it is the common language of communication in Turkey. Learning Turkish as a second language is outside the scope of this study and will not be mentioned in this article.

This study aims to examine how Turkish, acquired as a mother tongue, is taught in Turkey’s education system, especially in the “Turkish Language” courses at colleges, and make some recommendations.

“Acquisition of the mother tongue is a process that works from the birth onwards, automatically and continuously, in a cultural milieu stretching from the family to the social environment.” (Demir, Yapıcı: 180)

“However, mother tongue education begins when the parents and the close family members start correcting the mistakes, and continues in the pre-school period as the child learns the rules of the mother language.” (Karataş, 2013; 1882)

In the Turkish education system, Turkish as a mother tongue is taught in the following courses:

1. ‘Turkish Language Activities’ in pre-school education
2. ‘Turkish’ in elementary school (grades 1 through 8)
3. ‘Language and Expression’ in secondary school (grades 9 through 12)
4. At the last stage of this process, in college, Turkish is taught in the mandatory course ‘Turkish Language’ in all undergraduate programs except the Departments of Turkish Language and Literature. (Karataş, 2013; 1882)

1. At the pre-school stage of mother tongue education, “Turkish Language Activities” course includes the following activities:

• Tongue twisters
• Poems
• Finger games
• Riddles
• Fairy tales and stories
• Mother tongue practice activities (acting, monologue...)
• Audio slideshow stories

2. The contents of the ‘Turkish’ course taught in elementary school are as follows:

• Listening
○ Practicing rules of listening
○ Listening comprehension
• Speaking
○ Practicing rules of speaking
○ Verbal expression
○ Genres, methods and techniques of speaking
• Reading
○ Practicing rules of reading
○ Reading comprehension
○ Establishing meaning
○ Developing vocabulary
○ Genres, methods and techniques of reading
• Writing
○ Practicing rules of writing
○ Written expression
○ Genres, methods and techniques of writing
• Visual Reading and Visual Presentation
○ Visual reading
○ Visual presentation
• Grammar Acquisition

3. The contents of the ‘Language and Expression’ course taught in secondary school (grades 9 through 12) are as follows:

• 9 th Grade:
○ Communication, language and culture
○ Classification of languages and the place of Turkish among the world languages
○ Phonetics and pronunciation
○ Vocabulary
○ Syntax
○ Paragraph structure
• 10 th Grade
○ Presentation, discussion and panels

○ Expression and its characteristics
○ Types of expression
• 11 th Grade
○ Classification of texts
○ Educational texts
○ Verbal expression
• 12 th Grade
○ Identifying the characteristics of literary texts and examining literary texts
○ Literary texts (Fables, fairy tales, stories, novels, poetry, theater)
○ Verbal expression (Conference, panel, symposium, forum)
○ Identifying scientific texts' characteristics and writing scientific texts

As the contents of these courses indicate, mother tongue education starts at the pre-school period and continues until the college education.

At the college level, the mother tongue education continues with the 'Turkish Language' course, which is mandatory in all undergraduate programs except in the Departments of Turkish Education, and Turkish Language and Literature.

Why is this course even needed at the college level?

The common view on this question is that the previous levels fail in teaching the skill to "speak Turkish in a correct and elegant manner". And together with some psychological factors arising from socio-economic realities to this lack of skills, this lack of knowledge leads to the emergence of many negative attitudes towards Turkish, which should be the most important symbol of national pride.

In 1981, the Higher Education Council of Turkey (YÖK) was established. With the establishment of YÖK, 'Turkish Language' course became mandatory at all universities and departments to teach mother tongue. The course was taught over eight semesters until 1991, but since 1991 it has been taught for two semesters to freshmen students only, with a total of 60 class hours.

In its framework curriculum, YÖK explained the rationale for introducing the course as follows:

"Because grammar and Turkish courses in elementary and secondary school levels are not in sufficient amount and quality, students starting college education lack the skill to speak Turkish in a correct and elegant manner. This means their Turkish skills are inefficient for college education, which necessitates having the Turkish Language course in colleges." (Vural, 2007: 496)

In the same curriculum, the aims of the course were defined as follows:

"To make sure that every young college graduate has a firm grasp of the structure and functioning of his or her mother tongue; to help students acquire the necessary skills

to use both written and spoken Turkish in a correct and elegant manner; to create a unifying and integrating language and to educate mother tongue-conscious youths.” The “Turkish Language” course introduced by YÖK with the above considerations has been taught for 35 years now, and it is obvious that despite all the time spent, the benefits expected from this course are not efficiently realized.

General problems regarding the Turkish Language course:

At this point, we can consider the following general problems regarding the Turkish Language course: (The following points were taken from Mustafa Karataş’s article titled “*Attitudes Towards Turkish and the Turkish Language Course in Universities*” Turkish Studies, Volume 8/1 Winter, 2013, p. 1884, and expanded upon.)

1. Problems with the name of the “Turkish Language” course.

The first thing that comes to mind when one hears the “Turkish Language” is the different variants of Turkish spoken by different Turkic people living in different countries. Kyrgyz, Azeri, Uighur, and Turkish spoken in Turkey are all Turkish languages. However, it is only Turkish that is spoken in Turkey covered in this course as it can be understood from the content. In addition, this course is not only a language course, its contents also include Turkish culture and history.

2. Problems with lecturers

- Selection of lecturers
- Compensation of lecturers

Although this course had grand aims, the necessary planning and preparation for the lecturers to be employed to teach this course could not be developed. Initially, the need for lecturers was met by employing Turkish teachers serving at secondary schools run by the Ministry of National Education. Later, graduates of Turkish Education and Turkish Language and Literature departments were employed as lecturers even though they did not have specialist training.

3. Physical infrastructure (crowded classes)

Most classes are very crowded, which is among the most important problems preventing efficient instruction.

4. Problems with implementation (Teaching to freshmen, without credit)

This course is taught in the freshmen year of all undergraduate programs in all universities, for two hours a week. Students do not earn any credits for this course even though it is a mandatory course, which creates negative attitudes towards the course among students. Many students regard the course as simply “a waste of time”.

5. Problems with curriculum (Framework curriculum)

- Continuation of grammar teaching
- Subjects that are out of touch with modern needs and realities
- Lack of harmony between goals and contents

- Focus on rote learning, failure to teach awareness, self-respect and self-esteem

Grammar of mother tongue is taught at all levels of education, always accompanied by clichés and in the form of rote learning. This approach to teaching also applies to the Turkish Language course taught in universities. Students do not get a chance to grasp the structure of their mother tongue and use it in practice. The problem stems both from the education system in general, and from a lack of commitment of the students to learn how to use their mother tongue in a correct manner. The lack of commitment, is associated with the language awareness of the family and in general of the society. Another problem in this regard is that the aims YÖK set out when introducing the course are not in harmony with the contents of the course. Contents of the course vary from university to university due to factors including some of the problems mentioned here.

6. Problems with teaching materials

- Lack of high quality books
- Lack of harmony between goals and book contents
- Lack of educational technologies such as computers and projectors in some universities

When Turkish Language course was first introduced, there was a lack of teaching materials designed for the course. Over time, various books were written by academicians to meet this need. However, many of these books fail to follow criteria set by YÖK, and provide encyclopedic information rather than encouraging practice. In addition, some universities are not able to offer basic educational technologies, which is another factor preventing the applied teaching of this course.

7. Problems arising from the education system and socio-cultural environment

- Failure to instill love of mother tongue and mother tongue awareness
- Failure to provide efficient Turkish language education

A commonly accepted view about the Turkish education system is that it is based upon rote learning. Even though there are efforts to move beyond rote learning, changing the deeply held attitudes is a difficult undertaking. The Turkish education system conceives of teachers as conveyors of information. Students, in turn, are expected to receive the pre-packaged nuggets of information provided by the teachers and convey them back to the teachers during the exams. During this process, students are not expected to engage in deep learning or creative expression, they are only required to reproduce information in an accurate manner. As a result, following the exams, most of the information memorized is lost because they are irrelevant to the daily needs of the students.

In addition, there is a certain lack of awareness in the wider society regarding mother tongue, and insufficient love of mother tongue. Speaking Turkish in a correct and effective manner is considered to be a professional skill only. Sloppy grammar, broken sentences, and misspelling are treated as minor slips by most people. As a result, many students majoring in other fields, even some academicians, have an easy time finding excuses for their poor Turkish.

8. Problems with the students

- Lack of previous learning
- Lack of interest
- Negative attitudes resulting from lack of self-esteem, self-respect and negative self-concept

Many students in Turkey start their college education without mother tongue awareness and without a grasp of the rules of their mother tongue. This results from the following factors:

- Failure to teach Turkish in a sufficient and comprehensive manner in secondary education
- Lack of attention to correct usage of the mother tongue in family, at school and in other social environments
- Mothers' low level of education
- Low levels of reading in Turkey

As is clear from the preceding discussion, mother tongue education in Turkey is a serious problem deserving attention, one that has long been debated in academic circles. Many scholars defend re-structuring this course, whereas others argue that it is better to cancel the course altogether because the expected benefits are not realized and the course is seen as an "unnecessary burden". In this confusion, some universities already started offering this course in the form of "distance education", allowing their students to follow the course online only. The "distance education" formula resulted in minimizing student-teacher interaction, and made achieving the aims of the course even more difficult.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first priority in Turkey should be raising awareness about the mother tongue. To this end, mother tongue education at elementary and secondary school levels should be conducted with the seriousness it deserves. In addition, a sufficient number of efficiently well-trained teachers should be educated, and students should be encouraged to develop a strong reading habit. YÖK is well advised to provide the necessary infrastructure in universities for this course. Only then would we be able to eliminate many of the problems in universities mentioned above.

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