

*Transformation of the English Courses in the Turkish Educational System From
the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey*

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Abstract

The education system of the Ottoman Empire was always in a transformation process during its 600-year-history in Anatolia. On the other hand, New Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 based on a completely different regulation system which brought innovations in many areas including education. Accordingly, there were considerable changes in the school types, curricula and the basic elements of education such as the type of the original alphabet and the educational philosophies behind the whole educational system. Despite these significant changes, foreign language education (FLE) has always become a part of curricula, with a recent focus on English language. Therefore, as a part of the educational reforms, there have been many transformations in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Turkey, especially in terms of the objectives and the standards. The aim of this study is to show the transformation and the development process of FLE in Turkish educational system through the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic in order to understand the contemporary status and the problems of English as a foreign language in Turkey.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Turkish Republic, Course Materials

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Introduction

The New Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, initiating reforms across various sectors, including education. Significant changes were implemented in school types, curricula, and foundational elements such as the original alphabet and the educational philosophies underpinning the system. In the first official curriculum of 1924, teaching English as a foreign language became essential, particularly in middle and high schools. Comprehensive course books from foreign publishers were selected for English courses, aiming to enhance students' reading, writing, and speaking skills. A century later, English remains the most significant foreign language in Turkey, and it is taught even in primary school. However, at the high school level, over two million students still follow an A2 level English curriculum in the 9th grade. Additionally, course materials and exams primarily focus on reading and writing, often neglecting listening and speaking skills.

Educational Reforms in the First Years of Turkish Republic

Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 on the lands of Anatolia after the Ottoman Empire was defeated in World War I. After that, modern Turkish government declared independence to have the new secular, democratic system including country-wide innovative revolutions (e.g. a purified form of Turkish becomes the official language of the country by abolishing the use of Ottoman Turkish which were composed of Arabic and Persian words). The main objective of these revolutions was to provide approval and consistency of the new system by both the citizens of Turkey and other countries. As a part of this modernization movement, Turkish government announced a number of reforms in the educational system in 1924 under the name of *Centralized Educational Law* (Turk. Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu). This law aimed to provide the central rule over the country-wide educational institutions, by abolishing all types of religious schools. Moreover, all types of schools would accept both boys and girls on the contrary to the previous system of separate schools for each sex. These new schools had to follow the common curriculum prepared by the state itself. All of the schools were also announced to be tuition fee free in order to educate as many students as possible for the new country.

In order to provide European style educational institutions, Turkish government invited scientists from various countries so that they can observe the conditions and give suggestions to increase the quality of education in Turkey. One of these scientists was John Dewey who visited different parts of country and wrote two reports on Turkish educational system. The first report was mostly based on how national budget should be used in order to provide improvement in education. On the other hand, the second report included more practical suggestions such as how to design the school objectives and curricula individually based on the differentiating local needs of students in various parts of the country. Following the official declaration of the national language to be Turkish in the new country, Latin alphabet was started to be used in 1928 around the country. The main purpose of this reform was also increasing the literacy rate of the society, which was followed by the foundation of local educational institutions. All of these steps were aiming to provide social and economic development of the whole society of all ages in the newly founded country.

In terms of formal educational guidelines, the first national curriculum of Turkish Republic was announced in 1924, mainly following Dewey's ideas of progressivism and pragmatism. In this curriculum, the objectives and content of the subjects were also shaped through essentialism to prevent resistance of specific conservative groups against the new values and

reforms. The national values of “being a good citizen” and “being Turks” were repeatedly emphasized in many sections of this curriculum to provide unity of the society. Five-year primary education became obligatory for all children in the country, during which they would learn Turkish, basic mathematics, social and natural sciences, and religion. In primary school curriculum, there were no foreign language subjects. After primary school, there were high schools including two different levels with three years each (similar to three-year middle schools and three-year high schools for contemporary educational system). Both in the first and second level of high schools, foreign languages (French, English and German) would be taught for five hours a week based on the students’ preferences and teachers’ availability (Can & Kartal, 2020; Dilek, 2016).

According to the English language curriculum of 1924 (Maarif Vekaleti, 1924), in the first grade of high schools, the first half of the course book, *Beginning English for the Levant* would be studied. English would be five hours a week filled with oral and written exercises, translation activities and memorization of vocabulary. That curriculum suggested using two of five hours to teach English grammar by using Turkish for explanations or to make translations from Turkish to English if it becomes necessary during completing the exercises. In the other three hours, teachers would mostly focus on speaking and dialogue exercises without using Turkish. In the second grade, the other half of the same course book (*Beginning English for the Levant*) would be used, by following the same pattern of the first grade in terms of the weekly activities. However, in the third grade, another course book, *Royal Readers No. I* would be used for reading various English texts by focusing on translation activities, written and oral use of language and vocabulary exercises to help students to use the language in classes actively (two hours a week). Teachers would cover *Brackenburry’s English Idiom* for other two hours in a week to improve students’ vocabulary and grammar knowledge. The last one hour of each week would be reserved for production purposes such as students writing short letters and essays, giving feedback to their peers while teachers would provide guidance. This specific hour would also be used for students’ retelling the original stories they read in English through using their own words.

In 1934 and 1938, new forms of curriculum were announced, in which there were slight changes in English courses in terms of weekly class hours and course books. In these curricula, English would still be taught for five hours a week for first and second year students. However, in 3rd year, the students would make selection of fields of specialization to follow different curricula (e.g. science or literature, with four or six hours English in a week respectively). In terms of course books, *Royal Readers No. I* and *Brackenburry’s English Idiom* would be used for first year groups, while second and third graders would cover original reading texts from English and American literature to improve their English. Following these revolutionary years for Turkish Republic, two other national curricula (in 1952 and 1956) were declared to provide improvement in the educational system. However, for these new programs, the English course books were prepared by the National Ministry of Education (Türk. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı). That means *Royal Readers No. I* and *Brackenburry’s English Idiom* were used to teach English at high schools for a long period (1924-1952) in the first years of Turkish Republic until the Ministry of Education designed the course books.

In the current educational system of Turkey, there are two types of high schools differentiating in terms of foreign language education. In the first group of high schools, there is one-year obligatory preparatory class before 9th grade, following a special curricula including high number of weekly class hours (20/22 hours) of foreign language. In these less

common schools, students learn English starting from A1 level, and reach B1 level at the end of that year. After that, they become 9th graders and take regular classes of high school education including English courses in low hours (2/4/5 hours a week) (MEB, 2016). On the other hand, in the more common group of high schools in Turkey, which includes more than two million students, there is no obligatory preparatory year to learn foreign language (MEB, 2024a). In this type of schools, students become 9th graders immediately and have English courses (2/4/5 hours a week) as a part of their regular curriculum by starting from A1/A2 level (MEB, 2018). As a result, a huge number of first grade students in high schools use beginner level of English course books in these classes.

By taking all of this information into consideration, this study investigates the research question of “What were the target level, objectives and content of the English curriculum and course books used at high schools in new Turkish Republic compared to the current situation at high schools?” The aim of the current study is to examine the curriculum and content of one of the course books suggested for English course of the first year of high school education in the first 30 years of Turkish Republic in terms of its level compared to the current situation of foreign language education in Turkey. For this research focus, the course book of *Royal Readers No. I* was examined because it was one of the two books that were used for a long period (for 3rd year groups between 1924 and 1934, for 1st year groups between 1934 and 1952). Moreover, *Royal Readers No. I* was available for the analysis, while the other long-term used course book, *Brackenburry’s English Idiom*, was not available. Therefore, content of *Royal Readers No. I* has been examined in terms of the variety of its activities and correspondence with the language levels suggested by CEFR standards of communication. In the last part, these findings have been compared with the sample materials recently used for teaching English at 9th grades in 2023-2024.

Method

The current study implements the content analysis of the sample materials of *Royal Readers No. I* suggested for English course at high schools for the first 30 years of Turkish Republic to demonstrate the target language levels based on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) standards (Council of Europe, 2001). The sample materials suggested by the Ministry of Education for 9th grade English classes of 2023-2024 were also analyzed to identify the qualifications of their activities. The purpose was to compare the previous materials with the current materials used for English as a foreign language education in Turkey in terms of their range and levels. The first target material to be analyzed is *Royal Readers No. I*. (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1916?) including reading texts divided into three parts. Through pages and parts, the texts are getting longer and the grammatical structures used in the texts are getting more complicated. The current sample materials suggested for English subject of the 9th graders were reached through the official website of Turkish Ministry of Education. On this website, there are 20 units and two different worksheets for each unit, in accordance with the course book used at that grade (MEB, 2023). The worksheets basically include vocabulary, language use, translation and comprehension questions. Moreover, there are suggested sample exams (Semester 1 Exam No. 1 and 2, Semester 2 Exam No. 1 and 2) on the same website, in which, there are a number of questions (e.g. blank filling, comprehension questions, identification and/or analysis questions) (MEB, 2024b).

Findings

Sample Materials of 9th Grade English Courses Between 1934 and 1952 (Royal Readers No. I)

Before reading sections, there is a part entitled *Preface*, which provides a brief glance for the content of the book. The purpose of the book is stated as “[...] to induce children to take a real interest in what they read, and to make them delight to exercise their power of reading.” Accordingly, the book was stated to be designed to include texts related to the things of daily life. The visuals of the book are for helping teacher to draw attention of the students on the texts, which are advised to be closely analyzed through questioning technique to help students to make production. There are also suggestions about using pronunciation parts of the texts through dictation activities so that students could improve their spelling in addition to writing skills.

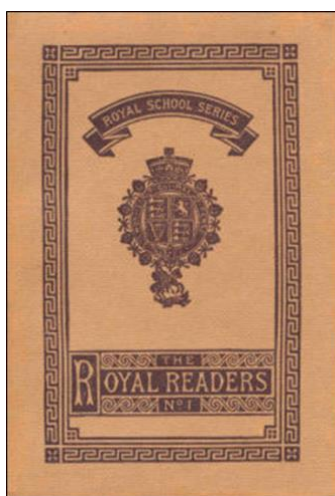


Figure 1: The Cover Page of Royal Readers No. I

The first section of the book starts with a short text (Figure 2) consisting of short, very simple sentences. After each text, the target vocabulary list is suggested, starting from one-syllable words in that part. There are also some advices about pronunciation of these words. Through pages, the texts and the sentences of texts are getting longer and more complicated, which shows the increase in the target level starting from Simple Present Tense (A1/A2 level) to Present Perfect Tense (A2 level). For some texts, related visuals are included in order to help understanding of the texts.

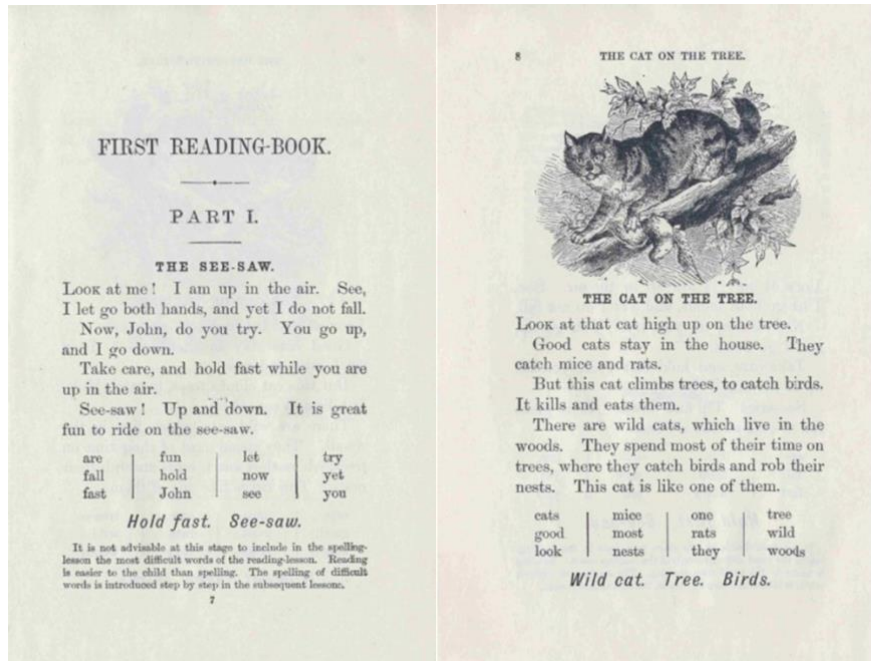


Figure 2: The First Reading Text of Royal Readers No. I Part I

The second part of the book starts with a two and a half page text including long sentences with Past Perfect Tense (B1 level). That part basically includes texts of at least two pages and also a number of poems.

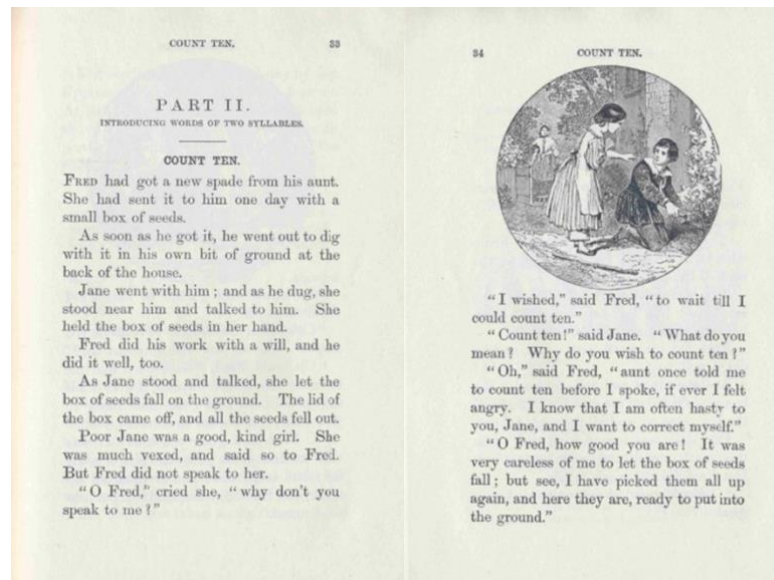


Figure 3: The First Reading Text of Royal Readers No. I Part II

On the other hand, the last part of the book (part three) starts with a text including sentences with the grammatical structures of passive voice, noun clauses and adjective clauses (B1/B2 level). This last part has longer texts related to the concepts that students may personally know or experience such as animals or furniture. For example, there is a text about rabbits (Figure 4) and another one about kitchen equipment (Figure 5).

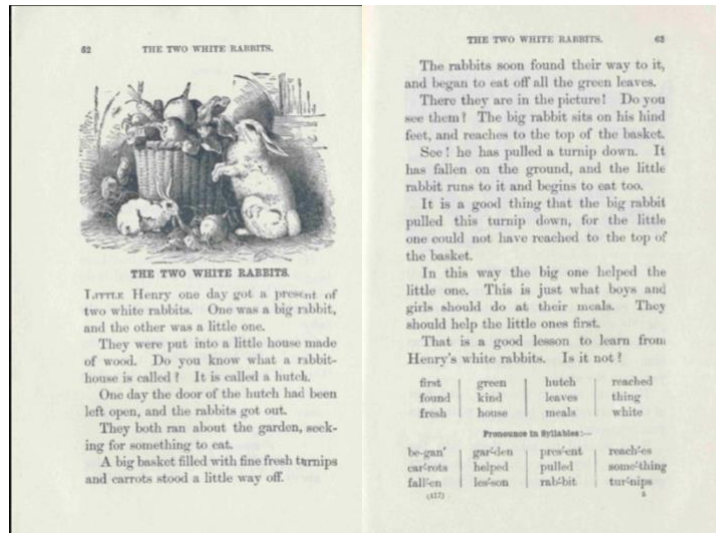


Figure 4: Sample Reading Text of Royal Readers No. I Part III

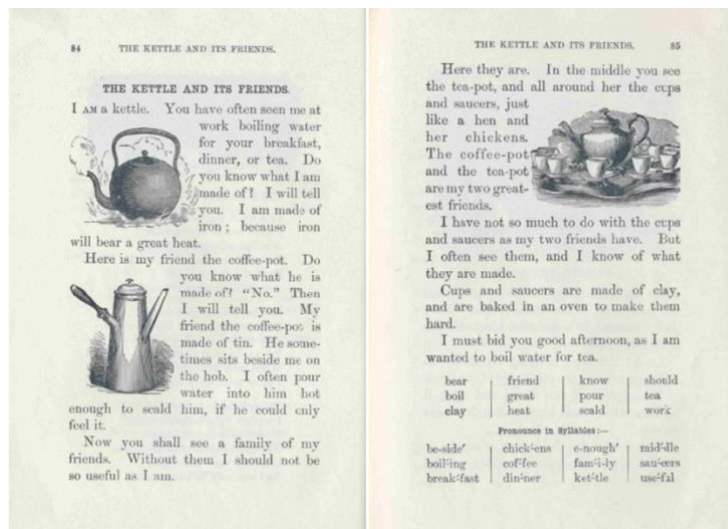


Figure 5: Sample Reading Text of Royal Readers No. I Part III

This last part of the book ends with a number of poems with the themes of daily life, natural world and religion (Figure 6). Both in part two and three, texts are followed by target vocabulary and pronunciation parts, for some of which visuals are provided.

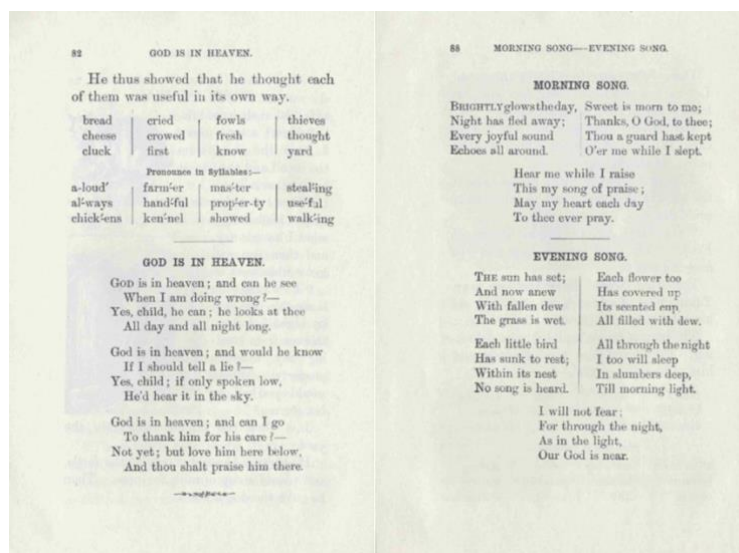


Figure 6: Sample Poems from Royal Readers No. I Part III

Sample Worksheets and Exams for Current English Courses of 9th Grades (2023-2024)

For the academic year of 2023-2024, Turkish Ministry of Education provided sample materials for various subject areas of each grade. For English course of 9th grade, there are two sample worksheets for each unit of the course book used at schools (20 units and 40 worksheets in total). In addition, there are two sample exams for each semester (Fall and Spring) so that teachers and students could see the expectations in terms of level and question types. In sample worksheets, there are reading comprehension, dialogue completion and vocabulary questions. All of these questions are in multiple choice format with five options and the level of the questions range from A1 to A2 level (MEB, 2023). Figure 7 is a dialogue completion activity in one of the sample worksheets, which suggests sentences of a dialogue in mixed order so that students can turn them into a meaningful dialogue.

<p>5. Jenny : Hello! My name is Jenny. What is your name?</p> <p>Thomas : Hi! I'm Thomas. - - - -</p> <p>Jenny : Nice to meet you, too.</p> <p>A) How are you? B) Nice to meet you! C) See you later. D) How old are you? E) What is your address?</p>

Figure 7: Dialogue Completion Question in Sample Worksheet 1

In another worksheet, there are questions providing introductory information for students so that they can select the best word from the options to complete one of the sentences. (Figure 8).

1. Anna works at a café. She serves food and drinks to people. She is a - - - - .

A) student
 B) chemist
 C) waitress
 D) teacher
 E) journalist

Figure 8: Vocabulary Question in Sample Worksheet 2

In Sample Worksheet 3, there are also questions for vocabulary in which students need to match the visuals with the words to name them (Figure 9). For these questions, students need to know the meaning of the words in addition to correctly identifying the objects in the pictures.

6.

I.	Umbrella	a.	
II.	ID Card	b.	
III.	Mobile phone	c.	
IV.	Passport	d.	
V.	Wallet	e.	

Which of the following matchings is CORRECT?


- A) I. d / II. a / III. b / IV. c / V. e
- B) I. b / II. e / III. d / IV. c / V. a
- C) I. d / II. a / III. b / IV. c / V. e
- D) I. b / II. e / III. d / IV. a / V. c
- E) I. e / II. c / III. b / IV. c / V. a

Figure 9: Vocabulary and Identification Questions in Sample Worksheet 3

In the materials of the sample exams, question types include activities to fill in the blanks and to write answers for comprehension questions by identifying and/or analyzing the information provided in various texts. In the sample exams, there are multiple choice, matching and completion types of questions, which require more writing of the students compared to the sample worksheets. In terms of level, sample exams are consistent with the level of sample worksheets (A1/A2 level) (MEB, 2024b). For example, in comprehension type of exam question, a visual is provided to be scanned by students to find the relevant specific information for the questions (Figure 10). These questions require scanning of the main text and the questions in addition to the identification of the answer of the questions.

1. Answer the questions according to the student ID card.

Student ID Card

	<p>Name : Barney</p> <p>Surname : Brown</p> <p>Country : Spain</p> <p>Languages : English, Spanish, and Turkish</p> <p>Email : bbrown@brownmail.com</p>
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a. How many languages can Barney speak?

b. Does Barney have an email address?

c. Where is Barney from?

Figure 10: Comprehension Question in Semester 1 Exam 1

In the scenario part of the sample exams, there is also a reading text about which three open-ended questions appear (Figure 11). In this part, students need to read a short text to identify answers of the questions and then write their answers to the following blank.

2. Read the text and answer the questions.

Sally is an exchange student in İzmir, Türkiye. There is a café near her apartment. She reads a book and has a cup of coffee there. There is a big park near the café, so she can take her dog for a long walk. There is a big supermarket near her apartment where she can find fresh vegetables. There is Güneş Restaurant near the supermarket. She can try local food there.

a. Where does Sally live?

b. What does Sally do at the café?


c. In which restaurant does Sally try local food?

d. Is there a place where Sally can take her dog for a walk?

Figure 11: Comprehension Question in Semester 1 Exam 2

There are also comprehension types of exam question, in which a reading text is provided which should be scanned by students to find the relevant specific information for the following questions (Figure 12).

2. Read the text below and answer the question.



Amy

Last night, I left a pot on the stove, boiling and fell asleep. Unfortunately, it caught fire while I was sleeping. The fire sprinkler system at home became active and put out the fire. I woke up with the sound and smell. Luckily I had fire sprinklers at home. They saved both my life and my sweet home.

What is the main idea of the text above?

Figure 12: Comprehension Question in Semester 2 Exam 2

Discussion

In the first years of Turkish Republic, foreign language education was starting in middle school years while in the contemporary curriculum of Turkey, English language education starts at primary school (specifically in the 2nd grade as two-hours a week). While the materials used for foreign language classes were mostly from the foreign publishers in between 1924 and 1950s, in today's case, Turkish National Ministry of Education is preparing all course materials itself. As it is seen on the sample excerpts, on the contrary to the more advanced level (B1/B2 level) of the first English curriculum of Turkish Republic, current 9th grade English course is designed for A1/A2 level. Accordingly, English course books, sample materials, and sample exams for 9th graders are currently based on this beginner level which interestingly assumes that these students have not previously learned English at all. While the course book of *Royal Reader No. I* was covering texts of various topics and even poems through the end, the currently used materials for 9th graders are lower level with very simple texts.

In terms of the content of the materials, in the older version of the materials, there was a focus on caring students' interests by using topics which might be attractive for them in addition to improving their reading skills. Although the texts of the current materials are attempting to be student-centered, the themes of the texts are not always directly related to the daily life issues. In terms of teaching process, there were suggestions and tips for teachers in *Royal Reader No. I* related to the use of materials in classes so that they can motivate students easily. Unfortunately, in the current materials, there is no guidance provided for teachers about how they could be covered in the classes to use them more effectively. Apart from these, the biggest difference between the older and newer forms of the materials is related to the target skills. While the currently used English course materials are only for improving grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing skills of the students, in the book of the first curriculum, there was a strong focus on active use of English by the students through production activities such as question answering. Improvement of the speaking skills was strongly emphasized not only in the pronunciation parts, but also in discussion parts on the reading texts and related visuals. Finally, the question types on the recently used testing materials are very limited compared to the the first years of Turkish Republic as the current ones are mostly in forms of multiple choice or short answers. Therefore, it seems that the expectations about the English language skills of 9th graders have been lowered to a large extent in one-hundred years of the country.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the course book used for English courses during the first 30 years of Turkish Republic, it can be concluded that *Royal Reader No. I* was full of texts of various topics, moving from A1 towards B2 level. Moreover, the book was rich in terms of the visuals and pronunciation-focused materials. On the other hand, the sample materials obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education demonstrates that the target level for current 9th graders is A2 at most. Moreover, in current English courses the main focus is on reading and writing skills of the students without any content for listening and speaking skills. Question types suggested in these materials are also very limited compared to the materials of the first years. That means there has been a big decrease in the expectations from high school students in terms of their English language skills. In order to improve these students' various English skills, it is definitely needed to *suggest some sample materials and exams specifically for listening and speaking skills*. In addition, *the currently used materials*

with the focus on reading and writing skills should be improved in terms of the types of questions. As a result, the students will be able to show improvement in all types of skills in English as a foreign language. In addition, there is the necessity to revise the beginning and target level of English courses for high school years as these students have actually learned English through their primary and middle school years. In accordance with the current trends of the world, it will be better to use more interactive and production-based activities based on the students' needs and interests.

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