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University students' awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to determine the awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use of the students of Ankara University Faculty of Educational Sciences. To this end, the students' opinions on awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use were collected through face-to-face and semi-structured interviews. The scope of the study is limited to a group of students randomly selected from Ankara University Faculty of Educational Sciences Department of Primary Education. The results of this study are of great importance to increasing prospective teachers' awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use.
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Keywords: Turkish language education, foreign language learning, language use, language awareness, teacher education.

1. Introduction

In recent years, misuse of language in oral and written communication in Turkish has become widespread and the number of foreign words in the Turkish language has remarkably increased. With an effort to show how powerful and wealthy the Turkish language is, Aksan (2001) explained the general qualities and unique expressions of the Turkish language in detail and demonstrated the wealth of the Turkish language. In this regard, Turkish has the capacity to produce new words. However, it includes many foreign words. Of course, languages may change over time as a result of contact with other languages and thus borrow words from other languages in order to meet the changing conditions and needs of their speech community (Shukla & Linton, 2006). But it is also necessary to raise language awareness of that community to prevent borrowing and use of foreign words in a way that would damage their languages.

In addition to the widespread use of foreign words and expressions in Turkish and insufficient production of new Turkish words and terms, the desire to deliver foreign language-medium instruction and the idea that Turkish is not a scientific language adversely affect the development of Turkish (Kavcar, 2008). One of the main reasons for these problems is poor Turkish education. Although a prominent place is given to the Turkish education in the curricula in primary and secondary education, the desired results could not be achieved. For instance, there are many studies that have revealed that written and oral expressions are not used at the desired level.

Another important problem encountered is about foreign language learning. Although there is a great interest in foreign language learning and the students take English courses during primary and secondary education, they

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cannot write and speak in that language and they cannot read the texts written in that language.

Language awareness is believed to have an important role to play in overcoming these problems experienced in both Turkish and foreign language education. Language awareness programs are seen as a tool to make explicit pupils' intuitive knowledge of their mother tongue, to strengthen language skills and increase the effectiveness of communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages, and to help understand the value of language as part of human life (James & Garrett, 1991). The success of these programs, on the other hand, lies in teacher awareness. Teacher awareness is a precondition for raising students' language awareness. According to James and Garrett (1991), language awareness should be embedded into pre-service or in-service teacher training and not only language teachers but all teachers in a school should be trained in language. However, the role of language in education came to the forefront only at the end of the twentieth century and work on the role of teachers as educational linguists remained limited (Brumfit, 1997).

Against this background, this study focuses on prospective teachers' awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use and aims at providing guidance in relevant research and studies to be made in the future.

2. Language Awareness

Language education, language learning and language awareness have been regarded as important topics throughout the world. The language awareness movement started in the early 1980s in the UK driven by the Bullock Report which was written as a result of a government investigation about the situation of the British language education (Van Lier, 1996, p. 78). This movement aimed at addressing the need for a more systematic and efficient approach to language education and language use in schools and academic institutions (Donmall, 1985). Countries like Australia, Canada and the USA also attached importance to language education and introduced such movements to underline the importance of language in education (Van Lier, 1996, p. 78). In Turkey, on the other hand, the language awareness has been incorporated into the curricula in both Turkish and foreign language education. A prominent place was given to the language awareness in the objectives set out in the curricula for primary and secondary education.

Language awareness was defined by the Language Awareness Working Party which was formed by the National Council for Language in Education as "*a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life*" (Donmall, 1985, p. 7). Hawkins (1987) also provides a definition of language awareness which is based on the objectives of the language awareness. These objectives can be listed as "*facilitating the start of foreign language studies, assisting with the explosion of concepts and language introduced by new subjects, connecting different aspects of language education, and challenging linguistic prejudice and parochialism through open discussion and greater awareness*" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 80).

James and Garrett (1991) explain the scope of the language awareness through five domains: affective domain, social domain, power domain, cognitive domain and performance domain. The affective domain is defined by Donmall (1985) as "to *form attitudes and to awake and develop attention, sensitivity, curiosity, interest and aesthetic response*". The social domain is "*to foster better relations among all ethnic groups*" (Donmall, 1985). The power domain means "*to give the individual control over language and language learning for the achievement and expression of, as well as sensitivity to, identity and purpose*" (James & Garrett, 1991). The cognitive domain means "*to improve intellectual functioning*" and the performance domain means "*to improve proficiency*" (James & Garrett, 1991).

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to find out how aware the students of Ankara University Faculty of Educational Sciences were of the Turkish language; to determine their awareness of foreign language learning; and to determine their awareness of foreign language use.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 24 sophomore and freshman students who were randomly selected from Ankara University Faculty of Educational Sciences Department of Primary Education. The participants have similar educational backgrounds since all of them had graduated from state schools, studied social sciences as study field during the secondary education and studied English as a foreign language for at least six years in total during the primary and secondary education. All of the participants took English courses in the first two terms of the tertiary education and few of them attended the one-year preparatory program offered by the university as an optional English language teaching program. All of the participants had resided since birth in Turkey and they said they had never been abroad.

3.3. Instrument

The participants' opinions on the awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use were collected through semi-structured and face-to-face interviews. These interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes and included eleven open-ended questions. The interview questions were grouped in three parts. In the first part, four questions were asked to the participants with a view to elicit data on their awareness of the Turkish language. The questions were about the importance of the correct use of the Turkish language, use of foreign words in oral and written communication in Turkish, knowledge about Turkish grammar, spelling and expressions, and English-medium instruction at universities in Turkey. In the second part, the participants were asked to answer four questions so as to elicit data on their awareness of foreign language learning. The questions were about the participants' affective response to learning a foreign language, their opinions on the necessity for learning a foreign language, their foreign language learning strategies, and their success in learning the foreign language. Finally in the third part, the participants were asked three questions in order to elicit data on their awareness of foreign language use. The questions were on their success in foreign language use, their opportunities to use the foreign language and their affective response to using the foreign language. The participants' answers to these questions were recorded through a recorder and transcribed to be analyzed in detail.

4. Findings

4.1. Awareness of the Turkish Language

The first question asked to the participants with an effort to see their awareness of the Turkish language was about the importance of the correct use of the Turkish language. All of the participants agreed with the fact that the correct use of the Turkish language was of great importance and they mentioned two main reasons for that. The first reason widely stated by the participants was that the correct use of the Turkish language could enable them to express themselves correctly and effectively. The second reason mentioned by eight participants was that they could be easily understood by the others when they used the Turkish language correctly. In addition, three participants stated that the correct use of the Turkish language was important for them as prospective teachers.

In the second question the participants were asked about their opinions on the use of foreign words in oral and written communication in Turkish. All of the participants stated that foreign words should not be used in oral and written communication in Turkish. The participants believed that the use of foreign words adversely affected the Turkish language, and foreign words should not be preferred if there were the Turkish equivalents of these words. When the participants were asked whether they used foreign words in Turkish communication, they said that foreign words were widely used around them and they also inevitably used foreign words in the Turkish communication. The participants believed that the reasons for using foreign words in the Turkish communication were insensitivity to the Turkish language, widely and habitual use of foreign words in the community and desire to impress others by use of foreign words. The participants stated their opinions as follows:

I think my friends use foreign words in the daily life to show off.

One of our teachers was frequently using foreign words such as "feedback". … This maybe showed our teacher's professionalism, but it was not good for us since we could not understand what he was saying.

The reason for use of foreign words is insensitivity. … We do not realize that the words we use are foreign words.

In the third question, the participants were asked if they thought that their knowledge about Turkish grammar, spelling and expression was sufficient. The vast majority of the students stated that their knowledge about Turkish grammar, spelling and expression was not sufficient. While some of them believed that this was because of their insensitivity, most of them thought that external factors such as poor educational system, incompetent teachers and dialects was the reason for that. Eight of the participants stated that their knowledge about Turkish grammar, spelling and expression was sufficient. These participants believed that their knowledge was sufficient due to their good grades in the secondary education and their success in the university entrance exam. In addition, four students said that their knowledge was at medium level and it should be improved.

The last question in the first part of the interview was about English-medium instruction at universities in Turkey. While some of the students believed that it would be quite difficult for them to receive education in English during the tertiary education, most of them stated that English-medium instruction at universities would strengthen foreign language learning. On the other hand, these students believed that English-medium instruction at universities in Turkey would adversely affect the Turkish language and therefore it would be better to offer English-medium courses instead of delivering the entire education in English during the tertiary education.

4.2. Awareness of Foreign Language Learning

In the second part of the interview the participants were firstly asked whether it was necessary to learn a foreign language or not. 23 of the participants stated that it was absolutely necessary to learn a foreign language while one of them said that it was unnecessary since he did not need it. Nine participants believed that it was necessary to learn a foreign language for professional and academic reasons. Eight participants said that they should learn a foreign language to understand other peoples and cultures. Seven participants cited the Turkish saying "One language, one person; two languages, two people" which means the one who knows two languages is worth two people.

Secondly, the participants were asked about their foreign language learning strategies. This was considered as a significant question since it aimed at determining how aware the participants were of their language learning process. At first, none of the participants explained their language learning strategies as an answer to that question. They mentioned external factors such as necessity to attend private courses, to go abroad, to have a better educational system and more competent teachers, etc. When the question was clarified, 17 participants said that they made lists of new words and memorized them. The other strategies mentioned by the participants were reading books, doing tests and watching movies. On the other hand, some students said that they did not have any strategies and explained the reasons as follows:

I did not study English that much since I did not know the importance and value of English then.

The third question was about whether the participants like learning a foreign language or not. Most of the participants said that they liked learning a foreign language because learning new things could be enjoyable and they

could understand other peoples and cultures. Some of them, on the other hand, said that they did not like learning a foreign language since it was difficult, they had pronunciation problems, they did not need it, etc.

The last question asked in the second part to the participants was about whether they thought they were successful in learning a foreign language or not. While half of the participants said that they were not successful, six of them stated that they were successful at the medium level and they should improve themselves. The students mentioned external factors again as reasons for that such as poor educational system, incompetent teachers, no chance to attend private courses or go abroad. On the other hand, seven students believed that they were successful since they got good grades during the secondary and tertiary education.

4.3. Awareness of Foreign Language Use

The first question asked to the participants with a view to seeing how sensitive they were to foreign language use was about whether they thought they were successful in speaking or writing in the foreign language or not. While eleven students said that they were not successful in speaking or writing in English, eight of them thought that they were successful in writing but not in speaking. Three students said that they were good at speaking and writing in English. Two students did not know whether they were successful or not because they said they did not learn it and they had no chance to use it. The main problem expressed by the students who thought to be unsuccessful was that they could understand what they heard or read, but they could not speak and express themselves in the foreign language.

The second question asked in the third part was about whether the participants had opportunities to use the foreign language and if so in which situations they used it. 19 students said that they had never had a chance to use English while 5 students said that they had few chances to use English when they met tourists in the summer or they talked to their friends on the internet. It was significant to find out that most of the students did not use English in the classroom during primary, secondary and tertiary education. They explained what they did in the classroom as follows:

> *Even in the speaking class we did not have a chance to speak. We just read the texts provided in the books. So we did not communicate or interact in the classroom.*
> *We had never spoken English in the classroom. We just said good morning when the teacher entered into the classroom.*
> *We did not use English in the classroom. Generally our teacher told something and we listened.*
> *We had never used English in the classroom since the education was teacher-centered.*

The last question asked in the third part was about whether the participants liked using the foreign language or not. Seven students said they did not like it mainly due to pronunciation problems while ten students said they liked using English and especially speaking English. The other students stated that they did not know if they liked using English or not since they had never had a chance to use it, but they would have liked it if they had learned it.

5. Conclusion

In terms of the students' awareness of the Turkish language, it was found out that the students knew that it was of great importance to use the Turkish language correctly in order to express themselves effectively and to be understood by the others. However, it was also seen that few students were aware of the importance of the correct use of the Turkish language for them as prospective teachers. In addition to that, it was determined that the students used foreign words in the Turkish communication although they believed that this adversely affected their mother tongue. Moreover, although the students knew that it was important to have a good knowledge of Turkish grammar, spelling and expressions, it was found out that most of them did not find their knowledge enough and they gave external factors as reasons for that. Finally, most of the students believed that English-medium instruction at universities would strengthen foreign language learning although they also mentioned that it would negatively affect the Turkish Language.

In terms of the students' awareness of foreign language learning, it was found out that the students knew that it

was necessary to learn a foreign language and most of them liked learning a foreign language, but it was also seen that they were insensitive to foreign language learning and they did not pay much attention to the foreign language learning process and foreign language learning strategies. When they were asked about their learning strategies, it was determined that they did not know their learning strategies and they did not internalize the language learning process. It was significant that when asked about foreign language learning the students talked about only grammar and vocabulary and they did not mention skills or communication. Finally in that part it was determined that the students were unsuccessful in foreign language learning and gave external factors as reasons for that.

In terms of the students' awareness of foreign language use, it was seen that the students were not sure if they liked using the foreign language and if they were successful or not in foreign language use since most of them had never had a chance to use it even in the classroom and they decided whether they were successful or not according to their grades. It was thought provoking that most of the students did not use the foreign language in the classroom for communication during primary, secondary or tertiary education.

It is believed that the definition of the current situation in prospective teachers' awareness of the Turkish language, foreign language learning and foreign language use which is determined through the findings obtained as a result of this study will guide relevant research and studies to be made in the future.

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