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## The Problematic Interaction between the Mother Tongues, the National Language and Foreign Language Instruction in Turkish Education

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### Abstract

In Turkey, English language learning results have been generally poor. More than a quarter of Turkish citizens and foreign residents do not speak the standard Turkish language as their native tongue. This paper evaluated the weaknesses in the current system in light of this phenomenon and linked them to the poor results in English language learning. Relevant literature on the failure of English and other language programs in Turkey and other countries with similar multilingual populations was examined. Teaching Turkish as a second language and English as an additional language and development of appropriate curricula, methods and materials were recommended.

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### 1. Introduction

On 27 May 2011 in an address to a Council of Higher Education (YÖK)-organized International Conference on Higher Education, “New Directions and Problems,” former Turkish State President Abdullah Gül remarked:

On the subject of foreign language instruction, I do not know of a country as unsuccessful as ours. I say this openly. I say this for primary instruction and for university education as well. All of us know how embarrassed students have been,

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students whom we deemed qualified, when they have gone abroad. Our biggest disadvantage on the international platform is the youth's ignorance of a second language. Those who know a second language are very few. Is it possible to continue this way? (Council of Higher Education, 2011, translated from the Turkish by the author)

Gül's statement epitomizes a popular perception. As for an academic assessment, the recent (2013) report of British Council/Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) *Turkey National Needs Assessment of State School English Language Teaching* bleakly noted:

5. Turkey is yet to catch up with competitor economies in its level of English language proficiency. Turkey consistently ranks very low on various measures of English language speaking. For example, the 2013 English Proficiency Index (EPI) developed by English First puts Turkey 41<sup>st</sup> out of 60 countries.
6. In 2012, the average total Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of both native Turkish speakers and residents of Turkey was 75 over 120, similar to countries which do not have a Latin alphabet, such as Sudan and Ethiopia. (TEPAV, 2013, p. 15)

Many underlying problems were outlined. The following summarized findings from the report are critical:

- The teaching of English as a subject and not a language of communication was observed in all schools visited.
- Students fail to learn how to communicate and function independently in English. Seating arrangement to organise students into pairs and groups for independent, communicative language practice in everyday classroom contexts.
- At present, official textbooks and curricula fail to take account of the varying levels and needs of students.
- Teachers interviewed stated they have little voice in the process and practice of teaching English.
- As a result of the repetition of a similar curriculum from grade to grade, and teachers' obligation to follow the curriculum, students self-assess their level of English lower as they progress through the education system. (TEPAV, 2013)

Over the last few decades, English language instruction has been added to the primary school curriculum. Although this was evidence of a serious effort on the part of the Ministry of Education (MoE) to promote the teaching of English language skills to school pupils, it was also recognition that English instruction had hitherto been inadequate in producing a successful outcome. Moreover, at the level of higher education in recent decades, there has been evidence of great effort to reinforce English language instruction after the proven successful models of the intensive Preparatory Year English Programs (PYEPs) at Middle Eastern Technical University (METU/ÖDTÜ) and Bosphorus University (BU/BÜ). A few newer private and public universities where the primary medium of instruction (MOI) is English and where there are also strong PYEPs have also met with success. However, after a few years, most of the other state universities have drastically scaled back their PYEPs, and the shrinkage may continue. Apparently, most students in such programs believe that the benefits are dubious and are not worth the investment of an academic year and its accompanying material costs while faculty either do not want to teach courses in English or such course offerings have not met with any student response (Peachy, 2014). Whether or not the PYEPs are successful, their past and present existence has been a *de facto* admission that most matriculating university students have not mastered the English language skills expected of students who have undergone eight to ten years of primary and secondary English instruction.

Thus, popular and academic perceptions of English language teaching in Turkey have been and still are largely negative. The increasing efforts of the MoE and the Council of Higher Education (*YÖK*) in fortifying foreign language instruction have led to the inescapable conclusion that, despite the devotion of great resources over many years, foreign language instruction has met with little success. This failure begs the question: *Why has foreign language instruction been failing in Turkey?*

This study has attempted to answer this question and to provide practical suggestions and recommendations to remedy the situation.

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