

A Comparative Analysis of English as Foreign Language Education Programmes

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study is to examine current English as foreign language education programmes in China (Hong Kong), Finland, Southern Cyprus, Japan, and Turkey and to reveal similarities and differences between them. And, the method of this study is reviewing of literature. At the end of the study, it was concluded that these countries have different objectives of a foreign language education according to their economic, cultural, and social status. However, communication and international relations are common denominators. It was also seen that China (Hong Kong), Finland, Southern Cyprus, and Turkey start teaching English as a foreign language at young age. If it is considered that starting English as a foreign language education at an early age is an advantage, it can be seen that Japan and Turkey have disadvantage. And, Finland is the most successful country in foreign language teaching. It was reached the conclusion that supporting the individuality of a foreign language education has a major share in this success. When it was examined the approaches used in a foreign language teaching, it came to a conclusion that all countries use various methods which make students active.*

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language Education Programmes, Foreign Language Learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to compete with other countries for the survival of a country in a globalized world. It is important to have English knowledge to be able to follow developments in the technological and economic issues. Today, learning English as a foreign language is very important for these reasons. People from around the world can bring together by instant communication possibilities. And, there is a major share of English in bringing people of different nationalities together. Of course, it forces the states to renew or replace of language education policies¹.

In language education, there are many variables that must be considered. The purpose of language education, having homogenous or heterogeneous population structure, cultural heritage of the state, culture of language taught, different techniques and strategies in teaching situations are examples of these variables. When all these are taken into account, it is considered to meet at some common denominator though there are different perspectives on language education in countries around the world².

This study is a qualitative study. The requirements, starting age and learning criteria and evaluation methods of foreign language education and approaches in foreign language teaching are compared because of the constantly developing and changing foreign language education policies. Turkey has experienced difficulties in foreign language education. The purpose of this study is to set an example compared countries' successful implementations for countries facing language education problems like Turkey and to encourage them to solve these problems.

1.1.English as a Foreign Language Education

While first language means mother tongue, a foreign language which is actually the mother tongue of another community represents a learner's second, third, fourth, etc. language(s). And, foreign language education policies are decided at the level of governments taken into consideration of some interests³. Also, it is stated that there are two different contributions of learning a foreign language⁴. The first dates back to the 19th century and Latin and ancient Greek is included in the curriculum in order to reach written information in the ancient sources. After the 20th century, foreign language education gained an importance due to a different cause. The necessity of learning a foreign language has been accepted for individuals to communicate effectively ever since. It is mentioned that English is the lingua franca of science, technology, trade, and global organization and emphasized the importance of English cannot be denied¹. And also, it is stressed that a quarter of people around the world use English as the language of communication and this rate is increasing day-by-day due to the global economy⁵.

It is emphasized that the aim of Bologna Declaration which was adopted in 1999 is students' freedom of academic movement in Europe⁶. And, this plays an important role in increasing the impact of English in the academic environment. Moreover, English is the language of education, commerce and technology in Europe and it is a critical language for global affairs in countries outside Europe. For example, in China, English offers more opportunities in education while it represents the social and economic welfare. It is also mentioned a similar situation in third world countries such as Kenya⁷. Kopečková said that English is considered to be representative of a better future in these countries. Thus, it can be seen that English gives way to the curriculums in a global world.

It is the generally accepted idea that students should make sense of the language in learning process for using a foreign language in communication. It is said communicative competence, development of language skills, focusing on students' needs and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is new trend in foreign language teaching pedagogy². Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a scale model that defines the students' communicative competence on A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 level. Many countries are developing their foreign language training programs based on this framework.

Learning a foreign language is an advantage for individuals no matter what their ages are. Today, the importance of knowing foreign languages has increased greatly and states have lowered increasingly the age to start English language programs. The reasons starting foreign language learning at young ages are to transform a foreign language learning process as natural as possible and to provide plenty of exposure to this language⁸. It is emphasized that it is a long process⁹. And, he also states foreign language education should start at an early age so that individuals can practice before exposure to stress of working life. Moreover, it is argued that students at a young age have a superior sound system and they can imitate different voices very well by means of this¹⁰. And, they suggest the ability to imitate decreases with age and this affect pronunciation of language students in advanced age adversely. Because of the mentioned reasons, starting age of teaching English gradually decreases.

In this study, it was aimed to compare of English as a foreign language education programs in China-Hong Kong, Finland, Southern Cyprus, Japan, and Turkey and to reveal similarities and differences between them.

II. METHOD

2.1. Research Model

The descriptive survey model was used so as to compare the countries' foreign language education programs in this study. This is an approach that aims to describe a past or currently existing case. As a result, the events and circumstances can be investigated in detail¹¹.

2.2. Data Collecting Instrument

The data were obtained by literature review. Literature review is a process consisting of gathering the data, discussing the importance of the data collected, establishing the relations between the data and the problem, and the classification of the information stages. In this technique, it is aimed to collect the data by examining the existing sources, documents, and papers¹². Also, in this study, the typical sampling developed by Patton was used. The purpose of the typical sampling is not to select typical situations and generalize the universe. It is to have an idea about a certain area by studying on the average conditions or to inform people who do not have sufficient knowledge about an area, an issue, a practice or an innovation¹³.

2.3. Analysis of Data

The data were analysed by using the descriptive analysis approach. This approach allows to be organized the data according to themes that emerge from the research question or to submit the data considering questions or size used in interview¹⁴. By this approach, the data was selected, organized, put together similarities and differences, compared and interpreted.

III. FINDINGS

There are well-structured English as a foreign language programs in China-Hong Kong. Owing to these, it takes second place in the PISA reading average¹⁵. And, China-Hong Kong is one of the successful examples of foreign language education in Far East. Also, Finland is an example of exhibiting a utopia in education. And, it is quite good in foreign language education. Although the Finnish and Swedish are the mother tongues, 69% of the population can speak one language, 47% of them can speak two, and 47% of them can speak at least three foreign languages. According to these, 77% of the Finnish population have the language proficiency, which is above the European average¹⁶. Southern Cyprus is among ten countries which are the most recent members of the European Union. It has been made structural reforms of foreign language education according to Europe's multilingualism and multiculturalism. It is stated it is given only four hours of English lessons per week. He also suggests that they are quite successful in foreign language education¹⁷.

Foreign language education is not at the desired level in Japan. It is asserted that there are serious problems in English education¹⁸. They mentioned the Japanese’s communicating difficulty in English is the most common problem. There is a similar case in Turkey. According to the foreign language report of Socio-Cultural Studies Centre of Turkish Education Association¹⁹, a student is taught English approximately 1296 hours during compulsory education in Turkey. Despite sparing so much time to teach English, nearly 95% of high school graduates have difficulty in even saying a simple sentence except for specific students.

It was given the requirements of foreign language education, starting age of a foreign language education, approaches to teaching a foreign language, and the assessment criteria for a foreign language teaching of these five countries in the following tables.

Table 1 Requirements of Foreign Language Education

| Countries | Requirements |
|-----------------|---|
| China-Hong Kong | To familiarise other cultures and people To provide personal and intellectual development To keep in step with changing and developing technology |
| Finland | To learn about other cultures To communicate easily To gain cultural talent |
| Southern Cyprus | To ensure multilingualism To compete with other countries thanks to the language skills To understand and accept other cultures |
| Japan | To educate individuals as being respectful against different cultures To revive the spirit of international cooperation |
| Turkey | To establish international communication To create an international cultural awareness |

The countries’ objectives of a foreign language education can vary according to their economic, cultural, and social status. Yet, the countries involved in this study find several common denominators. As it is observed in Table 1, one of the common reasons of a foreign language education is communication in these countries. Especially, foreign language education has great importance in order to establish international relations. When people contact with people from different cultures, they can learn to be respectful to person who has a different culture. Because of this, familiarising other cultures is another issue on which they stood strongly

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Table 2 The Starting Age of Foreign Language Education

| Countries | Class | Age |
|-----------------|--|-----|
| China-Hong Kong | First class | 6 |
| Finland | It is as elective in first and second classes, and it is compulsory from third class | 7/9 |
| Southern Cyprus | First class | 6 |
| Japan | Sixth class | 12 |
| Turkey | Second class | 7/8 |

As seen in Table 2, the starting age of foreign language education is 6 in China-Hong Kong and Southern Cyprus. The students who start a primary school are educated in a foreign language as well as the native language^{20, 22}. Individual differences are considered in Finland. That is why foreign language education is elective in first and second grades of primary school and it is compulsory from third class²¹. In Turkey, with the purpose of the mother tongue’s adoption, using and dissemination, first grade of primary schools devoted to develop basic language skills. As a result of this, foreign language education is initiated in the second grade of primary school²⁴. In Japan, it is started in the sixth grade unlike other countries²³.

Table 3 Approaches in Foreign Language Teaching

| Countries | Approaches |
|-----------------|---|
| China-Hong Kong | Interpersonal Based on information and experience Totalitarian Task-based |
| Finland | The communicative approach based on comprehension, repetition and practice Content-based approach Functional and game-based methods |
| Southern Cyprus | Communicative approach Individual differences International awareness Interdisciplinary approach |
| Japan | Communicative approach based on listening and speaking |
| Turkey | Eclectic approach Communicative approach Cultural awareness |

It is understood by Table 3 in where has coverage the foreign language teaching approaches adopted by the countries that almost all of the countries use variety of methods that make students active. With communicative approach which is adopted by Finland, Southern Cyprus, Japan and Turkey, it is possible for students' making appropriate exercises and unlimited activities. It is organized on the basis of communicative functions that a given learner needs to know. It emphasises the way in which particular grammatical forms may be used to express these functions appropriately²⁵. Task-based approach is one of the methods adopted by the China-Hong Kong that students are exposed to a variety of situations related to real life; they try to fulfil their assigned tasks, and they are obliged to make them in verbal communication. In this approach, language is considered as a tool²⁶. Apart from these, foreign language educators such as Crandall²⁷, Snow²⁸ and Stoller²⁹ have promoted the benefits of content-based approach which is one of the methods adopted by Finland. They stated that instruction of content-based fosters academic growth while also developing language proficiency. And, they stressed it views language as a medium for learning content and content as a resource for learning and improving language. Eclectic approach adopted by Turkey requires addressing issues with different perspectives, also²⁴. As speaking is not enough for language acquisition, it is not sufficient to adopt a uniform approach to learn the language dimensions such as reading, writing, and listening. Because of this, the countries have adopted multiple approaches for language acquisition. In general, the approaches adopted by them are based game, funny and requiring active participation.

Table 4 Learning Criteria and Evaluation Methods

| Countries | Learning Criteria | Evaluation Methods |
|-----------------|--|---|
| China-Hong Kong | Learning Outcome Framework 4 Key Stages | An exam held at the end of the theme or subject Alternative evaluation methods |
| Finland | CEFR | Alternative evaluation methods |
| Southern Cyprus | CEFR | Alternative evaluation methods |
| Japan | Any criteria is not specified | An exam held at the end of the theme or subject |
| Turkey | CEFR | Alternative evaluation methods |

As shown in Table 4, the learning criteria and evaluation methods adopted by Turkey, Southern Cyprus and Finland are the same. CEFR scale is a guide that is used to define success at the end of foreign language learning. It is proposed by European Union Council to establish the verification system of language skills in November of 2001. Six levels are determined as reference in CEFR. And, they are defined as the standards of Europe for grading an individual's language proficiency. Also, the alternative evaluation methods necessitate that the students should be assigned tasks related field³⁰. The learning process is as important as emerging products. So, these countries aim to motivate the students and to assess them deeper. The evaluation method which is adopted by Japan prevents students from passing without understanding subjects. Therefore, it is an early intervention method. With this method, it is possible that the students' knowledge can be evaluated quickly and their learning can be meaningful²³.

IV. DISCUSSION

A substantial part of national culture is language. It is also a self-image. And, a foreign language education policies and practices reflect the spirit of the times³¹. As China-Hong Kong, Finland, Japan, Southern Cyprus and Turkey's foreign language education programs are compared, it is seen that language education is started at a young age in China-Hong Kong, Finland, Southern Cyprus and Turkey. In similar manner, language proficiency is linked to certain criteria in these countries. While Finland is the only country referring to the individuality in foreign language education, all of them value an international communication and cultural awareness. And, they have adopted the communicative approach in a foreign language education.

According to these results, if it is accepted that language education starting at a young age as an advantage for individual, Japan in which language education is started in the sixth grade and Turkey where language education has been given in second grade of primary school since 2013 can be counted among the failed samples in a foreign language education. Finland is regarded as the most successful country in a foreign language education. In the light of this success, it can be argued that the individualisation is effective.

In Turkey, the continued practices of English as a foreign language education reveal the underlying political, social and economic concerns of the country. Turkey continues to be concerned about its economic future and has enacted a policy that is open to foreign language to address this. In the light of the data obtained from other countries which are successful in English as a foreign language education, it can be said if it happens starting a foreign language education at an early age, identifying the students' needs correctly and individualising a foreign language education in Turkey, it will be easy to reach political, social and economic objectives.

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