Elephants in the Classrooms: Ignored Realities in the Teaching and Learning of Spoken English in a Turkish University Preparatory Program

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ABSTRACT

Many preparatory-year English programs (PYEPs) around the Turkish Republic are in a period of transition, and even of crisis. While established universities whose primary medium of instruction is English and whose students must pass a PYEP are enjoying greater recognition in world rankings, the newer state universities such as Düzce University (DU) whose students are not required to pass a PYEP are seeing decreasing enrollments and success rates in their PYEPs. In AY 2014, a new law was passed cancelling the requirement that universities and academic units must offer 30% of their instruction in English. Up to now, the ongoing lack of initial student motivation and subsequent demotivation has not been adequately addressed. There are many demotivating factors feeding the emerging crisis, while the poor performance of students in evaluation instruments for oral production has glaringly revealed that the speaking segment of the PYEP is sick. This may be a result of failures in the teaching and learning of this skill, of faulty speaking evaluation instruments, or most probably of a combination of these two deficiencies. This study critically examined the expectations of the Higher Education Council (HEC) for the skill of speaking, the aims and methods of the instructional materials used for teaching speaking at DU and at many Turkish universities, and the instruments used for evaluating student performance and achievement at the beginning of, during and at the end of the PYEP at DU. The research revealed that, not only are the HEC objectives unrealistic, the instructional materials inappropriate and ineffective and the evaluation instruments demotivating, but that the perpetuation of this situation, despite the obvious failures, resulted from deliberately ignoring the realities. Those elephants are filling the foreign language classrooms, and they are crushing the students and instructional staff.

Key Words: Preparatory program, teaching spoken English, demotivation, evaluation, Higher Education Council (HEC).

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a period of transition, even of crisis, for many preparatory-year English programs (PYEP) around the Turkish Republic. While established universities such as Boğaziçi University, Middle Eastern Technical University and Istanbul Technical University Sabancı University and Bilkent University, whose primary medium of instruction is English and whose students must pass a PYEP are enjoying greater recognition in world rankings, the newer state universities such as Düzce University (DU), where units undertook to teach 30% of their courses with English as a medium of instruction and whose students are not required to pass a PYEP, have seen decreasing enrollments and success rates in their PYEPs. Such units were the main institutional stakeholders in the preparatory year programs, but in practice and in fact, they have rarely offered such courses, and when they have, no students have enrolled in them. (Peachy, 2014a)

Just before AY 2014-2015, at DU’s Hakime Erciyas School of Foreign Languages (HESFL), all departments in the Faculty of Forestry and half of them in the Faculty of Engineering withdrew from the PYEP, reducing AY 2014-2015 enrollment by one third. The reasons for

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these decisions emerged in 2014 during interviews conducted on faculty attitudes. Faculty members stated that enrollments in their departments had been declining, and from their own sources of information, they learned and believed that students would choose other universities where they did not have to spend a preparatory year learning English. Not only were they told that students and their parents did not want to waste the time and money for a fifth year for a bachelor’s degree, but they wanted to seek and begin employment in a government ministry as soon as possible. (Peachy, 2014a)

Although regulations for PYEPs mandating and governing the PYEPs at Turkish universities where Turkish is the primary medium of instruction have been clear have been clear for years, most faculties and higher schools in the newer state universities in Turkey, it seems, had been content with the non-compliance of such programs with those regulations. The regulations stipulated that academic units requesting PYEPs for their students had to meet a minimum requirement of 30% of English-medium instruction. Following an administrative court case, it was announced on 26 November 2014 that by law, beginning in the next academic year, AY 2015-2016, participation in the English language program for all but English teacher training departments were to become optional (T.C. Law No. 6569, 2014, Article 28). Then from the Higher Education Council Directorate’s Office of Education and Training on 19 January 2015, Düzce University received an official directive (Higher Education Council Directive No. 75850160-312/2567, 2015) implementing T.C. Law No. 6569. Accordingly, university foreign language schools that have hosted these programs are faced with a certain amount of shrinkage in enrollment. The degree of that shrinkage is a subject of pessimistic estimates. While in AY 2014-2015, Düzce University’s Hakime Erçıyas Higher School of Foreign Languages enrollment was in the mid 500’s, the highest voiced estimate of next fall’s enrollment was 200, and some instructional staff have estimated that the number could be below 100. The threat is very real, and the consensus of the HESFL instructional staff is that no more than 150 new students will enroll in the PYEP in the fall term of AY 2015-2016. In the opinion of this author, the threat of the dissolution of the entire program looms like the legendary sword of Damocles.

What has also become clear in the last four years is a post matriculation demotivation. That is, those students who may have exhibited enthusiasm or at least receptiveness to the rigors of the intensity of instruction in a preparatory year program of twenty-four hours per week for about 30 weeks, very early on begin to exhibit lack of interest in or even negative attitudes towards the program. This disinterest has particularly been evidenced over the past two academic years: first, by increasing rates of absences from class; second, by absences from quizzes and tests, particularly the speaking segment of midterm and final examinations; third, by a general decline in quiz and examination scores; and fourth, and most strikingly, by increased and shameless use of smart phones in class. While there may have been many demotivating societal and academic factors feeding the emerging crisis, the especially poor performance of students in evaluation instruments for oral production (HESFL, 2009-2014) has glaringly revealed that that the speaking leg of the PYEP is sick.

This study aimed to discover the causes for this crisis and to offer possible solutions for the future of PYEPs at new Turkish universities, with special emphasis on the problems presented by the speaking segment of the program.

2. METHOD

This study critically examined the expectations of the Higher Education Council (HEC) for the skill of speaking, the aims and methods of the instructional materials used for teaching speaking at DU and at many Turkish universities, and the instruments used for evaluating
student performance and achievement at the beginning of, during and at the end of the PYEP at DU.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, instructional staff in the Faculty of Forestry and in some departments of the Faculty of Engineering felt threatened by declining enrollment in their university departments and by the feedback that they had received from current and prospective students and their families. While this author has researched faculty attitudes, those of students and their families should also be researched. It is clear that the perception of a lack of initial student motivation has not been addressed adequately. It is not all clear why no need has been felt in the academic communities of higher education for needs analyses, and for the stakeholders’ perceptions of those needs. Needs analyses in the academic world are akin to market analyses in the business world, which is research essential to the creation, production and marketing of their products and services.

What is the reason for so obvious a failure, a failure that is not evident in PYEPs in older, established, respected Turkish universities? In this instructor’s opinion, the breakdown is logically either a result of (1) failures in the teaching and learning of speaking, (2) faulty evaluation instruments for speaking (Peachy, 2012), (3) unreasonable expectations of program outcomes (Peachy, 2014b), (4) inappropriate materials for achieving the desired results (Peachy, 2013), or (5) some combination of these four deficiencies. While the PYEP as a whole, i.e., the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, is a failure, this study focused on the critical examination of the expectations of the HEC for the skill of speaking, including the aims, the instruments utilized for the evaluation of student performance and/or achievement and the methods of the instructional materials used for teaching speaking at the beginning of, during and at the end of the PYEP at DU and by extension at many Turkish universities.

Research done by this author revealed that not only have the HEC objectives been inappropriate for most students, but that they have been deemed irrelevant by most of the stakeholders of the PYEPs. The expected results of that study that the assumptions and goals of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), HEC and Turkish academic units were not in harmony were generally confirmed. Specifically, the author concluded that (1) The CEFR came into existence to meet the particular needs of a Europe that did not want to re-experience the situations that led to two world wars in the twentieth century. (2) The HEC mandates have been an attempt to support better and stronger relations with the Council of Europe (CE) and the European Union (EU) with the avowed attempt of successive Turkish governments to join the EU. (3) Many Düzce University Turkish academic units have shown by their actions and applications that they do not support the CEFR nor do they respect the HEC mandates (Peachy, 2014b). This author has noticed that students either do not appreciate the factors that led to the twentieth century European horrors, two world wars and the genocide of the Jews and that of the Srebrenica Muslims in 1995, or that they have no acquaintance with those historical episodes. Not only have they not related the need to communicate by speaking or by writing, but HEC mandates do not require that they show any kind of competency in the two passive skills of listening and reading, let alone the more demanding skills of speaking and writing, except in extremely rare case that they have to or want to take a course taught in English. Only a handful of students ever aim to reach the competency for study or work abroad. Only students studying
tourism and hotel management communicate that they feel the need to speak English socially and professionally. This author has also done research on instructional materials. Touchstone is one of the three course books used at the HESFL. It a course book that tries to base itself on the micro-culture of the international classroom. This approach is typical in the university Intensive English programs (IEP) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in English-speaking countries. The Teacher’s Edition of Touchstone 1 is quite revealing:

Finally, successful learning is all about motivation. Corpus-informed materials motivate learners because they can feel confident that the language they are learning is up-to-date, useful in everyday conversations, and targeted to situations in which they are likely to find themselves. Students can also be sure that the language corresponds to what they will encounter in real conversations, on radio and TV shows [in English], in movies, on the Internet, and in books, newspapers, and magazine. (Aldkorn et al., 2010, p. v)

The text strongly implies that the milieu is English and Western. It does not specifically teach North American or British culture. Rather, by using names and monuments of several world regions, it tries to provide an international cultural environment that students are likely to find in the ESL/IEP classroom.

At DÜ, NorthStar was used in AY 2010-2011 and was used again in Academic Years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. It has a definite, marked North American cultural orientation. On p. v of all books in the Fourth Edition of the Series, the following declaration is found under the head of “PRINCIPLES”:

1 The more profoundly students are stimulated intellectually and emotionally, the more language they will use and retain.

The thematic organization of NorthStar promotes intellectual and emotional stimulation. The 50 sophisticated themes in NorthStar present intriguing topics such as recycled fashion, restorative justice, personal carbon footprints, and microfinance. The authentic content encourages students, links them to language use outside of the classroom, and encourages personal expression and critical thinking.

2 Students can learn both the form and content of the language.

Grammar, vocabulary, and culture are inextricably woven into the units, providing students with systematic and multiple exposures to language forms in variety of contexts. As the theme is developed, students can express complex thoughts using a higher level of language. (Numrich and Boyd, 2009, p. v)

The ideas are similar to those of Touchstone, as mentioned above. It is clear from the phrasing “authentic content...links them to language outside the classroom,” that the “outside”, the instructional context, is a Western English-speaking culture. Subjects such as advertising, fraud, gender, the Amish, produce and endangered cultures as well as the ones from No. 1 of the above Teachers Edition excerpt are "hot topics" in North America.

The author has found that student interest in such cultural focuses is extremely hard to maintain over nine months of instruction. He has looked into the question of the relationship of culture and language in the various major popular frameworks of ESL, ESP, EFL and EAP. It is not understandable why ESL programs and materials designed for international students where English is the native or national language, and that
teach North American or British culture to complement and anchor vocabulary, expressions and structures used every day in those local areas are used in Turkey and other countries where most students will never experience the appropriate occasions for their use. English is a foreign language in Turkey, and that means that North American or British culture is a barrier, a hurdle on which students and instructors waste a great deal of effort and time for little or no result at best and distaste or disgust at worst. What unrealistic goals there are for speaking and what ineffective, counter-productive instructional materials that exist that are the transportation to take students to those goals.

Finally, the evaluation instruments are particularly demotivating in the case of speaking. A speaking rubric taken directly from the CEFR is used to give students numerical marks on midterms and finals, the same one in every oral test:

**ORAL TEST RUBRIC**

(used in all in-term examinations and in the final examination in the DU HESFL PYEP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>Understands questions and probes easily and expresses himself/herself fluently and accurately using well-formed sentences, transitioning easily from one topic to another displaying comfort with a variety of tenses and [broad] vocabulary use</td>
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<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>Understands questions and probes with no further explanation and repetition; demonstrates speech with two-or-more-sentence discourse with somehow complex sentences with a variety of tenses on unfamiliar and familiar topics; can easily provide justification with some hesitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>Understands questions and probes, hardly requires repetition, feels relatively at ease expressing himself/herself mostly at sentence level with a variety of tenses. providing justification and explanation on familiar and unfamiliar topics with occasional grammar errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Understands questions but occasionally requires repetition; can express himself/herself on simple topics with sentences displaying enough control over simple tenses, has enough vocabulary to get by; remarks marked by occasional inconsistencies to grammar, but effort for repair is evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Understands questions requiring personal information, answers mostly in phrases; despite frequent grammatical and vocabulary errors she/he can convey a message; finds it hard to form sentences and respond to probes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Understands simple questions and mostly answers in simple phrases with a limited range of grammar and vocabulary; displays common accuracy problems in attempts at forming sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Finds it hard to understand most questions; responds hesitantly only to personal information questions in phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-29</td>
<td>Understands and responds to very common daily conversation questions only; shies away from answering the rest of the questions</td>
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The rubric obviously does not measure achievement. It measures competency, and most students consistently range from 20 to 50 in the A or A+ range. Those are failing or near failing marks in university courses, and such marks understandably demotivate their recipients, especially over a term of nine months, the term of the PYEPs through the end of AY 2014-2015. The continued misuse of a CEFR modeled rubric despite the obvious failures is the result of deliberately ignoring realities. Those elephants are filling the foreign language classroom, and they are crushing the students and instructional staff. My fear now is that such an analysis as this can only serve as a post mortem, not a diagnosis that might lead to a successful treatment, let alone a positive prognosis of the phenomenon that was the movement toward preparatory year programs in the Republic of Turkey.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A nationwide needs analysis can be carried out involving the stakeholders of the newer universities. The perspectives, opinions and needs of students, the families of students, prospective public sector employers, potential private sector employers, university faculty members and university academic unit heads should be surveyed and the results analyzed. Based on such analyses, programs can be designed to meet their real needs. Appropriate instructional materials can then be chosen, or preferably designed and written for university students in the Republic of Turkey. If these measures are taken, the elephants can at last be banished from the classroom.

REFERENCES


