Turkish Learning Experiences of Syrian Students within the Context of Turkish Higher Education System: From War to Education

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Abstract
The necessity for studies based on the different dimensions of teaching Turkish as a foreign language during the period of globalization of education has considerably increased. The language courses for the Syrian refugees provided by the Research and Application Center of Turkish and Foreign Language (known as TÖMER) established in various foundations, cultural centers, Turkology research and university centers, have met this need on a vast scale. However, reporting the difficulties of teaching Turkish as a foreign language and increasing the quality require much more research. Hence, the experiences of the Syrian students learning Turkish were investigated in this study. To obtain data, snowball sampling strategy and semi-structured interviews were carried out with the Syrians living in Osmaniye and Kilis. Considering findings, internal and external difficulties faced by the Syrian refugees were determined. The results were discussed in terms of contributing both to the literature of teaching Turkish as a foreign language and to the integration of the refugees into the Turkish society. The results show that the productive skills need to be highlighted much more while teaching Turkish and alternative course books for teaching Turkish seem to be needed as there are not many different books published in this field.
Keywords: Teaching Turkish as a foreign language, Teaching, Syria, Syrian refugee students, Turkish Higher Education

1. Introduction

Due to its geostrategic position at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, in a region that has long been known for its political instability and violence, Turkey is one of the biggest countries in the world hosting refugees (Busch, 2005, p.17). It is surrounded by eight countries, many of which have turmoil-ridden histories and conflicts, including Iraq, Iran and recently Syria.

History of immigration to Turkey, however, is not a new phenomenon. According to İçduygu and Aksel (2012), history of illegal immigration to Turkey can be classified under four different periods. The first period is between 1979 and 1987 and it can be called as the fertilisation period. The second one which is between 1988-1993 is the maturation period. Years between 1994 and 2001 are the satisfaction period and lastly, 2001 and onwards can be named as the degeneration period.

İçduygu & Aksel (2012) point out that the first mass migration to Turkey happened in maturation period in which almost half million refugees were harboured from Bulgaria and Iraq as a result of political and economic upheavals in their countries. While most of these Iraqi refugees returned to their homeland, Bulgarian Turks settled in Turkey and became citizens.

The last period that begins in 2001 represents an irregular migration which gained importance in Turkey and international arena because it led to problems such as human trafficking and smuggling (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012, p. 12).

According to UN refugee agency (UNHCR), as of 29 August 2014, 3 million Syrians have fled their homes because of the conflict in Syria, seeking shelter in neighbouring countries, with the highest concentrations being in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. Syrian Human Right organisation, on the other hand, reports that the number of refugees is actually about 6 million and almost half of them are not registered with UNHCR. According to the same report, Turkey has received the largest number of refugees approaching 1.9 million people. UN estimates that the Turkish government has spent more than 2 billion dollars for Syrian refugees (AFAD, 2013) Most of these refugees have been experiencing physical, political and psychological problems in many different aspects. Almost every day, news or problems related to refugees can be seen on TVs or in newspapers. Columnists have written about living conditions of refugees and many articles and reports have been published with regard to Syrian refugees. Still, there have not been many academic publications or comments when it comes to the language problem of the Syrian refugees. If one visits Kilis, which is a city by the Syrian border, Syrian refugees can easily be seen in every corner of the city. When you go to a restaurant, you can see Syrian waiters. Likewise, when you go to a barbershop, you can see Syrian apprentices and finally

when you go to university, you can see Syrian students. The same problem can be experienced in Osmaniye, which is a province located in the south of Turkey. It is 200 km away from the Syrian border and for this reason; it also has a crowded population of Syrian refugees. Among all these Syrian people, some can speak and understand Turkish quite well while the others literally cannot utter a few Turkish words properly. This case appeared to be an issue of concern for this study, that's to say, I wondered how come some of them are capable of speaking Turkish well enough but the others are not. This curiosity indeed became the source of inspiration to execute this research. Yet, reaching all the refugees living in Kilis seemed so unrealistic that narrowing down the study to involve only Syrian refugee students studying in different departments of Kilis 7 Aralık University and Osmaniye Korkut Ata University seemed to be more practical. So, finally, two research questions were formed as following:

How do Syrian refugee students learn Turkish?

What are the language problems faced by Syrian refugee students in the process of learning Turkish?

Providing insights to the research questions, as noted above, will significantly enlighten this issue and contribute to the field.

1.1 Review of Literature
1.1.1 The definition of the term "refugee"
The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNCHR, 2015). This refugee convention was also accepted and signed by Turkey in 1951. "It should be noted that the term refugee is different from the term "immigrant" in that unlike most immigrants, refugees do not flee their countries by chance. Refugees are forced out of their native countries, often in violent circumstances like civil war, and many homeless refugees must take up residence in temporary refugee camps (McBrien, 2005, p. 5). Another familiar term with refugee is "asylum seeker" which is defined as "an asylum-seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated" (UNCHR, 2001-2015). There will not be big attention to such distinctions between the definitions in this study and the term "refugee" will be used in most cases.

1.1.2 Education for refugees in the world context
The number of refugees in the world was 16.7 million at the end of 2013. Almost every country in the world has a number of refugees. The question is how these countries provide education, specifically language education, to those refugees if they ever do so. In this section, some of the work on refugee education in different countries will be highlighted.

Ghaffar-Kucher (2005) calls attention to education problem of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistani camps. She argues that due to the lack of attention given by the international community to Afghan refugees and their education in the period of Afghan-Soviet war and after, violent madaris have increased in number and have been able to find a continuous supply of student (Kucher, 2005, p. 5). She further argues that Somoratne Ekanayke, a refugee education expert, rightly states, education is crucial for refugees because it is the only baggage that they can take back to their country" (Kucher, 2005, p. 7).

Bogner (2005) indicates that most people relate emergency education with countries having upheavals or with developing countries having a huge number of refugees. Actually, developed and prosperous countries can also be associated with "emergency education". He gives the USA as an example stating that it has got great numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. He also argues that because of the traumatic experiences and disadvantages they have encountered, educating these refugees requires special qualifications.

Wachob & Williams (2010) examined challenges which are pertinent to the African and Middle Easterner refugees in Cairo, Egypt. The most striking data that they found is that it is really hard to find funding and space for refugee education as well as to recruit volunteers to educate them.

1.1.3 Refugee education in Turkey
As stated before, not much research on this issue has been carried out in Turkey up to now. But still, there are some remarkable works. Perhaps the most valuable one that should be mentioned is that of Garret Hubing, who wrote his master's dissertation related to this area which is called "Language learning and transit refugees in Turkey: A case study of Afghans in Turkey". With his work, Hubing (2011) focuses on the social and sociolinguistic situation faced by refugees and asylum seekers living temporarily in Turkey. The writer also emphasises that there has not been enough research dealing with how these Afghan refugees obtain education. So, his study can be regarded as an initial attempt to address this research gap. So, this paper will be different from this thesis in that it will primarily focus on the Syrian refugee students and the language problems they encountered.

E. Frantz (2003), on the other hand, made a five-week exploratory study about the situation of refugees. Her study covered the dates from December 2002 to January 2003. On her report, she provides statistics and

demographic information about Turkey's refugee population. She also focuses on the refugee rights in Turkey. Completed in 2003, the statistics of this report has changed dramatically since then. But this work is still a very useful effort since it gives information about international sources of refugee laws, refugee status determination procedures and etc.

In his paper, Akkaya (2013) points out that after the civil war in Syria, people began to take refuge in neighbouring countries. Except for Turkey, Arabic is spoken in these countries so when Syrian refugees fled to Turkey, they were challenged with Turkish language. For this reason, Akkaya tries to uncover the Syrian refugees' perceptions of the Turkish language through metaphors. After his study, he concludes that 96.2 % of the participants in his study developed positive metaphors for Turkish. This study can be classified as an outstanding research in revealing Syrian refugees' perception of Turkish language.

2. Methodology

2.1 Procedure

The survey was conducted with 38 Syrian refugee students studying in different departments of Kilis 7 Aralık University and Osmaniye Korkut Ata University. The sample group of the study consisted of 38 participants. 57,8 % of the participants were male while 42,2 % of them were female. Participants' ages range from 19 to 27. All of the participants stated that they know English at an elementary level. In this current study, snowball sampling strategy was used in order to collect data. The researchers prepared 9 open-ended questions in Turkish and each question was elicited one by one with the help of a Turkish-Arabic interpreter. Data collection process lasted almost a week.

2.2 Interpretation of the survey

As an introduction question, the participants were asked whether they knew Turkish before they took refuge in Turkey. The ones that gave positive answer to this question were excluded from the study because the study aimed to reveal the difficulties faced by the students who learnt Turkish after they migrated there. When asked how and where they learnt Turkish, the majority, that's 20 of the participants, answered that they learnt Turkish language in TÖMER centres (Turkish Language Teaching Centre) which were established in Kilis and Osmaniye. They learnt it in the years of 2013 and 2014. Other participants stated that they learnt it in a language course cooperating within the body of universities and private Turkish language courses. Some of the participants expressed that they tried to learn Turkish via online Turkish courses. The third question aimed at finding out in which skill (reading, writing, listening, speaking) they had the most difficulty.

Table 1. Distributions of answers to question 3

		Q3: Which skill do you think is the most difficult for you to learn?			
		Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Kilis 7 Aralık University	Number of the participants	2	2	2	14
Osmaniye Korkut Ata University	Number of the participants	2	2	1	11
TOTAL		4	4	5	25

The same question further asked the reasons of these difficulties. Participants' choosing "reading skill" as the most difficult skill put forward that it is really hard for them to sort out Turkish alphabet since they use Arabic alphabet which is quite different. Four participants noting "writing skill" as the most difficult skill went on to say that they mix the vowel sounds in Turkish. Besides, they have difficulty in paying attention to spelling rules. Another group who remarked "listening skill" is the most difficult one complained that some people speak very fast so they cannot understand what is told to them. Lack of enough vocabulary also makes it difficult for them to perceive what they listen. Finally, the most crowded group choosing "speaking skill" expressed that Turkish is a polyphonic language and it has a different phonological system from their native language. These reasons make speaking skill challenging for them. Furthermore, they stated that they did not get enough opportunity to practice speaking skill with native Turkish speakers.

The fourth question was asked in order to find out which books were used in their courses and whether they think these books were effective enough to teach Turkish. All of the participants stated that they used the book called "Hitit" which is widely known as TÖMER's book. Some of them stated that the book was okay while the majority pointed out that it could have been better specifically in teaching speaking skills. They also complained that the book had a high academic level and the exercises it had were limited.

Next question aimed to reveal in which language pattern such as; alphabet, phonology, word structure, sentence structure, and grammar the participants had the biggest difficulty to learn

Table 2. Distributions of answers to question 4

		Alphabet	Phonology	Word structure	Sentence structure	Grammar
Kilis 7 Aralık University	Number of the participants	5	4	--	7	4
Osmaniye Korkut Ata University	Number of the participants	-	3	2	7	6
TOTAL		5	7	2	14	10

Participants, by claiming that the alphabet was the hardest part to learn, complained mostly about the vowel sounds in Turkish, specifically ö and ü vowels. Some of them also claimed that they still cannot distinguish these sounds. The ones who chose "phonology" stated that they cannot get their tongue around to pronounce some Turkish words. Moreover, they indicated that Turkish has got more grammar rules than Arabic, which makes them difficult to acquire easily. The majority of the participants indicated that sentence structure was the hardest part for them to learn. Some of the participants pointed out that it is because of the differences between word order of two languages which are Arabic and Turkish. In addition, they said Arabic is written from right to left whereas Turkish is written from left to right. The ones choosing grammar reported that Turkish has got lots of suffixes as well as conjunctions, which make it highly difficult to learn.

When they were asked what kind of qualification their Turkish language teachers should have, almost all participants indicated that it would be more useful for them if the educator focused more on speaking skills and grammatical points rather than reading. They demand richer examples while the grammatical patterns are being explained. Some of them asserted that it would be more effective if their teachers could speak in Arabic and explain grammatical rules in Arabic. Some of them also stated that it would be better if their teachers knew English properly so that they would solve communicational problems.

The 7th question was actually somehow similar to the 5th one. It examined the most difficult part (suffixes, nouns, adverbs, adjectives, modals, tenses, conjunctions) that the participants experienced while learning Turkish. A wide variety of answers were given to this question. For example, one of the participants stated:

Conjunctions are the most difficult aspect because there are lots of conjunctions in Turkish and they do not exactly know where and when to use them.

Another participant claimed:

Suffixes in Turkish language are really complicated and they cannot be sure about the order of suffixes.

Some of the participants made remarks as follows:

Turkish pronouns do not correspond to Arabic pronouns and for this reason; he/she cannot use them correctly.

I have difficulty in all of the language aspects.

In general, suffixes can be seen to be regarded as the most problematic part for the students.

"Can you express yourself comfortably in Turkish?" That was the next question and as it is shown in the Table 3 given below. 23 participants out of 38 stated that they can express themselves comfortably while 7 of them gave negative answers and 5 of them chose to say "partially". From this table, it can be concluded that the giving proper education regarding Turkish language can be useful and effective.

Table 3. Distribution of answers to question 8

Q8. Do you express yourself comfortably in Turkish?				
Kilis 7 Aralık University	Number of the participants	Yes	No	Partially
		9	6	5
Osmaniye Korkut Ata University	Number of the participants	14	1	3
TOTAL		23	7	8

Final question was related to what kind of methods students used in order to learn Turkish. For this aim, the majority of students were interested in watching Turkish series and movies, listening to Turkish songs and communicating with their Turkish friends. However, some of the participants noted that they were generally shy and reluctant to practice Turkish with local people.

3. Results

Participants enrolled in Turkish language courses with the aim of learning and improving their level of Turkish. The majority of them were taught Turkish at TÖMER centers located in Kilis and Osmaniye as well as at various language courses. Participants indicated they had the biggest difficulty in speaking and listening skills because of the lack of speaking and listening activities in the courses as well as their being reluctant to communicate with local people in Turkish. All of the participants used the book called "Hitit" and the majority of them think the book could have been better and should have included more speaking activities. This finding shows that there is a need for more interactive and new books for teaching Turkish.

Turkish alphabet, sentence structure, phonology and grammar are the other points that the participants think

are problematic to learn. Especially, the difference between word order and the direction of the script which is from right to left in Arabic and from left to right in Turkish make students confused. Some of the participants think it would be less problematic if the teacher could explain the grammatical points of Turkish in their native language. Also, it would be better if the teachers communicated in English to solve the communication problems. Moreover; Suffixes and conjunctions seem to be a significant trouble for Syrian students.

Despite the problems indicated above, almost half of the participants think they can explain themselves in Turkish comfortably while others do not agree on this issue. Traditional language learning methods and techniques were generally used by the participants. This case actually proves why the participants have difficulty in speaking skills and it would probably be more effective if modern methods in language teaching and learning were preferred.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study dealt with the Syrian refugee students' language learning experiences and the language problems they faced while learning Turkish language. Results show conclusion, much more attention should be given to the productive skills while teaching Turkish as a foreign language. In addition to this, alternative course books for teaching Turkish seem to be necessary as there are not many different books published in this field. The majority of the participants think that they can express themselves well in Turkish which shows that they have self-confidence in using Turkish language and the education given to them achieves its aim. However, some of the participants stated that they feel uneasy to practice Turkish with native speakers and this may demonstrate the need for social activities and incorporation with local people. The study also recommended some tips such as making use of modern language teaching methods, that is eclectic methods, during Turkish language teaching process so that more emphasis can be given to productive skills. This study was restricted to 38 Syrian refugee students in two state universities in Turkey. Moreover, the scope of the study was limited to the survey with open-ended questions. In short, this study has some limitations noted above. Further research may focus on examining refugee students' perceptions of more specific language patterns such as grammar, speaking etc. rather than giving a general overview of the common problems.

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Appendix 1 (Interview questions in Turkish)

Değerli Arkadaşlar,

Siz, Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin Türkçe öğrenirken karşılaştığınız sorunlar hakkında bir araştırma yapıyoruz. Çalışmamızı tamamlayabilmemiz için sizlerin Türkçe öğrenimi ile ilgili görüşlerinize ihtiyacımız var. Vermiş olduğunuz samimi bilgiler için teşekkür ederiz.

Cinsiyet:…………… Yaş:…………………………

Okul/Bölüm:…………………………………

Bildiğiniz yabancı diller:…………………..

1. Türkiye'ye iltica etmeden önce Türkçe biliyor muydunuz?
2. Türkçeyi nasıl, ne zaman ve nerede öğrendiniz?
3. Türkçe'de en çok zorlandığınız beceri hangisidir? (Konuşma, Okuma, Yazma, Dinleme) Nedenleri nelerdir?
4. Türkçe öğrenirken kullandığınız kitaplar v.s yeterli miydi? Örneklerle açıklayınız.
5. Türkçe öğrenirken sizi en çok zorlayan kısımlar nelerdi? (alfabe, sesletim, kelime, cümle yapısı, dilbilgisi vb.)? Örnek veriniz.
6. Türkçe öğreten öğretmenlerde bulunmasını istediğiniz özellikler nelerdir?
7. Türkçe öğrenirken sizi en çok zorlayan konular? (ekler, isimler, sıfatlar, zarflar, zamirler, kipler, bağlaçlar vb) nelerdir? Örnek veriniz.
8. Kendinizi Türkçede rahat ifade edebilir misiniz?
9. Türkçe öğrenirken hangi yöntemlerden yararlandınız?

Appendix 2 (Interview questions in English)

Dear friends,

We are doing a research on the problems you, the Syrian refugee students, face while learning Turkish language. In order to complete this study, we need your opinions on learning Turkish.

Thanks in advance for the answers you provided.

Gender:………………………… Age:………… School:…………………………….

Department:…………………………………………….

Foreign languages you know:……………………………..

1. Did you know Turkish before you took refuge in Turkey?
2. Where, how and when did you learn Turkish?
3. Which skill (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) do you think is the hardest for you in Turkish?
4. Do you think that the books that you used while learning Turkish were sufficient? Give examples.
5. What were the most difficult parts for you while learning Turkish? (alphabet, phonology, words, sentence structure, grammar)
6. What should be the qualifications of a good Turkish teacher?
7. What were the most difficult subjects forcing you in learning Turkish?
8. Can you express yourself comfortably in Turkish?
9. Which methods did you make use of while learning Turkish?