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Turkish language acquisition of refugee students in North Cyprus public schools

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Abstract

The current research investigated the difficulties faced by refugee students in the acquisition of the Turkish language as a second language (L2) in North Cyprus. Participants of the study included six refugee students with their parents as well as their teachers. All of the refugee students were originally from Syria who obtained the refugee status in North Cyprus after leaving Syria as a result of the instabilities existing this country. Students were two females and four males whose ages ranged between 8 to 15 years old. The study employed a qualitative approach and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that most of the refugee students have difficulties in acquiring the Turkish language within three layers, family, society and school environment.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; refugee students; Turkish language; Qualitative design

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1. Introduction

Acquiring a second language differs from acquiring the mother tongue language in many aspects. Ellis (2004) defined second language acquisition (SLA) as "the study of how learners learn an additional language after they have acquired their mother tongue" (p. 5). As there are specific conditions distinguish the acquisition of the L2 from the mother tongue, there are also other conditions which distinguish the acquisition of L2 from learning a foreign language. Gambarotta (1997) identified the main condition which makes the acquisition of L2 is different from learning a foreign language. This condition is the spontaneity of input which should not be predetermined and comes directly from native speakers (NSs) of the target language (TL). Learning a foreign language, on the other hand, occurs in a tutored environment where learners are exposed to a very limited and treated input and mostly given by non-native speakers. Furthermore, the quantity and quality of exposure is important for acquiring the L2 in the target culture (Flege, 1991).

In the recent years, millions of people are escaping their own insecure countries and resorting to other safe places. Those people who are forced to leave their own homes are called generally refugees. According to the United Nations high Commissioner (UNHCR) convention and protocol (2010), a refugee is someone who "has 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 or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (p.14). The journey which refugees embark to reach safe heaven countries was described by Lustig et al (2004) in three stages: pre-flight, flight, and resettlement (Gonsalves, 1992; as cited in Haene, Grietens, & Verschuere, 2007). In the first stage, refugees face insecurity and chaos in their own country where they feel the need for finding a better place. The second stage is the flight stage where refugees embark on their journey and become displaced and disrupted to reach a safer place. Finally, in the resettlement stage refugees reach their host countries and start adapting to a completely new culture and world.

However, their predicament does not end by reaching the host countries. Though they will experience better educational opportunities than those in their own countries, they will face social, political, economic and linguistic difficulties. Related research identified two main difficulties that refugees face when they reach their destinations: culture unfamiliarity and language. In this regard, Yau (1995) identified a range of other difficulties that refugee children encounter in their new places. These difficulties are "Coping with a whole new language and culture; post-traumatic stress and an on-going sense of fear; precarious residency status and endurance of long bureaucratic processes; disintegration of family units; financial difficulties; frequent relocations; cultural disorientation" (p. 10).

Regarding psychological consequences, refugee students may experience anxiety, anger, insomnia, paranoia. Furthermore, their mental well-being is also disrupted by parents' unemployment, mother's mental state, and negativity (Andermann & Simich, 2014). For more explanation, some of the characteristics of refugee students were summarized by Bloom (2008) as follows: (1) Refugee children may have difficulty of concentration on their studies or interaction with the teacher and classmates; (2) A noise or movement can trigger memories of a traumatic event; (3) They may find it hard to trust people because of past betrayal; (4) They may behave inappropriately if, for instance, they have been sexually assaulted by asking other children to pull their pants down;(5) They may draw violent images; (6) They may be quick to anger" (p.36). Moreover, they become known in their host countries as a minority group who is characterized of having a different accent and culture (Korn, Manks & Strecker, 2014).

With the aforementioned difficulties, refugee students find it difficult to keep their minds focused on the lesson inside the classroom (UNHCR, 2001). In this vein, Hos (2012) recommended that students who flee wars and catastrophes are in need of more mental support than their counterparts who did not experience war and traumas. Differences among refugee children also play a role in showing to what extent these difficulties influence them. Studies revealed that refugee students in schools generally show higher rates of dropout, low self-esteem, and academic low achievement (Kanu, 2008; Leth, Niclasen, Ryding, Baroud, & Esbjørn, 2014). Therefore, in order to prevent these consequences from taking place or minimizing their negative effects, several suggestions have been provided by experts. According to Gibson, (1997) "Minority students do

better in school when they feel strongly anchored in the identities of their families, communities, and peers” (P.19). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) also call for enhancing refugee students’ learning without ignoring the existing cultural and linguistic knowledge of their original countries.

In fact, the role of the indigenous language is important for the survival of refugees in their new environments. In Canada, for example, 40% of refugee women reported having difficulties finding a job because of their lack of knowledge of both languages; English and French (Xue, 2006). Regarding the effect of language difficulties on the students' achievement, Vang, (2016) also pointed out that refugee students show a higher per cent drop-out rate in school. To counteract this problem, Hamilton (2004) asserts that " Schools should provide parents with second language skills which will allow them to participate more fully in their child’s education experience, and to support the efforts of schools” (p.86). Nevertheless, refugee students' acquisition of their host country’s language is hindered by the language which they use in home, their identities, and the different cultures which they are exposed to (Cummins, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that school is not the only source of knowledge and experiences for children. According to Vygotsky theory, the cognitive abilities of students are determined by their interaction within their own communities (Vygotsky, 1986). This interaction is called proximal processes which help in the linguistic and cognitive development of the child (Ceci, 1990). It refers to human mutual interactions with the organic and non-organic surroundings. Therefore, if the majority group did not interact with the refugee minority, this would be interpreted as a denial of their own identity by the minority group and, as a result, they may suffer from social rejection. However, this could be avoided through welcoming refugee students into schools and providing them with all what is needed to learn L2 and maintain continuous mutual interaction (Kennedy & Fisher, 2001). Outside the classroom, schools and teachers can also work as mediators between the indigenous community and the minority group (Chisholm, 1994).

From an educational perspective, the school system and the refugee students pose a challenge for one another. The curricula and pedagogy are designed for the aboriginal students which may not be suitable for the refugee students who come from different cultures, and as a result, they will feel excluded and marginalized (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Additionally, language and the cognitive abilities of the students are developed within context (Gass, 1997). Thus, refugee students may feel isolated because of not being able to interact with their peers in the classroom and understand the curriculum (Sirkeci & Seker, 2015). As a suggestion to solve this difficulty, pairing a refugee student with one of the indigenous students can help him/her to know the system and practice the language (Loewen, 2004). Additionally, schools should start teaching refugee students by building on their prior knowledge (Cummins, 2009). To sum up, the mutual relationships between school and students should be strong and continuous for supporting the students in their struggle to adapt to the new society inside and outside the school. As stated by Ngo (2008), “Effective teaching could occur through connecting the social and cultural contexts of students’ lives to the work of classrooms and schools” .

2. Background

The ongoing war, which started in 2011 in Syria, forced more than 400.000 Syrian refugee students to flee to Turkey seeking refuge (HRW,2015). According to reports, though the Turkish government adopted a policy which would allow Syrian refugee students to have access to public schools, children still lack education because of several obstacles (Ji, 2015). These obstacles could be summarized as language barriers, social integration, economic hardship and insufficient knowledge about the time period and results of the conflict in their original countries (Rifai, 2015). Recent reports also alarmed that refugee students in their different new shelters are in dire need for second language support programs (Amos & Meuse, 2015). For being a recent world event, the literature about the difficulties that refugee students encounter in acquiring the Turkish language is still lacking. In this study, the aim is to find out the difficulties which hinder refugee students from acquiring the Turkish language.

Question of the study

The study attempted to answer the following question:

What are the major difficulties that refugee students encounter in their acquisition of the Turkish language?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The design of this research is a case study which was investigated and analyzed using qualitative methods. In the light of the research main question, semi-structured interview questions were composed for the targets of the study.

3.2 Participants

Participants were six refugee students, their parents, teachers and social workers. Students' ages ranged from 8 to 15 and two of them were females (Amal and Nadia), while four were males (Hamid, Mosa, Nadir and Sami). All the participants who obtained the refugee status in North Cyprus were originally from Syria.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected after the procedures of the study had been explained to each participant. A written informed consent from parents as well as a verbal consent from teachers were obtained. Using a digital voice recorder, each participant was interviewed in his own language (Turkish and Arabic), then the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into the English language. Approximately 5 hours of spoken data were collected and analyzed.

4. Findings and discussion

The study focused on finding out the difficulties that refugee students encounter in the acquisition of the Turkish language.

Analysis of data revealed a number of themes as follows:

First: Exposure to the Turkish language

This study was conducted on five families. Four of which are living in the same city, closely in the same neighborhood. Only one family is living in a different city and mostly surrounded by Turkish Cypriot families in the neighborhood. As reported by Hamilton and Moore (2004), exposure to the L2 is more important than at what age the L2 is best acquired. In this study, the teachers, parents, and social worker affirmed that apart from school, refugee students get no exposure to the Turkish language. Moreover, all participants' parents reported to use the Arabic language with their children at home. Thus, refugee students had little exposure to the Turkish language. The social worker who visits these families in a regular basis expressed her observation during her visits to their homes:

At home, they do not speak Turkish. They speak their own language because it is part of their identity. From what I see their exposure to the Turkish language is only limited to the school, so they do not get enough exposure to the Turkish language. I think the school should be compensating for this limited amount of exposure (Social Worker, Personal communication, 2016).

The students themselves are aware of this situation and compare themselves with their peers in school. Supporting this, Nadir, a student refugee, compared himself with an immigrant Pakistani student who speaks fluent Turkish because of his wide exposure to the Turkish language.

My other Pakistani friend speaks Turkish very well. He lives among Turkish people and whenever he is playing with his Turkish friends, he uses the Turkish language (Nadir, Personal Communication, 2016)

Furthermore, L1 is not only spoken at home, but also in the neighborhood with other refugee families and Arabs living or working in the area which makes it difficult for the refugee students to

acquire the Turkish language. For example, Amal and Nadir's father commented that his children whenever they play with the neighbors' children, they only use the Arabic language, "Within our neighborhood all are Arabs. We do not have Turkish neighbors" (Nadir's father, Personal Communication, 2016).

Though not mentioned by the other three families, they also live in an Arab neighborhood which makes their children face the same situation. Geva and Wiener (2015) state that the amount of exposure refugee students get to the L2 determines their progress and achievement. For instance, if refugee students had little exposure to the L2, then their acquisition of L2 would be slower. This point of view was confirmed by Bot and Schrauf (2009), "This situation often gives the child a disadvantage compared to his or her mono-lingual classmates because the child has to deal not only with a totally new environment and culture at school, but also with a new language system that he or she does not understand at all" (p. 130). Consequently, those children will not be able to catch up with their peers in the classrooms (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). In an interview with a teacher, students' inability to understand and engage in classroom discussions was highlighted by Nami when she described the behaviour of Nadir and Amal, who always ask the teacher questions showing lack of comprehension, compared with their Turkish peers.

They come back usually to ask me about specific things. Because they are not sure, they have low self-esteem, and because they are not fluent in Turkish, they always need to ask me, they ask "is it like that?" (Namia, Personal Communication, 2016).

Unlike the other families, Mosa and Hamid's family live in a neighborhood mostly occupied by Turkish Cypriots. Thus, they have more exposure to the Turkish language than the other families. In other words, they are lucky enough to interact with native speakers of the Turkish language in everyday life activities which is reflected positively on their acquisition of L2.

Father: When we came to North Cyprus, after a while we did not know how they have acquired the Turkish language. (Mosa's Father Personal Communication, 2016).

Mother: For the first two months, we lived with my brother and they speak fluent Turkish. By the time, they acquired the language spontaneously by interacting and playing with my nephews. (Mosa's Mother, Personal Communication, 2016).

Hamid: I learned through interacting with my cousin. He is originally from here and speaks Turkish very well. So I started hanging out with him, going to the gym and other places and build new friendships with Turkish Cypriots in the gym and other places. I was exposed to the Turkish language from morning until night. Gradually, I learned the Turkish language from interacting with them, and even I learned the reading and writing through my cousin. He was correcting me regularly, step by step. I learned how to read and write. (Hamid, Personal Communication, 2016).

Their other Child, Mosa, did not only become fluent in speaking Turkish language, but his excessive exposure to L2 became a threat to his mother tongue. He prefers to watch Turkish cartoon programs rather than to watch Arabic cartoon. Though this was beneficial for L2 acquisition, it created unfavorable environment and even a source of danger for the L1. Mosa's parents are satisfied with their child's progress in mastering the second language, nevertheless, they are worried about L1 attrition which is obvious in using Turkish words and expressions deliberately to express himself. It means that the child started to lose his first language which addressed the need for creating more opportunities to use the Arabic language in the family communications and daily activities to reserve his L1:

Mosa's mother: He learned the Turkish language to a degree that it became stronger than the Arabic language. Sometimes, we are forced to use Turkish chunks to communicate with him and when he speaks to us, he is deliberately using the Turkish language. He wants to speak in Arabic, but it is difficult for him because the Arabic language became weaker by the time. So, he uses some Turkish words to make you understand what he wants to say. (Mosa's Mother, Personal Communication, 2016)

According to the available data, this family lacked the social network which provided an opportunity to L1 maintenance for the other four families. This is similar to Hulsen's (2000) study on Dutch migrants in New Zealand regarding the effect of social communications in maintaining L1 where L2 is the dominant language in the society. It was found that L1 speakers, who had more

contact with other L1 speakers in primary social networks, did not find difficulty in retaining L1 words, unlike those who had not had a close social network (Hulsen, 2000). As expected, Mosa' mother ascribed L1 attrition to the extensive exposure to the Turkish language through various and regular activities (public school, private lessons after school, playing with Turkish Cypriots in a regular basis in the neighborhood and Turkish TV programs).

Interviewer: Is he forgetting the Arabic language?

Mosa's Mother: Yes and we are afraid of this thing.

Mosa's Father: We are thinking in summer to put him in a mosque, so the Arabic language might be reinforced.

Mother: Sometimes it is difficult for me to understand what he wants to say..... He even speaks Turkish because it became easier for him to speak it rather than to speak the Arabic language. I have some Arab friends who have kids, when their kids play with my son, they speak with one another in Turkish, not in Arabic. He even refuses to watch cartoon in Arabic. (Mosa's Mother, Personal Communication, 2016).

This preference, as Paradis (2009) contents, leads to L1 loss or stagnation. Generally, both languages should be maintained where neither L1 preclude the acquisition of L2, nor L2 abrade the maintenance of L1. For this to happen, a proper policy could be adopted by all parties including teachers, school, and parents.

Second: Absence of a proper policy

The absence of awareness among teachers and school staff of refugee students' real situation was an important theme emerged from data analysis, especially with regard to the teaching of the Turkish language. Teachers generally were dealing with refugee students as if they were fluent in Turkish language. The social worker and parents claimed that the teachers are dealing with the refugee students without taking into consideration their special needs, and without realizing the differences that exist between refugee students and Turkish Cypriot students.

The school does not recognize the special needs of refugee students and the teachers are not prepared, of how to react and deal with refugee students and in order for them to do their part, they need clear instructions from the administration. There is a lack of proper legislation to enforce these instructions (Social Worker, Personal communication, 2016).

According to their parents, refugee students do not have special classes and they share their Cypriot counterparts the same sessions. They also get the same treatment and are supposed to achieve the same expectations regarding reading and writing of Turkish language. "The teacher once told me that he is writing slowly in Turkish and we should make him write faster" (Nimr's father, Personal communication, 2016). Furthermore, the same policy is applied with homework and other school duties. Although the students are still beginners at learning the Turkish language and their skills are still limited, they are required to do similar activities for homework which burden the students and their parents, who are Turkish illiterate.

Teachers deal with him as if he is a Turkish student. They should know that he cannot speak Turkish like others. They do not explain to him what is needed from him with regard to homework. I cannot read or write to help him in Turkish, thus I cannot help him in his homework neither his mother. (Nadir's father, Personal communication, 2016).

Other components of the educational inputs also cause difficulties to students' advancement. Curricula, mainstream teachers and teaching strategies pose a challenge for immigrants and refugee students (Cline & Neco, 2004; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). In this study, refugee students, being in a classroom filled with native speakers of Turkish language, have to endure many difficulties related to teacher practices. This is similar to Maltseva's (2009) study where it was found that teachers use the same teaching strategies with both immigrant learners and Icelandic learners. She further explains that additional training was suggested for mainstream teachers in order to meet the needs of immigrants and refugee students.

For supporting the refugee students in their struggle to acquire the second language, the UNHCR organization provides volunteers who are willing to teach refugee students and their parents the Turkish language. However, those volunteers also have no academic or professional training on strategies of teaching the L2. In addition to skilled teachers, teaching a language needs to be in line with recent theories of teaching and learning. Gilbertson (2000) states that one of the disadvantages of teaching refugee students by volunteer teachers is using outdated language teaching methods. Teachers in this study proposed using bilingual dictionaries and immersion in the target culture. However, these recommendations might not lead to the desirable achievement at all school subjects. As Miller, Mitchell, and Brown (2005) put forward osmosis does not lead to full language learning, only language could be learned through work and proper strategies. For instance, students may fail to achieve good scores in different subjects despite having sufficient exposure to the Turkish language and being fluent in spoken Turkish.

Interviewer: I see your mark is below 5 in Dil Alatin course, do you have any difficulties in this subject. Hamid: Yes because it is related to grammar. You need to be built from the basics in this subject from the first grade till the ninth grade (Hamid, Personal Communication, 2016).

As indicated previously, students' lack of the basic skills necessary for mastering certain subjects is an obstacle to their educational achievement. Refugee students lack the foundation which might help them cope with academic level of other students of their age (Yau, 1996). In fact, there is a real need for building strong and solid ground for supporting refugee students in learning L2 through intensive remedial programs which involve all parties in this process.

Third: Communications between parents and school

Another important theme is the absence of a communication channel between parents and teachers at school because of the language barrier (Miller, Mitchell & Brown, 2005). Being unable to speak Turkish fluently discourages parents from visiting schools for seeking advice and sharing teachers their concerns about the level of their children at school (Baykusoglu, 2014). Parents and teachers in this study stated that they have to use gestures and body language for communicating:

Even their families could not speak Turkish and, as you said, before, I start educating the sign language and gestures to communicate with them, like what I did with their children in the beginning (Naima, Personal Communication, 2016).

Regular communications between parents and school are essential for the betterment of refugee students. As Bronfenbrenner (1995) states, the child's development takes place through the effective interaction that occurs between family and teachers. According to Myers (2013) there should be a joint work between teachers and parents for the benefit of the child. In this study, teachers are not able to address their advice and recommendations to students' families. Parents also are unable to help their children whenever they complain about their concerns and difficulties at school. Similar to this is Yu's (2012) study, who found that refugee parents' low proficiency in the English language hinder communications between teachers and parents, and thereby reflects negatively on students' learning process and prolongs the problems they endure in school because of the absence of guidance.

5. Conclusion

Refugee students and their families enter in a process of immense transformation when they reach their host countries (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985). Adjusting to this transformation process could become difficult if the proper tools were not provided for them. In this study, I tried to find out part of the challenges, especially the ones which are related to education and acquiring the language of the host country. The first challenge is the exposure to the Turkish language, which might cause problem if it was not proportioned to the needs of the refugee students. The second challenge is the absence of a proper policy to address the needs of refugee students inside and outside the classroom. Finally, the absence of a communication channel between parents and the school staff because of parents' deficiency in the Turkish language and absence of language interpreter. In fact, second language learning at any age or any stage of life becomes a necessity in the current century as a result of the compulsory migration and expulsion of families from their homelands towards different parts of the world. Therefore, this work should be of some interest to schools and other

social organizations who might be interested in helping refugee students acquire the L2 and proceed towards better education like other mainstream students.

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