

ON “THE STEP BASED SYSTEM” AND UNPLANNED LANGUAGE PLANNING: REDISCOVERING AMERICA?

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**ABSTRACT:** Political fluctuations and *unplannedness* have strong influences on different aspects of language planning policies of a country. For example, the foreign language policy of Turkey has turned to a scratch pad in the last four decades. That is, each fluctuation changed the ministers of national education and each minister entirely changed the foreign language policy from top to down. Nevertheless, state policies need to be stable and consistent. It should not be dependent on individuals or political disturbance. That is, before putting an educational policy or a reform movement into practice, it needs to be well prepared, in depth planned and successfully piloted which was not the case with foreign language policies in the past. What even worse is, nowadays the history seems to repeat itself and therefore this paper suggests re-evaluating what earlier in the history has happened before discovering America once and again.

**Keywords:** Unplanned language planning, Basamaklı Kur Sistemi, foreign language policy, foreign language teaching.

**BASAMAKLI KUR SİSTEMİ VE PLANSIZ DİL PLANLAMASI ÜZERİNE: AMERİKA’YI YENİDEN Mİ KEŞFEDİYORUZ?**

**ÖZET:** Politik çalkantılar ve “plansızlık” bir ülkenin yabancı dil politikasını her zaman olumsuz etkilemiştir. Örneğin, Türkiye’nin yabancı dil politikası son yarım asırdır yazboz tahtasına dönmüştür. Zira her bir politik çalkantı Millî Eğitim Bakanını, her bir bakanda ülkenin yabancı dil politikasını baştan aşağı değiştirmiştir. Fakat ülke politikaları sabit ve tutarlı olmak zorundadır. Bir başka deyişle, eğitim politikaları veya bu tür reform hareketleri uygulamaya konmadan önce iyi hazırlanmalı, doğru planlanmalı ve pilot uygulamaları başarılı olmalı. Ne yazık ki, geçmişteki yabancı dil politikaları sıkıntılı olmuştur. Daha da kötüsü bu durum kendini tekrarlayacak gibi görünmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu makale Amerika’yı yine ve yeniden keşfetmeden önce geçmişte olan bitenlerin tekrar gözden geçirilmesini önermektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** “Plansız” dil planlaması, Basamaklı Kur Sistemi, yabancı dil politikası, yabancı dil öğretimi.

**INTRODUCTION**

The global developments in the area of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) have always been maintained with deep concern by the Ministry of National Education (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı) of Turkey. As known, until 1970s, the prominent FLT policy in Turkey, as well as in many countries in the world, was carried out by classical method which emphasized only “knowing everything about language rather the language itself”; so called the Grammar Translation Method. Although, the foreign language policy of Turkey in parallel to the integration process with the European Union has a base since 1950s, the reorientation and rehabilitation of foreign language teaching in Turkish educational system began in 1972. Under the guidance of the Turkish Education Board (Talim Terbiye Kurulu) the modernization of foreign language teaching accelerated and the Ministry of National Education executed a decree and published in July, 1973. This decree aimed to bring radical changes to the foreign language education system in Turkey. The most prominent one, for example, was to teach the language itself, rather merely the form of the language. It was also aimed to re-evaluate and redesign the teaching materials according to the new foreign language curriculum. In academic year 1974-1975, finally, this new curriculum beside its new system, methods and materials started with great expectations.

This new program was desired to replace the previous one gradually and predicted to achieve and accomplish in 1977. However, although the new foreign language policy seemed to be well prepared, actually it was not pre-planned and piloted. In a short time after the application, it was realized that there were not sufficient foreign language teachers to put the program into practice. Moreover, the school-classes were crowded and the lack of sufficient school buildings in most areas of Turkey was another crucial issue (Özduman, 1989). Additionally, political fluctuations are the other side of the medallion. That is, rise and falls in state policy, frequent minister changes and military coups have always blocked the development of national educational system and also the foreign language policy of Turkey.

Considering the 1980s, the conditions in Turkey were not different. Political fluctuation did not give way to these above mentioned new ideas in foreign language policy, moreover, these ebb and flows in national policy terminated this FL program in less than no time. However, this is the reality; that is the sensitive issue or as uttered in a Turkish saying the “bleeding wound” of developing countries but language policy of a state needs to be stable and cannot be affected by any kind of fluctuation. Since if we talk about a language policy, then we know simply that it is pre-planned, evaluated on efficiency and rationality, and finally a cost-benefit analysis has been conducted. As it is in any language planning process, however, unplanned language planning plays and seems also to play a crucial role in the future. For example, after this bitter disappointment, in late 1980s the Turkish Ministry of National Education made a new movement called the Basamaklı Kur Sistemi (hereafter The Step Based System) which was another flash in the pan. What even worse is, nowadays the history seems to repeat itself in Turkey. The Turkish Ministry of National Education is in another struggle for a new foreign language reform. This paper, therefore, suggests re-evaluating what earlier in the history has happened before discovering America once and again.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***The Birth and Development of the Step Based System***

Despite everything, rapid changes in the world primarily in the areas of technology, industry and business life and the increasing desire for learning a foreign language, especially English as a lingua franca, forced the Turkish Ministry of National Education also to set up new projects on foreign language education in late 1980s. In 1988, the ex-minister of education Hasan Celal Güzel declared a new reform movement in education especially in foreign language education called the Step Based System (Basamaklı Kur Sistemi). After a preparation in a record time of only six months the 12<sup>th</sup> National Education Council (Milli Eğitim Şurası) was hold with an enormous number of participants in Ankara, Turkey. Within the six months, the Ministry of Education had established the foreign language commission and selected the participants from the staff of different universities and from specialists of the Minister of Education which came in touch with experts of the field in and outside Turkey. This commission, finally, prepared a report the so called Step Based System and sent it to the 12<sup>th</sup> National Education Council in July, 1988. In the preparation phase of the report, the commission considered some crucial limitations in Turkish educational system such as the lack of qualified language teachers, the foreign language teaching materials and the lack of school buildings in some areas of Turkey and offered to use or direct the limited sources merely to self motivated, willing and linguistically skilled language learners. The report of the commission is discussed at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Education Council, accepted hastily and suggested to the ministry to put the new reform movement into practice in academic year 1988-1989 starting with the six grades and extending year by year to the whole secondary and high schooling in Turkey.

### ***Basic Principles of the Step Based System***

A new reform movement needs to be supported by clear principles in order to state its difference. The main approach of this system advocated that it was not needed to teach every school child the same amount of foreign language. That is, it was not needed for a learner to gain a foreign language in the same proficiency level compared

with other learners, since the needs of learners may vary. For instance, some learners may wish to master merely the basic communication skills; the so called survival skills would be enough for him/her, others would prefer only academic reading and writing and so forth. In short, this model suggested learners to serve the needed amount of foreign language by the help of its gradual system. That is, the Step Based System consisted of six steps and it is up to the learner to follow them step by step or quit whenever s/he wants. Considering these factors, the foreign language commission stated the main principles of the Step Based System as:

- The Step Based System was made up of six steps and should start with the sixth grades of the secondary school and extends year by year to the whole six year educational period of the secondary and high schooling.
- The Step Based System was obligatory at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school but the following steps were optional. That is, the learners may follow the language program till the end phase or quit it after completing the first grade; but has the chance to turn back whenever s/he wishes.
- Teachers should observe the learners through the year and provide the needed scaffolding to improve language learning. Each step lasts one educational year and has weekly five course hours.
- Number of students should be limited to 25.
- Testing techniques should be redefined and re-evaluated.
- Learners should pass a final exam at the end of each step.
- A certificate is prepared at the end of each step.

Following these main principles, the commission stated the short-term targets of the Step Based System as:

- Goals/objectives and language teaching methodology for the 6<sup>th</sup> grades learners need to be stated,
- Foreign language education system needs to be re-examined,
- Course-books need to be re-evaluated and re-designed according to the Step Based System,
- Additional teaching materials need to be prepared,
- In-service training is planned to start.

And the long-term targets as:

- Communicative based teaching materials, which covers all steps, need to be prepared,
- New course-books and supplementary materials related to the new program need to be designed,
- New testing and evaluating techniques related to the new program need to be developed,
- For each step, specific final exams need to be developed since the certificates aimed international validity.
- YADEM, (Yabancı Dil Eğitim Merkezi) the Foreign Language Education Centre needs to be established.

#### ***Contributions of the Step Based System to FLT in Turkey***

Each new idea or reform movement should make a difference, contribute and develop the earlier one. The step based system in Turkey, in this line of thinking, has some contributions among the lines of its failure story. For example, it is not a new idea that the personal factors such as motivation, attitude etc. affect the learning a foreign language. In the light of this belief, the Step Based System offered teaching foreign language(s) only to willing, self motivated and linguistically skilled language learners and it is also not needed to teach every school child the same amount of foreign language.

Another important outcome is that this system aimed to give an international valid certificate. This system consisted of six steps and can be followed step by step or it is possible to quit the system but gives a certificate after each completed step. In Turkey, nowadays, it is a widely adapted and spread state that every institution gives its own certificate. Giving a certificate is also a part of the European Language Portfolio which aims to develop all Europeans into multi-lingual and inter-culturally competent citizens, in other words this portfolio should show

linguistic competence in different languages and guide the language learning process Council of Europe, 1997, 1998; Demirel, (2004, 2005).

The other contribution is based methodologically. That is, language teaching in the world directed its route to communicative based approaches and so was the new system. Therefore, the Step Based System aimed to change learners and teachers focus on form to communicative based approaches. That is, learners should be able to understand basic spoken and written texts and also make themselves easily understood in written and spoken language. An additional outcome is the limitation of the class size in foreign language classrooms to 25, since the amount of students in language classes were over-crowded and therefore the teaching of a foreign language was nearly impossible in such classrooms.

A final but crucial contribution to the field of FLT in Turkey is the establishment of YADEM at universities (Yabancı Dil Eğitim Merkezi – Foreign Language Education Centre) in 1988. In the light of the latest developments, YADEM was given the responsibility to improve foreign language learning and teaching in formal and informal educational institutions. So, if the objectives could be reached, learners would be able to use the language as a real communication tool. Following this idea, all universities in Turkey have established this centre to spread and improve the foreign language education.

All in all, although it was a flash in the pan – since the step based system ended dramatically in 1989 - there was an effort to bring international valid standards to the system. That is, this system tried to bring unity in language education and established a target to follow and complete.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The ability to think globally and act locally to influence the language policy should be enhanced by examining language policies and practices in well chosen pilot areas. In the late 1980s, the graded language learning model the Step Based System and its limitations sounded really good and were also for some educators of that time. For instance, Veysioğlu (1989:10) stated his view in the Journal of National Education as: "...it is a fact that there are some important problems in language education in Turkey... in spite of fundamental solutions, the problems were passed-over slightly by minor changes such as regulating the course hours...but the Step Based System will bring the expected changes and make language teachers feel relieved". According to Veysioğlu, the Step Based System seems to bring fundamental changes to the matter of foreign language teaching. Similarly, Mr. Ihsan Sezal, Undersecretary of Ministry of Education, had great expectations. In an interview published in the Journal of National Education (Milli Eğitim, 1989), he evaluates the early contributions of the Step Based System. He states that there could be some problems but these can be solved gradually in the process level. That is, the program can start and the problems encountered can be handled with ad hoc solutions.

The Step Based System sounded really good but it would be much better if it also sounded scientific. Since, the Step Based System ended dramatically in 1989 before it had the chance to flourish. However, why did this happen? Why was it needed to try to discover America once and again? First of all, the Step Based System and the former movement were totally populist approaches of some policy makers and political periods. Hasan Celal Güzel, Minister of education in 1988 was the main supporter of this project but after his limited period of office, the project "caused to become an orphan."

Second, the Step Based System was called as a Reform Movement but especially this kind of fundamental changes needs to be pre-planned, pre-programmed and most importantly piloted. In an interview, Mr. Sezal, Undersecretary of Ministry of Education, was asked why the project was not piloted. His answer was very interesting. He said simply that Turkey had no time to waste for piloting! And added that the step based system could be developed when it was in progress and problems in application could be solved with ad hoc solutions. The surprising point is

that such assumptions do have base and supporters in the literature. For example, Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) and Eggington (2002) suggest that unplanned language planning might involve language modification affected by accident, by shared set of laissez-fair attitudes toward a language situation and/or by an ad hoc solution to an immediate problem. They advocate also that planned and unplanned language planning attempts can co-exist in a symbiotic relationship, and thus a formal language plan is incomplete unless it considers existing unplanned language plans within the social ecosystem. However, theoretical thoughts without a scientific base have no validity and may end without the desired outcomes but time and money consuming as the case of the Step Based System.

In Turkey, the expectations from language education are generally determined by daily or term-based problems and tried to be cured mostly by ad hoc solutions. It is also very clear that political aspects play important roles in foreign language education. In this sense, the Step Based System or reform is a political and populist outcome. However, it should not be forgotten that we have no time and money to waste with unplanned language policies. We simply need longitudinal studies. That is, not only projects on language learning and teaching but also educational ones need to be well prepared, in-depth planned and most importantly piloted very carefully if we wish to reach the desired outcomes. That is, if we do not want discover America once and again, we need to think globally and act locally.

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