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The Views of Instructors on Teaching Speaking Skills to the Syrian Students Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Having a significant role in communication, speaking skill is an inborn and improvable ability. Since their existence, human beings have consistently improved this ability in order to communicate with others. Besides, one of the most fundamental keystones of making a healthy contact and living in harmony with different societies are no doubt being a proficient speaker of this language. Therefore, the need of speaking Turkish for Syrian refugees forced them to migrate to Turkey, because some political reasons come out and Turkish instruction become vital. Evaluating the speaking skills of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language, through the views of Turkish instructors, is aimed in the present study. The research data were obtained through semi-structured interview questions directed to 11 Turkish language instructors in Adana Turkish Language Education Centres. The gathered data were analysed by content analysis method. The findings of the study suggest that instructors have such difficulties in improving the speaking skill of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language as having pronunciation problems during speaking activities and anxiety while speaking Turkish. Thus, instructors fail to assess Turkish speaking skill despite carrying out various speaking activities to overcome these problems.

Keywords: Speaking skill, Turkish instruction, Syrian students, content analysis

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Introduction

Needs analysis is a vital issue in educational settings in the contemporary world (Ulum, 2015). In the era of globalisation, communicating with people from different cultures and languages with ease increases the need for learning other languages apart from the native languages of the individuals. Eventually, human as a social being has to communicate with the people around to express himself. (Temizyürek, Erdem, & Temizkan, 2007, p. 266). There are several ways of communication such as verbal, non-verbal and written. People mostly use the verbal one, speaking in other words, among the other ways of communication to be able to contact with other people around them, and express their feelings, thoughts, views, dreams etc. As understood from this statement, speaking skill is a basic language skill that helps individuals to communicate with other people in their daily life.

According to Sever (1997, p. 20), speaking has had an important place in maintainin the relationship amongst peoples and affecting one another for ages. While improving one's Turkish speaking skill, it must be taken into consideration that meaning of the words can change depending on pronunciation, rhythm, setting, occasions or persons. Comprised of components like those, speaking skill necessitates that this education must be given by experts. First of all, instructor has to have a fluent diction himself, stress the right syllable and word, and use gestures properly to improve this skill. Likewise, Turkish teacher has to have knowledge of voice and breathe control. No matter how perfect the pronunciation of a teacher is, if he can not control his breath, the sentences he forms do not count for much. Hence, teachers have to practise breath control frequently before the lessons (Erem & Sevin, 1947). Consequently, the teacher above all has to be a good sample for students with his own eloquence in teaching speaking (Kavcar, Oğuzkan, & Sever, 1999, p. 58).

Foreign language speaking skill should not be seen as a simple ability in language instruction. Many language functions such as what, when and where a person having a full command of a language can speak; how his parlance towards people in same and different positions and status should be; what kind of body language is suitable for different contexts, what behaviors like keeping quiet and taking turn methods and techniques during conversations are expected; how to apologize and request someone; how to convey an assistance and collaboration demands, and how to abstain from these politely; to whom and how one can order, all can be achieved thanks to this skill (as cited in Bayraktar, 2014, p. 117).

Millions of Syrian refugees' entering and living for a long period in our country as a result of political problems and battles in their country enhances the importance of teaching Turkish as a foreign language (Eryaman & Evran, 2019; Ulum & Kara, 2016). After all, knowing the language of the society one lives in is significant for the individual to adapt to the society and be informed about the cultures of the speakers of this language because the whole characteristics of the culture and

historical, social background are found in the language (Bölükbaş & Keskin, 2010). Accordingly, Turkish instruction is given both in public schools and Turkish Education Centers and Temporary Education Centers. A big number of research studies on the importance of foreign language speaking instruction (Temizyürek, 2004), and speech anxiety (Sevim, 2014; Sallabaş, 2012; Tunçel, 2014, Özdemir, 2012) of students learning Turkish as a foreign language exist in the related literature. Moreover, there are researches mentioning the place of teaching Turkish to Arabs in history (Akkuş, 1999; Baskın, 2012) and studies dealing with coursebooks used while teaching Turkish to Arabs (Şeref & Yılmaz, 2013; Yılmaz & Şeref, 2013), basic language skills improved (Bölükbaş, 2011; Subaşı, 2010), grammar teaching (Doğan, 2007), researches for problems encountered (Polat, 1998) and Syrian refugees' educational problems and perceptions of Turkish. As for this study, our purpose is to state instructors' views on teaching speaking Turkish to the Syrian students. Thus, the opinions of instructors teaching Turkish to the Syrian students about the Syrian refugees' educational problems and their perception of Turkish were taken via interview forms and analysed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the views of the instructors on Syrian students' gaining and improving Turkish speaking skill. The following questions were accordingly formed:

1. Do the instructors have difficulty in improving the speaking skill of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language?
2. What are the mistakes that instructors encounter while improving the speaking skill of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language?
3. What are the methods and techniques instructors use while improving the speaking skill of Syrian students learning Turkish as a foreign language?

Method

Based on a qualitative research design, this study evaluates the views of instructors teaching Turkish as a foreign language in a Turkish Language Education Centre. A qualitative research uses qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview and document analysis, and follows a qualitative process towards revealing perceptions and incidents in an integrative and realist way in the natural environment (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, p. 39). Interview forms were used as data collection tools in this research study. Further, the data acquired in this study were analysed through content analysis technique, which is a systematic technique and repeatable way of data collection (Büyüköztürk, 2009, p. 269). Semi-structured interview questions were developed by experts from the related field. Moreover, for the coding reliability of the interview, Kappa Coefficient for Inter-coder Reliability was calculated and it was seen that the coding process was reliable ($K = .886, p < .001$).

Participants

11 Turkish language instructors working in the Turkish Language Education Centers of Çukurova University and Adana Science and Technology University form the study group in this study. 5 of the informants are male while 6 of them are female. All the instructors have a master's degree in foreign language education.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the research, the instructors working in Turkish Language Education Centers were asked to answer eight semi-structured questions to collect data. Codes and themes were defined examining the data collected. During the process of reporting, the views stated by instructors were cited directly. Each instructor was named as the letter “K”, and instructors are lined up as “K1, K2, K3, K4...” and so on.

Results

The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question “*What are the opinions of your students about speaking Turkish?*”, categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Findings related to the opinions of students towards speaking Turkish according to the instructors

| Categories | F | Sample Statements |
|---|---|---|
| Regarding speaking Turkish as difficult | 5 | <i>They generally state that they find speaking skill more difficult than other skills. (K-2)</i> |
| Abstaining from speaking Turkish | 3 | <i>Students abstain from speaking Turkish as they avoid making mistakes. (K-4)</i> |
| Enthusiasm about speaking Turkish | 2 | <i>In general sense, they are enthusiastic about speaking Turkish; however, it must be said that this skill is improved by the student's personality, will and study. (K-6)</i> |
| Love of speaking Turkish | 2 | <i>They like and join in speaking activities. (K-5)</i> |
| Rush for learning speaking Turkish | 2 | <i>Students dreaming themselves as native speakers learn faster and become more successful. (K-1)</i> |
| Prejudice against Turkish | 1 | <i>Students are seriously prejudiced as Arabic and Turkish are completely different languages. (K-3)</i> |
| Getting tired of speaking Turkish | 1 | <i>While Turkish is the favourite lesson of some students, some of them are bored as they abstain from making mistakes. (K-1)</i> |

As for the Table 1, most of the instructors state that students think that speaking Turkish is difficult. They also point out that students avoid making mistakes, feel like an outsider and thus refrain from speaking Turkish. This result shows that Syrian students have difficulty in feeling confident about speaking Turkish. The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question “*Can your students explain the difference between spoken and written Turkish? Please explain.*”, categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Findings related to students' distinction of spoken and written language

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|--|---|---|
| Distinction through improvement in Turkish language level | 8 | <i>Though at first they can not internalize the distinction; as they have a good knowledge of Turkish in the upcoming periods, this problem vanishes. (K-2)</i> |
| Distinguishability | 3 | <i>They understand that there is a difference but they do not understand what is said in spoken language yet. (K-1)</i> |
| Indistinguishability | 1 | <i>No. They can not distinguish. (K-11)</i> |

As for the Table 2, most of the instructors state that students have difficulty in distinguishing spoken language from written language at first; however, they can recognize this difference as they have a good knowledge of Turkish. Furthermore, it is explained that though beginner students understand the written language, they have difficulty in understanding speeches. The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question "Do you have difficulty in improving Turkish speaking skill? Why?" categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Findings related to whether instructors have difficulty in improving speaking Turkish skills

| Categories | f | Causes | f | Sample Statements |
|--------------------------------|----|--|---|---|
| The Ones Having Difficulty | 10 | Having difference between their native language and Turkish. | 2 | <i>I have difficulty from time to time. I have some problems with students in course A because Turkish and their native language are different.(pronunciation-syntax etc.)It may take time to resolve these problems. (K-9)</i> |
| | | Not being able to transfer the things students learned to the conversations. | 2 | <i>The students successful in verbal expression may unfortunately fail in dual conversations. For instance, the students using words with proper affixes and paying attention to grammar while introducing themselves have difficulty in communicating. (K-7)</i> |
| | | Having difficulty in pronunciation of some letters. | 2 | <i>They have difficulty in articulation of umlaut vowels. (K-5)</i> |
| | | The fear of students | 2 | <i>Of course. Because there are lots of things to say in their minds. Yet, along with the fear, they may prefer speaking with only one sentence or not speaking at all when they do not have enough vocabulary. (K-10)</i> |
| | | Having a strong pronunciation of Arabic | 1 | <i>Compared with the other languages, it takes a quite time to soften the strong pronunciation of Arabic. (K-3)</i> |
| | | Not knowing where to use case suffixes. | 1 | <i>They are not able to understand exactly where to use case suffixes while constructing sentences. (K-3)</i> |
| | | Referring English when students have difficulty in speaking Turkish. | 1 | <i>Referring English especially when they have difficulty in improving speaking Turkish causes them to delay the improvement of speaking Turkish. (K-4)</i> |
| | | Not being able to distinguish the similar sounds. | 1 | <i>They have difficulty in understanding the difference between similar sounds. (K-1)</i> |
| The ones not having difficulty | 1 | Enthusiastic behaviors of students | 1 | <i>I try to encourage students to feel confident. After a while, I do not have much difficulty as they are enthusiastic when they feel confident. (K-6)</i> |

As for the Table 3, most of the instructors state that students have difficulty in improvement of speaking Turkish. As fundamental reasons for this, they give vocal and structural differences between Turkish and their native languages, not being able to transfer the information they learned to the conversations and having difficulty in pronunciation of some words. The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question "What are the most common pronunciation mistakes of your students while speaking Turkish?" categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 3.

Table 4. Findings related to the most common pronunciation mistakes of students according to the instructors

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|---|---|---|
| Having difficulty in the pronunciation of vocal sounds | 6 | <i>I-i/u-ü/o-ö are the voices they find most difficult to pronounce. (K-9)</i> |
| Confusing the pronunciation of similar sounds | 3 | <i>They also confuse the voices Ç-ş/s-z/c-j/c-ç and mispronounce them. (K-9)</i> |
| Having difficulty in the pronunciation of voices not found in their native languages. | 2 | <i>They have difficulty in pronunciations of both vowels and consonants not found in their native languages. (K-5)</i> |
| Confusing the voices found in their native language but not in Turkish. | 1 | <i>Confusing the pronunciations of letters found in Arabic but not in Turkish such as k/g/h is one of the most common problems. (K-2)</i> |
| Using the voices found in their native language while speaking Turkish. | 1 | <i>They often use the letter "ayın" in Arabic while speaking Turkish. We make them utter the correct voice repeating frequently. (K-3)</i> |
| Mispronunciation of the words consisting similar sounds. | 1 | <i>As there are lots of vowels in Turkish, they may have pronunciation mistakes while uttering similar words. Like iş, eş, aş etc. (K-6)</i> |
| Uttering the common words as they are in their native language. | 1 | <i>They pronounce Arabic words in Turkish as they are in their native languages. E.g. : instead of "yani" a long and rough "yeeđanii" (K-2)</i> |

As for Table 4, most of the instructors state that students mostly have difficulty in the pronunciations of vocal sounds. Moreover, they state that students confuse the voices and words having similar pronunciations in Turkish, have difficulty in the pronunciations of words not found in their native languages, referring English when they have difficulty in speaking.

The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question "What kind of exercises do you do to eliminate the mistakes your students do while speaking Turkish? Please explain." categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 5.

Table 5. Findings related to the exercises instructors do to eliminate students' pronunciation mistakes

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|--|---|---|
| Making voice and words repetitions | 3 | <i>I write them as a list and want them to read the words including these sounds again and again and practise at home. (K-1)</i> |
| Using words in sentences | 2 | <i>In order to eliminate these mistakes, we want them to pronounce the words correctly and use these words in a sentence giving a word list including these sounds. (K-4)</i> |
| Reinforcing the speaking with other skills | 1 | <i>I do pronunciation exercises. I reinforce them with listening activities. (K-5)</i> |
| Making drama activities | 1 | <i>We prefer the teaching of correct pronunciation with sample usage, especially using drama, in classroom. (K-7)</i> |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Using “Minimal Pairs” technique | 1 | <i>In order to eliminate these mistakes, we especially prepare minimal pairs activities and implement them in the class. Students both have fun and learn. (K-9)</i> |
| Making Dictation practices | 1 | <i>Dictation practice is the most common method we use. (K-10)</i> |

As for Table 5, it is seen that instructors make exercises like repetitions of the sounds and words students have difficulty in pronunciation, using the words including the sounds they have difficulty in a sentence, organizing drama activities. The quotes from the instructors’ answers for the question “*What are the methods and techniques you use to improve your students’ Turkish speaking skills?*” categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 6.

Table 6. Findings related to the methods and techniques instructors use to improve students’ Turkish speaking skills

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Dialogue Technique | 7 | <i>Grounding on a “specific theme” for verbal expression and dual conversation, we do activities turning this skill from being secondary skill. (K-7)</i> |
| Question and Answer Technique | 5 | <i>Question and Answer is one of the most common methods we use to improve this skill. However, the student may give short answers to these questions. (K-3)</i> |
| Verbal Expression | 4 | <i>Speaking activities are done via verbal expression and dialogues. (K-4)</i> |
| Picture Reading and Interpreting | 2 | <i>Dialogue activities are done including a context and speech with reference to a photograph. (K-4)</i> |
| Educational Games | 2 | <i>I try to improve speaking skills with games and various activities. (K-9)</i> |
| Communicative Method | 2 | <i>They have the opportunity to practice speaking Turkish by socializing with Turkish students at university. (K-4)</i> |
| Case Study Technique | 1 | <i>We practice especially with case study and dialogue techniques. (K-2)</i> |
| Presentation | 1 | <i>We can lead them to prepare presentations according to their levels to improve their expression skills. (K-6)</i> |
| Drama and Animation | 1 | <i>We also adopt the methods like animation, drama, and ask their impressions showing them pictures. (K-7)</i> |
| Reading Aloud | 1 | <i>We make text and newspaper reading aloud both to hear their own pronunciations and to realize their intonations. (K-2)</i> |
| Audio-Lingual Method | 1 | <i>Question and Answer, Dialogue Memorisation along with Communicative and Audiolingual Methods are the methods and techniques I use most. (K-1)</i> |

As for Table 6, it is seen that the techniques instructors’ use to improve Syrian students’ speaking skill are as follows in order of priorities; dialogue technique, question and answer technique, verbal expression, picture reading and interpreting, educational games, communicative method, case study technique, presentation, drama and animation, reading aloud and Audio-Lingual method. The quotes from the instructors’ answers for the question “*What are the assessment and evaluation techniques you use to determine the levels of improvement and language acquisition skill?*” categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 7.

Table 7. Findings related to the techniques instructors use to determine the students' Turkish speaking levels

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|--|---|--|
| Evaluation of their verbal expressions and dialogues | 7 | <i>We divide this skill into two parts as verbal expression and dual conversation. We evaluate it with a scale improved proper to each level. A student speaks alone first, then makes a dialogue with a friend. (K-1)</i> |
| Evaluation with pilot tests | 2 | <i>We make pilot tests. We prepare activities proper to levels and implement them in class. (K-5)</i> |
| Evaluation via observation | 1 | <i>I make my evaluation through observation in the class. I choose different topics. I assess whether they understand the grammar I teach. (K-8)</i> |
| Not making an assessment | 1 | <i>I do not make a particular assessment and evaluation. (K-9)</i> |

As for table 7, instructors divide speaking skills into two techniques. Thus, they evaluate students' speaking skills considering dialogues and verbal expressions they use while narrating an event or a case. Even though some instructors state that they consider criteria such as "interaction, consistency, accuracy, fluency" in evaluation, it is seen that most of the instructors do not have enough knowledge of assessment and evaluation techniques. It is also seen that speaking, one of the ways of verbal communication, is evaluated by instructors with pilot tests. The quotes from the instructors' answers for the question "Do you find instructors teaching Turkish to the foreigners efficient as for the improvement of basic language skills?" categories and frequencies are shown in the Table 8.

Table 8. Findings related to the instructors' views on efficiency of themselves and other instructors teaching Turkish in improvement of basic skills

| Categories | f | Sample Statements |
|--|---|--|
| I find instructors inefficient. | 7 | <i>I think that we are lacking in following the studies, especially comparative studies, and publications in different cities and countries as instructors. I also think that we should follow publications more closely to achieve new ideas in improvement of basic language skills. (K-7)</i> |
| I find myself inefficient. | 6 | <i>I do not find myself efficient in this respect; however, I think that I am gaining ground in my career path to become an expert. (K-4)</i> |
| I find myself efficient. | 3 | <i>I find myself efficient in improvement of speaking skill. I give weight to improving this skill in my lessons. (K-9)</i> |
| I find instructors efficient. | 2 | <i>Yes, I find them efficient in general. (K-2)</i> |
| I find instructors and myself efficient up to a point. | 2 | <i>Partially, because there are two different aspects. Instructors are efficient to a certain extent as they are appointed after being selected. Yet, as this area is quite new, we need to update ourselves as there are lots of things to do and to teach. (K-6)</i> |

As for the Table 8, it is understood that the majority of the instructors find both themselves and the other instructors inefficient. Inadequate criteria for the selection of instructors, the area of teaching Turkish as a foreign language being new, and insufficient studies on this area are shown as the reason for this.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study lays emphasis on the views of instructors teaching Turkish as a foreign language on acquiring and improving Turkish speaking skills to Syrian students. Accordingly, the instructors'

opinions on the perception of students about speaking Turkish, the mistakes students make while speaking Turkish (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014), the activities instructors do to correct pronunciation mistakes, the techniques to assess speaking skill and proficiency of instructors in improving speaking skill are taken and analysed. The findings obtained from the study are as follows:

According to the instructors, Syrian students are anxious as they are afraid of being criticised when they make a mistake. In order to decrease this anxiety, speaking activities should be increased and students should be encouraged to participate voluntarily. Because when the students are forced to participate in speaking activities in a foreign language learning environment, they feel anxious just as they are scared of height, elevators or snakes etc. (as cited in Baş, 2014, p. 11). Furthermore, it is stated that students think that speaking Turkish is difficult. So as to change this perception, it is necessary to enhance students' perception of their self-competence in learning a foreign language (Köksal & Ulum, 2016). To achieve this, it is required to shed light on what students are going to do with this foreign language rather than what they cannot do (Şahin & Koçer, 2014, p. 43).

Although students have difficulty in recognizing the difference between spoken and written languages when they are beginners, this difficulty begins to vanish as their language levels improve because each vowel is represented by a letter in Turkish and this property of Turkish facilitates the transition from written language to spoken language for the students (Güneş, 2007). Almost all of the instructors show reasons for their students' difficulty in improving speaking skills such as the vocal differences between their native tongue and Turkish, their being unable to transfer the grammar rules and patterns to dialogues, their being worried or anxious about speaking Turkish, their Arabic accent being strong (Ulum, 2020), and their tendency to resort to English whenever they have difficulty in expressing themselves in Turkish. It is remarkable that although most of the instructors find themselves incompetent to improve this skill, they base their opinion about having difficulty during learning process solely on students.

Instructors, indicating Syrian students make several pronunciation mistakes, state that pronunciation of vowels are the most common mistakes. Besides, having differences between students' native language and Turkish creates an ill effect on the correct pronunciation of Turkish sounds. Also, confusing similar sounds in Turkish and mispronunciations are an issue. In order to eliminate these mispronunciations, instructors frequently want them to repeat especially the sounds mispronounced and words including these sounds (Üredi & Ulum, 2018). Furthermore, they state that they have used dialogue and verbal expression activities during the process of improving speaking skills.

Assessment and evaluation is crucial in language instruction. Because feedbacks taken from the assessment and evaluation done parallel to the speaking, writing, reading and listening activities implemented during study period will enable the elimination of deficiencies in education (Yıldız & Tuncel, 2014, p. 201). However, it is seen that some instructors are incompetent in assessment and

evaluation of speaking skills of Syrian students. Some of the instructors state that they evaluate speaking skills in two forms of speaking ability; verbal expression and dialogue using while others say that they do a pilot test and observe or do no assessment at all. Finally, it is understood that instructors see both themselves and others incompetent for further development of this skill.

Consequently, instructors have difficulty in improving speaking skills of Syrian students. Even though they do not find themselves competent enough to improve this skill, they see the most of the difficulties they have are student-based. They also state that students make pronunciation mistakes for several reasons; some of the students have a negative perception of speaking Turkish and abstain from speaking. With reference to these results, the following recommendations on improvement of students' speaking skill should be taken into consideration:

1. Researches on Syrian students' anxiety of speaking Turkish are needed to be done and their anxiety levels should be decreased to a minimum level.
2. Instructors are supposed to encourage their students to speak Turkish and encourage them to gain self-confidence. Besides, they should provide volunteer participation in speaking activities and should state that they do not need to be afraid of making mistakes.
3. Instructors' competence in improvement of speaking skill should be taken into consideration and people giving this education should be chosen with a specific criterion.
4. Researches on Syrian students' pronunciation mistakes while speaking Turkish are needed to be done and studies for elimination of these mistakes should be carried on.
5. Instructors should provide their students the opportunity of communication with native speakers of Turkish by organizing tours and activities outside the school without confining the education within the walls of a school while improving students' speaking skills.
6. Studies to fulfill the lack of instructors in assessment and evaluation are needed to be done.
7. Instructors should continuously improve themselves and should search and use the new methods and techniques to make their students gain and improve this skill.

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