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SUGGESTIONS OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS FOR MESKHETIAN STUDENTS MIGRATING TO TURKEY TO ACQUIRE ACADEMIC LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract

Forced migration from one country to another leads the immigrants to have social, cultural, economic, language and educational problems. Meskhetians (Ahiska Turks) having lived in Ukraine for long were forced to migrate to Turkey and approximately one thousands families were allowed and accommodated in the city of Erzincan in the years between 2015-2017. Meskhetian children at school age have been admitted to Turkish Language courses in order to adapt the education at Primary, Secondary and High schools. The biggest and most important problem that they faced in educational institutions in Turkey is academic Turkish language, though their mother tongue is Turkish. In the study we aimed to determine the problems with acquirement of academic language skill and the suggestions of language instructors. To get the necessary data, we interviewed with five Meskhetian students in secondary school and high school and three language instructors who teach Turkish Language in Secondary Schools and University. We used Qualitative Research Method and Focused Group Interview to obtain necessary views from the participant instructors and students in our study. After analysing the data, we have concluded that the Meskhetian students have difficulty in multiple choice exams due to lack of academic Turkish and academic language skills, though their native language is Turkish. Also we determined that their academic vocabulary capacity in Turkish is insufficient for multiple choice exams, and should be developed and supported through academic language courses.

Keywords: Meskhetians, Ahiska Turks, Language Teaching, Academic Language, Education of Immigrants.

1. INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a growing case and has a growing structure throughout human history. Forced migration from one country to another leads the immigrants to have social, cultural, economic, language and educational problems. One of the most experienced countries in the world in terms of forced migration and population movement, Turkey has been able to absorb the mass migrations over the past century. Migration beginning with the weakening Ottoman Empire, grew further in the fall period of Ottoman Empire and the process was still in effect in the Republic of Turkey (Akpınar, 2016). Since the foundation, Turkey has received continuous migration was hosted by opening its arms to the embattled group. In the aftermath of the "East Ukrainian Crisis" in the late 2013, the factors such as the cultural and linguistic adaptation of the Turkish and Muslim immigrants, their integration into the social, economic and political processes, and the adaptation to the national structure have been decisive factors for Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks living in the region to migrate to the Üzümlü subprovince of Erzincan.

Immigration incidents have caused large-scale social trauma in terms of immigrants as well as preparing the ground for various problems in the countries of immigration practice (Aktepe et al, 2017). The most fundamental problem of immigration, which has an international character with globalization, is the radical changes in the geographical and cultural life for which immigrants undergo. This problem of spatial change is accompanied by many problems such as alienation and non-conformity to the city, unemployment, cultural integration, housing, planning and management problems, and particularly education of the immigrants and training their children at school ages. Turkish language courses were provided for the Meskhetian Immigrant students before their education in Turkish schools in order that they could adapt Anatolian accent of Turkish. Although their native language is Turkish, they have had certain difficulties in academic language which is necessary for their education, particularly for their achievement in examinations. To solve this problem, some academic language courses have been held in their schools (Güler Arı and Kayalar, 2017).

1.1 Academic Language

Starting from primary school years, writing studies that start with composition practices, especially with the applications in language classes, have given its place to academic writing in high school and higher education, especially in post-graduate education. The biggest and the most important issue that the immigrant and foreign students encounter in target language at school environment is to acquire academic language and to use it effectively in examinations. The students' language skills and abilities play an important role to acquire academic language. The ability of having a large capacity of scientific vocabulary also plays a vital role for the achievement in school examinations. The management of the schools to which immigrant students mostly attend organises and holds academic language courses for them prior to each term.

Language instructors try to assess students' language learning skills and their language abilities to effectively teach academic language, and the language demands of the scientific and academic texts (Grigorenko, 2015). Many language instructors evaluate their students' language skills formally or informally, using language surveys to obtain self-reports about their language usage and proficiency in academic language. The ability of academic language can be evaluated by careful and close observation of the students' written and oral language usage in examinations and classroom activities.

As the immigrant students use non-standard dialects, they have difficulty in stating their statements precisely and understanding the questions in exam papers, particularly in multiple–choice exams. The instructors try to find out language strengths of students in order to teach them what they need in terms of academic language. After the instructors determine the students' capacity of scientific vocabulary, they can plan instruction for content teaching. The text difficulty should be accorded with the level of the students' academic language abilities. The text difficulties or complexities according to the Common Core State Standards include levels of meaning or purpose, structure, language

conventionality and clarity, life experiences, cultural or literary knowledge and content or discipline knowledge (Manville, 2013).

To effectively teach academic language, educators must utilize the information about students' existing language skills and patterns to expand their linguistic skills in ways that allow them access to the language of instruction and to develop the ability to communicate their learning in ways that count. Based on what students already know, educators need to teach students specific rules, norms, conventions, patterns and features that constitute standardized English. This may include speaking practices like tone of voice, volume and appropriate eye gaze, intonations and gestures. Teachers should make expectations explicit for both verbal performances and written language tasks.

In order to teach the academic language effectively, language instructors should get use of information about the language skills and patterns of the students to expand their academic language skills, in the way that enable them to access to language of instruction, and to expand their learning to improve their ability to communicate with excellent methods. Respectful of what students have already known, educators are supposed to teach students certain rules, norms, patterns, and features that form a standardized target language. This may include voice tone, volume, and speech applications such as appropriate eye gaze, tonality, and gestures. Teachers should clearly state expectations for both verbal performance and written language work.

Fluency in language is one of the key strategies for instructing students with regard to academic language. Grigorenko (2015) suggests that many students are introduced to the content specific language of a discipline, the discourses of the classroom or a particular genre of language use, but are never given enough time and practice to be able to independently and confidently use the language for the range of functions demanded in school.

One of the most basic findings of linguistics is the richness that can meet the needs of every language speaker. Turkish is a language that is potentially capable of responding to all kinds of needs of speaking like other languages. Problems such as the inadequacy of the term, the lack of vocabulary examples in some branches, or the difficulty in writing Turkish scientific texts or cultural texts due to the lack of cultural cognition are not caused by the language itself but its use in efficient. As it is on every level, the so-called deficiencies that may emerge in the field of the term, it can be removed by the means of derivation and copying,. Therefore, whether Turkish language is a scientific language is not the problem of the language itself but of the speakers of Turkish language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapin (2006), Ediger (2000), Turner (1999), and Karadag and Cengelci (2011) argue in their studies that language skills, especially reading, writing and visual reading skills are important skills for Social Studies. The Social Studies courses are based on training activities with language skills. Students are required to understand the content of the subject in the Social Studies courses and develop their understanding skills to reach the knowledge. There is a positive relationship between students' reading ability and success in Social Studies courses.

According to Staab (2001) and Conley (2008), students develop language and communication skills when they write stories, reports and other texts about Social Studies. For this reason, it is important for teachers to take into account their visual and linguistic functioning in terms of a functional language from educational activities. In this context, teachers can work on the development of language skills in the social studies courses in order to increase the success in the social science classes. They can organize activities that require students to use oral and written language.

Tekin (1980) stated in his research that the realization of learning depends on the existence of effective communication, and it is based on the effective use of the language of instruction. It is not

expected that a student who can not understand what he reads or listens to, or who can not tell his or her thoughts or feelings verbally or in writing, is successful in his school.

Tok and Gönülal (2016) argue that academic writing has its own set of rules. In writing studies, students should stay away from the art of speech, express their thoughts as clearly as possible, and follow punctuation and grammar rules. It should be noted that the type of features to be written and the organization of its own constructions should be quoted from published works to support their thought.

Based on the findings of the research by Taşkıran et al (2015), it supports the idea that the increased reality practices allow state learning within the constructivist approach and that the learning takes place in the best possible context. It is believed that enhanced reality application provides enhanced learning experiences through the provision of raw information through technology, allowing learners to construct knowledge more easily.

Acording to Göçer (2009) and Yalçın and Özek (2006), words that help human beings to express themselves and the outside world lies on the basis of indispensability of the language, which is one of the basic elements with an active role in human life. Words are artificial signs produced by the human mind at will. Human beings can realize the internalization, perception and meaning of the outer world by separating it through these artificial demonstrations. Vocabulary is one of the main elements playing a leading role in the formation and development of all disciplines. The basic language skills that have a close relationship with the vocabulary richness and especially the reading comprehension show a high relationship with the success in different academic fields. This makes academic language skill highly important.

Göktaş (2010) argued in her master thesis that studies having done to determine the success of mathematics suggest that some factors such as academic language capacity, reading comprehension skills can affect the success of mathematics. In the thesis, she tried to determine whether the effect of reading comprehension is efficient on mathematics success or not.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

3.1. Problem Statement and Purpose

In the study on suggestions of language instructors for Meskhetian students migrating to Turkey to acquire academic language skills, we aimed to determine the views of three language instructors teaching Turkish in secondary schools and University, and to suggest language instructors to practice effective strategies to make Meskhetian students achieve an effective academic language. To fulfil the purpose of the study we asked language instructors two open ended questions: “Why do the Meskhetian students fail in examinations, though they can speak Turkish?”, “What do you suggest them to be successful in academic language and to achieve in academic language skill?” In order to determine the matter deeply and support the instructors’ suggestions, we asked five Meskhetian students why they get low marks in the examinations, and what they expect their instructors to do so that they can be proficient in academic language.

3.2. Methods and Research Design

We used a qualitative research method to determine and evaluate the students’ and language instructors’ views on Meskhetian students’ failure in academic language. We preferred this kind of methodological approach as qualitative research is attempting to reach knowledge using induction methodology. The most important component of qualitative research is "qualitative data". Qualitative data are all kinds of information obtained by various techniques such as observations and interviews

in the natural environment, for specific purposes, including perceptions and thoughts about the events of the persons (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). It is not intended that the qualification by this state be made in the quantitative research, as well as in the reduction of the number. With qualitative data, the researcher aims to present a descriptive and realistic picture to the reader about the subject being investigated. For this reason, it is very important that the qualitative data have a detailed and specific depth (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2003). We carried out this research with the views of language instructors in Secondary Schools and University. For this reason we relied on case study design for the purpose of our enquiry. The case study design in research is chosen as it reduces the use of positivist or post positivist perspectives, accepts postmodern sensibilities, captures the individual's point of view, examines the constraints of everyday life, and secures rich descriptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

3.3. Participants

The participants in our study were three language instructors teaching Turkish Language, mathematics and Science at Secondary School and University. The youngest participant is male, with 3 years of teaching experience, teaching Science in Üzümlü Secondary School, while the eldest is male, with ten years of teaching experience, teaching Mathematics in Üzümlü Anatolian High School. As we intended to look into the matter deeply, and to support the results, we interviewed five Meskhetian students at Secondary School in Üzümlü Subprovince of Erzincan city where the Meskhetian immigrants have been accommodated. We preferred and used easily accessible sample technique in the research, as it increases the speed of collecting data and enables researchers to access the sample easily (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2003). We obtained the data from three language instructors and five immigrant students who admitted to be involved in the interview for the research. The participants were asked whether they were contented to answer to the questions, and then we applied the tool. The names of the instructors and students are coded with letters and numbers.

3.4. Research Instrument

In the study, we used the tool with semi structured interview form to gather data from language instructors. We asked two open ended questions to the instructors and two to the students. The questions were designed in accordance with the main strategies of language teaching and learning skills. The questions of the interview were chosen among ten questions by the final judgement of three experts in the field, who are teaching staff in the Department of Educational Sciences in Erzincan University.

3.5. Data analysis

We obtained the data through one by one and face to face interview with the participant instructors and students; the replies to the interview questions were abstracted and made into pure data. The data were then transferred and digitalized into computer in order to form digital data. As the number of participants in our study was low, we did not use content analysis with the percentage and frequency values.

4. FINDINGS

We asked two open ended question to the participant instructors to obtain the data, the first one is "Why do the Meskhetian students fail in examinations, though they can speak Turkish?" The instructors replied the first question as follows;

(Instructor 1, Teacher of Mathematics with 10 years of experience) *"... I have been teaching mathematics for ten years and this school is my third workplace. At my first school I had a lot of bilingual*

students, and I am aware of the importance of language proficiency for academic achievement. The better the students have academic language skill, the more successful they become at examinations. The immigrant students in my class have a good mathematic background but they fail in the exams and quizzes as they are lack of academic vocabulary capacity. If they can understand the question, they are more likely to do well, otherwise I need to explain the question in a simple way using simple vocabulary ….”

From the statements of the instructor, we can argue that scientific vocabulary in education is very important for the students to understand the texts or questions at examination paper, and to do well and be successful in courses. The fact that the immigrant students are good at mathematics is not enough for them to be successful in the class as they do not have academic language proficiency.

According to Farmer (2007), for the reader to understand what he or she is reading, the unknown words in the text must be understood and conceived of the sense of unity between the words and the paragraphs. Reading is to understand what is written, and to take the message of the author and to be able to dominate the profound structure of the text. A student who fails to understand what he reads can never succeed in school life.

Individuals who have a habit of reading books are patient and focused on work. They are successful in everything they do because they are attracted to their work with high motivation.

In order to determine the reasons why Meskhetian students fail in the examinations and what they expect their teachers to do so that they can be successful at quizzes and examinations, we asked five students at secondary school and the statements of the students are as follows;

(Student 1, at the 6th Grade of Secondary School) *“… I am twelve years old. Accompanied with my parents and four siblings, I migrated to Turkey and were accommodated in Üzümlü district. I had to leave the school in Ukraine due to migration to Turkey. Soon after we came here, we were subject to Turkish Language to adapt the accent that is formerly spoken in Turkey. Although I can communicate very well with my native friends and new friends in Turkey, most of my peers have been failure in examinations like me. I can speak well out of school but I have difficulty comprehending the texts and the questions of the exams. I often ask my teachers to explain the questions as I encounter a lot of words that I have never heard and known before. This is not only my problem, but my immigrant peers are of the same ….”*

From the statements of the student, reading comprehension skill is of great importance in the courses such as Language, Mathematics and Science. Scientific and academic vocabulary plays a great role in academic achievements of immigrant students. The reason for their failure in examinations has been found to depend on their inadequate reading practices.

It is often observed that people without goals have a miserable and monotonous life. But those who read books have goals and roots that they set for these goals. They walk with sure steps to each goal and do not give up their purpose.

In the study by Ateş (2008), titled “The relationship between the Reading Comprehension levels of the students at the 6th grade of Secondary School and academic achievements and attitudes to Turkish Language Course”, it was found that the students with high level of comprehension in reading are significantly more successful than those with low and medium level of comprehension in reading. Moreover, academic achievement averages of the students with intermediate level of reading were found to be significantly higher than those with low level. In the study titled “A Study on the Determination of the Effect of Reading Comprehension on the Mathematical Success', Tatar and Soylu (2006) determined a meaningful relationship between students' scores in Turkish Language and Mathematics courses

(Instructor 2, Teacher of Science with 3 years of experience) *“… It is 3 years since I began teaching science at Secondary School. My first experience with the Meskhetian students in my classes was in the*

last semester. I have done my best to help immigrant students become successful in their courses. I know they are very good at Science Courses , yet they do not have the ability to express themselves in the courses. I refer this situation to their lack of academic language and doing insufficient reading. Because, they can communicate well out of course, whereas they are not so good at understanding the textbooks and using language at examinations…."

(Student 3, at the 9th Grade of High School) *"… I can speak Turkish so well that some native people in our town can not realise that I am immigrant. I do not have any difficulty in oral communication with the teachers and the other staff. But when it comes to courses and examinations, I do not become sure about the exact meaning of scientific words. As I always read textbooks in Russian and Ukrainian Languages during my education before migration to Turkey, I find difficult to understand Turkish scientific and academic language in some section and units of textbooks …."*

From the statements of the instructors and the students, we can conclude that reading is very important for the immigrant students to learn target language and achieve in exams and courses.

Reading habits do not only enhance the comprehension capacity of a person in general, but also one's thinking power, mental processing ability. Understanding, comprehending and analysing are all important function of the mind. As physical development of our body depends on food, so does our mind depends on knowledge. The mind is fed with knowledge. One of the most important ways of acquiring information is through reading. Reading means increasing mental capacity. The teachers should provide their immigrant students with suitable readings for their science courses. In this way the vocabulary capacities of the immigrant students will enhance to the desired level. On the other hand, some textbooks are not so easy for the immigrant students to understand, as the scientific language is uneven in the level of difficulty.

Those who acquire reading habits are successful in their decisions and time management. They enjoy a planned and programmed life. True collective lifestyles add joy to their lives and their looking around are always positive, which brings success in their educational life

According to Yıldız (2015), in order to solve the disproportionate distribution of language skills in the textbooks, it is necessary to seek solutions with additional teaching materials that the teachers will prepare by considering the language needs and levels of the target language.

(Instructor 3, academic staff in the university with 6 years of experience) *"… I am teaching Turkish language at various departments of Faculty of Science and Arts. Only two of my students are immigrants and they came from Ukraine. Turkish is their native language, but they got their Elementary Education in Ukraine. They read all the course books in Russian and Ukrainian Languages. They have a hard time understanding my course. I encourage them to do the readings as much as possible. I have observed some improvements in their readings and using vocabulary. Last year they were much worse than their present situation…."*

Success in examination, above all, requires the question to be understood and comprehended correctly and quickly. Speed and accuracy of understanding a question will be different between the student with an advanced mental capacity and the one with less advanced mental capacity. Therefore, the reading habits are the first and foremost effect on the success of the exam. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that this understanding process is valid not only for Turkish and Social Science courses, but also for mathematics and science-based courses. In our country in recent years, etc. almost all of the students who have succeeded at the top levels in their exams for university or Anatolian High School clearly state that they owe it to their reading habits as well as their regular and disciplined work.

5. RESULT AND SUGGESTIONS

The Meskethian students having migrated from Ukraine to Üzümlü Subprovince of Erzincan, Turkey during the last two years have certain difficulties in examinations particularly in multiple choice exams, inasmuch as they are not good at academic language and scientific readings. It is argued that these immigrant students had their trainings in Russian and Ukrainian Languages before migration to Turkey. their scientific backgrounds are fairly well but scientific languages are not sufficient for education in Turkish schools.

The instructors, mentors, teachers and education coaches should encourage immigrant students to do the readings regularly and should make it as a habit in their free time. Many researchers (Biggs, 1999; Bowden and Morton, 2000; Bain, 2004; Erickson et al, 2006; Millis, 2008) argue that individuals who have a habit of reading books are patient and focused on work. They are successful in everything they do because they are attracted to their work with high motivation. It can often be observed that people without goals have a miserable and monotonous life. But those who read books have goals and roots that they set for these goals. They walk with sure steps to each goal and do not give up their target. Those who acquire reading habits are successful in their decisions and time management. They enjoy a planned and programmed life. True collective lifestyles add joy to their lives and their looking around are always positive. Regular readers always tend to learn new things. That is why they are not easily persuaded against tabular, superstitious beliefs and some generally accepted things. They always need to improve themselves. They easily empathize. Good readers are creative, and know that everything they learn will benefit them. As a result of this, speaking skills and literary skills are at a high level. Reading books regularly enhance the capacity of vocabulary which is required for reading comprehension and deeply understanding the texts, thus bringing success at examinations.

We have the conclusion that the instructors should provide some reading opportunities for the immigrant students so that they can enhance their vocabulary capacity. The instructors should develop educational materials suitable for the students to learn scientific vocabulary and to keep them in their mind easily. The instructors should repeatedly explain the meaning of the exam questions in a way that the immigrant students can understand precisely and correctly. In this way the immigrant students can learn the language of exam, thus developing their academic language. As every scientific field has its own scientific language, the immigrant students should be taught the differences between the meanings of difficult words regarding their usage in different ways so that the immigrant students can understand the deep meaning of the questions in examinations.

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