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## **TRANSFORMATION IN THE TURKISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY: THE ELEMENTS BEHIND THE CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF EFL**

### INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire ruled the lands of Anatolia for more than 600 years, during which the educational system was always in a transformation process. On the other hand, following the collapse of the Empire, New Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 based on a completely different regulation system with lots of modern principles. Under the rule of the new republic, people went through a process of radical innovations in many areas including education. Within the transformation period, there were considerable changes not only in the school types and the curricula, but also in the basic elements of education such as the type of the original alphabet and the educational philosophies behind the whole educational system. In the recent years of the Turkish Republic, there have also been a number of reforms in educational policies as a result of the political and economical progress of the country. Foreign language education (FLE) has always become a part of curricula with a recent focus on English language. Therefore, in accordance with the educational reforms, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Turkey has also widely transformed in terms of the objectives and the standards. Since 2012, the obligatory process of education (4+4+4), ends with high school education which could be completed in different types of high schools which basically follow a common core curriculum in English courses. On the other hand, the recent reforms such as the *2023 Education Vision* (MEB, 2018) project suggest variety in the application of the curriculum in different types of high schools in addition to the diverse weekly hours of language

classes. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the transformation and the development process of Turkish educational system starting from the Ottoman Empire in parallel with the political and historical events, which leads to the contemporary status of English as a foreign language in Turkey. By this way, the problem this study focuses on is the conditions and needs becoming crucial in shaping the process of contemporary state of EFL in Turkey.

## 1. TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Education in the Ottoman Empire can be broadly divided into the classical period and the post-Tanzimat period<sup>1</sup> (Inalcik & Seyitdanlioglu, 2006, p. 387). The Ottoman educational system consisted of various institutions of groups belonging to different religions. Muslims as an essential element of the Ottoman Empire, were considered as a single nation. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, had different statuses according to their religions and sects. It is worth noting that there was no central educational policy for the elements of the Ottoman Empire in the first 500 years. Therefore, each nation such as Armenians and Greeks implemented different education systems by following their own curricula with very low number of hours of Turkish. While the education of non-Muslims was under the supervision of their own spiritual head, the education of Muslims was under the control of the state. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as in the rest of the world, education was conducted with classic religious-oriented programs. In these years, westernization in military education was adopted in order to stop the underdeveloped military and political elements compared to Europe. Since westernization obviously gained momentum during the Tanzimat period, the western model of education began to develop alongside the classical education model (Ozturk, 2007, p. 567).

*Mektep* was the basic word for the schools with the meaning of „a place to teach literacy” hence educational institutions for Muslims in the Ottoman Empire were *sıbyan mektepleri* (Eng. primary schools) and *madradas* (Eng. middle school and high school). Primary schools were basic educational institutions that spread to the villages. The main purpose of these institutions, which were usually located in a single classroom with a single teacher, was to convey religious and cultural traditions to children during the three-year period of education. The program consisted of Qur’anic reading, catechism and moral knowledge, and there were also lessons for writing and arithmetry. Primary schools were built and financed by local foundations or by the people of the neighborhood or village. However, the Muslim people did not show enough interest in the *sıbyan mektepleri* and they were unfortunately not willing to send their children to these institutions because of the financial problems. For example, even in Istanbul, which

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<sup>1</sup> In Ottoman literature, the Tanzimat period covers the years 1839–1876. However, within the scope of the term modernization, this period continues until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

was the center of modernization in 1820, a significant number of children lacked basic education as they needed to work. The basic backbone of the educational system in the Ottoman Empire was the *madrasas*. *Madrasas* were established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and they played a significant role in the development of culture and civilization. *Madrasas*, in today's sense, covered the process from the second level of primary education to undergraduate education. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *madrasas* began to deteriorate because knowledge and skills were not sought in the selection and promotion of instructors. In addition, *madrasas* declined because philosophy and mental sciences were excluded. With the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, military schools were established to follow the political changes and developments in Europe. These institutions, which provided education in the fields of engineering and medicine, civilized over time (Ozturk, 2007, pp. 565–568).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *madrasa* education was completely out of date. Therefore, there was an inevitable need for a total innovation in education. In 1838, a ministry of education (Turk. *Mekâtib-i Rüşdiyye Nezareti*, Eng. ministry of secondary schools) was founded with the responsibility to establish *rüşdiyye* (Eng. secondary schools) to train students for higher education, however, the plan did not become successful. In 1845, following the declaration of *Tanzimat Fermani*<sup>2</sup> (Eng. Tanzimat Edict), an edict was issued by the then sultan, Abdülmecid, with the statement of the need for the modern schools in order to provide development of the country (Inalcik & Seyitdanlioglu, 2006, p. 493). Thereupon, an institution called *Meclis-i Maarif-i Muvakkat* (Eng. council of temporary schools) was founded with a three-tier educational system consisting of primary, secondary and higher education, similarly to the West. In 1857, the Ministry of Education was established to be responsible for educational affairs. These developments were also the beginning of the dual education model that would last until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This dichotomy was traditional *madrasa* education on the one hand and westernized institutions on the other. In 1847, the first *rüşdiyye* was opened. In the 1850s, *ibtidai* (Eng. primary school) schools were established, which provided modern education in contrast to *sibyan mektepleri*. In 1870, the first *Darülfunun* (Eng. university) was established, which was followed by the first *idadi* (Eng. high school) in 1874. Thus, the western-style three-tier educational system emerged concretely. In the meantime, between 1848 and 1870, secondary schools for girls and teacher training schools for both men and women were also opened. It is worth noting that this was the time when Muslim girls over the age of ten were allowed to continue their formal education for the first time in the history of Islam. Teacher training schools were also important in terms

<sup>2</sup> The Tanzimat Edict was promulgated in 1839. Edict means a written order of the Sultan. Although Tanzimat was proclaimed in 1839, it was initially implemented in Istanbul. Its implementation in the entire Ottoman geography covered a long time. Therefore, it was not applied everywhere at the same time and with the same effect due to political, social, military, and geographical issues. Thus, modernization could not take place everywhere.

of implementing a semi-secular model outside the *madrasa* for the first time. In 1868, a secondary education institution called *Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultanisi* was established, with the focus on educating society as familiar with European language and culture. The mission of this school was to encourage children from different religious and ethnic groups to adopt the understanding of Ottomanism (Davison, 1961, p. 298).

In 1869, the Regulation on Education, which was valid until the collapse of the empire, was issued. Interestingly, the French educational system was taken as a model in this regulation, and the schools were classified as primary, secondary and higher education. The management and curriculum of all schools at these levels became completely controlled by the government. Obviously, the aim was to make religious and ethnic groups feel themselves as Ottoman citizens (Ozturk, 2007, p. 567). The duration of education in primary schools was four years, and if there were two schools in a neighborhood or village, one was to be reserved for girls. Schools for Muslims and non-Muslims were separate. Teachers had to be Ottoman citizens and graduates of *Darülmualim* (Eng. school of teachers). The second-tier *rüşdiyes* were four-year schools with more than five hundred households, established in every town and paid for by the state. The curriculum of the *rüşdiyes* included religion, the Ottoman language, spelling and writing, Arabic and Persian grammar, calligraphy, arithmetics, geometry, Ottoman history, geography and gymnastics. Notably, there were lessons for the mostly spoken language in the city of the *rüşdiyes* and it was also possible to learn French as a foreign language in the fourth grade in the commercial centers. In girls' secondary schools, teachers were required to be women. Subjects such as sewing-embroidery, music and housekeeping were also included in the curriculum in girls' secondary schools. Those who graduated from the *rüşdiyes* were educated together with Muslim and non-Muslim children with the courses such as reading and writing Turkish, French, Ottoman laws, logic, geography, general history, mathematics, engineering, chemistry and painting. Those who graduated from *rüşdiyes* with an exam could attend *sultani schools* (Eng. university) in return for a fee, which were in the form of higher education (Cagır & Turk, 2017, pp. 1–14).

## 2. EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN TURKISH REPUBLIC

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, which was an extensive revolution of moving from sultanate into democratic parliamentary system. This revolution resulted in significant changes in many fields such as law, economy and education. In order to provide the central rule over the educational institutions, a secularity-based law (Turk. *Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*, Eng. centralized education law) was implemented in 1924, through which the religious schools (Turk. *medrese*) were abolished. Relatedly, the government founded centralized mixed state schools after closing single-sex *medreses* to provide girls with education. All schools became

free, and they started to follow a fixed curriculum prepared by the state (Ozturk, 2007, p. 567).

It is worth stressing that scientists from various countries were invited to the new country in order to increase the quality of education. John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator, was one of the most significant scientists visiting the newly founded country to make observations and suggestions for improvements. After visiting Turkey in 1924, Dewey wrote two valuable reports, *Preliminary Report* and *Report and Recommendation Upon Turkish Education*, one of which was related to how national budget should be used in the field of education (e.g. building schools, libraries, educating people to work there, sending young people to other countries to get professional education, training teachers). The second report was about identifying school objectives, educating all members of society, designing curricula based on the local needs of different regions and founding teacher-schools. Following these reports, the first curriculum of Turkish Republic was designed, which was turning around the philosophies of progressivism and pragmatism based on Dewey's ideas. In addition, essentialism had a great role in designing this curriculum as it was necessary to prevent resistance against the new values and reforms appearing with the new Republic after having Ottoman traditions for hundreds of years. The emphasis on the idea of nationalism was also crucial to provide sustainability of the new one-nation country (Ulubey & Aykac, 2017, p. 1196).

One of the enormous changes in the educational system in this period was the commencement to use Latin alphabet in 1928 by abolishing Ottoman alphabet which was a mixed alphabet of Persian and Arabic. The main purpose of this change was to increase the low literacy rate (less than 10%) of society by having an easier and western-style alphabet. In 1932, a different type of educational institution, *halkevleri* (Eng. home for society) was founded around the new country in order to educate adults through multiple courses of science and arts. Local libraries also became available for the people living in smaller parts of the country such as villages. Following these reforms, the number of schools increased including art schools, vocational schools, teacher schools and institutes. In 1937, a project to educate teachers for the village schools was implemented, which was the initial step in founding *köy enstitüleri* (Eng. village institutes) in 1940. The main slogan of these well-designed institutes was „Production within education and education within production”. They aimed to change the traditional mindset of the smaller parts of the country by introducing the ideas of secularism and also to educate some people from rural areas so that they can educate the rest of the society. This would be provided through production-based curricula in parallel with Dewey's idea of „learning by doing”. Accordingly, the curricula of these institutes were designed by focusing on the local conditions such as teaching fishing, farming, beekeeping, and also covering artistic and cultural lessons such as painting, music and theater in addition to the regular courses. Including the local people in these activities and providing a total development for the whole

area were similar to the ideas of *Politechnical School* of Blonsky or *Collective Production School* of Makarenko (Cetin & Kahya, 2017, pp. 134–161; Ezer, 2020, pp. 1787–1801).

In this period, the main philosophy shaping the educational system was positivism, westernism (occidentalism) and Turkism. This main ideology is stated in National Education Law No. 1739 as [...] *the main purpose of education is to improve abilities by adding knowledge, behaviors and cooperation skills, through which providing the qualities of a profession making themselves and the society happier* (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Mevzuat Bilgi Sistemi, 1973, p. 2). Accordingly, value education was also shaped around the national values such as „being a good citizen”. Foreign languages such as English, German and French were included in the curricula. It is worth pointing out that Anatolian high schools were founded in 1956 with the aim of providing better education including high level English because of the increasing popularity of English around the world<sup>3</sup>. These schools were suggesting one-year obligatory English preparatory program to develop language skills of the students.

In 1960, there was a military coup with the purpose of „bringing national values back to the country with an instable process”, which caused a big devastation for the economy. For the field of education, the committee announcing the coup had the idea of a special educational program, *Milli Eğitim Seferberliği* (Eng. National Education Campaign), around the country in order to increase the educational level of the society. As part of this program, retired soldiers were allowed to become teachers and work in *Halk Eğitim Merkezleri* (Eng. Education Center for Society), teaching reading and writing, and also some professional skills such as farming or sewing. The curricula and coursebooks were revised to be more nationalist. Despite all these revisions, the literacy rate could only become 48% in 1965 (Kilic, 2020, p. 102). On October 30, 1961, a new era began in relations between Turkey and Germany with the *Turkish Agreement on the Repatriation of Workers to the Federal Republic of Germany*, after which Turkish workers started to migrate to Germany to work (Ger. *Gasterbeiter*) (Kandaz, 2006, p. 40). This migration movement provoked the immigrants to try to learn the target language (German) to express themselves as part of their interaction with the local community. During this process, while trying to integrate into the new culture, the immigrants became more aware of their own cultural values in order to protect their own identity (Iyi, 2021, p. 23). Unfortunately, following the period

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<sup>3</sup> The word „Anatolia”, of Greek origin (anatolē ανατολή), has three different meanings: (1) departure, rise, especially sunrise, (2) east, (3) East of the Aegean; verb form (anatállō ανατέλλω) means to rise, to appear. The word „Anatolia” was used to specify the geographical area which is „The eastern country, the country between the east coast of the Aegean and the Euphrates river” (etimolojiturkce.com, retrieved: 22.02.2024).

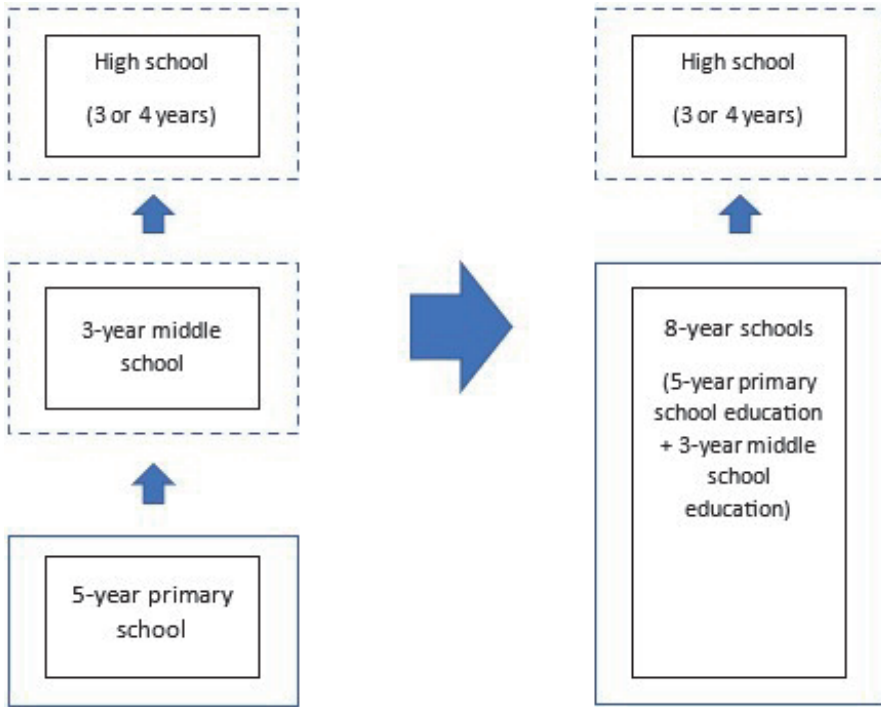
Between June 06-21, 1941, Turkey was divided into 7 major geographical regions (Karadeniz, Marmara, Ege, Akdeniz, İç Anadolu, Doğu Anadolu, Güneydoğu Anadolu) in The First Geography Congress in Ankara based on the geographical location, landforms, climate, vegetation, hydrography, soil, settlement, population and economic activities (MEB, 1941; Özcaglar, 2003, p. 13).



of conflict between rightist and leftist groups in 1970s, there was another military coup in 1980 in order to form „a military disciplined society” which brought high inflation and unemployment to the country once again. As a result of the movement of the immigrants back to Turkey, the Ministry of Education suggested a number of summer schools and Integrative Anatolian Highschools in order to help the children of the immigrant families to integrate or re-integrate into Turkish society and educational system of Turkey (Akbalık et al., 2003, p. 3). These schools provided not only basic high school courses such as social sciences and mathematics, but also some extra courses such as Turkish, religion and morality. However, these schools did not become popular as they were not well-designed in terms of their curriculum, capacity and eligibility (Caglar, 1993, pp. 19–22). After 1987, Turkey could have democratic elections.

Pragmatism was the basic philosophy in Turkish education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following the valuable suggestions of John Dewey based on the idea that education is not the preparation for life, but the life itself. This philosophy with essentialism could be easily identified in all forms of curricula published in the following years (1936, 1948, 1968 and 1998) after the first national curriculum of 1926. Through the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ideologies behind educational system have widely evolved by taking into consideration the common qualifications identified by the fields of education and business. The basic concepts for this new world order are learning and innovating skills, media and technology skills, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, cooperation, creativity, technological literacy, flexibility, self-control and productivity (Kartal, 2019, p. 3). These global changes in the philosophy of education resulted in a number of advancements in Turkish educational system, one of which was the reform of 8-year obligatory education in 1997 by changing the prior law of 5-year obligatory education of 1924 (Figure 1) (Cinar et al., 2007, p. 189). In accordance with globalization, international communication became very important, and English was included in the curriculum starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade as 3 hours per week. All of these changes resulted in an increase number of schools and students throughout the country. Therefore, there was an inevitable need for more English teachers and this problem was temporarily solved by assigning graduates from different areas such as chemistry or philosophy. University graduates could work as English teachers if they had the basic English knowledge such as being graduated from a English-medium university, which was identified as 5% within all English teachers (Taner, 2017, p. 301; Yaman, 2019, p. 161).

**Figure 1**  
Transformation of Obligatory Education System in Turkey in 1997

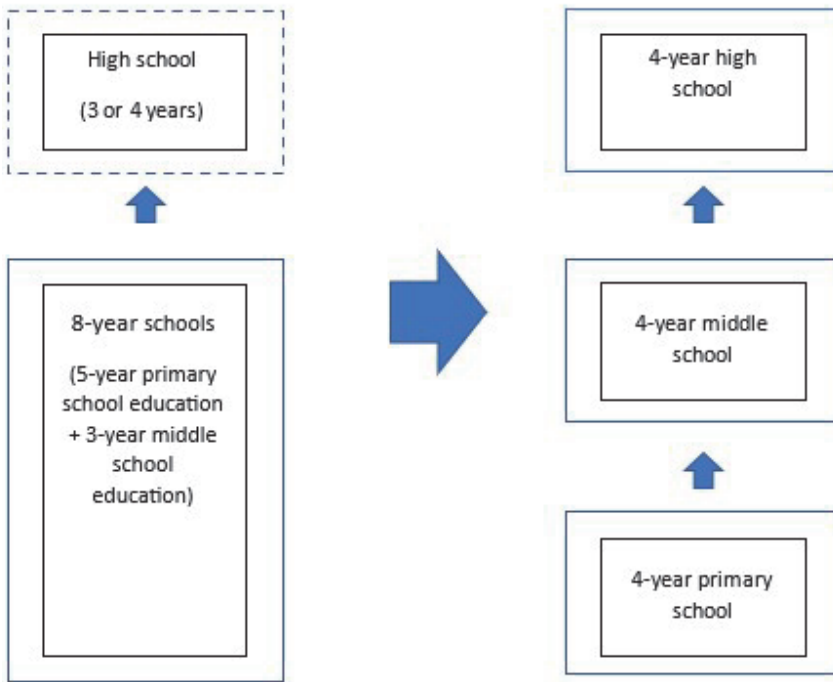


*Note.* This is the change from the 5-year obligatory educational system working from 1924 with non-obligatory middle-school and high school education into the 8-year obligatory education with non-obligatory high school education in 1997. The figure is the author's work.

In 2005, a constructivist approach was started to be implemented and high school education was increased to 4 years with 10 hours of English classes per week. With the academic year of 2008–2009, the system of *Dynamic Education* was started in which foreign language teaching was supported by computers for the grades between 4 to 8. In 2010, another innovative project called *FATİH* was put into practice which aimed to distribute tablets to teachers and students, and also provide smartboards to classrooms in order to use technology actively to support learning. In 2011, the government started to employ foreign teachers from other countries to provide English speaking classes in primary and middle schools, which was criticized harshly because of the high unemployment rates of English teachers with Turkish nationality in the same period. In 2012, the obligatory school period became 12 years in the form of 4 years of primary school, 4 years of middle school and 4 years of high school (Figure 2). In the new three-level (4+4+4) system students have more foreign language courses starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and the curriculum is activity based focusing on the skills development within the context (Gursoy et al., 2016, p. 61).



**Figure 2**  
Transformation of Obligatory Education System in Turkey in 2012



*Note.* This is the change from the 8-year obligatory education with non-obligatory high school education (1997) into the 12-year obligatory system (2012). The figure is the author's work.

More recently, in 2018, the Ministry of National Education announced the *2023 Education Vision* (2018) project with the aim of qualifying students with the skills and abilities necessary for the current and future era. The slogan of the project was „Happy Kids, Strong Turkey” and the reforms in each field of education would be student-centered as the needs and abilities of students would be prioritized. Some other interesting projects in the vision document included preparing development plans for each school individually based on their profiles and needs by creating a data storage system for each school and allocating budget to the schools for these needs. The main emphasis of education would be the evaluation of the whole learning process of the students rather than the grades as the final product, which would bring less focus on the exams. The approaches were listed as „game-oriented learning” for 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, and „differentiated education” for 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades. In addition to introducing social, cultural and sports activities into the curricula, teachers’ and school administrators’ qualifications were planned to be developed only through in-service trainings.

After starting the project implementation, the researches showed that the project had a number of positive aspects such as being comprehensive and

well-prepared (Dogan & Tuncer, 2022, p. 91). Aksoy (2021, p. 15) described the new project as very similar to the 1968 primary educational curriculum as they both focused on individual differences and teaching of students in addition to the emphasis on production, interaction and promotion of national and moral values by applying a decentralized curriculum. School administrators seemed to be generally supportive to the project because they thought students would feel a greater sense of belonging to school, become more social and more successful in their courses (Canbulat et al., 2020, p. 575). The project was also accepted as beneficial in terms of being human-oriented, skills-based and innovation-oriented (Solak & Karatas, 2020, p. 7). Teachers from various levels of education also had positive ideas about the project by stating that the project would provide students to participate in different activities through which they could explore their skills and interests (Canbulat et al., 2020, p. 575; Duran & Kurt, 2019, p. 98) and also to interact and cooperate with their peers (Canbulat et al., 2020, p. 575).

Despite these positive aspects of the project, the school administrators identified a number of drawbacks about the document such as including unclear sentences as targets and the problems in the feasibility and application (Dogan & Tuncer, 2022, pp. 79, 81), lack of concentration in students, more workload for teachers, and not having enough budget to make the suggested activities in schools (Canbulat et al., 2020, p. 576). Teachers also stated some possible problems in the project such as the lack of opportunities in some parts of the country, the difficulty in its implementation because of the problems in physical structure of classrooms. Teachers also drew attention to the exam-oriented system and their worries about the quality of short class hours suggested by the project (Canbulat et al., 2020, pp. 144–146; Duran & Kurt, 2019, p. 98).

Interestingly, in the *2023 Education Vision* (MEB, 2018) document, there was a specific chapter related to FLE with three targets. The first objective was the adaptation of FLE based on the levels and types of the schools, which aimed to have specific programs and curricula for different types of schools. For instance, vocational high schools of tourism without preparatory class would have English classes (starting from A1/A2 level in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade) with the focus on improving communication skills such as listening and speaking. Related to that target, Ozmen (2018, p. 5) criticized that in order to develop communication skills, students should have a basic level (B1) in English, which is not the case for these student groups. In addition, it was also necessary to revise evaluation methods such as test types based on these new targets, which has not been included in the Vision report. Karakas (2021, p. 74) also drew attention to the teacher qualifications working in these schools, as they were not educated to teach English for professional life (ESP: English for Specific Purposes) in specific types of schools, which requires specialization in the related fields.

Another objective of *Education Vision* document related to foreign language education was to give a chance to students to experience English-speaking

world. On that issue, Ozmen (2018, p. 4) drew attention to the limited class hours and not having the chance to practice English out of the classrooms. Without revising the class hours to provide students to use their English skills more often, it would not be easy to apply this objective in real life. Karakas (2021, p. 61) also stated that various student profiles in different parts of Turkey, lack of technological facilities at schools and incapability of teachers to use technological tools effectively would be problems in the implementation process.

The last objective in FLE was to improve the qualifications and the competence of foreign language teachers. As the foreign teacher certificate programs did not focus on the local needs and problems of Turkish students and schools, these programs might not be beneficial. In addition, as the trainers in these programs would probably be non-Turkish, they would not even be aware of the problems of Turkish students in learning English (Ozmen, 2018, p. 3). In the Karakas's (2021, p. 72) study, teachers also identified this objective as impractical as they would not have enough time and budget to participate in in-service training programs because of their other responsibilities at school and at home.

### 3. CONTINUOUS PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE TURKISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

In this long and constantly changing atmosphere, the educational system of Turkey undoubtedly has had a number of problems. The issue of unstable educational system is listed as a problem not only by teachers, but also by student-teachers and parents (Ates & Ihtiyaroglu, 2019, p. 182; Eren, 2022, p. 120; Guven & Guven, 2019, p. 415). Even in the 100-year history of the Turkish Republic, there have been many political and economic turns and flows, with unavoidable effects on the educational system. The instability in politics and repeated coups resulted in the financial crises causing the people to feel worried about their life and employment standards. In addition, these economic recessions inevitably caused problems in the investments in education. As a result, financial issues were listed as a significant problem not only by the teachers of Turkey, but also by the school administrators and student-teachers (Eren, 2022, pp. 118, 120). Student-related issues such as students entering high schools with lower points from the entrance exam, negative attitude towards schools or discipline problems are also commonly mentioned by teachers and school administrators (Eren, 2022, pp. 118–119; Guven & Guven, 2019, p. 415). The lack of quality in schools, constantly revised curricula, and changes in the admission criteria for better schools unfortunately caused the students to lose their belief in the necessity and value of education. It is worth to emphasize that that is completely the contrary of the Dewey's philosophy and the basic standards of the Turkish educational system which is „education is not the preparation for life, but the life itself”.

On the other hand, Turkey has a high population with various needs in the different parts of the country. Without providing the basic standards such as a well-developed and stable school or exam system in each part of Turkey, it would not be possible to take care of the individual needs of these areas. The difficulty in implementation of well-prepared plans and the issues of feasibility in various parts of Turkey, unqualified teachers, low quality course-books, and the focus on memorization are also listed as the problems by teachers and student-teachers (Ates & Ihtiyaroglu, 2019, pp. 182–184; Guven & Guven, 2019, p. 415). Relatedly, there is also a problem in providing equal living standards such as the availability of well-equipped hospitals all around Turkey. This caused teachers not to prefer to work in some parts of the country (e.g. Eastern parts or less developed parts of Turkey) even if the government has some regulations (e.g. obligatory teaching service after being employed) or suggests some promotions (e.g. higher wage) in case they work in these cities or settlements. In case teachers go to work in these „less developed” parts of the country for a while, they generally want to change their workplace and move back to more developed areas when they complete their obligatory service as working conditions are more challenging. Unfortunately, constant flow of teachers in these less-preferred schools and areas is another problem for students as they need to get used to many teaching styles or sometimes, they even have the problem of lack of teachers.

Recently, becoming a teacher has been perceived as a profession with high expectations, but at the same time bringing a lot of economic, social and safety problems (e.g. low wages, the possibility of unemployment and the need to complete obligatory service) before starting to work in more developed parts of the country. In addition, both teachers and student-teachers also have worries about their own future such as finding jobs after graduation while parents stated their stress about their children’s future because of the high rates of unemployment in Turkey (Eren, 2022, p. 120). Similar to the teachers, students’ parents also care about the negative effects of the exam-oriented system such as dissatisfaction or the misery of the next generation. Families also care about the changing political conditions and the overestimated role of religion in shaping the educational systems and curricula. Having exams at every stage of education is also a problem for parents as they may not afford extra courses so that their children can become successful in these exams. They also always need to support their kids emotionally as exams bring a big amount of stress and worries for their children (Eren, 2022, p. 121).

In addition to these general problems, there are also some specific issues related to FLE in Turkey. First, despite high numbers of class hours in primary and middle schools (700 hours in total) and high schools (next 700 hours), most of the students (90%) still need to attend preparatory classes to pass English qualification exams at their universities before starting their undergraduate

education (Paker, 2012, p. 89). The reason for that can be the focus on grammar-skills in English classes at high schools instead of developing all skills and communication skills. The lack of oral exams and limited types of questions in written exams such as matching and gap filling are also the problems of the system, which provokes students not to produce but to memorize material just to pass the exams. The nation-wide foreign language exams are also based on reading skills, without any parts testing listening, speaking or writing skills (Paker, 2012, p. 90). Demirpolat (2015, p. 13) also suggested the issues with qualifications in English teachers such as insufficient number of internship hours before graduation and not having language or pedagogy-related background. Feasibility is another important problem including crowded classes or lack of technological devices to do the activities. Lastly, teaching related issues such as problems in coursebooks and not using the communicative approach are significant in limiting language learning success in Turkey (Celebi & Narinalp, 2020, pp. 4994–4997; Demirpolat, 2015, p. 13). Pre-service teachers also list the problems of not having various question types in foreign language exams, inflexible curriculum and coursebooks non-addressing the needs, non-communicative activities, using L1 in foreign language courses frequently, exam-oriented and unmotivated students, and physical problems such as crowded classes, and physical and technological limitations (Tasci, 2023, pp. 1668–1669).

#### 4. HIGH SCHOOLS IN TURKEY

After completing obligatory the 4-year primary school and 4-year middle school education, students have to start their high school education in Turkey. The recent data (2023–2024 academic year) about the number of schools and students in each type of high school has been presented below (Table 1). In the previous years, *Anadolu Liseleri* (Eng. Anatolian High Schools) referred to more prestigious schools which admitted students with higher number of points from the exam at the end of the middle school education. However, with a recent change in 2014, *Anadolu Liseleri* included a wide range of schools such as religious schools (Turk. *Imam Hatip Liseleri*, Eng. Religious High Schools) and also vocational and technical schools (Turk. *Mesleki ve Teknik Liseler*) of various fields such as law, information technologies, child development and education, maritime, electrical and electronical technologies, journalism, traditional Turkish arts, fashion design, health services etc., which explains the reason to have the highest population of students. *Fen Liseleri* (Eng. Scientific High Schools) are the second biggest group, covering a science-based curriculum, followed by art schools (Turk. *Güzel Sanatlar Liseleri*), sports schools (Turk. *Spor Liseleri*) and social sciences schools (Turk. *Sosyal Bilimler Liseleri*) (MEB, 2023, p. 5).

**Table 1**  
Number of High Schools Providing English Courses

	School	Student	Teacher
Anatolian HS*	2898	1.852.700	122.395
Social Sciences HS	94	41.947	2.999
Scientific HS	365	152.839	9.873
Artistic HS	105	17.654	2.577
Sport HS	99	23.895	1690

*Note.* This table was designed by the author based on the data from the website of the Turkish Ministry of Education (2023, p. 5).

Related to the popularity of the high schools in Turkey, the most recent OECD report (2023) demonstrated that upper secondary general programs (in Turkey it is high schools) are preferred more by the students with the percentage of (33.52%) while only 25.18% of the students are in upper secondary vocational programs in 2021 (p. 144). Moreover, nearly 99% (98.95%) of upper secondary schools students in Turkey are enrolled in the programs providing access to tertiary education. This high rate can be explained by a result of the perception about the need to attend universities with a basic level of English knowledge related to their profession in order to find a better job (p. 153).

In terms of school completion rates, 95.88% of males and 97.30% of females graduated from the upper secondary schools in 2021, while these rates are 77.74% for females and 64.34% for males in vocational programs (p. 196). In total 78% of females and 88% of males completed their upper secondary education in Turkey in 2021 (82% on average) (p. 209). That means male students have more tendency to leave school, maybe because of discipline problems or their need to work to support their families financially. The ratio of students to teaching staff is 14 in general programs while it is 11 in Turkish vocational schools in 2021 (p. 432). Therefore, vocational schools are places which offer more chances to observe interaction between teachers and students, which might facilitate learning in EFL courses as students could develop their language skills (Rido et al., 2014, pp. 422–423).

In the report, the national budgets allocated for education are also analyzed. Surprisingly, in Turkey, the total expenditure per upper secondary education student is higher in vocational programs compared to the general programs in 2020 despite the lower number of students (OECD, p. 264). As a percentage of GDP, total expenditure on general programs is 0.68% while it is 0.65% on vocational programs (1.32% in total) (pp. 282, 292). The source of funds seems to be increased through years from 84 (2012), to 110 (2016) and then to 114 (2020) similar to the increase in GDP rates in these years (p. 293).

In 2020, the Turkish government used 2.96% of total government expenditure for upper secondary schools, 1.15% for general schools and 1,81% for vocational

\* HS stands for High School in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.



schools despite its lower number of students (p. 316). With this rate, Turkey was one of the countries allocating the largest shares of government expenditure to vocational programs (p. 317). On the other hand, it is interesting that reports show a decrease in the budget provided for educational costs despite the increasing population and the constant incline in the number of students. That would cause inevitable negative effects on education such as not allocating enough funds to afford an increasing need for facilities such as an increased number of schools, classrooms with necessary equipment and teachers. For example, the government expenditure on education decreased in Turkey between 2019 and 2020 by 8.8% and then declined again between 2020 and 2021, by 9% (p. 323). Compared to the prior period, the government spent 5.9% less of the total government expenditure (p. 329) on education. This recession may result in less-qualified pre-service and in-service English teachers as they graduate from the faculties with more crowded classes, have less contact with the faculty members, less qualified internship process and less budget for research.

## 5. FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Education First (EF) is an international education company which suggests EF Standard English Test (EF SET) or some other English placement tests all around the world. EF regularly publishes reports comparing English proficiency levels of the countries and there is no other data set of comparable size and scope provided by any other organizations. The test takers are reported as mostly working adults or young adults finishing their studies. In the 2022 report of EF, Turkey was 64<sup>th</sup> out of 111 countries (scoring 495 points out of 800 on average) among with a low proficiency level. Similarly in the 2023 report of EF, Turkey was again 66<sup>th</sup> out of 113 countries (scoring 493 points out of 800 points on average) with a low proficiency profile in English. This level is reported as equal to the upper half of CEFR level B1 in English, which allows the individuals only to engage in small talks with colleagues and understand simple e-mails from the colleagues (Education First, 2022, p. 34; 2023, p. 46). On the other hand, in terms of the age groups, there is a surprising sharp decline in the success of the 18–20-year-old participants from all around the world between 2015–2023. Specifically in Europe, the participants aged 18–20 are the only group with a decrease in the profile of English proficiency. Similarly in Turkey, there is a sudden decline between 2015–2023 in the proficiency levels of the individuals at the age of 18–20 years old, who are expected to be at the end of their high school education (Education First, 2022, p. 7; 2023, pp. 18, 39).

In terms of the English language education, high schools in Turkey vary in terms of whether they provide one-year obligatory English preparatory class or not. The high schools with preparatory classes have more hours for language teaching in their curricula. During the preparatory year, weekly language classes cover 20/22 hours aimed at bringing students language skills from A1/A2 level

to B1 level (Table 2). In the following years, the students have language classes for 2 or 4 hours a week, allowing them to reach B2+ or C1 level. In some types of schools, it is also possible to take elective courses of foreign language in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade in addition to the obligatory ones. In the table below, the only school with a different case is the religious high school as they have the option to provide English or Arabic in the preparatory year. Even if students learn Arabic in the preparatory year, the obligatory foreign language course for the following years is English. The elective ones in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades can be either Arabic or English (MEB, 2016, p. 14; MEB, 2023, pp. 7–28).

**Table 2**  
Number of class hours in High Schools with the Preparatory Class

	Preparatory Class	9 (obligatory)	10 (obligatory)	11 (obligatory)	12 (obligatory)	11 (Elective)	12 (Elective)
Anatolian HS	20	4	4	4	4	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12
Social Sciences HS	20	4	4	2	2	0-2	0-2-3
Scientific HS	20	4	4	4	4	-	-
Special-programmed Scientific HS	22	4	4	4	4	-	-
Religious HS (English)	20	5	2	2	2	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12

*Note.* The students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades need to take obligatory English courses and they may (or may not – 0) also select a foreign language course as elective for different number of hours (2/10/12) in the same years (e.g. Anatolian High School students just have 4 obligatory hours of English in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades in case of not selecting it as an elective course. On the other hand, they might have up to 16 hours of English per week when they take it as an elective course for 12 hours). This table was designed by the author based on the data from the website of the Turkish Ministry of Education (2023, pp. 7–28).

On the other hand, the schools without one-year preparatory class have the purpose of developing English language skills of students starting from A1/A2 level to B2 level with different weekly hours of language classes based on the curricula of each type of school. While there are 4-hours English courses weekly in each year of Anatolian, Scientific, and Artistic High Schools, Social Sciences High School curriculum includes 4 hours English per week in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, and 2 hours in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Table 3). While there is no obligatory foreign language courses in Vocational and Technical High Schools, there is just one hour of English course in each grade in Sport High School. Religious High School has 5 hours of a foreign language course in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 2 hours for the following years. The number of hours for English as an elective course in these schools are listed on Table 3 (MEB, 2018, pp. 7; MEB, 2023, pp.7–28).

**Table 3**

The number of class hours in High Schools without Preparatory Class

	9 (obligatory)	10 (obligatory)	11 (obligatory)	12 (obligatory)	11 (Elective)	12 (Elective)
Anatolian HS	4	4	4	4	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12
Social Sciences HS	4	4	2	2	0-2	0-2-3
Scientific HS	4	4	4	4	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12
Religious HS	5	2	2	2	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12
Vocational and Technical HS	-	-	-	-	0-2-10-12	0-2-10-12
Artistic HS	4	4	4	4	-	-
Sport HS	1	1	1	1	-	-

*Note.* The students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades need to take obligatory English courses and they may (or may not – 0) also select foreign language as an elective course for different number of hours (2/10/12) in the same years. (e.g. Anatolian High School students just have 4 obligatory hours of English in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades in case of not selecting it as an elective course. On the other hand, they might have 16 hours of English in a week when they take it as an elective course for 12 hours). This table was designed by the author based on the data from the website of Turkish Ministry of Education (2023, pp. 7–28).

All in all, there is a big difference between various types of high schools in terms of their language education schedules. First, in the high schools with the preparatory class, students have at least 2 hours per week to continue to improve their language skills after the preparatory class. In addition, these students have the chance to develop their English level more if they prefer to take it as an elective course, even with the chance to take 12 hours of English a week. On the other hand, the high schools without the preparatory class have a completely different situation. In these schools, students of Anatolian High Schools, Scientific High Schools and Artistic High Schools have 4 obligatory hours of English, weekly, for each year, which is the only chance to learn the language if they do not prefer to take it as an elective course. Furthermore, students of Social Sciences High Schools, Religious High Schools and Sports High Schools may have even fewer (5/4/2/1) weekly hours of English for each year with or without the chance to take it as an elective. Lastly, in Vocational and Technical High Schools, there are no obligatory English classes for any year and students may graduate without learning English if they do not prefer to take it as an elective in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

After completing this kind of various high school education in Turkey, students need to take national examinations (*Yuksekogretim Kurumlari Sinavi*, YKS; Eng. Higher Education Exam) for access to tertiary education, the case of which is very similar to 29% of the other OECD countries (OECD, 2023, p. 409). The first part of YKS exam, *Temel Yeterlilik Testi* (TYT, Eng. Basic Qualification Test) is a central exam, which is common and obligatory for all students, including

questions from Turkish, mathematics, science etc. Although English language education starts at primary school and lasts until the end of the high school, there is no obligatory foreign language part in the first common exam. In the second step of YKS, students need to take another test, *Alan Yeterlilik Testi* (AYT, Eng. Field Qualification Test), which includes a number of tests (e.g. Turkish language and literature, mathematics, physics, chemistry, history, geography) based on their preferences and the criteria of their target university faculties and departments. In that step, only the students, who plan to attend language-related departments of the universities, take a foreign language exam, *Yabancı Dil Testi* (YDT, Eng. Foreign Language Test) (OSYM, 2023, p. 11).

Within this examination system, not having any foreign language questions in the basic exam, TYT, appears as the first problem for the motivation of students as they do not see English as a reasonable course for their lives. On the other hand, there are some English medium universities/programmes at prestigious universities and when students want to enroll in these programmes, they need to pass an English qualification exam before taking bachelor courses. As a result, they (again) need to attend one-year preparatory programs at that point of their lives, which could be late for improving their language skills. These students sometimes even need to take private English courses to be able to pass English proficiency exams. Furthermore, YDT is paper based and verifies only passive/receptive knowledge of reading, grammar and vocabulary without any parts to test active knowledge of listening, speaking or writing skills. Thus, foreign language students may get higher points to start language-related programs without advanced communicative skills (becoming active users of English). When they are enrolled in the universities, they also take English proficiency exams including listening, speaking and writing skills and if they fail, they also (again) need to spend one year in the universities' preparatory program, which might actually be the second year in their lives to learn English if they already attended it in high school. As these students are expected to become professionals in these languages after graduation, struggling with the communicative skills within this period entails the problem of expressing themselves orally and understanding their teachers in their undergraduate courses. This issue also affects their professional skills such as their ability to teach English.

## CONCLUSION

Education has been a basic field of transformation in the lands of Anatolia not only during the long history of the Ottoman Empire, but also during the recent years of the new Turkish Republic. Changes in educational system has not just been in terms of the philosophy behind the school structure and theoretical concept of education, but also in the practical areas directly affecting the society such as the legal alphabet of the country or the obligatory years of education. Having these radical shifts has definitely brought some drawbacks in their

application in addition to their benefits. One of the following issues was losing the value of education in the eyes of students as they perceived the educational system as something not prioritized by the authorities. On the other hand, the worries of teachers and school administrators were about the implementation of the improvement projects because of the unequal opportunities around the country, physical incapacities and budget related issues. Specifically related to FLE, there have been a number of conversions in the curricula and exams; however, not including foreign language questions in the common and obligatory exam (TYT) to enter the universities and testing only passive knowledge of students in the foreign language exam (YDT) led to demotivation of students to learn English at an advanced level. In this case, it will definitely be better to re-design the curriculum and the structure of the educational system for all schools. These revisions should be coordinated with some practical changes such as altering the obligatory exams for all students, by including productive skills such as speaking and writing in addition to tests on their passive knowledge in order to improve English levels of students. In addition, language students will probably be taught more effectively in Turkey if they improve their English skills before entering the university. As a result, they could neither waste their time before starting their university education nor have problems resulted from being late to learn a foreign language. As this study has focused on the transformation of the educational system of Turkey throughout history, which has led to the contemporary status of English as a foreign language in Turkey. Another approach should refer to the country's current social and economic conditions, and the necessary adjustments to provide success in EFL. Moreover, examining language teaching programmes and curricula of various steps of education may help to have a wider perspective and to have more effective suggestions about EFL in Turkey.

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### ***Transformation in the Turkish Educational System from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey: The Elements Behind the Contemporary Status of EFL***

#### **Summary**

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to show the evolution of the Turkish educational system, tracing its development from the Ottoman Empire simultaneously with the political and historical events. Thus, it intends to explore the conditions and requirements that played a pivotal role in shaping the current status of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Turkey.

**Methods:** The historical review method was used to present frequent regulations applied by the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic in the country’s educational system, and more specifically in the education of English.

**Results:** Frequent radical changes of the last two decades in the educational system have resulted in a number of problems. Firstly, education lost its value in the eyes of students as they thought the authorities do not see the educational system as something important for the country. Secondly, there have been many concerns among teachers and school administrators regarding the implementation of the improvement projects due to some factors such as inequality in opportunities across the country, physical limitations, and budgetary constraints. In the context of Foreign Language Education (FLE), the lack of foreign language questions in the common mandatory university entrance exam (TYT), and the assessment of only passive language knowledge in the foreign language exam (YDT), led to a decline in students’ motivation to learn English.

**Conclusions:** Enhancing English proficiency prior to university admission could lead to more success in language learning experiences of students in Turkey. This approach would prevent them from wasting their time before commencing their university education and avoid challenges arising from delayed foreign language learning.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the educational system, the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic, students’ motivation to learn English.