

CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES OF EFL TEACHERS AND NEWLY ARRIVED REFUGEE STUDENTS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN TURKEY

Halis Gözpinar

The need within the Turkish education system to educate the overwhelmingly large influx of refugees is becoming a never pressing issue. This present paper examines the challenges and experiences of Turkish secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and newly arrived refugee students towards the current refugee-oriented education. It also aims to gain suggestions from them to improve education, particularly language education. This study was based on qualitative research. It used an ethnographic approach and provided information by using multiple sources of data in a culturally inclusive and multilingual environment. The participants were eighteen EFL teachers from five different schools and eight refugee students. The results indicated that most of the teachers had fears, stress and insufficient experience. They also agreed that EFL classrooms were unique, neutral and safer places to encourage and increase the active participation of refugee students.

KEYWORDS: English Teachers, Refugees, Secondary Education, Social Integration, Teacher Attitudes, Translanguaging.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of people are forced to flee their homelands every year out of desperation, due to reasons such as poverty and civil as well as regional conflict. Turkey, being a bridge between the east and the west, tolerates illegal

Halis Gözpinar ✉
Research Scholar, Giresun University,
English Language and Literature Department, Turkey
Email: halisgozpinar@gmail.com

immigration and remains home to the largest refugee population in the world. The Turkish National Ministry of Education has revised the policies for refugees and asylum seekers that are preventing them from getting an education in Turkish state schools. During the year 2014, MoNE had issued a circular which thus allows refugees to register with state schools (MEB, 2014). As schools across Turkey are starting to diversify, the need within the Turkish education system to educate the overwhelmingly large influx of refugees from neighbouring countries becomes a never more prominent and pressing issue.

Schools in host countries facilitate the contact with members of the local communities (Kao & Tienda 1995; Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011); provide a safe environment; reintroduce a sense of normality; foster social, psychological and intellectual development, and increase self-reliance (Arnot, Pinson & Candappa, 2009; Bačáková, 2011). Specific places in school, activities, friendships with children from similar cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, and relationships with teachers help build attachments to the school (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2016). But school settings that do not require rapid language and cultural acquisition are considered to be the best settings for refugee children in recent researches (McBrien, 2005).

The role of teachers worldwide in terms of their interaction with refugees has been the subject of extensive research. Teachers have difficulties when it comes to dealing with the complex social, psychological, and cultural challenges faced by students, as well as when it comes to obtaining resources that are tailored to their needs (Miller et al. 2005). Refugee student-teacher ratios, student behaviour, the lack of resources, and socio-political challenges put teachers under tremendous stress (O'Neal et al. 2016). Teachers fundamentally lack both readiness and training (Clark 2017), and what's more, they simply do not understand their students' needs (Windle & Miller 2010; Yau 1996; Yu 2012). Moreover, teachers lack any interest in taking time to learn about their students' backgrounds (Gagné, Schmidt, & Markus, 2017; Yau, 1996). Refugees experience racism at the hands of their teachers (Brewer & McCabe, 2014). Teacher-centered instruction often predominates in refugee classrooms, whereby teachers spend most of their time lecturing, as opposed to offering their students the opportunity to ask questions or foster creativity (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Turkish-based research aimed at identifying the professional competence of teachers in terms of how they interact with refugee students also reveals that teachers have difficulties in teaching them. Teachers do not have sufficient training (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Er & Bayındır, 2015; Sağlam & Ilksen Kanbur, 2017). It is felt that their awareness could be better raised through on-the-job training (Saklan & Erginer, 2017). They do not know what to do in situations

where they encounter communication problems with their students. A variety of events (in-class activities, school trips, etc.) should be planned in order to foster cross-cultural dialogue between the refugees and their Turkish peers (Rengi & Polat, 2014). Providing special attention when it comes to educating refugees is often met with little or no regard.

Moreover, teacher training curricula should include courses on multiculturalism and multicultural education, which currently are not offered even as electives in any Turkish teacher training program (Polat & Ogay Bakra, 2014). While a small number of pre-service teachers are sufficient when it comes to cross-cultural communication skills, they nevertheless lack any sense of empathy (Polat, 2009). Education that caters to the needs of refugees still remains insufficient. It lacks the philosophy associated with refugees, integration, and multiculturalism (Aydin, Gundogdu & Akgul, 2019).

Many schools seem ill-equipped to handle these kinds of issues, which are connected with refugee students in Turkey. The refugee students in culturally inclusive classrooms with their Turkish peers' experience language barriers, lack of family support, culture clash, financial problems (Yasar & Amac, 2018), teacher-centered pedagogy, and discrimination in school settings (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). They also have problems with reaching information (Nofal, 2017), difficulty in comprehension, making communication, self-expression (Ciğerci & Güngör, 2016), integration, lack of trauma-sensitive instruction, lack of contextual knowledge, lack of school resources, lack of a learner-centered approach, a wave of xenophobia, overcrowded schools (Aydin & Kaya, 2017). The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey has increased its focus on the need to strengthen teacher capacity to be responsive to the needs of the refugee students and decided to develop an inclusive education teacher training module (UNICEF 2018). In order to provide better education to all children, this study aims to contribute to the government's response strategies and action plans.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Education in emergencies should meet psychosocial needs and convey key messages and skills (Sinclair, 2001). Schools need to develop an action plan for recently arrived refugee pupils in the short term. Imagine that one day your school's principal enters your classroom with a refugee student by her/his side. What language would you use to greet that child? Turkish, Arabic, English...? The student is likely to suffer from psychological issues due to war and the trauma associated with it. The child has stumbled into a safe haven for the first time. Despite the teacher knowing almost nothing about her/his new

pupil, in many instances “a common language” comes to their rescue. This language, more often than not, is “English”. The use of any language other than English in such situations should be encouraged so that refugee students can benefit from their knowledge of languages. This is the strategic usage of multiple languages to create meaning and called “translanguaging” which doesn't consider language as a mere linguistic competence. It incorporates an understanding of how various modes add to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire in order to maximize communicative potential (García, 2009: 140). The role of foreign language teachers in such a situation cannot and should not be underestimated – that is, at least until students gain a sound command of the language of the host country. Multilingual students and teachers should feel responsible to support refugee education at the school. It was hypothesized that most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in this research would be ill-equipped to teach refugees and would be in a particularly good place to bridge cultural divides and help refugee students. It was anticipated that EFL classrooms would be neutral and safer places encouraging active participation of refugee students and local students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research examines the challenges and experiences of Turkish secondary school EFL teachers and newly arrived refugee students towards the current refugee-oriented education. It also aims to gain suggestions to improve education for them, particularly the language education. This study is a qualitative research using an ethnographic approach and was conducted in a multilingual environment where the refugees have to acquire three languages, namely Arabic, Turkish and English. In order to better focus on this topic, the researcher has sought to answer the following two questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' challenges and experiences of their ability to teach refugees?
2. What are refugee students' experiences regarding EFL classes?

SAMPLE FOR THE STUDY

The total number of refugee students residing in the province of Ordu, Turkey is 1,060 according to 2017-2018 education year statistics. Their countries of origin are as follows: Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, and Algeria. The researcher included the opinion of eight refugee students (five females – three males) about their experiences regarding EFL classes. The refugee students do not want to talk much because they think that those who conduct surveys, interviews or researches are state officials.

There were eight teachers of English as a foreign language in the school. The researcher also informed five head English teachers representing each school at monthly provincial teacher meetings. The total number of English teachers in those five schools was thirty-four. The researcher chose the teachers among the ones who had a minimum of three (3+) refugee students in their classes and had a minimum of five (5+) years of teaching experience. A total of eighteen English teachers (eleven females – seven males), expressed interest in the topic with great sensitivity, had agreed to participate in the study. Four of the schools managed international school projects within the scope of Erasmus+ in the last five years and six teachers have had an international experience. Teachers have no knowledge of the mother tongues of their students (i.e. Modern Arabic, Kurdish, Farsi-Dari etc.)

DATA COLLECTION

This present study is the result of the researcher's (2015 – 2017) teaching English as a foreign language to refugee students at a high school in Ordu, Turkey. Fifty-six refugee students were studying at the school the researcher was working. The researcher was a member of the refugee integration committee at the school. Thanks to five years of experience as a teacher of Turkish as a Foreign Language (TFL) abroad, the researcher ran Turkish language trainings for refugees as well and had a chance to evaluate their educational progression through classroom observations, unstructured interviews, field notes, e-mails and phone correspondence, face-to-face discussions, family visits, and casual talks with parents, youth, and teachers. The researcher tried to obtain a broad range of data from all of the participants. The education center for research and development in the city Ordu also helped the researcher with the collection of data. The study provides information by using multiple sources of data such as:

- a) Semi-structured / unstructured interviews
- b) teachers' committee meetings
- c) field research
- d) classroom observations and
- e) small group discussions

DATA ANALYSIS

Evaluation of the semi-structured / unstructured interviews with the participants and field notes will be the central focus of the findings. After learning more about the teachers' experiences and challenges of their ability to teach refugees, and the refugee students' experiences regarding EFL classes, the researcher scanned, coded, and categorized the data collected through multiple sources and then reorganized, grouped them according to themes, and presented them.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

What emerged out of the analysis were two broad themes:

1. Teachers' Experiences and Challenges

The majority of the teachers agreed that they should keep abreast with trends and developments in teaching throughout the course of their professional lives. They think that they are not ideally responsive enough to refugees needs due to a lack of prior experience as well insufficient training in this matter. Only three teachers indicated that they had received special refugee education training, thanks in part to efforts made by the MoNE in terms of providing teacher training workshops and courses. They also think that teacher training programs must be in line with international standards. They agreed that their knowledge on how to approach and teach refugees will only increase over time through on-the-job training. A few are optimistic about their refugee education progress:

Extract 1

"I had felt unenthusiastic about teaching the refugees during their first few weeks as well as during specialized training. Yet, after gaining bit of experience in working with them over a period of time, my attitude had changed for the better and became more self-confident."

A few teachers mentioned that their positive, sensitive and appropriate attitude may be a starting point for developing refugee students' capacity:

Extract 2

"We all should keep in mind that one does not always require words in order to make him- or herself understood. A student's only expectation of their teacher is her/his willingness to help as well as a smile on her/his face."

Some teachers also think that MoNE should create a website through which teachers from across Turkey can get in touch and share experiences:

Extract 3

"We should share our experiences with teachers including those who do not presently have refugee students in their classroom. We learn best from each other."

Some teachers also expressed that they had no knowledge whatsoever of their students' cultural backgrounds. According to them, inter-cultural awareness of the teachers should be increased:

Extract 4

"Teachers' degree of competence in intercultural awareness needs to be increased, which would, in turn, contribute to their teaching experience."

Most teachers also put the emphasis on developing culturally and socially appropriate materials for refugee students. A few teachers also commented that these materials should not cause their students a culture shock:

Extract 5

"I feel that teachers first should be familiar with the culture(s) of their students when selecting materials, talking about culture and general topics. The student could perceive what they are being taught in the wrong way and thus lose trust in her or him."

Teachers also agreed that under such circumstances, implementing the use of such materials requires extra time and energy, and could lead to the teacher trying to avoid taking on any responsibility.

Some teachers mentioned that because the authorities spread refugee students across various schools, this causes a few public schools and some teachers to ignore refugee students:

Extract 6

"Teachers often follow their curriculum. We don't allocate extra time for refugee students. If we accommodate additional time, host students are bored easily."

Some teachers argued that teaching refugees' places too much stress on them and they are unable to properly follow the teaching curriculum:

Extract 7

"I feel that these types of factors put tremendous pressure upon teachers and may even prevent them from doing their jobs properly."

One female teacher talked about an event that affected her very much. She also thinks that it creates pedagogical dilemmas for them:

Extract 8

"Teaching refugees is joyful but also extremely stressful especially when you listen to the stories and the challenges they have faced or are struggling with now. You often remember these stories and have the same suffering as if you have experienced them. You also need to think how you can deal with their severe problems."

Teachers also put the emphasis on the administrators' strong leadership strategy and their approach to refugee education in a constructive manner. A few teachers have the perception that the administrator is placing an extra load upon her/him, in turn, causing them to lash out:

Extract 9

"There is absolutely no logic in administrations occupying teachers' time with more paperwork than necessary, when instead teachers could be focusing their attention on carrying out their roles as educators."

According to the results, most teachers are ill-equipped to teach refugees and lacking prior experience as well sufficient training. They concluded that their knowledge will only increase over time after receiving specialized training and gaining experience in working with refugee students. Teachers also argued that this situation places too much stress on them. They suggested that culturally and socially appropriate materials should be developed and administrators' approach should be of a constructive manner.

2. English Classes are Valued Places for Refugee Students

The vast number of teachers agreed that refugee students' academic performance and proficiency in Turkish level must be increased. According to them, they are not able to attain the same level of success as other local students although some of them are eager to learn. Some refugee students agreed with their teachers and think this is the most difficult problem:

Extract 10

"I want to believe that my education is not temporary. I wish they implement programs to support us."

Some refugee students said that they want to localize themselves but think that some teachers have to change their attitudes towards them:

Extract 11

"We want teachers to be sensitive to our journeys. We don't want to be treated as an outsider but as a newcomer."

Most refugee students mentioned how their English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes help them in hosting community. A few students expressed their positive experience in the following words:

Extract 12

"I will never forget the support of my English teacher right from day one. She had included me into group activities and pair work in order for me to make new friends."

One student also talked about benefiting from something of a similar nature:

Extract 13

"In English class I had put together a presentation showing people about the pre-war condition of the touristic landmarks in my country. They immediately came to understand how destructive war is. My classmates after that had started to show me more respect and love."

A few teachers also commented that refugee students are more successful and more motivated in English courses. They also reminded the importance of the variety of activities in English classes:

Extract 14

“Performing dialogues, theatrical sketches, storytelling, various group activities, and the singing of songs, had somewhat lowered their psychological stress.”

They also stressed how non-language teachers who have knowledge of foreign languages are just as important during this period:

Extract 15

“Students respectfully tend to flock around such teachers. Teachers who are unaware of this fact are generally surprised by how happy they have made their students.”

These extracts suggest that teachers mostly follow their curriculum and some refugee students feel ignored. There is an urgent need for “newcomer” programs. Considerable burden rests upon the shoulders of EFL teachers. Multilingual teachers should feel responsible too.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Need for Turkish Language Training

Countries such as the U.S.A., the U.K., Canada, and Australia are well known for their many years of successful refugee education (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Birman, 2007; Boyson & Short, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 1988; Haynes, 2017). Turkey should also form “newcomer” programs which will provide the refugee students with the opportunity to academically, culturally and emotionally adapt to rapid change in their new lives through language training and meeting fellow immigrants with common experiences. Refugee students fare the best in school after they have acquired the academic language of their new country and been accepted by their teachers and new peers (McBrien, 2005). Turkish is the medium of education across all public schools in Turkey. Refugee students are unfortunately thrown headfirst into “normal” school classes with their Turkish peers without first receiving intensive Turkish-language training, so refugee children cannot easily adapt to it. There are Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish language courses organized by governorships, municipalities and MoNE, however none of them sufficient enough to meet the needs.

Most teachers agreed that in the long term, refugee students need to acquire the language of their host country (Turkish) in order to meet their basic needs. The vast majority of refugee students living in the province of Ordu continue their education at special Imam Hatip religious vocational high schools because the curriculum is taught predominantly in Arabic. It is a culturally inclusive and multilingual environment where the refugees have

to acquire three languages, namely Arabic, Turkish and English. The researcher was working in such type of schools. Refugees' problems tended to be addressed the quickest in such schools where the number of native or non-native Arabic-speaking teachers was relatively high. Teachers also agreed that refugee students should be directed to such types of schools in the short term.

EFL Teachers' Fears, Stress and Insufficient Experience

The majority of English teachers in this research agreed that their colleagues, as well as most non-language teachers who have no/less knowledge of foreign languages, currently view themselves as being ill-equipped to teach refugees. Their insufficient experience can lead to misinterpretation of their families' culturally inappropriate attempts to succeed in their new environment (Hones, 2002; Lee, 2002; Trueba et al., 1990). Some teachers also reminded that refugee students inform one another about their overall status and their teachers. They also stressed that when teachers seem reluctant and lack empathy, students feel unaccepted, which will cause them to skip school (Hones, 2002; Lee, 2002; Trueba et al., 1990). Teachers should receive specialized training to help refugee students understand the unique needs of them (Henderson & Ambroso, 2018). The courses must develop teachers as researchers, not just technicians and deliverers of the syllabus (Richards & Renandya, 2002, pp77). Teachers in this research agreed that Turkey needs to have its universities swing into action more and pre-service teachers ought to receive more training in refugee education.

Most refugees experience three types of stress: migration stress, acculturative stress, and traumatic stress (Adkins, Birman & Sample, 1999). Psychosocial adjustment, language acquisition, repressed memory, trauma experience and lacking support can negatively influence their academic achievement and language acquisition (Finn, 2010; McBrien, 2005; Sondergaard & Theorell, 2004). Teachers need to know how those children's learning styles are affected by their previous educational experiences and by any physical, emotional, or neurological barriers to learning which they may have (Genesee, 1994). They should embrace refugee youth and provide an education that meets the needs of all students (Prior & Niesz, 2013). Most teachers agreed that all these create a challenging set of pedagogical dilemmas for them. In order for them to get past such scenarios, Richards and Renandya (2002, pp77) suggest that "teachers must be reflective, analytic and creative, open to new methods and ideas." Teachers have the same type of pedagogical, curricular, linguistic and social obstacles and fears as their refugee students (Karam, Kibler & Yoder, 2017). Excessive workloads and

challenging pedagogical dilemmas put an extra burden on the shoulders of the teachers and create a stressful atmosphere as well as a stressful teacher. This stress will affect their psychological well-being, teaching quality (Harmsen, Helms - Lorenz, Maulana & van Veen, 2018) and students' achievement (Klusmann, Richter & Lüdtke, 2016). They will be more vulnerable to the pressures of the situation (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). They will have to overcome their fears and stress while helping refugee students who experience the same. This could lead to the teacher trying to avoid taking on any responsibility because they will have to cope with their own challenges. As they develop their coping skills and teaching skills, the problems decrease. Teaching is a profession that is learned naturally over time, and the learning of how to work with refugees is no exception to that rule.

EFL Classrooms are Unique, Neutral and Safer Places

Schools should develop an action plan for recently arrived refugee pupils in the short term at least until they learn the language of the host country. English language learning is essential in building resilience among displaced populations and learning English plays different roles: developing feelings of confidence and happiness; recovering from the shocks; providing better job opportunities; better living conditions, fast integration (Ameen & Cinkara, 2018; Cinkara, 2017). Turkish is the medium of education across all public schools in Turkey, whilst English is mandatorily taught from the first grade onwards. Turkish high school students' level of communication skills in English versus in Arabic is better. The refugee students whose English levels are slightly better are able to establish communication, which is reflected in terms of their social comfort. Those who know English are also able to bridge communication between the hosting and refugee groups (Gözpınar, 2018a, pp. 102). If more refugees could arrive with basic English, the adjustment could be faster, less traumatic, and less expensive to the receiving country where they are resettled (Steele, 2017). Some of the refugee students' motivation level is high in English classes because of the desire and belief that they may be resettled in an English-speaking country (Wachob & Williams, 2010). English classes create space in schools to support their literacy and they are united by language, literacy and learning (Naidoo, 2012).

EFL teachers and their class activities can play an essential role in overcoming the pedagogical, curricular, linguistic, and social obstacles of refugee students (Ameen & Cinkara, 2018; Cinkara, 2017; Karam, Kibler & Yoder, 2017). Learning is considered as "participation" and this participation refers to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of

social communities (Wenger, 1998). EFL classrooms are unique, neutral and safer places encouraging and increasing active participation of refugee students and local students. The teacher's doing more engaging activities rather than imposing responsibilities yields positive results. The classes both give language support and meet the social and emotional needs of refugee students. They lower the students' stress level in this situation because they learn to communicate and to get to know each other in a neutral language. It helps to ameliorate social tensions as they get to know each other in this neutral terrain (so it can be good for society also). Their interaction through English both boosts the student's level of confidence and makes them feel special. Teachers also provide students with the opportunity to form cross-cultural friendships based on common core values.

This duty is not only of EFL teachers. Schools should promote “translanguaging” in such situations. The administrators should have a strong leadership strategy and their approach to this topic should be of a constructive manner. Recently arrived refugees who are multilingual or have proficiency in key languages should get together for at least an hour a day with the teachers with whom they share a common language. They should empathize with refugees, and moreover, ponder over what measures they can take in order to responsibly prevent a “lost generation”. Such teachers should teach practical and social content and aim to meet refugee students' fundamental needs as well as provide them with one-to-one tutoring. Refugee students will be able to freely express themselves and share their stories while improving their knowledge of languages and awareness in or out of school. They will begin to place great value on their language use and to learn more about cultures and interact with more peers and teachers. This approach can be viewed as a plan of action particularly for countries that accept refugees on mass and are thus caught unprepared as a consequence.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) ought to be given a good deal of emphasis in foreign language teaching (Demircioğlu & Çakır, 2015). Cultural studies heighten sociocultural understanding, lead students to become more sensitive towards other cultures and change their negative attitudes into positive ones (Gözpinar, 2018b). Learners understand the nature of the relationship between language and culture in foreign language classrooms. Cross-culturally sensitive teachers are immensely empathetic, as well as have demeanours that are more positive, more supportive, and warmer than their monocultural peers (Börü & Boyacı, 2016). This research showed that teachers, who had previously lived or studied in cosmopolitan cities, who spent time abroad, participated in international education programs are more supportive and view multicultural education more

positively than their peers who lack the same experience. Such programs help for shattering the preconceived notions that cultures have about one another and improving traditional four language skills, as well as cultural studies (Gözpınar, 2018c).

The materials they use should include the host culture and the home culture of refugee students (Gözpınar, 2018b). Teachers will be more compassionate and willing to work with refugees when they have enough knowledge about their backgrounds (Hones, 2002). Most teachers think that the spiritual and cultural/ethnic makeup of the Middle East is no different than that of Turkey when in reality the differences between them on every level are in fact rather stark. First, they should become familiar with the culture(s) of their students when selecting their materials, talking about culture and general topics which might be different than theirs or else the student could perceive what they are being taught in the wrong way and thus lose trust in the teacher. Teachers should care for their needs and be flexible in attaining them. They can do immeasurable good for their healing and sense of purpose. It brings meaning and belonging to refugee students, as they learn to appreciate other cultures and especially their own (Steele, 2017).

We expect that this research will shed light on new subtopics within, as well as serve as a sound contribution to this particular field. The information that the participants of this research provide might be of tremendous value both to students and educators alike. Hence, educators will be able to develop better and more appropriate teaching methods, as well as be able to better address the needs of learners and form policies based on those needs.

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