DEVELOPING A CEF BASED CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY

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The common purposes of the studies conducted in language program evaluations are to examine the match between what is desired for the programme versus the actual state of the programme, to make judgments about learners' level of skills and knowledge, and to make suggestions for improvement. However, it is not currently common practice in Turkey either to develop language teaching programmes based on the Common European Framework as a reference, or to introduce improvements in these programmes based on an evaluation of their effectiveness. This study aims to describe the process of developing a new teaching programme, taking CEF into consideration, at the Preparatory Programme at the School of Foreign Languages, Izmir University of Economics, and also to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme. 236 Freshman students and 48 faculty members from 5 different faculties participated in the study. The results indicated a significant relationship between students' proficiency scores and perception of their own competencies and a significant difference in perception of their own competence in terms of levels at the preparatory program. Although faculty members stated that Preparatory Program, in general, meets the needs of the students, students still have difficulty in practising some tasks requiring higher order thinking skills. The study suggests a series of learner training sessions to raise the awareness of the students, extending duration of the modules, reviewing the order of objectives in Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate, and working in cooperation with Faculties in order to increase awareness of mutual expectations.

Key Words: language program evaluation, curriculum development, language learning, foreign language, Common European Framework, case study

INTRODUCTION

The idea of curriculum is not new, however, the way we understand and theorize it has changed over the years. Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) define curriculum as a plan that includes strategies for achieving desired goals. Much earlier, Bobbitt (1923) and Taba (1962) had approached curriculum from a wider perspective, describing the curriculum as a plan for learning, a production system, and a programme evaluation of the outcomes. Programme evaluation, which is a very significant part of curriculum, has also been defined differently in literature. While some educators relate evaluation with measurement, the others define it as the assessment of specific objectives which need to be attained (Worthen and Sanders, 1988). Tyler (1991) briefly summarizes programme evaluation as a process essential to curriculum development. As indicated in all these definitions, programme evaluation is seen as a systematic effort that includes the collection, analysis and synthesis of information.

Programme evaluation can be conducted for two main purposes: firstly, improving the programme, known as formative evaluation, and secondly, deciding whether a programme should be continued, called summative evaluation. Formative evaluation is conducted to collect and share information for programme improvement, through which problematic aspects are identified and possible solutions are worked on (Scriven, 1991). Summative evaluation, on the other hand, is conducted at the end of a programme to provide information about that programme's success (Worthen, 1990). Researchers emphasize that programmes should be evaluated regularly using either one or the other of these methods, and that decisions made should be based on research which covers the identification of measurable student learning objectives and outcomes, the assessment of the degree to which students are meeting the objectives, the evaluation and sharing of results, leading to consequent changes to the programme as deemed necessary (Scriven, 1991; Worthen, 1990).

Programme evaluations have been conducted in every single subject, discipline and field, including English Language Teaching as a Foreign Language. There has been an increasing need for developing and evaluating new language teaching programmes, in particular, after the introduction of intensive foreign language instruction into the Turkish education system. In the last two decades, programme evaluations of the Preparatory programmes at universities have become increasingly important. These evaluations are designed to ensure that, during the course of one academic year, students reach a proficient level of English, which will enable them to follow their courses effectively. Because of this mission attributed to preparatory programmes/schools, it is essential that the preparatory school programmes be evaluated regularly so that their strengths

and weaknesses can be identified and goals can be achieved. This need has led to a number of studies. In the study conducted by Güllü (2007), the English programme at Vocational School of Çukurova University was evaluated from the students' point of view, revealing certain problems such as the difficulty of the course content, course materials that appeared unattractive and lacked relevance, lack of motivation and interest, and inappropriate physical conditions. The data revealed that the programme did not match students' expectations and needs, and therefore, was in urgent need of reviewing, revision, and improvement. Erdem (1999) investigated the effectiveness of English language curriculum at Middle East Technical University and found that the program was overly teacher-centered and recommended its replacement with a more student-centered one. In addition, the study also revealed a need to improve in-service training and to set up an ongoing curriculum evaluation system. A similar study by Gerede (2005) at Anadolu University compared the old and renewed curricula of Preparatory Programme and the results showed that a significant improvement had occurred in terms of meeting the students' language needs. A study by Topçu (2005) examining the implementation of the theme-based curriculum and objectives of the Basic Education Department at the Middle East Technical University indicated a great difference between the perceptions of teachers and students. Karataş (2007) evaluated the syllabus of English instruction programme at Yıldız Teknik University by collecting data from teachers and students, revealing significant differences between the teachers' and students' opinions on the suitability of the programme's objectives, the audio-visual materials used in the programme, the tasks, students' participation, and the suitability of the activities. The results highlighted the negative opinions of the teachers, who emphasized that the programme had no positive effect on the students' listening, speaking or grammar knowledge.

The common purposes of the studies mentioned above are to examine the match between what is desired for the programme versus the actual state of the programme, to make judgments about learners' level of skills and knowledge, and to make suggestions for improvement. However, it is not currently common practice in Turkey either to develop language teaching programmes based on the Common European Framework as a reference, or to introduce improvements in these programmes based on an evaluation of their effectiveness. The Common European Framework (CEF) is a guideline for languages and is used as a reference point. It encourages programmes in language education to develop skills, create a system of continuous assessment; it also presents a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications and educational mobility. The framework provides a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods, and thus enhances the

transparency of courses, syllabus and qualifications (Council of Europe, 2003). For this reason, it is considered that designing a new English teaching programme based on CEF will lead to a sound and well-grounded syllabus. Many Asian and European countries as well as USA and Canada have either adopted CEF or made CEF based adaptations to their language teaching curricula. In the US, educational frameworks in every state borrowed scales from CEF. In Ireland, English Language Proficiency Benchmarks have been developed based on CEF for learners of English as a second language in primary and post-primary (secondary) schools. The aim is to offer a curriculum which can improve the learners' language so that they can access English-medium education without intensive support. Moreover, in China, the government is planning to change high school exit assessment and the curriculum according to CEF. In such a case, millions of people will be affected by this innovation (Little, 2006). Likewise, Korea is planning to implement changes in line with CEF in order that Korean students can have acceptable language qualifications when entering the global job market (Finch, 2009). However, the situation is not similar in Turkey as CEF addresses only general English whereas the Preparatory Programmes in English-medium universities in Turkey aim to teach General English while at the same time prepare their learners for the academic studies in their faculties. Therefore, their syllabi must include aspects of both General and Academic English. When this reality is taken into consideration in these settings, the implementation of CEF alone would be insufficient for the accomplishment of the objectives in the Preparatory Programmes, because CEF covers descriptions of objectives in General English only, and excludes Academic English. Thus, this study describes, in detail, how the Preparatory English Teaching Programme at Izmir University of Economics has been developed on the basis of the CEF, but also incorporating specifically academic objectives for each level. The study firstly gives information about the curriculum development process, importance of the study, then methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Previous System at the Preparatory Programme

School of Foreign Languages (SFL) runs the Preparatory Programme, which prepares the students for their Faculties through an intensive English preparatory year. Over the previous eight years of its existence, the school followed a semester-based system. An entire academic year in the semester based system consisted of two fourteen-week semesters, with no learner requirements needed to pass between levels. The three quizzes within the semester and one mid-term exam at the end of the semester only served to allow calculation of the average grade, which the administration used to decide whether the learner could enter the Proficiency in English Exam, the sole

requirement for learners to proceed with their undergraduate programmes. A questionnaire was given both to faculty members and students to see the effectiveness of the system. The feedback received showed inadequacies in students' proficiency in faculty classes, and this led the administration to search for new approaches.

Transition to the new system – "Modular System"

Having worked on new alternatives for one and a half years in order to develop the existing curriculum, Modular System was decided to be adopted for the 2009-2010 academic year. During the development of this teaching programme, the CEF was used as a resource tool, taking into account the needs of the setting. With the introduction of the modular system at the Preparatory Programme, an urgent need was felt to review and revise the programmes. The steps followed in this process are as follows:

- A needs analysis was conducted with the faculty members and Freshman students to identify the main needs of students and the expectations of faculty members, which later led the curriculum designers to develop the current curriculum accordingly.

- Having considered the needs of Faculty, the outcome of Preparatory Programme was defined as B2/CEF. Taking the need to reach this level as the finishing point, the Curriculum Unit accordingly set objectives for each level, Beginner (A), Elementary (B), Pre-Intermediate (C), Intermediate (D), and Upper Intermediate (E) levels. The identified aims/objectives were converted into linguistic requirements – "can do" statements of the CEF-, specifying not only the knowledge and skills, but also the ability level that the learner is likely to need.

- An international consultant on CEF was also involved in the process in order to oversee the research done for the improvement of the programme, and this ensured and confirmed the reliability of the work carried out for the implementation of Modular System.

 Modular System

The modular system consists of 5 levels: Beginner Level (A), Elementary Level (B), Pre-Intermediate Level (C), Intermediate Level (D), and Upper-Intermediate Level (E). Each level corresponds to one module which takes 7 weeks. In this respect, students who start their academic year in A Level can complete the Preparatory Programme in 5 modules (one academic year) on condition that they do not fail in any levels. Each level has its individual aims

and objectives which the students have to meet. The aims and objectives of each level are also interconnected serving for the purpose of the final outcome of Preparatory Programme. The aims for levels A and E are indicated below to give an overall idea of what is expected of the students at the beginning and at the end of the programme.

Table 1. Level aims

Reading	
Level A	Level E
Students can understand very short simple texts, postcards, e-mails, notices and written directions including familiar names, words, and basic phrases.	Students can understand complex texts at various lengths with a wide vocabulary range. They can follow the development of an argument; make judgments based on writer's attitude and implied / stated opinions. They can interpret graphic sources and draw conclusions based on prior knowledge and clues from the text.
Listening	
Level A	Level E
Students can follow very short monologues, dialogues, and simple instructions when carefully articulated with long pauses. They can understand very basic phrases and familiar words related to areas of most immediate priority (very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment, etc.)	Students can follow complex texts (monologues, interviews, discussions, dialogues, lectures). They can understand attitudes and viewpoints in complex texts on both concrete and abstract familiar topics. They can listen to lectures on academic topics and take notes for future reference.
Writing	
Level A	Level E
Students can write simple phrases / sentences and create simple texts on familiar topics.	Students can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects, synthesizing information and arguments from a number of sources when necessary. They can repair most of their own mistakes and monitor their own work with or without the help of a pre-prepared checklist.
Speaking	
Level A	Level E
Students can use phrases and very short sentences to talk about themselves and their family. They can ask simple questions to interact about their immediate needs and very familiar topics.	Students can express and seek view points, exchange relevant information, and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences in conversations and discussions on topical issues with a degree of fluency and spontaneity. They can report information and arguments from a number of sources. They can give descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to their field of interest.

As seen in the table, the aims have a simple, General English orientation in the early levels, but follow a more academic direction in the upper levels. The programme has been designed taking CEF and the faculty programmes into consideration. As a result, it is expected that students completing the Preparatory Programme will be equipped with General and Academic English, both of which are needed in their undergraduate programmes.

Table 2. Courses / skills and lesson hours in the modular system

LEVEL A (Beginner) 26 hours	Main Course	Integrated Skills	-	-
LEVEL B (Elementary) 26 hours	Main Course	Integrated Skills	-	-
LEVEL C (Pre-Intermediate) 26 hours	Main Course	Writing	-	-
LEVEL D (Intermediate) 28 hours	Main Course	Listening & Speaking	Reading	Writing
LEVEL E (Upper-Intermediate) 28 hours	Main Course	Listening & Speaking	Reading	Writing

As for assessment, to be eligible to move up to the next level, a student must achieve a weighted average of 60. 10% of the final mark is obtained from the Assessment Tasks and 90% from the Gateway examination. For each module, unsuccessful students have to repeat the module until they pass. In this way, students continue to move forward through the levels until they become eligible to take the Proficiency Exam.

Importance of the Study

The importance of integrating the European dimension of education into the existing national curricula is emphasized by the Ministry of Education and Board of Education in several studies (Doğan, 2007). It is believed that renewing foreign language teaching programmes in accordance with CEF will facilitate a clear definition of teaching and learning objectives and materials. Thus, it is expected that the results of this study will help the administration identify the level of effectiveness of the current English Teaching Programme, and also define the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. Another significant aspect of this study is that it will contribute to the scant body of literature on preparatory school programme evaluation, and also help those working in similar settings in both in administration and curriculum development to make the necessary adjustments to their programme.

METHOD

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to describe the process of developing a new teaching programme, taking CEF into consideration, at the Preparatory Programme at the School of Foreign Languages, Izmir University of Economics, and also to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme. The study answers the following questions:

- Is there a significant difference in students' perceptions of their own English competencies according to gender?
- Is there a significant relationship between students' proficiency scores obtained at the end of the Preparatory Programme and the perceptions of their own English competencies in their faculties?
- Is there any significant variation in students' perceptions of their own English competencies in their faculties according to their achieved levels in the Preparatory Programme?
- Is there a significant variation in students' perceptions of their own English competence according to the faculties they attend?
- What are the teachers' perceptions of the students' competencies in the four skills?

Participants

Participants in this study were 236 Freshman students, 110 male, 126 female, and 48 staff members from 5 different faculties, with teaching experience ranging from 2 to over 20 years. All students involved had experienced the initial year of the modular system in 2009-2010 academic year.

Data Collection Method

After a broad literature study, and careful consideration of objectives, the researchers developed a scale as a data collection instrument consisting of the abilities and competency level of students. The scale was piloted on 113 Freshman students from 5 different faculties and 10 faculty members. Reliability and factor analysis was conducted. Principle components analysis showed that there is one factor with an explained total variance (%59). The reliability co-efficiency was found to be 96. A focus group interview with 12 students was conducted to elicit the students' general perceptions of their competencies in four skills and the learning environment. Interviews with 48 faculty teachers were carried out to investigate the students' English language competencies in the faculties from the perspective of teachers'.

Data Analysis

Independent t-test was conducted in order to compare the means of male and female. One way ANOVA was used in order to compare the means of students' language level and its relation with the proficiency exam; and competency level was investigated by using Pearson correlation.

RESULTS

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a newly developed English language teaching programme based both on CEF and Academic English. The results regarding the first question exploring the question of whether there is a significant difference in students' perceptions of their own competencies in terms of gender indicate no significant difference between male and female students' perceptions of their own competencies ($t(234)=.79$, $p>.05$). It can be said that both males and females perceive themselves as equally competent in terms of using the English language in their faculties (Table 3.).

In regard to the second question a significant relationship between students' proficiency scores and perception of their own competencies was found ($r(237)=.24$, $p<.01$). The results indicate that students' perceptions regarding their competency level in faculties increase relative to the score of the final Proficiency exam.

The third question researched differences in students' perceptions of language competencies in terms of their starting levels at the Preparatory Programme. Results showed a significant difference in perception of their own competence in terms of levels was found out ($F(3,232)=3.7$, $p<.05$). According to the Tukey test, the difference between A and C is significant, which indicates that students who began the programme at Beginner level perceive themselves less competent than those starting at Pre-Intermediate level. The fourth question concerned the identification variation in students' perceptions, if any, of their English language competence in terms of four skills, according to their particular faculties. The results indicate no significant difference ($F(4,224)=.28$, $p>.05$), which means that students' competency level in English has not changed according to the faculty (Table 3.)

The last question examines the teachers' perceptions about the students' language competencies at faculties. Interviews were made during the teachers' office hours and questions in the scale were discussed with the teachers. The points and comments made by the teachers were noted down as follows:

In general, teachers stated that most students are able to understand the content of the English texts, follow lectures in English, and agreed that the education

students received at the Preparatory Programme helps them follow their lessons in the faculty. However, they stated that students still have difficulty in
- differentiating between main and supporting ideas in texts (9 teachers)
- differentiating important and irrelevant information in texts (13 teachers)
- differentiating facts from opinions in texts (18 teachers)
- paraphrasing and summarizing while writing essays (21 teachers)
- taking notes and writing clear and detailed texts (33 teachers)
- reporting ideas in written form by synthesizing information from a number of sources (31 teachers)
- paraphrasing and summarizing texts orally in English (27 teachers)
- taking part in discussions in English and presenting their ideas orally (21 teachers)

A focus group consisting of students revealed that students are able to follow lectures in English and communicate with their teachers in English. However, they reported difficulty in doing activities which require higher order thinking skills, such as differentiating facts from opinions, differentiating important information and irrelevant information, synthesizing information from a number of sources, and taking an active part in discussions in English. They also reported that while they feel comfortable with grammar based and guided activities, they feel less competent with activities which require creativity and production.

Table 3. Students' perception of English competencies according to gender, level, faculty

	N	*Mean*	*Standard Deviation*
GENDER			
Male	110	64.79	13.37
Female	126	63.53	11.01
LEVEL			
A Level	39	60.12	12.07
B Level	92	62.70	12.60
C Level	78	66.88	9.91
D Level	27	66.74	14.68
FACULTY			
Engineering	44	64.04	15.52
Economics	67	64.89	11.68
Communication	30	62.06	10.14
Arts and Sciences	29	64.48	11.46
Fine Arts and Design	59	64.20	12.03

DISCUSSION

The results of the statistics, interviews with the teachers, and the student focus groups indicate that, in general, selecting objectives according to CEF and integrating academic skills objectives into these undoubtedly led to a higher quality preparatory programme, as both students and faculty teachers find language competency sufficient. The only discrepancy is between the students' satisfaction with their own competency level in their faculties and the teachers' belief that students still need to improve the skills and abilities which require higher order thinking.

As the results of the study indicate, the high score of Proficiency exam and the level students start at the Preparatory Program are important determining factors for students' perceptions regarding their language competency level in their faculties. It is interesting to note that students who started at Pre-Intermediate level in the Preparatory programme felt more competent than those in all other levels, whether higher or lower. This is to be expected in relation to Beginner and Elementary level, but seems surprising in relation to Intermediate and Upper Intermediate levels. A possible reason could be that students who start the Preparatory programme at Pre-Intermediate level are frequently English-medium high school students who are likely to arrive at university with the perception of their own competence, originating from their previous academic background. The significant difference found between the Pre-Intermediate level and the other levels suggests that a careful examination of the objectives is needed, especially of the intermediate level, considering difficulty, appropriateness, and duration of each module.

That there is no significant difference among the faculties regarding students' perceptions of competency can be interpreted as the English teaching programme, in general, has met the language needs of the faculties. Teachers reported during interviews that students can follow lectures in English. However, students seem to have been unsuccessful in using some strategies and skills closely related with higher order thinking skills. One of the reasons for this could be that students come from a culture and an education system that tends to rely on memorization rather than the development of thinking skills. Thus, integrating academic skills into the CEF specifications is a strategy that is likely to have contributed to the prevention of complications which would have arisen if higher order thinking skills had been ignored. Many studies on higher order thinking skills emphasize the importance of a strong relationship between how four language components and thinking skills are taught in English classes. Thus, well-written objectives in the teaching programmes do not in themselves guarantee the development of student thinking, and, therefore, conscious efforts

by teachers should be made in this respect (Perkins, 1993). In addition, teaching higher order thinking skills are a long process and this should not only be the responsibility of language teachers in the preparatory programme. Course teachers at faculties should also design and present materials in a way that students could have an opportunity to improve these skills. Therefore, while it is essential in English medium universities to integrate academic skills into General English regarding the needs of the students, any particular Preparatory Programme, even one that blends both the general and the academic, is not likely to be sufficient in itself for the success of the students' undergraduate studies.

The results also revealed differences between the teachers' and students' perception regarding the objectives. The skills and strategies which we integrated into our program, such as paraphrasing and synthesizing, are seen by students as only a tool for language competence, while the expectation of the faculty teachers is that these skills acquired in the preparatory year should be of a sufficient level for effective use throughout their faculty education without further instruction. Students' lack of awareness of the importance of these academic skills, and the faculty teachers' overly high expectations of the preparatory programme may be part of the reason for the discrepancy stated above.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As indicated in several studies, programme evaluation is a systematic approach in identifying strengths and weaknesses of any programme, which leads to improvement in teaching programmes for the benefit of both students and teachers. The results of this study indicate that, in general, the programme meets the expectation of the students by supplying them with both General and Academic English. However, the teachers and the focus group students suggest that the programme still has room for improvement in some areas, mainly in the higher order thinking skills required in academic life.

Based on the needs put forward by teachers and students, it could be suggested that:
−   a series of learner training sessions to raise the awareness of the students can be integrated into their orientation program,
−   duration of the modules, particularly for Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate can be extended as these levels require more time to focus on higher order thinking skills,
−   the order of objectives in Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate Levels can be rearranged considering the difficulty level,

− some learning strategies and academic skills could be introduced in Elementary and Pre- Intermediate level in such a way that students will be exposed to them earlier to extend the duration for practice. For example, the reading objective "takes notes while reading'' is in the objectives of Level D. However, this objective can be introduced in Level C.

Faculty members and the Preparatory Program Curriculum Unit should work in cooperation in order to increase awareness of mutual expectations.

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