

# English Language Teaching in Turkmenistan — Still There Is A Way To Go

Meretguly Gurbanov

*Research scholar, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India*

**Abstract:** *The study gives some general information about Turkmenistan, the country which was chosen for this study. It provides some knowledge about its history, language, culture, and education system. The main part of this study uses mixed methods to investigate the history and present day situation of English language in educational and social contexts of Turkmenistan following the political changes of 1991. It also examines Turkmen people's attitudes toward the use of English in this EFL context before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The study provides a rationale for making relevant changes to English education, draws implications for curriculum development and teacher training, and makes suggestions for improving the teaching and learning of English in the country. The findings reveal that curriculum changes for English language education, which emerged as a result of reforms in Turkmenistan, have not been completely implemented mostly due to the shortage of well equipped researchers, curriculum developers and insufficient teacher training. Because, locally organized teacher training institutions are unable to provide effective education, the majority of Turkmen teachers of English are lack of both theoretical knowledge and practical understanding of the principles of latest approaches in teaching foreign languages. The unique role of English in the global village, the Turkmen people's positive attitudes toward the language and their effort to catch up with the Western world, English has become the most widely learned foreign language in Turkmenistan. The findings of this study are hoped to have implications on training well equipped teachers of EFL, designing new syllabuses and producing materials using latest approaches of FLT in order to improve ELT classes in Turkmenistan.*

**Keywords:** *Turkmen ELT context, Soviet time and after, EFL, Syllabus design and materials production, teacher training, Turkmenistan*

## 1.0. Introduction

### TURKMENISTAN: A Brief Knowledge

Turkmenistan is a Turkic country in Central Asia rich in natural gas and oil. Until 1991, 27<sup>th</sup> October, it was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkmen SSR). It is bordered by Afghanistan to the southeast, Iran to the southwest, Uzbekistan to the northeast, Kazakhstan to the northwest, and the Caspian Sea to the west. The name of its capital, Ashgabat, means “the City of Arsaces (Arshaq)” in Persian. It also loosely translates as “the city of love” or “the city that love built”.

Turkmen people has very strong tie with their tradition. They follow their custom in their daily life. Their dressings, eating habits, neighbourhood and so many other things in their daily routine are come from very rich tradition of Turkmen people. They have five thousand years of history as a nation which made them to have a rich tradition. In addition to that Turkmen people accepted Islam voluntarily in VII century, and this religion added so many good things to the tradition of this nation, the Nation which gave birth to the new cultures (Turkmenbashy, 2001).

Education is mandatory through the secondary level, the total duration of which is twelve years. Literacy is universal and medium of instruction is in Turkmen, Russian is second language and English is widely learned foreign language.

This study is a case study and is a descriptive, exploratory or explanatory analysis of Turkmen ELT, its history, changes and developments.

## **2.0. Literature Review**

The purpose of this part is to a critical look at the existing literature in order to build a theoretical framework for the present study.

### **2.1. Language Spread**

Cooper (1982), one of the most prominent and frequently cited scholars, defines language spread as “an increase, over time, in the proportion of a communication network that adopts a given language or language variety for a given communicative function” (p.6). He proposes three defining features of language spread: form, function, and pervasiveness. Form refers to the “linguistic diversity of the language which is spreading as well as to its structural similarity to the other languages known by adopters or potential adopters” (p.6). In other words, form is a new variety of a language which has developed as a result of its assimilation in a new language environment. Function, Cooper further claims, seeks answers for why a language or its varieties are spreading and who uses them. And finally, pervasiveness refers “to the degree to which speakers adopt a language or language varieties for a given communicative function” (Cooper, 1982, p.10, cited in Hasanova, 2007, p.6).

Brosnahan (1963) examines the reasons for language spread. He identifies four factors essential to be the phenomenon: 1) language is put into place through military conquest, 2) it must remain for an extended period of time, 3) it must be diffused in an area of multilingualism, and 4) it must confer material benefits upon its new users (cited in Hasanova, 2007, p.7). Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad (1977) further elaborated Brosnahan’s factors of language spread and hypothesized five additional factors that relate to the spread of languages around the world. These factors include: urbanization, economic

development, educational development, religious composition, and political affiliation (Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad, 1977).

In the early twentieth century when Turkmenistan became one of the republics of the Soviet Union, the political supremacy of the Soviet government attributed power to the Russian language because “only Russian allowed one to read the best Marxist – Leninist criticism of capitalist culture” (Fierman, 1991, p. 180, cited in Hasanova, 2007, p.8). During the Soviet era Russian also became the language of the political power, the legal system, the administrative network and higher education. The power of Russian in the Soviet Union was more than the power of English in British Empire.

English, unlike Russian, has neither political power nor colonial history in Turkmenistan. Therefore, the rapid spread of English in the newly independent country is primarily determined by the positive attitude of the Turkmen people toward the language and the users of this language, and by the unique role English holds in the international arena. Moreover, Turkmens realize that the knowledge of English has become essential in the wake of modern discoveries in technology, computer sciences, and health care.

### **3.0. Methodology**

Mixed-method approach was selected as the methodology of this study. Mixed methods research may be defined as “the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research” (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 212 cited in Creswell et al., 2005, p. 224).

Mixed-method approach enables the researchers to draw on all possibilities (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) and provides a broader perspective to the study as the qualitative data helps describe aspects the quantitative data cannot address (Creswell, 2003, cited in Ozsevik, 2010). A mixed-methods approach to research is one that involves gathering both numeric information (e.g., on instruments) as well as text information (e.g., on interviews) so that the final database represents both quantitative and qualitative information (Creswell, 2003, p.20, cited in Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Using both forms of data allows researchers to simultaneously generalize results from a sample to a population and to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

In this study, the mixed methodology helped to explain the Turkmen EFL situation broadly.

### **4.0. Importance of the study**

Turkmenistan achieved independence with a strong commitment to radically reform its education system. Indeed, already in May 1993, the government launched the *Bilim* (Knowledge) program,

significantly revising the education system at school and university levels, introducing new curricula and completely de-Sovietising educational institutions. All Soviet ideology-charged subjects were removed and replaced by those that emphasized Turkmen people's national identity, national pride and strengthened the national idea. In addition, the new Turkmen script based on the Latin alphabet replaced the old Cyrillic-based script. In the Soviet Era, English played the role of a foreign language with a less attention paid to it; mostly people thought that having the knowledge of Russian would help them everywhere. English textbooks were following the old methods, hours given to teaching of English were less than Russian language had, and even in many schools English was not taught at all. The situation completely changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the growing economic presence of western powers, English is becoming more and more popular, especially with the upwardly mobile urban youths. English language teachers are wanted for village schools where no foreign languages have been taught for years, because there was no educational structure to support it.

Since the downfall of the Iron Curtain English has gained a new status in the former Soviet republics. Functions and growth of this global language in Central Asia, particularly in Turkmenistan still remains unexplored. Because of the shortage of knowledge about English education in the country, Turkmen people are not well aware of the spread of English in Turkmenistan after 1991. Moreover, they are not informed about the latest developments in learning and teaching of English within the domains of foreign language education. Thus, this is one of the first studies to investigate the status and the role of English language teaching in Turkmenistan. This study is needed to understand better and analyze the spread of English in former Soviet republics and to familiarize Turkmen educators and foreign language learners with the ongoing progress of English in the country.

### **5.0. Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to profile the role and the status of English language in post – Soviet Turkmenistan and to draw implications for English language education. In doing so, the study tried to achieve several additional objectives. First, because the study's findings are mainly based on primary data that were collected from classroom observations and interviews with English teachers and students, implications and conclusions drawn from this study can serve as a valuable resource for English teachers, teacher- trainers, and curriculum developers to make improvements in English education in Turkmenistan. Second, by revealing sufficient information regarding the spread of English in Turkmenistan, the study can provoke and serve as a basic resource for future more in-depth studies on the same topic. Third, it can serve as a threshold for future research focused on exploring the sociolinguistics of English in Central Asian countries. Finally, by selecting ELT in Turkmenistan, I want to make my contributions as a scholar to the promotion of the welfare of my people through the study of English.

Moreover, although there have been several publications on the role of English in the post – Soviet countries, this study is the first to explore the situation of ELT in Turkmenistan.

## **6.0. Findings**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Turkmenistan was recognized as an independent developing country within the global village, English became the most prestigious and widely learned foreign language in the country. Like the people of other nationalities, Turkmens recognize the importance of English for their professional growth and success in the global community. Yet, despite the popularity of English in the education system, local schools and other institutions are unable to meet the ever-growing demand from English language learners because of a lack of proper teaching materials and insufficient teacher education and training.

There are lots of problems and challenges of English Education in Turkmenistan. Here, I will list just two of them that are needed urgently for the all state schools in Turkmenistan. 1) Well trained and/or experienced teachers and teacher trainers of English. Schools are lack of experienced EFL teachers. Education authorities are not able to provide in-service teacher training programmes regularly. The number of classroom-based researches is very less. As a result, pre-service English language teacher training programmes are not responding to the growing needs.

2) Good textbooks. Textbooks should be enough, well designed and contemporary in use of language and context. The existing textbooks do not promote communicative skills, they are lack of authentic texts and tasks, and they need culturally and morally friendly content. Unfortunately, present textbooks in state schools are without workbook, supplementary reader and teacher's book. Teachers do not have help or guidance. Students cannot have extra exercises without workbook.

## **7.0. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This conclusion part discusses the results, some implications and proposals for ELT in Turkmenistan. Also, it gives suggestions and shows guidelines future researches that may extend the concept and functioning of ELT in Turkmenistan.

There should be departments where the English textbooks are designed with great effort. They have to be based on the principles of the latest foreign language teaching and learning. Their language should suit the age of learners and the content should be useful in daily life. In addition to all these, textbooks should be presented as a package: teachers' handbook, workbook, supplementary reader and course book. In details:

- Introductory guidance on the presentation of language items and skills should be enough
- Suggest aids for the teaching of pronunciation (e.g. phonetic system) without listening

- Should offer meaningful situations and a variety of techniques for teaching structural units (GRAMMAR)
- Distinguish the different purposes and skills involved in the teaching of vocabulary
- Should provide guidance on the initial presentation of passages for reading comprehension
- Texts should be appropriate to the student age
- Should demonstrate the various devices for controlling and guiding content and expression in composition exercises (WRITING)
- Should contain appropriate, motivational and aesthetical pictures, diagrams, tables, etc
- At least they should have attractive cover with quality of illustrations
- The use of mother tongue in English language textbooks. The present textbooks are bilingual textbooks; most of the instructions are given in L1.
- They do not have authentic materials at all; they do not have good texts to convey morally significant messages.
- Language is learnt well when all the communicative skills (LSRW) are included.

Pre-service teacher training programmes should be revised and bring up to date. Education authorities should conduct periodical in-service teacher training programmes. Associations for English language teachers should be established. Researchers should carry out classroom-based researches in order to improve the quality of ELT classes.

English has become the most widely learned foreign language in Turkmenistan. English functions as a performance variety that is to say, it is primarily acquired through formal schooling. However, due to the high demand of local people of various ages to learn English, more and more adult EFL learners have been taking evening, also morning and afternoon batches are available, English classes at both private and public language learning centres. Unfortunately, even these courses are not able to fulfil the learners' needs up to the required level of foreign language proficiency. English language teaching in Turkmenistan still has a long way to go.

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