PIONEER AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES



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Delving into Educational Odyssey of Refugee Students: Lessons from Turkey*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, humanity has been shaped by challenges like wars and conflicts. One recent example is the Syrian civil war, which has significantly impacted Turkey, especially in the education sector, with over a million refugee children needing schooling. As one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries, Turkey has faced immense pressure to integrate these children into its education system while maintaining quality and inclusivity. Various initiatives, such as Temporary Education Centers (2014) and the PIKTES project (2016), have supported these students, offering tailored programs to address their unique needs. Despite these efforts, challenges like language barriers, ethnic discrimination, and resource shortages persist often impeding long-term integration and academic success. At the K-12 level, efforts continue to study and address these issues, with policymakers and educators working collaboratively to ensure proper integration that aligns with global best practices. Despite these obstacles, Syrian students in Turkey demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning English, viewing it as a critical tool for their future aspirations. Nevertheless, their needs remain unmet particularly in providing sustainable language support and culturally sensitive learning environments. By analyzing these ongoing challenges and achievements, this study underscores the importance of targeted educational policies and practices that not only respond to immediate needs but also build a resilient framework for the future of refugee education in Turkey and beyond.

Keywords: educational policies, migration, integration of refugee students, educational model, language learning

INTRODUCTION

Adverse living conditions have driven people to migrate throughout history, often due to famine, wars, resource shortages, or economic difficulties (Karataş & Ayyıldız, 2021). Forced migration disrupts not only individuals' lives but also the socio-economic and cultural fabric of host countries, posing significant challenges, particularly in education. A recent example is the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 and led many to seek refuge in Turkey. This conflict has been described as one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, reshaping regional demographics and placing unprecedented pressure on neighboring countries. In 2012, there were just 14,237 Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey, but by July 2024, that number had grown to 3,105,009 making Turkey the world's largest host for Syrian refugees (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024). Among these refugees, 1,130,336 children are between the ages of 5 and 18 representing a considerable portion of the K-12 student population in Turkey.

Initially, when the refugee numbers were lower and the conflict was expected to be short-lived, Temporary Education Centers (TECs) were set up in 2014 to address the educational needs of K-12 students (UNICEF, 2023). The primary objective of these institutions was to provide Arabic instruction and foster students' connection to their cultural identity, while simultaneously introducing them to fundamental Turkish language skills. However, as the war dragged on and it became clear that refugees would remain in Turkey for an extended period of time, the necessity for a shift in the country's educational strategy became apparent. The Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES) was launched in 2016 to phase out TECs and integrate Syrian children into public schools (Karaman, 2018). This marked a significant turning point in Turkey's refugee education policy, as it demonstrated a more comprehensive dedication to sustainable integration. While this project significantly boosted enrollment rates and facilitated access to education for the displaced students, it fell short in creating a fully inclusive educational environment (Çelik Keskin & Atay, 2022). Challenges related to teacher training, school resources and systemic discrimination remained demonstrating the gaps between the policy objectives and practical outcomes.

Twelve years on, most Syrian students in primary and secondary education were born in Turkey under temporary protection, representing a generation that was shaped by displacement. Many high school students were too young to fully grasp their circumstances when they arrived and were emotionally connected to their home country, which led to intriguing interplay between identity and adaptation in their lives. Nevertheless, the psychological and social impact of the war remains visible in these children which manifest in their actions, academic success, social interactions and emotional well-being (Dağ, 2023). Although the Ministry of National Education has offered in-service seminars on inclusive education under PIKTES, these trainings have proven inadequate in practical experience due to their limited support for educators in the actual classrooms (Çelik Keskin & Atay, 2022), Teachers often reported that they felt underprepared to address diverse needs of these students, and many felt unsuccessful in combating the prejudices and barriers created by discrimination (Demir Başaran, 2020).

Studies have further shown that these students continue to face persistent challenges in social and psycho-social contexts. Marginalization, labelling, exposure to violence, and the negative attitudes of Turkish families toward refugees remain a significant barrier to a successful integration (Altıntaş, 2018; Ünal & Aladağ, 2020). A major ongoing issue is the language barrier, as many students primarily speak Arabic at home. This linguistic gap not only makes it difficult to communicate with teachers and peers but also hinders academic progress, social inclusion, and adaptation to their schools (Arslan & Ergül, 2022; Doğan & Avcıoğlu, 2022). In some cases, this disconnection adds more up to the feeling of alienation and disengagement,

which makes it more challenging for these students to adapt their schools and envision a future in their host country. For this reason, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that will consider not only an effective educational policy but also a broader socio-cultural aspect in the refugee integration.

TEACHING ENGLISH TO REFUGEE STUDENTS

Syrian students in Turkey not only struggle with learning Turkish but also face challenges in learning English, which is part of the curriculum from the first grade in private schools and the second grade in public schools. English, often seen as a bridge between Turkish and Arabic due to its widespread use, holds significant importance in their education (Gözpınar, 2018). For many Syrian students, English represents a gateway to global communication and future opportunities, but its acquisition remains a complex process. Since English classes are typically taught in Turkish, these students face the difficult task of learning a new language through another language they barely understand, making it much harder for them compared to their Turkish peers (Sarıer, 2020; Temizel & Boğa, 2023; Tunaboylu et al., 2021). This creates a multilayered cognitive load that significantly affects their language acquisition journey.

Research shows that Turkish children generally feel more confident in their English skills than Syrian children, and while a majority of Turkish students have family members who know English, this is true for only a small fraction of Syrian students (Asmalı & Sayın, 2021). This lack of family-support leaves the Syrian students without out-of-school reinforcement which could be considered crucial for language acquisition. Besides, the lack of appropriate teaching materials tailored to Syrian students' needs adds to the challenges they face in learning English (Alan, 2021; Asmalı, 2017). The textbooks and classroom resources are primarily designed for native Turkish students, and for this reason, the Syrian students often fail to address their unique linguistic and cultural needs to satisfy, which creates a kind of educational inequality for them.

Despite these difficulties, Syrian students often show a positive attitude toward learning English and are engaged in classroom activities (Asmalı & Sayın, 2021; Biçer, 2023; Utaş & Öcal, 2020). Even though their motivation sometimes wanes due to the obstacles they encounter, they remain hopeful about their future (İpek, 2021). In the Turkish context, learning English can offer Syrian students a sense of identity and meaning, especially as they learn about other cultures and gain new perspectives on their own (Steele, 2017). This cultural enrichment is especially important for the refugee students, who most of the time experience identity struggles because of their displacement.

However, English education for these students, which is crucial for their future, is often neglected (Asmalı & Sayın, 2021).Teachers who often play a crucial role in fostering language learning process, often lack sufficient training on this matter, or they limited experience with these students, which limits their ability to effectively address the specific challenges that these students face. Also, many schools are under-sourced and unprepared to meet the needs of a diverse student population- which is even larger now with the inclusion of Palestinian students-, and this creates an additional barrier to the quality of education. Therefore, there's a need for additional support and resources, not just for the students but also for schools and teachers, as this is the case in many host countries (Gözpınar, 2019). Given the importance of English language education for refugees, it shouldn't be limited by the current system. Moreover, the educational challenges faced by refugee students have broader implications for our human capital and overall educational success (Fidan & Taş, 2023).

Drawing from the circumstances of Syrian refugee students in Turkey, an urgent change is needed in the Turkish education system. According to the report of UNICEF (n.d.), to contribute to the education of the students in the best way possible, considering that there are 1.1 million Syrian students at the K-12 level in Turkey, it is believed that they must first acquire Turkish to keep in step with the community. Developing targeted language programs, increasing teacher traşining, and creating inclusive educational materials are critical steps in ensuring that the displaced students can deal with the problems they face in their social and educational journeys. Then, their education should be supported with other foreign languages.

STEPS TAKEN: WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?

So far, only a limited number of projects focused on English education for refugees have been implemented in Turkey. One of the most well-known is the HOPES project (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians). However, under this project, only 4,314 students at the higher education level completed their courses, and only a small number were able to advance their English proficiency within the Common European Framework (CEFR) (British Council, n.d.). This limited success underlines the scale of the challenge that might hopefully provide a meaningful English education for the displaced students.

Another initiative that supports refugee children's English education is the My Life Centers, established through a partnership between UNICEF and the Refugee Education Foundation. These centers, located in just three cities, offer students intensive Turkish lessons along with English courses (UNICEF, 2016). Although these projects are remarkable their limited geographic scope and scale limit their total impact. The services primarily

serve as extra educational resources, rather than an in-depth response to the various issues that refugee students face in Turkey.

Beyond these two projects, despite the large number of refugees, there hasn't been any significant effort to promote English language education for refugee students in Turkey, even though English is a required subject at all K-12 levels. This gap in educational policy highlights the urgent need for comprehensive and nationwide educational programs that address the specific language needs of refugee students. Such a new project would not only support their linguistic development, social interactions, and future aspirations, but also contribute to the literature on this topic.

Refugee students struggle with learning English even in countries like Jordan and Iraq, where Arabic is the official language and they receive education in their mother tongue (Ahmed, 2021; Alefesha & Al-Jamal, 2019). These struggles highlight the broader difficulties associated with English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in refugee contexts, where resources and tailored instructional methods are often lacking. Similarly, in countries like Canada, where English is a native language and refugee students have greater exposure to it, challenges still persist, particularly for students with limited prior schooling or interrupted education (Guo et al., 2019). In Turkey, the situation is even more challenging, as these students are expected to learn both Turkish and English simultaneously, often without adequate exposure to English.

The difficulties they face in learning English, alongside the challenges of adapting to the education system (Çelik Keskin & Atay, 2022), deprive them of the benefits of learning a language that is the lingua franca of the 21st century, ultimately impacting their basic educational rights. English is not only a necessary skill for academic success, but it also provides a path to future profession and social mobility. Without focused support, Syrian students risk becoming increasingly excluded, missing out on opportunities to improve their integration and long-term prospects in Turkey and internationally. This underscores the need for an alternative approach to English instruction for refugees, one that focuses their specific needs while also aligning with larger educational rights frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When the existing literature and projects are examined, key findings can be summarized as follows so that relevant lessons can be taken away for further studies:

1. The model adopted in the education system: When the education policies, educational principles, and educational programs published by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Board of Education are examined, it has been observed that an innovative and inclusive approach to education that allows an international mixed

education could not be executed. The current system largely maintains a one-size-fit-all approach which fails to address the diverse needs of refugee students who require tailored teaching and learning strategies for their language acquisition and cultural integration.

2. Implemented projects: When the projects established nationally and internationally are examined, it is concluded that they are conducted with a temporary focus, often as short term solutions to immediate problems or challenges. The sustainability of these projects is low, and their effects are rarely enduring. For instance, while some projects provide initial support for integration or language acquisition, they lack mechanisms for long-term impact or scalability, leaving gaps in the continuity of education for refugee students.
3. Methods used: Many studies examining the education of immigrant and refugee children have employed insufficient or incomplete methodologies. These studies often fail to utilize robust, mixed-method approaches that could yield comprehensive insights. As a result, the findings are limited in scope and fail to capture the complexities of the issues at hand. Methodological shortcomings, such as inadequate sample sizes or over-reliance on single data collection techniques, compromise the validity and generalizability of the results.
4. Main problem issues: In many studies, specific problems have been addressed instead of existing ones. Although it is a reliable method in terms of the validity of the research, the sub-problems that create or cause the main problem are excluded from the subject matter.
5. Second foreign language: Overlooking the fact that refugee students come from different countries with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Also, a major shortfall is the failure to distinguish between teaching Turkish as a foreign language and English as a second foreign language. The lack of differentiation in pedagogical approaches limits the effectiveness of language instruction, making it harder for refugee students to achieve proficiency in either language.
6. School/Life Separation: Another important shortcoming of the studies is that there is an obvious bridge between school and life through English. Even though most of the students have not fully mastered Turkish, it is possible to agree that most of the problems they experience will be alleviated if they acquire English, as it is the lingua franca. Notwithstanding, the education-oriented system is insufficient to support foreign language learning in terms of personal development.
7. Education faculties: Another issue that is often overlooked but equally important is whether sufficient training on the subject is provided in education faculties. The scope, sustainability, and universality of the education provided in faculties are vital phenomena that need to be

studied and developed, both nationally and internationally. Ensuring that teacher candidates receive comprehensive training on inclusive education, multilingual pedagogy, and cultural sensitivity is essential for fostering a more equitable and effective educational environment for refugee students.

RECOMMENDATİONS

Taking various steps to support the aforementioned findings will be crucial to ensure that this problem is adequately handled and that a more complete and long-lasting solution is eventually reached. When the problems encountered are categorized into three main areas, various solutions can be outlined (see Figure 1). To overcome language barriers, seminars should be prepared not only for the students but also for the teachers. Teachers should receive consultancy from experts and institutions regarding their language teaching. Preparation classes should also be introduced. Lastly, more materials that support their learning process should be developed.

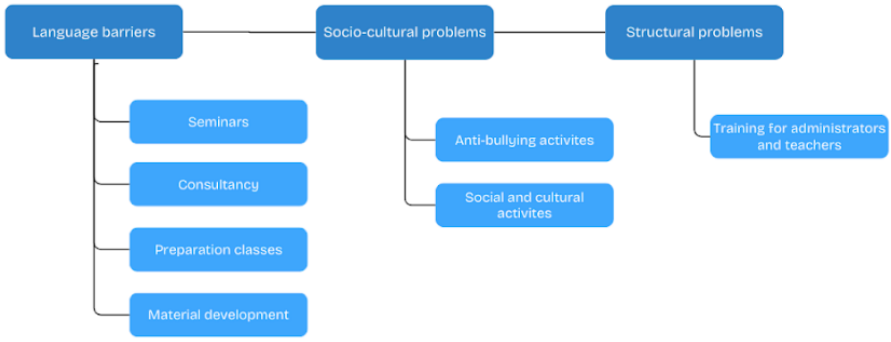

Figure 1 Suggested solutions to primary challenges in the education of refugee students

As a solution to socio-cultural problems, various activities should be encouraged to stop bullying inside and outside school. These should include social and cultural activities that foster the integration and mutual understanding among students. Activities designed to promote collaboration and interaction between refugee and non-refugee students can help break down barriers and create a more inclusive environment. As for issues related to the school's structure, programs and activities that can eliminate prejudice among students should be planned, and school administrators and teachers should be given practical training, on psychological well-being, and family attitudes of refugees.

Additionally, classrooms that form the heart of education should be transformed into places where refugees can receive education in equality with other class members. Recognizing the traumas that refugee students have experienced and taking into account the effect of the environment on psychology, classrooms should also provide social, and emotional support students need. This involves not only creating a sense of belonging, but also integrating trauma-informed approaches into teaching strategies to ensure these students feel valued and supported.

From another perspective, the curricula of courses should emphasize cultural elements, ensuring that languages possess functional proficiency. Alongside this, it is crucial to instill confidence in students through appropriate teaching programs and methodologies that align with their potential strengths. This approach should focus on enabling students to adapt to their environment, culture, and life, accordingly by navigating their new realities effectively.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for sustainable, longer-term strategies and policies for refugee students in Turkey (Tanrıkulu, 2018; Tümen, 2023). Simply enrolling refugee students in formal education alongside their peers does not necessarily mean that they will benefit from it in the same way as their peers. The fact that there is no information on this subject in the current 2018 English curriculum and there is no special program prepared for this issue (Aydın & Kaya, 2019) supports this idea. In this respect, the most basic philosophy of the 2023 Education Vision of the MoNE, “bringing people back to the agenda of education in the way they deserve," once again clearly emphasizes the need for more inclusive education for Turkey, which is the cradle of different ethnicities and nations (MoNE, n.d., p. 16). Therefore, this study can be seen as a valuable starting point for understanding how to integrate refugee students, which is essential for shaping a more inclusive and cohesive society. By addressing the challenges, regardless of their religion, language, or ethnicity, we can work towards a future where all individuals have the opportunity to receive a meaningful education. This approach is not only relevant to Turkey but also to other regions, particularly in light of ongoing global conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the resulting refugee crises. These issues are likely to remain significant in the agendas of Europe, and beyond, making it crucial to examine and address the integration processes of refugee populations so that necessary policies and curricula, including a thorough understanding of these students' conditions, demands, and needs, can be designed appropriately.

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