European Language Portfolio in Turkish High Schools: Attitudes of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

European Language Portfolio (ELP), adopting a vision for a better language teaching and learning process, has been piloted and implemented in many Turkish foreign language classrooms for over a decade. In spite of the several studies related to the ELP focusing on learner autonomy, speaking skills and course books, only few studies aimed at specifically examining reading skills. However, reading in language teaching and learning is often a major means in non-English speaking countries like Turkey because of the limited contact with native speakers. With this study, it is intended to implement the ELP in reading skills in Turkey, and to explore the attitudes of the students studying English with the ELP. In line with this purpose, 20 high school students are taught English during nearly a term, and then their views are gathered with oral interviews at the end of the study. In addition, portfolios are also kept by students during the application process to fortify the research findings. The data of the study are qualitatively analyzed. Research results reveal that the ELP in high school plays a significant role in improving students' reading skills. This study also indicates that ELP has a positive effect on students` attitudes in reading skills. Further studies can focus on the effects of the ELP on other language skills as well as achievements of the students.
Key Words*: European Language Portfolio, High School Students, Attitude, Reading, Qualitative.*

INTRODUCTION

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences (Council of Europe, 2000). So far the ELP has been extensively studied in language teaching and learning fields by many researchers (Kohonen, 2001, 2002; Little, 2002, 2003; Schärer, 2008). The majority of the studies related to ELP have been generally carried out on promoting student autonomy (Gonzalez, 2009; Kohonen, 2001; Koyuncu, 2006), its relationship with language examinations (Martyniuk, 2005), teacher training (Little & Perclova, 2001), and improving the language skills with the ELP (Göksu, 2011; İşisağ, 2008).

Various aspects of the ELP have also been investigated into Turkey (Demirel & Güneyli, 2006; İşisağ, 2008; Koyuncu, 2006; Mirici, 2008; Yılmaz & Akcan, 2012). Demirel (2005) reported that the ELP has been researched and implemented in many schools in Turkey since 2003. Although there have been many studies which include the implementation and contribution of the ELP to the language teaching and learning in Turkey, very little research has focused on the attitudes of learners. However, the attitudes play an important role in language teaching and learning process. Because the attitude is "an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent" (Gardner, 1985; p. 9). In order to fill the gap in this field, the study aims to investigate the attitudes of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students towards the ELP in Turkey. This study illustrates the attitudes of the Turkish speakers of English in high school about the use of the ELP for many researchers.

THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO (ELP)

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) created by the Council of Europe gains importance in the development of foreign language teaching and learning. The ELP, which provides important concepts and tools for language teachers and learners (Kohonen, 2002), facilitates language learning by giving a chance for learners to evaluate, describe and situate their language proficiency levels (Pawlak, 2009). It has three components: (1) language passport summarizes the owner`s linguistic identity by briefly recording second languages (L2s) learnt, formal language qualifications achieved, significant experiences of L2 use, and the owner`s assessment of his or her current proficiency in the L2s he or she knows; (2) language biography is used to set language learning targets, monitor progress, plot the development of language learning skills, and record and reflect on especially important language learning and intercultural experiences; (3) dossier contains a selection of work that in the owner's judgement best represents his or her L2 capacities and achievement (Little, 2005; p.325).

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which has been a part of the ELP, provides "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.1). The aim of the CEFR is to facilitate reflection, communication and networking in language education (Council of Europe, 2009, p.3). In addition, the ELP has two main functions. The first one is the reporting function which is about the product aspect of foreign language learning and the other is the pedagogic function which is about the process aspect of language learning (Kohonen, 2004). In short, the aim of the ELP is to educate students to become autonomous, life-long language learners who can assess their proficiency realistically in the different language skills and can communicate this knowledge to institutions to acquire further education, future employers, and other interested parties (Mansilla & Riejos, 2007; p.193).

Regarding language teaching and learning, the ELP supports the language teaching as; (a) how I organize my teaching, (b) how I prepare my teaching, (c) how I use the textbook and (d) how I assess my learners (Little & Perclova, 2001; p.24). Furthermore, the ELP and CEFR also describes common standards which facilitate the recording, planning, and validation of lifelong language learning for language teaching and learning in many educational institutions and organizations in Europe and other parts of the world (Glover, Mirici & Aksu, 2005).

There are four basic language skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing in language learning. Reading, one of the fundamental language skills, has a great importance as

the most frequently used instrument (Morgado, 2009). In general, reading is used as an activity to improve foreign language learners` levels, and is often the only means since foreign language learners in non-English speaking countries like Turkey have limited contact with native speakers of the target language. Therefore, reading is the one of the primary skill to be taught/learnt as well as paying researchers' attention in non-English speaking countries (Hu, 2009; Kuzu, 1999; Lee, 2004; Uysal, 2012). We can also understand better the importance of reading when it is thought that Turkish speakers of English are far away to target country whose language is spoken. Besides, it is limited or difficult to hear target language and converse with it for many learners in their countries. Therefore, many foreign language learners except for a few learners can learn the target language with reading texts (Kuzu, 1999). The process of foreign language teaching and learning how to read in a foreign language are brought to the fore when progress can be made visible in small steps: more exactly, in the form of a portfolio. Moreover, the ELP provides the learner with insights into what he/she wants to learn, collecting in a dossier the concrete results of what has been learnt makes him/her aware of the learning process (Stockmann, 2006).

There have been many studies related to the ELP in the world, and almost all studies have indicated that the ELP is an effective tool for EFL learners. For instance, Little (2005) investigated learners and their judgements in the assessment process with the CEFR and ELP. The results revealed that CEFR and ELP play a key role in their self-assessment and develop individual language learner's reflective capacities. In another study, Schärer (2008) reported a concise summary of ELP activities and their impact from 2001 to October 2007. He summarized the activities, developments and outcomes of the ELP as; (a) the ELP has contributed significantly to the dissemination of European goals, values, concepts and principles, (b) it has made a difference in educational practice, and (c) is an effective catalyst for change at European, national and local levels. In addition, Mansilla and Riejos (2007) briefly discussed the ELP use in Europe and in Spain. They expressed that the ELP can be used as significant tool to help students acquire the literacy proficiencies which are necessary for academic and professional language learning atmospheres. As for the implementation of ELP in Czech schools, Perclova (2006) found that learners' attitudes towards the ELP and its use were usually very positive; students enjoyed the reporting function of the ELP, and believed that ELP tasks were attainable.

THE ELP IN TURKEY

Turkey, a member of the Council of Europe, tries to arrange its language teaching programs as well as other fields according to standards improved by the Council of Europe. In this sense, the ELP which is an alternative model for language teaching and learning has also been researched all along and implemented in many schools in Turkey. Although many studies about the ELP have been conducted in terms of different perspectives in Turkey (Ceylan, 2006; Demirel & Güneyli, 2006; Kazazoğlu, 2006; Köse, 2005, Mirici, 2008; Yılmaz & Akcan, 2012), only little research about the ELP focuses on the attitudes of Turkish students. The attitude is employed in relation to the learners and it builds on current findings in social psychology. Furthermore, an attitude expresses an individual's likes and dislikes (Perclova, 2006). In language teaching and learning, students' attitudes are also important in terms of acceptation and adoption of the model, method or strategy, because students' attitudes towards language learning can be affected positively or negatively according to the used model, method or strategies.

With respect to Turkish students' attitudes towards the ELP, there are a few studies at different age levels. For instance, Glover, Mirici, and Aksu (2005) researched the use of the ELP in a university preparatory school in Turkey. The study revealed that teachers' and students' attitudes towards the ELP were positive. Most of the students liked the ELP, and said positive views about its potential. In addition, the teachers said they are motivated to use the ELP in the future. Demirel and Güneyli (2006) also applied the ELP to the Turkish as a foreign language learning process at adult or university level. They investigated the proficiency level of Turkish related to four basic language skills and learners` attitude towards ELP in TOMER (the language center of Ankara University). The study showed that most students (65%) expressed that the ELP was useful in the Turkish learning process as well as being an effective way in English teaching and learning process. In addition, they also stated that their responsibilities in language learning increased. For young learners, Koyuncu (2006) investigated the ELP as an alternative assessment tool for improving primary school students' autonomy in learning. She concluded that the ELP played a significant role in increasing students' autonomy and autonomous learning. Moreover, many participants in the study expressed their positive attitudes towards the ELP by emphasizing their high interests to study with the ELP.

However, studies focusing on the effects of the ELP on Turkish students' attitudes are still limited. Furthermore, there is almost no research which investigated the attitudes of Turkish students towards the ELP at high school level. In order to fill this gap in the field, the present study aims to investigate what are the attitudes of the EFL students towards the ELP in reading skills in Turkish high schools. To fulfil these goals, the ELP was implemented in English reading courses at a private high school, after that the learners' portfolios were evaluated, and oral interviews were conducted with all participants. This study also reflected the feelings and thoughts of Turkish speakers of English about the use of the ELP. Moreover, it was also intended to extend the ELP studies' cover area and broaden the knowledge about EFL reading skills from the ELP perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

On the basis of the literature review described above, the present study which is qualitative in nature aims to investigate Turkish EFL high school learners' attitudes as well as their feelings and thoughts towards the ELP in reading skills. In order to fulfil this aim, EFL students at a Turkish private high school were chosen, and a set of teaching experience were carried out with them. The data were collected via learner portfolios and interviews. Sampling, instrumentation, data collection and analysis procedures were described in detail way in the following sections.

Sampling

The convenience sampling methodology was adopted in this study and the subjects consisted of 20 high school students at A2 level (Male: 9, Female: 11) determined from initially 45 students studying in the 9th grades of a private high school in Turkey. Their ages ranged between 14 and 15 (SD= .50). The subjects were determined with the help of the Self-assessment Grid in CEFR.

Instruments

Instruments of the study constituted a "Can Do" descriptors' grid, participants' course portfolios and oral interviews with the participants. The grid developed by Council of Europe (2001) contained can-do statements in Turkish about four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) related to A2, B1 and B2 levels. The grid was only used to determine the target (study) group. Another instrument used in this study was the learner portfolios which were collected through the application of the study. Each of the 20 participants kept a portfolio containing documents during the implementation of the study. The portfolios showing the proficiency of the students were generally filled up with participants' own studies relating to the A2 level, story book reports, exercises for the readings and reading activities from their course books. The last instrument of the study was an interview form. In this study, an interview form including seven semi-structured questions of the oral interview based on Koyuncu (2006) were prepared to gather detailed knowledge about the ELP and its implementation in high schools.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data were collected from the participants during pre-instruction, while instruction and post-instruction processes. In pre-instruction process, firstly the students were acknowledged about the consent form and the study, and then study group was determined with the help of "Can Do" descriptors' grid. Then, the study group was informed about the portfolio and portfolio assessment procedure, and it was expected that each student kept a portfolio to improve their reading skills during the learning process. They were also taught English with reading materials prepared for the level A2 in CEFR, and with the course book "Solutions at Pre-Intermediate Level" from Oxford University Press (Falla & Davies, 2008) which contains many classroom reading activities. In addition to these materials, the participants read different story books from Oxford, Cambridge and Macmillan Publishing which consisted of levels 1, 2, 3; and they prepared book reports related to the stories they read. Students' book reports consisted of basic information about the reading book, exercises in vocabulary and sentence structure and a short summary, written in English by learners.

Lastly, standardized semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants and they were recorded via recording equipment in post-instruction process. During the interviews, students answered seven questions about the ELP and their course. The interviews were held in Turkish to help participants' better express their thoughts and they were conducted in through one-on-one meetings with the researcher. The length of the interviews varied according to the participants' answering period, and the mean length time of 20 interviews was 12 minutes 10 seconds (00:12:10, SD= 1,15).

In the analysis of data, considering the qualitative data, the analysis procedure consisted of two sections including student portfolios and the interview. Learner portfolios and the interviews were descriptively analysed and interpreted for the study. Document analysis of learner portfolios were conducted to see commonly mentioned points in the interviews and to deepen our knowledge about the application. Therefore, portfolios kept voluntarily by students were collected at the end of the study. Student interviews were classified into two parts and descriptively analyzed according to the answers given to each question. The first part covering the questions 1 and 2 was related to the participants' attitudes and feelings towards the use of the ELP, and the second part consisting of the questions 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, was about the effect of the

ELP on students' learning process. The interviews were useful for the participants so that they could describe their activities in detail including both the benefits and drawbacks of the ELP. In the presentation of qualitative data results, students' citations about the questions were also used, and participants were given numbers according to the interview range such as S1, S2, S3. In addition, only significant excerpts were mentioned in the presentation as some of the participants' expressions were too short to cite in the study.

QUALITATIVE DATA FINDINGS

Findings of Document Analysis

Document analysis of learners' portfolios showed that portfolios were generally filled up with carefully arranged work containing participants' own studies, class works, book reports, exercises from the readings, and reading activities in the classroom. Each dossier contained papers including different activities such as reading passages, cloze tests and story book reports. Given all learner portfolios provided important information about the use of the ELP to improve reading skills. From the portfolios and student interviews, it was observed that learners' reading skills improved and they enjoyed doing reading activities both inside and outside of the class. On this issue, for example, S3 said:

> "Keeping a portfolio was very useful, because I saved all my activities which I did during the term. When I needed a document about a lesson or an exam, I could find it easily in my portfolio."

In spite of positive comments, few participants stated that carrying out the activities for the portfolio was difficult. The following example about keeping a portfolio was as below:

> "It was good for me to study with the ELP during the term. We learnt English from our course book. ... But, to tell truth, I have not enjoyed much more to keep a dossier or portfolio as it was difficult for me." S1

In addition to the portfolio activities, students prepared story book reports which they read during the implementation process. Students were free to choose their reading books consisting of different types such as adventures, action, short stories, love, horror, legends, miracles, and so on. From carefully arranged and prepared book reports, and student interviews, it was clear that book reports had positive effects on learners' attitudes towards reading skills and made significant contributions to the development of their reading skills. S11 told about positive effects of the ELP as follows:

> "...the level A2 showed me which level book I could read. ... I borrowed a book at level 2. While reading it, I realized that the level 2 was suitable for me. Then I completed the book report with my understandings. It surprised me, because I realized that I could read a book and comprehend it myself. Finally, reading with the ELP was very useful. "

Another student mentioned that the ELP changed positively his thoughts about reading English books and he gained a good habit about reading in English. S14's views on this issue are seen below:

"Normally, I have not enjoyed reading books and have been scared of them until the beginning of this term. But now, my thoughts have changed. Henceforth, I like reading books. I read six books in these three months though I read, maybe, a total of five books until this year. So I am very glad about this result." S14

Findings of Oral Interview

The analyses of oral interviews were presented in two sections. The first section including the first questions "How much do you like studying for the ELP?" and question 2 "How much is the studying process for ELP helpful?" were asking the feelings of learners about the implementation of the ELP in language classrooms. The second section including 5 questions was related to the ELP's effect over the general language education process by engaging the learners in every process of instruction.

Regarding the first section of the interview, when interviewees were asked about their feelings related to the use of the ELP, their answers were generally positive as mentioned in the previous studies in Turkey (Demirel & Güneyli, 2006; Glover, Mirici, & Aksu, 2005; Perclova, 2006). Almost all participants also stated that they enjoyed very much with the ELP during reading activities in the class. S1 expressed his thoughts about the first question as below:

"I like studying with the ELP a lot. Because, in this system, one can realize easily his level and know better what he should do while studying a foreign language. ... I enjoyed very much doing the activities especially preparing a brochure of a city."

In addition, the students' answers showed that they were happy to learn the language with the ELP, and they were also pleased since the ELP contributed to their success and was helpful for their learning. The answer of S5 to the second question is as follows:

"This studying process with the ELP was very helpful for me. Our English lessons were efficient. We did not spend our time inefficiently because we did not study material which we had already learnt since the level of everybody in the class was the same and everybody in the classroom had studied the same material."

The other 5 questions about the effect of the ELP on students' learning process aimed to evaluate the ELP in general English education. Therefore, each question examined the issue from a different perspective such as awareness of students' capabilities, understanding learning aims, self-evaluation of the learning process, taking part and responsibility in the education process.

In this context, the third question "To what extent does the ELP show what you can do in a foreign language?" was about students' views on the contribution of the ELP over their awareness towards their language capabilities. Almost all participants expressed their positive beliefs towards the ELP about their own language capabilities. On this issue, the participant, S19 said:

"...I developed my ability in a foreign language with the ELP and I realized that I would be able to increase my level of foreign language myself especially my reading abilities.", and he followed " ... now, I can read and understand reading

texts without any help such as my teacher or a dictionary even if I cannot sometimes understand exactly."

The fourth question "To what extent does the ELP help to understand the learning aims?" was about how effective the ELP was in helping students understand the learning goals. The participants believed that the ELP was efficient in giving the aims of the learning programme. Thus, most of them reported that the ELP made a great contribution to their understanding of educational goals and the importance of a foreign language in daily life. The following extract shows these findings.

"The ELP really helped us to understand our learning aims because I have studied my subjects according to my aims since the beginning of the fall term. The ELP showed us that the foreign language is necessary for me not only at school but also in my life." S 17

The fifth question "How much does the ELP help you to see your own learning process?" dealt with how much the ELP affects the learning process which includes regularly reviewing, and evaluating students' own learning processes. All students expressed the opinion that the ELP clearly showed their learning processes by emphasizing step by step procedure in learning. They told the interviewer that the ELP improved their English reading skills by considering their needs in foreign language learning process. The following example, taken from the interviews, shows the evidence that these students were aware of these requirements:

"The ELP showed me as a picture what I could do in the learning process. That is, everybody knows their level and what they learnt in their learning process. In addition, everybody can see how much they can improve their skills." S3

The sixth question "How much does the ELP help you to participate in the learning process?" was about the effect of the ELP on the learning process which is taking initiatives in planning and executing learning activities. Almost all the students stated that they participated in the learning process since the level of everyone was the same and they felt more courageous in the classroom. When they compared their previous learning process, the ELP really contributed better to their participation to the courses. S19 underlines these findings as follows:

"We, all the students, were at the same level in the class and I felt more courageous among my friends. So I participated in the lessons much more and integrated easily in lessons and reading activities. In addition, I studied the subjects myself, read story books myself, and did activities and exercises myself at my level."

Finally, the seventh question "How much does the ELP facilitate to feel responsible for learning?" was concerned with accepting responsibility for students' own learning. Many students pointed out that the ELP helped them to take responsibility for their learning. On this issue, S5 said:

"...Since the ELP has a level for every student, everyone in the class wants to keep their levels, and so they feel more responsible for their learning. In addition, other friends in my class hearten and encourage me in my language learning, too. "

Another student, S20 reported that she felt more responsible for the learning, because she knew she would drop from A2 to A1 if she did not study. She also reported as follows:

"I realized my responsibilities which I should do and how I would study them. Besides, I felt more determined while studying a foreign language, because my aim is to learn English better and to pass the level B1."

According to the other findings from the interviews, the interviewees also pointed out that they always studied together with the ELP while learning English inside and outside the classroom. With the help of the ELP, they reviewed what they had learnt, and which responsibilities they had. Furthermore, the ELP increased their awareness about their roles in their own learning process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use and effects of the ELP in reading skills in Turkish high school. Findings obtained from learners' portfolios, book reports and interview revealed that students' reading skills improved via the ELP during the implementation of the study. Most of the learners expressed that they enjoyed doing activities with the ELP, and felt positive about the ELP. Many learners believed that the ELP was an important tool for their language learning process as well as their reading skills. However, few students participating in the study also expressed their negative attitudes towards keeping a portfolio. They stated that always keeping a portfolio and implementing the ELP at the same time were difficult for them since they did not have enough time because of their other lessons. Even so, as students learnt many new things while doing the activities, they pointed out that keeping a portfolio was very important in their learning process. In addition, the book reports and story books as extra activities for the learners' portfolios had really positive effects on attitudes of learners towards reading skills, because students could choose their story books themselves, read them voluntarily and complete the book reports themselves. This point related to choosing books was also underlined by Fenner and Newby (2000). When students choose books themselves according to their personal interpretations, interests, and needs; one consequence is that there must be room for freedom of choice for the individuals. Through the implementation of a rich variety of texts, genres, tasks, approaches and methods, students can learn how to make qualified choices that will suit their personal learning processes (Fenner & Newby, 2000). In addition, the participants in the present study also gained autonomy in their learning process since book reports and story books provided independent learning opportunities for EFL students. The results of the interviews also showed that the students' feelings and thoughts about the implementation of the ELP in reading skills were generally positive, and they were pleased with studying with the ELP. The participants also expressed that they understood what they could or could not do in their language levels and what the courses aim at. These findings are consistent with the previous study (Perclova, 2006) that demonstrated Czech learners found the ELP both interesting and useful, and their attitudes towards the ELP were very positive. Regarding positive attitudes of the teachers and students towards the ELP, similar results were also reported by Glover, Mirici and Aksu (2005). Furthermore, as Koyuncu (2006) expressed in her study, the results of this study showed that the ELP is an effective way to improve students' reading skills or learn in a free atmosphere. Students could see, review and evaluate their own learning process with the help of the ELP. Therefore, their motivation is higher than before. In addition, they engaged in the

course much more than before, and took responsibility in every step of the education. This study also indicated that almost all participants felt more independent, courageous, active, determined, responsible and motivated with the ELP in addition to participating in more reading activities.

In spite of the strengths of the study which were the adequacy of the implementation duration of the ELP and different qualitative data collected including portfolios and oral interviews, this study had also some limitations related to the numbers of participants and data collection methodology. The participants for this study comprised of only 20 high school students, and the data were only collected via qualitative approach. Therefore, future studies can focus on higher numbers of (high school or secondary) students and mixed data collection methodology.

To sum up, this study reveals that the ELP positively affects learners' attitudes and feelings towards language learning especially reading skills. Most students believe that the ELP helps them be aware of their capabilities, understand the goals of the course, and learn to self-evaluate their own learning process. Additionally, while learning English, they also participate more in reading courses and activities, and gain the ability to take responsibility for their education with the ELP. Consequently, this study reflects that the implementation of the ELP in Turkish high school plays an important role in improving EFL learners' reading skills. Furthermore, almost all participants have positive attitudes towards the use of the ELP. This research can be used by many researchers in language teaching and learning fields from different countries as well as Turkish researchers in order to teach and learn effectively foreign language. Further research can focus on the effects of the ELP on other language skills as well as students' attitudes and achievements towards the ELP. In addition, it can also be studied to see how the ELP is conducted effectively in foreign language classrooms.

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