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ANALYSIS OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULA AND COURSEBOOKS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

The current study aims to investigate the distribution of the speaking skills in the English language curricula and the coursebooks of high schools in Turkey from the perspective of Bloom's revised taxonomy. The study adopted mixed-methods research design, based on both qualitative and quantitative data. The data were collected from the high school English language curricula and the coursebooks for the grades between 9th and 12th in Turkey. The data obtained were analyzed via content analysis and illustrated in the taxonomy table using the descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage. The results revealed that both the speaking outcomes in the curricula and the speaking activities in the course-books were mostly placed in the lower order categories according to the cognitive process dimension, in all the grades except for the 12th grade. Besides, it was found out that most of the outcomes and activities were based on conceptual knowledge and there were not any outcomes or activities aiming at metacognitive abilities.

Keywords: English language curriculum; curriculum evaluation; course-book analysis; speaking skills

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1. Introduction

In Turkey, primary education curricula have been exposed to radical changes since 2004 (Aktürkoğlu, 2019). Following the changes in primary education, secondary education curricula have been revised. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE, hereafter) aims at equipping the students with 21st-century skills so as to help them survive in the rapidly changing world through restructuring the education system. As a part of this process, English language curricula in primary and secondary education have been revised respectively. In the revised curricula, teachers are supposed to focus more on communicative activities by assigning students with meaningful tasks rather than asking them to memorize separate items without context. In addition, there has been an effort to make a shift from teacher-centered teaching to student-centered teaching. Teachers are not seen as the only source of knowledge anymore and students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning process.

Educational reforms led Turkish students to find more opportunities to get acquainted with foreign languages after the Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011) although it was not the first time for Turkish people being exposed to foreign languages. As a result of these reforms, many university students were able to study at European universities. Consequently, they both learned the language they were exposed to and mastered in their fields. Following that, English-medium instruction started to appear at universities in Turkey with the foundation Middle East Technical University in 1956 and Boğaziçi University in 1971. Attempts to teach English have also been made in secondary education with Anatolian High Schools in which some of the school subjects were taught in English (Demirel, 1990).

Turkey's international policies, relations with great powers in the world and European countries, and technological and economic developments influenced English language education in Turkey directly (Kırkgöz, 2009). Students started to be introduced to English in the fourth grade with the educational reform in 1997 (Sarıçoban, 2012) and later, at the second grade in 2012. With these changes, the MoNE aimed that students would be exposed to English at an earlier age and for longer periods so that they could learn it better. Apart from decreasing the age that the students start learning English, the English language curricula and the coursebooks have been designed according to the CEFR principles since the CEFR was adopted as a guideline in foreign language teaching by the member countries of the Council of Europe in 2001. Students are supposed to be basic users (A1/A2 level) in the 9th grade and they are expected to be proficient users (B2+ level) at the end of the 12th grade according to the CEFR (MoNE, 2018b). The MoNE adopted an action-oriented approach to follow the principles of the CEFR with the revisions in the English language education curriculum. Therefore, the revised curriculum has been devised to present English “as a means of communication” (MoNE, 2018a:3). In the revised program, it is emphasized to foster learner autonomy and problem- solving skills through authentic materials and appropriate tasks.

Students are encouraged to use the language interactively instead of focusing on the grammaticality of the structures. Students need to be motivated to learn the language, so the curriculum intends to make the process of learning English fun for them through enjoyable activities. Four language skills are presented in an integrated way and students are provided with different assessment tasks to serve the language learning goals (MoNE, 2018b). To conclude, the revised curriculum aims to achieve the goal of guiding the students to be “autonomous” learners and “effective communicators of English” (MoNE, 2018b). In this regard, this study intends to examine the learning outcomes in the curriculum and the tasks for the speaking skill in the coursebooks in terms of fostering higher-order thinking skills of high school students.

1.1. The Importance of Developing Higher Order Thinking Skills

Despite the existence of different definitions of higher-order thinking, researchers have almost agreed that it requires going beyond memorization of facts (Newmann, 1990; Resnick, 1987; Zohar and Dori, 2003). It has often been referred to as critical and reflective thinking and associated with elaborate cognitive activities such as analyzing, evaluating, applying, constructing, and creating (Lewis and Smith, 1993; Newmann, 1990; Resnick, 1987). Resnick (1987) provides an overall summary of higher-order thinking as follows:

Higher order thinking involves a cluster of elaborative mental activities requiring nuanced judgment and analysis of complex situations according to multiple criteria. Higher order thinking is effortful and depends on self-regulation. The path of action or correct answers are not fully specified in advance. The thinker's task is to construct meaning and impose structure on situations rather than to expect to find them already apparent (p.44).

As technology has facilitated access to information, fostering students' higher-order thinking skills has become more important. Although higher-order thinking skills are often considered to be restricted to advanced levels (Resnick&Klopfer,1989; Zohar and Dori, 2003), they can be taught to “all students, from the earliest grades” (Resnick & Klopfer,1989:2).

In Bloom's revised taxonomy, the first three skills (remembering, understanding, and applying) are accepted as lower-order skills and the last three levels are referred to as higher-order skills (Orey, 2010). In educational settings, it is quite important to create opportunities for students to develop higher order thinking skills through meaningful activities. The revised curriculum in Turkey (2017) intends to support students' higher order skills with the changes in the activities and assessment methods.

There have been a lot of studies conducted on Bloom's original and revised taxonomy both in Turkey and abroad. Some studies focused on learning outcomes and instructional activities whereas others studied assessment in relation to the taxonomy. Some of these studies are provided below. The results of these studies suggest that the outcomes in the curricula and the exam questions need to be diversified in order to foster the development of HOTS of the students. In this study, the outcomes for the speaking skills in the high school English curricula and speaking activities in the coursebooks have been evaluated in terms of their alignment.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The quality of ELT in Turkey has always been a matter of debate. Lack of competent teachers, traditional teaching methods, inconsistencies in educational policies, learning environment, and teaching materials are among the major problems in teaching English in Turkey (Alagözlü, 2012). However, since the adoption of the CEFR in 2001 as a guideline to shape the English language teaching process in Turkey, the MoNE has promoted revisions in the English language curricula and coursebooks of both primary and secondary education based on the CEFR (Mirici, 2015).

Although the assumption that starting to learn a foreign language as early as possible is better is still debated in the field of ELT, there is a tendency to introduce English to young children in many countries around the world (Copland & Garton, 2014). In this regard, students in Turkey have been taught English starting at the 2nd grade with the new system adopted in 2013 differing from the previous years. This situation led to changes in the English language curricula, learning outcomes, teaching materials, and assessment tools for all grades between 2nd and 12th. The effectiveness of these changes needs to be evaluated through different studies from several perspectives in the field by the experts.

1.3. Aim of the Study

The present study aims to evaluate the outcomes for the speaking skill in the high school English language curricula (9th-12th grades) and the speaking tasks in the coursebooks provided in the high school English language courses according to Bloom's revised taxonomy. In that scope, the following research questions have been formulated:

Research Question 1- What is the distribution of the outcomes for the speaking skill in the English curricula throughout the grades between 9th and 12th in Turkey according to BRT?

Research Question 2- What is the distribution of the speaking activities in the English language coursebooks throughout the grades between 9th and 12th in Turkey according to BRT?

Research Question 3- What is the relationship between the outcomes for the speaking skill in the high school English language curricula and the speaking activities in the high school English language course books in Turkey according to BRT?

As the new curricula put an emphasis on the communicative skills of the students in the foreign language, developing speaking skills is highly important. Therefore, this study intends to focus on the speaking skill to analyze its longitudinal development in the new curricula and coursebooks.

1.4. Limitations

First of all, the analysis of the English language curricula and the coursebooks is limited to high schools in Turkey. The curriculum and coursebooks used in primary education (1st-8th grades) are not analyzed in this study. Secondly, the study is limited to the outcomes for only speaking skills in the high school English curricula in Turkey. The outcomes for the other three skills – reading, writing, and listening- and pronunciation are not included. Thirdly, only the speaking activities in the books used in public high schools are analyzed. Finally, the evaluation method of the curricula and the coursebooks is limited to Bloom's revised taxonomy.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The current study is based on a mixed-method research design. Mixed method studies attempt to answer a complicated research question benefiting from both qualitative and quantitative data in the process of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 1999). For the qualitative part of this study, document analysis has been used. Through document analysis, qualitative data can be evaluated systematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research question (Bowen, 2009). Content analysis has been adopted to interpret the qualitative data since it is advantageous to analyze qualitative data by systematically categorizing them (Mayring, 2000). After the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data, the relationships that appeared in the qualitative data have been presented quantitatively both in frequencies and percentages.

2.2. Data Collection

Speaking skill has been decided as the sample to be explored through typical case sampling. Typical case sampling is one of the purposive sampling methods and it is used to display a typical case to provide an overview of the phenomenon to the people who are not familiar with it (Patton, 2002).

Data were collected from the high school English language curricula and coursebooks. Outcomes for the speaking skill throughout different grades have been counted to obtain data for the first research question (MoNE, 2018b). As it can be clearly seen in Table 1, there are 93 outcomes for the speaking skill in the high school English curricula.

Table 1. Categorization of the Speaking Outcomes in the Curricula

	9th grade	10th grade	11th grade	12th grade	Total
Number	29	23	19	22	93

The speaking activities in the coursebooks provide data for the second research question. Table 2 presents the number of speaking tasks in the English coursebooks for each grade in high school. The speaking tasks in the following books have been investigated since they have not been examined before:

- High School Relearn! Student's Book (Pasifik Publications, 9th grade)
- Ortaöğretim İngilizce 10 Ders Kitabı (Gizem Publications, 10th grade)
- Sunshine English 11 Student's Book (Cem Publications, 11th grade)
- Count Me In 12 Student's Book (MoNE Publications, 12th grade)

Table 2. Categorization of the Speaking Activities in the Coursebooks

	9th grade	10th grade	11th grade	12th grade	Total
Number	34	38	29	25	126

2.3. Data Analysis

Data have been categorized according to the knowledge and cognitive process dimensions of the taxonomy through content analysis. The outcomes have been divided into two parts as the verb phrase and the noun phrase. The verb phrases determine the cognitive process level whereas the noun phrases in the outcomes are considered to determine the knowledge level according to BRT. Therefore, the revised taxonomy (2001) has mainly helped to categorize the outcomes. Stanny's compiled verb list (2016) has helped for the verbs that are not clear in the taxonomy. For the verbs that do not exist in the tables, similar verbs have been taken into account and related studies have been carefully investigated. For the categorization of the speaking activities in the coursebooks, the underlying objectives have been determined with two colleagues and the final decision has been made based on the experts' opinions. the subskills required for each activity have been determined and then they have been placed into

the revised taxonomy table accordingly. The frequency and percentage tables have been presented to interpret the quantitative data.

3. Findings

Findings for each research question are provided respectively.

Research Question 1. What is the distribution of the outcomes for the speaking skill throughout the grades between 9th and 12th in English curricula in Turkey according to Bloom's revised taxonomy?

When the latest 9th, 10th and 11th grade curricula are examined according to the cognitive process dimension, it is seen that the outcomes stated for the speaking skill focus more on the category “apply” according to the cognitive dimension of BRT and on the category “conceptual” according to the knowledge dimension. 12th grade curriculum is different from the other grades since the most focused category in the speaking outcomes of the 12th grade curriculum is “evaluate”. The numbers and percentages can be seen in Table 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 3. Categorization of the 9th Grade Speaking Outcomes According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	3	10,34	18	62,07	-	-	4	13,79	-	-	25	86,21
Procedural	-	-	-	-	3	10,34	-	-	-	-	1	3,45	4	13,79
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	3	10,34	21	72,41	-	-	4	13,79	1	3,45	29	100

Table 4. Categorization of the 10th Grade Speaking Outcomes According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	4	17,39	10	43,48	-	-	5	21,74	-	-	19	82,61
Procedural	-	-	-	-	3	13,04	-	-	-	-	1	4,35	4	17,39
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	4	17,39	13	56,52	-	-	5	21,74	1	4,35	23	100

Table 5. Categorization of the 11th Grade Speaking Outcomes According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	3	15,79	9	47,37	-	-	3	15,79	-	-	15	78,95
Procedural	-	-	-	-	3	15,79	-	-	-	-	1	5,26	4	21,05
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	3	15,79	12	63,16	-	-	3	15,79	1	5,26	19	100

Table 6. Categorization of the 12th Grade Speaking Outcomes According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	2	9,09	4	18,18	1	4,55	9	40,91	-	-	16	72,73
Procedural	-	-	-	-	1	4,55	-	-	3	13,64	2	9,09	6	27,27
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	2	9,09	5	22,73	1	4,55	12	54,55	2	9,09	22	100

Research Question 2. What is the distribution of the speaking activities in the English language coursebooks throughout the grades between 9th and 12th in Turkey according to Bloom's revised taxonomy?

The findings show that 9th, 10th and 11th grade coursebooks provide speaking activities that are mostly intended to improve lower order thinking skills according to the cognitive process dimension and “conceptual” knowledge according to the knowledge dimension of the taxonomy. 12th grade coursebook is different as it is designed to foster higher order thinking skills more. The numbers and percentages are provided in Table 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Table 7. Categorization of the 9th Grade Speaking Activities According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	3	8,82	17	50,00	-	-	5	14,71	-	-	25	73,53
Procedural	-	-	-	-	8	23,53	-	-	-	-	1	2,94	9	26,47
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	3	8,82	25	73,53	-	-	5	14,71	1	2,94	34	100

Table 8. Categorization of the 10th Grade Speaking Activities According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	15	39,47	8	21,05	-	-	5	13,16	-	-	28	73,68
Procedural	-	-	-	-	6	15,79	-	-	-	-	4	10,53	10	26,32
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	15	39,47	14	36,84	-	-	5	13,16	4	10,53	38	100

Table 9. Categorization of the 11th Grade Speaking Activities According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	4	13,79	13	44,83	-	-	3	10,34	-	-	20	68,97
Procedural	-	-	-	-	2	6,90	-	-	-	-	7	24,14	9	31,03
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	4	13,79	15	51,72	-	-	3	10,34	7	24,14	29	100

Table 10. Categorization of the 12th Grade Speaking Activities According to BRT

The Knowledge Dimension	The Cognitive Process Dimension													
	Remember		Understand		Apply		Analyze		Evaluate		Create		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Factual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Conceptual	-	-	3	12,00	7	28,00	1	4,00	11	44,00	-	-	22	88,00
Procedural	-	-	-	-	1	4,00	-	-	-	-	2	8,00	3	12,00
Meta-cognitive	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	3	12,00	8	32,00	1	4,00	11	44,00	2	8,00	25	100

Research Question 3. What is the relationship between the outcomes for the speaking skill in the high school English language curricula and the speaking activities in the high school English language course books in Turkey according to BRT?

Findings suggest that the speaking outcomes in the curricula and the speaking activities in the coursebooks are mostly aligned at all levels in the high school. In the 9th grade, 72.41% of the outcomes and 73.53% of the tasks are in the category “apply”. In the 10th grade, 56.52% of the outcomes and 73.53% of the tasks are in the category “apply”. In the 11th grade, 63.16% of the outcomes and 51.72% of the tasks are in the category “apply”. In the 12th grade, 54.55% of the outcomes and 44% of the tasks are in the category “evaluate”.

4. Discussion

The findings that show the dominance of the outcomes in language curricula in the LOTS in terms of the cognitive process dimension are consistent with the findings of the previous studies (Gökler, 2012; Gökdeniz, 2018; Öztürk, 2019; Güde, 2021). In these studies, the programs that are analyzed are different; however, they all report that the outcomes are found to be in LOTS categories. For example, Gökler (2012) evaluated the objectives and functions in the 8th grade English course curriculum, SBS questions, and exam questions according to BRT. In her study, it was concluded that most of the objectives and functions in the curriculum, SBS questions, and exam questions aimed at LOTS categories. Similarly, Öztürk (2019) examined the 9th grade English language outcomes in the curriculum and coursebook activities and reported that the outcomes and activities for all four skills and pronunciation focused more on LOTS categories. In her recent study, Güde (2021) analyzed the outcomes for four skills and pronunciation in the secondary school preparatory class English language program. The findings of this study suggested that most of the outcomes have been placed in LOTS categories.

Similar results have been obtained in the studies which were carried out to analyze English language coursebooks (Mizbani & Chalak, 2017; Oktaviani, 2018; Öztürk, 2019; Rahpeyma and Khoshnood, 2015; Ulum, 2016). These studies were conducted to investigate the activities in different coursebooks from the perspective of BRT and all of them concluded that the number of the activities in LOTS was more than the number of those in HOTS. Especially, in the study conducted by Mizbani & Chalak (2017), it was revealed that all of the listening and speaking activities in the coursebook Prospect 3 were in LOTS categories. All in all, the results displaying that the outcomes and activities aim at LOTS imply that learners are expected to remember facts, comprehend principles, and apply them in appropriate situations. It is acceptable that especially students with low English proficiency level feel more confident and safer speaking in a controlled activity since they are often reported to have high levels of foreign language speaking anxiety (Dalkılıç, 2001). However, activities that lead students to think critically and creatively should be included in all levels (Zohar & Dori, 2003).

Regardless of their proficiency levels, students should be exposed to activities in which they can analyze the information, discuss their opinions and produce something using the language that is appropriate to their level since critical thinking should be enhanced continuously (Liaw, 2007).

As for the findings related to the knowledge dimension, the current study concluded that both the outcomes for the speaking skill and the speaking activities in the coursebooks in the high school focused most on conceptual knowledge and lacked metacognitive knowledge, which is similar to the findings of the studies conducted by Gökler (2012), Gökdeniz (2018), Öztürk (2019) and Güde (2021). For instance, Gökdeniz (2018) investigated the questions in the TEOG exam and the outcomes in the 8th grade English language teaching curriculum. She suggested that there was neither a question in the TEOG exam nor an outcome in the curriculum which was based on metacognitive knowledge. Similarly, Öztürk (2019) concluded that none of the outcomes and activities were related to metacognitive knowledge in the 9th grade curriculum and coursebook. However, students who can use metacognitive strategies tend to be more successful since they are better at planning and checking their own learning processes (Rahimi and Katal, 2012). Defined as one's awareness of cognitive strengths and weaknesses (Pintrich, 2002), metacognitive knowledge should be taught at all levels while teaching a foreign language. Studies on metacognition display that using metacognitive skills effectively “empowers learners” (Öz, 2005:151). In speaking classes, students can learn how to plan what to say when, monitor their speech, and evaluate their improvement with the help of metacognitive strategies if they are taught. Being knowledgeable about these strategies might also help students feel less anxious while speaking since they know how to overcome their strengths and fears. However, as Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach (2006) stated, teachers themselves are not knowledgeable enough about metacognition. Although they are willing to incorporate metacognitive knowledge into their teaching, they need guidance and training on what metacognitive strategies can be taught to students and how to integrate them into their classes.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

In the English language curricula and coursebooks for the grades 9, 10, and 11th, it has been found out that both the outcomes and the activities for the speaking skill have been mostly distributed into the LOTS categories. The 12th grade coursebook and curriculum differ from the ones in the other grades since both the outcomes and the activities are distributed to HOTS categories more. The distribution of the outcomes and activities in the knowledge dimension is similar at all levels in the high school, in which “conceptual” knowledge is highly emphasized, and “factual” or “metacognitive” knowledge does not have a place.

This study is limited to the analysis of the speaking skill in the high school curricula. Further research can be conducted to analyze the distribution of the speaking outcomes in the primary and secondary school curricula, and the speaking activities in their coursebooks

according to BRT. Moreover, to examine how the speaking outcomes are assessed in the high school English classes, a comparative analysis of the assessment tools used for speaking and the outcomes can be made. The rate of their alignment could be searched. Further studies might focus on different skills to find out the distribution of the outcomes and activities according to BRT. Listening or reading, for example, might yield totally different results as they are receptive skills. Finally, a study can be conducted to investigate the outcomes in the English language curricula for all grades in terms of the knowledge dimension only. Outcomes for different skills might be based on different types of knowledge according to BRT.

To conclude, in the light of the findings related to the inadequacy of the HOTS and lack of metacognitive knowledge both in the outcomes and the activities, it could be beneficial to place the outcomes in the categories of the taxonomy to be able to see their distribution concretely while revising the curricula. Outcomes could be rewritten with more emphasis on HOTS categories to help learners realize more complex tasks using the language. Even if the activities in the coursebooks do not support students in terms of improving their critical thinking skills, teachers should be knowledgeable about these skills and how to help their students improve HOTS. The curricula and coursebooks could be revised in a way to include metacognitive knowledge. Students should be introduced to strategic knowledge and self-knowledge. Training programs should be planned both for in-service and pre-service teachers to help them integrate metacognitive strategies into their classes more effectively.

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