Attrition of Oral Communicative Ability among English Language Graduates in Turkey

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explored the relationship between the period of Turkish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) graduates' not using English as well as their ages with the attrition of their oral communicative ability. The study also indicated the language maintenance strategies the Turkish EFL graduates pursue to prevent the attrition of their oral communicative ability. To investigate the issues, the present study used a quantitative design and the convenience sampling. The participants included 153 Turkish graduates majoring in English fields. A test of oral communicative ability as well as a checklist including 20 'Language Maintenance Strategies' were used to collect the required data. The results showed that the longer the period of language non-use, the more likely the attrition of oral communicative abilities of Turkish EFL graduates will occur. As for the language maintenance strategies, the item 'watching movies with its corresponding subtitle in English' was the most frequent, followed by 'listening to English songs', whereas 'speaking in English with Turkish friends' was the least frequent one, and this was followed by 'speaking in English with foreigners'. The study highly recommends enhancing the conditions and quality of the EFL teacher education programs in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of non-pathological Foreign Language (FL) attrition, defined as FL learners' loss of their linguistic knowledge or skills when they end or stop their formal language learning (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Bardovi-Harlig & Burghardt, 2020; De Bot & Weltens, 1995; Moorcraft & Gardner, 1987; Oxford, 1982; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012), has been widely discussed and investigated since the 1980s (Bahrick, 1984; Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; A. D. Cohen, 1989; De Bot & Weltens, 1995; Gardner, Lalonde, & Macpherson, 1985; Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft, & Evers, 1987; Kuhberg, 1992; Nakuma, 1997; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012; Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016; Weltens, 1987). Even though it is not still completely clear what factors cause or contribute to language attrition, both personal and external factors can contribute to FL attrition (Schmid, 2011; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). Among the former are "age, age at the onset of attrition, attained proficiency," "attitude and motivation", (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012, p. 113), and "contact with the language" (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012, p. 115); among the latter are "time since onset of attrition, language contact and use and/or length of exposure to the language" (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012, p. 113). Language disuse, or non-use, is one of the most key factors

of language attrition (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Gardner et al., 1985; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012).

English language attrition seems to be a problem of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduates in Turkey. The Turkish EFL learners generally demonstrate that they can understand English but cannot speak in English (Koşar & Bedir, 2014). As Coşkun (2016) stated, "The saying 'I can understand English but I can't speak' is so commonly used by Turkish people that it would be fair to state that not being able to speak English has almost become a syndrome in society." (p. 1). Additionally, although English, as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) in Turkey has been considered as one of the most essential skills to acquire and "has been taught at earlier stages in primary schools since 1997" (Kizildag, 2009, p. 188), the majority of the Turkish people cannot speak English. English proficiency of the Turks, in general, is not good at all (Botica, 2019; Çelebi, 2006; Işık, 2008; Kırkgöz, 2009; Sak, 2012). In 2019, Turkey was ranked 79th out of 100 countries/regions in the EF English Proficiency Index as the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills. In the list of countries by English-speaking population, which was last updated on August, 15th, 2020 on Wikipedia, about 17% of the Turkey's population can speak English.

Several studies have already revealed the causes of the challenges of speaking English in Turkey. The old-fashioned

grammar-based teacher-centered English teaching approach has been the most frequently cited cause of the challenges of speaking English in Turkey (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Gençoğlu, 2011; Güney, 2010; Karaata, 1999; Özsevik, 2010; Toköz-Göktepe, 2014). Then, lack of skilled fluent English teachers and quality education to train them (Sak, 2012), use of Turkish language instead of English by the teachers in EFL classes (Coşkun, 2016), learners' lack of motivation to speak English (Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013), learners' fear of speaking English or being criticized and evaluated negatively (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Savaşçı, 2014; Tok, 2009), learners' lack of exposure to authentic English and their limited speaking practice opportunities outside the classroom (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Toköz-Göktepe, 2014), and the EFL course books which do not include colloquial English and neglect the speaking skill (Coşkun, 2016; Saraç, 2007) were mentioned as the factors negatively affecting the EFL learners' speaking proficiency in Turkey.

Considering the mentioned context of Turkey, English will probably be forgotten once it is not used or studied anymore by the EFL graduates because literature has indicated that the most common causes of FL attrition are the strength and quality of FL learning, motivational factors causing acquisition, and the way the learned language is used (Lambert & Freed, 1982; Weltens & Cohen, 1989). Further, productive skills are more prone to attrition than receptive ones (Al-Sulaiman, 2020; Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992; Weltens & Grendel, 1993). However, the Turkish researchers have been more concerned with English language use than language loss so far. In Turkey, English language attrition is an under-investigated area of research.

Although some scholars believe in the occurrence of language loss or attrition, De Bot and Weltens (1995) suggested that when a language is acquired, it is never lost. What happens is that when a foreign language is not studied or used for a period of time, the foreign language elements in knowledge may not be readily available (De Bot & Weltens, 1995). There can be some remedies for language attrition (Neisser, 1984; Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016).

Therefore, Kopke (2007) argued that "the issue of language use and contact certainly needs to be investigated further in the context of attrition" (p. 25). Furthermore, as Schmid and Mehotcheva (2012) argued, in a society which people spend time, money, and effort on learning a FL, understanding about what causes and contribute to FL attrition is really important. Moreover, as Schmid and Mehotcheva (2012) put it, "research on FL attrition can have implications not only directly for FL teaching and learning but also for more theoretical linguistic aspects." (p. 103). Additionally, as Cohen (2018) pinpointed, more energy is spent helping learners learn language than to maintain what they have learned, and he recommended that teachers and learners be alerted to strategies for preventing attrition.

Some researchers have already explored the problem of first language (L1) (i.e., Turkish) attrition among the Turkish people (Karayayla & Schmid, 2019; Kasap, 2015; Yildiz

& Koyuncuoglu, 2017). Nonetheless, to the best knowledge of the researcher of the current study, no study has been published exploring the English language attrition among the EFL graduates in Turkey. As a result, this study attempts to partially fill in this research gap in Turkey. The present study addresses the following questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant correlation between the period of English non-use and the attrition of the oral communicative ability of Turkish EFL graduates?
2. Is there a statistically significant correlation between the age and the attrition of the oral communicative ability of Turkish EFL graduates?
3. What are the most used techniques for preventing the attrition of the oral communicative abilities of Turkish EFL graduates?

METHOD

Research Design

This research has a quantitative correlational design. The convenience sampling was utilized in this study.

Participants

The 153 participants in this study included 96 female and 57 male Turkish EFL graduates who lived in Turkey. Their native language was Turkish, and their L2 was English. They all held bachelor's degree in Applied Linguistics, Translation Studies, English Literature, Linguistics, and other majors. The mean age of the subjects was (33.75), ranging from 24 to 51 years. The time lapse between their graduation and participation in this study ranged between 1 to 29 years. None of them had been teaching English during the mentioned time lapse. Table 1 indicates a summary of participants' background characteristics

Instruments

A test of oral communicative ability was used in this study. The questions were compiled from Levels 2, 3, and 4 of the book Real Listening and Speaking by Logan and Craven (2008) as well as (Craven, 2008a 2008b) respectively. For more information on the used test, see Appendix A. The Audioscript of the questions are also provided in Appendix B. Moreover, among the "Sample Assessment Rubrics" of New York State Education (n.d.), the Spontaneous Conversation Rubric was utilized to assess the participants' performance on the oral communicative ability test. However, the rubric was modified by omitting the Vocabulary section to match the requirements of the test. For more information on the used rubric, see Appendix C. Additionally, a checklist, which included 20 'Language Maintenance Strategies' was prepared by the Google Forms; the list was prepared using the ideas gotten from Ostovar-namaghi and Rahmanian (2017) as well as Al-Sulaiman (2020). The mentioned checklist is available in Appendix D. Further, the Skype computer application was used to administer and record the oral communicative ability test.

Table 1. Participants' background information

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	96	62.7
Male	57	37.3
Major		
Applied Linguistics	23	15.0
Translation Studies	37	24.2
English Literature	49	32.0
Linguistics	40	26.1
Other	4	2.6
Years Since Graduation		
Mean	10.41	
SD	7.867	
Age		
Mean	33.75	
SD	7.553	

Data Collection Procedure

After the oral communicative ability test was prepared, the researcher searched the Turkish EFL graduates out via LinkedIn and Facebook. Moreover, the email addresses of several EFL graduates were obtained either from their universities or via their friends. The invitation to participate in the study was sent to 201 Turkish EFL graduates. A hundred and sixty-three people consented to take part and the researcher guaranteed their anonymity.

Ten out of 163 subjects agreed to participate in the test-retest process to validate the oral communicative ability test, and the rest (153 subjects) participated in the study. The prepared test of oral communicative ability was administered twice (after a lapse of 12 days) to the group of ten individuals (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991); subsequently, the reliability of the test was measured running the Pearson correlation. The time lapse of 12 days was decided based on Henning (1987, as cited in Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991), which recommended that "the time lapse should be less than two weeks" (p. 532).

Then, the date and time of doing the test were scheduled at each participant's convenience. Afterwards, the researcher connected the participants individually via Skype and administered the test. The duration of the whole process varied among the participants, but the maximum duration was nearly 25 minutes. The variation was mainly because of the differences in participants' fluency in spoken English. Each subject's participation was recorded for further analyses.

Following that, the link of the form, entitled 'Language Maintenance Strategies', was sent to the participants either by email or their WhatsApp accounts at each participant's convenience. They checked the language maintenance strategies which they either pursued or would like to adopt and submitted the list to the researcher.

In order to prevent the possibility of the researcher's bias and considering the rater reliability, each oral communicative ability test was scored independently by two raters: the researcher and a colleague who held master's degree in Applied Linguistics and was a professional researcher. Each rater used the mentioned rubric and graded the participants' performance out of 20. The final score consisted of the average score of the two raters.

RESULTS

Estimating the Reliability

The Cronbach alpha coefficient, utilized to measure the reliability of the oral communicative test as well as the inter-rater reliability, were .991 and .993 respectively.

Correlation between the Period of English Non-use and the Attrition of the Oral Communicative Ability

To investigate the probable relationship between the Turkish EFL graduates' period of English non-use and their attrition of the oral communicative ability, first the preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.; the value of kurtosis statistics was -1.128, so it was not within +/-1; in addition, the result of the Shapiro-Wilk test was .000, so it was lower than .05. It was concluded that the assumption of normality was violated based on Thode (2002), Larson-Hall (2010), Phakiti (2010), and Pallant (2016). As a result, Spearman's rho was utilized to explore the correlation between the period of English non-use and the attrition of the oral communicative ability.

There was a strong negative correlation between the period of English non-use and the Turkish EFL graduates' oral communicative ability total score, $r = -.753$, $n = 153$, $p = .000 < .01$ (Cohen, 1988). In other words, the more years passed since the participants' graduation, the more impaired their level of oral communicative ability was.

Correlation between the Age and the Attrition of the Oral Communicative Ability

The Spearman's rho was conducted to seek for the probable existence of the correlation between the age and the attrition of the oral communicative ability among the Turkish EFL graduates.

There was a strong negative correlation between the Turkish EFL graduates' age and their oral communicative ability total score, $r = -.725$, $n = 153$, $p = .000 < .01$ (Cohen, 1988). In other words, the older they were, the more impaired their level of oral communicative ability was.

The language maintenance strategies used by the Turkish EFL graduates

To find out what techniques the Turkish EFL graduates use or would like to adopt to prevent the attrition of their language ability, the frequencies and percentages of the items related to language maintenance strategies were calculated. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2. The language maintenance strategies used by the Turkish EFL graduates

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Watching movies with its corresponding subtitle in English	101	66.0
Watching English non-subtitled Movies	81	52.9
Watching English-speaking Programs on TV Channels	73	47.7
Speaking in English with Foreigners	45	29.4
Speaking English while Traveling Abroad	81	52.9
Chatting online in English with Foreigners	73	47.7
Speaking in English with my friends in my country	41	26.8
Listening to English Songs	89	58.2
Listening to English News	69	45.1
Reading English Short Stories and Novels	64	41.8

As Table 2 shows, the item 'watching movies with its corresponding subtitle in English' was the most frequent (66.0%), followed by "listening to English Songs (58.2%). 'Speaking in English with my friends in my country' was the least frequent one (26.8%), and this was followed by 'speaking in English with foreigners' (29.4%).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study found strong negative correlations between years since graduation and the Turkish EFL graduates' oral communicative ability as well as their ages and their mentioned ability. These findings are consistent with some of the similar previously done studies worldwide in other contexts, such as Gardner et al., (1987) and Al-Sulaiman, (2020).

However, generalizing the findings from the earlier studies on FL attrition to the current one might be impossible due to the fact that the characteristics of the language pedagogy and learning method used in the context of Turkey as well as the Turkish EFL graduates' social and individual differences could affect the attrition of their English oral communicative ability. As was stated in the Introduction, in Turkey, English is taught exclusively in formal settings of classrooms where there is limited authentic input. Speaking and use of the language is also limited to the classroom and each individual can have limited opportunities for authentic real-life use of English (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Gençoğlu, 2011; Güney, 2010; Karaata, 1999; Özsevik, 2010; Toköz-Göktepe, 2014).

Furthermore, some similarities have been found between the language maintenance strategies which Turkish EFL graduates adopt or would like to utilize, and the ones employed by the subjects in Ostovar-namaghi and Rahmanian's (2017) as well as Al-Sulaiman's (2020) studies. As for

the context of Turkey, this study showed that speaking in English with friends in Turkey was the least frequent one (26.8%), and this was followed by 'speaking in English with foreigners' (29.4%). Based on the previously done studies, the reason can be their anxious feeling while speaking English, (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Savaşçı, 2014; Tok, 2009), and lack of knowledge about English culture (Coşkun, 2016). Moreover, the old-fashioned grammar-based teacher-centered English teaching approach can definitely cause the challenges of speaking English in Turkey (Coşkun, 2016; Dinçer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Gençoğlu, 2011; Güney, 2010; Karaata, 1999; Özsevik, 2010; Toköz-Göktepe, 2014).

Further, as the literature revealed, English teachers in Turkey are not entirely familiar with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and follow the traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching method (Gençoğlu, 2011; Güney, 2010; Kirkgoz, 2007; Özsevik, 2010; Uysal & Bardakçı, 2014). Therefore, if the English teachers in Turkey perfectly learn about the CLT approach and do not follow the traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching method, the conditions can improve.

Additionally, lack of skilled fluent English teachers and quality education to train them (Sak, 2012), as well as use of Turkish language instead of English by the teachers in EFL classes (Coşkun, 2016) were mentioned as two key factors affecting the English speaking ability of the Turkish students and people. In addition, literature already revealed the weaknesses of EFL teacher education in Turkey. The weaknesses include lack of "a clear-cut philosophy of teacher education" (Karakaş, 2012, p. 8), lack of "systematic planning and scientific research on training needs of teachers due to the non-functional organizational structure and under qualified personnel of the Ministry of Education's in-service training department." (Uysal, 2012, p. 19), an absence of "a comprehensive, current, and consistent conceptual framework that is informed by current L2 learning and teaching and teacher education research … Second, there seems to be a lack of focus on a background in linguistics and SLA" (Mahalingappa & Polat, 2016, p. 8), not following a holistic and an experiential approach, in which a variety of techniques are applied (Bayrakcı, 2009; Karakaş, 2012), not supporting the Turkish teachers of English by any feedback or evaluation system (Bayrakcı, 2009; Özer, 2004; Uysal, 2012), the limited hours allocated to practically oriented courses, such as teaching practice (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Sanli, 2009; Seferoğlu, 2006), and not including "a reflective practice component" (Karakaş, 2012, p. 10). Consequently, if the EFL teacher education programs in Turkey improves, the quality of the EFL teachers' teaching, as well as the oral communicative ability of the Turkish EFL learners improve, which may also reduce the probability of language attrition.

Even though this study is informative about the attrition of oral communicative ability among Turkish EFL graduates, there is no denying that it has some shortcomings and further research is needed to enlighten the EFL experts in the context of Turkey on how to pursue the mentioned matter.

For example, a bigger sample size will contribute to more generalizability in the results. Additionally, further research is needed to discover the various internal or external factors of attrition, other than age and language non-use.

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APPENDIX A

Oral Communicative Ability Test

1) Socializing
a) Starting a Conversation
Imagine you meet 4 new people at a party. Listen and answer their questions.
b) Maintaining a Conversation and Asking Follow-up Questions)
Imagine 5 people talk to you at the party. Listen to their statements (a-e). Respond with follow-up questions.

2) Eating Out
(Talking about what you ate at a restaurant)
Think about the last time you went to a restaurant. Listen and answer the 7 questions.

3) Travel
a) Offering Travel Tips
Imagine you are in your hometown and a tourist asks you 6 questions (a-f). Listen and reply, using your own ideas.
b) Asking for Detailed Information to Book a Trip
Imagine you are on holiday in India and an Indian tour guide is trying to sell you an excursion. Using the prompts below (a-e), ask questions, and then you will hear the tour guide's response to each of your questions.
a. How long?   b. Where / leave from?
c. What time / leave?   d. What / included?
e. Hidden extras?

4) Shopping
a) Asking about Products in Detail
Imagine you want to buy a smart phone. Use the prompts below. Use a to answer the clerk's question and use the prompts b-e to ask questions. Then, you will hear the clerk's answers.
a. look for / smart phone
b. have / a closer look?
c. happens / press this button?
d. keypad / for?
e. blue button / do?
b) Bargaining
Imagine you are at a market. Listen. Accept an offer and reject the other one.

5) Healthcare
a) Describing Symptoms
Think of a minor illness. Imagine you have a minor illness and are at the doctor's. Listen and answer the doctor's questions (a-f).
b) Understanding the Diagnosis
Imagine you are at the doctor's. Listen to the doctor's instructions and then repeat the information back to the speaker to check you have understood.

6) Bureaucracy
(Giving Explanations)
Picture this:
You are studying sociology at university in Canada. You need to get a job to support yourself for the next year while you study. You have found a job in a local restaurant, but you need a work permit to work off campus. You haven't got a Social Insurance Number.
Now, imagine you are having an interview with an immigration official. Listen to 5 questions and answer each one as clearly and precisely as you can.

APPENDIX B

Oral Communicative Test Audio script

1) Socializing
a) Starting a Conversation
What do you do?
The food's good, isn't it?
How long have you lived here?
Do you know anyone here?
This is a nice house, isn't it?
b) Maintaining a Conversation and Asking Follow-up Questions)
a. I read a book at the weekend, but it was terrible.
b. My sister's just had a baby.
c. I used to do a lot of sport, you know, when I was younger.
d. I haven' seen my parents for a long time.
e. I'm going to go to the city center this afternoon.

2) Eating Out
(Talking about what you ate at a restaurant)
a. When did you last go to a restaurant?
b. What type of restaurant was it?
c. Did you have a starter? What was it?
d. Did you have a dessert? What was it?
e. What did you eat for the main course?
f. What's it made with?
g. Did you enjoy it?

3) Travel
a) Offering Travel Tips
a. Can you recommend a good place to stay?
b. Is it worth hiring a car?
c. Do you know a nice place to eat?
d. Where can I change money?
e. What's a good way to spend an evening?
f. Where are the best places to go shopping?

b) Asking for Detailed Information to Book a Trip
a. Do you want to go on a night cruise?
b. Just two hours.
c. We'll pick you up by bus outside the hotel.
d. At six o'clock tomorrow night.
e. Bus to and from the hotel, and the cruise.
f. Dinner isn't included, but you get one free drink.

4) **Shopping**
  a) Asking about Products in Detail
    - Can I help you?
  a
    - Right, well this one is pretty popular.
  b
    - Sure. Here you are.
  c
    - That switches it on.
  d
    That's for typing messages, like emails and notes.
  e
    - It switches on the wireless internet connection.

  b) Bargaining and Reaching an Agreement
    a. You can have the desk for $45.
    b. Ok. You can have this Rolex watch for $390. How's that?

5) **Healthcare**
  a) Describing Symptoms
    a. What seems to be the trouble?
    b. Do you know when it started?
    c. How long have you been feeling like this?
    d. What symptoms have you got?
    e. Are you feverish?
    f. Have you been taking anything for it?

  b) Understanding the Diagnosis
    This is a prescription for some medicine that should help sort it out. Take two tablets three times a day, before meals.

6) **Bureaucracy**
  - You are a student here. What are you studying?
  a
    - Why do you want to work?
  b
    - How long are you going to be studying here for?
  c
    - Have you found a job already?
  d
    Have you got a Social Insurance Number?

APPENDIX C

Spontaneous Conversation Rubric

Comprehension: The ability to understand what is said to the speaker.

2 Shows ability to understand the target language when spoken at a somewhat normal rate of speed, with only one repetition or rephrasing, if necessary.

1 Can understand the target language when spoken at a somewhat normal rate of speed, with more than one repetition or rephrasing.

0 Does not seem to understand the target language.

Pronunciation: Pronouncing words in such a way that native speaker would understand what is being said.

2 Can be understood in the target language, but may make few or minor errors. Makes an effort to sound "native," i.e., uses target language speech patterns, intonation, and phrasing.

1 Can be understood in target language, but may make one or two major errors and/or has some interference from English language speech sounds, patterns, and rules.

0 Makes major errors and/or uses English pronunciation rules to speak in the target language, or doesn't/can't respond.

Fluency: Easy, smooth flow of speech, within a reasonable amount of time (15–20 seconds).

2 Has a generally smooth flow, with self-correction and little hesitation.

1. Speaks slowly, using hesitant or halting speech.

0 Makes no attempt or shows constant hesitation.

Grammar: Word order and sentence structures in the target language.

2 Demonstrates good use of grammatical structures. Makes no grammatical errors, or a few minor grammatical errors that do not interfere with communication.

1 Uses a range of grammatical structures, but may make several grammatical errors that do not interfere with communication.

0 Makes many grammatical errors that negatively affect communication, or doesn't/can't respond.

APPENDIX D

Language Maintenance Strategies

To prevent the attrition of my English language skills, I / I'd like to …
- watch movies with its corresponding subtitle in English
- watch English non-subtitled movies
- watch TV programs on English-speaking channels
- review my previously learned materials
- study commercial materials to develop my English language skills
- study the contents of English learning channels on Telegram
- study the contents of English learning websites
- practice English using the applications which can be installed on PC or cell phone
- attend free discussion groups online
- speak in English with foreigners
- speak English while traveling abroad
- speak in English with my friends in my country
- chat in English with foreigners
- correspond with native speakers of English
- correspond with non-native speakers of English
- listen to English songs
- listen to English news on radio or online
- listen to audiobooks or podcasts
- think or talk to myself in English
- read English short stories or novels
- other …