

# **SUCCESS STORY OF AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM: ACTIONABLE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

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## **1. Introduction**

English is the most preferred language in written and spoken discourses all around the world. In a recent study, English appeared to be the most spoken language with 1.35 billion people worldwide followed by Chinese Mandarin by 1.12 billion people (Szimigiera, 2021). Additionally, English is the language of science that the majority of scholarly articles, up to 98 % of publications written, are in English (Ramírez-Castañeda, 2020). That being said, English maintains the status of being a ‘lingua franca’, the language for mutual communication, in the world. As thus, it would not be difficult to estimate that English is by far the most-studied target language around the world by up to 1.5 million learners as of 2014.

The case is not different in Turkey; English is the most preferred and taught foreign language in Turkey (Baş-Collins, 2020). To this end, English language instruction has always been a priority in the educational agenda of the Turkish policy-makers. One obvious evidence to back up this argument is that the English language was integrated into the second grade of the primary school education as a required course starting in the 2013-2014 academic year. Given time and effort invested in teaching English, the proficiency level of Turkish students is not satisfactory. EF (Education First) agency released (2020) Turkish students’ English proficiency report as ‘low’ ranking 39<sup>th</sup> out of 100 countries included in the survey. According to the country-wise report, Turkey was found to be 33<sup>th</sup> out of the 34 European countries.

In Turkey, housed in both state and private universities, Schools of Foreign Languages (SFL) (aka foundation or English preparatory schools), offer one year intensive English language instruction to undergraduate students as a departmental requirement. That is, some departments require their potential students to study English intensively for a year before they start their disciplinary studies. The studies conducted across the country so far to investigate the existent problems and the efficacy of the instruction provided at SFL revealed that there are problems such as: teacher-led classes, lack of emphasis on speaking skills, lack of practice components in the four language skills, unmotivating coursebooks, poorly-designed curriculum and courses, coursebook-bound instruction, lack of practice component accompanying regular courses (Örs, 2006; Karataş & Fer, 2009; Özkanal & Hakan, 2010; Baş-Collins 2020; Demirtaş & Sert, 2020).

Although the title of the chapter reads ‘story’, everything included in this chapter is real. The chapter will present a plethora of extra-curricular activities that have been tested and confirmed as beneficial in a SFL at a state university. The practices can be regarded exemplary as the school was granted European Language Label Award twice for two innovative teaching projects. That being said, the primary purpose of this chapter is to showcase a success story that will presumably inspire teaching staff working in such schools by replicating and adapting some of the presented activities in their own contexts.

## **2. Prevalent Concepts in Current Language Teaching and Learning Practices**

Language learning is a complex and multidimensional process including cognitive variables such as language aptitude, learning strategies, learning habits, affective variables like language learning anxiety, personality-related variables, and demographic variables such as the age of the learner (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). All these parameters have an impact on a language learner's learning processes which are traditionally compartmentalized in three stages as input, processing and output.

To begin with, language teaching and learning practices and accompanying competencies are shaped by changing needs and expectations of a particular age. During the pre-methods period, the ancient languages such as Latin and Greek were taught by teachers solely relying on the epitomes of the Grammar-Translation method. Simply put, literary texts were used to teach linguistic structures and vocabulary items through memorization. It was not until the emergence of the communicative approaches to language teaching in the 1970s that the language competency was limited to primarily teaching decontextualized linguistic elements. Canale and Swain (1980) redefined the meaning of knowing a language in their seminal article. In their conceptualization of communicative competence they highlighted four competencies as linguistic (rules, lexical knowledge and so on), sociolinguistic (use of the language appropriately in social contexts), discourse competence (appropriate coherence and cohesion in the oral and written communication), and finally strategic competence (knowing and generating strategies to survive).

As the borders of the world have started to shrink thanks to the globalization, intercultural competence emerged as another vital competency along with formerly-established language competencies (Alptekin, 2002). The basic premise of the intercultural competency is that effective communication across the borders in a globalized world can be ensured by intercultural competence.

In the current era of digitalized world where there is an abundance of digital instructional sources outside the classroom available to what Prensky (2001) calls 'digital natives', teachers' reliance on taken-for-granted pedagogical teaching skills of the past appears to be a big fallacy. In sum, language learning and teaching practices performed by learners and teachers are prone to change in accordance with the necessities that arise in a particular course of time period. However, what remains constant is that people will continue learning languages to express themselves by harnessing written and oral affordances appropriately in a context-sensitive manner. In recent years, three important concepts; exposure, engagement, and positive psychology have been situated in the language teaching/learning literature. Closely related to the language teaching pedagogies, these concepts are well credited in increasing number of empirical studies.

### **2.1. Exposure**

The concept of exposure is associated with usage-based approaches. These approaches operate on the premise that language learning is linked with input and experience with language (Ellis & Cadierno, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2018; Tomasello, 2003). More specifically, aligned with the usage-based approaches, this concept suggests that inside and outside

learning contexts might have an impact on language learning process. That is, input-rich environments outside the classroom are promising for learners to improve proficiency. Drawing from the above argument, we can deduce that learners may achieve higher levels of competency when they are exposed to input-rich activities outside the classroom. Given the fact that classroom instruction is limited to the input provided by teachers through coursebooks or similar teaching materials, the provision of input-rich learning ecology additional to the classroom instruction needs to be given due credit.

With regards to the classroom input, some researchers argue that poor input, both in terms of quality and quantity offered in the classrooms lead to slow learning rate. Additionally, scholars also argue that most classroom instruction fosters explicit learning (DeKeyser, 2012; Munaz, 2006; Munoz & Cadierno 2012). Thus, in order for learners to improve the target language skills, they need to be exposed to extra activities that they can practice and internalize the target language beyond the classroom walls. As is asserted, teaching does not occur in a vacuum; metabolizing what is learned inside the classroom is likely to be translated into tangible practices when students are exposed to language-rich activities. In doing so, students can find venues to experiment and internalize what they are instructed within classrooms. To exemplify, a study conducted on Japanese L1 learners revealed that students' pronunciation skills have improved in spades after getting exposed to extra activities inside and outside the classroom (Saito & Hanzawa, 2018).

## **2.2. Engagement**

Another prevalent concept in the current language learning and teaching practices is engagement. The concept of engagement was traditionally associated with the field of education and was found to have promising impact on overall learning outcomes. Primary concerns of the earliest studies were compartmentalized in students' engagement with school and school community with an emphasis on drop-out rates, lack of motivation in school activities (Case 2007 as cited in Zhang 2020; Mann 2001).

Since its emergence in the field of education, this complex and multifaceted concept has been researched in various studies. Based on a study conducted by Anderson et al. (2004), the concept was conceptualized in four different layers as behavioral (e.g. participating in extra-curricular and class activities), academic (e.g. task completion, time spent for learning and while engaging with a task), cognitive (e.g. utilizing learning strategies or self-regulated learning modalities), and psychological (e.g. relationships with teachers and the sense of belonging to a school culture). Some other researchers have come up with different conceptualizations of the concept of engagement. Dunleavy (2008), for instance, investigated the learner engagement at secondary schools in Canada and proposed a tripartite conceptualization of the concept as behavioral (e.g. participation in school activities and attendance), academic-cognitive (e.g. time assigned to task, homework assignment completion) and social-psychological dimension encompassing motivation and interest so on. The concept has also found its place in language teaching arena in relation to its many constructs that are linked with the discipline such as cognitive, behavioral and academic dimensions. The concept of engagement is promising for teachers as it provides insights into

teaching practices that can create optimal learning environment thereby facilitating learner engagement.

The concept of exposure suggests that input is vital in language learning process. However, quality and quantity of the provided input is also important. Language learners need to be surrounded by language-rich environments both in and outside the classroom. Thus, they can engage with the input at academic and cognitive levels. Linked with the education discipline, the concept of engagement, on the other hand, suggests that students need to be provided with instructional affordances that trigger engagement at behavioral, academic and cognitive levels. In a nutshell, both concepts point out the characteristics of favorable teaching milieu where students are surrounded by rich and quality input of desirable quantity in and beyond the classroom. Once students are provided with language-rich learning affordances they will likely get engaged in the learning process. Along with the aforementioned concepts of exposure and engagement, the concept of positive psychology has potential to link with the scope of the chapter at hand.

### **2.3. Positive Psychology**

The concept of positive psychology (PP) was first introduced in a seminal work produced by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). The rationale and primary argument in the work was a needed shift in the focus from negative emotions to more positive ones. More specifically, there is a fixation in psychology on highlighting the negative emotions over positive ones such as hope, love and enjoyment. However, in reality, life is a mixture of both good and bad instances. Of the definitions proposed so far, Peterson's (2006) definition of positive psychology as "the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between" (p. 4, cited in Wang et al., 2021) provides the backbone of the concept of positive psychology.

The concept has been positioned in the language studies by advocating the integration of both positive and negative emotions. In line with PP, various studies on enjoyment of learning experience, happiness, emotional intelligence have appeared along with bulky studies accentuating negative emotions with regards to language learning. Supporters of positive psychology in language acquisition argued that in the past, the subject areas researched in L2 were clustered around negative aspects such as anxiety, burn out, or boredom. However, the concept of positive psychology in L2 suggests that separation between two ends of the emotional continuum is nearly impossible. That is, the positive psychology researchers in L2 advocated accentuating and investigating both groups of emotions especially the good ones instead of creating a sheer polarity between positive and negative emotions.

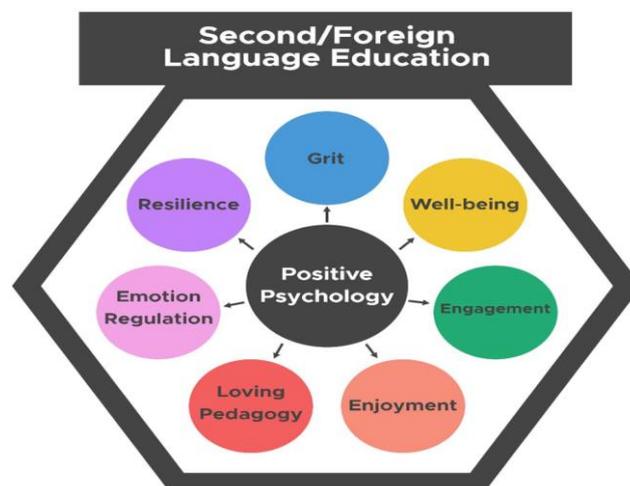
Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) stated the pillars of positive psychology as whatever is positive in the realm of emotions, subjective experiences and personality characteristics. Since the onset of the concept in education field and its transfer to L2 teaching discipline, Oxford's (2016) EMPATHICS model of nine components has become an important step. Largely drawing from the PERMA model proposed by Seligman (2011), Oxford's EMPATHICS model stands for;

1. Emotion and empathy,

2. Meaning and motivation
3. Perseverance, including hope, resilience and optimism
4. Agency and autonomy
5. Time
6. Hardiness and habits of mind
7. Intelligences
8. Character, strengths and
9. Self factors (self-verification, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy) (Wang et al 2021. p.3)

As can be seen from the items included in the model, almost every detail that might impact learning is included. In the figure below, possible PP dimensions for language teaching are presented (Wang et al., 2021). Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review every parameter in the figure in detail, the PP factor of enjoyment is truly worth mentioning in relation to the topic of the chapter at hand which is extra-curricular activities. Based on the findings of various empirical studies it has been stated that foreign language enjoyment (FLE) is an underestimated subject, yet influential in terms of motivation, engagement and overall achievement of the students. Furthermore, research studies on FLE also indicated that teacher-related factors are more definitive in the whole process. That is, teacher's support, friendliness, tone of voice, sense of humor or respect toward students were found to be correlated with students' overall achievement. Enjoyment in itself is stated to be a factor which stimulates engagement in the activities. Therefore, it is crucial that students are provided with opportunities that they can enjoy while learning. To this end, it can be stated that well-designed extra-curricular activities have potential to create enjoyment-filled learning ecology at SFL.

In a nutshell, the concepts of exposure, engagement and positive psychology all have valuable insights into rationalization of extra-curricular activities at Schools of Foreign Languages. Exposed (**exposure**) to well-designed extra-curricular activities, learners can find joyful learning milieu (**enjoyment**) where they can get engaged (**engagement**) in language-rich learning processes.



**Figure 1:** Positive psychology factors contributing to the second/foreign language learning experience (Wang et al., 2021, p.6).

The rest of the paper will be devoted to the extra-curricular activities that were successfully conducted with promising outputs at a state SFL in Turkey. The following section is divided into two major sections; the activities designed for the instructors working at the school and the students who are receiving EFL instruction.

#### **2.4. Instructors**

As it is repeatedly mentioned in the related literature, instructors, as game changers, are the gatekeepers of quality education at all levels. Simply put, quality education can be ensured by only quality instructors. As thus, continuing professional development of instructors comes to fore as a must for quality education. Below is a list of ideas that can be actualized to help instructors both develop professionally and teach effectively.

#### **2.5. In-service Seminars from Within**

In-service seminars are typically considered the major source of professional development pursuits for both teachers working at primary or secondary schools and instructors working at higher education institutions. Generally speaking, at SFL, teacher trainers affiliated with major publishing houses provide seminars for the instructors. However, in order to create collegiality and establish what might be called 'learning culture' at schools, instructors should be given the opportunity to conduct seminars themselves along with the other type of seminars given by invited teacher trainers. In the related literature, the concept of 'communities of practice' points out a theoretical framework in which teachers collaborate to learn (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Lave & Wenger 1991). In line with this, the instructors working at SFL can be asked to choose a topic of their interest and give a seminar to their colleagues. In so doing, the instructors will develop professionally thereby creating a 'learning community'.

#### **2.6. Seminars from Outside**

As mentioned earlier, typically in-service seminars for the instructors are provided by the teacher trainers from the publishing houses. Usually the case is the teacher trainer presents what s/he has on his/her professional agenda. That is, the content is usually determined by the teacher trainer. However, these seminars can be more beneficial if they are informed by the professional needs of the instructors working at SFL. That is, the school management can conduct needs analysis surveys to identify the real needs of the instructors before arranging such seminars. For instance, instructors at a particular SFL might need to learn how to create a rubric to assess oral presentation or spoken language skills and the school might ask the teacher trainers to give a seminar particularly on this subject.

#### **2.7. Ongoing Assessment Meetings**

Addressing usually to large groups of students, the SFL which provide intensive English instruction are busy programs with tests, quizzes, lessons devised at various proficiency levels and managing some curricular details. That is, co-ordination of tasks and general flow of the work at such busy programs require allocation of agency among teaching staff. In line with this, instructors can form autonomous teams under lesson sections such as; Listening-Speaking, Reading-Writing, Main Course, and so on. In doing so, instructors will be encouraged to hold section-wise meetings autonomously as teams and make decisions based

on the needs of their lesson section. The concept of autonomy is highlighted for both students and teachers as well in the related literature (Holec 1981; Lamb 2008). The existence of autonomous teachers at a SFL will serve two purposes. In the first place, autonomous teachers will have a voice in the decisions related to the school which, in turn, will nurture a sense of belonging to the school. Secondly, autonomous teachers will be aware of the problems that might occur in the school system and adopt a proactive stance.

As is widely agreed, assessment is a crucial component of every educational setting at all levels. The case is not different at SFL. In order to realize educational endeavors smoothly and effectively at busy schools like SFL, holding regular ongoing assessment meetings with the participation of all teaching staff is crucial. During these weekly meetings where the school management and the instructors, that is, teams of instructors representing their own lesson sections get together to evaluate the past week and plan the next week. During these meetings, the instructors representing different lesson sections will have an opportunity to share the decisions taken in their group meetings with both the management board and their colleagues. Holding regular weekly ongoing assessment meetings at SFL is like feeding two birds with one cone; weekly assessment of the instruction will lead to effective teaching practices at school and create a synergy where autonomous instructors are involved in the decision making processes. Furthermore, collective decision making process in such an autonomous ecology is likely to lead to collegiality among teaching staff thereby nurturing a sense of belonging to the institution.

### **3. Extra-curricular Activities for Students**

#### **3.1. Establishment of Clubs: Speaking Club and Reading & Writing Club**

The concepts of engagement and exposure both advocate provision of language-rich activities for language learners at schools. That is, students need to be exposed to joyful activities in which they will have the opportunity to engage in the learning process. With this in mind, clubs can be established at SFL. Operating on volunteer-based, these clubs will be preferably moderated by the instructors of the related lesson-section. The contents can be either arranged based on the coursebook content or on the topic of interests that students want to talk about. In order to add extra spice to these clubs, foreign students who are studying at institution might be invited to join the clubs. In the Reading & Writing Club students can read books of their choice and engage in discussions and writing activities accordingly. What needs to be noted is that both clubs should meet regularly with the participation of volunteer students. In order to motivate students, topics of interest might be identified via needs analysis surveys beforehand and be announced a week before the club meeting.

#### **3.2. Self-access Center (SAC)**

These centers are considered to be a part of autonomous learning (Benson & Voller 1997; Koyalan 2009; Lamb 2008). The rationale for SAC lies in the fact that learners should be exposed to a variety of learning materials to help with their learning process. Establishment of such a center at SFL will encourage students to practice language beyond the classroom at their own pace and time. The materials can be compiled by donations from appropriate sources. In SAC, board games in English can be placed that students can form their groups

and play. In case the SAC sources cannot address to large number of students, use of the center can be designed on appointment basis. At the beginning of the semester, students can be provided with an orientation as to how they could use the center and what type of materials available.

### **3.3. Wall Paper**

Throughout the intensive English instruction at SFL, students are assumed to prepare homework assignments and various projects. On the walls of the halls, Wall Paper can be placed to display students' assignments. In so doing, students who see their peers' assignments on the Wall paper can be motivated to work harder. Furthermore, weekly topics of the abovementioned clubs can be announced on these paper.

### **3.4. Discipline-specific Oral Presentation**

The schools of SFL host students from various disciplines. These students study English for a year. Although, curriculum might change from one school to another, almost always basic language skills are taught at every school along with other courses. In Listening/Speaking course, students might be asked to give a prepared talk to their peers on a disciplinary topic as a partial requirement of the course. To actualize this task, students might be directed to their departments to meet the teaching staff and get some ideas for their talks. In doing so, students will have the opportunity to get familiarized with their future school ecology thereby getting acquainted with the teaching staff there.

### **3.5. Invited Talks from Representative Disciplines**

As mentioned earlier, demotivation among students at SFL is a prevalent problem that needs to be addressed. In order to increase motivation level of students, guest speakers can be invited representing the disciplines of the students. Designing such invited talks where SFL students will have the opportunity to listen to experienced and knowledgeable faculty is likely to boost up their motivation.

### **3.6. Game Day**

As is stated earlier in relation to enjoyment studies, students are more motivated to learn when they are provided with joyful activities. To this end, a specific time and day can be integrated into the curriculum as 'game day'. Game day can be designed in a way that students have opportunity to review unlearned vocabulary items or subtle structures that they have problem to internalize.

### **3.7. Fun Night**

Scheduled at the end of the academic year, this night is the showcase of the students who have received instruction for a year. The students are informed about the Fun Night at the beginning of the year and are encouraged to take part in this night with any performance they want to share with their peers, teaching staff, and even with their parents. This night is totally assigned for student performances in English of their own choice. The performances may vary from reciting poems, staging short plays they have written down, to music. To realize Fun Night, the participating students will have to work with the guidance of the instructors through decision making and rehearsal processes. Being the showcase of students'

accumulated language learning experience, such a performance night will prove that what is learned in the classes theoretically can well be morphed into flesh and blood.

#### 4. Conclusion

Language learning is a complex and painstaking process. The prevalent concept of exposure advocates that language learners need to be **exposed** to quality input and quantity in language-rich contexts. The concept of **engagement**, on the other hand, suggests engagement is necessary for the internalization of provided instruction. **Enjoyment**, one of the research areas of positive psychology, tells us it is important to create a learning ecology where teachers are friendly, humorous, respectful toward students. In other words, in the learning settings where students are happy and enjoy themselves, reaping the fruits of painstaking language instruction will be easier. To this end, well-designed extra-curricular activities might function as life jackets to remedy various learning problems that might be encountered at SFL. Despite the significance of extra-curricular activities, there is a dearth of empirical studies regarding the views of the instructors working in the intensive or foundation programs teaching English. With regards to the instructor voices, a study conducted by Ginosyan et al. (2019) found that instructors agreed on the positive effects of these activities implemented in a foundation school in Oman. The study asked the participating instructors to evaluate the extra-curricular activities on eight different dimensions varying from language improvement, learners' needs and their interests, self-esteem to self-confidence. The findings revealed that foundation students benefit from the activities in terms of language improvement and adjustment to education life.

Language learners need venues to practice what they have learned in the classes. Extra-curricular activities have potential to offer language learners opportunities to practice language beyond the walls of classrooms. In the chapter, a number of actionable extra-curricular activities enacted and tested beneficial at a state SFL were presented with the hope that they could be replicated in similar settings.

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Oya Tunaboylu holds BA from Atatürk University, MA and PhD degrees from the Ohio State University in TESOL. She also holds an MA in British Theater from Atatürk University. Professor Tunaboylu served as the director of School of Foreign Languages at Süleyman Demirel University. During her managerial post, the school was granted European Language Label Award twice first in 2009 and 2011 for two innovative language teaching projects. Tunaboylu is interested in multidisciplinary approaches to language teaching practices.