

## Reasons for learning English in Turkey and the activities learners do to reach their goals

## Türk öğrenciler neden İngilizce öğrenmek istiyorlar ve bunu gerçekleştirmek için neler yapıyorlar?

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### Abstract

This study tried to find answers to the following questions: What is the importance of learning English for Turkish learners in relation to some specific areas or purposes? Which specific out-of-classroom activities do Turkish learners of English follow in order to develop their English? In order to collect the data, 94 learners of English were given a 23-item scale whose Cronbach's alpha value of reliability was calculated as .786, suggesting that the tool was moderately reliable for the purposes of this research study. Results show that for 90% of the participants, English is important to actualize their personal goals, for 89% of them, being successful in their field of study is important and for 88% of them, gaining self-respect is argued to be important. The most frequently repeated activity related to using English is listening to music (50%) followed by watching films in English (43%). Visiting touristic places (34%) and visiting Internet sites (26%) are the other frequently completed activities students do in order to learn English.

**Keywords:** English, reason, need, motivation, activity

### Özet

Bazı belirli alanlarda veya amaçları ile ilgili olarak Türk öğrenciler için İngilizce öğrenmenin önemi nedir: Bu çalışmada aşağıdaki sorulara cevap bulmaya çalıştım? Hangi özel dışı sınıf içi etkinliklere sırasına geliştirmek için İngilizce öğrenenler takip ediyorsunuz? Amacıyla İngilizce 94 öğrenenler olan güvenilirliği Cronbach alfa değeri araç orta derecede bu araştırmanın amaçları için güvenilir olduğunu düşündürdü, 0,786 olarak hesaplanmıştır 23 maddelik ölçek verildi, veri toplamak için. Sonuçları önemli olduğu ileri sürülmektedir özsaygı kazanma, katılımcıların% 90'ı için, İngilizce öğrenim alanında başarılı olmak, bunların% 89 için, kendi kişisel hedeflerini gerçekleştirmek için önemli olması önemlidir ve bunların% 88'i için gösteri. İlgili en sık tekrarlanan etkinlik İngilizce müzik (% 50) İngilizce (% 43) filmleri izlerken takip dinlemektedir kullanarak. Turistik yerlerde (% 34) ve Ziyaret internet siteleri (% 26) Misafir öğrenciler için İngilizce öğrenmek için yapmanız diğer sık tamamlanan etkinliklerdir. **Anahtar Sözcükler:** İngilizce, neden, sebep, gereksinim, ihtiyaç, motivasyon, etkinlik

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## **Introduction**

Teaching English in Turkey's state schools has many instructional and professional obstacles. Many claim that most students who complete their English language courses in state schools for six or seven years cannot use basic expressions to pass across their thoughts and feelings. Similarly, English is one of the most difficult subjects for those who attend university. Our experiential knowledge shows that students who are good at various subjects in their fields are usually not successful in English, which is a compulsory subject for them to take for the first two semesters. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, as Saraç-Süzer (2010: p. 316) articulates, 'failure in using a foreign language is grouped into two different categories which are pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure caused by insufficient or incorrect language knowledge. Learning the relevant social and cultural aspects of sociopragmatic usages is a prerequisite to achieve language competency and intelligibility.' In Turkey, because English is only accepted as a school subject without having a role in social or daily lives of its speakers such as its use in national TV channels or films, such failure in using English becomes understandable. This negativity occurs all the while there appears to be growing emphasis on English language teaching at all levels of education. Recently, English language classes start at 4<sup>th</sup> grade and continuous to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. At the university level, all students must pass courses in English and there are various English medium universities and departments across the country. These show the dramatic importance of English for a country which has been negotiating with the European Union as a candidate member State.

There must be several reasons for English language learners' inability in using English in Turkey and every teacher, researcher and even student may come up with lots of ideas about the source of the problem. Relevant literature in Turkey suggests that students' failure in using English mainly results from their lack of knowledge in speaking (Batdı and Özbek, 2010) and knowledge of language (Saraç-Süzer, 2010). McKay and Tom (1999) argue that teachers should know about their students' personalities, knowledge of their first and foreign languages and knowledge of the world, previous learning experiences, goals in learning a foreign language and learning preferences and styles. Hence, it is probable that cultural variables constitute a significantly important factor in students' success. Research also signals that governments' incorrect educational policies have negative effect on people's unsuccessful foreign language performance (Schulz, 2002). D'iachenko (1991) argues that unless students strengthen what they learn in their classrooms outside the class especially through meaningful activities, their speaking skills will not develop as planned in the classroom. As can be seen in this discussion, all these factors include a variety of

independent variables most of which are too broad and challenging for researchers and teachers to be tackled or even questioned.

Although researchers and teachers alone cannot do much about the above mentioned factors, they can put their foreign language teaching methods, techniques or instructional practices under scrutiny. In fact, foreign language teaching research has produced a wealth of information about the roles of teachers, learners or materials in a way to develop the most effective ways of teaching (Broady, 2002). When the teachers' case is considered, teachers have the opportunity to make necessary changes during the teaching process and introduce new materials or apply new techniques. However, research also shows that especially in foreign language teaching, success comes from outside the classroom since it is fundamental that students develop, extend, and use what they learned in the classroom through their out-of-class activities (Koren, 1999). Hence, it is expected that the foreign language being learned must be used outside the classroom so that an effective learning takes place.

Akyel (2002) stresses the importance of motivation. By referring to available learning strategies such as inductive inferencing and practice and monitoring she proposes a task-based learning approach to learning a foreign language. She thinks that it is important to conduct the lesson according to the reactions of the students and to enliven it with activities that appeal to them. Taking students' reactions into account and turning the lesson into a process of meaningful tasks and appealing activities are not the only factors facilitating the teaching process. There are strategies to prevent the occurrence of unfavorable experiences and negative attitudes toward the foreign language learned.

After a twelve-year research to find out 'why some people can learn a foreign language quickly and expertly while others, given the same opportunities to learn, are utter failures', Gardner and Lambert (1972) deny the notion that "it all depends on how the second language is taught". They also ascertain that "having a knack or an ear for languages" cannot be the answer. That is, both method and talent are of secondary importance. Gardner and Lambert (1972) believe that language learning is a socio-psychological process and state that a serious student of a foreign or second language who has an open, inquisitive, and unprejudiced orientation toward a learning task might very likely find himself becoming an acculturated member of a new linguistic and cultural community. Hence, having an 'open and unprejudiced orientation toward the learning task' is seen as an imperative for developing a successful language learning process in which the learner lets herself engulfed in the

linguistic and cultural community whose language is being learned. However, when foreign language learning is considered, it can be understood that the only way to be a part of the foreign language community can be through tourism or media such as the Internet or films.

The term “attitude” can be defined as “someone’s opinions or feelings about something, especially as shown by their behavior”. Students’ attitudes may be positive, negative or neutral. They affect and even shape students’ behaviors accordingly. Values are “the principles and beliefs that influence the behavior and way of life of a particular group or community” (Macmillan English Dictionary) and Wright (1987) states that our values are the basis for our attitudes. Values and attitudes are formed through the social, cultural and educational background of individuals and affect their future learning strategies. Unfavorable experiences lead to developing negative attitudes and anxiety and may result in poor learning performance. For example, in a study about anxiety in a college Japanese language classroom, Kitano (2001) found that an individual student’s anxiety is higher as his or her fear of negative evaluation is stronger and that this tendency depends on the instructional level and the experience of going to Japan. If learners have negative attitudes towards a certain subject, topic or procedure, then the answer lies in an emotive atmosphere and motivation. Taking the learners feelings, values and attitudes into account will help the teacher create an emotive atmosphere in which the students’ motivation is increased. In a related study, Tılfarlıođlu and etiner (2002) compared the attitudes of teachers and learners and found that 76% of the students and teachers share similar ideas about the students’ interests and their undeniable effect on their decision-making system. The same study asserts that 66% of the students and teachers think that they have good relations with each other and that this has a positive effect on students being more comfortable and relaxed in the foreign language classroom.

Stern (1983) claimed that socioeconomic status played an important role in one’s learning of a foreign language. In addition to his explanation connecting success with material qualities, research also shows that emotional states play significant role in one’s overall learning. Foreign language learners’ emotional states are known to have an effect on their overall learning experiences. Emotion can be defined as personal and subjective feelings and is inter-related with attitudes. It can be pleasant or unpleasant, mild or intense, transient or long lasting or as interfering or enhancing our behavior (Strongman, 1973). Motivation is related with the orientation of the need or reason for learning a language. It can be instrumental, reflecting the practical value and advantages of learning a new language or integrative, representing a sincere and personal interest in the target language and the culture of people who speak it. Studies show that there is a close relationship between

motivation, attitudes and success in learning a language (Çekiç, 2001; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Nunan, 1998).

Nunan (1998) investigated forty-four 'good' language learners to find out whether there were any common patterns in their learning experiences. Their responses turned out to be surprisingly homogeneous. The results revealed that motivation and the opportunity to use the target language is vital to the success of learning a foreign language. Similarly, perceived self-efficacy is an important factor along with motivation. Sex and age are other factors that affect the motivation and willingness to communicate in L2 and perceived self-efficacy (MacIntyre et al, 2002) and in fact all these elements are correlated. In their study of the relationship between goal orientations, perceived self-efficacy and success, Vrugt, Oort and Zeeberg (2002) concluded that perceived self-efficacy contributes to pursued goals and that the goals in turn contribute to course grades. Ariogul (2009) found that among all motivation types, only intrinsic motivation had significant correlation with student success (GPA) and no correlation existed between sex and motivation type.

A narrower perception of motivation is the one which is proposed for desuggesting the fears and negative attitudes of the learners within and especially in the beginning of the lessons. This kind of motivation includes preparing a good and pleasant learning atmosphere, providing the learners with reinforcement and self-perception of efficacy. Demirel (1999) sees this kind of motivation as one of the most important tasks of language teachers. Schunk (2003) claims that efficacy is not the single most important factor affecting a learner's success because some other factors such as knowledge of content and learners' expectations affect success in a sound manner.

Using the target language in the classroom as a means of interaction and communication is an important factor that affects the motivation and perceived self-efficacy of students. Recent research advocates the employment of L2 in classroom settings. Yet, as Meiring and Norman (2002) point out, although teachers can provide situations and opportunities for the target language use, the real impetus will lie within the motivation of the learners themselves to use what they learn which is more problematic than it might seem. These researchers suggest that encouraging intrinsic motivation in learners may provide a way out of the problematic nature of the target language use. However, Arikan's (2008) study revealed that even when the case of the prospective teachers of English is considered, those who spend more than 6 hours or more of their Internet time to sources in English make up only 26.7% of the participants, showing a low profile interest of these participants in the target language in an EFL environment.

Although we accept the effect of all above mentioned factors, we also believe that students' unpleasant experiences in English classes lead to developing negative attitudes towards English. These negative attitudes inhibit language learning and failure in learning strengthens the negative attitudes and the belief that s/he cannot accomplish. This vicious circle is most likely to deepen the severity of the problem. Thus, we aim to investigate the importance of learning English by Turkish learners of English and the types of they do outside their classrooms. To be more exact, this study tried to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the importance of learning English for Turkish learners in relation to some specific areas or purposes?
2. Which specific out-of- classroom activities do Turkish learners of English follow in order to develop their English?

## **Method**

### **Population and sampling**

Freshmen classes and Vocational High School of Gaziantep were taken as the target population. One class of 41 students from Freshman classes and another one of 30 students from Vocational High School of Gaziantep were chosen randomly. Similarly, 23 preparatory level students from Akdeniz University were chosen randomly. In total, 94 Turkish students who are learning English took part in the study. Selecting students from different universities and different departments helped us reach groups that have a variety of personality and learning characteristics. The participants have quite different backgrounds and different attitudes so as we observed in the schools prior to the study.

### **Data collection and analysis**

A questionnaire was designed and given to a class of 40 students as a preliminary study of the reliability of the items. It was observed that it took the participants about 15 minutes to read and mark the items. We received no questions about the instructions or the items. This preliminary study showed that the Cronbach's alpha value of reliability of this 23-item scale was .890, suggesting that the tool was highly reliable in this particular application. In the actual application of the scale to 94 learners, the Cronbach's alpha value of reliability of the scale was calculated as .786, suggesting that the tool was moderately reliable for the purposes of this research study in our specific contexts.

## Results

### Research question 1. What is the importance of learning English for Turkish learners in relation to some specific areas or purposes?

As can be seen in Table 1, majority of the participants (90%) claim that English is important to them to actualize their personal goals. Being successful in their field of study is thought to be important for 89% of the participants and gaining self-respect is argued to be important for 88% of them. Eighty-two percent of the participants also claim that learning English is important to them to be useful in society. In opposition to these findings, very few participants think that learning English is important to attend a language course in Turkey or abroad. Similarly, listening to music in English and travelling abroad are not among the participants' favorite reasons for learning English.

**Table 1. Importance of learning English for specific areas**

Items	NI	SI	I	VI	EI	X	St. Dev.
How important is English for...	%						
1. following the developments in the field.	3	4	30	29	34	3,86	1,043
2. being successful in the field.	2	3	6	12	77	<b>4,57</b>	,909
3. learning field-specific terms-concepts	3	3	21	18	54	4,17	1,074
4. gaining self-respect.	1	2	9	20	68	<b>4,52</b>	,826
5. being useful in society.	1	5	10	22	60	<b>4,36</b>	,948
6. development of Turkey.	2	3	13	25	57	4,31	,964
7. being happy.	5	3	13	13	66	4,30	1,145
8. reaching personal goals.	1	2	6	15	75	<b>4,61</b>	,791
9. communicating with foreigners.	7	17	26	30	20	3,38	1,201
10. listening to music in English...	15	17	30	23	15	3,06	1,268
11. traveling in foreign countries...	20	15	23	20	21	3,07	1,423
12. attending a language course in Turkey...	28	18	33	15	6	2,54	1,224
13. attending a language course abroad...	31	8	18	19	23	2,95	1,572

### Research question 2. Which specific out-of- classroom activities do Turkish learners of English follow in order to develop their English?

As can be seen in Table 2, the most frequently repeated activity related to using English is listening to music (50%) followed by watching films in English (43%). Visiting touristic places (34%) and visiting Internet sites (26%) are the two most frequently repeated activities with which the participants are engaged. It is noticeable that only 6% of the participants read newspapers and 12% of them read brochures in English. Similarly, only 14% of the participants read books in English. These results suggest that the media, both the Internet and videos, make up the most popular tools

through which Turkish learners of English are exposed to English. However, the participants seem to refrain from communicating with other English language speakers via synchronous tools such as chat programs just as the results of this study show since only 11% of the participants claim to chat on the Internet in English. Although 34% of the participants claim to be visiting touristic places, only 16% of the participants claim to be speaking to tourists in English suggesting that the Turkish learners of English seem to refrain from face-to-face interaction with foreigners in at least in touristic environments.

**Table 2. English language learners' daily activities in English**

Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	X	St. Dev.
Do you...	%						
14. chat on the Internet in English?	20	31	38	10	1	2,40	,953
15. speak to tourists in English?	29	38	17	10	6	2,26	1,165
16. listen to songs in English?	6	16	28	32	18	<b>3,39</b>	1,147
17. watch movies in English?	4	17	36	25	18	<b>3,35</b>	1,094
18. read books in English?	32	31	23	11	3	2,22	1,108
19. memorize songs in English?	39	27	20	8	6	2,14	1,208
20. read newspapers in English?	54	34	7	3	3	1,63	,878
21. read brochures in English?	27	46	16	10	2	2,14	,994
22. visit Internet sites in English?	15	28	32	13	13	<b>2,80</b>	1,220
23. visit touristic places in Turkey?	31	17	18	20	14	<b>2,89</b>	2,621

## Conclusion

The results demonstrate that both instrumental and integrative motivation of the learners is high whereas they have negative attitudes towards the procedures of foreign language learning. They rarely use English in their daily life and oppose using English as means of communication in the classroom although they accept English to be very important. The perceived self-efficacy of the learners proves to be low and this leads to negative attitudes towards communicative language learning process. They prefer the techniques such as translating English sentences into Turkish, explaining grammatical points in Turkish and doing exercises on the board. This preference is related with their previous learning experiences and the fear that they will fail. Foreign language education, particularly English, has had great importance in Turkey for many years since English is an international language so as to trade, communicate, to learn other cultures, to improve political issues in abroad and more importantly to have better opportunities in our



own country. We are in a period where a foreign language is indispensable part of our lives. In order to achieve what is stated above, foreign language education begins from 4th grade in primary schools and continues till the nearly end of university education in Turkey.

For foreign language learners, classroom is the main place where they are supposed to be frequently exposed to the target language. The type of language used by the teacher for instruction in the classroom is known as teacher talk (TT). Bailey and Allwright (1991) define speaking as one of the major ways that teachers convey information to their learners and also one of the primary means of controlling learner behaviour. In other words, teacher talk is used in class when teachers are conducting instructions, cultivating their ability and managing classroom activities (Feng Qician, 1999: 23, cited in Xiao-yan, 2006: 6). Teachers adapt the target language to promote their communication with learners. In this way, learners practice the language by responding to what their teacher says. Besides, teachers use the language to encourage communication between learners and themselves. Therefore, when the results of this study are considered in terms of the low frequency of students' interaction with other speakers of English, the importance of teacher talk and material use becomes obvious. Hence, students need to be both exposed to various uses of English in and outside the classroom. Thus, teachers and programs should encourage learners to use English in their own time.

These results suggest that the perceived role of the EFL teacher is to prepare learners to use English outside the classroom. Nunan (1987, cited in Atkins, 2001: 1) argues that the style of language used in the classroom environment may seriously affect a student's ability to cope in the real world. It seems therefore expedient for language teachers to analyze the language of the classroom and assess its effectiveness which will affect students' attitudes positively towards learning English.

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