

Learning Model for English 2nd -8th Grades

Introduction

The teaching program for English has been prepared in accordance with the general goals of Turkish National Education as defined in the Basic Law of the National Education No. 1739, along with the Main Principles of Turkish National Education (2014).

In order to continue to provide a high-quality public education for Turkey's elementary and secondary students, periodic revision of course syllabi in all subject areas is necessary to maintain an up-to-date and effective curriculum that is in line with contemporary educational research and international standards for learning.

Furthermore, the recent changes to the Turkish educational system, which entail a transition from the 8+4 educational model to the new 4+4+4 system, have led to an immediate need for the redesign of current teaching programs. With respect to English language education, in particular, this new system mandates that English instruction be implemented from the 2nd grade onward, rather than the 4th grade; therefore, a new curriculum which accommodates the 2nd and 3rd grades is necessary. As the newly-designed 2nd and 3rd grade syllabi will serve as the foundation for English language learning, the syllabi for the 4th through the 8th grades must also be revised in order to maintain continuity. In addition, while the existing curriculum was designed for learners who are beginning foreign language learning at approximately 8-8.5 years of age, children will now receive instruction in English starting at around 6-6.5 years old; thus, the new program must take the needs of younger learners into account. In designing the new English language teaching program, the principles and descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) were closely followed. The CEFR particularly stresses the need for students to put their learning into real-life practice in order to support fluency, proficiency and language retention (CoE, 2001); accordingly, the new curricular model emphasizes language use in an authentic communicative environment. As no single language teaching methodology was seen as flexible enough to meet the needs of learners at various stages and to address a wide range of learning styles, an eclectic mix of instructional techniques has been adopted, drawing on an action-oriented approach in order to allow learners to experience English as a means of communication, rather than focusing on the language as a topic of study. Therefore, use of English is emphasized in classroom interactions of all types, supporting learners in becoming language users, rather than students of the language, as they work toward communicative competence (CoE, 2001).

As the CEFR considers language learning to be a lifelong undertaking, developing a positive attitude toward English from the earliest stages is essential; therefore, the new curriculum strives to foster an enjoyable and motivating learning environment where young learners/users of English feel comfortable and supported throughout the learning process. Authentic materials, drama and role play, and hands-on activities are implemented to stress the communicative nature of English. At the 2nd and 3rd grade levels, speaking and listening are emphasized; while reading and writing are incorporated in higher grades as students become more advanced.

Throughout each stage, developmentally appropriate learning tasks provide a continued focus on building the learner autonomy and problem-solving skills that are the basis for communicative competence.

There is no question that the key to economic, political and social progress in today's society depends on the ability of Turkey's citizens to communicate effectively on an international level, and competence in English is a key factor in this process. On the other hand, despite continual efforts at improving the effectiveness of language education in Turkey, a significant percentage of students leave school without the ability to interact successfully in an English-language medium. While it is understood that there are many variables at work in this ongoing problem, it is believed that one of the main reasons for the failure of such a large number of Turkey's students to master competence in English lies in the fact that the language is presented to them as a subject to be learned in school – an academic requirement to be met – rather than as a means for communication. However, in order for meaningful learning to take place, in English as in any other subject area, the material must have relevance in students' daily lives. Therefore, scholars such as Hymes (1972) and Widdowson (1978) have argued that language learning must be carried out in context; that is, it must be used in the course of everyday interactions, for true communicative purposes, rather than practiced as an abstract exercise.

Accordingly, in order to impress on students the role of English as a means of relaying needs and wants, voicing opinions and beliefs, building relationships, and so on, the new curricular model is focused on language learning as communication. The communicative approach entails use of the target language not only as an object of study, but as a means of interacting with others; the focus is not necessarily on grammatical structures and linguistic functions, but on authentic use of the language in an interactive context in order to generate real meaning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards, 2006). In other words, learners/users engage in activities which require actual communication between peers or between students and their teacher, such as creating a game as a group and then playing it with classmates, rather than rehearsing prepared material (e.g., taking turns reading a printed dialog from a textbook or reciting memorized lists of verb forms). Classroom materials and teaching tools are drawn from authentic sources as much as possible in order to demonstrate English as it is used in real life. Furthermore, as motivation is essential to learner success, the curriculum aims to make learning English interesting, engaging and fun, taking into account the diverse needs of students at different developmental levels (Cameron, 2001).

Organization of the Curriculum

In framing the new curricular model for English, no single teaching methodology has been designated. Instead, an action-oriented approach grounded in current educational research and international teaching standards has been adopted, taking into account the three descriptors of the CEFR comprising learner autonomy, self-assessment, and appreciation for cultural diversity (CoE, 2001). In doing so, it is expected that learners will become confident and proficient users of English, developing appreciation for their own unique culture while learning to understand and value a broad spectrum of international languages and cultures in accordance with the CEFR's emphasis on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism.

Instructional design. The curricular model is divided into 3 learning stages with respect to the language uses, functions and learning materials that are introduced.

At the earliest levels, comprising grades 2 through 4, the main emphasis is on listening and speaking. Reading, writing, and grammatical structures are not a focus at this stage, in line with research indicating that younger children learn languages best through songs, games, and hands-on activities (Cameron, 2001). Thus, reading and writing tasks at the lower grade levels are limited. At the earliest stages, learners are introduced to English through cognates; these are believed to provide a bridge between languages, helping learners to transition from the known to the unknown using terms that are easily recognizable (Rodriguez, 2001). This concept is supported by Krashen's (1988) argument that language input must be interesting, relevant and comprehensible to stimulate comprehension.

In the 5th and 6th grades, as students continue to develop their language skills, exposure to short texts is introduced. At the same time, these learners may participate in controlled writing activities such as filling out a club membership registration card with their name, date of birth, address, and other concrete, factual information. In the 7th and 8th grades, older students who have formed the necessary foundation for an understanding of literacy issues will then be exposed to reading and writing as an integral aspect of language learning, such as reading simple texts or writing short, simple stories about their friends (Bayyurt & Alptekin, 2000). This approach follows Cummins' (1984) model, which advocates a progression from cognitively undemanding, context-embedded activities to cognitively demanding, context-embedded tasks, moving from familiar to unfamiliar concepts in building language and literacy skills.

Accordingly, the learning materials and language functions to be taught have been selected to reflect the types of activities appropriate to each learning phase. At stages 1 and 2, comprising the 2nd - 4th and the 5th - 6th grades, similar materials types and language functions are given; these are expected to be adapted to suit the activities specified for each level. At stage 3, additional materials and functions are used along with those applied at stages 1 and 2. This design will permit classroom teachers to choose from the learning applications they feel are best suited to the specific needs of their students.

As noted by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), attention to the formal aspects of language is an essential element in the construction of meaning; therefore, it is necessary to consider these in the context of communicative language learning. However, in accordance with Cameron's (2001) contention that children's grammatical knowledge of a language emerges naturally through "the space between words and discourse" (p. 18), the structural features of English are handled implicitly as learners/users develop communicative skills, rather than addressed as a separate issue.

Instructional materials. For each grade level, a series of 10 sample units is provided, structured around interrelated themes. The use of thematic units is supported by Hale and Cunningham (2011), who point out that this approach allows educators to present new information in a manner that is both relevant and interesting to learners, encouraging them to build on existing knowledge while at the same time revisiting earlier material in as a means of supporting retention. In order to create a link between language learning and daily life, the themes for each unit have been chosen to reflect ideas and issues that are familiar to young students; therefore, themes such as family, friends, animals, holidays, leisure activities and so on are highlighted. In consideration of the CEFR's emphasis on developing intercultural