

# **English-medium instruction in Turkish higher education: The current state of English in psychology departments**

Beril T. Arik and Engin Arik

*English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA*

## **Abstract**

English-medium instruction in non-English speaking countries has gained prominence around the world in the last decades due to the internationalization of higher education but the way English is used in higher education varies. To investigate this further, we focused particularly on the use of English in psychology departments across Turkish universities because psychology is one of the fields in which English is the dominant language globally. Data were collected from official reports and from 287 psychology students who evaluated the use of English in their programs by responding to a questionnaire. English was the medium of instruction in 31 out of 79 programs (about 40%) of all offered undergraduate psychology degrees in Turkey in 2015, but their measures for students' proficiency varied. Students reported that the amount of English used in their classes did not change over the course of their undergraduate psychology program. Students also stated that their comprehension level increased during their study. They also reported that some core courses should be taught or supported by materials in Turkish. The results showed that as the internationalization of higher education continues increasing, so does English-medium instruction especially in the fields such as psychology.

**Keywords:** English-medium instruction, Turkey, teaching of psychology, World Englishes

## **Introduction**

The spread of English is an unprecedented global phenomenon and its effects can be observed in many areas, from science to education to business (Crystal, 1997). One of the consequences of the pervasive presence of English in various educational contexts and countries is the emergence and rapid development of English-medium instruction (EMI) at universities around the world. The use of EMI at the university level in countries where English is not a native language has become more prominent due to the internationalization of higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Research on the status and impact of English in general and EMI in particular indicates that there is a great amount of variation among non-English-speaking countries (Doiz et al., 2013; Nunan, 2003). Because of the pervasive role of English internationally,

the rapid spread of EMI as a result, and the wide heterogeneity of EMI practices around the world, it is imperative that more research be conducted in order to document the status of and processes at play with respect to EMI around the world, especially considering the wide range of stakeholders, from students and teachers to administrators and policy makers, as well as the high stakes surrounding EMI.

Yet, previous research indicated that the use of EMI at the university level was not homogeneous, suggesting that there were disciplinary differences between programs (Block & Cameron, 2002). Our previous research (Arik & Arik, 2014), too, showed that, as an expanding circle country (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005), following the global trend, English is currently the medium of instruction in Turkish universities for around 50% of the programs in some subjects, such as engineering and English. One could argue that these subjects are easier to teach in a second language than are subjects related to social sciences and other humanities, where high proficiency levels in all domains of English are expected. To investigate this in the present study, we first focus particularly on the use of English in psychology departments across Turkish universities because it was documented that psychology is one of the fields in which English is the dominant language (Groddol, 1997). We then evaluate attitudes of psychology students of these departments toward EMI. Our findings indicated that English is the medium of instruction in about 40% of all offered undergraduate psychology degrees in Turkey. Moreover, students reported that the amount of English used in classes remained the same over the course of an undergraduate psychology program. According to students' self reports, comprehension level of students increased during their study. They also reported that some core courses should be taught or supported by materials in Turkish.

### **Higher education in Turkey**

Higher education in Turkey has been transformed considerably in the last decade in line with the Turkish Vision for 2023, which maintains the goal that Turkey will be among the most developed countries by 2023, and the Bologna Process (<http://www.ehea.info/>), which has 47 members, including Turkey, to establish standards for higher education across Europe so as to internationalize European higher education. The Vision for 2023 focuses not only on the development of the Turkish economy but also on technology and education. To actualize the goals posited in this document, the Higher Education Council (YÖK) encourages public and private sectors establish new public and foundation universities as well as let established and new universities offer new undergraduate and graduate degrees. Nevertheless, the newly established universities did not often have adequate infrastructure in terms of teaching facilities, libraries, labs, and, perhaps most importantly, academics (Kavili Arap, 2010; OECD, 2011; TÜBİTAK, 2005; YÖK, 2007).

As a result of several incentives by the government the number of universities was doubled just in eight years; there were 107 universities in 2007 and 194 in 2015. But it is questionable if the quality of education could keep up with such drastic increase in numbers. Following the Turkish Vision for 2023 and the Bologna Process, English as the language of instruction has often been encouraged to internationalize Turkish higher education so that now English is the medium of instruction in about 20% of all offered undergraduate degrees in Turkey (Arik & Arik, 2014). There has been an increase in both the number of EMI universities (Büyükkantarıcı, 2004) and the number of students at foundation universities with EMI (Kırkgöz, 2009), which, we observe, is still the tendency. Nevertheless, according to the British Council Report in 2015, English teaching in Turkish higher education is below expectations.

It is worth investigating students and teachers' views on EMI. Recent research has shown that students at Bilkent University, a private university in Ankara, are satisfied with EMI in Turkish universities but they are not satisfied with the language policies and practices at the universities, especially with regard to the materials used in class (Karakaş, 2017). Another study was conducted with the participation of 13 lecturers from three EMI universities in Turkey to investigate to what extent teachers use their mother tongue, Turkish, in their classes. The results showed that most of those lecturers were in favor of using Turkish to support the EMI classes (Karakaş, 2016).

## **Method**

We examined the use of English as the medium of instruction in psychology programs in Turkey, first to see if Turkey was able to reach its goals as stated in the Turkish Vision for 2023 as part of the Bologna Process and second to document the practices and perceptions regarding EMI in psychology programs, especially because psychology has been established as one of the most English dominant disciplines in previous literature.

Our research questions were the following:

- (1) How many programs in psychology are currently offered in universities in Turkey?
- (2) What are the languages of instruction in those programs?
- (3) How are proficiency levels of students measured in those programs? Are there any English support courses offered in the curricula?
- (4) How do students evaluate the use of English in EMI programs in psychology?

To answer the first three questions, we collected data from the Turkish Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) and the websites of Turkish universities. ÖSYM, run by the government, is the only organization that administers the National Placement Tests in Turkey. Every year, ÖSYM

publishes booklets about the university entrance exams that include information about the universities and their departments. We focused on the ÖSYM reports from 1996 on. The websites of Turkish universities include detailed information about the departments and curriculum according to the Bologna Process. We visited the websites occasionally from 2013 on and focused on their current forms by May 2016.

To answer the last question, we prepared a questionnaire, approved by the ethics committee, in which we asked psychology students to evaluate the instructions and learning opportunities they received in the departments where the language of instruction was English. By using either a 5-point Likert type scale or yes-no questions, the students were asked whether their classes were offered in English (in practice), to what extent they could follow the classes, whether their class materials and exams were in English. The questionnaire was online and in Turkish. 285 students participated in this study (gender: 233 female, 51 male, 1 no-answer; age:  $M = 22.26$ ,  $SD = 2.74$ ).

## Results

Psychology education lasts four academic years in Turkey. Before graduation, a student must have completed at least 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits, which are roughly equivalent to 1,800 hours for classes over the four years. Students are offered either a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree, which gives them the right to hold the title of “psychologist”. This title allows graduates to work as psychologists at hospitals, schools, mental institutions, counseling centers, special education centers, and prisons, among others. All of the programs in psychology offer regular classes with the exception of the programs at Yildirim Beyazit University, which offers regular classes and night classes in two separate programs in psychology.

To address our first research question, we examined universities and their undergraduate programs in Turkey. Our findings showed that, as of 2015, there were 194 universities in Turkey. Of them, 72 offered undergraduate degrees in psychology (Appendix 1). The total number of programs in psychology was 79. We found that undergraduate education in psychology is highly affected by the Turkish Vision for 2023. Therefore, there has been an exponential increase in not only the number of programs offering psychology degrees (e.g., 10 in 1996, 58 in 2013, and 79 in 2015) but also in the number of students enrolled in those programs (e.g., 391 in 1996, 4,796 in 2014, and 5,809 in 2015). Table 1 displays these changes year by year. Therefore, the findings not only showed the number of psychology programs (79) in relation to all undergraduate programs (41%), but also that there has been a substantial increase in the number of psychology programs.

### ***The languages of instruction***

To address our second research question, we investigated the languages used in these psychology programs. We found that the universities in Turkey offer three types of education in terms of the language of instruction: 1) all of the psychology courses are offered in Turkish; 2) all of the psychology courses are offered in English; and 3) 30% of the psychology courses (usually courses related to Statistics, Research Methods, and Introduction to Psychology) are offered in English, while the remainder are in Turkish.

We found that, of the 79 programs in psychology, English is the medium of instruction in about 40% of all offered undergraduate psychology degrees in Turkey (31 out of 79 programs in 2015). A total of 30% of psychology courses are offered in English in four programs. The language of the instruction in the remaining 44 programs is Turkish only. Table 2 provides the names of the Turkish universities offering a BA or a BSc degree in psychology, their ownership, and the languages of instruction.

As the number of universities in Turkey changes rapidly, the number of programs offered in Turkish or English change. In 2014, there were 70 programs in 63 departments of psychology. Of them, 43 programs were in Turkish and a few in 30% English, while 27 programs were entirely in English. In 2015, seven universities offered two separate programs in psychology. One conducted classes in Turkish and the other in English. In 2014, there were six such departments. Overall, the findings indicated that a large percentage of psychology programs in Turkey were in either completely or partially in English. The findings also supported the claim that psychology is one of the disciplines that English is prevalent as the medium of instruction (citation). Our previous research (citation) has demonstrated that around 20% of all undergraduate programs in Turkey were conducted in English, but as can be seen the percentage for psychology programs is 40%, and the numbers have been increasing.

### ***Preparatory schools and English support***

To address our third research question, we explored how universities evaluate psychology students' proficiencies in English. We found that students should pass an institution-based English proficiency exam or document their proficiency level according to their TOEFL or IELTS scores. Those who fail will enroll at an English preparatory school for an academic year. Currently, only one university, Koç University, administers an institutional TOEFL test.

Table 1

*The number of universities with a psychology department and the total number of enrollments in Turkey*

Year	Number of Universities with a Psychology Department	Total Number of Enrollments	Enrollments per Department
2015	72	5,809	80.68
2014	64	4,796	74.94
2013	58	4,361	75.19
2012	51	3,598	70.55
2011	42	2,755	65.6
2010	34	2,128	62.59
2009	30	1,921	64.03
2008	30	1,770	59
2007	26	1,192	45.85
2006	23	1,035	45
2005	22	954	43.36
2004	19	779	41
2003	16	654	40.88
2002	14	566	40.43
2001	13	512	39.38
2000	13	489	37.62
1999	11	393	35.73
1998	11	488	44.36
1997	11	509	46.27
1996	10	391	39.1

Nevertheless, most of the departments continue offering mandatory courses to support freshmen and sophomores' academic English. The names of these courses vary, and include Academic English, English for Psychology, Reading and Speaking Skills, Skills in English, and Academic Writing in English.

### ***Student evaluations***

To address our final research question, we prepared a questionnaire and asked students a series of questions. A total of 287 students participated in this online questionnaire. They were from 24 different programs (24 out of 31, but not equally distributed), thus representing most of the EMI psychology programs in Turkey at the time of data collection. There were 36 freshmen, 69 sophomores, 86 juniors, and 96 seniors. There were 8 missing responses out of 861. Table 2 gives the descriptive statistics from the Likert-type scale (see also Figures 1 and 2).

Table 2

*Descriptives of students' evaluations of the use of English in their programs (scores between 0-4)*

	Courses		Instructors		Comprehension	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Freshman	3.39	0.14	3.44	0.1	2.52	0.17
Sophomore	3.34	0.09	3.37	0.07	2.6	0.11
Junior	3.22	0.09	3.3	0.08	2.79	0.11
Senior	3.34	0.07	3.41	0.06	2.98	0.1

We then excluded scores from the freshmen because most of the classes were common core courses during the freshmen year and the number of the freshmen in our sample was relatively low. A two-way 3x3 ANOVA test (Class: sophomore, junior, senior x Evaluation Type) indicated that there was main effects of Class,  $F(737,2) = 3.632$ ,  $p = .02$ , and Evaluation Type,  $F(737,2) = 32.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , but no interaction. Tukey post-hoc analyses showed that the seniors' evaluation scores were significantly higher than those of the juniors' scores ( $p = .02$ ), but not the sophomores ( $p > .05$ ). The scores of the juniors and the sophomores did not differ from one another ( $p > .05$ ). Tukey post-hoc analyses also showed that the scores for following classes in English were significantly lower than those for classes in English,  $p < .001$ , and proficiency of the instructors,  $p < .001$ . The latter two did not differ from each other ( $p > .05$ ). These results indicated that the use of English in classes and by instructors do not change over the course of an undergraduate psychology program. Yet the comprehension level of students increases during their study according to students' self-reports.

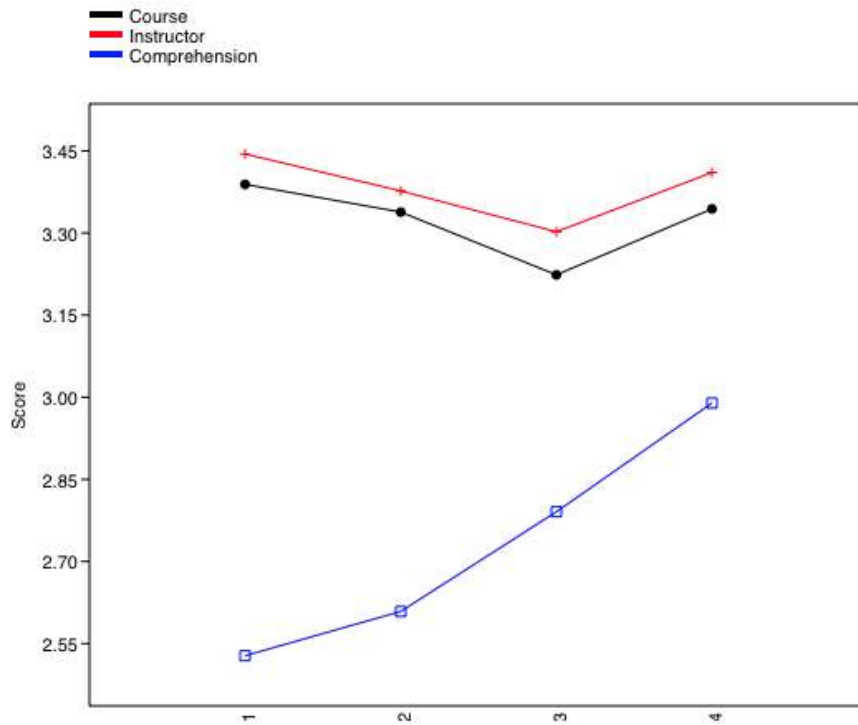


Figure 1. Means of scores for the type of evaluations by class.

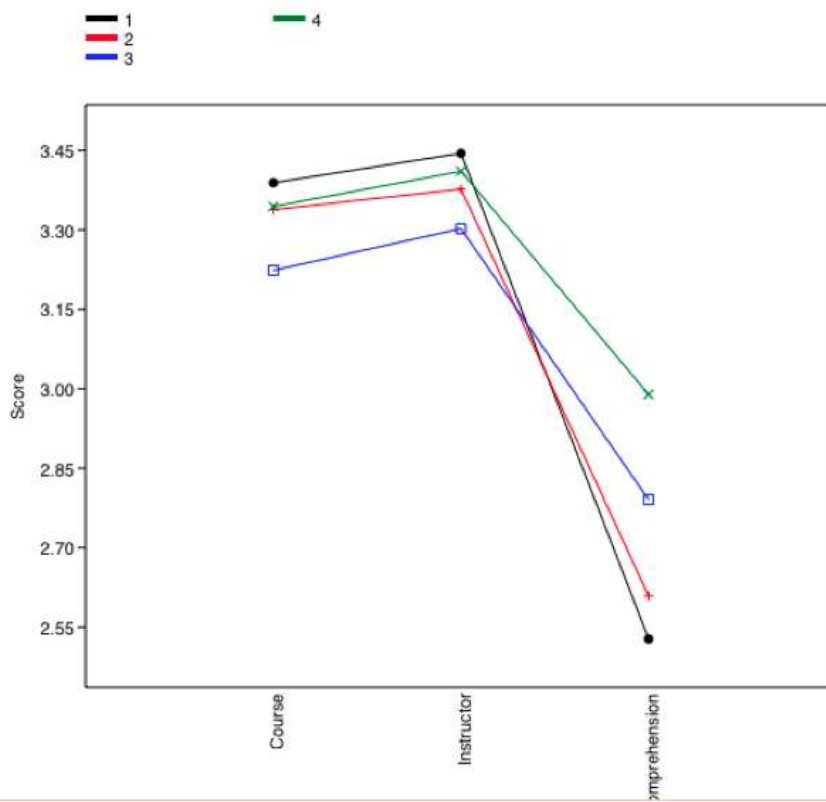


Figure 2. Means of scores for classes by the type of evaluations



The participants were also asked to report the use of English in their classes. They reported that most of the course materials, almost all of the exams, and a large percentage of written assignments and presentations were in English (Table 3). The results suggested that although not 100% correct, the representation of English use in university courses as presented on university websites and ÖSYM data was for the large part accurate. The data showed that some of the written and spoken assignments (10-15%) prepared by students were in Turkish. This might be due to the fact that students' English proficiency, especially in productive skills (writing and speaking), was not up to the challenge of using English as the medium of instruction all the time.

Table 3  
*Students' evaluations of the use of English in their programs (Yes-No questions)*

	Yes	Some	No	Missing response
Course materials in English	263 (91.6%)	21 (7.3%)	0	3 (1.1%)
Exams in English	277 (96.5%)	9 (3.1%)	0	1 (0.4%)
Written homework in English	254 (88.5%)	31 (10.8%)	0	2 (0.7%)
Student presentations in English	237 (82.6%)	43 (14.9%)	5 (1.7%)	2 (0.7%)

We also asked students' opinions as to whether there should be any classes offered in Turkish even though the language of instruction is English. A total of 117 out of 287 participants responded to this open-ended question, and 10 of them (8.5%) said there should be no classes in Turkish whereas 11 of them (9.4%) said all of the classes should be offered only in Turkish. Another 15 students (12.8%) said some of the courses should be supported by Turkish, e.g. during discussions, providing examples, and review for exams.

Many students named specific courses that should be taught in Turkish. All of the core courses were mentioned at least once but the most frequently mentioned courses were Psychopathology (25 students, 21.3%), Clinical Psychology (24 students, 20.5%), Research Methods or Interview Skills or Assessment (14 students, 11.9%) and Statistics or SPSS (14 students, 11.9%).

## Conclusion

Higher education in Turkey has drastically changed in recent years due to the Turkish Vision for 2023 and Turkey's involvement in the Bologna Process. The number of universities and the number of enrollments have increased exponentially to gain more prominence in the world, leading to an internationalization of Turkey's higher education. In this article, we showed the effects of the internationalization of Turkey's higher education on the languages of instruction in psychology departments in the Turkish universities. We found that there is an exponential increase in the number of psychology programs, which suggests that university administrators and language and psychology instructors might consider how to best meet the demands of this growing population, in addition to findings ways to provide quality education that can match this drastic quantitative increase. We also found that the classes in the psychology programs in Turkish universities are conducted either in Turkish (55%) or in English (40%), a percentage significantly higher than the role of English in other undergraduate programs in Turkey (20%) as showed in Arik and Arik (2014). We also observed a trend in terms of language choice towards more psychology programs in English. Over the last couple of years, the percentage of EMI psychology programs has increased compared to that of Turkish psychology programs. There is also an interesting trend in which 30% of the courses in some of the psychology programs are conducted in English. This might be considered either a transitional phase until the language proficiency of the students improve in general, or a synthesis of multiple and often conflicting demands of various parties, such as market forces, global influence of English, educational policies of Turkey, and available resources.

We found that the English preparatory schools mostly use institutional tests or TOEFL scores to measure the language proficiency of psychology students. Our findings showed that even after students pass these tests and continue their college education, many of these programs continue offering English support classes. When these results are compared to the perceptions of the students, it gets clear that the placements scores required by the universities might be too low for students to function successfully in their classes conducted in English. Furthermore, even though many universities provide English support, many students do not seem to be satisfied with the level of support they receive. Needless to say, students' perception is only one of the perspectives to be taken into account when making university level policy decisions.

The findings suggest that there is a close relationship between educational/language policies, such as the Bologna Process and the Turkish Vision for 2023, and practices. Thus, administrators and language instructors should keep an eye on these national and international developments in language policy to meet the changing needs and demands of the students. It will be particularly interesting to observe if and how Turkish higher education

policies might change as a result of the negative political relationship between the EU and Turkey in recent couple of years. The findings also imply that quantitative measures, such as the number of programs offered in Turkish and English, might not always reflect the perceptions of students involved and the quality of EMI. Nevertheless, such studies are a good and necessary starting point for further investigation.

In the present study, we asked students to evaluate the use of English in classes, by instructors, and their comprehension levels, i.e. to what extent they could follow the classes and understand the course materials. We found that there was no difference in the way English was used in the class materials, during the class, and by the instructors throughout undergraduate study. Based on these findings, it appears that the reason underlying the difficulty of comprehension is not the instructors. Therefore, it can be more effective to allocate available resources to infrastructure and pedagogical materials as suggested by Karakaş (2016, 2017). It can also be more effective if educators and policy makers consider a more developmental approach, for example, allowing the use of Turkish more, at least in supplementary materials, in the first year of study and increasing the use of English over time.

This developmental approach might be more in line with the needs of the students as suggested by our findings regarding comprehension levels. We found students' comprehension levels, i.e. to what extent they could follow the classes and understand course materials, increase as the years pass during their undergraduate study. Nevertheless, students also reported that some, if not all, of the courses should be supported by Turkish, e.g. during discussion sessions, with the help of Turkish terms corresponding to the terms in English. This finding is parallel to the perceptions of teachers as reported by Karakaş (2016) in that teachers, too, express a need to use Turkish in classes, at least to a certain extent, to help students. We found that some students even advocated for having particular courses in Turkish such as core courses, interview skills, research methods, and classes teaching the use of statistical programs in psychology such as SPSS. Although it is understandable that psychology students who are planning to work in the Turkish institutions after they graduate prefer to have basic communicative skills and disciplinary vocabulary in Turkish to talk about their work and communicate with their clients, employers, and colleagues, it is worth considering to what extent and in which particular domains English and Turkish would serve the students' needs best. We need more research in order to answer questions. For example, What are the job descriptions and needs of professional psychologists in Turkey? To what extent do they correspond to the psychology education? Is it more effective to prepare students to use English before they get to the higher education level, for example, with better English education in high school or preparatory school? Should instructors follow more transitional pedagogical approaches throughout undergraduate study? What is the best way to provide English support to these students?

This study answered our research questions however it also raised new ones. For example, it remains an open question, which we currently investigate, as to whether students' use of English increase in terms of the traditional four domains of proficiency: Speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Our results suggest that even receptive language skills (readings and listening) of psychology students in Turkey might not be up to the challenge of using English in the classroom since students expressed some difficulty following courses. Since students do not attribute this to the language proficiency of their instructors, one question to investigate is what the underlying reason for their perceived difficulty is. Possible explanations include the quality of previous language education including preparatory schools in the universities, low student motivation, or a mismatch between the perceptions of students and their actual level of proficiency. Considering the fact that productive language skills often develop slower than receptive skills, it is safe to assume that students might need even more support and more time to develop their productive skills. Who should be responsible for that support is an open question, where the answers will most likely vary from high school language teachers, students and parents, language institutions, writing centers, universities, and psychology programs. Another question for future research is to what extent students' perceptions reflect the reality of their experiences, proficiencies, and needs. We currently investigate in EMI in psychology, as to whether English preparatory schools and students' language proficiency are below expectations as the British Council Report in 2015 claimed about higher education in Turkey.

It is an undeniable reality that English is an international language and that is the reason we need more research about this unprecedented phenomenon with far reaching consequences. Previous research has repeatedly shown that the spread of English as an international language is not linear or equal in different countries, domains, or disciplines as this study also provides supporting evidence. Considering the diversity of experiences with English as an international language, it is imperative that we document a wide range of experiences so that we can reach a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of English as an international language, and learn from not only trials and tribulations but also triumphs and successes of dedicated students, language professionals, administrators, and policy makers.

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### Notes on Contributors

Beril T. ARIK is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Second Language Studies/English as a Second Language program at the Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA. She has a PhD and an MA from the same program. She is interested in qualitative and quantitative approaches to second language acquisition and second language writing. She is also interested in identity and literacy practices. Email: beriltez@gmail.com

Engin ARIK is an associate professor of Linguistics in Turkey and also a lecturer in Department of English at Purdue University. He received his PhD in Linguistics from the same university and holding an associate professorship in linguistics (psycholinguistics and cognitive sciences) from the Interuniversity Board in Turkey. He is interested in language typology, including sign and spoken languages, conceptualization, bibliometrics of social sciences, and current issues in higher education. Email: [enginarik@enginarik.com](mailto:enginarik@enginarik.com)

**Appendix 1. Turkish universities with a psychology department and their languages of instruction**

Turkish Universities with a Psychology Department	Public/Foundation	Language of Instruction
Abant Izzet Baysal University	Public	Turkish
Acibadem University	Foundation	Turkish
Adnan Menderes University	Public	Turkish
Akdeniz University	Public	Turkish
Ankara University	Public	Turkish
Atilim University	Foundation	English
Avrasya University	Foundation	Turkish
Bahcesehir University	Foundation	English
Baskent University	Foundation	Turkish
Beykent University	Foundation	Turkish
Bingol University	Public	Turkish
Bogazici University	Public	English
Canik Basari University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Cumhuriyet University	Public	Turkish
Cag University	Foundation	English
Cankaya University	Foundation	English
Cukurova University	Public	Turkish
Dogus University	Foundation	English
Dokuz Eylul University	Public	30% English
Ege University	Public	30% English
Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation University	Foundation	Turkish
Fatih University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Gediz University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Hacettepe University	Public	Turkish
Halic University	Foundation	Turkish
Hasan Kalyoncu University	Foundation	Turkish
Isik University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Ihsan Dogramaci Bilkent University	Foundation	English
Ipek University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	English

Istanbul 29 Mayıs University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Arel University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Aydın University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Bilgi University	Foundation	English
Istanbul Bilim University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Esenyurt University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Gelisim University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Istanbul Kemerburgaz University	Foundation	English
Istanbul Kultur University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul Medipol University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Istanbul Sehir University	Foundation	English
Istanbul Commerce University	Foundation	Turkish
Istanbul University	Public	Turkish
Izmir University of Economics	Foundation	English
Izmir Katip Celebi University	Public	Turkish
Izmir University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Kadir Has University	Foundation	English
Koc University	Foundation	English
Maltepe University	Foundation	Turkish-English
MEF University	Foundation	English
Meliksah University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Mersin University	Public	Turkish
Murat Hudavendigar University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	Turkish
Nisantasi University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Nuh Naci Yazgan University	Foundation	Turkish
Okan University	Foundation	30% English
Ondokuz Mayıs University	Public	Turkish
Middle East Technical University	Public	English
Ozyegin University	Foundation	English
Sabancı University *	Foundation	English
Suleyman Sah University <sup>x</sup>	Foundation	English
TED University	Foundation	English



TOBB University of Economics and Technology	Foundation	Turkish
Toros University	Foundation	Turkish
Ufuk University	Foundation	Turkish
Uludag University	Public	30% English
Uskudar University	Foundation	Turkish-English
Yasar University	Foundation	English
Yeditepe University	Foundation	English
Yeni Yuzyil University	Foundation	Turkish
Yildirim Beyazit University	Public	Turkish-English (Night School)

Note: Those marked <sup>x</sup> were closed by the government due to the State of Emergency declared after the failed coup attempt in July 2016 in Turkey.