

Combating War with Education: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Syrian Youth in Turkey

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<http://educateforsyria.blogspot.com.tr/>

Section I

b. My project's aims were to provide educational support to Syrian refugee students in between high school and college. Working with the only free TOEFL preparation center in southern Turkey, I provided TOEFL lessons, teacher training, purchased projectors and a sound system for listening practice, and created a computer lab for students to practice conversation skills with my online tutoring program.

c. No other fundraising efforts contributed to my project.

d. I arrived in Hatay, a southern Turkish province bordering Syria, where I planned on bolstering the only free test preparation resource center, providing courses in computer programming, TOEFL testing, English lessons and Turkish lessons to Syrian and Turkish students between ages 16-24 (and sometimes a bit older). The majority of my grant went towards paying for students to take the TOEFL test. This was incredibly important because no matter how hard the students studied, many of them simply could not afford to take the exam. This meant that, due to financial constraints, they could not propel themselves towards a better future, which for many of them included either a university education or a good job in Turkey that required a TOEFL certificate. With this money, fifteen students were able to sign up for the 10/3/2015 TOEFL exam in Iskenderun. With just a little bit of financial assistance, fifteen students were able to give themselves a future.

In addition, I purchased two much-needed projectors for teachers to use, aiding four classrooms serving about 500 - 1000 beneficiaries in total. I also purchased and oversaw the installation of a surround sound system for one of the four classrooms, to be used for listening exercises. Most students and teachers told me they did not have Internet access at home, so I created a computer lab for students and teachers to use for their own language development, complete with headsets for listening practice. Specifically, the lab was geared towards giving students a chance to participate in my online tutoring program Paper Airplanes, which provides English conversational practice to Syrians via Skype by matching them with a native English university student abroad. I also purchased a fourth, higher-functioning laptop for teachers to use for their own instruction, allowing them to make presentations, run videos for students, and access high-speed digital content. This computer lab will impact around 400 students who are taking the three levels of English courses and Turkish courses.

Finally, I taught the advanced TOEFL course four days a week to between fifteen and twenty students. The lessons went far beyond English instruction and encompassed complex topics like conflict resolution, the definition and justifications for revolution, and women's rights. I provided one on one support for students with specific needs such as writing personal statements, searching for colleges, or preparing for interviews. I also worked with teachers one on one to improve their English instruction and knowledge of the college application process.

As with any project, there were both unforeseen challenges and challenges that were simply difficult to overcome. The heat wave across southern Turkey proved incredibly challenging, and twice classes needed to be cancelled because I was either sick from the heat or just unable to travel to Reyhanli because the heat was too extreme (it killed several people this summer). However, the greatest unforeseen challenge was the shift in management. Emotional instability in many of the students also served as an unforeseen challenge, though not an insurmountable one. Often our discussions in class would turn incredibly personal, and students would pour their memories, hardships and emotions into the classroom. Luckily, we created an environment where that sort of sharing was encouraged, and students were both thoughtful and empathetic. Finally, the Syrian manager was on his way to Sweden

when I arrived (as so many Syrians are hoping to do), and the center is in the process of transitioning to a new funding organization. This made coordination challenging, in part due to tension between the Syrian management and the international management staff. However, the Syrian manager and I formed a close relationship, and I worked around this obstacle by placing both the Syrian manager and English instructor in charge of the items I purchased, and helped the Syrian manager find a new organization interested in funding them.

Given that the center was already established, this project is highly sustainable. The center is a meeting place for many members of the community, and it is well known and respected. It employs Syrians and Turks in the community, and provides much-needed services to youth. The future of the center is still in the air, but prospects are good for several interested NGOs. In terms of my students themselves, they are on their way to applying to jobs and universities throughout the world, hopefully turning their lives around and overcoming the hardships they have faced. Certainly the future of my project rests on expanding free services to students like my tutoring program Paper Airplanes, and connecting the students to resources that give them a chance.

Section II

After spending seven weeks on the Syrian border, I've realized peace does not simply mean people does not use violence, it also means removing violent ideas. This includes includes advocating for violence against the host community, it includes supporting militant groups, it includes feeling violently towards Americans. I learned that without tackling these issues, peace will never be achieved.

Through my project I tried to address these various facets of peace. First, by bolstering the center's resources, I improved its ability to lift students out of desperate situations. I improved their chances for doing well on the TOEFL, and I gave teachers an understanding of how the college application process works. I also provided the financial means for fifteen students to take the TOEFL exam. All of this gives the students an alternative to joining militant groups, or to pursuing illegal ways of supporting their families. Second, I used my classroom as a forum for discussing difficult issues like conflict, violence, and women's rights. It gave the students an opportunity to voice their opinions but it also forced them, I hope, to question some of their assumptions on minority rights, on democracy, on women, and other difficult topics. Finally, my status as an American did a lot to broadening their understanding of what America is and what it isn't. I gave them a positive representation of my country, and I answered their probing questions. One student came up to me afterwards and said I had totally changed his perspective on America, and he no longer saw America as bad. He then shared several arguments with friends where he used me as a reason for why Syrians should not hate America.

This project taught me that peace involves two important processes: providing opportunities for at-risk youth and giving them space to question common ideas that foster violent actions. Without one or the other, we cannot stem violence that perpetuates civil wars and creates unrest in neighboring communities. Without education or alternatives to violence, we see war perpetuate.

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