

Learner Attitudes and Preferences in Terms of Learning Culture

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Abstract

Problem statement: Due to its complex nature, the teaching of culture poses a lot of problems. It encompasses everything from daily life to traditions, or from ways of showing politeness to important occasions or special days in a society. Thus, “what of culture” and how it will be taught must be determined carefully through close scrutiny especially for the “expanding circle countries” since in these countries there is no direct contact with native speakers. Curriculum designers and language teachers need to make a number of choices as regards the selection of cultural categories to teach and what techniques to use in the teaching of these cultural elements.

Purpose of the study: The present study aims at finding out Turkish learners’ preferences in terms of learning and teaching of culture in order to shed light on the practice of language teaching in an EFL context.

Method: A questionnaire was used in the study. It was administered to 92 participants.

Findings and results: The findings suggest that Turkish learners’ awareness must be raised in terms of the importance of the target culture. Turkish learners view target culture learning as comprising of both big “C”, which can roughly be defined as values pertaining to the target community, and lower case “c” culture, which is related to practices. Another important finding of the study is that students in Turkish context do not view learning culture essential for effective communication.

Conclusion and recommendations: This study focused on the learning and teaching of culture in terms of learner attitudes and preferences. As an indispensable element of language, culture must also be studied in terms of other variables like materials and course books. Therefore, studies into materials and course books in relation to their cultural load are needed in order to bridge the gap and optimize the practice of target culture teaching in Turkey.

Keywords: culture, culture teaching, learner preference

Introduction

The majority of the discussion on the place of culture in EFL has problematized whether or not to incorporate culture into the language teaching process. Recent views have articulated that language and culture are indeed inseparable (Dörnyei, 2000). As an international language, English has spread all over the world and created a lot of varieties. Accordingly, profiles of English users and learners are changing. To categorize them, one can refer to Kachru's (1992) terms: *Inner Circle Countries*, *Outer Circle Countries*, and *Expanding Circle Countries*. Culture seems to be the most relevant, at least in the case of immediate language needs, in the *Inner* and *Outer Circle Countries* due to the fact that in these countries English is used in daily transactions either as first or second language. Therefore, cultural elements assume significance in Inner Circle and Outer Circle countries. Teaching and learning a foreign language in the expanding circle denotes that needs of language learners are different. Therefore, in the *Expanding Circle Countries*, practitioners must be relatively more selective in the teaching of culture.

The relationship between language and culture has been studied in various studies in Turkish contexts (Bada & Genç, 2005, Önalın, 2005, Ünver, 2007). Önalın (2005), for example, focused on Turkish teachers' views on teaching culture. Bada & Genç (2005) examined effectiveness of a separate culture course and found that a separate course on target culture raises learners' motivation and awareness. Ünver (2007) offers a program for exchange students in ERASMUS programs.

Another important point is that as a result of the spread of English worldwide, there are now assumptions that American or British cultures may no longer be the relevant cultures (Alptekin, 2002) on account of the fact that there are too many varieties and users

of the English language. In order to reduce the complexity and determine how much culture is needed and how it is to be handled in L2 classes, studies must be conducted. The present study was undertaken to investigate Turkish learners' views, attitudes, and preferences on the learning of target culture with a view to unearth how they approach the issue and more importantly to help curriculum designers and language teachers in their practices.

Definition of Culture

It is not easy to define culture. For some it is related to general knowledge and for others it is related to ways of life. When we agree on the latter definition, we are faced with a whole bunch of choices that range from categories like *holidays* to the *flag of the target country* or from *food* to *special occasions*. Hence, language teachers and planners are inevitably faced with the issue of selection of the cultural elements that are most applicable for their teaching contexts.

For others, *art, literature, customs* and *everyday lives* of a peculiar group form the culture. These are, however, manifestations of the implicit culture. There are also values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes. The new Encyclopedia Britannica's definition may be a working definition. It reads as follows: "behavior peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior; specifically culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, ritual, ceremonies, and so on" (1991, p.874). This comprehensive definition covers most of the components of culture.

When it comes to the relation between language and culture, many researchers seem to indicate the close relation between them. Brown (2000, p. 177), for example, states that "a language is part of a culture, and a culture is a part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either culture or language". Byram (1994, p. 94) makes the point that "the language holds the culture through denotations and connotations of its semantics". All in all, the relation between language and culture is so tight that it is almost impossible to think one as independent of the other. Therefore, the teaching of any language inevitably involves the teaching of culture, either explicitly or implicitly.

In short, it would be wise to converge on the point Hinkel (1999) makes: there are "as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups,

system, behaviors, and activities” (p.1). Therefore, a study into target culture learning and teaching would have to include everything that can be viewed as part of a culture.

Topics for Teaching Target Culture

Topics that are to be taught within the scope of the target culture are many and varied. Brooks (1994), for example, compiled 62 topics that are related to target culture. His list includes greetings, patterns of politeness, verbal taboos, festivals, folklore, music, medicine, hobbies, learning in schools, meals, schools, and careers. Similarly, Chastain (1988) compiled 37 categories including family, home, money, religion, holidays, clothes, good manners, and non-verbal communication. The literature offers different groupings. The CEF (2001, p.102-102), for example, offers six categories. These are as follows:

1. Everyday living (e.g. food and drink, holidays, and working practices)
2. Living conditions (e.g. housing conditions)
3. Interpersonal relations (e.g., class structure, family structures, and relations between generations.)
4. Values, beliefs, and attitudes (e.g., social class, wealth, regional cultures, minorities and arts)
5. Body language and social conventions (punctuality, dress, behavioral, and conversational conventions)
6. Ritual behavior (e.g., birth, marriage, and death)

Byram and Morgan (1994) offer nine categories including social identity and social groups (e.g. social class, sub-culture identities, ethnic and cultural minorities), *social interaction* (e.g. verbal and non-verbal behavior, greetings at different levels, gender relations and taboos) *belief and behavior* (e.g. certain actions such as going to school and going to church and their meanings, and recipe knowledge, that is, routine behaviors, e.g. how to use public transport), *socio-political institutions* (e.g. government, law and order and health care), *socialization* and the *life-cycle* (e.g. schools, family and education), *national history* (e.g. different periods and events, national geography (e.g. distribution of population, topography and climate and vegetation), *national and cultural heritage* (e.g. embodiments from national culture from the past and present), and *stereotypes* and *national*

identity (e.g. explanation of stereotypes and symbols of national stereotypes and their meanings and national identity).

Moran (2001: 25) conceptualizes culture in five broad dimensions: practices, persons, perspectives, communities, and *products*. “*Products*” are all of the elements produced by the members of a given society. They can be either tangible like tools, buildings, or written documents, or intangible like oral and written language, music, or various institutions. “*Practices*” refer to language and other forms of communication, either verbal or non-verbal, involving notions of space, time, and appropriateness. “*Perspectives*” reflect beliefs, values, and attitudes, which actually form the worldview of the given society. “*Communities*” include social contexts where practices occur like national culture, language, gender and class, or more narrowly political parties, sport clubs, and family. Finally “persons” are the main building blocks who experience that specific culture. Clearly, such *systematic* categorization would help curriculum designers by giving them a clear view in facilitating topic selection processes. Therefore, it is also important to analyze cultural issues under such headings in order to maintain systematicity of what is taught. Due to the complexity of such lists, and for the sake of clarity, the cultural elements used in the present study have been grouped in a way to provide systematic results and draw logical conclusion. In the present study the number of categories is ten including the following:

1. Geography (neighboring countries, plants, animals, etc.)
2. History Politics (monarchy, democracy, etc)
3. Traditions (religion, celebrations, etc)
4. Art, literature, music
5. Youth life (education, hobbies, problems, drugs)
6. National symbols (flag, monuments, etc.)
7. Rules of behavior (body language)
8. Cultural groups, minorities
9. Sports
10. Business and economy

This study aims at identifying Turkish learners’ attitudes and preferences in an attempt to provide help for curriculum designers and language teachers. Therefore, the study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are Turkish learners' attitudes and beliefs towards the learning of the target culture?
2. Which aspects of the target culture do Turkish learners want to learn?
3. What are the best ways of learning the target culture?
4. Are Turkish learners' motivated to learn the target culture?

Method

Data for the study were collected by means of a questionnaire that was administrated to preparatory level students enrolled at Başkent University. Five classes were selected randomly. The application stage went smoothly because the questionnaire was piloted prior to use.

Data Collection Tool and Participants

The questionnaire consists of three parts. In the first part, demographics and questions regarding some possible intercultural experiences of the subjects are sought. The second part contains personal preferences in relation to the teaching and learning of culture. Finally, the last part aims at gathering data on the elements of culture in which learners would be interested and how they would like to be taught these elements. The results are analyzed with the help of SPSS 16.0. The questionnaire was administered on 92 Turkish learners at University Preparatory classes. The classes were selected randomly.

Data Analysis

This part regards what the definition of culture for Turkish language learners is. In the questionnaire there are three options. These items try to find out whether learners view culture as comprising of big "C" or a small "c" or both. Big 'C' culture refers to arts or literature of a society whereas small 'c' culture refers to daily, practical issues.

Table 1

Definition of culture according to students

Definition of culture	<i>f</i>	%
C	7	7,6
c	29	31,5
Cc	56	60,9

The results suggest that with a mean score of 2,53 learners opted more for the small “c” culture. It is understandable from Table 1 that Turkish learners see culture as a combination of both big “C” and small “c” elements. Therefore, we can understand that Turkish learners have a more instrumental sense in their cultural preferences.

Table 2

The meaning of target culture

Target culture	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
American	18	19,06
British	48	52,02
Australia/Canada	6	6,05
Other	20	21,07
Total	92	100

Table 2 presents the results about the primary culture in the eyes of the learners and which one must be learned in English lessons. The highest frequency belongs to British culture.

The following items constitute the likert section where learners’ beliefs and attitudes are investigated. Table 3 gives the frequencies.

Table 3

Turkish learners’ attitudes on learning culture

ITEMS	DISAGREE	AGREE
1. I would like to learn more about English speaking countries	72	20
2. I don’t mind what others do in their own cultures, what really a matter for me is just to learn the language.	37	55

For Item 1, Turkish learners opted for the “disagree” option with a frequency of 72. They do not seem to be willing to learn more about the English speaking countries. The second item is complementary of the first one. In this item, learners mostly disagreed with a frequency of 55. We can understand from these two items that Turkish learners of English are not motivated to learn the culture of the language they are learning. This answers the fourth research question of the study. These results may be related to the fact that Turkish learners view target culture knowledge as comprising of both big C and lower case c

culture. Ethno-linguistically speaking, they may be resistant to learn the *products* of the target culture.

Turkish Learners' Beliefs on Learning Target Culture

The following items are about learners' beliefs on learning the target culture. They are analyzed in detail. The results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Turkish learners' beliefs on learning culture

ITEMS	DISAGREE	AGREE
3. Culture is an indispensable part of language learning.	63	29
4. I could learn cultural aspects better if I had a native teacher.	58	34
5. Learning a foreign language is the same as learning any other academic subject	21	71
6. While learning the target culture it is important to study certain communities like family, or political parties.	36	56
7. I will lose my native culture if I learn the target culture	12	80
8. Learning the target culture gives harm to the home culture	20	72
9. Insufficient cultural awareness hinders communications in the second language	47	45

For item 3, 63 of the participants disagreed, indicating that Turkish learners do not view learning culture as important or indispensable. Item 4 regards whether learners could learn the target culture better if they had a *native* English teacher. The results are surprising. Most of them (n=58) disagreed. Learners do not think that they could learn the culture better with a native English teacher. This item seems to verify the emerging view that the status of native speaker as a point of reference is declining.

Item 5 was particularly important on account of the fact that we need to find out how language learners view learning a second language. Majority of the participants (n=71) stated that they agreed on the statement. Turkish learners view learning a second language the same as learning any other subject. Item 6 was about whether certain communities like family, or political parties bear importance in the eyes of Turkish learners. The result shows that they are actually important because 56 of the participants agreed.

Item 7 in the questionnaire was about whether Turkish learners think they will lose their own identities when they learn the target culture. Most of the learners (n=80) agreed

on the statement, which indicates that Turkish learners think that they may lose their native culture and identity when they learn the target culture. Similarly, for item 8, majority of learners (n=72) stated that learning the target culture may give harm to the home culture in general.

Item 9 is about how learners view the relation between culture and the ability to communicate. Participants do not seem to think that insufficient cultural knowledge hinders communication. However, we know that it is not possible to communicate without cultural knowledge. We can also understand from this item that learners actually are not aware of the tight bounds between culture and language. To sum up, Turkish learners of English are not willing to learn the target culture for fear that it will give harm both to the individual and collective identities of home culture.

Practical Aspects of Learning Target Culture

There are three items under this heading. The results are given in Table 5.

Table 5

Practical aspects of learning culture (frequencies)

ITEMS	DISAGREE	AGREE
10. We generally work on cultural issues in our English lessons.	23	69
11. Working on culture motivates me to learn the language.	61	31
12. Our course book includes sufficient cultural knowledge	46	46

It appears that Turkish learners work on cultural issues in their English lessons. They also become more motivated to learn the language when they work on target culture. Finally, they believe that their coursebooks include enough amount of cultural knowledge.

Preferred Methods of Learning Target Culture

This section concerns the preferred ways of learning culture on the part on the part of the participants.

Table 6

Preferred ways of learning culture

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Mean
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
From my English lessons	22	23,91	14	15,21	35	38,04	10	10,86	11	11,95	3,35
From press	13	14,13	16	17,39	21	22,82	13	14,13	29	31,5	2,68
School activities	16	17,39	13	14,13	15	16,30	25	27,17	23	25	3,18
Internet	23	25	26	28,26	25	27,17	12	13,04	6	6,52	3,08
Cinema	19	20,65	22	23,91	21	22,82	17	18,47	13	14,13	3,78
Music	15	16,30	17	18,47	19	20,65	16	17,39	25	27,17	3,07
From native speakers	14	15,21	3	3,26	15	16,30	21	22,82	39	42,39	4,25
From my family	14	15,21	12	13,04	13	14,13	18	19,56	35	38,04	2,47
From TV	12	13,04	19	20,65	31	33,69	19	20,65	11	11,95	3,02
From social networks	18	19,56	15	16,30	29	31,5	9	9,78	21	22,82	3,00
Going abroad	20	21,73	7	7,60	10	10,86	10	10,86	45	48,91	2,42

The top choice is “from native speakers” with a mean score of 4,25. We can understand that Turkish learners view the native speaker as the main point of reference in the learning of culture. “Going abroad”, “watching English movies” and “reading written sources like novels or magazines” are the following most favored options. In this section almost all of the items have a mean score of above 3.00. It seems that learners favored all of them as viable ways to learn the target culture. However, watching TV, listening to music, and social networking sites received the lowest scores, suggesting that these are less favored by the participants as culture learning opportunities.

Cultural Elements Turkish Learners Prefer Working on

Finally, the last section concerns the cultural issues that learners would like to work on. Learners were presented with a number of choices and asked to select.

Table 7

Cultural elements Turkish learners prefer working on

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Mean
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Geography	26	28,26	11	11,95	22	23,91	18	19,56	15	16,30	3,16
History	20	21,73	24	26,08	19	20,65	14	15,21	15	16,30	3,21
Politics	25	27,17	18	19,5	20	21,73	12	13,04	17	18,47	3,23
Traditions	29	31,5	25	27,17	15	16,30	10	10,86	13	14,13	3,51
Art	27	29,34	29	31,5	13	14,13	14	15,21	9	9,78	3,55
National symbols	27	29,34	19	20,65	16	17,39	11	11,95	19	20,65	3,26
Cultural groups	21	22,82	19	20,65	19	20,65	18	19,5	15	16,30	3,14
Youth life	32	34,78	25	27,17	15	16,30	11	11,95	9	9,78	3,65
Rules of behavior	34	36,95	22	23,91	12	13,04	11	11,95	13	14,13	3,57
Sports	20	21,73	24	26,08	19	20,65	12	13,04	17	18,47	3,19
Business life	31	33,69	20	21,73	17	18,47	13	14,13	11	11,95	3,51
Social rules	34	36,95	21	22,82	18	19,56	5	5,43	14	15,21	3,61

Items in the table above include examples of both big “C” (history or art) and lower case “c” (daily behaviors or social rules). The results show that the top mean score is that of the “youth life”. What follows is *social rules of behavior* with a mean score of 3,60. The fact that “social rules of behavior” has a high degree of frequency indicates that Turkish learners are actually more interested in learning lower case culture. In short, important findings of the present research can be summarized as follows:

- Turkish learners view target culture learning as comprising of both big “C” and lower case “c”.
- Turkish learners did not benefit from their English lessons in terms of learning the target culture.
- Turkish learners are not motivated to learn the target culture.
- Turkish learners believe that learning the target culture harms home culture.
- Turkish learners see “British Culture” as the primary culture to be learned.
- Turkish learners are not fully aware of the link between language and culture.
- The primary choice of Turkish learners in regard to the cultural categories is “social rules of behavior”.

Discussion

This study is a descriptive study as regards Turkish learners' beliefs, attitudes, and preferences about the learning and teaching of target culture. The results have been listed item by item above. In the light of the findings, it is possible to say that Turkish learners view "English Culture" as the relevant culture to study. Another point that merits attention is that Turkish learners do not seem to be motivated to learn culture. First of all, they must be motivated to learn the target culture. There are a lot of activities and ways to teach the target culture. They can be applied in the process of teaching the target culture.

It was mentioned above that the study would also focus on Moran's (2001) cultural categories: *persons*, *products*, *practices*, *communities*, and *perspectives*. The results can be categorized under these headings. For *persons* the items that sought whether learners would prefer to work on different groups within the target community found out the Turkish learners are actually eager to get to know the how persons live in their daily lives. As regards *products*, we can say that learners consider them important as well because they stated that they would like to learn the literature pertaining to English. When it comes to *practices*, the findings indicate that practices also occupy an important place in the views of learners. Perspectives did not turn out to be an applicable item for the present study on account of the fact that it is related to the general aim of the paper. Finally, *communities* were also favored by Turkish learners high.

Conclusion

In this study, the main aim has been to get an overall understanding of how Turkish learners view the learning of the target culture. To this end, learners' previous experiences, their beliefs and attitudes as regards certain issues about the learning of culture and finally their preferences about what cultural topics they would like to work on were investigated.

The results of the study revealed a number of important points on how Turkish language learners view the learning of the target culture. It must be noted that Turkish learners' awareness must be raised in regard to the learning of the target culture. In short, this research was significant in that it found out a number of important points that can be reconsidered in curriculum design for the future language teaching practices.

The relation between culture learning and motivation is an important one. Since the present study attempted to get an overall picture, the relation between motivation and the learning of the target was also another area of interest. However, it could not be studied thoroughly due to the reason that the purpose of the paper was to research the issue of culture from a broader perspective. In another study this can be studied. Another suggestion might be to reconsider the cultural topics given in the last part of the questionnaire. In addition, as regards the categorization there are a number of different categorizations. The ones selected for the present study were re-written by the researcher. In another study, they may be selected from longer or more detailed ones. As was stated at the onset, since culture is too broad a construct it is not easy to handle it in one single study. Therefore, more research is needed to identify specific points regarding the teaching of target culture in Turkey.

The findings of this study may help curriculum designers on deciding what to include and what not to include in regard to culture in language teaching programs. Another important finding, namely the fact that Turkish learners do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes culture, must be handled carefully prior to embarking on the teaching of it. Therefore, as Önalın's (2005) study also reveals, the teaching of culture must primarily focus on increasing learners' awareness

This study focused on the learning and teaching of culture in terms of learner attitudes and preferences. As an indispensable element of language, culture must also be studied in terms of other variables like for example materials and course books. Therefore, studies into materials and course books in relation to their cultural load are needed in order to bridge the gap and optimize the practice of target culture teaching in Turkey.

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Hedef Kültür Öğrenimi Hakkında Öğrencilerin Tutum ve Seçimleri

Öz

Problem Cümlesi: Yabancı dil eğitiminde etkili iletişim becerilerinin kazandırılması için hedef kültürün öğretimi büyük önem taşımaktadır. Ancak karmaşık yapısı yüzünden hedef kültürün öğretimi eğitimciler açısından problemler yaratmaktadır. Bu problemlerden en başta geleni hangi kültürel öğelerin dil öğretim programlarında yer alacağıdır. Diğer bir sorun ise öğrencilerin hedef kültürü öğrenmedeki motivasyon eksikliğidir. Bu çalışma program geliştiricilere bu konularda yardım etmek için yapılmıştır.

Çalışmanın Amacı: Bu çalışmanın amacı öğrenciler açısından kültürün tanımının ne olduğunu anlamak, hangi kültürel öğelerin öğrenciler açısından önemli olduğunu saptamak ve hedef kültürü öğrenirken öğrencilerin hangi noktalara yoğunlaşmak istediklerini tespit ederek program geliştiricilere yardımcı olmaktır.

Yöntem: Çalışmanın yukarıda belirtilen amacını gerçekleştirebilmek için alanyazın taramasının ardından hazırlanan bir anket 92 kişiden oluşan bir katılımcı gruba uygulanmış ve sonuçları analiz edilmiştir. Anket birkaç bölümden oluşmaktadır. Birinci bölümde katılımcılara kültürün tanımının ne olduğu sorulmaktadır. İkinci bölümde katılımcılara kültür öğrenimi hakkında maddeler sunulmuş ve bu maddeler hakkında katılımcıların görüşleri alınmıştır. Son bölümde ise öğrencilerin hangi kültürel öğeleri önemsedikleri ve bunları hangi yöntemlerde öğrenmek istedikleri sorulmuştur.

Bulgular: Bulgulara göre hedef kültürü öğrenme konusunda öğrencilerimizin eksikleri olduğu görülmüş ve bunların başında motivasyon olduğu anlaşılmıştır. Sonuç olarak hedef kültürün öğretimi açısından yapılması gerekenlerin başında öğrencilerin bu konuda farkındalıklarının artırılması gelmektedir.

Sonuç ve öneriler: Bu çalışma, kültür öğretimi hakkında öğrencilerin düşünce ve tutumlarını kültürün öğrenciler açısından tanımının ne olduğunu ve öğrencilerin hangi kültürel öğeleri önemli gördüklerini belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Bulgulara göre öğrencilerin kültür öğretimi hakkındaki farkındalıklarının ve motivasyonlarının artırılması gerekmektedir. Bundan sonra yapılacak çalışmalarda katılımcı sayısı artırılabilir veya öğrencilere göre kültürel öğelerin önem derecesi saptanabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kültür, kültür öğretimi, öğrenen tercihi