



A Study Of Cultural Aspects Of English Language With Turkish Learners Of English

Ayhan KAHRAMAN*

Abstract: There is a strong claim that culture learning affects students' linguistic ability positively in foreign language learning. Others claim that culture can be used as an instrument in the process of communication. This study hopes to expand previous understandings by analyzing the attitudes of Turkish students studying at the department of English Language and Literature towards cultural aspects in language teaching and learning. The data were collected through a Likert type questionnaire in which all participants were asked questions to respond with the purpose of finding the importance of cultural aspects in language. The analysis of the data showed that culture and language in foreign language learning/teaching is also inseparable for Turkish participants but the courses and teachers do not serve enough exposure to the target culture.

Keywords: culture, cultural aspects, cultural learning, foreign language learning.

Türk Öğrencilerle İngiliz Dili Kültürel Öğeleri Üzerine Bir Çalışma

Özet: Yabancı dil öğreniminde yabancı kültürü de öğrenmenin dilsel yetileri önemli ölçüde etkilediğini belirten güçlü iddialar vardır. Diğer araştırmacılar ise kültürü iletişim süreci içerisinde bir araç olarak kullanılabileceğini öne sürmektedirler. Bu çalışma literatürdeki bu düşünceleri geliştirmek ve İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümündeki Türk öğrencilerinin yabancı dil öğretimi ve öğrenimindeki kültürel öğelere karşı tutumlarını ölçmek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Veriler anket uygulaması ile toplanmış olup, deneklere kültürel öğelerin dil içindeki önemi sorulmuştur. Verilerin analizi, yabancı dil eğitiminde dil ve kültürün ayrılmaz bir bütün olduğu denekler tarafından da desteklenmektedir fakat derslerden ve öğretmenlerden hedef kültüre yeterince “maruz” bırakılmadıklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: kültür, kültürel öğeler, kültür öğrenme, yabancı dil öğretimi.

INTRODUCTION

Various definitions are offered to delineate the term culture, each looking at it from somewhat different perspective. Montgomery and Reid-Thomas (1994) seem to have come up with a rather comprehensive one. They define culture as “... the whole way of life of a people or group”. In this sense culture “includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others”.

It is widely claimed that cultural learning has positive impact on the learning of a foreign language. The fact of matter is that foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture. For scholars and layman alike, cultural competence, i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputable and an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum (Thanasoulas, 2001).

These common opinions made the starting point for this study which aspired to find out whether these views are also valid from learners' perspective. In other words we want to figure out the degree to which the learners perceive the learning of cultural elements as an indispensable part of second language learning. As such the study aims to unearth the idiosyncratic (personal) views of learners with regard to learning culture and figure out how far these views are in line or mismatch with those of common beliefs about culture in ELT. This is important since students view over the instrumentality of incorporation of cultural features, or lack of it, may directly affect their learning of these feature and second language in the long run.

The following research questions are hence formulated:

- Do Turkish students recognize that culture and language are interrelated?
- How are their attitudes towards cultural aspects in foreign language learning especially towards English cultural learning?
- What do they know about the target culture?
- What are their sources for their perceived cultural competence?
- And finally, are these sources sufficient?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although thinking that the presence of culture in current writings is relatively recent, a review of the L2/FL literature shows that this is clearly not the case. The early pattern is evident: people learned a second or foreign language in order to read and study its literature. Allen (1985) has summarized it: "...prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for second language study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization" (p.138). As Flewelling (1993) notes, "it was through reading that students learned of the civilization associated with the target language".

Concurrently, the development of the social sciences resulted in an increased focus on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and a more widespread

understanding of culture. The sixties were also the height of the audiolingual era in language teaching, and the time when Brooks (1968) "emphasized the importance of culture not for the study of literature but for language learning". In the 1970s, an emphasis on sociolinguistics resulted in greater emphasis on the context and situation where the L2 or FL would be used. 'The communicative approach' eventually replaced the audiolingual method in many areas of the world, and in describing their framework for communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) claimed that "a more natural integration" of language and culture takes place "through a more communicative approach than through a more grammatically based approach" (p. 31). During the 1980s, Stern's (1983) major work recognized the 'concepts of society' in language teaching. In Europe, a focus on 'cultural studies' developed in FL teaching, and in the 1990s, the cultural syllabus has been supported by research in the National Core French Study (Flewelling, 1994).

As L2 and FL educators, we teach and our students learn about the culture of the L2/FL whether or not we include it overtly in the curriculum. This point was made by McLeod (1976, cited in Tang, 1999): "by teaching a language...one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly". In an article on discourse, for example, Brown (1990) questions whether or not language may be value-free or independent of cultural background. She concludes: "there are values, presuppositions, about the nature of life and what is good and bad in it, to be found in any normal use of language" (p. 13).

Beyond this perspective, Buttjes (1990) refers to ethnographic language studies and summarizes several reasons why "language and culture are from the start inseparably connected":

- i. Language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures;
- ii. the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations;
- iii. every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function and the content of children's utterances;
- iv. caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge;
- v. the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture (Buttjes, 1990, p. 55).

According to Pica (1994: 70), the question "how necessary to learning a language is the learner's cultural integration?" is something which "troubles teachers, whether they work with students in classrooms far removed from the culture of the language they are learning or with students who are physically

immersed in the culture but experientially and psychologically distant from it". Numerous other researchers have tried to address issues along similar lines, including Gardner and Lambert (1972) who postulate that learners may have two basic kinds of motivation. The first is integrative motivation, which refers to the desire of language learners to acquire the language while immersing themselves into the whole culture of the language, in order to "identify themselves with and become part of that society" (Brown 1994: 154). The second is instrumental motivation, which refers to the functional need for learners to acquire the language in order to serve some utilitarian purpose, such as securing a job, or a place at a university. The argument is that such instrumentally motivated learners are neither concerned with the culture from which their target language emerged, nor interested in developing any feelings of affinity with the native speakers of that language.

This study hopes to expand previous understandings by analysing 22 Turkish students' attitudes towards cultural aspects in language teaching and learning.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects for the study were 22 Turkish students – 10 male and 12 female – at the English Language and Literature Department of Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

The data of the study was collected through a Likert type questionnaire (see appendix A) in which all participants were asked 12 questions with the purpose of finding the amount of importance that learners ascribe to cultural aspects in language learning.

The students were also informed that their responses will be used for a research paper in "Culture in ELT" course.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

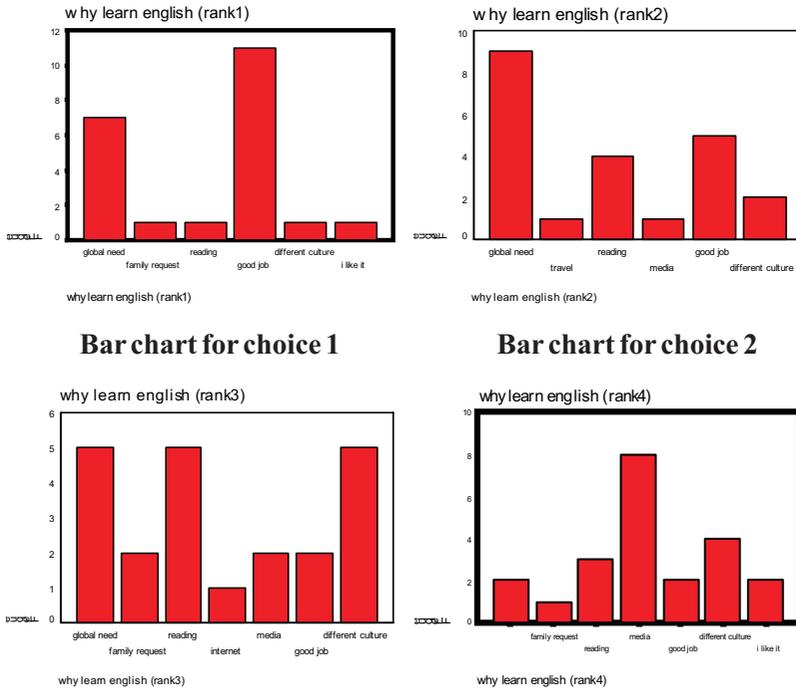
In the questionnaire, there are questions to which the student gives answers either by putting a tick to the most suitable choice or by putting the choices in the order of importance and while analysing the answers we took the choices, which were marked as the most important items by the student. The data were analysed using SPSS v.10.0

The first question in the questionnaire was asked to obtain information about the background English knowledge of the students. The result showed that participants' English learning period has the average of 9.8 years. It seems most probably that they have had enough exposure to English language.

The second question asks participants' purpose of learning English and the results can be seen on the bar charts below (see Table1). 21 students of 22 (95%) have the common view that English should be known due to global need. We know that nowadays, globalisation forces to learn not only English but also

“Englishes”. Post and Rathet (1996) advocate that learning a foreign language today is very important in that it permits entrance into contact with other realities and other cultures in order to understand their mentality and varied customs.

Table 1: Bar charts for the question 2; “Why do you learn English?”

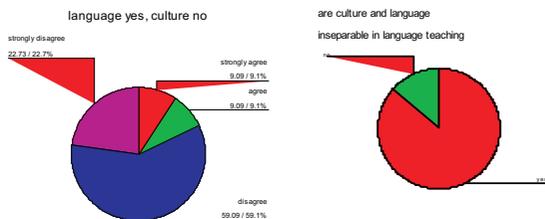


Bar chart for choice 3 **Bar chart for choice 4**

In question 3, the students were asked to state their views on the belief: “I’m learning English only for learning a language; I don’t need to learn its culture.”

And question 8 asks whether language & culture are integrated parts or not.

Table 2: Pie charts for the questions 3 and 8



Since Sapir's (1921) sociolinguistic dictum that “language does not exist apart from culture” many researchers such Stem, Brown, Rivers et.al advocates that language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded (cited in Zaid, 1999).

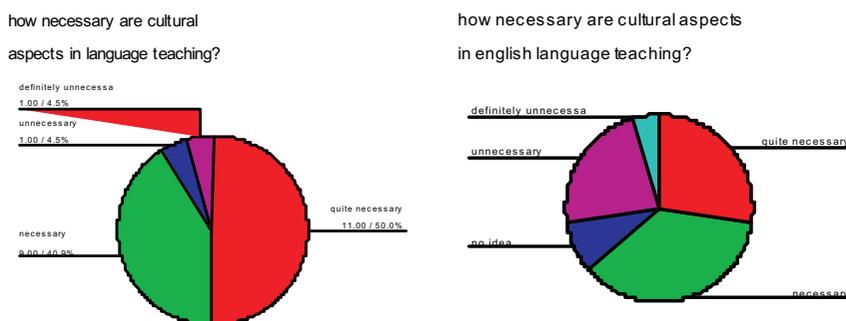
The results of the participants support this view strongly (see bar charts above).

Question 7 and 9 are similar and intended to question the importance of cultural aspects in language teaching & learning process but the results are questionable. Firstly, question 7 is a more general one as compared with 9.

Q7: How far is it needed to teach cultural aspects in language teaching?

Q9: How far is it needed to teach **English** cultural aspects in **English** language teaching?

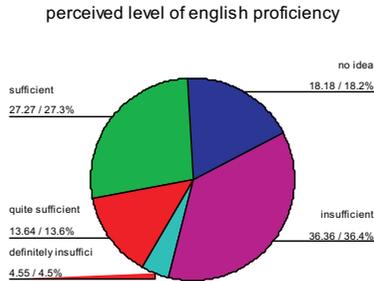
Table 3: Pie charts for the questions 7 and 9



Results of q7 show us that 90.9% of the class agrees of teaching cultural aspects in language teaching but this view decreases to 63.7% when we modify the question to a specific one.

This can probably be explained by whether they have not answered with care or they are really not aware of it. The most interesting results came out with question 4. Cultural competence of the class was asked and the result states us that the class is statistically undecided. 40.9% say that they have sufficient knowledge about the target culture but on the other hand 40.95% that they do not.

Table 4: Pie charts for the question 4



When we compare the results of q10 (What aspects do you know about English culture? -see pie charts below) and q12 (What would you like to know about English culture? – see table below) with q4 (asking cultural competence of the class), we can see that class has some cultural knowledge but requests more.

Table 4: Students' knowledge about English culture

	Eat. Habit	Entertainment	Family Affairs	Office Affairs	Neighborhood affair	Education	Political Relations	Religion	Customs	Travel	Daily Life	Reading habit
f	18	16	14	4	9	14	7	6	8	10	3	21
%	81.8	72.7	63.6	18.2	40.9	63.6	31.8	27.3	36.4	45.5	13.6	95.5

Table 5: Cultural needs of students

	Nothing	More cultural Aspects	Family Affairs	Religion	Education	Political Relations	Political Relations
Frequency	1	10	4	4	2	3	5
%	4.5	45.5	18.2	18.2	9.1	13.6	22.7

Analysing students' perceived English culture (q4) with teachers' exposure of English culture (q6):

Table 6: Test Statistics (χ^2) non-parametric test for significance of variable values

	perceived level of English proficiency	teachers' knowledge of English culture
Chi-Square	6.636	14.000
df	4	3
Significance (p<)	.156	.003

As can be seen above, Question 4 data seem to be random (runs test results are not significant), while it can also be seen that these data are not statistically significant. On the other hand, Question 6 data were found to be statistically significant. Thus, it may be said that the respondents were certain about the teachers' insufficiency, but not about their own proficiency level.

Table 7: Test Statistics (χ^2): Non-parametric test for significance of variable values

	perceived level of English proficiency	cultural items in English lessons
Chi-Square	6.636	20.727
Df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.156	.000

Table 8: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		perceived level of English proficiency	cultural items in English lessons
N		22	22
Normal Parameters	Mean	2.91	3.14
	Std. Deviation	1.19	1.13
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.229	.324
	Positive	.186	.253
	Negative	-.229	-.324
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.075	1.520
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.198	.020

a Test distribution is Normal.

b Calculated from data.

Data for 'question 5' is statistically significant, but not for 'question 4'. This may be interpreted as; the respondents are certain about the insufficiency of cultural aspects in lessons, but not about their own cultural proficiency level.

The findings above seem to suggest the conclusion that students were not sure about their knowledge of English culture, but very much so regarding the lack of cultural aspects in their courses and teachers' lack of cultural aspects.

CONCLUSION

The findings above suggest the following conclusions that students

- view cultural learning as a worthwhile and inseparable objective that accompanies language learning.
- were quite aware of the existence of a close tie between culture and language learning.
- were not sure whether their present knowledge of foreign cultural elements, i.e their cultural competence, were sufficient.
- express their lack of knowledge about the daily cultural habits of the speakers of the target language.
- interested to learn more about the target language culture.

So what seems to be apparent from these findings is that there is not much discrepancy between the recent beliefs of the researchers' about the decisive role of culture in language learning and that of learners. Both think in the same vein and consider culture learning as a necessary and indispensable part of language classes. The lack of certainty learners with regard to the sufficiency of the culture knowledge could be justified on several grounds. Learners may have not concrete ideas about what culture is or whether what they perceive as foreign language culture is a functional or workable knowledge that could assist them with their learning process.

Learners learn what they perceive as important and only that much. If our learners conceive language learning as important, as the present study reveals, then we are one step close to the reality of the practicality of incorporating cultural elements in our classroom settings. If our learners are intrinsically prepared to receive and take in the cultural knowledge, then the next step is in our range and attainable. We believe that now we are not facing a group of learners who resist or reluctant to culture learning. But the other way round, there are, awaiting learners who are fully aware of their dire need for new cultural knowledge and ready to receive and incorporate this knowledge as a complementary component of their communicative competence.

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