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Fostering Critical Cultural Awareness Among Prospective Teachers of English via Virtual Exchange Project

İngilizce Öğretmen Adaylarının Kritik Kültürel Farkındalıklarının Sanal Değişim Projesi Aracılığıyla Geliştirilmesi

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Abstract: This study aimed to explore critical cultural awareness improvement of prospective teachers with a transnational virtual exchange project. Within the scope of this study, prospective teachers of English studying at English Language Teaching (ELT) department in Turkey attended a virtual exchange project that was organized with other prospective teachers of English from Germany and Israel. The prospective teachers weekly interacted with each other via online meetings, and they collaborated on assigned tasks to come up with a final product, which is an English teaching lesson plan. The research was designed as a qualitative study and the data were analyzed according to the the principles of directed qualitative content analysis. Directed qualitative content analysis is used when researchers start with a theory to code the qualitative data. In this study, Byram's (1997) framework was used as a theory to direct analysis of the data. The participants' weekly interactions were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework's critical cultural awareness dimension. The analysis of the data revealed that the prospective teachers' critical cultural awareness was significantly improved.

Keywords: critical cultural awareness, virtual exchange, ELT prospective teachers

Öz: Bu çalışma öğretmen adaylarının kritik kültürel farkındalıklarının uluslararası sanal değişim projesiyle gelişimini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma kapsamında, Türkiye'deki bir üniversitenin İngilizce Öğretmenliği programında öğrenim gören İngilizce öğretmen adayları Almanya ve İsrail ülkelerinde öğrenim gören İngilizce öğretmen adaylarıyla düzenlenen bir sanal değişim projesine katılmışlardır. Katılımcı öğretmen adayları online toplantılar aracılığıyla haftalık olarak birbirleriyle etkileşime girmişler ve ortak bir İngilizce öğretimi ders planı hazırlamak üzere verilen haftalık görevler üzerinde iş birliği yapmışlardır. Bu çalışma nitel araştırma desenine göre tasarlanmış ve yönlendirilmiş nitel içerik analiz prensiplerine göre analiz edilmiştir. Yönlendirilmiş nitel analizde araştırmacılar nitel veriyi kodlamak için bir kuramdan yola çıkmaktadırlar. Bu çalışmada Byram'ın (1997) çerçevesi nitel verilerin analizinde yönlendirici olarak kullanılmıştır. Katılımcıların

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haftalık etkileşimleri harfi harfine çözümlenmiş ve nitel içerik analizi ilkelerine ve Byram'ın (2021) Kültürlerarası İletişim Yeterliliği (ICC) çerçevesinin kritik kültürel farkındalık boyutuna göre analiz edilmiştir. Verilerin analizi katılımcı öğretmen adaylarının kritik kültürel farkındalıklarının önemli şekilde arttığını ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kritik kültürel farkındalık, sanal değişim, İngilizce öğretmen adayları

Introduction

The concept of communicative competence was coined by Hymes (1967). The term was elaborated by Canale (1983), arguing that linguistic competence is not enough to be competent in a language. Learners also need to have the necessary skills to use the language appropriately during communication and interaction with other people. Considering this argument, researchers put forward that culture's place in language learning and teaching cannot be overlooked as well (Kramsch, 1993). Celce-Murcia, M. (2008) indicated that when the goal of language teaching becomes achieving communicative competence among learners, cultural and cross-cultural instructional activities and tasks must be included in educational programs.

The importance of culture and social factors in language teaching made another concept come to the forefront: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). O'Dowd (2019:1) defined ICC as: "the ability to navigate interactions comfortably with others from different cultural backgrounds". The concept of ICC has been used extensively in ELT for a long time in a pedagogical sense, and interest in fostering ICC in the field of education in general is growing (Council of Europe, 2018). However, many studies approached ICC and language teaching only at a superficial level, which means that intercultural competence was seen only knowing few information about other countries and cultures or simply learners from different countries exchange information about each other's cultural differences (Byram, 1997). Byram (2021:29) argued that the goal of foreign language teaching is to foster ICC, and communication here is not only about exchange of information and getting by. According to him, communication "is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships, and the efficacy of communication depends on using language to demonstrate one's willingness to relate".

Byram (1997,2021) came up with the most popular ICC model in the field of language education. His model was founded on five *savoirs*: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Language is linked with identity, culture, social relations, and worldview of people who speak it (Fantini, 2012; Jackson, 2015). ICC development is essential for language learners to be a productive member of today's globalized and contemporary world (Walinski, 2013). Researchers put forward that main purpose of language teaching around the world should be to develop ICC (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). Because ICC development has a critical role in language teaching, teachers must be competent enough to guide learners in the process of becoming intercultural speakers. Critical cultural awareness is the final dimension of the ICC framework, and it is the targeted level that learners are expected to reach. Byram (1997: 53) defined critical cultural awareness as: "an ability to evaluate critically on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries".

As more learners with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds come to language classrooms every day, second and foreign language teachers are expected to be interculturally competent (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Sardegna & Dugartsyrenova, 2021). This situation has implications on foreign language teacher education departments as well. Language teacher education departments should train prospective teachers as interculturally competent educators who are aware of the dynamics of cultural and linguistically diverse language classrooms. Byram (2021) argued that the goal of fostering critical cultural awareness in language classrooms should not be at the "tourist" level. When tourists travel to different places, their encounters and experiences with the language and culture of that place do not fundamentally enrich or change their own perspectives. On the other hand, the sojourner delves into the social, cultural, and political aspects of life in the place that he/she lives. In other words, through true life experiences and education, the sojourner has an opportunity to reach critical cultural awareness and become an open-minded person who critically evaluates cultural and social issues. The aim of equipping

learners with critical cultural awareness should be promoting the sojourner perspective. The method of virtual exchange can be considered as one of the best ways of promoting the sojourner perspective of critical cultural awareness in foreign language classrooms because it allows teachers and learners to interact easily with people in geographically dispersed locations and get involved in intercultural interactions (O'Dowd, 2019).

Critical cultural awareness, the most significant dimension in the ICC framework, focuses on critically reflecting on different cultural practices, values, and perspectives, and acting appropriately at the sojourner level during intercultural interactions (Guilherme, 2015). An individual at this level makes an analytical and critical analysis of intercultural interactions. Byram (2021:110) indicated that at the level of critical cultural awareness individuals “interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges on the basis of a reasoned analysis, negotiating where necessary a degree of acceptance of them by drawing upon one’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes”. In this vein, the dimension of critical cultural awareness encompasses all the other dimensions of the ICC model and becomes the target that learners are expected to reach in foreign language classrooms.

At the critical cultural awareness dimension, individuals are expected to fully realize the uniqueness and value of every culture. Moreover, individuals at this level are sincerely open to cooperate and collaborate with people from other cultures and willing to learn about cultural practices and perspectives of people from other cultures, and critically reflect on them. According to Byram (1997: 53), critical cultural awareness is “an ability to evaluate critically on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries”. Guilherme (2015) indicated that critical cultural awareness focuses on genuinely reflecting on interests, rights, and perspectives of people from different backgrounds and cultures. Byram (1997) put forward that at the critical cultural awareness level learners identify and interpret various seen and unseen values in one’s own and other cultures. Moreover, the intercultural speaker at this level brings his/her own experiences and perspectives openly to the interaction and can evaluate the intercultural interaction critically and analytically. The Turkish prospective teachers’ weekly interactions with German and Israeli prospective teachers throughout the virtual exchange project were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed according to the principles of directive qualitative content analysis.

Virtual exchange refers to “the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work” (O’Dowd, 2011: 342). With the development of technology and the internet, pedagogical virtual exchange practices have mushroomed. Virtual exchange is one of the reasons of the intercultural turn in the field of language teaching (Thorne, 2006). Moreover, it is one of the most significant ways of integrating technology into language classrooms (Vinagre, 2017).

In the present study, the researchers organized a virtual exchange project between Turkey, Germany, and Israel. The project was organized and conducted because “the world we live in today is one that is full of conflicts based on regions, religions, access to resources, and many other factors” (Sadler, 2018: 224). Thus, as teachers and teacher trainers, we should “encourage our students to attain a better sense of ‘the other’, and telecollaborative exchanges are one of our best tools to do so” (Sadler, 2018: 224). By bringing together prospective teachers from different cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds, the researchers aimed to break the wall of ‘the other’ and allow the prospective teachers to explore other cultures, establish good relationships, make empathy, and think globally and act locally.

Bringing up intercultural speakers in foreign language classrooms is seen as one of the fundamental goals of language teaching today (O’Dowd, 2019). The concept of ICC is mainly interested in transforming language learners into intercultural speakers who can critically evaluate cultural practices, events, and documents belonging to both his own and other cultures in a relationship of equality. Thus, learners who are intercultural speakers interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds without stereotypes and preconceived opinions and try to explore and evaluate different

cultural practices and perspectives based on empathy and sincerity. As mentioned, the dimension of critical cultural awareness is the most significant one in the ICC framework because it is the last step that learners are expected to reach and achieve. The prerequisite of preparing foreign language learners for the global world and society and making them intercultural speakers who are ready to suspend disbeliefs about other cultures and ready to interact and collaborate with them is bringing up teachers who are intercultural speakers and have achieved critical cultural awareness. This study hypothesized that involving prospective teachers in a transnational virtual exchange project would equip them with critical cultural awareness because the participants of such projects interact with interlocutors from other cultures and countries to collaborate in a relationship of equality and establish meaningful relationships.

Dooly and Sadler (2013) conducted a two-year virtual exchange study with prospective teachers of English studying in Spain and the US. The prospective teachers in both countries engaged in virtual interactions and they completed certain pedagogical tasks collaboratively and they gave each other's works peer-feedback. The results of this study revealed that virtual exchange and online intercultural exchanges enhanced teacher development and allowed prospective teachers to make better connections between pedagogical theories and practices. Vinagre (2016) investigated the development of in-service teachers' competences during a training that was given as a virtual exchange project. Results revealed that a successful collaboration is required for enhancing teachers' knowledge and competences for virtual exchange.

Fuchs (2019) conducted an important virtual exchange study with German and Hong Kong prospective teachers of English. She investigated critical incidents based on cultures-of-use that took place during intercultural interactions and exchanges in the virtual exchange project. The study is meaningful in terms of examining learning cultures of Western and Eastern cultures and their effect on teaching philosophies, just like the present study. Tanghe and Park (2016) organized international virtual exchange project with 4 graduate students from South Korea and the US. The authors aimed to internationalize teacher education by involving graduate students in collaborative pedagogical activities. The authors suggested that internationalizing teacher education programs offers important benefits and pre-service teachers find the opportunity to experience real and authentic collaboration in the process of critically discussing pedagogical issues.

Lee and Markey (2014) organized a virtual exchange project among 28 Spanish and American participants. The participants used Twitter, blogs, and podcasts for one semester for intercultural exchange. The authors reported many benefits and gains on the part of the participants, indicating that students gained cultural knowledge, they became more aware of their own beliefs and attitudes toward their own culture, their awareness of cultural norms was increased, and the peer-feedback increased their linguistic skills. Yang (2020) explored affordances and challenges of virtual exchange in English language teacher education with 19 American and Korean pre-service teachers. The author investigated the impact of virtual exchange on pre-service teachers' ICC development, teaching skills, and digital literacy skills. The findings of the study revealed that the participants' cultural knowledge and understanding were improved, they found the opportunity to revise their perspectives of other cultures, and their digital literacy skills were enhanced. In addition, the author reported that this virtual exchange project significantly increased the pre-service teachers' ICC skills.

In a very recent study, Sardegna and Dugartsyrenova (2021) reported the findings of their study on online exchanges of 28 prospective teachers of English from Russia and the US. The prospective teachers stated their opinions about cultural issues, and they critically discussed their perspectives with each other via voice-based virtual exchange. The authors argued that involving prospective teachers in intercultural exchange projects and finding international partners for this purpose allows prospective teachers to develop their cognitive and affective engagement in cross-cultural exchanges and this is one of the findings of the study. The authors also indicated that the collaborative practice in this study gave the prospective teachers the golden opportunity of learning about the other culture, hear different perspectives, compare, and contrast the cultural exchanges they engage in, and reflect on all of these intercultural communicative activities.

Üzüm, Akayoglu, and Yazan (2020) organized a virtual exchange project between Turkey and the USA and investigated the promotion of ICC among prospective teachers of English. In this respect, their study is like the present study. The researchers reported that ICC of the prospective teachers were developed. In addition, they indicated that the method of virtual exchange is an effective way to promote ICC, cultural diversity, and intercultural interaction. Üzüm, Yazan, Akayoglu, and Mary (2021) conducted a trilateral virtual exchange research between France, Turkey, and the USA, and explored pre-service teachers' translingual negotiation strategies. The study revealed that the pre-service teachers employed some different negotiation strategies successfully in their intercultural interactions with their partners. This shows that the method of virtual exchange helps learners improve not only their ICC, but also their grammatical, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences.

O'Dowd and Dooly (2022) reported the results of a virtual exchange project with 31 teacher trainers exploring teachers' professional development throughout the project. This study is unique in terms of its participants. The researchers indicated that by involving in a virtual exchange project, teachers had a golden opportunity to improve their professional development in an intercultural environment and learn new pedagogical methods and techniques. Moreover, the teacher trainers found new international partners and improved their collaboration techniques. Lin (2021) investigated pre-service English teachers' perspectives on using virtual exchange in the context of global learning. The researcher reported that virtual exchange is an authentic tool to improve pre-service teachers' collaborative skills and ICC. Eren (2021) carried out a virtual exchange study with 50 pre-service teachers and explored the participants' ICC development. He argued that virtual exchange project improved the pre-service teachers' ICC and critical cultural awareness, and the method of virtual exchange is an appropriate instrument for reducing the prejudices and promoting meaningful intercultural interactions. Hilliker and Yol (2021)'s virtual exchange study explored pre-service English teachers in Poland and the US transformations in terms of pedagogy and teaching methodology. The researchers indicated that virtual exchange is an effective venue for improving pre-service teachers' pedagogical knowledge. Some other studies also reported that virtual exchange in general and virtual exchange specifically are the most appropriate and valuable tools to promote ICC, critical cultural awareness, empathy, and intercultural interaction among learners, teachers, and teacher candidates (Vinagre, 2022; Luo & Gao, 2022; Tutunea, 2021).

This study brought together prospective teachers from Turkey, Germany, and Israel, and investigated if critical cultural awareness, the last dimension of the ICC framework, is fostered among the participants thanks to the virtual intercultural interactions and collaborations. It was indicated by the researchers that virtual exchanges are one of the most practical ways of bringing together participants from geographically dispersed locations and giving them the opportunity to interact and collaborate. Yet, the method of virtual exchange has hitherto received scant attention by researchers, especially in Turkey. Moreover, there is a general paucity of studies investigating the effectiveness of virtual exchange in terms of its effect on critical cultural awareness among prospective ELT teachers. The present study is unique in terms of its context and participants. Prospective teachers from Israel and Germany participated in this study, and this is important in terms of bringing together eastern and western cultures. The participants in this study were asked to compare their countries' system of English language education and their own English teaching philosophy. In this vein, the participants learned about how English is taught in other countries and how prospective teachers from these countries approach teaching of English in foreign language classrooms.

This study aimed to explore critical cultural awareness improvement of prospective teachers with a transnational virtual exchange project. The prospective teachers of English in this project took part in transnational groups and each group organized a virtual meeting every week. The participants collaborated on the assigned tasks to complete an English language lesson plan. At the end of the project, the participants' recorded weekly interactions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the qualitative content analysis. The following research question was explored in this study:

Does involving in a transnational virtual exchange project help prospective teachers of English to reach the critical cultural awareness dimension of the ICC framework?

Method

Research Design

The present study was designed and conducted according to the principles of qualitative research design. The qualitative research design is used “for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 41). The data were analyzed according to the the principles of directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Directed qualitative content analysis is used when researchers start with a theory to code and interpret the qualitative data. In this study, prospective English teachers collaborated with other prospective teachers of English from Germany and Israel to come up with an English lesson plan based on global problems and their solutions. Byram’s (1997) framework was used as a theory to direct and interpret the data in the process of analysis. The prospective teachers’ transnational interactions throughout the virtual excghange project were investigated in the present study. The Turkish prospective teachers’ weekly interactions were analyzed according to the critical cultural dimension of ICC framework (Byram, 2021).

Participants

Participants of this study were prospective teachers of English studying at ELT department of a university in Turkey. Convenience sampling (also called accidental or opportunity sampling) was employed for this study. Convenience sampling “involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011: 155). For the virtual exchange project, eight prospective teachers of English from Turkey participated in the study. The Turkish prospective teachers interacted with other prospective teachers from Germany and Israel. All the participants of the project were put into transnational teams and each group weekly met with each other on Zoom and completed assigned tasks of the week by collaboration.

Data Collection

The prospective teachers’ weekly interactions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis to investigate their critical cultural awareness development. Each week, the participants were given tasks by the instructors to be completed. The participants interacted with each other every week and collaborated on the tasks to come up with a lesson plan. During the project, the participants did some icebreaker activities to get to know each other. Moreover, they decided on a global issue to be discussed, and, they collaborated to create an English lesson plan based on the discussed the global issue. The weekly virtual interactions of the participants were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed according to directive type of qualitative content analysis, in which the analysis is carried out with a theory or research findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the critical cultural awareness dimension of Byram’s ICC framework was used as a theory, and the data were analyzed according to this dimension. As it was mentioned, eight prospective teachers of English participated in the study from Turkey. These participants were given a number from 1-8 and they were named as P1, P2, P3 etc. in the findings section. According to Byram (1997: 53), critical cultural awareness is “an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries”. Moreover, he also argued that learners with the critical cultural awareness can make an evaluative analysis and interpretation of cultural practices and he/she can interact with people from other cultures and countries in a relationship of equality, empathy, sincerity, and understanding. The participants’ whole interactions were read three times by the researchers. Each researcher coded the statements of the participants that belong to the category of critical cultural awareness based on the criteria that were put forward by Byram (1997). Byram

(1997:53) talked about three indicators for the critical cultural awareness dimension: “identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one’s own and other cultures, make an evaluative analysis of the documents and events which refers to an explicit perspective and criteria, and interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges in accordance with explicit criteria”. At the end of this process, the researchers compared their codes. Based on the number of statements that were coded, it was seen that the researchers reached the consensus on most of the codes. Then, the dataset and the codes were sent to a scholar who is an expert in qualitative research in applied linguistics. With the feedback received from the expert, the statements that were coded as “critical cultural awareness” were revised and took their final shape.

Findings

The participants’ interactions revealed that the critical cultural awareness dimension of ICC has been achieved throughout the virtual exchange project. The virtual exchange project brought together learners from different countries and backgrounds and this intercultural interaction paved the way for the improvement of ICC and critical cultural awareness. The participants’ statements were categorized according to the critical cultural awareness dimension of the ICC framework and its indicators. The categorization of the participants’ statements is shown below in the table based on the indicators of critical cultural awareness. The names of the indicators were shortened on the table based on their first words.

Table 1. Participants’ Statements Corresponding to the Indicators of Critical Cultural Awareness

Identify and interpret	<p>P4: “As part of our global issue, I think that everyone in this team has a high level of environmental awareness. Especially you guys from Germany, you have very interesting and effective perspectives on making our environment clean, healthy, sustainable... I think that Turkish people are not that careful about environment and this is what I learned and discovered about German culture”</p> <p>P8: “I believe our meetings are very helpful because it helps me to recognize your countries and cultures and recognize my own cultural identity as we discuss cultural issues because as we discussed cultural issues, we saw other perspectives, and other perspectives made me question myself and got to know them. Thanks to you guys, I improved my skills to interact with people from different cultures”</p> <p>P7: “I used to believe what the media shows us about the issues in your country. You guys have beautiful hearts. I can understand better now what you have been going through”</p>
Interact and mediate	<p>P5: “Thanks to this project, as we delved deeper into our cultures, the social and cultural norms and lives of our countries, we understood and empathized with each other better, which I think is beneficial.”</p> <p>P1: “Our research on children's rights, I researched the laws of children's rights in my country, the events in this regard, the rights given to children, how they were educated, and this helped me to know my culture. Likewise, while exchanging ideas on this issue as a group, I also learned about your cultural identities. Because the laws on children's rights in your countries, how they were educated, what happened, were researched, and when I talked about these issues, I learned about your cultures.”</p> <p>P4: “Thanks to our interactions, I found the chance to get to know you and learn your perspectives. I also explored my own cultural orientations. I would not approach intercultural interactions with stereotypes anymore. I would prefer to get to know a person and establish relationship with her.”</p> <p>P7: “Before knowing you guys I didn’t know the reality behind this Palestine problem. I had preconceived ideas about Israel and Palestinian people. Your explanations made me realize that we shouldn’t have stereotypes about other cultures and people without interacting them.”</p>

P1: *“I can say that I will change my perspectives about other cultures and think outside the box from now on because you cannot know a person without talking to him or working with him.”*

P4: *“Collaboration is essential here because we are dealing with global issues like this plastic pollution thing. You have really interesting way of looking at things and I really like this. I am really happy we worked together. Thank you for everything”*

Making an evaluative analysis

P2: *“We discussed global issues in more detail, and discussing these issues allowed us to look at social and field-related issues from a different perspective, which was very productive in terms of getting to know ourselves.”*

P3: *“Yeah that's all really good. I'm like you, especially in the cultural learning context, I would express that it is important, I think that we are all very open minded. And it would be great if we actually pass this on to our students. So that our future students would be brought up as intercultural speakers who interact with other people on the basis of empathy and understanding.”*

P6: *“foreign language education should prepare the students for a global life so they move away from their own culture like family and friends and that they are then open minded towards other cultures, which doesn't even have to be on a global level, but also like, be aware that everyone has a different culture.”*

P3: *“It is clear that these global issues concern all of us. I had no idea that women had limited rights in Germany in the past. Discovering your opinions was very good for me.”*

The statements show that the participants' critical cultural awareness was fostered at the end of the transnational virtual exchange project. The Turkish prospective ELT teachers learned to interact with people from other cultures based on explicit criteria and reflected on their interactions analytically and critically. The participants expressions reveal that they explained their standpoints in rational and logical ways, and this is the main indicator of the critical cultural awareness dimension. The participants' intercultural interactions expose that the virtual exchange project equipped them with the abilities to identify and interpret seen and unseen values in cultural practices, make a critical and analytical evaluation of cultural practices based on a solid criterion, and interact with people from other cultures based on their own experience and attitudes.

Result

These examples reveal that the process of virtual exchange allowed the prospective teachers of English to meaningfully interact with other prospective teachers coming from different cultures and explore their perspectives, values, sensitivities, and cultural practices. The process of the virtual exchange project also gave the participants the opportunity of becoming an intercultural speaker and critically analyze the intercultural interactions. The participants' statements show that they are ready to establish meaningful relationships with people from other cultures and move away from “the tourist” perspective to “sojourner” perspective.

The statements also reveal that the participants are happy to collaborate with participants from different cultures and this collaboration taught them to meaningfully interact with people and learn from their experiences and perspectives. The findings reveal that the prospective teachers of English reached the dimension of critical cultural awareness, and they have the ability and intention to establish meaningful and sincere relationships with people from other countries. Especially the statements of P7 show the sense of camaraderie in the group. In this vein, it can be inferred that the virtual exchange project achieved its goal of making prospective teachers “intercultural speakers” and equipping them with critical cultural awareness.

Discussion

Especially in recent years, there has been growing recognition of the vital links between intercultural communicative competence and foreign language teaching. As the world has become a global village and multiculturalism has become a norm everywhere in the world, the goal of foreign language teaching should be preparing learners to become intercultural speakers. To achieve this end, first, English teachers need to be trained as “global” teachers who are informed and professional intercultural speakers, so that they can contribute to the process of fostering critical cultural awareness in foreign language classrooms. Foreign language teachers have a significant role and responsibility to put learners in environments and situations where they have meaningful intercultural interactions with people from other backgrounds and cultures, and this is not limited to foreign language classrooms (Byram, 2021). Currently, there is a growing interest in different types of real and virtual exchanges through which learners could interact and collaborate with people from geographically dispersed locations (O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Learner autonomy becomes a key requirement here at this point because especially in virtual exchanges like the present study, the exchanges usually take place outside the classroom and learners need to take responsibility for their own learning, and teachers guide them and structure the tasks and activities. Byram (2021: 145) emphasized this point: “The learner who has acquired autonomy in learning can use and improve their intercultural competence through performance”.

Three categories have been proposed by researchers for the acquisition of critical cultural awareness: classroom, pedagogically designed projects and activities outside the classroom, and independent efforts and attempts. The present study took the second category as the standpoint, and the researchers organized a transnational virtual exchange project, designed and structured pedagogical tasks and activities, and involved prospective teachers in the environment of intercultural interaction. Byram (2021) argued that the critical cultural awareness dimension has three characteristics. Firstly, it is not hypothetical. The dimension operates in a meaningful and realistic way, and learners can achieve it. Moreover, the dimension of critical cultural awareness rejects the notion of “native speaker” and aims to bring up “intercultural speakers”. Second, it aims to foster critical cultural awareness as part of educational objectives. Third, because it is intended to be used in educational contexts, it specifically points out the responsibilities of teachers and learners. Considering these three characteristics, the present study caters to all these characteristics and features.

The findings of this study showed that the prospective teachers of English in the virtual exchange project improved their critical cultural awareness by interculturally interacting and collaborating with prospective teachers of English coming from Germany and Israel. The experiences and perspectives of the Turkish participants were collected by analyzing their weekly interactions with partners from other countries. The interactions of the participants revealed that thanks to the intercultural interactions and collaborations, they learned more about both their cultures and their international partners’ cultures. They realized that first-hand experience of directly interacting with people from other cultures is the best way to eliminate stereotypes, misbeliefs, and misconceptions about other people, cultures, societies, and languages. They discovered that establishing good and sincere relationships with people coming from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds broaden their horizons and make them global citizens. Moreover, the participants were convinced that it is possible to make the world we live in today a much better place by just interacting, discussing, negotiating, and collaborating with other people living in completely different parts of the world.

The most significant point in the findings of this study was that the Turkish prospective teachers of English realized that critical cultural awareness is not fostered in foreign language classrooms just by mentioning other cultures or feeding learners with factual information about other cultures. They experienced that critical cultural awareness is best promoted in foreign language classrooms by collaborating together on a “glocal” issue, which is an issue that is specific to a particular context but is relevant to every society in the world (e.g. women rights, plastic pollution, deforestation). Another important point is that the Turkish prospective teachers had the opportunity to discuss with their partners

the English teaching practices, English teaching philosophies, and English teaching curriculum in Germany and Israel. In this way, they learned about pedagogical practices in other countries and cultures, and by exchanging ideas with their partners, they learned different pedagogical teaching activities and techniques from each other. By interacting and collaborating with their transnational partners, they created a comprehensive English teaching lesson plan with the theme of a glocal issue. In other words, this virtual exchange project trained the prospective teachers to become an international teacher with the think globally act locally mindset, who can bring up intercultural speaker learners who can selflessly work to make the world a better place.

The participants' statements revealed that they were highly satisfied with the method of virtual exchange because they established warm and sincere relationships with their partners from other countries, learned to embrace and appreciate cultural diversity and multiculturalism, learned not to approach other cultures, people, and society with stereotypes and misconceptions, and realized the benefit and value of collaborating with their fellow prospective teachers from different countries. The findings of this study are congruent with the findings of Üzüm, Akayoglu, and Yazan (2020), Üzüm, Yazan, Akayoglu, and Mary (2021), Eren (2021), and O'Dowd and Dooly (2021). The present study shows that virtual exchange and virtual exchange can be used in ELT departments to improve prospective teachers' critical cultural awareness and pedagogical capacity and competence.

Virtual exchange projects can be integrated to ELT departments so that prospective teachers are brought up as intercultural speakers who have the critical cultural awareness. It is recommended that researchers seeking to conduct studies on virtual exchange can collect data from different sources and with different tools throughout the project to further reveal the method's effectiveness in ELT departments. Moreover, such projects can be more helpful and reveal more interesting results with participants from underprivileged areas.

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