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**The Place of Culture in EFL Classes: Perceptions and Challenges of Pre-Service and In-Service English Teachers**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate Turkish EFL pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions of the place of culture in English language teaching in addition to uncovering the difficulties they face while teaching/integrating culture into their practice. A total of 40 participants were administered a comprehensive questionnaire the results of which were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings of the study revealed that pre-service and in-service teachers did not differ in terms of their perceptions of culture in their practice. However, the ways of integrating culture and experienced difficulties vary to a considerable extent between the two groups. The results showed that in-service teachers are inclined to make use of course books as a way of teaching culture whereas pre-service teachers favor authentic materials to integrate culture into their teaching. Regarding the challenges faced by the teachers, the lack of time allotted for teaching of culture which is restricted by the curriculum and the dominance of UK and US culture in the textbooks were addressed as the major problems. The present study offers critical implications for foreign language teachers, teacher education programs and curriculum specialists.

**Key Words:** Culture, teaching culture, teachers' perceptions, cultural competence.

## 1. Introduction

Various researchers have defined culture in different ways from the lenses of different disciplines. Bruner (1986) underscored that a culture is as much a *forum* for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules of specifications for action. On the other hand, anthropologists regarded culture as a phenomenon that is both collective and shared (Robinson, 1985). In today's sense, as Brown (2007) emphasized, culture is believed to include the ideas, customs, skills and tools which characterize different groups of people. However, it is almost impossible to say that there is an agreed definition of culture among the researchers and scholars since it is a very complicated and multifaceted concept.

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Similar to most of the scholars, Oxford Dictionaries also defines culture as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group”. What is more critical is not the definition of this concept but its dynamic and strong relationships with other phenomena. In this regard, it might be pointed out that culture has also a lot to do with social life, language, religion, eating behaviors, rules of etiquette, moral values, and even life after death in a basic sense. Among these elements of culture, language is claimed to be the most complex one. As Agar (1994) stated “Culture is in language and language is loaded with culture.” This reality is what makes the relationship between language and culture a complex one. Therefore, culture is a term which influences not only the process of an individual’s language learning but also individuals themselves (Lafayette, 1998), which makes the need of investigation of culture and language learning/teaching inevitable.

Teaching English as a second and foreign language has been under investigation of a great number of researchers during the last few decades. Almost all components of language teaching and language teaching pedagogy have been dealt with by a large number of research studies. Although the components and sub-skills of foreign language teaching such as speaking, writing, listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary appealed to the researchers working in the field intensively, culture and teaching culture has become the recently-concentrated components of language teaching.

Regarding the place of culture in second/foreign language teaching, some researchers pointed out that it is an indispensable part of learning and teaching a new language (Rivers, 1981; Fox & Allen, 1983; Jiang, 2000; Wei, 2005). It was underlined by the majority of studies that being competent in speaking, listening, reading or writing is not adequate to communicate since without knowing the culture of the language, it would be almost impossible to have a true understanding of the language (Önalın, 2005; Razi&Böcü, 2016). Furthermore, some researchers also indicated that the lack of cultural and intercultural competence lead to many communication breakdowns, misunderstandings or deviated norms in an interaction no matter it is spoken or written. (Farnia &Abdul Sattar, 2015) On the other hand, few researchers went one step further and proposed strong stances with respect to the significance of teaching / knowing the culture of the target language. Bennet (1993, p.16) suggested that a person who has good language skills, fluency or structural accuracy but lacks cultural competence is a fluent fool.

At this point, there come up two essential questions. The first one is what makes us get rid of being a fluent fool and the second one is how this quality is situated in both theory and practice. Apparently, the component that prevents us from being a fluent fool is culture. However, what is much more important is how culture is applied in language teaching and what its scope should be. Doubtlessly, culture seems to be one of the vital aspects of our continuously growing global society as more and more people are getting in touch with each other from different nationalities, backgrounds and ethnicities using a shared language as a mean of communication in this growing global society. This fact, indeed, have made the scholars redefine the scope of being competent in a foreign/second language. As well-known concepts of the field, linguistic competence, communicative competence and pragmatic competence have been emphasized extensively.

Introduced by Chomsky (1965), linguistic competence refers to an individual’s implicit understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in the language they speak. On the other hand, communicative competence, which has also drawn the attention of a good number of researchers, is defined by

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Hymes (1972) both as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a range of communicative situations. Finally, pragmatic competence, which the researchers have recently started to focus on, was defined by Chomsky (1980) as the “knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use (of the language), in conformity with various purposes.”. At this point, the target culture appears on the stage. It is known that to be able to communicate in the target culture, what a person needs is the knowledge of conditions and manners of accurate uses of the language which are learned through learning the culture of the language. If a person with good linguistic and communicative competence lacks cultural knowledge of the target language, he/she ends up with what Thomas (1983) called as “Pragmatic Failure”.

When it comes to whys of teaching culture, both practitioners and theoreticians are still in an unending debate. As cited in Gonen and Saglam (2012), Rivers (1981) proposed seven goals of culture instruction. These include helping learners to gain awareness of the way people behave, the effects of social variables on the way those people speak, how the people of target culture traditionally act under various conditions, culture of the most commonly used lexicon, being critical about the target culture, gaining and maintaining the essential skills for situating and organizing materials about the target culture and developing intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy towards its people.

The studies focusing on the place of English culture in EFL classroom presented multifaceted perceptions on integrating culture to classroom, rendering them to three main categories: a) teachers’ perceptions b) teachers’ and learners’ perceptions c) pre-service and in-service teachers’ perceptions. To foster positive culture learning, teachers’ active involvement and acknowledgment of cultural values’ importance are maintained to be an indispensable component. (Byram et. al, 1991; Robinson, 1981). As teachers are one of the most influential agents in implementing cultural activities in classrooms, most of the studies are geared towards teachers’ perceptions. Robinson (1981) maintained that teachers perceive culture as a tool to arouse learners’ interest and Byram et. al (1991) suggested that the integration of culture is “didactic and goal oriented” (p.118).

Önalın (2005) concluded that EFL teachers utilize culture to foster students’ communicative competence and their attitude towards integration of culture in classroom is positive; however, their definition of culture is related to more observable components (i.e., food, clothing) of culture. In another study, Yeganeh and Raeesi (2015) argued that EFL teachers accommodate culture in language classroom to raise students’ awareness about the target culture and the most frequent method to achieve this goal is to compare the C1 and C2. Moreover, researchers arrived at the conclusion that what impedes culture learning in EFL setting is limited time. For instance, Baleghizadeh and Moghadam (2013) highlighted that EFL teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about culture teaching reflect the optimal while their implementation in the classroom indicates a mismatch stemming from “education system and learners’ and teachers’ preferences”. As to Turkish contexts, according to the study conducted by Aydemir and Mede (2014), Turkish EFL instructors view culture as a critical part of language teaching and use course books as the guideline to teach. A more recent work of Saryıldız (2017) argued that Turkish EFL novice teachers as well as experienced teachers show variation in their knowledge of C2.

Some studies incorporated the learners' views on culture teaching and integration of culture into EFL classroom besides teachers' views. Damar (2013) suggested Turkish EFL learners and teachers show parallelism on both attributing importance to integrating general knowledge about C2 into classroom as well as lacking knowledge on culture-specific aspects of C2. In addition, the perceptions of EFL pre-service teachers have been included to contribute to the improvement of teacher education programs. Karağaç Tuna and Razi (2016) investigated the similarity between Turkish EFL pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions on the significance of culture integration to EFL classroom and concluded that they do not differ in terms of the notion that the scope of target culture information in EFL classroom should be extensive. As to the best knowledge of the researchers, there are not sufficient studies to examine the parallelism between pre-service and in-service teachers' perception regarding the place of culture in EFL classroom setting besides investigating the difficulties encountered by pre-service and in-service Turkish EFL teachers when teaching the target culture.

It is a well-known fact that there are some scholars who are skeptical of teaching culture due to some limitations in foreign language contexts such as Krashen (1982) claiming that classroom is not a proper place to acquire culture and language. When compared to second language settings, it is almost certain that acquiring a foreign culture is not that possible in a proper sense, neither teaching culture is. However, this point is not an end state, but a challenge for foreign language contexts and teachers, particularly who are teaching English.

No matter how many people in the field are discussing how to teach culture or whose culture to teach nowadays, as the current study takes culture for granted in language education, in this study the aim is to investigate both pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions with respect to culture's place in EFL settings and the scope of their culture instruction. This study aims to answer the following research questions;

1. What are the perceptions of Turkish EFL pre-service and in-service teachers regarding the place of culture?
2. Is there a difference between these two groups in terms of their perceptions of culture in their practice?
3. What are the difficulties that pre-service and in-service teachers face when teaching culture?

## 2. Methodology

A mixed method approach was employed in order to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Venkatesh, Brown & Bala, 2013). A qualitative research method was adopted as the researchers attempted to explore the perceptions of Turkish EFL pre-service and in-service teachers considering the place of culture in terms of the meanings the sample group brings to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In order to compare the difference between different participants assigned to each condition (i.e., pre-service and in-service), a quantitative research method was employed in line with the aim of this present study (Field, 2009).

## 2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 20 pre-service teachers who were in their final year in English Language Teaching program at a state university and involved in a practicum course. Also, 20 in-service teachers who were working as English Language instructors at preparatory school at a private university with either ELT or non-ELT backgrounds took part. All participants consented to participate in the present study. In-service teachers had experience ranging from 2 to 15 years whereas pre-service teachers had no or less than one year of teaching experience. At the time of the study, all pre-service teachers were studying at a state university in Ankara and all in-service teachers were working at a different private university in Ankara. Teaching experience, gender and age were not considered as variables in this current study based on the findings of previous studies (Karağaç Tuna & Razi, 2016; Sarıyıldız, 2017). The participants were selected as they were accessible to the researchers and met the condition of either being pre-service and in-service teacher (Lavrakas, 2008).

## 2.2. Instrument

A questionnaire which was originally designed by Önalın (2005) as a result of his close examination of Damen (1987), Byram (1988), Bentahila and Davies (1989), Brown (1990), Alptekin & Alptekin (1984), Adaskou et al. (1990), Fahmy and Bilton (1992), and Bex's (1994) studies was adapted by the researchers in line with the main interests of the study. The survey consisted of 2 parts. The first part had 8 multiple choice questions that the participants could mark as many appropriate options as possible which represented their perceptions. The second part of the survey had 16 items. The participants marked the statements using a likert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## 2.3. Data Collection and analysis

As aforementioned above, data for this comparative study were collected from a total of 40 teachers who were pre-service (n=20) and in-service teachers (n=20). The survey was given to the participants as hard copies and collected by the researchers in January 2018. The data was collected in two weeks. The data were analyzed by using SPSS (23). Besides the descriptive statistics of the collected data, a series of independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the sample means (Field, 2009). The open-ended section of the survey was analyzed manually and qualitatively by the researchers consecutively to ensure reliability of the results.

## 3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned before, the participants were asked to respond to 8 items which were multiple choice that required the participants to choose only one option (i.e., 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> items) and all suitable ones in the rest.

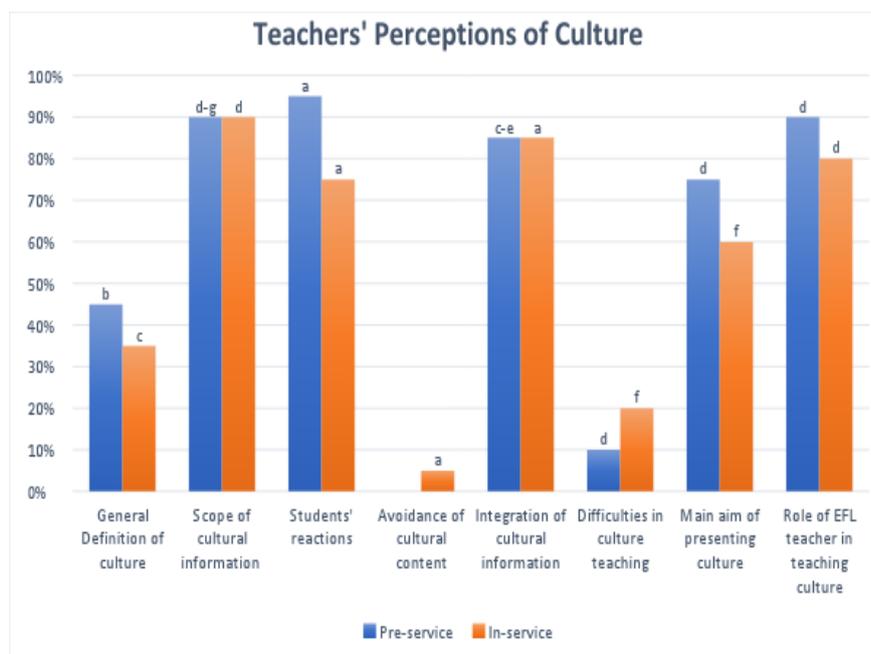


Figure 1. Mostly rated statements by percentage and group

Table 1. Mostly rated statements

1. General definition of culture	b. The characteristics of home life, family nature and interpersonal relations in a community. c. Culture refers to the customs, traditions and institutions of a country
2. Scope of cultural information	d. Daily life style, food and clothes. g. Communicative aspects like body language and idioms
3. Students' reactions	a. Interested (positive reactions)
4. Avoidance of cultural content	a. There is not enough time.
5. Integration of cultural information	a. Through the content of course books. c. Discussions of cultural experiences e. Video films and documentaries
6. Difficulties in culture teaching	d. There is too much emphasis on US/UK culture f. It is difficult to raise the interest/motivation of the students.
7. Main aim of presenting culture	d. Comparison between own and US/UK culture. f. Familiarization with US/UK culture
8. Role of EFL teacher in teaching culture	d. helps students show respect to all other cultures.

The analysis of part 1 showed that in-service teachers had a more general understanding of scope of the cultural information whereas the perceptions held by pre-service teachers reflected a notion which is more related to communicative and language-oriented aspects of culture instead of a narrow one (e.g., daily lifestyle, food and clothes) unlike the findings of Önalın (2005) who also concluded that in-service EFL teachers tended to focus on sociological aspects of culture from the general perspective. This might stem from the fact that pre-service teachers are more exposed to theories regarding

(Inter)cultural communication and competence whilst in-service teachers concentrate on the elements of culture which are more related with practical dimension of culture such as way of life, traditions, customs, food and clothes etc. Driven by practical concerns, the in-service teachers' definition of culture might be motivated by didactic and goal-oriented dimension of culture teaching.

When it comes to teachers' perceptions of their students' reactions, although both group of teachers reported that students tend to analyze and compare the target culture with their own as well as highlighting the presence of some students who are skeptical of the target culture and reject it, the majority of the teachers in both group stated that their students showed positive reactions and attitudes towards the target culture. The practical embodiment of the perceptions held by the teachers in the present study is reflected in Robinson's (1981) study in which teachers view culture as a tool to arouse students interest in practice.

Regarding teachers' avoidance of cultural content in their classrooms, 90% of them highlighted that they did not avoid integrating cultural content into their teaching. Similar to the findings of Yeganeh and Raesi's (2015) study, 10% reported they had to avoid it because of the inadequacy of time which is allotted for the integration of culture in curriculum.

One of the most striking findings of the current study was that in-service teachers considered the textbooks as the mostly used way of integrating and teaching target culture as Aydemir and Mede (2014) found out while pre-service teachers appreciated the use of authentic resources such as video films and documentaries as well as the discussion of various cultural experiences. One plausible explanation for this divergence might be related to in-service teachers' concerns about catching up with the requirements of the curriculum and time limitations. On the other hand, pre-service teachers are provided with the opportunity to be a part of exchange programs which raised their intercultural awareness. Also, the difference might stem from the pre-service teachers' being digital natives and in-service teachers' belonging to digital immigrant community (Prensky, 2001) because digital natives value technological tools to reach authentic resources to learn and teach English whereas digital immigrants considerably differ in their ways to teach and learn English.

In terms of the difficulties in culture teaching, pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions might be driven by various concerns. Thanks to the recent initiatives to integrate various courses that are geared towards increasing pre-service teachers' intercultural awareness, pre-service teachers had more comprehensive view of culture as an indispensable aspect of language. In other words, they were uncomfortable with the dominance of UK/US culture in the course books. As for in-service teachers, the difficulties encountered were attributed to the classroom realities. Particularly, the difficulty of raising students' interest/motivation of learning the target culture was noted by in-service teachers. When the both groups were asked to specify the main aim of presenting target culture content, pre-service teachers highlighted the necessity of the comparison between students' own culture and ones of US and UK, which signals that they perceive culture teaching is targeted towards raising students' intercultural awareness and competence rather than simply providing students with essential elements of the target culture as input. Yeganeh and Raesi (2015) whose study concluded that what the in-service teachers perceived as the least fundamental aim of teaching culture was intercultural communication. Indeed, overwhelmed by the dominance of US and UK culture in their course books, in-service teachers defined the main goal of presenting culture as making students familiar with those cultures.

Table 2. Descriptives (n=20 for each group)

	Pre-service		In-service	
	M	SD	M	SD
Culture is needed to be integrated into curriculum and classroom	2.09	.58	1.91	.44
Students show positive attitudes towards learning culture.	3.67	.67	3.65	.76
Teachers need to be well-equipped to teach culture.	4	.48	3.97	.49
Culture is a must to learn a foreign language.	4.07	.59	4.10	.71
Students themselves are responsible for the learning of cultural information.	2.90	.96	3.10	1.07
Learning a foreign culture harms the native culture.	1.55	.60	1.15	.36

Both groups did not differ in their beliefs that the role of EFL teacher in teaching culture was majorly help students show respect not only to English culture but also all other cultures. They perceived the main role of EFL teacher as a guide to make students gain Intercultural Interactional Competence (ICIC). Containing 16 different statements, the second part of the questionnaire which was administered to confirm and contribute to the findings of the first part focused on the place of culture in EFL classrooms. The participants were requested to rate these items using Likert-Scale. The statements were grouped thematically into six factors which are presented in Table 1. The results of the second part turned out to be consistent with the findings of the first part. Namely, both groups of teachers stressed out the significance of integration of culture into teaching and curriculum, students' positive reactions, the vitality of teachers' initiatives to teach culture. Additionally, they underscoring the fact that foreign language teachers themselves are supposed to be well-equipped to teach culture.

Table 3. Comparison between the groups

	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error
Culture is needed to be integrated into curriculum and classroom	.27	.16
Students show positive attitudes towards learning culture.	.91	.22
Teachers need to be well-equipped to teach culture	.87	.15
Culture is a must to learn a foreign language.	.90	.20
Students themselves are responsible for the learning of cultural information	.53	.32
Learning a foreign culture harms the native culture.	.01	.15

To investigate whether pre-service and in-service teachers differ from each other with respect to their perceptions of culture in their practice, a series of independent samples t-tests were conducted. The results revealed that there were no significant mean differences between pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions regarding the place of culture in their practice (see Table 3). This finding shows parallelism with the earlier studies (Önalın, 2005; Damar, 2013; Karağaç Tuna & Razi, 2016). However,

the perceptions on *learning a foreign culture harms the native culture* turned out to be significant when two groups were compared ( $t(31.28) = 2.53, p < .05$ ). This might be an indicator of the fact that pre-service teachers show an inclination that foreign culture harms the native culture more than the in-service teachers assume. One reasonable explanation could be related to classroom experiences' shaping the in-service teachers' perceptions which seem to be significantly stronger than those of pre-service teachers (Borg, 1997). That is, pre-service teachers might have mild levels of opposition to the idea that foreign culture harms the native culture mostly because of their inexperience.

#### 4. Conclusion

Culture, which was generally defined as customs, traditions and institutions of a country as well as characteristics of home life, family nature and interpersonal relations by the pre-service and in-service teachers, is still an ambiguous concept as there is no agreed definition of it. This ambiguity also raised the questions of what to teach as culture (Damen, 1987) and whose culture to teach in the field of foreign language education. However, accepted by the great majority of researchers and practitioners, the significance of culture has been out of question. The current study, which aimed to explore the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers and potential differences between these groups, uncovered that there were no significant differences between two groups of teachers with respect to analyzed factors except from the degree of their opposition to the idea that learning a foreign culture harms the native culture.

In addition, the findings of the present study revealed some differences between these groups about their cultural practices, difficulties of teaching culture and ways of integrating culture into their practice. While in-service teachers stated that they regarded and employed textbooks as the main way of integrating cultural content into their teaching, prospective teachers reported that they were in favor of utilizing authentic materials for culture integration. However, as Cortazzi and Jin (1999) underscored, the text books do not always include the elements of cultural information adequately. This noteworthy difference might be an outcome of the gap between theory and practice. Deviated from the ideals by the realities of educational system, curriculum in practice and classrooms, in-service teachers unfortunately have been obliged to remain within the borders of prescribed curricula and time limitations, which limits language learners' opportunities to have cultural intake during their language learning processes.

#### 5. Implications

In the light of the conclusions drawn and interpretations made in the current study, the following implications might be suggested for the fields of foreign language teaching, teacher education and curriculum development:

It is of vital importance for foreign language teachers to increase intercultural awareness of students to abstain from the status of being "fluent fools" by achieving this without bombarding students with cultural values in the form of pure conceptual cultural content in a meaningful and communicative way. In line with this, teachers are advised to be selective of the quality of cultural input besides quantity (Önalın, 2005), what they integrate into their teaching as a cultural component and how they do it to refrain from creating a monotonous classroom atmosphere and decreasing students' motivation and interest to learn the target culture.

The gap between in-service and pre-service teachers regarding their perceptions of the applicability of culture integration shows substantial and meaningful disparity. The limited place of practicum courses in foreign language teacher education programs may be leading prospective EFL teachers to have “unrealistic” or “over-idealistic” expectations and conceptions about foreign language teaching. As for in-service English teachers, their distance from theory which presumably stems from their notion that the practical knowledge gained by experience is more valuable and pragmatic than those of the theory makers is decreasing the quality and quantity of their cultural input (Borg, 1997; 2003). To be more precise, pre-service teachers should be provided with opportunities and context in which they might synthesize theory and practice to become more efficient foreign language culture facilitators whereas in-service teachers who are isolated from theory should be informed about current trends and implications of the related research findings. Moreover, equipped with theoretical considerations and ideal trends, the knowledge and competence of pre-service teachers are more likely to be successful on condition that this knowledge is sustained and improved through in-service teacher training programs when they become in-service teachers to avoid frustration and teacher burnout. Analyzing the difficulties and complaints of practitioners, it is quite an advisable point for curriculum developers that culture is needed to be given a broader space to end up with more interculturally aware and successful communicators who are what modern world demands at the end of language learning and teaching processes.

## 6. Limitations

The main limitation of the present research is the size of the sample which was comprised of 40 participants. Hence, the number of participants can be increased. Another limitation was that language teachers’ perceptions of teaching culture and perceived challenges might not reflect the reality about their culture competence and real classroom practices. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited to their self-perceptions and reported challenges and might not be generalized to a greater population.

## 7. Suggestions

Since the current study mirrors the perceptions of the teachers’ reflections of culture teaching and challenges they experienced, a more in-depth qualitative study might be conducted through structured interviews and observations. Alternatively, a mixed method design encapsulating the questionnaire and observations and/or interviews with pre and in-service teachers might be applied to reveal teachers’ real teaching culture practice in classroom for the future studies.

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