The Role of Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching[*]

Derin ATAY
Gökçe KURT
Zeynep ÇAMLIBEL
Pınar ERSIN
Özlem KASLIOGLU
Marmara University, Faculty of Education

Abstract

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education, and teachers today are expected to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Turkish teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching and to see how and to what extent these opinions and attitudes are reflected in their classroom applications. Data were collected from 503 EFL teachers by means of a questionnaire. The findings have revealed that language teachers seem to be aware of the role of the culture in foreign language education though they do not often integrate culture into their teaching in order to develop intercultural competence in their learners.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, EFL teaching, Turkish teachers of English*

One of the most significant changes in language learning and teaching over the past few decades has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component. This change has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent. The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001). Rather, it is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which is "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer, 1991, p. 138). This definition, in fact, adds to the notion of communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence. As stated by Byram (1997) the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the "the ability to decentre and take up the

other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior " (p. 42).

The intercultural dimension in the teaching of foreign languages has become a special concern for teachers and researchers. Studies in the field of social psychology, as well as studies of intercultural communication (Wiseman & Koster, 1993) have provided insights into the linguistic and social skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations. The intercultural dimension in foreign languages emphasizes effective cross-cultural communication based on the acquisition of a key set of competences as suggested by Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence. This model identifies five different factors involved: Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills of interpreting and relating, Skills of discovery and interaction and Political education including critical cultural awareness (1997).   Knowledge includes learning about social groups, products, practices and processes of interaction. Attitudes involve curiosity and openness towards the other as well as readiness to revise cultural values and beliefs and to interact and engage with otherness. Skills of interpreting and relating mean ability to identify and explain cultural perspectives and mediate between and function in new cultural contexts.

Skills of discovery and interaction are related to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication. Finally, Critical cultural awareness is defined as the ability to evaluate critically the perspectives and practices in one's own and other cultures.

Jokikokko (2005) defines intercultural competence as "an ethical orientation in which certain morally right ways of being, thinking and acting are emphasized" (p. 79). Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet (1992) further claim that the primary focus of teaching based on the intercultural approach is on the target cultures, yet, it also includes comparisons between the learner's own country and target country, thereby helping learners to develop a reflective attitude to the culture and civilization of their own countries. Thus, educating students to use a second/foreign language means to accustom them to being interculturally sensitive, by supporting them to build the ability to act as a cultural mediator, to see the world through the other's eyes, and to consciously use culture learning skills (Sen Gupta, 2002).Within this framework, the foreign language learner is viewed as an "intercultural speaker", someone who "crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values " (Byram & Zarate 1997, p. 11).

This change in focus in the conceptualization of the foreign language learners entails a change in the expectations voiced towards foreign language teachers. Teachers are now expected not only to teach the foreign linguistic code but also to "contextualize that code against the socio-cultural background associated with the foreign language and to promote the acquisitions of intercultural communicative competence" (Castro, 1999, p.92). The teacher is expected to mediate between the native language and target

language culture(s) to help learners achieve the above mentioned goals (Byram & Risager, 1999; Edelhoff, 1993). Thus, to support the intercultural learning process, foreign language teachers need additional knowledge, attitudes, competencies and skills. They need to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture learning theory and intercultural communication and need to be willing to teach intercultural competence and know how to do so (Edelhoff, 1993; Willems, 2002).

Among the studies on the role of culture in language teaching, Lessard-Clouston (1996) focused on 16 Chinese teachers' views on culture in both EFL learning and teaching. Findings revealed that teachers supported the role of culture in their EFL learning, but they suggested the need for a greater understanding of how to focus on culture in their own EFL classes. In a similar study, Sercu (2002) investigated whether and to what extent Flemish, English, French and German teachers support intercultural objectives and are willing to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence through their foreign language teaching. Data analyzed showed that Flemish foreign language teachers supported the aim of interculturalizing foreign language and they were willing to be teachers who develop intercultural communicative competence in their students. Moreover, Castro, Sercu and Garcia, (2004) investigated to what extent Spanish teachers of English supported cultural objectives, including the objective to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence. Results of data in general revealed that Spanish foreign language teachers were willing to try and attain culture learning objectives in foreign language education. With respect to culture teaching objectives, they prioritized the promotion of students' familiarity with the culture over the acquisition of an open mind. However, intercultural objectives that aim at promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills were not deemed important. In an international study with 424 teachers from seven countries, Sercu *et al.*, (2005) aimed at describing an average foreign language-culture teacher in terms of perceptions and attitudes regarding intercultural competence teaching and actual teaching practice, irrespective of the country in which s/he teaches. Findings of the study revealed two distinct teacher profiles, i.e., the favorably disposed foreign language teacher, who believed in the importance of integrating culture into their classroom practices, and the unfavorably disposed foreign language teacher, who did not support this practice. Data further revealed that no clear relationship appeared to exist between teachers' beliefs regarding integration of culture and the way in which they actually shaped their teaching practices. Teachers, similar to those in other studies, seemed to try, with varying degrees of success, to integrate the teaching of culture into the curriculum (Lazar, 2001; Liddicot, 2004).

A review of literature has shown that there is little research on how Turkish teachers of English envisage intercultural competence teaching and on their general disposition towards it. In a study carried out with 65 Turkish prospective teachers of English, Atay (2005) found that participants were aware of the importance of the cultural dimension in language learning, yet they were also aware of their own lack of knowledge related to the target language culture(s) and that the teaching culture actually involved more than what they could do.

Research into innovation in education has shown that teachers' perceptions of the innovation, beliefs, and preferences, in short, their conceptions, determine the success of that innovation to a large extent. When taken as a whole, the body of research on teachers' conceptions suggests that these conceptions shape teachers' instructional behavior to a considerable degree and a direct relationship was found to exist between these and the way teachers teach (Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Williams & Burden 1997). Thus, insights on teachers' conceptions are crucial for understanding the way in which teachers currently perceive the advocacy to integrate intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and the reasons underlying their actual practices.

The present study aimed to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Turkish teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching and to see how and to what extent these opinions and attitudes are reflected in their classroom applications, as reported by the teachers. The following research questions were addressed in this the study: a) how do Turkish EFL teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education? b) what are the opinions and attitudes of Turkish EFL teachers regarding the role of intercultural competence in teaching a foreign language? c) to what extent can Turkish EFL teachers incorporate classroom practices related to culture teaching?

METHOD

Participants and Setting

The participants of the present study were 503 Turkish teachers of English from all regions of Turkey, i.e., Marmara (196), Black Sea (75), Aegean (70), Central Anatolia (34), Eastern Anatolia (32), Southeastern Anatolia (26) and Mediterranean (70). The teachers were selected randomly from public and private schools and from primary, secondary and tertiary levels. According to the results of the demographic questionnaire 51 % of the teachers were between 20 and 29, 34 % were between 30 and 39, 11 % between 40 and 49, and 4 % between 50 and 59 years of age. While 86 % of the teachers held the BA degree, 10 % of them reported to have completed an MA program. Eighteen teachers had a PhD degree. Teaching experience of the teachers was as follows: 1-5 years (39%), 6-10 years (35 %), 11-15 years (12 %), 16-20 years (6 %), and more than 20 years (8 %). 72 % of the participating teachers worked at schools located in urban areas while the rest worked in rural areas or suburbs. The foreign languages taught in the schools in which teachers worked included English, German and French. The average number of hours they taught English per week ranged between 1-5 (.8 %), 6-10 (2.2 %), 11-15 (3 %), 16-20 (22 %), 21-25 (33 %), 26-30 (32 %) and 30 and more (7 %).

Data collection and Analysis

Data for the present study, which is descriptive in nature, were collected between the 2007-2009 academic years by means of a questionnaire developed by Sercu *et al.* (2005). The questionnaire, consisting of seven sections, aimed to investigate teachers' views on the role of culture in language teaching and the extent to which their current

teaching practice can be characterized as directed towards the attainment of intercultural competence and a cultural approach. In their study, Sercu *et al.*, asked the participating teachers to respond on 5-point, 4-point and 3-point scales, depending upon the purpose of the question. In the present study the same format was followed, yet, the questionnaire was piloted with 52 randomly selected teachers for reliability purposes and the Cronbach coefficient was found to be .80. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by taking the frequency counts for each question.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In the first section of the questionnaire, teachers were given seven statements listing the possible priorities in teaching English and asked to indicate the most three important ones for their teaching situation. As their first priority, 317 teachers out of 503 selected "building good relationships with students" followed by "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for life" (101), "teaching curriculum topics" (43), "taking students' attention to the lesson" (26) and to "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" (3). For their second most important priority, 175 of the teachers out of 503 selected "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for life" followed by "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" (143) and "taking students' attention to the lesson" (125). Finally, as their third priority, teachers indicated "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" (218).

In the second section, teachers were asked to indicate their opinions about different aims of foreign language teaching. This section consists of eight statements on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from "very important" to "not important at all." These eight possible objectives can be grouped into three categories, including: (a) language-learning objectives (n.1, 3 and 7), (b) culture-learning objectives (n.2, 5, and 8), and (c) general learning skills objectives (n. 4 and 6). The frequency of the responses to each statement is presented in Table 1.

The responses showed that for the participating teachers the most important aim of foreign language teaching is "to help students use English for practical reasons" followed by "motivating students to learn" and "helping students gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general." There is a clear preference for language learning objectives and general learning skills objectives. Teachers who prioritize linguistic competence aim to promote in their students the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language so they can use it for practical purposes. They are also interested in motivating their students to learn English. The culture learning objective related to helping students learn about foreign cultures, and the language learning objective related to developing proficiency to read literary works were ranked last.

Table 1
Objectives of foreign language teaching

Statements	Teacher responses									
	5		4		3		2		1	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Motivating Ss to learn English	348	70	149	30	3	.6	2	.4	1	.2
2. Helping Ss learn about foreign cultures	108	22	276	55	83	16	30	6	5	1
3. Helping Ss reach a certain proficiency level to be able to read literary texts	108	22	181	36	140	28	57	11	12	2
4. Helping Ss gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general	278	55	172	34	40	8	8	1.6	5	1
5. Helping Ss be open and positive to foreign cultures	225	45	207	41	51	10	16	3	2	.4
6. Helping Ss gain learning skills necessary to learn different foreign languages	199	40	224	45	56	11	18	4	-	-
7.Helping Ss to use English for practical reasons	352	70	128	25	19	4	4	.8	-	-
8. Helping Ss understand their own cultures and identities better	267	53	170	34	49	10	17	3	-	-

*5= Very important, 4= Important, 3= I can't decide, 2=Not important, 1= Not important at all.

In the third section, in order to investigate the way in which teachers defined the aim of teaching culture in the foreign language education context, the respondents were given eight statements and asked to assess the level of importance of each on a 5 point Likert scale. These eight statements referred to three dimensions defining culture learning: "The knowledge dimension," i.e., the acquisition of culture (n. 1, 2, & 3); "the attitudinal dimension," i.e., adoption of intercultural attitudes (n. 4); and "the skills dimension," i.e., acquisition of behavior in intercultural situations (n. 5, 6, & 7) (Castro, Sercu, & Garcia, 2004, p. 98). From Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of Turkish EFL teachers supported the skills dimension of foreign language teaching. All three skills objectives enjoyed highest support amongst Turkish EFL teachers. Least importance was attached to giving information about the music, literature and cinema of the foreign culture.

Table 2
Definition of culture teaching

Statements	Teacher responses									
	5*		4		3		2		1	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Giving information about foreign cultures, i.e., their history, politics, etc.	75	15	227	45	107	21	86	17	8	1.6
2. Giving information about the daily lives of a foreign culture.	154	31	238	47	74	15	35	7	1	.4
3. Giving information about the music, literature and cinema of a foreign culture	114	23	254	51	90	18	36	7	6	1.2
4. Helping Ss develop a positive perspective towards the foreign language culture	197	39	234	47	45	9	21	4	4	.8
5. Helping Ss be aware of the cultural differences	280	56	194	39	22	4	7	1.4	-	-
6. Helping Ss understand their own culture better	301	60	150	30	39	8	11	2	-	-
7. Helping Ss to develop intercultural communication skills	292	58	189	38	16	3	4	.8	-	-

*5= Very important, 4= Important, 3= I can't decide, 2=Not important, 1= Not important at all.

As teachers are expected to help their students to gain intercultural competence, they need a thorough understanding of the target language culture(s). Thus, to gain insights about teachers' knowledge on target language culture(s), the respondents were asked how much they know about the history, daily lives, youth culture, education, traditions, literature, music, politics of the target language culture(s) as well as their economic and cultural relationships with Turkey in the fourth section. Teachers indicated how familiar they were with each aspect on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from "I know it very well" to "I don't know it at all." The analysis of the mean scores revealed that teachers thought they had some knowledge about the above mentioned characteristics of foreign cultures (M= 2.82, SD= .49).

In the fifth section, teachers were asked to indicate how frequently they get connect with the foreign culture while at home on a 3 point scale with 1 representing 'never' and 3 representing 'often.' As can be seen in Table 5 below, teachers had highest amount of contact with the target language culture(s) at home and they do appear not to travel much.

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Table 3
Ways of communication with foreign people and cultures

Statements	3		2		1	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Through media (newspaper/TV/radio)	269	10	185	37	45	9
2. By visiting cultural centers of foreign countries in Turkey	43	9	231	46	225	45
3. By communicating with foreigners living in Turkey	136	27	289	56	72	14
4. By communicating with the native speaker teachers at my school	97	19	107	21	286	57
5. By communicating with visiting foreign teachers/students	78	16	228	45	185	37

*3= often, 2= sometimes, 1= never

In the sixth section, teachers were given 17 statements about the role of the culture in foreign language education and asked to indicate their opinions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "I totally agree" to "I don't agree at all." Example statements were as follows: "There must be more focus on culture in foreign language education," "European or global citizenship should be emphasized in foreign language classes," or "Learning about foreign cultures may change the attitudes of the Turkish student towards his own culture." High scores reflected positive attitudes of the teachers towards the role of culture in foreign language education. The analysis of the mean scores revealed that (M= 3.44, SD= .37) their answers were somewhere between "I can't decide" and "I agree" possibly reflecting the fact that Turkish teachers of English have positive attitudes towards the role of culture in foreign language education.

The last section of the questionnaire aimed to answer the third research question, i.e., teachers' classroom applications. Teachers were given ten examples of classroom practices related to culture teaching and asked to indicate to what extent they were applying the given practices in their classrooms on a 3 point Likert Scale (3=often, 2= sometimes, 1= never). The mean score of classroom practices was found to be 1.48 (SD= .23) reflecting the fact that they sometimes carried out the above mentioned practices in their classrooms. The following table presents the results regarding this section.

Table 4
Classroom practicing focusing on culture teaching

Classroom practices	3		2		1	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. I share what I hear/read about foreign cultures with my students	67	13	111	22	325	64
2. I ask my students to do some research about foreign cultures	30	6	123	24	349	68
3. We watch CDs/movies about foreign cultures in my classes	68	13	160	31	275	54
4. I ask my students to talk about living in a foreign culture	49	10	292	57	159	31
5. I talk about my own experiences with foreign cultures	94	18	175	34	231	45
6. I invite people with having lived abroad to the classroom	5	1	50	10	448	88
7. I ask my students to talk about their own culture in the foreign language	55	11	129	25	319	63
8. I put pictures about foreign cultures on the classroom walls	32	6	142	28	329	65
9. I ask my students to participate in pair work activities with students from foreign cultures	30	6	137	27	335	66
10. I discuss the prejudices towards the foreign culture with my students	59	12	143	28	301	59

*3= often, 2= sometimes, 1= never

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

One of the most significant changes over the past few decades has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component of language studies. This has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent and the traditional aim of developing linguistic skills modeled on the norms of native speakers has lost ground. According to the intercultural model, languages are related to the cultures, communities and societies that use them for communication and language learners should be encouraged to become competent intercultural speakers (Garrido & Alvarez 2006). For this purpose, language teachers are expected to guide students in the acquisition of various skills, contributing to the development of their knowledge and understanding of a target language and culture(s), and helping them reflect on their own culture as well. Thus, language teachers have to be familiar with what lies behind the new skills and strategies their students are expected to acquire for

intercultural understanding. The present study aimed to investigate the opinions of Turkish EFL teachers regarding the role of teaching culture in foreign language education and the extent to which they incorporate cultural activities into their classroom practices.

The findings of the present study were consistent with those of Sercu et al., (2005). Similar to Turkish teachers, Polish, Spanish, Swedish and Belgian teachers defined the objectives of foreign language above all in terms of the acquisition of the ability to use the foreign language for practical purposes and in terms of motivating students to learn foreign languages. Similarly, Spanish secondary school EFL teachers in Castro et al.'s (2004) study prioritized language teaching objectives over culture teaching objectives.

Regarding the objectives of culture teaching, Turkish EFL teachers supported the skills objectives like helping students gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general as well as skills necessary to learn different foreign languages, whereas foreign language teachers in Sercu *et al.*'s study favored the development of openness and tolerance and defined culture teaching more in terms of passing on knowledge than providing intercultural skills. In both studies, teachers favored the knowledge of "providing information about daily life and routines" more than information about the foreign culture, history, geography and political conditions. The implications of this could be that teachers associated cultural information with communication. This finding may be a trace of the relationship between intercultural competence and communication competence being dominated by communicative skills rather than the general educational objectives which might be associated with history, geography and political issues.

An interesting finding of the present study was that teachers expressed strong support to "help students understand their own cultures better". This finding might be attributed to the fact that the teachers were not familiar enough with target language cultures, did not have much contact with English speaking people, and did not feel fully knowledgeable about the target culture, so that they felt more comfortable focusing on the students' and their own native culture. On the other hand, European and Mexican foreign language teachers in Sercu *et al.*'s study (2005) did not support this objective. According to the researchers, teachers in their study seemed to consider this a responsibility of mother tongue and other teachers rather than of foreign language teachers.

Finally, teachers appeared not to be integrating culture-related classroom practices in their own classes frequently, although they reported to have positive attitudes towards the role of culture in foreign language education. This finding is in contrast with the research finding that teachers' beliefs and attitudes shape their teaching practice (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Williams & Burden, 1997). This might be due to two reasons: First, teachers might not know how to integrate culture into their own classrooms. In other words, they might be lacking the training focusing on the integration of culture into foreign language education. Second, they might not have the

opportunities to integrate cultural practices into their classes. They might not have necessary resources such as computers, Internet, DVD players, or tape-recorders.

This study yields a number of educational implications. To begin with, teacher education programs should include a cultural aspect in their curricula, such as a course on intercultural communication, in order to equip prospective teachers with intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. Both pre- and in-service teachers can be provided with examples of how language and culture teaching can be integrated, and encouraged to explore alternative ways of culture teaching. Once language teachers become more knowledgeable and competent regarding this issue, they will eventually be more able to integrate cultural practices in their teaching. Teacher development programs may also help teachers realize the opportunities to enhance prospective and in-service teachers' intercultural competence inherent in experiential learning activities, such as exchange projects.

To conclude, further studies should be conducted to investigate the factors affecting teachers' opinions and attitudes towards developing intercultural competence in foreign language education. Moreover, studies on the effects of experiential tasks related to culture learning/teaching on teachers' attitudes and classroom practices may provide invaluable insight for teacher educators.

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İletişim/Correspondence

Derin ATAY
Marmara University, Faculty of Education
Phone: 0090 532 211 8114
dyatay@yahoo.com

Gökçe KURT
Marmara University, Faculty of Education
Phone: 0090 532 304 8362
gokcekurt@hotmail.com