

## Culture as a Motivating Factor in Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language

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### *Abstract*

*Although Turkish is a rooted language, teaching Turkish as a foreign language is quite a new field. Teaching foreign language is not to find the equivalent of the concepts in mother tongue and express them in target language, but it is to know where and when to use those words. It is possible to gain this ability with cultural transmission that affects the language. The goal of this study is to find out Polish students' attitudes towards Turkish culture in Turkish language classes. In this study a questionnaire with 15 Likert-scale and four open-ended questions was administered to 46 Polish students studying at Turkology department, Jagiellonian University (UJ) in Poland. As a result of this study, Turkish culture has an important role in Polish students' desire to learn Turkish. Thus, Turkish language teachers should develop both students' grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing competence and they should also help them develop socio-cultural competence.*

**Key Words:** Culture, Turkish Language, Cultural Expressions.

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### **Introduction**

Since human beings lead social lives, learning a foreign language has always been necessary for people throughout history. Especially in today's globalized world, where life is shaped by international relationships, learning a foreign language is of great importance. Thus, foreign language learning is regarded as an indispensable part of curriculum all over the world.

Cultural aspects of Teaching Turkish language in Poland have not been analyzed. The Turkology department has focused on literature and history. In addition, although many needs analyses and curriculum development have been reported in the literature on teaching foreign languages, researchers have not evaluated teaching the Turkish language sufficiently.

The Turkish language has always been a significant language for historical reasons, and due to the political, geographical, and economic position it has in the world. As a result, many universities in the world have Turkology departments and more people encounter the language every day and want to learn it. Unfortunately, the technical, methodological, and theoretical developments on teaching Turkish as a foreign language seem far from commensurate with the magnitude and significance of the demand for it. This fact motivates the author to evaluate Polish students' attitudes towards culture in Turkish language courses at UJ in Poland.

Today, European foreign language teachers are expected to teach intercultural competence. The Council of Europe's CEFR and as well as other national and European Union documents assert that this new competence should be developed and encouraged in foreign language students. Learning a foreign language

becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers (Alptekin, 2002: 58).

## **Foreign Language Teaching and Culture**

In foreign language teaching, great importance has been attached to the development of students' four basic language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some of the teaching syllabuses share such priorities, but focus on student's test-taking skills and neglecting their communicative ability. Students often find it hard to apply what they have learned in classroom to real-life encounters with members of the target community. In most cases, students' communicative frustration can be attributed to their insufficient knowledge of target culture. Therefore, foreign language teachers should not only help students learn pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, but also, perhaps more importantly, immerse them into the culture of target language (Yilmaz, 2011: 86).

The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction over the past four decades. Culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistically and pedagogically. Linguistically, it affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it influences the choice of the language materials because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials (McKay, 2003).

Culture and teaching language cannot be separated, thus culture has to be integrated into the target language teaching (for insightful analyses see Morain, 1983; Grittner, 1990; Bragaw, 1991; Moore, 1991; Byram and Morgan, 1994). It is a well-known fact that language teaching and culture are connected, especially during international communication, students require social and cultural awareness. If languages are taught without their cultures, students become linguistically competent strangers in the target language culture. However, it is important to mention that cultural elements of the target language should be taught carefully.

Competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also by the ability to use language appropriate to particular contexts. Thus, successful language learning requires the language users to learn the culture that underlies language (Tseng, 2002: 11-12). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the sociocultural determinants of linguistic communication. It includes an ability and knowledge of using communication conventions such as rules of politeness; rules of communication depending on the age, gender, and social status of interlocutors; communication rituals, registers, and linguistic styles; social and regional varieties of language; and other factors related to the intercultural communication (Miodunka, 2004: 103). "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (Brown 1994: 165).

In our everyday life, we vary the kind of language we use according to the levels of formality and familiarity. Determinants of social relations are connected with factors like type of relation and intimacy of relation. For example, a student can greet his friend by saying *selam!* 'hi!', but he cannot use this form of greeting with his teacher. Because of the difference in status, he should greet the teacher with *merhaba* 'hello'.

According to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 6-8), the teaching of culture should:

1. Raise students' awareness of intercultural issues and enable them to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts.

2. Help students develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
3. Help students develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
4. Help students become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
5. Help students increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
6. Help students develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
7. Stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture and encourage them to develop empathy towards its people.

Researchers widely claim that cultural teaching has a positive impact on the learning of a foreign language. It is now accepted that foreign language learning is comprised of several components, which include grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, and a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture. For scholars, cultural competence is the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country. It is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning. Many teachers see it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum (Thanasoulas, 2001: 1).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study is to find out Polish students' behavior towards the Turkish culture while learning the Turkish language. The author endeavored to discern Polish students' needs, expectations, and ideas about cultural issues in their Turkish language courses in order to expose the importance of culture teaching in language courses.

Although a great amount of discussion is devoted to the inclusion of 'culture' in the field of foreign language education, there are few studies regarding the Turkish culture. One of these studies was carried out by Gönül (2007) "Intercultural Communicative Competence: The Assessment of a Teaching Turkish Set for Foreign Adult Learners". In her unpublished doctoral thesis, she analyzed the Turkish language materials from the cultural point of view. The other was by Yılmaz (2012) "Cultural Transmission through Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language Course Books".

### **Methodology and Findings**

A questionnaire with a 15 Likert scale and four open-ended questions was administered in an effort to find out the behavior of Polish students towards the Turkish culture. The questionnaire was completed by 46 students.

Most of the students stated that they have difficulty to understand social variables such as; age, sex, social status affect the way Turkish people speak. Tilting the head upwards while doing a *jık* sound with one's mouth and raising eyebrows indicates "no." Likewise, a sharp downwards nod of the head combined with a longer than average blink means "yes". This is one of the hardest gestures for Polish students to adopt.

All of the students stated that they want to learn the target (Turkish) culture of the language they are learning. They find the Turkish culture interesting and quite different from western cultures, which increased its attractiveness and worthwhile value for them. Some mentioned that they decided to learn Turkish because of their desire to learn the Turkish culture.

All of the students think that in order to learn a foreign language it is necessary to learn the target culture. Students are aware of the importance of culture in foreign language learning. Turkish culture has a triggering effect on students learning Turkish. 70% of the students think that the practical Turkish courses help them learn Turkish culture. Practical Turkish courses taught by a qualified native speaker help them to develop an understanding of Turkish language and Turkish cultural elements.

All of the students find learning Turkish culture enjoyable. All of the students enrolled in the program willingly. Willingness has a motivating effect on learning a foreign language. All of the students think that placing the emphasis on learning Turkish culture is not disturbing to them. None of the students was disturbed by learning Turkish culture. It has been noted in the research that sometimes if teaching a foreign language is dominated by the target culture; it can make students feel uncomfortable.

Most of the students stated that they learn Turkish culture from the language textbooks. The fact that most students learn Turkish culture from textbooks means that Turkish language teachers rely heavily on textbooks for depictions of Turkish culture. Additional materials including films and other authentic materials, such as songs, literature, and newspapers need to be adapted and included in Turkish language teaching materials to give a broader and less stereotypical image of Turkish culture. A textbook should include authentic materials with the target cultural topics.

All of the students stated that learning Turkish from a native speaker of Turkish helped them to learn Turkish culture. When students compared their experiences learning Turkish culture with the non- native speakers of Turkish, students indicated they learned more cultural elements from native speakers of the Turkish language.

Some of the students stated that Turkish native speaker instructs the Turkish culture explicitly. A Native speaker usually explains the cultural issues in class and makes discussions about the Polish and Turkish culture.

Most of the students have stated that the modern techniques and teaching methods should be applied in Turkish language classes, such as role plays, cooperative learning and using games, films, poems, authentic texts and songs. These methods and techniques will contribute to both Turkish language development and cultural transmission which reflect the real life situations and culture.

The participants were asked four open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. Students were asked how the Turkish culture should be integrated best for them. The majority of the students stated Turkish culture can be learned best by experiencing and studying abroad for a period of time, and they also stated that the Erasmus student exchange program is a good opportunity to learn the target culture, and to develop intercultural skills in Turkey. Watching films, reading books, and having pen- friends from the target culture are other ways of learning target culture.

Students gave a variety of responses when asked about the reasons they were learning Turkish. However, most of the students said they were learning Turkish in order to learn Turkish culture. This is significant because Turkish courses, like all language courses should be developed according to the needs of the students. Some stated that Turkish language is a very different and interesting language; some indicated that they were interested in Turkish history. Most notable, however, is that culture was largest motivating factor for them. It would make sense then, to design curricula in such a way that they incorporate those elements that most expressly meet students' expectations.

Most of the students stated that the most striking cultural element for them is the hospitality of Turkish people.

Students indicated that cultural expressions such as *bereket versin*, *Allah Allah*, *Allah rahatlık versin*, *Allaha ısmarladık*, *Eyvallah*, *Vallah billah*, *Evel Allah*, *Estağfirullah*, *Hayırlı olsun*, *Gözün aydın* and *Güle güle kullan*, were the most difficult to understand because religious issues and idioms are always difficult and problematic for students. Basic sentence patterns reflecting Turkish culture and wealthiness of Turkish are one of the cultural elements used in communication a lot and making people relationships easier. Formulaic expressions which should be learned in every language for an effective communication reflects viewpoints of societies from sociocultural aspect.

Some students have difficulty with understanding the everyday speech, gestures, figurative, and idiomatic meanings of the words. The main reason behind the difficulty of learning figurative meaning, idioms, proverbs, and cultural expressions is that Polish learners are not familiar with the Turkish culture. The cultural issues which are used in everyday speeches are proverbs, gestures, idioms, slangs, formulaic expressions. These are products of the language with culture and society. Here are the formulaic expressions students find difficult to understand: *Kolay gelsin* "May it come easily", *eline sağlık* "health to your hand", *bereket versin* "may God give abundance". The difficulties encountered by the Polish students in learning Turkish idioms, proverbs, and figurative meanings of words cannot be overcome without making them familiar with Turkish society and culture. All these aspects need to be integrated into the Turkish language teaching through utilizing appropriate texts and contexts. The correct usage of these expressions will make the users of Turkish appear more natural and authentic. By learning these expressions, students will have a better idea of the role of cultural expression in daily Turkish conversation.

Some students indicated their purposes behind learning Turkish by writing statements such as:

- "I am interested in Turkish culture and language..."
- "In order to learn that wonderful language and culture..."
- "...because I love Turkish culture"
- "In order to recognize Turkish culture"
- "To develop my Turkish and learn more about Turkish culture and history"
- "I want to go to Turkey and work there"
- "I want to go to Turkey"
- "...to live in Turkey"
- "In order to learn language and Turkish culture."
- "I love Turkish culture"

As we see from these excerpts from the questionnaires, the Turkish culture plays a crucial role in the students' desires to learn Turkish. Culture is the strongest motivating factor behind the students' desire to learn the Turkish language.

In their classes, Turkish language teachers need to maintain their students' interest all of the time. Culture is one of the best means of motivation for students and it provides authentic settings for students to better comprehend the nature of a given language. The necessity of cultural transmission in foreign language teaching is undeniable. Students will better understand their own culture and learn to be unbiased towards foreign cultures through the cultural values they acquire during the process of language learning (Genç & Bada, 2005:80-81).

## **Conclusion**

1. Successful foreign language instruction utilizes authentic materials, audiovisual materials, proverbs, cultural expression, and literature. According to Morain (1983:404), *how* to teach culture seems easier to determine than *what* to teach does. Materials and culture should be integrated into Turkish language learning.

2. The result of this study shows that the Turkish culture has a crucial role in Polish students' desire to learn Turkish. Therefore, Turkish language teachers are expected to develop students' intercultural competence. Cultural activities should be incorporated carefully while teaching the Turkish language.
3. Turkish is rich in cultural expressions, idioms, proverbs, and linguistic filters that reflect the culture. Many of these expressions do not have a Polish equivalent. The correct usage of these expressions will make Polish learners speak and understand Turkish cultural expressions. Thus teachers should prepare activities on real life situations.
4. Turkish language teachers should develop both students' grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing competence and they should also help them develop socio-cultural competence.
5. Turkish language learning should provide exposure to authentic language use in class such as cultural expressions in daily Turkish conversations, gestures, body language, slang, idioms, and proverbs. Technology should be used more in the classroom so as to promote learning.
6. As we see from the results of this study, culture is the strongest motivating factor in learning Turkish at Polish universities. Therefore, in designing the language courses, students' needs and expectations have to be taken into consideration.
7. Including culture into foreign language lessons increases motivation and most of the language teachers support the inclusion of cultural elements in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. Thus, the question is not whether to include culture in teaching foreign languages but what aspects of culture to include and how the culture should be integrated.
8. Through the use of technology in education, we have an opportunity to develop teaching materials for teaching Turkish as a foreign language that focus attention on integrating culture in Turkish language teaching.

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