

**RAISING CULTURAL AWARENESS OF TURKISH  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ATTENDING EFL  
PREPARATORY CLASSES**

**Türk Üniversite Hazırlık Sınıfı Öğrencilerinin Kültürel  
Farkındalıklarının Arttırılması**

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**Abstract**

Culture is the accumulation of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a group, institution or society. The relation between culture and language has long been of interest to researchers, and the common view regarding the relation between culture and language has been centered upon the intertwinement between them. Such an interest is due to the fact that being aware of target culture is of crucial significance for fruitful and successful communication. For native speakers it is not uneasy to adapt to their own culture, because they are surrounded by the society where features of the culture are noticeable in all aspects. Nevertheless, in Turkish context learners do not have a great deal of opportunities to become aware of target culture, rather it is underestimated and neglected in the course of teaching. Text books and the media are the main sources helping students become aware of target culture; hence as English language teachers we should take action with the intention of teaching cultural aspects of target language whether or not it is overtly stated in the curriculum. Therefore, this study aims at enabling university prep-class level students to become aware of target culture while they are intensively studying English in the preparatory classes so that they can both enhance their proficiency level in English and develop a sense of global harmony and peace. The participants of the study were 25 university prep class students. Observation and semi-structured interview were used as data collection tools. The findings of the study revealed that embedding culture teaching into language learning process raised students' awareness of the significance of target culture alongside target language.

**Key words:** *Language learning, culture teaching, target culture, target language, raising cultural awareness.*

**Özet**

Kültür, bir grubu, kurumu ya da toplumu karakterize eden değerler, tutumlar, hedefler ve uygulamalar bütünüdür. Kültür ve dil arasındaki ilişki uzun zamandır araştırmacıların ilgi alanı içerisinde bulunmuştur ve kültür-dil ilişkisine yönelik temel kanı ikisinin iç içe geçmiş olması ve birbirlerinden ayrı düşünülmemesidir. Bu alana yönelik ilgi başarılı iletişimde hedef kültürün taşıdığı önemin bilincinde olunmasında yatmaktadır. Anadili İngilizce olanlar için içerisinde doğdukları kültüre adapte olmaları zor değildir. Türkiye bağlamında ise hedef kültürü öğrenme adına öğrencilerin çok fazla fırsatı yoktur ve dil öğrenimi esnasında hedef kültürü öğrenme göz ardı edilmektedir. Ders kitapları ve medya hedef kültürü öğrenmeye hizmet eden temel kaynaklar arasındadır; bu yüzden, İngilizce öğretmenleri olarak, müfredatta yer alsın ya da almasın, hedef kültürü öğretmek amacıyla girişimlerde bulunmalıyız. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışma, üniversite hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin hedef kültüre yönelik bilinç düzeylerini üst düzeye taşımayı, böylelikle, hem İngilizce yeterlilik seviyelerini arttırmayı hem de öğrencilerde küresel barış ve birliktelik

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anlayışını oluşturmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çalışma, 25 hazırlık sınıfı öğrencisiyle durum çalışması olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Gözlem ve yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşme veri toplama araçları olarak kullanılmıştır. Çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular, kültür öğreniminin dil öğrenimine entegre edilmesinin, öğrencilerde hedef kültür öğreniminin dil öğrenme sürecine olan olumlu etkisine yönelik bilinçlenmeye yol açtığını göstermiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Dil öğrenimi, kültür öğretimi, hedef kültür, hedef dil, kültürel bilinci artırma.*

## Introduction

Since culture is a very broad term, proposing a precise definition to cover all the constituents hidden in the culture may not be attained with ease. Hinkel (1999) says that there are almost as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviors, activities. Byram (1989) defines culture as “the whole way of life of the foreign country, including but not limited to its production in the arts, philosophy, and high culture in general.” Culture is a combination of attitudes, customs, daily activities of people, the way that they think; in other words, culture is a total reflection of a community’s shared perceptions of life (Valdes, 1986).

There has been an increase towards realization of the interconnection that lies between culture teaching and second or foreign language learning. The movement for emphasizing raised consciousness of the effect of cultural components during foreign language learning placed radical responsibility upon language teachers. Kramsch (1993) states that raising cultural awareness and infusing cultural components into language teaching can be a supportive factor in second language learning. Perceptions, beliefs, and conventions of native speakers are reflected, and embedded in the language. Language and culture are the two parts of a unity which cannot be considered without one another. Differences among languages unavoidably emerge alongside with differences among cultures (Jiang, 2009).

Learning a foreign language is comprised of various competences subsuming grammatical competence, communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, which orientates the emphasis on the cultural dimension of foreign language learning. Bianco (1999) states that culture teaching in second language teaching occupies an essential corner in language courses. According to them this shift needs to be represented more apparently and supported in language policy discourses. Limbert (1999) says “almost all of culture is related to language and conversely language provides access to many to most aspects of culture.”

Teaching culture moderates the approaches towards target culture presented by target language. In addition to giving necessary importance to cultural dimension in language teaching, this consciousness for significance of culture teaching may be a helpful way so as to understand one’s own culture better. Bennet (1986) mentions the powerful effect of producing empathy toward different cultures, because he captures the idea that there is no absolute “rightness” or “goodness” which can be matched to cultural behavior, this notion damages the centralism of one’s own culture though it is preferable by native speakers. Foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one’s own or another culture (Kramsch, 1999). While integrating culture teaching into foreign or foreign language teaching, creating harmony between students’ own culture and target culture without placing more importance on one of them is a matter of concern. Peterson and Coltrane clarifies this perception with the following words; “cultural information should be presented in a nonjudgmental

fashion, in a way that does not place value or judgment on distinctions between the students' native culture and the culture explored in the classroom(2003).” In this study researchers will try to find out the answers to questions given below.

- What are the students existing perceptions on target culture?
- Are they aware of the role of culture in language learning?
- Will there be any change in the students' perception of target culture after training?

**Methodology**

The study was conducted as a group case study that lasted three months. As Krasner (1999) states linguistic competence is not enough for language learners to be competent at a language. Twenty-five intermediate level university students whose ages differed between 18 and 21 participated in our case study; they were studying English in EFL preparatory classes, in intensive English Language Teaching program. In order to equip the participants with the unifying potency of the cultural knowledge, the participants were taught some of the cultural values that are embedded in English during their regular English courses. In due course of this process, the students were observed and interviewed by the administration of semi-structured interviews. The students were interviewed before and during the administration of the activities and also at the end of the activities. One of the researchers took notes at the same time. At the end of the implementation of each interview the researchers reviewed the tape recordings and wrote down the direct quotes of the students which were evaluated as relevant. Various studies have revealed that language teachers need to present a comprehensive picture of the target culture from many angles ((Oxford, 1994; Omaggio, 1993 ). Thus, a combination of the tactile, audio and visual material ought to be used. Following table presents suggested materials which can aid fulfilling the aim of bringing together culture teaching and foreign or second language teaching in classroom.

• Video	• CDs
• TV	• Readings
• Internet	• Stories
• Students own information	• Songs
• Newspapers	• Realia
• Fieldwork	• Interviews
• Guest speakers	• Anecdotes
• Souvenirs	• Photographs
• Surveys	• Illustrations
• Literature	

The food, night clubs, working life, religion, awards, education, funerals, and marriage were the main elements dealt with in relation to teaching culture as a part of foreign language teaching. These cultural values were put forward in the classroom through making use of OHP, internet, youtube, pictures. The data were collected via direct observation and interviews.

### **Findings and Discussions**

At the beginning of the study, the students were asked whether they had known anything about the target culture. One of the responses received from the students was a sign of prejudice and preconception towards target culture, because he said that he did not know all the components of his own culture and did not understand the necessity of showing effort to learn cultural values as well as learning the linguistic elements comprising English. Although not all of the 25 students uttered the same thought, it was easily observable that there existed an overt negative attitude for merging cultural traits and linguistic items in the course of learning. One of the researchers carried out the implementation of the activities in the classroom. The first activity was about Thanksgiving Day.

#### **Activity 1: Thanksgiving Day**

Before concentrating on the reading passage on Thanksgiving Day, the students were asked questions to gather information about what they knew about it. The students responded that they had never heard about Thanksgiving Day. Following this pre-interview, the students started to read selected reading passage about that eminent day in Christian world. Afterwards the participants looked at pictures depicting outstanding features of Thanksgiving Day and that was continued by watching a video from youtube which exemplified an American family's celebration of Thanksgiving day. At the end of this activity an interview was had with the students to detect the influence of the activity.

Teacher: Was it interesting?

Student 1: Yes, it was interesting.

Student 2: I am happy to learn about Thanksgiving Day, because it is also important for my general culture.

Student 3: It was fascinating.

Teacher: You have liked the activity. That is great. Do you think having knowledge about these special days can help you respect other cultures without any biased attitudes?

Student 4: Yes, we should respect everybody and their culture.

Student 5: It is like Ramadan in our culture.

Student 6: If I go to America, I have something to talk about.

As can be derived from the responses of the students, they compare Turkish culture with the target culture, which results in having students think more about their own culture like the target culture in concern. In addition, this activity seems to help raise the students' awareness of the target culture and this, in turn, directs the students' attention to attaching importance to showing respect to the target culture.

#### **Activity 2: The food (KFC)**

The food of different cultures is a very appealing topic for the students. KFC was chosen by the researchers. Like the procedure pursued in the first activity, a pre-interview was handled with the students:

Teacher: Have you ever heard of KFC?

Student 1: I am from Kahramanmaraş and I have never heard of KFC.

Student 2: I think I know it, but I have never tried.

Student 3: Yes, I ate their chicken, it is very delicious.

Student 4: I have no idea.

Student 5: I don't know.

The students were eager to learn about KFC, They began to read the information on KFC and the founder of it, Harland Sanders. It was quite interesting for the students to learn that they sell 2.5 billion chicken dinners every year. The reactions of the students are given below:

Student 1: I did not think it would be that much big.

Student 2: I want to try their fried chicken.

Student 3: Is there KFC in Gaziantep?

Student 4: We have a wide cuisine, yet I think they generally consume fast food.

### **Activity 3 Tonic Water, please**

A reading passage from a book called Select readings was chosen for the students which was about a Japanese guy who went abroad and had communication problems at a night club with the bartender. In the erading passage there were some terms which were essential to comprehend the meaning of the case such as quarters. The teacher drew a table on the board in which she wrote down the names and values of American coins. At the end of the activity in order to grasp the approaches of the students towards this activity, an interview was organized.

Teacher: Did you like the text, new terms in the text?

Student 1: Yes, if I did not know the meaning of, for example quarters, it would be difficult to understand the idea there. I am happy now, because I will go to America this summer and this will help when I have dialogues with the native speakers.

Student 2: Yes, it was helpful.

Student 3: Of course, they are useful; they help us improve our speaking skills.

Student 4: I liked it.

At the end of the study the students were interviewed to figure out the extent of the influence created by teaching culture to students in their English courses. Some of the responses are as follows:

Student 1: If we learn language, we should also learn culture

Student 2: Culture is important and it will be prestigious to communicate with foreigners

Student 3: The target culture attracts our attention and the course becomes more enjoyable.

Student 4: When we go to the UK or USA or when they come here or just while chatting on facebook, the culture we have studied will be useful for better communication.

Student 5: I think, I have changed my mind. All of the activities we carried out in the class and the videos we watched made it clear for me that without cultural knowledge, learning grammar is meaningless.

### **Conclusion**

The positive influence of adding cultural traits of the target culture into language teaching is unquestionable. Nonetheless, the necessary attention has not been paid so far in Turkey. English teachers have not handled their courses in a consistent manner with the accepted efficiency of the combination of teaching culture and foreign language teaching. Another striking point was attained by the analysis of the responses of the students during the interviews conducted at the beginning of the study; the students

were not aware of the crucial effect of integrating culture teaching into language learning. They even possessed negative attitude towards learning target culture. The students placed emphasis on the attainment of linguistic competence; they wanted to improve themselves in grammatical rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation which can be explained by the existence of proficiency exams in English. The students mentioned that mandatory participation in proficiency exams urged them to pay more attention to linguistic competence. However, this study helped students realize the importance of learning culture during their English classes and in addition, going on searches on target culture after classes on the internet or via other sources. This study shows that Turkish students may become more competent in learning English through the aid of learning cultural values and components of the target culture and students' language proficiency increases alongside with the increase in culture teaching. Besides, they can begin to appreciate others and other cultures after dealing with cultural elements hidden in target language.

### **Implications of the study and suggestions**

Observations and interviews revealed that teaching target culture when teaching target language intrigues the interest of students and acts as a motivator (Hammerly, 1982; Hendon, 1980). Shumin (1997) reinforces this view by promoting the use of what she calls cultural-awareness: oral activities which she says will serve to motivate students. Language learning experience becomes more real, more purposeful and more authentic for learners when they are taught the cultural contexts of the language itself (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Cultural competence should be an indispensable part of English courses and English language teachers should organize their courses in such a way that cultural elements take their places in the flow of the courses. Language teachers have a significant and central role to play in aiding students to acquire both linguistic and cultural competence in an L2 or FL.

*Global world* is a frequently term used in the media, academia and even in our daily life. The world has changed a lot but not the teaching methods in foreign language teaching. Culture teaching should be emphasized to give students a chance to understand the deeper meanings of the symbols and language is a means to achieve this ultimate goal. It is more useful to take a cross - cultural approach in English language teaching. By focusing on the cross - cultural values, students will become aware of both their culture and target culture. It is clear that students will be more motivated for language learning when they learn different values of target culture.

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