TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF CULTURE TEACHING IN ELT AND THEIR FAMILIARITY WITH THE TARGET CULTURE ¹

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Abstract
This study aims to determine the perceptions of the English teachers in Turkey of the role of target culture in learning and teaching a foreign language, and their familiarity with the target culture. Considering that the majority of the English teachers in Turkey are non-native speakers of English, and they teach culture either directly or indirectly in their classes, a necessity to analyze their perceptions of target culture teaching arose. With this purpose, a questionnaire with 26 items including statements focusing on the role and importance of culture teaching, and cultural aspects of the target culture was developed and administered to 40 English Language Teachers. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test. The findings of this study revealed that most of the teachers viewed culture teaching as crucial as language teaching; however, novice and experienced teachers differed in some aspects like culture’s motivating students, changing students’ attitude towards her/ his own culture, and possessing a high level of proficiency before teaching the target culture. Besides, it shows that almost all of the teachers have a tendency to view themselves as sufficiently familiar with the target culture especially with the youth culture and literature of the target culture; however, they did not view themselves as insufficiently familiar with the target culture in values and beliefs of the target culture. Also, the novice and experienced teachers differed in their familiarity with the target culture in some aspects like daily life and routines, traditions and folklore, tourist attractions, and international relations (political, economic, and cultural) with students’ own country and others. It is suggested that another study can be replicated through using interviews and observations of teachers regarding target culture teaching.

1. Introduction
Culture is an integral part of every language teaching and learning activity, and the issue of teaching culture has been controversial throughout the history of language teaching. As Zhao (2011) states, cultural competence is an integral part of language competence, and lack of cultural knowledge is likely to result in failure in developing language abilities. Therefore, it should be integrated into foreign language teaching. In this regard, the perceptions of non-native teachers of English of the importance of culture in foreign language learning and teaching, and their familiarity with target culture will be analyzed in this paper.

¹ This study was presented at CUELT Çukurova International ELT Teacher Conference (3rd) held on 20-21 April, 2017 at Çukurova University, Turkey
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2. Review of Literature

2.1. Theoretical Background

2.1.1. Culture

There have been different definitions of culture in the literature. The term “culture” is defined as “the beliefs, way of life, art, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society” in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1978). Culture was first used in terms of human behaviors by English Anthropologist Edward Tylor. Tylor (1871) stated that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. According to Lederach (1995), groups of people have created knowledge and schemes for the purpose of comprehending, interpreting, expressing, and responding to realities in social life. As for another definition of culture, Gonen and Saglam (2012) states that culture is what interacting human beings share and learn as a community.

Culture and language are influenced and shaped by each other. Brown (1999) argues that people are represented through language since it reflects their cultural and historical background, apart from revealing how they think and live. As Sun (2013) states, culture would not be known and transferred to other generations and civilizations if language did not exist. On the other hand, without culture, language would be incomplete and rootless. Similarly, Jiang (2000) highlights that language and culture belong together, and they are so interwoven that separation of them would result in losing significance for both. Also, he suggests that without culture, language would not exist any more; without language, culture would not have any shape. Considering this, it is not possible to teach foreign language without its culture.

2.1.2. Culture and Foreign Language Teaching/Learning:

Culture and language learning are closely linked to each other (Zhao, 2011). Gao (2006) proposes that language learning is culture learning and as a result, language teaching is cultural teaching. Similarly, Wang (2008) states that foreign language teaching is like foreign culture teaching, and teachers of foreign languages are foreign culture teachers. Sun (2013) also states that lack of culture integration in foreign language teaching has been proved to block foreign language learning. When these are taken into consideration, it is seen that these two concepts are interrelated and inseparable from each other.

There are different opinions about why culture should be taught while teaching a foreign language. Valette (1977) identifies the goals of teaching culture in foreign language which are cultural awareness including knowledge about geography, contributions of target culture to the world, differences in life styles as well as values in target community, command of etiquette like politeness, understanding daily life, understanding cultural values, and analysis of the target culture. On the other hand, Rivers (1981) claims that through teaching culture, seven goals can be accomplished, which are making learners aware of how people act, how some variables like age, gender, sex, social class affect how to speak, how people of target culture behave in different situations, commonly used words and phrases, making students be critical about target culture, enhancing skills required for organizing materials about target culture, and arousing curiosity about target culture and empathy feeling towards target culture people. In parallel with this view, Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) describes the aim of culture teaching as increasing students’ awareness and enabling them to make comparisons among diverse cultures. Thanasoulas (2001) also argues that if we teach culture explicitly in foreign language classrooms, students will have the opportunity to be autonomous through evaluating and
examining the context in which target language is embedded. Besides this, he states that in order to be a competent foreign language speaker, a person should learn the cultural knowledge and skills, which occurs at the same time as learning a foreign language.

Bada (2000) highlights that teaching culture is crucial in foreign language classrooms by arguing that if learners are not exposed to cultural elements of target language, it is highly possible that they will encounter problems in communicating meaning. In addition, he supports the idea of studying language in context, which will enable learners to realize how the language is used in certain situations by native speakers of the language. Besides, Pulverness (2003) states that it is necessary for learners to know about the people speaking this language and the country where this language is spoken, which enables them to make sense of language.

Another issue is related to culture's being fifth language skill and there has not been consensus on whether culture is a fifth language skill or not. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture is not an expandable fifth skill to the other four language skills, which are listening, speaking, writing, and reading. He also asserts that culture is always in the background and it challenges learners' abilities to interpret the meaning of the world as well as making their limitations of communicative competence apparent. However, Hong (2008) argues that culture teaching should be the fifth skill during language teaching and learning. Similarly, Tomalin (2008) states that culture's being the fifth language skill enables learners to adapt their English to comprehend and appreciate the features and values of different cultures, which will result in achievement in interaction with other people. Besides these, thanks to culture learning, students will have the opportunity to appreciate differences and to be more tolerant towards these differences.

According to Tomalin (2008), teaching of culture in foreign language classrooms should include cultural knowledge, cultural values, cultural behaviour, and cultural skills. Byram (as cited in Sun, 2013) also states that foreign language education should include culture awareness and cultural experience. As for the ways of integrating culture into foreign language education, Hughes (1986) suggests some teaching strategies for increasing cultural awareness, which are comparisons of cultures, Total Physical Response, newspapers, and media. Besides these strategies, Krasner (1999) promotes that we should make learners demonstrate cultural behaviors in a given specific situation. Another view on this issue belongs to Peterson and Coltrane (2003) who propose the importance of the use of literature and communication with native speakers. Besides these, to teach culture in foreign language classroom, Kramsch (1993) offers that both foreign culture and learner's own culture should be included so that learner can comprehend the foreign culture. Also, he states that when learners interact with native speakers and texts, they have the chance to construct meaning rather than having teachers transfer direct information about target culture. Another viewpoint is that while teaching culture, metalanguage should be taught to talk about culture, and to provide our students with insider perspective which can help them to interpret foreign cultural behaviors (Straub, 1999).

2.1.3. Intercultural Competence:

Meyer (1991) defines intercultural competence as “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes, and expectations of foreign cultures” (p. 138). According to Jokikokko (2005), intercultural competence is “an ethical orientation in which certain morally right ways of being, thinking, and acting are emphasized” (p. 79). Further, it is stated that the priority of teaching which is based on intercultural approach is target culture as well as making comparisons between target country and their own countries (McConnell-Ginet, 1992).
Sercu (2005) argues that the aim of foreign language learning is no more to acquire communicative competence, but it is to acquire intercultural competence. On the other hand, Byram (1997) offers a model called intercultural communicative competence which focuses on 5 major factors. These are knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, attitudes, skills of discovery and interaction, and political education consisting of critical cultural awareness. While knowledge refers to knowledge about social groups, practices and ways of interaction, attitudes refer to being open to other cultures besides curiosity. As for the skills of interpreting and relating, it is related to identifying cultural perspectives whereas skills of discovery and interaction is related to learning new knowledge of culture and operating this knowledge in real-life communication. The last factor, which is critical cultural awareness, is the ability of evaluating perspectives and applications in both one’s own and in other cultures in a critical manner.

2.1.4. Problems in Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom:

Most foreign language teachers fail to realize the strong relation between culture and language. The research conducted in this area also shows that teachers face certain problems while teaching culture (Sercu, 2005).

According to Saglam and Gonen (2012), there are mainly five problems that teachers face. The first problem is stated to stem from the overcrowded curriculum that teachers have to follow. Teachers claim that they cannot allocate sufficient time for teaching target culture, and they also state that after vocabulary and language mechanics are dealt in a detailed way, they will expose students to culture of that language. However, most of them end up not integrating culture into their lectures. As a solution, it is suggested that from the beginning culture should be integrated in teaching language. Lafayette (1988) proposes that cultural context should be used as a language practice activity, and four language skills can be taught in a cultural context. Also, he argues that by integrating cultural topics into lesson plans culture teaching can be achieved. The second problem stated by Saglam and Gonen (2012) is related to teachers’ fear of not having enough knowledge on the target culture. Teachers fear that they do not have sufficient knowledge about the target culture and their role is limited to transferring facts to the students. The third problem stems from students’ attitudes, which limits students to interpreting target culture from within only their sphere of native culture. Işık (2004) addresses the same problem by stating that some students find the target culture as strange when the culture is different from students’ expectations. The fourth problem is that teachers have not been trained in terms of how to teach culture, and their minds are not clear about which strategies to apply. The last problem is that teachers may not know how to measure cultural competence as a result of culture teaching. In this respect, Kramsch (2008) also states that teachers who teach language as culture have some fears about stereotypes attached to the target culture. Also, teachers have some doubts about whether students end up behaving in the same way as what they read or learn.

2.1.5. Previously Conducted Studies

Research conducted on the issue of culture and foreign language learning and teaching reveal that there are various views and findings on this issue. A lot of research has been conducted on culture and culture teaching in foreign language classrooms, and they have focused on different dimensions of this issue like the role and the importance of culture in foreign language learning and teaching, and ways of enhancing culture teaching and intercultural communicative competence (Thanasoulas, 2001; Zhao, 2011).

Thanasoulas (2001) conducted a study about the importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. The relationship between culture and language are examined as well as the reasons why culture should be taught. He reveals that there are a number
of goals of teaching culture as stated by Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), some of which are making students aware of cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target culture, stimulating their intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and making students develop the understanding that social variables like gender, age, social class affect the way people speak and behave. Also, he suggests some ways of integrating culture into the foreign language classroom like teachers’ inviting guest speakers having experiences of foreign country, and teachers’ bringing maps, pictures, and other realia with the aim of making students develop a mental image of the target culture. Lastly, he suggests that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers. Besides, Zhao (2011) also carried out a study on enhancing culture teaching in English language classes, and he has suggestions on conducting culture teaching in ELT like developing interest in culture learning, group discussions about cultural elements embodied in reading texts, and use of movies as well as surfing the Internet to search for topics related to the target culture.

Xiaohui and Li (2011) conducted a study on teachers’ cognition of intercultural communicative competence in Chinese EFL contexts. They aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of culture teaching objectives and perceptions of their own familiarity with the target culture, and teachers’ opinions of intercultural dimensions of English teaching. 30 English teachers working at Chinese university took part in this study and questionnaires were used as instruments. The results of this study show that teachers regarded developing students’ communicative competence and language proficiency as the crucial teaching objectives, and most of the teachers were found familiar with daily life, routines, and food and drink of English cultures; however, most of them did not know youth culture and ethnic groups of English cultures much. Also, they all agree that teaching culture is as crucial as teaching the target language.

Also, Gonen and Saglam (2012) carried out a study on teachers’ perspectives about teaching culture in foreign language classroom. They investigated 60 teachers' perceptions of culture teaching in FL classroom, but these teachers have different educational backgrounds rather than cultural backgrounds. With the aim of gathering students’ perceptions about the role of culture in teaching and learning a foreign language, a questionnaire was used and follow-up interviews were carried out. The results showed that though some differences exist between teachers of different backgrounds about which aspects of the target culture to give importance, almost all of them are aware of the significance of teaching and integrating culture in the foreign language classroom. Besides, it was revealed that to some extent all teachers know about the aspects of the target culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Statement of the Problem

The main aim of this study is to investigate teachers’ familiarity with the target culture and their perceptions towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language. As well as investigating perceptions of teachers taking part in this study in general, it is also aimed to investigate whether there are differences between novice and experienced teachers’ perceptions towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language and their familiarity with the target culture.

Although there have been a large body of research investigating different aspects of culture and foreign language learning and teaching, there is a need to conduct a study with English teachers working at preparatory schools of universities in Turkey considering the crucial role of culture in foreign language learning. In this regard, this study aimed to investigate more than one aspect of culture and foreign language
3.2. Research Questions
With regard to the research gap in the field, this study seeks to answer the following four questions:

1) How do foreign language teachers perceive the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language?
2) What do foreign language teachers think about their familiarity with the target culture?
3) Is there a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language?
4) Is there a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards their familiarity with the target culture?

3.3. Setting and The Participants
This study was carried out at the preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. The participants were chosen depending on voluntary basis and in total 40 instructors participated in this study. They are all native speakers of Turkish and have learned English as their foreign language. There are 25 females and 15 males in this study, and the age of the participants ranges from 23 to 60. Among them, 18 are novice teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience, and 22 are experienced teachers.

3.4. The data collection instrument
The data collection instrument is a questionnaire adapted from Gonen and Saglam’s questionnaire (2012) by the researcher, and consists of 2 parts including 26 items. The first part of the questionnaire consists of 15 items to which the subjects responded using a 5-point scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (undecided), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). The second part of the questionnaire consists of 11 items to which the subjects responded using a 3-point scale: 1 (not sufficiently familiar), 2 (sufficiently familiar), 3 (very familiar). The respondents’ answers provided quantitative data. After the preparation of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted to provide inter-rater reliability.

3.5. Procedures and Data Analysis
Each response of the participants to each item in the questionnaire was coded and computed. The collected data was analyzed and evaluated by the SPSS 22 by calculating percentages, mean scores and applying descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test to clearly demonstrate the findings. The findings were also supported and visualized through tables.

4. Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: How do foreign language teachers perceive the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language?
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

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<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
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This table shows that most of the teachers tend to regard the role of culture in foreign language learning and teaching as important. Especially, what most of the teachers agree on is teaching culture’s being as crucial as teaching foreign language (M=3.90). However, when the issue is the culture’s encouraging empathy towards different cultures among students, teachers neither agreed or disagreed (M=2.93).

**Research Question 2:** What do foreign language teachers think about their familiarity with the target culture?

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
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<tbody>
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<td>Q18</td>
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<td>Q19</td>
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<td>2.3000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Q21</td>
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<td>Q22</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>Q23</td>
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<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
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</table>

As this table shows, 53% of the teachers tend to regard themselves as sufficiently familiar with the target culture. Especially, what most of the teachers regard themselves as nearly very familiar is youth culture and literature of the target culture (M=2.35, M=2.3250). However, what most of the teachers regard themselves as not sufficiently familiar with the target culture is values and beliefs of the target culture (M= 1.9250).

**Research Question 3:** Is there a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language?
An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language. With respect to the 7th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=3.50, SD=0.70) and experienced (M=4.1, SD=0.87) conditions; t (38)= -2.324, p= 0.026. In the 9th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=3.56, SD=0.86) and experienced (M=2.90, SD=0.78) conditions; t (38)= 2.682, p= 0.011. Besides these, in the 13th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=2.7, SD=0.90) and experienced (M=4.20, SD=0.80) conditions; t (38)= -5.460, p= 0.000. In the 14th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=2.40, SD=0.70) and experienced (M=4.50, SD=0.70) conditions; t (38)= -9.412, p= 0.000. In the 15th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=3.70, SD=0.80) and experienced (M=2.80, SD=1.15) conditions; t (38)= 2.818, p= 0.008. These results suggest that the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards the role of culture in foreign language learning and teaching were generally similar on this issue except for the five aspects above.

Research Question 4: Is there a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards their familiarity with the target culture?

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards their familiarity with the target culture. In the 16th item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=2.60, SD=0.50) and experienced (M=2.05, SD=0.57) conditions; t (38)= 3.274, p= 0.002. In the 21st item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=2.30, SD=0.65) and experienced (M=1.80, SD=0.65) conditions; t (38)= 2.169, p= 0.036. In the 22nd item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=2.55, SD=0.60) and experienced (M=1.90, SD=0.60) conditions; t (38)= 3.717, p= 0.001. In the 23rd item of the questionnaire, there was a significant difference in the scores for novice (M=1.85, SD=0.70) and experienced (M=2.50, SD=0.75) conditions; t (38)= -2.891, p= 0.006. These results suggest that the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards their familiarity with the target culture were generally similar on this issue except for the four aspects above.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study revealed that 53% of the teachers taking part in this study regarded culture teaching as important as language teaching; however, there are a few differences between the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards the role of culture in learning and teaching a foreign language. Novice and experienced teachers differed in some aspects like culture’s motivating students, changing student’s attitude towards her/ his own culture, and attaining a high level of proficiency before teaching the target culture.

Also, the findings show that almost all of the teachers have a tendency to view themselves as sufficiently familiar with the target culture. Especially what they regard themselves as very familiar is youth culture and literature of the target culture; however, what most of the teachers regard themselves as not sufficiently familiar with the target culture is values and beliefs of the target culture.

As for the comparison of perceptions of novice and experienced teachers towards their familiarity with the target culture, they have differed in their familiarity with daily life and routines, traditions and folklore, tourist attractions, and international relations (political, economic, and cultural) with students’ own country and others. While most of the novice
teachers were found to regard themselves as sufficiently familiar with daily life and routines, traditions and folklore, and tourist attractions, most of the experienced teachers were found to regard themselves as almost-very familiar with international relations (political, economic, and cultural) with students’ own country and others.

It must be borne in mind that culture teaching is an inseparable part of foreign language teaching, and it should be integrated into foreign language learning. Therefore, it is vital that English teachers should be aware of the role and importance of target culture in their language classes, and should be able to integrate culture into their classroom settings. Also, it should be taken into consideration that both teachers and students’ familiarity with the target culture can be provided and enhanced through a number of ways like movies, surfing the Net, textbooks, reading materials, using realia, cultural tours and workshops.

Being familiar with the target culture helps language learners in terms of both general world knowledge and linguistic development. Also, language learners’ communicative competence can be developed and achieved through focusing on cultural real world activities and tasks as culture and communication are directly linked. Therefore, being aware of the importance and the role of culture in foreign language teaching and learning, and exposing students to cultural elements is crucial, and culture teaching is the last aspect to be neglected in English language teaching.

6. Suggestions

Since this study reflects the perceptions of the teachers in the issue of culture teaching and their familiarity with the target culture to some extent, a more in-depth qualitative study can be conducted through structured interviews and observations. Also, language teachers’ actual performance can be a further area of research.

7. Limitations

The major limitation of this study is the number of participants. With only 40 participants, the sample size is small, and to overcome that limitation, the number of participants can be increased. Another limitation is that language teachers’ perceptions towards culture teaching and cultural familiarity are likely not to reflect the reality about what they can or do. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited to the self-perceptions of the language teachers.

8. References

Hong, S. (2008). The Role of Heritage Students in Incorporating Culture into Language Teaching, South Asia Language Pedagogy and Technology, 1(1), 1-10.


