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Turkish EFL teachers' opinions on intercultural approach in foreign language education

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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 (Byram & Zarate, 1997). The present study aims to investigate how well informed and equipped Turkish teachers of English are in terms of adding the intercultural aspect into their language teaching and to determine their attitudes to this issue, thereby complementing similar studies carried out in other countries. Data were collected from 200 EFL teachers by means of a questionnaire and analyzed by means of quantitative methods.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s the greater emphasis on language learning for communication and social interaction led to a new perspective in language teaching, i.e., the intercultural perspective. 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, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate way (Council of Europe 2001, p. 9). Intercultural communicative competence, on the other hand, builds on communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence. According to Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet (1992) the primary focus of teaching based on the intercultural approach is on the target cultures, yet, it also includes comparisons between the learners' own country and target country, thereby helping learners to develop a reflective attitude to the culture and civilisation 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 others' eyes, and to consciously use culture learning skills (Sen Gupta, 2002).

Several researchers emphasize the role of the language teacher within this framework: the teacher mediates 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

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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).

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 (Atay, 2005). However, learning these and their actual practices are of utmost importance for teacher educators in designing and reconstructing the teacher education programs. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Turkish teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching and to see how these opinions and attitudes are reflected in their classroom applications.

2. Methodology Participants and Setting

The participants of the present study were 200 Turkish teachers of English from all regions of Turkey, i.e., Marmara (50), Black Sea (38), Aegean (34), Central Anatolia (24), Eastern Anatolia (20), Southeastern Anatolia (18) and Mediterranean (16). 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 47 % of the teachers were between 20 and 29, 36 % were between 30 and 39, 9 % between 40 and 49, and 8 % between 50 and 59 years of age. While 88 % of the teachers held the BA degree, 11 % of them reported to have completed an MA program. Only one teacher had a PhD degree. Teaching experience of the teachers was as follows: 1-5 years (32%), 6-10 years (40 %), 11-15 years (12 %), 16-20 years (6 %), and more than 20 years (10 %). 72 % of the participating teachers worked at schools mostly located in urban areas while the rest worked in rural areas or suburbs. The foreign languages taught in the schools that teachers worked for included English, German and French. The average number of hours they taught English per week ranged between 11-15 (3 %), 16-20 (20 %), 21-25 (41 %), 26-30 (33 %) and 30 and more (3 %).

3.Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in the second term of the 2007-2008 academic year by means of a questionnaire developed by Guilherme (2002) and Sercu et.al. (2005). The questionnaire, consisting of seven sections, each with a different number of Likert scale items, aimed to investigate teachers' views on the role of culture in language teaching, the extent to which their current teaching practice can be characterized as directed towards the attainment of intercultural competence and cultural approach, and to determine teachers' degree of willingness to interculturalize foreign language education. It was piloted with 52 randomly selected teachers for reliability purposes and the Cronbach coefficient was found to be .80. Following the identification of the schools, questionnaires were sent out by post, with cover letters explaining the purpose of the study. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by taking the frequency counts for each question.

4. **Results**

In the first section, the teachers were given seven statements listing the possible priorities in teaching and asked to indicate the most three important ones for their teaching situation. As their first priority, 122 teachers out of 200 selected "building good relationships with students" followed by "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for life" (46), "teaching curriculum topics" (12), "taking students' attention to the lesson" (12) and to "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" (2). For their second most important priority, 70 of the teachers out of 200 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" (66), "taking students' attention to the lesson" (38), "teaching curriculum topics" (14), "guiding them in their personal

development" (4) and "building good relationships with students" (2). Finally, as their third priority, teachers indicated "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" (80), "guiding them in their personal development" (78), "helping students with their private problems" (22), "taking students' attention to the lesson" (10), "teaching curriculum topics" (2), and " helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for life" (2).

In the second section, teachers were asked to indicate their opinions about different aims of foreign language teaching for eight statements on a 5 point likert scale ranging from "Very important" to "Not important at all." The frequency of the answers for each statement is presented in Table 1. The answers 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 understand their own culture and identity better."

Table 1

Statements	Teacher responses				
	5*	4	3	2	1
1. Motivating Ss to learn English	140 (70 %)	60 (30 %)	-	-	-
2. Helping Ss learn about foreign cultures	56 (28 %)	98 (49 %)	32 (16 %)	14 (7 %)	-
3. Helping Ss reach a certain proficiency level to be able to read literary texts	54 (27 %)	76 (38 %)	42 (21 %)	24 (12 %)	4 (2 %)
4. Helping Ss gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general.	110 (55 %)	80 (40 %)	10 (5 %)	-	-
5. Helping Ss be open and positive to foreign cultures	98 (49 %)	78 (39 %)	16 (8 %)	6 (3 %)	2 (1 %)
6. Helping Ss gain learning skills necessary to learn different foreign languages	92 (46 %)	90 (45 %)	14 (7 %)	4 (2 %)	-
7. Helping Ss use English for practical reasons	142 (71 %)	56 (28 %)	2 (1 %)	-	-
8. Helping Ss understand their own cultures and identities better	114 (57 %)	70 (35 %)	12 (6 %)	4 (2 %)	-

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

The third section asked teachers to indicate the meaning of teaching a foreign language culture on a 5 point likert scale. Table 2 shows the frequency of given reponses. It can be understood from the table that for the majority of the teachers teaching a foreign language culture meant "helping students understand their own culture better" followed by "helping students develop intercultural communication skills" and "helping students be aware of the cultural differences."

Table 2

Statements	Teacher responses				
	5*	4	3	2	1
1. Giving information about the historical, geographical and political situation of foreign cultures	26 (13 %)	98 (49 %)	34 (17 %)	42 (21 %)	-
2. Giving information about the daily lives of a foreign culture	60 (30 %)	100 (50 %)	24 (12 %)	16 (8 %)	-
3. Giving information about the music, literature and cinema of a foreign culture	52 (26 %)	110 (55 %)	20 (10 %)	14 (7 %)	4 (2 %)
4. Helping Ss develop a positive perspective towards the foreign language culture	84 (42 %)	90 (45 %)	14 (7 %)	10 (5 %)	2 (1 %)
5. Helping Ss be aware of the cultural differences	112 (56 %)	78 (39 %)	6 (3 %)	4 (2 %)	-
6. Helping Ss understand their own culture better	134 (67 %)	52 (26 %)	12 (6 %)	2 (1 %)	-

7. Helping Ss develop intercultural communication skills	132 (66 %)	60 (30 %)	8 (4 %)	-	-

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

The fourth section aimed to investigate the extent to which teachers knew English speaking countries, cultures and people. They were given ten statements focusing on the history, daily lives, youth culture, education, traditions, literature, music, values and beliefs of foreign countries, cultures and people and their political, economical and cultural relationships with Turkey. Teachers were asked to indicate how much they were familiar with those given situations 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 enough knowledge about the above mentioned characteristics of foreign cultures (M= 2.84, SD= .49).

In the fifth section, teachers were given ten examples of classroom practices related to culture teaching. They were asked to indicate how often they shared what they heard or read about foreign cultures or their own experiences with their students, how often they asked students to do some research about the foreign culture, to watch CDs or movies about the foreign culture, to talk about their own culture in the foreign language, to participate in pair work activities with students from foreign cultures, how often they invited people having lived abroad to the classroom, how often they put pictures about foreign cultures on the classroom walls and how often they discussed the prejudices towards the foreign culture with their students. They gave their answers on a 3 point Likert Scale (3= often, 2= sometimes, 1= never) and the mean score was 2.02 (SD= .33) reflecting the fact that they 'sometimes' carried out the abovementioned practices in their classrooms.

In the sixth question, the teachers were asked to indicate how often they traveled abroad as a tourist, for friend and/or family visits, for a teacher training or a language course, for school trips and for business trips, i.e., teacher exchange programs. Table 3 presents their answers on a 3 point Likert scale, ranging from 'often' to 'never.' It can be seen from the table that most of the teachers indicated not having traveled abroad for the abovementioned reasons.

Table **3**

Reason for a trip	Teacher responses		
	3*	2	1
1. As a tourist (at least 2 days)	20 (10 %)	74 (37 %)	100 (50 %)
2. For a friend/family visit	10 (5 %)	44 (22 %)	136 (68 %)
3. For a teacher training or a language course	16 (8 %)	40 (20 %)	134 (67 %)
4. For a school trip (1-2 days)	10 (5 %)	36 (18 %)	154 (72 %)
5. For a business trip (i.e., teacher exchange programs)	10 (5 %)	34 (17 %)	156 (73 %)

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

In the seventh question, teachers indicated how often they had a contact with the people and cultures of English speaking countries through given means on a 3 point scale with 1 representing 'never' and 3 representing 'often.' As can be seen in Table 4 below, most of the teachers indicated not having contact with English speaking people and cultures through given means.

Table 4

Ways of communication	Teacher responses		
	3*	2	1
1. Through media (newspaper/TV/radio)	20 (10 %)	74 (37 %)	100 (50 %)
2. By visiting cultural centers of foreign countries in Turkey	10 (5 %)	44 (22 %)	136 (68 %)

3. By communicating with foreigners living in Turkey	16 (8 %)	40 (20 %)	134 (67 %)
4. By communicating with the native speaker teachers at my school	10 (5 %)	36 (18 %)	154 (72 %)
5. By communicating with visiting foreign teachers/students	10 (5 %)	34 (17 %)	156 (73 %)

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

In conclusion, the analysis of the data showed that the three most important teaching priorities for the teachers of the study were "building good relationships with students", "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for life", and "helping students gain knowledge and skills they need for foreign language learning" respectively. Furthermore, they indicated that the most important aim of foreign language teaching for them was "to help students use English for practical reasons". When they were asked about how they viewed teaching a foreign language culture, most of the teachers chose "helping students understand their own culture better" as an answer. Participating teachers indicated that they had "enough" knowledge of target language cultures, countries and people, and they reported that they "sometimes" carried out classroom practices related to teaching culture. In addition, most of the teachers indicated not having traveled abroad, and not having contact with English speaking people and cultures.

5.Conclusion and Discussion

Although the participating teachers were all foreign language teachers, providing knowledge and skills that the students need for foreign language learning did not appear to be the first most important priority for them. They were rather concerned with building interpersonal relationships and knowledge. When it comes to their aims in terms of language education, teachers predominantly thought of teaching English for practical purposes, despite the given options that were related with cultural issues. As a matter of fact, for them, teaching the foreign language culture mainly serves the purpose of helping the students understand their own culture better, rather than getting to know the target or foreign cultures better. This finding might be attributed to the fact that the teachers were not too familiar with the English speaking countries, 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. This is in line with the finding that shows teachers' applying and implementing cultural practices in their teaching only some of the time.

This study yields certain educational implications. Teacher training 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. Similarly, in-service teachers need to be familiarized with the target language cultures. Once language teachers are more knowledgeable and competent regarding this issue, they will eventually be more able to integrate cultural practices in their teaching.

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