

## **Cultural Learning in a Turkish Language Course: An Initial Investigation into How College Students Make Meaning of Cultural Information in the Classroom**

William Martin Geibel <sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

For years research has affirmed the positive role that foreign language courses play in increasing the cultural knowledge and understanding of university students. However, at a time where internationalization is now at the forefront of nearly every major US university, foreign language courses are being cut and defunded at unprecedented levels. Clearly, the cultural benefits that foreign language courses provide are not meeting the standards necessary to be seen as key contributors to the goals of internationalization. Thus, the research presented in this paper is an initial student-centered investigation into the process of cultural learning within foreign language courses. Specifically, this research focuses on how students perceive and understand the cultural information they are exposed to in the classroom. This research illuminates important areas in which foreign language courses can improve in order to better facilitate cultural learning.

*Keywords:* Cultural learning, foreign language, cultural understanding, higher education, internationalization.

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## **Türkçe Dil Kursunda Kültürel Öğrenme: Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Sınıftaki Kültürel Bilgileri Nasıl Anlamlandırdığına Dair Ön Arařtırma**

### **Öz**

Yıllardır arařtırmalar, yabancı dil kurslarının üniversite öğrencilerinin kültürel bilgi ve anlayışlarını artırmada oynadığı olumlu rolü teyit etmiştir. Ancak, uluslararasılaşmanın řu anda hemen hemen her büyük ABD üniversitesinde ön planda olduğu bir zamanda, yabancı dil kursları daha önce olmadığı kadar çok kesiliyor veya feshediliyor. Açıktır ki, yabancı dil kurslarının sağladığı kültürel faydalar, uluslararasılaşma hedeflerine kilit katkıda bulunanlar olarak görölmek için gerekli standartları karşılamıyor. Bu nedenle, bu makalede sunulan arařtırma, yabancı dil kurslarında kültürel öğrenme sürecine ilişkin öğrenci merkezli bir başlangıç arařtırmasıdır. Özellikle bu arařtırma, öğrencilerin sınıfta maruz kaldıkları kültürel bilgileri nasıl algıladıklarına ve anladıklarına odaklanmaktadır. Bu arařtırma, yabancı dil kurslarının kültürel öğrenmeyi kolaylařtırmak için içerisinde geliřebilecekleri önemli alanları aydınlatmaktadır.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Kültürel öğrenme, yabancı dil, kültürel anlayış, yüksek öğretim, uluslararasılaşma.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr., California Üniversitesi, E-posta: wgeibel@ucla.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1593-8598>

## Introduction

Internationalization, defined generally as the integration of international people, perspectives, programs, and knowledge into the university, has become an increasingly mainstream endeavor for universities across the United States. As globalization puts pressure on educational institutes to stay globally competitive, universities have responded with efforts to improve the global and cultural understanding of their students. However, for the majority of US universities, such efforts have been focused primarily on study abroad or other forms of student mobility programs (Helms, Brajkovic, & Struthers, 2017). Such a focus on study abroad has led to a tripling of participation over the last several decades and an influx of research validating the assumption that study abroad improves students' cultural awareness and understanding (Clarke et al., 2009; Salisbury, 2013; Williams, 2005).

However, despite its growth, only around 10% of college students study abroad in their academic careers, the vast majority of which (75%) are Caucasian (NAFSA; DeRey, 2014). Luckily, to combat this inequality, researchers such as Soria and Troisi (2014) have found that domestic alternatives can positively influence students' intercultural competency as much, if not more than, traditional study abroad. One particular effective domestic option is students enrolling in foreign language courses, which research has shown can play a significant role in the development of intercultural awareness and understanding (Omer & Ali, 2011; Kramsch, 2013). Yet despite our collective knowledge that foreign language courses can improve cultural awareness and understanding, we know much less about the nuances of how this learning takes place and is understood by students. Therefore, the current research project seeks to build upon research confirming the benefits of study abroad to paint a more nuanced picture in terms of understanding the student perspective of cultural learning in foreign language classrooms.

As such, three main questions guided this research:

- 1) How do students see or perceive of cultural information being incorporated into their foreign language class?
- 2) What are students' perceptions and perceived outcomes of the culture-related information they received in the class?
- 3) In what ways do the students' perceptions of cultural information differ from that of the instructor?

The third question was added midway through the research process as it became apparent that for a project focusing on how students understand or perceive cultural learning, the perspective of the instructor was needed to fully understand the students' experiences. By providing a comparative aspect to the research, the third question provides a richer contextualization of the students' interviews and illuminates whether there were any disconnects between the intentions of the instructor and the perceptions of the students.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

As a study that seeks to understand how students make meaning of cultural information with the goal of expanding cultural awareness and understanding, this research is informed by the constraints and pressures being applied to students and universities as a result of globalization. Therefore, as the primary theoretical influence, globalization offers a helpful lens from which to understand the importance of cultural learning and proficiency. Globalization explains the increased connections between different regions of the world – from cultural to the criminal, the financial to the environmental – and the ways in which they change (Held,

McGrew, Goldblatt, Perraton, 1999). As goods, people and ideas move more frequently between countries the importance of individuals who are able to understand and appreciate other cultures is greatly enhanced.

From an economic globalization perspective, the ability to educate citizens who are capable of intercultural communication and understanding produces great benefits for respective countries as well as the global community (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006). In business companies that are successfully able to communicate cross-culturally “have a competitive advantage because they can devote more time and resources to conducting business and less time on internal and external communication issues” (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012, p. 326). In social and political environments, intercultural understanding also has tremendous benefit, for example, “communication that is based on cultural understanding is more apt to prevent misunderstandings caused by personal biases and prejudices” (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012, p. 326). Thus, it is clear that as the world grows closer through the mechanisms of globalization, cultural understanding becomes less of a luxury and more of a necessity to ensure a peaceful world.

Finally, this research also draws upon epistemological constructivism, which contends that “our understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). The research conducted in this paper focuses not on *truth* (i.e. students having an objective understanding of other cultures), but on exposure, and ultimately, students *understanding* of another culture through the information they are exposed to in foreign language courses. Thus, the goal is not to surmise how or what factual information students are taught, but how they perceive the culture-related information to which they are exposed and how this exposure influences their understanding of the countries/people who speak the targeted language. When I speak of cultural learning, I am not speaking of students learning *correct* information, whatever that may be, I am referring to gaining information that influences students’ opinions and perspectives of that culture.

But what is meant by *culture*? Culture is such a complex and varied term that scholars are quick to contend that many definitions of culture fail to communicate the nuances and subtleties that so often define a culture (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). In 2006, Baldwin et al. (2006) found 300 different definitions of culture, reinforcing the complexity of the concept and our collective disagreement about what it entails. Therefore, I have chosen to draw upon Helen Spencer-Oatey’s (1998) definition of culture as “a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behavior and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behavior.” From this definition, I refer to culture-related information as anything that pertains to or influences the specific character of a society, including its history, politics, values, traditions, etiquettes, geography, customs, religions, and beliefs.

## Methodology and Methods

### Research Design

In terms of methodology, which refers to “an analysis of how research does or should proceed and necessarily reflects the politics embedded in theoretical frameworks” (Donaghy, 2016), this study takes on an interpretive qualitative approach. Interpretative research seeks to understand the meaning, “for participants of the student, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in” (Maxwell, 2013) and is therefore an

appropriate approach through which centralize the voices of students as active participants in the process of cultural learning. Ultimately, I use a qualitative approach to provide a more nuanced understanding of cultural learning in foreign language courses that focuses on how students understand and make meaning of the cultural information to which they are exposed.

### **Research Location**

In deciding upon a research location, foreign language courses were selected for two reasons. First, there is an inherent relationship between language learning and cultural learning. As Kramsch's (1993) reflection suggests, culture is always present in language courses, though not in necessarily explicit ways, but rather in the background as a looming force over the most skill-based language learning that takes place. Second, the importance of understanding cultural learning in foreign language classes is even more critical today, as foreign languages are being cut from college campuses at an alarming rate. In fact, over 651 foreign language programs have been lost in only the past 3 years (Johnson, 2019). This rapid decline in how society perceives the value of foreign language is reason enough to seek a more robust understanding of what we are losing each time a university closes a language course. As a result, the selected research site was a first-year Turkish language course at a large, public university in California. The university boasts a population of 15% international students and a selection of 40 foreign language courses that are available to students of all levels. The specific site was selected primarily due to the researcher's access to the classroom, material and participants, as the research was a participant in the course as well.

### **Participants**

Since the course was relatively small (6 students), 3 students were selected to participate in the study, along with the instructor of the course. All of the students were of minority ethnic groups: 2 Korean-American males, and 1 Armenian-American female. The instructor was a Turkish female. The minority demographics of the students was intentional as well as pre-determined, as there were no Caucasians in the course. However, with the current lack of minority participants in study abroad programs, the selected participants represent a block of individuals whose opportunities to garner the benefits of study abroad programs are least promised. Of the student participants, one had been to Turkey previously, two had studied abroad in other countries, and all had prior international experience.

### **Data Collection**

As a qualitative study, the data collection process consisted of 2 hour-long classroom observations and 60 minute interviews with each of the four participants.

### **Observations**

The two observations were conducted at the site of the study, with the researcher assuming the role of a participant observer. During the site visits, the researcher took extensive field notes on the happenings and interactions inside the classroom, paying particular attention to situations in which cultural information was being exchanged or engaged. In the end, the insights gathered from these observations provided an initial foundation for understanding the interactions, content and environment present within the course. Each observation was purposely aimed at looking for moments and instances of cultural exposure, cultural lessons and/or cultural interactions.

## *Interviews*

After the two observations were completed, individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the four participants. In these semi-structured interviews, interviewees were asked questions about their exposure to and understanding of Turkish culture before, after and during the course. For the instructor, a native Turkish woman, the interview sought to gain insight into her perspective and understanding of what cultural learning takes place within the context of her own course. The data gathered was analyzed using a constant comparative approach in which the information was coded and analyzed at the same time in order to develop concepts and themes from the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

## **Findings**

Upon coding and analysis of the data, the following themes emerged as particularly significant to the main questions of the research. The findings below are broken up by research question and highlight the main themes related to each of the three initial research questions.

### **How do students see or perceive of cultural information being incorporated into their foreign language class?**

#### *Theme 1: Language and Culture are Embedded*

Among all students, there was a shared recognition of the embedded nature of culture in language and the implicit ways in which it finds its way into the class. At times, the participants struggled to explain the notion of gaining cultural understanding through language learning, but all made clear that they saw cultural learning as a natural result of language acquisition. When explaining her views on culture in the classroom, Victoria provided clarity to this theme:

Language and culture are embedded, so why would you just learn the language isolated from the country it comes from? I think it's important to learn about both, language and grammar, and what it relates to.

Daniel spoke of a similar view of culture in the course when he provided a reflection on the way in which culture can be taught within an environment that is not a native speaking environment (e.g. a classroom), "(culture) opens up a whole new world... and I think language is the way to do it. You can't really grapple with a culture outside of it, except for with language."

In terms of how students saw culture being incorporated in the course, the majority of students saw culture as being presented in a "here and there" manner, as Adam put it. Students interpreted Mrs. Kaya's incorporation of culture as deliberate, yet not necessarily predetermined. Daniel remarked that he feels like cultural lessons are not necessarily something that the instructor planned out each day, but instead, he saw culture being presented more spontaneously:

I think you get bits and pieces randomly. Like if it's an interesting word it's like "oh let's talk about this." I don't think it's systematic. I don't think that she necessarily plans it out but yeah... bits and pieces in every lecture.

Adam echoed a similar sentiment, explaining that he sees the class going on "rabbit trails on culture," both of which suggest that students are actively aware of cultural lessons taking place, but view them as part of language learning rather than their own lessons.

### ***Theme 2: The Instructor as a Cultural Resource***

A common theme throughout the student interviews was the notion that Ms. Kaya's mannerisms, way of speaking and interactions were a rich source of cultural information in and of themselves. For the students, observing Mrs. Kaya's "Turkishness" was the most identified method of exposure to Turkish culture. Daniel reflected on how culture was presented in the classroom by saying, "we get [culture] a little bit every class... even just the way she [Mrs. Kaya] interacts, it's so Turkish, I mean it's not American, ya know." This reality was articulated by Adam when he explained that because Mrs. Kaya is Turkish, he sees cultural information just "naturally coming out" during the class.

Supporting the students' observations, I also observed that often cultural lessons were not identified as such, but were provided indirectly through routine student-teacher interactions, such as question asking, casual dialogue and greetings. During one such observation, students were doing group work towards the end of class when a student raised their hand to ask Ms. Kaya a question about how they might be able to translate a specific English phrase into Turkish:

From the front of the room Ms. Kaya sees the student's hand go up and acknowledges his request by slightly nodding her head upwards and raising her eyebrows. She does this while she looks directly at the students and begins to walk toward them, her gaze cast candidly on the single student who has begun asking the group's question. As the question ends, Ms. Kaya wastes no time in responding, though not verbally. Her response takes the form of a single swift motion. Raising up her chin towards the ceiling while simultaneously pressing her tongue into the roof of her mouth in such a manner that a sharp, strong sound releases from her mouth; *tisk*. The entire motion lasts but a split second though the *tisk* is clear and decisive. With the *tisk* sound still hanging in the air, Ms. Kaya goes on to explain to the students why this English expression is not used in Turkish. The students listen intently; there is no indication that anyone even noticed the "tisk" directed at their question but there is also no clarification as to what Ms. Kaya meant by her response. The group of students receives their answer and the whole class continues on. No one mentions or comments on the actions of Ms. Kaya, no one seems confused by her body language or response to the question; class continues on.

Students can be exposed to culture in many different contexts within the classroom, but on this occasion, a simple language-based question sparked a cultural learning opportunity. Whether it is the acknowledgement of a question with raised eyebrows or responding to a question with a *tisk*, offhanded cultural lessons such as these were commonplace in the classroom and were reflected in each student's interview.

Students in Ms. Kaya's class were exposed on a daily basis to the characteristics of culture as they were manifested in the instructors own habits, traits and interactions, many of which she may not have even been aware of at the time. At certain points her presence alone was enough to spark a cultural lesson or exchange between two students as illustrated by an Adam's description of an interaction he had during one class:

I was talking to Sam (another student in the class), whose half Turkish, one time about Mrs. Kaya's grading and our conversation tailed off into him telling me about Turkish women and how they are so kind, and that's just the way they are. They are just always people who kind of take care of you... so if Ms. Kaya wasn't Turkish we wouldn't have had that conversation.

What Adam is describing is a learning experience in which Ms. Kaya played no active role, yet her presence as the instructor elicited an opportunity for Sam to provide Adam with cultural knowledge, which as a result allowed him to develop an understanding of gender roles and social values within Turkey. Regardless of the accuracy of such an understanding, the exposure to such information has had a significant impact upon Adam's perception of Turkey and its culture.

Videos were also a main source of exposure to cultural information for the students and as such, all the participants referenced the importance of multimedia methods in distributing culturally relevant content. As research has documented, using videos in foreign language classrooms is an effective technological tool and teaching method for presenting cultural information (Herron, Dubreil, Cole & Corrie, 2000). To this point, Adam talked at length about his appreciation for the utilization of movies to expose students to culture:

It's really insightful, just even the dramas we watch that are more contemporary. But even in my first quarter, we watched like a couple movies and one took place in this older type Turkish and that was pretty insightful as well.

In talking about the use of videos in the class, Adam hits on the important role that videos play in exposing students to both historical and contemporary cultural environments within Turkey and highlights the insightful information that such methods can provide students. Additionally, the type of multimedia that is popular in a country is also a form of cultural knowledge, as Victoria explains, "we do watch *Ask-I Memnu* (a Turkish soap opera) and I think that shows a lot of Turkish culture because Mrs. Kaya said that soap operas are really prevalent."

Turkish media not only reveals Turkish culture to students in the classroom, but it also stimulates interactions and dialogue among students around topics of Turkish culture. In the following scene, I had entered the classroom early one day and found myself to be the first one to arrive. While I sat waiting, Victoria (another student in the class) enters the room:

Victoria sits down next to me and, in English, we begin discussing what was due for homework. She comments that the soap opera we are watching for the class is, "really dramatic!" I nod my head in enthusiastic agreement and comment on how "weird it is that the main character wants to marry a man so much older than her!" At that time Adam enters, and we all exchange "Merhaba" and "Hoş geldiniz," and he takes a seat at the back. Mary comes in next and immediately greets everyone with a "Merhaba!" in a very happy and excited tone. She sits down and joins Victoria's and my conversation about the Turkish soap opera. Mary says it makes her feel like she is "seeing about how Turkish people live... but just more dramatically." Victoria and I agree. Daniel and Sam enter at the same time; Sam takes a seat in the back of the classroom and Daniel sits next to me and Victoria. He immediately brings up the soap opera by saying, "what the heck... this show is crazy!" Everyone smiles and agrees with him, Sam chimes in from the back of the room to say that he read about the final season and it gets even crazier. Everyone is engaged in this conversation, there seems to be genuine interest in talking about the soap opera and how Turkish people live, even though the consensus is that it's quite an overly dramatic show.

This scene demonstrates the spark that videos can provide in making cultural lessons both engaging and entertaining. The fact that students were engaging in an informal conversation about Turkish culture is testament to the usefulness of incorporating videos into

foreign language courses. Such conversations of Turkish culture would likely not take place if it were not for a shared experience of the students, via watching a movie, that provides them with enough context and information on Turkish culture that they feel comfortable engaging further on such topics amongst themselves. This type of learning seems to resonate deeply with students, much more so than, say, the cultural reading notes in their textbooks, which are present in each book chapter yet were only mentioned one time throughout the interviews.

### **What are students' perceptions and perceived outcomes of culture-related information being taught in their foreign language course?**

#### ***Theme 1: Gaining perspective on culture***

Many students spoke about the course having instilled in them a perspective that has allowed them to better understand Turkish people and their way of life. Victoria spoke about the benefits she has seen as a result of her participating in the course, commenting that:

It teaches you to have different perspectives ... and if we ever go to Turkey it is really good to have cultural knowledge so that we don't make fools of ourselves... I don't know, I just think it's important to be able to understand other people.

Victoria here is expressing the importance of understanding culture in order to be respectful and act appropriately when visiting or living within it. While not making "fools of ourselves" could potentially refer to interactions with other Turks, in this context, Victoria is using it to describe situations in which American students might go to Turkey and through their actions and naivety to Turkish culture, conduct themselves in a manner disrespectful to Turkish norms. In thinking about the impact the course has had on him, in terms of understanding Turkish culture, Adam remarked that:

I can see just as a whole what Turkish people value... how society moves in general over there in Turkey. I definitely got the picture about work in Turkey and the way that they do work. I think we were talking about hours and like when they get up and when they close shops and things like that. But even with that, I could draw inferences, for example, their dichotomy between work and family.

This statement reflects what was a common take-away for the students in Mrs. Kaya's elementary Turkish class, which is taking information and knowledge and being able to infer cultural norms or values about Turkey.

#### ***Theme 2: Uncovering the diversity of culture***

Gaining a sense of the diversity within Turkey was also another cultural learning outcome that the majority of the students identified as significant. Daniel and Victoria both expressed how their initial understanding or stereotypes about Turkish people were challenged and corrected throughout the course of the class. With modest exposure to Turkish culture prior to the course, Victoria expressed that she didn't necessarily feel that through the course she had any "total 180 degree changes in perspectives... but it's just really built on my knowledge of Turkey and Turkish culture." However, she added that through her interactions with Mrs. Kaya, her understanding of Turkish diversity when it comes to certain social/political issues:

The only super negative view I have had (about Turkey) is that a lot of Turkish people don't recognize the Armenian genocide, but Ms. Kaya is learning about Armenian language and culture, so it's nice to know that there are a lot of Turkish people that don't fit with that stereotype... (and) realizing how progressive they can be.

This is a clear example of two things: first, it is testament to the cultural influence that an instructor can have in a foreign language classroom, and second, it clearly shows the immediate impact that foreign language course can provide in improving intercultural understanding among students. For Victoria, being exposed to information that broke down her stereotype of Turkish people is a crucial step in moving towards fully understanding Turkish culture. Coming in with zero background with Turkish culture, Daniel commented on how his views of Turkish diversity are also a major part of the cultural knowledge he gained throughout the course. Specifically, Daniel highlighted the activities that allowed students to come into contact with native Turkish speakers in providing such lessons on Turkish diversity:

You get to see the faces that speak this language and how diverse they are for instance. I feel like when it comes to the types of people, you think they are unified... I mean they are unified by language obviously, but when you look at the ethnic backgrounds or at least where they are descended from, it's so diverse. You don't really get that unless you meet Turkish people. You know what I mean... it's so diverse, you can see people of Arab looking descent and European descent and it's all mixed in there, which is kind of cool. So that perspective of thinking of Turkey as this kind of homogenous people just isn't correct.

Again, Daniel's reflection is testament to the power of cultural exposure in foreign language classes and provides an apt illustration of one of the main perceived outcomes for the students in Mrs. Kaya's class. Diversity is clearly an important cultural learning objective and the findings suggest that it is a topic that resonates widely with students while providing a rich array of cultural learning opportunities.

### ***Theme 3: Gaining Nuance***

The *most* universally understood student learning outcome of the course was gaining a more "nuanced" understanding of Turkey and its culture. Nuanced here refers to examples like Daniel's confession of how his prior lack of knowledge on Turkey has both been enhanced and complicated through the course:

Language opens up the nuances of culture. When you don't know much about a culture you can easily just generalize. It's tricky, but issues become more complicated and when you see a language... it adds these kinds of shades to your understanding about a people, group or country.

Daniel's exposure to cultural information in the elementary Turkish class has allowed him to develop a more nuanced understanding of Turkish culture that is appreciative of the subtleties and complications of any culture. Adam also hit on this concept of understanding the complications and nuances of Turkish culture when telling me about religion in Turkey. Being a topic that interested him, he already had a bit of knowledge on religion in Turkey, but through his exposure to culture in the class, he has developed a much greater, more nuanced understanding of Turkish culture:

Religion is an important part of their culture. That was maybe the one thing that I knew about vaguely because what I want to do in Turkey is related to religion. But I think having now been in the course and getting a little more exposure to that, I can see that you can't separate the two... Islam and Turkish culture. You can't separate the two.

Adam's heightened understanding of the relationship between Turkish culture and religion illustrates one of the most significant impacts that the course has had on the students.

In their minds, the course has equipped them with knowledge that allows them to understand Turkish culture in a more accurate and in many ways, nuanced manner.

### **In what ways do student's and the instructor differ and agree in their perception of cultural information being taught in the classroom?**

#### ***Theme 1: Knowing about Turkey vs. Being Turkish: The Importance of the Instructor***

Mrs. Kaya is considered by all the students to be an extremely skillful instructor of Turkish language and culture, and she shares with them many of the same understandings about culture in the classroom. However, there are significant differences in emphasis between her perceptions of culture in the classroom versus her students.

In regards to what cultural information students are exposed to, the majority of them referenced the mannerisms and "Turkishness" of the instructor. Mrs. Kaya, as well, acknowledged the role that her presence plays in providing students with cultural knowledge, however, her emphasis on what she adds to the class was different than what the students articulated. Mrs. Kaya described the influence of *teacher characteristics* in terms of having a general background knowledge of the country and speaking the targeted language:

I think it's important for language teachers to have some kind of background, at least exposure to, the language and culture. They don't need to be native speakers, but I think it's important. For example, I am really able to bring in lots of knowledge about general Turkish culture and how it has changed over time.

However, this interpretation of the role of the teacher in the classroom does not necessarily support the students' perceptions of culture, which are based around the authenticity of the teacher's interactions and mannerisms that stem from being a native of the specified country. While knowledge and background of the country are certainly useful and important in facilitating cultural understanding, having an instructor that is native of the place in which the language is spoken, provides the students with opportunities to witness and engage directly with culture through their daily attendance and participation in the class.

#### ***Theme 2: Gaining Proficiency vs. Improving Understanding***

When it comes to the perceived cultural outcomes of the course, Mrs. Kaya and her students seemed to have slightly varying interpretations. Mrs. Kaya spoke in detail about providing her students with the ability to interact effectively with Turks, and the linguistic application of culture. Although she does hope her students are able to know the "differences in the (Turkish) regions," and be able to do things such as "take transportation," the outcome she emphasizes the most is being able to interact with Turks:

First, I hope that they can have conversations with Turkish speakers... If they can speak then they can go on and speak to Turkish people or if they go to Turkey, they can get involved in daily activities and exchanges with the language and they can produce.

This statement runs in slight contrast to the students' articulation of the main cultural learning outcome, which focused on *understanding* culture, not necessarily *interacting* with it. Though interaction and understanding are very much intertwined, the differentiating factor has to do with action: the students' interpretation of "understanding" is not active, it does not require another person and in that sense is very much an individual, passive outcome of cultural learning. Interaction on the other hand, though it presupposes some level of understanding, is an active outcome, one that requires multiple participants and takes place externally from the individual.

Thus, Mrs. Kaya's intent in teaching students culture, in an effort to improve their capacity to interact, was not fully absorbed by the students. This does not mean that the students don't see the importance of interaction or feel able to interact with Turks, instead it suggests that students aren't looking at or understanding the ability to interact with Turks as a primary cultural take away of the course. While there were several areas in which these types of disconnects were evident between students and teacher, these specific examples represent a central finding, that students and instructors can and do understand cultural learning in different ways. Many of which may have profound impacts on the ultimate outcomes or take-aways of the course.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

From the findings presented, it is important to highlight 3 main conclusions that can be drawn. First, it is clear that foreign language courses can and do play an important role in providing opportunities for cultural learning and cultivating intercultural understanding, which supports much of the previous literature on culture and foreign language courses. Throughout the research all the students gave compelling testimonials to the cultural knowledge they gained through the class, particularly when it came to making more complex and nuanced their understanding of Turkey and Turkish culture, while also enhancing their language acquisition. Thus, this research supports the importance of foreign language courses in helping prepare students to be global citizens: to able to understand cultures and people across the globe. However, in light of recent cuts in funding to foreign language courses (Johnson, 2019), language courses must continue to improve the impact they have on students. One area of growth, as this study points out, would be to go beyond teaching students to understand other cultures, and to give students more opportunities to interact with the culture (e.g. bring in speakers, hosting more foreign language teachers from other countries, etc.).

Second, the findings make clear that students are more receptive and aware of cultural learning when it is presented in certain ways. The implicit nature of the way cultural information is presented to students led to difficulty for many of the many in recalling and articulating the cultural knowledge they had gained. When reflecting on culture in the classroom, all of them picked out activities that had an explicit cultural lesson, such as drinking coffee or watching Turkish media, which may reflect the very nature of culture as an ambiguous term, but it also suggests that students may benefit from cultural lessons that are explicit and defined. In particular, interacting with a native speaking instructor and consuming cultural-based media content seemed effective. Less impactful are the cultural notes that students read in their textbooks or other more passive forms of learning. In other words, not all exposure to culture is equally impactful on student learning, and educators should design their classrooms accordingly in order to extract the most worth out of their pedagogical efforts.

Third, despite students all agreeing that cultural learning had taken place throughout the course, it is clear that participants (students and teachers) often understood culture in the classroom in divergent and various ways. While the instructor focused incorporating her knowledge of Turkey and helping students to *interact* with the culture, the students picked up much more from the mannerisms of the instructor while focusing more on learning to *understand* Turkish culture. Such a finding suggests that cultural learning may be greatly increased if instructors are more clear in defining and communicating the cultural goals and content being presented in the classroom. In doing so, students and teachers will be more aligned in their expectation of what cultural information is being incorporated into the classroom thereby making students more aware, and receptive, of its presence.

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