



The Impact of Cultural Elements on Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language According to a Non-Native Speaker Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract: Teaching Turkish as a foreign language is a complex process that involves language learning and cultural interaction. In this context, the experiences, and perspectives of teachers whose native language is not Turkish are crucial for examining the cultural impact on learning Turkish as a foreign language. Cultural elements play a significant role in the development of students' language skills. Nowadays, language teaching requires more than just a focus on grammar and vocabulary. The influence of social and cultural elements on the language learning process is becoming increasingly important. This study aims to investigate the sociological aspects of teaching Turkish as a foreign language from the perspective of non-native speaker teachers. The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research method. A total of 26 teachers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Tanzania, Kenya, and Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the study, including 8 Kazakhs, 6 Kyrgyz, 2 Uzbeks, 3 Azerbaijanis, 1 Turkmen, 2 Tajiks, 1 Kurd, and 3 Bosniaks. The interviews with non-native Turkish-speaking teachers explored their perceptions and experiences related to sociological aspects of language teaching. The findings indicate that non-native Turkish-speaking teachers have a high level of awareness regarding the importance of cultural elements in language teaching. It is important to note that the impact of cultural elements on teaching Turkish as a foreign language, according to non-native speaker teachers, is significant and appears to be positive. These elements enable a strong connection to be established between language and culture by influencing students' language learning processes.

Keywords: Culture, Foreign Language, Turkish Language Teaching, Teacher Perspective, Native Speaker.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, foreign language learning is increasingly gaining importance. There are thousands of living languages on Earth. While languages like Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Arabic, and Turkish are spoken by millions of people, many languages are known only by a few hundred individuals (Akar, 2005). "According to linguists, 10 languages die each year, with some claiming that a language dies every 15 days. Regions with linguistic diversity have higher language extinction rates. With the disappearance of these languages, cultural richness is also fading away" (Güneş, 2013, pp. 2-3).

According to Uzun (2012, p. 132), "In terms of its origin, geography, and population, Turkish is a language that slightly exceeds the quantitative averages of other languages in the world." In a report prepared by UNESCO in the 1980s, it was stated that Turkish is the fifth-largest language in the world in terms of speakers (Kulturportali, 2023). The increasing number of people wanting to learn Turkish for various purposes, both domestically and abroad, has led to a rise in the number of institutions and organizations teaching Turkish as a foreign language (Balçı & Melanlıoğlu, 2016). However, it cannot be overlooked that the sociological characteristics of the Turkish society also have an impact on the teaching of Turkish as a foreign language.

When a language is taught, it is not only speaking and writing in that language that is taught. Along with the language, the history, culture, traditions, and customs of the people who speak that language are also taught. In this case, what is being taught is not just the language but also the cultural identity of a nation. Foreign language instruction also helps promote peace and order in multicultural societies. Işık (1996:7) expresses this with the following words: "Foreign language instruction aims to open up to multiculturalism on one hand and to ensure peaceful coexistence in multicultural communities on the other hand. The upper purpose of this foreign language understanding, or in other words, culture-oriented approach today is to develop intercultural communication skills." In this context, people from various regions of the world with different languages, colors, and cultures come to Turkey through various institutions to learn Turkish or attend schools or courses in their own countries established by Turkish government institutions or private institutions to learn Turkish and Turkish culture (Alyılmaz, 2018).

Some researchers have emphasized that in foreign language instruction, it is not sufficient to teach only the rules of the target language; there is a need to teach the social, cultural, geographical, and economic structure of the language being taught. They have emphasized the necessity for individuals to be aware of the culture associated with the target language they are learning (Köşker, 2015). To speak and understand a foreign language correctly, it is necessary for participants in communication to also learn non-verbal elements such as body language, gestures, facial expressions, as well as the culture and lifestyle of the society they are immersed in. Effective and healthy communication in a foreign language encompasses not only understanding words but also comprehending the actions of individuals (Köşker, 2015). Therefore, for foreign language instruction to be fully realized, it is necessary to teach the fundamental components of the target culture as well.

According to Doğan (1995, p. 8; cited in Özben, 2012): "Sociology, as a science that investigates the reality of human coexistence, examines the regularities of social interaction patterns that exist everywhere in society. Sociology focuses on human relationships and interactions, centering its attention on this reality. In this respect, sociology is the scientific examination of human interaction in society." From a sociological perspective, some foreign individuals feel the need to learn Turkish as a foreign language. Sometimes, this can be due to family ties, common ancestral languages, the desire to understand the structure of Turkish society and conduct academic research, tourism, migration, military service, or religious reasons (Alyılmaz, 2018).

Method

Research Model

The design of the research is a case study, which is one of the qualitative research models. "A case study is a method where a single case or event is examined in-depth longitudinally, data is systematically collected, and an investigation is conducted into what happened in the real context" (Subaşı & Okumuş, 2017, p. 420).

Population and Sample

The research population consists of teachers whose native language is not Turkish but who teach Turkish to foreign students who have studied in foreign countries in elementary school, middle school, high school, and university language learning courses. "Population is a large group consisting of living or non-living entities from which the data needed to answer questions are obtained. In other words, it can be defined as the group in which the analysis of the data to be collected in the research and the results to be obtained will be valid and interpretable" (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014, p. 80).

"Sample is a limited part of the universe under study selected to collect information about its characteristics" (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014, p. 81). The sample group of the research consists of 8 Kazakh, 6 Kyrgyz, 2 Uzbek, 3 Azerbaijani, 1 Turkmen, 2 Tajik, 1 Kurdish, and 3 Bosnian Turkish teachers working in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Tanzania, Kenya, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. A total of 26 teachers participated in the research, including 13 females and 13 males.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

In the research, data was collected through semi-structured interviews. It was decided that the most suitable data collection technique to answer the defined research questions was the interview technique. Because the interview technique is very effective in obtaining information about the experiences, attitudes, opinions, complaints, feelings and beliefs of individuals (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

To determine which sociological factors influence students' learning of Turkish as a foreign language, preliminary interviews were conducted with five Turkish teachers. Based on the feedback received, trial interviews were conducted using forms prepared accordingly. Teachers were asked about their views on why students want to learn Turkish from a sociological perspective. Each teacher was asked to express their experiences and observations related to the topic in their own words. Ten questions related to sociological factors were created for the study. Data was collected from each teacher individually through face-to-face interviews, phone calls, and video/online meetings.

The opinions of the participating teachers were coded and recorded. For example, their role was indicated by "T" (teacher), their gender by "M" (male) or "F" (female), and a code number representing their sequence of participation was added (T1F = First female teacher). A total of 312 minutes of face-to-face, phone, and Zoom interviews were recorded using video and audio recording devices, and transcripts of the interviews were generated.

After collecting data in the research, it was analyzed through content and descriptive analyses, and then interpreted. Content analyses are commonly used in the field of social sciences, especially in educational research (Ültay & Ültay, 2014). The general aim of content analysis studies is to guide future academic research on the subject and to determine the general trends related to the topic under consideration.

Findings and Interpretations

The Influence of Turkish Food Culture on Students' Learning of Turkish

One of the most significant cultural features of a society is its food and beverages. Turkish food and beverage culture possess a great richness on a global scale. The historical geographical context and way of life have played a crucial role in shaping this richness. Not only Turkey but all Turkic peoples have a very diverse cuisine. The richness of food and beverage culture also reflects on hospitality. Therefore, the hospitality traditions of Turkic peoples leave deeper impressions on guests compared to other societies, leading to the formation of friendships and amity. Specific Turkish items such as tea, baklava, lahmacun, ayran, döner, and others are unforgettable flavors for tourists or guests who have previously tasted them. In fact, Turkish döner has now become widespread in various countries around the world. In the research, Table 1 presents the responses given by the participating teachers regarding the suggestion of *the influence of Turkish food culture on students' learning of Turkish*.

Table 1

The Influence of Turkish Food Culture on Students' Learning of Turkish

The effect of Turkish food on learning Turkish	f	Participant
In the city where I live, there are cafes and restaurants that serve Turkish food.	18	S1M, S3F, S4M, S5F, S6F, S7F, S8M, S9F, S11F, S12M, S13F, S14F, S15F, S16F, S19M, S23M, S25M, S26M
Turkish food culture has an effect on learning Turkish.	13	S1M, S2F, S3F, S4M, S5F, S8M, S9F, S10M, S11F, S12M, S15F, S19M, S21M
Most of my students like Turkish food.	12	S1M, S2F, S4M, S5F, S6F, S7F, S9F, S13F, S20F, S22M, S25M, S26M
We sometimes cook Turkish meals ourselves with students.	10	S1M, S2F, S7F, S10M, S14F, S15F, S16F, S17M, S20F, S21M
They learn Turkish only because of Turkish food.	5	S13F, S17M, S18F, S23M, S24M
There is no restaurant serving Turkish food in the city we live in now.	5	S10M, S17M, S18F, S20F, S24M
There are those who are interested in learning Turkish cuisine and try it at home.	4	S2F, S8M, S20F, S26M
It is enough for our students to learn Turkish through Turkish cuisine.	2	S1M, S12M
Turkish food is not very popular in the city we live in.	1	S14F

According to the findings obtained, the number of respondents who agree with the statement *there are cafes and restaurants in my city that serve Turkish cuisine* has been determined as 18. Nowadays, there are restaurants serving Turkish cuisine in many cities around the world. Especially, there is a considerable number of restaurants using the name *Istanbul*. These restaurants generally offer dishes such as döner, lahmacun, as well as desserts like baklava, oven-baked rice pudding (sütlaç), künefe, and beverages like ayran and tea. The deliciousness of Turkish food culture is reflected in people's taste buds, and the words and phrases that encompass food culture are learned quickly and memorably by learners. In line with this, the number of participants who claim that *Turkish food culture has an influence on their Turkish learning* is 13, and those who say *most of my students like Turkish food* is 12. Looking at the taste left by Turkish food and beverage culture in people's mouths, it has been observed that 10 respondents agree with the statement *sometimes we make Turkish food with the students ourselves*. On the other hand, the number of those who say that *there are those who are interested in learning Turkish cuisine and try it at home* is 4, and it is possible to say that the students are interested in Turkish food at home, albeit partially. Only 5 participants agree with the statement that *they are learning Turkish solely because of Turkish cuisine*. Therefore, it can be understood that students are not learning Turkish solely because of Turkish food culture. The fact that only 2 people agree with the statement *it is enough for my students to learn Turkish through Turkish cuisine* supports this situation.

Table 2

Turkish Dishes That Students Enjoy Eating

Foods	f	Participants
Doner	9	S1M, S5F, S6F, S10M, S11F, S12M, S13F, S23M, S26M
Baklava	8	S4M, S5F, S6F, S11F, S22M, S24M, S25M, S26M
Pide	7	S2F, S7F, S10M, S13F, S15F, S18F, S25M
Kebap	7	S3F, S5F, S9F, S10M, S15F, S19M, S25M
Lahmacun	6	S7F, S10M, S13F, S15F, S18F, S25M
Lentil soup	4	S2F, S11F, S19M, S26M
Iskender	4	S4M, S11F, S12M, S13F
Raw Meatballs	3	S7F, S15F, S22M
Turkish Tea	3	S10M, S14F, S25M
Doner Roll	3	S16F, S17M, S18F
Toast	3	S12M, S16F, S23M
Rice pudding	2	S4M, S14F
Menemen	2	S7F, S10M
Turkish coffee	2	S7F, S25M
Meatball	2	S11F, S23M
Pogaca	2	S14F, S26M
Turkish ravioli	2	S2F, S25M
Chicken foods	1	S2F

Table 2 continue

Rice	1	S2F
Adana kebab	1	S4M
Ayran	1	S11F
Moist cake	1	S11F
Şekerpare	1	S11F
Moist pasta	1	S14F
Cigarette pastry	1	S14F
Turkish breakfast	1	S14F
Simit	1	S17M
Dessert	1	S20F
Cookie	1	S20F
Pastry	1	S20F

In the table above, participants were asked the question, *what Turkish dishes do students enjoy eating?* Based on the responses of the participants, it can be understood that students most enjoy eating Doner, Baklava, Pide, Kebab, Lahmacun, Lentil Soup, Iskender, Raw Meatballs, Turkish Tea, Doner Roll, and Toast in that order. The diverse and delicious nature of Turkish cuisine has led to the opening of thousands of Turkish restaurants worldwide in the service sector. Especially, Doner has become a significant industry, particularly in Europe. In this context, it is possible to say that Turkish food culture holds an important place worldwide.

The Impact of Religious Life in Turkey on Learning Turkish

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The Impact of Religious Life in Turkey on Learning Turkish

The effect of religious life on Turkish learning	Participant	f
Religious life in Turkey has no effect on learning Turkish.	S1M, S2F, S5F, S6F, S8M, S9F, S10M, S11F, S12M, S14F, S15F, S16F, S17M, S19M, S20F, S22M, S23M, S24M	18
Religious life in Turkey has an effect on learning Turkish.	S7F, S13F, S18F, S21M, S25M, S26M	6
I don't know about this situation.	S3F, S4M	2
Total		26

According to the opinions of the participants in Table 3, the number of those who agree with the idea that *religious life in Turkey has no impact on learning Turkish* is 18. Consequently, based on the responses received from the participants regarding the suggestion that *religious life in Turkey has an impact on learning Turkish*, it is understood that religious life does not have an impact on learning Turkish. However, some teachers participating from Muslim

regions in the research have stated that individuals want to learn Turkish due to their religious experiences in Turkey and to better understand the Islamic religion. Participant S26M, who took part in the research, stated:

-Among my students, those who are members of the Islamic faith learn Turkish with the aim of attending religious education institutions in Turkey, reading and understanding religious texts, and participating in religious activities. They want to learn Turkish in order to better understand the Islamic religion, read religious texts in their original language, and gain a deeper insight into Islamic culture.

Another participant, S7F, said:

-They are looking at Turkey's religious websites on the Internet to study religious topics. Among the ladies, she may be veiled herself but half-veiled, and when she sees a fully veiled Turkish lady among Turks, she admires her and wants to dress like her. The influence of political Islamists in Turkey using the Islamic religion for political propaganda has had a significant impact on this situation. As a reflection of this, it is possible to point out the high viewership of Turkish series, especially those related to history and religion, in Muslim and Turkish regions.

The Impact of Turkish Clothing Culture on Learning Turkish

Table 4

The Impact of Turkish Clothing Culture on Students' Learning of Turkish

The Influence of Turkish Clothing Culture on Learning Turkish	Participants	f
There is no influence of Turkish clothing culture on students' learning of Turkish.	S2F, S3F, S5F, S6F, S8M, S9F, S10M, S11F, S12M, S13F, S16F, S17M, S19M, S20F, S23M, S24M, S26M	17
Turkish clothing culture may have an influence on students' interest in learning Turkish.	S1M, S4M, S7F, S14F, S15F, S18F, S21M, S22M, S25M	9
Total		26

According to the opinions of non-native Turkish-speaking teachers in Table 4, the distribution of the influence of Turkish clothing culture on students' interest in learning Turkish can be observed. In this context, it can be said that the influence of Turkish clothing culture on students' learning of Turkish is partial (17 participants negative, 9 participants positive). It is possible to say that today's youth prefer modern clothing over traditional attire. However, it is observed that they have a cultural interest in traditional Turkish clothing. Participants in the research have emphasized that their interest in Turkish clothing elements is high in environments where Turkish folklore, folk dances, and games are displayed. Culturally, Turkish clothing culture is rich regionally; items such as Şalvar, Tülbent, Fistan, Kundura, Kuşak, Cepken, Entari, Fes, Gömlek, etc., are important examples of Turkish clothing culture.

The Influence of Turkey's Turkish on Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language

One of the most important elements that constitute culture is the common language. Today, there is significant interest, particularly in the Turkic Republics, in learning Turkish as spoken in Turkey. One of the most important reasons for this is that these languages share structural and historical similarities, making them products of a common culture. In the Turkic Republics, which were under the influence of the USSR for nearly 70 years, there was an attempt to replace the language of the people with Russian. During this process, the language development of Turkic peoples was disrupted. Even today, the influence of Russian on the languages of the Turkic Republics remains significant in terms of phonetics, morphology, and sentence structure. Consequently, the languages of the Turkic Republics have been unable to achieve the natural linguistic development and vibrancy inherent in a language. In contrast, Turkish as spoken in Turkey has made significant progress in terms of phonetics, morphology, and sentence structure. Citizens of Turkic Republics who watch Turkish TV series or have frequent interactions with Turkey often attempt to use Istanbul Turkish because it has a well-established phonetic structure today.

Modern Turkish in Turkey is primarily based on Ottoman Turkish. Efforts to learn Turkish as spoken in Turkey, both culturally and academically, are also present in regions where the Ottoman Empire previously held sway, especially because areas where Turkish TV series are popular today are often former Ottoman territories. In this context, it is possible to say that the common language and culture play a role in the learning of Turkish as spoken in Turkey in the context of the relationship between language and culture.

Results and Recommendations

Turkish is one of the important languages learned as a foreign language worldwide, and its teaching as a foreign language is quite widespread in Turkey. In this context, the influence of non-native Turkish-speaking teachers and the sociological factors they encounter form an important research topic.

It is understood that non-native Turkish-speaking teachers are aware of the influence of cultural elements in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. They are conscious that these elements also play an important role in student motivation and language skills development.

The teachers who participated in the research have indicated that students' cultural backgrounds affect their learning processes and may contain factors that facilitate or hinder language learning. They emphasized the need to consider cultural elements when selecting learning materials and teaching methods depending on the cultural context of the language.

The importance of cultural elements in individuals' learning of Turkish as a foreign language has been determined. It has been observed that Turkish culinary culture has an influence on students' learning of Turkish. The indirect impact of religious practices in Turkey on learning Turkish has also been observed. It is possible to mention the indirect

influence of Turkish clothing culture on students' interest in learning Turkish. Additionally, it has been identified that the influence of a common language and culture on learning Turkish is significant.

Understanding cultural elements by teachers and integrating them into the instructional process can contribute positively to the development of students' language skills and cultural adaptation. Cultural elements should also be taken into account in the determination and implementation of educational policies.

Undoubtedly, teachers play a crucial role and have the power to change everything in foreign language teaching. In teaching Turkish as a foreign language, educators should teach the language by comparing it with the student's native language, thus developing different methods in the language-culture relationship, and they should have knowledge about Turkey and other cultures in this context.

While this study is important in revealing the needs of foreigners learning Turkish, it has a limited scope. Similar studies with a larger sample and comprehensive results can be achieved.

Non-native Turkish teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities to effectively participate in Turkish language teaching. Educators should receive training in language teaching techniques, effective classroom management, and cultural awareness, and continuous updates should be made in this field.

Language and culture learning are inseparable. Non-native Turkish-speaking teachers should be encouraged to teach Turkish lessons intertwined with the social and cultural context of the language. Cultural activities, traditions, and practices related to language use will contribute more to students' language learning.

Curriculum studies and lesson plans should be developed for Turkish culture, including Turkey's Turkish, in narrower fields and for specific purposes in Turkish language teaching. Textbooks and materials should be prepared accordingly.

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