

The Impact of Turkish Language Proficiency on the Cultural Adaptation Process of American Teachers in Turkey

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Abstract

There is no doubt that intercultural competence is needed for effective and appropriate intercultural interactions. However, in order to make accurate inferences about the adaptation process to unfamiliar cultures, the focus should be turned to differences between individuals and specific factors affecting the adaptation process. Accepting that culture is an integral part of language, this paper aims to reveal the possible effects that Turkish language proficiency has on the cultural adaptation process of American teachers in Turkey. Considering the argument that learning a language cannot be separated from the acquisition of the culture that language embodies, this paper examines how a causal relationship exists between American teachers' attempts to learn Turkish, their language proficiency level and their adaptability to Turkish culture. In this study, a total number of 40 American teachers, a large part of whom are Fulbright scholars working for different state universities in Turkey, are examined. The Fulbright scholars and the other American English teachers participating in this study have different levels of Turkish language proficiency, and the results of the study indicate significant differences in their adaptation process to Turkish culture. The main conclusion of this study highlights the interaction between language proficiency and cultural adaptation indicating the need for revision of foreign language learning curriculums in terms of developing intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: *adaptation to culture, Turkish language proficiency, intercultural interaction*



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Turkish Language Proficiency on the Cultural Adaptation Process of American EFL Teachers in Turkey

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Outline

- Problem statement
- Research Questions
- Methodology
 - Participants
 - Instruments
- Results
- Conclusions & Implications

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Problem statement

- Living in a foreign country brings about a variety of difficulties in terms of cultural adaptation process.

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Research Questions

Main Research Question:

What are the challenges that American EFL teachers face during the process of cultural adaptation in Turkey, and what is the impact of Turkish language?

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Methodology

- **Participants**
 - N = 31 out of 77 (40%)
 - **Gender:** 6 male, 25 female
 - **Age:** range = 22-41 years old, M = 25 years
 - **Education:** BA = 26, MA = 5 participants
 - **Teaching Certification:** 8 teachers (26%)
 - **Experience:** range = 1-6 years, M = 2.2 years
 - **Length of Stay:** range = 7-60 months, M = 15 mo.
 - **Previously lived abroad:** 18 participants (58%)

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Methodology

- **Instruments**
 - Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS)
 - Turkish Proficiency Test
 - Interview Questions

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Sociocultural Adaptation Scale

- Five-point Likert type scale
- 29 items
- Adapted from
 - Ward & Kennedy (1999) and Wilson (2013)
- Participants indicated the 5 most important items in terms of cultural adaptation
- Cronbach Alpha = .88 (out of 29)

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Please indicate how much difficulty you experience in Turkey in each of these areas by using the following 1 to 5 scale:
 1=no difficulty 2=slight difficulty 3=moderate difficulty
 4=great difficulty 5=extreme difficulty

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Making Turkish friends.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
2. Finding food that you enjoy.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
3. Following rules or regulations.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
4. Dealing with people in authority.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
5. Managing your work responsibilities.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
6. Using the public transportation system.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
7. Dealing with bureaucracy.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
8. Understanding the Turkish value system.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
9. Making yourself understood.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
10. Seeing things from a Turkish point of view.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
11. Going shopping for daily needs.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
12. Dealing with someone who is unpleasant.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
13. Understanding jokes or humor.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
14. Adapting to housing situations.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
15. Going to community events or social gatherings.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
16. Dealing with people staying at you.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
17. Understanding ethnic or cultural differences.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
18. Obtaining the services I require (i.e. hospital, bank, etc.).	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
19. Worshipping in your own religion.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
20. Adapting to local worship practices.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
21. Interacting with members of the opposite sex.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
22. Finding your way around.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
23. Understanding the Turkish political system.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
24. Maintaining your personal interests.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
25. Dealing with the climate.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
26. Understanding other people's body language (i.e. gestures, facial expression, etc.).	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
27. Understanding family relationships.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
28. Adapting to the pace of life.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE
29. Understanding other people's emotions.	CE	CE	CE	CE	CE

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Turkish Proficiency Test

- 25 questions
 - 21 multiple choice questions
 - 4 true/false/not given questions
 - 4 points per question
- Adapted from Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University TÖMER

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Interview Questions

1. What was the first cultural difference that you noticed?
2. What is the greatest cultural difference that you notice?
3. In what ways have you experienced difficulty in adapting to Turkish culture?
4. What efforts have you made to foster your understanding of Turkish culture?
5. Is it difficult for you to maintain your social life in Turkey? Please explain briefly by giving examples if possible.
6. Do you think Turkish people are difficult to understand in terms of their reactions, habits, and character? Please explain briefly by giving examples if possible.
7. Does being from a different country and culture make you feel alienated in your work place or neighborhood? Please explain briefly by giving examples if possible.

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Results

Independent samples t-tests:

- Language
- Education
- City of Residence
- Length of Stay
- Gender
- Teaching Certification
- Teaching Experience
- Previous experience abroad

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Turkish Language

- **3 groups:**
 - 0-9 correct,
 - 10-19 correct,
 - 20+ correct answers
- **No significant correlation between language proficiency and sociocultural adaptation**
 - ($F(2, 28) = 13.99, p > .05$)
- **Additionally:**
 - No significant correlation between length of stay and language proficiency
 - Pearson's $r(31) = .06, p > .05$
 - Significant correlation between language proficiency and "obtaining the services required"
 - Pearson's $r(31) = .38, p = .04$

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The effect of...

- **Education**
 - No significant difference between BA holders ($M = 2.21, SD = 0.46$) and MA holders ($M = 2.11, SD = 0.35$), $t(31) = 0.435, p > .05$
- **City of Residence in Turkey**
 - No significant difference among Western, Central, and or Eastern Turkey ($F(2, 28) = 0.89, p > .05$)
- **City of Residence in USA**
 - No significant difference among East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast ($F(2, 28) = 12.14, p > .05$)

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The effect of...

- **Length of Stay**
 - No significant difference between shorter (<12 mo.; $M = 2.19, SD = 0.44$) and longer residents (>12 mo.; $M = 2.19, SD = 0.48$), $t(31) = 0.20, p > .05$
- **Gender**
 - No significant difference between male ($M = 2.25, SD = 0.45$) and female participants ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.35$), $t(31) = 1.448, p > .05$
- **Teaching Certification**
 - No significant difference between certified ($M = 2.16, SD = 0.50$) and non-certified participants ($M = 2.20, SD = 0.43$), $t(31) = 0.225, p > .05$.
- **Teaching Experience**
 - No significant difference between less experienced (≤ 2 yrs; $M = 2.20, SD = 0.43$) and more experienced participants (>2 yrs; $M = 2.17, SD = 0.49$), $t(31) = 0.171, p > .05$

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However...

- **Previous experience living in a foreign country for at least 3 months**
 - Significant difference between participants who had not been abroad ($M = 2.00, SD = 0.40$) and those who had been ($M = 2.33, SD = 0.43$), $t(31) = -2.122, p = .04, d = -0.78$ overall scores with a large effect size

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Top 5 Most Important Items

As ranked by the participants:

1. Making Turkish Friends (Item 1)
2. Understanding ethnic or cultural differences (Item 17)
3. Seeing things from a Turkish point of view (Item 10)
4. Making yourself understood (Item 9)
5. Adapting to the pace of life (Item 28)

- **Note: "Obtaining the services required" was ranked 7th most important**

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SCAS Results

5 Most Difficult Items:

1. Dealing with bureaucracy (Item 7; $M = 3.29$)
 2. Obtaining the services I require (Item 18; $M = 3.03$)
 3. Making yourself understood (Item 9; $M = 2.74$)
 4. Understanding the Turkish political system (Item 23; $M = 2.71$)
 5. Dealing with someone who is unpleasant (Item 12; $M = 2.71$)
- **Note: The only item in common between this scale and the ranked items was**
 - **Item 9, Making Yourself Understood (ranked 4th).**

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Interview Responses

1. **What was the first cultural difference that you noticed?**

- 15 total, 3 main differences:

1. **Hospitality**
 - "An extreme helpfulness to others/strangers and loyalty without wanting or asking for things in return."
2. **Religion**
 - "The first cultural difference I noticed in Turkey was the call to prayer."
3. **Appearance/dress**
 - "The gendered nature of outward appearance was the first cultural difference that I noticed."

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Interview Responses

2. What is the greatest cultural difference that you notice?

- **Basic themes: gender relations, family relations, individualism/communalism, and directness/indirectness**
- “The importance placed on family and the frequency of communication with extended family.”
- “Turkey seems to be a more communal culture. Things are shared more often and more easily here.”
- “The greatest cultural difference is Turkish romantic relationships. Intimacy, jealousy, dating, cheating...”

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Interview Responses

3. In what ways have you experienced difficulty in adapting to Turkish culture?

- **Basic themes: interacting with people, language, gender relations, and bureaucracy.**
- Does it match the SCAS?
 - Yes:
 - (1) Item 7 ‘Dealing with bureaucracy,’
 - (3) Items 9 ‘Making yourself understood’ and
 - (5) Item 12 ‘Dealing with someone who is unpleasant’
 - But: Although the participants reported Turkish language proficiency as one of the biggest difficulties in adapting to Turkish culture, **no correlation was found between Turkish language proficiency and cultural adaptation.**

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Interview Responses

4. What efforts have you made to foster your understanding of Turkish culture?

- Most frequently used strategy: interacting with people
 - Also the most difficult!
- Other common strategies:
 - Reading (books, novels, magazines, newspapers)
 - Media sources (radio stations, TV channels)
 - Learning Turkish* (16 participants)
 - Travelling

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Interview Responses

5. Is it difficult for you to maintain your social life in Turkey?

Splits results: slightly more YES than NO.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NO (n = 15): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends (Turkish, American, English-speaking) • Foreignness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YES (n = 16): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges making friends • Importance of family • Lack of Turkish • Gender norms • Different social life
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Item 24 ‘Maintaining your personal interests’: M = 2.58 (moderate difficulty)

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Interview Responses

6. Do you think Turkish people are difficult to understand in terms of their reactions, habits, and character?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes (n = 11): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directness/indirectness, body language, sense of humor • Gender relations • Concepts of cleanliness • Curious, emotional and hypocritical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No (n = 20): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-minded, direct • More similarities than differences
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Item 26 ‘Understanding other people’s body language’: M = 1.68 (low)
Item 17 ‘Understanding other people’s emotions’: M = 2.26 (moderate)

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Interview Responses

7. Does being from a different country and culture make you feel alienated in your work place or neighborhood?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YES (n = 21): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Foreignness (looks, stares) • Religion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NO (n = 10): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hospitality • Foreignness (attracts people) • American/English-speaking friends
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Follow-up Interview

- **Only significant difference: having lived abroad for more than 3 months in a country other than Turkey.**
 - 18 participants (58% total)
 - 13 respondents (72%)
1. What was the greatest cultural difference that you noticed in that country?
 2. In what ways did you experience difficulty adapting to the culture of that country?
 3. In what ways has it been easier or more difficult to adapt to Turkish culture than to the culture of the country you lived in before?
 4. When you compare Turkish culture with the other foreign culture(s) you have experienced before, what similarities and differences have you noticed?

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Follow-up Questions

1. **What was the greatest cultural difference that you noticed in that country?**
 - Similar to the greatest cultural differences noticed in Turkey
 - Communalism, family relations, gender relations, and politeness, directness
2. **In what ways did you experience difficulty adapting to the culture of that country?**
 - Similar responses: communalism, language, gender relations, the pace of life, making friends, and dealing with people
 - 2 respondents: little or no difficulty

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Follow-up Questions

3. **In what ways has it been easier or more difficult to adapt to Turkish culture than to the culture of the country you lived in before?**
 - **A majority of respondents stated that they experience greater difficulty adapting to Turkish culture.**
 - language, communalism, and gender norms
 - more noticeably differences between Turkish culture and American culture
 - **Negative transfer or biases**

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Follow-up Questions

4. **When you compare Turkish culture with the other foreign culture(s) you have experienced before, what similarities and differences have you noticed?**
 - Overall, a greater diversity of similarities than differences
 - Common similarities *and* differences: hospitality, religion, and communalism
 - Three prominent aspects of Turkish culture observed by the respondents.

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So What?

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So What?

1. **Language Proficiency does not assist in the process of cultural adaptation**
 - Perceived as important, but not supported in the data
 - But maybe makes life easier (e.g.: Obtaining Services)
2. **English as a Lingua Franca**
 - English-speaking Turkish friends
 - Ability to communicate in English
 - Cognates and English-ization of Turkish

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So What?

3. Perceived knowledge vs. Actual knowledge

- Comments regarding the Turkish Proficiency Test
 - "I will confess to you that my aural language comprehension skills are pretty good, but my written ones are totally abysmal. This may be the only time I would have preferred to opt for an oral exam and not a written one."*
 - "When I started the Turkish evaluation test I got entirely discouraged. I feel like I'm making advances in my Turkish, but it is mostly verbal, so written Turkish is a very different thing--there's no context or situation for me to put it in."*
- An inflated understanding of one's language abilities could lead to an inflated understanding of one's cultural adaptation
- Body language
- Need for Reflection

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So What?

4. Proficiency is not necessary

- "Enough" oral skills to get by
- If the goal is communication, are we assessing the right skills of language?
- Motivation factors (length of stay and language)

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**Thank you for your patience
and participation**

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