

Turkish language proficiency and cultural adaptation of American EFL teachers in Turkey

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Abstract

Researchers have long focused on the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar cultures. Language is seen as a way to gain access to another culture, bridging the gap between cultures (Charalambous, 2013), facilitating adaptation which can be understood as ‘fitting in’ to the host culture (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Turner (2013, p. 463) states that “‘what matters’ for cultural studies these days very much depends on where you are’. The literature has commonly examined the cultural adaptation from several perspectives. However, lacking from the literature within the field of foreign language teaching is an examination of the adaptation processes of sojourner EFL teachers. Moving from Turner’s insight on cultural studies, this study examines the sociocultural adaptation of 31 American EFL teachers working at different institutions in Turkey in terms of their Turkish language proficiency. A Turkish language proficiency test, a Sociocultural Adaptation Scale that was adapted from Ward and Kennedy (1999) and Wilson (2013), and follow-up interview questions were used to collect the data. To examine the effect of language on adaptation, participants were grouped into three categories according to their test scores. The results did not indicate significant differences between their language proficiency and sociocultural adaptation. Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between sociocultural adaptation and the following variables: gender, age, education level, city of residence in Turkey, city of origin in the USA, length of stay in Turkey, teaching experience, and teaching certification. However, a significant negative correlation was found between previous experience abroad and successful sociocultural adaptation in Turkey. Qualitative data retrieved from the interview sessions also confirmed the quantitative data. Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is that there was no correlation between language proficiency and cultural adaptation, suggesting that knowledge of the host language may not assist in the process of sociocultural adaptation.

Key words: sociocultural adaptation; Turkish language proficiency; intercultural interaction; intercultural competence; unfamiliar cultures

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Problem statement



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

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?

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%)



Methodology

Instruments

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

Sociocultural Adaptation Scale

(SCAS)

- * 29 Five-point Likert items
- * Adapted from Ward & Kennedy (1999) and Wilson (2013)
- * $\alpha = .88$
- * 5 most important items in terms of cultural adaptation

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

Turkish Proficiency Test

(COMU TÖMER)


- * 25 questions
- * Adapted from
Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University
Turkish Language Teaching Centre (TÖMER)



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Interview Session

- * 7 open-ended questions
- * Mainly aimed to reveal cultural differences and difficulties in adapting to Turkish culture.



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Turkish Language

Sociocultural Adaptation

- * **3 groups:**
 - * 0-9 correct,
 - * 10-19 correct,
 - * 20+ correct answers
- * **No significant difference**
 - * “sociocultural adaptation” considering “language proficiency”
 - * $F(2, 28) = 13.99, p > .05$



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Turkish Language

Length of Stay

- * **No significant correlation**
 - * “length of stay” and “language proficiency”
 - * Pearson's $r(31) = .06, p > .05$
- * **Significant correlation**
 - * “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**
 - * “BA holders” ($M = 2.21, SD = 0.46$)
 - * “MA holders” ($M = 2.11, SD = 0.35$)
 - * $t(31) = 0.435, p > .05$
- * **City of Residence in Turkey: No significant difference**
 - * “Western”, “Central”, and “Eastern”
 - * $F(2, 28) = 0.89, p > .05$
- * **City of Residence in USA: No significant difference**
 - * “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**
 - * “shorter” (≤ 12 mo.; $M = 2.19, SD = 0.44$)
 - * “longer residents” (> 12 mo.; $M = 2.19, SD = 0.48$), $t(31) = 0.20, p > .05$
- * **Gender: No significant difference**
 - * “male” ($M = 2.25, SD = 0.45$)
 - * “female” ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.35$), $t(31) = 1.448, p > .05$
- * **Teaching Certification: No significant difference**
 - * “certified” ($M = 2.16, SD = 0.50$)
 - * “non-certified” ($M = 2.20, SD = 0.43$), $t(31) = 0.225, p > .05$
- * **Teaching Experience: No significant difference**
 - * “less experienced” (≤ 2 yrs; $M = 2.20, SD = 0.43$)
 - * “more experienced” (> 2 yrs; $M = 2.17, SD = 0.49$), $t(31) = 0.171, p > .05$

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However...

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

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

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; $M = 2.71$)
- * **Only common item between SCAS and the ranked items**
 - * **"Making yourself understood" (ranked 4th)**

Interview Responses

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

- * **3 main differences (15 total):**
- 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."

Interview Responses

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

Basic themes

- gender relations
 - family relations
 - individualism/communalism
 - 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..."

Interview Responses

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

interacting with people language gender relations bureaucracy

Basic themes

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

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.



- * **YES (n = 16):**
 - * Challenges making friends
 - * Importance of family
 - * Lack of Turkish
 - * Gender norms
 - * Different social life
- * **NO (n = 15):**
 - * Friends (Turkish, American, English-speaking)
 - * Foreignness


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?

- * **YES (n = 11):**
 - * Directness/indirectness, body language, sense of humor
 - * Gender relations
 - * Concepts of cleanliness
 - * Curious, emotional and hypocritical
- * **NO (n = 20):**
 - * Open-minded, direct
 - * More similarities than differences




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?



- * **YES (n = 21):**
 - * Language
 - * Foreignness (looks, stares)
 - * Religion
- * **NO (n = 10):**
 - * Hospitality
 - * Foreignness (attracts people)
 - * American/English-speaking friends


Foreignness (common item)

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Follow-up Interview

Rationale

- * **Only significant difference:**
 - * **Having lived abroad for more than 3 months in a country other than Turkey.**
 - * 18 participants (58% total)
 - * 13 respondents (72%) agreed



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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.

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Follow-up Questions

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

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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:**
 - * **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?

- * **A greater diversity of similarities than differences.**
- * Common similarities *and* differences:
 - * hospitality,
 - * religion, and
 - * communalism.

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So What?

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Conclusion

1. Language Proficiency does not assist in the process of cultural adaptation

- * **Knowledge of the host language:**
 - * Perceived as important.
 - * May not assist in the process of SCA.
 - * May make life easier (e.g.: Obtaining Services).
- * Different from:
 - * Selmer (2006), Shi and Wang (2014), Tonsing (2014), and Ward and Kennedy (1993).
- * Similar to Mapp (2012) and Lai (2010).

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Conclusion

2. English as a Lingua Franca

- * English-speaking Turkish friends
- * Ability to communicate in English
- * Cognates and Englishization of Turkish

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Conclusion

3. Perceived knowledge vs. Actual knowledge

- * Comments regarding the Turkish Proficiency Test
- * **Language acquisition vs. language learning**
 - * Acquirers may prefer oral exam (consider body language)
 - * Learners may prefer written exam

"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."

Conclusion

4. Proficiency is not necessary

- * "Enough" oral skills to get by
- * If the goal is communication, are we assessing the right skills of language?
- * Consider the criticism against ELF by Capucho and Piedade Silva (2014).

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Thank you for your patience and participation

