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

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Abstract

Intercultural competence is needed for effective and appropriate intercultural interactions. However, differences between individuals and specific factors, such as directness/indirectness and collectivism/individualism, should be considered when examining cultural adaptation. This paper aims to reveal the possible effects that language proficiency has on cultural adaptation. Although the 31 American teachers surveyed in this study had different levels of Turkish language proficiency, the results indicated no significant differences between their language proficiency and sociocultural adaptation. However, a significant negative correlation was found between previous experience abroad and successful sociocultural adaptation in Turkey. The main conclusion of this study questions the relationship between traditional conceptions of language proficiency and successful sociocultural adaptation.

1. Introduction

Researchers have long focused on the challenges and experiences that individuals face during the process of adapting to unfamiliar cultures. Particularly in today's globalized world, effective intercultural communication is necessary. Charalambous (2013) argues that language can be seen as a way to gain access to another culture, bridging the gap between cultures. With this in mind, adaptation can be understood as 'fitting in' to the host culture

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(Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Ward and Kennedy (1992, 1999) have identified two types of intercultural adaptation: psychological and sociocultural. While psychological adaptation is often evaluated in terms of coping with stress and measuring levels of depression (Aroian & Norris, 2002; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), sociocultural adaptation (SCA) can be understood in terms of the individual's ability to manage his or her daily life in the host culture (Tonsing, 2014).

Research suggests that personal factors are an integral part of the sociocultural adaptation process. McNamara (2013) argues that personal factors contribute to language learning and understanding other cultures. Costa and McCrae (1998) state that personality traits, such as openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion, positively impact the adaptation process, while factors such as neuroticism negatively influence it. Additionally, Ward (1996) highlights the effects of personal variables—such as language fluency and cultural identity—and situational variables—including length of stay, cultural distance—on the adaptation process. Bochner (2011) states that individuals are attracted to people similar to themselves and experience greater difficulty moving to cultures different from their own. He defines two types of cultural contact: between-society contact and within-society contact (2003). The present study investigates the between-society contact of American teachers and members of their host society.

The literature has commonly examined the cultural adaptation processes of refugees, immigrants, international students, and businessmen. However, lacking from the literature within the field of foreign language education is an examination of the adaptation processes of sojourner EFL teachers. The present study examines the SCA of American EFL teachers in Turkey in terms of their Turkish language proficiency (TLP) by posing the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between language learning and cultural adaptation?
2. Does language proficiency facilitate SCA?
3. Does being proficient in Turkish improve the SCA of American EFL teachers living in Turkey?
4. What are the most challenging aspects of the SCA process?

2. Sociocultural adaptation

Previous researchers have examined the relationship between cultural adaptation and language. Studying the SCA of first- and second-generation immigrants in Hong Kong, Tonsing (2014) found that the levels of psychological distress in the second-generation group were higher than in the first-generation group, despite the second-generation reporting higher levels of host language proficiency and assimilation. Although they had lower levels of distress, members of the first-generation group reported that a lack of language fluency and fewer interactions with members of the host culture led to lower self-esteem and less SCA.

Studying the host language proficiency of international businessmen in China, Selmer (2006) found a correlation between Chinese language knowledge and SCA. Although the participants reported low levels of language proficiency, they reported high levels of adjustment. Controlling for time spent in China, Selmer found that the positive relationship between language and SCA was strongest for social interactions and weakest in the workplace. In a similar study, Shi and Wang (2014) investigated the experiences of 80 Chinese businessmen working in an international context. They found that the greatest difficulties faced were business communication, language barriers, and heavy pressure from work duties.

Examining the significance of host language knowledge for international students, Ward and Kennedy (1993) found a correlation between language and SCA. Surveying New Zealand students living abroad, the researchers found that poor language ability and unfulfilling relationships with members of the host-culture led to greater social difficulty. However, in a study of short-term study abroad programs, Mapp (2012) found that neither the language of the host country, the length of the trip, nor previous experience abroad had an effect on the students' SCA.

In Lai's study (2010) examining 44 international EFL instructors, no statistically significant relationship was found between a variety of variables and SCA. The results indicated that those instructors coming from more individualistic cultures (e.g. USA, UK, Canada) and with more experience living abroad had a greater tendency to minimize the cultural differences experienced in Taiwan. Overall the instructors reported 'slight difficulty'

adapting to Taiwanese culture, ranking the three most difficult items as 'dealing with bureaucracy', 'making yourself understood', and 'dealing with unsatisfactory service'.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study examined 31 (6 male, 25 female) American EFL teachers working in different institutions, including language schools, high schools, and universities, in Turkey. Of the respondents, 25 were Fulbright scholars assigned to state universities. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 41 years old, with an average of 25 years. Five of the teachers completed MA studies; the rest held BA degrees from different disciplines. Eight of them were TESOL, TEFL or CELTA certified. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 6 years, with an average of 2 years.

The length of residence in Turkey varied from 7 months to 5 years, with an average length of 15 months. Among the participants, 18 individuals had resided in a foreign country other than Turkey for more than three months. Thirteen participants indicated that they came from the East Coast of the US; 12 participants came from the Midwest; and the remaining 6 came from the West Coast. In Turkey, 17 participants resided in the West; 7 participants lived in Central Anatolia; and the remaining 7 lived in Eastern Turkey.

3.2. Data collection instruments

The data for this study were collected using a Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), a Turkish Language Proficiency Test (TLPT), and follow-up interview questions. The SCAS was a five-point Likert-type scale consisting of 29 items adapted from Ward and Kennedy (1999) and Wilson (2013). The items ranged from everyday situations to host country perspectives and values. The participants indicated how much difficulty they had experienced with regard to each item, with a lower rating reflecting a greater ease of adaptation to the host culture (e.g. 'Making Turkish friends', 1 = no difficulty). At the end of the scale, participants listed the five items that they thought were most important to cultural adaptation. The TLPT, developed by Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (ÇOMU) Institute of Turkish Language Teaching (TÖMER), consisted of 25 questions, including 21 multiple-choice and 4 true/false/not given question. In order to triangulate the quantitative data, a set of follow-up interview questions were given to the participants. Their responses revealed their implicit feelings and thoughts about adapting to a new culture and provided more detailed information about their experiences in Turkey.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative data of the study

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to explore possible differences within the group. The analysis mainly focused on finding the relationship between the mean scores of the SCAS (see Table 1), the TLPT, and various data gathered from the participants' demographic information.

To examine the effect of language on adaptation, participants were grouped into three categories according to their TLPT scores. ANOVA on participants' mean values from the SCAS with reference to the TLPT scores did not indicate significant differences among these three groups, $F_{(2, 28)} = 13.99$, $p > .05$. Furthermore, the participants' length of stay and their scores on the TLPT were not significantly correlated, Pearson's $r(31) = .06$, $p > .05$. However, an investigation of the items on the scale revealed that their TLPT scores were significantly correlated to 'obtaining services that they require', Pearson's $r(31) = .38$, $p = .04$.

Additionally, no significant relationship was found between mean scores of the SCAS and the following variables:

- Education level (independent samples t-test: $t(31) = 0.435$, $p > .05$)
- City of residence in Turkey (ANOVA: $F_{(2, 28)} = 0.89$, $p > .05$)
- City of origin in the U.S. (ANOVA: $F_{(2, 28)} = 12.14$, $p > .05$)

- Length of stay in Turkey (independent samples t-test: $t(31) = 0.20$, $p > .05$)
- Gender (independent samples t-test: $t(31) = 1.448$, $p > .05$)
- Teaching certificate (independent samples t-test: $t(31) = 0.225$, $p > .05$)
- Teaching experience (independent samples t-test: $t(31) = 0.171$, $p > .05$)

However, a significant difference was found between those participants who had previously lived abroad in a country other than Turkey for more than three months and those who had not ($t(31) = -2.122$, $p = .04$, $d = -0.78$ overall scores with a large effect size).

After completing the SCAS, the participants were asked to indicate the five most important items on the SCAS in descending order of importance. The top five rated items were Item 1 ($M = 2.55$), Item 17 ($M = 2.26$), Item 10 ($M = 1.94$), Item 9 ($M = 1.61$), and Item 28 ($M = 1.13$), respectively. However, according to Table 1, the participants experienced the most difficulty with the items 7, 18, 9, 23, and 12. The only common item is Item 9 (Making yourself understood).

Table 1. The items in the scale in descending order ($N = 31$)

Items	M	SD
7. Dealing with bureaucracy.	3.29	.783
18. Obtaining the services I require.	3.03	.983
9. Making yourself understood.	2.74	.930
23. Understanding the Turkish political system.	2.71	1.071
12. Dealing with someone who is unpleasant.	2.71	.864
10. Seeing things from a Turkish point of view.	2.58	1.025
24. Maintaining your personal interests.	2.58	1.259
21. Interacting with members of the opposite sex.	2.55	1.028
13. Understanding jokes or humor.	2.48	1.180
4. Dealing with people in authority.	2.45	.888
3. Following rules or regulations.	2.39	.882
1. Making Turkish friends.	2.39	.844
8. Understanding the Turkish value system.	2.32	.909
28. Adapting to the pace of life.	2.26	1.154
29. Understanding other people's emotions.	2.26	.855
17. Understanding ethnic or cultural differences.	1.97	.875
19. Worshipping in your own religion.	1.97	1.278
16. Dealing with people staring at you.	1.94	.892
22. Finding your way around.	1.87	.718
27. Understanding family relationships.	1.87	.806
15. Going to community events or social gatherings.	1.87	.806
14. Adapting to housing situations.	1.84	.735
5. Managing your work responsibilities.	1.74	.815
25. Dealing with the climate.	1.74	1.125
6. Using the public transportation system.	1.74	.773
20. Adapting to local worship practices.	1.68	.832
26. Understanding other people's body language (i.e. gestures, facial expression, etc.).	1.68	.599
11. Going shopping for daily necessities.	1.45	.675
2. Finding food that you enjoy.	1.42	.886

4.2. Qualitative data of the study

The participants were asked a set of interview questions to reveal their implicit thoughts and feelings about Turkish culture and their SCA. Using context analysis, responses were grouped according to common themes:

The participants emphasized a total of 15 differences regarding the first cultural differences that they noticed. They focused mainly on three points: hospitality, religion, and appearance in terms of style of dress. They also mentioned other differences such as gender relations, concepts of cleanliness, social life, eating habits, and curiosity. Concerning the greatest cultural differences, the participants reported differences such as individualism/communalism, family relations, and directness/indirectness.

To measure the consistency between the SCAS and the written interview responses, the participants were requested to indicate the difficulties they had experienced adapting to Turkish culture. The comments included a wide variety of issues, most commonly related to interacting with people, language barriers, gender relations, and bureaucracy. According to Table 1, the highest mean score on the SCAS belongs to the Item 7, 'Dealing with bureaucracy', which was also supported in the interview responses. Additionally participants reported difficult interacting with people, confirmed by the Items 9, 'Making yourself understood', and 12, 'Dealing with someone who is unpleasant', which have the third and fifth highest ratings respectively in Table 1. On the other hand, although the participants reported language barriers as one of the biggest difficulties in adapting to Turkish culture, no correlation was found between Turkish language proficiency and cultural adaptation.

Another point that the interview focused on was the participants' efforts to foster their understanding of Turkish culture. Most participants reported interacting with Turkish people along with other strategies such as reading Turkish books, novels, or newspapers, watching Turkish television, and learning the Turkish language. Among the participants, 16 of them claimed that they were trying to learn Turkish to facilitate their cultural adaptation. However, the analyses conducted in this study did not indicate significant correlation between language level and adaptation.

The participants were asked whether it was difficult to maintain their social lives in Turkey. Their comments revealed that they could maintain their social lives thanks to Turkish friends and American and/or English-speaking friends. Some participants reported that being foreign also contributed positively to their social lives, as they attracted more attention and people were eager to meet them. However, about half the respondents stated that it was difficult to maintain their social lives as they had in American due challenges making friends, Turkish people's commitment to their families, a lack of Turkish language skills, and different norms regarding gender relations. According to Item 24 on the SCAS, the participants had moderate difficulty 'maintaining their personal interests' ($M = 2.58$), reflecting their split interview responses.

The participants were also asked to reflect on the characteristics of Turkish society. Eleven participants found Turkish people difficult to understand due to several differences including communication strategies (directness/indirectness), gender relations, body language, and sense of humor. They noted that Turkish people were curious, emotional and even hypocritical. On the other hand, 20 participants reported that Turkish people were not difficult to understand since they were open-minded and direct. These participants emphasized that there were more similarities than differences with their native culture in terms of people's reactions, habits, and character. According to Table 1, the majority of the participants found body language easy to understand (Item 26; $M = 1.68$) but experienced moderate difficulty understanding other people's emotions (Item 17; $M = 2.26$).

Twenty-one participants reported feeling isolated or alienated, especially at the workplace, because they were foreign and did not know Turkish. Their foreignness also attracted looks or stares on the street, which caused them discomfort. On the other hand, 10 participants stated that they had been received hospitably because they were foreign. Some participants also reported that the presence of other Americans or/and English-speakers made them feel more comfortable.

As noted in the Quantitative Data section above, the only significant statistical difference measured was between participants who had previously lived abroad and those who had not, with the former experiencing more difficulty adjusting to Turkish culture. To examine the reasons behind this difference, a set of follow-up questions was given to the participants who had lived abroad before coming to Turkey. Thirteen of the 18 participants responded.

According to the findings, the greatest cultural differences in the prior host countries were rather similar to those in Turkey. Most respondents focused on communalism, family relations, gender relations, and politeness, including directness. When asked to indicate the difficulties of the previous host culture, a majority of respondents reported communalism, language, gender relations, pace of life, making friends, and dealing with people. Similarities can be observed between these responses and those of the original survey regarding adaptation to Turkish culture. Only two participants stated that they did not experience much difficulty adapting to the prior host culture. Supporting the quantitative data, many participants stated that they experienced greater difficulty adapting to Turkish culture than their previous host culture due to language, communalism, and gender norms in Turkey. Furthermore, half of them reported that there were more noticeably differences between Turkish culture and American culture than there had been with their previous host culture.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Perhaps the most striking finding in this study was 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 SCA. Although Selmer (2006), Shi and Wang (2014), Tonsing (2014), and Ward and Kennedy (1993) found a significant correlation between SCA and language proficiency, the results of Mapp's (2012) and Lai's (2010) studies support the findings of the present study. While the participants perceived Turkish language as important for understanding Turkish culture and making friends, this was not supported in the data. However, because a strong correlation was found between TLPT scores and responses to SCAS Item (18), 'Obtaining the services I require', language proficiency might facilitate daily life—an important measure but still one distinct from SCA.

Furthermore, the adaptation of the participants, all of whom were native English speakers, might have been facilitated by the prevalence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in Turkey, suggesting that knowledge of a language is not necessary to understand the culture associated with it. Furthermore, many participants reported having English-speaking friends. Such friendships could alleviate the feelings of isolation and loneliness commonly associated with culture shock and sociocultural maladaptation. Finally, because SCA is understood in terms of the individual's ability to manage daily life in the host culture, ELF would facilitate daily tasks by allowing the participants to communicate their needs in English or to rely on English cognates in Turkish, of which there are a growing number. That Turkish language ability does not play a significant role in the SCA process could be contributed to the prevalence of ELF.

A distinction between perceived knowledge and actual knowledge could be significant when examining SCA. In the SCAS, participants were asked to self-report their experiences; thus, their SCAS scores could be understood as perceived knowledge because they were without reference to an external source. TLP, however, was assessed through the administration of a test compiled by a branch of prominent Turkish language education institute in Turkey. In this sense, the results measured not the individual's perceived knowledge but their 'actual' score evaluated by a standardized test. Here, it should be noted that several participants expressed concerns with the test, arguing that it was not an accurate representation of their language abilities. Two of their comments are below:

- "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." [P10]
- "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." [P28]

Primary among their complaints was that the exam measured grammar and written skills, whereas their language abilities primarily consisted of the oral skills they used in daily conversations with members of the host society. Assuming the results of the TLP test can be considered as an accurate measure of one's language ability, these comments suggest an elevated sense of language proficiency among the participants. An inflated understanding of one's own language abilities could lead to an inflated understanding of one's SCA as well, suggesting that results of the SCAS indicate a level of adaptation beyond that actually experienced by the participants. Alternatively, higher oral language ability could be contributed to the use of body language and inference from context clues. All

in all, these comments and results highlight the need for greater self-reflection during the SCA process to reduce the gap between perceived and actual knowledge. Furthermore, reflections on actions during the cultural adaptation process may lead to further and better understandings of cultural components and dynamics of the host society.

Alternatively, perhaps the participants were correct in stating that their Turkish communication skills, specifically their oral skills, were stronger than the results reflected in the TLPT. The results may indication that proficiency—at least as traditionally assessed within the field of foreign language teaching—is not necessary for SCA. If the goal of language learning is to communicate with members of the target society, perhaps we are not assessing the right skills of language. The participants could conceivably possess 'enough' oral production and comprehension skills to get by. If so, this suggests that high lexical knowledge and in-depth grammar competency do not necessarily contribute to cultural adaptation but may be superfluous for daily life and conversation. In fact, this idea is corroborated by the lack of correlation between length of stay and proficiency in the host language, a result also found by Mapp (2012) and Lai (2010).

The results of the SCAS strongly support Lai's (2010) findings in terms of the most difficult items for SCA. In both studies, the most difficult item was 'dealing with bureaucracy', followed by 'making yourself understanding', and 'obtaining the services you require', worded in Lai's survey as 'dealing with unsatisfactory service'. Additionally, the following items were among the top 10 most difficult in both studies: 'dealing with someone who is unpleasant', 'seeing things from a Taiwanese/Turkish point of view', 'understanding jokes and humor', and 'understanding the Taiwanese/Turkish political system'. In total, 7 of the top 10 items were the same in both studies. Additionally, Lai found that members of individualistic societies, like American society, tend to minimize differences between cultures, a tendency seen in the interview results of the present study, in which many participants insisted that there were more similarities than differences between Turkish and American culture.

5.1. Limitations of the study

Due to the low sample size, generalizability of the results is limited. Furthermore, a majority of the participants were female (n = 25). Although no statistical difference was observed between genders in this study, a larger number of male participants could have revealed the impact of gender on the SCA process. Additionally, the sample population was relatively young, lacking both long-term teaching experience and residency in Turkey. A more diverse sample population could have deepened the results.

5.2. Implications for further research

This study measured written language proficiency. Further research could trace the possible relationship between language proficiency and SCA by examining the participants' oral communication skills and/or their perceived knowledge of the host language rather than by conducting a detailed language test. Such research would shed light on the potential gap between perceived knowledge and actual knowledge; it would also examine the claims made by some participants regarding written and oral communication styles.

Acknowledgements

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