

# The Effect of Culture Integrated Language Courses on Foreign Language Education

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When examined carefully, it is seen that there is not an available and detailed curriculum designed for the aim of foreign language teaching with integrated cultural items of the target language in the programs of the schools under authority of the Ministry of Education and Turkish higher education institutions. In recent years, the specialists have an agreement on the issue that foreign language instruction should be carried out by the means of target language's history, literature, geography and also its social characteristics. The idiom "it's raining cats and dogs" can be misinterpreted by a Turkish student without the knowledge of this idiom's story in English history as "Cats and dogs are pouring down from the sky". An important French architectural building "Saint Mary Cathedral, Notre Dame de Paris" can be misunderstood as "Our Parisian Woman" by a student who is unfamiliar with French culture. Both examples show that encountered foreign words and phrases can be misunderstood and mostly these words are perceived and interpreted according to learners' own cultural figures. The aims of this study are to show the significance of culture-based foreign language courses and to make a contribution to the literature by regarding the views of researchers believing that culture and language are inseparable concepts. In this context, Erzincan University French Language Teaching Department students' opinions on the relation between culture and language learning were received with the application of qualitative structured written response method. Then, document analysis of written comments was evaluated. Consequently, the analysis on the participants' written comments showed that a culture integrated foreign language course can make positive contributions to students' learning, language learning process and learning environment.

*Keywords:* culture, foreign language education, culture integrated language course

## Introduction

Language is an instrument of conveying feelings and thoughts. This instrument is developed within the society in which it is mostly used. All feelings and thoughts of a society are poured down into the language goblet and this holy goblet filled with language is presented to further generations. This presentation is carried out only by the language itself. As a society's language and cultural values of that society have similar characteristics, every language should reflect the culture of the society in which the language is spoken, and reversely every culture should contain linguistic figures. This can be thought as a chicken-egg question which could not be answered yet and also would not be answered forever. Each language is a gate opening new cultures and it is important to be acquainted with other cultures in the relations between the civilizations (Köse,

2005). The term “culture” is defined in the planner’s guide of The National Centre for Cultural Competence as:

An integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations. (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000)

As understood from the definition, the culture concept is not a single case, on the contrary, it is a combination of many phenomena dealt with social characteristics. In fact, culture and language can be called as an iceberg according to JIANG (2000). In his definition, the language is the part of iceberg seen above the surface while the culture is a part remaining under the water which does not appear. In other words, this sentence says that all comments made only by looking at noticeable portion of the iceberg would remain incomplete. According to Crawford-Lange and Langes’ expression, the inevitable relation between culture and language is such as, “... language and culture are no longer just ‘going steady’; they are truly engaged. Marriage has not taken place yet, thought ...” (Crawford-Lange & Langes, 1984, p. 144).

In language education field, education applied only by considering linguistic perspective would be inefficient just like the comments about noticeable portion of the iceberg. Scientists paying more attention to this topic such as Klippel (1994), Pulverness (1999) and Hedge (2004) stated that language and culture are inseparable parts of a whole. According to Hedge (2004), the amount of relation between language and culture plays a significant role in determining these concepts. Language itself gains a more broaden meaning by means of its relation with culture and also when the language is the reflection of that culture, on the other hand, culture can be thought as a key or an instrument for all languages. Kramersch (2004), describing culture just as shared thoughts of members of a society, stated that thoughts are shaped with language and they are transferred to others by the same way with the language, and she added that language is not only a different encoding which should be taught but also a transfer agent of the live styles.

Fink (2003) and Mairitsch (2003), having common beliefs with Kramersch, expressed that in foreign language education, only teaching rules of that language is not adequate, and emphasized that social, cultural, political and economical structure of target language and cultural awareness of students who are desired to learn that language are necessary in this process.

The significance of teaching cultural features in foreign language education has become considerable important according to developments in foreign language education methods. At the end of 1970s when the traditional methods and teacher-centered approaches aiming at teaching language structure and grammar rules were abandoned, the importance of cultural norms was noticed in our society with the application of methods centering the student in instruction (Pulverness, 2000).

In the following years, scientists highlighted the need of adding cultural motifs of target language in foreign language curriculum (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2003). Scientists such as Byram and Kramersch expressed the continuous relation between culture and language in their works done in the past two decades (Byram, 1989, 1994, 1997; Kramersch, 1988, 1993, 2001; Kramersch, Cain, & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996). Kramersch, emphasizing that culture and language are inseparable parts of a whole at every opportunity, said that teachers should use every chance combining the culture and language without taking any risk in foreign language education process (Kramersch, 2001).

Cultural features which should be given importance in foreign language education process are summarized

in fundamental seven items in European Council's (Conseil de l'Europe) report presented in the year 2000. These are elements related to a community's daily life, social life standards, people's relationships with each others, social values and beliefs, body language, social traditions and lastly behaviors about social customs (*Common European Framework in Its Political and Educational Context*, 2000, pp. 102-103). These elements would be beneficial when they are supported with photographs, videos, songs, voice records, reading texts and internet containing target language's cultural motifs.

Kitao (1991), drawing attention on teaching the target culture in foreign language classes, explained advantages of these courses like below:

(1) Those students learn that the target culture is a cause for them to learn the target language;

(2) Although course books used in foreign language education contain so-called logical examples from daily life, these examples can be perceived by students as fictional ones. In this context, learners can associate language forms and its abstract voices with natural persons and places by learning target languages' culture;

(3) Cultural studies not only increase students' concerns on target language's country but also raise students' motivation towards learning;

(4) Teaching cultural features in education plays an important role in general education process of students as well as its advantages for foreign language education at the same time. With cultural studies, students can learn the target country's history, geography, cuisine and etc.

Roswell city located in Georgia State of US has foreign language curriculum for schools aiming at transferring cultural features. Application results of Georgia Primary School Foreign Language Program, aiming at teaching Japanese at Mimosa Elementary School in that city, showed that the most significant advance at students was their progress of developing positive attitudes towards another language and culture (Uchihara, 2001). With the help of this program, it was observed that students having great enthusiasm towards Japanese culture were motivated towards learning the language which they want to learn, their concern related to target language raised up and they spent a more successful learning period.

In addition, there are some other examples of culture integrated foreign language classes in some countries. Paris Language Centre (École des langues à Paris) constructed under the authority of Paris V Sorbonne University and French education programs having courses called as "French culture project and language learning" at Southern Illinois University of US use cultural-based language education curriculum. Also, American Nevada State Ministry of Education pays attention on the issue of the significance of these courses at the meeting held in June 1997, by the attendance of employer representatives, educators and parents (Nevada State Department of Education, 1999).

When overlooked the application of target culture in language classes in our country, it is seen that there is not any language course titled with culture, and target culture is only presented to students in the way of integrated a few tasks in course books. In recent years, though course-books and their other materials are prepared according to target cultural norms by considering its effects, teachers may be criticized from the point of their prior experiences about teaching and inadequate education levels. However, such problems occur also in Turkish universities. At university foreign language departments, target cultures are only presented to pre-service teachers with a few courses like literature, language acquisition and linguistics. It is unarguable that these lessons look only from one point of the view teaching culture and so it is seen that bachelors' degree education has some inefficiencies.

Thus, culture integrated language courses would be more helpful for using language teaching materials

appropriately by raising up more effective pre-service students for further generations. By this study, it is stated that culture integrated language courses which are neglected so much in our country are a need for the development of effective education.

### Methods and Research Design

The data in this study were obtained during the fall semester of the academic year 2009-2010 from totally 38 students, 12 preparatory class students and 26 first-grade students, who are enrolled in Erzincan University, Faculty of Education, French Language Teaching Department. The participants of this study are formed with 15 male and 23 female students who have common cultural characteristics and almost the same age group (20-24). These students have graduated from foreign-language-based high schools and they went up to the university by entering YDS (foreign language exam in English) for those graduated from foreign language sections of high schools.

Four open-ended questions were prepared by the researchers in order to measure the participants' readiness level on culture-language relation and cultural awareness. The first two of four questions aim at measuring the effects of culture-integrated language courses on foreign language education process and determining which language skill is mostly affected positively from culture integrated courses. The goals of the last two questions are to find out the results of acquainting with a foreign culture for the students as a general and to measure their awareness on target culture. Three of these categorized questions (Q-1, Q-3 and Q-4) are in "Yes/No" question type and the other (Q-2) is divided into four groups of language skills. After choosing only one alternative of each question, students are needed to write their detailed ideas on why they choose that answer.

These categorized questions were analyzed firstly by calculating the frequency and percentage degrees belonging to each reply. Then, the students' detailed written responses about their replies were interpreted from the perspective of these two categorized questions' aims.

### Results

The data related to the Q-1, "Is it beneficial to have prior knowledge about French culture before beginning foreign language courses? Explain.", and the Q-2, "What do you think about which language skill (reading, writing, speaking or listening) is affected mostly from foreign language instruction process benefiting from French culture in a positive way? Please explain why.", which were asked to measure language skills of the participants, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *Language Skills*

Question number	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Q-1	Yes	36	94.68
	No	2	5.26
Q-2	Reading	6	15.78
	Writing	7	18.41
	Speaking	24	63.12
	Listening	1	2.63

*Note.* Values do not add to 100% due to rounding.

As shown in Table 1, when investigated responses given the Q-1, it is seen that the vast majority of the participants agree with the thought that having prior knowledge about target language's culture will be helpful

for acquiring the new language at a significant level. According to the frequencies and percentage values of the Q-2, more than half of the participants have the belief that culture-integrated French courses will develop their speaking skills mostly.

Cultural awareness of participants is evaluated with the Q-3 and Q-4. The data about frequency and percentage degrees related to the Q-3, “Does having knowledge about a culture except from your own culture make positive contribution to your daily life? Explain.”, and the Q-4, “Do you live a cultural shock when you visit a community which you have learnt prior knowledge on their cultural features? Please explain briefly.”, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Cultural Awareness*

Question number	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Q-3	Yes	37	97.31
	No	1	2.63
Q-4	Yes	6	15.78
	No	32	84.16

*Note.* Values do not add to 100% due to rounding.

According to Table 2, in the Q-3, nearly all participants stated that they would gain positive contribution from getting knowledge about a different culture for the quality of their daily lives. The answers given to the Q-4 say that students believe in the thought that they do not live any cultural shock in a foreign language atmosphere if they are equipped with target language’s cultural features. The students’ replies given the open-ended questions also verify these numeric data shown in Tables 1 and 2. The analyses of students’ written responses and a few samples from students’ writings are dealt in the discussion section.

## Discussion

When findings of this study obtained with written interview technique are considered, the analyses of the students’ responses given the Q-1 measuring the effects of culture-integrated language courses on language skills show that knowing a society’s culture could motivate the students affirmatively in the process of their language learning and also it would help learners to live more effective in learning process. Some of the students’ opinions supporting these inferences are like “If we learn that culture, it will be different for us and in that time we will like that language very much”. Another student also wrote that, “Learning the target language’s culture increase our motivation for learning that language”.

As stated by language experts, such as Gardner and Lambert examining the effects of motivation on language learning in their studies (1959; 1965; 1972), teaching cultural items make the process of language learning for learners easier. In addition to these, cultural items provide knowledge on living inner dynamics which are not narrated in written texts of that language. A student verifies this idea by stating that, “We can learn proverbs and idioms which do not exist in that language’s dictionaries with the help of cultural items”.

Today, unfortunately most of teachers do not attach equal importance to four language skills, and speaking skill is the most neglected aspect of the four skills in foreign language instruction. Also in Turkey, there are some inadequacies in teaching speaking skill in all degrees of education. In that context, culture-integrated language courses can be helpful for shy students refraining from taking part in speaking activities to overcome their afraid of speaking. This overcoming speaking inhibition situation was stated by a student like:

On talking remember of that society the gestures of facial expression of the speakers are very important to understand what he wants to explain. Each community's body language varies from one culture to another, in that case, if I know these conditions, I will be very comfortable in communication with others and I will cope with speaking shyness.

Q-2's results show that reading and writing skills have approximate values and these can be interpreted that both skills are very closely related to each others. An average student who is not familiar with the target language's culture could not be able to give the original meaning of some words, such as "Le Pont Neuf, l' Arc de Triomphe, The House of Lords, Big Ben etc.", and they cannot fully understand any text containing cultural items or could not translate perfectly a passage into their own language. Target language's geography, significant places, important historical heroes and its literature do not express any sense for a student unfamiliar with target language's culture. In this way, culture-integrated language courses motivate students for learning by filling the gaps towards cultural knowledge of target language. These lessons can help to develop students' language skills especially speaking ability.

The assessment about the levels of learners' cultural awareness emphasizes that it is important to become aware of some similarities and distinctions between learners' own culture and target language culture for social life. As a human being grows and develops in the cultural norms of his/her own society, he/she learns the cultural dynamics unconsciously. That human being only becomes aware of these unconscious learnt cultural values in such a community that he/she is not familiar. Some of the students' responses given the Q-3 evaluating cultural awareness are like that, "I would find out that I have learnt my culture unconsciously and by comparing both cultures I would notice my cultural motifs one more time". Another student says in this issue that, "Getting knowledge about another society's living styles, their points of views and their evaluation ways on any issue cause people to gain different points of views on world". In this context, these culture integrated language courses would be beneficial for the learners to acquire an ability of comparing the similarities and distinctions between both cultures and by using this ability, learners would take more constant and reasonable steps in becoming more successful individuals.

The answers given to the Q-4 state that students equipped with cultural motifs of a foreign language have beliefs that they do not live any cultural shock when they are in a foreign country where the language they want to learn is used. An individual not living a cultural shock in a foreign country would have the ability of comparing and noticing the differences between both cultures. Therefore, such a learner would communicate with others reluctantly, get rid of from prejudices about the target culture easily and have a more positive world-view by the help of culture-integrated courses. A student response stated this situation, such as, "I absolutely won't live any cultural shock, in reverse I can learn lost of things by talking with foreigners".

On taking into consideration findings of this study, there are some limitations related to participants, research design and data collection procedures. The participants in this study are limited to only 38 French Language Teaching Department students chosen from preparatory and first grade classes. In addition to this, only using qualitative-based research design and limited numbers of open-ended questions measuring the foreign language and culture relation are shortcomings of this study. The results of this study can be generalized to all language learning fields by enhancing the population number and adding other groups of foreign language learners such English, German. With more comprehensive questions on foreign language and culture relation, this issue can be explained in a more detailed way from the perspectives of learners. However, the findings can be interpreted as a contribution to the field studying this issue and be helpful for the other researchers at the same time.

By this study, students' perceptions about the effects of culture integrated foreign language courses on language education process were investigated with written interview method. As a result, it is found that culture integrated foreign language courses are very closely related with student motivation and the courses can help learners gain a more advanced level of speaking skills by motivating them towards the education. In addition, from another perspective, these courses can be helpful for language teachers in generating imaginative ideas in creating modern language classes and bringing up foreign language students having broad visions about the world.

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