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Reasons and Opinions of Students Learning English as a Foreign Language about Learning the Target Culture

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Abstract

This study aims to compare the opinions of optional and compulsory preparatory class students about learning English and the target culture. Furthermore, students' reasons to learn English are examined in terms of independent variables (gender, going abroad and status of prep class). In the present study, data are gathered through a questionnaire in the fall term of 2021-2022 academic year. Data are obtained from 150 participants and analyzed via SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics are conducted. Findings show that students are motivated to learn English both instrumentally and in an integrative way. In addition, there is no statistically significant effect of independent variables on the reasons to study English and the attitudes towards learning English and the target culture. As a result, this current study offers guidance for teachers while they are preparing their teaching materials. That is, teachers should consider not only the culture of British or American but also they should focus on other cultures.

Keywords: Foreign Language, Target Culture, Opinions of Learners, Reasons to Learn English

1. Introduction

Culture has attracted attention of many scholars and anthropologists through history. Their studies mainly were concerned with identification and explanation of culture. Also, incorporating culture into language teaching context has become the concern of language teachers for many years (Genc & Bada, 2005). It has become a vital topic in education when topics content and culture in language learning and teaching process have been considered (Byram & Grundy, 2003). The content of language refers to "speech acts, functions of language and the analysis of needs, for example, have led to a greater awareness of learners as social actors in specific relationships with the language they are learning, relationships which are determined by the sociopolitical and geopolitical circumstances in which they live" (Byram & Grundy, 2003, p.1). On the other hand, culture is categorized as a difficult notion to define with its many facets. For example, Brown (2007, p. 188) defines culture as "a way of life". "It is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others". A comprehensive definition about culture learning is suggested by Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein and Colby (2000, p. 4) as in the following: "Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively".

Genc and Bada (2005) discuss the importance of different cultures as “ethnocentricity limits the self, hence individuals have to look at themselves from a different perspective to surmount such limitation; thus, culture classes are vital in enabling individuals to see themselves from a different point of view” (p. 75). Therefore, everyone needs to learn and understand people and their traditions, beliefs and opinions.

Paige et al. (2000) also support the importance of learning a different culture and state that learners, who have information about cultures and some experience related to different cultures and have been motivated to learn cultures of different nations thanks to this knowledge and experience, begin to behave in the way which is compatible with this knowledge and feeling. They take initiative to learn firstly themselves as a cultural being, then the effect of culture on communication, behavior and identity, cross-cultural issues, particular culture and lastly the strategies to become an effective culture learner. When learners commence to learn culture, they become more interested in learning it because Tucker and Lambert (1972) state that learning culture attracts learners’ attention more than studying on linguistic aspects. According to them, the fact that learners are fed up with studying foreign languages results from linguistic repetitions and drills. On the contrary, learners have a desire to know the target nation, their way of life and to communicate with them, which motivates them to learn the language.

Similarly, Kim (2020) argues that language learning includes not only learning linguistic items and vocabulary but also learning the culture of other societies in which language is used in order to have experience in a different culture and to become a whole person. Thus, language learning is a tool for the development of humans (Kim, 2020). Besides Kim, Thanasoulas (2001) notes that communication takes place between the speakers effectively based on not only communicative competence but cultural competence, which helps speakers to respect and empathize with others and learning a foreign language includes learning the culture of this language. This will impede the misunderstanding and miscommunication in the conversation. Furthermore, learning culture “will affect their enthusiasm, attitude and motivation for language learning” (Göçen & Özdemirel, 2020, p. 80).

Consequently, culture incorporates members of a group (Brown, 2007), it helps the learners to survive in the new context in order to be a “globalized citizen” (Kuru-Gonen & Sağlam, 2012, p.26). Due to the other important concepts such as World Englishes as an international language (Matsuda, 2003), pluralism (Yumatle, 2015), global mobility in ELT (Codo, 2018) and multi-culturalism (Song, 2020), culture teaching is a must to see differences and similarities between different cultures (Genc & Bada, 2005), to become a whole person (Kim, 2020), to behave accordingly in a foreign culture (Thanasoulas, 2001), and to increase language learning motivation (Göçen & Özdemirel, 2020)

1.1 Previous Studies on Culture Teaching in Language Learning Process

In the literature, there are various studies on culture teaching in foreign language learning in Turkey (Belli, 2018; Genc & Bada, 2005; Göçen & Özdemirel, 2020; Karakuş, 2021; Kuru-Gonen & Sağlam, 2012; Tomak, 2012) and in second language learning abroad (Byrd, 2016; Sasani, 2018). All these studies will be summarized below.

While focusing on studies conducted abroad, Byrd (2016) carried out a survey research with 315 sixth- to twelfth-graders in the USA with an aim of investigating the perceptions of students about culturally relevant teaching with regard to their academic success and racial attitudes. These two independent variables affected students’ perceptions in a positive way. Additionally, Sasani (2018) revealed the opinions of non-native English teachers in the UK about intercultural competence through interviews and classroom observations. They had positive attitudes but they did not know how to integrate it into the class systematically and they had some uncertainties such as time limit and students’ language level.

Two of the studies above are based on culture teaching in a second language teaching context, but our concern in this study is teaching culture in the foreign language context. Thus, studies carried out in Turkish context will be discussed and the underlying reason behind this current study will be presented.

Genc and Bada (2005) conducted a study with 38 students from ELT department at a university. After they had a culture course, they answered a questionnaire. Findings demonstrated “a culture class is significantly beneficial in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness, changing attitudes towards native and target societies, and

contribution to the teaching profession” (p.81). Similarly, Belli (2018) investigated the attitudes of ELT students towards culture learning and teaching in the foreign language classes. According to the findings, majority of them had positive attitudes in terms of culture teaching and they believed that culture teaching would help students to be aware of different culture and they would become more tolerable to the differences.

Tomak (2012) examined perceptions of English language teachers about target culture teaching and data were gathered through the questionnaire and interviews. Results showed that teachers could not integrate target culture into their classes due to the time restriction in the intense curriculum and the researcher suggests that teachers should be trained how to integrate target culture in in-service teacher training. In the same vein, Kuru-Gonen and Sağlam (2012) aimed to find out teachers’ ideas about what they think and do in terms of culture teaching amid foreign language teaching. Findings showed that teachers knew the importance of culture teaching in foreign language classes. However, due to the curricular limitations, they could not integrate culture teaching into their classes.

Apart from opinions of ELT students and teachers about culture teaching and learning, Karakuş (2021) examined 22 foreign language course books in terms of world, target, and local cultures and cross-cultural comparisons. She found out that foreign language course books include mainly target culture, which refers to the lack of different cultural elements from world and local cultures.

Another different study in Turkish context is the study of Göçen and Özdemirel (2020), in which metaphorical perceptions of 180 students about Turkish culture who were studying Turkish as a foreign language in Turkey were revealed through the images and drawings. Content analysis method was employed in the study. Students identified Turkish culture with 106 metaphors under seven categories and they had positive attitudes toward learning Turkish culture. It might be concluded that “learners’ drawings that learning a language in the country/countries where it is spoken as the native language helps learning the culture. It can be inferred that there is a call for doing in-class instructional activities related to daily life and involving some extracurricular activities in teaching processes” (p.101).

To sum up, considering the target culture teaching and learning studies in the literature, it is concluded that there is a lack of research which concentrates on the comparison of opinions of students who learn English as a foreign language in a compulsory prep class and an optional prep class. The aim of the current study is to examine the attitudes towards learning culture of optional preparatory class students and compulsory preparatory class students. Furthermore, whether their reasons to learn English, gender, going abroad and status of prep class affect their attitudes towards learning a different culture will be revealed. The following research questions will frame this study.

RQ1: What are the reasons of students to learn English?

RQ2: Do the students’ gender, going abroad and status of prep class affect their reasons to study English?

RQ3: What attitudes do the students have towards learning English language and culture?

RQ4: Do the students’ gender, going abroad and status of prep class affect their attitudes towards learning English language and culture?

RQ5: Do students’ reasons to study English affect their attitudes towards learning English language and culture?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study is based on a survey design in which a questionnaire is used to gather data from participants about their perceptions, behaviors and attitudes (Creswell, 2012). In this study, students’ reasons to learn English and their attitudes towards language and culture learning were revealed considering their gender, going abroad and status of prep class.

2.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Turkey. 150 students participated in this study. 107 out of these students are studying English in an optional preparatory class (their majors vary from engineering to health) while 43 students are studying English in a compulsory preparatory class (their major is English Language and Teaching) (See Table 2). The number of male participants (n=89) surpasses the number of female students (n=61) (See Table 1). As it is seen in Table 3, only 20 students have been abroad while 130 students haven't been abroad yet.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics by Gender

		f	%
Valid	Female	61	40.7
	Male	89	59.3
	Total	150	100

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by the Status of Prep Class

		f	%
Valid	Optional prep class	107	71.3
	Compulsory prep class	43	28.7
	Total	150	100

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics by Going Abroad

		f	%
Valid	Not going abroad	130	86.7
	Going abroad	20	13.3
	Total	150	100

2.3 Instrument

In order to gather data in the study, a questionnaire was administered, which was adapted from various studies and used by Güven (2015) in her master's thesis. After piloting and making with necessary changes, she calculated reliability of the questionnaire and it was found as .788 (p. 46). Under demographic information category, a question about "the status of prep class in which students study" was added to the questionnaire in order to compare the ideas of both groups (compulsory and optional prep classes).

The questionnaire consists of 6 parts. First part (reasons to learn English), third part (attitudes towards learning culture), fourth part (teaching topics about the culture) are in the form of 5 point Likert scale. In the second part, students are asked to choose culture/s when they think of English culture. In the fifth part, they are asked to select the materials and activities to learn target culture. Finally, in the sixth part, demographic information such as gender, going abroad and their status of prep class is asked.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

After necessary permission was taken from the school, the questionnaire with the aim of the study was administered to students through Google forms in the fall term of 2021-2022 academic year. Data obtained from questionnaires were fed into a computer through SPSS 25. Afterwards, the data were analyzed using Descriptive and Inferential Statistics (Independent Samples t-Test and regression statistics)

3. Results

This study aimed to examine the attitudes towards learning culture of optional preparatory class students and compulsory preparatory class students. Furthermore, whether their reasons to learn English, gender, going abroad and status of prep class affect their attitudes towards learning a different culture were identified. Findings for each research question will be discussed below.

3.1 What are the Reasons of Students to Learn English?

Table 4: Reasons to Study English

Items	M	SD
To study in other countries	4.35	.919
To pass my classes in my department	4.11	1.075
To communicate with people from other countries	4.69	.592
To find work after graduation	4.72	.648
To get informed about the culture of other countries	4.22	.884
To use the Internet	4.16	.935
To watch movies or TV programs in English	4.48	.825
To take part in the cultural activities arranged by the European Union such as Erasmus and European Voluntary Service	4.58	.797
To listen to music in English	4.17	1.019
To visit other countries	4.81	.473
To follow published materials (books, journals and magazines) in English	4.21	1.012

As it is seen in Table 4 above, questionnaire item “to visit other countries” has the highest mean value ($M=4.81$, $SD=.473$), which is stated as integrative motivation and the lowest mean value refers to the item “to pass my classes in my department” ($M=4.11$, $SD=1.075$), which is categorized as instrumental motivation. The mean value for other items varies between these scores. It could be concluded that students are motivated to learn English both instrumentally and in an integrative way.

3.2 Do the Students' Gender, Going Abroad and Status of Prep Class Affect Their Reasons to Study English?

Table 5: Effect of Gender, Going Abroad and Status of Prep Class on the Reasons to Study English

	<u>Female</u>		<u>Male</u>		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	4.47	.342	4.35	.543	1.636	.104	143.939
Reasons to study English	<u>Going abroad</u>		<u>Not going abroad</u>		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	4.37	.42	4.41	.48	.342	.733	145
	<u>Compulsory prep class</u>		<u>Optional prep class</u>		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	4.50	.394	4.36	.499	-1.676	.096	145

* $p<.05$

An independent samples t-test was carried out in order to find out to what extent gender, going abroad and status of prep class have an effect on the reasons to study English. Findings show that there is not statistically significance difference between females and males ($t(143.939)=1.636$, $p=.104$), between student going abroad and students not going abroad ($t(145)=.342$, $p=.733$), and between students in compulsory prep class and optional prep class ($t(145)=-1.676$, $p=.096$).

3.3 What Attitudes do the Students Have towards Learning English Language and Culture?

Table 6: The Cultures of English Language

Items about the cultures of English language	n	%
Culture of British	118	78.6
Culture of American	116	77.3
Culture of countries in which English is the native language	62	41.3
Culture of countries in which English is the official language	15	10
Culture of countries in which English is spoken as a foreign language	30	20

No particular country's culture

4

2.6

According to Table 6, particularly two different cultures are thought by the students. 78.6% of students choose British culture and 77.3% of them select of American culture when they think of English culture. Also, some of the students (41.3%) think of the cultures of Canada, Australia and New Zealand where English is the native language.

Table 7: Attitudes towards Learning English Language and Culture

Items	M	SD
English language has become a world language rather than that of a particular nation	4.72	.463
It is necessary to have a good command of English that enables communication with foreigners	4.69	.615
English is the most widely used language in international communication.	4.78	.490
English language reflects one country's cultural values	2.17	1.012
To be able to speak good English, it is necessary to know about the culture of countries where English is the native language (America, England, etc.)	3.43	1.167
To have verbal and written communication skills in English has gained importance in each business sector.	4.71	.538
Cultural elements of different world countries should be introduced in English language classes	4.13	.836
Learning about the standards of judgment of other cultures improves our communication skills with people from these cultures	4.31	.687
I would like to learn about the similarities and differences between the cultures of other countries and Turkish culture	4.15	.857
Learning about other cultures is harmful to my own culture	1.76	1.107
In intercultural communication, it is important to know what not to say to whom in different cultures	4.40	.657
Learning about different cultural elements in English language classes makes language learning more interesting	4.20	.824
I do not think it is necessary to learn about the cultures of other countries	2.07	1.161
It's necessary to learn about how people from different countries behave in various circumstances to have better communication with them	4.38	.611
Introducing culture in English language classes teaches to be respectful of other cultures	4.25	.697
Gaining awareness about cultural differences can minimize misunderstandings among people from different cultures.	4.34	.611
During the introduction of different cultural elements in English language classes, I develop a negative reaction	1.72	1.087
Cultural content should be included in English language teaching curriculum	3.95	.873

According to Table 7 above, which shows the items about attitudes towards learning English language and culture, item "English is the most widely used language in international communication" has the highest mean value (M=4.78, SD=.490). The lowest item is "During the introduction of different cultural elements in English language classes, I develop a negative reaction" (M=1.72, SD=1.087). Both of these items as the highest and lowest ones imply that students know the importance of English and the target culture. Thus, they have a positive attitude to learn the language itself and cultural elements of this language.

Table 8: Topics about the Cultures

Items	M	SD
Turkey- life and culture	3.77	1.119
The U.K- life and culture	4.38	.704
The U.S.A. - life and culture	4.32	.721
The countries in which English is the native language - life and culture	4.02	.958
The countries in which English is an official language- life and culture	3.46	1.059

The countries in which English is a foreign language- life and culture	3.66	1.000
Issues related to science and technology	4.31	.727
Daily lifestyle, customs and traditions of different countries	4.32	.729
Issues related to politics	3.27	1.187
Issues related to world history	4.12	.989
Information on different religious practices	3.82	1.105
Communicative aspects like body language and idioms	4.15	.883
Architecture of other countries	4.22	.821
World literature and art	4.05	1.068
Food and clothes of other countries	4.32	.745
Leisure activities and styles of entertainment	4.30	.784
Social and historical aspects of different cultures (national holidays, national heroes, etc.)	4.12	.872

As it is showed in Table 8, item “Life and culture in the U.K” about the topics that students want to learn has the highest mean value ($M=4.38$, $SD=.704$). On the other hand, the lowest mean value refers to the item “Issues related to politics” ($M=3.27$, $SD=1.187$), which yields that students want to learn all the cultural topics mentioned in Table 8 above.

Table 9: Materials and Activities to Learn Culture

Items about the materials and activities to teach culture	n	%
Course book content	93	62
Classroom discussions of cultural experiences	95	63.3
Novels and short stories	69	46
Daily used items such as menus and tickets	68	45.3
Visual elements such as pictures and posters	88	58.6
Video films and documentaries	122	81.3
Newspapers and magazines	55	36.6

According to Table 9, majority of students (%81.3) want to learn culture through video films and documentaries whereas only 36.6% of them would like to learn via newspapers and magazines. That is, students prefer to learn target culture with visual and auditory materials.

3.4 Do the Students' Gender, Going Abroad and Status of Prep Class Affect Their Attitudes towards Learning English Language and Culture?

Table 10: Effect of Gender, Going Abroad and Status of Prep Class on the Attitudes towards Learning English Language and Culture

	Female		Male		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	3.79	.323	3.79	.409	-.037	.970	140
Attitudes towards learning culture	Going abroad		Not going abroad		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	3.84	.463	3.78	.361	-.568	.571	140
	Compulsory prep class		Optional prep class		t	p	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
	3.79	.349	3.79	.387	.075	.940	140

* $p<.05$

An independent samples t-test was run in order to examine whether gender, going abroad and status of prep class affect the attitudes towards learning English language and culture. Findings indicate that there is not statistically significance difference between females and males ($t(140)=-.037$, $p=.970$), between student going abroad and

students not going abroad ($t(140)=-.568, p=.571$), and between students in compulsory prep class and optional prep class ($t(140)=.075, p=.940$).

Table 11: Effect of Gender, Going Abroad and Status of Prep Class on the Topics about the Cultures

		<u>Female</u>		<u>Male</u>				
		M	SD	M	SD	t	p	df
		4.10	.448	3.99	.561	1.219	.225	145
		<u>Going abroad</u>		<u>Not going abroad</u>				
Topics about the cultures		M	SD	M	SD	t	p	df
		3.99	.585	4.04	.511	.387	.699	145
		<u>Compulsory prep class</u>		<u>Optional prep class</u>				
		M	SD	M	SD	t	p	df
		4	.519	4.05	.522	.498	.619	145

* $p<.05$

An independent samples t-test was run in order to identify to what extent gender, going abroad and status of prep class have an impact on the topics about the cultures. As it is seen in Table 9, there is not statistically significance difference between females and males ($t(145)=1.219, p=.225$), between student going abroad and students not going abroad ($t(145)=.387, p=.699$), and between students in compulsory prep class and optional prep class ($t(145)=.498, p=.619$).

3.5 Do Students' Reasons to Study English Affect Their Attitudes towards Learning English Language and Culture?

Table 12: Effect of Reasons to Learn English on the Students' Attitudes towards Learning English Language and Culture

Independent Variables	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error	F Model	p
Reasons to learn English	.423	.179	.173	.331	29.807*	.000

* $p<.05$

A regression analysis was run to identify the effect of reasons to learn English on the students' attitudes towards learning English and culture. Findings show that reasons of students to learn English significantly explain the variation in their attitudes towards learning culture ($F(1,137)=29.807, p=.00$).

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This present study focused on identifying the attitudes towards learning culture of optional preparatory class students and compulsory preparatory class students and their reasons to learn English. Also, the effect of independent variables "gender, going abroad and status of prep class" was examined. Specifically, this study was based on a survey design. In other words, it was a quantitative study. Findings of the study demonstrated the attitudes of students towards culture learning and their reasons to learn English and the effect of the independent variables on these variables.

The most important finding is that students are motivated to learn English both instrumentally and in an integrative way as all the items about their reasons to learn English have high mean values. There is no statistically significant effect of gender, going abroad and status of prep class on the reasons to study English. It is a bit hard to investigate attitudes independent from motivation as they have a close relationship between each other. Therefore, attitudes were investigated in interaction with motivation. Students' reasons to learn English significantly explain the variation in their attitudes towards learning culture. Related to this topic, Gardner and Lambert (1972, cited in Genç & Bada, 2005, p.74) similarly indicate that culture learning has an important role on motivation as learners

become more curious about and interested in target country. They are keen on the culturally based activities such as role-playing, dancing, searching about countries and people. Therefore, learners might give up their ‘stereotyping’, ‘political bias’, and ‘triviality’ towards particular culture (Patrikis, 1988, p.18, cited in Hadley, 1993, p.367).

Especially today common political and psychological movement around the world such as globalized citizen (Kuru-Gonen & Sağlam, 2012), World Englishes as an international language (Matsuda, 2003), pluralism (Yumatle, 2015), global mobility in ELT (Codo, 2018) and multi-culturalism (Song, 2020) make foreign language and its culture crucial. Therefore, learning culture in language learning process places an important role in internalizing the language. That is to say, one can learn how to behave, what to say, how to use language appropriately in different foreign social contexts. This has made integration of culture into English teaching and learning an inevitable part in ELT area over the past four decades. However, thoughts and feelings of language learners towards learning culture are of great importance. According to the findings of the current study, students are aware of the importance of English and the target culture. They have a positive attitude to learn the language itself and cultural elements of this language. However, when they think the target culture, most of them state British culture and American culture. They want to learn about various cultural elements such as life and culture, daily lifestyle, customs and traditions, literature and art, food and clothes, leisure activities and styles of entertainment in the UK and the USA or other countries in which English is a foreign language or an official language. As teachers need to prepare students for their future, by means of the concept “World Englishes” teachers can present “a different way of looking at the language, which is more inclusive, pluralistic, and accepting than the traditional, monolithic view of English in which there is one correct, standard way of using English that all speakers must strive for. In a sense, incorporating World Englishes is like putting on a new pair of glasses” (Matsuda, 2003, p.727)

Another finding of the study shows that there is no statistically significant impact of gender, going abroad and status of prep class on the attitudes towards learning English and culture, and the topics about the cultures. As the participants have positive attitudes towards learning culture, teachers can integrate culture teaching into the course. The teacher can provide students with different cultural materials and events to draw their attention to the language learning. Findings of the study also provide guidance for teachers while they are preparing their materials as students prefer to learn target culture with visual and auditory materials. Consequently, students’ success can also increase as in the study of Rehman and Umar (2019) in which students of the treatment group were taught through intercultural curriculum and they improved their reading comprehension effectively in the target language. Matsuda (2003) suggests “If face-to-face interactions are not possible, teachers can introduce different varieties of English through e-mail exchanges, projects that require students to visit Web sites in various Englishes, or by showing movies and video clips of World Englishes speakers” (p.723). Additionally, Dema and Moeller (2012) conclude that digital tools help teachers to integrate cultural elements into language classroom as they provide a dynamic process with real-life materials. Learning culture makes learners to be motivated and engaged in the process to have cultural awareness and to overcome bias. Kim (2020) suggests that teachers should help learners to take part in the culture and empathize with others while teaching a language and she adds that it is a must in the global World where everything is dynamic.

As for the methodological implications, to make investigation more deeply and findings more precise, a follow-up study might be conducted with interview questions or an experimental study might be designed. Furthermore, another section might be added to the study to measure the success of the students to broaden the research after the experimental study. Finally, the questionnaire might have been applied to more students in various universities, so the validity of the research would increase.

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