

# Attitudes of Foreigners Who Learn Turkish as a Second Language Towards Turkish Culture

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## Abstract

There is a very close association between language and culture. Thus, cultural values should be prioritized in language training and cultural knowledge should be concurrently instructed. Turkish culture should also be introduced to learners of Turkish as a foreign language. Therefore, it is important to determine the attitudes of learners of Turkish language as a foreign language towards the Turkish culture. The aim of the present study is to determine the attitudes of foreign students learning Turkish as a foreign language towards the Turkish culture. For this purpose, a field survey was conducted based on the screening research model. The study sample included 60 foreign students attending Giresun University Turkish Instruction Center (TOMER). The students included in the sample came from 8 different countries. The study data was collected by 'attitudes towards cultural values questionnaire'. After the obtained data was analyzed, it was determined that most of the foreign students established similarities between Turkish culture and their own, however they also experienced difficulties in adapting to Turkish culture. Furthermore, It was also found that Turkish students generally assisted foreign students in the process of adaptation to the Turkish culture and that foreign students adapted to Turkish food rather easily.

**Keywords:** Foreign language instruction, Turkish, culture, attitude.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the globalization, it became compulsory to learn a language other than the native language for socio-cultural, economic and educational relations between countries and even continents. To keep pace with the rapidly advancing and changing world, a single language is no longer sufficient for an individual to be an effective member of the society, leading individuals to learn different languages. The ever-changing needs also affect language instruction, and thus language learning processes need to be planned well. Language teaching programs, textbooks, audiovisual tools for listening and comprehension should be designed with a culture-oriented vision that also includes the language learning rules. Furthermore, a learner-centered approach should be preferred for success in learning a language.

The geographical location of Turkey, as well as its economic and political achievements have rendered it a remarkable country. Thus, Turkish language became a language which is in demand by foreigners for various reasons. Foreign students in Turkey study their fields, while simultaneously learn a foreign language. They also get to know a new culture.

Language is a carrier and a transmitter of culture as well as being a communications tool (Özbay, 2002: 15). Teaching both a native language and a foreign language both are also cultural transfer processes. Culture is the totality of the material-spiritual elements that distinguish one nation from another. To learn a different language is to learn the qualities of that nation that separated the nation from others (Gokcel, 2012: 71). Traces of the culture could be observed in every part of an individual's life such as language, eating and drinking, clothing, literature, arts, manners, customs and traditions.

It is necessary to transfer cultural elements in language instruction. Otherwise, foreign language teaching would be missing an essential element. Because, language is the mirror and the transmitter of the culture. It is necessary to enable foreigners to penetrate the language by providing cultural elements, include social relations, and to make them repeat what they have learned frequently (Barin, 1994: 55). Hence, they could internalize how the language is utilized in daily life and materialize the characteristics of the target language within the context of a causality relationship.

The first things that come to mind about foreign language instruction are the material-spiritual elements of the language, written and oral cultural works. This demonstrates the significance of cultural transfer in foreign language instruction. For example, the United States of America West Virginia Department of Education (2002) states that language and culture are parts of an inseparable whole, and students could not specialize in a language without having knowledge on the culture of the language they learn under the heading "culture" in foreign language curricula (cited by Er, 2006: 6). Today, Turkish language training as a native and foreign language is conducted with the themes and texts that include Turkish culture and the language rules are implemented in practice.

Learning a foreign language is not just about learning and implementing the grammar rules of that language or learning and using the Turkish equivalents of the words in the learner's own language. While learning a language as a foreign language, the perspectives, beliefs, true-false perceptions of the native speakers, and their

cultural rituals (kissing hand, handshakes, greetings, humor) should be evaluated in conjunction with grammar rules.

Learning a foreign language is a long-term process. Students learning Turkish should love the language and be aware of its subtleties; because when they return to their respective countries, they would transfer both the Turkish language and the Turkish culture to these countries. In addition to increasing the prestige of Turkey, this fact would also strengthen the preference of Turkish language among the languages of the world.

If it is assumed that the language is not just a system of expressions but a culture as well, then culture should never be neglected in language learning and instruction. Otherwise, it could be monotonous, mechanical and boring for the learners. Each sign in the language sequence refers to a reality in the world, which in turn is related to the culture. Hence, the meanings of the signs are formed and defined by a cultural element (Asutay, 2003: 27). Therefore, it could be argued that the semantic structure inside the formal structure of a language is constructed by the culture. Learning a foreign language means knowing a world, a foreign culture as well. Trying to understand and analyze the alien contributes to the knowledge and ideas of the student, expanding the student's horizon (Tapan, 1995: 156). Because foreign language teaching is not only about teaching words or grammar, but also the culture in which the language developed. When a student learns a foreign language, she or he also learns the culture of that language and then compares this culture to her or his own (cited by Okur & Keskin, 2013: 1623).

In the process of teaching Turkish as a foreign language, it is important to adequately transfer the cultural values that Turkish society created and experienced through the language and Turkish language should be used based on that content and values. Thus, the concept of culture and Turkish cultural values (respect for the elderly, love for the youngsters, religious obligations / traditions, greetings in holidays, farewells, clothing, meals, etc.), similarities and differences should be introduced to foreign students using course materials, manuscripts and exercises within the process of Turkish language instruction. Furthermore, attention should be paid to these elements during language teaching activities and cultural values should be included in curricula.

For the reasons mentioned above, the aim of the present study is to determine the attitudes of foreign students who learn Turkish as a foreign language towards the Turkish culture. For this purpose, it was aimed to determine whether the foreign students realized the similarities between their own and Turkish culture, whether their social circles in Turkey and course material had an impact on their attitudes towards the culture and learning Turkish.

## 2. METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research is a field study conducted with the screening research model. This model is a research approach that aims to describe a past or present situation the way it exists (Karasar, 2006: 77).

### Research sample

The research sample included 60 foreign students attending Giresun University Turkish Instruction Center (TÖMER). 16 students in the sample were female, 44 were male. Furthermore, the demographics of the students in the sample were as follows:

Table 1. Research sample demographics

		Nationality of the Students	f	Length of stay in Turkey	f	Purpose of learning Turkish	f
Students with Turcic Origin (41)	Azerbaijan		31	1 month	0	Education	58
	Turkmenistan		3	6 months	54	Business	0
	Kazakhstan		7	1 year	6	Tourism	0
Students from Other Countries (19)	Afghanistan		5	3 years or more	0	Other	2
	Russia		3				
	Syria		2				
	Brundi		5				
	Georgia		4				
			60				

Demographics of the sample group demonstrated that the students came from 8 different countries. 41 were of Turcic origins and 19 were from other countries. It was observed that foreign students came to Turkey to learn Turkish from Asian, African and Caucasus countries. It was also determined that students aimed to learn Turkish, mostly for educational purposes. When the time spent by foreign students to learn Turkish language and culture was evaluated, it was determined that 6 spent 1 year and 54 spent 6 months in Turkey. This demonstrated that

their experiences and the time they spent to get to know Turkish culture were equal.

### Data collection instrument and data collection

The 'Attitudes Towards Cultural Values Questionnaire' was designed by the researchers to determine the attitudes of foreign students towards the Turkish culture. The questionnaire items were finalized based on expert opinion. The questionnaire was examined by five lecturers in TOMER to establish content validity. The questionnaire included two sections. In the first section, the questions aimed to determine the level of the attitudes of foreign students towards the Turkish culture and the factors that affected them the most. In this section, 10 3-point Likert type questions (Yes, Partially and No) were asked. In the second section of the questionnaire, 4 open-ended questions on the attitudes of foreign students towards the Turkish culture and the process of learning Turkish were directed to the participants. Questions specifically aimed to address the factors that would affect and function as resources for the cultural approaches of the students. The questions were presented to the students in a survey form.

### Data analysis

Foreign students marked their responses on a 3-point Likert scale concerning their attitudes towards the Turkish culture in the questionnaire.

The collected data were analyzed with percentage and frequency techniques using SPSS 22 statistics software. As there was no homogeneity between the variable groups determined by the demographic features of the foreign students, the data analysis process was evaluated with frequency and percentage analysis. However, the level of attitudes of students with Turkic origins and those from other countries were reported separately. Content analysis was used to interpret the responses given by the students for the 4 open-ended questions. The answers to the questions were interpreted thematically based on their similarities and differences.

## 3. FINDINGS

### Attitudes of students who were learning Turkish as a foreign language towards Turkish culture

Table 2. Cultural similarity

1) Are there any similarities between the Turkish culture and your own culture?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	41	68,3	0	0	0	0
Others	10	52,6	3	15,8	6	31,6

One of the most influential factors on the process of learning a second language by foreign students is the culture of the target language. Since learning a language is also a process of culture transfer, cultural similarities would undoubtedly have a positive impact on learning a foreign language. Thus, 41 students with Turkic origin responded positively to the question "Are there any similarities between the Turkish culture and your own culture" while 10 students from other countries said "Yes," 3 responded as "Partially," and 6 gave a negative response. This finding suggests that all foreign students with a Turkic origin in the sample considered that their culture was similar to the Turkish culture. The fact that most of the students from other countries had similar views could be explained by the geographical proximity of the countries that these students came from.

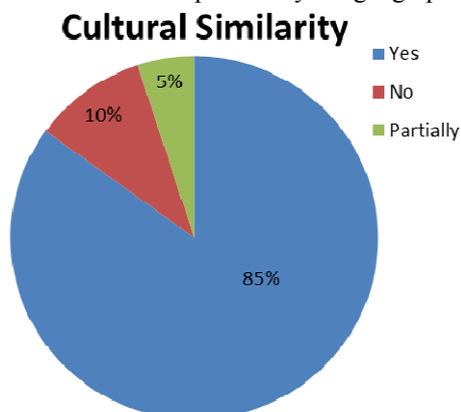


Figure 1. Cultural similarity

The graph demonstrates the rate the students in the sample (all without emphasizing those with Turkish origins or others) found similarities between Turkish culture and their own cultures. As seen in the graph, 85% of the foreign students who learn Turkish as a second language found similarities between their own culture and the Turkish culture.

Table 3. Adaptation

2) Are there any areas where you experience problems in adapting to the Turkish culture?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	0	0	35	85,4	6	14,6
Others	11	57,9	8	42,1	0	0

35 students with Turkic origin responded “Partially” to the question “Are there any areas where you experience problems in adapting to the Turkish culture” while 6 replied as “No” and 11 students from other countries said “Yes,” and 8 responded as “Partially.” This finding suggests that students with Turkic origins partially experienced adaptation problems despite, their cultural similarities, and most students from other countries had adaptation difficulties.

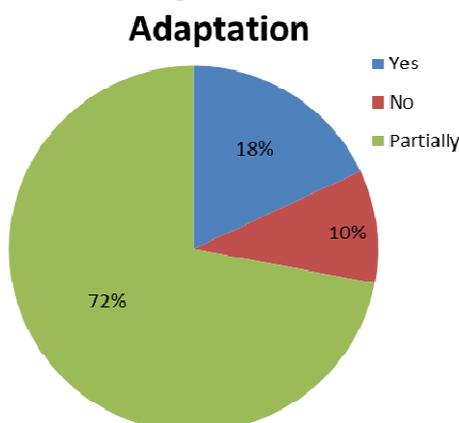


Figure 2. Adaptation

The graph demonstrates the data on whether the students in the sample experienced problems in adapting to Turkish culture. As seen in the graph, 71.7% of foreign students stated that they experienced problems partially, while 18.3% experienced problems and 10% did not experience any problems.

Table 4. Peer assist

3) Do Turkish students assist you in the process of adaptation to the new culture?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	29	70,7	12	29,3	0	0
Others	19	100	0	0	0	0

29 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes” to the question “Do Turkish students assist you in the process of adaptation to the new culture,” while 12 replied “Partially” and 19 students from other countries said “Yes.” As cultural ambassadors, it is a natural result of our hospitality to help the foreign students during their adaptation period This finding supports this fact.

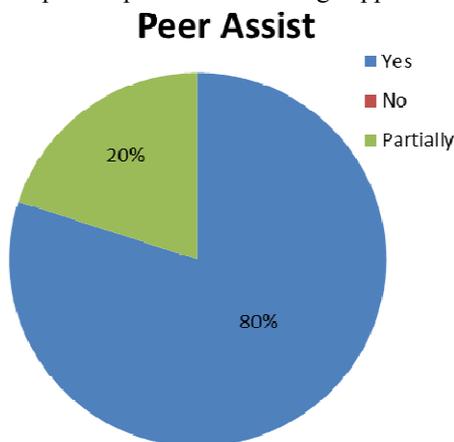


Figure 3. Peer Assist

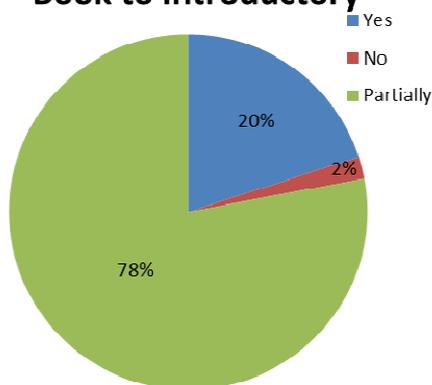
The graph demonstrates the findings on the level of assistance provided by Turkish students / peers to the students in the sample during the period of adaptation to the Turkish culture. As seen in the graph, 80% of foreign students stated that Turkish students helped them in this process.

Table 5. Book to introductory

4) Do you think the Turkish textbooks introduced Turkish culture adequately?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	4	9,8	36	87,8	1	2,4
Others	10	52,6	9	47,4	0	0

The only element that would strengthen the Turkish comprehension and expression skills of foreign students is reading Turkish sources and utilize what they learned in verbal and written expression. Thus, 4 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes” to the question “Do you think the Turkish textbooks introduced Turkish culture adequately,” while 36 replied “Partially,” 1 replied “No,” and 10 students from other countries said “Yes,” and 9 replied “Partially.”

### Book to Introductory



The graph demonstrates the findings on the adequacy of the Turkish textbooks in introducing Turkish culture according to participating students. As seen in the graph, 78% of foreign students stated that the Turkish textbooks introduced Turkish culture partially, while 20% stated that they introduced Turkish culture adequately.

Figure 4. Book to introductory

Table 6. Books cultural similarity

5) Are the cultural values in Turkish textbooks different from your own cultural values?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	0	0	13	31,7	28	68,3
Others	13	68,4	2	10,5	4	21,1

13 students with Turkic origin responded “Partially” and 28 responded “No” to the question “Are the cultural values in Turkish textbooks different from your own cultural values,” while 13 students from other countries said “Yes,” 2 replied “Partially,” and 4 replied “No.” The fact that cultural elements in Turkish textbooks were generally considered to be similar by students with Turkic origins suggests that textbooks have the capacity to reflect the culture.

### Books Cultural Similarity

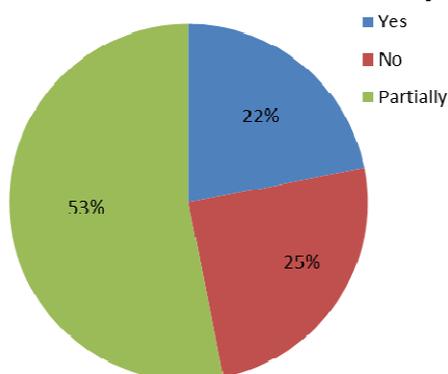


Figure 5. Books cultural similarity

The graph demonstrates the findings on the differences between the Turkish culture and the cultures of the foreign students as reflected in Turkish textbooks according to participating students. As seen in the graph, 53% of foreign students stated that there were no cultural differences, while 25% stated that they were somehow different and 22% stated that there were cultural differences.

Table 7. Turkic food

6) Did you adapt to Turkish food easily when you came to Turkey?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	34	82,9	4	9,8	3	7,3
Others	11	57,9	7	36,8	1	5,3

34 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes,” 4 responded “Partially,” and 3 replied “No” to the question “Did you adapt to Turkish food easily when you came to Turkey,” while 11 students from other countries said “Yes,” 7 replied “Partially,” and 1 replied “No.” Food habits are among the most important adaptation challenges that foreign students experience. However, this finding suggests that the majority of the students in the sample had easily adapted to Turkish food.

### Turkic Foods

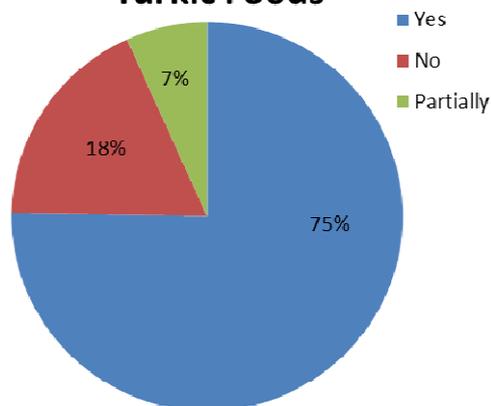


Figure 6. Turkic foods

The graph demonstrates the findings on the adaptation of foreign students to Turkish food. As seen in the graph, 75% of foreign students stated that they could adapt to Turkish food, while 18% stated that they somehow adapted to Turkish food and 6.7% stated that they could not adapt to Turkish food.

Table 8. Clothing habits

7) Did your Turkish friends welcome your clothing habits?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	9	22	28	68,3	4	9,8
Others	10	52,6	5	26,3	4	21,1

9 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes,” 28 responded “Partially,” and 4 replied “No” to the question “Did your Turkish friends welcome your clothing habits,” while 10 students from other countries said “Yes,” 5

replied “Partially,” and 4 replied “No.” Clothing habits are a significant cultural difference. It is one of the areas where foreign students are reluctant due to adaptation and acceptance challenges. However, this finding suggests that Turkish students had a positive attitude towards the clothing of the students in the sample.

### Clothing Habits

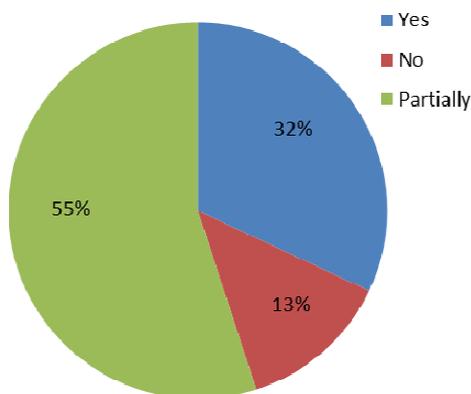


Figure 7. Clothing habits

The graph demonstrates the findings on the attitudes of the Turkish students towards the clothing habits of the foreign students in the sample. As seen in the graph, 55% of foreign students stated that their Turkish peers had partially positive attitudes towards their clothing habits, while 32% stated that they had positive attitudes, and 13.3% stated that their Turkish peers had negative attitudes.

Table 9. Safety

8) Do you feel safe in Turkey?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	35	85,4	6	14,6	0	0
Others	19	100	0	0	0	0

35 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes,” 6 responded “Partially” to the question “Do you feel safe in Turkey,” while 19 students (100%) from other countries said “Yes.” Thus, it could be stated that all foreign students in the sample felt safe in Turkey.

### Safety

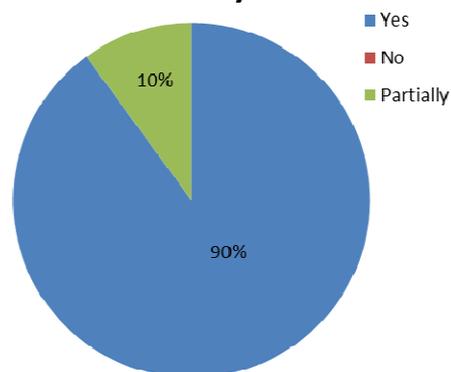


Figure 8. Safety

The graph demonstrates the findings on whether the foreign students felt safe in Turkey. As seen in the graph, 90% of foreign students felt safe in Turkey, while 10% felt somewhat safe.

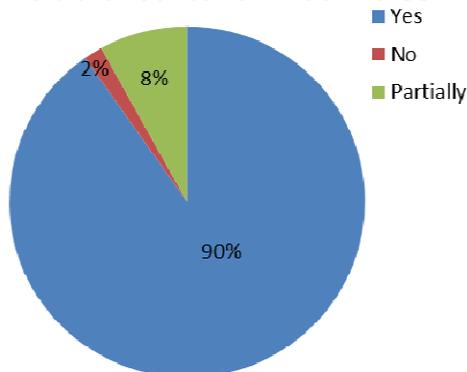
Table 10. Socio-cultural activities

9) Do the social and cultural activities in Turkey facilitate learning Turkish in your opinion?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	37	90,2	4	9,8	0	0
Others	17	89,5	1	5,3	1	5,3

Supporting grammar and practices instructed in the classroom with informal practices increases the permanence in foreign language learning. 37 students with Turkic origin responded “Yes,” 4 responded “Partially” to the question “Do the social and cultural activities in Turkey facilitate learning Turkish in your

opinion,” while 17 students from other countries said “Yes,” 1 replied “Partially,” and 1 replied “No.”

### Socio-cultural Activities



The graph demonstrates the findings on whether the socio-cultural activities that foreign students participated in Turkey facilitated learning Turkish. As seen in the graph, 90% of the foreign students in the sample stated that these activities facilitated learning Turkish.

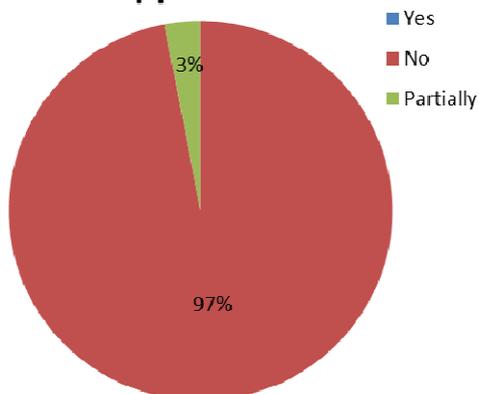
Figure 9.Socio-cultural activities

Table 11. Opposite sex

10) Do you think adaptation to a new culture was challenging for you when compared to the opposite sex?	Yes		Partially		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students with Turkic Origin	0	0	1	2,4	40	97,6
Others	0	0	1	5,3	18	94,7

1 student with Turkic origin responded “Partially,” and 40 responded “No” to the question “Do you think adaptation to a new culture was challenging for you when compared to the opposite sex,” while 1 student from other countries said “Partially,” and 18 replied “No.” This finding demonstrated that both female and male foreign students who were learning Turkish as a second language (except 1.7% who replied “Partially”) did not experience difficulties.

### Opposite Sex



The graph demonstrates the findings on whether the foreign students in the sample experienced difficulties when compared to the opposite sex while learning Turkish. As seen in the graph, 96.7% of the foreign students in the sample did not experienced any differences based on gender in the adaptation process.

Figure 10.Opposite sex

### Qualitative findings on the attitudes of foreign students towards Turkish culture

Foreign students who were learning Turkish as a foreign language responded to the questions asked to determine their attitudes towards the Turkish culture as follows. The responses of foreign students were grouped under themes and presented below:

1) *Where did you learn about the Turkish culture?*

The majority of the foreign students in the sample answered the question as follows: Television (Ö3, Ö8 etc.), Social Media (Ö1, Ö4, Ö9, Ö21 etc.), internet (Ö44, Ö52, Ö42, Ö16, Ö18 etc.); Turkish acquaintances (Ö3, Ö24, etc.) and TÖMER (Ö2, Ö7, Ö31 etc.).

2) *Which cultural activities you participated to adapt to the Turkish culture?*

45 foreign students in the sample answered this question as follows: Watching television, Turkish movies, listening to Turkish music (Ö1, Ö5, Ö6, Ö12, Ö14, Ö18, Ö31, Ö35, Ö36, Ö40, Ö42, Ö44, Ö50, Ö55 etc.).

15 students responded the question as follows: Spending time with Turkish friends, and following the recommendations of their teachers at TÖMER (Ö2, Ö5, Ö11, Ö19, Ö20, Ö23, Ö27, Ö59 etc.).

**3) *What are the things that make you happy in Turkey?***

All foreign students in the sample (Ö1-Ö60-100%) replied this question as the sincerity of people, geographical and historical beauties, and food and music.

**4) *Which cultural elements in Turkish society affected you the most? Briefly explain.***

28 foreign students in the sample answered this question as follows: Turkish food (Ö3, Ö6, Ö10, Ö11, Ö25, Ö30, Ö37, Ö57 etc.).

32 foreign students in the sample stated that Turkish language, music, history, tourist attractions, food, traditions (such as holidays) (Ö2, Ö3, Ö4, Ö8, Ö13, Ö21, Ö24, Ö42, Ö44, Ö57, Ö58, Ö60 etc.) affected them.

As a result of the analysis of the qualitative data on the attitudes of foreign students towards the culture, it was determined that foreign students were influenced by Turkish culture, found elements that made them happy and tried different methods to adopt to the Turkish culture. When all findings are assessed in conjunction, it could be stated that the attitudes of the students in the sample towards Turkish culture supported the process of learning Turkish as a second language and no negative attitudes were observed.

#### **4. CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION**

It is important to teach other social behavior such as gastronomical culture, entertainment and dressing habits of the instructed language in foreign language teaching. Because reciprocating the cultures is inherent in learning a language (Gulec & Ince, 2013: 97). However, researchers such as Troike (1989), Fink (2003), Mairitsch (2003), Er (2006) and Kiroglu et al. (2010) also found that the cultural and social structure of the language that would be instructed should be taken into consideration in the instruction process, in addition to teaching the grammar of the said language.

In the present study conducted to determine the attitudes of foreign students who were learning Turkish as a foreign language towards the Turkish culture, it was determined that most of the students found similarities between Turkish culture and their own and they experienced certain difficulties adapting to the Turkish culture. Furthermore, it was observed that Turkish students generally assisted foreign students in the process of adaptation to Turkish culture, and Turkish textbooks were partially sufficient in introducing Turkish culture and foreign students adapted to Turkish food easily. In addition, the clothing habits of foreign students were partially welcomed by Turkish students, and the impact of gender on adaptation to the Turkish culture was negligible.

Findings obtained in the present study are similar to the positive findings by Gulec and Ince (2013) on the daily lives of foreign students learning Turkish and their dressing and participation in social activities, but differed with the finding of the said study on difficulties experienced about Turkish food. Furthermore, the findings of the study by Okur and Keskin (2013) on the assessment of textbooks based on transfer of culture in teaching Turkish as a foreign language were similar to the characteristics that should be present in Turkish textbooks to introduce and convey cultural elements according to the present study. Also the findings of the study by Iscan et al. (2017) on cultural awareness and transfer properties in instruction of Turkish as a foreign language were consistent with the findings of the present study.

As a result of the study, the findings obtained by Gillian (1990), Rosberg (1995), Tseng (2002) and Er (2006) on the necessity of instruction of the culture of the language in the instruction of native and foreign languages, having knowledge about the said culture for motivation and achievements of the curricula were tested.

The fact that foreign students could give concrete examples for the questions about their attitudes towards the Turkish culture demonstrated that they easily adapted to Turkish culture and had a positive attitude towards the Turkish culture.

The adaptation to the Turkish culture and positive attitudes are very important for foreign students who learn Turkish as a foreign language for Turkish education that could also be considered as a transfer of culture. Easy introduction, internalization of the target audience to the Turkish culture along with the language and accurate use of the language in the cultural context is indispensable for success in instruction of Turkish as a foreign language. Thus, it would be beneficial for teachers and Turkish students to know that they are the ambassadors of culture transfer, and to prepare the course materials in line with this principle, and to conduct the instruction using examples adequate for the cultural environment. With learned language the students' ability to present their home region, their culture at an international level can help to initiate mutually beneficial cooperation with foreigners and other cultures representatives (Shyryaeva & Truus, 2013:259).

In conclusion, it could be recommended that experimental and descriptive studies on the perception, status and success of the transfer of cultural values in the instruction process of Turkish as a foreign language should be conducted and attention should be paid to the culture transfer in designing the course material.

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