

# Prospective English Language Teachers' Perceptions of the Target Language and Culture in Relation to their Socioeconomic Status

Arda Arikan

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Letters

Department of Western Languages and Literatures, 07058, Antalya/ Turkey

Tel: 90-242-310-23-33 E-mail: ardaari@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Prospective foreign language teachers need to have an accurate knowledge and a positive perception of the target language and target culture so that they can help their students gain further insight on culture by and large. Hence, by means of a questionnaire, prospective English language teachers' (n= 412) perceptions of the target language and culture are sought to be answered in relation to their present knowledge of the target language and culture and their socioeconomic status. The results indicate that the participants see themselves knowledgeable in target language, but insufficient in target culture. Similarly, target culture is much less appreciated than the language. It is also shown that attitudes toward target language, knowledge of target culture, parental use of target language, family income, and father's job have significant influence on prospective teachers' perceptions.

**Keywords:** Culture, Prospective teacher, Socioeconomic, Foreign language

## 1. Introduction

Atkinson's (1999) thorough analysis revealed that research on culture received minimal consideration in literature although we know by experience that PTs need to have an accurate knowledge and a positive perception of the TLC so that they work perform with this knowledge in their classrooms comfortably. This is especially important in foreign language teaching since, as Kramsch (2004) shows, the contemporary foreign language teacher is an expert of linguistics and culture who understands the interplay between language and culture while delivering these two efficiently.

There is research-based evidence that PT' perception of and attitude toward TLC are shaped by various forces. Review of literature shows that PT' perceptions toward other cultures are mainly affected by four sources, namely, social, (inter)cultural, educational, and socio-economic forces. Social forces which contribute to PT' perception of cultures develop early in childhood under the influence of parents and peers (Brown, 2000; Brown and Ratcliff, 1998; Kelleher, 1987). Ahlquist (2000) further notes that PT internalize chauvinistic ideologies in their social circles strengthening their resistance toward learning and appreciating other cultures.

Having or lacking (inter)cultural connections with the TLC has been found to be influential in the formation of PT' perceptions about the TLC. PT of English who are non-native speakers of English are deprived of experiencing TLC in their naturally occurring ways. Research shows that intensive cultural immersion results in seeing the world differently (Villegas and Lucas, 2002) and even short-term overseas experiences have a positive effect on teachers' perceptions and teaching (Mahan and Stachowski, 1990; Pence and Macgillivray, 2008; Quinn, et. al., 1995; Wilson 1984). Similarly, while knowing about others' cultures keeps communication open (Liaw and Johnson, 2001; Xiao and Petraki, 2007), not having lived in the TC hampers the development of the speaking ability (Osborn, 1973).

Educational factors have a profound impact on PT' perception of the TLC in foreign language learning and teaching environments since language and culture are considered to be inseparable (Akl, 2007; Beamer and Varner, 2001; Flewelling, 1994; Kramsch, 1988; Seelye, 1984) and there is continuous interplay between language learning and identity formation (Benveniste, 1971; Canale and Swain, 1980; Firth and Wagner, 1998; Lankshear, 1997; Pennycook, 1998; Pool, 1979; Willinsky, 1998). Knowing that PT are exposed to numerous ELT materials throughout their education, it is deducible that that they attain their knowledge of the TC via these materials although these materials have been severely criticized for their representation of the TC in hegemonic, colonial, or worse, chauvinistic tendencies (Auerbach 1993; Canagarajah, 1999, Kachru, 1994; Phillipson, 1993; Pennycook, 1998, Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Willinsky, 1998). Sercu, Garcia and Prieto (2005: p. 489) state in relation to target culture that "teachers' perceptions will, undoubtedly, permeate their lessons, determining the way the foreign

culture/s is/are presented and dealt with.” Furthermore, attitudes and behaviors acquired by students and PT through direct instruction or modeling provided by their classroom teachers (Malow-Iroff, O’Connor and Bisland, 2007) or colleagues (Freeman, 2002: p. 11) are also known to strengthen their negative or hostile feelings toward other cultures.

Although the effect of socioeconomic status on PT’ perceptions of the TC is not well articulated in research literature, it has been shown that students with higher SES demonstrate higher academic achievement (Caldas and Bankston, 2004; Chiu, 2007; Considine and Zappala, 2002; Kan and Tsai, 2005; Tomul, 2008) and enroll in elite universities more than their lower income peers (Li, 2007). It has also been shown that social class, housing, and access to resources have considerable impact on acquisition of value systems as much as on academic achievement (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994; Ichado, 1998). Hill and Sandfort (1995: p. 106) state that low SES is ‘an important impediment to physical growth, cognitive development, and socio-emotional development. Similarly, some attention has been paid to how gender, socioeconomic status (SES) and race impact on teachers’ identities (Brown *et al.*, 2000). Particular to Turkish society in foreign language contexts, Faas (2008) articulated that coming from working-class families and having less access to the opportunities associated with European life style such as traveling, result in developing nationalistic identities which inevitably lead them to take part in various ethnic divisions and conflicts. However, the relationship between PTs’ perceptions of the TLC and their SES in EFL environments is still under-researched; in Castro, Sercu, and Garcia’s (2004: p. 94) words, research on “teachers’ beliefs concerning the cultural dimension of foreign language education” is “relatively recent.” Hence, much research is needed to connect teachers’ beliefs with their actual teaching practices since, as Bayyurt (2006: p. 243) concludes, ‘the background of individual teachers influences their attitude towards the incorporation of culture into their language teaching.’

Identifying PTs’ perceptions of the TLC is necessary since, as Tse (2000: p. 70) has shown, ‘one’s attitude towards the other (target language) community and beliefs about language learning will help to determine individual differences in success.’ Although perceiving the TLC in positive terms will most probably result in increased proficiency in L2 (Brown, 2000), there is pressing need for teacher education curriculum to engage PTs in a discussion about what is needed to help erase the achievement gap for low-income students (Télliez, 2008). Learning a second language is often viewed by EL teachers as threatening to personal and cultural identity (Gray, 2000), arousing a mix of negative feelings including suspicion and distrust of the dominant language and its speakers (Lambert, 1980). However, studying another culture formally becomes, in Rivers’ (1981: p. 318) words, ‘a liberating experience in that students are encouraged to develop tolerance of other viewpoints and other forms of behavior while understanding better those of their own society or cultural group.’ Hence, how individual PTs from different SES come to form perceptions of the TLC is an important topic of study necessitating an analysis of their living conditions and childhood realities both to strengthen research as well as practice. In this present study, PTs’ perceptions about TLC are studied in terms of their relationship with their SES. The situation of the PTs, the majority of who do not experience the culture of the TL by direct contact, remains problematic and research should shed light on this problematic facet of second/foreign language teacher education.

Gay and Airasian (2000: p. 38) rightly put that ‘a veritable gold mine of research topics arises out of the questions we ask ourselves every day about education’. The major impetus for this research comes from my discussion with my students on the place of culture in English language teaching. I have realized that most of my students (prospective teachers of English) believe that they are either “not knowledgeable in” or are simply “against” the target culture (TC). While reading the reflection papers written by these prospective teachers (PS), I noted that they could write about the ways of teaching culture, but not on what the TC actually meant to them. One of them ended his paper by writing “I love learning and teaching English. But what do I know about the TC? What is there for me to teach?”

As a teacher educator, I wanted to know about the conditions under which these prospective English language teachers come to know about the TC they are going to teach. This question gave birth to the present study which investigates prospective English language teachers’ perceptions of the target language and culture (TLC) in relation to their socioeconomic status that might have an effect on this formation. I was especially interested in whether the demographic characteristics and socioeconomic qualities of the participants played an important part in their perception of the TLC. I hypothesized that a thorough analysis of their perception of the language and culture would reveal data-supported evidence that would help locate problems associated with prospective teachers’ formation of views of the TC. Such knowledge will not only show the underlying factors affecting students’ sentiments toward the TC about which they will be teaching, but it will also give data-based evidence to eradicate such possible negative feelings.

The present study probes into the role that PTs' SES plays in their perception of the TLC. In sum, by analyzing questionnaire responses from 412 PTs, I tried to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are PTs' perceptions of TL and TC?
2. Is there a relationship between PTs' present knowledge of TLC and their perceptions of TLC?
3. Does SES of PTs affect their perceptions of TLC?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Study group

Convenient sampling was used in the selection of the participants (Gay and Airasian, 2000). The participants enrolled at two state universities in Ankara, Turkey during the academic year 2007-2008. In the beginning, 736 PTs filled in the questionnaires and 412 PTs' responses were decided to be included in the final analysis (see the Instruments section for further information). The majority of the participants were females (74.5%) as is typical in this educational context. This sample size is argued to be adequate regardless of the size of the target population since any sample size above 400 provides researchers with 'a safe sample' whose results can be generalized (Gay and Airasian, 2000: p. 135). All of these PTs were fourth year students, currently entering classrooms as practicum teachers.

### 2.2 Instruments

Given the fact that a valid instrument to measure the relationship between SES of PTs and their perceptions of the TLC was not available in the research literature, a questionnaire was constructed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple choice questions and a Likert-type scale containing 25 questions. The questionnaire gathered information about PTs' educational background, habits, knowledge, perceptions, and views related to the TC in relation to their SES. Single questions aimed to interrogate participants' attitudes toward the TC components with three choices: "I agree, I am neuter, and I do not agree." Hence, the participants were asked to what extent they were positive towards the language use, habits, practices or beliefs that are specific to the target cultures. These statements were general in their scope such as "I enjoy listening to music sung by the target culture singers, I like learning about how people in the target language communities live, I am interested in the culinary arts of the target culture countries, and I want to learn more about the religious beliefs and practices of the target culture communities." The aim of these questions was to find out and stratify the participants' attitude towards TC on the basis of their attitude towards target-culture specific notions.

Each positive response ("I agree") was given 1 point and the total scores were used to measure each respondent's self-reported attitude towards the TC. Hence, each questionnaire weighed 100 points. In the final analysis, each participant's questionnaire with a score above 75 was accepted as filled in by those PTs who are positive towards the TC and the questionnaires with a score below 50 were considered as holding negative perceptions towards the TC. Questionnaires between these values (50-75) are excluded in the final analysis. Hence, a total number of 324 questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis because they were not representative of positive or negative feelings of the participants towards TC. The questionnaires with negative and positive attitudes were then processed to find answers to the research questions specified.

In constructing the questionnaire, a thorough literature review helped deciding on the variables to be included. The socioeconomic factors gathered from review of literature were: a) gender, b) parental income, c) father's job/profession, d) home environment such as urban, rural or suburban (Duranczyk, Goff and Opitz, 2006) and those added by the researcher were e) TL use in family, and f) current residence status (living with parents or in a dormitory). All of these factors indicating the SES of PTs were used as independent, attribute variables to parse PTs' responses. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the part of the questionnaire used in this study was .81, which showed that it could be accepted as a reliable research instrument within the context of the study and for the purposes of the research.

### 2.3 Analyses

To answer the research questions, the following analyses were conducted. First, descriptive statistics were attained to understand the general qualities and nature of the data. Non-parametric statistical significance tests were utilized to provide a more comprehensive student profile. The relationship between PTs' perception of TC and individual variables was analyzed by means of a Chi-square test procedure at a selected probability level ( $p < .05$ ). In order to understand the nature of the relationships amongst the variables of SES and prospective teachers' perception of TLC, the findings were cross-tabulated. In this study, PTs' perceptions of TC and TL were studied in relation to the following variables:

1. Gender
2. Knowledge of TL and TC
  - 2.1. Knowledge of the TLC
  - 2.2. Age of starting to learn TL
  - 2.3. Parental use of TL
3. Socioeconomic status
  - 3.1. Family income
  - 3.2. Father's job
  - 3.3. Place of residence during primary education
  - 3.4. Place of residence during university education

### 3. Results

As can be seen in Table 1, 92.5% of the PTs claim that they have sufficient knowledge of the TL whereas 46.6% claimed to be knowledgeable in the TC. These results show that PTs see themselves knowledgeable in the TL, but insufficient in the TC. It is also noteworthy that the number of PTs who see themselves knowledgeable in the TL is almost twice as large as in TC, showing the great difference between these two areas as perceived by PTs.

[Table 1]

These results indicate that almost all PTs are positive toward the TL, but are mostly negative toward the TC. The results further show that those who see themselves sufficient in the TLC tend to be more positive toward the TLC. TL sufficient PTs show the greatest appreciation of the TL (100%) and the TC (62.5%). Those who view themselves knowledgeable in the TC are the most positive group toward the TC (58.2%), followed by the not so knowledgeable ones (49.1%). Those who consider themselves not knowledgeable in the TC remain the least positive (33.3%).

[Table2]

*Age of starting to learn the TL.* PTs who started learning the TL between the ages of 0-6 have the most positive attitude toward the TL (100%) and the TC (80%). The results also indicate that those who started the TL after the age of 15 develop a high degree of appreciation towards the TL (94.6%), but their appreciation of the TC remains the lowest (43.2%). The results further show that although both early and late exposure to the TL may result in developing a positive perception of the TL, late exposure to the TL may result in developing more negative feelings toward the TC.

*Parental use of the TL.* PTs whose parents do not speak the TL are more positive toward the TL (92.7%). However, those whose parents speak the TL developed a more positive perception of the TC (67.9%). These results suggest that parents' use of the TL may positively affect the perception of the PTs toward the TC although the same is not true of the TL since PTs whose parents did not use the TL are more negative toward the TC.

*Family income.* In terms of the relationship between family income and perception of the TLC, the lowest income group (below 500 liras per month) is the least positive group toward the TL (88.6%). The second lowest income group (501-999 liras per month) is the least positive group toward the TC (47.7%). Those with the parental income of more than 1.500 liras are the most positive group toward the TL (92.9%) and the TC (58.2%). These results suggest that lower income groups are less positive toward the TLC. Accordingly, as the family income increases so does the PTs' positive perception of the TC.

*Father's job.* The results show that PTs whose parents are farmers and workers represent the lowest income groups. In terms of the relationship between father's job and perception of the TLC, farmers/ workers/ unemployed are the most negative groups toward the TLC and officials/ self-employed are the most positive group toward the TLC. Father's job is found to be effective in PTs' perception of TC since there is significant difference between the perceptions of farmers' children and the others.

*Place of residence during primary education.* PTs who lived in urban areas during their primary education are the most positive group toward the TL (93.2%) and the TC (49.4%) followed by those who were raised in towns (92.5% for the TL and 41.5% for the TC). The least positive group comes from villages (88.1% for the TL and 40.5% for the TC). These results suggest PT who come from urban areas develop more positive perception of the TLC.

*Place of residence during university education.* PTs who live with their parents are more positive toward the TL (95.8%) and the TC (55.6%). Those who live with their friends are the most negative group toward the TL (88.6%)

and the TC (34.3%). Among those staying in dormitories, students staying in private dormitories are more positive toward TC (52.1%) and those staying in state dormitories are more positive toward the TL (93.5%).

*Correlational findings.* The results show that PTs' perception of the TC is significantly correlated with their perception of the TL (.000), knowledge of the TC (.029), parental use of the TL (.032), family income (.002) and fathers' job (.028).

[Table 3]

#### 4. Discussion

Locating and understanding attitudes of PT toward the TLC is a complex matter largely because of the existence of numerous factors affecting their formation. Although this study offers no definite cause and effect relationship between PT' SES and their present perception of the TLC, some of the findings give an indication of areas that may be helpful in understanding the profiles of PT in relation to the TLC. Such knowledge will help us in planning PT education firstly because an important difference was found between those PT who see themselves knowledgeable in the TC and those who do not. This finding most probably means that PT who feels knowledgeable in the TC may be more likely to appreciate it. Hence, prospective teacher education programs should engage PT with a study of the TC in a way that they feel they are knowledgeable in the TC as teachers of English.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that PT from a higher income level view the TC in more positive terms whereas those low income groups are the most negative groups toward the TC. Hence, it can be inferred that teacher education programs should especially be concerned with PT coming from lower income groups so that their appreciation and positive perception of the TC increase.

Although no relationship was found between PT' backgrounds in terms of the place of residence (city or village), PT with farming backgrounds hold negative feelings toward the TC in contrast to those whose fathers own private businesses. Along with the numerical evidence that PTs coming from villages are more negative toward the TC than city dwellers, this contrast shows that PTs who come from rural backgrounds need to be exposed to the TC instruction so that their positive perception increases. This is especially important when the numerical evidence supports that farmers make up the majority of low income families.

#### 5. Conclusion

The fact that much research is needed to understand the place of culture in teacher education is especially important when the contemporary need for developing cross-cultural understanding is considered (Kraus and Sultana, 2008; McFadden, Merryfield, and Barron, 1997; Merryfield, 2000; Merryfield, Jarchow, and Pickert, 1997). It can be concluded that the major contribution of this study lies in its examination of PTs' SES in relation to their perception of the TLC, an area of research that is not yet articulated in literature. This paper provides insights into PT' knowledge and perceptions of the TLC. The current study affirms the importance of studying PTs' perceptions of the TLC in relation to their SES. According to the results of this study, SES of the PT is correlated with their perceptions of the TC. Hence, it can be implied that in order to change their views of culture, SES of PT must be taken into account in the planning and delivery of training and education.

Knowing that teachers' cultural beliefs and knowledge are key to change (Causey, et. al., 2000), any expectation toward building forms of relationships among cultural groups necessitates an understanding and change in teachers' notions of the TLC. As Van Hook (2000: p. 1) further states 'teachers need to carefully examine their world view to determine whether or not unintentional and subtle biases are promoted.' As for teacher education, this need is even more pressing since, as Van Hook (2000: p. 1) argues, 'one role of teacher educators may be to facilitate the development of greater intercultural sensitivity among PT.' Without well-qualified teachers knowledgeable in many aspects of the TC, foreign language classrooms can hardly be considered as learning spaces where language is learned in social contexts.

This study has several limitations. First of all, it looked into only one dimension of culture which can be categorized as national culture whereas culture can be studied from other perspectives, namely, national cultures, gendered cultures, and disciplinary cultures (Kraus and Sultana, 2008). One of the most significant limitations is that PTs worked on the term "culture" without the term's meaning explained to them. Hence, the findings are mainly subjective since it is most probable that each individual PT has their own understanding of TC. Given the fact that the PTs are fourth year students who had taken a variety of courses in which some aspects of the TC in foreign language curriculum might have already been introduced, it is even more probable that they understand the term "culture" as it has specifically been discussed in foreign language teaching. Similarly, the information used in this study is self-reported, and some other socioeconomic factors that may influence PTs' perceptions such as their home

language, personality types, family size, parents' educational background, and perceptions about their own culture were not considered.

Another limitation of this study is related to the number of the variables included in the analysis. Although the most important variables that were found in the related literature were included, some other variables such as parents' educational status were not included in the study although parental education was shown to be a denominator of general student achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005). Last but not least, PTs were asked to choose between three statements to understand their knowledge and perception of the TLC, a rather simplistic and subjective method of collecting data on individuals' perceptions. Despite its being simplistic, such a choice is believed to gather the direct position of the PT when he or she faces the term in its natural occurrence. Therefore, because these students had been involved in various discussions on the place of the TC in foreign language teaching, it is believed that they have already formed their position toward the TC which can be expressed in such contexts and by such means. In the face of these limitations, however, and since little research is available on PTs' perceptions of the TLC in relation to their SES, this study may provide insights into teacher education research.

Promoting education and scholarship to improve citizens's language skills in English continues to be of high priority all around the world although its importance in the Mediterranean region is significantly important due to the region's attraction of millions and tourists a year and the economic growth of the countries. The importance of English in the region stems from the rationale that 'countries that use English benefit from the increasingly widespread use of that language for science and scholarship' (Altbach, 2004: p. 3). Culture, in the widespread teaching of English is treated 'as a fifth skill' following the other language skills (Savignon, 1997: p. 250). Studying the effects of and relationships amongst SES of PTs and the constituents of the profession is crucial. Empirical studies conducted in other countries should investigate various aspects and resources of the perceptions of PT. Especially important among these is how PT' perception of the TLC can affect their culture teaching practices, which, in the end, may affect the way we teach the TLC. In that sense, qualitative work on how individual PT come to understand the meaning attributed to the TLC is also important.

From the perspective of curriculum planning, as Bayyurt (2006: p. 235) indicates, there are two dominant views in putting the notion of culture in the curriculum of English language education; the view supporting 'the implementation of a cultural-free curriculum for foreign language teaching' which still remains to be available both in theory as well as in practice. The second view emphasizes the need for attaining 'a global perspective' which forms the basis of the current foreign language teaching methodology characterized by more communicative aims and ways of teaching. Whichever view shapes the practice, there is serious need for curricular changes to be made so that prospective teachers of foreign languages are carefully prepared for the discourses and applications of the TLC in their future classrooms.

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Table 1. Knowledge and attitudes of PTs

	Perception	n	%
Knowledge of the TL	Sufficient	341	82.8
	Insufficient	71	17.2
Knowledge of the TC	Sufficient	79	19.2
	Insufficient	333	80.8
Attitude toward the TL	Positive	381	92,5
	Negative	31	7,5
Attitude toward the TC	Positive	192	46,6
	Negative	220	53,4

Table 2. Prospective teachers' attitudes toward the TL and TC in relation to the variables

	THE TL		TC	
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
Gender				
Female	93.2	6.8	48.5	51.5
Male	90.5	9.5	41	59
Age of starting to learn the TL				
0-6	100	-	80	20
7-11	88	12	51.8	48.2
12-15	93.4	6.6	44.9	55.1
15 +	94.6	5.4	43.2	56.8
Parental use of the TL				
Yes	89.3	10.7	67.9	32.1
No	92.7	7.5	45.1	54.9
Family income				
0-500	88.6	11.4	47.7	52.3
501-999	91.1	8.9	33.3	66.7
1000-1499	94.6	5.4	49.7	50.3
1500+	92.9	7.1	58.2	41.8
Father's job				
Farmers	25	75	28.6	71.4
Officials	94.1	5.9	54	46
Self-employed	91.0	9	44.1	55.9
Unemployed	91.7	8.3	41.7	58.3
Workers	97.4	2.6	39.5	60.5
Place of residence (primary ed.)				
Village	88.1	11.9	40.5	59.5
Town	92.5	7.5	41.5	58.5
City	93.2	6.8	49.4	50.6
Place of residence (university)				
House with family	95.8	4.2	55.6	44.4
House with friends	88.6	11.4	34.3	65.7
State dormitories	93.5	6.5	41.9	58.1
Private dormitories	91.8	8.2	52.1	47.9

Table 3. Correlations between attitudes toward the TC and other variables

Variables	Mean	<i>s</i>	$\chi^2$	Sig 2
Attitudes toward the TC	1.53	.499	-	-
Attitudes toward the TL	1.07	.264	.000	.000
Gender	1.25	.436	.218	.180
Knowledge of the TC	2.07	.672	.029	.000
Knowledge of the TL	1.17	.378	.914	.812
Age of learning the TL	2.57	.820	.186	.121
Parental use of the TL	1.93	.251	.032	.019
Family income	2.18	.983	.002	.005
Father's job	1.71	.451	.028	.007
Place lived during PE	1.64	.480	.124	.768
Place lived during UE	2.78	1.060	.123	.350

\* $p < .05$