INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION

5(*2*), 2025
www.jtade.com
ISSN: 2791-9951

Teachers' Opinions on the Turkish and Turkish Culture Competencies of Students Participating in Turkish and Turkish Culture (TTC) Classes (The Case of Belgium)

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0009-0006-3070-7543

Keywords

Turkish
Culture
Turkish Culture
Mother tongue

Article Info:
Received: 13-06-2025
Accepted: 01-10-2025
Published: 08-10-2025

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.17297086

Abstract

This study aims to examine the language and cultural competencies of students enrolled in Turkish and Turkish Culture courses in Belgium and to gather the views of Turkish and Turkish Culture teachers on these competencies. In this study, a case study from qualitative research methods was used. The study group of the research was determined by affinity sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. The sample of the study consisted of 11 Turkish and Turkish Culture teachers with different levels of age and professional experience (in years) working in Belgium. A semi-structured interview form was used as the primary data collection tool. The form consisted of open-ended questions to analyse how effective the teaching process is in developing the language and cultural competencies of the students. The content analysis method was preferred for data analysis. As a result, it is seen that Turkish and Turkish Culture courses are an essential carrier of cultural heritage for the Turkish community in Belgium, in strengthening cultural ties as well as language proficiency. Teachers stated that students were successful in using Turkish in daily spoken language but had difficulties in written expression and reading comprehension skills. However, some teachers reported that students' interest in the program was sometimes low, that the duration of the lessons was insufficient, and that students needed more guidance in some subjects

INTRODUCTION

Today, with the increase in migration movements, the educational needs of diasporas living in different countries have also diversified. In this context, Turkish and Turkish Culture (TTK) classes, organised for the Turkish community living in Belgium, assume an essential role in both developing children's mother tongue skills and preserving their cultural identity (Aydın, 2020). The provision of Turkish lessons to Belgian Turkish children in schools is carried out within the framework of agreements between the governments of Turkey and Belgium. Official Turkish education in Belgium started with the Science and Culture Exchange Programs signed with the French Community Ministry of Education in 1991. Later, the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Education of the French Community of Belgium signed the "Partnership Agreement on the Organization of the Curriculum of the Mother Language and Culture Course and the Curriculum of the Course of Recognition of the Culture of Origin" (Organisation des Cours D'acquisition de la Langue et de la Culture D'origine et des Cours D'ouverture a la Culture D'origine, LCO) in 2001. In 2012, a new agreement was signed, considered a continuation of the agreement that had been in force since 2001. This convention/agreement is called the "Program of Opening to Languages and Cultures: Charter of Partnership between the French Community of Belgium and the Republic of Turkey" (OLC), which is a formal agreement. It aims to promote multilingualism and intercultural dialogue for all, as well as encourage learning Turkish and exploring Turkish culture. The treaty entered into force with the signatures of Ömer Dinçer, Minister of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, and Marie-Dominique Simonet, Minister for Compulsory Education of the French Community of Belgium (Bayrakçı & Kavuncu, 2021). Conducted by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, these courses aim to strengthen the cultural ties of Turkish children abroad and help them gain proficiency in their mother tongue (MoNE, 2023).

Research in the context of bilingualism reveals that individuals who are proficient in their mother tongue are more successful in learning a second language and have an advantage in terms of cognitive development (Baker, 2011). On the other hand, international studies also emphasize the importance of mother-tongue education. According to the UNESCO (2003) report, mother tongue education has a positive impact on children's mental, emotional, and social development, and students who receive mother tongue support in multilingual environments tend to exhibit higher academic success. According to the Council of Europe's "Multilingualism and Cultural Diversity" report (Council of Europe, 2020), the education of immigrant children living in Europe in their mother tongue should be supported to promote democratic participation and social cohesion. Therefore, Turkish children in Belgium who learn both Turkish and the country's official languages to a reasonable level contribute to their becoming more effective individuals in both academic and social life.

Bayrakçı and Kavuncu (2021) stated that, according to data shared by the Consulate General of the Republic of Turkey in Brussels, the number of Turks in Belgium today is approximately 250,000. Additionally, a significant portion of this population consists of children (Statbel, 2023). Many of these children are educated in Flemish or French in the Belgian education system, but need additional support to stay connected to their families' cultural heritage. Language is not only a means of communication but also a cornerstone of cultural identity. In this context, maintaining mother tongue education is critical for children in the diaspora (Cummins, 2001).

In different regions of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), TCC classes are taught by teachers appointed by the Turkish Ministry of National Education for a period of five years. In the Flemish region, TCC courses were abolished in 2016 due to the termination of the bilateral agreement, while Turkish and Turkish Culture courses continue to be offered free of charge in schools in the Brussels and Walloon regions within the framework of the OLC (Programme d'Ouverture aux Langues et aux Cultures) agreement with the Walloon-Brussels Ministry of Education. It has been observed that the demand for TCC courses is higher in multicultural regions, such as Brussels (Vandecandelaere et al., 2018). This is due to the differences in regional education policies and approaches to multiculturalism.

Another factor affecting the quality of TCC lessons is the attitude of families. Research shows that families' attitudes towards preserving their children's mother tongue directly affect participation in lessons and children's motivation levels. A significant number of Turkish families in Belgium strive to ensure that their children do not forget their Turkish heritage; however, their children's attendance at mother-tongue classes may be interrupted from time to time due to academic pressures (Şahin, 2020).

In educational processes aimed at increasing awareness of Turkish and Turkish culture, developing students' language skills and enabling them to internalize cultural values are key goals. However, there are various challenges and obstacles in achieving these goals. Deficiencies in students' reading and writing skills, inadequacies in grammar, and limited teaching of cultural values can negatively impact the efficiency of the educational process when developing Turkish language skills. Students' reluctance to develop their language skills and the alienation they experience in the cultural context highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach in education. This situation necessitates that teachers reconsider classroom interaction and the methods used, and transition to a student-centred and culturally enriched teaching model, taking into account factors such as family participation in the educational process.

This study aims to evaluate teachers' views on the basic competencies gained by students attending Turkish and Turkish Culture courses in Belgium. In this research, answers to the following questions were sought:

Students attending Turkish and Turkish Culture courses;

Can they speak their mother tongue at an adequate level?

Can they express themselves orally and in writing?

How interested are they in learning about our cultural values?

METHOD

In this section, the research model, study group, data collection tool, research process and data analysis are explained.

RESEARCH MODEL

In this study, the case study design was preferred among qualitative research designs, as it was considered the most appropriate method for analysing the contribution of the teaching process, which involves teachers acting as educators, to students' language and cultural proficiency.
A case study is a research method used to collect and analyse in-depth information about a specific phenomenon, event, or group (Yin, 2018).

STUDY GROUP

The study group consisted of 11 Turkish and Turkish Culture teachers working at the Brussels Education Counsellor's Office who voluntarily participated in the study. The study group comprises teachers with diverse levels of experience, ages, and professional backgrounds in various regions of Belgium. One teacher who participated in the study had 6-10 years of experience in his/her professional career, 2 teachers had 11-20 years of experience in their professional career, and 8 teachers had 21-30 years of experience in their professional career. Eleven teachers participated in the study, with 7 being male and 4 being female. The ages of the respondents ranged between 31 and 60. The demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Teachers Participating in the Study*

Variable	*Gender*	*Age Range*	*Professional Experience (years)*
T1	Woman	41-50	11-20
T2	Woman	31-40	6-10
T3	Woman	51-60	21-30
T4	Woman	31-40	11-20
T5	Male	51-60	21-30
T6	Male	41-50	21-30
T7	Male	41-50	21-30
T8	Male	41-50	21-30
T9	Male	41-50	21-30
T10	Male	51-60	21-30
T11	Male	51-60	21-30

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

In this research, a semi-structured interview form was utilized as the primary tool for data collection. This interview method is designed to obtain consistent information from participants regarding the topic under investigation. Prior to the interviews, a guide containing predetermined questions or discussion points is prepared to assist the interviewer throughout the process (Diktaş, 2021, p. 67).

The researcher worked as an educator in the field of Turkish language and culture in Belgium. Of the total 23 educators working in this field across Belgium, 11 volunteered to participate in the study. Due to the limited number of participants, no inter-coder comparison was made. The research questions were formulated based on the researcher's own experiences and the opinions obtained through communication with other educators working in the field. In order to ensure validity and reliability, the questions were shared with relevant educators and revised based on the feedback received. An academic expert in the field evaluated the final version of the interview form, and the necessary adjustments were made based on their recommendations to finalize the form.

The interview form, which consists of open-ended questions designed to analyse the extent to which the teaching process contributes to students' language and cultural proficiency, is divided into two sections. The first section aims to collect demographic information about the participating teachers, including their age, professional experience, and gender. The second section aims to gather participants' views on the basic competencies acquired by students enrolled in Turkish language and culture courses in Belgium, as assessed through questions prepared by the researcher.

The questions in the second part of the interview form are given below:

How do you think your students developed basic reading skills within the scope of the Turkish and Turkish Culture Curriculum? How did these skills contribute to your students' daily lives?
How do you think your students developed basic writing skills within the scope of the Turkish and Turkish Culture Curriculum? How did you observe that these skills contributed to your students' daily lives?
How did the Turkish and Turkish Culture Curriculum improve your students' language awareness and language use? How would you assess the impact of this development on students' communication skills?
How do you think the Turkish and Turkish Culture Curriculum contributes to your students' internalization of national, spiritual and historical values? What are your observations about how your students adopt and integrate these values into their lives?

What kind of awareness has been created in your students about Turkish culture and civilization through the Turkish and Turkish Culture Curriculum? How do you think this awareness shapes students' cultural identities and their relations with society?
Do you have any other observations or suggestions you would like to add about the Turkish and Turkish Culture competencies of the students participating in Turkish and Turkish Culture (TTK) courses?

RESEARCH PROCESS

The research was conducted from March 17 to 31, 2025. In this process, a semi-structured interview form was delivered to participants online via Google Forms. Prior to data collection, participants were informed in detail about the purpose, scope and conditions of participation, and participation was entirely voluntary. The interview form was designed in a flexible structure to allow participants to respond at their convenience. Ethical rules were meticulously observed throughout the research process; the privacy of the participants was respected, and personal data were kept confidential. The qualitative data collected were subjected to a systematic analysis process, and various themes and codes were determined based on the teachers' views.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the study, the data were analysed using the content analysis method. Content analysis involves coding the data, identifying themes, organising the codes and themes, and defining and interpreting the findings. During the analysis, the data are first divided into units of analysis and each unit is given a code. Then, categories are created from the codes according to the similarities and differences between them (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

In order to ensure the internal validity of the study, the interview form was prepared in accordance with the scientific process. To ensure internal reliability, the codes related to the teachers' opinions on each interview question were supported with direct quotations. During the quotations, the identities of the teachers whose opinions were stated were indicated as T1 and T2. The forms were evaluated using a content analysis method. In the analysis of the teachers' opinions, codes were created based on the similarity of the statements, and themes were formed accordingly.

While analysing the codes, the participants' sentences were included, thereby increasing the reliability and validity of the study.

FINDINGS

In the study, the views of Turkish and Turkish Culture teachers on the basic competencies of Turkish and Turkish culture students attending Turkish and Turkish Culture courses were examined. Standard codes were determined from the answers given by the TCC teachers, and the following table in Table 2, with the codes according to the research questions, was created:

Table 2: *Teachers' Opinions on the Question "Does he/she speak his/her mother tongue adequately?"*

Theme	*Code*	*f*	*Quotes*
Language Awareness and Use	Mother tongue awareness	9	"Students started to take Turkish language more seriously." (T1)
	Ability to communicate effectively	7	"Now they can communicate with clearer, proper sentences." (T2)
	Controlled use of language	5	"They are more selective and careful when they speak." (T3)
	Vocabulary Development	4	"They express themselves more easily thanks to their vocabulary knowledge." (T4)

The standard view of the teachers is that students' awareness of their mother tongue, Turkish, has increased. This increased awareness has positively affected their speaking skills; students have developed the ability to communicate more selectively, accurately, and effectively. Maintaining a sense of belonging to Turkish in a bilingual environment is an important factor in this development. The opinions of the teachers are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: *Teachers' Opinions on the Question "Can he/she express himself/herself verbally and in writing?"*

Theme	*Code*	*f*	*Quotes*
Basic Writing Skills	Development of written expression skills	10	"Being able to express themselves in writing makes them more self-confident" (T3)
	Reinforcement of grammar through writing	6	"They can use the grammar rules they have learned while writing." (T7)
	Daily writing (diary, letter, etc.)	5	"Students develop their basic writing skills through journaling, short texts and creative writing activities." (T2)

Upon reviewing the answers provided, it was noted that their written expression skills had improved noticeably. It was reported that the habit of writing increased with diaries, letters and dictation exercises, and that written expressions improved in terms of order and compliance with grammar rules. It was also noted that some students were reluctant to write. For this reason, the ability to express oneself in writing develops more slowly than the ability to express oneself orally. Some teachers stated that the writing skill was the area where the least progress was made, as follows:

T5: I observed that writing skills are the area where we have made the least progress in Turkish and Turkish Culture lessons.

T6: We observe that our students are slightly behind in writing skills compared to their reading skills. This is because our students have fewer areas of use or needs in writing Turkish.

According to the responses, Turkish and Turkish Culture lessons strengthen students' love for their homeland, national values and feelings of social belonging. Emotional ties with the motherland are established through national day activities, and family ties are supported through values education. The teachers' opinions are shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: *Teachers' Opinions on the Question "How interested are they in learning about our cultural* values?"

Theme	Code	f	Quotes
Cultural Identity and Values	Values Education	11	"The course helps students recognize and understand national, spiritual and historical values. They embrace these values through traditional stories, important historical events and cultural activities." (T2)
	Emotional connection with the motherland	5	"It is observed that their feelings of belonging and respect for national, spiritual and historical values such as love for homeland, love for the flag, Çanakkale, martyrdom, Ramadan have increased." (T6)
	Consolidation of cultural identity	9	"The course creates a deep awareness of Turkish culture and civilization in students and strengthens their national identity." (T3)

Teachers' opinions show that students' awareness of Turkish culture increased significantly. Especially with the most emphasized code, "reinforcement of cultural identity", it was stated that students' identity awareness developed. Students have a more conscious understanding of their origins, traditions and identities, not only linguistically. This enables them to maintain their cultural ties and feel proud of their identity in the society they live in.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Turkish and Turkish Culture (TTK) courses in Belgium make substantial and multifaceted contributions to students' linguistic, cultural and identity development. Analyses based on teachers' opinions indicate that students have made significant gains in both basic language skills (reading, writing, speaking) and cultural awareness and national values. Students' more conscious adoption of their cultural identity, their acquaintance with traditional values and their effective use of their mother tongue are among the primary outcomes of this education. Additionally, the development of self-confidence and a sense of social belonging among students participating in TCC lessons is another important outcome. The majority of teachers believe that TCC classes play a critical role in ensuring cultural continuity and preserving language awareness in the long term.

In terms of language skills, it was found that Turkish children in Belgium were more successful in listening and speaking, but had significant difficulties in written expression. This situation was associated with the fact that students use Turkish mostly orally in their daily lives. Speaking Turkish in the family plays a crucial role, especially in the development of listening skills. However, frequent language errors in written expression suggest that students require additional support in this area. This finding aligns with Prensky's (2001) and Cummins' (2001) studies on language acquisition. These studies reveal that environmental interactions are decisive in language development and that inadequacies in academic language can negatively affect students' success in the classroom. In this context, there is a need for more systematic and academically oriented practices to improve Turkish students' written expression skills.

Another finding of the study is that students generally exhibit a positive attachment to Turkish

culture. It is evident that TCC courses make a significant contribution to the development of cultural identity and increase students' interest in cultural values. In particular, the interest of families in teaching Turkish culture has a positive impact on students' participation in the lessons. However, it is noteworthy that their knowledge of Turkey's historical and geographical features is superficial. This shows that students' cultural knowledge repertoire is not developed in depth. Kramsch (2000) states that cultural identity is shaped not only through language but also through social, cultural and political interactions of the individual. In this framework, it is concluded that students in Belgium should be included in a more comprehensive and structured cultural education process.

In line with the teachers' views, it is generally accepted that TCC lessons make valuable contributions to students both linguistically and culturally. However, some structural problems need to be overcome for this contribution to be sustainable. The inadequacy of the course hours, which are limited to one or two hours a week, limits the process of students learning Turkish and Turkish culture. Therefore, the duration of lessons should be increased and the content should be enriched. Additionally, it is emphasized that teaching materials should be updated and supplemented with contemporary content that is suitable for the student profile. Akın (2015) states that the design of teaching materials in accordance with the age and cultural characteristics of students directly affects the success of language teaching.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

The research findings also show that students are more enthusiastic about TCC lessons at a young age; however, their interest and participation in the course decrease as they get older. It has been observed that students' social environment and peer groups influence them as they enter adolescence, and as a result, they often lose interest in Turkish lessons. This situation poses a significant risk to the continuity of cultural identity. Gürsoy and Yılmaz's (2018) research also reveals that social environment, media and cultural interactions shape young people's motivation for language learning. Accordingly, it is essential to implement more interactive, up-to-date, and student-centered teaching methods to revitalize students' interest.

Overall, Turkish and Turkish Culture courses play an indispensable role for students living abroad, helping them maintain their mother tongue and preserve their cultural identity. Analyses based on teachers' opinions highlight areas that need improvement, as well as the program's strengths. The program has significant advantages in terms of supporting the development of language skills, raising cultural awareness and reinforcing a sense of social belonging. However, to sustain these advantages effectively, elements such as lesson duration, material quality, curriculum content, technology use, and family involvement need to be strengthened. In this respect, restructuring the current program in terms of both content and implementation will make students' commitment to the Turkish language and culture more permanent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study’s conclusions, the following actions are recommended:

Some structural and pedagogical suggestions have been developed to enhance the linguistic and cultural competence of students enrolled in Turkish and Turkish Culture classes in Belgium. First of all, it has been observed that the current course hours are insufficient, and that one or two hours of lessons per week are not effective enough in developing students' written expression skills. Therefore, the weekly hours of TCC courses should be increased to at least three hours (Demir, 2020). Additionally, presenting language teaching and cultural content in an integrated manner will support students' language awareness and development of their cultural identity (Korkmaz & Yıldız, 2019).

More student-centered and interactive methods should be applied in the teaching process. Methods such as visual materials, game-based learning, drama and group work can increase students' active participation in lessons and make learning more permanent (Gürsoy & Yılmaz, 2018). In addition, utilizing digital technologies (e.g., multimedia tools such as videos, animations, and virtual excursions) will contribute to students learning both Turkish language and cultural elements in a more effective and multidimensional way (Akbulut & Arslan, 2021).

The contribution of families to TCC lessons is also a noteworthy area of influence. The support students receive from their families in their Turkish learning process can increase their motivation and success levels. Therefore, it is essential to involve families more actively in the process and support them through activities such as informative meetings, cultural events, and book reading campaigns (Yıldırım, 2022).

This study was conducted based on the opinions of a limited number of teachers. Therefore, in order to increase the generalizability of the findings, it is recommended that future studies be conducted with larger and more diverse groups of participants. In particular, multidimensional qualitative and quantitative studies that include the views of students, parents and other stakeholders can provide a more comprehensive perspective on the effectiveness of TCC lessons.

In addition, it is important to conduct detailed studies examining the relationships between students' attitudes towards Turkish and Turkish Culture courses, academic achievement levels and language skills. Such research will provide a scientific basis for the restructuring of course content and teaching strategies. In addition, comparative analyses of Turkish language teaching programs implemented in various European countries should be conducted, and policy recommendations should be developed by leveraging successful implementation examples (Özkan & Taş, 2023).

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