

**Communication in the Classroom:
An Observational Analysis Comparing Turkish & US American College Students**

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Abstract

This paper reports on observations of classroom interaction between students at universities in Turkey and the United States. Using internet video technology, in live, synchronous meetings, groups of students in Turkey and the United States communicate about culture and daily life. When examining the presentations and discussions, terms used to describe cities, families and cultural contributions reveal differences in emotional content. Turkish students used more positively evaluative terms than US American students, and included more detailed content in their descriptions.

Key words: Intercultural communication, video technology in classroom, live meeting, Turkish and US university students

Sınıfta İletişim:

Amerikalı ve Türk Üniversite Öğrencilerini Karşılaştıran Gözlem Analizi

Özet

Bu makale A:B. Devletlerindeki ve Türkiye'deki üniversite öğrencilerinin iletişim kurmalarının gözlem sonuçlarını çözümleyerek aktarmaktadır. Amerikalı ve Türk öğrenci grupları internet teknolojisi aracılığında iletişim kurarak kültür ve günlük yaşamları üzerine bilgi paylaşmaktadırlar. Konuşmalarında ve sunumlarında kendi şehirlerini, ailelerin anlatırken, kültürlerini tanımlarken kullandıkları terminolojiler incelendiğinde duygusal farklılıklar saptanmıştır. Türk öğrencilerinin Amerikalı öğrencilerden daha olumlu değerlendirme sözcükleri kullandıkları, tanımlarına da daha ayrıntılı içerikler ekledikleri saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürlerarası iletişim, sınıfta video teknolojisi, canlı bağlantı, Türk ve Amerikalı üniversite öğrencileri

Introduction

My first introduction to Turkish culture came through watching episodes of the U.S. television show “M*A*S*H.” Running from 1972–1983, the show depicted US Army doctors, nurses, and support personnel during the Korean War (1950–1953). Although the show was ostensibly a comedy, it dealt with many serious issues related to warfare, and strived to achieve a high degree of veracity when it came to showing what US soldiers and their allies experienced. This included five episodes where Turkish soldiers were shown (Wittebols, 2003). The television showed Turkish men using broad stereotypes intended to be humorous. One episode portrayed “The crazy Turk” who, although seriously wounded, only wanted to return to the front lines to “kill Chinese.” Another episode showed a wounded Turkish soldier wanting to get back to duty because, according to him, “a Turk must kill many men.” A Turkish officer came and accused this soldier of having a self-inflicted wound and then tried to kill him, but ended up shooting himself in process. Two other episodes showed Turkish and Greek soldiers attacking each other, once in a bar and another time in a recovery room at the hospital. Finally, an unconscious Turkish soldier needed a great deal of blood, and, at the end of episode, Turkish soldiers arrive at the hospital to donate blood in gratitude for saving their comrade (Kalter, 1984). What was interesting was that, except for the instance of donating blood, Turkish soldiers were presented as highly emotional, violent, and unreasonable. Early mediated experiences such as this go a long way toward creating stereotypes that can last a long time (Lustig & Koester, 2000). Sad to say, this was my only view of people from Turkey for the next thirty years.

This perception that Turkish people were highly emotional actually goes against many current stereotypes of Turkey today. When I directed an International Studies program at a US American university, we provided many resources to help prepare students for study abroad. Unfortunately, many of these sources presented blanket generalizations about specific countries, and this included Turkey. What was often stated was that US American students should be very careful about expressing emotion during interaction with Turkish people. For example, one on-line advice resources said:

Turks smile much less than Westerners, especially Anglo-Saxons. Avoid smiling at a stranger, because if you do they most likely will not respond in kind and they will regard you either as odd or think that you are mentally handicapped. Smiling in Turkey towards strangers in public is not done and will be considered

inappropriate. Smiling is traditionally reserved for family and friends; smiling at a stranger will be considered offensive, as they will either think that you are making fun of them and there is something wrong with their clothes or hair. Furthermore, an automatic 'Western smile' is widely regarded as insincere, as in 'You don't really mean it' (Local Customs and Culture in Turkey, 2015).

Sources like this perpetuated the stereotype by using showing unsmiling Turkish men, women, and even children in stock images of crowded shopping and tourist spots in Istanbul and/or Ankara.

Adding to this stereotype that Turkish people express less emotion was a recent instance where a deputy prime minister in Turkey gave speech focused on enhancing the "morality" of men, women, and young people. Although the speech covered many topics, including media, television, and consumerism, Western media focused almost exclusively on the minister's statement that "Women should not laugh in public" (Dearden, 2014). Commentators ridiculed this one aspect of the speech and illustrated each story with the unsmiling official.

The Global Classroom

The above examples illustrate the danger of relying on generalized advice and mediated news stories to prepare students for real intercultural communication. That is why my goal as a teacher is to find ways to give US American students opportunities to actively engage "face-to-face" with students in other countries. To this end, with the assistance of administrators and faculty in Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, Yemen, Spain, Japan, and Costa Rica, I developed a "Global Classroom" model for the intercultural communication basic course. This course has at its core real-time, face-to-face interaction with cultures around the world using internet video. During the semester, we have weekly synchronous video conferences with faculty and students in at least two countries. Because of the new video technology, we are able to see and hear life-size projections of our international partners and they are able to see and hear us. We also share PowerPoint and other video/audio resources at the same time. Additionally, we engage in on-line discussions outside of class to supplement our class discussions. Our goal is to learn how to effectively interact with diverse cultures and how to engage in discussions of global issues. The end result is intended to expand our global awareness and knowledge of human diversity (Braithwaite, 2018).

When you look at communicative interaction, especially when it involves people of different backgrounds and cultures, you can learn a great deal about who they are as persons. According to Carbaugh (1994; 2012), the language and ways of speaking used during interaction

reveals how people see themselves, how they see others, how they see the world, and how they feel about all of the above. Additionally, numerous communication scholars have argued that one of the most important aspects of self is how we choose to express emotion (Lyon, 1998; Metts & Planalp, 2011; Planalp, 1999). Interestingly, the few communication studies that specifically addressed aspects of how Turkish people expressed emotion, seem to conclude that they viewed these expressions as indicative of a “universal” perspective. That is, the emotional reactions to various stimuli is the same for others as it is for Turkish people ((Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Karademir, 2017; Rankin, Ergin & Gökşen, 2014; Saktanber, 2002).

Because of the stereotypes I’ve encountered about the expression of emotion by Turkish people, and because of the communicative importance of how we show emotion during interaction, I have paid particular attention to how Turkish and US American students in the Global Classroom use terms in their presentations and discussion that express emotional content.

Turkish/US American Presentations of Self

At the heart of our Global Classroom interaction is the use of PowerPoint presentations. Because internet video technology allows us to show presentations simultaneously with face-to-face discussion, the use of these slides enhances the collaborative action in the classroom. Additionally, the use of PowerPoint assists with the understanding of language, since many of our international partners have English as a second, third, or fourth language. The images used allow students in both countries to see aspects of culture they might not normally have a chance to view. During any given semester we have student presentations that cover a myriad of topics: national history, important leaders, national cuisine, important holidays, etc. However, the presentations where students have the most opportunities to talk about themselves and their feelings are in their introductory presentations where they answer the question “Who Am I?”

The topics I found the most differences between Turkish and US American students in terms of the expression of emotion came when they talked about: (1) family; (2) home towns; and (3) cultural contributions, e.g., food, art, economic importance. In these cases, Turkish students were the most animated and emotional in their slides and their descriptions, whereas US American students offered mostly simple and straightforward description with little in the way of evaluation.

Family: “I love my family” vs. “I have a mom and dad”

What always stands out when Turkish students introduce themselves in the Global Classroom is the effusiveness in which they express the emotions associated with family. Some of the most common expressions we would see and hear include:

“my lovely mother”

“a wonderful brother”

“my sister, my love”

“my loving father”

Invariably, these feelings are accompanied by photographs showing lots of touching, hand-holding, and other physical closeness among all family members. An interesting aspect of the descriptions given of parents that could be related to emotion is how common it is for Turkish students to list the ages of their mothers and fathers. One explanation offered by a student as to why he told us their ages was that birthday celebrations are so important to him, that he was very aware of the date and year of parental birth. This sharply contrasts with almost all of my US American students who never listed the age of their parents, and, when asked, often could not tell me how old their parents were.

Another aspect of the different expressions of familial affection came when US American students asked questions about family interaction, especially among siblings. A very common question asked of the Turkish students, at least those who mentioned having brothers or sisters, was “do you get along with your (brother or sister)?” The usual response, offered quite quickly was “Of course!,” followed by smiling and laughing. The Turkish students seemed to find the question amusing. What was interesting was that sometime the Turkish student did not seem to completely understand the question, often responding “What do you mean?” They seemed to find the question a strange thing to ask about one’s brother or sister.

What characterized the US American presentations was the matter-of-fact descriptions of their family unit, usually just listing the names (sometimes) of the members. This was often accompanied by a formal picture that might come from a wedding, a graduation, or a holiday card. As mentioned above, the US American students would not present ages, or sometimes even occupations of their parents, although it was not uncommon to mention the ages of their siblings.

Even when the family unit was divided by divorce, all too common in US America where the divorce rate is over 50%, little was provided in the way of evaluation of the parents, either positively or negatively. Sometimes the Turkish students asked the US American students their feelings toward siblings, especially if they had been asked the question about “getting along” with their brothers or sisters. In those cases about one-half of the US American students responded in a positive fashion, and other times they mostly expressed ambivalence. Overall, the US American students stuck with “just the facts” when it came to describing all aspects of their family.

Hometown: “Greatest city in the world” vs. “not much there”

I found some of the greatest contrast in emotional expression to occur when students talked about the cities and towns where they were born or where they currently live. Turkish students were almost universal in presenting, both verbally and nonverbally, the exciting and important aspects of their hometowns. Some of the most common expressions about Turkish cities we would see and hear include:

“most wonderful city in the world”

“so many natural features”

“city of great beauty”

“you must come and visit”

Turkish students almost always included detailed maps showing the location of their hometowns, although that is not surprising given the lack of knowledge they know US American students have about Turkey and much of the world. These maps were often surrounded by photographs showing important sites and landmarks, as well as images of the student in various locales that they like the most. Common descriptions included the historical significance of the city, along with important people or events that are associated. Famous products or foods or specific dishes (“Çag Kebab!”) will usually be highlighted, and sometimes even recipes would be provided. All of this was intended to show the remarkable qualities of the hometown, and to give US American listeners another reason to visit. Of course, no mention of a large city would be complete without an enthusiastic account of the local football team (“Fenerbahçe!” “Galatasaray!” “Beşiktaş!”). Any

mention of a favorite football team would always elicit shouts of the names of other teams by their loyal followers, all in good fun of course.

The same sort of simple and unembellished descriptions US American students provided about their families extended to any accounts about their hometowns or places of birth. When preparing their presentations, I often had to encourage my students to include some sort of map showing where the city was located, especially in relation to the location of our university. Students would usually find some stock photo, rarely anything they had taken on their own, and, for the small towns, the photographs would often be of a central street with few if any people or anything that stood out as interesting. Those students that came from very small towns, i.e., 200 or fewer residents, would even make jokes about how unimportant and uninteresting anyone would find their residence. Few students would indicate they had plans to return to their hometowns, which contrasted with the majority of Turkish students that explicitly said they would return to the city of their family. All in all, there were few enthusiastic adjectives used by US American students associated with their hometowns, even when talking about large and important US cities.

Cultural Contributions: “The best comes from Turkey” vs. “nothing special”

Much like the way the important or special aspects of their hometowns were described, so did many Turkish students talk about the numerous contributions Turkey made to the world. It often seemed as though some Turkish students were working as publicity agents for their country, which maybe they were, judging by the descriptors they used to talk about food, drink, art, the historical significance, and the economic importance of their country. Some of the most common expressions about Turkish cultural contributions we would see and hear include:

“this (coffee, tea, specific food) was invented here”

“the best _____ comes from Turkey”

“the most modern”

“the oldest...the first...the original...”

In no way am I trying to imply a sense of arrogance or conceit, or that Turkish students try to present their country as superior as or better than US America or any other place. What we noticed was the sincere pride Turkish students had in those aspects of their country and history. When

they talked about how wonderful a particular food might be, whether it was hazelnuts, or coffee, or fish, it was as a way of letting their foreign audience know how special they would find the product. And when they talked about the enormous contributions of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, it was to demonstrate how much he changed their country for the better. Again, these were not presented merely descriptively, but, instead, were accompanied by words of happiness, pleasure, and honor.

It is possible that hearing of the long history and varied contributions Turkey has made in regard to cuisine, architecture, art, music, and politics, some US American students felt that anything local or at the state level could not remotely compare. This could be one reason why the US American student presentations on their region tended to be less evocative and compelling. When asked about the “best” foods of the area, US American students often fell back on what might be called “comfort food,” such as hamburgers, pizza, and those dishes found at a typical US American “Thanksgiving meal,” e.g., roasted Turkey, plain potatoes, boiled vegetables, and pies made from squashes such as pumpkin. One did certainly not hear the same degree of pride and pleasure from the US American students when describing local foods as we heard from Turkish students. Although US America definitely has many historical “firsts” that could be presented, e.g., transportation, space exploration, military strength, few if any of the US American students chose to emphasize these accomplishments in their presentations. Overall, the view presented to our international partners was that, at least when it came to this region of the USA, there was “nothing special” or noteworthy compared to Turkey.

Conclusion

We have to be careful to not read too much into this brief report of some differences in presentations prepared by Turkish and US American students. Remember, these are classroom assignments that students were required to prepare, as opposed to spontaneous utterances or completely naturally occurring interaction. Also, because students had opportunities to view and hear the presentations of their classmates, there might be some impact on the kind of language used in preparing their own materials. However, it should be noted that the differences described in the emotional expressiveness occurred in both prepared presentations and the discussions that followed. The same degree of enthusiastic language on the part of Turkish students was heard in

both contexts, and the same was true on the reliance on simple, descriptive terminology on the part of US American students in both their slides and their verbal responses to questions.

The conclusion that I draw from this report is that some Turkish college students are very willing to express emotional content in their presentations, and that some US American college students were generally uninterested in saying much about their emotional reactions to the content of their presentations. This could be for a variety of reasons. First, it could be that Turkish students were showing their pleasure of coming into “our house” at the US American university and wanted to express their pleasure in being part of that experience. Second, it could be that most US American students have little experience with being asked to share their feelings about themselves and their culture in a public classroom. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the US American students were asked to be expressive at 8am, something that just doesn’t happen normally, and the Turkish students were ending their school day and getting ready to go out and enjoy themselves. I believe this contextual reason for the differences reported between Turkish and US American students is potentially the most significant.

As always, much more detailed reports on language and conversation in this context are required, and, with any luck, we will keep having the opportunity to continue to gather further examples of face-to-face talk between the people of Turkey and US America (inshallah!).

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