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Characteristics of Learners of Turkish: Motivation, Investment, Beliefs, Autonomy and Strategies

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Characteristics of Learners of Turkish: Motivation, Investment, Beliefs, Autonomy and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a study into the multiple interacting factors which are involved in the successful learning of Turkish, the demand for which has been steadily increasing given the geo-political realities of the region at this time. The participants were 250 students of Turkish learning Turkish as a target language. A 12-item questionnaire was used which examined motivation, investment, beliefs, autonomy and strategy use on a rating scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The highest ratings were for motivation and the belief that Turkish is a good language to learn (median rating=5). None of the biographical variables (gender, age, nationality, length of study or length of time in Turkey) was found to be significantly related to the test score. The findings, which would seem to suggest that all of these multiple factors contribute to successful course outcomes, are discussed and compared with existing literature. Possibilities for further research are also suggested.

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The good language learner (GLL) concept has been around since the mid to late 1970s, when Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) all published pioneering work on the subject. In the early GLL work, most of the focus was on strategies, with the idea that, if we could only find out what good learners do, we could teach this to less successful learners. A number of studies (for instance, Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006) found a positive relationship between language learning strategy use and successful language development, and Griffiths (2003) also found more frequent use of strategies by more proficient learners.

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In recent years, however, there has been a developing realization that, in addition to strategies, many other factors contribute to the degree to which a given learner is “good” or not, and the reality is much more complex. This realization has driven a great deal of research into the various other factors which may impact on successful language learning.

Some commonly researched variables have been shown not to have a major impact on successful language learning. For instance, although according to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967), age has been commonly thought to limit an individual’s ability to learn language, there is increasing evidence that mature individuals can learn language under the right circumstances (e.g. Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Moyer, 2014; Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Likewise, as to the role of gender, although females are often believed to be better language learners than males (e.g. Ellis, 1994), research evidence for this belief has been “elusive” (Nyikos, 2008, p. 80). Although intuitively, extroverted personalities might be assumed to be better language learners, Ehrman (2008) found that introverts were over-represented among highly proficient learners, and she concluded that individuals can learn language effectively whatever their personality. Similarly with learning style, Nel (2008) concluded that it has not been possible to identify any style which is more or less typical of good language learners. And although affective factors (such as anxiety, attitude, attribution, empathy, inhibition, or self-concept) have long been acknowledged as important (e.g. Arnold, 1999; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gregersen 2012; Schumann, 1975), it has not been possible to establish clear evidence of a relationship between good language learners and any particular emotional state.

Other factors, however, have been shown to be significant contributors to successful language learning. The role of strategies, defined by Griffiths (2015) as actions chosen by the learner for the purpose of learning language, has been explored and expanded by many over the years (e.g. Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 2017). The effectiveness of particular strategies may vary, however, according to context (e.g. Gao, 2010; Harish, 2014; Ushioda, 2015), learning goal (e.g. Gürses & Bouvet, 2017; Macaro, 2006), how well they are “orchestrated” or used in combination with each other (e.g. Anderson, 2008), how many are used (e.g. Griffiths, 2003), or how often they are employed (e.g. Oxford, 1990). Good language learners are autonomous, in that they can manage their own learning (e.g. Gao & Lamb, 2011; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2017; Wenden, 1991), and they have positive beliefs about themselves and about the language they are trying to learn (e.g. White, 2008). Perhaps most importantly, good language learners are motivated (e.g. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Hasannejad, Zoghi & Asl, 2017) and, as a result, they are prepared to invest (e.g. Norton Peirce, 1995; Darwin & Norton, 2015) time and effort in the language learning endeavour.

2. Previous Research into Learners of Turkish

In the research to date, it is the characteristics of good learners of English that have been investigated in a large majority of studies. However, given its central position in the middle of what is, perhaps, the major conflict area in the world at the present time, the desire to be able to enjoy the relative safety and prosperity of Turkey has driven a major expansion in the demand for the language. In turn, this has driven an increase in research interest.

Some studies have pointed out common problems encountered when teaching Turkish (e.g. Açık, 2008; Göçer & Moğul, 2011; Durmuş, 2013; Biçer, Çoban & Bakır, 2014). Barın (2003) emphasized the importance of teaching basic but core vocabulary and collocations even at elementary level, and provided a series of suggestions to Turkish teachers while teaching Turkish as a second/foreign language. Kara (2010) studied the importance of games on Turkish language learning/teaching by making classroom observations, as a result of which he drew conclusions regarding the effectiveness of games for the improved performance of Turkish language learners. Akkaya (2013) analyzed “Nasreddin” anecdotes,

and found that, since they are short with plenty of humor, they are an effective means of teaching idioms, proverbs, vocabulary and lexical groups. In order to investigate the teaching of language skills in Turkish, Şeref (2013) analyzed the writing and speaking activities in a number of textbooks and made suggestions as to how to use communicative language teaching effectively while teaching Turkish to foreigners. Tiryaki (2013) also reviewed stages of how to teach writing more effectively in Turkish, listing teaching alphabet and vocabulary, as well as instruction in sentence, paragraph, and text construction, and suggesting that learners should go through a process (such as prior information, sample text analysis, preparation, drafting, writing by editing, correction and publishing). Tuna (2014) studied Turkish folk literature (specifically texts from the epic of “Oğuz Khan”) and suggested that the historical culture and its merits could all be used effectively to teach Turkish. Also capitalizing on Turkey’s rich literary traditions, Yılmaz and Taşkın (2014) explored the effectiveness of plays such as “Hacıvat and Karagöz”, and found that they can be used effectively to teach linguistic structures as well as Turkish culture. And in an experimental study, Yılmaz (2015) compared students receiving training on creative writing activities (N = 16) to those receiving traditional writing instruction in Turkish (N = 16), and he found that although students in the traditional writing group improved their performance from pretest to posttest, those in the creative writing group made much greater improvement.

3. The Current Study

Although an increase has been witnessed in the literature regarding finding better ways of teaching Turkish as a foreign language, most are still limited to measuring methodological effectiveness of one over another (e.g. the effect of using literature or games, teaching skills, etc.). There has been very little exploring the issue from the learners’ point of view. This study therefore addressed the key question:

1. What are the characteristics of good learners of Turkish?

3.1. Setting and Participants

This study was carried out at the TÖMER centre of a state university in Turkey. The center is like a preparatory school teaching Turkish as a second language from elementary to advanced level. Before classes start, students’ proficiency is measured by a standard and reliable proficiency exam in all four language skills. Although some students pass and therefore start at their faculties, many fail because of their lack of Turkish knowledge, and they are placed into different levels at the school.

Initially, 296 students were included in the survey, which was conducted in both English and Turkish. Of these, however, 10 were French, and they could not manage to respond to the questionnaire items in either English or Turkish, so they were not included in the analysis. Furthermore, after the final test at the end of the semester, 36 students did not achieve the passing grade (60%). Since the aim of the study was to explore the characteristics of successful learners of Turkish, these 36 were also eliminated, leaving 250 participants. Ages ranged between 16 and 42, and 171 were male while 79 were female. At the time of the questionnaire, at the beginning of the semester, students’ length of time in Turkey ranged from one month to 196 months, and their length of study ranged from one month to 60 months. The participants came from 49 different countries from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Countries of origin (N = 49) of the students in the study (N = 250) with numbers of students from each

COUNTRIES	COUNTRIES	COUNTRIES
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Abkhazia (1)	India (3)	Sierra Leon (6)
Azerbaijan (5)	Iran (2)	Somalia (11)
Bangladesh (1)	Iraq (34)	Sri Lanka (1)
Benin (4)	Jordan (1)	Suudi Arabia (7)
Bosnia (2)	Kazakhstan (2)	Syria (82)
Burkina Faso (4)	Kenya (2)	Tajikistan (1)
Burundi (1)	Korea (3)	Tanzania (3)
Cameron (1)	Malaysia (1)	Togo (1)
Central African Republic (3)	Mali (1)	Tonga (3)
Chad (1)	Montenegro (1)	Turkey (1)
Djibouti (2)	Myanmar (10)	Uganda (2)
Egypt (1)	Nepal (2)	Ukraine (2)
Ethiopia (2)	Palestine (5)	Uzbekistan (1)
Flippines (7)	Romania (2)	Yemen (3)
Georgia (1)	Russia (2)	Zimbabwe (2)
Germany (4)	Rwanda (3)	
Ghana (8)	Serbia (2)	
Total=49 countries, 250 students		

3.2. Data Collection

In order to collect the data, a Likert-type questionnaire developed by Griffiths (2017) was used. The questionnaire items were based on findings from the literature noted above regarding the importance of motivation, investment, beliefs, autonomy, and strategy use. Strategy use was further differentiated according to number, frequency, orchestration, goal, situation, and individual needs. Participants were asked to respond on a scale of 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) to a series of 12 statements. After the items were translated into Turkish by Author 1 (who is a Turkish native speaker), the questionnaire in both English and Turkish was piloted with a group of students (N = 25) in the English language teaching department who were not included in the final study. Since the alpha coefficient for reliability over all items proved to be 0.842, the questionnaire was considered to be sufficiently reliable for use with the target participants (learners of Turkish).

After gaining permission from the principal of the school and explaining the purpose of the study to the students to ensure informed participation, they were asked to sign consent for the data they

provided to be used for research or publication purposes. The questionnaire was given to the students during class time with the cooperation of the class teachers. Questionnaires were distributed not only in Turkish but also in English, as it was thought that there could be some students who were not sufficiently fluent to respond to the items in Turkish, and English was, effectively, the lingua franca for most of them (except, as mentioned before, for the 10 French students). The first author stayed with the students throughout the classes in order to answer any questions.

3.3. Data Analysis

After collection, the data were entered into SPSS and analyzed for reliability and normality of distribution. A factor analysis was also conducted. As the data are ordinal by nature, median levels of agreement were calculated for questionnaire items, as suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) and Dörnyei (2007). Since a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality indicated that the test results were not normally distributed (sig.=.003), nonparametric correlations (Spearman's rho) were calculated between test scores and age, length of time in Turkey and length of time studying Turkish. In addition, nonparametric differences were calculated according to gender (Mann-Whitney U for two independent samples) and national origin (Kruskal-Wallis test for K independent samples).

4. Results

The reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 0.816 (Chronbach's alpha) over all 12 items, which is considered acceptable (Dörnyei, 2007). No item needed to be changed or removed because the range if removed was between alpha=0.792 (the lowest, item 6) and alpha=0.817 (the highest, item 12). A factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis and Equimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization showed that all items formed a unified construct which did not need to be sub-divided and from which no item needed to be removed. A Shapiro-Wilk test of normality of distribution indicated that none of the items of the questionnaire was normally distributed (in all cases, p=0.000), and, as noted above, the test results were also not normally distributed.

4.1. Medians

The median scores showed that the students agreed (rating=4) with almost all the items, except for item 1 (I was motivated) and Item 12 (I believe Turkish is a good language to learn) with which the students strongly agreed (rating=5). There were no items found to be either neutral (rating=3), or in the disagree range (rating=1-2). These results are set out in Table 2:

Table 2.

Median levels of agreement for all the items in the questionnaire

When learning Turkish...	Median
1. I was motivated	5
2. I spent a lot of time working on my Turkish	4
3. I put a lot of effort into my Turkish studies	4

4. I used many strategies (activities chosen for the purpose of learning)	4
5. I used strategies frequently	4
6. I chose my strategies carefully so that they worked well together	4
7. I chose strategies to suit my individual needs (e.g. age, gender, culture, style, personality, etc.)	4
8. I chose strategies to suit my learning goal	4
9. I chose strategies to suit my learning situation	4
10. I took charge of my own learning rather than waiting for someone else (e.g. teacher) to make all my decisions	4
11. I believe I am a good language learner	4
12. I believe Turkish is a good language to learn	5

(1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=no strong opinion; 4=agree; 5= strongly agree)

4.2. Correlations

Relationships between questionnaire items and test results

There were no significant relationships (Spearman's rho) between the final test score and any of the questionnaire items, suggesting that agreement is very uniform across the sample, whether high or low scorers on the test, as also suggested by the uniformly high medians: they all seem to be motivated, autonomous, strategically active, to be willing to invest time and effort, and to believe in themselves and that what they are doing is worthwhile.

Relationships between age and test results

There was no significant correlation (Spearman's rho) between age and the test grade, suggesting that age is not a major issue with these students. In other words, successful learning of Turkish does not seem to be age-dependent.

Relationships between length of study/time in Turkey and test results

Although, understandably, length of time in Turkey and length of study were significantly correlated with each other ($r_s = 0.429$, $p = 0.000$), neither LOTT nor LOS was significantly correlated (Spearman's rho) with test score. In other words, just because they had been in Turkey longer or had studied Turkish for longer did not necessarily make them any more successful in the test.

4.3. Differences

Differences according to gender

According to a Mann-Whitney U test of difference for two independent samples, although female students had a higher mean rank (137,70) than male students (119, 86) for the test, this difference was not

found to be statistically significant. This suggests that gender is also not a major issue with these students when learning Turkish.

Differences according to nationality

According to a Kruskal-Wallis H test of difference for several independent samples, there were no significant differences in test results according to nationality. This suggests that no national group stands out as being more or less successful at learning Turkish.

5. Discussion

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of these results is the remarkable uniformity. Inevitably, of course, when the survey forms are examined individually, there are variations in the ratings given. Overall, however, although there are wide differences in levels of proficiency (from elementary to advanced), the picture which emerges regarding these learners of Turkish is of a remarkably homogenous group who are motivated, autonomous, strategic, have positive beliefs, who are prepared to invest both time and effort in their studies, and who do not show significant differences according to age (16-42), gender, nationality, length of time they have been studying (1-60 months), or length of time they have been in Turkey (and therefore exposed to the language, 1-196 months).

When Griffiths (2017) used the questionnaire employed in the current study with a group of teachers who were non-native speakers of English, she found that, like the current group, they also gave a median rating of 5 (strongly agree) to the item concerning motivation. This concurs with the importance given to motivation by others, such as Rubin (1975) and Ushioda (2008). The participants in this study also agreed that they invested time and effort (median rating=4 for both). These responses are also in close accord with those from Griffiths's (2017) study (median rating=4,5 for both). The concept of investment was first introduced to the language learning field by Norton Peirce (1995), and it remains an important theoretical construct which may help to explain why some learners are more successful than others (e.g. Darwin & Norton, 2015). In answer to the question about autonomy (Item 10), a concept defined by Holec (1981) as the capacity to control one's own learning, which has long been associated with strategy use (e.g. Wenden, 1991), the median rating was found to be 4 (agree), suggesting that when needed, good learners of Turkish are able to take charge of their own learning processes in order to maximize their learning success. The importance of beliefs was first introduced to the field of language learning by Horwitz (1987), and the relationship with successful language learning has received much research interest in the years since (e.g. White, 2008). In the case of the current study, most of the participants seemed to confidently believe (rating=4) that they were capable of learning Turkish. Even stronger agreement (rating=5) was accorded to the item concerning positive beliefs about the language they were learning. As for strategies, there was also agreement (ratings=4) that they frequently used (Oxford, 1990) and carefully orchestrated (Anderson, 2008) many strategies (Griffiths, 2003) chosen (Cohen, 2011) to suit their goals (Macaro, 2006) as well as their situations (Gao, 2010) and individual needs (Griffiths, 2013; Pawlak, 2012). Although the ratings in Griffiths's (2017) study were a little more varied (going from median=5 for goal-orientation to median=3 for orchestration), overall they are similar in that none of the responses from either study are in the negative range (disagree or strongly disagree).

This study would seem to have demonstrated that multiple factors (motivation, autonomy, beliefs, investment, strategies, age, gender, nationality, length of study and length of residence) are all of almost equal importance when it comes to successfully (all of the students reported here obtained more than the passing grade of 60%) learning a target language (in this case, Turkish). In addition, it is interesting to note that the results of this study are remarkably similar to the results of Griffiths's study of good learners

of English. Might this suggest that the process of successfully learning a language is quite similar irrespective of the actual language?

6. Suggestions for Further Research

This study has produced some interesting insights, but some questions could benefit from more exploration:

- Since very similar results were obtained from both learners of English and learners of Turkish, it could be interesting to explore the possibility that the process of learning a language is similar rather than language-specific. In order to investigate this question, it would be necessary to apply the questionnaire to different language groups (e.g. French, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, etc.) and to compare the results looking for any similarities and differences.
- Since the questionnaire used in this study was given to students whose main concern is with the language they are trying to learn, and who are, therefore, willing to divert their attention to other matters (such as filling out research questionnaires) for a short time as long as it does not distract too much from their main goal, it was kept short in order to minimize the possibility of participant resistance. As a result, therefore, none of the items deals with any of the issues in any depth, which leaves much space for further exploration. The items which received the highest median ratings (motivation and belief that Turkish is a good language to learn), for instance, could well be worth further investigation. Further details about exactly what strategies they use, how, when, where, how many, how often, how they orchestrate them, etc., what they do to achieve autonomy, etc., could also produce useful extra information.
- The questionnaire could also be used in other situations in order investigate any differences which might exist according to context. This might apply to other nationalities, or to other institutional environments or geographical locations within the same country.
- Some of the nationalities have very low numbers, making it impossible to make reliable generalizations about them. It would be interesting to gather larger numbers of some of these nationalities in order to investigate whether any effect relates just to individuals or whether it is more widely applicable.

The current article reports just quantitative results. Interesting insights might also be obtained by taking a qualitative view by means, for instance, of interviews. Although this option was not pursued in the current study because, by the time the questionnaire data had been analysed, the semester was finished and students were no longer available, some interesting insights could be obtained by means of interviewing individual students or small focus groups and exploring the reasons for their ratings in more depth.

7. Conclusion

The picture which emerges from this study of a group of successful students of Turkish is one of remarkable homogeneity. They are highly motivated, and they believe that they work hard and spend a lot of time working on their Turkish. They are able to take charge of their own learning and learn autonomously by frequently using many well-orchestrated strategies which are appropriate for their

personal needs, goals and situations. By these means, they seem to be confident that they can successfully learn Turkish, which they believe to be a worthwhile objective. And these characteristics seem to apply across genders, age groups, nationalities, length of study and length of time in the target language environment.

Based on these results, we might, therefore, say that there appears to be no single main factor which explains successful language development for any particular group, although motivation and belief that the language is worth learning rate slightly more highly than the other items. On the contrary, the multiple factors all appear to contribute almost equally to the successful language learning outcomes achieved by the diverse participants in this study.

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