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# Language Teacher Cultural Competency through Virtual Exchange

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore United States-based English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher candidates' self-assessed success of teaching grammar and cultural competency, focusing specifically on Turkish culture. This study will examine these themes through data collected during a six-week virtual cultural exchange with undergraduate Turkish students currently enrolled in Istanbul Technical Institute. The participants, twelve graduate teaching candidates studying at Binghamton University, were sorted into twelve individual groups and paired with one or two Turkish students. All participants remained with the same international group members through the six-week virtual cultural exchange. Each week participants were instructed to complete a pre and post-exchange survey, which covered topics relevant to grammar teaching and cultural competency. While most surveys were qualitative, there were quantitative elements included. The pre- and post-survey responses were collected and quantified, resulting in a summary of the teacher candidates' week one beliefs of their successes in cultural competency and teaching grammar in comparison to their success throughout the exchange's duration and week 6. The results demonstrated that while the virtual cultural exchange allowed some participants more confidence in teaching grammar and a more comprehensive understanding of cultural competency and therefore learning, some participants experienced an opposite result; throughout the duration of the exchange, a number of participants became less confident and therefore indicated less success in their teaching of grammar and cultural competency. Positively, the study results indicated the importance of teacher education in the use of visual aids and asking intentional questions to increase cultural competency.

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## 1. Introduction

In consideration of a rapidly increasing need for global competency and international cultural understanding, language learning is at the forefront of implementing this competency at both the student level, and educator level. For years, language learning has been rooted in cultural competency. Kim (2020) states, "language teachers have always known that learning an additional language requires learning about another culture," (p. 520). The very concept of language learning is impossible without the inclusion of cultural understanding. Kim (2020) states that the most successful language learning is done while the language learning occurs in tandem with culture, something that is sometimes undervalued in language learning classrooms. Each of the nearly 7,000 living languages currently spoken throughout the world are interwoven within the cultures in which they reside, as well as past and present cultures in which they are changed and affected even in modern times. It is this changeability and adaptation of languages that defines them as living. Language educators must be seen as pioneers in preservation, but also expansion of these living languages. The benefits of cultural competency with language learning assist learning to use words, both orally and written, correctly and effectively (Kizi, 2020). Kizi further (2020) describes learning language without culture as "eating a meal without salt" (p. 592). While current research on language learning speaks heavily of the importance of teaching language and culture interconnectivity in the English classrooms, more research is needed on the importance of language educators' personal understanding of cultural competency and global awareness.

Cultural competency cannot be simply defined; however, it should include four components that must be developed: linguistic-cultural, sociolinguistic, socio-psychological and cultural (Ветошкина, 2018). While this definition can be used as a starting platform it cannot be used as a comprehensive definition of the cultural competency needed for language educators to ensure the success of their language classrooms. While this definition could be of use to English language educators working in international settings, it is improbable to believe a language educator within the confines of an English-speaking country's language classroom could follow such guidelines for cultural competency, due to every changing student enrollment in language learning classrooms, specifically in the variety and diversity of students' cultures, L1s and background. It would be impossible for a language educator to be fully culturally competent in all their student's cultures and L1s. Therefore, language educators residing in English speaking settings must adapt their understanding of cultural competency to include, but not limited to, communication skills, teaching methods, question baiting, curriculum building, socialization, etc. Pedagogy without cultural content is severely limited, and pedagogy reform in a cultural context is needed throughout the world (Jukes, 2021). Only through learning how to be more culturally



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sensitive, as well as competent can a language educator achieve success, for cultural competency is crucial in aiding students to feel respected and comfortable.

This study examines these ideas by focusing specifically on language teaching candidates' self-assessment of their cultural competency, as well as their success in teaching, specifically grammar. Their assessment of grammar teaching is used as quantitative understanding to otherwise qualitative-focuses data analysis.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Global Awareness*

The need for global awareness and consequential global identity is crucial within todays' society. While the definition of global awareness varies amongst authors, the existing literature states that global awareness at its core is understanding concerning world affairs and interdependence between people (Lenkaitis et al., 2019). In support of this, Reysen and Katzarska-Miller (2013), define global awareness as "knowledge of global issues and one's interconnectedness with others" (p. 861). Hanvey (1976) further elaborates with his five categories of study in which students need full comprehension in order to obtain personal global awareness. The categories are as follows: perspective consciousness, state-of-the-planet awareness, cultural awareness, knowledge of global dynamics and awareness of human choices. Within cultural and language focused classrooms, such as L2, study abroad or cultural exchange courses, meeting these categories can be prescribed within the scope of the set curriculum. Recent research within the fields of language learning and linguistics has focused on methods and strategies to increase students' global awareness and cultural competency through cultural exchange (Hall 2016, Lokkesmoe 2016, Chen 2016, Djebbari 2021, Slapac 2021)

### *Cultural Exchange*

Cultural exchange is a crucial component toward creating global awareness (Cuccurullo, 2020). Cultural exchange can be summarized as an exchange between people within differentiating cultures, societies, ages, nationalities, ethnicities, gender, or sexual orientations to name a select few. O'Regan (1999) defines cultural exchange as "the circulation - the giving, receiving, and redisposition - of cultural materials among differentiated socio-cultural formations. The component parts of the cultural exchange process" (p. 262). There exists countless research on cultural exchange, particularly within the parameters of higher education. Due to this, cultural exchange research varies greatly in purpose based on incident, form, and purpose (O'Regan 1999). However, varied the exchange purposes and research may be, for cultural communication for educational purposes and at the higher education level, the purposes can be summarized as in preparation for intercultural interactions and increasing of global identity and awareness. Lewis (2016) explains that cultural exchange has been "tremendously powerful in transforming



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participating language learners' experiences from a predominant focus on 'language' and towards processes makes salient the need to develop the linguistic, intercultural and interactional capacity for creating and maintaining social relationship significance (p. 9). Additionally, further research shows that cultural exchange increases not only students' understanding of new cultural knowledge but more understanding of their own beliefs, attitudes and culture (Lee and Markey, 2014).

Within his research DeLong (2011) states that "global learning in U.S. higher education is driven by internationalization of curriculum as well as the practical need to learn how to navigate professionally across cultures" (p. 42). This reality has driven the past and current research of cultural exchange at the university and language classroom parameters. However, within the parameters of a present and post-covid-19 reality, the ability and resources for cultural exchange has diminished by the inability to be mobile throughout various countries and therefore instilled a need to fill the gap for cultural exchange within the university setting. Cultural virtual exchange or virtual exchange can fill in the need for exchange programs to gain cultural competency and global awareness.

***Virtual Exchange***

Virtual exchange is a newer concept and term than cultural exchange due to the ever-growing and advanced technological boom of recent years. Therefore, research exists to examine this concept, but has limitations in the expansiveness and comprehension of virtual exchange. As defined by O'Dowd and O'Rourke (2019), virtual exchange at the higher education level "involves bringing together groups of learners from different cultural contexts for extended periods of online intercultural collaboration and interaction," (p. 1). To expand on this definition within the context of language learning O'Dowd (2019) further states: a result of the growth of initiatives in online intercultural competency and dialogue, the terminology from other curricular areas has made inroads in the field of foreign language education, and, for this reason, terms such as *COIL*, *virtual teams*, and *virtual exchange* are appearing alongside the more common term *virtual exchange* in the literature (p. 2). Therefore, research on virtual exchange exists and is gaining momentum within the language learning fields. This momentum has only been furthered by the Covid-19 pandemic when university courses were forced onto online platforms seemingly instantaneously throughout the world. Therefore, research has expanded as well on this topic. In addition, universities have become more proactive in implementing virtual exchange programs, such as the SUNY network, in regard to the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which connects similar course content between different countries and academic disciplines (Schultheis Moore & Simon, 2015). Sadler and Dooly's

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(2016) research explore the increase of virtual exchange in language learning settings and how it can help facilitate communication and learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy through virtual exchange can be described as the learners being responsible for their own learning, including but not limited to reflection, evaluation and use of language (Fuchs, 2021). This study will coincide with learner autonomy at the level of self-language assessment and understanding at a sociocultural level. Existing research has also explored the limitation of virtual exchange within the classroom. Hanna and De Nooy (2009) explore this limitation stating that "[i]nteraction is restricted to communication with other learners, a situation that is safe and reassuring for beginners and younger learners, but somewhat limiting for more advanced and adult learners, who need practice in venturing beyond the classroom" (p. 88). This current study hopes to push beyond these limitations and explore the role of visual aids in cultural understanding through a cultural virtual exchange program at the advanced and adult language learner level.

## 3. Research Question

Exploring how a group of U.S. graduate teacher candidates define their own understanding of their success in teaching grammar, as well as their cultural competency success during a six-week virtual cultural exchange was the aim of this study. To this end, this paper hoped to explore the ideas of how these teaching candidates understood their success of teaching grammar in a real teaching setting, and focused more heavily on how the participants perceived the complex nature of cultural competency through a cultural virtual exchange in which mimics the kind of cultural exchange they will experience on a daily basis in their future language classrooms. Despite their previous learning and understanding of grammar teaching and cultural understanding and comfortability, the cultural virtual exchange allowed for real-life experiences on these topics and therefore offered more authentic responses. This paper answers the research question: From the perspective of graduate teacher candidates, how did a six-week virtual cultural exchange affect their belief and techniques of grammar teaching and cultural competency success?

## 4. Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants in this study consisted of twelve graduate teaching candidates from a university in the United States. These participants were sorted into twelve groups for the duration of a six-week international virtual cultural exchange with one or two Turkish students in each group. The graduate students were enrolled in an education course, in which the objective was to assist the teacher candidates in their understanding and ability as future TESOL teachers. The undergraduate students from Turkey were enrolled in a technical university in various majors;



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however, all enrolled in an English language course within their university from which the cultural virtual exchange was a requirement. All participants in both Turkey and the United States were informed on the recording of their meetings and survey questions.

***Procedures***

Divided into groups of two or three, each teacher candidate was assigned Turkish English language learners to collaborate with during the duration of the six-week program. The video conferencing platform, Zoom, was used as the meeting platform for all twelve groups, separately each week. Each group in the program had the same materials: surveys, visual aids, and videos in which to facilitate conversation during the weekly cultural virtual exchange.

The teaching candidates were responsible for completing course work individually and with their undergraduate students through the facilitation of the weekly zoom meeting; while the undergraduates were required to complete a linguistic autobiography, online worksheets, pre and post zoom questionnaires and an individual essay. The topics of the exchange included, but were not limited to, university culture, rural vs urban communities, sports, and food from the US and Turkish cultures. Both undergraduate and graduate participants had to complete pre and post zoom surveys in self-assessment of their understanding of their English language learning and English language teaching, respectively.

***Data Collection***

Over the course of the six-week cultural virtual exchange the teaching candidates were asked to complete pre-zoom and post-zoom surveys. An exception exists as participants were only asked to complete one survey during week 1 and week 6, a pre-zoom survey and post-zoom survey, respectively. The questions of each survey vary depending on weekly topics, and change slightly between pre-zoom and post-zoom; regardless of the slight changes in questions verbage or changes due to specific topics discussed, conclusively the surveys are focused on the participants self-evaluation and understanding of their grammar teaching abilities and understanding of Turkish culture, regarding their past qualifications and personal life as well as the effects of the aforementioned cultural virtual exchange. In addition, the Zoom meetings were recorded and could be transcribed for further data collection in regard to understanding more comprehensively the ideas focused on in this study.

The data collected will be analyzed mostly qualitatively with the expectation of week one and week six survey questions, which is measured quantitatively in consideration of success in teaching grammar. Some survey questions will be omitted due to irrelevancy, inconsistent data or omission of responses from participants. As well some participant's answers will be omitted due to misunderstanding of the survey question, omission of response or repetitions answer verbatim from week's past.



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## 5. Results & Analysis

### *Teaching Grammar*

During the duration of the six weeks, each of the twelve participants answered the quantitative question each week: "Using the scale below, how would you describe your success in teaching English grammar until this point? 0-0%; 1-20%; 2-40%; 3-60%; 4-80%; 5-100%". Below is a table illustrating the results of these questions over the six-weeks.

**Figure 1***: Pre-zoom Survey question 1*

| Participants | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 | Analysis | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 60%-80% | Increase 20% |
| B | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 80%-60% | Decrease 20% |
| C | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 | - | 100%-80% | Decrease 20% |
| D | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 60%-80% | Increase 20% |
| E | 3 | 4 | - | - | - | 4 | 60%-80% | Increase 20% |
| F | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | - | 60% | Stable |
| G | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 60%-80%-60% | Increase 20%/decrease 20% |
| H | 0 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 0%-100% | Increase 100% |
| I | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0%-60% | Increase 60% |
| J | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 60% | Stable |
| K | 1 | - | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 20%-40% | Increase 20% |

The twenty percent growth seen in the Figure 1 varies from participant and percentages: 60%-80% (3); 20%-40% (1). Participant G showed a 20% (60%-80%) increase between weeks 1 and 2 and remained stable until week 6 where there was a 20% decrease (80%-60%). Two participants, B and C, indicated a decrease in their abilities by 20%; 80%-60%, 100%-80%, respectively. The two remaining participants, F and J, were steady throughout the cultural virtual exchange remaining at 60%.

Along with the scaled survey questions, participants were asked to describe "In what ways and why do you feel you have been successful in teaching English grammar? Not successful?". The written responses to success and non-success can be attributed to having or the absence of past teaching experiences; own grammar learning; activities and games; native language; current virtual exchange program; and knowledge of English grammar rules. 50% of the participants indicated in week 1 that they had no past English grammar teaching experience. While the remaining six indicated a level of past success ranging from 'good' to 'limited'.



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In addition to the data indicated by Figure 1, there were several changes in the participants' belief in their teaching success over the duration of the cultural virtual exchange. Four out of the twelve participants indicated a twenty percent increase in their abilities in teaching grammar. Participant R indicated this shift due to "knowledge of grammar increased during the semester, [they] have improved in the way that [they] teach grammar", while participant G suggested that "in context is the most successful -using opportunity and students 'mistakes'". Participant I indicated a similar success stating that listening to students and giving subtle corrections lead to their teaching grammar success.

The two participants with a 20% decline indicated several reasons for this. Participant B attributed this decrease to not feeling they were focusing on grammar, but more focused on conversations. Participant C simply stated that there was "always room for improvement" in the week 6 survey.

Although the data results are inconsistent amongst each participant, the data in comparison to the students' verbal responses shows a variety of information. For the students who self-assessed their teaching grammar abilities increased attributed this confidence to the course, and their past and present experiences teaching grammar, as mentioned above. While those participants whose success in teaching grammar decreased, decreased for similar reasons, as the experience teaching grammar seemed to indicate that the difficulty of teaching grammar in the classroom decreased their belief in success. Two participants indicate this idea stating they still encounter grammar issues in which they do not know how to explain why it is wrong and furthermore how to fix; as well as not having enough grammar knowledge to help answer technical questions. This indicates a difference in understanding of realities teaching as a teacher candidate and that of the educator. For these reasons it may be considered that teacher education should include more real-life classroom experiences or more exchanges whether virtual or in-person, as this study showed success in this regard.

***Learning about Culture***

The participants were surveyed in their self-assessment of their success in learning about other cultures. The question "In what way and why do you feel you have been successful in learning about cultures? Not successful?" was asked in both pre-survey and post-survey throughout the six weeks. To quantify the participants' results their answers were categorized into subcategories. The successful responses were classified by personal learning; cultural immersion through traveling and living abroad; classroom experiences; inquiring/asking questions; and the current cultural virtual exchange program. The reasons for non-success in learning about different cultures were categorized as: stereotypes/bias; no formal experience or opportunities;



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cultural miscommunications/incompetence; and lack of knowledge. This is illustrated below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** *Reasons for Success & Unsuccess in Cultural Learning*

| **Success** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Personal learning | Cultural immersion: traveling/ living abroad | Classroom experience | Inquiring (asking questions) | cultural virtual exchange program |
| Week 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 | - | - |
| Week 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | - | - |
| Week 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | - | - |
| Week 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | - |
| Week 5 | - | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| **Not successful** | | | | | |
| | Stereotypes/ bias | No experience or no opportunities | Cultural miscommunications/ incompetence | Insufficient knowledge | |
| Week 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | |
| Week 2 | - | - | 3 | - | |
| Week 3 | - | 1 | 2 | - | |
| Week 4 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | |
| Week 5 | 1 | - | - | 3 | |

As seen in the figure the participants classified themselves as more successful than unsuccessful in learning about other cultures. Despite the weekly cultural virtual exchange program, some of the students still indicated elements of nonsuccess in the categories of stereotypes/bias, cultural miscommunication/incompetence and lack of knowledge, illustrated in Figure 2. When these figures are compared it is clear that as the cultural virtual exchange continued, the participants began to feel more confident in their success in learning about culture. Participants E stated they feel successful in learning about culture due to "frequently asking cultural-related questions" in their week 6 survey; however, in participant E's week 1 survey response they indicated the importance of learning about cultures and being 'intrigued' but did not indicate a specific skill or tool in which to build cultural competency.

One interesting aspect of the data was seen in the participants' answers about miscommunication or cultural ignorance. In week one, a participant stated they felt their past "ignorance and misunderstandings in certain situations could have come off as amateurish". Participants D also indicated a similar issue in cultural competency success saying,



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"Americanism causes cultural miscommunications". However, in week six, participant D stated that they felt justified with their Turkish culture understanding due to direct explanations given in the cultural virtual exchange. This indicates that the cultural virtual exchange influenced participants in helping to alleviate miscommunication and comprehension in their cultural competency. Participant H stated in week 6 that through the cultural virtual exchange they were "able to communicate with [student] in a way that he understood (slower pace, not complex ideas made the setting more informal to let him feel more relaxed and through this I was able to understand concepts from him as well". This supports both the idea that real cultural exchange is crucial in understanding skills and tools to facilitate good language learning while also assisting in cultural competency.

On the opposite side, similar to teaching grammar, the real-life exchange challenged some participants to comprehend the complexity of cultural competency. This is seen in four participants in week 6 indicating that they understood that they still have much to learn as well as need to do more work to understand culture awareness. Interestingly, as the participants interactive more with their assigned Turkish student, they became more aware about the vastness of cultural difference and could attribute for the continuation of miscommunication and cultural incompetence indicated during weeks 1 through 6. These findings support results seen in the latter topics in that while some participants' experiences with the virtual cultural exchange increased their cultural competency success, some remained less affected.

***Learning about Turkish Culture***

While it would be inconceivable to expect the participants to gain full cultural competency of Turkish culture, through a short cultural virtual exchange with one or two Turkish residents, this study breaks Turkish culture into four categories in which the participants' curiosity on these topics and latter understanding based on their exchange will be examined. This will be done in the hopes of better understanding methods and aspects to increase language educators' understanding of what is needed to become culturally competent while also facilitating cultural awareness and competency within their future classrooms.

Apart from an analysis of the four subtopics of Turkish culture, the participants were further surveyed about learning about Turkish culture specifically as well as weekly subtopics within Turkish culture, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Two survey questions were asked regarding this topic in both pre and post surveys each week with the expectation of a post-survey week one and pre-survey week 6. The verbiage of the questions was "'Write 3 details about the culture of Turkey'; 'write 3 ideas you have about the culture of Turkey.'" These responses will be analyzed qualitatively in the topics in which participants discussed in their responses throughout the six weeks as well as the progression of topics.



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Some commonalities amongst the participants included topics of gender roles, specifically inequality of woman; cultural mixture of eastern and western cultures; religions, in consideration of Islam and Christianity influences, and religious extremes or liberalism; food and drinks; hospitality and friendship; cities; family dynamics and national pride. The survey responses, both in the pre and post survey responses throughout the six weeks also varied amongst the participants in regards response length and quality. Some participants responded in detail of what they had learned specifically in that week's exchange, on the other hand, some participants omitted an answer to the questions, stating they 'answered last week' while others simply copied and pasted their responses from the previous weeks. Consistency existed in that individual participants were consistent throughout the weeks. Those participants who each week expanded their knowledge and understanding of Turkish culture through their exchanges, added new knowledge each week. Those participants who did not respond or did not offer any new knowledge of the cultural competency neglected this throughout the six-week exchange. Considering the objective of the cultural virtual exchange was a cultural exchange, the results show varying degrees of Turkish cultural comprehension, and despite the continuation of exchanges with their group members, most participants did not expand their knowledge of Turkish culture past the aforementioned topics. While there was some development in understanding and depth of knowledge, the majority remained confined in topics that had been previously discussed in earlier weeks.

An argument could be made about the importance of self-motivation and want of learning and could be observed more in the recorded Zoom meetings, but for this study, the success of Turkish cultural competency from the participant can better be analyzed in the specific subtopics that were the focus of four individual weeks: food and breakfast; Istanbul; sports and university life, which will be talked about in the next section.

***Learning about subtopics of Turkish Culture***

In a similar format the participants were asked about various subtopics of Turkish culture: University life, Istanbul, sports and food. These subtopics were designated as topics of conversation in specific weeks. In the pre-survey of these designated weeks the participants were asked to 'write three questions about - *insert subtopic*- that you would like to ask your students'. Afterward, in the post-survey they were then asked to 'briefly describe what you learned about - *insert subtopic*- culture in Turkey,'. The responses will be compared based on questions introduced in the pre-survey and the description of the post-survey responses in the appropriate weeks at the individual level as well as collectively amongst the twelve participants.

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***Learning about University life in Turkey***

The first subtopic on Turkish culture was perhaps the most extensively asked about in the pre and post survey questions throughout the weeks. Survey questions, "'write 3 details you know about the university culture of Turkey'; 'write 2 ideas you have about the university culture of Turkey'; 'write 1 question you have about the universe culture of turkey" were asked at various and multiple times throughout the exchange. These results will be discussed to aid in an overall understanding of the data; however, for consistency standards, the responses will be analyzed using the same method as the three other subtopics: in the pre-survey question being compared with the individual's post-survey response. The student questions varied, and therefore each participant's responses were evaluated based on the individual pre-survey question and their post survey responses to the question. Participants E, I, K asked questions related to the similarities and differences of western, US specifically, university systems and the systems in Turkey. The responses to these questions discuss a variety of topics, including the similarities such as the 'hectic' schedule of college students, and the financial cost difference of public vs private education. There were also some indications that the university system in Turkey was becoming more 'western'. The differences in the two university systems included differences in coursework and requirements, as indicated by participants E, and competition of admission rates. The question based on a comparison between US university life and Turkish university life is useful in a few aspects: it allows cultural competency for all group member on both the American and Turkish side, simultaneously, which allows for a more natural conversation flow, as well as engaging in a more meaningful sharing of cultures.

Participants D and H asked questions related to the normalcy and popularity of attending university. Unfortunately, neither participant's post-survey responses had any indication on whether they received an answer to this question. Four participants had post-survey responses that did not connect to their pre-survey questions. This could be due to a variety of reasons, such as but not limited to, natural conversation progression, language misunderstanding or time restraints. All participants' post-survey responses varied in length and detail.

***Learning about Istanbul***

Using the aforementioned formatting, in week three, participants were asked to indicate questions they had in regards to Istanbul, the city in which the Turkish students were attending Istanbul Technical Institute. Each group was also given the same visual aids. The participants' questions varied between topics and wanted information. Some question topics included: things to do, food, public transportation, religions, immigration presents, weather, etc. The response in the post-survey varied as equally as the questions of the pre-survey. The information expanded from history to general information about the everyday life of the city and cultural facts.



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Based on the survey responses and questions, a correlation of the number of questions and comprehension of responses could be seen. The questions about Istanbul were expansive and covered a wide variety of topics, it may be predicted that this would lead to an equal amount of information in the post-survey responses; however, the opposite is presented. It seems that the large number of topics and questions in which the participants wished to have answered during that week's exchange were not as comprehensively communicated, or at least recorded in the post-survey responses. While some of the participants' specific questions were answered, others were not, either no relevant response being recorded, or an entirely different topic being indicated. As to why this difference and disconnection of pre-question vs. post-responses, it may be due to the number of questions and topics. Some of the participants may have found it hard to incorporate all their initial questions within the short timeframe of that week's exchange. Another reason may be a more positive one in which the participants did not have time to get to all the questions due to the conversation flow initiated by the first questions. In either regard, in future exchanges it may be more beneficial to have teaching candidates focus solely on a smaller number of initial questions to allow for more comprehensive communication and learning than general information facilitated by a wide number of questions.

***Learning about Sports in Turkey***

During week 4, sports culture was the next subtopic to be discussed. The same method was used, a pre-survey question and post-survey response of what was learned. Each group was also given the same visual aids. Nine of the twelve participants had questions about popular sports in Turkey, both to watch and play. Nine participants spoke about the importance and passion for soccer, while basketball and volleyball were also mentioned as Turkish favorites, 5 and 7 participants, respectively. Multiple (5) participants also spoke about the popularity of women's volleyball specifically. Participants B, C, D, F and G, in their pre-survey questions, asked specific questions about women in sports, regarding the popularity of playing and watching, co-ed teams and the value of women athletes.

As seen in the responses, most participants' questions were answered fully during the exchange, even being expanded upon beyond the confines of the initial questions. These results indicate the importance of question-leading conversation as a platform to build further meaningful exchanges. The highlighting of women in athletics can be associated with the responses seen in the section about ideas of Turkish culture. Participants often asked questions of the role of women in Turkish society at a variety of levels. This topic can also be seen as a success in virtual cultural exchange in that many participants in the early weeks of the study mentioned their belief of the more conservative gender roles within Turkish society, as well as misunderstandings of religious beliefs. As the exchange continued, the participants' responses



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became more understanding of the gender roles and the complexity of religious influences of Turkey in a more comprehensive and broad understanding.

***Learning about Food and Breakfast***

Food and breakfast were the last focus topic during the cultural virtual exchange. Considering the nature of the cultural exchange the participants and their Turkish counterparts spoke both about Turkish food and breakfast as well as American; for the purposes of this study only the responses regarding learning about Turkish food and breakfast were considered. The responses were analyzed in the same pre-exchange survey questions and post-survey responses. Collectively there were some commonalities of topics for questions about the topic. Five participants asked questions related to the common foods and drinks eaten by Turkish people at breakfast time. All five participants indicated, in the post-survey, the answer to this question. Another common question regarded the importance of tea drinking in Turkey, 5 participants. In regard to these two topics of conversation the answers varied slightly, however, there was overlap in information given. Each group was also given the same visual aids, depicting Turkish and American breakfast, to help facilitate conversation in which the educators could use to aid the flow of conversation.

## 6. Discussion

The overall results of the study showed a variety of things to consider when thinking of language educators in their need for cultural competency. One of these aspects was the need for and importance of asking questions, specific, in general and open-ended. Questions baiting, and open-end questions were extremely important for the success of not only the cultural virtual exchange itself, but for the language educators' own cultural competency. As seen in the subtopic pre and post survey responses, the questions allowed for teacher candidates to formulate and continue their cultural exchanges in a meaningful and intentional way. Without the use of pre-determined and in-conversation follow-up questions, the conversation may have stalled which affects the flow of comfortability between the participants.

Additionally, in week 6 post-survey, participant 6 simply stated “I feel I’m still on the surface,” indicating that throughout the exchange it became clear how much there was to learn about others culture and how overwhelming and nearly discouraging it felt. Questioning, done respectfully and intentionally can help not only alleviate some of the stress of overwhelming information intake and aid the conversation flow, but also allow language learners to be comfortable in the classroom because they are being asked about their own culture and feel the educator is interested in their culture and therefore them personally. As far as the benefits from the language learning perspective, educators asking questions in which language learners must

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answer with more comprehensive responses assist in willingness to communicate and real language use, both crucial elements in language learning pedagogy.

Additionally, the week in which each topic was discussed should be considered in regards to the data collection. While survey questions focusing on university life in Turkey were asked throughout the entire duration of the cultural virtual exchange, it was first the topic of conversation during week 2. Istanbul, sports and food and breakfast, followed in the following weeks, 3, 4, 5, respectively. Considering the questions in the pre-surveys for both Week 2, university culture, and week 3, Istanbul, were the topics in which the responses were the least comprehensive regarding answering the aforementioned questions could be an indication of a few aspects. During the first few weeks of the exchange the participants were still getting comfortable with their group members, in addition, getting familiar with the virtual platform setting: Zoom. Furthermore, six out of twelve participants did not have much experience with other cultures in a teacher-student relationship or in an intentional cultural exchange. This may have been attributed to the lack of interconnection between the pre-survey question and post-survey responses during those first few weeks. Additionally, this same reasoning could be the cause of the more interconnected, concise and comprehensive responses of the latter topics and weeks, sports and food and breakfast.

Another reason for this could be the topics themselves. Food and sports are typically considered beginner level conversation started in an L2. The Turkish students, and retroactively the study's participants may have felt more comfortable speaking about these topics; and therefore, had more to converse about. The Turkish students may have had a higher language vocabulary of these topics; and consequently, there may have been less misunderstanding and language issues.

## 7. Limitations

Some limitations exist in the current research. The research is limited in participant size, as well as, at various times, participants omitted responses or neglected the survey question. Future research could be done to increase the participant size as well as ensuring that each participant answered each question. The research may also be expanded further by examining the Zoom meeting and collecting additional data from the interaction to support the conclusions and results. Follow-up interviews of the participants would also greatly assist the understanding of data.

## 8. Conclusion

The study's results indicate a need for, not only further research on the topic of cultural competency of ESL teachers/teacher candidates, but also the positive effects and need for real cultural exchange - either within a virtual or in-person setting - within education programs and curriculums. Cultural understanding and competence are crucial to the success of any teacher but



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specifically a teacher working within cultural settings and international students, that is every present in the language learning classrooms. Cultural competence can not only be quantified by understand major elements of another culture, but at the educational level must include techniques, resources and methods, and all aspects of pedagogy, in which to ensure cultural understand at an appropriate level to ensure a comfortable and accepting classroom for students and teachers to further ensure the most conducive atmosphere for language learning, which is heavily influenced by how comfortable a language learning feels with their instructor and within the classroom parameters.

**Authors' Contributions**

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

**Declaration**

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

**Transparency Statements**

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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**Ethical Consideration**

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

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