

Beliefs about Language Learning: A Study of International University Students Learning Turkish as a Second Language

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Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkçe'yi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen üniversite öğrencilerinin Türkçe öğrenimine yönelik inançlarını Horwitz'in (1987) anketi kapsamında incelemektir. Bu çalışmaya Doğu Akdeniz Üniversitesi'nde okumakta olan yabancı öğrenciler katılmıştır. Öğrencilerin geldiği ülkeler arasında Nijerya, Irak, Pakistan, ve Kamboçya yer almaktadır. Araştırmadan elde edilen sonuçlar Türkçe'yi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen üniversite öğrencilerinin Horwitz'in (1987), Truitt'in (1995), Diab (2000) ve Kunt'un (2007) İngilizce ve Fransızca öğrenen katılımcılarından daha farklı inançlara sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca bu öğrencilerin Türkçe ile birlikte Türk kültürünü de öğrenmeye yönelik motivasyon düzeylerinin yüksek olduğu saptanmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Türkçe'yi ikinci dil olarak öğrenenler, dil öğrenimine yönelik inançlar, dil öğrenimine yönelik inanç ölçeği, Türkçe'yi ikinci dil olarak öğrenme, Nijeryalı dil öğrenenler, İranlı dil öğrenenler, Ürdünlü dil öğrenenler, Pakistanlı dil öğrenenler, Iraklı dil öğrenenler*

The purpose of this study is to investigate university students' beliefs about learning Turkish as a second language. Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory was used as the primary measure of the study. International students studying at Eastern Mediterranean University participated in the study. The country origins of the students include Nigeria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Cambodia. Findings of this study indicated that Turkish as a second language (TSL) learners' beliefs about language learning differed from those of ESL students in the United States (Horwitz, 1987), EFL students in Korea (Truitt, 1995), EFL and French students in Lebanon, and Turkish EFL students in North Cyprus. In addition, international TSL students had high levels of integrative motivation regarding Turkish culture.

Key words: *Turkish as a second language learners; beliefs about language learning; Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory; BALLI; Teaching Turkish as a second language; Nigerian language learners; Iranian language learners; Jordanian language learners; Pakistani language learners; Iraqi language learners*

1. Introduction

Learners' beliefs about language learning can have critical effects on their ability, and expectations to learn a language (Kunt, 2007). Horwitz (1999) has argued that "it is important to understand learner beliefs about language learning in order to understand learner approaches to and satisfaction with language learning instruction" (p.558). Young (1991), lists learner beliefs as one source of foreign language learning anxiety: personal and interpersonal issues, instructor-learners interactions, classroom procedures, language testing, instructor beliefs about language learning, and learner beliefs about language learning. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) also define learner beliefs as a source of language learning anxiety.

Considerable research indicates that learners' beliefs about language learning have a major influence on the language learning process itself. According to Abraham and Vann (1987), for example, language learners' beliefs may affect the variety and flexibility of the language learning strategies the learners use. Bundak (2006) also supported this view. Yorio (1986) found that some beliefs about language learning may have negative influence on language learning. Also, Horwitz (1987) stated that some preconceived beliefs are likely to restrict learners in the range of strategies they use. For example, some language learners believe that they should not say anything in the foreign language until they are able to say it correctly, and some believe that if beginning learners are permitted to make errors at the early stages of language learning, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later. Mattheoudakis (2007) indicated that also student teachers have definite beliefs that influence their language learning and teaching.

In addition, Kunt (2007) stated that learners' beliefs usually spring from their earlier learning experiences and are shaped by their cultural backgrounds. Diab (2000) and Horwitz (1987, 1999) pointed out that cultural background may be one factor influencing learner beliefs about language learning. They also argued that specific educational and language learning environments in different countries may also be an important factor. Truitt (1995) found that learners' beliefs about language learning correlate with the learners' background variables.

To the best to my knowledge, no research has addressed Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) learners' beliefs about language learning. The focus of this study, therefore, is to characterize beliefs about language learning among international university students of Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) at the Department of General Education in Eastern Mediterranean University. The study addresses the following questions:

1. What beliefs do international TSL (Turkish as a second language) learners have about learning Turkish?
2. How do the international TSL learners' beliefs about language learning compare to those of other language learners?

2. The Study

2.1 The Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of two measures: The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987) and a background questionnaire. The English versions of the instruments were used.

2.1.1 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

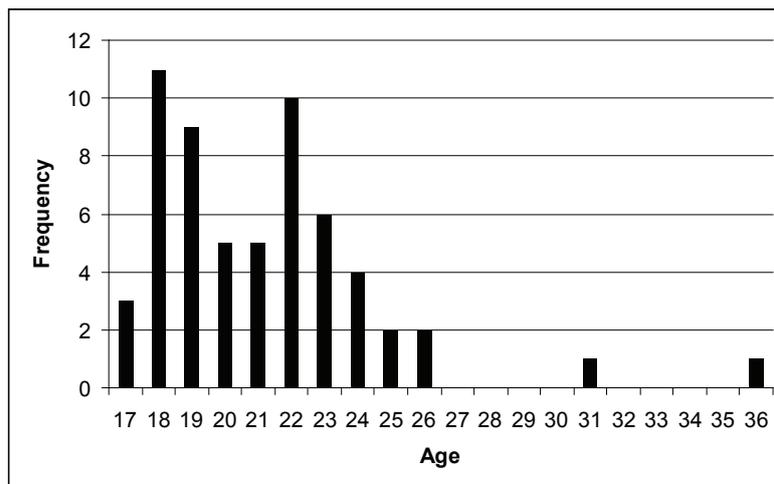
BALLI was developed by Horwitz (1985, 1987) to identify students' beliefs about language learning. BALLI has been widely used, including studies on American learners of French, Spanish, German, and Japanese; US university instructors of French, pre-service ESL and EFL teachers of English; Korean, Taiwanese, Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

The English version of BALLI was adapted to the Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) context by the author. One item was added to the questionnaire specific to Turkish language learning situation: "I am learning Turkish to be successful in my university education." The thirty-five items of BALLI were scored on a Likert scale ranging from "1: strongly agree" to "5: strongly disagree." Because BALLI measures different beliefs about language learning, there is no composite score.

2.1.2 Background Questionnaire

The background questionnaire was developed by the author. The questionnaire provided a variety of information about the subjects of the study: gender, age, class, and home country. Additional questions ascertain whether the subjects had studied languages besides Turkish.

Figure 1. The age distribution of subjects



2.2 The Subjects

The subjects of this study were 60 international university students studying Turkish as a second language (TSL) at Eastern Mediterranean University in Famagusta, North Cyprus. The subjects were from eight different countries: Nigeria, Iran, Cambodia, Jordan, Cameron, Pakistan, Iraq, and Mongolia. Their countries of origin are listed in Table 1. The students were all students in introductory level Turkish courses (TURK 100 and TUSL 180,) as part of their course requirements. Eastern Mediterranean University is an English medium university. Therefore, all the subjects were proficient in English. Also, there was a diversity regarding the subjects' first language backgrounds, and because of this reason, the English version of BALLI was administered.

Forty-six of the subjects were male and 10 female. Four of the subjects did not specify their gender. The majority of the subjects were freshmen. Their age ranged from 17 to 36. The details about the age distribution are shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: Subjects by countries of origin

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Number of Students</i> |
|----------------|---------------------------|
| Nigeria | 38 |
| Iraq | 2 |
| Cambodia | 1 |
| Jordan | 2 |
| Cameron | 1 |
| Mongolia | 1 |
| Iran | 12 |
| Pakistan | 3 |

2.3 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The questionnaires were administered by the researcher at the end of Spring 2007 to international university students with the cooperation of the Department of General Education administrators and course instructors.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for MS Windows, Release 11.0 was used for the analysis of quantitative data in this study. Descriptive statistics were computed on the students' responses to the BALLI items. The descriptive statistics used in this study consisted of mean and frequency distribution of the BALLI items. These analyses addressed the research question, "What beliefs do the international Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) learners have about learning Turkish?"

2.4 Results

Student responses to BALLI were grouped into Horwitz's (1987) five major areas: 1- foreign language aptitude, 2- the difficulty of language learning, 3- the nature of language learning, 4- learning and communication strategies, and 5- motivations. The

full results of the BALLI questionnaire are presented in Appendix A.

2.4.1 Foreign Language Aptitude. BALLI Items 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 16, 19, 30, 33

Some of these items involve the presence of the special abilities to learn a language: item 2- “Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages”, item 16- “I have a special ability for learning foreign languages”, and item 30- “People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.”

Regarding foreign language aptitude, most of the international Turkish as a second language (TSL) students believed that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language (88%), but 75% agreed with the statement that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language, although this is contradictory with the previous statement. They also agreed that some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages (85%). On the other hand, 56% of the students agreed on item 6- “People in my country are good at learning foreign languages.” Thirty-seven percent had neutral ideas about this item. Fifty-nine percent agreed that it is easier for someone who already spoke a foreign language to learn another one. Thirty-nine percent disagreed with the statement that people who are good at math or science are not good at learning languages, and 46% agreed that women are better than men at learning foreign languages. Many (51%) also agreed that they personally are good at learning languages, and that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent (49%).

2.4.2 The Difficulty of Language Learning. BALLI Items 3, 4, 5, 15, 25, 34

These items relate to the difficulty of learning Turkish as a second language. For example, item 3 was “Some languages are easier to learn than others”, and item 4 was “Turkish is (1) a very difficult language; (2) difficult language; (3) language of medium difficulty; (4) an easy language (5) a very easy language.”. Items 25 (“It is easier to speak than understand Turkish”) and 34 (“It is easier to read and write Turkish than to speak and understand it”) evaluate the relative difficulty of various language skills and areas: and item 5 is related to the students’ personal expectations regarding their own success to speak Turkish.

These international TSL learners overwhelmingly believed (85%) that some languages are easier to learn than others and they were also quite positive about their own ability to speak Turkish very well (80%). Twenty-two percent considered Turkish to be difficult or very difficult, but the majority of the students considered Turkish moderately difficult (46%) and 10% thought it was easy. When asked, “If someone spent one hour a day learning Turkish, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?”, their answers were less than a year (34%), one to two years (41%), three to five years (19%), and five to ten years (3%). Interestingly, nobody expressed the opinion that “you can’t learn a language in one hour a day.” Thirty-one percent of the TSL students disagreed with the item, “it is easier to speak than understand a foreign

language” and 39% of the students had a neutral opinion about this statement. On the other hand, 47% agreed with the belief that it is easier to read and write Turkish than to speak and understand it.

2.4.3 The Nature of Language Learning. BALLI Items 8, 12, 17, 23, 27, 28

This area includes different items regarding the nature of language learning. For instance, item 8 was “It is necessary to know about Turkish-speaking cultures in order to learn to speak Turkish” and item 12 was “It is best to learn Turkish in a Turkish-speaking country.” Item 27 is about the learners’ beliefs about how language learning is different from other academic subjects. Items 17, 23, and 28 are related to the importance of vocabulary words, grammar, and translation while learning Turkish as a second language.

With respect to the nature of language learning, most of the subjects agreed that it is best to learn Turkish in a Turkish-speaking country (86%), but 37% had neutral ideas, 36% agreed, and 24% disagreed regarding the necessity to know about Turkish-speaking cultures in order to learn to speak Turkish. The majority of the students agreed that vocabulary words (78%) and grammar rules (61%) are the most important part of language learning. On the other hand, the responses of international TSL students varied considering the importance of translating from one’s native language while learning Turkish. Forty-six percent agreed on the importance of translation, while 34% of the TSL learners did not express any opinion and they tended to be neutral and 17% of the respondents disagreed about it.

2.4.4 Learning and Communication Strategies. BALLI Items 7, 9, 13, 14, 18, 21, 22, 26

These items relate to the use of language learning and communication strategies. Items 18 (“it is important to repeat and practice a lot”) and 26 (“it is important to practice with cassettes or tapes”) concern the use of language learning strategies. The rest of the items (7, 9, 13, 14, 21, 22) concern the usage of communication strategies employed by the interlocutors when they have insufficient linguistic knowledge during conversation in the target language (Tarone, 1980). Statements that relate to communication strategies included items 13 (“I enjoy practicing Turkish with Turkish people I meet”) and 14 (“It’s okay to guess if you don’t know a word in Turkish”). Also, the statements about feeling timid speaking Turkish with other people (item 21) and making errors in Turkish (item 22) concern communication strategies.

In the area of language learning strategies, 83% of the subjects reported that it is important to repeat and practice and 51% agreed that it is important to practice with cassettes or video tapes while learning Turkish. Regarding communication strategies, 78% of the international TSL students agreed on the importance of excellent pronunciation, and they also overwhelmingly agreed that they enjoy practicing Turkish

with people who speak it as a native language (83%). On the other hand, 68% disagreed with the statement that you shouldn't say anything in Turkish until you can say it correctly and 46% did not feel timid speaking Turkish with other people. Responses were almost evenly distributed for item 22-- "if beginning students are permitted to make errors in Turkish, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on" (36% agree, 26% neutral, and 34% disagree).

2.4.5 Motivations. BALLI Items 20, 24, 29, 31, 32, 35

These items concern the aspirations students have related to the learning of Turkish. For example, item 24 "I would like to learn Turkish so that I can get to know Turkish people better" and item 29 "If I learn Turkish very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job". Item 35 ("I am learning Turkish to be successful in my university education") was added to the questionnaire since the group aimed at TSL learners.

Finally, in the area of motivation, the majority of the respondents agreed that they would like to learn Turkish so that they can get to know Turkish people better (78%), but 58 percent of the TSL students disagreed with the statement that "People in my country feel that it is important to speak Turkish,". About half of the students associated learning Turkish with better job opportunities (56%) and 68% had the desire to have Turkish friends. Eighty-seven percent of the subjects reported that they want to learn Turkish well (63% strongly). While 45% agreed on the item "I am learning Turkish to be successful in my university education" 28% disagreed and 27% had neutral ideas about this item.

2.5 Comparisons with Previous Studies Using the BALLI

This section includes some of the representative studies using the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory to identify situational similarities and differences across the learner groups. A comparison of the international TSL student responses with similar data from other studies was undertaken to respond to the research question: "How do the international TSL learners' beliefs about language learning compare to those of other language learners?"

The responses of the international Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) students were compared with those of other English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as Second Language (ESL), and American students of foreign languages. These studies will be presented here in the following order: Horwitz (1987), with international ESL students in the United States; Truitt (1995), with Korean EFL students; Diab (2000), with Lebanese students of English and French; and Kunt (2007), with Turkish EFL students in North Cyprus.

2.5.1 Horwitz (1987) with International ESL Students in the United States

Thirty-two students with diverse cultural backgrounds, who were in the intermediate level of the Intensive English Program at The University of Texas at Austin, participated

in Horwitz's (1987) study.

Compared to these students, the Turkish as a second language students seemed more confident about their personal ability to learn second/foreign languages, but they had similar ideas about the superiority of children learning foreign languages. A majority of the TSL students were supportive of the importance of grammar and vocabulary, but only half of Horwitz's (1987) subjects agreed on this. This difference may be related to the difference in the contents of examinations administered in the university. TSL students may think that focusing on vocabulary and grammar is more beneficial. It may also be due to the fact that students studying in the U.S are confronted daily with the limitations of studying only vocabulary and grammar.

2.5.2 Truitt (1995) with Korean EFL Students

Truitt (1995) administered the BALLI study to 205 university students in Korea who were learning English as a foreign language.

Regarding the items related to motivations, some differences were observed between Korean EFL students and the TSL students. For example, 78% of the Korean students agreed on the importance of speaking English, but only 14% of the TSL students shared the same view for Turkish. On the other hand, many of the Korean EFL students rejected the idea of learning a foreign language in order to know its native speakers better, while the majority of the TSL students accepted it. The difference between learning English in a non-English speaking country (Korea), as opposed to learning Turkish in a Turkish-speaking country (North Cyprus), can explain the contrast in the responses to this item. Being in North Cyprus may allow TSL students to get to know Turkish people better.

2.5.3 Diab (2000) with Lebanese Students of English and French

Diab (2000) studied student beliefs about language learning of Lebanese university students learning English and French. A modified version of BALLI was administered to 284 university students in Lebanon.

According to Diab's (2000) findings, most of the Lebanese subjects rated English as an easy or very easy language and French as a difficult one, while the TSL students considered Turkish to be of medium difficulty. This may be related to the context of foreign language education in Lebanon. Diab (2000) stated that Lebanese students have been exposed to two foreign languages, namely English and French. Regarding the area of learning and communication strategies some similarities observed between Diab's (2000) students and the TSL students in this study. Both groups agreed that they enjoy practicing their target language with native speakers and they do not feel timid when speaking it with other people.

2.5.4 Kunt (2007) with Turkish EFL Students

In a recent study, Kunt (2007) used BALLI to investigate Turkish EFL students' beliefs about language learning. The instrument was translated into Turkish and

administered to two groups of EFL Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot students in different English preparatory schools in two universities in North Cyprus.

Some similarities and differences exist between Turkish students who were learning English as a Foreign Language (Kunt, 2007) and the international TSL students. For example, more than half of the students in both studies shared the view that “it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one”. However, approximately half of the international TSL students believed that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent while approximately 60% of the Turkish EFL students were opposed to this opinion. Interestingly, both groups were strongly motivated to learn their target languages, but an important distinction was observed regarding the types of motivation that was related to the reasons of language learning. For example, international TSL students showed strong integrative motivation for learning Turkish while the Turkish EFL students in Kunt’s (2007) study had more instrumental reasons to learn Turkish.

3. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of this study. First, this study found that international Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) students in North Cyprus possessed mainly different beliefs about language learning from those of international ESL students in the United States (Horwitz, 1987), EFL students in Korea (Truitt, 1995), French and EFL students in Lebanon (Diab, 2000), and Turkish EFL students in North Cyprus.

Secondly, the findings of the study revealed that international TSL students were self-confident about their ability to learn Turkish well. This is similar to the findings of Diab’s (2000) and Kunt’s (2007).

Finally, the international TSL students are studying Turkish in a university in North Cyprus where Turkish is spoken as an official language, and therefore knowledge of Turkish is crucial to international students for their daily communication outside of the university campus. In addition, since they live in a Turkish-speaking country, they may want to be part of the Turkish culture. These international students reflected this need to learn Turkish in their BALLI responses. According to the BALLI results, international university students seemed to have integrative motivation to learn Turkish that is related to learning target language culture.

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Appendix A. Responses for BALLI

| | Strongly Agree (%) | Agree (%) | Neutral | Disagree (%) | Strongly Disagree (%) |
|---|--------------------|-----------|---------|--------------|-----------------------|
| <i>1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language</i> | | | | | |
| | 59 ¹ | 29 | 7 | 3 | |
| <i>2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.</i> | | | | | |
| | 31 | 54 | 8 | 2 | 2 |
| <i>3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.</i> | | | | | |
| | 49 | 36 | 5 | 7 | |
| <i>4. Turkish is:</i> | | | | | |
| <i>1) a very difficult language</i> | | | | | |
| <i>2) a difficult language</i> | | | | | |
| <i>3) a language of medium difficulty</i> | | | | | |
| <i>4) an easy language</i> | | | | | |
| <i>5) a very easy language</i> | | | | | |
| | 5 | 17 | 46 | 10 | 10 |
| <i>5. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.</i> | | | | | |
| | 31 | 49 | 10 | 5 | 3 |
| <i>6. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.</i> | | | | | |
| | 17 | 39 | 37 | 3 | 2 |
| <i>7. It is important to speak Turkish with excellent pronunciation.</i> | | | | | |
| | 34 | 44 | 17 | 3 | |
| <i>8. It is necessary to know about Turkish-speaking cultures in order to learn to speak Turkish.</i> | | | | | |
| | 12 | 24 | 37 | 15 | 8 |
| <i>9. You shouldn't say anything in Turkish until you can say it correctly.</i> | | | | | |
| | 10 | 14 | 7 | 36 | 32 |
| <i>10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.</i> | | | | | |
| | 19 | 41 | 25 | 8 | 7 |
| <i>11. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.</i> | | | | | |
| | 5 | 14 | 41 | 15 | 24 |
| <i>12. It is best to learn Turkish in a Turkish-speaking country.</i> | | | | | |
| | 49 | 37 | 10 | 2 | |
| <i>13. I enjoy practicing Turkish with Turkish people I meet.</i> | | | | | |
| | 47 | 36 | 8 | 3 | 3 |
| <i>14. It's okay to guess if you don't know a word in Turkish.</i> | | | | | |
| | 22 | 29 | 27 | 15 | 5 |

| | Strongly Agree (%) | Agree (%) | Neutral | Disagree (%) | Strongly Disagree (%) |
|--|--------------------|-----------|---------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: 1) less than a year 2) 1-2 years 3) 3-5 years 4) 5-10 years 5) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day | | | | | |
| | 34 | 41 | 19 | 3 | |
| 16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages. | | | | | |
| | 10 | 41 | 36 | 8 | 3 |
| 17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words. | | | | | |
| | 41 | 37 | 12 | 5 | 3 |
| 18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot. | | | | | |
| | 56 ² | 27 | 14 | 2 | |
| 19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages. | | | | | |
| | 12 | 14 | 27 | 19 | 27 |
| 20. People in my country feel that it is important to speak Turkish. | | | | | |
| | | 14 | 29 | 32 | 25 |
| 21. I feel timid speaking Turkish with other people. | | | | | |
| | 5 | 15 | 34 | 27 | 19 |
| 22. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in Turkish, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. | | | | | |
| | 15 | 20 | 29 | 15 | 19 |
| 23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar. | | | | | |
| | 29 | 32 | 27 | 7 | 2 |
| 24. I would like to learn Turkish so that I can get to know Turkish people better. | | | | | |
| | 41 | 37 | 14 | 3 | |
| 25. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language. | | | | | |
| | 14 | 15 | 39 | 19 | 12 |
| 26. It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes. | | | | | |
| | 19 | 32 | 29 | 10 | 8 |
| 27. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects. | | | | | |
| | 32 | 42 | 12 | 5 | 5 |
| 28. The most important part of learning Turkish is learning how to translate from my native language. | | | | | |
| | 12 | 34 | 34 | 10 | 7 |

| | Strongly Agree (%) | Agree (%) | Neutral | Disagree (%) | Strongly Disagree (%) |
|---|--------------------|-----------|---------|--------------|-----------------------|
| <i>29. If I learn Turkish very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.</i> | | | | | |
| | 36 | 20 | 27 | 10 | 5 |
| <i>30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.</i> | | | | | |
| | 22 | 27 | 27 | 14 | 8 |
| <i>31. I want to learn to speak Turkish well.</i> | | | | | |
| | 63 | 24 | 8 | 3 | |
| <i>32. I would like to have Turkish friends.</i> | | | | | |
| | 32 | 36 | 22 | 10 | |
| <i>33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.</i> | | | | | |
| | 27 | 47 | 8 | 8 | 5 |
| <i>34. It is easier to read and write Turkish than to speak and understand it.</i> | | | | | |
| | 12 | 36 | 29 | 15 | 7 |
| <i>35. I am learning Turkish to be successful in my university education.</i> | | | | | |
| | 20 | 25 | 27 | 19 | 9 |

¹Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number.

²Some of the subjects did not respond all of the items on the inventory. Hence, some of the total percentages may not add up to 100%.

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