

### Attitudes towards German language and culture: Reflections from Turkey

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the language attitudes of students enrolled in the Department of Foreign Language Education at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. In particular, the study aims to shed light on the status of German as a foreign language and attitudes attributed to German language and culture. The research findings gathered through a questionnaire, in general, pointed that the attitudes toward German language and culture are instrumentally positive in the sense that German language serves for the participants' personal development regarding inter- and cross-cultural and linguistic competence of the learners.

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## 1. Introduction

Language and identity could be regarded as the two different sides of a coin, which implies that they could not be evaluated separately. At the heart of this interconnection between language and identity is attitude per se, which might be defined as an individual's psychological construction regarding his or her own language and/or the languages of others (Crystal 1992). According to Baker (1988), attitudes are internalized predispositions and therefore are not subject to inheritance. Attitudes towards a particular language might be either positive or negative, but it is also possible that individuals generate neutral feelings. Attitudes towards a language are likely to have been developed by experience and are subject to change when opposite experiences are made. According to Fasold (1984), that attitudes towards a language are often mirrored in the attitudes towards the members of that speech community.

The phenomenon of 'language attitude' is a particularly important notion in the sense that it plays a key role in not only bi/multilingual studies but also in language learning and teaching. In line with these acknowledgements, language attitude and motivation have come to be regarded as important factors affecting learners' success starting with the 1980s (Gardner 1985). For instance, Prodromou (1992), asserting that a successful learner is the one who possess positive attitudes towards the target language, pointed to the importance of attitudes within the field of language learning. At this point, one might question the precise meaning of attitude which is put by Allport (1935: 8) as "a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related". In other words, an attitude, including its cognitive, psychological, and sociological behavioral components, is a rather complex phenomenon that should be taken into consideration in language pedagogy. Studies on language attitudes in various educational contexts might have both micro implications in the form of in-class teaching and macro implications in the form of curriculum adaptation and development, instructional design and language policy. The issues briefly outlined above could be considered as milestones in the field of language pedagogy.

### 1.1 The rise of learning foreign languages in the Turkish context

The history of foreign languages in Turkey dates back to the Ottoman Empire era (see Demircan 1988 for an overview). As stated by König (1990) "language learning was [then] the privilege of the elites, and foreign language teaching was predominantly under the control of minority and foreign groups. A number of schools were founded in Istanbul during the Ottoman rule in which the medium of instruction was French, German, or English". Foreign languages taught in Turkey were Persian, Arabic and finally western languages, including French, German and English. Though German, towards which the attitudes are investigated in this study, was the third most frequently taught language between 1923

and 1950, it reached its culmination after the 1980s as a result of domestic Westernization movements and liberal policies. Table 1 presents these chronological changes in the priority given to foreign languages in Turkey.

ORDER	PRE 1773	1773-1923	1923-1950	1950-1980	AFTER 1980
1	Arabic	Arabic	French	English	English
2	Persian	Persian	English	French	<b>German</b>
3	Turkish	French	<b>German</b>	<b>German</b>	French
4		English	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic
5		<b>German</b>		Persian	Persian

Table 1. Chronological change in priorities given to foreign languages in Turkey (from Demircan 1988: 16)

In Turkey, in the current educational context, English is predominantly considered to be the first foreign language. König (1990) emphasizes the dominance of English in Turkish context as follows: "...there exist a growing number of secondary schools and universities in which the medium of instruction is predominantly English. And the demand for such educational institutions grows increasingly... It is not on the way to become a second language in Turkey; it certainly is a foreign language, but is the second most useful language after Turkish as it is all over the world today". Consequently, English has been the first foreign language taught both at state and private schools since the 1980s. To exemplify this development, there are many state schools named 'Anadolu Liseleri' in which the medium of instruction is mainly English. The case of universities is no different in that they are either English-medium universities or they give specific emphasis to teaching English with intensive English courses, particularly in the first academic year.

Despite the omnipresence of English in a global context as well as its reflections in Turkish social and educational milieu, the value of German is also on the rise due to the following reasons. First of all, the integration of Turkey into the European Union provides a basis for an interest in European languages, predominantly English and German. The language policies of the European Union promote linguistic diversity among the member states with the aim of founding a unified European identity comprised of multilingual and multicultural societies. Secondly, due to economic, educational or political reasons people – in their search for better work and better educational opportunities – have become increasingly mobile and have started to migrate to various countries, one of which is Germany. During the 1950s and early 1960s, due to its expanding economy and the increasing need for labor to help with the reconstruction of the country after the Second World War, Germany experienced an exceptionally large wave of in-migration from Mediterranean countries like Italy, Spain, Turkey and Portugal. While some immigrants returned to their home countries when their work permits in Germany expired, many others decided to remain in West Germany and subsequently brought their families to live there. One of these immigrant groups consists of workers and their children from Turkey. According to the

statistics provided by the German Federal Statistics Office, Turkish immigrants account for almost two million of the foreign citizens, in 2006 constituting the largest foreign ethnic group living in Germany. The existence of such a large number of Turkish people in Germany makes this country attractive due to its economic, educational, and social opportunities. As a result, knowing and learning German has progressively become more popular, particularly among university students in Turkey.

Another factor that influences the current status of German in Turkey is social origin. Approximately two million Turkish immigrants in Germany add to the joint memory of the two societies. Germany and Turkey have come to be concentric cultural circles; in other words, there is a Germany in Turkey and a Turkey in Germany. Besides, according to statistics published by the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Turkey is visited by nearly three million German tourists each year.

German is taught at different levels in the Turkish national educational system, ranging from primary schools to institutions of higher education as well as in private language courses. German is the medium of instruction in some programs at the university level, and it is offered as elective or mandatory foreign language courses on the secondary and tertiary levels and as a language for specific purposes. For instance, there are 22 German-medium secondary schools and 12 German language teaching departments. Also, there are joint educational activities between Turkey and Germany, such as exchange programs (DAAD, Socrates), partnerships among universities and 'The Sixth Framework Programme' (FP6). Moreover, the newspapers and magazines published in German such as the "Aktuelle Türkei Rundschau" (ATR), the "Deutsche Türkei Zeitung – Prima Türkei," "ODA – Das Wirtschaftsmagazin der AHK Türkei" and the "Türkische Allgemeine" provide opportunities to follow events in the German language in Turkey.

Close economic ties with Germany, which reached their peak with a trading volume of 16 billion Euros in 2003, enhance the relations between the two countries. The volume of exports to Germany, Turkey's major trade partner, amounts to about 7.2 billion Euros according to 2003 figures provided by the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany. Finally, the lion's share of foreign enterprises in Turkey is of German origin, namely Siemens, Mercedes-Benz, MAN, Bosch and Fraport, which are also the flagships of German economy. Considering the close social and economic ties between Germany and Turkey, the role of German in the Turkish educational context has gained more importance than ever.

## **2. Background to the study**

This study investigates the language attitudes of students enrolled in the Department of Foreign Language Education at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. In particular, the study aims to shed light on the status of Ger-

man as a foreign language and the attitudes attributed to the language and its culture.

Middle East Technical University (METU) is a leading university in Turkey, where the medium of instruction is English. Before pursuing their majors, all students who are admitted to the METU on the basis of the national 'University Entrance Exam' are required to take the METU English Proficiency Exam (also known as METU-EPE) to determine the level of their English language proficiency. Based on the test results, they either carry on their undergraduate studies or spend one or two semesters of intensive English language study at the Department of Basic English where they enrol full-time in English language courses.

The Department of Foreign Language Education, in which the current study was conducted, offers a B.A. program in English Language Teaching together with a wide selection of elective courses in literature and linguistics. In addition to the undergraduate program in English language teaching, the department offers two minor programs, namely in German and French (see König 1993 for initial aims and objectives of the German minor program).

### 3. Participants

The participants in this questionnaire survey consisted of a total of 117 students aged between 18 and 23. These students were all students at METU and thus had English as their first foreign language, and were all enrolled in a German course offered by FLE during the data collection period of this present study. In general, the students had started learning German at high school at around the age of 14 to 15 and continued with German at the university. The courses in which they were enrolled were Comparative English-German Language Structure I and II, which focus on German grammar in comparison to English grammar and Reading Comprehension, and Writing in German I, which aims to develop reading and writing skills in German, paying particular attention to the textual practice of grammatical knowledge. Table 2 displays the demographic information about the students participating in this study.

	MALE	%	FEMALE	%
<b>Distribution of gender</b>	37	26	76	74
<b>Age distribution (starting age of German instruction)</b>	<b>Number of respondents within the range</b>			
13	5		5	
14	26		2	
15	35		1	
16	9		3	
17	2		7	
18	3		6	
20 and above	7		4	

Table 2. Demographic information about the participants

#### 4. The instrument

This study was based on quantitative data obtained through a 50-item questionnaire. It was based on Gardner's (1985) and Cook's (2001) questionnaires and was adapted specifically for this study. It was composed of three sections: *a) attitudes towards foreign languages, b) attitudes towards German culture and the society and, c) attitudes towards learning German, d) open-ended questions.* The items were structured as statements in the form of a 5-point Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 5 stood for "strongly agree", 4 stood for "agree", 3 for "neutral", 2 for "disagree", and 1 stood for "strongly disagree".

Before the questionnaires were handed out to the students, the items were reviewed by three instructors other than the researchers. Then the questionnaire was piloted with 30 students who were also university students in the same age range. The purpose of this piloting process was to rephrase any unclear items and to establish the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire. The students in the piloting group were asked to fill in the questionnaire and highlight any unclear items. Based upon the feedback received from these students and the instructors, some of the items were rephrased and clarified.

#### 5. Findings and discussion

This section is organized according to the three main parts of the questionnaire: *a) attitudes towards foreign languages, b) attitudes towards the German culture and the society, c) attitudes towards learning German, and d) open-ended questions.* For statistical analysis the responses were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 13.0 for Windows. The statistics computed included frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The results in the tables below are reported with the mean scores (M) and standard deviations (S.D.) of the responses. For the purpose of interpretation, mean scores of 4.0 and above were considered to reflect positive attitudes, around 3.0 neutral attitudes, and values of 2.50 and below negative attitudes.

##### 5.1 Attitudes towards foreign languages

All in all, the attitude of the students towards foreign languages tended to be positive, indicating that the majority of the students believed that knowing a foreign language is one of the requisites of their lives and therefore have a strong wish to speak a language other than their native language (M = 4.83). As Table 3 shows, the results indicate that the participants were willing to learn a foreign language not because they are required to, but because they were aware of the opportunities that a foreign language provides (M = 4.58). The reasons for such positive attitudes are related to both social and individual factors. To start with the social factors leading to positive attitudes, the participants stated that they needed to know a foreign language for various reasons, for example, when they visit a foreign country, they would like to speak the language of that coun-

try ( $M = 4.64$ ) and would like to meet people speaking different languages ( $M = 4.47$ ). Besides, they felt that they needed to follow the foreign media ( $M = 4.45$ ) and to understand publications in foreign languages ( $M = 4.32$ ).

Item	Mean	S.D.
1. I wish I could speak another language perfectly.	4.83	.61
2. I would study a foreign language in school even if it were not required	4.58	.56
3. If I were visiting a foreign country I would like to be able to speak the language of the people.	4.64	.63
4. I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.	4.47	.68
5. I often wish I could read newspapers and magazines in a language other than Turkish.	4.45	.61
6. I want to read the literature of a foreign language in the original language rather than a translation.	4.32	.80
7. Learning a second or third language makes me more confident	4.53	.80
8. People who speak two or more languages think more critically and comprehensively than those who speak only one.	3.99	1.08
9. Speaking two or more foreign languages impedes on my command in my native language.	2.04	1.08

Table 3. Interest in foreign languages

In addition to these social motivations, the participants believed that knowing a foreign language will considerably contribute to their personalities. For instance, they assumed that knowing a foreign language will increase their self-esteem ( $M = 4.53$ ) and will contribute to their capability in critical and holistic thinking ( $M = 3.99$ ). In multilingualism literature, one of the major misconceptions used to be that knowing an additional (second/third, etc.) language would negatively affect the individuals' cognitive skills. However, many studies have provided evidence for the opposite, in that learning additional languages was found to increase the learners' cognitive capabilities; this is evidenced by the greater metalinguistic awareness in bilinguals than in monolinguals (Malakoff 1992; Thomas 1988). Similarly, the participants in this study believe that knowing a foreign language does not decrease their potential in their native language ( $M = 2.00$ ). Furthermore, the results indicate that among the participants there was the belief in a facilitative and reciprocal relationship between knowing a foreign language and thinking comprehensively.

## 5. 2 Attitudes towards German culture and society

In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked about their attitudes towards German culture and society (summary presented in Table 4). Following a Vygotskian approach (1978), we believe that culture is transmitted via language and that the target language cannot be taught without references to its culture. However, regarding this belief, this questionnaire directed our attention to an unfortunate fact, namely that the responses related to the attitudes to-

wards German culture and society revealed that participants' exposure was limited to the German language and did not give a comprehensive account of German culture and society that they had been learning for at least two semesters ( $M = 2.16$ ). This finding (and issue) was also echoed in the open-ended part of the questionnaire where the participants were asked to write down a German writer or book, singer or song, a philosopher, a German city or state they knew or had heard of. The participants' responses disclosed that they were not well-informed about German culture and society. However, a tendency to learn more about German language and its culture is indicated ( $M = 4.21$ ) as they advance in German. Despite these issues, the participants responded that in general, they had positive attitudes towards German culture and society ( $M = 3.36$ ), and they stated that the more they learned about the culture of the language, the more fluent they would like to become in German ( $M = 3.65$ ). Though this study does not attempt to correlate the attitudes developed towards the target language with achievement in the target language, it is highly likely that the students would be better learners if they were more informed about German culture. In this regard, Alptekin (1993) states that the learner who has not resided in the target language culture will most likely experience problems in his or her learning process, which supports the argument that the target language should be taught in relation to its culture.

Item	Mean	S.D.
1. I know enough about German culture and society.	2.16	.88
2. I would like to know more about German culture and society.	4.21	.76
3. I have a favorable attitude towards German culture and society.	3.36	.86
4. The more I get to know about German culture and society, the more I want to be fluent in their language.	3.65	.97
5. I think that Germans are self-disciplined people.	4.15	.85
6. German people are very friendly and hospitable.	2.92	.64
7. I think that most Germans are not generous.	3.04	.82

Table 4. Attitudes towards German culture and society

In terms of specific beliefs, the results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the students thought that the Germans are self-disciplined individuals ( $M = 4.15$ ). It also indicated that the Germans are believed to be friendly and hospitable individuals ( $M = 2.92$ ). Nevertheless, the results did not always point to positive attitudes. For instance, there was an overwhelming belief that the Germans are not generous people ( $M = 3.04$ ). This point is illustrated in a number of students' references to an idiom "Let's go Dutch (splitting the bill by expecting each person to pay his/her own share)", which has its equivalent in the Turkish phrase "Let's go German". Although the global understanding of this idiom puts Dutch society on the stage, in the Turkish context the floor is given to German society.

### 5.3 Attitudes towards learning German

The third part of the questionnaire, which investigates the attitudes towards learning German, reports positive attitudes overall (Table 5). Responses to each separate item show that these positive attitudes have their basis on two types of motivation. Based on their intrinsic motivation (inner desire to do something), the participants stated that they liked the experience of learning German ( $M = 4.38$ ), and that they believed that learning German will have a contribution to their personalities, especially by expanding their knowledge in how to learn foreign languages ( $M = 4.41$ ). Secondly, the students who were extrinsically motivated to learn German believed that knowing German will positively serve their future career ( $M = 4.52$ ). The most important motivation for their wish to learn German as well as possible ( $M = 4.63$ ) was indicated by the conviction that knowing German will enable them to find a good job upon graduation ( $M = 4.17$ ). By reason of their knowledge of German, the participants also think that they might have the opportunity to get a position in some social and cultural activities organized within the European Union framework. Furthermore, it is believed that by meeting German people and people from other nations, students will be able to develop better communicative skills ( $M = 4.61$ ).

Item	Mean	S.D.
1. I love learning German.	4.38	.61
2. Studying German can be important for me because it will make me a more knowledgeable person.	4.41	.69
3. Studying German can be important for me only because I'll need it for my future career.	4.52	.69
4. I plan to learn as much German as possible.	4.63	.53
5. Studying German can be important to me because I think it will someday be useful in getting a good job.	4.17	.77
6. Studying German will allow me to be more at ease with foreigners who speak German.	4.61	.66
7. Studying German will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people.	4.19	.86
8. German is an important part of the school program.	3.62	.91
9. I would rather have started learning German at an earlier age.	4.36	.90
10. It is difficult to learn German in a classroom setting.	2.54	.98

Table 5. Attitudes towards learning German

On the basis of the stated reasons, the participants considered the German courses an important part of their curriculum ( $M = 3.62$ ) and stated that in addition to English, which is taught as the first foreign language in Turkey, German courses should also be offered as either first or second foreign language rather than being an elective course.

Focusing on their own process of learning German, the majority of the participants indicated that they would have liked to started to learn German at an ear-

lier age ( $M = 4.36$ ). As for the learning environment where German could best be learned, some of the students pointed to the difficulties of learning a foreign language in a classroom atmosphere via instruction ( $M = 2.54$ ). Last but not least, the questionnaire revealed an interesting tendency in that the participants did not develop any attitudes towards the necessity of nativeness of the ideal German language teacher. To clarify, their responses showed that in order to be an ideal teacher of German, one would not necessarily have to be a native speaker of German.

#### 5. 4 Open-ended questions

The last section of the questionnaire is devoted to open-ended questions which investigate the specific rationale behind the learners' attitudinal disposition regarding German language and culture. In order to have a clear understanding of the picture, the discussion is explored under two major categories: disposition toward German language and culture, and disposition toward learning German. The findings obtained by means of the questionnaire, shown in Table 6 below, support the claim that German is an influential language in the fields of tourism (66 responses), academic studies (44 responses), communication (37 responses) and the economy (37 responses), respectively.

<b>ITEM: German is widely used in the following domains _____.</b>		
<b>FIELDS</b>	<b># OF RESPONSES</b>	<b>RANK</b>
Politics	34	4
Economics	37	3
Academic studies	44	2
Communication	37	3
Sports	13	7
Education	32	5
Religion	5	8
Media and entertainment	32	5
Scientific developments	30	6
Tourism	66	1
Literature	32	5
Other	5	8

Table 6. Statistical representation of Germany's sphere of influence

The current close ties between Germany and Turkey in the field of tourism is the major determinant for the high reputation of German in Turkey. Germany, being the top tourist-provider for years, reached the top in 2002 with over 3 million tourists, according to the statistics provided by the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB 2003). Another finding related to the tourism sector comes from TouristScope which shows that Turkey was the fourth-most visited country by Germans as of 2002 (TouristScope 2002). Academic studies go hand in hand with the tourism sector and serve for the expansion of the influence of the Ger-

man language in Turkey. Supported by several exchange programs in secondary and tertiary level education, German becomes more prominent day by day among scholars and students. The increasing popularity of German in Turkey has its roots in the highly-respected German philosophy and literature as mentioned in the open-ended items of the questionnaire. To quote two anonymous respondents: “I admire German philosophy and literature” (Respondent 1), and “the solid history of philosophy and the necessity to read German texts developed my curiosity toward German language and culture” (Respondent 2) are among two examples given. Another factor supporting the reputation of German is found in the economic relations between the two countries. Economic indicators regarding Turkish-German relations within the framework of the European Union confirms the findings of the present study which also shows that job opportunities and dominance of Germany in European Union are perceived as positive factors in terms of the respondents’ attitude development.

The positive attitudes generated towards the German language boosted the attitudes toward learning German language. It is interesting to note that the first step towards German language learning for all of the respondents was taken in foreign language classrooms. The statistics regarding the factors behind learning German (Table 7) clearly reveal that the students’ primary rationale behind learning German is “to understand other cultures”. Considering the scope and influence of Germany within the European Union, the German language serves as the tool which opens the doors to primarily German-speaking societies. Accordingly, another popular motive to learn German is “to interact with a wider group of people”, which also supports the argument that respondents are eager to engage in relations with German-speaking societies. In addition, the role of German in the European Union family had a distinct role in developing an interest towards learning it. Another highlighted reason was “to find a good job” which also emphasizes the instrumental value of knowledge of German in today’s global economy. No matter where the respondents were, German was believed to pave the way for a successful career.

<b>ITEM: I want to learn German</b>		
<b>MOTIVES</b>	<b># OF RESPONSES</b>	<b>RANK</b>
to understand other cultures	85	1
to interact with a wider group of people	77	2
to know an international language	40	4
to pass my courses	21	5
to pursue graduate studies	21	5
to find a good job	71	3
Other	15	6

Table 7. Statistical representation of the factors behind learning German

Another open-ended item in the questionnaire specifically investigated the source of influence in students’ attitude development towards learning German.

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Most of the respondents highlighted the role of their instructors throughout their educational background. On the one hand, they attributed positive associations to their university instructors. To quote a respondent, “Instructors are very enthusiastic in language teaching. They not only advertise the language but also its culture”. On the other hand, there is an evident attitudinal ambivalence regarding the role of their high school teachers in the formation of their attitudes towards learning German. Quoting another respondent, “Instructors were present in the class without any preparation and enthusiasm, just because German as a foreign language was a compulsory course”.

In addition to the instructor factor, learners concentrated their comments on the milieu of German language learning in terms of their parents and relatives. As far as the context of German language learning is concerned, the responses revealed that the students’ attitudes were shaped by their parents and relatives who either were in Germany or are still there. In other words, the current close contact with Germany has a direct influence on learning German.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate the current status of German as a foreign language among Turkish students and their attitudes to German language and culture in a Turkish educational context. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to a group of university level students who were learning German as their second foreign language. The results of the questionnaire demonstrated that the vitality of German language in a globalised era is acknowledged by Turkish learners of German along with its prestigious status in the eye of the respondents as far as its history, philosophy and literary achievements are concerned. The findings also highlighted the fact that close socioeconomic ties with Germany and European Union boost the significance of knowledge of the German language in various aspects of life (job opportunities, inter-cultural and educational events). Consequently, the attitudes toward the German language and culture are found to be instrumentally positive in the sense that the German language and Germany serve to facilitate the learner’s inter- and cross-cultural and linguistic development of the learners.

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### Anmerkungen

<sup>1</sup> The names of the authors were listed alphabetically.