@

Tuğba Nur Karadağ Gökçe
Lecturer, National Defence University, School of Foreign Languages, İstanbul, Türkiye
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6226-7283

Didem Koban Koç
Assoc. Prof. Dr., İzmir Democracy University, Department of Foreign Languages Education, İzmir, Türkiye
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0869-6749

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Didem Koban Koç, Üçkuyular Mahallesi, Gürsel Aksel Bulvarı, No:14 35140 Karabağlar/İzmir, Türkiye. Email: dkoban2@gmail.com

BALKAN JOURNALS

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to their Cultural Intelligence

Tuğba Nur Karadağ Gökçe
Didem Koban Koç

Abstract

This study aims to provide qualitative insights from interviews with preparatory program students, examining factors that influence cultural intelligence (CQ) development. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to explore factors affecting their CQ beyond English language learning alone. Content analysis, following a six-step approach, was used to analyze the qualitative data, identifying four main factors influencing CQ: individual effort, social interaction, internet, and classroom. The interviews showed that individual effort and social interaction, including engagement on social media, significantly impact CQ development. When asked about CQ improvement activities, most students indicated a lack of dedicated cultural activities but showed a strong interest in them. This study adds to the existing literature by emphasizing the importance of cultural activities within language education.

Keywords: culture, cultural intelligence, cultural intelligence development, English as a foreign language

Introduction

In educational settings, students are expected to learn foreign languages and engage with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Effective communication in a foreign language requires cultural knowledge, which helps students understand and navigate different beliefs, values, and customs. Some individuals struggle to adjust to cross-cultural situations, while others adapt easily. Those who excel in such environments often exhibit high levels of cultural intelligence (CQ), which is the capacity to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng et al., 2012). The purpose of this study is to gather qualitative insights from preparatory program students to explore the factors that influence their CQ development.

Literature Review

CQ and Four-Factor Model of CQ

Cultural intelligence is the capacity of an individual to adapt and perform well in culturally varied settings (Earley & Ang, 2003). It encompasses a range of abilities, viewpoints, and conduct that are formed via exposure to and engagement with many cultural contexts (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). Livermore (2011) defines cultural intelligence as an individual's ability to comprehend and adapt to various cultural settings, enabling them to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves a set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that enable individuals to navigate and succeed in diverse cultural environments. In 2007, Ang and his colleagues established the four-factor model of CQ consisting of motivational, behavioral, cognitive, and metacognitive dimensions and provided evidence that CQ is distinct from other individual characteristics and that it can be developed through training and experience as well. Also, there is a reciprocal relationship between exposure to and interactions with different cultures, often referred to as Multicultural Exposure (MCE), and the dimensions of CQ. On the one hand, high levels of MCE can lead to changes and improvements in various CQ dimensions. Conversely, having high levels of CQ can increase an individual's openness and receptiveness towards elements and members of different cultures. This heightened CQ can, in turn, lead to increased MCE and interaction (Aytug et al., 2018).

The motivational dimension refers to one's ability to be motivated to understand and adapt to cultural differences and to have a positive outlook and interest in

interacting with other people from various cultural backgrounds. It entails a person's readiness to take chances, learn from errors, and persevere in the face of cultural obstacles. Individuals with high behavioral CQ effectively use a wide range of verbal and nonverbal skills, such as culturally appropriate vocabulary, tone, gestures, and facial expressions, to adapt their actions to specific cultural contexts. This ability allows them to control and regulate their social behavior during cross-cultural interactions, reducing misunderstandings and inaccurate judgments (Ghahremani et al., 2010; Van Dyne et al., 2012). Cognitive CQ can be defined as conceptualizing the cognitive component, which relates to characteristics of intelligence that include information processing (Earley & Peterson, 2004), and it shows general knowledge and knowledge structures about culture (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). Metacognitive CQ pertains to the cognitive processes people employ to gain and comprehend cultural knowledge, which includes the ability to manage and regulate their own thought processes regarding culture.

CQ and Language

Language proficiency is crucial for cultural competence, as it enables deeper cultural understanding and effective intercultural communication (Alon & Higgins, 2005). Proficiency in multiple languages enhances cultural knowledge and helps individuals navigate cross-cultural situations (Shannon & Begley, 2008). Studies show that language learners with higher proficiency levels exhibit greater cognitive CQ (Ergun & Güzel, 2017), and cultural knowledge varies with language proficiency (Gedik Bal, 2022). Research by Chang Alexander et al. (2022) and Kistyanto et al. (2021) demonstrated that study-abroad experiences significantly contribute to CQ development. Social media use also positively impacts CQ, particularly through information acquisition and socializing (Hu et al., 2018; Canbay, 2020). Additionally, cultural content in textbooks is often limited to superficial aspects, and the integration of deeper cultural elements is needed for better CQ development (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015; Ayu, 2020). Studies highlight the importance of media like documentary videos for enhancing CQ, with positive student responses (Al-Obaydi & Pikhart, 2023). The primary aim of this study is to collect qualitative insights from interviews with preparatory program students to determine the factors impacting CQ development. The study is guided by the following research question:

1) What are the students' perceptions regarding the factors that contribute to their CQ?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to acquire a detailed comprehension of the influential factors and their interconnectedness. In order to achieve the research objective of identifying influential factors for CQ, 11 participants for the qualitative data were selected through a random sampling method. The qualitative data collection involved 11 participants who consented to online video interviews. Each session, lasting about 10 minutes, began with a brief introduction and study overview. Three initial questions, reviewed by an ELT expert for clarity, were posed, followed by additional questions based on participants' responses for deeper insights. To avoid communication issues, interviews were conducted in Turkish. Participants were informed of the research objectives and consented to recording. There were a total of three questions, as follows:

1. What are the roles playing in your learning about different cultures?

2. What kinds of activities that can improve your CQ level are applied in the classroom?

3. How do you feel towards other cultures as you learn or improve your English?

Data Analysis and Findings

In the initial phase, the information obtained from the recorded interviews was transcribed meticulously. The data were gathered via the interviewing process and examined using content analysis based on Creswell's (2012) six processes for doing a data analysis. The researcher sought input from two ELT experts to evaluate the themes and codes, strengthening the study's trustworthiness. This qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, aims to explore students' perceptions of factors influencing their CQ. To ensure anonymity, participants were labeled S1 to S11 based on their student numbers.

Q1) What are the roles playing in your learning about different cultures?

The first question explores how students learn about different cultures, focusing on the tools and resources they use. Four themes and several sub-themes emerged with respect to the first question. The themes were individual effort, social interaction, the Internet, and the classroom. Content analysis revealed several ways students learn about different cultures. Many mentioned watching foreign films and

series, as well as reading books, as valuable resources rich in cultural insights. Traveling abroad, when possible, was highlighted as an ideal way to deepen cultural understanding. Social interactions with foreign friends also played a significant role, often occurring online via apps, games, WhatsApp, or video calls. Some students noted meeting foreign peers in preparatory classes. The internet emerged as another key resource, with students using YouTube, social media, and search engines to explore cultural information. Additionally, classrooms provided opportunities through coursebooks featuring authentic materials and teacher-led activities designed to foster cultural awareness. The following statements serve as examples of resources that students utilize to learn about different cultures:

> "Of course, seeing their way of life is effective. To see that culture in its place, to travel its geographies, and to live in them a little bit. This could be travel, for example, or making friends with one of them. Even if I do not necessarily go there, it could be talking on the phone or texting on WhatsApp. It could also be the books I read. For example, I read a book when I was very young, in middle school. It was about women in Iran. I was very impressed by it, and I still remember it." (S2)

> "Books are the most important examples of this; for example, I love George Orwell. He has a book called Down and Out in Paris and London. Here, you can learn about the cultural situation arising from socioeconomic differences in economic terms, as well as what kind of jobs people with poor financial conditions in London and France can work and how they can live." (S6)

Q2) What kinds of activities that can improve your CQ level are applied in the classroom?

The second interview question explored cultural activities in the preparatory class. Three themes emerged related to the second question: 1) specific activities, 2) book-based, and 3) teacher-based.

In general, the students' consensus is that there were not any dedicated activities for learning about other cultures. Nevertheless, they did have a coursebook that contained various texts and authentic videos about different cultures, allowing them to learn certain specific cultural elements. Furthermore, their teachers enriched their cultural knowledge by sharing their personal travel experiences and cultural insights with the students. Occasionally, the teachers also introduced games, films, and songs that provided students with access to diverse cultural knowledge. The following extracts exemplify the activities carried out in the classroom:

"I can say that no activity was held. The book we studied talked about different cultures where here people drink, what they have, and how they are educated. For example, there was a school in Thailand. They were eating insects and stuff. It was both reading and video." (S1)

"Our teachers are generally people who have been abroad. They shared their experiences with us; for example, I was in Germany, such and such happened, and I saw such and such things. Also, our teacher brought some games that have cultural information. I can learn that way too." (S3)

"We used a book in the preparatory class. There were a lot of BBC documentaries, and we would watch the documentary and comment below. There were documentaries from different countries. For example, a documentary introduces a hotel in a different country and asks questions about it, and we watch the video and give answers. We discussed that topic as a class. If our teacher knew, she would give information about that hotel or any other place." (S4)

"While we were studying the subject, our own teachers gave us information. Mostly, we learned some information about other cultures from our coursebook. Frankly, we did not do anything else. A concept could be prepared according to the culture of a country. A meeting together could have been held in the classroom. Foods specific to that culture could be brought, and events could be organized, such as domestic goods week." (S7)

Q3) How do you feel towards other cultures as you learn or improve your English?

The objective of this interview question was to gather information regarding the feelings and attitudes of students as they learn or enhance their English in relation to other cultures. Based on the content analysis, willingness, and openness emerged as themes regarding the third question. Most students noted that as their English skills improved, their willingness to communicate with foreigners increased, overcoming initial shyness. This shift encouraged them to make foreign friends, engage in conversations, and reduce their fear of traveling abroad. Some are even planning trips. Learning English also motivated them to explore other languages like Russian and Spanish, boosting their confidence in expanding their linguistic abilities. Initially, many students held biases and preconceived notions about foreigners and their cultures. However, gaining cultural knowledge fostered empathy, helping them dismantle prejudices and better understand foreign behaviors and practices. The following excerpts confirm those feelings and thoughts:

"As I started learning English, I became interested in learning different languages other than English…. I was someone who was very hesitant about going to different countries. But that thought of mine has changed, especially after listening to the places our teachers visited abroad and learning that they improved their English more there." (S5)

"For example, everyone was laughing at something in the series, but it did not seem funny at the time. But as I learn English, even though we do not live there, as I learn some language patterns, I say that this is what they meant. This is so funny." (S10)

Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative analysis identified four key factors influencing students' CQ: individual effort, social interaction, the internet, and classroom. These themes align with Crowne's (2008) view that familiarity with culture can be gained through travel, study, reading, or media. Regarding individual effort, students reported that activities like watching foreign films, reading books, and engaging with media help enhance their cultural knowledge. These activities provide insights into customs, diets, clothing, idiomatic expressions, and humor, as well as socio-economic situations. Thus, individual efforts such as media consumption and reading can significantly contribute to CQ development.

Social interaction emerged as the second most significant factor in developing CQ. Social interactions, such as traveling or living abroad, meeting foreign friends through apps or in class, video chatting, and playing online games with foreign friends, contribute to cultural knowledge. According to students, going abroad and living in foreign countries offer immersive opportunities to learn about different cultures, aligning with studies by Chang Alexander et al. (2022), Crowne (2008), and Kistyanto et al. (2021), which emphasize the positive impact of multicultural and international experiences on CQ. Social media platforms, by fostering emotional empathy and self-confidence, further facilitate these interactions, supporting the findings of Hu et al. (2018) and Majda et al. (2021), which suggest that cross-cultural interactions via social media also boost CQ. As for the internet, it plays a key role in students' cultural learning. They use social media, watch YouTube and Instagram videos, and search for information online to explore different cultures, aligning with findings by Hu et al. (2018) and Canbay (2020).

Regarding the classroom, the students noted that they acquire cultural knowledge in the classroom, especially through their coursebooks, which include reading materials and videos related to various cultures. This aligns with Al-Obaydi and Pikhart's (2023) research, which highlights the positive impact of cultural documentary videos in EFL classes, particularly appreciated by students. As for cultural activities in the classroom, the participants noted that there are no specific cultural activities in their learning, and instead, they gain cultural knowledge through videos and reading

materials in their coursebooks. While research shows that videos positively impact CQ (Al-Obaydi & Pikhart, 2023), and reading materials can provide insights into different cultures, coursebooks often focus on surface-level cultural aspects, such as holidays, tourist attractions and cuisine, which do not offer a deep understanding of the target culture (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015). Regarding students' feelings and attitudes towards other cultures, many students reported changes in their attitudes and feelings. They expressed a greater willingness to communicate with foreigners, a desire to travel abroad, and an eagerness to learn other languages. Additionally, they became more open to different cultures, ideas, customs, and people. These responses were categorized into two main themes: "willingness" and "openness."

Many students in the study reported that learning English increased their willingness to learn other languages, communicate with people from different countries, and explore new places. This aligns with previous research, such as Malmin (2021), who found high motivation to tackle challenges and learn new things, and Canbay (2020), who identified a positive link between language learning motivation and CQ. Students also expressed a desire to connect with people from different cultures, reflecting the findings of Gedik Bal (2022), which highlighted traits like friendliness, open-mindedness, and empathy as crucial for successful intercultural communication. Additionally, students reported increased confidence in communication and adaptation, suggesting that exposure to intercultural content could address language learning motivation challenges. Students also reported that learning or improving their English made them more open to other cultures and accepting of cultural differences. As Ang and Van Dyne (2008) note, cultural empathy—understanding the emotions, thoughts, and actions of people from different cultures—is closely linked to open-mindedness, which involves a nonjudgmental approach to diverse cultural norms and customs. Language proficiency also enhances nonverbal communication by improving the ability to recognize contextual nuances, leading to better social interactions and higher CQ. Supporting this, Ang et al. (2006) found that openness to experience correlates with all aspects of CQ. The study has limitations, including data collection from a single context, which may limit generalizability. Future research could include more universities and students from different regions and consider the perspectives of English language instructors on integrating culture into the classroom.

References

Al-Obaydi, L. H. & Pikhart, M. (2023). The Evaluation of CQ Enhancement Through Documentary Videos for L2 Acquisition. *MEXTESOL Journal, 47*(1).

Alon, I., & Higgins, J. M. (2005). Global leadership success through emotional and CQs. *Business Horizons,* 48, 501–512.

Ang, S., & Van Dyne, L. (2008). *Handbook of CQ: Theory, measurement, and applications.* M.E. Sharpe.

Aytug, Z.G., Kern, M.C. and Dilchert, S. (2018). Multicultural experience: development and validation of a multidimensional scale. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *65*, 1-16.

Ayu, M. (2020). Evaluation cultural content on English textbook used by EFL students in Indonesia. *JET (Journal of English Teaching)*, *6*(3), 183–192. https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v6i3.1925

Canbay, F. (2020). The Relationship Between CQ And Language Learning Motivation. *Journal on Educational Psychology*. Doi: 10.26634/jpsy.13.4.17003

Chang Alexander, K., Ingersoll, L. T., Shields, C. G., Miller, M. L., Gipson, J. A., Calahan, C. A., DeMaria, A. L., & Chang Alexander, S. (2022). CQ and short-term study abroad length: The effect of an undergraduate cultural development course and short-term study abroad program on student CQ. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *34*(2), 280–301. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v34i2.567

Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Medsurg Nursing, 25*(6), 435-436.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th edition). Pearson.

Crowne, K. A. (2008). What leads to CQ?. *Business Horizons, 51*(5), 391–399. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2008.03.010

Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *CQ: Individual interactions across cultures.* Stanford University Press.

Earley, P. C., & Peterson, R. S. (2004). The Elusive Cultural Chameleon: CQ as a New Approach to Intercultural Training for the Global Manager. *Academy of Management Learning &Education, 3*(1), 100-115.

Ergun, G., & Güzel, A. (2017). Evaluation of CQ levels of female university students according to negative automatic thoughts and some other variables. *Gumushane University Journal of Health Sciences, 6*(4), 30-43. https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/371050

Gedik Bal, N. (2022). CQ of English language learners and their perceived strengths and weaknesses in Intercultural Communication. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language--TESL-EJ*, *26*(4). https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26102a3

Ghahremani, D. G., Monterosso, J., Jentsch, J. D., Bilder, R. M., & Poldrack, R. A. (2010). Neural components underlying behavioral flexibility in human reversal learning. *Cerebral Cortex, 20,* 1843–1852.

Gómez Rodríguez, L. F. (2015). The cultural content in EFL textbooks and what teachers need to do about it. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *17*(2), 167–187. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v17n2.44272

Hu, S., Liu, H., & Gu, J. (2018). What role does self-efficacy play in developing CQ from social media usage?. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, 28,* 172–180. doi:10.1016/j.elerap.2018.01.009

Kistyanto, A., Rahman, M. F., Adhar Wisandiko, F., & Setyawati, E. E. (2021). CQ Increase Student's innovative behavior in Higher Education: The mediating role of interpersonal trust. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *36*(4), 419–440. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-11-2020-0510

Livermore, D. A. (2011). *CQ: Improving your CQ to engage our multicultural world.* Baker Books.

Majda, A., Bodys-Cupak, I. E., Zalewska-Puchała, J., & Barzykowski, K. (2021). Cultural Competence and CQ of Healthcare Professionals Providing Emergency Medical Services. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *18*(21), 11547. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111547

Malmin, H. (2021). *Predictors of CQ* (Master's Thesis). Retrieved from https://uia.brage.unit.no/uia-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2786491/Hilde%20Malmin.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Shannon, L. M., & Begley, T. M. (2008). *Antecedents of the four-factor model of CQ.* In S. Ang, & L. Van Dyne (Eds.), Handbook of CQ: Theory, measurement, and applications (pp. 41–55). New York, NY: ME Sharpe.

Van Dyne, L., Ang, S., Ng, K. Y., Rockstuhl, T., Tan, M. L. and Koh, C. (2012). Sub-Dimensions of the Four Factor Model of CQ: Expanding the Conceptualization and Measurement of CQ. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass,6*(4), 295–313.