

## **Snapshots of a Culture: How Do American and Turkish Elementary Students Represent Their Cultural Identities Using Technology as a Means of Expression and Communication?**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how elementary students can learn about the culture of another country and how technology can play a role in this process. The sample of the study included 135 fifth grade students from the United States and Turkey. Initial knowledge and information sources of students were assessed at the beginning of the study. Then, they exchanged multimedia presentations which they prepared to make their peers more knowledgeable about their own country. After studying the presentation about the other country, the students responded to a post-survey assessing their knowledge gains. Results showed that the Turkish students had much more initial knowledge about the American culture compared to knowledge of the American students about Turkey. Both groups had certain prejudices or misperceptions about each other. Media, school, and family were main sources of information, while books and friends played a small role. Studying multimedia-based presentations and discussing its content as a group was highly effective to learn about the culture of another country. By exchanging intercultural information through technology, students became less prejudiced and more understanding of each others' respective cultures.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural learning; Cross-cultural education; Multimedia-based learning; Information and communication technologies; Snapshots*

### **Introduction**

Today's world is more global than ever before essentially due to economic investments, social movements, cultural exchanges, and technological developments. It is almost impossible for anybody to live completely in his/her own local culture. Countries, nations, and cultures are much more interconnected compared to previous centuries. Globalization brings radical changes in all spheres of human life. Coming closer may be a chance to develop constructive dialogue among representatives of different cultures. Therefore, we need to learn about and interact with other cultures in order to become a world citizen.

Since the interdependencies of today's world touch and involve all of us, we may have to search for new ways of living together in order to understand the other as somebody to be respected in his/her differences. It has often indicated and proven that the absence of war automatically does not mean peace. This is particularly true in social and cultural domains so

that we can use intercultural learning as a tool in our efforts to comprehend the complexity of today's world, by understanding others and ourselves better. In this context, intercultural learning becomes a personal development process with collective implications. When looked at from this perspective, intercultural learning can be understood on different levels. On the one hand, it refers to an individual process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that are connected with interaction of various cultures. On the other hand, it is seen in a larger context to denote a concept of how people with different backgrounds can live together in peace (Chen & Starosta, 2008; Council of Europe & European Commission, 2000).

Learning another culture means getting familiar with common principles, rules, assumptions, norms, and values that are the very foundations of the overt behavior which we can observe as an outsider or experience as a participant. Traditionally, people used to visit a country of the foreign culture that they would like to learn about and get some level of exposure in order to catch a flavor of the new culture. In recent years, however, information and communication technologies have made it easy to get a grasp of the basics of a foreign culture. This often considered the modern way of intercultural learning.

The issue of intercultural learning becomes more important for students in public schools. Generally speaking, there are many ways and approaches to teach or train students about another culture. Schools, media, families, and peers may have the power of providing eminent opportunities in this regard. There are also special institutions, training centers, and learning programs presenting and/or enhancing intercultural experiences. These opportunities either give general information about a foreign culture or offer limited exposure through some purposeful ways (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2003; Zhu, 2004).

Most of these activities are designed to allow learners to discover that there are special skills needed to communicate across cultural boundaries. They often aim at short-term adjustment to a country the learners have not yet visited. A few of these activities are virtual games or simulations that allow the participant to experience a measure of what it feels like to be in an intercultural situation (Fowler & Mumford, 1995; Seelye, 1996).

Stated differently, the current learning activities are built around one or more incidents of cross-cultural understanding. This strategy, which is essentially based on "critical incident" approach, may be in the form of demonstrations, role-playing skits, case studies, problem solving activities, games, simulations, conflict resolution exercises, and virtual interactions (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Fennes & Hapgood, 1997; Kayes, 2002; Mintzberg & Goslin, 2002). They all involve that the participant actively becomes aware of cultural differences, finds the cause of misunderstanding, and decides or exhibits the right behavior. They also aim at replacing the unacceptable values and attitudes with acceptable ways of thinking and acting. Is this strategy effective enough when considered the extent of encountering cultural differences in the era of the so-called "clash of civilizations" or the "war of cultures"? Perhaps, the answer is not very clear and discussions are certainly worth to attend.

Research generally suggest that social goals and interactions are important in learning cultural negotiation, but that setting explicitly social/educational goals may not be the right scaffold. In other words, there should be no formal obligation or manipulation check during intercultural learning even in virtual games (Ogan, Kim, Alevan, & Jones, 2009). If this is the case, how can students learn adequately and accurately about the culture of another country as early as possible, particularly in elementary grades within the global community using a simple technology application such as PowerPoint? Can we develop appreciation for intercultural

differences through the use of undemanding technologies which are easily available on daily basis rather than professionally-designed technological tools that serve intelligently toward predetermined goals?

When intercultural learning for elementary students is considered, there is the traditional curriculum for social studies designed to include standards as set forth by the national education guidelines of each country. Both the teachers and the textbooks, however, may reflect a bias about the culture of that country, as they are not participants in the culture but rather simply interpreters. What is learned in their educational setting may also be limited or excluded from their general curriculum.

Similarly, political and public discussions tend to simplify facts, they rarely search for causes. The historic memory transmitted to young people in many countries is short and one-sided in most cases. Intercultural learning processes with young people should be based on their reality. Education of the youth in this regard should present contradictory tendencies/realities and help them to integrate toward an honest intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2000; Rimmington & Alagic, 2008).

Perhaps what becomes more influential than is the media's public exposure. How a country is portrayed in the media (television, radio, newspapers, Internet, movies etc.) may be an accurate portrayal or it might be biased and misleading. The media often are not compelled or accountable to anyone but their audience. Media might also influence the adults and peers with whom the children come in contact. Increasing communication among people of different cultures through contemporary technology may bring them closer and allow their knowledge grow but not necessarily their ability to integrate it successfully. Moreover, it is possible that technology may contribute to stereotypes and misconceptions about other nations and cultures. How can students then develop a more accurate understanding about the culture of another country?

The present study chose to address the above question by a cross-cultural investigation involving the use of a simple technology such as PowerPoint. The study did not attempt to determine the extent to which the use of selected technology played a role in the students' understanding of a culture but considered technology a means of expressing their ideas through self-designed multimedia involving text, audio, and video messages. The study did not compare itself with other studies using technology such as video conferencing (Sato & Sumiya, 2006), or e-mail correspondence to solve a problem and address an issue as a means of social communication.

The main question of the research was: "How do American and Turkish elementary students represent their respective cultural identities using technology as a means of expression and communication?" The following sub-questions related to the main question were addressed: (1) What are the initial perceptions and misconceptions?; (2) How have these perceptions been biased by the portrayal of the cultures in media?; (3) How have the students' educational experiences been a factor in their individual perceptions?; (4) Have they been influenced by attitudes outside of the educational experience such as family, friends, community, religious affiliations?; and (5) Will these perceptions and misconceptions change and/or become more accurate as a consequence of the cross-cultural sharing and will this lead to a greater level of understanding of cultures in the global community?

## Methodology

### Sample Description

Two private elementary schools were selected for this cross-cultural study; one from Michigan, USA and the other from Eskisehir, Turkey. The majority of the students in both schools were from middle class socio-economic backgrounds. Both schools required some type of academic entrance examination for admittance. The sample included a total of 135 fifth-grade students; 71 from USA and 64 from Turkey. The age of students did not range much, 90% was 11 years old. Gender distribution was also balanced (52% female and 48% male).

### Data Gathering and Analysis

The use of technology as a means for visualization and communication was an important component of this study. It was decided that PowerPoint would be the application to be used by the students because of its availability to both schools and the fact that it was an existing part of each school's technology curriculum. Based on their previous experiences, the researchers devised a template for the students' PowerPoint presentations. The template was reviewed by administrators and teachers of the elementary schools as well as a small group of students selected for the study. Considering their criticisms and recommendations, the final version of the template was prepared.

As a means of assessing students' prior knowledge, the researchers developed a simple pre-survey asking what they knew about the other culture, where they learned that information, and what they wanted to learn from their peers in the other country. They were also provided with several Likert-type items to respond in order to determine the degree to which they thought the cultures were similar or different. A post-survey was also created to assess what the students had learned from this cross-cultural experience.

The final version of the template used in the study consisted of one-hundred PowerPoint screens in five categories. The distribution of the screens for categories and sub-categories were as follows: (a) *"Who are we?"*: 50 (School:4; City:8; Country:7; Diversity in the school:5; Curriculum:10; Likes/dislikes:6; Heroes/role models/famous people:10); (b) *"Our favorites"*: 24 (Foods:4; Music:3; Books:2, Sports:5; TV programs/films:5, Activities:5); (c) *"Our celebrations (Holidays and special events)"*:10; (d) *"Our future"* (Hopes and dreams): 10; and (e) *"Good bye"* (Pictures of students): 6. However, the students were told that this was only the template and they were free to change the number and distribution of screens based on their group decisions. Both the American and the Turkish students came up with minor changes in terms of the number of screens for categories and sub-categories, and their total numbers slightly exceeded one hundred (108 screens for the Turkish and 104 screens for the American students).

After a brief discussion of the topics and topic assignments, the students prepared PowerPoint presentations about their own culture using the template. In the process of preparing their PowerPoint presentations, the students were helped by their classroom teachers, English teachers, and computer teachers. However, the teachers did not intervene regarding the content of the screens. Their help was basically about corrections in terms of facts, language, and use of computers. The students took sole responsibility about their material.

After both sides completed their “Snapshots of Our Culture” presentations, they exchanged and studied these presentations. They watched and discussed the presentations together with their classmates. Finally, the students were given the post-survey asking what new information they learned or what personal knowledge they had beforehand changed based on the presentation. These pre-post responses were analyzed and compared with each other. The students completed this survey in their own native language. The researchers translated responses of the Turkish students into English for the purpose of composite data analysis. Analyses were conducted independently by the researchers and cross-checks showed no significant deviations between them. There was about 95% agreement between the evaluators of student responses.

### Findings

#### Prior Knowledge

At the beginning of the study, both groups of students were asked to write on a survey sheet, in as much detail as possible, what they had knew about the other country and where they had learned their information. This was a pretest-survey to assess their prior knowledge or preconceptions regarding the other culture. Table 1 shows the initial responses of the Turkish students about the United States.

Table 1. Initial knowledge of the Turkish students about the United States

Subject	Frequency
Americans usually eat fast food	40
Americans are always at war with other nations	35
Americans are Christians	30
Holidays and special days are different in USA	29
United States invade other countries against international law	23
President Bush is a problem for world peace	22
The monetary unit of the USA is dollars	20
Natural disasters such as tornado frequently occur in USA	19
Science and technology are advanced in USA	18
Americans have high living standards	17
Favorite sports are American football and basketball	17
United States is a large country surrounded by oceans	16
American government tortures people	14
Streets and neighborhoods are clean in USA	14
USA is a beautiful and rich country	13
American educational system and schools are good	13
There is racial discrimination in the United States	13
“We watch their movies and TV shows”	12
Most Americans have unhealthy eating habits	12
Most Americans are arrogant and self-centered	11
American foreign policy is hostile against the rest of the world	10
United States has killed many Indians	10
Well-known figures are mostly artists and musicians	10
USA has a short history	9
USA is scared of terror after 9/11	7
The statue of liberty is their national symbol	7

Official language of the United States is English	7
The capital city is Washington	7
Most of the houses are duplex	7
Major cities are New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles	6
Environment policy of the United States is dangerous	6
They are hard-working, well-trained, and responsible people	5
Typical American lady is a blonde	5
People are more liberal in dressing	4
Others	18

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

Turkish students wrote many facts and thoughts about the United States; the variety and content of their writings were very detailed. Although the list is relatively long, it is possible to classify initial knowledge/thoughts of the Turkish students about the United States into certain clusters.

Their most frequent negative responses (more than half of the Turkish students) referred to the US administration and its foreign policy regarding wars, invasions, hostilities, and sanctions against other countries. There were also negative feelings about the US government’s lack of concern for world environmental issues to protect their industry.

Approximately two-thirds of the Turkish students thought that most Americans’ diet consisted of fast-food. They further associated the unhealthy eating habits of American citizens with the reported high rate of obesity, which has become a serious problem in recent years.

On the positive side, more than one fourth of the Turkish students indicated that the United States is well-advanced in science and technology. According to the students, this has contributed to wealth and high living standards of the country. As a result, most American families have their own homes in ever-green neighborhoods. The Turkish students particularly emphasized the presence of large, well-organized, and clean streets in the United States.

Approximately half of the Turkish students mentioned that Americans are Christians; that is why they have their own celebrations of holidays and special events. Turkish students particularly mentioned the Halloween celebrations and found Halloween customs very strange. Although a few students indicated that majority of Americans are hard-working and professional, relatively more students (twice the number) claimed that most Americans are self-centered and arrogant. Some students referred to the negative way US officials treated foreign passengers at airports to support their hostile beliefs.

Turkish students seem to be aware of racial issues in the American population. Approximately one fifth of the students wrote comments about the dominance of white people, and how they behaved against minorities. Several students pointed out that a typical lady in the United States is a blonde with blue eyes, and a typical American citizen is more liberal or relaxed as far as dressing is concerned. One sixth of the students commented on the past conflicts between Anglos and Indians.

One fourth of the Turkish students watch popular sports in the United States such as American football and basketball, although they don’t understand why Americans use the word “soccer” for the world-known “real football”, the Turkish students are also fans of certain basketball celebrities in US.

A significant number of the Turkish students indicated general facts about the United States. These include; the US often faces natural disasters such as tornadoes, its monetary unit is dollar, the official language is English, it is surrounded by oceans on the east and west sides, the capital is Washington DC, major cities are New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Although the Turkish students thought that the US has a relatively short history, they know the symbolic importance of the statue of liberty.

A few students had factual mistakes about the United States. One indicated the population of the US as 350 millions. Similarly, a couple of students thought that the country was divided into two parts as North America and South America, probably referring to the continent rather than the country. This may be so for two reasons: First, the name “United States of America” is used as “America” in Turkey. Second, many books and movies produced in US use a kind of jargon or local language by referring to southern states as “South” and northern states as “North”.

One fifth of the Turkish students thought that many of the movies and TV shows that they watch in Turkey are American productions. Similarly, they emphasized that most of celebrities or public figures in US come from the entertainment sector such as music and movie. It may be that the students see these people on TV or the movies frequently.

Finally, the Turkish students thought positively about the educational system in the United States. One in every six students expressed their positive thoughts about American schools. It is particularly important that these views were expressed before they watch the presentation that their peers prepared for them.

Under the “other” category the following comments were written by the Turkish students: The USA has a high rate of criminals, a bad justice system, big oil reserve, good hospitals, large shopping centers, gambling places, and a strong intelligence service; Americans wear shoes inside their houses. Two students pointed out that the Turkish movie; “The Valley of Wolves-Iraq” was a good answer to hostilities in Northern Iraq.

In general, the amount and variety of knowledge of the Turkish elementary students about the United States was profound. With this in mind, the same question regarding their initial knowledge/thoughts about Turkey was asked to the American students, and their responses were presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Initial knowledge of the American students about Turkey

Subject	Frequency
“I don’t know anything”	47
“I heard but don’t know where it is”	8
Turkey is in Europe	7
Turkey is related to the Middle East	4
Turkey is in Asia	3
Turkey is located between Europe and Asia	1
Turkey is in the northern hemisphere	1
Turkey is close to Armenia	1
Greece was part of Turkey in the past	1
St. Nicholas came from Turkey	1

Istanbul is the largest city of Turkey	1
It's a country	1
It's a small city	1
It is close to Cleveland	1
Turkey may have a lot of poultry (mainly Turkey)"	1
"I know a lot about Turkey"	1
"I haven't heard of it"	1

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

Approximately two thirds of the American students indicated that they didn't know anything about Turkey or its people and culture. About one in every ten students pointed out that they had heard about it but did not know where it was. Some students located Turkey in Europe, while some others located it in Asia or in the Middle East. In fact, they were right because Turkey belongs to both continents. Several students even named a few neighboring countries such as Armenia and Greece; the sources of this information were their ancestors who originally came from the mentioned countries.

It appears that the American students did not have much prior knowledge about Turkey, particularly compared with initial knowledge of the Turkish students about the US. Most of the things they mentioned were inaccurate. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that their social studies, thus far, makes little reference to Turkey or the Mediterranean countries and cultures, although these countries have rich cultures and are of significant importance in the global community.

### Information Sources of Initial Knowledge

Both groups of students were asked to write down from where they had learned their initial knowledge about the other country. Table 3 demonstrates the sources of information on the pre-survey for both the Turkish and the American students.

Table 3. Sources of information for students

Sources	Turkish	American	Total
Television	54	3	57
Parents	40	2	42
Newspapers	39	--	39
Internet	36	--	36
Teachers	35	--	35
Books	24	2	26
Friends	22	1	23
Magazines	22	--	22
Radio	13	--	13
Others	5	3	8

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

The frequencies were very low for the American students, and this made interpretations of total scores for each source of information meaningless. Comments based upon composite numbers would basically reflect the situation for the Turkish students. Therefore, findings in the table were interpreted separately for each group of students.



A great majority of the Turkish students (54 out of 64) indicated television as the main source of information. It was followed closely by parents, newspapers, Internet, and teachers. Among these, television can be considered the most biased means of mass communication, while newspapers and Internet might be more inclined to have a hidden agenda/bias. Approximately one third of the Turkish students indicated books, magazines, and friends as information sources. Radio was their last choice.

Few (11 out of 71) American students listed their sources of initial knowledge which was directly related to the fact that the majority of students did not know much about Turkey and so did not indicate a source of knowledge. Sources listed were TV news, parents, textbooks, friends and others.

### Learning Needs about the Other Culture

The pre-survey also asked the students what they wanted to learn from the students of their age about the other country. Table 4 shows their responses.

Table 4. Expressed learning needs about the other country

Subject	Turkish	American	Total
Activities for fun and recreation	52	54	106
Foods	44	54	98
Popular movies and TV programs	50	47	97
Sports	41	47	88
Popular literature	44	24	68
Geography, climate, and cultural regions	40	21	61
History of the country	32	28	60
Religions	38	20	58
Political system and institutions	17	23	40

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

The top-down rankings of the categories based on their frequencies were almost the same for both the Turkish and American students, with a few exceptions. Therefore, findings in the table were interpreted based on their row totals. However, when necessary, comparisons were made between the choices of the two groups.

The percentage breakdown for the categories included; leisure time activities, (80%), foods (73%), and popular movies as well as TV shows (72%). There was a difference between the Turkish and American students regarding their second and third choice. The American students rated foods as the second, and the Turkish students indicated movies and TV shows as their second preference.

The last three categories were history (44%), religions (43%), and politics (30%) of the other country. However, individual rankings of the last category were different for both groups; it was politics for the Turkish students and religion for the American students. It is interesting that the American students, at this point with very little prior knowledge of Turkey, often mistakenly confuse it with the Arab countries.

**Initial Comparisons of Similarities and Differences**

Based on their prior knowledge, the students were asked to compare the Turkish and American cultures from the point of similarities and differences. Table 5 demonstrates their comparisons of the two cultures on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 5. Initial comparisons of the Turkish and the American cultures

Comparison	Turkish	American	Total
Very different	11	6	17
Slightly different	18	11	29
Both similar and different	32	41	73
More similarities than differences	2	6	8
Very similar	1	1	2

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

Majority of students (56%) perceived that there were both similarities and differences among the two cultures. On the other hand, the percentage of the students emphasizing differences (36%) was higher than those emphasizing similarities (8%).

**Knowledge of the Other Country after the Presentation**

After watching and discussing the multimedia based presentations prepared by their peers in the other country, the students were asked to write down what they learned from the presentation. Table 6 presents the responses of the Turkish students.

Table 6. Knowledge of the Turkish students about the United States after the presentation

Subject	Frequency
American children don't want war	32
Americans eat fast food and their foods don't have much variety	26
Their school is large, beautiful, and well-equipped	25
Indians are the ancestors of Americans	15
American students know stories of their national symbols	15
Turkish and American cultures have some similarities	14
Students in the United States read novel and story books for leisure	12
American students learn mathematics through games	10
Most common sports are American football and basketball	10
"My thoughts haven't been changed"	10
Anglo Americans have killed many Indians	9
They have similar courses and activities in the school	9
Americans kill innocent people for their own interests	8
Many Americans (including students) aren't telling the truth	8
Like other nations, Americans are proud of their heroes	8
Students in the US schools don't like homework	8
The US government invades other countries by force	7
Americans have different religious beliefs	6
Americans celebrate different holidays and special days	6
Children in US watch popular movies	6

The US people have to solve the Bush problem	5
American children aren't interested in other cultures	4
Structure of the government is different in USA (state system)	4
It's interesting that they saved the slaves in the past	3
Appearance and dressing of American students are more relaxed	3
The US is a high-tech society	3
The USA is a beautiful country	2

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

Half of the Turkish students were surprised that the American students were against war because they thought that all Americans supported military operations of their government in other countries. The feelings of the Turkish students were mixed: Some thought that their peers were not telling the truth, some indicated that "children are the same all over the world", some expressed their sympathy toward such peaceful attitudes, and some questioned it by asking "why don't American citizens stop their government then?"

The second most important information (more than one third of the Turkish students) learned from the presentation was the limited variety of popular foods, mainly fast food. This is what they predicted in the pre-survey and it was substantiated in the PowerPoint as fast foods (pizza, chicken nuggets, and hamburger). Many Turkish students pointed out that fast-food is not healthy and particularly children should not eat it. Considering the great variety of the traditional Turkish food that they are familiar with, the Turkish students found the typical American food nutritionally very poor.

More than one third of the Turkish students were impressed when they saw the pictures of the American school. The campus was larger, better-designed, more beautiful, and better equipped than a public or a private school campus in Turkey, presenting more chances for participation in activities.

Another interesting piece of information that the Turkish students learned from their American peers was about Indians. Approximately one fourth of them wrote something about Native Americans. Beforehand they misinterpreted "native Americans" as "ancestors of Americans." Having learned about the wars and conflicts between Indians and European settlers throughout the US history, the current and positive portrayal of Indians by Anglo-American students was surprising for many Turkish students. In fact, some of them re-emphasized wars between Indians and white people in the past but now see the respect shown for these "First Americans".

The Turkish students often compared their educational experiences with that of Americans. For example, they liked the idea of learning mathematics through games and reading novels and stories for leisure time. They were able to understand why American students did not like assignments and developed empathy for them. Similarly, one fourth of the Turkish students enjoyed learning about stories of American national symbols such as federal flag and the statue of liberty. They also learned that the most popular sports were football and basketball. However, they questioned Americans calling football "soccer" when the world calls it football and that this was unfair and disrespectful for the rest of the world.

About one fourth of the Turkish students mentioned similarities between the Turkish and American cultures. However, they were able to understand and appreciate that each nation celebrates different holidays and special events. They also indicated that like all other nations

Americans were proud of their heroes and honor them in every possible occasion. The fact that many American students honored "Black Americans" was in direct conflict with the initial thoughts of the Turkish students that Americans were prejudiced against black people.

Turkish students were still critical of the US government policies. One out of eight Turkish students mentioned their disappointment in the American people for supporting their government in some of their global policies and distorting the truth for their interests.

The Turkish students mentioned facts about the US which they gained from the PowerPoint such as; a majority of people being Christians, and the government being composed of federal and state bodies, and the US is a beautiful and technologically-advanced country. In addition to their personal evaluations of the country and its culture, the Turkish students perceived a typical American as more comfortable and relaxed than a typical Turkish person.

Table 7 demonstrates what new information the American students have obtained from the presentation that their peers in Turkey prepared.

American students learned many things about Turkey and its culture and went from having no prior knowledge of the country to having a great respect for the country and its culture. Approximately two thirds of the American students stated that the Turkish people attend popular sports such as football, basketball, and volleyball. They also pointed out that the Turkish people celebrate both national and religious holidays, in addition to special days that are the same in the western world. The American students were particularly surprised and impressed when they learned that Turkey is the only country in the world celebrating a children's day with participation of children coming from other countries.

American students were impressed with the great variety of the Turkish foods and wealth of numerous ancient places in Turkey. They learned that almost every province in Turkey has been the capital of some kind of ancient civilization. Therefore, Eskisehir, where the Turkish students participating in the study were located, was an industrialized province with an ancient heritage. They mentioned that Turkey is at the junction of Europe and Asia but acknowledged the rich traditions and resources that this location could bring to Turkey. One fourth of the American students acknowledged that Turkey would be an interesting place to visit. They also expressed their desire to visit Turkey in the future.

The factual information about Turkey that the American students found interesting and informative included; geography and climate of the country, important cities, Ataturk (founder of the republic) whom they compared to George Washington, the Turkish language, and the democratic and secular nature of the state, even though a great majority of people believe in Islam.

After learning Turkey's total population and the percentage of young people, one in every six American students, thought that the Turkish schools must be crowded. However, they learned that this particular school was a private school and each class could not exceed 18 students according to legal regulations. One third of the American students were surprised to learn that Turkish schools are co-ed and have similar curricula with the western world. They interpreted this as Turkey giving a high priority and importance to education.

A few American students couldn't understand why the Turkish students wear school uniforms. Similarly, they raised questions about why the Turkish students sang their national anthem

twice a week, at the beginning and the end of each school week although the American students start each of their school assemblies with the “Pledge of Allegiance” to the American flag. Americans were also able to empathize with their Turkish counterparts when they learned that they were tired of exams and assignments.

Table 7. Knowledge of the American students about Turkey after the presentation

Subject	Frequency
Most popular sports are football, basketball and volleyball	46
Turks celebrate both national and religious holidays	30
Turkish people are very proud of their history and national heroes	27
Eskisehir is an industrialized province with great heritage	24
Turkish students go to western-type coed schools	24
Turkish children don't miss popular movies and TV shows	22
Turkey has a large variety of ancient places	22
Turkey is at the junction of Europe and Asia	20
Turkish people like arts, music, and literature	18
Turkey is a peaceful and interesting place to visit	17
Turkish students take similar courses with American students	17
Population of Turkey is about 70 million	15
Turkish foods have a good variety and taste	15
Turkish students attend many extra-curricular activities	15
Turkey is modern, democratic, and secular country	13
Turkey and the US have many similarities	13
Turkish population are relatively young so that schools are crowded	12
Turkey is the only country celebrating a children's day	12
Turkey is a rapidly developing country with rich resources	12
Majority of Turkish children listen to western-type music	11
Turkish students take compulsory ESL courses in the school	11
A big majority of Turkish people are Muslims	9
"This project was very useful to learn about another culture"	9
Ataturk is the founder and the first president of Turkey	8
Elementary education is compulsory and free in Turkey	7
Turkish students sing the national anthem twice a week	7
Different regions of Turkey have different climates	7
Turkey gives priority to education and technology	6
Turkish schools participate in many fairs, festivals, and tournaments	6
Turkish students dream of a peaceful, green, and happy world	5
Ankara is the capital and Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey	5
Students in Turkey wear school uniforms	4
Turkish is the language spoken in Turkey	4
Turkish students are tired of exams and homework	4

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

Finally, the American students were happy to learn that Turkish students dreamed of a peaceful, green, safe, and enjoyable world for everyone. They also noted that the Turkish students often attend fairs, festivals, and tournaments to exhibit their talents. As a last remark, one third of the American students enjoyed learning that the Turkish children do not miss the popular movies, music, and literary books they enjoy.

### Domains of New Learning

Both groups of students were asked in which areas they learned most from the presentations. For this purpose, the students were presented a tentative list of the possible topics and they were allowed to indicate multiple categories. Table 8 demonstrates their responses.

Table 8. Areas of new information learned from the presentations

Subject	Turkish	American	Total
Activities for fun and recreation	54	61	115
Foods	52	61	113
History of the country	51	60	111
Sports	50	59	109
Popular movies and TV programs	52	55	107
Popular literature	47	50	97
Religions	44	47	91
Geography, climate, and cultural regions	33	55	88
Politics	23	55	78

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

They mentioned almost all areas, and the frequencies of the areas were relatively close to each other. The highest ranking area was leisure time activities for children (85%), and the lowest ranking area was politics of the country (65%). With the exception of the category of religion for the American students, all the top-down rankings of the categories were the same for both groups.

Although the students were initially critical or not knowledgeable enough about the other country, they showed interest almost in all areas of information and a desire to become more knowledgeable about the other country and its culture. Based on this fact, the students were asked again how similar or different were the two cultures and the findings are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Post-survey comparisons of the two cultures

Comparison	Turkish	American	Total
Very different	1	3	4
Slightly different	7	16	23
Both similar and different	26	37	63
More similarities than differences	19	12	31
Very similar	2	2	4

\* Note that the values in the table show frequencies not percentages.

There seems to be a change between pre-survey perceptions and post-survey perceptions of the two cultures by the students. Based on total scores, approximately half of the students thought that the Turkish and American cultures have both similarities and differences which were consistent with their initial comparisons. However, majority of the remaining students indicated more similarities (28%) than differences (22%) in their post comparisons. This finding runs contrary to initial comparisons of the students where they claimed more differences than similarities between the two cultures.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated whether elementary students in the United States and Turkey could use a simple and undemanding technology such as PowerPoint as a means of communication to represent their cultural identities. The students exchanged their relatively multimedia-based presentations for cross-cultural learning. They selected, structured, and integrated textual, auditory, and visual materials with the understanding of multimedia design. Moreover, the students watched and discussed the materials about the other culture with their classmates. In this sense, they were both producers and consumers of the multimedia-based presentations using the PowerPoint as the main design tool along with some others.

It appears that both the American and the Turkish elementary students can successfully use the PowerPoint to represent their cultural identities and express their views. They can even accommodate intercultural learning needs of their counterparts through this technology. They act sensitively to needs of their counterparts both in selecting and designing the content. An undemanding technology such as PowerPoint provides unique opportunities in this regard because it is easy to prepare, change, and update information within the reach of elementary students.

The students participating in this study were not initially very knowledgeable about the culture of their counterparts. Although the Turkish students had considerable information about the United States, the American students knew almost nothing about Turkey. Based on their initial perceptions coming mostly from media and family, both groups thought that there were considerable similarities and differences between the two cultures; however, they thought that differences were more visible than similarities. It is important to note that this pattern stayed almost unchanged after studying the presentation about the other culture but the students expressed more understanding, respect, and empathy for differences.

Although it is relatively true for all ages, young people generally live experiences very intensely and are open to all kinds of changes. Thus, they are frequently considered the first losers and the first winners. Compared to adults, young people are more open to intercultural learning processes, to get in touch with each other easily and discover/explore diversity. This is because they are eager to learn new things and have little accumulation of misconceptions about others. Unfortunately, most of the education young people receive in schools and families favors simple answers and provides ready concepts. Media also work with simplifications and deepen stereotypes and prejudices about others. Youth finds fewer reference points in this regard; life experiences and the perception of reality are more fragmented. Society gives young people few examples and leaves them few spaces to express and encourage diversity, particularly in public schools and their curricula. What they need are firsthand, truthful, and independent sources of information about other cultures (Council of Europe & European Commission, 2000). In this study, the students were able to act in this role and provide their counterparts with direct and true information to accommodate their intercultural learning needs by using a simple communication technology such as PowerPoint.

Research has proven that people learn best through their own experiences that involve cognition, affection, and action. The results of this study support this theory because both the American and the Turkish students actively involved in learning from others and helping others learn. There was no evidence of overt ethnocentrism (meaning perceiving one's own culture

superior while demeaning the others) in their exchange of messages. There was also very little categorization behavior (Bennett, 1993).

The students participating in this study wanted to know most about recreational activities, foods, popular movies, and sports in the other country and requested information consistent with these lines. They provided necessary information with many pictures, videos, and textual explanations. It appears that they did not exaggerate anything. However, both the American and the Turkish students were highly surprised when they observed a large number of similarities in these areas between the two cultures. The similarity-shock was particularly visible in popular movies, TV programs, and sports. It seems that globalization is successful in homogenizing different cultures in certain areas, whether they can even be the cultures of geographically far away countries.

Cultural interaction is an inherently social process between people with different cultural identities. While culture may be largely unconscious, it becomes more salient when interacting with someone of another culture who is then categorized as a member of an “outgroup” (Prentice & Miller, 1999). Such cross-cultural contact can exacerbate ingroup-outgroup biases and lead to social goals like the desire to be seen as distinct from and positively compared to the outgroup. These motives can be detrimental to learning about a new culture (Ogan, Kim, Alevin, & Jones, 2009). However, this tendency was not observed in the present study because students in both groups showed interest in similarities as well as differences between their respective cultures.

Since assessment of intercultural competence is not a trivial task, a test-like measurement tool was not used in this study. Instead, students were asked to report what they have learned from this intercultural experience. Also, prior to and after the intervention perceptions were compared based on their open-ended responses. The study also did not dictate explicit presentation of social goals with the understanding that they might be harmful to intercultural learning as reported by Ogan, Kim, Alevin, and Jones (2009). The approach employed in this study provided the students with more freedom in terms of the content, delivery medium, and assessment. It is clear that both the American and the Turkish students benefitted from this flexibility. Of course, selecting a simple and easily available technology such as PowerPoint was a big part of this approach.

There have been cross cultural studies using technology in the area of intercultural learning. However, most of them were personally expensive, institutionally available, and professionally designed technologies. To our best knowledge, none of them used student-selected images inserted in the PowerPoint as a basis for communication of the culture. Other cross cultural studies are directed towards solving a problem, pen-pal communication, innovative use of digital technologies, cross-cultural collaborative learning, telecommunication which provides instant feedback but does not allow for thoughtful reflection while the students are engaged (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006; CultureQuest, 2008; ESPA, 2007; O’Brien & Eriksson, 2010). We have reported that students acquire most of their knowledge about other countries or cultures from the media and from parents, very little comes from peers. The results of the present study suggest that peers in other countries can be a useful and reliable source of information about their cultures by exchanging messages through simple technologies such as PowerPoint. This also avoids media bias for themselves or their parents in the accuracy of information. The study of Turkey and the United States is not a part of either country’s formal curriculum at this age yet it is interesting to see all of the misconceptions and inaccurate information that results when the only means of information is media.



The significance of the present study lies in its ability to be replicated easily since it does not require participating schools to have access to video conferencing or students to be using the Internet for communication. The project enables students to put thoughtful reflection into what they will use to portray their country's culture. This makes it suitable for younger children who are more likely to be influenced by media images since their formal education has not covered world cultures in depth (Belet & Eristi, 2009). Although the present study was done with the Turkish students in Eskisehir and the American students in Michigan, it is planned to be replicated with elementary students from Argentina, Greece, and Nigeria in the near future to make further comparisons.

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