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To cite this article: Esim Gürsoy & Leyla Deniz Ertaşoğlu (2019) Syrian refugees' perception of barriers and bridges towards integration into Turkish society, Language, Culture and Curriculum, 32:2, 128-141, DOI: [10.1080/07908318.2018.1542000](https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1542000)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1542000>



Published online: 04 Nov 2018.



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Syrian refugees' perception of barriers and bridges towards integration into Turkish society

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ABSTRACT

Population displacements have occurred in tremendous amounts in the last few decades due to the collapse in civil order of the neighbouring countries of Turkey. This situation not only created a need for researchers to deal with the social, psychological and economical aspects of this forced mobility, but also with the acculturation process of the refugees who left their home owing to serious human rights violations. Because they do not occupy a great space in the policy agendas, they are an 'invisible' group. This poses a major problem that there are no specific theories regarding the second language acquisition process of refugees, because they are considered together with all immigrants although their experiences distinguish them from other groups. Thus, feeling the need to be the voice of this unvoiced group with their SLA experiences and witnessing the swiftly changing dynamics in the world, the Middle East in particular, and its impact on the sociocultural context, this paper concentrates on the perceptions of Syrian refugees about the L2 (Turkish) and the target language group (Turkish people).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 July 2017
Accepted 23 October 2018

KEYWORDS

Acculturation; cultural adaptation; immigrant learners; SLA; Syrian refugees

Introduction

Refugees are the people fleeing their homeland owing to serious human rights violations and seeking safe harbours by crossing their borders (Allen, Aina, & Hauff, 2006). The collapse in civil order of the neighbouring countries has resulted in a tremendous population displacements in the last few decades. The significant refugee crisis after the events of 2011 in Syria represents a turning point in the world, and Turkey in particular. Beginning with the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011, the Syrian exodus has resulted in millions of people leaving their homes in need of asylum. The recent figures of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016) report that there are 4,796,896 registered Syrian refugees, and 2,753,696 of them are registered in Turkey. As stated in Geneva Convention of 1951, the status of refugee is acknowledged by the United Nations and involves certain legal and social rights for those who have left their homes for serious reasons, such as natural disaster, war, or genocide. However, not all Syrians leaving their homes have the status of refugee; rather, they are defined as 'asylum-seekers'. An asylum seeker, as Lynch and Cuninghame (2000) define, refers to somebody who has crossed an international

border in pursuit of a safe harbour. Even though the reason behind this forced migration is the same, the only difference between these two groups is the rights given to them. Therefore, for practical purposes, all participants in this study will be referred to as refugees, ignoring their legal status in Turkey.

Upon moving to Turkey as a haven, the challenges faced by refugees become further complicated by the serious demand of adjustment to the new country (Kinzie & Jaranson, 2001). Therefore, a great number of Syrian refugees try to attach themselves to the society they live in by starting with the acquisition of the host society's language, which is Turkish in the current study. Once refugees settle down in a new country, adapting to their new life requires them to learn the language they are exposed to. As Munthe (2011) suggests, although the language itself is not a prerequisite to start a new life, the success they show in acquiring it, is one measure of the extent to which they are adapted to their new environment.

All these changing dynamics due to the Syrian exodus have altered the way Turkish is considered and has attracted researchers' attention. Therefore, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the study of Turkish as a foreign/second language. One line of research has focused on the perceptions of refugees (Akkaya, 2013; Arslan, 2011; Şeker & Boysan, 2013) and the Turkish teachers' experiences in teaching Turkish as a foreign language (Gün, 2015; Mert, Gündoğdu, & Albayrak, 2013). Another line of research concentrated upon the challenges met in the process of teaching Turkish to foreigners (Subaşı, 2010; Şengül, 2014). Nevertheless, the number of studies conducted is limited to study Turkish as SLA in relation to refugee experiences. To the researchers' knowledge, no study has particularly handled the Syrian refugees' attitudes towards Turkish as a second language and Turkish culture and how their attitudes and adaptation are inter-related. First, because refugees are considered alongside immigrants/migrants even though their situations are totally different, the reason behind their move is often ignored. Second, all refugees are grouped under the same category regardless of the variables, such as their race, ethnicity, background, gender, and age. Third, the invisibility of refugees in national educational policy agendas leads to ignorance in the literature, as many researchers tend to focus merely on English as the second language (Burns & Roberts, 2010). Due to the abovementioned gap in the literature, the present study has significance for the field as it aims to identify the attitudes of Syrian refugees towards Turkish culture and Turkish as a second language and to investigate how attitudes, employment, and gender impact on the adaptation levels of refugees. Considering the inadequacy of the national response to grapple with the acculturation process, this study may have implications for the policy makers to fulfil the pressing needs that arise from the current realities of refugee experiences highlighted by this research. It is informative in that it presents statistical data for a healthier integration process through educational and employment-oriented programmes for the Syrian refugees by the authorities. Furthermore, the research exemplifies the study of SLA in a non-English context, which may inform researchers from other countries having a similar refugee concern. This study is also significant for breaking a stereotype that SLA studies should focus on English as a second language whereas there are myriads of people from diverse backgrounds leaving their homes for various reasons with many SLA experiences in several languages of non-English contexts. The scarcity of data in those contexts brings to the fore that the policy makers may benefit from the insights into and the perceptions

of the target population to their cultural and linguistic adaptation to the host country for a more effective integration.

Literature review

Agency is a significant consideration in issues concerning SLA because it influences the way we see the acquisition process through learners' experiences and perceptions. In a broader sense, 'human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our little attention' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 5). In addition, motivation is acknowledged to be significant for second language learning (Hatoss, 2013), yet the motivation of refugees to learn languages has caught little attention of researchers. Although motivation is a rather complex phenomenon with myriads of definitions and theories attempting to explain it, this study draws on Gardner's (1985) distinction of orientation in the light of the socio-educational model. Gardner and Lambert (1959) point out that the model proposes two classes of attitudes – integrative and instrumentally motivated attitudes. Whereas, integrativeness refers to the need for an attachment and willingness to identify with the dominant group, instrumentally motivated attitudes refer to a desire to obtain social recognition and meet some utilitarian goals through the language. In Gardner's theory of motivation, integrativeness is taken as an orientation that helps formulating goal-directed behaviour. Accordingly, integrative goals point out a strong personal quality (Dörnyei, 1998). Integrativeness, as one of the main constituents of integrative motivation, consists of 'integrative orientation, interest in the foreign languages, and attitudes toward the L2 community' (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 68). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) explain this last feature as the willingness of individuals to interact with other groups. It is also reflected in Clement's (1980) concept of linguistic self-confidence. Accordingly, in social environments that members of different languages live together, the amount and quality of contact between these groups pave the way for willingness to be engaged in intercultural communication. Moreover, such contact determines the degree of identification with the L2 group (Dörnyei, 1998).

Although the research is concentrated on two main types of orientation, it does not assume that learners have either of them. On the contrary, they may have both integrative and instrumental motivation at the same time because motivation is dynamic that can change instantly depending on the learning context or task (Ellis, 1997). While motivation is influential in SLA by orientating individuals to find out opportunities to learn the language, according to Masgoret and Gardner (2003) orientations do not necessarily signify motivation, for the connection between learning and motivation is not so obvious and linear (Elmeroth, 2010).

SLA plays a crucial role for refugees and it is 'the key to successful integration into the social fabric of the broader society' (Hatoss, 2013, p. 40). In addition to their attempts of acquiring the host society's language, another challenge that refugees face is settling in a new society and orienting themselves in an unknown territory (Anderson, 2004). Building social networks, making friends, having a sense of belonging to the host society, and meeting daily needs are among the tasks that facilitate the integration of the refugees into their unfamiliar environment. When all these changes arise upon 'the contact' between individuals of different cultures, it brings about another phenomenon called

'acculturation' (Sam, 2006) that deserves attention to shed light on refugee experiences and SLA. Among a number of suggested definitions, the following is considered as the most accurate: 'acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups' (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Nonetheless, it is sometimes wrongly interpreted and used interchangeably with *assimilation*. At this point, it is noteworthy to state that acculturation is to be differentiated from assimilation as it can be a stage of acculturation. Assimilation requires an individual's complete loss of identity and ethnic background by melting in the dominant culture and it is usually regarded as a result of acculturation (Weinstock, 1969).

Acculturation refers to a gradual process of cultural and psychological adjustment with psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Berry, 2006) because after a certain period of exposure to acculturation, most individuals – to a large extent unconsciously – experience some adaptation to the new cultural context. While the psychological outcomes refer to overall satisfaction and mental well-being of groups' (Lindert, Korzilius, Vijver, Kroon, & Toth, 2008) with 'a clear sense of personal and cultural identity' (Berry & Sam, 1996, p. 299), the latter involves their participation in the mainstream group successfully (Lindert et al., 2008) including the competence to handle daily problems especially at work, school, etc. Although two major outcomes of acculturation are concentrated upon in this research, there is a vast array of adaptation forms depending on the variety of factors in the acculturation process.

It is important to underline the interdependency between SLA and sociocultural adjustment (Kleinmann, 1984). The acculturation model hypothesises that the degree to which a learner acculturates to the L2 target group and the degree of second language acquisition are closely related (Popescu, 2008). As van Tubergen's (2010) study on the L2 proficiency of refugees from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and former Yugoslavia in the Netherlands suggests, the extent of exposure to L2 and the effectiveness with which people learn a new language are among the major determinants affecting second language proficiency. Therefore, the social gap between the individual and the host society cannot be ignored in the SLA.

How broad this social gap is of great concern for the integration of refugees to the host society. Based on the issue of integration, the refugees' orientations towards the target language and the host culture are regarded to be the key factors. The variety of orientations brings to the fore that there are some determinants of how attitudes vary, which can be listed as gender, occupations and/or employment, age groups, and the length of stay. As Kartal and Başçı (2014) argue, although the social profiles of refugees differ depending on the countries they are coming from, gender is of great importance as one of the factors shaping the refugee experiences. Their study on refugee groups from various countries, such as Somali, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, in Turkey illustrates that migration seems to have more adverse effects on women compared to men due to several socioeconomic factors, including their education level, gender roles, and difficulties in finding a job. Thus, it is noteworthy to focus on the orientations of Syrian refugees to their new environment by taking the aforementioned factors into account.

Methodology

The present study was conducted with adult Syrian refugees in Bursa, Turkey. By taking Gardner's concept of 'integrativeness' (Dörnyei, 2005) as the standing point of the research, the study aimed to see Syrian refugees' integrative orientation, their interest in learning Turkish and their attitudes toward the Turkish community as an indication of their willingness to interact with the host group. A quantitative approach was used in order to arrive at answers of the following research questions:

(1) What is the Syrian refugees' integrative orientation towards Turkish society and culture?
Are there any differences between;

- (a) genders,
- (b) age groups,
- (c) occupations and/or employment and
- (d) their length of stay in terms of their **integrative orientation**?

(2) Are the Syrian refugees interested in learning Turkish?

Are there any differences between;

- (a) genders
- (b) age groups,
- (c) occupations and/or employment and
- (d) their length of stay in terms of their **willingness to learn Turkish**?

(3) What are the Syrian refugees' attitudes toward Turkish community in terms of their willingness and interest in social interaction?

Are there any differences between;

- (a) genders,
- (b) age groups,
- (c) occupations and/or employment and
- (d) their length of stay in terms of their **willingness and interest in social interaction**?

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of randomly selected 170 adult Syrian refugees (92 female and 78 male) living in Bursa, Turkey and enrolled in a language course organised by a non-governmental organisation. All were native speakers of Arabic and their ages ranged from 18 to 69 years. The participants were grouped under four categories as follows: 18–25 aged (24.7%), 26–40 aged (49.4%), 41–55 aged (21.2%), and 56 and above (4.7%). The residence time of participants in Turkey varies, which required grouping for accurate observation. In the light of the data gathered, 4.1% of them were in Turkey for 0–6 months, 19.4% for 7–12 months, 39.4% for 13–24 months, 27.6% for 25–36 months, and 9.4% for 37 months and above. Of all the participants involved in the study, only 44.7% were employed and 55.3% were unemployed.

Data collection

For the study, quantitative data were collected via a Likert type instrument. The data collection was completed in the fall term in 2016.

Instruments

In order to evaluate participants' integrativeness, a questionnaire, consisting of 25 items, was used to collect data (see Appendix A). Prepared both in English (as some of the participants were fluent in English) and Arabic, the instrument was developed as a result of extensive literature review and by partly adapting from a survey developed by Arslan (2011). It was then revised upon expert opinions according to Gardner's concept of 'integrativeness' within his theory of motivation (Dörnyei, 1998). According to Lawshe technique (1975), five experts were given the questionnaire to rate each item as 'essential', 'useful but not essential', or 'not essential'. Content validity ratio (CVR) of the items in the instrument was found to be 0.99.

The instrument has two parts. While the first part collects the demographic information of participants, such as age, gender, job, and length of stay in Turkey, the second part consists of 25 questions aimed to identify participants' integrative orientation (Q5, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q20, Q22, Q23), their interest in learning Turkish (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q10, Q12, Q13) and their attitudes toward the Turkish community as an indication of their willingness to interact with the host group (Q8, Q9, Q11, Q21, Q24, Q25).

In terms of piloting, the survey was conducted with 26 randomly selected participants who did not participate in the main study. The collected data were analysed by using SPSS and the Alpha value for reliability was .70. Following the piloting, some changes were made for face validity and user-friendliness besides adding two extra questions collecting demographic information. With all these changes and more participants, the Alpha value for reliability was calculated to be .84 in the main study.

Data analysis

Due to a limited number of participants in the institution and because of the fact that the language institution was closed shortly after the initial data collection process, the researchers did not have a chance to check the survey for construct validity via a factor analytic study and apply it again to a similar group afterwards. Thus the instrument was used as a survey rather than a scale and the data analysis was done accordingly.

For the data analysis, SPSS software programme was used. In addition to descriptive statistics for dual and multiple comparisons, non-parametric tests, Mann-Whitney *U* and Kruskal-Wallis were used.

Results

This study sought to investigate the orientations of Syrian refugees to Turkish culture and society as the host culture along with their interest in learning Turkish as a second language and their attitudes towards the Turkish community in terms of their willingness and interest in social interaction.

The first research question is aimed to investigate the Syrian refugees' integrative orientation towards Turkish society and culture as the host environment (Table 1) along with the possible significant differences among the independent groups including gender, employment, occupations, length of stay, and age groups.

As a possible answer to the first question, for the questionnaire items related to refugees' perceptions of Turkish culture and society (Q5, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q20, Q22, Q23), non-parametric tests (Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis) are conducted and differences among the groups are calculated.

According to the results of the SPSS analysis, there are significant gender-based differences in several items (Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17). Accordingly, male participants are more advantageous regarding their integrative orientation. Females seem to feel more isolated in Turkish society [(reversed item) males mean rank: 94.02, females: 78.28] and have more difficulty fitting in the new culture [(reversed item) males mean rank: 97.23, females: 75.55]. Males indicate that they have less difficulty in doing their own shopping (males mean rank: 96.92, females: 75.82) and/or going to the hospital on their own (males mean rank: 100.40, females: 72.86).

In terms of age, the results indicate significant differences in two items (Q5, Q18). The youngest age group (18–25) seems to feel that knowing Turkish is necessary when compared to other age groups [(18–25 aged) mean rank: 92.93, (26–40 aged) mean rank: 83.82, (41–55 aged) mean rank: 87.19, (56 + aged) mean rank: 56.50]. Moreover, the younger group states that they enjoy listening to Turkish songs more than the other groups. It seems that there is a decline in their interest as the age groups of the participants increase [(18–25 aged) mean rank: 97.26, (26–40 aged) mean rank: 88.90, (41–55 aged) mean rank: 70.60, (56 + aged) mean rank: 55.13].

Participants' employment has an important effect on their integrative orientation. There are statistically significant differences in six of the items (Q5, Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q23). The employed seem to have positive orientations in their ideas, such as considering Turkish necessary for doing shopping, going to the hospital on their own, enjoying Turkish songs, following the Turkish written media although they state that they came to Turkey because they had no other choice.

Considering the participants' length of stay, there are significant differences in two of the items (Q14, Q23). The results show that those who have been in Turkey for 7–12 months feel isolated most in a Turkish-speaking society [(0–6 months) mean rank: 92.79, (7–12 months) mean rank: 106.80, (13–24 months) mean rank: 79.98, (25–36 months)

Table 1. Syrian refugees' integrative orientations towards Turkish society and culture ($N = 170$).

How refugees feel about Turkish society and culture	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Questionnaire items		
Learning Turkish is necessary for me.	4.84	0.36
I feel isolated in a Turkish-speaking society. (R)	2.83	1.24
I have difficulty fitting in this new culture. (R)	3.33	1.13
I can do shopping on my own.	4.08	0.89
I can go to the hospital on my own.	3.12	1.25
I enjoy listening to Turkish songs.	3.52	1.22
I follow the Turkish newspapers or magazines.	2.63	1.05
I watch Turkish TV channels.	3.37	1.13
I live temporarily in Turkey. (R)	3.17	1.25
I came to Turkey because I had no other choice. (R)	2.54	1.37

mean rank: 72.72 (37+ months) mean rank: 99.03). Moreover, the frequencies, stating that they came to Turkey because they had no other choice, are affected by their length of stay. Accordingly, those who have been in Turkey relatively for a shorter period have the feeling of Turkey as their only choice [(0–6 months) mean rank: 127.43, (7–12 months) mean rank: 104.20, (13–24 months) mean rank: 83.44, (25–36 months) mean rank: 64.38 (37+ months) mean rank: 99.25].

The second research question aims to investigate the Syrian refugees' interest in learning Turkish (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q10, Q12, Q13) (Table 2) and answer if the independent variables, such as gender, age, length of stay, employment, and occupations impact on this interest. The answers to the questionnaire items indicate that the participants have positive perceptions regarding learning Turkish.

According to non-parametric test results, participants' avoidance of speaking Turkish and acceptance of Turkish as an easy language to learn is affected by the gender variable. Female participants avoid speaking Turkish more than male participants do [(reversed item) males mean rank: 93.78, females: 78.48] with a male dominance of the consideration of Turkish as an easy language to learn (males mean rank: 94.32, females: 78.02).

Age seems to be an important factor in participants' efforts of trying to understand what is spoken while others speak in Turkish. Whereas the youngest participants (18–25 aged mean rank: 90.40) show more effort, the oldest participants (56+ aged mean rank: 48.50) seem not to have that strong urge to try to understand what is spoken while others speak in Turkish.

While the jobs the participants perform in Turkey do not have an impact on their willingness to learn Turkish, their employment does in one item (Q2). The results show that the employed are less bored while others speak in Turkish [(reversed item) the employed mean rank: 94.45, the unemployed mean rank: 78.27].

The participants' length of stay in Turkey is seen to be affecting their willingness to speak it (Q1) [(0–6 months) mean rank: 60.57, (7–12 months) mean rank: 89.27, (13–24 months) mean rank: 90.66, (25–36 months) mean rank: 82.53 (37+ months) mean rank: 75.75].

The third research question aims to investigate if their perception of Turkish society in terms of their willingness and interest in social interaction is parallel to their positive attitudes to Turkish (Q8, Q9, Q11, Q21, Q24, Q25) (Table 3). In the light of the results, some significant gender-based differences were seen in three items (Q8, Q21, Q24). Male participants want to know more about the Turkish culture (males mean rank: 93.18, females: 78.99) with a greater belief that they can use Turkish in various fields in their lives

Table 2. Syrian refugees' interest in learning Turkish ($N = 170$).

How refugees feel about Turkish	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Questionnaire items		
I want to speak Turkish.	4.86	0.34
I usually get bored while others speak in Turkish. (R)	3.37	1.16
I try to understand what is spoken while others speak in Turkish.	4.56	0.66
I avoid speaking Turkish. (R)	4.17	0.87
Turkish is a language that is easy to learn.	3.55	0.99
I want to spend more time to improve my Turkish.	4.55	0.56
I think trying to learn Turkish is a waste of time for me. (R)	4.67	0.58
I believe that Turkish courses are important for me to learn Turkish.	4.72	0.55
I find learning Turkish enjoyable.	4.37	0.73

(males mean rank: 94.97, females: 77.47). Furthermore, the results display that female participants report lower scores than male participants for communicating with Turkish people in Turkish (males mean rank: 96.65, females: 76.05).

In terms of communicating with Turkish people in Turkish in social life, age groups significantly differ from each other. The youngest group scores higher than older participants at communicating with the host society considering the consecutive decline in the age groups [(18–25 aged) mean rank: 102.48, (26–40 aged) mean rank: 84.29, (41–55 aged) mean rank: 78.53, (56 + aged) mean rank: 40.50].

As to the participants' occupations, there are significant differences in three items (Q8, Q9, Q21). Whereas the white-collar employees report more frequently that they could use Turkish in various fields in their life (unemployed mean rank: 82.52, housewife mean rank: 70.59, blue-collar mean rank: 99.71, white-collar mean rank: 101.19); and that knowing Turkish would give them an opportunity to find a job (unemployed mean rank: 81.00, housewife mean rank: 75.88, blue-collar mean rank: 95.07, white-collar mean rank: 96.68), the blue-collar employees score higher than the other groups in communicating with Turkish people in Turkish (unemployed mean rank: 74.27, housewife mean rank: 75.08, blue-collar mean rank: 100.47, white-collar mean rank: 96.95). Likewise, the participants' employment reports some significant differences in the same items showing the employed as the more advantageous group. Moreover, the participants' employment reports significant differences in two more items (Q24, Q25). The results display that the employed want to know more about the Turkish culture (the employed mean rank: 93.45, the unemployed mean rank: 79.07) and have greater willingness to be more fluent in Turkish as they get to know the Turkish people (the employed mean rank: 93.26, the unemployed mean rank: 79.22).

With regard to the participants' length of stay in Turkey as a variable in their willingness and interest in a social interaction with the host society, statistically significant differences are calculated in one item (Q9). [(0–6 months) mean rank: 71.43, (7–12 months) mean rank: 89.52, (13–24 months) mean rank: 95.06, (25–36 months) mean rank: 72.77 (37+ months) mean rank: 80.75].

Discussion

In the light of the results reported above, it can be suggested that there are some gender-based differences in Syrian refugees' integrative orientations. Considering the results of some items, male participants seem to be more advantageous than females. They feel less isolated and more fitted in the new society in addition to their statements that they have less difficulty in doing shopping and going to the hospital on their own.

Table 3. Syrian refugees' attitudes to Turkish community ($N = 170$).

How willing/interested refugees are for social interaction	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Questionnaire items		
I believe that I can use Turkish in various fields in my life.	4.47	0.63
I think knowing Turkish will give me an opportunity to find a job.	4.56	0.72
I try to find friends whom I can speak Turkish with.	4.42	0.60
In social life I can communicate with Turkish people in Turkish.	3.44	1.08
I would like to know more about Turkish culture.	4.47	0.70
The more I get to know the Turkish people, the more I want to be fluent in Turkish.	4.57	0.63

Participants' employment may be one of the reasons behind these significant differences between the genders in terms of their integrative orientations. 55.3% (94 out of 170) of the participants are unemployed and 72 of them are women. The results show that the employed have more positive orientations to the related items. Coming from Arabic culture low employment rate in women might be attributed to the patriarchal nature of Syrian families. In comparison to other countries, the Arab world has the lowest female participation rates in labour force (Sidani, 2018). In the same vein, as noted by Sidani (2018), Human Development Report of 2016 by United Nations Development Programme displays that male labour force participation rate is 70.8% whereas it is 12.2% for female labour force participation rate with a 0.17% female to male ratio. These numbers can be explained by the role of cultural values giving a restrictive role for the women in society.

Age and the length of stay are seen to be other factors impacting on the participants' feelings of Turkish as necessary and of Turkish songs as enjoyable. The results indicate that while the youngest group (18–25 aged) are more willing to learn Turkish and listen to Turkish songs, their interest declines as they get older. In terms of the participants' length of stay, the group that feels most isolated are those who have been in Turkey for 7–12 months and the group that feels Turkey as their only choice are mostly the newcomers – those who have been in Turkey for 0–6 months. The reason behind this might lie in the acculturation process as well as the refugees' motivation to live in Turkey. The newcomers are probably still dealing with acculturation thus their adaptation to the new environment is limited.

It was assumed that the refugees' perceptions of Turkish and the Turkish culture play a crucial role for willingness to speak Turkish because as Tum, Kunt, and Kunt (2016) note, beliefs about the target language, its speakers and their culture are among the factors that play a significant role in second language learning. Accordingly, the second research question aimed to investigate the participants' interests of learning the Turkish language.

Although almost all participants (Mean: 4.84) think that Turkish is necessary and are willing to learn it, gender, age, and employment play an important role in the participants' interests in learning Turkish. Female participants not only avoid speaking Turkish more than male participants, but they are also the majority (compared to male participants) in thinking that Turkish is not an easy language to learn. This situation may be explained by the high unemployment of Syrian women and their avoidance of contact with the host culture willingly or unwillingly, which could be a reflection of the patriarchal nature of Syrian culture. Furthermore, the younger the participants are, the more efforts they show to understand Turkish when it is spoken in the social life. Because the employed Syrians are more in contact with the dominant group and are more used to it, they are less bored than the unemployed while others speak in Turkish.

The Syrian refugees' perceptions of Turkish society manifest the willingness and interest of the refugees in social interaction with a host country population. Notably, gender, age, and occupations of the refugees emerge as significant variables affecting the outcomes of this process. The men want to know more about the host culture than the women do. In addition, men, the employed, and the younger Syrians are better at communicating with Turkish people in Turkish. These three groups may be more sociable and in touch with the host culture, which could explain why they are better at communication.

Turkish plays a crucial role in adapting to the new sociocultural context because, as suggested by Hatoss (2013), SLA bears a great importance in integration into a fabric of the new society.

The adaptation process Syrian refugees experience can be argued in the framework of acculturation, which is a gradual process of adjustment including psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Berry, 2006). Although there are many ways to adapt depending on a variety of contexts, the collected data are analysed in the light of sociocultural outcomes, which is one of the two major outcomes of adaptation argued by Berry (2006). Because sociocultural outcomes refer to successful participation in the new society (Lindert et al., 2008) and dealing with everyday problems, how Syrian refugees' participate in social life is questioned and the collected data give the impression that there may be a delicate relationship between the Turkish and the degree to which refugees acculturate to Turkish society.

There seem to be many factors affecting the orientations to the host culture, the society, and the language. Among these factors, age, gender, and employment deserve to be given attention the context of the refugees' perceptions. The findings display that younger refugees are more willing to learn the language and to interact with the dominant group. They also show that men have more opportunities than women with regard to communicating with the new society, which may be fruitful to be assessed together with the employment figures. It is seen that 94 out of 170 participants do not work and 72 of them are women. In this sample, because of female participants' social roles, such as mothers, caretakers, housewives, etc., they do not work and have less active roles in social life with a possible outcome of less interaction with Turkish-speaking society. This positioning of two sexes in the social life, as a cultural factor, may be the reason behind the significant differences between the perceptions between the two. These findings support the research results of Şeker and Boysan (2013) in terms of gender. Whereas (un)employment has an effect on perceptions, the types of jobs the refugees carry out do not cause a significant difference in the perceptions of these people.

Conclusion

The aim of the present study is to investigate the attitudes of Syrian refugees to Turkish as the second language and Turkish society as the host culture besides their attitudes to the Turkish community in terms of their willingness and interest in social interaction. In accordance with the collected data, Syrian refugees seem to have highly positive attitudes to Turkish as the second language and Turkish society as the host society. In terms of their orientations towards Turkish culture and society along with their willingness to learn the target language, gender, employment, and age seem to have a significant effect while jobs do not.

What is new in this study is focusing specifically on a disadvantaged group, namely refugees – who are often ignored in studies on the second language. It should be noted that, however, this is an exploratory study, and the number of the participants as well as the number of cities they settle down in can be increased in order to have a wider perspective of the issues discussed in this study and for the generalisability of the results.

This study may have several implications for policy makers and researchers interested in SLA studies. A fruitful integration process of Syrian refugees into Turkish society is a long-standing and pressing concern, which necessitates the analysis of the asylum process and the integration of refugees in the host country. Therefore, more and detailed field studies

need to be done to have education programmes contributing to the integration of refugees who have been in Turkey for more than six years.

As part of life-long learning and as a key for the acculturation process, governments should organise, control and supervise educational institutions not only in terms of language education but also for intercultural understanding. As Munthe's (2011) study with refugee students from Myanmar in Norway suggests, language training contributes to the foundations for further integration. Thus, the results of the current study can be used in countries having a similar refugee concern. The countries that are accepting refugees of other religions, in particular, need to bear in mind that intercultural understanding was stressed by the participants of the present study. Feelings of safety, and the degree of adaptation seem to be interrelated with cultural similarities and customs. This creates a need for developing intercultural understanding not only for refugees, but also for the members of the host country.

As indicated earlier, the perceptions of Syrian refugees bear great significance for a healthy integration process considering the fact that there is a non-negligible connection between the attitudes and refugee integration. Additionally, SLA studies should not be merely centred on the English language, considering the changing political dynamics in the world with the migration of numerous disadvantaged groups to different parts of the world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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