

The International Turkish Language Olympiads (ITLOs): Educating for Intercultural Dialogue and Communication

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Abstract This paper outlines the role of the International Turkish Language Olympiads (ITLO) in establishing the understanding and importance of intercultural dialogue and communication amongst high school students across the globe as a means of combating the negative aspects of globalisation. It highlights the use of foreign language education as a catalyst to enable this interaction and as a means for enhancing understanding, respect and tolerance amongst people from different backgrounds. The ITLO is an NGO that organises language and culture Olympiads for secondary students from Transnational Turkish Schools; hosting 2000 students from 140 countries in the latest 2013 Olympiads. The ITLO are held in Turkey and in the Turkish language which aim to facilitate significant cultural exposure and exchange between students in an environment of respect and openness. Using information gathered from a sample set of student participants in the ITLO, this paper considers whether the ITLO is able to achieve its aim and whether the forum of the ITLO is successful for this purpose. Overall, it argues that the ITLO provides a platform for cross-cultural exchange and supports the aims of working towards a more peaceful world through a celebration of diversity, intercultural dialogue and respect for all humanity.

Keywords Intercultural Dialogue and Communication, International Turkish Language Olympiads, Transnational Turkish Schools, Cultural Diversity, Education, Globalisation

1. Introduction

In modern political and socio-economic environments, globalisation has curbed the evolution of unilateral nationalism through economic, social and political forces. These developments have levelled the world as the free flow of trade; capital and information have made people and countries more aware of our growing interdependence than ever before (Friedman 2007). The latter part of the 20th century particularly, is increasingly referred to as the “age of

globalisation”. It is accepted in many circles that the world is getting “smaller and shrinking” due to both the decrease in the cost of air travel and the rise of technology-enabled interconnectedness. Herring (2001, p. vii) describes globalisation as: “the trend that the world is getting smaller due to the extensiveness of information exchange and increased cross-cultural contact through the facilitation of computer networks”. Furthermore, Giddens views globalisation as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64). However, in more contemporary times and with increased communication between nations, the definition expands to include cross-border social, cultural, political, and technological exchanges between countries and, in particular, between people.

Whilst globalisation has brought many positive aspects through democratisation, increased awareness of human rights and a greater flow of information, it has also given rise to some negative aspects in addition to exacerbating global problems (Dower 2003). It has brought about a dramatic increase in economic disparities, where distinctive cultures have been obliterated, weapons of mass destruction have become widespread, and famine, selfishness and environmental degradation have become common (Kronfli 2011).

Despite these negative trends, the field of education is one area that offers some hope for a brighter future. According to Zajda (2009), recent global events depicting violence conflicts and war warrant the necessity for education and awareness within a more visible paradigm of intercultural and cross-cultural understanding globally (Zajda 2009). NGOs such as the ITLO have a critical role to play in facilitating educational and social programs globally and will invariably present positive outcomes and developments within the process of globalisation.

Globalisation has brought with it an increased responsibility for world citizens to learn about and understand each other. A lack of knowledge and understanding between peoples’ results in social tensions, intolerant behaviours and fragmentation at a local level,

which at a national and international level can give rise to social unrest and, worse still, armed conflict.

Transnational Turkish Schools¹, established by Turkish volunteers in 140 countries around the globe, provide a model of education that fosters intercultural respect and dialogue at a local level. The ITLO² takes this a step further on an international level, bringing together secondary-school students from all backgrounds and cultures to compete in the Turkish language, providing a platform of friendly competition where they can experience diversity and build strong relationships. The competition provides a positive encounter of globalization and interconnectedness in a non-threatening and non-judgmental atmosphere of peace and harmony, and builds awareness of global citizenry in its participants.

2. The Role of Language Education for Establishing Peace and Understanding

It stands to reason that language is a key player in globalisation; on a practical level, those with knowledge of one or more additional languages being at a greater advantage than those without these skills. The ability to interact on a global level and access vast sources of information is greatly enhanced with the knowledge of additional languages, particularly English which is the language of science, research and business. On a more tacit level, learning foreign languages exposes students to different cultures and ways of thinking and, together with education, language is seen as the most influential agent of inculcating a sense of responsible citizenship, cooperation and dialogue among individuals, groups and nations. Organisations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) identify that language learning “prepares learners to think and interact in a global community” and also enables learners to “become more adept in understanding diverse cultural perspectives and their own identity” (actfl.org). Gulen³ (2004) supports this perspective by stressing the pivotal role of education by exerting that a better and peaceful future for humanity can be established through universal and intercultural education. Furthermore, education is the most important element and an effective tool for the longevity of social movements such as the Transnational Turkish Schools that act as ambassadors of

good faith for intercultural dialogue and communication (Agai 2002 & Kucukcan 2007). Significantly, foreign language education has particularly developed to unravel the challenges that present and prospective interlocutors encounter; by emphasising learning how to communicate successfully with people who have different languages and cultures (Robotjazi 2008).

The ITLO is an educational and institutional tool which generates new levels of intercultural communication, interconnectedness and understanding. The event started 11 years ago with participants from 17 countries. Last year, the 2013 Olympiads saw 2000 students representing 140 countries competing in the Turkish language. The common experience of learning a new foreign language, in this case Turkish, gives the students the opportunity to participate in the ITLO which in turn exposes them to a platform where they are able to establish constructive relationships and, as a result, contribute towards stronger future global relations. Being of secondary school age, they are at a crucial stage in their personal development where they form their individual perspectives and outlook on life. A positive and intense experience in a multi-cultural environment can positively influence this development process. Diaz-Greenburg & Nevin (2003) believe that, through the medium of ‘linguaging’ or ‘linguicism’, a platform and springboard is created that permeates, mediates and establishes national and transnational identities, cultures and values. This includes committing oneself to envisage the potentiality of a ‘transcultural self’, which navigates the transnational terrain in understanding and tolerance of the other (Jordan 2001; Turner 2003 & Parry 2003). From a similar perspective Murphy (1994) holds that the best way to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts is to increase face-to-face communication and interaction. As a result, perceptions of prejudice, misunderstandings and intolerance can be corrected immediately.

Furthermore, Liu (2011) proves that the rapid advancement of information technology and cultural interaction among citizens of the world provides significant opportunities for language instructors and learners to simultaneously teach and learn a foreign language and its culture. He further states that, in order to live a peaceful and harmonious life in the 21st century, every member of the global village is obliged to make an effort to understand, learn from and appreciate each other. College language instruction plays a crucial role in preparing the 21st century citizenry who will be proficient linguistically and culturally to live and work with all their global neighbours (Liu 2011).

3. Intercultural Dialogue and Communication through Foreign Language Instruction

In attempts toward achieving values such as tolerance, understanding and inter-communication, the language factor has become significant for government agencies and

¹ Transnational Turkish Schools have been set up globally by volunteers inspired by the teachings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gulen. They provide secular state education according to the country in which they are based, and also emphasise moral values and global citizenry through the model behaviour of the staff. In many countries both the schools and students are amongst the top-performers in their area.

² ITLO: International Turkish Language Olympiads are organized by the International Turkish Education Association which is based in Istanbul, Turkey.

³ Fethullah Gulen is a Turkish scholar, poet, philosopher, thinker and prolific writer who focuses on education as well as intercultural and interfaith dialogue and has inspired the volunteer-based, global civil service Hizmet movement (see footnote 6).

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). Academics and theorists have developed different approaches and perspectives to address and achieve these values (Kim 2001; Prosser 1978 & Hall 1998). In this context, the main concept which comes to the forefront in the field of education and sociology is intercultural dialogue and communication.

The Council of Europe White Paper (2008) defines intercultural dialogue as a process of frank and viable exchanges of views between diverse ethnic, cultural and religious language groups and individuals, based on mutual understanding, tolerance and respect. A further requirement of intercultural dialogue is that individuals possess the freedom and ability to express themselves, with the willingness and ability to be attentive to the views and thoughts of others. As a result of this process, culturally diverse societies become more cohesive; equality is fostered with human dignity. Moreover, intercultural dialogue promotes a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, thus constructing a civilisation of respect and tolerance (Council of Europe White Paper 2008).

Results of a survey conducted by the European Commission in all the member states illustrate that the majority of Europeans opine that foreign language teaching in schools as well as exchange programs for students and teachers could assist them to understand each other better (September 2007 – Eurobarometer survey, cited in Woś 2010). The role of education for enhancement of intercultural dialogue is also emphasised by Woś (2010) as she expresses that in a multicultural society culturally sensitive education can help to avoid conflicts and fragmentation within the society.

Education and teaching a foreign language have become platforms stimulating socialisation, allowing individuals to share fundamental values and connect to the community through notions such as cultural identity, mutual understanding and respect. To this end, Hewstone's (2007) contact theory is pertinent. He argues that contact between groups stimulates positive attitudes, minimising prejudice and prompting lasting relationships. The creation of intergroup relationships is perceived as more pertinent and durable than simple cooperation. It results in common experiences and values among individual citizens from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Law et al's (2008) Intercultural Community Bridge Building concept supports Hewstone's theory as it is based on the premise that every individual in any nation benefits from knowing, experiencing and working with other cultures. By these means, tolerance and understanding occur where the primary focus and approach is on unifying elements rather than differences, and implementing Intercultural Community Bridge Building through these commonalities.

Brown & Brown (2003) argue that it is the language teachers who truly comprehend the importance of intercultural dialogue. To this end, Hosack (2011) holds that foreign language teachers should promote intercultural dialogue by providing content that addresses global issues. Moreover, to develop students' intercultural competence and

communication skills, he recommends a focus on cross-cultural comparisons based on mutual recognition, acknowledgement and respect. Thus, foreign language teachers make a distinctive contribution to intercultural dialogue by instilling a respect for diversity.

From another perspective, Byram's (2011) model focuses on encouraging social practices amongst different groups, in one's own and other countries. It also introduces important social skills related to education and language learning, such as the ability to research and interpret information about other cultures, and relate it to one's own culture.

From a similar perspective, the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) accentuates the significance of foreign language learning:

Language learning helps learners to avoid stereotyping individuals, to develop curiosity and openness to others and to discover other cultures. Language learning helps them to see that interaction with individuals having different social identities and cultures is an enriching experience. (Council of Europe 2008, p.16)

The statement is comprehensive and is in accordance with the theories outlined. Byram (2011) has a similar approach to foreign language teaching as he argues that intercultural dialogue provides opportunities for young people to engage with other ethnicities, overcoming any prejudice and intolerance that may be stimulated by nationalistic perspectives.

It is within this context that we can examine the establishment of schools across the globe by volunteer-based, Turkish educational foundations. These organisations have acknowledged these goals and aims and have, in a relatively short span of time, established many schools and institutions. Their primary focus through these institutions is set on teaching and empowering, thus promoting the concept of intercultural communication and dialogue (Pandya & Gallagher 2012).

4. The ITLOs and Transnational Turkish Schools

In the process of globalisation, with all the positive as well as negative consequences that have accompanied its progress, most if not all transnational movements and NGOs have made it their primary focus to establish an understanding of intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural communication in order to resolve global issues and concerns. It would be beneficial to study these movements in depth as they help shape the current world; however, this extends beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless, the ITLO provide a good case study as a platform that has organised public events to foster dialogue between individuals of different backgrounds. Behind the spectacle of singing and poetry-reading, lies the driving force of hundreds of Transnational Turkish Schools and language centres across the world. To understand the ITLOs it is first necessary to examine the Transnational Turkish Schools

from where the participants are sourced.

Significantly, Turkic languages are spoken by about 220 million people spanning 34 countries including Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, Central Asia, Siberia and Western China (TIECS 2012). It thus constitutes one of the seven most spoken languages in the world. Transnational Turkish schools, inspired by the philosophy of Fethullah Gulen (reference in footnote 1 above), were initially established by philanthropic volunteer groups in Central Asia and the Balkans peninsula after the collapse of communism in the early 1990s (Cetin 2009). These schools quickly spread and over time opened in different continents serving the people of the regions based on universal values (Ebaugh 2010). Today schools exist in 140 different countries around the world and are often amongst the most high achieving and prestigious schools in the area. They adhere to the state curriculum of the country they are based in and also offer the Turkish language as part of their curriculum. Ozalp (2010) states that the Turkish businessmen, social activists and teachers who pioneered these schools, included Turkish language studies as a part of the school curriculum which was approved by the educational authorities in each of the countries of operation.

Using the Gulen-inspired vision of education, these schools seek to improve both the academic achievement and personal character of the students. Therefore, in the Transnational Turkish Schools, education to develop personal character and values is more than just a stand-alone program; instead, it becomes integrated into the school-wide curriculum (Polat 2012). In an interview conducted by Aksiyon Magazine, a well-known sociologist Prof. Dr. Nur Vergin shares her experience regarding Turkish International Schools:

In terms of humanity and human values, the scene which impressed and most affected me was the story of a young South African student who is now a biology teacher at the school where he graduated from. ... The main factor which allowed this young teacher to achieve this goal was the Turkish International School and its teachers. A good example to the broader society and role model to fellow students (Ozcan 2012).

From a different perspective, in an interview, the Deputy speaker of the Turkish parliament (MP) and chairman of the ITLOs, Mehmet Sağlam notes that;

Whilst there may have been some suspicion at first, with the idea that Turkey is trying to prove its own linguistic superiority, it is now widely accepted that shared values are being highlighted whilst we are trying to show that differences cannot and should not prevent peace. Thus, we focus on love and friendship, bringing our children together in this way. Through this language learning competition, we also put the spotlight on multiculturalism and living together as one and in peace. Moreover, we build on themes and factors that cannot escape the notice of the United Nations and the Nobel Foundation.... (Kilic 2013)

English is the primary medium of instruction for core subjects in the schools; some classes are taught in the native language and Turkish is offered along with other foreign languages. Subjects generally include but are not limited to biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and computer science (Balci et al 2000). The schools have a very liberal and progressive educational curriculum adapted and tailored to the requirements as well as demands of each country's educational system where they operate (Cetin 2009).

Although the schools and ITLO have embraced a vast number of cultures and nationalities, there are also critiques that question the achievements of these institutions. Hakan (2012), a columnist from newspaper in Turkey with a politically secular outlook – *Hürriyet*, makes some remarks regarding ITLO. He highlights that students who sing in Turkish may not know the meanings or have the ability to sing other Turkish songs. He further questions the time taken to prepare for the Olympiads and doubts if students in other schools are also taught Turkish, indicating it might not have the expected impact on cross-cultural understanding and dialogue that ITLO organisers claim (Hakan 2012).

It can be argued that, even if students from these schools do not use Turkish in their future adult lives, just as many students around the world do not necessarily use their school-taught, foreign language; exposure to and knowledge of a language and culture different to their own can only be positive in terms of broadening their experience, tolerance and understanding of others, and can serve to make them more positive when encountering different languages and cultures in their adult and professional lives. Furthermore, these attitudes can be passed on to future generations through their influence on their children.

The Transnational Turkish Schools are also subject to some criticism through media and political circles. The drive for substantial change through the values advanced by the philosophy behind the schools (espoused by Gulen) has met opposition by some other groups. Yucel (2010) underlines that Gulen's critics include radical politico-religious groups, ultra-secularists and ultra-nationalists. They criticise Gulen for not opposing Turkey's EU membership, as well as his encouragement of various interfaith and intercultural activities. His meeting with Pope John Paul II in February 1998, highlighting the value he places on interfaith dialogue, was criticised by other religious movements within Turkey (Yucel 2010). Although Gulen has received criticism for his ideas and initiatives, Yucel (2010) advocates that similar to the challenges and later positive recognition other famous historic figures faced, so will Gulen's initiatives be viewed in the future. In his recent book on Turkey, Graham Fuller (2008, pp. 59-60) asserts that "despite some virulent attacks against it, the Hizmet Movement has been viewed positively by a number of leading Turkish politicians, prime ministers and presidents over the years on both the right and left".⁴

⁴The Hizmet movement is a transnational civic society movement inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gulen. His teachings about 'hizmet' (altruistic service to the common good) have attracted a large number of supporters in Turkey and other parts of the world. Gulen encourages interfaith and intercultural dialogue activities. Gulen also favours Turkey's bid to join the

Bulent Ecevit, one of the late leftist Turkish prime ministers, visited one of the educational institutions and expressed positive remarks about these establishments:

Table 1. ITLO Participation by Year

Year	Number of participating countries	Number of participants
2003	17	62
2004	24	120
2005	41	250
2006	83	350
2007	100	500
2008	110	550
2009	115	600
2010	120	650
2011	130	1000
2012	130	1500
2013	140	2000

Adapted from Ozalp (2010) & Sourced from <http://www.turkecolimpiyatları.org>

I examined the activities of these educational entrepreneurs and educators abroad, and I was pleased with what I saw. First of all, regardless of the host country, the educators were providing modern education ... And they were offering education in English, which is a prerequisite for scientific development today. Together with the local language, these schools were providing education in three languages. This is a great humanitarian service (Ateş et al., 2005, p. 30).

To this end, Cetin (2009) holds that Turkish schools make a significant contribution to the construction of a harmonious world, and attempt to build on universal values and peace. Similarly, Sarıtoprak (2005) holds that these schools have played remarkable roles in decreasing levels of conflict in these areas. Consequently, a harmonious and revitalised society in a diverse global environment would be established through the new generations referred to by Gulen as the "Golden Generation" (Nelson 2005, p.8).

Drawing on the success of the students in the Transnational Turkish Schools, the ITLO as an annual event has realised the potential of the Turkish language to be a platform for congregation. Selected students from schools around the world come together to compete in the Turkish Language Olympiads.

The annual increase in numbers as shown in Table 1 and the high standard of the participants indicates the quality of the education in the Transnational Turkish Schools Attendance for the events held in 55 Turkish cities in 2013 numbers reached five million (Yazar 2013).

The ITLO showcase students proficient in all different

academic skill sets as well as cultural talents. There are twelve categories in which these students compete such as grammar, oral skills, writing essays, reciting poems, singing songs, theatre and general culture, etc. As part of the Olympiads, the representatives of each country exhibit their own local traditions and culture to the public (<http://www.turkecolimpiyatları.org/>).

The events also reach out to Turkish youth born and raised overseas through three separate competitions: essay, poetry reading and general knowledge. The most popular are the poetry reading and singing competitions. In the field of poetry, students are exposed to an array of Turkish literary personalities, and are expected to recite at least one poem by heart. In a similar way, students who take part in the singing competition develop an awareness of the Turkish music world and sing a popular song for the audience. Students with stronger academic talents take part in writing, reading and general knowledge competitions (<http://www.turkecolimpiyatları.org/>). This humanitarian service approach which forms the backbone of the competitions allows them to act as stepping stones for the promotion and sustainability of the integration of the youth into their respective societies while still maintaining their sense of Turkish citizenship through consciousness of identity.

In an interview conducted by Ozalp (2010), Sezgin Akcay, executive director of the International Turkish Education Association, confirmed that the long term goal of the ITLO would be to give the whole world a message of dialogue, peace and love. The overall aim is to unite all people around the world under the slogan 'we are speaking the same language'. The outcome of the event is very promising as even students from countries that are hostile towards each other establish friendships and form healthy relationships (Ozalp 2010).

5. Methodology

5.1. Procedure and Participants

The research for this paper was based upon the most recent experiences and data accumulated from international students through interviews conducted both face-to-face and via email. The aim of the interviews was to identify the perceptions and opinions of participants regarding the effects of the ITLO on promoting peaceful relationships between citizens of the world.

The email interviews adopted a process of random selection. Interview papers were sent to 13 countries, of which nine responded (Australia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Albania, Cambodia, Romania, Bosnia, Bangladesh and Egypt). Interviews were administered to 27 high-school students (13 male and 15 female) from these countries aged between 14-18 years old as shown in Table 2. One significant exception to the group was a 20 year old female student studying in the USA at the time, a graduate of the

International Turkish School in Bangladesh.

The students in Australia were interviewed face-to-face and the students from overseas were sent interview questions by email. E-mail interviewing allows participants to construct their own experiences with their own dialogue and interaction with the researcher. This technique additionally empowers the participants because it essentially allows them to be in control of the flow of the interview (Bowker & Tuffin 2004), enabling them to answer at their convenience and in any manner they feel suitable. However, it is also important to note that in e-mail interviewing, it is always possible that some participants may not be as effective writers as they are speakers (Karchmer 2001), hence some meaningful information may be missed.

The researcher used pseudonyms to conceal the identities of participants in accordance with privacy and confidentiality requirements. The interview was divided into two sections: background information and interview questions. The interview format consisted of six questions in a semi-structured interview style (see Appendix for full text of interview questions).

A qualitative data collection method is used, as data is based on the participants' viewpoint, which provides individual understanding and a description of people's personal experiences of phenomena (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber 1994). Qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding" where the researcher develops a "complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell 1998, p. 15). Therefore, the decision for qualitative data was preferred by conducting online-interviews. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to interact and establish a social relationship with the interviewee. This method is also useful because the qualitative data collection generates subjective views and insights rather than numerical values (Miles & Huberman 1994).

After collection, the data was transcribed and coded manually into meaningful chunks of text. Coding entails discovering themes in the primary process from raw data by recognizing important moments in the data and encoding it prior to interpretation (Boyatzis 1998). The concept of thematic analysis examines commonalities and the relationship between the various elements of their analysis (Gibson & Brown 2009). I have employed this method because it emphasizes organization, interpretation and rich description of the data set. It allows major and minor themes to be extracted from the raw data showing commonalities in themes across the different participant countries and also elements that may be unique to a particular setting.

However, as is often noted, a limitation of the qualitative data collection approach is that it may not represent a large segment of society or student group (Reid 1996). Furthermore, limitations of the qualitative method include that the knowledge produced might not generalize to include other people or other settings (i.e., findings might be unique to the relatively few people included in the research study)

(Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). In this study, the interviewed students also form only a very minor sample of the students studying at the Transnational Turkish Schools, thus the data may not completely reflect the general situation of the student profile. In an effort to minimize the problem, students from different countries were interviewed to at least provide a variety of participants.

Table 2. ITLO country specifications

Participating countries	Number of students	Gender	
		Male	Female
Albania	2	1	1
Australia	5	2	3
Bangladesh	1		1
Bosnia	2	2	
Cambodia	2	1	1
Romania	5	2	3
Nigeria	5	2	3
Tanzania	5	3	2
Egypt	1		1

6. Discussion of Findings

Five major themes emerged from the interviews along with some challenges and shortcomings. The themes have been outlined below with supporting quotes from the interviews. At the end of each theme is an analysis of the data.

6.1. Change of Attitudes and Personal Development

Students that took part in the ITLO testified to a unique and positive, life-changing experience which broadened their previously narrow views, perspectives and outlooks on life. Others expressed that the Olympiads enhanced their personal development and transformed their perception of the world. The ITLO was similarly effective in removing some of the students' prejudices previously established through exposure to internet and media sources. These views are illustrated in the following quotes:

I could see my generation in different versions of it, and this, of course, broadened my vision a lot. It helped to change some of the prejudices that I had towards people from certain parts of the world. (Marcela—Albania)

Learning a language different from your mother-tongue is not easy so to be sincere; Turkish Olympiad contributed a lot to my perception of the world. I got to see other peoples' culture and their outfit. Also, my perception of other people changed because the way they are portrayed in the media is

different from the way I saw them. (Nneka—Nigeria)

Significantly, a Cambodian participant experienced a transformation to become friendlier, more motivated and more socially active:

The Turkish Olympiads contributed to my personal development by turning me into friendlier person, develop motivation, and it helped me in experiencing more social activity. It has also been contributed to the world's perception by creating peace, friendship, love, and respect especially, respect to other cultures and religions. Also it gave me enough courage to compete in the international stage. (Nhean—Cambodia)

One student underlined the positive impact of being able to speak multiple languages with confidence in communicating with peers, teachers and the general public. She felt more connected in having developed relationships with individuals from different parts of the world, whilst capitalising on the commonalities she had with these students:

I am proud to be able to speak in five different languages, but Turkish language is undoubtedly my favourite one. My perception of the world had changed after getting the opportunity to participate at the Turkish Olympiad in 2005. I realised how similar I was to my friend from Ukraine and my friend from Nigeria without ever going to their country or speaking their language. (Shema—Bangladesh)

A student from Australia highlights how she was deeply touched by the efforts of the teachers and her desire to follow the footsteps of these initiatives:

Seeing the tremendous efforts that the teachers were putting in was instantly eye watering. Seeing these teachers and their sacrifice upon the students has inspired me deeply to be like them and try to achieve the same goals that they have ... I would love to take students to the future 19. International Turkish Olympiads myself and be a role model for many younger students. (Selma—Australia)

Each of these participants experienced something unique and unexpected as a direct result of exposure to other nationalities, cultures and ways of thinking in an environment of peace and respect. This was unquestionably a result of participation in the ITLO which, as well as creating an environment which inspired self-confidence in the individuals, at the same time challenged their previously conceived ideas, brought them into consciousness and stimulated an objective observation of these views based on the new experience. This observation resulted in positive and dynamic change in the ideas and behaviours of the students.

6.2. Cross Cultural Communication

Participants are of the view that international events, such

as the ITLO, bring together people of many different backgrounds whilst contributing towards intercultural dialogue. For the duration of the project, some participants viewed getting together in this program as the initial step to developing long-lasting relationships:

It has helped people in getting new friends from different countries, who can now talk and share ideas. For now it may seem to them that the interaction is short-term, but when they get to the outer world the first people they would hold on to are those who they met within a short period with an everlasting effect. (Ayoub—Tanzania)

Students also highlighted the benefits of the preparation phase for the ITLO through the Turkish lessons at the Turkish schools. A student expressed that she has gained a better insight into multiculturalism through the topics discussed in class:

As for the Turkish lessons in the high schools, it has always contributed towards our character development and enhanced our cultural identity as multi-cultural Australians. In our Turkish lessons we discussed some important topics such as global ethics, global citizenship, multiculturalism, moral values, democracy, human rights etc. That is why I have always valued the Turkish language classes and have learnt a lot in the preparation process. (Selma—Australia)

The interviews also highlight an emphasis on the contribution of the ITLO towards instilling an 'international' feeling in students by being a part of an organisation that is internationally recognised and practiced.

During the Olympiad, I felt like I was in an entirely different habitat... This Olympiad, carrying the quality of diversity, helped me appreciate differences that exist between communities and nations. Now I have friends from all over the world. This makes me feel good and "international" too. When I left arena the last day, all in tears, I could feel that we all had become better people. (Marcela—Albania)

A former contestant from Bosnia equates the ITLO to the international sporting Olympics as it serves a similar purpose of bringing people and cultures from all over the globe together to compete and win awards

The vibrant atmosphere combined with people from a vast number of countries reminded me of the International Sporting Olympics in the sense that so many different cultures and languages were all there in the same space at the same time. (Haris—Bosnia)

The comments from the interviewees demonstrate the potential for the ITLO participants to develop lasting friendships that continue outside the framework of the organisation. Grounded in an education in the Transnational Turkish Schools that emphasises multiculturalism, global citizenship, moral values and democracy, the ITLO gives the students the opportunity to "live" these values during the

event period, the participants themselves claiming to “feel” international. This demonstrates the participants start to place their global, human identity about their national identity enabling them to see difference as something non-threatening. The impact of these relationships lasting for years after the ITLO events has the potential to contribute positively to peaceful coexistence between different cultures.

6.3. Global Peace and Harmony

Interestingly, some students were able to analyse their experience of the ITLO and apply their understanding more widely noting that the values the ITLO engenders are what is missing in areas where there is a the lack of peace, intolerance and conflict in the world:

Turkish Olympiad helps us learn to appreciate differences and tolerate them. It promotes solidarity and understanding among people. The lack of tolerance and solidarity is precisely the cause of the current conflicts in the world. Promoting them, which is something that this Olympiad has succeeded in is the right way to peace. We're on the right tracks; I would say... (Marcela—Albania)

Students also noted that the fact that all students were able to share aspects of their own culture and traditions as opposed to only the Turkish culture and traditions being imposed on all students contributed towards world peace by establishing mutual relationships.

In the universal Turkish schools and Turkish Olympiads the students also have the chance to show their own cultural aspects and expose their own traditions not just Turkish which is the factor that supports the contribution towards world peace. (Selma—Australia)

Teachers preparing students for the ITLO also play a significant role in promoting world peace and harmony to students. The emphasis they place on the beauty of diversity and respect towards different cultures helps students increase their self-confidence and feelings of warmth towards other cultures.

The most memorable part of my years at International Turkish Hope School (ITHS) was my interactions with my teachers. Our education was not confined to just the curriculum. Looking back, I realize that my teachers at ITHS inculcated within me an appreciation for diversity and an ability to interact with people of different perspectives and background with self-confidence, warmth, and respect. Turkish school has a special space in my country because of their love, affection, contributions and respect to our children of Bangladesh. I imagine students from other countries feel similar to what I do. If that is the case both Turkish schools and Turkish Olympiad can contribute to world peace. (Shema—Bangladesh)

A female student from Nigeria highlights the importance of events like ITLOs at a global level identifying them as a positive action in a world riddled with conflict in which many people feel they don't have a means to effect change.

Despite my elation and joy in sharing with and learning from international fellow students and friends, yet to my mind, I just feel a lot of despair and sadness that we remain so voiceless and powerless in a world ridden with the current conflicts, wars and crises all around us. In a global sense the world has become such a small place, where our problems and challenges have become more visibly frightening and disturbing. For that reason, events like Turkish Olympiads are very important in the future. (Sarima- Nigeria)

Participants in the ITLO show an acute awareness of the value of respect and tolerance of diversity as essential for world peace and global harmony. From the personal level of developing friendships based on these common values, to sharing and enjoying the differences in cultures and traditions, this is demonstrated in the interview comments. It is also clear from the comments that the students are aware that a lack of these common values gives rise to the problems we are experiencing in the world today. They agree that not only the ITLO but also, as noted by one interviewee, the experience in the Transnational Turkish Schools, is important in addressing these issues.

6.4. Friendships and Relationships

The ITLO has not only established communication between students around the world but has given rise to long term relationships. One of the students noted that she still contacts students from the Olympiads and has plans to meet them in the future. The following quote demonstrates the Olympiads' potential for establishing strong bonds between individuals.

I loved my time in Turkey as I was able to build relationships with people around the globe. Until now I continue to communicate with them and plan to see them in the future. I loved the hospitality that people offered us in Turkey. (Reyyan—Australia)

Another student valued the exposure to different cultures and found that the team spirit helped participants to establish a strong sympathy for one another, common values and healthy relationships.

The dialogues were the favourite part of the event, people of different cultures, races, religion come together and talk about the similarities they hold, how the Olympiads has helped them establish peaceful interactions within a team spirit of mutual coexistence. This event should be enhanced to bring greater effect, one day it would be a story proud to tell. (Ayoub—Tanzania)

Some of the students established such deep and close relationships with the other participant students; it was with

regret that they returned to their countries. Such bonds are generally formed when people have an extraordinary experience. A student from Egypt explicitly underlined how disappointed she was due to the possibility of not seeing her new friends again.

In fact, I have the most wonderful friends from around the world, and on the last day we all were very sad to know that we will not see each other anymore. That was the saddest moments of our departure. I hope we all get together again one day (Layla—Egypt)

Students also had the opportunity to meet important government officials from Turkey which helped to boost their confidence to initiate and build relationships with individuals of all calibres.

I am a kind of person that likes making friends and through the Turkish Olympiads I had a great exposure. I listened to students reciting poems by great poets and scholars like Fethullah Gulen, Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and Yunus Emre. Furthermore, the most enlightening and exciting moments were also when we visited government officials and recited poems in their presence. (Zara—Nigeria)

Interestingly, the ITLO, based on the quotes above, are becoming increasingly effective in building long-lasting relationships between individuals as well as between nations. It is thus proven that globalisation through cross-cultural communication and dialogue provides increasingly more thrust to charity organisations and educational NGOs allowing them to organise programs on an international scale.

6.5. Linguistic and Cultural Challenges

As well as discovering themes that support the vision and philosophy of the ITLO, the interviews also uncovered some personal challenges and obstacles experienced by some of the participants. The most common of these was the perceived difficulty in learning Turkish, particularly when preparing for the competitions. A male student from Romania highlighted the immediate linguistic challenges he faced. Despite the fact that he values and appreciates the exposure to Turkish language, he felt challenged by close competitors from countries like Pakistan or Tajikistan and Turkmenistan who had a language advantage over him.

As for the worst part of the Olympiad I would say it was the fact that I was given the same exam like others from Turkish backgrounds. Also the fact that I was in a group of countries which are close to Turkey like Pakistan or Tajikistan or even Turkmenistan. Because the Romanian language has no connection in terms of linguistics, grammar and vocabulary with Turkish (Anton—Romania)

A male Tanzanian student's biggest challenge was the time he spent to learn Turkish and finding it hard to balance this with his other school work. Despite all the hardship and

difficulties, he emphasised his ability to still succeed:

Preparing for the Olympiads got very challenging. Because it was a very different language, I had to spare a lot of time to study. This sometimes also affected my studies as I found it hard to balance. This adds to the difficulty, hardship a foreign student faces... (Ayoub—Tanzania)

A female Romanian student's difficulty was with Turkish grammar and memorizing verses in Turkish poems:

I think learning Turkish is not a piece of cake for many foreign students. For me, the case suffixes from Turkish grammar were the most challenging part of learning Turkish. Turkish grammar is a bit different from that of our native language which causes difficulty. Well... I can say that it was really hard to memorize verses in Turkish poems. But I had memorized all verses. (Adela—Romania)

A female Nigerian student outlines the cultural barriers which she faced when attempting to learn the Turkish language:

The thing that was most difficult for me in the early days was the fact that my culture was so different to the Turkish culture; from the food they eat, the sports that dominate popular conversation, and even the humour and gestures were so different and while learning Turkish I always felt reminded that I was in a completely different setting and environment. (Sarah—Nigeria)

However, the challenge of learning a different language, balancing school work and language studies and memorizing verses successfully can also be seen as something positive. Overcoming linguistic and cultural challenges successfully helps to enhance self-esteem, develop a positive work-ethic and build self-confidence to take on new challenges. It demonstrates first-hand to students what they can achieve through hard work and focus and this is a skill they can transfer.

7. Concluding Remarks

In a world that is increasingly culturally pluralistic there are few places untouched by globalisation. This world requires a more sophisticated, culturally aware citizenry to promote peace and understanding and avoid suspicion, conflict and exploitation. Language teaching and learning enables people to avoid stereotyping individuals by fostering an understanding of other nations, cultures and traditions. It develops curiosity and openness to others and unites people through their commonalities whilst promoting tolerance, respect and understanding of differences.

The youth from the international communities that take part in the ITLO experience reflective changes in the way they see others and people from other countries. Being high-performing students from successful Transnational

Turkish Schools, it is not wrong to consider they may hold positions of respect and influence in the community in the future. In this sense, as future world leaders, not only do they experience significant personal transformations but also as a group they have the potential to positively affect global peace and harmony. The results of the interviews clearly demonstrate the value that the students attach to their experience at the ITLO, their acute awareness of the positive impact and change it has made to their lives and their wish to extend the effect of this through continuing the friendships they formed during the event period, rather than seeing it as a one-off experience. Their experiences and the consequent effects are the direct result of exposure to another language and culture through the medium of education.

The relationships that they develop, as a result of participating in the ITLO, they hold in high regard and wish to continue long after the event. They view their differences as something of interest and value and use their commonalities as a base for a deep and successful friendship. What also comes to the fore is their frankness and openness to express their feelings and despair for their individualistic settings in their own communities and countries. Some respondents expressed clear remarks about general challenges and shortcomings.

Our results regarding friendships and relationships are aligned with Murphy (1994) who holds that misunderstandings and conflicts are best prevented by increasing face-to-face communication and interaction. Furthermore, in this regard language teaching and learning helps students see that interaction with individuals from different social identities and cultures is an enriching experience (Council of Europe 2007). Hosack (2011) shares similar views but also acknowledges the role of teachers in the process. The interview results also support this with students referring to the example of their teachers in influencing their viewpoint and affecting their decisions for the future.

Our findings seem to bear a resemblance to Hosack's academic overall world-view about cross cultural communication and social connections. Hosack acknowledges that through cross-cultural communication, deeper understanding, respect and tolerance can blossom and help develop new friendships and social connections. In order to effectively and efficiently establish a global civilisation of peace and harmony it is essential that intercultural dialogue and communication are at the forefront of world peace initiatives (Hosack 2011).

This vision seems to be shared by the general global community and it is with this vision that the Transnational Turkish Schools have been established around the world, facilitating an education based on global values such as diversity, tolerance, respect and intercultural dialogue. Students of these schools are then given the opportunity to actually experience this in action through the ITLO events which we have seen provide a rich, intense, life and perspective changing experience that cannot be gained through mere classroom education. The catalyst for this

experience is learning a foreign language which provides the medium for the cultural exchange. The ITLO can therefore be seen as a cultural exchange platform which has the potential to give rise to international dialogue and support initiatives to foster a peaceful world whose citizens build progressive communities based on mutual understanding, tolerance and respect.

Appendix

Background Information

Name of the Student:

Age:

Gender (M / F):

Country:

Interview Questions

1. As a person who has participated in the International Turkish Olympiads, how have the Olympiads contributed to your personal development and perception of the world?
2. What kind of personal transformations have you experienced as a result of learning a different language and culture?
3. 'Intercultural dialogue and communication' is a very popular concept nowadays. In relation to this, what do the International Turkish Language Olympiads have to offer?
4. What do you think the Turkish schools and International Turkish Language Olympiads have to offer in terms of world peace?
5. Were you able to establish friendships, dialogue and relationships with students from other countries in the three weeks that you have spent in Turkey?
6. Were there any significant challenges that you experienced in the initial years of Turkish language studies or International Turkish Language Olympiads in Turkey?

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