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TURKISH ERASMUS STUDENTS' LEVEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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Abstract

The study reports on Turkish Erasmus students' level of adaptation to different cultures in foreign countries by making use of quantitative and qualitative research methods. It presents the results of an eight-month investigation into cross-cultural adaptation to different surroundings. Thirty undergraduate students majoring in finance, business and economy at a university in the northwest of Turkey took part in this study. The participants were divided into experimental (outgoing exchange students) and control groups (campus students). Using the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), a pre-test and post-test were employed to find out to what extent the Turkish Erasmus students adapted to different cultures. After the inventory was conducted, a semi-structured interview was administered to the focus group to ensure an in-depth understanding of how they survived the different cultures. The findings indicate that the Turkish Erasmus students developed a good sense of cross-cultural adaptation during their stay abroad. However, the study demonstrates that they had difficulty in using foreign language skills.

Keywords

Cross-cultural adaptation
Turkish Erasmus students
Student mobility
Erasmus programme

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education institutions is the result of knowledge-based developments in every area. The developments and the growing worldwide labour market require highly skilled personnel. The students who are aware of this situation seek to gain skills required necessary for the labour market. In doing so, they aim to go abroad to have different education atmosphere, learn foreign languages, and get intercultural competence. Therefore, higher education institutions in another country are regarded as the source of training which will provide the qualifications mentioned previously.

International student mobility has been thought of as significant part of internationalization of higher education. It has two missions: reception of foreign students and sending domestic students abroad. Students are exposed to different international cultures through spending a limited period of study in a foreign country. They try to survive different cultures and languages. Student mobility is expected to help them develop cultural competence, present proper flexibility and provide social knowledge, so they might adapt to unfamiliar surroundings (Kehm, 2005). Seidel (1991) suggests that student mobility may be

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viewed as an effective means of developing personal experience. It is also regarded as an opportunity to lead to cultural integration of institutions. In addition, it enables individuals to live and behave in various multicultural contexts (Baumgratz, 1993). Interculturality plays an important role in this sense.

On the other hand, student mobility has been viewed as the desire to receive some subjects abroad which might not be learned at home due to insufficient education institutions. This motive still causes outgoing exchange students to seek study in another country (Berchem, 1991). In other words, being familiar with host country's culture and getting its academic education will therefore go hand in hand.

Technological and economic developments have long been influencing countries in Europe with respect to their education, economy and policy. Consequently, countries are changing into a new dimension which is called knowledge society. Following these developments, the European Union has attempted to create a Europe of knowledge in order to promote employment, economy and social integration (Aktaş, 2005).

Most universities in Europe have faced growing pressures to adapt to changes due to globalization which in every aspect influences our lives. The growth in the global economy along with socio-political and technological changes has forced higher education institutions to respond to these developments (Bartell, 2003). For this purpose, these institutions send their students to other countries through study abroad programmes. When exchange students prefer to study outside the border of their countries, this period of short term study has been regarded as an integral part of their overall degree. Furthermore, it helps them adapt to a new culture and have a satisfactory education environment (Teichler, 1996). However, the only thing that students will cope with relates to what extent they have cross-cultural adaptation.

In 1987 the European Commission paved the way for a new programme for student mobility called Erasmus, that is, the European action scheme for the mobility of university students. European students have had opportunity to study for part of their degree programmes in another European country since then. The Erasmus programme is viewed as vital in this process by which exchange students acquire cross-cultural adaptation. The programme also aims to support and promote co-operation among European universities involving approximately 30 countries including Turkey. In addition, it enables exchange students to be acquainted with other cultures.

Exchange students in international higher education institutions have made student mobility significant research topics (Chen & Barnett, 2000). However, we encounter few studies about Turkish Erasmus students' experience of communicating in another country. In other words, we have little information about these exchange students' attitudes towards other cultures. For this reason, this study aims to partly fill this gap in this area, thereby investigating to what extent they adapt themselves to host culture.

Literature Review

The studies which explore the impact of study abroad programmes are important in order to understand the effectiveness of cross-cultural adaptation. The results of the studies carried out so far suggests that short term programmes can positively influence the total development of students' cross-cultural sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2006).

There is an increase in the number of universities participating in study abroad programmes, as travelling to another country has become easy and the economies of the world have become interwoven. The universities which regard internationalization as significant tend to provide opportunities for their students to study abroad. In doing so, students have opportunities to face other cultures through short term study abroad programmes like Erasmus. Later, they are likely to be sensitive to these cultures by communicating with the people that they first meet.

There is also an increase in Turkish universities which require their students to receive first hand exposure to the target foreign language and culture. Outgoing exchange students from Turkey learn to observe and analyse host country's culture. This kind of interaction helps these exchange students enhance their linguistic and intercultural communicative competence (Jackson, 2006).

Intercultural dimensions are viewed as important elements in a wide range of fields. However, there have been insufficient studies related to the effects of student mobility within the framework of Erasmus since Turkey attended this programme in 2004. Kizilaslan (2010) conducts a study in which student teachers have international experience abroad. The results show that the outgoing exchange students benefit from this experience in terms of personal development, cultural awareness and target language learning. It helps them gain understanding and tolerance of others. Ersoy (2013) suggests that Turkish exchange students develop an awareness of how to survive different cultures to which they are exposed and tolerate host culture.

Şahin (2008) conducts a study exploring the effects of international student teaching on the personal development of pre-service teachers. In this study graduate students have a two-month internship in the United States. The researcher states that such international exchange programmes enable students to become cross-culturally efficient. They understand other people's culture and gain global perspectives.

Incoming exchange students' state of adaptability to Turkish culture has also been investigated. Icbay and Kocayoruk (2011) carries out a study analysing the adaptation of exchange students of foreign origin to Turkish culture. The study suggests that students find it challenging to adapt to new culture in terms of relationships between people. However, they try to overcome obstacles and develop tolerance to new atmosphere. Furthermore, they would like to internalize new culture.

The overall results obtained to date also confirm that students studying abroad gain a greater change in intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005; Xin, 2011). Communication skills become vital from exchange students' viewpoint in order to compete in a global market. Furthermore, they help students adapt to new surroundings. Jackson (2009) carries out a study in which the researcher presents an ethnographic case study of some students participating in a short term study in England. The students attend various contexts. As the students' experience of cultural differences becomes more complicated, their cultural competence enhances.

Most of the outgoing exchange students might find it difficult to adapt to different environments whereas a few students might easily adapt to them. Yeh and Inose (2003) claim that individuals who have a high sense of connectedness can easily communicate with other people and interact in various social activities whereas those who are not good at it

experience low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Lewthwaite (1996) suggests that the people who live in new cultures are disappointed to see that they are not highly integrated with them. Given that they are unaware of intercultural communication, the situation becomes worse.

A number of outgoing exchange students may have a variety of barriers in order to adapt to host country's culture. These barriers will inhibit them from developing cross-cultural competence. Koskinen and Tossavainen (2004) carry out a study to explore intercultural competence of some students while studying abroad. The researchers state that the students struggled with feeling of ignorance, frustration, anxiety and anger during their transition from the home to the host culture. They found that the target language was an inevitable barrier when the exchange students first moved to the host culture. As they had difficulty in communicating in the target language, they tended to keep away from the people in the host culture.

As exchange students get higher levels of intercultural awareness, they tend to improve their intercultural competence. In this process they aim to adjust their intercultural awareness to host culture. Koskinen and Tossavainen (2004) claim that the process of adjusting to a new culture might become a developmental task that promotes the development of different identities. On the other hand, they suggest that intercultural awareness which grows due to stressful adjustment to differences in other cultures might be key elements of getting interculturally competent. Thus, the degree of difference might positively influence students' learning process.

As outgoing exchange students go through differing cultural experiences, they are likely to employ different communication styles such as verbal and nonverbal. Thus, they tend to improve their intercultural communication through these communication styles. However, they sometimes find it difficult to survive in the process of intercultural communication regardless of which communication styles they use (Mclaren, 1998).

As stated previously, the international students who come from differing social contexts are likely to differ in communication styles. For example, Tatar (2005) suggests that the students coming from teacher-centred education contexts do not speak without being called on. According to the study, apart from target language difficulties, cultural differences are likely to play an important role in the participation of classroom activities.

Methodology

Design of the study

The study was designed to investigate the extent to which Turkish Erasmus students adapt to different cultures in foreign countries.

Participants

Thirty undergraduate students majoring in finance, business and economics at a university in the northwest of Turkey were asked to participate in this study. After they signed an informed consent, they were divided into two groups. Each group consisted of 15 students who would study at a European university for at least six months and who would continue to study on campus. The outgoing exchange students completed a pre-test before going to a European country, which they preferred to go, and a post-test when they returned to Turkey approximately eight months later. A control group of students who stayed on

campus also completed the pre-test and post-test to measure the differences between the groups and survey the Erasmus students' level of adaptation. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 with a mean of 20.

Instruments

The pre-test and post-test surveys included the 50 questions of Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory on a 6-point Likert scale (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). The inventory evaluates such subscales as emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy. The emotional resilience scale measures the extent to which a person can recover from unpleasant situations and feel better again. The flexibility/openness scale measures the degree to which someone approves a wide variety of ideas or manners of people in a different culture. The perceptual acuity scale measures the degree to which an individual is aware of the surroundings and pays attention to them. The personal autonomy scale assesses the extent to which a person has his or her own values or beliefs to contact the other people in a different environment and acts without being given a cue for it.

The inventory was translated into Turkish, and then a back translation was performed to ensure validity and reliability. The participants were provided with Turkish version of the survey so that they could grasp it.

Following the inventory administered, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the focus group that consisted of five study abroad students. After the interview was recorded and transcribed, it was categorized into meaningful themes considering content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Later on, the themes were revised with the help of an expert on this subject.

Results

The data were analysed by means of descriptive and inferential statistics such as paired samples t-tests. According to the pre-test and post-test findings obtained from the whole CCAI, the experimental group scored higher than the control group. The overall results indicate that the scores which the experimental group received increased from the pre-test to the post-test. However, the scores that the control group achieved decreased from the pre-test to the post-test (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the pre-test and post-test scores

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Emotional resilience				
Domestic	4.81	0.97	4.69	1.17
Study abroad	4.92	0.92	5.01	0.82

Flexibility and openness

Domestic	4.48	1.11	4.24	1.21
Study abroad	4.05	1.01	4.07	1.11

Perceptual acuity

Domestic	4.68	0.89	4.64	1.06
Study abroad	4.40	1.01	4.45	0.96

Personal autonomy

Domestic	4.91	0.79	4.76	0.86
Study abroad	4.70	0.98	4.75	1.09

A paired samples t-test was conducted to assess whether there was a statistically significant difference between the Turkish Erasmus students' pre-test and post-test scores received from the four subscales. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in the scores from the pre-test to the post-test, $t(3)=-3.66$, $p=.035$ (see Table 2).

Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test for the Turkish Erasmus Students' pre-test and post-test scores

Experimental Group	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the difference			
	Mean			Lower	Upper		
pre-test – post-test	-.05250	.02872	.01436	-.09820	-.00680	-3.656	3 .035

* $p<.05$.

The findings obtained from the interview indicate that the exchange students benefited from being in different cultures and successfully managed to survive them. However, the interview revealed one major problematic theme, which was related to linguistic knowledge. The focus group stated that they had difficulty communicating with the locals because they could not use the target language. They suggested that they made extensive use of body language to make up for lack of linguistic knowledge. They did not report any obstacles to adapting to the new cultures other than their foreign language skills. According to the interview, lack of foreign language skills might be a major obstacle for study abroad students to acquire adaptation to different cultures.

Discussion

It has become easy for individuals to have first-hand experience of other cultures, as national boundaries have lost their traditional characteristics due to global communication, international trade and investment (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Therefore, this kind of experience might enable individuals to improve their intellectual and personal lives.

The distance among countries is shrinking because of innovations in high tech communication systems, thereby leading to processes of globalization. Thus, people's cultures in various countries have become interconnected. Exchange students from differing cultural backgrounds make us aware of differences in cultures. These intercultural contacts are unavoidable with the internationalization of higher education in Europe. The field of intercultural communication has become significant as many universities mainly in the west have increased their student population from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Jiang, 2006).

Individuals in the world encounter a wide range of different cultures because of the growth of communication and globalization. In other words, we live in a world where a lot of different cultural practices have been implemented (Jular, 2007). Thus, we should be aware of these cultural differences when we communicate with individuals. First, we have difficulty interacting with these people. Second, as we get to know them, we learn their cultures and behave accordingly. However, when we learn their languages, we not only obtain their linguistic level but also we have access to their cultural characteristics. We get familiar with their communicative and cultural skills through this process.

The European continent consists of many different nationalities, cultures and languages. For this reason, diversity is an important asset for Europe, which needs to be developed and protected (Aguilar, 2009). When students go abroad to study at a university through the Erasmus programme, they face diverse cultures. At the beginning of their study, they might experience culture shock for a short period. Later on, they try to survive this culture shock by employing various communication strategies.

According to the European Union policies, the study abroad programmes are viewed as decreasing cross-border differences and promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism (Jular, 2007). Thus, outgoing exchange students are supposed to respect cultural and linguistic differences. If these students do not try to make an effort to accept other cultural differences, their cross-cultural communications are likely to be disconnected. Therefore, students should be open-minded and aware of cultural differences because the speakers with whom they interact might not share the same referential meanings. The Erasmus programme

might help outgoing exchange students develop the sense of interculturality through this process.

Study abroad is also viewed as a means of academic development (Teichler, 2004). This situation is known by most students, so they attend academic environments in another country. Academic achievement is their first goal. Students should adapt to this environment in the host country in order to be academically successful there. Apart from involvement in academic learning environment, they might want to meet people from different cultures, to travel and to enjoy life in a different environment. In doing so, they will find it necessary to improve the host country's language.

Academic exchange programmes help outgoing exchange students recognize differing cultural elements and perspectives. They also enable these students to communicate with other people whom they first meet. Students might employ a wide range of communication skills to adapt to new surroundings. Therefore, higher education institutions which tend to be internationalized should also base their education on intercultural issues so that students can overcome culturally diverse obstacles. Intercultural education efforts might facilitate transmission from one culture to another. Furthermore, they might help exchange students who encounter different cultures expand their knowledge about them, form positive attitudes towards them, and develop their skills to interact effectively with people from other cultural backgrounds.

Academic staff in host countries should help exchange students communicate effectively by explaining the properties of their culture. Especially foreign language teachers should give priority to target language communicative competence by combining language and culture (Alptekin, 2002). Outgoing exchange students might become aware of differences in social contacts through instructions that the host country's foreign language teachers provide.

People obtaining mostly monocultural contacts face only their own cultural perspectives (Hammer et al., 2003). Exchange students coming from this monocultural background are unlikely to communicate easily with other students who have different cultural backgrounds. Their attitudes towards different cultural backgrounds in intercultural contacts will probably improve by means of Erasmus exchange programmes.

The students who come from a teacher-centred education context like Turkey might have difficulty adapting to an unfamiliar culture. To overcome this difficult situation, they should adapt to host countries by attending a wide range of social contacts. It will help them to practice the target language and observe cultural differences.

Exchange students might encounter such barriers as unfamiliar surroundings and feeling of anxiety. To overcome these barriers, orientation programmes concerning study abroad should be presented to them. These programmes should encourage students to seek specific information about host culture. Furthermore, they should help them overcome language obstacles to accelerate their transition from home to host culture.

Outgoing exchange students might be exposed to a more complicated atmosphere through the exchange programme. Firstly, they should cope with the target foreign language. Secondly, they should overcome different education systems (Teichler & Steube, 1991). Thirdly, they should cope with adaptation to another social environment.

As mentioned above, the need for outgoing exchange students to develop positive relationships within host culture is vital. If these students cannot develop relationships in international environment, they are unlikely to survive different cultures. Consequently, this situation will have a negative effect on their academic performance. Thus, intercultural training is inevitable for exchange students to be successful in education and social contacts in another country. Otten (2003) states that intercultural training helps individuals get over their stress and develop favourable relationships with those in host countries.

International education programmes should aim to enable exchange students to tolerate diversity and to embrace differences of other cultures without feeling a prejudice. These kinds of programmes should seek to introduce intercultural training courses, as personal experience of cultural differences is inevitable in international higher education environments. Thus, it is necessary to increase exchange students' intercultural competence.

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