

TURKISH STUDENTS' ERASMUS EXPERIENCES: CHALLENGE OF FACING THE UNKNOWN*

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Abstract

With the commencement of the Erasmus student exchange programme, opportunities of studying abroad have been offered by universities in Turkey. While students apply to this programme mainly for increasing their language proficiency, gaining a global perspective and getting the chance to travel Europe, a significant outcome is learning about and being able to live in a different culture. There is consensus on the fact that higher education institutions can maximize such benefits of the study abroad experience by designing pre-departure training. By preparing students about culture-specific facts, problems that are likely to be encountered can be minimized. On the other hand, it can be claimed that difficulties related to the 'surface-culture' are easier to deal with, whereas issues of 'deep-culture' can cause more serious problems for the students if they are not prepared beforehand. In this paper, it is argued that Turkish students' experiences of intercultural encounters in the host country provide a rich resource for preparation to the 'deep culture' and minimizing the problems related to them. However, student reflections show that these experiences are often ignored by higher education institutions and educators. The study was carried out with Turkish students who study English Language and Literature at a state university in Turkey and who returned from the Erasmus exchange programme. An interview was conducted to let students reflect on the most problematic intercultural encounters they had, which was the focus of the study. The collection of their narratives was analyzed and the emerging themes were identified. It is suggested that pre-departure training should give more emphasis on developing the necessary coping strategies by referring to the specific incidents experienced by the returned students.

Keywords: Erasmus, exchange programmes, study abroad, intercultural education, intercultural communication.

* This study is an extended version of the paper presented at the 9th International Conference on Interculturalism: Meaning and Identity, Oxford, UK, 2016.

TÜRK ÖĞRENCİLERİN ERASMUS DENEYİMLERİ: BİLİNMEYENLE YÜZLEŞME

Öz

Erasmus öğrenci değişim programının uygulanmaya başlaması ile birlikte, Türkiye'deki üniversiteler tarafından öğrencilere yurtdışında eğitim görme imkanı sunulmaktadır. Öğrenciler bu programa öncelikli olarak dil seviyelerini geliştirmek, ufuklarını genişletmek ve Avrupa'yı gezme imkanı elde etmek için başvururken, programın önemli bir yararı öğrencilerin farklı bir kültürü öğrenmelerini sağlaması ve yabancı bir ülkede yaşayabilme becerisi kazandırmasıdır. Yurtdışı eğitim programlarının bu gibi yararlarını arttırmak için, yüksek öğretim kurumlarının gidiş öncesi hazırlık programları sunmasının avantajları bilinmektedir. Gidecekleri kültüre özgü bilgiler vererek, öğrencilerin karşılaşılabileceği problemler en aza indirilmeye çalışılabilir. Diğer taraftan, 'yüzeysel kültür' öğeleri ile ilgili karşılaşılabilecek problemlerin üstesinden gelmek daha kolaydır. 'Derin kültür' öğeleri ile ilgili problemler söz konusu olduğunda ise, eğer öğrenciler bunlara hazırlıklı değilse, ciddi problemler yaşanabilir. Bu çalışmada, yurtdışı eğitimine katılacak Türk öğrencilerin 'derin kültür' öğeleri ile ilgili yaşayabilecekleri sorunlara hazırlanmaları ve bu sorunların en aza indirilmesi sürecinde, Erasmus programına katılmış ve dönmüş öğrencilerin deneyimlerinin zengin bir kaynak olarak görülmesi gerektiği üzerinde durulmaktadır. Ancak, çoğu zaman bu deneyimler yüksek öğretim kurumları ve eğitimciler tarafından fazla ciddiye alınmayıp araştırılmamaktadır. Çalışma, Türkiye'deki bir devlet üniversitesinde, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı bölümünde okuyan ve Erasmus programına katılıp dönmüş öğrenciler ile yürütülmüştür. Yapılan görüşmede katılımcılar, çalışmanın odağını oluşturan, başarılarından geçen en can sıkıcı olayları ve bunlarla ilgili görüşlerini paylaşmışlardır. Bütün katılımcıların paylaştıkları deneyimler analiz edilerek, en çok dile getirilen konular tespit edilmiştir. Gidiş öncesi hazırlık programlarında, dönen öğrencilerin başarılarından geçen olayları esas alarak, problemlerin üstesinden gelme stratejilerine ağırlık verilmesi tavsiye edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erasmus, değişim programları, yurtdışı eğitimi, kültürlerarası eğitim, kültürlerarası iletişim.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the findings of a study carried out with Turkish students who study English Language and Literature at a state university in Turkey and who spent one semester at universities in Europe as Erasmus exchange students. The study was carried out on the Spring semester of 2015-2016 academic year and all the participants were returned Erasmus students. The aim was to find out the most problematic intercultural encounters that the Turkish Erasmus students experienced. The motive of the study originated from the students' presentations in an Oral Communication Skills class in their department. In this class, the returned Erasmus students were asked to prepare a presentation about their Erasmus experience as part of the coursework. The students were happy with this course requirement as it gave them a chance to tell their experiences in English, share their memories and pictures with their friends, and to answer their friends' questions on various aspects of their experience. In this way, the other participants of the class also got the opportunity to familiarise themselves about the Erasmus programme and felt encouraged to apply for it. Moreover, it helped to open a classroom discussion on a wide variety of topics related to intercultural issues. As the department has agreements with universities in two countries, the students who participated in the study had been either to Spain or Poland for their study abroad.

The study is based on the Cultural Responsiveness Framework (CRF) of Giovanangeli and Oguro (2016). A significant reference that the two researchers make in the development of their framework is Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997). However, with the claim that interculturality is not actually easy to measure as competence, the two researchers developed this framework with an attempt to find a suitable method to learn about the intercultural understandings of students, by collecting their narratives about their study abroad experiences. In their analysis of this data, they name three categories: 'awareness', 'engagement' and 'bringing knowledge home'. They state that the category of 'awareness' is about the feelings and thoughts related to the students' study abroad experience; 'engagement' is related to their involvement in the community; and 'bringing knowledge home' is about the influence of the intercultural experience on their current and future lives (Giovanangeli and Oguro, 2016: 72). CRF emphasises intercultural learning as an on-going experience of interaction between different cultures, including an experience of comparing and contrasting cultures, which is also claimed by Deardorff (2009). A significant perspective of the framework is the importance given to student reflections and their narratives about their experiences.

At the university where this study was carried out, what is expected from the students of English Language and Literature as the main outcomes of the Erasmus exchange programme can be stated as:

1. Developing one's intercultural communication skills
2. Developing tolerance, respect, empathy for other cultures and life-styles different from one's own
3. Developing one's academic knowledge
4. Gaining the skills of survival in a country different from one's own
5. Being able to adapt to an academic system different from one's own

As a general evaluation of their experience, all of the participants in the study reported the above benefits. Rather than the positive ones, this study focuses on the students' negative experiences as it was observed that they were the recurring topics of all the student presentations and they were mentioned briefly by the students. When they were asked to tell more about such

incidents, it was seen that the students were not prepared for some incidents that they experienced in the host country, which highlights the necessity of pre-departure training.

The negative experiences of the students can be grouped into two categories based on the iceberg analogy of culture (Hall, 1976): the ones related to the 'surface-culture' and the ones related to the 'deep-culture'. When culture is seen as an iceberg, it can be claimed that some aspects of it are visible (above the water), while a larger part of it is hidden beneath the surface (below the water). Some visible aspects of it are food, art, music, architecture, dance, religious practices, types of dress and language. Beliefs, values, world views, gender roles are some of the elements of culture which are not easily visible. The students stated that the issues related to food, transportation and the education system were difficult for them to deal with at the first weeks of their stay. Apparently, lack of knowledge on these issues may cause problems. Also, they are generally time-consuming for the students to deal with. However, as they are easily observable, they are issues to be dealt with in the context of 'surface-culture'. In time, the students got used to their new environment and developed survival skills related to the 'surface culture'.

The problems related to the 'deep-culture', on the other hand, are harder to deal with, especially if one is not prepared for them beforehand. This is due to the fact that the elements of 'deep-culture' are not easy to observe, they are related to the deeply rooted beliefs, values and traditions of the culture one is living in. When faced with a problematic situation related to the 'deep-culture', if one is not able to establish effective communication, this can cause misunderstandings, conflicts and can be psychologically damaging. If such kinds of problematic incidents experienced by the students can be collected and analyzed, they can be used as resources to develop the benefits of the Erasmus programme.

In this study, it is hypothesized that the Turkish Erasmus students are not prepared for problematic intercultural encounters in their host universities and therefore, a kind of preparation is necessary for the students. The study highlights the fact that English language teaching practices should prepare the learners for intercultural encounters and equip them with the skills of intercultural communication.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies show that study abroad has many benefits such as enhancing students' language skills (Kinging, 2011), critical thinking skills (Nguyen, 2012), intercultural communication skills (Rundstrom Williams, 2005) and personal growth (Dwyer, 2004). On the other hand, research on the problems faced by students at study abroad deal with difficulties experienced at the acculturation process. One of these difficulties is culture shock which is characterised with feelings of anxiety, loneliness and homesickness experienced in the adaptation process of living in an unfamiliar environment (Oberg, 1960). Research on culture shock produced different models that explain the stages that a foreigner goes through in daily life encounters. The four main stages of culture shock follows this sequence: a) the honeymoon stage, b) the crisis or disintegration stage, c) the gradual recovery stage, and d) the adaptation or resolution stage (Winkelman, 1994).

Li and Kaye (1998) aimed to investigate the main problems encountered by overseas students in United Kingdom and how these problems were related to each other. The overall findings showed that the major problems faced were financial difficulties and mixing with UK students, followed by academic progress issues and English language problem. The other problems mentioned were accommodation, teaching and tutoring, homesickness and feelings of isolation. Among these, the type of problem that is especially linked to communication issues is mixing with the UK students, which is ranked as the second major problem among others. English language ability appears to be a factor that has interactions with both homesickness and mixing

with UK students. The study concludes that academic institutions should provide counselling services for overseas students in order to minimize such problems.

Yeh and Inose (2003) conducted a study to reveal to what extent the age, gender, English fluency, social connectedness and social support network satisfaction of international students influenced their acculturative distress in United States. A significant result of the study shows that international students from Asia, Africa and Latin/Central America were more likely to experience racism and discrimination when compared to European international students. The authors of the study also claim that European students might have had less difficulty in coping with the contrast of cultural patterns of behaviour and value systems, compared to students from other geographic regions. It is highlighted that academic institutions should provide services for international students in order to ensure that they have adequate social connections. Another study by Wu - Garza et al. (2015) on the adjustment problems of international students in United States demonstrates that academic challenges, social isolation and cultural adjustment are the main issues to cope with for these students. The study reveals that international students face prejudice and discrimination by American students. It is suggested that the universities should be prepared to provide not only academic, but also social and cultural services for international students.

Chalmers and Volet's (1997) study on the misconceptions about students from South-East Asia studying in Australia draws attention to the attitudes and practices of teachers in higher education institutions. The stereotypical views about South-East Asian students such as being surface and passive learners, lacking the skills of analysis and critical thinking are challenged in the study.

Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) investigated the experiences of undergraduate international students in UK higher education. The study aimed to find out whether a) different groups of students had equal status, b) they all had meaningful common goals, c) intergroup cooperation was encouraged by the university, and d) administrators and the teaching staff of the university encouraged positive intercultural contact. As the study was carried out in two years, changes in students' adaptation process were also identified. It was found that during their first months, the international students experienced inferiority complexes, did not feel that they had common goals with UK students, had difficulty of adaptation to cooperative learning strategies and were concerned about their relationships with the teaching staff.

A recent study of Ata (2016) focused on the perceptions of 2232 Catholic high-school students towards Muslims and Islam in Australia. The results of the study shows that the participants had great lack of knowledge on Islam, which leads to prejudices, stereotypes and a negative attitude towards Muslims. The study concludes by emphasizing the role that schools play in promoting equality and eradicating racism. As Ata (2016: 349) comments "it is the atmosphere created by the school that can lead to increased acceptance of Muslims and Islam, rather than the level of pure factual knowledge."

Holmes - Bavieri et al. (2015) report on their study about a pre-departure training programme for Erasmus undergraduate students at an Italian university. Awareness on various concepts related to intercultural communication such as essentialism, stereotyping and otherising was aimed to be fostered in the designed course materials. Development in intercultural awareness was observed as a result of the training programme.

It can be summarized that an emphasized issue of importance in the relevant literature is the necessity of guidance and support that should be provided by schools, especially higher education institutions, for increasing the benefits of study abroad and minimizing the negative experiences. Such experiences are investigated as part of the acculturation process, and cultural differences appear to have a significant role in the overseas students' problems.

Pre-departure training is one of the suggested ways of support that can be provided by the home institutions.

III. METHOD

A one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted with the returned students of the Erasmus programme. Only the returned students were contacted and asked for participation. This is due to the fact that these students had time to reflect on their study abroad experiences, and hence were in the position to evaluate the positive and negative sides of their stay in the host country objectively. Ten students took part in the study; seven of them were female and three were male. As Marshall (1989) states, prior intercultural experience can have benefits for easy adaptation to other cultures. That is why, the students were asked about such previous experience. It was found that among the ten students, two of them had been abroad for a period of two weeks with their high school teachers and friends. One student had been abroad for ten days as a tourist. For the other seven students, the study abroad experience was their first time abroad. English was the only foreign language that was known by all the interviewed students before their Erasmus experience. Nine of the students were Muslim and one student was a Deist.

Procedure

The interview was conducted in Turkish. The following questions were asked:

1. What were the benefits of study abroad for you?
2. Have you faced misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural differences? If yes, please tell the most important ones for you.
3. Have you experienced incidents in which the other party had lack of information or false information about your country and culture? If yes, please tell the most important ones for you.
4. Before you went for study abroad, were you informed by your institution in Turkey that such incidents might occur in the host country or institution? Do you think students should be prepared for such incidents?
5. What do you think should be the best way of communication when faced with such negative incidents in the host country?

Each one of the ten participants was interviewed at the researcher's office. For conducting the content analysis, first, the interviews were recorded. Then, the recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Each student's interview transcript was read by the researcher of this study and another researcher. The two researchers coded the content of the transcripts by identifying the main themes that emerged. After that, the transcripts were reviewed once more, in order to ensure that all the relevant information was categorised. In order to ensure validity, re-interviewing was performed as suggested by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995). At this stage, three participants were randomly selected and asked whether they agree with the interpretation of the data. The selected participants stated that they agreed with the interpretation.

As the study is based on the Cultural Responsiveness Framework of Giovanangeli and Oguro (2016), the emerging themes of Turkish students' narratives were analyzed based on the dimensions of 'awareness', 'engagement' and 'bringing knowledge home'.

IV. RESULTS

As negative experiences were the focus of the study, problems related to both the 'surface culture' and 'deep-culture' were reported by students. All the students stated that differences in cultural orientations were a source of some misunderstandings, such as the ones related to body-language and punctuality. However, none of the students saw these as the most problematic incidents. The main themes that emerged related to the most problematic ones can be grouped as:

prejudiced and stereotyped views towards the students' cultures, discrimination of educators in the host country and self-reflections on identity.

A. Prejudiced and Stereotyped Views: All of the students stated that, as a major problematic situation in their communication, they were exposed to prejudiced and stereotyped views about their Turkish and Muslim identity. Although one of the male students was a Deist, when people in the host country learned that he was from Turkey, they generally assumed that he must be Muslim. This student also stated that, as he had a beard, he matched the stereotyped image of a Muslim in the minds of the people in the host country. Therefore, he also faced stereotyped comments about Islam.

One student who studied in Poland said:

In my opinion, one of the most serious problems that Turkish Erasmus students may face in Europe is Islamophobia. Because most of the people think of Turkey as a Middle Eastern country and that we are being ruled by the laws of 'sharia'. They think that the reason of our being abroad is 'jihad', and that we will kill everyone who is not Muslim. This is a very deep and important subject because peoples' prejudices about the issue are too many.

About experiencing prejudice, another student that spent her study abroad in Poland summarized the issue with these comments:

The main reason of our experiencing prejudice is that we are Muslim and Islam is seen by Europeans as a second, even third class religion, which restricts one's freedom and which does not give any value to women. They think it is a man dominated barbaric religion. Most of the Europeans do not have any knowledge about Islam, unless one has a personal interest to search and learn about it. I travelled twelve European countries and saw that people's life styles and ways of thinking were very similar, probably because they are all Christians. That is why, instead of being exposed to prejudiced views, they discuss their differences about their traffic rules, some simple problems of their countries or slight differences between their life styles. They are almost the same.

All of the students that took part in the study stated that one of the things that disturbed them was the questions that were repeatedly asked which showed that people had stereotyped views or images about Turks. The students received questions such as "do you ride camels in Turkey?", "how many wives does your father have?", "do all men wear a fez in your country?" and questions related to the 'harem' of the Ottoman Empire. Students stated that people in the host country associated 'harem' with the slavery of women, which lead to a stereotyped view of Turkish women's being slaves of their husbands. An interesting point that is worth noting is that, due to a very popular Turkish series that is about the Ottoman Empire and shown in Poland, the negative image of 'harem' and other negative views associated with it were reinforced.

One of the students who had returned from Spain comments about what she experienced as the common stereotype of 'all Muslims are Arabs' in this way:

We told them very politely and patiently that we are not an Arab country. They also think that our language is Arabic. However, I saw that no matter what we said, and how we explained it, the image of Turks in their heads did not change. I started to question like: why do these people ask the same questions to Turkish students each year, although they receive an explanation? That is why I started to think that they were doing this on purpose.

This issue was expressed by most of the students. Therefore, they thought there was deliberate 'othering' in some cases. Muslims were also explicitly labelled as 'terrorists', and the terrorist attacks in Europe caused serious problems for the Muslim students who were in Europe at that time for study abroad, including the Turkish students. One female student said: "I was in Poland during the terrorist attacks in Paris. It is so tragic that I had to face the label 'terrorist Muslims' in those days and had to explain the 'real' Islam to my friends, I had really hard time then." This student had

discussions with a Slovenian student who was so sincerely interested in learning more about Islam. They spent weeks comparing the Bible and the Koran, talking about the similarities and differences between the two. The Slovenian student eventually remarked that she was so surprised to see the many similarities between the Koran and the Bible which she had assumed were totally different.

B. (Perceived) Discrimination of Educators: The study revealed that not only the international students and the community outside the university, but also the educators had negative attitudes towards the Turkish students. Among the ten students, seven of them said that they experienced discrimination by their teachers. A female student who had been to Spain stated: *"In one of our classes our teacher made unfavourable comments about the Ottoman Empire. There were lots of other Erasmus students from other nationalities in class, and I don't think this was right behaviour."* Another female student who spent her study abroad in Spain commented as:

I failed from two of the classes just because the instructor refused to speak in English and taught the class in Spanish instead. As Erasmus students we politely asked them several times to speak in English and said that we do not know Spanish. They said they will do so, but they didn't. They almost had an implying attitude like 'if you came here, you have to learn Spanish.' This was my first time abroad, and I did not learn Spanish before. How can I learn Spanish in such a short time to be able to follow a class? I went there to study English Language and Literature.

A female student expressed her feelings by reporting as *"While some of our teachers were really interested in the other Erasmus students in class, they did not show the same interest to me. I was disappointed with this attitude."* Discrimination was also perceived to be displayed by ignoring the presence of the Turkish students, speaking and dealing with other students in class, while having no communication with the Turkish students.

A female Erasmus student who studied at a Polish university said:

We were ten students in our American Literature class. One day, during the class, the teacher said: "The belief of animal sacrifice is an unnecessary and meaningless barbaric ritual of the Jews and Muslims." I felt very bad at that moment but I could not say anything. Because those days I was having hard times in passing the class, due to the negative attitude of the teacher towards me.

When the same student was asked what percentage of the teachers showed discrimination towards her or towards other students (as she explained that German students were also discriminated), she said it was nearly forty percent in total. What was also significant in her remarks is that the Turkish students who had lower levels of proficiency in English were not aware of the prejudiced comments of the educators, as they could not quite understand what they said.

C. Self-reflections on Identity: Another issue that was an emerging theme in the interviews was the students' self-reflections on their identity. It appears that the students questioned their identity as a consequence of the intercultural encounters they had. Questioning and reflecting on one's identity is an important outcome of intercultural learning. Hence, it is actually a positive and desired outcome. However, it was an emerging theme of the study as it was the consequence of the negative experiences of the students. Therefore, it was stated by students either as concerns about the identity loss of other students in the host country, or questioning and feeling the need to learn more about one's own identity.

A student that had been to Spain said:

In my Erasmus experience, what made me feel bad most was that people of my religion and my nationality who were studying there and whom I met there, lost their identities and became strangers to their own culture. For example, we were found strange by Turkish students and were humiliated by our own citizens because we did not eat hamburgers with pork. I saw Turkish students who did not want to see any Turks at all, and who changed their ways when they saw a Turk.

Another student who reflected on the identity conflicts of Turkish students in Poland said:

When I think about it, I do not blame the Europeans for having prejudice about Islam, because Islamophobia is passing from one generation to the other. I see that nobody knows the 'real' Islam. And I saw that most of my Turkish friends did not know much about Islam, so I came to this conclusion: if we don't know about it ourselves, how can we blame Christians?

A female student that had been to Poland explained how the Erasmus experience influenced her thoughts about her identity. She said:

With this Erasmus exchange program, I got the chance to see the 'real' Europe, not the Europe which we had admired. Everyone who thinks we are underdeveloped should feel ashamed. In terms of technology, for example, I saw that we are much more developed compared to some countries in Europe. Also, I realized that I did not get the chance to know myself since I was born. The Erasmus experience was a journey to find my own self.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are consistent with previous research suggesting that study abroad students, in this case Erasmus students, faced various difficulties in the process of acculturation. However, due to the limited number of participants in the study, the results can not be generalised. Caution must also be taken in interpreting the results, as many factors might have influenced the views of the students. Psychological factors, such as culture shock, might have affected a considerable part of the students' intercultural experiences. Although the participants did not explicitly state that they experienced culture shock, the relevant studies show that it takes time for international students to overcome acculturative stress. Viewed from this perspective, compared to longer study abroad programmes, Erasmus offers a relatively short-term opportunity of studying abroad. Students have to deal with many unfamiliar issues in one academic semester, especially if it is their first time abroad like the majority of participants in this study.

The major source of difficulty appears to be the lack of knowledge or false knowledge of the people in the host country towards Turkish culture which leads to prejudices, stereotyped views, and perceived discrimination. Such attitudes can be claimed to be part of the invisible side of culture. Hence, referring to the iceberg analogy of culture, these are related to the 'deep culture'. The issues dealt with in this study are generally related to the attitudes of people in the host country towards the unknown. The study revealed that students experienced a period of self-reflection on their identities, which can also be seen as identity conflicts, as a consequence of the stereotyped and prejudiced views, and questions they were exposed to.

Different from the research that focuses on the problems of international students in general, the study highlights the fact that Turkish students' Muslim identity was a significant source of the problematic encounters they had. The students thought that media had a great influence in fostering Islamophobia. This is also an issue investigated by Said (1997). Students' comments on intentional 'othering' can also be viewed as related to Said's (1978) theory of orientalism.

An interesting finding of the study is the influence of the English proficiency of the students on their acculturation process. As claimed by Li and Kaye (1998), English language ability seems to be a significant factor that influences many aspects of the study abroad experience. Lack of proficiency in English leads to more acculturation stress, while high levels of proficiency in English makes it much more easier for the students to adapt to their host country (Yeh and Inose, 2003). In this study, some of the students who had high levels of English proficiency and who spent their Erasmus in Poland stated that their Turkish friends in class who were not so proficient in English could not understand the prejudiced and stereotyped questions of the instructors in class. Therefore, they could not express themselves or had to pretend that they understand the instructors.

It was seen that most of the interviewed students evaluated an important part of their success in the study abroad programme by referring to how much they were able to overcome these difficulties. Some of them felt as if they were like 'cultural ambassadors' of their country, and were pleased to explain their cultures to others who were sincerely willing to learn. At times of problematic encounters, the students had to find the most appropriate way of expressing themselves. From time to time, they found themselves in a position to speak not only for their countries and cultures, but also for all the Muslims in the world, and in some cases for other groups such as Jews for having similar religious practices.

Despite the difficulties they had in expressing themselves, the students still think that the Erasmus experience had positive outcomes for them. They believe that this experience made them more self confident, they learned how to survive in a country which was totally different from their own, so it was very helpful for their self-development. When evaluated based on the Cultural Responsiveness Framework (Giovanangeli and Oguro, 2016), the present study shows how the students' development of intercultural competence is affected by not only the positive but also the negative experiences they had. It can be claimed that the prejudiced and stereotyped views of people in the host country was a significant factor that almost forced the students to question their own cultural values and learn more about their own country. The perceived discrimination of the educators can also be claimed to originate from such prejudices and stereotypes. Hence, these two themes seem to have a major contribution in developing the 'awareness' dimension of the framework, in other words, they shape the overall view of the students' study abroad experience. Apparently, 'self-reflections on identity' as an emerging theme is also directly linked with the 'awareness' dimension. Similar to the remarks of the students in this study, one student in Giovanangeli and Oguro's (ibid: 75) study states that "*you don't realize it when you are here...but when you're in another country with different cultures, different ways of doing things, you realize they are not acting like me, so you can work out 'oh this is who I am'.*" Turkish students' reflections on their identity and 'self' might also have been fostered by coming from a collectivist culture, while studying in an individualist one in Europe. Commenting on the United States example, another individualist culture, Yeh and Inose (2003: 24) claim that "upon coming to the US, international students from collectivistic cultures may encounter fundamental cross-cultural differences in notions of self."

In terms of the category of 'engagement' in the framework, it is seen that the perceived discrimination of the educators of the host-institution might have had an important influence to prevent students' involvement in a friendly environment at their institutions. However, positive engagement was experienced in the environment of intercultural friendships instead. While the students in Giovanangeli and Oguro's (ibid.) study spent 12 months in their study-abroad programme, the students in this study spent one semester in the host country. That is why students in their study had more chances to engage with the host nationals, which was sometimes a requirement of their academic work. The Erasmus students in this study, on the other hand, stated that they had limited opportunities to interact with the host society. Still, based on their remarks, being involved in an intercultural friendship network was seen as one of the most rewarding experiences of the Erasmus experience.

When it comes to the framework's dimension of 'bringing knowledge home', Giovanangeli and Oguro (ibid.) found that the students expressed themselves in two ways related to this dimension: one is their sense of belonging to a place, and the other is how the experience had an influence on their future directions in life. In this study, the self-reflections of students on their identities and values seem to have a powerful influence on their sense of belonging. This is actually an ongoing process of questioning their taken for granted values, a skill which would hardly be gained if it were not for the study abroad experience. In terms of the directions of their future lives, the fact that many of the interviewed students were looking for ways to go back abroad can be

claimed to show that they are willing to further the positive outcomes of their experiences in academic or other job-related ways.

On the other hand, from the perspective of intercultural education, the study reveals that the students would have less problems of adaptation if they were prepared for the possible difficulties beforehand. This highlights the role of higher education institutions in providing the necessary services for the needs of study abroad students. As claimed by Makarova and Birman (2016: 11), "the establishment of *social equality and justice in education* is a pressing topic for educational systems to support minority youths' academic, social and psychological adjustment." It is clear that proficiency in English helps students not only to survive in a foreign culture, but also to be able to deal with the issues related to the 'deep-culture'. Hence, foreign language teaching approaches should not only equip the learners with general facts about a specific culture, but also with the necessary coping-strategies for problematic intercultural encounters.

The students stated that the only pre-departure training that was provided by the Erasmus office of their home university was a two hours session of informing the students of some paperwork to be done. All of the students commented that this was definitely not adequate. A training programme that prepares the students for all aspects of their study abroad appears to be crucial for Erasmus students. As explained by Holmes, Bavieri and Ganassin (2015), such training can make the students familiar with some intercultural communication concepts. The returned students can be invited to the training programme in order to share their own narratives.

VI. CONCLUSION

The major aim of the study was to find out the Erasmus students' communication problems that occur because of cultural differences. It is concluded that students should be given pre-departure training that covers all the issues that might cause difficulty, but especially about issues related to the aspects of culture which are not easily observable, as mentioned in this study. It can be claimed that the major element of 'deep-culture' that Turkish students had to deal with was the host culture's attitudes towards the unfamiliar and the unknown. For pre-departure training, an incident-based approach is likely to be more beneficial by making use of the returned students' real experiences. Experiential learning activities such as role-plays can be designed based on these experiences.

The study shows that there should be a kind of assessment to be made by both the home and host institutions in order to see the development of the students' intercultural competence. In this way, the educators in both institutions can ensure that everything is going well for the international students and if not, they can implement procedures for understanding what goes wrong. If necessary, training should be given to the educators of the host country about intercultural issues. In an intercultural education context, students' experiences and their stories should matter for the institutions, and solutions to problems should be offered in order to enhance the benefits of this unique experience.

The students evaluate the Erasmus experience positively, despite the difficulties they faced. Although their evaluation is positive, it should be highlighted that neglecting the problems encountered would prevent development of pre-departure training programmes. Another issue to be considered is how to develop awareness of students about the responsibilities of higher education institutions and instructors in an intercultural education context. In the future, longitudinal studies can be carried out to check the stability and changes of Erasmus students' perceptions over time.

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