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## INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS: ERASMUS STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

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**Summary.** In spite of the popularity of the Erasmus Mundus student mobility program, few formalized studies have been carried out to explore whether this program of international study is achieving its aims of promoting positive attitudes toward other cultures, developing competence in foreign languages, and increasing global awareness. Existing studies indicate that the majority of program participants report a positive experience. On the other hand, researchers have also noted numerous issues that may negatively affect individual students' perceptions of their experience, including language barriers, cultural differences and problems related to the program of study. The researchers believe it is important to develop a more in-depth understanding of participating students' personal experiences, from a social as well as an academic perspective. Doing so may draw attention to the strengths and potential weaknesses in individual institutions' implementations of the Erasmus program and guide program coordinators in designing a more enriching environment for visiting students. Accordingly, this study explored the attitudes of nine Erasmus-sponsored students concerning their social and academic experiences at a Turkish university, using open-ended questionnaires to elicit respondents' views. The results revealed that while the participants generally held a positive attitude toward Turkish culture, few of them had developed sufficient skills in Turkish to communicate on more than a superficial level, and many of them still regarded Turkish culture as inaccessible in many ways. The fact that most of the participants reported spending more time socializing with other foreign students and communicating in either English or their native languages may largely account for this issue. While this study is small in its scope, it may draw attention to some considerations that should be addressed in terms of program planning, including provisions for increased instruction in Turkish, as well as enhanced opportunities to interact with Turkish students on a social level.

**Keywords:** Erasmus program, intercultural awareness, student mobility, study abroad.

## **The Erasmus Mundus Mobility Program**

The Erasmus Mundus Program was established in 1987 to promote student mobility between international universities in participating countries in Europe and beyond as a means to “promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures” (European Commission, n. d., para. 1) throughout the European Union and other industrialized and Third World countries via international cooperation at the higher education level. The objectives of the program are reflected in the aims of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*. This document encompasses a number of important goals, calling on countries throughout Europe and beyond to promote increased intercultural awareness and experience in order to foster social, cultural and economic growth (CoE, 2001, 2001; European Commission, 2011). In this respect, Kumpikaite and Duoba (2007) point to the development of foreign language skills and intercultural competence through student mobility as two of the most significant contributions of the Erasmus program.

Since the inception of the Erasmus exchange program, over 3 million students from 27 European Union member countries, as well as Croatia, Turkey, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, have taken advantage of Erasmus funding to participate in study abroad as a means to develop appreciation for other cultures and to build intercultural competence and foreign language skills (European Commission, 2011). According to researchers such as Bracht et al. (2006) and Çelik (2009), students who participate in study abroad tend to exhibit increased competencies in numerous areas, including foreign language proficiency; intercultural understanding; academic knowledge; communicative ability; problem-solving; and leadership ability.

## **Students' Views of their Erasmus Experiences**

A limited number of formalized studies have been carried out to explore whether this program of international study is, in fact, achieving its aims of promoting positive attitudes toward other cultures, developing competence in foreign languages, and increasing global awareness. The existing research indicates that, from a broad perspective, the majority of program participants report a positive and enriching experience (e.g., Mutlu, Alacahan, & Erdil, 2010); furthermore, former Erasmus students believe that the skills acquired as a result of study abroad have benefited them in both their personal and professional lives (Bracht et al., 2006). On the other hand, more focused investigations have also noted numerous problems that may have a negative impact on individual students' experiences, including language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties related to the program of study (Lipowski, 2012), as well as logistical issues, unresponsive mentors and difficulties readjusting to their home environment upon completion of study abroad (Aydin, 2012).

## **Purpose of the Study**

In light of these issues, the researchers believe that it is important to develop a more precise and in-depth understanding of participating students' personal experiences in the course of Erasmus study, both from an academic and social perspective.

By doing so, it may be possible to identify the strengths and potential weaknesses in individual institutions' implementations of the Erasmus program and to guide program coordinators in designing a more enriching environment for visiting students. Accordingly, this study was designed to explore the attitudes of Erasmus students visiting a Turkish university toward the Turkish language and culture and their overall experience in the program, focusing on the following research questions:

After spending time in Turkey, what was their overall impression of Turks and Turkish culture?

What types of social interactions did they experience, and how did these affect their attitudes toward Turks and Turkish culture?

How did they view their experience from an academic perspective?

How did they feel about their communicative skills in Turkish, and how did their level of proficiency affect their overall experience?

Did the participants believe that their experience had affected their perceptions toward Turks and Turkish culture?

## **Research Framework**

As the focus of this study concerned the manner in which Erasmus students perceived their experiences during their study abroad, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their views (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Accordingly, the data were collected through open-ended survey questions that were designed to elicit respondents' views concerning their intercultural experiences in Turkey.

## **Setting and Participants**

The study was carried out at a prominent university located in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region in the 2012–2013 academic year. As the researchers were interested in the views of a specific, limited group of students, a purposive method of sampling was employed (Patton, 2002), and a group of nine Erasmus-sponsored students from four different countries agreed to participate in the study. Prior to the data collection phase, informed consent was obtained for use of the survey responses. Of the nine participants, three were from Lithuania, two were of Spanish nationality, three were visiting from Romania and one student came from Estonia. The participants, who comprised both undergraduate and graduate students, were pursuing a variety of degrees, including the Fine Arts, psychology, engineering, urban and regional planning, and international relations and European studies. A description of each of the participants is provided below, in Table 1. The respondents are referenced as L1, L2, L3, and so on in order to protect their anonymity.

Table 1

**Participant demographics**

| Participant Designation | Nationality | Gender | Education Level    | Major  | Length of Time in Turkey |
|-------------------------|-------------|--------|--------------------|--|--------------------------|
| L1                      | Lithuanian  | Female | Undergraduate      | Fine Arts                                    | 3 months                 |
| L2                      | Lithuanian  | Female | Undergraduate      | Psychology                                   | 3 months                 |
| L3                      | Lithuanian  | Female | Undergraduate      | Psychology                                   | 8 months                 |
| S1                      | Spanish     | Male   | Undergraduate      | Engineering                                  | 8 months                 |
| S2                      | Spanish     | Female | Undergraduate      | Mining engineering                           | 8 months                 |
| R1                      | Romanian    | Male   | Graduate (Masters) | Arts   | 8 months                 |
| R2                      | Romanian    | Female | Undergraduate      | International relations/<br>European studies | 3 months                 |
| R3                      | Romanian    | Male   | Undergraduate      | Arts   | 4 months                 |
| E1                      | Estonian    | Female | Graduate (Masters) | Urban and regional planning                  | 2.5 months               |

**Data Collection**

The data were collected via a series of open-ended survey questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008) which were developed by the researchers in consideration of the objectives of the Erasmus Mundus 2009–2013 program. The survey items revolved around the participants' prior beliefs about Turkish culture; their views of Turkish culture following their experience; their level of comfort with Turkish culture; their prior and current proficiency in the Turkish language; their perceptions of Turkish attitudes toward their home cultures; and whether they would return or maintain contact with any of their Turkish acquaintances (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of the survey questions). The list of survey items was reviewed by a colleague who had considerable professional experience with the Erasmus program in order to confirm the appropriateness of the survey questions (Merriam, 2002).

**Data Analysis and Credibility**

Following collection of the completed surveys, the participants' responses were reviewed individually by each of the researchers. Working separately, the researchers recorded their impressions of the character of the various responses and categorized them according to the recurring ideas. The researchers then met to collaborate on their interpretations, confirming or adjusting their interpretations according to the consensus of the group members. A research report was prepared, and again, an outside auditor was asked to review the researchers' interpretations of the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008; Merriam, 2002).

## Results

The results of the surveys are discussed in terms of the main categories that were identified by the researchers, in consideration of the research questions. Quoted material from the participants' responses is included to provide illustrative examples of their ideas.

### Participants' General Impressions of Turkish Culture

Most of the respondents revealed that, prior to their experience, their views of Turkish culture were mainly based on impressions obtained from the media or from friends and family who had visited Turkey. The general view expressed by the respondents was of a conservative, religious culture where men play a more active social role, while women tend to remain at home. At the time of data collection, the participants had spent at least 2.5 months and a maximum of 8 months at the university and had had an opportunity to confirm or adjust these views. For most of the participants, the impression remained that the majority of Turks were conservative and religious. According to Participant L1, for instance "a lot of different people live in Turkey, and the majority of them are very religious. These are conservative people, too, [with a] very complicated dressing style for women." Participant L2 supported this with her view that "Turkey has more rules and is more reserved as a country. Lithuanian people have more freedom in behaving as individuals like." Participant S2, furthermore, revealed her belief that "it's a closed culture and they live many years ago. They need to improve many things."

On the other hand, Participant L2 expressed surprise that "not all of them [Turkish people] are really Muslims." Participant S1 also made this distinction, pointing out that "there are two parts: those who try to be more liberal and those who try to hold on to traditions."

### Participants' Experiences with Social Interactions

In spite of their somewhat negative reflections on what they saw as overly-conservative views, most of the participants remarked favorably on the friendly interactions they had experienced. According to participant R2, for example, "every time someone asks me what [Turkish people] are like, I always say that they are very friendly and kind." Likewise, as Participant S1 explained, "I love that they are really polite with the people that they consider as guests." Participant L3 also related how her Turkish acquaintances had reached out to her, as "close friends invited me to spend time with them, to participate in more events, to visit some places; they tried to speak English and to communicate with me."

On the other hand, several of the respondents indicated that they were conscious of their status as outsiders, as in the way that "people stare us because we speak a different language" (S1) and "everybody watching me like I'm from the moon" (E1). Participant L1 likewise expressed discomfort in the attitudes she perceived from the Turkish people around her; as she put it, "I can't dress like I want. I felt under pressure from Turkish people."

Perhaps because of these circumstances, few of the respondents reported spending much time with Turkish students, instead associating more frequently with other Erasmus students. According to Participant L2, her time spent with Turkish students was limited to once or twice outside the university:

I did not maintain a strong relationship with anybody; I spent more time with my country people because of the circumstances; we all 5 Lithuanians were living in the same place. And it was hard to communicate, because the Turks were rarely able to speak English.

Likewise, Participant S1 reported spending more time with foreign students, because, as he said, "I live with them." His experience reflected that of Participant R2, who explained that the majority of his time was spent "with the other foreign students, because we share the same floor." In one exception, however, Participant L3 felt that she had spent significant time with her Turkish friends:

We meet every day in class; they suggested socializing, and I agreed. Someone invited me to their home to drink tea, to eat breakfast, to have a barbecue, to go to the cinema, to travel together and play pool.

### **Perceptions Concerning the Academic Aspect of the Program**

The participants gave only minimal responses to the questions concerning the academic aspects of their study-abroad term. In this respect, a few of the students expressed some initial difficulties adapting to the new environment. For instance, Participant S1 reflected that understanding the procedures of the department was also an issue in the beginning, but "it isn't a big problem" due to the willingness of others to assist with any questions or concerns. Participant L2 experienced a similar issue:

In the beginning, I did not feel very welcome [in the department]. Everything was quite unclear. But after I came and met some people who offered to help, and who were always ready to help, I changed my opinion.

### **Perceptions Concerning their Proficiency in Turkish and Its Impact on Their Experience**

Unlike the strictly academic aspects of their stay, the participants' Turkish language ability appeared to have a significant impact on their overall experience in the program. In this respect, only one of the participants reported having any previous knowledge of Turkish. According to Participant L3, "I didn't have any knowledge about [the] Turkish language in my country; I met with it for the first time when I came to Turkey;" while Participant R2 revealed that "the only word I knew in Turkish was 'Merhaba' [Hello]."

However, in spite of their general lack of ability to communicate in Turkish, most of the students had not come to Turkey with any intention of learning or using Turkish at all. Participant E1, for instance, revealed that "the decision to study abroad had nothing to do with language; I just wanted the abroad experience." Likewise, Participant L1 admitted that "I did not plan to speak Turkish; I expected to use the English language;" while Participant L3 commented that, "I didn't think about that; I was concentrating on the English language, because Erasmus is [an] international project."

In addition to the perception that learning Turkish had not been a major consideration in their decision to study abroad, the respondents revealed a degree of expectation that the lack of ability of Turkish students to communicate in English was a shortcoming; as Participant L1 put it, "it's one minus – just a few people speak in English. Turkish people need to concentrate on foreign languages, especially in English.

On the other hand, based on their experience, the participants expressed a willingness and effort to improve their Turkish skills. In Participant S1's opinion, "[the university] must increase the [number] of Turkish lessons. In order to improve her skills, Participant L3 explained that "I bought a dictionary; I enjoyed the Turkish language lessons in the university; and I asked my Turkish friends to explain or translate some expressions. In the end, having started with no experience in Turkish, Participant L2 reported that she had "learnt those skills which I needed to have short conversation or to shop, etc."

### **Impact of the Experience on Their Perceptions of Turkish Culture**

The participants generally agreed that the program had offered an opportunity to expand their views of Turkish culture. Participant L3 felt that "because I had an opportunity to see Turkish culture from inside, to talk with Turkish people and spend some time with them, to ask questions or to listen what they are saying," she was able to deepen her understanding of the Turkish people. Following her experience, she believed that "it's different from Europe. They have different relationships between each other. Their people are somewhere between village and city. They are simple." Participant R2 reported a positive overall expression of the experience, adding, "I hope I will return very soon, because I like the culture and the people." Participant L2 agreed, adding that as a result, she also felt that she had developed a better appreciation for her home culture:

Because I was not so much like a tourist, I could understand Turkish culture more thoroughly. In some ways now, I can compare how it is in my country and here. There are so many differences, I think; I can better value some things in Lithuania.

### **Discussion**

Based on the participants' responses, it can be seen that overall, little changed concerning their initial impressions of Turks and Turkish culture, as they believed both before and after the study that the culture was conservative in comparison with their home countries. On the other hand, several of the participants were able to discern that the stereotypical view they had initially held did not apply to all individuals, thus demonstrating that, in accordance with the Erasmus program's objectives, they were successful in increasing their intercultural awareness (Bracht et al., 2006).

In terms of the social interactions they experienced, the participants mainly found the Turkish people to be friendly and welcoming. As a result, they were able to enjoy spending time with the Turkish students they met and to experience aspects of the culture that might have been closed to them if they had visited in a touristic capacity.

In addition, they developed friendly relationships with other Erasmus-sponsored students, and the positive nature of their experiences in Turkey fostered an intention to return. These factors point to the social and cultural growth that are among the main goals of the *CEFR* and the Erasmus mobility program (CoE, 2001, 2001; European Commission, 2011).

While the academic aspects of the program emphasized by Bracht et al. (2006) did not figure significantly in their responses, the experience seems to have been positive. On the other hand, the respondents' overall lack of proficiency in Turkish appears to have hindered their efforts to interact more frequently with Turks (Lipowski, 2012). Furthermore, while the participants had expected to improve their skills in English, they expressed only minor interest in learning Turkish and learned only enough to communicate on a basic level. As Kumpikaite and Duoba (2007) point to the development of foreign language skills as one of the most important goals of student mobility, it can be argued that the students did not benefit fully from their study abroad in this respect.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the present study are limited to the views of a small number of respondents; and multiple factors, including the personal characteristics, academic interests, and previous intercultural experiences of these individuals may have influenced their perceptions of their experiences. In terms of the immediate circumstances, it can be seen that overall, the students' perceptions were positive and that the program objectives of fostering intercultural awareness and social growth were met. However, it appears that the ability of the participants to socialize or to experience the culture on more than a surface level was impaired by two factors.

First, the living situation of the students creates a likelihood that they would associate more frequently with other Erasmus students, including those from their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as opposed to seeking out Turkish students for socializing. A reconfiguration of these arrangements might encourage greater interaction between Turkish and foreign students, resulting in greater cultural awareness on both sides. Second, the language barrier appears to have posed a significant obstacle in terms of interactions between foreign and Turkish individuals. This problem may be addressed, in part, by offering intensive courses in Turkish that are focused on the needs of foreign students studying in Turkey.

In addition to adjustments to living arrangements and greater attention to developing foreign students' Turkish skills, program coordinators might consider establishing activities that are designed to bring Erasmus students and their Turkish classmates together for social interactions and sharing of culture.

While the circumstances for Erasmus students at any given university are highly situational, program planners may take the results of this study into account in determining how best to meet the needs of the program participants in a broad range of linguistic and cultural environments.



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## TARPKULTŪRINĖS UŽSIENIO STUDENTŲ PATIRTYS: ERASMUS STUDENTŲ POŹIŪRIS Į TARPKULTŪRINĖS KOMPETENCIJOS PLĖTOJIMĄ

**Santrauka.** Nors studentų mobilumo programa *Erasmus Mundus* ir populiarai, mažai tyrimų atlikta norint sužinoti, ar ši tarptautinių studijų programa pasiekia savo tikslus: ar skatina teigiamą požiūrį į kitas kultūras, ar tobulina užsienio kalbų kompetenciją, ar padeda išmanyti globalaus masto problemas. Anksčiau atlikti tyrimai rodo, kad dauguma šios programos dalyvių savo patirtį vertina teigiamai. Kita vertus, tyrėjai taip pat minėję daugybę dalykų, kurie gali suformuoti neigiamą kai kurių studentų požiūrį į jų patirtį šioje programoje, įskaitant kalbos barjerus, kultūrinius skirtumus ir problemas, susijusias su studijų programa. Mokslininkai mano, kad svarbu plėtoti programoje dalyvaujančių studentų geresnį supratimą apie savo pačių patirtį tiek socialiniu, tiek akademinio požiūriu. Tai leistų išryškinti stipriuosius ir potencialiai silpnuosius šios programos aspektus įvairiose institucijose ir programų koordinatoriams padėtų sukurti geresnes sąlygas atvykstantiems studentams. Todėl šiame straipsnyje buvo tiriama devynių *Erasmus* programos remiamų dalyvių požiūris į jų socialinę ir akademinę patirtį viename Turkijos universitete. Respondentams buvo pateikti klausimai. Rezultatai rodo, kad nors tyrimo dalyviai vertina teigiamai turkų kultūrą, tik nedaugelis jų įgijo neblogus turkų kalbos įgūdžius, kad galėtų bendrauti turkiškai geriau negu pavirsutiniškai, o daugelis vis dar laiko turkų kultūrą neprieinama daugeliu požiūriu. Tai, kad didžioji dalis dalyvių praleido daugiau laiko bendraudami su kitais užsienio studentais anglų arba savo gimtąja kalba, galėjo paveikti jų požiūrį. Nors šis tyrimas ir mažos apimties, jis atkreipia dėmesį į tam tikras aplinkybes, kurios svarbios planuojant programą, įskaitant galimybes klausyti dalykus turkų kalba ir bendrauti su turkų studentais.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** *Erasmus* programa, tarpkultūrinė kompetencija, studentų mobilumas, studijos užsienyje.

Appendix 1

### Survey Questions

| Part I | General Cultural Impressions  |
|--------|---|
|        | Before you arrived in Turkey, what was your overall impression of Turkish culture? On what did you base your ideas (e.g., friends/family; other students from your country who studied in Turkey; Turkish students studying in your country; media; courses taken at school; etc.)? |
|        | Now that you have spent some time in Turkey, what stands out as your primary impression of Turkish culture? How would you describe Turkish culture to your friends and family at home?  |
|        | What do you enjoy most about Turkish culture?   |
|        | What makes you most uncomfortable about Turkish culture?  |
|        | In your opinion, what are the greatest similarities between your home culture and Turkish culture?  |
|        | What do you think are the most significant differences between your home culture and Turkish culture?   |

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
|                 | <i>Do you think that your stay in Turkey has deepened your understanding of Turkish culture? Please elaborate.</i>  |
|                 | Do you think that spending time in a foreign culture has increased your understanding of your home culture? Please explain.   |
|                 | <i>Based on your experience so far, would you choose to come back to Turkey in the future? Why or why not?</i>  |
| <b>Part II</b>  | <b>Social Integration</b>   |
|                 | In general, do you feel that you have been welcomed to KTU and to your academic department?   |
|                 | Do you think that the attitudes of Turkish people toward your home culture have affected your reception here? Please explain.   |
|                 | <i>Has your own attitude about Turks and Turkish culture been a factor in your interactions here? Please explain.</i>   |
|                 | How would you describe your social interactions here? Have they been mostly positive or negative? Please give specific examples.  |
|                 | Have you spent time with Turkish students or other Turkish people you have met in a social context? If so, describe some of the circumstances.  |
|                 | <i>Do you spend more of your time with Turkish students, or with other foreign students, and why?</i>   |
|                 | What plans have you made or do you intend to make in terms of staying in contact with people you have met in Turkey?  |
|                 | What, if anything, have you done to introduce your home culture and language to others during the course of your stay?  |
|                 | <i>What steps have you taken to increase your understanding of Turkish culture during your stay?</i>  |
| <b>Part III</b> | <b>Language Integration</b>   |
|                 | What was your Turkish language ability before you came to Turkey? Had you studied Turkish in school or learned from friends or family members, or is this your first experience with the Turkish language?                  |
|                 | When making your plans to study in Turkey, did you plan to speak Turkish during your stay, or did you plan to rely on another language to communicate? If you did expect to use a language other than Turkish, what was it? |
|                 | Was the desire to learn a foreign language or improve your Turkish skills a factor in your decision to study abroad through Erasmus?  |
|                 | How would you rate your current level of Turkish? How does your current level of skill compare with your ability when you first arrived in Turkey?  |
|                 | Have you taken steps to improve your Turkish skills since you arrived in Turkey? If so, please describe them.   |
|                 | Have you used mainly Turkish during your stay? If not, what language have you primarily used to communicate with others?  |
|                 | Do you feel that your level of Turkish has had an effect on your ability to integrate well into the academic or social environment here in Turkey? Why or why not?  |
|                 | Have you spent the majority of your time with other foreign students or individuals with whom you share a common language other than Turkish, or have you interacted most often with native Turkish speakers?               |