

BECOMING BORDERLESS: MAKING THE UNFAMILIAR FAMILIAR-ERASMUS EXPERIENCE *

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Abstract

This study focused on seventeen ERASMUS exchange students' experiences who were enrolled in a business course at a university in Turkey. The data was collected between the years 2013 and 2016, using reflective journaling. Through thematic analysis three overarching themes were identified in the reflective journals: Openness and willingness to engage in the unfamiliar, viewing study abroad experience as a catalyst for breaking down prejudices, and becoming "borderless" or culturally aware. Data revealed that an international student mobility program can create intercultural awareness, help understand similarities and differences in people from different languages, cultures, religions, and countries, among exchange students who have been a part of it.

Keywords: ERASMUS, Student mobility, Intercultural awareness, Openness, Reflective journaling

Sınırların Ötesine Geçmek: Bilinmeyene Aşına Olmak-Erasmus Deneyimi

Öz

Bu çalışma öğrenci değişim programı çerçevesinde Türkiye'de İşletme bölümünden ders alan 17 Erasmus öğrencisinin deneyimine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışmanın verileri yansıtma metodu çerçevesinde 2013-2016 arasında toplanmıştır. Tematik analiz yoluyla, yansıtıcı günlüklerden üç ana tema belirlenmiştir: Bilinmeyene/alışılan dışına çıkmaya isteklilik, açıklık, yurtdışında öğrenim görme deneyimiyle önyargıları aşma ve "sınırsız" veya kültürel farkındalık için bir katalizör işlevi görme. Veriler, uluslararası bir öğrenci hareketliliği programının kültürlerarası farkındalık yaratabildiğini, bunun bir parçası olan değişim öğrencilerinin, farklı dillerden, kültürlerden, dinlerden ve ülkelerden gelen insanlar arasındaki benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları anlamalarına yardımcı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: ERASMUS, Öğrenci hareketliliği, Entelektüel farkındalık, Açıklık, Yansıtıcı günlük

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Becoming Borderless: Making The Unfamiliar Familiar-Erasmus Experience

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has developed several mobility opportunities to help students enrich their academic, professional, and personal experiences. These include Comenius (for all levels of school education), Grundtvig (for adult education), Leonardo da Vinci (for vocational education and training), and ERASMUS (for higher education) (Lesjak et al., 2015). Among these, however, ERASMUS—EuRo pean Community Action Scheme for the Mo bility of University Students—can be considered one of the most successful and well-established programs that promote European student mobility and cooperation between European institutions of higher education (Feyen, 2013; Mau and Buttner, 2010). The ERASMUS program is named after the 15th-16th century Dutch humanist and philosopher Erasmus Desiderius (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013). Since it was established in 1987, it has had an increasing impact on European students (Feyen, 2013). Primarily, it supports student exchanges for one full academic year or half a year, based on “reciprocity and symmetrical exchange between participating institutions” (Mau and Buttner, 2010: 560). The program ensures students get free admission to host universities and that grades and exams are mutually accepted by the participating universities. Besides these objective benefits, the program hopes that intercultural awareness, understanding, and cultural competence among people from different countries can be achieved (Cairns et al., 2018a). Nganga (2016: 84) stated that, “An education for intercultural competencies is designed to broaden learners’ perspectives about human differences. It is an education that maximizes people’s potentials irrespective of their differences, whether natural or socially constructed”. In addition, during this exchange it is hoped that students will not only learn in a formal classroom setting but also learn informally among peers and members of the host community (Cairns et al., 2018b). Besides EU member states, non-EU countries such as Iceland, Norway, and Turkey also participate in the ERASMUS student exchange program.

This article presents the findings of a study that investigates the perceptions and experiences of seventeen ERASMUS exchange students who were enrolled in a business course at a university in Turkey. Previous ERASMUS-related research mainly focused on ERASMUS students who studied in EU member states (Bótas and Huisman, 2013; Dervin, 2011; Lipowski, 2012). However, none of the prior studies examined ERASMUS students' personal and academic experiences while they were enrolled in a business education course at a university in Ankara, Turkey, using reflective journals.

1. Literature Review

Turkey has been part of the ERASMUS program since 2004 and is now one of the most active participants (Mede and Tuzun, 2016; Oner, 2015). According to the ERASMUS: Facts, Figures, and Trends 2013-2014 report, in Croatia, Cyprus, and Turkey outbound student mobility numbers increased over 110% compared to 2007-2008 data.

In the present literature, most student exchange and study abroad research has been conducted in Europe, North America, and Australia. In the last decade, only a few studies focused on the perspectives and experiences of ERASMUS students in the context of Turkey. However, in recent years the number of empirical studies that focus on the experiences of exchange students in Turkey has increased (Aksoy et al., 2017; Cankaya, 2017; Irmakli, 2017; Kagitcibasi et al., 2017). In their study, Özberk et al., (2017: 2411) included 175 outgoing and 39 incoming ERASMUS students. The study took place at a university in Ankara, Turkey, and aimed to examine the preferences of ERASMUS students in choosing an ERASMUS university. The researchers administered the "ERASMUS Mobility Survey," which used rank-ordered judgement to explore the priorities and selection criteria of the students. According to the results, "incoming students prioritized the university related factors while outgoing students prioritized the factors related to social environment". The results also indicated that incoming students from France preferred the Ankara university, and the outgoing students preferred to study in Germany.

Irmakli (2017) focused on the experiences of 39 incoming exchange students studying at a university in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2016 and 2017. These students were enrolled in the Language Center and learning Turkish language and culture before they started a degree program at the university. It was a mixed-method study where the data was collected through focus groups and a questionnaire. The study aimed to investigate if the ERASMUS and Mevlana exchange mobility programs influenced students' perspectives of the host culture and lifestyle, in this case in Turkey. The findings revealed that students had

incorrect representations about Turkish culture representations to be mostly wrong (though some were true) through their own personal experiences. Overall, the impact of the exchange programs was positive.

Aksoy et al., (2017) used the intercultural communication competence (ICC) framework and focused on the experiences of 20 ERASMUS students (10 male, 10 female) studying in Izmir, Turkey. The study explored the change in attitudes toward Turkish culture once these ERASMUS students came and started studying in Turkey. The data were collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and the emerging themes revealed that there is a relationship between studying abroad and ICC development. Aksoy et al., argued that studying abroad in a country where there is a greater cultural distance from their own may help develop a stronger intercultural knowledge.

Kagıtcıbaşı et al. (2017) study focused on 137 exchange students studying at a university in Istanbul, Turkey. There were two groups of students—73 European students who were participating in the ERASMUS program and 64 American, Canadian, and Australian students—who were in Turkey through bilateral agreements between their universities. Kagıtcıbaşı et al. argued that the European students had more prior experience with Turkish people than the American, Canadian, and Australian students due to there being a larger number of Turkish immigrants in Europe. The data were collected through a rating-scale questionnaire. The study aimed to understand the factors that play a role in the outcome of the participating students' overall experiences. The students' own attitudes and personal attributes were believed to influence their experiences while in Turkey. The findings revealed that diverse aspects of the students' background (country of origin) and their personality (related self) were important factors that influenced them to have diverse experiences.

As can be noted from the above, while various studies have focused on the experiences of exchange students in Turkey, none have utilized the student journals for data collection and analysis.

2. Methodology of Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of 17 ERASMUS exchange students who were enrolled in a business course at a university in Turkey. Qualitative research study approach was adopted because the purpose of this study was to understand the in-depth views and feelings of ERASMUS students studying in Ankara, Turkey through their written reflections.

2.1. Research Setting and Participants

The research setting of this study was a public university in Ankara, Turkey. The majority of the instruction at the institution is conducted in Turkish; however, about 30% of the instruction is conducted in English. Due to the bilateral agreement of sending institutions/ universities of the ERASMUS program, every department is obligated to offer a variety of courses instructed only in English. The availability of English-instructed courses attracts a number of English-speaking international students to the university. In the academic year 2004-2005, the first group of ERASMUS students arrived, consisting of only five students. This number increased gradually each academic year. In the 2015-2016 academic year, 90 students—the maximum number of ERASMUS students recorded thus far—arrived at the university. However, the following academic year, due to various terrorist attacks that happened in different parts of Ankara, killing more than 150 people in public areas, this number dropped significantly to only five incoming ERASMUS students.

Seventeen ERASMUS students in their early twenties participated in this study. Out of the 17, three were from Poland, five from Germany, two from Portugal, one from the Netherlands, one from Belgium, one from the Czech Republic, one from the UK, one from Spain, one from Italy, and one from Greece. Fourteen of the participants were female, and three were male. All participants were enrolled in a discipline related to social science in their home country.

2.2. Data Collection

The data of this study came from the reflective journals of students who were enrolled in a semester-long Human Resources Management course taught in English. The journal entries were assigned in English. Except for the one student who was from the UK, none of the other students' first language was English.

At this university, the duration of a semester is 14 weeks. In this Human Resources Management course, every other week the students were given a prompt to reflect on. As in the case of any given assignment, some of the students wrote quality reflection entries, while others did not put in as much time and effort. Therefore, not all of the 17 student entries were descriptive and elaborate.

The purpose of the reflective assignment was to make students think and reflect on their cultural learning experiences. According to O'Connell and Dymont (2013a: 24), if carefully implemented by the educator, "Journals provide a place for students to record observations of people, places, events, and natural occurrences that happen around them". In addition, O'Connell and Dymont argue

that journals are a great tool to facilitate learning through experience and help students become more engaged and active in their own learning. Specifically, “As students use journals to capture their impressions of the things going on around them and their places/roles in those events, they are able to make connections between what they’ve learned in class and other parts of their lives” (O’Connell and Dymont, 2013b: 25).

The first journal assignment asked questions such as, “What do you expect to gain from your experience as an ERASMUS Exchange business student at X university, Turkey? Why did you choose Turkey? Please explain. What are your initial reflections about Turkey and Turkish culture in general? What seemed so different and so similar to your culture?” There were a total of six journal entries throughout the semester. The data collection started in spring 2013 and continued until the end of spring 2016. In 2017, the Business Administration department did not receive any applicants from ERASMUS exchange students due to the political turmoil (i.e., terrorist attacks) that took place when applications were being received in spring 2016.

2.3. Data Analysis

First, the reflective journals were read without any coding. During the second and third rounds of reading, significant participant quotes and passages that stood out were highlighted, bolded, and underlined, and eventually color-coded into themes (Saldana, 2009). Using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) three overarching themes were identified in the reflective journals: 1) openness and willingness to engage in the unfamiliar, 2) viewing study abroad experience as a catalyst for breaking down prejudices, and 3) becoming “borderless” or culturally aware.

All students were assigned a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality, though the names were chosen to reflect their gender and (to a lesser extent) their nationality. English grammar and spelling errors within quotes of the written journal entries have not been corrected, so as to retain the authentic voice of the participant.

3. Results of Research

3.1. Theme 1: Openness and Willingness to Engage in the Unfamiliar

ERASMUS students’ choice of study location has typically been Mediterranean countries such as Italy, France, or Spain due to their popularity as touristic destinations and desirable climates (Gonzales et al., 2011). ERASMUS

students' choices have also been affected by similarities the host country shares with the students' countries of origin, such as in culture and lifestyle (Lesjak et al., 2015; Vossensteyn et al., 2010). Therefore, Turkey has not often been on the top list of countries in which to study abroad due to lack of popularity and cultural similarities. However, according to the reflective journal entries of the ERASMUS students in this study, travelling to Turkey was a unique opportunity to experience a culture and language different from their own. For example, Irena, who was from Poland, explicitly stated that "The main reason why I have chosen Turkey is the opportunity to experience different culture. I didn't want to move out to the European country, where everything is quite similar to Poland." Similarly, Lydia from Germany expressed how she came to Turkey with the intention to learn and understand it from every perspective. She admitted how she wanted to "free myself from these [representation of other countries in public and media] stupid fears and mental boundaries in which I have been stuck in the surrounding of my home city without even realizing it." For Lydia, getting out of her comfort zone was crucial, as she wanted "to hear all the opinions, contradictions and connections that defers from the way it is presented in the media or German public opinions." Lydia wanted to create her own perspective/lens through her *own* lived experiences and not what others have shared or dictated.

Garcia from Spain saw this experience as an adventure to an unknown territory without giving much thought to his choice, noting, "why not?" When he was filling out his application for ERASMUS, the only available country left to apply for was Turkey, and without any hesitation he immediately signed up. However, two days prior to his arrival to Ankara he initially thought, "it was the worst decision that I ever took, but I was wrong. My parents all the time ingrained in me 'catch the world, don't close doors in different countries, no one knows what is better in life.' Garcia often stated in his journal entries that his parents were always open-minded and encouraged him to experience new things. Thus, his decision to come to Turkey was fully supported and received with great excitement by his parents.

In their journal entries, students often wrote about their curious minds, in which they questioned life and the world they wanted to learn about. By "curiosity" Sova (2017: 33) means that "students are open to the unfamiliar...is about interest, a wish to learn...about challenge". As Matilde from Portugal noted, "we should educate our curiosity, to see, feel and what to know others country's and ways of feelings connected to each other." These ERASMUS students had the desire to leave the places and ideas that were similar to them. One student described this experience as "to free myself from all boundaries." Matilde further described a country as a piece of land and stated that "nobody, no country or culture is superior from any other." Her expectation was to "study

all different points of views.” She perceived this as a challenge that she fully embraced.

All these examples provide evidence of students’ openness and willingness to engage with others and travel to places and cultures that were unknown to them. Yet, in the end they were able to make the unfamiliar familiar.

3.2. Theme 2: Viewing the ERASMUS Experience as a Catalyst for Understanding Culture

Before arrival, none of the ERASMUS students were familiar with Turkey and its culture. In their journal entries they implied that it was not a European country they could immediately identify with and did not know what to expect culturally and socially. Some identified Turkey with other Arab countries because the majority of the population is Muslim; therefore, they believed that all Turkish people practiced a lifestyle influenced/dictated by Islam. As Ema from Poland wrote, “I identified this country with Arab countries. Turkey from the beginning surprised me and to this day is the same.” Aleska, also from Poland, thought all women in Turkey wore hijabs. Yet she admitted how little she knew about the country before coming, writing, “I thought most of women cover their hair, so when I noticed that they look very similar to European women in case of clothes I was shocked.” Aleska overgeneralized the Muslim culture by assuming that all women needed to cover themselves. Needa from the Czech Republic also reflected on religion as an aspect that was surprising for her. She mentioned that in the Czech Republic, religion does not have as significant a presence as it does in Turkey. Needa’s statement emphasized this specifically: “My initial reflections about Turkish culture are that it is so different from Czech culture. The most noticeable one is the religion because Czech Republic is one of the most atheist country in the world. [In Turkey] You can hear the ‘ezan’ (prayer) a few times per day from mosques.” Similarly, to Needa, Ecaterina from Greece also mentioned that the presence of religion is so different in Turkey compared to her country, which borders it. Ecaterina mentioned that Turkey and Greece have many similarities due to fact that the two nations existed together under the reign of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries. Prior to coming to Ankara, Ecaterina assumed she already knew about Turkey, as the two nations shared many commonalities such as food, customs, and traditions. Ecaterina discussed how “It is very strange to me to see the women with the scarfs. In Greece, people are not so focused on their religion and they are more open-minded than Turkish.” As noted in many students’ entries, religion in Turkey surfaces as the most significant difference with respect to the students’ home countries.

Hospitality was another theme that emerged in the students' reflections on Turkish culture. Mia from Germany mentioned, "Turkish people are friendly in a way I am unused to." Mia further explained how Turkish people being friendly was one of the most important cultural aspects that was different from her home country. She stated, "German people in general are not friendly and distant towards strangers. In Turkey everyone wants to help you." She mentioned that because she did not speak the language in Turkey she had trouble communicating with the locals. She realized that the locals always put the time and effort to help regardless of the language barrier that existed. In addition, Mia further noted, "When I say I don't know Turkish, the generality of people is starting to talk three times more slowly, more clearly and louder in the hope that I will understand." She concluded that Germans should learn the traits of being hospitable from the Turkish people. Aleska had similar reflections on the hospitality of Turkish people. She stated:

...an elderly shop assistant, gives me sweets for free, always with a smile on his face...I like that sellers show lots of fruits and vegetables outside their shops, it shows that people trust each other and aren't afraid of being robbed. In Poland it is very hard to see the shop, where lots of products are outside.

As can be noted above, some students related Turkey to other Arab nations just because the predominant religion is Islam. They have approached the differences from religious and hospitality perspectives, yet saw it as an opportunity to critically reflect on their observations in general.

3.3. Theme 3: Becoming "Borderless," Culturally Aware

Most reflective journals demonstrated that the ERASMUS experience was perceived as a contribution in terms of intercultural competence. Bennett (2004: 68) states that "one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures", leading to a certain degree of ethno-relative perspective. For example, Ema mentioned that her ERASMUS experience was remarkable, as she learned not only about the Turkish culture but also about other cultures as part of her interactions with numerous international students. Ema was unaware and surprised to find out how little people knew about Poland. She stated, "ERASMUS is an excellent chance to explain to many people that Poland is not Soviet Republic, at us white bears aren't running, that we have television and refrigerators." Ema found it interesting that many other international exchange students she met while in Ankara had the misperception that Poland was a state of the former Soviet Union. She was in utter disbelief that some of these students

did not have the current and historical knowledge that the Soviet Union dissolved almost 40 years ago. In Ema's own words, "people were stereotyping the Polish as Russian." Cordelia from Italy also discussed how the ERASMUS experience helped her "endure a new reality apart from my own." She felt the exchange program was a great opportunity not only for "cultural exchange but also to destroy the prejudices and stereotyping." Cordelia admitted she knew very little about Turkey at the beginning and realized her opinions about Turkey and other countries changed into something rather positive. Matilde was surprised to realize that she adapted to the Turkish culture shortly after her arrival. She stated, "I just embraced the Turkish culture as something that transcends beyond me, as human beings we are responsible for each other." She learned to be tolerant about differences and took on a new mindset about "bringing the differences together where there are no prejudices politically or socially in the world." She claimed her "intellectual knowledge was her weapon for a better world." Like Matilde, Aleska also mentions the power of knowledge:

During my ERASMUS exchange I mainly learned that we have to be more tolerant and less stereotypical because being different does not mean being worse. We can draw from those differences, bring some knowledge to our country, become more conscious and more open-minded, because I think being open-minded is a very important part of globalization. Otherwise, sharing our knowledge and development is just impossible.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of 17 ERASMUS students from various countries in Europe who were studying in Ankara, Turkey. Through their semester-long reflective journals, it was evident that these students were willing to go out of their comfort zone and travel to a destination that was different from their home countries. As one participant emphasized, "once you face the unknown there is nothing to fear anymore." According to Kondacki (2011), students from Western European countries who choose to study in Turkey for the ERASMUS exchange program are interested in personal growth—a desire to improve oneself, strive to make a change, and do things that are uncomfortable for their own good—rather than factors such as travelling to a popular destination (e.g., one with fun nightlife), building up their CV, or taking specific courses. In addition, students who applied to come to Turkey were *curious* (Sova, 2017) to learn and challenge the unfamiliar.

In this study, the majority of the participants' prejudices were based on religion. Prejudice is a fixed negative attitude stemming from unfairly judging another person because he or she is a "member of a different race, sex or

religion...sexual orientation, social class...interest...” (Worchel et al., 1991: 360). Difference in religion is considered the main distinction of a culture, given that an individual makes sense of similarities and difference between cultures through religious beliefs, economic systems, and arts and crafts (Moon, 2010). Many European countries share a similar cultural heritage, religion, diet, and other characteristics (Klieger, 2005). One of the most common religious features of a city’s landscape in Europe is a church/cathedral, whereas in Turkey it is a mosque. The hijab/veil/scarf that some women wear is another feature. Through ERASMUS students’ eyes, these two representations—mosques and women who cover themselves—of Islamic faith were the most noticeable and identifiable religious aspects of Turkey.

With Turkey being a predominantly Muslim country, the students’ perspectives were influenced by Arab countries that are ruled by Islamic laws. To their surprise, Turkey had a secular government. In her study, Irmakli (2017a: 8) noted a similar encounter with her participants, in that “representation of Turkey, especially on the international media affects people’s perceptions in an incorrect way. While Turkey is a secular country and does not have any official religion in its constitution, students heard the very opposite”. After their arrival, the students realized that most of the news they had heard and read about Turkey through the mainstream media presented a very different picture from what they actually encountered. Irmakli’s (2017b) findings revealed that the ERASMUS students in her study also had misrepresentations about Turkey’s religion, culture, and lifestyle through media, friends, and family.

The students understood and emphasized that learning about a new culture means effort. It is hard to get rid of prejudices, but once they realized that people are essentially the same, the small differences became meaningless. Although learning about new cultures is one aspect of the student exchange program, trying to overcome the prejudices of their own countries was also a challenge. Once they were out of their home countries, they realized that people who were not from their region also have stereotypes about them. As Dall’Alba and Sidhu (2015) state, students who immerse themselves in different cultural surroundings become aware of their practices and assumptions they did not pay attention to prior to the experience. Ema’s statement is an example of this realization: “It is easier for the agreement with students from countries of our region, of countries about similar historical experience: with Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Slovenians as well as inhabitants of Baltic countries. People from very distant cultures think we are all the same.” This study investigated ERASMUS students’ choice of location of their study, motives, and prejudice in-depth through their personal reflective journals as they were experiencing it and documenting it right at that moment. In addition, it was evident to view students’ perceptions and experiences closely as the time/semester progressed. The findings indicate a call

for the importance of pre-departure training. Informational workshops need to be implemented by the ERASMUS office administrators to provide better insights about the host culture exchange students will be studying at, especially about the non-EU countries such as Turkey. As with all research studies, the current study has limitations. The sample only represented voices of 17 ERASMUS students. Therefore, the findings may not apply to all ERASMUS students who studied in Turkey.

In conclusion, this study attempted to go a step further and analyze in detail the ERASMUS students' becoming interculturally competent and borderless by experiencing the otherness. While students reported that their ERASMUS experience made them culturally aware, get out of their comfort zones, and break down their prejudices, the durability of the effect will show only in the long run.

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