

## **Being an Exchange Student in Turkey: Adaptation to a New Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Late adolescence is a critical period of development during which individuals experience crucial changes in their social lives. Several developmental tasks appear during this transition to be accomplished by the late adolescents in order to achieve adulthood and to develop healthy psychological and social functioning. A significant task in this developmental stage is developing the ability to adapt to a new environment. This ability includes the processes of how the late adolescents effectively integrate themselves to a new culture, how they become efficient members of this new culture, and how they make sense of the elements in the new culture. In order to explore the adaptation ability, this study aimed at describing what sorts of experiences that exchange students had while they pursued some of their studies abroad. The participants were 50 undergraduate and graduate students who were attending two higher education institutions in Turkey. They were predominantly from three different regions: (a) European Union, (b) North America, and (c) Other (Australia and Ukraine). There were three main data sources: Focus group meetings were held approximately twice in a month in three rounds. The first round was done with 22 students in Ankara during October-December 2008. The second one was done with 7 students in Canakkale during December 2009 and January 2010, and the third round with 21 students in Canakkale during October-December 2010. In addition to the interviews, the participants were also asked to note down their adaptation experiences. The participants were also asked to complete a short survey after they returned to their countries. The results basically showed that the adaptation to a new culture was modifying the clashing elements between host culture and native culture and modifying those elements according to the rules in the host culture.

**Key words:** Adolescents, Adaptation, Content Analysis, Exchange Students

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## Introduction

A student exchange program is a type of program that allows students, often attending a higher education institution, to pursue some parts of their scholar work in a foreign country. It is an agreement established between two (or more) higher education institutions in two (or more) different countries. The common goals rooted in these various student exchange programs are (1) to increase the participants' understanding and tolerance of other cultures while they interact with people in the host country, (2) to broaden their social horizons and thus increase their intercultural abilities, and (3) to improve their language skills. Although the programs aim to provide new skills, new opportunities for exchange students, once they are exposed to a different culture from their own cultures, they are faced with the problem of adapting themselves to the new settings. In order to explore the adaptation process, this study followed 50 exchange students attending two higher education institutions in Turkey.

A student exchange program is basically an agreement of at least two higher education institutions, located in different countries, allowing their students to follow some parts of their scholar works in the agreed institution in the other country. Having an opportunity to study abroad automatically opens a door for the students to have an experience with the host culture. The experience with the host culture, i.e. the cultural experience in the new setting, involves closely interacting with the local people in the host country, practicing their language, becoming familiar with their customs, and thus gradually becoming a member of this culture. Having established its framework of cultural adaptation as "socially established structures of meanings" (Geertz, 1973, p.12), this descriptive study presented reports from the exchange students' accounts of how they gradually became efficient members of Turkish culture.

Students pursuing some parts of their university degree in a culture different from their own cultures are assumed to be undergoing some changes in their sense-making process in this new setting. The sense-making process of this new environment is basically uncovering the novel or clashing elements in the host culture and then modifying them to live comfortably in the new environment. If the exchange students resist and keep the clashing elements or resist adapting to the novel elements in the new setting, the cultural shock occurs and then persists as long as resistance continues, and thus the students have trouble adapting to this new culture. As a result, cultural shock has become the central theme in explaining the adaptation process in any setting.

It is also a well-known fact that human beings are naturally driven to adapt to a new environment, and thus majority of exchange students are able to acquire and cope with daily life in their host societies. A vast number of studies have been recently focused on the exchange students' learning experiences in their specific cultural (or sojourn) context. For instance, Taylor (1994) suggested that it was crucial to understand the actual learning process embedded in the cross-cultural adaptation process in order to develop effective education programs designed to encourage foreign students obtain abundant diverse cultural experiences. According to Brody (1970), adaptation means "the process of establishing and maintaining a relatively stable reciprocal relationship with the human, social, or interpersonal environment" (p.14). In the literature of cross-cultural perspective, Church (1982) proposed that

foreign students (or sojourners), adaptation practices should be considered as cultural adaptation which refers to a more long-term assimilation within the host culture.

There are three main theories centering on the role of culture shock in explaining the adaptation process of people living in a different culture (Zhou et al., 2008). The theory of *culture learning* regards culture shock as the main drive to acquire culture-specific skills that are required to engage in interactions in the new cultural environment (see Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The *stress and coping* theory views culture shock as rooted in stressful life changes leading people who engage in interactions in the new cultural environments to develop coping strategies (see Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As a result, adaptation is considered to be a process of managing stress at different levels. *Social identification* theories focus on the cognitive aspect of adaptation process. Any person having a sort of cultural shock tends to perceive himself in a much broader and unusual setting. The change in self-perception consequently leads to the change in self-identity (see Berry, 1994; 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Different from the three theories outlined above, the underlying framework in this study is rooted in Geertz's understanding of culture as the system of meanings (Geertz, 1973). For Geertz, culture is

a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life (1973, p. 89).

Following his formulation of culture and his way of finding culture in the details of everyday life (i.e. thick description) (Geertz, 1973), this study frames adaptation as a sense-making process of the cultural elements in the new setting. Thus, adapting to a new culture and thus becoming a functioning member of this new setting are basically the sense-making process of local mutual interactions in the host culture. More specifically, cultural adaptation is rooted in the gradual sense-making process of what sort of behavior in a certain context can be practiced and thus is considered by the local participants as either acceptable or unacceptable, or acceptable under specific circumstances.

The common custom, taking off shoes before entering home in a Turkish context, can be taken as an example. As a participant expressed in her observation of Turkish culture, "*you expect to take your shoes off before entering a house, and if they don't offer you slippers, you feel like you've lucked out.*" It is unacceptable to enter home with shoes on in the Turkish culture. As a result, the acceptable behaviour in this context is taking off shoes and then putting on the interior slippers. However, at a wedding or funeral, it is acceptable to enter home with shoes, especially when the number of people coming home is huge. Taking this example as guide, cultural adaptation is making sense of what sort of actions in a certain context can be considered as acceptable or what actions as unacceptable or what actions acceptable in certain conditions by the others in the new setting. Hence, the primary aim of this study was to find out what practices in the Turkish culture led to trouble in exchange students' making sense of their new environment.

### **The study**

The data for this descriptive study were collected from two main sources: (1) focus groups and (2) exchange students' notes on their daily activities in Turkey. The focus groups were held by three different groups of students. The first focus group meetings were held once a week between October and December 2008 in Ankara, and the second set had three meetings between December 2009 and January 2010 in Çanakkale, and the third set involved four interviews between October and December 2010 in Çanakkale. The exchange students were also asked to note their observations on their adaptation process and to share them at the meetings. Aimed at collecting thick description of the exchange students' experiences in the new settings, i.e. Ankara and Çanakkale, the study purposefully asked the participants to elaborate on their personal accounts of what sorts of troubles they had while they interacted with local people in the new setting. All of the discussions in the interviews and their personal notes were asked to be in English.

### **Participants**

13 male and 37 female undergraduate and graduate exchange students agreed to participate in the study. The students were mainly from the European Union countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Spain) and from Australia, Canada, Ukraine and the United States (see Table 1 for distribution of participants in three rounds). The participants were aged between 20 and 30, with an average of 24. At the time of data collection, these students were attending two higher education institutions located in Ankara and Çanakkale.

Convenience sampling strategy was used in the selection of exchange students. The exchange students who agreed to participate in the study were included in the study. This brought up some problems. Since all of the communications in the meetings and writings were done in English, some of the exchange students due to the lack of speaking and writing skills in English did not want to take part.

The first higher education institution is a state university located in Ankara. The university puts special emphasis on research and education in engineering and natural sciences, offering about 40 undergraduate programs within 5 faculties, and 97 masters and 62 doctorate programs within 5 graduate schools. It has approximately 23,000 students, of which 15,800 are enrolled in undergraduate programs, 4,500 in masters, and 2,700 in doctorate programs. The second higher education is a state university located in Çanakkale. It has 19,000 students participating in a wide variety of programs in 2 graduate schools, 9 faculties, 2 polytechnic colleges (four year programs) and 11 vocational colleges (two-year programs).

The amount of time that the participants spent in Turkey ranged from 3 months to 10 months, with an average of 5 months. Most of the exchange students in Ankara stayed in student houses located in the campus while the students in Çanakkale were staying at homes which they shared with either local students or other exchange students. Most of them stayed in Turkey to complete their exchange programs and then returned back to their countries, but a few continued in or returned to Turkey for other purposes, such as internships or working.

*Table 1.* The distribution of participants in the rounds.

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	
	Ankara	Çanakkale	Çanakkale	
Male	6	2	5	13
Female	16	5	16	37
Countries	Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Ukraine, US.	Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Spain.	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia.	
Total	22	7	21	50

### Student exchange programs

Most of the participants (40 students) were funded by ERASMUS program, 2 by EMECW and 8 by CIEE. ERASMUS (*European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students*) is a student exchange program functioning as an operational framework for the European Union's initiatives in higher education. Established in 1987 as the major part of the EU Lifelong Learning Program, ERASMUS enables around 180,000 students to study and do work placements abroad each year. By mid 2009, two million students had experienced an Erasmus experience, lasting from 3 months to 12 months (an average of 6.2 months), in one of approximately 4000 higher education institutions in 31 participating countries within the EU (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009).

EMECW (*Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window*) is a co-operation and mobility scheme in the area of higher education launched by Europe Aid Cooperation Office and implemented by the Executive Agency Education, Audiovisual and Culture. EMECW is a cooperation and mobility program that aims to enhance the quality of European higher education and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with Third Countries (Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, 2010).

CIEE (*Council on International Educational Exchange*) is a non-profit organization basically promoting international education and exchange. Established in 1947 in the United States, CIEE operates 95 educational/study abroad programs in over 33 countries, and organizes seasonal work experiences in the United States for approximately 45,000 university students each year through its Work & Travel USA program.

### Data analysis

The data from interviews and personal notes were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis involves searching for meaningful points in the data, assigning them descriptive codes and exploring their relations to arrive at themes and to describe the data as a meaningful whole (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley,

1979). The researchers first read through all the data from the notes and interviews to identify meaningful units based on the research questions and assigned descriptive codes to these units. For example, codes like “friendliness,” “cuisine,” “religious expectations,” “male-female relationships,” and “helping” were used to describe the data to uncover what sort of adaptation problems the exchange students had while they interacted with local people in the new settings. Second, the descriptive codes which fit together meaningfully were grouped in categories such as “religious expectations,” “hospitality,” “intimacy,” “practicing Ataturk,” and “material elements.”

In order to validate the codes and themes gathered from the two sources, the researcher also took some field notes while the participants were travelling in Turkey or when they met for fun, e.g. going out on Friday nights, going for theatres. In addition to the field notes, after the participants turned back to their countries, they were asked to complete an online survey. The survey mainly asked (1) how much time they spent in Turkey, and (2) what they remembered from their stay in Turkey.

## Results

The results from the talks at the interviews and the notes about the exchange students’ experiences in the new settings were organized under four certain themes. The first theme discusses the helping practices in Turkish culture, *understanding Turkish hospitality*, which was the most frequently stressed trouble among exchange students. The second theme uncovers how helping practices led to *intimacy with local people*, which was another problem often mentioned by female exchange students. The third theme discusses how offers in Turkish culture are repeated many times, which was a problem for the exchange students to cope with. The other themes reports the difference between what exchange student were thinking of Turkish culture in terms of religious practices and what they experienced while they lived in Turkey. Lastly, the study talks about how exchange students gradually adapted to Turkish food practice in Turkey.

### Understanding Turkish hospitality

The first striking theme that was recurrently emphasized in the participants’ sentiment was Turkish people’s hospitality and friendliness. Coming from a different “cultural pattern of group life” (Schutz, 1944, p. 499), the exchange students said:

R3/L1: Turkey also impressed me with friendly and helpful people. For the first days of my stay while I was new there, I could feel understanding smiles of people in the streets. It’s not a secret, not everyone in Turkey can speak in English [...] I was lost every time I could find a people who helped me.

R1/U3: I recall people [...] very hospitable. People would readily invite you to join their activities or social interactions.

R3/P2: What I remembered the best is Turkish hospitality which made me feel like at home (even better).

R3/B2: I will really miss that everyone's friendship and help they offered to me.

R1/C1: First of all, the people in Turkey are one of the friendliest people I have encountered in my recent travelling on different continents.

R1/G2: This is also one of my impressions: everyone helps you everytime.

R1/U5: I was able to interact better with the locals, and realized how helpful the Turks were to us.

Before going into detail about what was meant with Turkish hospitality, the action of helping needs to be uncovered. Any interaction in a *helping* context requires the sense-making process of what behaviour at each help offer is acceptable, or unacceptable, or acceptable under certain circumstances. As a result, accepting one's help offer requires what sort of help is offered at what context. The offer by a stranger to open the door for you when you have bags at both of your hands after shopping is acceptable, for example. However, the offer by the same stranger to carry the bags for you to your home is not acceptable. The same offer, carrying the bags to your home, can be considered acceptable if the person who is accepting the offer are old, disabled (or that person is specifically asking for that help under certain circumstances). Acting as a functioning member in a social setting in a helping context as a consequence requires the experience of these permutations at different settings.

The helping context in Turkish culture is an unfamiliar circumstance for the exchange students since they have not had the repertoire of how helping operated in Turkish culture. Thus, as they put it, the type of helping that they were exposed to in their first days was different from the one that they were familiar in their native cultures:

R1/D1: I experienced this [hospitality] for the first time when the plane landed in Esenboğa airport. People were actually giving space in the path so you could go out before them.

R1/G4: I could imagine this picture [too much food served in the dinner at a dinner] pretty well but I wasn't aware that in fact hospitality is far more than I could imagine. I don't think there is a word describing this in my language in a proper way.

### **Intimacy with local people**

The other theme frequently stressed by female exchange students was the close relationship with local people in their new settings.

R1/U2: Body language is one difference that I have experienced, especially between members of the opposite sex. Walking down the street I have to be careful not to make eye contact with men because that apparently means I am interested in them.

R1/D1: To say 'no thanks' to a beer can be very rude but to say 'yes' can mean that you have accepted the guy.

R1/U1: Before you go into a restaurant, you make sure you see other females inside, just in case.

Making sense of how a close relationship operates in a new setting is a complicated and challenging adaptation process for "the strangers" (Schutz, 1944) . Putting it differently, making sense of what sort of behavior in a casual encounter or close friendship is considered as an acceptable signal for further intimacy and what sort of behavior is unacceptable in a casual friendship requires experience and closer interaction with the members of opposite sex. Having a short talk, making an eye contact, or giving a smile in the Turkish culture for the opposite sex can refer to a signal to have closer relationship in a casual meeting or even while walking on the street.

R1/U2: Especially walking at night, men occasionally grab my hand if I am walking close enough and make catcalls. I have come across this many times, most notably with an event that started on the subway. A man was riding the subway with the CIEE group and asked where I was from. We ended up having a short conversation with him ending with me getting off the train or so I thought. About 15 minutes later while the group was entering the police station to obtain our resident permits, I caught a glimpse of the same man from the train. He had taken time out of his day to follow me around the city. This is not an isolated incident, but has actually happened multiple times since my arrival. Being followed and being constantly looked at, pointed at, and being the subject of conversation is one of the things that I have had the most difficulty in adapting to.

R1/C1: The only real problem, in my eyes, is the perception of Turkish guys towards foreign girls. I feel that anywhere I go, I have to be careful not to look at one guy in the eyes because, if I do, he will interpret it in a wrong way.

R1/A1: You accept that giving a broad smile and saying 'g'day' to people on the street isn't considered normal here and can give off a very wrong impression.

R1/A1: You understand why Turkish boys are so interested in the foreign girls.

R1/D1: Turkish men can easily misunderstand your behavior. It can be difficult to find out if the guy that you are talking to just think that it is a nice conversation or he thinks that you should be his girlfriend now. The signals between the sexes are hard to figure out.

### **Waiting for the second offer**

One of the points that exchange students had trouble in making sense was saying "No" to an offer in Turkish culture. In an offer/accept context, most often, the



person, who is being offered for something, is expected to refuse it in the first place regarding that he or she does not want to accept it. A good illustration of this takes place in meals. Traditionally, in Turkish culture, local people offer twice or more to the people if they reject it in the first place or later. The multi-offer practice at a rejection context continues until the people offered say “No more.” “Not really,” etc. However, this multi-offer practice is unfamiliar to exchange students.

R1/K1: Is it like a tradition here [in Turkey]? Maybe I'm wrong. I'm not sure. If someone asks you, if you want anything, you know. My roommate, if she's going out, if I want anything from outside, usually I have to say no. I mean. Is it polite way to say no? Someone told me it is a tradition if someone asks you something, you have to say no?

### **Religion**

Many exchange students in the talks talked about their projections about the religious status in Turkey. Most of the exchange students coming to Turkey through the Erasmus program had their first image of Turkish culture through the observations they had with the Turkish immigrants living and working in Europe. The typical Turkish culture, from their points of view, involved Turkish people practicing Islam regularly and strictly.

R3/P4: The first night one terrible thing happened for me. About 5 am I hear terrible sound outside. I thought the war started or something like this. But it was just Muslims praying time. I was jumping like this all month, 5 times per day, this sound was terrible for me. Only after one month I started to take it like normal sound and stopped jumping every morning.

R3/P7: Prayer few times in a day from minarets which you can hear everywhere.

R3/L4: That sound invite to pray. At first look strange, but later it became normal.

After being exposed to Turkish culture in Turkey and after travelling around Turkey, the exchange students observed that some people in different parts of the country or different people in the same places did not practice as much as they were anticipating before coming to Turkey. A good illustration of this was their trip to Amasra, a small town located on Black Sea coast in the north of Turkey, in the Ramadan period. Ramadan is the Islamic month of fasting, in which participating Muslims are not supposed to eat or drink during day. In our Amasra trip, they noticed some Turkish people drinking alcohol during the day, not even practicing the fasting.

R3/P7: I traveled little around Turkey. So it was difficult to me because in all different cities there are different rules. In one cities, you can walk with mini skirt and drink beer near the sea, in others it is forbidden.

### **Turkish cuisine**

One of the elements that the participants in the study found easy to adapt was Turkish cuisine.

R2/O1: I miss Turkish breakfast, my lovely simit<sup>1</sup> with black tea.

R3/P3: Olives, ayran<sup>2</sup>, salty white cheese, lentil soup, meals with aubergines, tea in small glasses with very small teaspoons, bazaar, even extremely sweet baklava [...] are all I miss now.

R3/P6: The thing I miss most is Turkish food which I'm trying to make from time to time in my country but have to face with lack of original components.

One of the local practices the exchange students had little trouble in adapting was drinking *çay*, Turkish way of serving tea. Turkish tea is typically prepared using two stacked kettles (*çaydanlık*) specifically designed for tea preparation. Drinking coffee for social purposes, like meeting for coffee to chat or drinking coffee while working, was replaced with tea in Turkish culture. Shifting the status of coffee to tea was respectively easy for the exchange students. However, one practice associated with Turkish tea was challenging to make sense for them. They could not make sense of the practice of tea being served almost in each local store they visited to shop.

### **Discussion**

A student exchange program is supposed to bring about some changes in the student's life. The program is constructed on the idea of cultural interaction and thus understanding of a new culture. Interacting in a new environment and understanding a new culture in this new environment require modifying the strangers' existing sense-making patterns or building a new repertoire for the cultural pattern of group life in the new setting (Schutz, 1944). The aim in our study was basically discovering how the exchange students were adapting to Turkish culture, and to find out what problems or troubles they had during this process.

The results from (1) the talks in the interviews, (2) notes from the exchange students' experiences with the local people in their new settings, (3) their responses to the survey and (4) the field notes showed that adaptation to a new culture was a process of transforming the existing sense-making patterns into the ones that could function properly in the new setting. Namely, the study demonstrated that the adjustment to interpersonal aspects of the new cultural context takes more time than the adjustment to basic living conditions within the new cultural environment. This appears to be case because the cultural adaptation of the foreign students requires the acquisition of new values and change in the existing beliefs and attitudes. A good illustration of this is the female exchange students' re-formulation of helping practices. Helping has a different pattern in their native cultures, while helping in the

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<sup>1</sup> Simit is a circular bread with sesame seeds, usually served plain, or for breakfast with tea, jam or cheese.

<sup>2</sup> Ayran, a yoghurt based beverage, is the mixture of yogurt, cold water, and sometimes salt.

Turkish context might lead to intimacy problems. Saying “yes” or “no” to a help offer from a local man, without being rude and without meaning further in terms of intimacy, requires close experience with the local people.

A limitation of the study was the number of participants. The number of volunteered students was 50, few of whom stopped attending the interviews or gave up the study. Further, one of the students participating in the second round had a traffic accident, and thus she had to be excluded from the study, which also made the researchers stop at that point. The other limitation was the language barrier. Since the whole data collection was done in English, some exchange students, especially from post-Soviet states and countries from the Mediterranean Sea region, had difficulty in speaking and writing in English. The other limitation was the discussion of delicate issues with the researchers. Since the interviews were guided with a local person, discussing delicate issues like dealing with Turkish boys got challenging. At this point, the researcher followed the students in their interactions with local people.

This study was essentially a descriptive one that aimed at demonstrating the adaptation process of the exchange students in Turkish culture. Some key elements that were frequently mentioned by the participants were presented. However, there were some elements to be discussed further in follow-up studies. One element was the role of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkish Republic, in today’s Turkish culture. The exchange students were questioning his role and came up with different ideas. The other elements included traffic in Turkey, traveling around Turkey, and Turkish as a second language.

In conclusion, one of the basic objectives of a student exchange program is to eradicate prejudices by presenting opportunities for student mobility and intercultural dialogue, and by strengthening the interaction within member countries to unite societies around an international mentality and an international consciousness. The findings from other research studies also support our thesis. According to Otero and McCoshan (2006), Erasmus students assessed their Erasmus period abroad very positively. Around 87% of students considered their overall experience abroad to have been positive/very positive. Further, the findings of this present study, that throughout the student exchange experience, students were open to new cultures and that their prejudices were broken down. This is the consistent evidence parallel another study in Turkey that mentioned a majority of Erasmus students were open to new cultures and any type of differences (Yağcı et al., 2007). On the other hand, the findings of this study generally support that moving to a new culture and establishing new interpersonal relations and social life is a stressful experiences. This process makes the foreign students become tolerant to uncertainty, try to adapt new experiences, and make efforts to integrate the cultural patterns of new culture into their existing value system. In considering the experiences of foreign students in this particular study, it can be suggested that there should be some educational or training programs in order to increase understanding of the processes in which foreign students perceive their adaptation challenges and overcome these challenges by using different strategies available for them. These educational programs should provide basic knowledge about their host country in terms of geography, history, customs, and religion. In addition to the issues outlined here, the program may need to encourage the foreign students using host country language abilities to ensure effective communication skills.

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