

**SOCIOCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT TURKISH
UNIVERSITIES¹**

**Türk Üniversitelerindeki Uluslararası Öğrencilerin
Sosyokültürel Uyumları**

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Abstract

In recent years, countries especially well-developed ones have been striving in order to fascinate international students to study in their countries. However, in Turkey, the majority of studies have focused on raising awareness about international students thanks to the incoming and outgoing Erasmus students. Considering the dearth of the studies on international students, the primary focus of this paper is to understand (I) how proficient they are in languages, (II) the social support given to the international students, (III) the actual contact of international students with Turks, and, in turn, to convey their suggestions through clarifying the similarities and differences between Turkish culture and their own cultures. Regarding the difficulties international students faced in Turkey due to cultural distance, the main conclusion is that universities should invest in international students by focusing on their needs such as accommodation, social activities, and language courses. Universities should also raise intercultural awareness, and student offices at universities should show great effort and care for international students. To sum up the study, Turkey should shoulder all responsibility of international students in terms of their standard of living. If Turkey achieves its role on international students, Turkey, with its increasingly important role in the world, can develop in international and academic areas.

Keywords: *Sociocultural adjustment, international students, Turkey, language, culture.*

Özet

Son yıllarda, ülkeler ve özellikle gelişmiş olanlar uluslararası öğrencileri kendi ülkelerinde okumak üzere etkilemek için yoğun çaba sarf ediyorlar. Buna rağmen, Türkiye’de çalışmaların birçoğu gelen ve giden Erasmus öğrencilerinin varlığı sebebiyle uluslar arası öğrenciler hakkında farkındalık oluşturmaya odaklanmıştır. Uluslar arası öğrenciler üzerindeki çalışmaların eksikliğini de göz önünde bulunduran bu çalışmanın temel amacı (I) uluslar arası öğrencilerin dil konusundaki yeterliliklerini, (II) uluslar arası öğrencilere verilen sosyal desteği, (III) uluslar arası öğrencilerin Türklerle olan gerçek iletişimlerini araştırmaktır. Bu araştırma ise uluslar arası öğrencilerin kendi kültürleri ve Türk kültürü arasındaki farkları ve benzerlikleri ortaya koyarak çeşitli önerilerde bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kültürel mesafe sebebiyle uluslar arası öğrencilerin Türkiye’de karşılaştıkları zorlukları göz önünde bulundurarak varılan temel sonuç şudur: üniversiteler uluslar arası öğrencilerin konaklama, sosyal aktivite ve dil kursları gibi ihtiyaçlarını göz önünde bulundurarak bu konularda yatırım yapmalıdır. Üniversiteler kültürler arası farkındalık geliştirmeli ve üniversitelerdeki öğrenci ofisleri uluslar arası öğrenciler için büyük bir çaba sergileyip onlarla ilgilenmelidir. Çalışmayı özetlemek gerekirse, Türkiye uluslar arası öğrencilerin yaşam standartları konusunda tüm sorumlulukları üstlenmelidir. Eğer Türkiye uluslar arası öğrenciler üzerindeki bu rolünü başarıyla yerine getirirse, dünyada gitgide önem kazanan bir ülke olan Türkiye uluslar arası ve akademik alanlarda gelişim sağlayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sosyokültürel uyum, uluslar arası öğrenciler, Türkiye, dil, kültür.*

¹ An earlier version of this study was previously presented in Çukurova International ELT Teachers (CUELT) Conference: An Insider View into Practice, in Adana, Turkey, May 21-22, 2015.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, countries especially well-developed ones have been striving in order to fascinate international students to study in their countries. Considering the last reports of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA): Association of International Educators (2012) and Higher Education Policy Institute (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007), economic benefits can be one of the parameters for why they have been showing such a great effort. According to the reports, the international students and their dependents in the USA made a major contribution with about \$21.81 billion in one academic year, and the net cash benefit of the United Kingdom from the fee income and living expenditure of EU and non-EU students was £4.1 billion per year. In Turkey, the majority of studies have focused on raising awareness about international students thanks to the incoming and outgoing Erasmus students, and these studies have not touched upon the adaptation problems of the international students coming individually from Turkic Republics, The Middle East, The Far East, Balkans and African countries. However, according to the 2012-2013 academic years statistics about the number of foreign students in educational institutions (Student Selection and Placement Centre-ÖSYM, 2013), the total number of foreign university students in Turkey was 43251, and 12903 of the total number were newly admitted foreign students. These statistics clearly show the increase in the number of foreign students in Turkey and its possible economic contribution. Therefore, the primary focus of this paper is to understand (I) how proficient they are in languages, (II) the social support given to the international students, (III) the actual contact of international students with Turks, and, in turn, to convey their suggestions through clarifying the similarities and differences between Turkish culture and their own cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ward and Kennedy (1993), adjustment can be classified under two categories: psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment. The former is directly related to how individuals feel about themselves, and the second refers to “the ability to “fit in” or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture” (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, p. 131). This study focused on the socio-cultural part since it has a significant role in understanding the new culture, language and contact (Ataca & Berry, 2002). On the other hand, there is a reciprocal relationship between sociocultural adjustment, and language proficiency, contact with host nationals (Swami, 2009) and social support (Ramsey, Jones, & Barker, 2007).

Among these factors, language ability or proficiency is highly important for adjustment (Ward and Kennedy, 1993). Several studies indicated that language proficiency had an effect on acculturative stress (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Gibbs, 2011), and this can be interpreted as to have an indirect effect on sociocultural adjustment. The second factor is the actual contact which refers to the participation of international students in new host groups (Berry, 1997). According to the literature, amount of actual contact is related to sociocultural adjustment (Ataca, 1998; Zheng & Berry, 1991). The third dimension, social support, is related to the integration of international students with their friends, acquaintances and professors in their daily life. To make international students feel a piece of the puzzle and adjust to the host culture, they should be welcomed and included in the society (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Based on the literature, the following research questions were posed for the study:

1. Which languages do international students use to communicate with people in Turkey?
2. What is the level of social support and actual contact in the host culture?
3. What are the cultural differences and similarities between their countries and Turkey?
4. What are the views of the international students about Turkey?

METHOD

Participants

The students who took part in this study were enrolled in different departments and preparatory schools of two state universities. At the beginning of the study, one participant was excluded due to his language proficiency, and four participants were excluded since they were originally from Turkey. From 16 different countries and backgrounds, 22 university students were interviewed for the study. To perform a detailed analysis, the participants were categorized as given in Table 1.

Table 1. Backgrounds and frequencies of the participants

ASIA			EUROPE	AFRICA
Turkic Republics (4)	The Middle East (7)	The Far East (3)	Balkans (2)	- (6)
Azerbaijan (1)	Iran (2)	Indonesia (2)	Serbia (1)	Burundi (2)
Turkmenistan (2)	Iraq (1)	Bangladesh (1)	Montenegro (1)	Ghana (1)
Uzbekistan (1)	Saudi Arabia (1)			Tanzania (1)
	Afghanistan (3)			South Sudan (1)
				Kenya (1)

As the gender distribution, 40.9% (*n*=9) of the participants were female, and %59.1 (*n*=13) were males. To the question of where they reside in their home country, 63.6% (*n*=14) of

them answered that they used to live in city centers in their country, 31.8% ($n=7$) in towns, and 4.5% ($n=1$) in village. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 31.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

To be able to describe the current situation, the survey research was used. After a part assessing demographic/background information, the surveys adapted by the researcher consisted of four parts: language proficiency, social support, cultural distance (Ataca, 1998) and actual contact (Kostovcik, 1983). The survey was prepared in two languages (Turkish and English) considering the language proficiency limitation of the participants, and conducted through face-to-face interview with the participants. The responses from the participants were coded and entered to SPSS Statistics 20.0 package program for the data analysis. In the current study, descriptive statistics were employed to take a snapshot on the data, and the results were shared in the following section.

RESULTS

Language Proficiency

Based on the classification in Table 1, the participants from Turkic Republics stated that they can understand, read and write Turkish well ($\bar{x}_1=3.5$, $\bar{x}_2=3.5$, $\bar{x}_3=3.5$, $n=4$) but they cannot speak Turkish well ($\bar{x}=2.75$). They can also communicate with shop assistants, Turkish friends and faculty staff adequately ($\bar{x}_1=3.0$, $\bar{x}_2=4.0$, $\bar{x}_3=3.75$) but had some problems about talking to official people or doctors ($\bar{x}=2.5$). When it comes to the question of which languages they speak in daily life, they responded that they mostly use Turkish. On the other hand, they do not prefer to speak in their own languages or in English.

For the countries in the Middle East, the participants stated that they can understand, speak and read Turkish fairly well ($\bar{x}_1=4.14$, $\bar{x}_2=3.86$, $\bar{x}_3=3.71$, $n=7$), and they can write to some extent ($\bar{x}_1=3.29$). They can also communicate with shop assistants, Turkish friends, faculty staff and official people sufficiently ($\bar{x}_1=4.29$, $\bar{x}_2=3.86$, $\bar{x}_3=4.14$, $\bar{x}_4=3.86$). In their daily life, they use Turkish and mother tongue in a balanced way; however, they rarely speak English.

For the countries in the Far East such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, the participants have problems about understanding, speaking, reading and writing Turkish ($\bar{x}_1=2.67$, $\bar{x}_2=2.67$, $\bar{x}_3=3.0$, $\bar{x}_4=2.33$). Due to their limited Turkish, they can communicate with shop assistants, Turkish friends, faculty staff and official people at an average level ($\bar{x}_1=3.33$, $\bar{x}_2=3.33$, $\bar{x}_3=3.0$, $\bar{x}_4=3.0$). While they use Turkish a little in their daily life, they prefer to communicate through their mother tongue and English.

For Serbia and Montenegro, the participants stated that they can understand, speak and read Turkish to some extent but they can write fairly well ($\bar{x}_1=3.0$, $\bar{x}_2=2.5$, $\bar{x}_3=3.0$, $\bar{x}_4=4.0$). Their Turkish is fairly sufficient to talk to shop assistants and Turkish friends ($\bar{x}_1=4.0$, $\bar{x}_2=4.0$); however, they have problems about talking to faculty staff and official people ($\bar{x}_1=2.0$, $\bar{x}_2=2.5$). According to the results, they rarely use Turkish in their daily life but they speak their own language and English.

Based on the results of African countries, the participants cannot understand and speak Turkish very well ($\bar{x}_1=2.83$, $\bar{x}_2=2.67$); however, they read and write Turkish to some extent ($\bar{x}_1=3.33$, $\bar{x}_2=3.17$). Due to their limited Turkish knowledge, their Turkish is not sufficient to communicate with shop assistants, Turkish friends, faculty staff and official people

($\bar{x}_1=2.83$, $\bar{x}_2=2.67$, $\bar{x}_3=2.33$, $\bar{x}_4=2.17$). Therefore, they usually use their mother tongue but Turkish and English to some extent.

Social Support and Actual Contact

Based on the results, the participants from Turkic Republics have some Turkish friends with whom they can share their feelings and thoughts. They trust these Turkish friends much and share their problems and needs with them. They sometimes participate in the social activities of Turkish and their country's organizations. The participants from the Middle East have a few Turkish friends with whom they can share their feelings, and they trust them to some extent. On the other hand, they think that Turkish friends are supportive in general. They attend their country's social activities instead of Turkish ones. The participants from Indonesia and Bangladesh have some Turkish friends with whom they can share their joys and sorrows. They trust their Turkish friends and share their problems and needs comfortably. They rarely participate in the social activities of Turkish organizations but they sometimes go to their country's social organizations. The respondents from Serbia and Montenegro stated that they have many Turkish friends with whom they can share their inner feelings and thoughts. They also trust their Turkish friends, and share their problems and needs with them easily. They sometimes participate in the social activities of Turkish organizations and frequently participate in the social activities of their own countries. African participants have only a few Turkish friends with whom they can share their problems, and they trust their Turkish friends to some extent. They always go to the social activities of their own countries. Furthermore, they try to participate in the social activities of Turkish organizations.

Cultural Differences and Similarities

The participants from Turkic Republics stated that they were the typical members of their own culture based on their clothing, religious identities, values and ideologies. According to them, they were similar to Turkish culture but they had some little differences in terms of their general knowledge, language and accommodation. The participants from the Middle East also stated that they were typical members of their culture but they have little differences from their culture in terms of their accommodation and political ideology. When compared to Turkish culture, the typical behaviors of them are different in terms of their pace of life, values, friendships, communication styles and political ideology; however, they were similar based on the experiences of customs, religious beliefs, food and life standard. The participants from the Far East stated that they were almost completely typical members of their own culture. The similar points between Turkish culture and their own culture were their recreational activities, accommodation, friendships, perceptions about Turkish culture, and social customs. However, the differences between Turkish culture and their own culture were clothing, daily life, food, religious beliefs, family life, values, cultural activities, language, and perceptions of Turkish people about their culture. One of participants from Balkans stated that s/he was the typical member of his/her culture excluding religious beliefs and political ideology. The other said that s/he was the typical member of his/her culture. On the other hand, for the participants, their culture was similar to Turkish culture except their language. The participants from African countries stated that they were the typical members of their culture except their recreational activities and political ideology. They were similar to Turkish culture based on religious beliefs, accommodation, and perceptions about Turkish people; however, their culture was different from Turkish culture in terms of clothing, food, standard of living, recreational activities, self-identity,

family life, friendships, cultural activities, language, political ideology, and social customs.

The Views of International Students

In the study, the participants suggested their opinions to increase the cultural awareness between Turkish people and them. The first problem of the participants is accommodation in Turkey. They suggested that the government should provide good and cheap accommodation according to their study levels or increase monthly allowances for them to find a reasonable accommodation for them. Married students also demanded some assist in terms of accommodation.

The second issue was about social activities. Students wanted officials to organize study tours, picnics, and sports activities for social integration with citizens of Turkey. To solve these problems, more student unions should be opened at universities. Some of the participants also criticized student offices and said that student offices should be sensitive to the problems of international students and they should not postpone their problems.

The most important problems international students had were about culture and language. Students said that universities and official authorities should introduce Turkish culture to international students through social activities. Furthermore, English-medium education should be promoted at universities to achieve a global mission in education. Not only in education field but also in every public facility, the government should employ officers who know some other languages especially English. Lastly, they suggested that Turkish university students should be taught English, and the Council of Higher Education and university rectorates should make Turkish students aware of intercultural issues to be more open-minded to the international students.

DISCUSSION

Based on the self-reported measures, a limited number of the participants were interviewed for the study. In this sense, instead of making generalizations, the problems and the suggestions of these participants can be analyzed, and some suggestions can be put forward in line with the results. Considering the results, language proficiency, social support and actual contact were interrelated concepts. The participants from Balkan countries claimed to have sufficient language proficiency, and they could communicate with Turks well. The reason behind that might be that they were similar to Turks and Turkish culture except language. Therefore, they had many Turkish friends. The participants from Turkic Republics and The Far East had some Turkish friends and communicated with Turkish people at an average level. However, the participants from The Far East were different in terms of religious beliefs, cultural values, food, clothing, and daily life. As most of the African participants were Muslim, the similar point was religion; however, clothing, food, recreational activities, family life, friendships, language, political ideology, and social customs were different. As a result of these differences, African participants had a few Turkish friends, and they were not good at four skills of Turkish. Therefore, they were having communication problems. According to the results, cultural distance makes adjustment of the students more difficult (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007). In other words, cultural similarity results in better adjustment of international students (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

As the first year of international students are highly crucial, universities should invest in international students (Ramsey et al., 2007) by focusing on their needs such as accommodation, social activities, and language courses. Universities should also raise intercultural awareness, and students offices should show great effort and care for international students.

To sum up the study, Turkey should shoulder the all responsibility of international students in terms of their standard of living. If Turkey achieves its role on international students, Turkey, with its increasingly important role in the world, can develop in international and academic areas.

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