AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON INTERCULTURAL PHENOMENON: INTERVIEW WITH ERASMUS STUDENTS[*]

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Abstract: Taking the reality of necessity for promoting the dialogue between cultures and civilizations into consideration a growing body of literature has emphasized the demand and the role of the intercultural sensitivity in our increasingly globalized and mobile world. Study abroad programmes are expected to become primary factor to promote interculturality. Although cultural travels are significant drivers for combating cultural prejudice, it is still a subject of debate whether student mobility has actually potential to cross boundaries and engage in cross cultural interactions. When dealing with a foreign culture in abroad the students, bringing their cultural memory with them, are supposed to tolerate themselves and the others with whom they don't share a common cultural background. In this respect this study tries to reveal the role of Erasmus to promote students intercultural sensitivity, students' prejudices and their tendency to move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspective, to cause students make self analysis and make discussion on experiences about cultural bias and handling cultural diversity and to display students' expectations and to what extent they get them. For the purpose of gaining information the researcher has interviewed 20 Erasmus students. Offering interview questions by way of email, the researcher intends to analyse how the students handle cultural diversity, stereotypes and make self-analysis on their experience of cultural threads.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity, Stereotype, Erasmus Programme, Cultural Prejudice.

Kültürlerarası Olgusu Üzerine Bir Keşif Çalışması: Erasmus Öğrencileriyle Görüşme

Öz: Kültürler ve medeniyetler arası diyalog geliştirmenin gerekliliğinin önemini göz önünde bulundurarak büyümekte olan bir alanyazın, giderek küreselleşen ve değişen dünyamızda kültürlerarası duyarlılığın rağbet ve görevini vurgulamaktadır. Yurtdışı eğitim programlarının kültürlerarası bilinci artırmada birincil unsur olması beklenmektedir. Her ne kadar kültürel yolculuklar kültürel önyargı ile mücadelede

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önemli etken olsalar da, öğrenci hareketliliğinin sınırları aşma ve kültürlerarası etkileşimde bulunma potansiyelinin gerçekten var olup olmadığı hala tartışma konusudur. Kültürel belleklerini de yanlarına alan öğrencilerden, yurt dışında yabancı bir kültürle muhatap olurken kendilerine ve ortak kültür geçmişine sahip olmayan diğer insanlara karşı hoşgörü göstermeleri istenmektedir. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, Erasmus Programının öğrencilerin kültürlerarası duyarlılığını artırmada ve etnomerkezci bakış açısından etnorelatif bakış açısına geçme eğilimlerindeki etkisini ve öğrencilerin önyargılarını, kendi kendilerini analiz etme becerilerini, kültürel önyargı ve kültürel çeşitliliği ele ama konusu üzerine tartışmalarını, programdan beklentilerini ve ne kadarını elde ettiklerini açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Araştırmacı bilgi edinme amacıyla 20 öğrenci ile görüşme yapmıştır. Elektronik posta yoluyla röportaj soruları sunan araştırmacı, öğrencilerin kültürel farklılığı, kalıp yargıyı nasıl ele aldıklarını ve kültürel konularla ilgili deneyimlerini analiz etmelerini çözümlemeyi amaçlamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık, Kalıp Yargı, Erasmus Programı, Kültürel Önyargı.

Introduction

A growing body of literature has emphasized the demand and the role of the intercultural sensitivity in our increasingly globalized and mobile world (Bloom, 2004; Guest, 2002; Gundara, 2014; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014; Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliar, 2004). As a result scholars from different disciplines are in line with the idea that it will become increasingly necessary to define, model, and assess the intercultural competence (Perry & Southwell, 2011). While the experiences of youth in today's rapidly changing world are linked to technological innovations, social processes, and cultural flows, the education should undergo intense transformations to better equip the youth to deal with the challenges of globalization. Study abroad programmes are expected to become primary factor to promote intercultural sensitivity by giving students multiple opportunities to enrich their cultural horizons. Erasmus Exchange Programme focusing its aim on personal development and job prospects since it was introduced in 1987 provides students opportunities to experience new cultures and relate and compare them to their own culture.

It is unfortunate that students in Turkey find little chance to go abroad. Their perceptions of different cultures are shaped limitedly by social media, TV shows, magazines and literary texts. In this respect this study tries to reveal the role of Erasmus Exchange Program to promote students intercultural sensitivity, students' prejudices and their tendency to move from ethnocentric to ethno relative perspective, to provide students a chance to make self analysis and make discussion on experiences about cultural bias and handling cultural diversity and to display students' expectations and to what extent they get them.

When we turn our attention to the global and social justice issues the desired outcome of Erasmus programme is expected to gain students the skills of interpreting and relating by embracing different cultures with enthusiasm. The limited literature available is far from satisfactory to give impetus to the recent research on the development of intercultural sensitivity of Erasmus students. This paper would further like to highlight the neglected outcomes of the programme including, but not limited to, outgoing students' transcultural understanding.

Literature Review

Using survey data Otero (2008) examines in his article the financial aspects and the family background of Erasmus students. Taking the socio-economic barriers into consideration the research aims to compare the results with a similar survey taken in 1998 and to present the expansion of the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds within the Erasmus programme. As the article puts greater emphasis into the social and financial portrait of the families of Erasmus students by collecting data from 30 countries with 15,513 valid responses, describing intercultural behaviours of students is left untouched. In their empirical study Gonzalez, Mesanza, and Mariel (2010) seek the determinants of Erasmus student mobility revealing both push and pull factors behind the students' decisions to study abroad. Here again, in an attempt to give possible explanations for the problems influencing student flows the study touches on the issue of family background and socio-cultural dimensions. The panel study conducted by Wilson (2011) aims to primarily reveal the objectives of Erasmus programme and how they have changed throughout its history, and then to present reasonable suggestions for why 'Erasmus generation' seems unrealistic in contrast to the expectations of the programme itself. For the methodological approach the panel study carried out in the article provides reliable evidences for the argument of the study, which concludes that "the Erasmus did not *cause* students to become more pro-European" (p.1134). In more recent years the literature has built greater resource on credit Erasmus mobility programme as the programme is becoming one of the largest international exchange programme in the world (Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, Wit,Vujic, 2013; Juvan & Lesjak, 2013; Breznik, Law, Skrbinjek, 2013; Ersoy, 2013; Böttcher, Araujo, Nagler, Mendes, Helbing, Herrmann, 2016). Carrying out a web survey including seven countries with 17.845 respondents Otero et al. (2013) mentions the benefits of Erasmus briefly and identifies barriers for non-mobile students. As a detailed research, the study differentiates barriers for both participants and non-participants under the five main types of barriers each of which has sub-factors. Also, Juvan & Lesjak (2013) highlight the main motives of students for participating in Erasmus as the goal of their article by giving an

outline of the process of Erasmus mobility over the years in terms of varying motives of students. It is also a basic tenet of another study conducted by Breznik et al. (2013) to provide a general overview of Erasmus student flow and to reveal three main groups of exporting and importing countries. In his phenomenological research Ersoy (2013) tries to understand the challenges that Turkish candidates have experienced during Erasmus period. To offer important insights into Erasmus mobility Böttcher et al. (2016) provides a focus for thinking about the gender gap in Erasmus programme by their large scale-study. Leaving the reasons untouched the analysis of the data gathered from 2551 universities reveals the fact that female students tend to be over-represented.

All these studies noted just above develop a clear understanding of the benefits of the Erasmus programme exploring motives of participants and non-participants from social, political, financial, and cultural aspects. This study stressing the personal development of the outgoing students and offering participants self analysis takes another perspective on the issue of Erasmus programme. While it is the case that countries become more interconnected the researcher recognising the importance of intercultural sensitivity tries to highlight the impacts of the programme upon the intercultural phenomenon.

Keywords

Intercultural sensitivity: While culture can be simply defined as a shared way of life of a group of people which transmits from one generation to the next, intercultural sensitivity is required in our rapidly globalized world. Our world becomes more interrelated and cultures are in a changing and developing process. In this regard, we human beings are to be more respectful to other cultures and adopt a manner of empathy. Intercultural sensitivity is an ability to realize and accept the similarities and differences of cultures in a bias free way.

Cultural Memory: Suffice it to say just now that cultural memory is viewed as an institutionalized and stored form that transfers to generations. Here it is related to collective memory and its effects on shaping students' opinions about the target culture.

Cultural Prejudice: Cultural prejudice results mostly from ethnocentrism and it is more than likely politically motivated. If it is needed to reduce the explanation we can simply say that it is an unfortunate reaction to strangers and just the opposite manner of curiosity that intercultural sensitivity demands for.

Stereotype: While the generalization is acceptable up to some extent, exaggerating and distorting reality cause problematic results just like a stereotype. It should be noted that cultures are dynamic and multi-layered including sub-cultures. Hence, problems occur when describing cultural behaviour we behave personal characters as the representative of the foreign

culture (Guest, 2002). As Clouet (2006, p.57) pinpoints that stereotypes result from "narrow view of culture, distorting reality, exaggerating some national characteristics."

Ethnocentric and Ethnorelative Perspective: Bennet (1993) presents a framework called "Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity". He offers six levels of intercultural sensitivity: denial, defence, and minimization which compose Ethnocentrism, and acceptance, adaptation, and integration which compose ethnorelativism. Ethnocentric view supposes itself superior to all the other cultures and positions itself on the centre of everything. However, ethnorelativism explains cultures by relating one and other and only in a cultural context. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that in order to gain intercultural sensitivity we should "move through the ethnocentric stages and progress toward more ethnorelativist stages" (Olson & Kroeger, 2001, p. 119).

Methodology

As the nature of exploratory research method doesn't intend to reach a mere conclusion this study intends to help us understand and view the Erasmus programme from a cultural perspective, which makes this study different from the recent studies. Organizing a meeting with the volunteer students to participate the study the researcher has explained the details to the students and then given them the interview questions. Students are asked to respond the question in a week by email. In a written form students feel more confident, hence they answer the interview question giving details in a more open way. The data set contains the information about the host country and gender of the participants. The volunteers involved in this study are 6 male and 14 female students from the Department of English Language and Literature at Cumhuriyet University. Host countries are Germany, Romania, and Portugal.

Table 1. *Participants of the study*

	Germany	Romania	Portugal
Female	6	4	4
Male	3	2	1

Discussion and Conclusion

The study sets the data by interviewing 20 yearlong Erasmus students by asking these questions below:

1. Have you ever been to abroad before Erasmus programme?

2. Before you have been to abroad have you made any research about host country? What was your resource?

3. What were the reasons to choose that country?

4. During your Erasmus period did you feel cultural bias? If your answer is yes, can you please give examples?

5. By the help of this programme what has changed about your personal development?

6. Can you tell that you get what you have expected from Erasmus mobility?

Students participated in this study have never been to abroad before Erasmus Exchange. Therefore it has been their first experience to develop their cultural observation and comparison skills. A related point worth rising here is that students may exoticize or overestimate the other. Here 'the other' becomes the culture of the host country. As just noted above, the interview raises the question about students' interest in the culture of the host country and tries to find out their resources to gain information. Not surprisingly, we can hardly say that students have a fairly clear idea of the host culture. Moreover, as they state they have had cultural prejudices about the target culture. The access to knowledge or information is through web pages of host institutions and social media. Some of the students state that they have met exchange students who have participated the Erasmus programme before and they have taken their advice. The superficial research they make about the host country includes the overview of the country, transportation, food, climate and such features of the city. In general, their research is on the financial issues as they prefer countries where they can live economically comfortable as Otero (2008) states financial problems emerge as one of the most significant barriers to mobility. Some responses of students whose code names are given in the parentheses are illustrated below as an example:

> Yes, I made research about that country. I searched where it is. How much far it is from other places. And I looked the city's pictures to have an idea about the city. (Tuba)

> I made a comprehensive research about Romania. I chose that country because I learned that Romania is a very cheap country. This was an important reason to go there. Also I heard that the courses of my host university in Romania are not different from my home university. (Hasan)

According to the responses, students choose Romania because it is cheaper than the other participating countries that they can go. And they choose Germany considering its educational advantages and to have Schengen visa which opens up an opportunity to visit neighbour countries. Also, the reason

why they prefer Portugal lies in the fact that they think they may never find a chance to go Portugal as it is quite far away from Turkey.

> The main reason of my choosing Germany was Schengen visa. Because I wanted to see more, visit more, and learn more about different countries. (Fatma)

> I didn't want to go to Germany and Romania. Because everybody knows that Germany is the second country of Turkish people. There are lots of Turkish people there. I thought that if I choose Germany I couldn't improve my language skills. Also I thought that whenever I want I can go Romania. But Portugal is the farthermost country of Europe and it is so difficult for me to go there whenever I want. After all, I choose Portugal to go. (Ahmet)

Participants state that students from different countries have misleading information about the Turkish culture and they experience stereotype or cultural prejudice. However, most students indicate that people are, in general, tend to learn about our culture and pay a good deal of attention to share their own culture.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the impact of Erasmus programme upon exchange students' personal development. Students state that they have some prejudices about the target culture before they have gone to host country but now they feel more confident and empathy for the foreign cultures. When students make self-analysis they mostly find themselves ethnocentric and realize that they prejudge the cultures before Erasmus Programme. Taking students' responses fully into account we can say that students gain the ability to see things in new ways and build greater intercultural awareness. Intercultural sensitivity is a lifelong process and cannot be achieved in a yearlong experience on abroad. However, in the light of the findings, it will not be exaggerated to state that Erasmus mobility enriches students' perspectives by providing a deeper understanding of both home and host culture and promote authentic communication.

Limitations

The significant limitation of the study is the quantity of the participants. The study is limited to 20 students from the department of English Language and Literature. As the researcher bases the study on volunteering, it is significant that all the participants are willing to take part in this research. Another limitation that is worthy of note is that the study is restricted to only three Erasmus countries. However, it depends on the Erasmus agreement between universities for student exchange.

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