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Language Barrier, language related issues and Stress among International Students in Turkish universities

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Abstract

The enrolment of International students in Turkish universities is achieving new heights every year. This influx of international students brings huge challenges to universities in terms of adjustment issues as these international students come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. This diversity on one side brings multiculturalism and opportunities to the campus but on another side, it brings diverse challenges in terms of academics, socio-cultural, and personal fronts. These international students every day face numerous challenges to adapt to their full potential and adjust to their new environment. One of the biggest and key challenges for international students in Turkey is the Turkish language. In this study, International students were examined in terms of the Language barrier and language-related issues which they face on-campus as well as off-campus and how this language issue leads them to stress. The study used a mixed design method in which a survey questionnaire was used to understand the language-

related issues and stress, and detailed interviews were conducted to get a better understanding of the language challenges among international students. The study found that language is one of the root causes of stress among International students in the beginning year and majority of the students feel incompetent in academic language which makes them feel isolated, stressed, depressed, and affecting their overall mental health. Interviews also revealed that the majority of students felt that one year of Tömer is not enough to have competent command of academic language. Interviews also revealed that language issues include writing skills, reading skills, understanding academic language, local accents, and understanding and participating in lectures, seminars, and extra co-curricular activities. The transit from Tömer to University life is the hardest and there is very little support from Universities during that phase and there is a strong need to create support from universities for International students.

Keywords: International students, Language barrier, Stress, Adjustment

1. Introduction

Globalization had created a huge demand and opportunities for nations to grow and in terms of movement of students got a huge setback. Globally every year there is a migration of millions of students. This migration of International students crossed 8 million in 2020 claims the UNESCO report. This International students migration was higher usually towards developed countries which give scholarship opportunities to developing and under-developing countries students. The central point of attraction for decades was countries like the United State of America, Canada, England, China, Australia, and major European countries. These countries have special policies which attract a huge number of international students from all across the world and provide them opportunities to achieve their dreams. Globalization and technological advancement reinforced this students migration for decades and these countries dominated in the educational market and it made them key players to attract a huge number of students across the world. These countries dominated the educational market and still, they are successful in attracting international students. The quality of education, academic environment, and future security make these countries a prime choice for international students. These International students not only enrich the educational environment on the campus with their diversity but also boost the economical prosperity of the host country (Ozer, 2012) ^[19]. Such a mutual transaction between International students and the host country helps each other reciprocally. The early dominance in education market was dominated by english speaking countries but recent data shows that this trend is changing and students are also drifted towards non-english speaking countries such as Germany and the Netherlands (Rienties *et al.*, 2012; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013) ^[25, 26], South Korea (Shin & Lee, 2021) ^[27] and Turkey (Snoubar & Celik, 2013) ^[28].

The history of the Internationalization of Turkish universities was not as rich as it is in the last decade. The determinant government efforts of Internationalization of Turkish education system started in 1990s with the project namely the Grand Student Project (Özoğlu *et al.*, 2015) ^[21]. Early this program didn't show much results for example, the number of students in Turkish universities in 2009 was a mere 2713 and during 2010 it was 7273 (Ozoğlu, *et al.*, 2012) ^[20]. The majority of these international students was coming from either African countries, Arabs, Balkans, or Turkic countries. But this trend saw a huge shift after 2010 for as the Turkish government introduced different scholarships and other programs for International students and payed special attention to the higher education studies (Özoğlu *et al.*, 2015) ^[21]. These kinds of changes in educational policies and providing diverse opportunities to international students attracted a huge number of international applicants to Turkish universities. According to the report of the Turkish council of Higher education, during the 2018-2019 academic year, 154,446 international students opted to study in Turkish universities. Such a huge drift made Turkey one of the important destinations for international students and this huge flux didn't remain limited to the neighbouring countries but it attracted students from the far east to the far west. The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) reported in 2019 that around 17000 international students from 160 countries are studying under their provided scholarship program alone. This number shows the diversity and the ripples the Turkish education system had created not only in its neighboring countries but becoming one of the important global players to attract international students.

International students Adjustment Issues

The life of international students is full of challenges in terms of adaptation and adjustment to new country. These students face challenges in numerous areas which can be broadly classified as academics, socio-cultural, and Personal issues.

Academic challenges are those challenges which international students face in relation to academic life in new country. Due to the differences between their native education system and host countries academic system can bring huge challenges. For example one of the key issues which we are exploring is language. Majority of universities in Turkey are following Turkish language as their academic language and it can create a huge challenge for international students although they spend almost one year in Tömer to study Turkish language. Second category is Socio-cultural challenges and these are those challenges which an international students face in terms of differences between cultural and other aspects of society. These challenges are also important to adapt and assimilate as it will determine the overall adjustment of the international students. Language can be included also under the socio-cultural aspects which can help to adapt to new culture and society. Lastly the Personal issues can also create an havoc in the adjustment process. Personal issues may include health, food habits, weather, etc.

Globally the most researched and discussed problem of international student while adapting to the new country is language. It is an important tool to understand and communicate with the immediate surroundings. Studies have reported that international students face trouble in

understanding professors, their teaching and grading style (Zhou, Freg & Bang, 2006), taking lecture notes (Huang, 2006) ^[10], Articulating and sharing their knowledge and learnings (Lin & Yi, 1997) ^[14], taking part in group discussions, lecture participation, and asking questions during the lectures (Coward, 2003; Gebhard, 2010; Han, 2007; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Liu, 2001) ^[5, 6, 9, 11, 15]. In case of Turkey where the academic as well as day to day language is Turkish which is not spoken in other countries can create huge adjustment issues for international students. Turkish is widely spoken all across Turkey and majority of people speak their native language and prefer to interact in this language. English or any related language is not common language in Turkey and people don't prefer to speak to those who know English only except at some touristic cities. No doubt, International students are supposed to learn Turkish in their first year of their universities but there are few questions which are needed to be researched. For example how hardships an International students face during first few months in terms of communication, How they cope up with such issues, how such language barriers can effect their overall mental health and last but not least Is one year of Turkish Language courses enough to have command of Academic Turkish Language and fulfil the demands of academic life. Studies have found that in order to adapt and develop a bond with host country and its culture, language plays a vital role (Aydın, 2020) ^[2]. Another study in New Zealand found that many International students find it hard to interact with the host country people due to the lack of English proficiency (Ward and Masgoret, 2004). Lee (2010) ^[13] also found that International students whose native languages are different than host countries language face a huge challenge and language becomes a major challenge and barrier for them. According to one of the research conducted in Turkey found that Turkish language is one of the key challenges for International students (Ozçetin, 2013) ^[18]. Another study found that Language barriers are the most difficult issues an International students face in during his adjustment process (Gebru, M. and Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, I., 2020) ^[7]. Language issue not only become barrier for communication but also is a barrier in academic adjustment and hinder international students to realise their full potential. As in Majority of Turkish universities programs are offered in Turkish languages (Bilecen, 2009) ^[3]. The case is not only within the lectures but also majority of informations provided offline or online are written in Turkish and other co-curricular activities and programs need Turkish language and due to this barrier majority of International students feel isolated from rest of the campus life (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017) ^[8]. This language barrier also becomes a hindrance for international students to take part in campus life, social gatherings, events, festivals etc. The complete isolation due to language barrier hinder international students to make new friendships and meet new people which can effect their mental health and can be one of the root cause of stress. Studies also had shown that those students whose language proficiency is higher and confident in language fluency feels less embarrassed about their cultural background and their accent " (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

2. Method

Due to the complexity, severity, and the need for a depth understanding of the problem this research used a mixed

research design method to study the issue. In the first phase, the study developed a self-designed survey questionnaire to understand the language barrier international students face in Istanbul. The survey questionnaire was developed after having a depth literature review. And in the second phase of the study in-depth interviews were conducted with the randomly selected students. The prime focus of the study was to understand the language barrier and related issues and its effect on the mental health of the international students so the participating criteria was a student must be an international student and who had not been living in Turkey for more than three years. In total there were 210 students for Quantitative study and 20 participants for Qualitative study and the data was collected online. The personal demographic sheet was also developed to get the demographic information of the students such as age, gender, the number of months or years spend in Turkey, Nationality, Number of languages known, Course studying, Grade, and marital status. The focus was put more on those students who had not been staying more than 3 years in Turkey because time is an important factor for adjustment.

3. Results

The study used mixed method design in order to have a deeper understanding of the issue and understand the process. Both these results will be discussed under the subheadings of Quantitative and Qualitative results.

Quantitative results

The data was analysed by using appropriate statistical techniques and each outcome will be discussed with the related literature. Table 1 shows the significant result by using the chi square test.

Table 1: shows the significant result by using the Chi-Square test

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.239	6	.001
Likelihood Ratio	27.410	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.263	1	.007
No of Valid Cases	210		

The table 1 show that is there any significant relationship between language and stress among International students. After applying the Pearson Chi-Square test and Linear-by-linear Association the results shows that language barrier is linked with stress and is significant even at 1% level of significance and even the linear by linear association is significant at 1%. These results shows that there is a significant relationship between language barriers and issues of International students and can act as a stressor among international students. The results are similar to the other researches which found that language barrier and language related issues are one of the stressors for the International students. For example Chinese students face a huge language barrier in America and these language barriers are one of the important stressors and bring hardships in acculturization (Lu & Han, 2010) [17]. In another study conducted in America, the new language and language related issues had been found one of the strongest distressor among the International students (Lin and Scherz, 2014) [16]. Young (2017) [31] also found that language fluency and language proficiency can be an important acculturation stress which

can hinder overall adjustment of the international students to the new environment ” (Young, 2017, p. 437) [31]. In nutshell we can conclude that new language learning and related barriers is one of the important transit for international students and it can act as one of the key stressors for them during their adaptation process.

Table 2 shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement I found Turkish Language very hard to understand. The statement try to understand the difficulty of the International students in understanding Turkish language.

Table 2: Shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement “I found Turkish Language very hard to understand”

I found Turkish Language very hard to understand.			
Statement	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Yes	1.3171	137	.47112
No	1.5862	73	.50123
Total	1.4286	210	.49844

The results in table 2 shows that out of 210 respondents 137 students felt that Turkish language is very hard to understand. The results showed that majority of the students had issues in language and felt it hard in understanding Turkish Language and can be one of the stressors and these stressors play an important role in overall adjustment. The results was confirmed by many other studies such as a study conducted in Ankara on International students and found that communication skills and adjustment are correlated and language issues can be one of the stressor (Karaoğlu, 2007) [12]. Another study conducted in United States found that the higher the language proficiency among the international students and lower is the acculturation stress (Poyrazli *et al.*, 2004) [22].

Table 3 shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement I feel low sometimes in the class because i dont understand Academic Turkish.

Table 3: Shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement “I feel low sometimes in the class because i dont understand Academic Turkish”

I feel low sometimes in the class because i dont understand Academic Turkish			
Statement	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Yes	1.3958	156	.49420
No	1.5000	54	.51177
Total	1.4286	210	.49844

The results in table 3 shows that out of 210 respondents 156 students felt low in the class during lectures and felt its hard for them to understand Academic Turkish language. The results showed that majority of the students had issues in understanding academic language and because of such stress they start feeling low and such stressors play an important role in overall adjustment. The results are parallel to many other studies such as a study conducted in New Zeland on International students new Academic and Linguistic environment and found that due to the lack in communication and find academic language hard to understanding majority of them felt loneliness, anxiety and high level of stress (Lewthwaite, 1996). In another study, it was revealed that academic language and communication with professors inside and outside the campus plays an

important role in overall adjustment of the International students (Poyrazli and Grahame, 2007) [23].

Table 4 shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement that because of language barrier I missed some important information during the lectures.

Table 4: shows the response of the international students towards the survey statement "because of language barrier I missed some important information during the lectures"

"Because of language proficiency I missed some important information during the lectures".			
Statement	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Yes	1.3966	132	.49345
No	1.5833	78	.51493
Total	1.4286	210	.49844

The results in table 4 shows that out of 210 respondents 132 students felt that they had missed some important informations during the lectures because of language proficiency. The results showed that majority of the students had issues in understanding and they feel alienated and left out and due to language proficiency they are suffering in the academics, which can elevate their stress also. The current result of this study is supported by studies conducted on International students around the world. For example a study conducted on International students in United Kingdom found that language barrier is one of the important stressor which hinder their academic understanding and academic performance (Foley, 2010).

The results are showing that how hard and one of the common stressor and overall factor a language can play in overall adjustment of the international students. Language plays a very important role in overall development and adjustment process of the international students as it has a strong correlation with other aspects of adjustment such as socio-cultural and academic adjustment (Özoğlu *et al.*, 2015; Titrek *et al.*, 2016; Andrade, 2006; GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) [21, 29, 1, 8, 30]. Other adjustment challenged may fade away with time but the main and important adjustment is academic adjustment and challenges remain through out the academic life and any extra or related challenge can be a constant stressor for International students.

Qualitative results

The qualitative part of the results is consisting of one to one interviews with 20 randomly selected international students comprising of 9 female students and 11 male students. The thematic analysis of interviews brought some common issues under the heading of Language barrier and how its effecting the day to day life of international students. These common themes are as follows according to prevalence and importance.

1. Language Proficiency
2. Academic Language reading, writing and communication skills.
3. Competing with other students in their native language is hard and it effects our overall grades.
4. Language brings Isolation, loneliness and stress.
5. At the beginning there is no support from the Universities especially from non-teaching staff.
6. Language becomes a barrier to take part in co-curricular activities.

7. Language insufficiency make us feel stupid, incompetent and unable to express ourselves.
8. Language make Socio-cultural adaptation harder.

During the interviews these themes was most common among international students. No doubt these issues are very higher during the initial days and slowly students try hard to cope up from such issues but majority of the students felt the need of a support especially from their universities. Majority of students expressed that there is almost zero support from the universities and especially there is no one who understand or they can communicate with from non teaching staff. International students admitted that they are having rigorous one year Turkish language courses before entering the universities but still that one year is not enough to gain an academic writing skills. A student comments that it becomes much stressful when one is unable to share his thoughts, express his ideas or unable to answer a simple question during the lecture. It makes us feel stupid, incompetent and depressed as such language barrier make people in the class that we are not fit for the class and it makes us feel embarrassing. Language barrier also increase their Feeling of isolation and loneliness as they are not able to connect with people around them. Usually researchers had found that extracurricular activities can help international students to integrate themselves in new culture and improve their language skills (Cathcart *et al.*, 2005; Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007) [4, 24].

Ozçetin (2013) [18] studied international students issues in Turkey and found that international students adjustment is influenced by number of factors and one of them is Turkish speaking and this language barrier is highly correlated with feeling of loneliness and such barrier of language is one of the most important issues which are effecting the international students academic life in Turkey. Language, Language related issues, academic and socio-cultural issues are some of the common factors which can be the cause of creating stress among international students (Nasir, 2012). The above-mentioned studies also support the results and it can be well understood that Language is a very important and vital component in overall adjustment for international students.

4. Discussion and conclusion

International students face challenges almost in every country during their adaptation process to their new environment. Globally each host country is different for International students and facing an adjustment challenge is normal but the important point is that how much these challenges can be minimized and this transition can be made easier. Broadly international students face challenges in three key areas as Academic, Socio-Cultural, and Personal issues. But among these, there is one of the common challenges which is connected deeply with each of these and those language barriers. The language barrier is common in each and can have a linear effect on each other and can have a huge impact on the overall development of international students. Turkey's educational system is completely dominated by the Turkish language and it's a very challenging task for International students to enter the Turkish academic life and competing with the native speakers of Turkish students. The one-year Intense Language course doesn't seem enough for most of the students in order to enter their academic life and groom out

their full potential. The academic pressure and other adjustment issues are already giving huge stress and in addition to all these challenges language barriers and language-related issues can create huge Psychological stress. The results of this study also show that the Language barrier and language-related issues are some of the important stressors for International students in Turkey. Language plays an important role in the overall adjustment process of international students. During the initial phase of transition, Language plays an important role and with time other factors' effects may fade away but academic language keeps constant pressure due to its influence on academic achievements. The quantitative, as well as qualitative results, showed that international students are struggling with language and related issues no doubt they had successfully completed their one-year Turkish Language course. And results also showed that each factor is having a profound effect on the students in terms of constant stressors. In addition to this, they are somehow connected with other aspects of adjustment. Sometimes students evaluate themselves negatively after having a complete frustration with language-related issues and may feel stupid, incompetent, and completely lost. Such constant pressure can influence their academic outputs and their overall growth.

As per the understanding of this study, its highly recommended to study international students issue at large and with higher number of samples. The study recognises the structural changes but there need to be some important changes brought on ground too. According to the results there is a need to reevaluate the Language courses and more focus must be given on the academic Language and in each part such as writing, reading as well as communicating skills. Moreover, once the students complete their language program their must be a support from the university side in terms of teaching as well as non-teaching staff. Beside having the academic course, universities must organise workshops, seminars for international students where much emphasis must be given to the language aspects of international students. In addition to these University international counseling department much locate such students and must actively offer helping hand to the students. International students office must take help from the senior international students who can help them to interact with new commers and work as a guide for them.

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