

An Outsider View: the Perceptions of Visiting International Students on Teaching, Language and Cultureⁱ

Bünyamin Bavlı

College of Education, Yildiz Teknik University, Esenler, 34210, Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract This study investigates how international visitor students studying temporarily at a public university in Turkey perceive teaching, language and culture. Qualitative explanatory single case study method was employed in the study. The data were obtained through face to face interview with 10 participants, and a focus group interview with 3 participants. The study results indicate that Turkish Higher Education seemed to these visiting students to have problems including the style of teaching, the language of instruction. Findings disclosed that, there are some challenges for participants in teaching such as the language of instruction and number of the courses provided. In addition to that, learning environment such as crowded classrooms and few varieties of class types for the instructions might be called as limitations. In the context of the language, participants criticized that English was not used as a medium of instruction because of the students' language deficiency. However, visiting students praised practice opportunity of the university, language development during their study, development of their intercultural understanding, international perspective, widening their horizon and social relations.

Keywords Culture, European Union, Higher Education, International Students

teaching, and European integration” are among the objectives of the mobility (Enders, 1998) [2]. After the World War II, student mobility started in the US by sending their students abroad for a period of time, mostly in Europa. In 1970s, mobility programmes gained popularity in Europa and called “Internationalisation” in Sweden, “Integrated Study Abroad” in Germany and “Academic Links and Interchange Scheme” in UK (Teichler 1996, p.153) [3]. Nowadays, student mobility is an official programme of European Union enacted in 1987 and including students in member and candidates countries (Altbach and Teichler, 2001) [4].

“The formal relationship between Turkey and the institutions of European Union (EU) integration began when Turkey applied for full membership on 31 July 1959” and started negotiations on October 2005 (Capan and Onursal 2007, p.104) [5].

Turkish national agency listed on its website that Turkey also has been governing the EU grants through Turkish national agency (T.R.N.A.) [6] to coordinate the participation of the foreign students to the EU funded programs in Turkey. One of the subprograms of the Erasmus+ Erasmus is key Action 1 Learning Mobility of Individuals, Higher Education student mobility program. The program offers opportunities for university students to experience learning in another EU member and candidate country (T.R.N.A., 2016) [7].

1. Introduction

Student mobility programs, which aim to develop students notably academically and culturally, have been addressed in the studies for a long time. Additionally, mobility of students comprises diversified objectives such as taking advantage of a more qualified study, enhancing neighborhood relations between countries and for financial reasons (Teichler, 2007) [1]. Furthermore, “fostering of communication and cooperation among institutions and academia, aimed at the advancement of knowledge, the renewal of academic

1.1. Erasmus: Learning Mobility of Individuals in Turkey

As of July 8, 2013, European Commission [8] listed its website statistics on Erasmus students. Analysis of the statistics on Erasmus Mobility of learners suggests that there is a high motivation of students, especially the Turkish students, to participate in the Erasmus student exchange program. Figure 2 infers the change in the number of the students per country between the years 2010-2012 (T.R.N.A., 2015) [9].

The Figure clearly indicates that the highest increase in out-bound students was noted in Croatia (+62%), which joined the program in 2009-10. It was followed by Denmark (+20%), Slovenia and Turkey (+17% each) (Study in Turkey, 2012) [10].

As of April 19, 2015 [9] Turkish national agency listed on its website that in Turkey, 12,358 students from 138 universities participated in the Erasmus student mobility program between 2012 and 2013. In the meantime, in the 2010-2011 academic years, 4,320 international students resided in Turkey within the scope of the Erasmus student mobility program. In 2012, countries sending the topmost number of students to Turkey for Erasmus mobility were Germany, Poland, Holland, France, Italy, Lithuania and Spain respectively.

There is considerable evidence for the benefits of students studying abroad as part of their higher education experience. Mobility increases the motivation of students to be a part of Europe, European Union (EU) citizenship, personal skills and employability (Pehlivaner 2006; Parey and Waldinger 2010) [11,12]. Likewise, apart from providing valuable academic and cultural benefits, educational mobility is increasingly important for improving young people's employability and access to the labor market (Paunesco 2008; Janson, Schomburg and Teichler 2009; Teichler 2012; Ozdem 2013; Eurostat, 2015) [12,13,14,15,16]. Moreover, international visitor students, who proceed a certain part of their study in abroad, getting a job opportunity is 70% higher than other students (Eurostat, 2015) [18]. As of November 11, 2015 World Economic Forum [19] listed on its website that international visitor students also improve their transversal skills such as teamwork or familiarity with office software. Furthermore, "Erasmus experience contributes to attitudinal changes about Europe among participants and highlighting significant differences between the Erasmus students and those who do not study abroad when it comes to levels of support for the EU and extent of identifying as European" (Mitchell 2012, p. 491) [20]. The program also develops self-confidence of students, provides them an intercultural dimension and expands their horizon (Aktan and Sari 2010; Findlay, King et al. 2012) [21, 22]. Moreover, participating in the program also improves international visitor students' English language competence which takes part in the skills of the 21st century and cultural awareness (Janson, Schomburg and Teichler 2009; Aydin 2012) [14, 23]. International visitor students also develop students' international integration and the European identity (Sigalas, 2009; Fombona, Rodríguez and Sevillano, 2013) [24, 25]. It is clear that cultivating international and European identity is substantial for both Eurostudents and Turkish students, as well. This case also influences the European Union integration of Turkey positively as it eliminates the prejudices. It is clear that mobility also stamp out the prejudices (Mutlu, Alacahan and Erdil 2010) [26]. However, international visitor students also experience some disadvantages as well. During their study in abroad, they might face various challenges. Most of the students assume

that financial support is insufficient (Souto-Otero et al. 2013; Bracht et.al. 2006) [27, 28]. In their study, Findlay et al. (2006) [29] clarified financial issues as a limitation for the mobility. Moreover, in the dissertation study carried out by Dzansi (2006) [30] pointed out that students face lack of support, adjustment problems, orientation and academic integration. Within the context of the academic difficulty, international visitor students have difficulty to understand the content of the courses (Crawford Camiciottol, 2010) [31].

1.2. Research Aim

In Turkey where the integration process and reform are in progress, it is crucial to get perceptions of international visitor students as they can perceive the situations better as foreigners and outsiders. It is also evident that getting the perceptions of international visitor students will also reveal the unrecognized problems by local community. Even though, there are lots of studies on international visitor students in the context of Erasmus Program in Turkey, it is apparent that the studies on international students' perceptions on academic issues are limited. Thereby, the purpose of this study is to explore international visitor students in the context of the Erasmus Program perceptions on teaching, language and culture in Turkey. In this regard, following research questions were explored in the study:

- 1) What are the international visitor students' perceptions on teaching at the University?
- 2) What are the international visitor students' perceptions on the language used as a medium of instruction at the University?
- 3) What are the international visitor students' perceptions on culture in the host culture?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The present study is constructed on the perceptions and experience of students coming from various European Union (EU) countries to study for a period in Turkey. The study aims to get graduate and post graduate international visitor students' perceptions on teaching, language and culture at the university during their study. Thus, the qualitative method was used for this study. The study centered upon one case. In the study, instead of multiple-case study, single case was selected for data collection. The chosen case included subjects related to study. As the researchers work as a staff at the case, they had favorable circumstances to observe and analyze the phenomenon supporting the obtained data. In addition to that, as of August 19, 2016 Council of Higher Education [32] listed on its website that Marmara region is the most active region in Erasmus mobility activities and most of the incoming Erasmus students choose the state universities to study, hence a case from a state university in

the Marmara Region selected for the study. In this sense, as Yin clarified, the case represents an extreme case and single case study is an applicable design for this study. As a consequence, an explanatory single case study was adopted in the study (Yin, 2003) [33].

2.2. Participants and Organization of the Research

To collect data, 13 students participated in Erasmus Learning Mobility in 2014-2015 academic years were included in the study. Participants consist of eight female, and five male students from several European Union (EU) countries and studying at different majors, and levels, B.A., B.S, and M.A. The age range of participants was between 21 and 25. Two of the participants were students of Master degree program. All other participants were undergraduate students studying at various majors of B.A. and B.S.

Purposive sampling technique was employed for this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. The researchers do not seek to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed (Bryman, 2012) [34]. As the focus of the study is to obtain the perceptions of the international visitor students on teaching, language and culture and only the international visitor students can provide the exact answers to the research questions, purposeful sampling best suits the current research design. In this respect, critical case sampling technique adopted in the study. As Patton justified "if it happens there, it will happen anywhere or if it does not happen there, it won't happen anywhere" (2002, p.236) [35].

This study was carried out at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of a state university which is one of the largest and the oldest state universities located in Central Marmara Region in Turkey during the spring semester of 2015 academic year. The main aim of the program at this Department is to provide pre-service teachers with teaching profession courses and equip them with fundamental content knowledge of teaching, develop their attitudes, skills, competences.

2.3. Ethical Consideration

Before starting data collection, to get the necessary permission to carry out the study, a request form involving scope and ethics of the study was sent to university administration. After obtaining the formal written permission for the study, an information sheet clarifying purpose, interview conduction time, risks, benefits, and confidentiality and anonymity of the students sent to each participant via e-mail. Furthermore, detailed information was provided to each potential participant upon request. Consequently, study data were obtained from the voluntary participants.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In the study, data collected through two techniques: a) semi-structured face to face interview, b) semi-structured focus group interview. Before semi-structured face to face interviews and focus group interviews, each participant was informed about the details of the study via e-mails, interview language, time, and location of research. According to each participant's choice of time and location, the researchers conducted one to one interview.

Semi-structured interview consists of questions on teaching, language and culture in the courses at the university. Under the main questions, there were also sub-questions. All the correspondences and interviews with participants were conducted in English language.

Interviews were undertaken in four months, from March to June, in the spring semester of 2015 academic years. Interview with each participant lasted from 35 and 100 minutes. A focus group interview comprised 3 participants and lasted 60 minutes. Focus group interview aimed to support the data collected through face to face interview and to provide variability of the data through participants' discussions (Berg and Lune, 2012) [36].

With the written consent signed by each participant in advance of the interview, responses of each participant were voice recorded. Before carrying out analyze and interpretation, each transcription of the interview was sent to the participant via e-mail to check transcription. However, none of the participants provided feedbacks to transcriptions.

To analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews, the content analysis method was employed. In this regard, researchers, first of all, read through the transcriptions and generated preliminary codes. Then, the researchers integrated formed categories to themes (Cresswell, 2007) [37]. To ensure the reliability between raters, the researcher also shared each transcription with another field expert to check similarity of the obtained themes. At the end, it was conferred that occurred themes coherent with each other.

3. Findings

At the following, qualitative findings connected to international visitor students' perceptions on teaching, language and culture were presented.

3.1. International Visitor Students' Perceptions on Teaching

To get data on international visitor students' perceptions on teaching, semi-structured face to face interview and focus group interview were executed. The figure 2, presented at the following summarizes the occurred themes at the end of the data analyze.

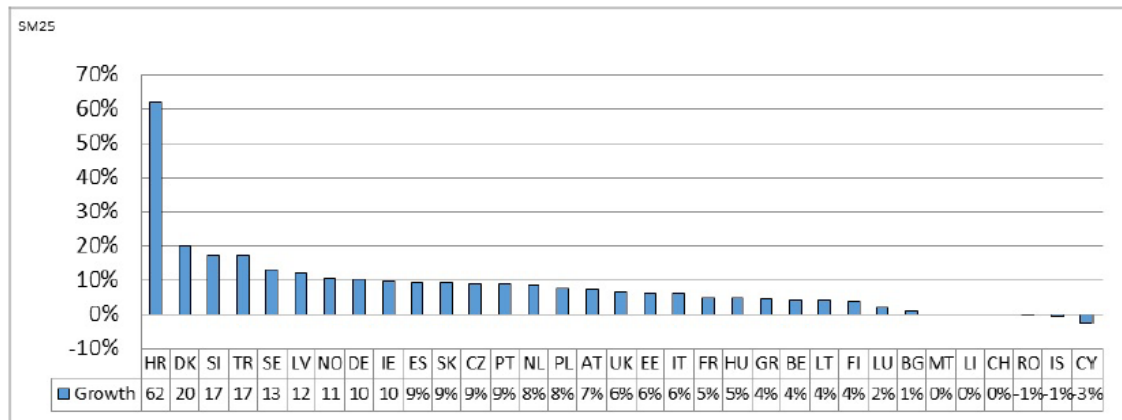


Figure 1. Erasmus Student Mobility per Country of Origin

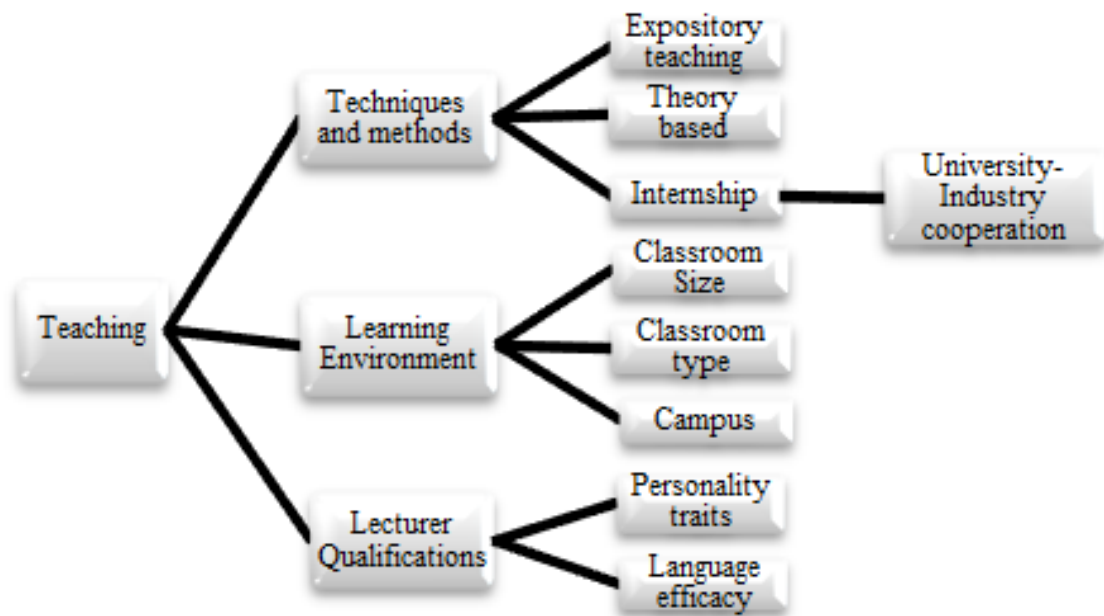


Figure 2. International visitor students’ perceptions on teaching

As it is evident from the figure 2, about the teaching, participants had various impressions such as techniques and methods, learning environment and lecturer qualifications.

In the context of the methods and techniques adopted by the lecturers, participants expressed that the teaching method usually employed was the “expository teaching”. In relation to that, they pointed out that they had little chance to practice the knowledge in some courses. Following quotations of participants prove these findings:

[...] The course I took here. It was more like a monolog of teacher and we just have to write down the texts and so on. It was interesting of course we did not have space not much for the discussions (25-year-old Austrian female, interview data, 03rd June 2015).

[...] In the context of the teaching methodology, she

just knows old methods, referring teacher. They do not prove your creativity. (24-year-old German female, interview data, 23rd June 2015).

[...] You are listening to them like listening the church praying. ala zala....Many professors do not he put the theoretical stuff in to the practical (21 - year-old Italian male, interview data, 29th May 2015).

[...] We should do more exercise to understand better (Focus group interview data, 6th June 2015).

On the other hand, participants praised the university-industry cooperation for the practice and also supporting the future carrier of the students, as well. Following excerpts of the participants support this finding:

[...] you have here is an internship. . Some big

industries come campus and you can talk with them for your future work. For me this is important. Because I have never seen something like that. (22 - year-old Italian female, interview data, 26th May 2015).

[...] It provides so many links with the city and with companies that are here (23- year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

Moreover, participants also made comments on learning environment. In this regard, they criticized the classroom size and number of the students in the class. Associated with this, they also judged the mono-type classroom environment. Following excerpts of the participants support this finding:

[...] You go to main course in Amphitheatre, with a lot of students and the teacher is speaking, speaking, speaking if you have question, you just ask, but he is reading the PowerPoint, you know making some explanations, on the board and then you have another small course with 25 students maximum and then you practice. You make some exercises in the small classroom. But here there is no... All the same classes (23- year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

[...] So this one course was very good because number of the students was low. We could also discuss a lot during the course (25 - year-old Austrian female, interview data, 03rd June 2015).

However, participants stated that university campus provides lots of opportunities for them and also the campus motivates participants to learn and spend time at the university.

[...] Here you have every faculty with its restaurant or cafe and (we have also a new one) also it is amazing you have a lot of things like you can play volleyball, football, you have the gym, the pool. I think it is really good for students because you want to go to university because you have to study okay but you have also the things you want to do (23 - year-old Italian male, interview data, 28th May 2015).

Related to the lecturer qualifications, participants expressed that lecturers were helpful, kind and they were efficient in English as well.

[...] Teachers can speak English very well and you can understand them. If you have any questions, you can and they can reply (22 - year-old Italian female, interview data, 26th May 2015).

[...] They are really good with us. They speak English very well. So it is not hard me to follow the lessons. I like them. Yes. (23 - year-old Italian female, interview data, 28th May 2015).

[...] because I know that they were good. It was

good with them. Their English was okay. (23-year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

In the context of the teaching, participants criticized the teaching techniques and methods applied by the lecturers. In this regards, they found the methods and techniques used by the lecturers mostly theoretical. In addition to that, participants also criticized learning environments at the university. Within this frame work, they especially found the classroom crowded, which does not allow practice for students. However, especially students of applied sciences praised the practice opportunity of the university which also contributes students' future carrier. Participants explained that lecturers were proficient in English which was medium of instruction and helpful and kind as well.

3.2. International Visitor Students' Perceptions on Language

Related to international visitor students' perceptions on language as a medium of instruction, semi-structured face to face interview and focus group interview were executed. Participants expressed that even though the medium of instruction is English according to information on university website, English was only partly used as medium of instruction.

[...] The courses supposed to be in English so I mean. Okay, people are speaking Turkish and they are Turkish so they have to give some explanations in Turkish sometimes. That is normal. But then okay just read what is on the table and after give all the good explanations that teacher supposed to do but you them in Turkish to Turkish people. What about the Erasmus people. So it is so bad and it happens. The teacher just reads, and then gives all the good things to the Turkish language. If you follow her she is speaking English and then she switched the Turkish, you just lose everything. So you lose the attention. The courses supposed to be in English; everybody who comes is supposed to understand (23 - year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

[...] Because I chose Turkey and Istanbul, I saw a lot of English exams in the site of the university, a lot, really a lot, was not like in the University of France, Germany so for this reason but I when I came, I checked the exam, it was written in Turkish, not in English (Focus group interview data, 6th June 2015).

Regarding to language as a medium of instruction, participants stated that even though the course language should be English as it was announced, English language was not used as an a medium of instruction in some courses. It is not because of the language inefficacy of the lecturers but students' deficiency of pre-learnings on language.

[...] many students here cannot speak English almost at all (21 - year-old Italian male, interview data, 29th May 2015).

[...] English of the students should be enriched (25 - year-old Austrian female, interview data, 03rd June 2015).

Related to language, Eurostudents expressed that during their study they had improved their foreign language, English. Following excerpts support this finding.

[...] I saw that I had to see. Improved 100 % percent my English. I learned another language but still. But I learned. It is still good beginning (23- year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

In the context of the language, participants criticized that English was not used as a medium of instruction because of the students' language deficiency. However, they expressed that during their study they had improved their foreign language, English.

3.3. International Visitor Students' Perceptions on Culture

To discover international visitor students' perceptions on the culture, the data were collected through semi-structured face to face interview and focus group interview. Figure 3 set out at the following summarizes the occurred themes at the end of the data analyze.

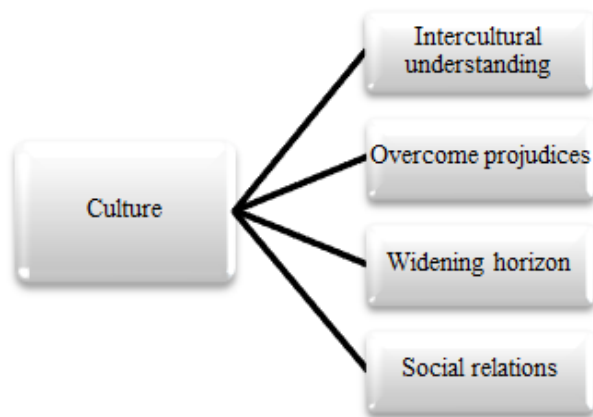


Figure 3. International visitor students' perceptions on culture

Related to the culture of the host country, participants stated that they developed their intercultural understanding. Following excerpts of the participants support the finding:

[...] There is a mixture of everything. Asian and modern, Christians and Islam, traditions and modernity. It was very interesting. (21- year-old Italian male, interview data, 29th May 2015).

[...] Of course everything foreign for you it is another benefit for you to improve your knowledge

or to get the other information from other culture (22 - year-old Greek female, interview data, 20th May 2015).

[...] I think it is a good opportunity to go abroad because then you can learn another culture, another people. You can learn the language. Of course I wanted to learn Turkish that why I came to Turkey (25 - year-old Austrian female, interview data, 03rd June 2015).

[...] I learned a lot about the culture. That was my main part. Most important contribution is cultural part for me because (24- year-old German female, interview data, 23rd June 2015).

In addition to that, interviews also revealed that participants had the opportunity to eliminate their prejudices.

[...] But the main reason is to know other culture. There are many prejudices about middle east countries, eastern countries in the western countries. I wanted to test it. Which is the truth. And I really noticed that many many things the mass media tell us repeated every day. They are not true (21 - year-old Italian male, interview data, 29th May 2015).

[...] You know something but it is different to feel it. Also good to know and to feel it. because you cannot understand if you are in another place. (23 - year-old Italian female, interview data, 28th May 2015).

Moreover, participants also pointed out that the program expanded their horizon.

[...] But one thing I am certain is that this Erasmus opened my mind about many things, about the trust in the people, about everything go to the food, being able to approach different kind of culinary, gastronomy, culture (21 - year-old Italian male, interview data, 29th May 2015).

[...] I have really widened my horizon and it is a normal life, normal city (22 - year-old Italian female, interview data, 26th May 2015).

Finally, participants stated that they developed their social relations under the favor of the program.

[...] The contribution is to have partnerships. I think it is social relations. You know the contact with people is the most important. Then all the things come with it (23- year-old French male, interview data, 12th June 2015).

[...] so I have got. So I was closed to Turkish people. I talked to them a lot. So the politics, life style, about everything (24- year-old German female, interview data, 23rd June 2015).

[...] It is a good opportunity for a person to be more

social, to have more contacts with other students, other teachers, of course with other culture (22 - year-old Greek female, interview data, 20th May 2015).

The third research question which aims to discover international visitor students perceptions on the culture revealed that students developed their intercultural understanding, broke prejudices. Furthermore, participants also stated that they developed their international perspective, widened their horizon and social relations.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Discussion

The current study aims to explore international visitor students' perceptions on teaching, language and culture. The study carried out with the students who have been studying in Turkey at the level of Bachelor and Master of Arts and Science. In accordance with this purpose, students were asked for to answer the questions related to teaching, language at the university and culture.

The data obtained through the semi-structured face to face interview and the focus group interview revealed that course contents were superficial and not detailed enough. The number of the course hours in the curriculum was also few. Lecturers were prone to use Turkish instead of English, which is normally the announced medium of instruction. The study carried out by Teichler (2012, p.10) [15] also supports this finding that "following the lectures in a foreign language" is among the academic problems for students. Moreover, in his study, Colemann's finding goes along with the finding of the current study that "local staff is unwilling to teach through English" (2006, p.7) [38].

In addition to that, to explore students' perceptions on teaching in the courses, semi-structured face to face interview and focus group interview were executed. The findings explored that techniques and methods employed by the lecturers during instruction were more related to lecture method and rote teaching instead of practical and experienced based. Similarly, the study carried out by Visakorpi et al. (2008) [39] and Koc (2003) [40] indicates that new teaching methods, staff development programs should be expanded and teaching strategies should be employed by the teaching staff to foster critical thinking skills of students. Furthermore, in the context of the learning environment, participants also explained that classroom size was crowded. This finding equivalent to previous finding by Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006) [41] that large classes cause discomfort among students. The Council of Higher Education report on education also contains the equivalent results. Even though average number of the students to each staff in tertiary education in OECD countries is 15, 6, the average number of students per lecturer is 21, for faculty members 48 in Turkey (YOK, 2014) [42]. However, in a

similar study conducted by Yagci, Cetin and Turhan (2013) [43] on Erasmus students, it was clarified by Erasmus students that learning environments were quite satisfactory. In addition to that, in the tenth five-year plan of Turkish Republic Ministry of Development, it was projected to decrease the number of the students per faculty members to 36 in 2018 (Ministry of Development, 2013) [44]. Furthermore, classrooms were mono or two types instead of multiple type classrooms which allow group teaching, practicing etc. This finding is similar to study on problems of Erasmus students carried out Kocakasap Doku (2013) [45] which found that students had some problems with the educational environment. However, especially students of applied sciences praised strong link between university and industry which provides practice opportunity and contributes students' future carrier. The study of Angell, Heffernan and Megicks (2008) [46] approves this finding that the cooperation is crucial for students. Students also explained that lecturers were proficient in English which was medium of instruction. Participants also reported that lecturers were helpful and kind. This finding is coherent with the literature that students describe lecturers friendly and helpful (Bogain, 2012) [47].

In the context of the language, participants criticized that English was not used as a medium of instruction because of the students' language deficiency. However, participants expressed that during their study they had improved their foreign language, English. Participating in the program also improves participants' English language competence which takes part in the skills of the 21st century and cultural awareness (Janson, Schomburg and Teichler 2009; Aydin, 2012) [14, 23].

Related to the culture in host country, participants expressed that they developed their intercultural understanding, broke prejudices. Furthermore, participants also stated that they developed their international perspective, widened their horizon and social relations. The finding is coherent with the previous studies that the program provides students intercultural dimension, expands their horizon contributes culturally diverse communities (Janson, Schomburg and Teichler 2009; Stronkhorst 2005; Aktan and Sarı 2010) [14, 48, 21]. In addition to that, study carried out by Zimmermann, Neyer (2013) [49] proved that mobility contributes extraversion of the students. Furthermore, it is clear that students' mobility also stamp out the prejudices (Mutlu, Alacahan and Erdil, 2010) [26]. However, according to the content analysis of 502 Erasmus students, it is crystal clear that "Erasmus Mobility experience contributed to students' individual development rather than academic development" (Mutlu 2011, p.87) [50].

4.2. Conclusion

The current study aims to find out international visitor students perceptions on teaching, language and culture. Findings disclosed that, there are some challenges for participants in teaching such as the language of instruction

and number of the courses provided. In addition to that, learning environment such as crowded classrooms and few varieties of class types for the instructions might be called as limitations. In the context of the language, participants criticized that English was not used as a medium of instruction because of the students' language deficiency. However, participants expressed that during their study they had improved their foreign language, English. Participants pointed out that they developed their intercultural understanding, international perspective broke prejudices, widened their horizon and social relations.

4.3. Limitations and Future Scope

The current study has some limitations. In the study, subjects were assigned just from one case. In the future research, participants from more than one case might be included in the study or participants from public and private universities might be involved in the study to compare if there were any differences in their perceptions. In addition to that, international visitor students coming from other countries and continents within the context of the other programs financed by Turkish State such as "Türkiye Scholarships" and "Mevlana Exchange Program" may also be included in the study to vary the data. Finally, to get data on teaching, language and culture, observation technique might also be employed to vary and verify the data.

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