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The Views of Erasmus Students Learning Turkish in Turkey

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the views of Erasmus students studying Turkish in Turkey on the challenges of their learning processes. The participants of the study were 25 Erasmus exchange students from different countries of Europe who came to a public Turkish university for one term or two. Their views on the challenges of learning Turkish were collected through a list of open ended questions and a face to face semi-structured interview. The content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data. Their stated challenges were discussed under the headings of (1) structural challenges, (2) cultural challenges, and (3) exposure challenges. The findings have some implications for current Turkish courses and further research.

Keywords: Erasmus, Turkish as a foreign language, challenges

1. Introduction

Today more and more people in the world are becoming eager to learn Turkish as Foreign Language (TTFL) for various purposes (Bayyurt & Yaylı, 2011). This demand requires a bigger number of qualified teachers, better equipment and materials in the field. A lot of students come to Turkey to have a university degree in many disciplines and they have to master the language of the country. Therefore TTFL as a discipline broadens its floor not only in Turkey but in other countries as well (Yaylı, 2004, 2007). Studies done in the field of TTFL are now helping the researchers better understand the contexts and characteristics of the practice inside and outside Turkey. Most of the studies in the field are related to the techniques, methods, activities used in four skills education (İşcan, 2011). Therefore new studies in the different aspects are needed. As TTFL is a growing field, it accommodates some critical problems that have not been solved yet. The recent research in the field has proved the existence of some methodological (e.g., Kırvar, 2000; Yaylı, 2004), structural (e.g., Cumakunova, 2000; Ekmekçi, 1992;

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Karababa, 2009; Okatan, 2012; Şahin, 2013; Vandewalle, 2000), cultural (e.g., Alkaç, 2001; Anciaux, 2001; Bayyurt, 2011) and political (e.g., Akıncı, 2011; Chakar, 2001; Yağmur, 2011) and material (e.g., Alkaç, 2001; Buliga, 2001; Toprak, 2011; Yağmur, 2001) problems that need solving. There are many students coming to Turkey for various purposes. Some come to Turkish universities for a bachelor degree and some for graduate studies. There are also Erasmus exchange students who visit Turkish universities for a short time. Thus, TTFL studies with Erasmus students are also necessary for the field in order to look into the challenges of learning Turkish as a foreign language. For this reason, this study aims to answer the question "What are challenges that Erasmus students experience while learning Turkish in Turkey?" by investigating their views about learning experiences. Even short visits in a semester can provide us with different observations of those students.

2. Method

This study has a qualitative design with which the views of Erasmus exchange students from European countries were investigated.

2.1. The context and the participants

Thanks to the Erasmus program of the European Union, a lot of students and faculty members move to the universities of the Union depending on the bilateral agreements they make among themselves. This study was carried out at a public university in Turkey which also has some agreements with several universities in Europe. At this university, the incoming students take courses in their field and some prefer to study Turkish. There is a special course for Erasmus students called 'Turkish for Foreigners'. The course is at A1 level and from 10 to 25 Erasmus students take it per semester. This study was conducted with 25 voluntary students (15 females and 10 males) in fall and spring terms. They were from different countries: Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Czech Republic. Of the participants, 20 were undergraduate students and 5 were graduate students. The age average of the participants was 22.40 at the time of the study.

2.2. Data collection

The data were collected through two instruments: open-ended questions and face-to-face interview. The open-ended survey questions aimed at discovering the challenges the international students experienced throughout their process of studying Turkish. They were told that they could feel free to answer the survey questions as they liked and that they could write as long as they would like. A semi-structured interview was prepared depending on the issues the students forwarded in their responses to the open-ended questions. The interview took about 30 minutes for each one of the 10 students who volunteered for the second step of the study. Both the survey and the interview were conducted in English by the researcher.

2.3. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed through a content analysis method. First of all, the emerging meanings were coded and noted. Later, the themes were determined under which the challenges could be described and discussed. Finally, the quotes from the survey and the interview were taken intact in order to better reflect the views of the participants. Another scientist from the field of language education checked the categories of the themes and an agreement of 95 % was established. The remaining part was discussed and a consensus was reached. In the excerpts presented in the findings section, pseudonyms were used.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Structural challenges

Most of the participants state that Turkish is very different from their native tongues and this makes the learning process hectic. They believe that if someone wants to know Turkish well, they need to work, repeat and practice a lot:

- I have studied several languages so far. However, Turkish seems to be the hardest one ever. The suffixes, word order and especially the way of thinking are completely different. There are some common words from the Ottoman times, but this is not about grammar. It is really challenging. (Tomas)
- I have to think twice while I am making a sentence in Turkish. Turkish people speak really fast and I cannot follow the meaning. The names of the days, months and grammar kill me. (Lina)
- I am not good at using the endings for inflection. I confuse the order. I think I need to hear the language more to automatically produce my sentences. (David)
- The first time the teacher went in and started to speak, I said "Oh, my God!" to myself. It did not resemble any language I know or heard in my life. But in time I realized that Turkish language has its own logic, like mathematics. Getting used to this logic should be very hard for everyone from Europe. I mean it! (Rasa)

The structure of Turkish makes every skill challenging to some extent because of the danger of negative transfer between languages (Yaylı, 2011). The participants support the idea that Turkish is different from widely learnt languages. Therefore, some learners could stop studying Turkish with the belief that they will never be able to speak it.

3.2. Cultural challenges

As the Erasmus students come from different cultures, they experience a culture shock the first time they come to Turkey. They find it difficult to interact with the people with different beliefs, values and way of living. This challenge is observable in their meanings about culture:

- I have grown up with Christian values, with a church in the neighborhood and ceremonies that are all ours. Here I cannot see the things I got accustomed to. I believe there are many conservative people in Turkey. Opposite sex relations are not as easy as in my country. My Turkish friends say I should be careful with my behaviors towards girls. (Tomas)
- I have been to other Islamic countries before, Egypt and Bosnia for example. But I was a tourist then. Now it is different. When you are learning the language, you must learn the culture with it. It is a part of the language. You do not want to seem rude, and to embarrass people around you. You want to use the right language in every place. I think it is fun to learn a different culture. I love it. (Pavel)
- When I learned German in Germany, I really felt at home because of the similar culture there. However, here in Turkey, things are not that easy. But it is OK. In your first weeks you should be careful in a strange place. I am trying to understand the different way of living here. This is a dry country in terms of alcohol. In my country every restaurant or café serves alcohol. But in here it is limited. Also people do not use the word 'alcohol' very often. I understand it is something religious, cultural. (Gloria)
- In the classroom you show too much respect to the teacher. That is weird. I do not like it. (David)

The cultural issues in language learning determine the pace of learning in many contexts. Learning a new language means learning a new culture. If the target culture is close to the culture of the learner, the number of culture dependent problems will be small whereas this number can be very high for a language with a highly different culture. In this study, many students said that they suffered in the beginning and getting used to the Turkish culture took some time. Due to the cultural elements in the language, getting used to the language itself could take a period of time.

3.3. Exposure challenges

For rarely learnt and taught languages, it is really hard to find enough exposure sources. When asked the participants, they foreground the fact that they will not be able to continue studying Turkish in their home countries. Some of their statements are presented below:

- As I said before, Turkish people speak fast. When I try to understand the spoken language, I cannot catch the meaning. Not even the gist. Then I am demotivated. In the beginning, there is not much source for your practice. That is how I felt in those days. (Lina)
- I want to keep my Turkish when I go back home. I am afraid I will not be able to find sources in Turkish there. Turkish is not like English. You cannot have graded storybooks, videos and other things for self-study. I feel sad about this. (Alina)
- I would like to take some Turkish language materials with me when I go back. Do you think I can find good ones? (Pavel)

Exposure problem is in TTFL is an under-discussed issue. Participants state that Turkish is not like English, which is spoken all over the world. Then learners of Turkish in the world suffer from the lack of exposure, which means lack of materials, media and context where Turkish is spoken. This problem makes Turkish a language that can be learnt in Turkey only, which actually should grow to be a myth instead of a reality.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the views of Erasmus students learning Turkish at a public university in Turkey. The data analysis revealed that the biggest challenges they face while learning Turkish are structure, culture and exposure. The structure and culture issues are in line with the previous studies (e.g., Bayyurt, 2011; Karababa, 2009; Yaylı, 2007; Şahin, 2013). However, the lack of exposure seems to be a new issue that should be discussed further. The problem of structure could be the focus of program and syllabus developers and textbook writers. The challenging structure of Turkish could be taken into consideration in meaningful activities. The culture problem also deserves extra attention in the programs and the textbooks. Some content based and task based activities could help the learners internalize the Turkish culture better. Exposure is really problematic especially for those learning Turkish outside Turkey. More materials should be developed and delivered for those learners. Some universities in Turkey could spend more time and effort on TTFL material development. Media also should be made available to the learners of Turkish language. This study was carried out with limited number of participants from several countries. Similar studies should be conducted in similar and different contexts with participants from various countries. This will develop the field of TTFL so that better solutions could be achieved depending on the different contexts of practice.

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