

## **Study Abroad Process from Intercultural Communication Perspective: An Exploratory Study on Erasmus Experience in Turkey**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the study abroad experience within intercultural communication competence (ICC) framework, focusing on Erasmus students at a foundation university in Turkey. Using a qualitative approach, the research is conducted in two phases, at the beginning, and at the end of a semester. The results of focus groups in the first phase with 20 students provided an understanding of students' motives to select the host country and city, information sources, prior knowledge and assumptions, and first impressions about the host culture. The second phase involved focus group sessions and in-depth interviews with the same students, enabling to reveal the changes relating to motivational and cognitive aspects of ICC and the challenging factors. Based on the findings and existing literature, a framework for the process of study abroad experience is proposed, encompassing decision-making process, study abroad experience, and ICC outcomes.

**Keywords:** Study abroad, Erasmus student mobility, intercultural communication competence, intercultural knowledge

## Kültürlerarası İletişim Perspektifinden Yurtdışı Eğitim Süreci: Türkiye’de Erasmus Deneyimi Üzerine Keşfedici Bir Araştırma

### Özet

Türkiye’de bir vakıf üniversitesindeki Erasmus öğrencilerine odaklanan bu çalışma kültürlerarası iletişim yeterliği (KİY) çerçevesinde yurtdışı eğitim deneyimini incelemektedir. Niteliksel yaklaşım kullanan araştırma, eğitim-öğretim döneminin başında ve sonunda olmak üzere iki aşamada yürütülmüştür. İlk aşamada 20 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilen odak grupların sonuçları, öğrencilerin ev sahibi ülkeyi ve kenti seçme nedenleri, bilgi kaynakları, önceki bilgi ve varsayımları ve ev sahibi kültür ile ilgili ilk izlenimleri hakkında bilgi vermiştir. KİY’nin motivasyonel ve bilişsel unsurlarına ilişkin değişimleri ve zorlayıcı faktörleri ortaya çıkarmaya olanak veren ikinci aşama, aynı öğrencilerle yapılan odak gruplar ve derinlemesine görüşmelerden oluşmaktadır. Bulgular ve mevcut literatür ışığında, yurtdışı eğitim deneyim süreci için, karar alma sürecini, yurtdışı eğitim deneyimini ve KİY çıktılarını kapsayan bir çerçeve önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yurtdışı eğitim, Erasmus öğrenci hareketliliği, kültürlerarası iletişim yeterliği, kültürlerarası bilgi

### Introduction

Internationalization is currently a major objective of institutions, resulting in initiatives for developing student exchange programs, which creates platforms for students to discover new cultures. Being an international student exchange initiative, Erasmus student mobility program integrated into Erasmus+ 2014-2020 strategy, encourages structured collaboration of higher education institutions to sustain the vision of internationalization, and identifies intercultural competences as a key priority area (European Commission, 2015). The Erasmus program not only emphasizes supplying well-developed human resources across Europe but also aims to foster intercultural skills as an essential aspect of self-improvement (Stier, 2006). Consequently, the Erasmus program is considered as a context for developing intercultural communication skills, and clearly falls within the interest area of intercultural communication as a short-term study abroad program.

Several studies (Covert, 2014; Deardorff, 2006; Root & Ngampornchai, 2012; Williams, 2005) have focused on various aspects of studying abroad, such as intercultural competence, adaptability, and intercultural acceptance. Student mobility within Europe has also attracted great attention in intercultural communication studies (Albuquerque, 2008; Gutiérrez, Durán & Beltrán, 2015; Papatsiba, 2006), including the studies that evaluate the intercultural outcomes of Turkish Erasmus students in Europe (Bozkaya & Aydın, 2010; Demir & Demir, 2009; Ersoy,

2013). Erasmus partnership of Turkey is a unique case in terms of being a non-EU country and having a different cultural context. This study aims to explore the study abroad experience from an ICC perspective, focusing on Erasmus students at a foundation university in Izmir, Turkey, where they are likely to experience relatively sharp cultural differences. In order to understand how study abroad experience is reflected in ICC, the research is divided into two phases. First phase aims to gain insight into prior student perceptions of the host culture, while the second phase aims to observe any changes in ICC that the program may bring about.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As the world increasingly demands the ability to interact with individuals and groups from culturally diverse backgrounds, ICC has become a prominent field of study both for academics and practitioners. Scholars define ICC as the ability to show appropriate and effective behavior in different cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999; Spitzberg, 2000). Effectiveness refers to “the accomplishment of valued goals”, and appropriateness means the consideration of “valued rules and norms” (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 380). Accordingly, individuals are expected to accomplish their communicative goals taking into consideration the cultural values and norms of an intercultural context.

The literature encompasses various models (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Bennett, 1986; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002; Deardorff, 2006; Holmes & O’Neil, 2012; Spitzberg, 2000; Stier, 2006), which conceptualize ICC based on its different aspects. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) indicate that despite variations, the models tend to demonstrate similar components, namely *attitudes*, *knowledge*, and *skills*. *Attitudes* refer to the motivational aspects of ICC, involving openness, curiosity and respect towards diversified cultures; *knowledge* stands for the cognitive component that engages culture-general and culture-specific knowledge; and *skills* refer to the behavioral component, which are identified with effective and appropriate communicative abilities in new cultural contexts (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Gertsen 1990). ICC is a continuing process that can never be fully completed, (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002; Deardorff, 2006), involving individuals fostering their own cultural knowledge and comprehension, increasing awareness and sensitivity, and expressing these with appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Gertsen (1990) suggests that knowledge is likely to develop positive attitudes, but such attitudes do not always lead to an effective and appropriate communication. Accordingly, an interculturally competent person is the one whose knowledge and positive attitudes are reflected in observable communication behaviors. Byram (1997) notes “knowledge and attitude factors are preconditions, which can

be modified by the processes of intercultural communication” (p. 33). Successful intercultural communication can be evaluated in terms of demonstrated communication skills, which are highly dependent on cognitive and motivational factors. Intercultural contexts create an environment for participants to gain cultural knowledge, and develop attitudes, which further may lead to demonstrate communication skills.

This study investigates the potential changes in attitudes and cultural knowledge of Erasmus students in Turkey through students’ perspectives. The study contributes a different cultural perspective to the literature by focusing on the context of Turkey, whose origins are found in the intersection of both Eastern, Islamic, and Western civilizations (Hongladarom and Ess, 2007). Few studies focus on the Erasmus program in Turkey; of these, Demirkol’s study (2013) on Erasmus students’ attitudes towards accession of Turkey to EU, found that they generally perceive Turkey as a part of EU. Similarly, Oner (2015) evaluates the influence of the Erasmus program on students’ perceptions about Turkey’s EU membership, and on European identity. And Keles (2013), focusing on intercultural communication barriers faced by Erasmus students, emphasizes the stereotypes and prejudices about Turkey. Despite these few studies regarding Erasmus students in Turkey, a focus on ICC outcomes of a study abroad derived from students’ experiences still remains to be studied. Therefore, this study provides a unique view by examining student perceptions on Erasmus experience within the context of ICC. Taking a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding about study abroad experience in relation with motivational and cognitive dimensions of ICC, the following questions are explored:

1. What are the main factors that students consider when choosing Turkey as a study abroad destination?
2. How do students express their knowledge and perceptions of the host culture at the beginning of the study abroad term?
3. In what ways do students make sense of their intercultural experiences in Turkey at the end of the study abroad term?
4. How does a short-term study experience influence students’ attitudes towards cultural differences and knowledge about the host culture?

### **Method**

In current literature, most of the studies which examine the outcomes of the study abroad programs, leverage quantitative methods to explore their impact on the improvement of intercultural competence (Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Peng & Wu, 2016; Williams, 2005; Zimmermann, 1995). Qualitative and mixed-methods (Covert,

2014; Gutiérrez, Durán & Beltrán, 2015; Jon, 2013) are also used, but still remains limited. Thus, to allow more individualized and detailed responses, this study adopts qualitative methods including focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Methodologically, in-depth interviews were adopted to capture individual's attitudes, thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors in a broader sense (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and focus groups to obtain deeper insights (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Since the study requires description of the role of experience, it follows a comparative approach in order to highlight changes emerging between the beginning and the end of an Erasmus period. To this aim, the data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, three focus group sessions were organized with participants in the second week of their stay to investigate their general perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge about Turkey and Turkish culture, and motivations for country/city choice. The knowledge obtained in this descriptive analysis informed the second phase, at the end of the semester, which involved both focus groups and interviews with the original participants.

### **Participants**

52 Erasmus students were enrolled in spring semester 2015 at a foundation university in Izmir, Turkey. Researchers attended the Erasmus Orientation Meeting to inform students about the study and request their participation. 20 students (10 male, 10 female) volunteered to participate (Table 1). With this purposeful sample of students, three focus groups (two groups of 7 and one of 6) were formed, representing a balance of gender and a range of nationalities to effectively examine different viewpoints within the group (Kitzinger, 1995), and to highlight contrasting opinions. The second phase was organized with the original participants at the end of the semester right before their departure. Due to the students' busy schedules, it was possible to hold only two focus groups consisting of 10 participants (5 in each) in the second phase, while the remaining students took part in in-depth interviews.

Participant List		
Initials	Nationality	Gender
A.G.	Poland	female
A.V.	Netherlands	female
B.J.	Poland	male
B.V.	Spain	male
C.B.	Portuguese	female
C.L.	Germany	male
E.S.	Poland	female
G.D.	France	male
H.R.	UK	female
J.D.	Poland	female
L.B.	Romania	male
M.K.	France	male
M.M.	France	female
M.N.	Italy	male
M.S.	Germany	female
P.L.	France	male
P.W.	Spain	female
R.K.	Germany	male
R.M.	Hungary	female
S.S.	Germany	male

**Table 1. Participant List**

## Procedure

The data was collected through a focus group guideline and a semi-structured interview form. Focus group guideline included general opening questions and ICC related questions addressing the attitudes and cultural knowledge. Each session has taken an hour in average. First phase findings were facilitated to prepare second-phase focus group and interview forms. Semi-structured forms, helping flexible interaction with the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011), included questions that lead respondents to narrate their experiences during the semester. The interviews lasted in approximately 50 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were audio-visually recorded.

## Qualitative data analysis

Audio-visual recordings of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim (illustrative quotes given in this article are reproduced as spoken by the informants). Using an inductive approach, qualitative data analysis was performed through an open coding process, which involves careful reading of the texts and taking notes on them (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). First, each researcher studied the texts separately and prepared preliminary codes, then discussed together through multiple re-readings for establishing the inter-coder reliability. The

codes were grouped into broader categories to generate a descriptive analysis, which illustrated the participants' current attitudes and knowledge.

The same methodological procedure was applied at the second phase to ensure inter-coder reliability. Since the study aimed to understand possible changes in the motivational and cognitive dimensions of ICC resulting from experience, in the second phase, a thematic analysis, defined as “a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82) was employed. Open coding process, enabling free category generation (Burnard, 1991), allowed sorting the preliminary codes into broad themes that are organized and interpreted regarding to the research questions. Thematic analysis guideline provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed for conducting a rigorous examination of the data.

### **Findings**

Two-phase process provided significant findings on how students perceive the host culture at the beginning, and how they make sense of their cross-cultural experiences at the end. First phase findings presented a general overview of students' cultural perceptions before experiencing the host culture, while second phase provided in-depth insights on the role of study abroad experience on attitudes and knowledge.

#### **Before coming to Turkey**

Focus group sessions at the first phase involved questions that address students' motives for country selection, sources of information, and expectations.

#### **Selecting the host city and country**

To elaborate students' decision-making processes, the study investigated reasons for choosing Turkey. The majority of students specified the main reason as their desire to explore a different culture compared to other European countries, while a few emphasized the attractiveness of Mediterranean climate. As one student declared:

“I could go everywhere around the world. I did my internship of second year in Caribbean, the island that belongs to the Netherlands, so everyone speaks Dutch, ... was not very different in the culture. And this time I wanted to stay bit closer to home but I wanted to experience a different culture that's why I chose Turkey.” (A.V.)

#### **Information sources**

Participants were asked to identify their initial information sources. Sources included the media and the families, which may lead to biases. Many participants explicitly stated that

choosing Turkey was not fully supported by their parents, due to their existing preconceptions. However, the students themselves were more open, as one of them stated below:

“My dad didn’t allow me to come here. But I just did it, and I’m totally fine and I think it’s not what he’s thinking of Turkey. I told my dad, maybe in Germany they’re living, more conservative ones. Maybe it’s different and I want to see that. I want to explore it.” (C.L.)

### **Pre-existing knowledge and assumptions about the host country**

Findings exhibited that participants’ prior knowledge was mostly derived from media, family, and the Turkish community in Europe. Students were encouraged to share their impressions about the local culture, in comparison, with their own. Common themes that emerged were the appreciation of hospitality and helpfulness. Participants often described people in Turkey as helpful and welcoming, based on their early experiences. Particularly students from Germany and the Netherlands compared locals with the members of Turkish community in their own countries. A certain stereotypical image of the Turkish community had been already developed in these participants’ perceptions before their arrival.

Furthermore, stereotypes also become apparent when describing their cultural expectations; some expected a culture similar with Arabic societies. One student declared:

“I thought it’s going to be more like an Arab country actually, like very old buildings, like Islamic Stone kind of architecture... I thought it’s going to be very traditional. And it’s actually quite modern. And it’s really, as you said, it’s more like the West even it’s more east so it’s surprising.” (L.B.)

Another one followed:

“I thought people would be more Muslim, everybody, girls wearing scarves and everything, but not really, I was a bit shocked about it, because people are pretty normal.” (C.B.)

Although the previous knowledge was to a certain extent based on negative stereotypes, rather reflecting a deep cultural knowledge, the attitudes towards the host culture appeared generally positive.

## **Study abroad experience**

This section encompasses the findings of the first phase regarding the first impressions of students; and key results gained from the second phase related to students’ cultural knowledge, and challenges they have faced.

### **Arrival period: First impressions**

The first research question addressed general perceptions about the host culture at the beginning of the period. A descriptive analysis of the first phase data enabled insights regarding participants’ perceptions, knowledge, and first impressions about the host culture. Regarding



the students' impressions of Izmir, the majority described the city as 'modern' and 'Western'. Participants were impressed with the city's general appearance expressing a sense of similarity with their home countries and European cities. One student stated:

"Izmir is really Western, like it's really modern. I read about it in the internet that says that's really modern but didn't expect it to be like this." (A.V.)

Many participants emphasized their awareness of a high degree of nationalism, based on their observations and narratives of local students. Participants were generally able to identify the flag and Atatürk, some also mentioned secularism in a Muslim society as a distinguishing characteristic. Participants' first impressions of Izmir, Turkey and people were therefore based on a combination of previous images, their own observations, and media representations.

### **Studying period: Developing Cultural Knowledge**

Second phase findings derived from focus groups and in-depth interviews highlighted the key topics of cultural comprehension expressed by students at the end of their stay. The cognitive dimension of ICC, knowledge and comprehension encompasses "cultural self-awareness; deep understanding, and knowledge of culture; culture-specific information and sociolinguistic awareness" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). Culture-general knowledge involves "the major elements that constitute the cultural environment", and culture-specific information comprises "how cultural universals are manifested in a specific domain and procedural knowledge of how to be effective in that domain" (Van Dyne et al., 2012, p. 300). Since intercultural understanding relies on a combination of self-awareness and knowledge of the other culture, to develop ICC it is important to be aware of similar and distinctive aspects of cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Accordingly, both phases of the study were aimed at understanding students' self-awareness and knowledge of the host culture.

The participants were asked to identify cultural differences between host and home countries. Comparative responses regarding cultural differences are categorized into three prominent themes: religious differences; modernity and Europeanness; and distinct daily life practices.

### ***Religious differences***

Cognitive skills in intercultural encounters are related with understanding of cultural differences and similarities (Moon, 2010). Differences in religion as a key aspect of cultural distinction can be understood through intercultural training or experience.

Findings reveal that religion was considered as the major cultural difference. Although they respect and appreciate the dominant religion in Turkey, most participants perceived it as an obstacle to European integration. One student explained this as:

“When I hear *ezan*, I think how it is possible that a country like this can become European, because we are so different in that side... I am studying on Turkey and European Union and I do not want to think that, because I think all cultures can come together, but for me it is very difficult that a country like this...” (B. V.)

Additionally, regarding to regional variation in Turkey, religion still stands as a major reference point for the students. Students’ observations of religious identities, were the basis for comparing cities, particularly Izmir and Istanbul. However, these observations were often at a superficial level, related to clothing, head covering etc.

“Istanbul is more religious. Women are covered their head in scarf” (A.V.)

“In Izmir, you see Ataturk’s pictures everywhere; in Hatay we didn’t see any. But the culture, the East is more similar to Middle East. Izmir is quite similar to Greece. We can see that dress code is different. People are different. Religion is more presented in the East.” (P.W.)

### ***Modernity and Europeanness***

Interview findings brought insights into students’ perceptions resulting from short-term residence. Students tended to raise the Europeanness concept when describing the Turkish culture. Ultimately, their understanding of the difference between Turkey and Europe was based on the notion of modernity. During the interviews, students often implied that Turkish culture is fundamentally different than European. This cultural understanding is mainly dominated by religious difference, summarized as follows:

“When I came here I expected something that is very unmodern. And I saw the city a few days, and I see that actually you have metro, you have glass buildings, you have apartment buildings and so on. So, I thought it’s like actually... more modern. Now, I spent here some time and see the differences...people are different, their mentality are different than the European ones.” (L.B.)

“At the beginning I was like it is really European I do not feel like it is Turkey but after I lived here and talked to people. The first image it looks like European but after, it is not.” (M.M.)

### ***Distinct Daily Life Practices***

To assess levels of cultural self-awareness and knowledge, participants were invited to narrate their experiences regarding time, personal space and non-verbal communication behaviors. Students noted considerable cultural differences in dispositions toward time and personal space. There are also differences in non-verbal communication behaviors, including gestures and the use of personal distance. One participant stated:

“Maybe Turkish people are closer. Like they are hugging or guys are kissing each other to say hello which is not that common in France only if you are very close friends.” (G.D.)

Thematic analysis revealed serious concerns of students with personal space. Students from non-Mediterranean countries declared that the personal space is smaller in Turkey, and found it difficult to identify when intimate greetings were appropriate, even after spending a whole semester in the culture.

“Turkish people may have more body contact than German people. We are negatively known for having really less contact ... But here in Turkey especially, the men kissing, kind of putting the hands together when they meet. That is something very different and first time it was pretty strange for me and until now I’ve never figured out when to do this and when not to do this.” (R.K.)

Students noted that the understanding of time in Turkey tended to be different from their own cultures. This difference becomes apparent in any daily life interaction, especially when cooperating with Turkish students. The following extracts exemplify how they experienced the time in daily life:

“In Hungary it’s more or less like in Germany. If you say that you are going to be there at 2 o’clock, then it’s basically 2 o’clock sharp. Here it is 2.20, 2.30, depends so. But it’s a Mediterranean thing because in Italy it’s similar.” (L.B.)

“I think they don’t really care about the time, just being in time somewhere... When we wanted to go to a trip, ... Turkish people were so late and also Spanish ones.” (R.M.)

Second phase provided an in-depth understanding about how students experienced the host culture. According to the findings two significant themes, resulting from study abroad experience in Turkey, emerged: challenges and change.

### **Challenges: Barriers to develop ICC**

Some students perceive cultural differences as challenging factors, resulting in the retention of self-cultural values, norms and systems. Consequently, it is considered that an inflexible and ethnocentric perspective may pose a barrier to the acquisition of ICC. Two prominent types of challenge were identified: language barrier and cultural distance.

#### ***Language Barrier***

Language is considered as a significant barrier in intercultural communication (Mancini, Backman, & Baldwin, 2009). The following cases exemplify how language barriers may prevent sufficient interaction with locals.

“I feel so shy to use it [Turkish] because I feel like I pronounce it so bad. ... They can see that I don’t speak Turkish and they think I’m speaking in a different language like they never understand if I want something.” (R.M.)

“It’s definitely for us a difficulty ... they didn’t speak English; they didn’t understand what I try to say to them” (L.B.)

Many students expressed complaints about the lack of English-speaking locals outside the university in Izmir. Although most students tried to learn basic Turkish for daily needs, some considered the language issue as a prominent challenge in their experience of living in Turkey.

### ***Cultural Distance***

To understand students’ attitudes to living in a different culture, they were given hypothetical situations like “if you received a good job offer in Turkey, would you consider living here?” and further scenarios such as attending a graduate program or marrying in Turkey. Almost all students replied negatively because of perceived “conservatism” in Turkey. Once again, religion emerged as a dominant theme in intercultural experience. Students stated:

“To be honest, if it is very conservative family with a very strong Muslim rules and cultures, it could be probably too difficult for me” (G.D.)

“I like really here as an Erasmus... Turkey is perfect but I think I cannot live here. Like one semester is enough but not more.” (M.M.)

Another barrier was the bureaucracy that they experienced. The role of bureaucracy can be considered as a distinctive cultural feature, influencing adaptability in the host culture, and hindering the development of ICC, as stated below;

“It seems very bureaucratic... These are the assertive things made by the government like rules, legislations and so on. So this is actually for me the most negative.” (R.K.)

### **Change: Study abroad outcomes of Erasmus experience in Turkey**

As Deardorff (2006) suggests, the process of intercultural competence involves internal and external outcomes of interactions between cultures. Internal outcomes refer to the ability of reference shift, which in turn motivate the formation of flexibility, adaptability, empathy, and ethnorelativism. In this context, the present study considers internal outcomes in terms of changed perceptions after a semester abroad. Since many students described this experience as a contribution to their adaptability and flexibility, it can be concluded that internal outcomes generally relate to a broader ethnorelative perspective.

The findings indicate the extent to which students perceive the Erasmus experience impacted their knowledge and attitude development in ICC. All agreed that Erasmus experience led to various changes including personal and intercultural skills. Most evaluated this experience as a positive contribution, while a few remained relatively neutral or negative. Once

the data was analyzed, to frame internal outcomes, three emerging topics were identified: motivation towards further intercultural experience; adaptability; ethnorelative perspective.

### **Motivation towards further intercultural experience**

It is clearly observed that Erasmus experience stimulates students' curiosity about new cultures and motivates them to explore further.

“I want to come back Turkey but not to live here, just to see the regions. I did not see because Turkey is huge and it is so different... These four months were not enough to see.” (H.R.)

“It was really interesting... So it's a good experience to have all these experiences. And, of course I hope it can help me ... to discover more culture” (G.D.)

### **Developing adaptability skills**

Students' statements presented that encountering different cultures may enable the assessment of situations from multiple standpoints, and increase tolerance of unfamiliar conditions and behaviors. Kim (1991) indicates that adaptability in ICC may occur at three different levels: cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive level is related with how individuals assess or interpret messages, as described below:

“As a guest you need to discover the culture. I think the right position is to say, okay they are different here, and so I just act what they want. That's the best part, it is about compromising.” (M.K.)

“I think that now maybe I'm more open-minded. I worked on myself just to discover, to adapt myself to new culture, to new country. We are different. We don't have the same culture. And, so for me it was kind of effort just to adapt myself.” (G.D.)

Students also referred to their adaptability reaching behavioral level, showing that the Erasmus experience makes a real contribution to their ability to adapt and survive in an unfamiliar environment.

“I was a little shy to speak with other people maybe in the street. I came here and after one month I changed it because I have to survive and I changed my this side.” (M.N.)

“I think I am so much more relaxed than I was four months ago.” (M.S.)

### **Gaining ethnorelative perspective**

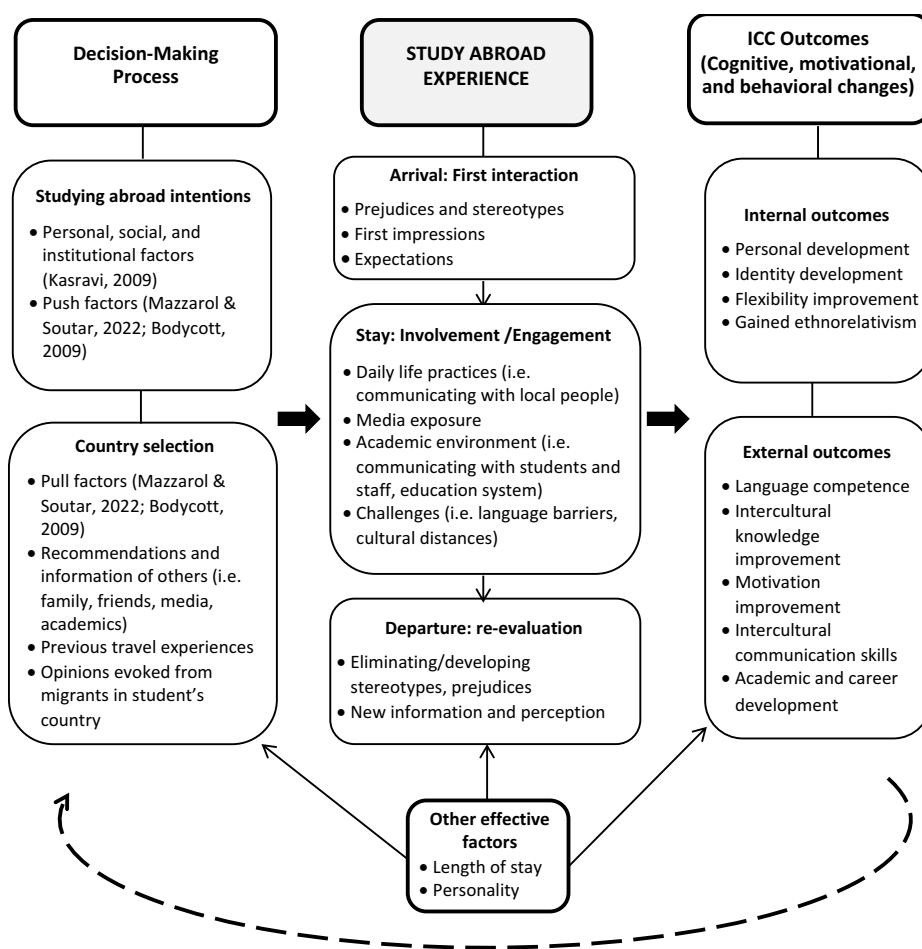
Most self-evaluations demonstrated that the Erasmus experience was perceived as a contribution to their personalities in terms of intercultural competence, leading to a certain degree of ethnorelative perspective, in which “one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures” (Bennett, 2004, p.68). Students stated:

“I spoke with some people from our group...they started to compare things like, in my country it’s like this, we have this, but I mean it’s a different country...It was their choice to come here they should have said it’s different. It’s not positive or negative, it’s just different.” (R.M.)

“It helped me about different points to be more open to the others” (G.D.)

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Focusing on the Erasmus student mobility program as a form of short-term international exchange, this study investigated the students’ study abroad experiences from the ICC perspective. Following the relevant literature and research findings, emerging themes are illustrated to reveal the relationship between the study abroad and ICC development (Figure 1). The study moves from questioning the students’ motivations for selecting Izmir and Turkey as an Erasmus destination, towards investigating their narratives to reveal ICC related outcomes of this experience. Accordingly, the illustration provides an overall understanding of the process by mapping the findings throughout interrelated phases in the light of the existing literature. This framework visualizes the dynamic process of intercultural experience, which can be improved with further research and contributions.



**Figure 1.** A Process of Study Abroad Experience

This study initially examines students' evaluations of destination options; therefore, decision-making process is taken as the starting point in the figure. Involving decision-making phase was necessary to assess students' prior attitudes and knowledge about a different culture, and to identify possible outcomes of this experience. Decision-making phase encompasses different aspects, including motivational factors and pre-existing information. Studies address decision-making process from various perspectives. Kasravi (2009) explores influencing factors of students' decisions on study abroad, and adopts a model that combines personal, social and institutional factors. Decision on studying abroad is followed by selecting the host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) which is affected by push and pull factors. Push factors involve economic, social, and political conditions of the original country, whereas pull factors refer to attractive aspects of the host country (Bodycott, 2009). After the study abroad program decision, students begin to evaluate the destination and institution alternatives. Bodycott (2009) identifies several pull factors, such as background knowledge about the destination country, financial requirements, and the influence of family and friends (p. 354). Examining the pull

factors, the present study highlights the cultural exploration as a prominent factor. Inherently, students evaluate options according to their different interests. Within the context of Erasmus program, pull factors vary from the host university's academic quality to the country's climate (González, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011). The current study reveals that the students who selected Turkey are those who prioritize cultural aspects; thus, intercultural experience appears to be their major driver.

In a survey study among seven European countries, Beerkens et al. (2016) emphasize five motivational factors in cultural experience: "career perspectives, intercultural experience, financial support, administrative support, and a good fit of the program" (p. 9). However, noting the limitation of retrospective surveys, they emphasize that a positive study abroad experience may result in biases that leads students to overtake their initial interests such as administrative or financial support (Beerkens et al., 2016). Thus, the present study reveals the notion of intercultural experience as a significant motivational factor at the beginning of students' Erasmus experience.

The decision-making process is affected by many factors, particularly the media and the recommendations of others. The study demonstrates that stereotypes about Turkey were generated through a combination of family views, the media images, and Turkish community in European countries. In the face of such views, students' choice of Turkey as a destination demonstrates a sense of openness and curiosity towards a different culture, with implications for ICC.

After decision process, study abroad phase begins on arrival in the host country, followed by the experience itself (see Figure 1). First interactions with the local culture provide an overall impression about the life-style, basic norms, regulations, and communication patterns. However, these early experiences are unlikely to be free from influences of pre-existing knowledge, perceptions, and experiences. Therefore, it was crucial to identify initial attitudes and knowledge regarding the host culture in the first phase of the research. Consistent with Gutiérrez, Durán, and Beltrán's study (2015), the descriptive assessment of the findings reveals relatively positive attitudes at the beginning. Early observations of the city emphasized its occidental appearance and similarities with Europe, including salient features (tall glass buildings, means of transportation, public spaces), and people's general appearance and life-style. This surface level image enabled students to test their original cultural perceptions gained through media or word-of-mouth, and build an initial positive attitude.



To improve in ICC, it is necessary to obtain certain levels of culture-general and culture-specific knowledge (Bennett, 2009) including individuals' own and different cultures. Experience often promotes culture-specific knowledge, even if based on superficial observations and interactions or the subjective narratives of others. In this study, participants observed religion as a key distinguishing cultural aspect which was central in their cultural comparisons. Eventually, the concept of Islam and Christianity become dominant in participants' cultural self-awareness and knowledge that was used to express sense of belonging to Europe. Some studies (Jacobone and Moro, 2015; Sigalas, 2010) primarily focus on the relation between the Erasmus program and European identity. Despite having no primary focus, in this study the notion of 'Europeanness' still emerged in the data as a powerful reference point for expressing cultural knowledge. The relatively wide cultural distance in the current context highlights the role of European consciousness for Erasmus students when faced with differences in religion. Unlike previous studies conducted in Turkey (Demirkol, 2013; Oner, 2015), concluding that Erasmus students have positive attitudes towards Turkey's integration in Europe, this study reveals that experienced differences strongly influence students' perceptions about Turkey in terms of not considering it as a part of Europe and as a EU member. Particularly, the social and political developments within Turkey could have boosted this polarized perception, yet needs to be further investigated.

Study abroad experience also involves challenges to some extent. This research emphasizes two major challenges to favorable outcomes of ICC. Firstly, language was a communication barrier to interaction with locals. All participants reported minimal levels of English spoken by locals in daily life; thus, they initially found communicating difficult. Most participants adapted to the context by learning basic phrases, while a few remained unadjusted and complainant. Secondly, cultural distance stemming from conservative social values and religion was identified as a prominent challenge. Although respectfulness was generally displayed, some perceived religious difference as an important challenging factor. A small number of cases of negative attitudes towards the host culture at the end of the semester demonstrate persisting inflexibility and inadaptability. In this respect, the study suggests that challenges may disable motivational, cognitive, and behavioral changes.

The study abroad period terminates with departure from the host country; however, its effects continue afterwards. Intercultural interaction can result in eliminating stereotypical views and prejudices, and moreover improving ethnorelative perspective. In contrast, intercultural experience can also result in new biases. New perceptions, either positive or

negative, form a basis of study abroad outcomes, which are generally classified as internal and external (Kasravi, 2009). Intercultural learning outcomes have received significant attention in the literature, such as, intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005), perceptions of developing intercultural competence (Covert, 2014; Zimmermann, 1995), and intercultural effectiveness of study abroad programs (Pedersen, 2010). The current study illustrates (Figure 1) ICC related study abroad outcomes in the light of existing literature. The major internal outcome is considered as a broader ethnorelative perspective resulting from the Erasmus semester, as evidenced by the students' reported development in adaptability and flexibility. External outcomes are described as being able to communicate effectively and appropriately in different cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006). This study presents that it may be useful to evaluate intercultural situations as satisfying or unsatisfying, rather than categorizing individuals as competent or not. ICC related outcomes are likely to influence future decision-making processes related to studying or living abroad (Figure 1). Therefore, another possible research area is how cognitive, motivational and behavioral components of ICC can impact on decisions about living in a different culture, and future experiences.

Conceptualized in various models, ICC represents an ideal situation. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) conclude that the models on ICC tend to ignore emotional aspects, hence describe them as “too conceptual, too rational, too conscious, and too intentional” (p. 35). Similarly, the current study suggests that other factors should be considered in explaining the relation between the study abroad process and ICC. One of the important aspect is personality, which is likely to affect the overall process, beginning from the decision-making. The field of intercultural communication includes studies on the relationship between personality traits and intercultural effectiveness and adjustment (Caliguiri, 2000; Shaffer et al, 2006). In the context of international education, the role of personality traits in cross-cultural adjustment have been highlighted (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004; Zhang, Mandl, & Wang, 2010). Taking a qualitative approach, the present study reveals positive initial attitudes in study abroad sojourns including respect, openness, and curiosity towards different cultures. During the exchange period, students developed a certain level of cultural knowledge. However, the process of transition from these two initial components (attitude and knowledge) to the achievement of internal and external outcomes depends to some extent on individual characteristics. Individuals and their experiences are unique; therefore, each individual perceives the study abroad experience differently. The study suggests that future research may focus on personality traits as factors,

which may affect decisions about studying abroad, and either enrich or disrupt the communication process in intercultural contexts, and thus impact on ICC outcomes.

Furthermore, the length of staying abroad is considered as a factor, which may influence the entire study abroad process, as illustrated in Figure 1. Previous studies have focused on the influence of length of stay on intercultural learning and adaptation (Miglietta & Tartaglia, 2009; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). Dwyer (2004) claims that there is a significant correlation between the length of study abroad term and the consequent intercultural development outcomes. In contrast, Hamad and Lee (2013) find no such correlation; however, they emphasize that the lack of a pretest before students' arrivals is a strong limitation, hence they recommend pre-and-posttests to gain more information about the factor. In this respect, the current study suggests for further research to assess length of stay as a variable in developing ICC during study abroad, which may impact not only the outcomes, but the entire process from the initial decision-making.

The discussion of potential impact of challenges on ICC offers a new perspective for further investigation of the Erasmus experiences' contribution to ICC development. Since the Erasmus program prioritizes fostering interculturally skilled global human resource, it must reconsider whether spending one semester in relatively similar cultures can have significant affects in students' intercultural competences. This study argues that experiencing greater cultural distance may challenge students in a way to develop intercultural knowledge and motivation.

Conducting the research in Turkey, a context where Eastern and Western cultural values coexist, provided a unique understanding of intercultural experience. Although the sample size seems to be a crucial limitation, the qualitative nature of the research enabled a greater depth of insight from student-perception-oriented narratives. Students' experiences are taken into consideration as a dynamic process between decision making phase and ICC related outcomes.

Finally, although short length of stay may be perceived as a disadvantage, the suggestion that "educational institutions have a role to play in fostering positive intercultural attitudes" (Arasaratnam, 2015, p. 301) highlights a distinctive advantage of the Erasmus program. Therefore, this study emphasizes the role of Erasmus experience on ICC and provides practical implications for higher education institutions aiming to implement internationalization strategies. Leung, Ang, and Tan (2014) demonstrate that the greatest contribution to intercultural competence results from direct experience in different cultures. The interactive environment of the experience plays a key role, especially in study abroad programs. However,

there is substantial indication that Erasmus students interact more with other exchange students than with local counterparts (Sigalas, 2010). Thus, higher education institutions are recommended to focus more on developing strategies to support exchange students to overcome language barriers and cultural distance, which are identified as challenges in this study, and to improve the provision for effective and appropriate communication in the host culture.

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