

Study abroad and culture shock education essay



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What is meant by study abroad is shortly that “ Off-campus education that occurs outside the participant’s home country” as defined by Peterson, Engle, Kenney, Kreutzer, Nolting, and Ogden (2007, p. 177). As defined in the study by Kitsantas and Meyers (2001) study abroad programs are based on an educational aim and they take place out of country boundaries which are participants’ native land. To be familiar with a new culture, to be receptive and more knowledgeable, to get professional information from another university and to reach a high level of target language can be some purposes of study abroad, in reference to Behrnd and Porzelt (2011). Study abroad programs require to be connected with foreign societies and cultures. However, trying to be adapted to a new culture sometimes ends up with culture shock.

There is a need for knowing the meaning of culture to be able to understand what culture shock is. Culture, according to Mcleod (2008), is to learn social heritage covertly and overtly, implicitly and explicitly, consciously or unconsciously and it helps to perceive, relate and interpret the reality.

What is the culture shock? According to definition of Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), culture shock is "...the multiple demands for adjustment that individuals experience at the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and physiological levels, when they relocate to another culture" (p. 168). Culture shock, especially for students, is a very common issue when they are in a study abroad program.

Culture shock can be defined as the period of adaptation of a new culture when a person experiences some feelings like anxiety, confusion and disruption while living in the new culture (Befus, 1986). Additionally, Pedersen (1995) has many definitions about culture shock:

(1) is a process and not a single event, (2) may take place at many different levels simultaneously as the individual interacts with a complex environment, (3) becomes stronger or weaker as the individual learns to cope or fails to cope, (4) teaches the individual new coping strategies which contribute to future success, and (5) applies to any radical change presenting unfamiliar or unexpected circumstances. Situations of culture shock abroad provide metaphors for better understanding culture shock related to physical health, environmental disaster, economic failure, psychological crises, or any radical change in lifestyle (p. vii).

1. 2 Purpose and Rationale

As the social life has an important place in everybody's life times, this study was conducted to examine the symptoms and causes of culture shock on the social lives of foreign METU students coming from Asia, Europe and other continents. By searching the symptoms and causes of culture shock on the

social lives of foreign METU students, we wanted to contribute to the studies searching solutions to problems resulting from these causes if there was any. With the help of this study, foreign METU students may get some information about what culture shock is and they may learn what kind of problems they can face at METU because of culture shock.

The main reason for this research was to find out whether or not there were any differences in terms of symptoms and causes of culture shock on social lives of foreign METU students coming from Asia, Europe and other continents. In addition to this, it was aimed to explain (a) what the symptoms of culture shock were, (b) what the causes of culture shock were and (c) which of these causes were the most common.

1. 3 Limitations

This research was conducted with only METU students coming from Asia, Europe and other continents. Since there was no possibility to reach all the foreign students at METU, the number of participants was limited to 40 students. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all foreign students in universities of Turkey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many people who travelled to remote regions so as to work, settle, teach, study and have fun in human history (Bochner, 2003). In recent years, study abroad programs have become very popular among university students. When the participants are away from their home country, they may have some difficulties in adjustment to new country and its culture. These difficulties are mostly caused by culture shock. According to Bragg (2005),

culture shock is a situation hard to get accustomed because of some elements like different physical environment, clothes, transportation, and food.

Researchers state that in the globalizing world, study abroad gets more and more students' attention due to the fact that it has a crucial role on students' analytic abilities, aspects for cultural diversity and their potential to cope with ambiguity (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1991). Whereas the specific objectives of study abroad programs depend upon the institutions participating in those, intercultural and academic proficiency are common to all institutions, in respect to Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen and Hubbard (2005).

Teichler (2004) indicates that the reasons for participating in study abroad programs are generally to learn a language in its native environment, to improve oneself, to take academic courses in another university, to understand and be familiar with a new culture, to increase the opportunities for business and to travel. There are three types of study abroad programs: full year, semester and summer term programs. Dwyer (2004) points out that full year programs generally last 32 weeks, semester programs last at least 16 weeks and summer term programs change six to seven weeks in length. No matter what the length of program is there will be culture change in their lives. There is no connection between duration of staying in a new culture and attitudes towards this culture either positively or negatively (Feichtinger and Fink, 1998).

Like language, culture acquisition occurs in early childhood with an inner aptitude and then it is supported with formal and informal education in social life into adulthood. (Stewart & Leggat, 1998). As culture has an important role on all human beings' lives, any change in the culture may cause some problems and one of them is culture shock.

Culture shock, especially for students, is a very common issue when they are in a study abroad program. Pyvis and Chapman (2005) illustrate that in the concept of higher education, international students travelling to other countries in order to study are identified at risk of culture shock.

People usually suffer from emotional disturbance when they are in an unfamiliar culture. There are many troubles of students who come from a country to another one so as to take higher education, especially if they have quite distinctive culture in their home country. Jiménez and Lechnitz (n. d.) note that the exchange students may confront many problems on their social lives, for instance, they may not know how to use the bank systems, where to go shopping, how to use public transportation and how to live according to traditions of that culture.

Previous research on this topic is limited in Turkey. However, there have been conducted many research about this topic around the world. For example, there is a study conducted in United Kingdom by Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) and they emphasize problems that students may encounter such as educational system which is quite different from the methods their own country, difficulty in adaptation to British customs, places to stay or sorts of food. In view of Mcleod (2008), exchange students from Western

countries, especially ones in Europe, experience lower degree of culture shock than non-Western countries' students. The degree of culture shock changes because of racism and discrimination not only Western cultures but also their taboos. In addition to this, the effects of exchange students' beliefs related to Americans' negative perspective about their own country may cause infelicity and adaptation problems.

As mentioned by Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) " The term culture shock was first introduced by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the late 1950s". Culture shock occurs due to decline of well-known elements of culture; therefore, some negative feelings appear in individuals' lives While travelling to a new country and being familiar with a new culture seem as positive affairs, they do not always positive effects in people's lives.

There are five stages of culture shock according to Pedersen (1995). He defines and explains those stages. First stage is ' honeymoon stage' in which exchange students experience curiosity and excitement to new culture. In the second ' disintegration' stage, they have feeling of disintegration and they cannot supply the requirements of the new culture. In the third ' reintegration' stage they start to adapt to and reintegrate with new culture. In the fourth ' autonomy' stage, there is a comparison between the new culture and the old one in terms of positive and negative elements. Lastly, in the fifth ' interdependence' stage, individuals become bicultural, so they feel comfortable in both cultures. However, it is uncertain that whether or not every individual reaches to fifth stage and acquires biculturalism On the ground that every student cannot reach the fifth stage, culture shock does not always end up with positive results (p. 3).

The research Culture Shock: Causes and Symptoms by Miller (2008)

mentions that there are 13 factors that cause culture shock. According to him, elements causing culture shock are language, interpersonal communication, politics, mentality, religion, Americans' attitude toward international students, infrastructure, service quality, education system, food, environmental concerns, social responsibility and immigration policies. These causes are so general that they should be narrowed down. Since the main focus of this research was the social lives of foreign METU students, only some causes based on social life were included in this research.

In social life people always communicate with each other. Thus, interpersonal communication has an important role on people's lives. Selçuk (n. d.) assumes that every society has their linguistic behavior models so as to use in daily life. These linguistic behavior models differ from society to society and culture to culture. If individuals participating in communication have different cultures there will be a disagreement in communication as they will not know the meaning of attitude and behaviors in the new culture. Since people cannot communicate with each other due to the differences in linguistic behavior models, they have high possibility to confront culture shock.

The problem in communication with the people of a new country has a close relationship with the attitudes of host country people toward foreign students. According to a statement by Frost (2007), " Finding a group of like minded people who will welcome them with open arms and empathize with their plight is like finding an oasis in a cultural desert". All of the students in host country do not have positive attitude toward foreign students, hence,
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the students coming from different countries have problem with finding friends. Frost emphasizes this issue saying that the exchange students, in fact, do not prefer to be friends with whom they have when they are in a study abroad program. However, as their choices are very limited, they have to be friends with those of host country.

As the world becomes more and more globalizing, students try to go to other countries for higher education. Ginkel (2008) considers that every person has their own point of view about education and its aim. It is not surprising to find out that different countries have different aims in education. When people are in another country, they can feel the education system of this country has a dissimilar way of teaching from one of their home country. According to Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) " Students may need to adjust to a new educational system, which differs considerably from the methods of study in their own country" This adaptation progress can be hard some foreign students due to big differences between education system of their home country and education system of country they have come as foreign students.

The research Culture Shock: Causes and Symptoms by Miller (2008) presents 10 general symptoms of culture shock that are irritability, homesickness, social withdrawal, boredom, a need for excessive sleep, depression, over-eating or loss of appetite, mental or relationship stress, loss of ability to study effectively, and feeling sick much of the time. If it is needed to specify more, there are some other symptoms like " excessive preoccupation with drinking water, food and dishes, fear of physical contact with servants and great concern over minor pain" as Befus (1986) stated.

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Study abroad programs that sometimes cause culture shock have been in demand much more recent years. As regards YÄ±ldÄ±z, ÇakÄ±r and KondakçÄ± (2011), although Turkey is seen among countries sending students, the number of foreign students coming to Turkey on the purpose of study abroad has been increasing consistently. In Turkey, it is hard to set a common rationale for foreign students from different countries and cultures. All students who come to Turkey for study abroad have differential reason for choosing Turkey. Turkey not only has many universities but also historical and natural beauty which anybody wants to see. These features make Turkey attractive for foreign students.

According to Gibbs (2011), METU is one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey. Therefore, it hosts over 1000 foreign students who want to take an academic education around the world. METU and these foreign students are inseparable from each other. The purpose of METU is to increase the number of foreign students next years.

This study aimed to highlight some causes and symptoms of the culture shock on the social lives of foreign METU students from Europe, Asia and other continents.

3. 0 METHODOLOGY

3. 1 Research Questions

This research was conducted in order to find answers to the following research questions:

Are there any changes on the social lives of foreign METU students from Europe, Asia and other continents? If yes, which changes are resulted from culture shock?

What are the causes of culture shock on the social lives of foreign METU students from Europe, Asia and other continents?

What are the symptoms of that culture shock on the social lives of foreign METU students from Europe, Asia and other continents?

Are there any differences at the rate of causes and symptoms of culture shock among social lives of foreign students from Europe, Asia and other continents at METU?

In this study, it was expected to find some significant symptoms and causes of culture shock on the social lives of foreign METU students. It was predicted that foreign students had both same and different symptoms and causes. By taking into consideration these three types of students, the symptoms and causes of culture shock was investigated.