

# LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN TURKEY

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# Abstract

Significant changes are seen in the number of international students both in Turkey and in the world-wide in recent years. However, a significant decrease has been observed in the number of the studies related to the problems of the students both in Turkey and in the world in recent decades. It is considered that this study would make a contribution to the literature to pay attention to the problems of international students. The purpose of the study is to investigate problems of the international students related to education and language in the faculty of education in Turkey. The sample of the study includes 85 international students (29 females and 56 males) who attended in the faculty of education in Turkey in 2008-2009 academic years. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. Opinions of 15 students who attended various departments were obtained to find out problems related to language and education more clearly. Of the interviewed students four are from Azerbaijan, three from Georgia, two from Mongolia, two from Kazakhstan, two from Greece, one from Kyrgyzstan and one from Turkmenistan. Semi-structured interview was used to determine international students' problems. Descriptive analysis was used in the analysis to define the themes. Based on the results of the analysis, the following problems related to language were found: 1. When the international students' responses concerning reading skills are analyzed, it is determined that poor command of Turkish affects comprehension skills negatively 2. A few international students have problems related to writing 3. International students generally have difficulties in self-expression when they first came to Turkey 4. Listening is the less problematic field. Problems related to education were found as follows: 1. All the participants express positive opinions about the quality of higher education in Turkey 2. Although the participants have negative opinions regarding lecturer's attitudes towards international students, in general they have positive opinion 3. International students' problems related to the courses mostly result from the poor command of Turkish.

**Key words**: International Student, Language Problems, Educational Problems, Higher Education.

# TÜRKİYE'DEKİ YABANCI UYRUKLU ÖĞRENCİLERIN DİL VE EĞİTİM SORUNLARI

#### Özet

Son yıllarda hem dünyada hem de Türkiye'de yabancı uyruklu öğrenci sayısında kayda değer değişiklikler görülmektedir. Buna karşın, bu öğrencilerin sorunlarına ilişkin yapılan çalışmaların sayısında hem Türkiye'de hem de dünyada son yıllarda önemli ölçüde azalma görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın yabancı öğrencilerin sorunlarına dikkat çekmek anlamında alanyazına önemli bir katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir. Araştırmanın amacı, Türkiye'deki bir üniversitenin eğitim fakültesinde öğrenim gören yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin eğitime ve dile ilişkin sorunlarını belirlemektir. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu 2008-2009 öğretim yılında bu üniversitenin eğitim fakültesinde öğrenim gören 29'u kız 56'sı erkek olmak üzere toplam 85 yabancı uyruklu öğrenci oluşturmaktadır. Araştırmada amaçsal örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Nitel çalışmalarda dikkate alınan ilkelere uygun olarak örneklem grubu 15 öğrenciden oluşturulmuştur. Bu öğrencilerin seçiminde her bölümden en az 1 öğrenci olmasına, kız ve erkek öğrenci sayılarının dengeli olmasına ve mümkün olduğunca farklı ülkelerden öğrenci seçilmesine dikkat edilmiştir. Görüşme yapılan öğrencilerden 4'ü Azerbaycan, 3'ü Gürcistan, 2'si Moğolistan, 2'si Kazakistan, 2'si Yunanistan, 1'i Kırgızistan ve 1'i de Türkmenistan uyrukludur. Bu çalışmada yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme tekniği kullanılmıştır. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin sorunlarına ilişkin görüşlerinin analizinde nitel veri analiz tekniklerinden biri olan betimsel analiz yaklaşımı kullanılmıştır. Katılımcılarla yapılan görüşmelerin analizi sonucunda dile ilişkin sorunların şu noktalarda yoğunlaştığı belirlenmiştir: 1. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin okumaya ilişkin sorulara verdikleri yanıtlar incelendiğinde, katılımcıların Türkçeye yeterince hâkim olamayışlarının, okuduğunu anlama becerisini de olumsuz etkilediği görülmüştür 2. Az sayıdaki yabancı uyruklu öğrencinin yazma konusunda sorun yaşadığı belirlenmiştir 3. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin Türkiye'ye geldikleri ilk günlerde genel olarak kendini ifade etmede sıkıntı yaşadıkları görülmüştür 4. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin en az sorun yaşadıkları alanın dinleme becerisi olduğu belirlenmiştir. Katılımcılarla yapılan görüşmelerin analizi sonucunda eğitime ilişkin sorunlarla ilgili şu sonuçlar elde edilmiştir: 1. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin tamamı Türkiye'deki yükseköğretimin kalitesine yönelik olumlu görüş belirtmişlerdir 2. Yabancı uyruklu öğrenciler, öğrenim gördükleri üniversitedeki öğretim elemanlarının kendilerine ilişkin tutum ve davranışlarıyla ilgili bazı olumsuz görüşler bildirmekle beraber genel olarak olumlu görüş bildirmişlerdir 3. Yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin derslere ilişkin yaşadıkları sorunların büyük ölçüde Türkçelerinin yetersiz olmasından kaynaklandığı görülmüştür.

**Anahtar kelimeler**: Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci, Dil Problemleri, Eğitimsel Problemler, Yüksek Öğrenim.

#### Introduction

The history of going abroad for education or adventure is as old as the history of learning (Sandhu, 1994). Nowadays, the desire to go abroad for education has been continuously increased. According to the OECD report (2008), while the number of students who go abroad to receive training was approximately 600.000 in 1975, the number has increased 5-fold and reached 3 million in 2006. Of these students, 20% are receiving education in the USA, 11.3% in England, 8.9% in Germany, 8.5% in France and 6.3% in Australia (OECD, 2008).

As a reflection of student's mobility in the world, Turkey has become a popular country for international students from 1980s onwards. The way students from Turkic Republics and countries in the region regard Turkey as a window opening to the contemporary science and technology and being in the status of state scholarship make Turkey a popular destination for international students (DPT, 2000).

In accordance with the internation al agreements, Ministry of National Education has started a student exchange programme with the Turkic Republics at elementary, secondary and higher education levels since January 1992. Within the scope of this programme, 5860 higher education students from Turkic Republics got involved in Turkish Education System until November 1993 (Açıkalın, Demirel & Önsoy, 1996). Within the scope of same student exchange programme 5804, 5462 and 5685 students from Turkic Republics came to Turkey to receive education between the years 1996-2000, 2000-2004 and 2004-2008 respectively (MEB, 2000; 2004; 2008).

As the number of international students is expressed as thousands, it is expected that this number leads to several problems. There have been numerous studies to investigate the problems of international students between the years 1992 and early 2000s (Otrar et al.,

2002; Tutar, 2002; Ercan, 2001; Soyutürk, 2000; Garabayev, 2000; Dağaşan, 1999; Açıkalın, Demirel & Önsoy, 1996; Dağaşan, 1994; Adıgüzel, 1994; Can, 1994). Recently, a significant decrease has been observed in the number of the studies related to the problems of international students (Allaberdiyev, 2007; Karaoğlu, 2007).

In previously conducted studies, it was determined that international students encounter communication problems when they first came to Turkey. The result of the study conducted by Allaberdiyev (2007), that problem in adjustment in life style is the most common one among the problems of international students (language, life style, schools, courses, student hostel, climate, and food).

The aim of the study conducted by Açıkalın, Demirel and Önsoy (1996) was to determine the problems of international students (ranging in age 17-22) attending universities in Turkey, homesickness was found as the most frequently expressed problem. The results also revealed that scholarships were not sufficient.

In the study conducted by Ministry of National Education (MEB) (2001), the major problems were listed as follows; housing, food and social conditions. In another study financial problem, concern for the future and problems related to university (language, examinations, marks, and relationships with the lecturers) were determined as major problems (Otrar et al., 2002).

It was suggested in similar studies that not only students in our country but also students in other countries could face these problems. Motarassed (1979) collected these problems under four headings; physiological (concern, self-respect etc.), academic (foreign language proficiency), social (interaction with students) and personal (economic status, age etc.). In addition, it was determined that international students had experienced some problems such as homesickness, adaptation, loneliness, anxiety, depression, sadness, test anxiety, identity disorder, ineffective time management, housing and food (Sam & Eide, 2008; Santos & Domingo, 2007, Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Meloni, 1986; Geuer, Breitenbach & Dadder, 1983).

Significant changes are seen in the number of international students both in Turkey and in the world-wide in recent years. However, a significant decrease has been

observed in the number of the studies related to the problems of these students both in our country and in the world in recent years. It is expected that this study would make a contribution to the literature to highlight the problems of international students.

# The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the international students' problems related to education and language in the education faculty of the university in Turkey. In accordance with this purpose following problems were analyzed.

- 1) Problems related to language
- a) Reading
- b) Writing
- c) Listening
- d) Speaking
- 2) Problems related to education
- a) Problems related to the quality of education
- b) Problems related to the faculty
- c) Problems related to the courses

# Method

# Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of 85 international students (29 female and 56 male) who were attending an education faculty of a university in Turkey in 2008-2009 academic year.

Participants were chosen by the use of purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Büyüköztürk et al. 2008; Gray, 2004; Patton, 2002). This sampling method is the use of subset/subsets of the population based on the particular purpose of the experiment to represent the whole population. In this study, to clarify international students' problems related to language and education, students were chosen from 8 different departments.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that sampling should include more than 12 and less than 20 cases for a satisfactory explanation. Therefore, the sample group consisted of 15 students from different departments and countries; three from Department of Foreign Languages Education; one from Department of Special Education, one from Department of Secondary Science Education; four from Department of Elementary Education; two from Department of Educational Sciences; one from Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technology; one from Department of Turkish Language Education and two from Department of Religion and Moral Education. Of these interviewed students four were from Azerbaijan, three from Georgia, two from Mongolia, two from Kazakhstan, two from Greece, one from Kyrgyzstan and one from Turkmenistan.

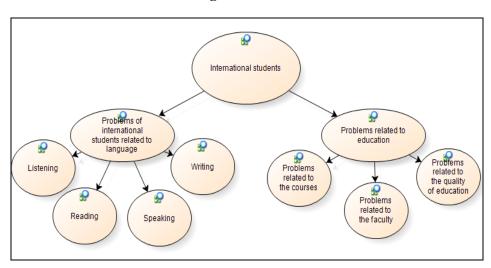
#### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data analysis techniques were used in the analysis of the international students' opinions related to education and language problems. To obtain factual and thorough information about the characteristics, experiences, and comments of the participants semi-structured interview technique was used in the study (deMarrais, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Interviews were conducted by at least two members of the research team in the researchers' offices. Considering the fact that international students may have language proficiency problems, questions were asked with simple language, and students' responses were waited patiently. Interviews lasted about 25-30 minutes and were recorded by tape recorder. 15 participants from different foreign countries were coded as S1, S2 ...S15.

# **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis, one of the qualitative data analysis techniques, was used in the analysis of the opinions of international students. For descriptive analysis, interviews were transcribed transcribing was made and then coding process was initiated. After analyzing, paraphrasing, and coding the data, draft was created under

themes and categories (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Relation between themes and categories were determined, arranged, and interpreted in accordance with the purpose of the study (see the Model). "Direct quotations" were frequently used in the study. QSR NVivo 7.0 package program was used in the analysis of qualitative data.



Model: Themes and categories

Validity and reliability are two of the most important features of a study. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2006) stated that reporting of the collected data in-detail and explaining the way of reaching a conclusion are the significant criteria of qualitative research. For this purpose, the way of collecting and analyzing the data were explained in details and citations that reflect the core of the issues were presented. Finally, two themes and seven categories were found. To provide internal reliability, three different methods were employed; firstly, presenting collected data into the study directly with a descriptive approach, which is one of the most effective way of providing internal reliability, was used. Secondly, all researchers worked together in every stage (research designing, preparing questions, data collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data) and reached an agreement. Thirdly, three specialists (from departments of Curriculum & Instruction, Educational Administration and Supervision, Measurement and Evaluation)

working in a university were asked about their opinions on themes and categories of the research. As a conclusion it is determined that themes and categories which were presented by the specialists correspond with the ones that the researchers presented.

# **Findings**

# Problems related to language

International students expressed that they had some difficulties in language skills. These difficulties were evaluated under four headings; reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Reading

When the international students' responses regarding reading skills were analyzed, it was seen that participants had difficulties in reading comprehension. These problems are expressed as follows:

Sometimes I get confused with the meaning of some written words. When I read something. "Did I misinterpret?" I wonder. Some words confuse me (S1).

I read some books but I do not understand some of them. I think we need to read more. Sometimes I cannot comprehend when I read once and I need to read the books again (S8).

Sometimes I had difficulties with some texts. There were some parts that I could not understand (S11).

I have some comprehension difficulties. I try to read every word then I try to integrate and make sense of them. Otherwise, I do not understand anything (S5).

I had difficulties in comprehension especially in the first term. When I read something I could not understand it, because my mother tongue is Russian (S13).

Some of the participants stated that professional jargon in the academic textbooks and poor command of Turkish language affects their comprehension negatively. Participants' statements are as follows:

Not in every textbooks but I had difficulties in pedagogy textbooks. The terms used in pedagogy textbooks are difficult (S14).

I have some problems in comprehending some terms in some textbooks. It depends on the course (S7).

For example, there are some words, phrases, metaphors, and abstractions in textbooks covered by [X] lecturer (S10).

A book was offered to read in a course... Turkish language course book. Whenever I read it I could not understand anything. Same thing happens in other courses, as well (S13).

Yes, I have some difficulties. I have difficulty in comprehending some jargons (S15).

It was determined that international students' problems related to reading comprehension stated above were more extensive when they first came to Turkey but the problem has decreased over time. Students' statements are as follows:

I try to understand. It was difficult at first but now it is better. There may have some words that I don't understand but now it is not much than it was earlier (S4).

Not too much. I read once or twice. Maybe, not in the first time, but sometimes I need to read the same text twice. At first, I hardly contain myself not to cry. I get used to (S6).

Participants expressed that they tried to find solutions about the problems stated above. These are; to receive support from members of the faculty, to ask a friend, to use dictionary, to improve study skills (to review at home, to read more than once etc.)

Writing

When the international students' responses regarding writing skills were analyzed, more than half of the international students expressed that they had no problems. On the other hand, some students stated that they had problems in writing. Poor Turkish grammar knowledge of the participants and vocabulary were determined as the main factors causing problems in writing. Students' statements related to this topic are as follows:

I try to write anytime but I cannot, because I get confused with some letters since we do not have "\"g" and "\"c" letters in my mother tongue (S1).

I have problems in writing, because I get confused when writing some words. For example, letter "§". Frankly, as we did not take notes, we could not improve our writing (S9).

As we are foreigner we cannot take notes (S10).

Sometimes I get confused with some letters such as "ü" and "i". I have also problems in punctuation. In Georgian language proper nouns does not begin with capital letters (S15).

It is interesting that participants consider themselves proficient in writing skills while they thought they are non-qualified in reading comprehension skills.

Speaking

When the international students' responses regarding speaking skills were analyzed, it was revealed that participants had hard times expressing themselves in Turkish in the first years but these problems decreased over time. Students' statements related to this topic are as follows:

Especially, I had difficulties in speaking Turkish at first. But I improved my skills in Turkish speaking. Now I am good at speaking Turkish (S1).

I had hard times in speaking Turkish in the first years. I got confused with the Turkish words and Azerbaijani words. I have lived for 9 months in Turkey, now I improved my skills in Turkish speaking. I have a lot of Turkish friends (S2).

I had difficulties in speaking Turkish in the first year. I have worked in patisserie to improve my Turkish (S13).

Some of the participants stated that they had difficulties in expressing their feelings and opinions in Turkish. Anxiety of being jeered by their friends or lecturers is one of the main reasons of this problem and it may cause shyness in classroom milieu for these students. Students' statements are as follows:

I know the answer but I can't speak. Sometimes I refrain from speaking for fear of being misunderstood by the lecturer (S10).

For example, lecturer asks a question, you know the answer but you refrain from giving the answer for fear of misspelling (S11).

I feel comfortable while speaking in Turkish among my peers. It happens in some lessons. Maybe I feel ashamed (S15).

I want to speak, but I don't speak for fear of being misunderstood. Lecturers always say "speak, whether it is true or not" but I don't want to speak (S5).

As it is understood from the expressions above, participants had hard times expressing themselves in Turkish in the first years but that these problems decreased over time. On the other hand, psycho-social conditions make them timid, shy, and anxious.

Listening

When compared with the other language skills, listening was found the less problematic field. Majority of the participants have stated that they didn't have too many problems in listening comprehension skills. Participants stated that they faced no difficulties in daily language but in courses. When the students' opinions were analyzed it was seen that these problems resulted from the academic language used in the textbooks, accent differences and the way of lecturers using language. Students' statements are as follows:

There are great differences in speech patterns and pronunciation. I think accent show varieties in different areas (S5).

I don't understand what lecturers say. They speak too fast. I can't catch up with them (S6).

Daily language is different from scientific jargon. There are too many scientific jargons in textbooks; in daily language we have no problems; whereas, I can't understand students from Trabzon or Kayseri due to their accent which is hard to perceive (S 9).

There are some literary expressions. Literature courses are difficult but I do well in other courses (S11).

When the lecturers speak, there are some scientific terms that I can't understand (S14).

It was determined that international students apply for some solutions to solve these problems such as asking a friend or a lecturer and repetition.

#### **Problems Related to Education**

Problems related to quality of education

When students' responses were analyzed, all of the participants expressed positive opinions about the quality of higher education in Turkey. They also stated that the quality of higher education was better than that of in their own countries. Students' statements are as follows:

The quality of higher education in Turkey is better when compared with that of in Georgia (S11).

The quality of higher education in Turkey is better when compared with that of in Azerbaijan. The use of technology in education is good I think. Students in Turkey are more successful than those in Azerbaijan. I cannot say it is perfect, but I think it is OK. It is 7 out of 10 (S12).

Some of the participants stated that the quality of education were ineffective in some aspects. For example, students' expressions about the deficiency of lecturers for guiding themselves are as follows:

I graduated from a higher school in Germany. We had no free time there. Lecturers have always informed us. In Turkey, it is different. In Germany lecturers guide us; there were activities (S1).

International students stated that overloaded curriculum content and multiple choice types of exams were the two main reasons that affect the quality of education negatively. Students' statements are as follows:

The quality of education is OK but mathematics education is really difficult. I mean no university can reach the level of mathematics education in this university. The lecturers say "Don't choose this programme!" I don't know why but mathematic education in this faculty is really hard (S5).

The quality (education) is good. But tests are not rational, because just limited types of knowledge can be assessed by multiple choice tests. I think there should be some essay questions as well for better assessment (S9).

Problems related to the lecturers

It was seen that international students expressed different opinions about the attitudes of the lecturers. Some of the participants expressed that they did not confront any negative attitudes from lecturers, on the contrary, lecturers sometimes made positive discrimination. Students' expressions are as follows:

The lecturer invites me in his/her office to give a lesson. Up to now their attitudes towards to me has been positive. I always receive kindness (S2).

Some says "You are a foreigner; it is hard for you to understand. We should make it easy for you." (S3).

They behave us equal with the Turkish students. They help us since we are foreigners (S9).

They consider us equal with the Turkish students, sometimes their approaches were better (S10).

On the other hand, there were some students in the opinion of being ignored by the lecturers as they are foreigners. Students' expressions on this topic are as follows:

Sometimes I sit in the classroom alone. The lecturer says "You just come and sit. You don't understand what I say. Why do you come then?" I feel sorry. Whenever we intend to speak, he turns us down without saying anything (S6).

Some lecturers have a completely different point of view. For example one says "You Mongolians, you are a new coming student, you never study. You are incompetent. You should find a way to pass the exams easily and get money." (S8).

Problems related to the courses

When students' opinions were analyzed, it was concluded that international students' problems related to the courses mostly resulted from the poor command of Turkish. Additionally, students expressed more specific reasons such as differences in teaching techniques and academic backgrounds of the students that do not correspond with Turkish educational system requirements.

There was an [X] lecturer. He/she only teaches once, never goes over the topics. On the other hand there was a [Y] lecturer. He/she speaks slowly, I can

understand... If my educational background were OK, I would be the best student in school. We got enough score in the university entrance exam easily but we have difficulty in lessons (S5).

I had difficulties in Atatürk's Principles and History of Turkish Revolution course. We were better to be exempted (S8).

I have difficulty in making presentation in the courses (S9).

In addition to problems related to courses, students also stated some problems about the duration and type of the exams. Two of the students' statements regarding these problems are as follows:

For example, students are asked to complete the test in 20 minutes. The duration is not enough to read. I think essay exam is better. There are some terms that I cannot understand. It takes long time to read (S8).

I think essay exam is better to improve oneself. When lecturers always make multiple choice exams we cannot be successful in essay exams (S9).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In different studies, it was exhibited that international students from different countries, who came to Turkey to receive education at a university, had some problems in some fields such as language skills, academic achievement, orientation, housing and economic status (Ercan, 2001; MEB, 2001; Garabayev, 2000; Soyutürk, 2000, Açıkalın, Demirel & Önsoy, 1996). Among these problems, language problems become more prominent (Allaberdiyev, 2007; Adıgüzel, 1994; Dağaşan, 1994). Problems related to language naturally bring about some academic problems (Tutar, 2002; Açıkalın, Demirel, & Önsoy, 1996). In this study, it was aimed to determine undergraduate international students' problems related to "education" and "language" in a university in Turkey in accordance with the findings obtained from the study.

In accordance with the analysis of the interviews with the participants; problems related to language were found as follows:

a) When the international students' responses concerning reading skills were

analyzed; it was determined that poor command of Turkish affected comprehension skills negatively.

- b) Few international students had problems related to writing.
- c) International students had difficulties in introducing themselves when they first came to Turkey.
  - d) Listening was the less problematic field.

In accordance with the analysis of the interviews with the participants; problems related to education were found as follows:

- a) All the participants expressed positive opinions about the quality of higher education in Turkey.
- b) Although the participants have negative opinions regarding lecturer's attitudes towards international students, in general they have positive opinion
- c) It was concluded that international students' problems related to the courses mostly resulted from the poor command of Turkish.

In the studies conducted in several other countries, especially in the United States, it was determined that the language proficiency problem was the most common one among the problems of international students (Yang, 2006; Mori, 2000, Sandhu, 1995; Huntley, 1993). Our study revealed similar results. Considering the fact that nine of the participants learnt Turkish in a language course in Istanbul, this result should be considered as natural. Definitely, it is obvious that one-year language education is not sufficient enough to receive training at a university. Participants stated in their interviews that they had hard times expressing themselves in Turkish in the first years and that these problems decreased over time. On the other hand, taking a blind eye the solutions to the problems becomes one of the main reasons of the students' academic failure in their first years. The failure that the participant students faced academically in their first years can be shown as the most powerful evidence. In fact, most of the participants had 5-13 failed courses.

Previous studies show that the reason why students desire to receive training in another country grounded in two main reasons. These are higher education quality and

similar socio-cultural structure (Eustace, 2007; Stephenson, 2004; Altbach, 1997; Parr, Bradley & Bingi, 1992; Kaplan, 1983). Similarly, the participants choose Turkey to receive training for the similar reasons; however, participants stated that they had various problems related to both education and lecturers. The underlying factors are; being foreigner and being in need of guided. Describing course contents and exams as difficult is a common result. Study findings show that the underlying factor is to have a poor command of reading comprehension. International students should overcome other problems such as understanding question completely and finishing up exams on time, in addition to those similar to Turkish students face. Besides, it is determined that although lecturer's attitudes towards the international students were positive, some of them do not take their problems seriously.

#### **Suggestions**

Study results show that ignoring or waiting for a spontaneous solution is like Waiting for Godot. Instead, universities should develop some practical solutions and approaches. Turkish language centre that provides intensive Turkish as a second language instruction for international students should be established with in the structure of universities. Additionally, International Students Office (ISO) that can serve as ERASMUS coordination should be established and if necessary foreign lecturers could be employed.

Establishing a communication among the lecturers and international students will be the most effective solution to the problems of international students related to education. It is thought that establishing an academic consulting service for international students and "Volunteer Matching Program" that can match international students with their Turkish peers can be beneficial. The use of these applications can help international students to cope with the problems related to language therefore the problems related to education.

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