

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

© Gizem Yilmazel, Ciler Hatipoglu

The work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Volume 37, Issue 2, pp. 113-138

DOI: [10.36366/frontiers.v37i2.897](https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v37i2.897)

www.frontiersjournal.org



Pakistani Students' Informal Interactions with Turkish Students at a Turkish Host University

Gizem Yilmazel¹, Ciler Hatipoglu¹

Abstract in English

This study investigated the social interactions of Pakistani students with their Turkish friends at a Turkish host university, Middle East Technical University (METU). The article describes the nature of the communication between students from different backgrounds from the perspective of Pakistani students, focusing on communication occurring in dorms and during breaks as settings of student interaction beyond the classroom. Qualitative data was collected through four weekly rounds of semi-structured group interviews with six Pakistani male students. The participants discussed their relationships with Turkish students, interaction patterns, and topics of their dialogue. The data demonstrates that Pakistani students had initiated and maintained conversations but as time passed, Turkish students began reciprocating and initiated conversations. The topics discussed among the two groups varied from exams to cultural differences. The findings shed light on the evolving relationships between international (Pakistani) students and Turkish students at METU, highlighting how cultural differences and language barriers impact social interactions and intercultural exchange. The significance of this study lies in its emphasis on the need for inclusive environments that facilitate international students' integration, the importance of enhancing support systems for language and intercultural communication, and its valuable insights for Global South-South study abroad programs to strengthen cultural ties.

¹ MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY, ANKARA, TÜRKİYE

Corresponding author: Gizem Yilmazel, gizem.yilmazel@outlook.com

Date of Acceptance: January 19th, 2025

Abstract in Turkish

Bu çalışma, Pakistanlı öğrencilerin Türkiye’de bir üniversite olan Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi’ndeki (ODTÜ) Türk arkadaşlarıyla sosyal etkileşimlerini araştırmıştır. Makale, farklı geçmişlere sahip öğrenciler arasındaki iletişimin doğasını, Pakistanlı öğrencilerin bakış açısıyla tanımlamakta olup öğrenci etkileşiminin sınıf dışında gerçekleşen ortamlarda, yurtlarda ve ders aralarında, olanları üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Nitel veriler, altı Pakistanlı erkek öğrenciyle yapılan dört haftalık yarı yapılandırılmış grup görüşmeleriyle toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar, Türk öğrencilerle olan ilişkileri, etkileşim şekilleri ve diyalog konuları ile ilgili yanıtlar vermiştir. Veriler, Pakistanlı öğrencilerin diyalogları başlatıp sürdürdüğünü, ancak zamanla Türk öğrencilerin karşılık verip konuşmalar başlatmaya başladığını göstermektedir. İki grup arasındaki tartışılan konular, sınavlardan kültürel farklılıklara kadar çeşitlenmiştir. Bulgular, ODTÜ’deki uluslararası (Pakistanlı) öğrenciler ile Türk öğrenciler arasındaki gelişen ilişkileri aydınlatmakta olup, kültürel farklılıkların ve dil engellerinin sosyal etkileşimleri ve kültürlerarası değişimi nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın önemi, uluslararası öğrencilerin entegrasyonunu kolaylaştıran kapsayıcı ortamlar oluşturulması gerekliliğine, dil ve kültürlerarası iletişim için destek sistemlerinin güçlendirilmesinin önemine ve kültürel bağları güçlendirmek amacıyla küresel öğrenci değişim programlarına dair değerli içgörüler sunmasına odaklanmaktadır.

Keywords

EFL contexts; higher education; informal interactions; migrant students; study abroad

1. Introduction

Study abroad programs have been attracting more and more overseas students, and the numbers of internationally mobile students are increasing and destinations diversifying. According to the numbers obtained from the International Students Office of Middle East Technical University (METU) in Türkiye, there also has been a gradual increase in the number of the international students over the years. The table below presents the numbers of Pakistani students coming to METU for either undergraduate or postgraduate programs over the last ten years period.

TABLE (1)
NUMBERS OF PAKISTANI STUDENTS AT METU

Years	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
2022-2023	164	49	213
2021-2022	137	46	183

2020-2021	114	46	160
2019-2020	85	44	129
2018-2019	89	40	129
2017-2018	91	34	125
2016-2017	103	39	142

This increase in the migrant student population requires more attention in order to address their needs and facilitate their overseas experiences. In the following study, the reason Pakistani students were selected is that they constitute a quite large population at METU with 213 students in the 2022-2023 academic year compared to the total number of international students, 1,900, from nearly 93 different countries at METU. Also, the field has studies on challenges faced by international students and lacks studies focusing on these students' daily interactions with local students and their perceptions of those interactions (Ayyoub et al., 2019; Bashir & Khalid, 2022; Noreen et al., 2019; Su, 2017).

The study aims to investigate degree-seeking Pakistani students' informal interactions with Turkish students at METU within the contexts of dormitory and class breaks, and discuss the findings on the basis of the theoretical foundations on intercultural theories. The utilized frameworks in this study are Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennett (1993) and Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede (2001) in line with the individualism versus collectivism dimension of the model (regarding the native and host cultures). These two models enabled the researchers to discuss the findings of the Pakistani students' conversations with their Turkish peers in terms of the topics they discussed, the initiation patterns and their relationships with each other by bringing an insight through intercultural varieties.

The findings of the study could inform researchers studying the cultural adaptation of minorities and host university stakeholders addressing challenges Pakistani students face during the process. The specific research question that this study aims to answer is: What characterizes Pakistani male students' informal interactions with Turkish students at a Turkish host university?

2. Theoretical Framework

The findings will be discussed within two frameworks: Bennett's (1993) stages of intercultural sensitivity and the framework of Hofstede (2001) in line with the individualism versus collectivism dimension (regarding the native and host cultures).

2.1. Bennet's Intercultural Sensitivity Framework

Intercultural sensitivity is "the construction of reality as increasingly capable of accommodating cultural difference that constitutes development" (Bennet, 1993, p. 24). This makes it a developmental procedure rather than a set of behaviors. Intercultural sensitivity can be experienced in various stages. There are ethnocentric (denial, defense, and minimization) and ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation, and integration) stages. The reason this framework was utilized in the following study investigating Pakistani students' interactions with local, Turkish students is that interactions can be affected by cultural differences, so it could be possible to discuss findings on the perceptions of the participants on their informal conversations with Turkish students.

2.2. Hofstede's National Cultures Model

This framework provides five different dimensions which identify national cultural differences, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long term versus short term orientation. Hofstede (2001, p. 29) suggests that "power distance is related to different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality and individualism versus collectivism is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups", which are the two aspects of the model that are utilized in this paper as the interactions of the participants could be discussed in line with national cultural differences.

3. Literature Review

This section presents a comprehensive description of Pakistani culture along with its comparison to Turkish culture as suggested by Hofstede's Cultural Framework and the relevant studies focusing on Pakistani students as minorities and internationals in the literature.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 31), "a dimension is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures." Hence, a comprehensive

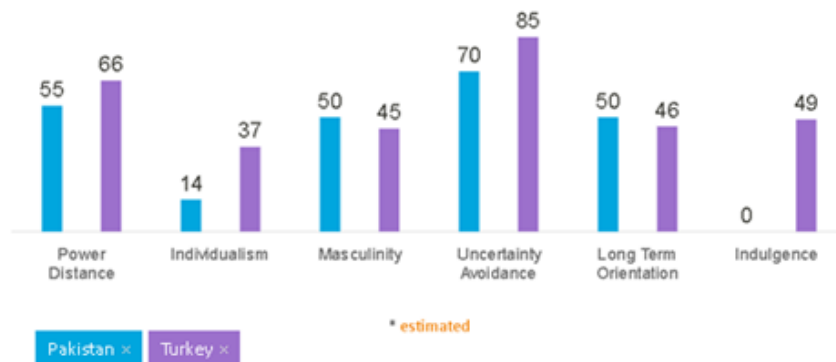
description of both Pakistani and Turkish cultures could be made by referring to Hofstede's (2001) Cultural Framework within the five dimensions proposed by the theory, which are power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation. A sixth dimension, indulgence, was added to the framework in Hofstede et al.'s book published in 2010.

Although Hofstede's model has been criticized, it is also regarded as beneficial and useful by many in the field. To begin with, McSweeney (2002) pointed out the model's reliance of absolute characteristics rather than comparative ones and doubtful representation of populations in IBM research. Orr and Hauser (2008) highlighted that the methodology adopted in the model reasons the dimensions on the basis of theoretical reasoning rather than empirical evidence. Furthermore, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) highlighted exceptions in real-world contexts, contrasting with Hofstede's findings that individualistic and collectivistic values are influenced by factors such as national wealth, population growth, and historical roots. For example, countries like Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have remained collectivistic despite significant industrialization (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Despite the criticisms, the model has still been widely used. It was also highlighted by Jackson (2020, p. 4) that "Hofstede's was a fresh voice in the 1980s. There are very few fresh voices within our discipline today. The countless imitators and regurgitators of Hofstede's work are far more common, and help to consolidate the conservative nature of our work."

Figure (1) presents a cultural comparison of Türkiye and Pakistan on the basis of Hofstede's Cultural Framework. As stated on the website, country scores are calculated and updated based on published scholarships on scientific journals.

FIGURE (1)

CULTURAL COMPARISON OF TÜRKİYE AND PAKISTAN ACCORDING TO HOFSTEDÉ'S CULTURAL FRAMEWORK (THE CULTURE FACTOR GROUP, N.D., PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS HOFSTEDÉ INSIGHTS)



According to the chart and the analysis on the [website](#), while it is difficult to determine a preference of power distance in Pakistan with a medium score, Turkish style appears to be dependent, hierarchical, and superiors are often inaccessible. Within the individualism aspect which refers to the place and integration of individuals in society, Pakistan is referred to as a collectivist society in which individuals take responsibility and build strong relationships with other members while Türkiye is even more collectivist with a higher score. Regarding the masculinity dimension, which refers to gender role differentiation, the score of Pakistani people shows that they do not have any preference while Turkish people seem to be on the side of femininity which meant that there is a tendency to value the soft aspects of culture such as leveling others, sympathy and consensus. The comparison on uncertainty avoidance element addressing a society's tolerance for ambiguity reveals that Pakistan has a preference on this issue by maintaining rigid codes of belief and behavior and precision as well as punctuality are norms; Türkiye has even a greater score meaning a high preference for rules and laws. From the orientation dimension, which refers to the importance attached to present or future, Pakistan does not have a preference on links between the past and the challenges of the present along with the future just like Türkiye which has no dominant preference, either. The final dimension, indulgence, which refers to a society freely pleasing their urges to enjoy the life and have fun while the opposite suppresses those with strict social norms cannot be determined for Türkiye due to the intermediate score while it has an extremely low score in Pakistani culture, which means the actions are restrained by social norms and people have the perception that indulging themselves is wrong.

Hofstede's framework enabled the study with a comprehensive description by means of a comparison of Turkish and Pakistani cultures. The findings will be discussed by referring to the individualism and collectivism constructs within the framework.

The relevant studies in the literature are quite scarce and their authors are mostly focusing on the challenges Pakistani students faced during the adaptation processes by neglecting the natures of their dialogues with the local students of the host country. This review includes four studies studying specifically Pakistani students. One of them is a worldwide study by Bashir and Khalid (2022). The other three took place in specific contexts, one in Austria (Ayyoub et al., 2019) and two in China (Noreen et al., 2019; Su, 2017).

To begin with the first relevant study, Bashir and Khalid (2022) investigated psychological adjustment determinants of Pakistani students in 18 different host countries abroad, presenting the bigger picture by including various countries. They utilized an acculturative stress scale, a Big Five Personality Test, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to collect quantitative data from 309 Pakistani students abroad. The study revealed both positive determinants which were related to age, perceived cultural distance and Neuroticism, and negative determinants that were social support and personality factors.

The study by Ayyoub et al. (2019) investigated adjustment issues of seven Pakistani PhD students in Austria. Upon analyzing interview data, Ayyoub et al. (2019) found that the participants' experience did not meet their prior expectations about studying in Austria. Ayoub and colleagues found challenges related to culture shock; encounters of discrimination, stereotyping, or harassment; the language barrier in communication; relationships with and support from supervisors and the local community; and psychological effects of studying in Austria. The participants were also observed to improve in terms of responsibility, tolerance, and sensitivity to others, being independent, confident, punctual and more technology-literate.

Additionally, Noreen et al. (2019) investigated the adjustment processes of 14 Pakistani students Huazhong University of Science and Technology in China. They focused on intercultural adjustment related issues during the study. They found that Pakistani students were satisfied with their social, educational, and cultural experiences in China as most of them did not face much difficulty in the adjustment to the new environment along with the adopting sociocultural elements. Likewise, Su (2017) investigated intercultural adaptation processes of Pakistani students at Chinese universities. In the study, Pakistani students' life and study experiences through their perspectives were explored, and the challenges they encountered during intercultural communication were revealed.

As the literature review presents, there are only a few papers studying international Pakistani students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Those studies are on the challenges faced by Pakistani students abroad, and their cultural and psychological adjustment processes, but there is not a study that specifically focuses on Pakistani students' interactions and conversations with the locals in the host countries' educational settings. That is why there is a

scarcity of information regarding the interactions of Pakistani students in educational settings, so the present study aims to investigate how Pakistani students interact with Turkish students outside the classroom setting at a Turkish university and contribute to the study by bringing about a description of the nature of those informal conversations from the Pakistani students' own perspectives.

4. Methodology

4.1. Setting

The language of instruction at Middle East Technical University is English. According to its General Information webpage, [METU](#) "hosts over 1,900 international students from nearly 93 different countries studying and conducting their research at various academic programs across three campuses." (Middle East Technical University [METU], n.d., p.1). As aforementioned, Pakistani students make up a considerable part of this international community. Engineering departments of METU offer courses on both theoretical knowledge and experiments in educational laboratories. The students are required to attend departmental lectures and take part in experimental projects. These projects and laboratories enable students to interact and collaborate with each other.

This following study focuses on the Pakistani students' interactions that take place during the break time between classes at school with their classmates and at the dormitory with roommates. The classrooms are mixed in gender while the dormitory rooms are either female only or male only. In the study's case, the participants are sharing rooms with males since female students were not willing to participate in the study. In these contexts, the participants and Turkish friends of theirs are equal, according to Hofstede's cultural framework (2001), in terms of power relations, which refers to them all being students. As the framework suggests, the power distance determines the societal order in some cultures, and in this study's context, since the participants were all students, peers and males (as they self-reported), they were equal in terms of power, which did not create any hierarchical tensions in interactions.

4.2. Participants

There were six participants in the study. The participants were chosen upon convenience and snowball sampling methods. First, two of the

participants, who were in the researcher's classroom, were invited to the interviews. Then, those two existing participants invited the other four. The utilization of these two methods eliminated any possible bias, contradictions, and paradoxes brought by the researchers since the students were randomly assigned in the classroom for the course. For the interviews, participants were divided into two equal groups. Students A, B and C were in the first interview group and Students D, E and F were in the second group. According to answers they gave to the Participant Information Survey (see Appendix A), they are all pursuing a Bachelor's degree in their freshman year. Their ages range between 18-20. Their major is engineering. Two of them have been in Türkiye for 1.5 months, two for two months, one for almost 1.5 years and one for six months. All six participants are residing in the campus dormitory with Turkish students. Prior to their arrival in Türkiye, none of them had lived outside their home country, Pakistan. All participants had received their education in schools within Pakistan until they enrolled at METU in 2022. Notably, Student A stands out as the sole participant who attained proficiency in Turkish at C1 level through TÖMER, an institution dedicated to teaching Turkish. The rest of the participants indicated that their Turkish proficiency ranges from A1 to A2 levels. They suggested that they tried to learn and improve their Turkish language skills through the Turkish course available in their departments, watching Turkish TV series and engaging in interactions with their Turkish friends. As they were taught English from the very early years of education, all of the participants were fluent in English, two of them having a slight Pakistani accent and one with a heavy Pakistani accent in English. The accent somehow affected the interviews as the interaction between the participant and the researcher was slightly hindered, which was highlighted in the limitations section along with an implication for researchers and further studies.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The study followed a qualitative design in order to come up with in-depth information on Pakistani students' informal interactions with their Turkish peers since the qualitative approach enables the researchers to explore and understand the meaning that participants infer to a social issue (Creswell, 2014). This means that the qualitative approach brought insights and information on the perceptions of the participants of their informal interactions with local students. Additionally, as Tracy (2010, p. 849) suggests, there are eight criteria that make qualitative research more qualified, which are "worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and

meaningful coherence.” That is why, the following study could be considered as a qualified qualitative research since it embodies the eight characteristic of a qualitative study contributing to the quality of the research. Firstly, Pakistani students’ interactions with local students has been illuminated for the first time in a Turkish higher institution. Secondly, the topic is worth to investigate since it had been a gap to be filled in the literature. Then, the participants provided the study with elaborative answers. Finally, the data was reported in a descriptive way, and reflects the patterns directly as observed.

Qualitative data was collected through four weekly rounds of semi-structured group interviews with six Pakistani male students. There was a set of questions to initiate the talk between participants and trigger them to reflect on their informal interactions. All of the participants were present during each of the interviews. Four interviews were held for the study. The participants stated that they met outside the interview place and came to every session together. Almost all the participants spoke equally, because they unintentionally waited for their friends’ speech and mostly spoke in turns instead of having a spontaneous discussion. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed afterwards. Each one of the four recordings lasts about 40 minutes. The transcription was analyzed by means of thematic analysis.

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye. Prior to the data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave oral consent. The participants were promised to be mentioned of anonymously as Student A, B, C, D, E and F. Participants were all volunteers to take part in the interviews. They also permitted to be recorded during the interview sessions.

5. Results and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from analyzing the interview data vis-à-vis the primary research question: What characterizes Pakistani male students’ informal interactions with Turkish students at a Turkish host university? These themes are: relationships with Turkish students, interaction patterns, and conversation topics. These themes presented and discussed in the following two subsections.

5.1. Results

5.1.1. Relationships with Turkish Students

Most of the participants pointed out their relationships with Turkish students while describing their informal interactions. To every interview for four weeks, they were able to bring incidents regarding the relationships they had. The participants reported that every week, the relationships became stronger, and they felt closer to Turkish students. In the first interview, when the participant students in group 1 were asked about their relationships with Turkish students at the dormitory, Student C stated that Turkish students were quite kind and helpful to Pakistani students. Student B said that they were on good terms with the Turkish roommates and in their free time, they practiced English together. Moreover, three participants agreed that Turkish students were eager to teach them Turkish. Student B asserted that he felt left alone since he was not able to speak Turkish. He said:

One day, I was walking down Devrim [the stadium at the campus] and four people approached me and one asked something in Turkish. I said I cannot speak Turkish. The other one asked 'Do you speak Arabic?' Then, I said that I only speak English. Then, they walked away. I knew that they could speak English, but they mostly do not prefer to communicate in English.

In group 2, Student D stated that Turkish students were physical in comparison to Pakistanis. Student E agreed with this idea and further explained, "They like to touch on my shoulder or arms while having a conversation." In week 2, Student A in group 1 implied that there was not much change and the relationships were mostly the same. Student B stated that he had made two Turkish friends since the arrival. He highlighted that they were so much closer now that they created a WhatsApp group and were making plans to hang out, which he believed to be a progress in the relationships. Student C expressed that there were not any new Turkish friends and with the existing ones, there was a positive change due to ice breaking and getting to know one another better. Student B added:

We are getting closer with the Turkish lab partners thanks to the group work activities in the classes. They are supportive. Although they speak Turkish amongst themselves, they sound kind and nice. Turkish people tend to teach Turkish and explain stuff in Turkish.

Student A commented on the interactions between international and Turkish students by saying: “A Turkish senior said that Turkish students are not so fond of internationals, because they think that they worked harder than the internationals for the university entrance and the exams at university.” Student A also implied that the experience at METU was rewarding as there was an international community thanks to which international students can interact with local people. He also suggested that he could interact more with other internationals than the Turkish students. Student B mentioned that the Pakistani community at METU was getting bigger and bigger, so he did not feel alone. He also said that there were many internationals around him such as the roommates and next-door people at the dormitory. Student C reported that he was enjoying the experience as he was into cultures and languages, which he can reach with the great international community at METU.

Moreover, all participants in group 2 stated that they communicate with the local students through English and the relationships with them did not change much compared to the previous week’s interview. Student D brought an incident to the discussion. He said that when he studies with his Pakistani friends in the group study section, where they do not need to be silent, Turkish students tend to react on their being loud. He stated that “a female Turkish student came to me and shouted by saying, “you Pakistanis are always so loud.” He comments on this reaction by saying, “we are disadvantaged because we are foreigners.” Then, Student E commented on the issue by saying “Turkish students are kind and helpful. A girl could not speak English, but still walked along with me and showed me the way, and a lot of Turkish people are like that. There are only a few bad apples.” In the third interview, Student A reported that there was no major difference, and they were still getting to know each other. Student B mentioned that he had a chance to observe a gathering in which Turkish students were watching a football match in a café around the dormitory. He compared this event to the ones back at his home and stated that “our gatherings are lively. The liveliness in here is different. They are not that live.” Student A agreed with Student B’s impression. Student C suggested that Turkish and Pakistani cultures were similar and this similarity facilitated interactions and building good relationships.

Participants in group 2 all agreed that they were better that week as they knew each other more and spent quite much more time together. Student D shared a proof of strengthened relationships, as he suggested. He said a roommate’s mother sent some traditional food from their hometown and he

said, “The guy said you can take whatever you like without asking for many times.” Moreover, all three participants stated they still enjoyed being an international at METU. When asked if there was anything else to tell and reflect on, Student E said there was not enough time (one-week intervals in between interviews) to collect incidents to bring to the interview, and Student D said: “On Fridays, I go to the campus mosque in my traditional dress. I never got weird looks or judgements. I sometimes get second glances, but Turkish students say that looks good on me.” In the last interview, participants in group 1 all agreed that friendships were getting stronger and communication better. Student B asserted that they might remain friends after school in the future. Participants in group 2 reported that relationships became stronger, and conversations were deeper and longer with the Turkish roommates and classmates.

All in all, participants’ utterances and answers pointed that the relationships between Pakistani students and the Turkish ones became stronger as weeks passed by. Beside these relationships that the participants had with Turkish students, they also reported incidents in relation with interaction patterns and initiation of dialogues. The following section presents the changes in interaction and initiation patterns as a result of weekly observations of the participants.

5.1.2. Interaction and Initiation Patterns

Almost all of the participants highlighted details about interaction and initiation patterns while reflecting on their conversations with Turkish students. In the first interview, in group 1, Student A highlighted that he was able to speak Turkish a little and he was the initiator of dialogues. He stated that “I speak to everyone in Turkish and most of the Turkish students I talk to tend to reply me in English.” Student B also commented on the initiation, and he said: “Turkish students do not initiate dialogues or if they do so, they do not maintain the speech.” On the same issue, Student C said: “I was really shocked when I realized that there are so many Pakistanis here. I am in good terms with them, but, ... the Turkish people, they are hesitant to start discussions.” Three of the participants agreed that the interaction patterns between students at METU are mostly either internationals to internationals or Turkish to Turkish. Student C expressed that there was an incident in which he spoke Turkish for a simple request and the person thanked him for using Turkish. In group 2, Student D highlighted that Pakistani people were more friendly and frank, but at METU, they needed to approach people to initiate talks. Then, he reflected on the comparison and

explained by saying, “Turkish students shy away from us, because they do not want to speak English.” Student E added: “They are not able to communicate, they just read articles and write essays.” Student F contributed to the discussion by saying: “They are not confident with their English.” Then, in week 2, Student B shared an incident related to initiation of dialogues. He said: “A Turkish student initiated a conversation at the dormitory kitchen to ask how to start the stove.” Student A implied that Turkish students rarely initiate interactions and a common one of those was warnings. He explained that sometimes he was asked to be quiet as he was talking louder than them. Student B agreed with the statement by saying “We speak louder than Turkish people.” and added that “Turkish people quickly identify us.” Student C stated that the reactions he received to his utterances and behaviors had been normal. Group 2 mostly discussed initiation patterns and topics. In week 3, In group 1, Student B reported that he and his roommates ordered food at the dormitory and they could not communicate with the delivery person and asked for help from the Turkish people. He said that Turkish students helped them and just like usual, he was the initiator of the conversation. Student C emphasized that he kept initiating conversations.

Participants in group 2 stated that they did not take as much initiative as in the first weeks. Student E gave an example of his friend’s initiating the talk. He said he was checking where a place was on Maps and a Turkish student approached to help and initiated the talk. In week 4, Students A, B and C highlighted that some of their Turkish friends started to initiate conversations with them. Student B explained by saying: “My friends don’t have any problems with starting conversations anymore, because we are closer now. Even in the cafeteria, they come and talk to me.” Student C highlighted that the Turkish students around them were more comfortable than while initiating conversations.

The participants’ expressions in the weekly interviews indicated that participants initially opted for dialogues with other international students and avoided conversations with Turkish ones. After a while, they observed that Turkish students were the ones avoiding initiating dialogues. Hence, the participants reported initiating dialogues with Turkish students. Then, they told that the more they had to interact with one another during classes and works at laboratories, the more Turkish students got used to and started approaching them to initiate and maintain dialogues.

In addition to interaction patterns and initiation, the participants referred to the topics they discussed in their conversations with Turkish students while describing their conversations. The next section presents these conversation topics.

5.1.3. Conversation Topics

Participants also touched upon the topics they talked about while interacting with Turkish students when they reflected on their conversations. In the first interview, regarding the topics in their informal interactions with Turkish students, Student A stated that they talked about Turkish food and culture at the dormitory. Student B expressed that they talked about the midterm exams and studies in that week during the break time, and about Turkish politics and Pakistan's economy at the dormitory. Student C stated that he did not have any dialogues or interactions during the break times at school but he talked with his Turkish friends at the dormitory about the Turkish culture and Ankara. Besides these topics, Student A stated that the students at METU had a tendency to initiate conversations about Turkish politics, and the local students were fond of discussing politics. He said that he was able to make comparisons with another community since he spent one year at Sakarya University before METU, and had not heard these topics discussed there. The other two students agreed on the idea that METU students were discussing politics more than usual. Then, Student C added that he was trying to avoid ideology or politics related talks as he believes that those topics are sensitive to talk at school. Finally, Student B highlighted an incident which he thought was interesting:

I was having lunch at the school cafeteria with Turkish students all around me. They were discussing politics again. All of a sudden, I realized that they were making negative comments and criticizing the president and political decisions. This is so interesting to me.

In group 2, Students D and F said that during the breaks between classes, they talked about cultural differences and studies. Student E said that they were talking about various topics and doing lots of activities together such as going to the cafeteria for lunch and hanging out of the campus as well. The topics at the dormitory appeared to be family relationships and similarities between Urdu and Turkish for Student D, and studies for Student E as he was studying in the room. Student E mentioned that drinking culture is another topic discussed at the dormitory. He said: "Pakistanis cannot legally drink and they need to show

ID to prove they are not Muslims to be able to drink.”. Then they continued the discussion by referring to smoking issue. Student D said: “Smoking is for somebody who is unemployed like not busy with useful works.” Student E opposed by saying: “That is a stereotype and I know a professor smoking in Pakistan.”. Then, as it was the midterm exams week during the second interviews, participants in group 1 mostly referred to the same topic. Student C noted that he did not have any interactions in between classes and had academic conversations at the laboratories of classes. Student B mentioned his interactions with Turkish students at the cafeteria of the school and the kitchen of the dormitory by saying:

While I was in the kitchen, a Turkish asked me how to start the stove. We met for the first time, we asked each other’s majors and started talking about midterm exams. After that day, I had lunch with a Turkish friend of mine at yemekhane (the school cafeteria). We are in the same ENG section. We talked about academic stuff like physics exam and grades. We compared our grades and found out I got 30 out of 50 and he got 50. It is very impressive. I really like physics actually. Then, the math quiz, he told me he got 10 out of 10. When I told him I got a 6, he was like ‘Why? Why did you have a 6? Wasn’t it easy enough?’

This incident, the Turkish student’s questions and the grade comparison triggered the participants to reflect on the reasons of the issue, and the discussion went off the topic, so that part is excluded from the data. After a short silence, Student A continued to elaborate on the interactions he had had since the previous meeting: “I as well had conversations on midterms. And, I have a Turkish friend at the dorm, he taught me a phrase “Canın sağ olsun.” I think it means be in good health or something.”. In group 2, the topics discussed during the break times were studies, cultural differences, and assignments for the three of the participants while they talked about sports, parties, plans to hang out at the dormitory. Student F highlighted that he was learning proverbs in order to surprise and entertain Turkish students. Not only did he memorize how to say those, but he also learned the meanings quite well. Then, Student D stressed that this topic change was not about the place but the time since if there was more time spent, topics were deeper. During the third interviews, Student A said that Turkish students disappeared after classes because of the rush to study for the midterm exams, so he could not interact much with them at school. At the dormitory, he stated that Turkish people continued to teach him Turkish expressions, and this week he learned “fena değil” (not bad) when he asked how someone was, and believed that to be the only meaningful interaction that week.

Student B said that they talked about how difficult the exams were during the break of classes. Student C highlighted that they were making plans to hang out with the people at the dormitory and the topics they discussed were still relevant to the culture and places to see. He expressed that he spent time on his own during the break so the interactions with Turkish students were limited to the ones at the dormitory. Participants in group 2 all agreed that they were still exchanging information related to Turkish and Pakistani cultures during the break times. Besides that, when they started to talk about the conversations they had at the dormitory, Student D reported that the conversations were lengthier and more about private and personal matters. He illustrated this with a remembrance of a Turkish roommate's sharing his breakup story. Then, Student E also said that they talked about family issues and especially the roommate's father's business. Student F stated that there were not many conversations, and the ones they had were about the Super Cup football matches. In the last week of interviews, for participants in group 1, the topics of the conversations at the dormitory were the football matches of the world cup for Student A, assignments for Student B and future career plans for Student C. The dialogues during the break times at school were expressed to be different. Student A highlighted that there was a personal information exchange. He said that his Turkish classmate told him about his travel to another city. Student B highlighted that the exams were still discussed and when that topic was over, students started discussing politics. He was reminded of an incident taking place at the cafeteria and said:

There was 'ayran' in the menu and it is the only thing I know in Turkish, so I had it and said it was really nice. Then, my Turkish friend offered to take me to a place where I can drink the best 'ayran'.

This incident shows the topics were still being formed around cultural dishes and places to see around, indicating the change in initiation pattern and demonstrating some strengthening of the relationships. Another topic highlighted by Student C is as follows: "In this university, exams end, tasks start, then the other exams start. That is why there is nothing interesting in terms of the topics of the conversations." In group 2, the topics of the conversations were expressed to be mostly the same as the previous weeks. Student D illustrated a cultural difference related conversation by saying: "One of the roommates brought two bottles of alcohol to the room and I said 'If you get drunk, do not come to the room.'. They were shocked at first, but they understood my sensitivity and behaved respectfully." In summary, it was found that cultural

differences and curiosity about each other's cultures and backgrounds shaped the conversations. Additionally, agenda at the campus impacted the topics they talked about during those interactions such as exams and assignments.

In this section, the findings were revealed to be relationships with Turkish students, discussion topics, and interaction and initiation patterns. These three themes were pointed out by the participants while describing how they interacted with the local students outside the class times: mainly, during the break of classes and at dormitory. The following section aims to discuss findings of the study by referring to relevant scholarships in the field and the frameworks that are Bennet's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (1993) and Hofstede's national cultures model (2001).

5.2. Discussion

As the relevant papers in the literature had different foci, this study has only a few coinciding findings. To begin with, the finding of unmet expectations in terms of academic facilities and school life in the study by Ayyoub et al. (2019) contradicts the finding in this study as the participants reported being happy as internationals at METU thanks to the facilities and activities at campus along with the active and welcoming communities around. However, findings related to culture and language coincide. Those are that most students did not experience culture shock although there were different reasons, and they encountered the language barrier while building relationships with the locals.

Furthermore, some participants' questioning cultural and religious acts of locals and the place of men and women in the society resembles to Student D and E's drinking and smoking related discussion here. This questioning could be discussed within Bennett's (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. According to the model, international students go through certain stages – ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) and ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration). In the case of this study, Student D appears to be on the ethnocentric stages of the model as he is at the defense phase by viewing cultural differences as threatening to his worldview, and Student E seems to be on the ethnorelative stages as he is acknowledging behavioral differences and not stereotyping varieties.

Contrary to the finding that “international students, who perceive more differences between the home and host cultures, have reported problems related to psychosocial adjustment” (Bashir & Khalid, 2022, p. 6), most

participants in the METU context referred to cultural similarities between Turkish and Pakistani societies, and they did not encounter such issues or conflicts. The individualism versus collectivism aspect in the cultural comparison made by The Culture Factor (n.d.) pointed a significant difference between Pakistani and Turkish cultures. As aforementioned and highlighted by Hofstede (2001, as cited in Bashir & Khalid, 2022), “Pakistani international culture is collectivistic, patriarchal and religious and gives rise to personalities and psychological dispositions that perceive achievement, bonding and identity differently in comparison to the West” (p. 7), which is more or less the same for the Turkish culture, and this could have facilitated the informal conversations between Pakistani students and local ones at METU. In addition, some of the comments on Turkish students being physical compared to them is also a culture specific trait. Judging by the Pakistani students’ perceptions and comments, this difference did not affect the conversations they had with the Turkish students in terms of the conversation initiation and maintenance or approaching one another.

In another qualitative inquiry, Noreen et al. (2019) found that Pakistani students were willing to make Chinese friends, and at the METU context, most Pakistani students also had quite a considerable number of Turkish friends. In both studies, the locals were found to be quite helpful towards the international participants. An interesting highlight is that in the study by Noreen et al. (2019), Pakistani students felt shy while talking to Chinese students at the beginning. However, at the METU context, the local students hesitated to approach and talk while the Pakistani students were the approaching and conversation initiating ones. The participants in this very research context also reported that they were confident with their English, which they thought to be the reason why they were initiating conversations, and Turkish students were stepping back.

Another coinciding finding is that sojourners’ adaptation process is affected by their length of stay (Su, 2017). In the METU context, students also reported that the dialogue initiation patterns changed, numbers of local friends increased, and the relationships got better as weeks passed by. They mentioned that Turkish students also got used to international students while participants went through their own adaptation process in the host context. Participants’ observations on changes in their interactions with Turkish students aligned with Bennett’s (1993) findings on intercultural encounters. Specifically, as Bennett suggests, individuals go through a process of accommodating cultural differences. Initially, they may deny, defend against, or minimize these

differences. However, over time, they begin to accept, adapt to, and even integrate with cultural variations. This shift ultimately allowed participants to engage in deeper dialogues and build stronger relationships with more Turkish and Pakistani friends.

Initiation patterns were not highlighted in any of the reviewed studies. In this current study, students highlighted that the communication patterns, styles are mostly the same in Pakistani and Turkish. Thanks to these similarities, they did not face any conflicts related to the norms of interaction.

Last but not the least, both Hofstede and Bennett's frameworks enabled the authors to discuss the findings of this study. Bennett (1993) appears to take parties in the intercultural encounters as whole persons by suggesting that individuals go through developmental stages while accommodating cultural varieties whereas Hofstede (2001) deals with the interculturality issue with a top-down and whole-nation approach by emphasizing generalized features of a nation's behaviors and features and differentiating nations. For example, Toyama and Yamazaki (2022) noted that they analyzed the relationship between foreign language anxiety scores and Hofstede's cultural model, facilitating a top-down regional approach. They also highlighted that "McCrae and Terracciano (2005) used ratings of Hofstede's cultural index in top-down studies when analyzing how national personality traits correlate to countries' regime types." (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022, p.2). On the other hand, Ting-Toomey (2005) points out that intercultural communication is a symbolic exchange process in which parties create a third place by building a common ground rather than focusing on differences. The third place was also redefined and discussed by Kramsch (2011) in a plenary speech delivered at Cambridge University:

THIRD PLACE, THIRD CULTURE and SPHERE OF INTERCULTURALITY are metaphors that attempt to capture through a place marker what is in fact a process of positioning the self both inside and outside the discourse of others. It is the capacity to recognize the historical context of utterances and their intertextualities, to question established categories like German, American, man, woman, White, Black and place them in their historical and subjective contexts. But it is also the ability to resignify them, reframe them, re- and transcontextualize them and to play with the tension between text and context. (p. 359)

That is to say, there are many variables to take into consideration in order to achieve successful communication such as individual features, culture-specific traits, emotions, context, means and so on. Hence, it is significant to have a

broader perspective while looking into intercultural exchanges by avoiding being limited to one framework only but incorporating different ones to consider nation-specific traits as investigated by Hofstede (2001)) individual intercultural sensitivity levels suggested by Bennett (1993) and the third place that would possibly be formed in intercultural encounters as proposed by Kramsch.

6. Conclusion

The findings revealed a description of Pakistani students' informal conversations with their Turkish classmates and roommates. The appearing themes were initiation patterns, conversation topics, and relationships with the local students. It was found that Pakistani students were initiating and maintaining conversations in the first two weeks, but as the time passed and relationships got stronger, Turkish students started to approach Pakistani students and initiate talks. The topics discussed were classes, exams and assignments, cultural differences, places to see around, linguistic differences and families. The topic selection seemed dependent to some extent on the place, classes, and the dormitory. The students reported it was also dependent on the duration of conversations. The relationships appeared to be strengthening and getting better every week.

7. Limitations and Implications

This section states the limitations of the study and offers some implications for further studies and practices in educational contexts.

One of the limitations of this study is that only males volunteered to participate in the interviews and the study. For future studies, it might be useful to hear about the experiences of different genders to enrich the data. Another possible limitation is that one of the participants had a strong Pakistani accent while speaking English. That is why it was highly difficult for the researcher to understand what he said during the interviews. The interviewer did not interrupt for clarification in the parts which were missed in order not to harm the flow of the group interview or create pressure on the speaker. Those parts are eliminated from the data. For future studies, it might be useful to have private sessions with the participant following the group interview and ask for clarification for the parts missed. Additionally, the participants had difficulty in bringing incident examples to the interview sessions. They said that one-week

interval was not enough for the interviews. That is why the fourth meeting was held two weeks after the third one. For future studies, it might be useful to have two weeks in between interviews from the beginning for the sake of collecting fruitful data.

As one of the participants stressed, the topic change in the conversations could be because of the length of the conversations beside places (dormitory, class breaks) since, as discussed in this paper, if the participants spent more time together with their Turkish friends, topics and conversations would be deeper. That is why, for further studies, it could be useful to investigate the topics discussed by focusing on the length of the conversations and make long/short dialogue comparison in addition to places where the conversations take place.

In terms of implications, this study took an initial step to have a closer look at the international students' adaptation processes by investigating their conversations and interactions with local students through their own eyes and perspectives. The findings could enable stakeholders in education to facilitate the process by extending their orientation and guidance practices to informal settings beyond classes. Also, the findings of the study could not only provide international students with insights regarding informal conversations, but also play a role in increasing awareness of local students about the needs and challenges of international students. To study abroad administrators, this study may be relevant and helpful as they seek to better design activities for welcoming and integrating international students.

This study could motivate similar studies regarding other nationalities. In the long term, specific programs, curriculums, practical intercultural activities for students, teachers and organizational units of the universities could be developed to facilitate adaptation and academic development processes.

References

- Ayyoub, M. (2019). Qualitative analysis of cultural adjustment issues in Austria: The case study of Pakistani Ph.D. scholars. *New Horizons*, 13(1), 31-50. DOI: 10.2.9270/NH.13.1(19).03
- Bashir, A., & Khalid, R. (2022). Determinants of psychological adjustment of Pakistani international students. *Cogent Education*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2113214>

- Bennett, J. M. (1993). Toward Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-71). Intercultural Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- The Culture Factor. (n.d.). *Country comparison tool: Pakistan, Turkey*. The Culture Factor. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=pakistan.turkey/>
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Sage.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill Professional.
- Jackson, T. (2020). The legacy of Geert Hofstede. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 20(1), 3-6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595820915088>
- Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 354-367. DOI: 10.1017/S0261444810000431
- Middle East Technical University (METU). (n.d.). General information. Middle East Technical University. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://www.metu.edu.tr/general-information#:~:text=METU%20hosts%20over%201%2C700%20international.research%20at%20various%20academic%20programs>
- McSweeney, B. (2002). Hofstede's Model of National Cultural Differences and their Consequences: A Triumph of Faith - a Failure of Analysis. *Human Relations*, 55(1), 89-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702551004>
- Noreen, S., Wei, F. W., Zareen, M., & Malik, S. (2019). The intercultural adjustment of Pakistani Students at Chinese universities. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v9-i3/5760>
- ORR, L. M. & Hauser, W. J. (2008). A re-inquiry of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: A call for 21st century cross-cultural research. *The Marketing Management Journal*, 2. 1-19. https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/marketing_ideas/122
- Su, X. (2017). The Intercultural Adaptation of the Pakistani Students at Chinese Universities. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 5(12), 2236-2240. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2017.051213
- Ting-Toomey, S., & Chung, L. C. (2005). *Understanding intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Toyama, M., & Yamazaki, Y. (2022). Foreign language anxiety and individualism-collectivism culture: A top-down approach for a country/regional-level analysis. *Sage Open*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211069143>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Appendix A: Participant Information Survey

- Are you:
 - male, female, prefer not to mention, other: _____
- How old are you?
- Where are you from? _____
- How long have you been in Türkiye? _____ years / months
- What is your department?
- What is your degree of education?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Week 1

1. Why do you study in Türkiye?
2. What can you tell me about being an international student at METU?
3. What can you tell me about the relations of students with each other?
4. Are the relations different from those of in your home country?
5. Do you speak Turkish? How do you communicate with your Turkish friends?
6. How are your relations with the Turkish students at the dorm and during the break? Please describe.
7. Can you compare those interactions with the ones you had back in your home country? (who initiates, what are the topics)
8. Can you give an example of your conversations with Turkish students at the dorm and during the break and reflect on those?
9. Do you have anything else related to your perceptions to share?

Week 2, 3, and 4

1. Can you give an example of your conversations with Turkish students at the dorm and during the break and reflect on those?
2. Are there any changes on your relations with Turkish students (at the dorm, during the break)?
3. Can you give an example of your conversations with Turkish students at the dorm and during the break and reflect on those?
4. Can you reflect on the reactions of Turkish student friends to your utterances or acts?
5. Do you have anything else related to your perceptions to share?

Author Biography

Gizem Yilmazel is an EAP lecturer offering Academic English courses at undergraduate level and a PhD candidate at Middle East Technical University, Türkiye. holds a BA and MA in English language teaching. She is interested in EFL, EAP, migrant students, inclusion and interculturality. She has published papers on international journals on the challenges of migrant students; peer feedback; incidents related to the absence of cultural sensitivity; and challenges faced by newly-hired teachers at METU.

Ciler Hatipoglu is a Professor at the Department of Foreign Language Education, METU, Ankara, Türkiye, teaching various Linguistics and Foreign Language Education courses. Dr Hatipoğlu received her BA and MA degrees in ELT from Boğaziçi University, Türkiye and her second MA and PhD from Bristol, UK. She is the creator of the METU Turkish English Exam Corpus and a member of the team that developed the first Spoken Turkish Corpus (METU STC).