



Language difficulties that international postgraduate students experience during their education with the medium of Turkish language

Sayed Masood Haidari ^{a*} , Tuğba Yanpar Yelken ^b 

^a Mersin University, Department of Educational Sciences, Mersin, Turkey

^b Mersin University, Education Faculty, Department of Educational Sciences, Mersin, Turkey

APA Citation:

Haidari, S. M. & Yanpar Yelken, T. (2018). Language Difficulties That International Postgraduate Students Experience During Their Education with the Medium of Turkish Language. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14 (1), 194-210.

Submission Date: 07/02/2018

Acceptance Date: 08/03/2018

Abstract

Language of instruction is a crucial aspect of teaching and learning process in every educational context. The language competence in fact can affect the degree of success of the students and their academic performance throughout their education; especially in postgraduate education level in a foreign language. In this case, it will be very difficult for the international students to pursue their education in an entirely different context with a language they learn for the first time. There is a sizeable amount of existing research carried out on the language difficulties of the international postgraduate students with the medium of instruction (mostly in English). The findings show that inadequacy in language utilization puts a profound negative impact on students' learning and understanding the intended content knowledge. Thus, the current study was conducted to explore the language difficulties that the international postgraduate students experience during their education at Turkish universities with the medium of Turkish, their applied strategies, the given supports, their suggestive solutions and expectations to reduce their current problems. The data was collected through a one-to-one semi-structured interview with 15 international postgraduate students from different countries pursuing their education in different faculties at Mersin University. The results of the study revealed that the main problem of these students was writing followed by speaking, listening and reading respectively. However, the problems related to the language skills were linked to other underlying factors such as poor vocabulary, fast speech rate of the instructors, structural aspects of the Turkish language and some others.

© 2018 JLLS and the Authors - Published by JLLS.

Keywords: international postgraduate students; Turkish as the medium of instruction; language difficulties

1. Introduction

Learning a new foreign language is kind of fun and adventurous. Through the language learning process, individuals learn about the unique social, cultural and historical values of a country. It is a tool through which human beings form their thoughts, construct meaning and share their ideas with the others (Jordan et al, 2008). More importantly, language plays a significant role in all forms of education; be it formal or informal (ibid).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +090-553-707-4021
E-mail address: haidarimasood@gmail.com

Learning a language is natural to every human being, though it has a complex system (Hazen, 2015). The complexity of a language is sensed more when the individuals start pursuing their education in a language they have just learnt. Soon they will perceive that there is a big difference between its utilization in daily life and the one used in the academic sphere; particularly in postgraduate education which requires deep analytic academic language. In this case, heading to the postgraduate education with a newly-learnt foreign language could be a big challenge for the students. The heavy loads of course literature, assignments and doing researches in the process plus language difficulties might become an inevitable obstacle at start.

In addition, language difficulties hinder the international students' participation in the classroom discussions and to be seen as if they were incapable of performing academic tasks (Sibomana, 2016). This is the main reason that they focus on the language rather than the content (ibid). These problems could continue throughout their education and affect their learning outcomes in a negative way. Besides, they could possibly experience failure in the exams which will result in boredom, distress, unnecessary prolongation of their education period and even dropout. As a foreigner student doing PhD in educational science with the medium of instruction in Turkish language, the first researcher in the current study has experienced certain problems both with written and spoken academic Turkish language which put him in a stressful position.

Majority of the international postgraduate students seem to be suffering similar problems with the academic Turkish language, emerged at the beginning of their education. Therefore, this study is amid to explore the problems and the challenges the international students face at the initial stage of their new academic life with the medium of Turkish. It is also aimed to explore the strategies they follow to deal with language difficulties, their suggestive solutions to ease their current problems and their expectations from their instructors in their departments.

1.1. Literature review

International students often experience many challenges in their academic life. Adjusting with the new context of education in a quite unfamiliar academic sphere is problematic oftentimes, especially for the postgraduate students (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Aside from experiencing cultural shock, feeling of social alienation and financial problems, language is also a matter of concern which puts international students in a stressful position (Sharkin, 2006; Güçlü, 1996). Moreover, educational challenges and language difficulties are seen natural alongside the other problems mentioned (Kırkoğlu et al. 2010).

Language as a tool, mediates the communication of knowledge, culture and social norms (Gök, 2008). It is in fact an inevitable part of social and educational life (ibid). Therefore, alongside learning everyday spoken language, students are required to acquire the academic language for understanding the intended content knowledge in their field (Sibomana, 2016). It is believed that the “academic language is no one's mother tongue” even if one is born as the speaker of that language (ibid, p. 125). Seriously, it is much more difficult for the international students to learn a foreign language for the first time and pursue postgraduate education right after.

The kind of problems that the international students face is different both in terms of cultural challenges and language difficulties compared to their native counterparts (Lin & Scherz, 2014). They come with diverse social, cultural, lingual, and educational backgrounds with different looks to the world (ibid).

A bulk of research exists regarding the linguistic challenges faced by the international students with the medium of instruction, particularly English. However, it appears that little research has been conducted with international students who are studying in Turkey with the medium of Turkish. Most

of the existing studies focus on the challenges that non-native speakers of English who are studying in English speaking countries or the countries using English as the language of instruction.

In general, the findings of some of the studies indicate that, the main sources of language challenges that international students face include understanding and using complex technical vocabulary (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Hennebry et al, 2012; Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017), understanding their professors during lectures (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Hennebry et al, 2012; Lin & Scherz, 2014) “understanding their professors’ academic requirements, and processing and producing key disciplinary genres” (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 387). Moreover, “interference from their first language, use of expressions and collocations, understanding the pronunciation of the native speakers and speech rate” (Hennebry et al, 2012, p. 217), understanding the colloquial language, doing presentations in the class, and the limited vocabulary were among the other challenges that the postgraduate students faced (Güçlü, 1996). The findings of the previous researches in this field are discussed in details as following:

Kaldırım and Degeç (2017) conducted a qualitative study about the challenges that the foreigner undergraduate students face in listening skills in Turkish language. They found that most of the problems that students faced in listening were because of not understanding the different local Turkish dialects, fast speech rate of the native speakers, the new vocabulary which do not have daily use, the expressions and proverbs (ibid).

Another qualitative study by Şengül (2014) shows that the foreigner students in Turkey have problems in articulating and using some letters or sounds in Turkish language like “a, e, ı, i, o, ö, u, ü, c, ç, ğ, l, ş, y” (p, 325). Moreover, it was found that the students could not differentiate between some letters like ‘a’ and ‘e’, ‘e’ and ‘i’, ‘ö’ and ‘ü’ as well as some other letters or sounds. However, the degree of the challenges they faced varied according to the languages they already knew (ibid).

In another study with undergraduate and graduate students in Sakarya University, Besel and Savaşan (2017) found that %64.9 of the students did not find it difficult to communicate with Turks because of their language problems. However, the majority of them had a feeling of fear and hesitation in speaking because their Turk friends made fun of them because of the way they spoke Turkish. %36.5 of them had difficulty in understanding the lessons, while %44 did not have such difficulty and also around %52 of the students had no problem in communication with their instructors or understanding them during the lectures. Moreover, about %69 of the students reported that their Turk friends were supportive and understanding towards them and %48 of them had good relationships with the academic staffs (ibid).

Furthermore, Gürbüz and Güleç (2016) report the result of a qualitative study with 13 undergraduate and postgraduate students as regards the challenges that they faced during their education in Turkish language. They found that the grammatical structures, technical words, and pronunciation of some sounds were difficult aspects of the Turkish language stated by the students. In grammar, the usage of the suffixes was found problematic. Besides, the students (10 of them) stated that they did not have a feeling of hesitation or anxiety when speaking in Turkish, while the rest two reported the opposite. Moreover, to improve their language skills they used mass media resources, watching Turkish series and listening to the Turkish music. Some also read Turkish books like novels and stories, read newspapers and magazines or practice by speaking to improve their Turkish (ibid).

The result of a longitudinal study with first year Hong Kong University international undergraduate students shows that academic reading and writing are the most difficult academic linguistic skills; writing being the first (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Contrarily, listening was found to be the least challenging skill, while in speaking the students still did not feel themselves confident in terms of their English fluency and accuracy (ibid). Moreover, Lin & Scherz (2014) found that listening and speaking

were difficult for the graduate students. They felt kind of anxious or stupid to express themselves in the presence of the others due to the inadequacy of their speaking skills. Further, they had to spend a lot of time on reading and writing. They had to take a slower pace in reading to understand the content knowledge (ibid).

However, in another study according to the Rwandan postgraduate students at a South African university with the medium of English, reading and writing skills were thought to be easier compared to listening and speaking (Sobomana, 2016). Likewise, Gürel Cennetkuşu (2017) found that the majority of the international graduate students considered their writing skill in a satisfactory level, which was also confirmed by most of their instructors.

Sobomana's (2016) research reveals that even using the daily English was found difficult for the students. Then, how come they could possibly manage to deal with the academic English. Students often struggled with the language first before being able to understand the content knowledge. A participant of the study indicated that "his level of academic performance would be higher if he were using a language that he could understand better" (ibid, p. 129).

Hennebry et al (2012) report similar findings about the postgraduate students' language difficulties in UK. They report that the international students (52.9% of them) think they are "at a disadvantage on coming to study at a UK university" (p. 217). Some of them had problem with simultaneous thinking and speaking during seminars and lectures as was also reflected by the academic staff. It means that they needed some wait-time to prepare what they wanted to say in their mind first. Some also indicated that they had problems in reading and writing. Moreover, the problems were not only about the language. Most of the discussions topics were from the British context which did not have any relevance to the international students. In one sense those students were ignored (Hennebry et al, 2012).

1.1.1. Strategies Adapted to Overcome Linguistic Challenges

Some of the common strategies followed to overcome the language challenges are referring to the dictionaries (Sibomana, 2016; Gürel Cennetkuşu (2017), interacting with native speakers, "recording lessons and listening to recording later at home" (Sibomana, 2016, p. 127; Lin & Scherz, 2014). Besides, reading course literature in English and then translating the concepts from English to their former language of instruction, asking friends to edit their work, producing the written assignments first in their native language and then translating them in English... are amongst the other strategies used by students (Sibomana, 2016). Some other students referred to other sources to improve their language skills such as listening to radio programs, practicing, reading newspapers or magazines, taking lessons in the target language (Güçlü, 1996), "watching TV, self-talk in English, and spending time in the cafeteria talking with native speakers" (Lin & Scherz, 2014, p. 25).

Sibomana's (2016) study shows that besides referring to the dictionaries Rwandan postgraduate students used 'machine translation' to convert English texts into French to understand the content. According to one of their lecturers, the students were also influenced by their French background mostly as evidenced in their written works (ibid). According to Gürel Cennetkuşu's study (2017), some of the strategies recommended by the instructors to the students were extensive reading, "using spell-checks and manuals to edit mechanical mistakes...relying on the past experience in academic writing" (p. 318).

Similarly, Hennebry et al (2012) also found that postgraduate students would appreciate their native friends to do grammar check in their written works and review the correct use of the vocabulary. Another study by Gürel Cennetkuşu (2017) indicates that most of the international graduate students (81.82%) refer to their mother tongues in order to solve their writing problems. When they cannot find a specific word while writing, first they find it in their first language and then

in the target language. Besides, in academic writing they had to think in their mother tongue first and then write in the second language. 41.67% said the format of the existing articles help them a lot about how to write papers (ibid).

1.1.2. Support Provided by the Department or the Instructors:

Supports provided by the instructors or the department might help students to reduce tension as regards the language difficulties. Hennebry et al (2012) report that one of the lecturers used to have the presentation slides accessible to the students over the internet to read them before coming to the class. This way they could familiarize themselves with the technical words and expressions before attending the lectures. Moreover, the university and the department provided language support to the international postgraduate students; especially with academic style of writing. Besides, all the instructors reviewed the students' writings and did some language corrections (ibid). This finding was also supported by Gürel Cennetkuşu (2017). She reports that the instructors provided some short written or oral feedback to the students, which was not found enough. However, around half of the students (49.12%) found the given feedback useful, although they were too brief (ibid).

Furthermore, Sibomana (2016) reports that the postgraduate students received additional English course funded by the university, but it was found ineffective for methodological reasons and shortness of the program. When it comes to the instructors, some of them were approachable and supportive. They helped the student with the extension of the deadline of the assignments, encouraged and provided solutions to their problems as well as provided extra after-class elaboration about the content. However, some of the instructors were found to look down on Rwandan students and made fun of them in public saying they are not made for doing postgraduate education. Some of the students even received discouraging comments from their advisors. Only seven out of 22 of the participants of this study were able to graduate by the end, while the others did not make it (ibid).

A similar finding was also found by Güçlü (1996) in a study with 500 international graduate students from 90 different countries studying in an American university. She found that the American university lecturers were less supportive to the foreigner students. Moreover, despite the existence of university consultation centers for the students and the other foundations established to help international students, students were not provided any kind of support (ibid).

1.2. Importance of this study

Since Turkey is attracting large number of students from different countries, the quality of their education also needs to be focused. The quality of education might be compromised in case the students cannot use the language of instruction effectively. As discussed above, plenty of research exists regarding the language difficulties that the international students face in different levels of education. Most of the existing researches only focus on English as the medium of instruction. However, it seems that fewer researches have been done regarding the problems faced in education with Turkish language; particularly in postgraduate levels. Therefore, the current study was planned and conducted in order to have shed light on underlying factors causing such problems and how students with different language backgrounds are struggling to cope with their language difficulties.

1.3. Research questions

The following research questions were devised to serve the purpose of this research:

- 1) What challenges do the international postgraduate students face during their education in terms of language difficulties with the medium of Turkish?
- 2) What strategies do they use to overcome the challenges?
- 3) How do the current problems affect their learning in terms of content knowledge?

- 4) What are the possible solutions for the challenges related to language difficulty? What will be their expectations or suggestions?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative research approach was carried out using a semi-structured interview in this study for the deeper exploration of the language difficulties that the international postgraduate students face at Mersin University with the medium of Turkish. This method was opted for it enables the researchers to do detailed investigation of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). In another word, qualitative research approach facilitates “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This is of course made more possible through the data collection tool, semi-structured interview, which has been selected for this study. Semi-structured interview enables the researchers to collect qualitative data through asking pre-defined open questions, where they influence the interview session to keep the discussion go on topic (Given, 2008). The researcher can ask follow-up questions for more clarification and elaboration of the responses considering a “series of prompts and probes” (Cohen et al., 2007, p, 361)

2.2. Participants

The samples of this study were comprised of 15 international postgraduate students from different countries who were studying in different faculties at Mersin University, Turkey. All of them had taken around a nine month’s Turkish preparatory course before starting their postgraduate education in September 2017.

To serve the purpose of the current study, the samples were selected purposefully. This sampling technique provides the researchers the opportunity of collecting data from the individuals who have an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated and can provide genuine information (Creswell, 2012).

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process took place in November 2017 through a one-to-one semi-structured interview conducted in three different languages: English, Persian and Turkish. Before conducting the interviews, the views of the expert researchers were sought regarding the interview questions as well as two pilot interviews were conducted to increase the reliability and validity of the study. The interviews were carried out after bringing some changes in the interview questions in the light of the feedback received from the experts and the emergence of some ambiguities during the piloting. Further, during the interview some follow-up questions were asked to elicit more details about the issues brought up by the interviewees.

To ensure the ethical rules of the study, first of all the participants were informed about the purpose of the study promising their complete anonymity and confidentiality (Creswell, 2012). Besides, their voices were recorded receiving their own consent first for the later analysis. Then, all the recordings were transcribed and translated into English. As a matter of fact, recording the minutes of the interview sessions enables the researcher to carry out the coding, summarizing and quoting process in later stages of a research with the possibility of several referral when needed (Bell, 2005).

Moreover, the transcribed interview data was reciprocally and simultaneously coded with a colleague and then the codes were cross-checked to ensure the internal consistency according to Miles

and Huberman's recommended internal code consistency (Creswell, 2009). The codes were found to be consistent by 0.95, 0.91, 0.88, and 0.88 according to each research question respectively. Then the thematic content analysis of the refined data was carried out being presented in the tables accordingly. Major themes were derived from the interview questions which were devised according to the research questions of the study.

2.4. Limitation of the Study

Since the research was concentrated only in one specific region with few numbers of participants, the results may not be generalized. Besides, the shortage of existing materials having similitude with the purpose of the current research in Turkey was sensed. However, more researches are recommended to be carried out in this field in order to obtain more reliable results.

3. Results

The qualitative interview data of the current study was transcribed, coded, categorized and summarized in tables and the analysis were done accordingly. The total number of the participants who had pointed to the challenges featured in the tables are given and selective direct quotations are made as regards the most striking points referring to the participants as S1, S2, S3... S15.

3.1. Language Difficulties of the International Postgraduate Students

The result of the study indicates that the international postgraduate students experience different challenges with different features of the Turkish language as the medium of instruction. As seen in section 'A' of Table 1, writing was found to be the major problem of the students (n=13), which is followed by speaking and listening respectively. Most of the language difficulties experienced in linguistic skills were associated with their poor vocabulary (n=11).

Table 1: Language difficulties of the international postgraduate students

Theme	Sub-Themes & Codes	Number of Participants
Language Difficulties	A) Challenges in language skills & grammar	
	- Listening	10
	- Speaking	11
	- Reading	6
	- Writing	13
	- Grammatical Structures	6
	B) Other Challenges	
	- Pronunciation	4
	- Vocabulary	11
	- Insufficient materials in Turkish	1
	- Speech Rate (Fast Speaking)	8
	- Retention (shyness/hesitation)	8
- Turkish is different from other languages	3	

Moreover, students related the writing difficulties to different aspects of the language. The influence of already familiar languages, complex structure of Turkish language, poor vocabulary and poor reading skills are the indicative features of their writing problems. For instance, one of the PhD

students was concerned about being affected of the structure of the languages he already knew in terms of the way he wrote in Turkish. He explained this way: *“When the teachers ask us to write articles...we have a fear of being influenced in writing by our native language structure, which is Persian, or the English language structure”* (S2). In contrast, another student related the writing difficulty to his poor vocabulary and said *“I think writing is also very difficult because my vocabulary is not rich... it’s difficult for me to paraphrase the texts”* (S3). Moreover, another student said that *“If you cannot read automatically, writing will be very difficult”* (S10), while S8 stated *“I might know how to write the words, but then making a sentence with the correct grammatical expressions can be a problem”*.

Speaking comes second after writing in the difficult language skill category. Most of the students (n=11), found it difficult to express themselves, though they knew what to say. Sometimes what they said was not clearly understood by the native speakers in the class. S2 stated *“...our speaking skill is not in the level that we can make the teacher understand what we are trying to say”*. Another student contended that *“You know what is needed, but for you to explain yourself in a way they are going to understand you, it is a difficult challenge”* (S7). However, S12 stated: *“I find speaking more difficult because when I want to speak what goes in my mind, I cannot remember the right words to explain them”*.

The poor speaking skill of the students were also linked to the retention or sort of apprehension they had because of their inadequacy in using spoken Turkish. Some of them felt shy, hesitated and feared of making mistakes in the presence of their instructors and Turk classmates. As one student argued like this: *“I’m feeling shy even to ask some questions because I’m not at the same level as Turkish people in Turkish who learn Turkish since their childhood”* (S14). Such kind of language anxiety can also hinder students’ participation in the classroom discussions. S3 commented in this regard as *“I fear of making a lot of pauses and making mistakes. I just don’t want to appear stupid. I try to contribute to the discussions, but I find speaking in academic context very difficult”*.

Similarly, the fast speech rate of the lecturers made it difficult for the students (n=8) to understand them. According to one of the students *“if the teacher speaks too fast, I cannot get the main idea of what the teacher is trying to explain to us”* (S11). In general, students (n=10) found listening skill very difficult, which is also linked to the fast speech rate as one student commented *“at times listening you get to understand at times you don’t understand, especially [when the] lecturers are speaking very fast”* (S7).

However, reading was also found to be difficult, but for a smaller number of students (n=6). Compared to the other language skills, fewer problems were felt in reading. One of the students said *“reading is very difficult and if the reading is very difficult, it means that we cannot understand”* (S10). The students’ language utilization was also negatively affected to a smaller degree from structural perspective of Turkish language, like sentence structures from grammatical point of view like the use of suffixes (n=6), and the pronunciation of some special letters/sounds in this language. This structural difficulty of the Turkish language was thought to be sourced from language dissimilarities according to some students (n=3). This was well reflected in one of the students’ contentions who was well-versed in both English and French:

“Turkish language is really different than other language[s]. For example, when I have to take like French or English or Spanish, these are languages that belong to the same family which is not in the case of Turkish. Turkish is....a Middle Eastern language. So, it means that for example when you take Turkish academically or grammatically, it doesn’t have the same structure. When we speak Turkish, we have to put the verb at the end, but for example when we are speaking in English I have to put my verb in the middle to respect the grammar rules” (S14).

To sum up, the language difficulties were mostly felt in three language skills such as writing, speaking and listening respectively. However, the features in section ‘B’ of Table 1 were perceived to be the sources of the problems students have experienced; the poor vocabulary being on top list.

3.2. Strategies Used Against the Language Difficulties

The common strategies followed, or better to say the sources that international postgraduate students refer to decrease their linguistic challenges during their postgraduate education in different fields with the medium of Turkish, are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Strategies that the international postgraduate students follow to overcome their language challenges

Theme	Sub-Themes & Codes	Number of Participants
	Strategies followed to overcome the challenges	
Strategies	- Referring to the Dictionary	7
	- Referring to the Google Translate	12
	- Chat over the internet	2
	- Listening to the Turkish songs	3
	- Watching TV, Turkish movies or series	4
	- Reading (normally first in other languages)	10
	- Writing more	2
	- Practice speaking with Turk friends	6

As illuminated in Table 2, a handy tool which is most frequently used by the students to overcome their daily linguistic problems in their academic life is the Google Translate (n=12); although some of them found it misleading. As one of the students explained that “*sometimes the Google translation is misleading us. That’s why when we are presenting using the Turkish language, the people will not understand what we are saying*” (S10), while another student said “[*Google translate helps me*] too much because without Google translate how I’m going to handle it” (S14).

The second most frequently used strategy was reading a lot; normally first in other languages they already knew (n=10). Then they would try to study the same materials in Turkish language to boost up their understanding of the content knowledge as well as improve their Turkish. Some comments are quoted below regarding this strategy that students had stated:

“First I use English because the English books are available in the internet... then try to read as Turkish” (S13).

“First of all, I try to learn in my mother tongue to understand well, and then in English and Turkish... We do study in Turkish, but we get to understand only half of the content” (S2).

“I have to give myself more time when this comes to reading so that I can understand” (S7).

“I’m trying my most of the time to read the books. It’s like to force myself to read the Turkish books” (S10)

The other basic strategies as noted in the tables are referring to the dictionaries, multimedia, studying Turkish materials and some others which are referred to deal with the challenges they face in terms of the medium of instruction.

3.3. Supports Provided in Reducing the Language Difficulties

Almost all of the postgraduate students (n=14) stated that their instructors are kind and supportive to them, but the type of support they received was dispersed to some extent. Besides, some of them (n=7) stated that they receive support from their Turk classmates (for more details see Table 3).

When it was asked about the kind of supports that students received from the instructors, it was found that when they did not understand something they would get extra explanation of the lessons usually in English (n=8). Besides, they were recommended English references and some also were allowed to use English to do their assignments (n=6), which was welcomed to a great extent by the students (See section 1 in Table 3). For example, some of the students give explanation as in the following:

“Most of the time they are used to translate the Turkish books into English and sometimes they just help us by recommending us to read the English books instead of the Turkish books” (S10).

Table 3: The support sources of the international postgraduate students

Theme	Sub-Themes & Codes	Number of Participants
	Sources of Support	
Provided Supports	1) Instructors	14
	- Extra Explanation (in English)	8
	- Giving feedback	3
	- Encourage	2
	- Make sure students understand	2
	- Allow using English	6
	2) Classmates	7
	- Extra explanation	3
	- Help with the assignments or give feedback	3
- Help each in learning English & Turkish	2	

As seen in Table 3, the international postgraduate students received other types of supports to some extent like receiving feedback, being encouraged in their education, and making sure these students understand the subject knowledge. However, only seven of the students said they also received some minor supports from their Turk classmates, while the rest said they do not get any support from them. The supports were mostly felt within the classroom like receiving extra explanation about the lesson if possible in English, helping in how to do the assignments, and also mutually helping each other learn English or Turkish. One of them put this way: *“They [Turk classmates] explain how to do some of the tasks given and share their experiences, which I find quite useful” (S3).* In contrast, only one student showed dissatisfaction in this regard.

3.4. Impact of the Linguistic Challenges on the Content Knowledge

As presented in Table 4, majority of the students felt that understanding the content of their course literature is badly affected because of the problems they have in the language utilization.

Table 4: The impact of language difficulties over the content knowledge of the students

Theme	Sub-Themes & Codes	Number of Respondents
Content Knowledge	Language difficulties affect content knowledge	
	- Affects Negatively	12
	- Understanding	12
	- Lose a lot of time	4
	- Not affected	1

Table 4 above shows that students felt that they cannot understand the subject knowledge in different courses they get in Turkish as the language of instruction. Particularly when they attend the lectures, they find it difficult to understand the lecturers in that they touch upon the important aspects of the content knowledge. As a result, they might miss some of the important points being explained by the lecturers. One of the students added this way: *“The main content is related to the knowledge and the new scientific findings that we have to get from our instructors”* and added *“if we cannot understand the lecturers how we can understand the content knowledge the lecturers are trying to teach us about and as a result we cannot improve our content knowledge”*. Another student also found it difficult to understand teachers in the class, but when it came to developing his content knowledge from the course literature he could study similar materials in English. He explained that *“the literature is not the problem because at times you find 70 75% of the subject that you are doing... I will simply read it in English and I will understand what they were saying, what they needed”*.

Moreover, they had to spend longer time on reading the same material several times in Turkish and even in other languages to make sense of the contents. They also spent a lot of time on translating materials from Turkish to the languages they could understand. Apparently, doing so, they would improve both their language skills as well their content knowledge; though they have to spend a lot of time.

“Right now instead of learning new things about my department, chemical engineering, I just focusing on translating what they gave to me into a language that I can understand” (S15).

“Instead of studying engineering books we are busy with dictionaries and Google translation” (S12).

One more student even explained like this: *“These language difficulties hinder my learning and understanding when I want to read an article or something. I have to read again and again to understand”* (S4). In contrast, one of the students who said his content knowledge is not affected saying that his entire program is in English. That’s why he did not think if it badly affected his understanding of the content knowledge.

3.5. Suggestive Solutions and Expectations

As seen in Table 5, the solutions that the students have suggested is a reflection of the strategies they have followed or the supports they have received from their instructors or classmates. According to some of the students (n=6), it will be more helpful to let them if they could use English in all parts of their postgraduate education. Even some of them (n=4) also suggested if it is possible the language of instruction should be changed into English; especially for the international postgraduate students.

Table 5: The solutions suggested by the students for easing the language challenges

Theme	Sub-Themes & Codes	Number of Respondents
Solutions and Expectations	A. Suggested solutions for language difficulties	
	- English as the medium of instruction	4
	- Be allowed to use English	6
	- Work harder	5
	- Refer to an already familiar language	1
	- Ask friends for help	2
	B. Expectations of the students	
	- Lecturers can explain in English	1
	- Use simpler Turkish during lectures	1
	- Give English references	3
	- Give feedback	2
	- Take slower pace when speaking	1
- Design a specialized language course	3	

Moreover, according to the students (n=6) using English has a number of advantages. For example, there are plenty of updated materials available over the internet in that they can understand and improve their content knowledge in a reasonable way. As one student said even “*The Turkish itself has adapted concepts from English*” (S12). He also added that “*In some of the course I’m taking, my instructors recommend English references saying that we do not have any materials in this area or they are insufficient*”. Some selective comments regarding the solutions against the language difficulties are cited beneath.

“*One solution is that the teachers should let us use English sometimes beside Turkish... we spent most of our time on the Turkish language other than Turkish content knowledge*” (S2).

“*I think if it’s possible they should allow the international postgraduate students to do their assignments and examinations in English... Using English also help us to access the new research materials and books in every field of education.*” (S3).

In addition, some of the students (n=5) believed that it is better to work harder and try their best to develop their Turkish language skills by any means possible. They also suggested that solution should be sought in the Turkish language preparatory courses. According to S14 “*The only solution is to work hard and make it*” and he expected “*...if possible after the C1 after the Turkish preparatory course we have also to take some more Turkish*”.

In contradiction to some students (n=3) expecting a supplementary Turkish course, some others (n=3) expected instructors give English references. Contrarily, there were one or two students who wanted try their best to improve their Turkish language and improve to make it. In addition, they believed that not everyone in class may know English. One of the students argued like this: “*for example me, I’m good in English..., but you find there is one other person in your class who doesn’t understand English, but he can understand Turkish better*” and added that “*when to say let’s use another language other than Turkish that would be selfish because the Turkish language is the only thing that is bringing us all together*” (S7). Other expectations that individual students had are presented in Table 5.

4. Discussion

4.1. Language difficulties:

This study contributed to a number of important findings as regards the language difficulties that the international postgraduate students face during their postgraduate education with the medium of Turkish. Apparently, the difficulties that the students faced were rooted to some other underlying factors. For instance, generally the language utilization of the students in relation to the different linguistic skills was negatively affected by their poor vocabulary or understanding the uncommon terminologies.

Moreover, the fast speech rate of the instructors and the students' poor vocabulary had a combined negative impact on their listening and their learning thereafter. This finding is in line with the findings of existing research as discussed in the literature review section (Kaldırım and Degeç, 2017; Besel and Savaşan, 2017).

Considering the language skills, academic writing was found to be the most problematic area for the international postgraduate students. The sentence structures in Turkish language, unfamiliarity with the technical vocabulary in the field of their education and being influenced by the languages they already know made writing difficult for them. Here, it can be contended that the language differences and language dissimilarities might have negatively contributed to such problems. Learning languages belonging to the same family like English, German, and French for example might be much easier. In spite of differences these language belong to the same family sharing similarities. However, when it comes to Turkish, it is quite different according to some of the students who come from totally different language backgrounds than the Turkish language.

Further, the result of this study regarding writing problems of the students in Turkish language is supported by the findings of the previous researches. For instance, Kesten et al (2010) explored the language difficulties of the international postgraduate students studying in an education faculty of a Turkish university. They found that some of the students had difficulties in writing because of the grammatical structures, low level of vocabulary and some letters in Turkish alphabet. Similarly Okamura (2006) interviewed 13 Japanese researchers who used to write in English. It was found that the main challenge all of them had experienced in writing was poor vocabulary and the amount of time spent in the writing process (ibid).

Furthermore, the second major problem experienced by the students in language skills is speaking in the academic context. Self-disclosure in the presence of the native speakers often caused language anxiety and the students withheld of participating in the classroom discussions. They had a feeling of shy and hesitation and afraid of making mistakes. Even some of them were saying that they cannot remember the right word when they want to express themselves or take longer to utter a few sentences. This could be an example of how language anxiety affects the students' participation and their learning thereafter.

According to Chun et al (2017) such students are concerned of being judged by their language abilities in the classroom, which will negatively affect their learning as they found it in their study. However, when students feel confident in the language use and have higher self-efficacy, their academic success can also be higher (ibid). Confirming this point Kesten et al (2010) found that in terms of speaking the main problem student experienced was the language anxiety. They felt kind of shy because of their inadequacy in Turkish language in the presence of their instructors and classmates (ibid).

4.2. *Applied Strategies by the Students:*

To overcome the language difficulties the students in this study tried different strategies. Quite many of them referred to the translation tools like Google Translate. Although they believed it does not translate the right thing most of the time, they referred to it often. The second trick they used frequently was doing extensive reading or reading the literature related to the course contents normally first in English or other languages and then in Turkish. This finding is consistent with Sibomana (2016) research who found that students converted English texts into French using a translation tool to understand the course literature. The students also followed other different ways to improve their Turkish as discussed in the findings section of the current study.

Moreover, students would be at disadvantage in terms of understanding the content knowledge and their success in academic works unless they are good in the language of instruction (Civan & Coşkun, 2016). Confirming these points, this study revealed that the language difficulties negatively affected understanding the intended content knowledge of the international postgraduate students. It appears that the adaptation process to the Turkish language would not be easy like any other languages. This process might take longer time. In this case, the postgraduate students will be in a more disadvantaged position in developing their Turkish language skills while spending most of their time in attending lectures, assignments and research works. Since they will not be in the class most of the time and do a lot of self-study instead, they will not often interact with native speakers compared to the undergraduate students who have a chance of practicing their Turkish every day.

4.3. *Given Supports:*

In contradiction to some of the existing research findings (Sibomana, 2016; Güçlü, 1996), Turk instructors were found to be more supportive to the international postgraduate students in this study; except in one case. Having an understanding of the problems international students have, they tried to give explanation in English and some of them allowed the students to use English in their academic works in order to have made their life easier. Moreover, some students expected to be allowed to use English or if possible have English as a medium of instruction for the international students because they can have access to large amount of quality materials which exist in this language (Civan & Coşkun, 2016).

The dominating position of English language has globally influenced every aspects of global life than any other languages (Sawir, 2005). It is widely being used as a common lingua franca in different social, economical, political and educational status (ibid). It seems that many international students in this study want to take their courses in English, even those whose English is not in a satisfactory level. Some of them believed that English could be useful both in their current academic life and their after graduation career. In a sense, they are trying to be a part of the globalized world having direct contact with knowledge existing in this language.

5. **Conclusions**

To sum up, this study revealed that the international postgraduate students face many linguistic problems during their postgraduate education in Turkish as the medium of instruction. These problems were felt in all four linguistic skills being negatively affected in various degrees by different factors as discussed before. Most of findings show consistency with the existing literature in terms of the challenges related to the medium of instruction faced by the international students either in Turkish or English, while also rejecting some of them.

Since a growing number of international students are coming to Turkey in order to receive quality education in different levels and the language of instruction is mostly in Turkish, the language barriers need to be removed. The following points are suggested which could contribute in lowering the language difficulties of the international postgraduate students so that they could focus on improving their content knowledge other than their language skills.

- Improving the Turkish language orientation program by applying frequent quality check of the teaching and learning process
- Designing extra quality supplementary academic Turkish language courses delivered by the experienced and dedicated instructors
- Creating a friendly and welcoming learning atmosphere considering the student differences and their needs
- Apparently majority of the instructors know English, so the postgraduate students could be allowed to do their assignments and their readings in English as was evidenced in this study

Moreover, most of the researches done in this field are qualitative and the intended data are mostly collected through semi-structured interview with the limited number of participants. However, conducting quantitative research with larger number of samples might end up with different results; especially when the study focuses on each language skill in pre-defined details in the light of the existing literature. Besides, a longitudinal research is recommended to check if the language difficulties of the international postgraduate students persist over the entire phases of their postgraduate education.

References

- Bell, J. (2005). *Doing Your Research: A guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science (4 Ed)*. UK: Open University Press.
- Besel, F. and Savaşan, F (2017). Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Sosyo-Ekonomik Problemleri ve Çözüm Önerileri (Sakarya Üniversitesi Örneği). *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi*, 12(1), 203-254.
- Chun, S., Kim, H., Park, C. K., McDonald, K., Ha, O. S. & Kim, D. L. (2017). South Korea Students' Responses to English-Medium Instruction Courses. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 45(6), 951–966.
- Civan, A. & Coşkun, A. (2016). The effect of the medium of instruction language on the academic success of university students. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 16(6), 1981–2004.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education (6th Ed)*. London: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (3rd Ed)*. USA: SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research, (4th Ed)*. USA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Evans, S. & Morrison, B. (2011). The First Term at University: implications for EAP. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 387, 397.

- Given, L. M. (Ed). (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Method*. USA: SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Gök, T. (2008). Eğitim Yabancı Dille Mi, Ana Dille Mi?. *Milli Eğitim (178)*, 214-231.
- Güçlü, N. (1996). Yabancı Öğrencilerin Uyum Problemleri. *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 12: 101-110.
- Gürbüz, R. and Güleç, İ. (2016). Türkiye’de Eğitim Gören Yabancı Öğrencilerin Türkçeye İlişkin Görüşleri: Sakarya Üniversitesi Örneği. *Sakarya University Journal of Education*, 6(2), 141-153.
- Gürel Cennetkuşu, N. (2017). International students’ challenges in academic writing: A case study from a prominent U.S. university. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 309-323.
- Hazen, K. (2015). *An Introduction to Language*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Hennebry, M., Lo, Y. Y. & Macaro, E. (2012). Differing perspectives of non-native speaker students’ linguistic experiences on higher degree courses. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(2), 209-230.
- Jordan, A. et al. (2008). *Approaches to Learning: A Guide for Teachers*. UK: Open University Press.
- Kaldırım, A. and Degeç, H. (2017). Türkçeyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Dinleme Esnasında Karşılaştıkları Sorunlar. *Eğitim Bilimleri Araştırma Dergisi, Uluslararası E-Dergi*, 7(1), 19-36.
- Kesten, A., Kırkoğlu, K. & Elma, C. (2010). Language and Education Problems of International Students In Turkey. *Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 24, 65-84.
- Kırkoğlu, K., Kesten, A. & Elme, C. (2010). Türkiye’de Öğrenim Gören Yabancı Uyruklu Lisans Öğrencilerinin Sosyo-Kültürel ve Ekonomik Sorunları. *Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 6(2), 26-39.
- Lin, S. & Scherz, S. D. (2014). Challenges Facing Asian International Graduate Students in the US: Pedagogical Considerations in Higher Education. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 16-33.
- Okamura, A. (2006). How do Japanese researchers cope with language difficulties and succeed in scientific discourse in English?: interviews with Japanese research article writers. *The Economic Journal of Takasaki City University of Economics*, 48(3), 61-78.
- Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 2005, 6(5), 567-580.
- Şengül, K. (2014). Türkçenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretiminde Alfabe Sorunu. *Uluslararası Türkçe Edebiyat Kültür Eğitim Dergisi*, 3(1), 325-339.
- Sharkin, B. S. (2006). *College Students in Distress: A Resource Guide for Faculty, Staff, and Campus Community*. USA: The Haworth Press, Inc.
- Sibomana, E. (2016). We Know What to Say, We Know What to Write, But We Don’t Know How: The Challenges of Becoming Academically Literate in a New Linguistic and Socio-cultural Space. *Education as Change*, 20(2), 123-144.

Uluslararası lisansüstü öğrencilerin Türkçe diline ilişkin olarak eğitim sürecinde karşılaştıkları dil zorlukları

Özet

Eğitim ortamında öğrencilerin, öğretim diline ilişkin olarak yeterli dil becerilerine sahip olmaları beklenmektedir. Bu bakımdan öğretim dili, öğrenme ve öğretme sürecini doğrudan etkilemesi nedeniyle oldukça önemlidir. Özellikle yabancı bir dilde lisansüstü düzeyde öğrenim gören öğrencilerin dil yeterliliği, onların başarılarını ve akademik performanslarını eğitimleri süresince etkileyebilir. Bu durum, ilk kez öğrendikleri bir dil ile eğitimlerini tamamen farklı bir bağlamda sürdüren uluslararası öğrenciler için çok zor olabilmektedir. Alanyazında öğretim dili (çoğunlukla İngilizce) ile uluslararası lisansüstü öğrencilerin yaşadığı dil zorlukları üzerine yapılan çok sayıda araştırma bulunmaktadır. Bu araştırmalarda, dil kullanımındaki yetersizliğin öğrencilerin öğrenmelerini ve derslerin içeriğine ilişkin bilgileri anlamalarını olumsuz bir şekilde etkilediği belirtilmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, öğretim dili olarak Türkçe'nin tercih edildiği Türk üniversitelerinde öğrenim gören uluslararası lisansüstü öğrencilerinin Türkçe diline ilişkin olarak yaşadığı sorunları, bu sorunlara neden olan alt faktörleri, bu sorunların çözümünde öğrenciler tarafından uygulanan stratejileri, onların çözüm önerilerini, beklentilerini ve bu süreçte öğrencilere ne tür desteklerin sağlandığını belirlemektir. Araştırmanın çalışma grubu, Mersin Üniversitesinde farklı fakültelerde uluslararası lisansüstü eğitim gören 15 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Nitel araştırma yönteminin benimsendiği bu çalışmada veriler yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler vasıtası ile toplanmıştır. Araştırmanın sonuçlarına göre, Türkçe diline ilişkin olarak uluslararası lisansüstü öğrencilerinin yaşadığı en büyük dil sorununun yazma becerisi ile ilgili olduğu belirlenmiştir. Sonuçlarda öne çıkan diğer dil sorunlarının ise sırasıyla konuşma, dinleme ve okuma becerileri ile ilişkili olduğu anlaşılmıştır. Bununla birlikte öğrencilerin dil becerilerine ilişkin olarak karşılaştıkları sorunlar; zayıf sözcük dağarcığına sahip olmaları, öğretmenlerin hızlı konuşmaları, Türkçe dilinin farklı yapıda olması ve diğer benzer alt faktörlerle ilişkilendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: uluslararası lisansüstü öğrencileri; Öğretim dili olarak Türkçe; dil zorlukları

AUTHORS' BIODATA

Sayed Masood Haidari has accomplished his undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature, Faculty of Language and Literature, Balk University, Afghanistan. Then he continued his graduate education in the field of Educational Sciences at Karlstad University, Sweden and received his MA degree. Currently, he is doing his PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, Institute of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Education, Mersin University, Turkey. Moreover, he has worked as an English teacher, teacher educator and teacher trainer for more than seven years in Afghanistan. His research interests are in foreign language teaching and learning, teacher education and active learning.

Prof. Dr. Tuğba Yanpar Yelken has accomplished both her undergraduate and postgraduate education at Hacettepe University, Turkey. She has worked in a number of different positions; as a university professor in three different universities, head of department, vice-dean, Dean of Education Faculty at Mersin University and many more. Besides participating in various academic projects she has many publications in both national and international level. Currently, she is working as the head of Curriculum and Instruction Department at the Education Faculty of Mersin University, Turkey. In the meantime, she is also working as a member of Teacher Education Study Group and as a member of Higher Education Quality Board at Turkish Higher Education. Her research interests are in instructional technology, curriculum and instruction, life-long learning, teacher education, and higher education programs.