

Socio-cultural, psychological and academic problems of undergraduate Syrian students in Turkey

İshak Kozikoğlu and Mecit Aslan

Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Turkey

The aim of this study is to determine diverse problems of undergraduate Syrian students at Yüzüncü Yıl University, Turkey. The study was conducted with 82 students using both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. Descriptive statistics, t-test and descriptive analysis technique were used for data analysis. As a result of the study, it was found that Syrian students have problems in the four basic language skills; feel high levels (often) of homesickness; have good relations with their classmates and administrative staff, but some of them have serious problems with their instructors and with the local people.

Introduction

Developments in science and technology all around the world have ushered a globalisation era with increased social mobility and interactions between diverse countries, cultures and social groups. While this mobility is mostly voluntary, such as attending a university in a different country, attending a language course, etc., in some cases social mobility may happen involuntarily because of civil wars, natural disasters, unemployment, food shortage, etc. In both voluntary and involuntary case, adapting to new cultures and new social environments may be challenging for individuals (Duru & Balkıs, 2013). In 2011, parallel to the Arab Spring protests, the Syrian civil war or Syrian revolution began with nationwide protests. In just a little over three years, more than 3.2 million men, women and children fled out of the country in hopes of finding safety and protection from the violence in Syria. Neighbouring countries have taken on responsibilities for accepting Syrian refugees. Since October 2014, about 1.6 million Syrian refugees have been living in Turkey (Amnesty International, 2014). Syrian university students who came to Turkey due to the civil war have continued their undergraduate education in various universities in Turkey. One of these universities is Yüzüncü Yıl University, located in the east of Turkey. In Yüzüncü Yıl University there are 238 Syrian students including 214 undergraduate students, 16 vocational higher education students and 8 masters or PhD students.

Moving from one environment to another for academic purposes is widespread all around the world in recent years (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis & Sabatier, 2010). This increasing trend of international student exchange has drawn the attention of educators and researchers towards adaptation problems amongst international students. They face various difficulties in adjusting to a new social environment and adapting to cultural changes (Nasir, 2012). The literature contains many studies examining academic and socio-cultural adaptation by international students (Campbell, 2012; Glover, 2011; Özçetin, 2013; Yuan, 2010; Zhang, 2012). It is stated that the experience of being an international student causes various difficulties and challenges in addition to cultural and intellectual advantages (Brisset,

Safdar, Lewis & Sabatier, 2010). Foreign students may experience cultural shock, emotional, academic and social problems to some degree (Sharma, 1971), originating from various factors such as cultural diversity, language skills, discrimination and racism, financial or psychological or family support problems. (Özoğlu, Gür & Coşkun, 2012). As even voluntary students going to another country for academic purposes have such kinds of problems, it can be said that the case of Syrian students coming to Turkey due to civil war is more severe and serious.

In their literature review of international students' adaptation issues, Wenhua & Zhe (2013) categorised the challenges in five categories: personal psychological issues (homesickness, loneliness, stress, depression, frustration, anxiety, confusion, etc.), academic issues (academic progress and demands, lack of understanding of the educational system, difficulties in using educational support services such as library, academic counseling, etc.), socio-cultural issues (culture shock, prejudice, racial discrimination, difficulties in adjusting to new social/cultural customs, norms and regulations and participating in intercultural/social activities, etc.), general living issues (accommodation difficulties, financial problems, safety threats, etc.) and language proficiency (difficulties in communicating with native speakers, understanding lectures, writing essays, etc.). In this respect, the challenges faced by Syrian university students coming to Turkey due to the civil war can be problems encountered in their studying, problems in language skills (writing, listening, reading, speaking), and homesickness, financial, and adjustment problems.

Foreign student mobility in Turkey or in the world causes many socio-cultural and economic problems apart from language and academic problems (Kıroğlu, Kesten & Elma, 2010). For the students coming from different countries for higher education, a different education system, living in a different culture, inability to speak the local language fluently, and financial problems hinder adaptation to their new environment and university and impedes their academic achievement. It is not easy for foreign university students to adapt quickly to conditions in Turkey (Özçetin, 2013). Adaptation to the new environment is very important for foreign students' engagement in the learning process. It is of great importance to be aware of the factors that influence their adaptation, in order to improve their adjustment to the new environment (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013).

Apart from academic, socio-cultural and financial problems, one of the important challenges of foreign students is psychological issues. Homesickness may be a crucial phenomenon. In the literature, there are various definitions, but homesickness may be defined as a disturbing emotional experience including missing and frequently thinking about home and friends, feeling lonely, and experiencing adaptation problems. The state of homesickness is generally caused by separation from home, family, and familiar people and environment. A high level of homesickness hinders students' academic progress and causes adaptation/adjustment problems (Duru & Balkıs, 2013). So, there is a need for investigating homesickness levels amongst foreign students, as an important factor affecting their susceptibility to difficulties in both their academic and social environments.

The purpose and importance of the study

Being a university student in a foreign country undoubtedly makes the individuals face many challenges. The aim of this study is to determine socio-cultural, psychological and academic problems of undergraduate Syrian students having undergraduate education at Yüzüncü Yıl University in Turkey. In this respect, socio-cultural, psychological and academic issues have been examined in accordance with the issues such as problems encountered in learning and outside the learning environment, problems in language skills (writing, listening, reading, speaking), homesickness and adjustment problems, etc.

There are similar studies in the literature on foreign students. Concerning recent studies abroad, Zhai (2002) studied social support and adjustment issues of international students; Galloway and Jenkins (2009) analysed the adjustment problems faced by international students in the United States; Brisset, Safdar, Lewis and Sabatier (2010) investigated psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of university students in France; Juntarciego, Maderazo, Malipero and Masalunga (2014) analysed academic experiences of undergraduate international students at the University of Santo Tomas, Philippines; Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015) analysed international students' challenges and adjustment to the college.

Concerning recent studies in Turkey, Derman (2002) examined the problems of foreign students in learning Turkish; Özçetin (2013) analysed the factors that affect foreign university students social adaptation; Apaydın-Şen (2008) determined the opinions of foreign students attending Turkish universities about their communication experiences in educational settings; Kıröğlü, Kesten and Elma (2010) researched problems facing undergraduate international students in Turkey under headings such as human relations, financial problems, housing, homesickness, food, clothing, and custom; Aktaş, Aksu, Gökmen, Kurt and Ekici (2012) studied the problems of Central Asian students studying in Turkey; and Yiğit (2012) examined psychological needs of university foreign students studying in Konya in terms of some variables.

Based on these studies, it can be said that adaptation/adjustment problems, communication experiences (language), challenges, socio-cultural, psychological and financial problems of international students were analysed in most of the studies. But it is seen that most of the studies were conducted with voluntary international students rather than involuntary students who were forced abroad by civil war, natural disasters, unemployment, food shortages, etc. So, there is a need for the studies concerning socio-cultural, psychological and academic problems of involuntary international students.

This study has importance in terms of determining challenges, problems, needs and expectations of Syrian university students in their education and social life, and developing solutions. The determination of these issues and the provision of solutions require the authorities to have an awareness of this situation, and to ensure that all the necessary measures are taken to overcome these problems.

Method

Research design

Mixed research method was used in this study aiming to determine socio-cultural, psychological and academic problems of undergraduate Syrian students having undergraduate education at Yüzüncü Yıl University/Turkey. The research design of the study is *explanatory mixed methods design*. In this research design, quantitative data is collected and then qualitative data is collected to explain quantitative data (Creswell, 2005). In this study, firstly, a scale and a survey were used to collect quantitative data and then a focus group interview was conducted to explain the quantitative data.

Study group

The participants of this study were involved in two stages named as the quantitative and qualitative stages. In the first stage (quantitative data collection), the study group consists of 82 Syrian students in Van Yüzüncü Yıl University. As one of the purposive sampling methods, a maximum variation sampling method was used in order to obtain the group for this study. In a maximum variation sampling method, different homogeneous groups are identified in the population in accordance with the aim of the research (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012; Patton, 2002). In this study, variation was ensured by taking Syrian students' faculty and gender into consideration. Of the 82 Syrian undergraduate students selected, 38 (46%) were female, 44 (54%) male; the age of the participants ranged from 18 to 25; 35 (43%) were preparatory class students, 11 (13%) were first year level and 36 (44%) were second year level students from various faculties such as Faculty of Education (17; 21%), Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (17; 21%), Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (16; 20%), Faculty of Science (11; 13%), Faculty of Letters (6; 7%), Faculty of Dentistry (3; 4%), Faculty of Divinity (3; 4%), School of Health Sciences (3; 4%), Faculty of Agriculture (2; 2%), Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (2; 2%), Faculty of Medicine (2; 2%). Two of the students lived with their families, two stayed in private houses and 78 of them stayed in a dormitory; nine came to Turkey in 2011, 41 in 2012, 17 in 2013 and 13 in 2014; and 19 students' families live in Syria and 63 students' families live in refugee camps in Turkey.

In the second stage (qualitative data collection) of the study, a focus group interview was conducted with eight of the 82 Syrian undergraduate students. One of the purposive sampling methods, criteria sampling, was used in selecting eight students. In a criteria sampling method, the criterion for the sample is determined and the units (individual, object, event, etc.) that meet the criterion are sampled (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012; Patton, 2002). In this study, criteria were determined as the students who are volunteers and can speak Turkish at good level, then the students who meet these criteria were included in the study group. Of the eight Syrian undergraduate students, four were female, four of were male; four were at first year level and the other four students were at second year level from various faculties such as Faculty of Education (2), Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (2), School of Health Sciences (2), Faculty of Agriculture (1) and Faculty of Letters (1); one of them came to Turkey in 2011, six 2012 and one in 2013; and the families of all eight live in Turkey.

Data collection tools

Both quantitative (a scale and a survey) and qualitative (focus group interview) data collection tools were used in this study. The *Utrecht Homesickness Scale* developed by Stroebe et al. (2002) and adapted to Turkish culture by Duru & Balkıs (2013) was used as the first quantitative data collection tool. The scale consists of five sub-dimensions (missing families, loneliness, missing friends, adjustment difficulties, and memories about home) and 18 items. Each item is scored with a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from “never=1” to “always=5”. Five sub-dimensions explained 73.25% of the total variance and the Cronbach reliability coefficient of the total scale, .90 according to Duru and Balkıs (2013), was found as .89 in this study, which shows that the scale is a valid and reliable data collection tool.

A survey developed by the researchers was used as the second quantitative data collection tool. The main purpose was to determine the views of the students about their educational process. First of all, literature was reviewed in detail and opinion statements concerning the education of Syrian students were written. Then, three experts' opinions were taken for the item pool and item statements were revised accordingly. Finally, the survey included 21 items scored with a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from “strongly disagree=1” to “strongly agree=5”. The reliability coefficient of the survey was found as .87 in this study, indicating that the survey is a valid and reliable data collection tool.

A focus group interview form developed by the researchers was used to collect qualitative data. Focus group interviews are based on the principle of interaction among group members. The researchers have a facilitating or moderating role in this process such as determining rules, asking questions, and managing time and process (Glesne, 2012). In the development of this focus group interview form, literature was reviewed in detail and four questions were prepared in order to determine problems faced by Syrian students concerning use of language skills, homesickness, relationships in the university and

relationships in social life. Then, three experts' opinions were taken, the draft form was examined by two Syrian students and the questions were revised accordingly. The final form of the focus group interview was conducted with eight Syrian students and it took approximately 90 minutes. The Turkish language was used for administering the survey, scale and focus group interview.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed with the *SPSS* program. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.) and independent samples t-test were used in the analysis of quantitative data. A descriptive analysis technique was used in the analysis of qualitative data. Descriptive analysis consists of four stages: forming thematic framework for descriptive analysis, the processing of the data by themes, the identification and interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, in descriptive analysis, the data may be presented considering the questions or dimensions in the interview process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). In this study, these stages were followed in the analysis of qualitative data. The themes were determined in accordance with interview questions, then the data were identified and interpreted based on themes. In addition, the findings were supported with direct quotations in order to clearly reflect Syrian students' opinions.

In this study, in order to enable internal reliability (consistency), the qualitative data were analysed by two researchers and the consistency between two raters was examined. The numbers of agreements and disagreements were calculated by comparing the themes and codes of two raters using the formula proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994), namely "Reliability = number of agreements/total number of agreements + number of disagreements." The consistency between two raters was found to be 92%, showing that the codes and themes are sufficiently reliable. Sample codes and themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample codes and themes

Student views	Themes	Codes
I'm having the most trouble in writing, because I did not get a language course.	Language skills	Writing
My classmates are very helpful to me. That's why I'm staying at this college.	Relationships in the university	Relations with classmates
The people outside think we need money because we are Syrian. But we say we need mercy, not money.	Relationships in social life	Relations with larger society
I left my family for the first time. It is hard. I have not seen my mother for three years. I miss that relationship.	Homesickness	Missing family

For qualitative studies, internal validity is related to the credibility of the results, whereas external validity is related to the transferability of the results to other situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the integrity and consistency of the results were constantly revised by the researchers and the findings were supported by direct quotations in order to ensure internal validity (credibility). Furthermore, all processes concerning data

collection tools, data collection and analysis were described in detail in order to enable external validity (transferability).

Results

According to the results obtained from the survey and focus group interview conducted with Syrian students, the students' opinions were grouped under three themes that are academic, psychological and socio-cultural problems. Students' opinions concerning determined themes are explained below.

Academic problems

In order to determine the views of Syrian students about their educational process, a survey was conducted; the mean and standard deviation values of the items in the survey about Syrian students' education process are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the items in the survey (N=82)

Items	Mean	SD
1. I have difficulty in understanding instructors during the course.	2.89	1.20
2. I have difficulty in expressing myself in classroom activities.	2.92	1.22
3. I have difficulty in doing homework.	2.87	1.24
4. I have difficulty in understanding the books/resources we use in lessons.	3.15	1.19
5. I have difficulty in writing what I think.	2.98	1.39
6. My classmates help me in the classroom.	3.21	1.51
7. I have difficulty in adapting to the classroom.	2.52	1.27
8. Instructors support my classroom learning.	3.19	1.32
9. I have difficulty in finding an environment to study in the faculty.	2.59	1.49
10. Administrators help me to solve my problems.	3.01	1.31
11. Instructors provide the necessary support outside the classroom.	2.78	1.22
12. Officers in the university help me to solve my problems.	2.71	1.39
13. My classmates help me to do my homework.	2.92	1.42
14. My friends from Turkey help me when I have a problem outside.	3.09	1.39
15. Enough financial support is provided for my education.	3.70	1.55
16. I think the education which I take is useful.	3.52	1.24
17. The people outside the university help me.	2.86	1.38
18. I have difficulty in participating in socio-cultural activities at university.	2.93	1.49
19. I receive enough support to learn Turkish.	2.41	1.27
20. I have difficulty in obtaining enough books/resources to learn Turkish.	2.58	1.53
21. I enjoy learning Turkish.	3.35	1.52

Scale: strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5

As seen in the Table 2, the means of items about Syrian students' education vary between 2.41 and 3.70. The items having the highest means are "Enough financial support is provided for my education" and "I think the education which I take is useful". The means of these items are at "strongly agree" level. On the other hand, the items having the lowest means are "I receive enough support to learn Turkish", "I have difficulty in adapting the classroom", "I have difficulty in obtaining enough book/resource to learn Turkish" and "I have difficulty in finding environment to study in the faculty". The means of these items are at "strongly disagree" level. The means of all other items are at "moderately agree" level. Similarly, in the focus group interview, Syrian students stated that they have difficulty in language skills and adaptation to the classroom environment to some extent.

In the focus group interview, Syrian students stated that they had problems in four basic language skills. Concerning reading skills, they stated that they have difficulty in understanding what they read and have to read many times to understand. In addition, some participants pointed out that they translated Turkish texts into Arabic first and tried to understand them in this way. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

I am having problems with language skills only in reading. I read the sentence once, but I can understand it only when I read it three or four times. (S1)

I have problems in reading and writing. For example, we had history exam. Our friends are reading once. I read a sentence several times or translate it into Arabic. I try to understand and translate it back to Turkish. (S4)

We are trying to understand by reading. Sometimes we translate into Arabic. We memorise what we read. In classical exams, we write what we memorise. (S6)

Concerning writing skills, they stated that they have problems in taking notes during lessons and have a lot of problems in writing what they think. Furthermore, concerning listening skills, they stated that they are having problems in understanding the spoken words because of the fact that sometimes they do not know the words or the instructors sometimes talk too quickly. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

I am having the most trouble in writing, because I did not get a language course.(S2)

My problem is talking and listening. Sometimes I do not understand very well what is talked on some subjects. (S3)

I cannot keep up with what the instructors say. I want the notes later from my friends. (S8)

Concerning speaking skills, participants expressed that they are good at speaking in general, but some of them are having problems in expressing themselves verbally concerning academic language. Participants stated that the problems they have experienced with language negatively affect them, especially during exams. Apart from pointing out that they have important tasks in solving the problems they have with the language, they stated that the instructors should speak more slowly in the lessons and give some additional time in the examinations. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

Some of the instructors speak fast. We are having trouble understanding them, we cannot write their conversation. If the teacher teaches the lesson slowly, we will have no problems. I also think that if given more time on the exam, it will be better. (S1)

We know Turkish well but we cannot express ourselves in academic language. It is easy to speak in everyday life, but when it comes to academy, it is a problem. ... As for the exams, we want additional time from the instructors, but they do not. (S7)

When the opinions of the Syrian students about the teaching staff, classmates and administrative staff are examined, it is seen that they have especially good relations with their classmates and administrative staff. Participants indicated that their classmates help them, especially in academic matters. Furthermore, they stated that they didn't experience any problems with the administrative staff and received the necessary help whenever they needed. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

My classmates are very helpful to me. That's why I'm staying at this college. (S2)

Some of our friends are the only Syrians in their class, so our Turkish friends are helping them. In our class we are 10 Syrian students. We spend time together. My Turkish friends are helping us when we ask for something. I can say the administrative staff is very good. We are very well treated and able to work together when we need. (S7)

However, one of the participants stated that her classmates underestimate her for being Syrian as follows "I am not good at my classmates. They say 'You are Syrian, be yourself!'" (S4). Concerning the instructors, some participants stated that they developed very good relationships with their instructors, while some of them stated that they have serious problems. The students having problems stated that they have problems especially in academic matters, they want the instructors to help them and give them homework for passing the lessons. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

Our instructors are very good and very helpful. I did not have any trouble. (S3)

We do not have any troubles with friends, but we are having trouble with the instructors. We all Syrians in the classroom have the same problem. For example, one of our instructors said, 'You cannot pass my two courses for four years.' This affects our psychology negatively. (S6)

Our expectation from the instructors is to help us, because we have problems during the exams, they can give us homework so that we can pass the lessons. (S8)

Psychological problems

In order to determine Syrian students' homesickness level, a survey using the *Utrecht Homesickness Scale* was conducted. Means and standard deviation values concerning its sub-dimensions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean and standard deviations of Utrecht Homesickness Scale (N=82)

Scale and sub-dimensions	Mean	SD
Missing family	4.25	1.03
Loneliness	2.72	.92
Missing friends	3.60	1.09
Adjustment difficulties	2.82	1.16
Memories about home	3.67	1.12
Total scale	3.44	.79

As seen in the Table 3, Syrian students experience "homesickness" at "often" level (mean=3.44). Considering the sub-dimensions of the scale, they experience the phenomenon of "missing family" at "always" level (mean=4.25); "missing friends" and "memories about home" at "often" level (mean =3.60; mean=3.67); "loneliness" and "adjustment difficulties" at "sometimes" level (mean =2.72; mean=2.82). Similarly, in focus group interviewing, Syrian students stated that they miss their family and native country.

When the views of Syrian students on their missing their families and native country are examined, it seems that they miss their families and native country. Most of the participants stated that they often had opportunities to meet their families because they stayed in the camps in Turkey. Nevertheless, they stated that they missed them, wanted to remove them from the camp environment and wanted to live a family life again. On the other hand, they often expressed that they miss their native country more and worry about their country. Participants stated that the conditions they are in are mandatory and they want to contribute to their families and to the reconstruction of their country through the education they receive. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

I miss my country. This makes me stronger, because I have knowledge, diploma. I'll try to get back there. (S2)

Of course I miss my family. I miss my country more. I have to stay away from my family. I learn in order to rebuild my country. (S3)

I left my family for the first time. It is hard. A friend's family is here. She invited friends from last semester to dinner. The girl and her mother were cooking together. I have not seen my mother for three years. I miss that relationship. (S4)

In order to determine whether Syrian students' feelings of homesickness change according to gender, independent samples t-test was used and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test results for Utrecht Homesickness Scale in terms of gender

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Total scale	Female	38	3.71	.70	3.07	80	.003
	Male	44	3.20	.80			
Missing family	Female	38	4.61	.61	3.29	80	.002
	Male	44	3.93	1.21			
Loneliness	Female	38	2.87	.94	1.36	80	.177
	Male	44	2.59	.90			
Missing Friends	Female	38	3.89	.96	2.25	80	.027
	Male	44	3.36	1.14			
Adjustment difficulties	Female	38	3.16	1.17	2.53	80	.013
	Male	44	2.53	1.08			
Memories about home	Female	38	3.85	.92	1.45	80	.151
	Male	44	3.50	1.26			

As seen in the Table 4, there is a significant difference between males and females' mean values in favour of female students in the total scale of "homesickness" and its sub-dimensions that are "missing family, missing friends" and "adjustment difficulties" ($p < .05$). On the other hand, there is no significant difference between males and females' mean values in sub-dimensions of "loneliness" and "memories about home" dimensions ($p > .05$).

Socio-cultural problems

In the focus group interview, Syrian students were asked about their relationships with the local people. When the opinions of the Syrian students about the local people were examined, some participants stated that they do not have any problem with the society and are satisfied with them, while other students stated that they have some problems. Some of the participants' views are as follows:

I did not have any problems with the larger society, they are very helpful. (S1)

The people outside think we need money because we are Syrian. But we say we need mercy, not money. Some of them say 'What are you doing here? Go away from here.' Sometimes we play games, they say 'You have a war. Why are you playing? Go and fight.' However, some are helpful and understanding. (S2)

Some people look at us as needy, this is humiliating. (S3)

We are faced with underestimation because of being Syrian. One day on the bus, a woman said her daughter, 'Look, these are Syrian' and said to me 'Do not speak Arabic. You will make our country Arabic. For you, bread is free, water is free, school is free. If I were you, I would find a husband and stay here.' I was shocked.
(S4)

As stated above, some of Syrian students described the local people as helpful. However, participants having problems described these as people seeing them as needy, encountering contemptuous situations, confronting some disturbing questions and accusations when they say they are Syrian.

Discussion

In this study, it was found that Syrian students think that enough financial support is provided for their education and they find their education as useful. They think that they do not have difficulty in obtaining enough books/resources to learn Turkish or finding an environment to study in the faculty, but they think that they do not receive enough support to learn Turkish. Their thoughts concerning the need for support in learning Turkish may be a result of their having difficulties in Turkish language skills, because in focus group interview Syrian students stated that they have problems in the four basic language skills.

Concerning reading skills, it was found that they have difficulty in understanding what they read and have to read text material many times to understand or they translate Turkish texts into Arabic first and try to understand them in this way. Similarly, in the survey, they agreed with the statement "I have difficulty in understanding the books/resources we use in lessons." Concerning writing skills, they have problems in taking notes during lesson and have a lot of problems in writing what they think. In the survey, they agreed with the statement, "I have difficulty in writing what I think." Concerning listening skills, it was found that they have difficulty in understanding the spoken words because sometimes they do not know the words, or the instructors sometimes talk too quickly. Similarly, in the survey, they agreed moderately with the statement, "I have difficulty in understanding instructors during the course." Concerning speaking skills, it was found that some of them have difficulty in expressing themselves verbally concerning academic language. Similarly, in the survey, they agreed moderately with the statement "I have difficulty in expressing myself in classroom activities." These results are consistent with the results of similar studies (Apaydın-Şen, 2008; Hamisa, 2017; Hammada, 2014; Özçetin, 2013) in the literature.

For example, the study conducted by Apaydın-Şen (2008) found that international students mostly had difficulty in attending class discussions, and in the study by Özçetin (2013), one of the most challenging issues for the students was speaking in Turkish. Similarly, the study by Hamisa (2017), examining the challenges faced by Syrian students in acquiring Turkish, found that most students had difficulties in the acquisition of

Turkish language. Hammada (2014) reported that higher education Syrian students had difficulties studying in Turkish colleges due to insufficient Turkish language proficiency. Language is considered as one of the most disturbing problems confronted by Syrian students and they have difficulties due to language barriers (Turkish Medical Association Publications, 2016). In brief, it can be concluded that Syrian students have certain difficulties both in receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills concerning Turkish language. The importance of language skills across national and linguistic boundaries is clear. Language proficiency helps to attainment of a safer and interactive classroom environment. Furthermore, it can support the development of basic life skills and facilitate to meet psycho-social needs (British Council, 2016). As language is a fundamental element for interacting with other cultures in culturally or linguistically diverse settings, it can be concluded that there is a need for comprehensive language programs in which Syrian students can use Turkish language in both written and communicative ways, and develop reading comprehension and listening skills, especially for academic matters.

In this study, it was concluded that Syrian students feel high level (often) of homesickness. They often miss their family, friends and home. Furthermore, they sometimes feel loneliness and experience adjustment difficulties. Similarly, in the focus group interview, they stated that they missed their families, wanted to live with their family again, and miss and worry about their country. Although the study by Apaydın-Şen (2008) found that international students did not feel loneliness or isolation, other studies (Kaçmazoğlu & Şeker, 1998; Kiroğlu, Kesten & Elma, 2010; Rajapaska & Dundes, 2002) are in accord with our study, finding that international students feel homesickness, missing their family, country and friends to a great extent. Moving to an unfamiliar environment causes some challenges and difficulties apart from cultural enrichment (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis & Sabatier, 2010). One of these challenges is homesickness, identified in the literature as one of the most common challenges faced by international students (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). Similarly, the study by Ying and Liese (1994) found that homesickness is the most important predictor of adjustment difficulties. Homesickness is a mood that can happen to anyone, anywhere at any time, so it is naturally possible for foreign students to feel homesickness (Kiroğlu, Kesten & Elma, 2010). As with other international students, it can be said that Syrian students often suffer high levels of homesickness. As Syrian students are involuntary students who came Turkey because of civil war, it is not unexpected for them to feel homesickness for their families, friends and their native country.

Our findings indicate that female students feel homesickness more than male students. In other words, female students miss their family, friends, native country and they experience adjustment difficulties more than male students. Similarly, the study by Güçlü (1996), investigating the adjustment problems of foreign graduate students attending Pittsburgh University, found that female students experienced significantly more adjustment problems than males. Parallel to the results of this study, it was found that female students feel homesickness more than male students in similar studies (Arefi, 2016; Sun, 2015; Stroebe et al, 2002). Perhaps female students are more emotional and sensitive to incurring homesickness and adjustment difficulties, compared with male students.

The focus group interview showed that Syrian students have good relations with their classmates and administrative staff, stating that they received the necessary help from their classmates and administrative staff whenever they needed. Similarly, in the survey, they agreed moderately with the statements "My classmates help me in the classroom"; "My classmates help me to do my homework"; "Administrators help me to solve my problems"; "Officers in the university help me to solve my problems". Similarly, in the study by Özçetin (2013) found that most of the foreign students in Turkey don't have problems about relationships. Ergin (2016) investigated Turkish university students' perceptions towards Syrian classmates and found that Turkish students supported their Syrian classmates' participation in their classes. One of the reasons for foreign students not suffering isolation or prejudice is establishment of good friendship relations (Kıroğlu, Kesten & Elma, 2010). It can be concluded that as Syrian students have good relations with their classmates and administrative staff, they do not have serious problems with them and get support when needed. The focus group interview showed that some of them have good relations with their instructors, while some of them have serious problems especially in academic matters.

In the survey, they agreed moderately with the statements "Instructors support my classroom learning" and "Instructors provide the necessary support outside the classroom". In addition, it was found that they want the instructors to help them, give them homework to assist in passing the lessons, speak more slowly in the lesson, and give some additional time in the examinations. Syrian students need help and understanding from instructors, they expect some positive discrimination for being Syrian, such as giving homework as an alternative to exams, speaking more slowly and giving additional time in the exams; but some of them have difficulty in their interactions with their instructors and getting help that they need. Therefore, as the British Council (2016) suggested, there is a need for instructor training on how to manage instruction and provide for student participation in classes where for some their native language is not Turkish.

The focus group interview also indicated that some Syrian students have good relations with the local people, while others have serious problems, such as people seeing them as needy, encountering contemptuous situations, and confronting some disturbing questions and accusations when they say they are Syrian. In the survey, they agreed moderately with the statement "The people outside the university help me". It can be concluded that some Syrian students exposed to some racist discourses and behaviours. One of the serious problems that Syrian refugees may face is discrimination. Among local people, they may be perceived as a threat in economic, political and cultural terms (Turkish Medical Association Publications, 2016). In this case, Syrian students' social ties with local people weaken for being seen as an existential threat (Tan, 2015). Therefore, Syrian students' being exposed to some racist discourses and behaviors could happen due to local people's concerns or prejudice towards Syrian students. In addition, it is concluded that some Syrian students feel exposed to other people's pity for being Syrian, but they do not want pity from others, rather they want their support and help.

Conclusions

Based on observations of academic problems of undergraduate Syrian students in Turkey, we conclude that although there is a proper learning environment, and the necessary resources for learning Turkish are available, they need additional support in order to better develop language skills in Turkish. They have difficulty in reading comprehension skills and in writing skills, because of inability to write the thoughts in their minds. Furthermore, they have difficulties in listening skills, especially understanding what they hear in Turkish academic language. We conclude that Syrian students have difficulty in expressing themselves both verbally and in written language, especially for Turkish academic language. Furthermore, it is concluded that although they have good relations with their classmates and administrative staff, they need help and understanding from instructors as some of them encounter difficulties in comprehending the instructors' speech, and they have difficulties in their interactions with instructors and getting the help that they need.

From observing psychological problems of undergraduate Syrian students in Turkey, it is concluded that they feel high levels of homesickness and experience adjustment difficulties. Female students feel homesickness and experience adjustment difficulties more than male students.

Based on observations of socio-cultural problems of undergraduate Syrian students in Turkey, some have serious problems in relations with the local people, as they exposed to some racist discourses and behaviours.

In accordance with the results obtained from this research, some suggestions are presented as follows:

1. Projects should be developed aimed at supporting the integration of Syrian students into the Turkish education system and society.
2. Qualified language education programs should be prepared by conducting needs assessment for the development of Turkish teaching programs for Syrians.
3. In-service training programs should be prepared for instructors on how to manage instruction and provide student participation in classes where their native language is not Turkish.

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Dr İshak Kozikoğlu (corresponding author) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Sciences, Division of Curriculum and Instruction, at Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Turkey. His current research interests are curriculum studies, instructional issues, teacher education, cultural issues and teacher professional development.

Email: ishakkozikoglu@hotmail.com

Dr Mecit Aslan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Sciences, Division of Curriculum and Instruction, at Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Turkey. His current research interests are curriculum studies, curriculum development, curriculum evaluation, multicultural education, cultural issues and authentic learning.

Email: maslan4773@gmail.com

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