

UNVEILING THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS AND IDENTITY  
NARRATIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES  
IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION AMIDST CRISIS

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NARRATIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF SYRIAN  
REFUGEES IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION AMIDST CRISIS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **UNVEILING THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS AND IDENTITY NARRATIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION AMIDST CRISIS**

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This doctoral dissertation investigates how Syrian refugee students perceive and navigate the complex interplay between their war experiences, forced migration, intersectional identities, and educational adaptation and integration processes in a host country. Through individual and focus group interviews, journals, and related artefacts, this ethnographic case study examines how the learning trajectories of five Syrian refugee students are shaped by their initial educational experiences through higher education. It also examines how they narrate their learner identity while learning English in the preparatory school, the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online education, and their experiences of studying at an EMI university in an EFL setting. A reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed the diversity and intricacy of particular refugee experiences within this specific context of a state university in central Türkiye. First, it was found that the war and forced migration experiences of participants affected their adjustment and integration process and initial educational experiences. They had varying experiences and struggles transitioning to Turkish schools and higher education from preparation

to admission to the programs. Additionally, the findings highlighted the English language learning experiences of participants in preparatory school within the EFL context. Moreover, the analysis of the participants' narratives related to the COVID-19 pandemic period and the transition to online education revealed major influences on participants' educational processes and how they navigated challenges and changing circumstances. Finally, this study identified the challenges faced and coping strategies developed by refugee students on their way to resilience. The study concludes with implications of this study to enhance the higher education experiences of refugee students in similar contexts.

**Keywords:** Refugees Education, English Medium Instruction, Covid-19 Pandemic, Online Education, Preparatory School, English Language Teaching, Higher Education

## ÖZ

### EĞİTSEL YOLLARIN VE KİMLİK ANLATILARININ İZİNDE: KRİZ ORTASINDA TÜRK YÜKSEKÖĞRETİMİNDEKİ SURİYELİ MÜLTECİLERLE İLGİLİ BİR ETNOGRAFİK DURUM ÇALIŞMASI

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Bu doktora tezi, Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin savaş deneyimleri, zorunlu göç, kesişimsel kimlikler ve eğitimsel uyum ve entegrasyon süreçlerinin karmaşık etkileşimini nasıl algıladıklarını ve yönettiklerini araştırmaktadır. Bireysel ve odak grup görüşmeleri, günlükler ve ilgili eserler aracılığıyla bu etnografik durum çalışması, beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin öğrenme yolculuklarının ilk eğitim deneyimlerinden yükseköğretime kadar nasıl şekillendiğini incelemektedir. Ayrıca, hazırlık okulunda İngilizce öğrenirken öğrenci kimliklerini nasıl anlattıklarını, COVID-19 pandemisinin algılanan etkisini ve çevrimiçi eğitime geçişi, ve İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği bir ortamda eğitim dili İngilizce olan bir üniversitede öğrenim görme deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Nitel verilerin refleksif tematik analizi, Türkiye'nin İç Anadolu'daki bir devlet üniversitesi bağlamında belirli mülteci deneyimlerinin çeşitliliğini ve karmaşıklığını ortaya koymuştur. İlk olarak, katılımcıların savaş ve zorunlu göç deneyimlerinin uyum ve entegrasyon süreçlerini ve ilk eğitim deneyimlerini etkilediği bulunmuştur. Hazırlık aşamasından programlara kabul sürecine kadar Türk okullarına ve yükseköğretime geçişte çeşitli



deneyimler ve zorluklar yaşamışlardır. Ayrıca, bulgular, katılımcıların İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği bir ortamda hazırlık okulundaki İngilizce dil öğrenme deneyimlerine ışık tutmuştur. COVID-19 pandemisi dönemi ve çevrimiçi eğitime geçişle ilgili katılımcı anlatılarının analizi, katılımcıların eğitim süreçlerinde önemli etkiler ve değişen koşullarla nasıl başa çıktıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Son olarak, bu çalışma, mülteci öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları ve dayanıklılık yolunda geliştirdikleri başa çıkma stratejilerini belirlemiştir. Bu çalışma, benzer bağlamlarda mülteci öğrencilerin yükseköğretim deneyimlerini geliştirmek için çıkarımlar ile sonuçlanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mülteci Eğitimi, İngilizce Dilinde Eğitim, Covid-19 Pandemisi, Çevrimiçi Eğitim, Hazırlık Okulu, İngiliz Dili Öğretimi, Yüksek Öğretim

*To my sons, Deniz and Demir*

*and*

*To all the resilient children in the World who are stuck in conflict, war and chaos*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCTE	Conditional Cash Transfer for Education
CoHE	Council of Higher Education
DAAD	German Academic Exchange Service
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
DGMM	Directorate General of Migration Management
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EBA	Education Information Network
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EMI	English as the Medium of Instruction
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
GoT	Government of Türkiye
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
IYEP	Remedial Education Program
LYS	Bachelor Placement Exam
MoNE	Ministry of National Education
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
ÖSYM	Student Selection and Placement Centre
SAT	Scholastic Assessment Test
TEC	Temporary Education Centers
TMI	Turkish as the Medium of Instruction
TÖMER	Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center of Ankara University
TP	Temporary Protection
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
YKS	Higher Education Institutions Exam

YÖS

Foreign Student Entrance Examination

YTB

The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Chapter Presentation

In this introductory chapter, I start by providing the background to the study. Then, I discuss the need for and the significance of the study and conclude the chapter by giving a brief account of the Syria Conflict and the Syrian refugees in Türkiye to provide the context for the study. To start with, during the Fall Term of 2016-2017, I stepped into my new classroom for the first time to teach, unaware of Ali's presence. He would always sit quietly in a corner close the door, dressed in dark caps and stylish clothes. Though silent, he was attentive and engaged with the class content. It was only on that first day at the Preparatory School where I worked that I realized I had a refugee<sup>1</sup> student in my class. Despite my extensive background in English Language studies, holding both a bachelor's and master's degree, and currently pursuing doctoral courses in the same field, I felt profoundly unprepared to support a refugee student in my classroom.

Since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Türkiye has experienced an unprecedented influx of Syrian citizens. Consequently, it was not uncommon to encounter refugee students in higher education institutions or other educational levels across the country. Despite this, as a teacher and researcher, I soon realized how unprepared I was to teach these students from refugee backgrounds or to create an environment and employ the necessary pedagogical tools tailored to their needs. I had never anticipated needing to address these challenges. I lacked knowledge on

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<sup>1</sup> Syrian nationals who arrived in Türkiye after April 28, 2011, due to the civil war, are granted temporary protection (TP) by the Turkish government. In this dissertation, the term "refugee" is used broadly and generically to encompass internationally displaced persons, asylum seekers, and individuals with any type of international protection status, including temporary, subsidiary, or humanitarian protection.

how to support students with trauma, respond to their specific needs, understand their migration journey, or appreciate their diverse identities, backgrounds, and future aspirations. At that moment, I knew very little. However, I did possess a crucial asset: the curiosity and courage to learn and to help.

Ali ignited and nurtured my interest in multilingualism, identity, refugee education in general, and specifically the education of refugees in higher education. Together, we conducted a narrative study, which deepened my engagement with the topic. My extensive background, comprising over a decade of teaching experience at the higher education level, recent direct teaching engagements with this unique group of learners, and relevant coursework from my doctoral studies, provided a solid foundation for this research. I developed a genuine interest in their life stories, the challenges they encounter, and the resilience they exhibit. Beyond the statistics and figures, I now had real refugee students with real and distinctive life experiences. Understanding the individuality of each refugee student is crucial, and it has been an objective for me to present these insights scientifically to a broader audience.

## **1.2. Background to the Study**

Without the successful completion of primary and secondary school, higher education is not an option. Conversely, in situations where access to higher education is limited or non-existent, children and young people are less motivated to persist in primary and secondary school (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012). For refugees, education is rarely a smooth continuum from one level of schooling to another, with opportunities becoming increasingly limited at each successive step. Even when refugees have fulfilled all academic requirements for higher education, they encounter further obstacles in accessing opportunities. These obstacles include financial costs, the absence of necessary documentation such as birth certificates or examination results, the recognition of educational certifications from other countries, and institutions' nationality requirements for enrollment or access to reduced fees (Arar et. al., 2020; Ateşok et. al., 2019; Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Class et. al., 2023, Erdemir, 2022).

In the literature the challenges refugee students face in their entry to education are well documented. Some of these challenges include structural barriers such as information blockages, assumptions about language proficiency and familiarity with systems and cultural practices (Stevenson & Baker, 2018), limited conceptualizations of transition (Naidoo et al., 2018; Baker & Irwin, 2021), monolingualism (Ollerhead & Baker, 2019), and incompatible temporalities. Personal challenges for students from refugee backgrounds include the impacts of disrupted education and responses to prior trauma, which can significantly affect cognitive engagement (Maringe et al., 2017). Additional socioeconomic factors—such as living in under-resourced areas, being un/underemployed, and financial pressures, can impact their capacity to engage, especially when balancing paid work, family responsibilities, and study too. Sociocultural factors, such as unfamiliarity with education systems (Fincham, 2020), language and literacy development, and the need to establish new networks and connections (Cin & Doğan, 2021) can also complicate or hinder educational engagement.

There are numerous and other overlapping obstacles that impede participation in formal education during displacement. These barriers include economic challenges, language proficiency issues, cultural differences, discrimination, unfair policies, ineffective teaching methods, and limited school capacity (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2012; Hadid & Hos, 2021). The loss of economic, social, and cultural capital, along with temporary status, language barriers, lack of qualification documents, and other vulnerabilities are additional challenges that hinder refugees' access to higher education (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021).

As a result of these barriers, institutions often fail to recognize or value the diverse experiences, knowledge, languages, and practices that refugee students bring to their studies (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019). Instead, there is a widespread perception of refugee students lacking cultural capital (O'Shea et al., 2015). The dominant discourse of 'lacking capital' is reductive and often reflects a deliberate neglect of the complexities within structural and symbolic hierarchies. This creates a deeply uneven playing field and justifies institutional blind spots that hinder the development of more equitable and inclusive support structures for refugees (Baker & Shda, 2023).

For refugee students, factors such as disrupted education, education in multiple languages, countries, and systems, and the impacts of post-traumatic experiences create unique needs that normative transition practices fail to address. Consequently, significant “stuck places” arise due to “monolithic assumptions about what students bring with them and can do, and unrealistic expectations of individuals” capacity to help themselves without targeted and responsive supports (Baker & Irwin, 2021, p. 91).

Students from refugee backgrounds have a significant contribution to make to learning environments. When they choose to share their experiences, it can help other students, especially those with limited life experience, gain new perspectives on the world. Their languages and cultural practices can enrich monocultural and monolingual classrooms, and their journeys to education often highlight stories of personal strength and resilience (Baker & Shda, 2023; Naidoo et al., 2018; Mkwanzani, 2018). As Papadopoulos (2007) emphasizes, responses to adversity are not limited to trauma but also include resilience. This concept explores how adverse experiences can lead to positive developments that directly stem from exposure to adversity. For instance, many forcibly displaced individuals have managed to transform their negative experiences into positive outcomes, discovering new strengths and experiencing transformative renewal and resilience (Papadopoulos, 2007).

Currently, there are approximately thirty "protracted" refugee situations worldwide, with the average length of stay nearing twenty years. The prolonged nature of displacement and the limited educational opportunities in exile result in most refugees missing their one chance for school-based learning. Given the uncertainty of refugees' futures, the increasingly globalized realities they face, and the promise of knowledge-based economies, education that is adaptable and portable is crucial (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012), but this research needs to be not only based on the barriers and systematic challenges they frequently face, but also how they navigate these challenges, act against adversaries, and build resilience in the face of conflict too. A shift from a deficit perspective to a more empowered approach that highlights agency needs to be promoted. This was one of the aims that this research was designed to address.



### **1.3. The Need for the Study**

As of the end of 2023, there are 117.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, significant public order disruptions, and environmental crises, whether climate-related or natural disasters like earthquakes (UNHCR, 2024). Among these, 68.3 million are internally displaced, and 37.6 million are refugees. The remaining individuals are asylum seekers and other people in need of international protection. Although 117.3 million may not seem like a substantial number compared to the global population, those seeking refuge in countries other than their own are in dire need of assistance. Their arrivals are often unplanned, occurring in a state of flux and generally under duress. This forced movement leads to various tensions and conflicts consequently both for the refugees and the host countries they seek refuge at.

As it is also evident from the statistics on displaced individuals, neighboring countries have predominantly served as primary or secondary resettlement destinations for refugees. There are several contributing factors to this trend, including geographical proximity, favorable neighboring relations fostering familiarity, cultural and religious affinities and naturally, inherent easiness of border crossings when compared to distant countries. Thus, nearly 70% of all refugees are hosted in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2024). Türkiye was the first country holding the largest refugee population for the ninth consecutive year in the world. It has become the second country in hosting largest refugee population with 3,3 million refugees after Islamic Republic of Iran, which hosts nearly 3,8 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024). They are followed by Colombia (2,9 million), Germany (2,6 million), Pakistan (2 million). As it can also be understood from the statistics, except for Germany, neighboring countries shoulder almost the entire responsibility for refugees although they are not the most developed countries, and each has their structural and systemic challenges within. This situation emphasizes the need for other countries, especially the ones in the Global North to step forward and share the responsibility.

When the young population of refugees is also taken into consideration, it can also be realized that apart from the utmost safety and health issues, education is also one of

the most significant concerns that need to be taken into consideration. Higher education plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of inclusion in an era of exile by providing opportunities and options to rehabilitate existing skills and competencies, as well as to develop new ones for rebuilding lives in new destinations. A growing body of evidence indicates that education significantly impacts refugees' full integration into host communities (Watenpaugh et al., 2014), their physical and psychological health, well-being, recovery from trauma (Streitwieser et al., 2018), and livelihoods. Furthermore, education promotes social cohesion and helps prevent undesirable future outcomes such as crime, social conflicts, radicalization, child labor, and child brides (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Seydi, 2014; Watenpaugh et al., 2014).

Refugees also place immense importance on pursuing higher education. As tensions and hostilities between refugees and host communities increase, higher education provides a space for many youths that alleviates these tensions, reduces inequalities, and creates opportunities for fostering friendly interactions with locals (Cin & Doğan, 2021). Several scholars argue that, despite facing academic and non-academic barriers, refugee students demonstrate high levels of educational resilience (Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017) and despite facing numerous obstacles, they can and do succeed in higher education (Morrice, 2013). Despite the significant role of higher education (HE), there has been little concern for the higher education prospects (Cin & Doğan, 2021) and access to HE for refugees and forcibly displaced migrants remains limited. More intersectional research dealing with widening the participation and success of refugees in HE is needed (Kondakci et al., 2022). Moreover, despite the increasing body of research on displaced students' higher education experiences, there is limited research on the steps and support systems that have enabled these students to access and remain in higher education against the odds (Oddy et al., 2022).

Research on how refugee students navigate barriers to access higher education, especially in displacement contexts like Türkiye, is limited (Hauber-Özer, 2023) too. This is partly due to the more restricted access compared to resettlement countries in the Global North (Morrice et al., 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Investigating the

strategies used by successful students can offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and aid organizations aiming to enhance educational outcomes and promote self-sufficiency. Additionally, it can challenge the prevalent deficit perspective that depicts refugee learners as helpless victims or public burdens. That there is no singular refugee experience is widely accepted now, thus exploring how the intersectional challenges frequently encountered by refugee students affect their engagement with higher education needs further research too (Baker & Shda, 2023) with a focus on the subsequent phases of educational and adaptational experiences.

Since conflict and displacement are increasing more and more and raising the number of refugee populations in the host countries, there is a need not only to conceptualize but also to rethink refugees in education as a long-term objective (Dryden-Peterson, 2017) to react and respond to the unique educational needs of these populations as refugee education is not only salient in terms of preparing the welfare of next generations but also for the fact that appropriate educational implementations and policy responses to refugees have the ability to reduce the risk of stigma, isolation, intra-community tensions, cases of marginalization or radicalization (Deane, 2016) too. Displaced because of war and conflict, refugees may experience culture shock as they generally leave their countries unprepared, have more risk related to mental health issues, and do not have the chance to prepare places to stay or work (Hocking et. al., 2015) as well as have their education interrupted either in departure or long before it.

Establishing that learners of refugee backgrounds come to school with diverse needs and levels of competence deconstructs the myth of the monolingual, heavily Turkish-students-oriented English language classrooms, and make our classrooms more multicultural. Having little knowledge and experience on how to deal with classroom diversity (Akar, 2010; Karaman & Tochon, 2007; Karaman, 2014), teachers are challenged to question their assumptions of what students with refugee background know and are capable of when it comes to foreign language learning, and how these tacit expectations can privilege specific learners and put some others in disadvantageous positions. Studying refugee learners' educational experiences through and in higher education and what kind of an influence these experiences

have on their narrations of identities can provide a deeper and more strategic understanding of their foreign language learning trajectories and this in turn can facilitate information sharing and construct a more inclusive classroom.

#### **1.4. The Aim and Significance of the Study**

Having escalated from a regional issue to a global concern, the ongoing Syrian conflict is now in its thirteenth year and is anticipated to persist for an extended period. Migrations from Syria may continue in different combinations to many countries around the world, especially to neighboring countries like Türkiye (Bimay, 2021) which presents a significant case study as the country hosting the largest number of refugees globally and implementing an inclusive policy at the state level (Yıldız, 2023). Therefore, it can be said that the issue of refugees and asylum seekers will continue to preoccupy countries in the coming periods. Along with the influx of refugees from Syria and other neighboring countries, the number of students who attend higher education has increased noticeably in Türkiye (Yılmazel & Atay, 2022). As of the 2023-2024 academic year, Türkiye hosts 336,366 international students at its universities (YÖK, 2024). Among these, 60,750 are Syrian refugees under temporary protection. Given the rising number of international students and Türkiye's currently being the largest refugee hosting country in the World (UNHCR, 2024), it is essential to understand the experiences of these students to enhance the quality of their education and overall experience in Turkish higher education institutions.

Resettlement policies often prioritize the immediate and basic needs of new arrivals, particularly focusing on employment for those over eighteen (Baker & Shda, 2023). Because education in this context is generally confined to schooling and adult language education, higher education, viewed as a long-term concern, typically falls outside the scope of resettlement activities (Baker & Shda, 2023). The increase in the number of migrant and refugee students has highlighted the need for more research on this topic, as there is limited information about the overall experience of refugee students in higher education. Particularly, the initial war period and forced migration journeys are not mostly incorporated into studies, although they offer valuable units

of analysis and are one of the primary factors affecting later educational and societal adaptational processes in the host countries. Besides, how they navigate their higher education journeys are not limited to preparation or the challenges and barriers of admission processes. Particularly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the online education process following it brought specific challenges which needed to be understood in their specific contexts. The online EMI period was another specific period in educational trajectories of students, which needed to be highlighted in order to respond to the challenges and needs as well as to understand how they navigated the academic and social adaptation process in the middle of the crisis.

In the literature, it is frequently stated that lack of Turkish language proficiency hinders the educational engagement of refugee students (e.g. Arar et. al., 2020; Arar, 2021; Ateşok et. al., 2019; Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Baban et. al. 2016, Dereli, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Ergin & de Wit, 2020); however, what kind of experiences they have in an English-medium university is less researched. This research aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing a unique ethnographic case study of five Syrian refugee students within the specific context of a central EMI university in Türkiye. It explores their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to online education, English language learning experiences and their engagement in an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) environment. Additionally, the study delves into their coping mechanisms, strategies for overcoming challenges, and pathways to building resilience amid these circumstances. The fieldwork spans from the first year of university education in preparatory school to the last year in university during a critical time for the World. This has provided the chance to study with the participants not just in crisis but also in times when normalcy prevailed. Understanding these specific group of five refugee students' experiences at a university in central Türkiye can have the potential to contribute to both the educational and administrative levels to provide the necessary support for migrant and refugee students as they adapt to the Turkish higher education system.

The limited focus on higher education in displacement contexts has resulted in research gaps concerning the availability of higher education for refugees, their

access to these opportunities, their expectations from higher education, and their experiences within these institutions (Fincham, 2020). Research has generally focused on the barriers to access to HE (Arar et. al., 2020; Ateşok et. al., 2019; Bimay, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Hauber-Özer, 2021; Kondakçı et. al., 2022; Yavcan & El-Gahli, 2017) and issues related to providing quality education for refugees at primary and secondary levels; however, the issue of higher education for refugees is virtually unexplored in both scholarship and policy (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012). In Türkiye, there is limited research conducted on the education and academic adaptation of refugee and migrant students in Turkish Higher Education (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021; Yılmazel & Atay, 2022) either. Besides, this research is mostly focused on a limited time, while there is almost no ethnographic research (excluding Hauber-Özer, 2021) on refugee students. Ethnographic research presents significant challenges, especially when involving migrant populations (De Fina & Tseng, 2017) as they are mostly mobile and have vague presence in a place not knowing where to go next. At other times, since they are in the process of resettlement, they find themselves struggling with various responsibilities, and thus not having the time needed for the prolonged nature of the ethnography. That is why it is difficult to sustain research partnership with this population of students and make longitudinal studies such as ethnographies with them (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Focusing solely on providing access to higher education for refugees neglects significant elements of their educational journey. Equally critical are the outcomes and experiences following their enrollment. Prioritizing access alone can obscure the inequalities that may perpetuate within universities. Viewing access as the final objective prevents us from comprehending what students can accomplish and whether they are able to make informed, reflective decisions about what constitutes a fulfilling life for them. This perspective fails to consider whether students are genuinely engaged in their education and developing the capabilities they value (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Hence, achieving equity in higher education necessitates addressing the broader educational processes, relationships, and opportunities, extending beyond mere access (Marginson, 2011).

Moreover, the existing literature predominantly emphasizes the obstacles refugees face in terms of participation and achievement (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Zeus, 2011), rather than highlighting positive coping strategies and methods to support their success (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). This focus sustains a deficit perspective on refugee learners undermining their agency. Focusing on the highly educated group of refugees can highlight their strength and resilience, thereby fostering a more balanced perspective of refugees (Safak-Ayvazoglu & Kunuroglu, 2021). This study aims to explore the coping strategies of these students on their way to building resilience in order to overcome this challenge. Besides, the World has gone through a global pandemic for the first time in years. Documenting five refugee students' perceived experiences while going through it would enable valuable insights as once the pandemic was over, the only way to research it would be retrospectively. Other aspects, such as the transition to online education as a result of the pandemic and experiencing all these in their first year during preparatory school in an EMI Turkish higher education institution, came together and created a unique context for these five refugee students. Their educational and adaptational journey amidst all these trajectories has been the focus of this dissertation.

In this dissertation, issues of perceived identity, self-presentation, and personal experiences as depicted through participants' narrations are also investigated. Particularly, the focus was on what kind of experiences were salient in the identity narrations and how they were narrated in the interviews. For this purpose, participants' oral life stories, autobiographical and personal experience narratives were collected. Although narratives that are about ethnic and racial prejudice are very common in studies with migrants (De Fina & Tseng, 2017), in this study, narrations were a part of the overall journey and depicted in different contexts from home to school and to the experiences of social discourses in the host country. Thus, in this study, all these intricate components of particular refugee students lives in the context of their life stories were investigated in their integrity.

In this context, the present dissertation study aimed to explore and understand how these particular refugee students' learning trajectories are shaped from their initial learning experiences in Türkiye through Higher Education and how they narrate their

learner identity accordingly, especially with a focus on their English language learning journey both within preparatory school and in later experiences of studying at an EMI university. By taking refugee experience through Turkish Higher Education in Türkiye which is a process full of crises as well as building resilience, in this research, I aimed to explore the diversity and intricacy of particular refugee student experiences in a country which hosts the largest number of refugees. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do the educational experiences of a particular sample of refugee students evolve from their initial learning stages to their integration into Turkish higher education, considering their experiences at EMI universities and the perceived influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the shift to online education?
  - 1a. What are participants' war and migration journey experiences and how do they influence their perceived integration to the host country and its education?
  - 1b. How do participants navigate the initial stages of learning upon arrival in Türkiye, considering factors such as language barriers, cultural adjustment, and access to education?
  - 1c. What challenges do participants encounter during their transition to Turkish higher education institutions, and how do they navigate these challenges?
  - 1d. How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence the educational experiences of participants?
  - 1e. What are the specific challenges presented by the shift to online education for participants, and how do they adapt to online learning environments?
  - 1f. What are the unique experiences and challenges faced by participants studying at a particular EMI university and how do these experiences influence their educational trajectories?



2. How do refugee students narrate their identities amidst the challenges of displacement and adaptation to new educational and social contexts in the host country?
  - 2a. How do participants adapt their identities within various learning environments and social contexts?
  - 2b. What type of coping strategies do participants develop against the emotional challenges they face on their way to resilience?

### **1.5. Syria Conflict and Syrian Refugees in Türkiye**

The global displacement situation has worsened significantly due to the ongoing conflict in Syria, resulting in what has been described as "the largest displacement crisis in the world" since World War II (UNHCR, 2018, p. 3). The majority of forcibly displaced migrants (FDMs) (68%) originate from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Most of these migrants (73%) aim for five main destinations: Türkiye, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda, and Germany (Kondakci et. al., 2023). The geographical distribution patterns of forcible displacement tend to focus on one country per continent, with 84% of forcibly displaced people primarily residing in neighboring countries (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021) with the exception of Germany (UNHCR, 2024). Türkiye holds a unique position in the Syrian crisis, having taken in the largest portion of over 6.5 million refugees. This distinction is also due to its policies on refugee settlement, legal status, and provision of free public services in health, education, and socioeconomic areas. Sharing the longest border with Syria (911 km) and adhering to an "open-door policy" for Syrian arrivals, Türkiye has faced a massive influx of refugees under emergency conditions and has hosted the largest refugee population in the world since 2014 (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021).

Due to its geographical position, Türkiye has always been a transit country for migration, both receiving and sending migrants, and has also served as a bridge for the transfer of socio-economic and cultural values. Especially after World War II, during the Cold War period, Türkiye received migrations from various regions, particularly the Middle East, as well as from the Balkans, the Caucasus, and other

parts of the world. In recent times, external migrations to Türkiye come not only from Syria but also from many countries around the world, including Iraq, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. The first mass migration from Syria to Türkiye occurred on April 29, 2011, when about 300-400 Syrian citizens entered the country through the Cilvegözü Border Gate in the Yayladağı district of Hatay province. In its thirteenth year, this number has exponentially increased, reaching 3,111,047 Syrian refugees who are under protection (DGMM, 2024). However, it is believed that the actual number of refugees in Türkiye exceeds the official figures (Aydın & Kaya, 2017), due to factors such as irregular entry into the country, violations of entry conditions, and the expiration of refugees' legal status. Geographic proximity and cultural similarities are perhaps the most significant reasons why the majority of Syrians fleeing the war (65.2%) have sought refuge in Türkiye. The fact that Syrian refugees view Türkiye as a transit country to reach European countries is also a major factor contributing to the increase in the number of refugees in Türkiye (Güngör & Sosyal, 2021).

Although in most contexts, refugees frequently encounter challenges related to protection and human rights, such as confinement to camps (Fincham, 2020), in Türkiye, out of the 3,111,047 million Syrian refugees, only 277,117 reside in government-run refugee camps (DGMM, 2024). The vast majority of Syrian refugees live in urban areas across various regions (UNHCR, 2024) although a result of temporary protection status, they have restricted movement. This status does not limit their access to services in urban areas either. Syrian refugees in Türkiye have access to free public services, including healthcare. Moreover, refugees are encouraged to complete their education which is free for all citizens and refugees, secure employment upon graduation and build the resilience needed for self-reliance and meaningful participation in civil society. However, employment remains a significant issue due to the cumbersome process of obtaining a work visa. This challenge forces many Syrians to drop out of school to work in the informal sector under precarious conditions, ultimately discouraging them from pursuing further education (Cin & Doğan, 2021).

Since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, Türkiye has emerged as the world's largest host country for refugees (Dereli, 2021). Syrians constitute the largest

refugee population in Türkiye and are considered refugees under international law. However, in Türkiye, Syrians are not officially recognized as refugees due to the restrictive interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Türkiye is a signatory to the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which is the principal international legal framework for the treatment of refugees, having been signed and ratified by 144 nations. However, Türkiye has implemented a geographical limitation, recognizing only individuals of European origin as refugees under this Convention. That's why, in alignment with Türkiye's humanitarian approach, open-door policy and supportive stance toward refugees, Syrians were initially classified as "guests" and were allowed to reside in camps indefinitely to mitigate the adverse effects of their displacement (Erdoğan, 2022).

However, the ongoing influx of refugees necessitated the Turkish government to introduce the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) which came into effect on April 11, 2014 and was subsequently revised in 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). The Law on Foreigners and International Protection grants rights and benefits to "foreigners" to promote social harmonization (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014). This law established guidelines and procedures for international protection and migration management, designating migrants from the East as "conditional refugees." In 2014, it also introduced the "temporary protection" status for these refugees. Türkiye grants Syrians temporary protection status based on the principle of non-refoulement, which provides them with legal residency, access to services, and other basic rights but does not provide any working rights to those under its protection. According to Yavcan and El-Ghali (2017), the temporary protection status established a legal foundation for a high-standard emergency response by ensuring an open-door policy and non-refoulement. However, this status has not completely resolved the discrepancies between the policy for Syrian refugees and its legal basis and it treats Syrians as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid rather than as political agents which brings insecurity and ambiguity in their lives as they belong to neither of the categories of refugees or guests (Baban et. al., 2016).

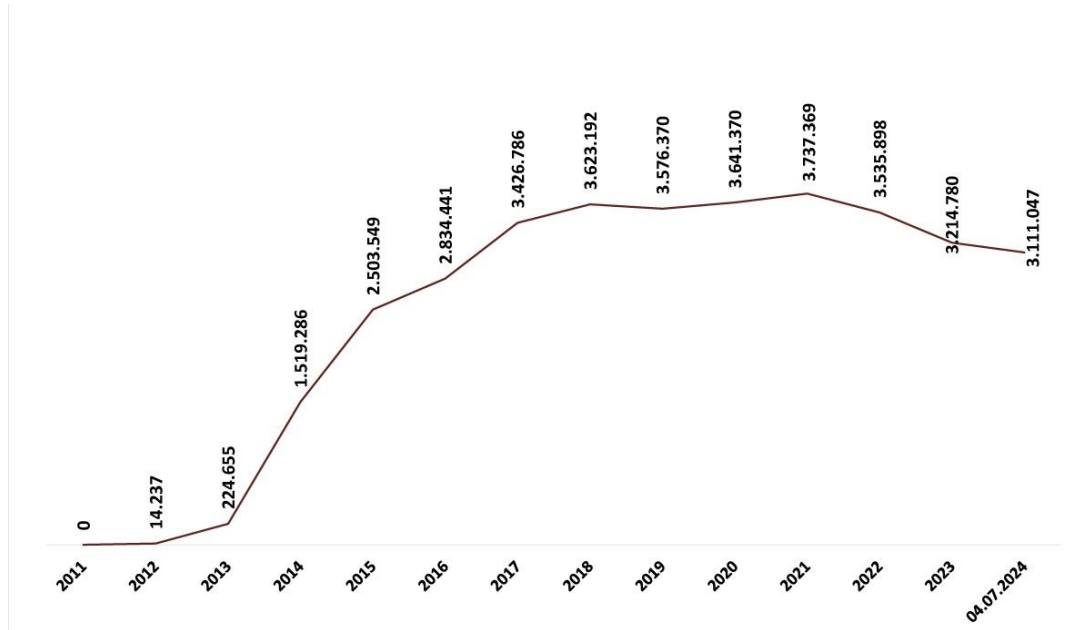
Türkiye's integration policy for Syrian refugees can be categorized into three distinct phases. The first phase, from 2011 to 2015, saw the Turkish Government establishing

tent cities in southern Türkiye and providing humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees. The 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation classified Syrians as "guests under temporary status," reflecting the government's belief that their stay would be temporary. The second phase began in 2015 with the increased movement of refugees from Türkiye to Europe. The European Union (EU) requested that Türkiye enter into an agreement to control this migration. In November 2015, a Joint Action Plan was signed, emphasizing the need for enhanced cooperation to prevent irregular migration. This phase underscored the reluctance of European countries to share the responsibility of hosting Syrian refugees, suggesting that many Syrians would remain in Türkiye for the long term. The third phase started in 2016 and continues to the present. During this period, the Turkish Government has focused on integrating Syrian refugees into Turkish society. Efforts have been made to improve their access to employment and education, and some refugees have been granted citizenship (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Ergin, 2016; Ergin & de Wit, 2020; İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016).

As stipulated in Article 12 of Türkiye's Citizenship Law, foreigners who have rendered or are anticipated to render exceptional contributions in the realms of science, technology, economy, society, sports, culture, and the arts may be eligible for Turkish citizenship through exceptional citizenship. In a statement made by Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya on November 9, 2023, it was announced that 237,995 Syrians have been granted Turkish citizenship so far (BBC, 2023). The provision for exceptional citizenship in Türkiye's Citizenship Law has made it possible for all migrants, including Syrians under temporary protection who possess either economic or cultural capital, to acquire citizenship (Dereli, 2021). This provision underscores the significance of cultural capital, which the host country associates with attending its universities.

Given the scale of the population and the suddenness of the situation, Türkiye's response can be considered a success story (Erdoğan and Erdoğan, 2021). Türkiye, with its open-door policy, has extended humanitarian aid, as well as access to education, residency, and work permits to Syrian refugees (Ergin, 2016). Since the initial arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011, both the Turkish state and its citizens have

shouldered a significant burden. Recent reports indicate that government expenditure on Syrians in Türkiye has surpassed USD 40 billion (Ergin & De Wit, 2020).



**Figure 1.** Syrians under temporary protection by years

Source: DGMM (2024). Retrieved from <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

Of the Syrians in Türkiye, 1,562,177 Syrians are in the 0-18 age group for primary and secondary school age, while 649,096 Syrians are in the 18-29 age group (DGMM, 2024) for Higher Education, making 2,211,273 out of 3,111,047 Syrians under 30 years of age. This makes Türkiye the second country in the European Higher Education Area to accommodate the largest group of students (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018), too. However, rising resentment and anti-migrant discourse directed at refugees in Türkiye (Turhan & Yıldız, 2022) represent a substantial obstacle to the social integration of refugee students in higher education institutions. Since studies show that return intentions and opportunities are decreasing as their stay in Türkiye continues to be extended (Erdogan and Erdogan, 2018), for Türkiye to truly integrate Syrian refugee students and fully utilize their human capital, it is essential to consider their presence beyond the ‘temporary’ status (Yıldız, 2023) which renders refugee education critical for both refugees and the host country.

We are now living in a poly-crisis era where we need to face many crises all at once, whether they be environmental, medical, political or social (Whiting & Park, 2023).

Although refugee receiving countries have tried to stop or lower the influx of people entering their countries by building physical borders like great walls, or increase their scrutiny for foreign visitors, or sometimes deny the entry of some populations or citizens of specific countries all together, the increasing number of refugees now constitute one the biggest, real and most critical problems of the World nowadays. And this will not continue just because of wars or conflict which have happened so far, but the numbers are liable to increase because of widespread pandemics, environmental crisis stemming from climate change, political disputes, shrinking economies, dehumanization of people and lower standards of living conditions. With the rising globalism, and with the transnational identities we hold, although the borders have been built in all ways, people will go on seeking refuge and migrate.

While this dissertation was being written, the crisis in Syria went on, a global pandemic broke out, new refugee crises broke out in different parts of the world. Refugees' lives are great representations of possibilities in this poly-crises era, as they are already distinct with their witnessing some of these challenges and already having survived some of them. Depicting a particular snapshot of their picture not only promises us to understand their journeys and thus the possibility to present meaningful ways of assisting both them and the host country people living with them, but also as global citizens of this world, it gives us the chance to witness other ways of being and living in this world (Tochon & Karaman, 2009).

## **1.6. Definitions of Terms**

**Refugee:** A person who has a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (CPRSR, 1951, p. 14).

**Temporary Protection:** A legal category in Turkish law for asylum seekers entering in a mass influx due to war or persecution; the duration of protection is undefined,

but it guarantees humanitarian aid, basic social services, and no forced returns (DGMM, 2014).

**Resettlement:** Long-term resident status provided to refugees by a third country (i.e. neither the nation of origin nor asylum) (UNHCR, n.d.).

**Identity:** “The way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 4).

**Integration:** Incorporation of migrants into a new society; typically encompasses social, economic, cultural, and linguistic domains (Ager & Strang, 2008).

**Refugee Education:** Providing educational opportunities and support for individuals who have been defined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as refugees (UNHCR, 2010, p.14).

**Preparatory Schools:** “English preparatory schools are considered a part of university education in Türkiye, and they offer language support for students preparing for EMI. The language education in these schools is usually described as General Academic English” (Kurt & Bayyurt, 2023, p. 225).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1. Chapter Presentation**

This chapter is organized into six key sections, each of which aims to inform the reader about the key works in the relevant topics. The first section is dedicated to identity, specifically in relation to refugees and migration. The second section explains higher education for refugees and migrants. The third section focuses on refugee education in Türkiye through and in higher education. The fourth section reviews the studies related to refugees in higher education in detail. In the fifth section, the theoretical framework of the dissertation is explained, and finally, in the sixth section, the ontological and epistemological orientations of the researcher are presented.

#### **2.2. Identity**

In research on language education, since the seminal work of Norton Pierce (1995) on identity development of five immigrant women learning English in a majority setting and their investment in the language they learn, identity has been increasingly considered as an important analytical tool in understanding schools and society (Gee, 2000). As the sense of self and our subjective being in the world is constructed through its tight and intertwined relationship with language (Weedon, 1987), identity has been a fundamental construct in applied linguistics (Darvin, 2018). Based on Weedon's (1987) notion of subjectivity, language shapes our sense of self, and identity is viewed as multiple, dynamic, and a site of struggle (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Norton (2013) explains that when people speak, they not only communicate but also build "a sense of who they are and how they relate to the world" (p. 4).



Drawing on the poststructuralist notions of social identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change (Karaman & Edling, 2021), learners are treated not as ahistorical and uniform, but as individuals who have a complex history and multiple different desires unique to their sense of selves (Norton, 1995). Castells (2011, p. 7) explains this as:

“The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework.”

Norton (2013) defined identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 45). While identity can be viewed as experiential, discursive, and developmental, Norton’s conception of identity is primarily relational; the individual is always an integral and constitutive part of the social world she lives in. As learners navigate various spaces, their sense of self and their relationship to the world constantly evolve and change. They negotiate their identities, position themselves and are positioned by others in terms of identity markers such as race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. To participate actively in these spaces, learners utilize their material, cultural, and social resources, which are valued differently by others. In this ever-changing context, identity is dynamic, multifaceted, and often contradictory (Norton, 2013).

Based on Tajfel's (1974) concept of social identity, which emphasized how individuals categorize the social world and see themselves as group members, Giles and Johnson (1987) proposed a theory on how ethnolinguistic identity and solidarity influence tendencies towards speech accommodation and language maintenance. At that time, language learners were often viewed as having fixed personalities, learning styles, and motivations, consistent with product-oriented methodological trends. Identities were representations of essential characteristics that defined individuals or the groups they belonged to, and inborn qualities that were carried with them unchanged. Thus, earlier SLA research typically characterized learners in binary

terms such as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted (Darvin & Norton, 2022). With artificial distinctions drawn between the individual and the social, or by loading some terms such as refugee with certain meaning, and leaving others aside, learners and their identity were tried to be understood. However, binary distinctions and “arbitrary mappings of particular factors on in either individual or the social” (Norton, 1995, p. 11) may lead to certain populations of learners, such as refugees, incomprehensible, leaving these groups of learners with more challenges to handle in their educational trajectory.

Many contemporary scholars recognize identity as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, influenced by various historical and material factors. Based on the notion of performance (Butler, 1990), identities are seen as not fixed entities that people have, but rather something they “do” as they perform in the process of self-presentation. As Bakhtin (1981) also puts forward, identities are plural and ‘crowded’ with different voices in their self-presentation, so it can be said that identities are presented with many other voices that we own which are also included in our identity. Researchers such as Norton (2000), Toohey (2000), Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), Block (2007), and Kramsch (2009) demonstrated that language learners possess multifaceted identities that are dynamic and frequently contested. These evolving identities are influenced by learners' material circumstances, lived experiences, and their envisioned futures (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019).

Although these markers of identity seem to be separate categories, they are in a constant dynamism and categories intersect (Crenshaw, 1991). The analysis of identity complexity is possible through the intersectional approach, a critical framework that equips researchers with the mindset and language needed to examine the interconnections and interdependencies within social categories and systems (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality theory highlights the importance of considering an individual's combination of group memberships and identities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their unique social experiences and worldview (Settles & Buchanan, 2014).

From a sociocultural perspective, learners are seen as agents shaped by, but not entirely determined by, their contexts, possessing the capacity for self-determination.

Drawing from poststructuralist views of the individual, subjectivity focuses on how our sense of self is formed through discourse, while subject position highlights how we position ourselves and are positioned within this discourse (Kramsch, 2009; Weedon, 1987). Both subjectivity and subject position emphasize discursivity, but identity emphasizes how these selves are constructed in practice. Learners create, enact, or perform identities (Blommaert, 2005; Butler, 1990) as they engage with others in the social (Peirce, 1995) an everchanging World.

A growing body of research has examined how migrant language learners construct their identities while learning new languages and socializing with host communities in both Western (e.g., Fotovatian, 2012; Miller, 2003; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2013; Rawal & De Costa, 2019) and non-Western contexts (e.g., De Costa, 2016; Gu, 2015; Hauber-Özer, 2021). These studies primarily focused on how transnational ethnic minority students negotiated their identities by using the target language to integrate into the host community. They provided valuable insights into the complex identity-inflected language learning processes, showing that although cross-border minority learners are often in disadvantaged positions, they managed to negotiate desirable identities by utilizing available resources.

The identity development of migrant learners is mostly dealt with in newcomer settings and in English as a second language contexts. In one such study, Bergquist et. al. (2018) investigated how personal, relational, enacted, and communal layers of identity manifested during refugee settlement, and how, if any, identity gaps were manifested in their context. Designing a model named identity pathway to refugee well-being, they positioned identity and identity gaps as central to understanding barriers and motivations for support-seeking and well-being. They stated that there is a variability in “how refugees make sense of their identity, enact this identity on both personal and relational levels, as well as understand and affiliate (or not) with the communal refugee and cultural identity” (Bergquist et. al., 2018, p. 397)

Finally, Uptin et al. (2016) examined the ways in which young refugees constructed new identities in order to access schools in their host countries prior to resettlement in Australia. One of the major findings of the study was that refugees strongly

rejected being called 'refugee' as a reflection of their desire to construct a new identity free of refugee status. It was also revealed in the study that negative discursive positioning of 'the refugee' denied refugee youth from access and resources to education.

### **2.3. Higher Education for Refugees and Migrants**

Access to higher education is a vital lifeline for refugees and migrants as it not only equips them with internationally recognized skills and qualifications but also helps prevent isolation, marginalization, and the waste of human potential (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Morrice, 2013). Besides fostering their success and well-being, higher education plays a significant role in enhancing the welfare, stability, and security of the host society where refugees live (Zeus, 2011). The investment in higher education is not something that only benefit only a small and elite group of refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2012), but it is an investment for cultural capital that can benefit refugees for a lifetime whether in the host country or in homeland in case of return.

Firstly, the provision and uptake of higher education signifies a process of change away from disempowerment, indicating a prior or concurrent shift in power relations between refugees and others. Secondly, higher education enhances refugees' ability to make informed strategic life choices by expanding and improving their access to information and knowledge. Thirdly, higher education has a greater potential than lower levels of education to foster a critical consciousness which further refines the strategic choices refugees can make (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012). Having the potential for accepting and accommodating those who live on the margins of society (Cin & Doğan, 2021), it is a powerful tool for empowering vulnerable populations, fostering individual, social, and economic development (Erdogan and Erdogan, 2020), and nurturing career aspirations. It contributes to the establishment of inclusive societies through education, employment, and integration (Crea, 2016).

When refugees access and secure admission in higher education, they acquire the 'university student' identity in addition to their refugee identity. This new status of university membership provides space for refugee students to overcome the

stigmatized image of Syrian refugees and offers them a secure environment to interact and engage with the new surrounding higher education. Although they retain their Syrian identity, which might limit interaction with local students at times, they also integrate into the higher education community like any other student which contributes to the increased sense of normalcy. This sense of belonging to a secure place and their learner identity can foster a feeling of belonging that can extend beyond the campus (Dereli, 2021). Higher education can equip refugees with the knowledge and skills necessary for employability, thereby facilitating their integration by expanding their social capital (Wright and Plasterer, 2012). It also helps them develop a voice in their lives and communities (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012), inspires young people to aspire towards a better future and enables them to become socially productive members of society where their voices are recognized and valued (Wright & Plasterer, 2012). Moreover, attending universities may serve as a critical enabling factor for refugees, helping to broaden their social networks and create new friendships. This can contribute to their valued social capabilities, such as feeling part of the local Turkish community and engaging peacefully with others without facing shame, harassment, or discrimination, as noted in other refugee education research. Unlike the broader community where structural and discursive inequalities may be prevalent, universities may provide a sense of equity and justice, possibly offering refugee students a degree of justice and recognition (Cin & Doğan, 2021).

Higher education can also help individuals combat feelings of stagnation and hopelessness, support self-actualization, develop active social networks, and facilitate social integration into the host society (Fincham, 2020). It equips individuals with knowledge and skills for better livelihood prospects, economic self-reliance, integration into local economies, and increased participation and leadership in civic and public life, serving as role models for children and youth. For governments, higher education fosters social stability and cohesion, sustains the economy, and creates a well-educated, skilled labor force for the business sector. However, it does not just hold critical significance only for post-conflict reconstruction but also for addressing the current needs of Syrian refugees and benefiting the host country. University education enables women to pursue careers

instead of entering early marriages, and men with higher education are more likely to secure employment after graduation, reducing the risk of radicalization by fighters crossing the open Türkiye-Syria border (Yavcan & El-Ghalil, 2017).

Although there are a lot of perceived benefits of higher education for refugees, while the average gross enrollment rates for refugees are 38 per cent for pre-primary education, 65 per cent for primary education, and 41 per cent for secondary education, it is only 6 per cent for tertiary education (UNHCR, 2023). Besides, even though access to higher education has been identified as an effective tool for mitigating the social and economic impact of displacement and enhancing the chances of integration into the host country (Zeus, 2011), there is limited research on higher education for displaced migrants and refugees (Arar et al., 2020). Regarding educational services for Syrian refugees, extensive attention has been given to primary and secondary education, while relatively less focus has been placed on higher education (HE) for Syrian refugees (Kondakçı & Önen, 2019). Moreover, higher education is often deprioritized by most donors, who tend to view it as a luxury reserved for a select elite (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012).

The provision of higher education to refugees faces significant substantive and logistical challenges, which are highly context dependent. Thus, it is important to define and support refugee students' strategies for overcoming these challenges on their own terms (Hauber-Özer, 2023). Since higher education can significantly improve the status of refugees and alleviate the effects of their displacement as active agents of their lives, further research into Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Türkiye is essential (Yavcan & El-Ghalil, 2017).

#### **2.4. Refugee Education through and in Higher Education in Türkiye**

The Syrian crisis has evolved into a long-term and persistent displacement situation with significant international repercussions, particularly for Türkiye, which hosts around 65 per cent of the Syrians who have sought refuge outside of Syria. As the Syrian conflict continues into its thirteenth year with no resolution in sight, Syrian refugees have entered a "protracted refugee situation" (PRS) (Şahin-Mencütek,

2019). According to the UNHCR (2020), once refugees have been in exile for five years and entered PRS, the average duration of their stay in the host country extends to twenty years.

The dual pressures of a large influx of refugees and limited international funding have resulted in challenges across all areas of Türkiye's emergency response, including education (UNICEF, 2022). When it is taken to account that the largest age-group of the Syrians in Türkiye are children and the youth, the access to education becomes even more crucial for the two-way mutual integration. Education serves as a vital means for Syrians to (re)acquire their cultural capital, playing a key role in restoring their identity as ordinary students and for naturalization process in general. Educational spaces offer opportunities for interaction between Syrians and their local peers (Zeus, 2011) promoting the interaction between the host country people and refugees too.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, everyone has the right to receive education. The Turkish national education system consists of two primary components: formal education and non-formal education. Formal education pertains to the regular schooling of individuals within specific age groups and is provided through various educational institutions. This includes pre-primary, primary, secondary, and higher education. While pre-school education is currently optional, there are plans to make it compulsory and accessible in both public and private schools, as outlined in Türkiye's Education Vision 2023 (MoNE, 2018). Non-formal education, on the other hand, is delivered through a network of training centers overseen by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Examples of non-formal education services encompass literacy programs, education for school dropouts and continuing education opportunities. Additionally, distance higher education, categorized as non-formal education, is available through the Open Education Faculty of Anadolu University.

Education in public schools is free and compulsory from ages 5/6 to 17, encompassing both primary and secondary education. Türkiye's educational model follows a 4+4+4 structure, comprising four years of primary school, four years of

lower secondary school, and four years of upper secondary school<sup>2</sup> (UNICEF, 2022). Turkish is required to be the primary language of instruction in all institutions, with the exception of those that are specially licensed or foreign. Since 2012, it has been compulsory for students in Türkiye to complete twelve years of education (Yavcan & El-Ghalil, 2017).

Universities in Türkiye operate under the supervision of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), which ensures regular accreditation of their programs. CoHE functions as a fully autonomous national board of trustees, independent of political or governmental influence. The primary language of instruction at most higher education institutions is Turkish. However, some institutions use English, French, or German as the medium of instruction and may provide an additional preparatory year for students to accommodate this. In higher education, many international students, including primarily Syrian students, are studying within the scope of internationalization in education, which includes international or intercultural dimensions, and the education process is conducted within the principles set by CoHE (Bimay, 2021).

International students aiming to enroll in university programs at Turkish higher education institutions must apply directly to the universities and have completed secondary education equivalent to a Turkish lycée. Additionally, their high school academic records must be validated by a Turkish Embassy in their home country. Universities consider these applications within the quota for international students. Applicants must also take the Foreign Student Entrance Examination (YÖS), which includes a basic learning skills test and a Turkish language proficiency test. For students who do not speak Turkish, language courses are provided. Some Turkish universities also offer courses taught in English, French, or German. Syrian refugees can follow the same procedure as international students according to the existing legal framework. Given their temporary protection status, the Turkish state guarantees their right to education. Additionally, several laws and bylaws have been enacted to broaden their access to Turkish institutions, allowing them to pursue higher education free of charge without taking the Foreign Student Entrance

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed figure on Turkish public education system is available in the Appendix A



Examination (YÖS), provided they fall within the designated quotas at universities across Türkiye.

The Syrian civil war, which has displaced millions of people, has caused numerous socio-economic, political, and cultural impacts in countries of origin, transit, and destination. It has especially resulted in migrants, who have become refugees in the countries they moved to, experiencing challenges in access to education. As the country hosting the most Syrian refugees in the world, Türkiye has attempted to provide many opportunities to refugees, especially in education, through its temporary protection policy (Bimay, 2021). For this purpose, the Ministry of National Education has made significant efforts regarding the education process of refugee children, especially in primary and secondary education. This legislation emphasized providing "well-meant support from the host for the guests within the bounds of possibility" rather than conferring rights upon refugees and imposing state obligations (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 260). Specifically, it stated that "within the economic and financial capacity deemed possible" (p. 36), Türkiye would furnish migrants with the necessary knowledge and skills for independent living in both the host country and their homeland upon return. This included access to public and private services such as education, healthcare, the labor market, and courses on the country's culture, history, and language (UNHCR, 2017).

Host countries often lack clear policies regarding the enrollment of displaced individuals, leading them to admit these students through conventional international student channels and accepted enrollment processes (Jungblut et al., 2018). Although its being the largest refugee hosting country has imposed a significant strain on the country's infrastructure, including employment, housing, and natural resources – particularly in border provinces where large numbers of refugees reside, Türkiye, particularly in the early stages of the crisis, managed the Syrian refugee crisis, including higher education, within its borders through its own programmes. The Turkish government took proactive measures to facilitate the enrolment of Syrian youth in universities and enabled them to continue their studies in Türkiye (Fincham, 2020). While authorities in many countries were reluctant to offer Syrians equal educational opportunities regarding access to education (Erdemir, 2022), Türkiye

extended the same educational access to Syrians as it did to its own citizens and in terms of preparation, application and enrollment processes, Syrian refugee students did not encounter specific challenges related to the lack of clear guidelines. The key distinction is that there are supportive mechanisms available specifically for refugees, such as tuition fee waivers, scholarships, Turkish language support, and YÖS preparation courses. For instance, in 2014, CoHE exempted all Syrian refugee students attending public universities from tuition fees. Thus, Syrian students were exempt from paying international student fees at state universities for a long time, with their fees covered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). Cin and Doğan (2021) emphasized that fee exemptions and scholarship support were crucial in enabling Syrian students to access higher education. However, with a Presidential Decree on July 1, 2021, the fee exemption for newly registered Syrian students was abolished (Yıldız, 2023). This new regulation does not affect those who enrolled before the 2021-22 academic year. Although the removal of the fee exemption may be due to the extended stay of Syrians in Türkiye, which is no longer considered an emergency requiring special intervention (Yıldız, 2023).

During the initial years of migration, under emergency measures, several policies have been implemented to enhance the teaching and learning opportunities available to Syrian students in Türkiye. During the transitional period, Türkiye established 350 Temporary Education Centers (TECs) where Syrian teachers instructed Syrian students in Arabic using adapted Syrian curricula. These curricula, which were developed by the Syrian National Coalition Higher Education Commission under the control of the MoNE (Seydi, 2014), were revised three times by the Turkish Government and the MoNE, with assistance from the Syrian community in Türkiye (UNICEF, 2022). In time, the change in educational policies has shifted from a humanitarian emergency response to a development-focused approach, facilitating the transition of Syrian students to Turkish Public Schools (TPSs) by gradually closing TECs. As of September 2020, all TECs have been closed, and all Syrian students attending these schools were transferred and integrated into TPSs on equal terms with Turkish citizens in an attempt to provide more quality education to Syrian students (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018).

The "Project for Supporting Inclusive Education for Kids in the Turkish Education System (PIKTES)" was also put into action in 2016 with an aim to enhance access to education and promote social cohesion for refugee children in Türkiye upon the influx of refugees starting from 2011 through the years. The project focuses on increasing enrollment, school attendance, and improvement within the formal education system for refugee children in 29 provinces with high refugee populations. It is in its third phase as of January 2023 and is expected to continue until November 2025. The key objectives of the project include increasing accessibility to formal education for refugee and socio-economically disadvantaged host community children in the 29 provinces; establishing and maintaining a safe, supportive, and high-quality learning environment in supported educational institutions; improving the operational quality of educational institutions and their staff. Expected results include improved access to formal education for both refugee and socio-economically disadvantaged host community children, as well as the establishment of safe and supportive learning environments in the supported institutions in 29 provinces where the project is run.

Apart from all these initiatives, at times of crises, MoNE tried to compensate for the educational challenges COVID-19 pandemic brought about globally in 2020. During this period, the Education Information Network (Eğitim Bilişim Ağı – EBA), traditionally used for distance education in the Turkish education system, was effectively utilized to support Syrian students. The EIN Language Learning Portal offered course materials to all students, and EIN TV course videos were made available on the PIKTES YouTube institutional page. Within the Adaptation Classes for Foreign Students Programme, the Turkish Proficiency Exam, which was scheduled, was canceled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Nonetheless, all students were permitted to continue their regular education without taking the exam. Additionally, the decision was made to continue adaptation classes during the 2020–2021 academic year for foreign students in the third grade of primary school and for those whose Turkish language proficiency was considered insufficient, as per the MoNE's Circular 2020/7. To mitigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrian students were provided with internet packages and tablets (UNICEF, 2022).

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the February 6th earthquakes in 2023, as well as socio-economic challenges, had an impact on school enrolment and attendance. After the devastating earthquakes on 6 February that affected 11 provinces namely Adana, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Malatya, Osmaniye, Şanlıurfa and Elazığ where 1.7 million Syrians (811,000 children) were residing, Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) has settled Syrians in the temporary accommodation centers (TACs) to accommodate affected people who were in need of shelter. According to PMM data, more than 74,500 Syrians are staying in nine TACs (Sert. et. al., 2023).

To facilitate the integration of Syrian students TPSs, various Turkish language courses and support initiatives, such as Back-Up programs, were established. Additionally, several measures were introduced to assist students who had experienced prolonged interrupted education or had never attended school, with the aim of easing their re-entry into the educational system and enhancing their learning experience. These measures included Catch-Up programs, Back-Up programs, summer schools, and language support programs. Syrian students were also included in educational support and financial incentive programs originally designed for Turkish students, including the Remedial Education Program (IYEP) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) Program. To further promote student success and facilitate their integration into to TPSs, adaptation classes were introduced. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Electronic Information Network (EIN) was effectively utilized as a distance learning tool to provide additional support to Syrian students. Furthermore, to support adolescents aged 14 to 17 who often discontinue their education after completing basic education, the Schooling Adolescents through Vocational Training (SAVE) program was introduced, enrolling these students in vocational training centers (UNICEF, 2022).

The higher education system in Türkiye comprises three levels: associate degree (at least two years), undergraduate degree (at least four years), and graduate degree (master's, PhD, expertise in arts, and proficiency in art). CoHE serves as the central and autonomous public authority responsible for planning, coordinating, and supervising higher education institutions (HEIs). Currently, Türkiye has 208 HEIs,

including 129 public universities, 75 non-profit private universities, and 4 non-profit higher vocational institutions established by foundations (CoHE, 2024). In the academic year 2023-2024, a total of 7,081,289 million students were enrolled in higher education institutions in Türkiye (CoHE, 2024). Out of this, 336,366 students are international students, and among these, Syrian refugee students has increased from 608 in 2011 to 60750 students in 2024 (CoHE, 2024) constituting one of the largest refugee student populations in HEIs in the World.

Access to higher education in Türkiye is administered distinctly for Turkish and international students. Turkish citizens must pass the nationwide, competitive Central Placement Exam (YKS), which ranks them according to their overall scores. These scores are a combination of their performance in the central exam and their high school grade point averages. Students are then placed into institutions through a centralized system based on their preferences and the limited quotas available at each HEI. For international students, admission criteria, procedures, and quotas are determined individually by each higher education institution (HEI) within the framework set by CoHE. All international students are required to take the Foreign Student Exam (YÖS) which focuses on mathematics, geometry, and basic learning skills for admissions. The TR-YÖS exam, which is valid for two years from the date of the exam, can be taken in multiple countries and regions. Each has a different fee structure, which ranges from 750.00 TL to 2,250.00 TL based on the refugee's home country (ÖSYM, 2024). The exam is conducted in Turkish, German, English, French, Russian, and Arabic languages. Specifically, international students applying to Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Law, Teaching, and Engineering programs must take the YÖS, which is centrally administered by CoHE in six languages (Turkish, English, German, Arabic, French, and Russian) to ensure standardization; however, since 2010, each university has developed its own version of the exam in the language of its choice (Fricke et al., 2014).

Starting in 2013, Syrians under temporary protection were allowed to skip YÖS and directly apply to universities. Initially, this policy was applied at seven universities in cities bordering Syria, and it was subsequently expanded to include all universities across the country. Applicants may also need to provide national or international

baccalaureate test scores, high school transcripts and diplomas, passports, Turkish residency documents, and language proficiency test results (UNICEF, 2022) for admission. Additionally, some universities may also require a minimum score on an international standardized exam, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Although these initiatives to ease the transition of international, especially refugee students, have been effective for their admission process, the competitive placement system for Turkish students and the different procedures for Syrians' access to higher education have fueled increasing anti-migrant sentiments and misconceptions in Turkish society. Despite having separate quotas and admission processes, Syrians are often wrongly perceived as gaining entry to HEIs without any assessment, thus taking the limited spots from Turkish students (Yıldız, 2023).

Since September 2012, through CoHE, Türkiye has attempted to ease the access and transition to higher education institutions in several ways. Some of these policies are aimed at eliminating the economic hardships that refugee students face, for example by accessing Turkish higher education through the special examination of international students, but without the tuition fees that other international students pay, or by having several scholarship opportunities specifically for them (Dereli, 2021). Moreover, in the initial period, Syrian students were placed in "special student" status at seven universities located in provinces near the Syrian border to include them in the education process (Seydi, 2014). It has reduced bureaucratic procedures, especially regarding the provision of official documents by universities, and implemented a series of regulatory changes to allow more flexible programs in Turkish or any foreign language.

CoHE decision dated January 18, 2017, titled "Recognition and Equivalence Application Processes for Those from Countries Under War, Invasion, and Annexation Conditions," established procedures for individuals unable to submit diplomas, transcripts, or any documents proving their educational level. It was decided that equivalence applications for those affected by war, annexation, or occupation in their countries, and thus unable to provide the required documents, would be handled by commissions at selected universities in Türkiye. These commissions are responsible for determining and confirming the applicants' level of

education and graduation through Level and Proficiency Identification procedures. The countries included in this decision are Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, and Crimea.

Additionally, following practices developed worldwide, CoHE also implemented measures such as establishing Diploma and Degree Verification Committee for refugees with incomplete documents, placing those with completed documents in schools under special student status, creating the Foreign Academics Information System, improving different scholarship programs for these students, and improvement of recognition and equivalency regulations enhancing recognition and equivalency regulations (YÖK, 2017). As it is expressed by Göktürk et al. (2018), some Turkish Higher Education institutions tried to adapt to the new realities the changing world has brought and developed several strategies to overcome these challenges, such as providing enhanced support for students, partnering with alternative institutions for the benefit of students. As Hohberger (2018) indicates the internationalization trend and the quantitative capacity of Turkish Higher Education have been functioning as two key supporting mechanisms for enrollment of Syrian refugee students in Turkish Higher Education.

Türkiye developed several measures in order to widen Syrian refugee students' access to Higher Education. Arar et. al. (2020) explain these steps as such: The initial step was to exempt Syrian refugee students (SRSs) from the exam required for all international students applying to Turkish universities, allowing them to apply to any program at any university. However, providing proper documentation to certify qualifications and previous records came out as a significant problem. The Turkish Ministry of Education initiated a high school diploma equivalency process for Syrian students, enabling them to establish diploma equivalency even without original documentation. The second challenge related to documentation was credit transfer for Syrian students who left their studies and migrated to Türkiye. To address this, CoHE granted these students special student status, allowing them to enroll in public universities without all the necessary original documents. They attained regular student status once they completed the required documentation. The third challenge was the language of instruction. Most Turkish universities use Turkish as the medium

of instruction, with other universities which are mainly English Medium Instruction Universities, use mainly English. Therefore, proficiency in Turkish is crucial for accessing universities. To address this, universities near the southern border of Türkiye expanded their capacity to teach Turkish. Additionally, programs delivered in Arabic were increased, regardless of whether they had actively enrolled students or not.

Finally, the fourth challenge was financing the cost of study. In September 2014, the Council of Ministers decided that Syrian students would be exempt from the tuition fees typically paid by other international students in Türkiye. Instead, the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) was designated to cover these fees for Syrian students. (Watenpaugh et al., 2014; Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017; Hohberger, 2018). Alongside this exemption, YTB also provided scholarships to Syrian students to support their educational and living expenses. National resources and policies were further bolstered by international donors, INGOs, and UNHCR, particularly to secure funding and facilitate language learning prior to university applications (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021). To facilitate the transition into quality higher education (HE), increase enrollments, and invest in the career development of Syrian refugees, Türkiye adopted the motto “leaving no one behind” and developed strategies in collaboration with national and international authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private donors too (Erdemir, 2022).

Numerous organizations have supplemented the Turkish government’s scholarships for Syrian students with additional scholarships and grants. For example, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) program of the UNHCR granted scholarships along with providing internships, skills development, and career readiness training (UNHCR, 2024). Another international initiative focused on enhancing higher education opportunities for Syrian refugees in Türkiye is The Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) program, an internationally funded body which offers support such as academic counselling, scholarships, and short courses in language and HE for students aged 18–30 in Türkiye, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017). HOPES was established in direct response to the Syrian crisis, with the objective of



empowering young Syrians to forge their own career paths by addressing their educational needs. Funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis - The Madad Fund - offers a comprehensive range of educational programs to Syrian refugees in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. The initiative includes academic counselling for up to 42,000 young Syrians regionally, language courses for 4,000 students, over 300 full academic scholarships, and higher education short courses for more than 3,500 student refugees. The HOPES program is implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in partnership with the British Council, Campus France, and EP-Nuffic. Additionally, SPARK, an organization affiliated with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provided student services and training in civic leadership and economic empowerment. The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), in partnership with the UNHCR and partners of the Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (3RP), is among the organizations that cover refugee students' tuition fees at state universities and provide them with scholarships too (Erdemir, 2022). A third international initiative supporting Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Türkiye is the SPARK fellowship program, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In response to the increasing demand for higher education, SPARK established its presence in Türkiye in 2012, running projects in Syria and supporting the Syrian community in Türkiye. Since then, the SPARK office in Türkiye has set up five higher education institutions inside Syria, serving hundreds of students, and has provided various activities for Syrian students in Türkiye. These scholarships cover tuition fees and may include additional allowances such as local transportation, study materials, and a monthly stipend, depending on the educational program (UNICEF, 2022).

As for Turkish language instruction, many students benefited from Turkish language courses provided by TÖMER, which has been established at universities in provinces with high Syrian populations and is one of the most widely recognized programs for providing language training. Students attend TÖMER before beginning their higher education programs (Arar et al., 2020) in order to be prepared for Turkish-medium instruction at schools. Additionally, other students had opportunities to attend courses offered by municipalities, the Turkish Red Crescent, the International Middle

East Peace Research Center Humanitarian, and various local NGOs such as Hilalder (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017). UNICEF also supported over 2,000 students enrolled in Turkish language courses at Ankara University through the Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center (TÖMER) program (UNICEF, 2015). Despite the Turkish government's policies to facilitate the integration of refugees into the higher education system, Syrian youth face various challenges, including language barriers, financial hardship, lack of information about the application process, the complexity of the system, and academic barriers (Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017; Ateşok et al., 2020). Language is likely the most significant barrier to the integration of Syrians into Türkiye's higher education system, a challenge common to many refugee and migration contexts (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Nonetheless, higher education can provide them with hope for building their futures, even in the face of many hardships (Arar et al., 2020; Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017). Considering the high percentage of Syrian youth and their significance for the future of both Türkiye and Syria, higher education is crucial for offering them a sense of normalcy, stability, and hope despite their prolonged situation (Dereli, 2021).

While Türkiye has implemented policies to facilitate refugee access to higher education and established procedures to address potential barriers, it has adopted a decentralized approach, leaving the implementation of these steps and procedures to the discretion of HEIs. As a result, different HEIs have interpreted and applied the policies variably, particularly regarding the admission, rejection, and integration of Syrian refugee students (Cin & Doğan, 2021). While a de-centralized approach allows HEIs' flexibility in the admission process, it also allows them to deter and reject refugee students. (Yıldız, 2023). Although CoHE centrally establishes the maximum quotas and general admission principles for international students and refugees, the specific admission criteria, procedures, and recognition of prior learning are determined by the autonomous higher education institutions (HEIs) which results in non-standardized systems across the HEIs with huge quality differences in admission procedures. Among 208 HEIs in Türkiye, only ten universities host 40 per cent of all Syrian students (Yıldız, 2023), which does not exhibit a balanced distribution, putting an additional burden on the hosting universities. The situation is the same for MoNE schools where the high

concentration of the Syrian population in certain areas presents several issues. One problem is the strain on physical capacity, necessitating the implementation of double-shift schools, which, in some regions, these high concentrations have led to negative reactions from Turkish families (UNICEF, 2022). Increasing resentment and anti-migrant rhetoric towards refugees in Türkiye (Turhan & Yıldız, 2022) pose a challenge to the social inclusion of refugee students in HEIs too. This issue is exacerbated by Türkiye's current economic difficulties and the growing politicization of migration (Kirişci & Yıldız, 2023). The competition for jobs and the strain on public services have resulted in greater social distance and reduced social acceptance of Syrian refugees. The media often portrays Syrians as an economic burden and a security threat.

Another challenge is that country-wide data on the financial status of Syrian students in Türkiye are not available. However, a survey conducted by Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018) with 395 Syrian students in Turkish universities provides some insight. According to the survey, 18% of the students receive a scholarship, 24.93% are employed, and 57.65% have their education expenses covered by their families. This data indicates that the number of Syrian students receiving scholarships is relatively low (Ergin & De Wit, 2020) which necessitates young Syrian people to work: boys are often pushed into the informal labor sector, while girls are expected to perform unpaid domestic work. As they grow older, their enrollment rates decline due to some families supporting early marriage and being reluctant to send their daughters to mixed-gender classes. The most socio-economically disadvantaged Syrian families frequently have to choose between financial stability and their children's education, resulting in many children leaving school to work and support their family's basic needs. This brings the risk that only Syrian parents in Türkiye who can afford to finance their children's university education, or Syrian students who are healthy and fortunate enough to secure employment to cover their expenses, are able to participate in the higher education system (Ergin & De Wit, 2020). All in all, the financial burden remains one of the greatest challenges for Syrian students and their participation in higher education in Türkiye (Ateşok et. al., 2019).

Although HEIs in Türkiye host one of the largest numbers of refugee students, a high number of students admitted to the HEIs does not necessarily mean a successful

model of integration (Yıldız, 2023). Türkiye's primary challenge today is no longer ensuring access to higher education, as many Syrian students already have this opportunity. Instead, the main challenge now is determining whether their social mobility and educational achievements enable them to secure employment in fields that match their qualifications and skills (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Yıldız, 2023). Research in this area highlights the determination, strength, and resourcefulness of Syrian youths in higher education (Ateşok et. al., 2019). Despite facing numerous obstacles, they have successfully devised and implemented ad hoc solutions to overcome the barriers impeding their access to higher education and can learn to navigate the system, demonstrate resilience, and develop resources to overcome challenges (Naidoo et al., 2018; Mkwanzani, 2018). Therefore, their agency should be recognized and incorporated into institutional mechanisms and research (Ateşok et. al., 2019) in order to increase their chances of securing the capital they need to fully integrate into the host society by creating opportunities for them to secure jobs for financial capital they need to build their lives after HE.

## **2.5. Studies Related to Refugee Students in Higher Education in Türkiye**

Previous studies on refugee students in higher education often explore the challenges, particularly linguistic, psychosocial, and structural challenges, refugee students face while trying to secure admission to universities and their experiences while studying in the host country (e.g. Arar et. al., 2020; Ateşok et. al., 2019; Bimay, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Hauber-Özer, 2021; Hauber-Özer, 2023; Kondakçı et. al., 2022; Yavcan & El-Gahli, 2017). Ayvazoğlu and Kunuroğlu (2021) identify some of these challenges faced by refugees across different stages of their journey from pre-migration to post-migration contexts. Prior to migration, refugees endure traumatic experiences related to war and conflict, including the loss of loved ones, home, and identity. During migration, they encounter dangerous travel conditions, and post-migration is marked with challenges related to learning a new language, adapting to a new cultural environment, and dealing with socio-economic issues. Additional difficulties include planning for family reunification, facing discrimination, and managing psychological distress.

For instance, in one of the very first studies upon Syrian refugees arrival right after the conflict broke out, Seydi (2013) did a study to find out the views of 15 Syrian academics and educators on how the conflict in Syria reflected itself on the Syrian students' education. Then, the result of the study revealed that participants thought there were serious educational problems, and they had critical expectations in relation to the advancement of education for Syrian students. The areas that were expressed to be problematic in the study were higher education, Arabic language teaching and the education outside of the camps. During that period, camps were more populated than now, and not many refugees were living in urban areas when compared to the recent times. Besides, the education was mostly provided in an accelerated manner in Temporary Education Centres (TECs) which had Arabic teachers, and Syrian curricula. From the TECs' closure and onwards, MoNE is the only institution responsible for the education of Syrian students as for formal education, and Syrian students attend Turkish schools and have the same rights as Turkish mainstream students.

In his study, Ergin (2016), focused on the perceptions of non-immigrant local Turkish citizens studying at the English Language Preparatory Department rather than migrant students. Exploring Turkish students' dispositions towards their Syrian peers/classmates, he found out that most of the participants had concerns related to Syrian peers' access to higher education although they gave their support to their participation in their classrooms. It was found that while Turkish students favored the internalization of Higher Education in Türkiye, some of them also expressed that Syrians' access to universities was unfair to Turkish students as they do not take the same test to gain access to universities, decreased their job opportunities and made their classes as more crowded (Ergin, 2016). Despite these concerns, there was a shared agreement on education as a universal right for all.

Additionally, some individuals in Ergin's study (2016) endorsed the notion of providing education to Syrians at Turkish universities. They argued that since these Syrians might not necessarily go back to their home countries, it makes sense to educate them in Türkiye. Furthermore, they believed that if these individuals returned, they would remember the support they received from Türkiye. However,

there were also some challenges stated like not being able to communicate with these students effectively as most Turkish students did not know Arabic, and some Syrian students were not so fluent in Turkish (Ergin, 2016). English is one of the main the lingua francae among these students; however, it should be noted that they were learning English at preparatory school too. Another concern expressed by Turkish students was that when they graduated from Turkish universities, they would compete with Syrians in the job market, potentially diminishing the job prospects for Turkish graduates. Another interesting finding of the study was also that most of the Turkish students thought integrating Syrians into Higher Education was also a strategic move as these students would one day return to Syria, and build the country in the post-war era which may result in these people's good diplomatic relations with Türkiye (Ergin, 2016). It can be inferred from these results that higher education of refugees was believed to contribute to both Syrians and the host country whether they would stay in the country or not by the participants in this study.

In their qualitative study, Yılmazel and Atay (2022) investigated the challenges of seventy-five migrant students in six different universities in Türkiye through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Their analysis revealed that migrant students faced school-related challenges in terms of courses and contents, communication problems, challenges related to cultural differences and discrimination. Exams, homework, physical conditions, registration, and rules were other challenging areas encountered in Turkish Higher Education. In addition to school-related challenges, participants faced learning challenges based on their Turkish language proficiency and English language learning processes too.

Ateşok et al. (2019) also investigated the challenges faced by refugee university students in Türkiye. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with university administrative staff and two focus group discussions involving five Syrian academics, ten Syrian students, two researchers, and eight representatives from voluntary organizations working in refugee education. The challenges identified included issues related to refugee status, a restrictive legal and regulatory framework, language barriers, non-recognition of prior formal education, and a lack of sufficient information and guidance.

In a different region of Türkiye, Bimay (2021) also examined the challenges together with the expectations of Syrian students who migrated to various cities in Türkiye regarding their access to education while studying in higher education institutions. Employing a phenomenological design, the study focused on universities in Mardin, Batman, Siirt, and Şırnak cities in the Southeast Region of Türkiye. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form from students selected through random sampling from universities in these cities in the first half of 2021. The findings of the research revealed that Syrian students faced numerous challenges in their education process, primarily due to language barriers and economic conditions. It was also determined that they were not able to overcome the severe psychological trauma caused by the war and did not receive support from any institutions, including their universities, which negatively impacted their education. Additionally, it was also revealed that they contributed to the socio-cultural life of the city they resided in and mostly did not wish to return to their home country. Relying on these findings, Bimay (2021) suggested that there is an urgent need for measures to address the problems faced by Syrian students and considering the number of Syrian youth studying in higher education in Türkiye, he suggested in this study that a more comprehensive education and integration policy that includes more holistic elements for Syrian students can significantly contribute to Turkish Higher Education.

Shifting the focus from the challenges to the issues of belonging, Dereli (2021) employed a refugee-centered approach to investigate how higher education shapes experiences of belonging with a particular focus on place-belongingness which she investigated based on the campus experiences of Syrian refugee students. Employing a qualitative case study in which forty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with Syrian university students and participant observation as data collection tools in Gaziantep, Türkiye during the fall of 2019, this study sought to identify the factors that contributed to refugees' sense of belonging and to what extent these contextualized experiences impacted their feeling of inclusion in the university environment. Interviews with participants in the study revealed that a combination of autobiographical, relational, cultural, and legal factors could enhance refugees' sense of belonging through their campus interactions. Conversely, some participants reported negative experiences and a diminished sense of belonging due

to these same factors. In line with the studies of Cin and Doğan (2021), the university campus provided a relatively equal standing with local students in a welcoming, diverse, and home-like setting, fostering increased interactions with locals and peers. For some, their learner identity extended their sense of belonging beyond the campus, empowering them in the host country with this acquired identity. But still for some others, the university represented another space where they felt marginalized indicating that refugees' sense of belonging is relative, complex, and multifaceted and is impacted from a variety of distinct factors.

In a multi-site empirical qualitative research with Syrian refugee youth, Fincham (2020) critically explored Syrian refugees' interest in, access to and experiences within higher education opportunities provided for them by local and international partners in Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye. By using interview and focus group data, the study examined the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of higher education opportunities for Syrian refugees in these countries. It was found in this study that although access to higher education is improving for refugees in the Syrian context, the accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of these opportunities to meet the needs of refugees remain challenging, and thus, higher education often fails to empower refugees to lead lives they find meaningful. Moreover, the functionings achieved in and through higher education for refugees turned out to be economic (e.g., improved employability prospects), intrinsic (e.g., personal fulfillment), or social (e.g., gaining status within the community).

Hauber-Özer (2021) explored the experiences of 11 young adult Syrian refugees living under temporary protection status and studying at a Turkish-medium university in a small city in central Türkiye. Employing critical ethnography and narrative inquiry methodology, the study investigated the experiences of participants in Turkish universities, how they overcame barriers to invest in higher education in the host country and how they envisioned and pursued their future goals and identities through education by means of the collection of multilingual and multimodal data with questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and photovoice workshops. The analysis revealed participants' experiences, presented as individual narrative portraits that highlighted both unique and shared challenges in



navigating linguistic, economic, and structural obstacles. The findings emphasized the significance of quality language instruction, interpersonal relationships, and supportive faculty, while also highlighting key deficiencies in current Turkish educational and migration policies, underscoring the urgent need for curricular reform and teacher professional development.

In another study, Arar et. al. (2020) examined Turkish higher education (HE) policy for Syrian refugee students by exploring their experiences and documenting the political, social, and cultural dynamics influencing these experiences. The research involved reviewing reports, notices, and circulars to understand the main aspects of Türkiye's HE policy for Syrian refugee students. To uncover the students' experiences, 27 interviews were conducted with students studying at a public university in the eastern region of the country. The findings of this study highlighted three main points. First, Türkiye's HE policy was found to be reactive, with ongoing challenges leading to modifications, alterations, or additions to the policy. Second, both the interview data and key reports identified documentation, language barriers, financial issues, and guidance as the primary challenges for Syrian refugee students. Lastly, the students highlighted the positive impact of higher education in helping them normalize their lives in the host country and build their future. However, the conflicts identified between Syrian and Turkish students suggested in this study that Syrian refugee crisis extended beyond a refugee issue, encompassing complex sociological and political dimensions, thus complicating the situation further.

In a similar vein, Erdemir (2022) explored the opportunities and challenges that Syrian refugee students have been experiencing since their immigration to Türkiye and the HE policies in socio-economic, cultural and political contexts with a bilateral analysis discussing the advantages and disadvantages of this migration for both host and refugee communities. By employing policy documents, reports, regulations and circulars, this study sought to answer questions related to the opportunities and challenges for Syrian refugee students in HE, the major reasons for unease among Turkish youth in HE related to Syrian migration and how future HE policies can be shaped for the good of Syrian and Turkish youth. In line with the previous research, in this study main challenging areas were found to be the preparation for HE,

admission and registration processes, financial barrier, unemployment and financial challenges and finally Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies related to refugees.

In her study, Hauber-Özer (2023) sought to address how refugee students overcame barriers to access higher education through an asset-focused perspective on the stories of ten Syrian young adults accessing higher education during forced displacement in Türkiye. Through the narrations of these ten students, the researcher divides stories into stages of crossing, preparation, struggle, transformation and participation, and depicts how they passed through them. She found out that segregated education in temporary education centers supported by NGOs, while easing the transition to formal schooling, hindered language acquisition and social integration, and although many participants had positive experiences in these schools, the quality varied significantly across Türkiye due to inconsistent oversight and teacher qualifications.

In their study Safak-Ayvazoglu and Kunuroglu (2021) depicted the acculturation experiences and psychological well-being of Syrian refugees attending universities in Türkiye. They examined the contexts of acculturation that shaped Syrian university students' experiences, their acculturation orientations, and the association between their psychological and social well-being in the migration context and their intergroup perceptions by using semi-structured oral interviews with fifteen students. The research revealed that the majority of Syrian university students adopted an integration strategy in the public domain and a separation strategy in the private domain as their acculturation orientations. Most participants reported high levels of life satisfaction in Türkiye and noted a positive influence of the refugee experience on their lives. Conversely, they described negative psychological states, including depressive feelings and intrusive distressing thoughts about past traumatic events, as well as poor social well-being, such as low levels of connectedness and inclusion in the new context. They also found out that participants identified several perceived causes of their psychological state, which were categorized under 'reasons for negative psychological well-being.' These included (1) lack of a wide social circle of friends, (2) lack of social support, (3) discrimination, (4) worries about Syria, (5) worries about family, and (6) language difficulties. Conversely, other factors were grouped under 'reasons for positive well-being in the migration context,' such as (1)

having the chance to continue education, (2) escaping the negative conditions in Syria, (3) speaking the mainstream language, (4) natives being supportive, (5) having a satisfying social life, (6) having in-group support, (7) having good professors, (8) cultural similarities, (9) possessing skills valued in the social circle, (10) family members doing well, and (11) positive thoughts about the future of Syria.

In their phenomenological study, Kondakçı et. al. (2022) explored the HE experiences of Syrian forcibly displaced migrants (FDMs) in Türkiye. In the study which they used snowball sampling twenty-four Syrian FDMs in Türkiye were interviewed. The results indicated that HE was a means for these individuals to rebuild their lives. However, they encountered numerous challenges both before and after accessing HE. These challenges were difficulties in obtaining official documents from their home country, managing university admission processes, and language barriers, as well as from broader social, economic, and cultural systems, including public resistance. Regarding education system-related challenges, Türkiye adopted a dynamic approach to addressing these issues and creating opportunities for Syrian FDMs in HE. However, challenges related to discrimination led Syrian FDMs to question their sense of belonging, initially based on cultural, geographical, and religious proximity to Türkiye, and to reconsider their intentions of staying in the country permanently (Kondakçı et. al., 2022).

In another study on refugees in HEIs, Cin and Doğan (2021) investigated how refugee students created pathways to higher education, based on interviews with fifteen Syrian university students attending various universities across Türkiye. Adopting capabilities-based human development framework, they identified the factors that facilitated students' transition into university and examined how they navigated the complexities of higher education. The narratives of the refugees revealed that access to university was influenced by a combination of personal ambition, family support, community assistance, and social and educational policies. Their educational experiences indicated that higher education served as a site of justice, where everyday racism, xenophobia, and discrimination were significantly mitigated by providing a peaceful and safe space for coexistence, despite financial and pedagogical challenges. This research highlighted the students' agency in

utilizing their assets for the benefit and well-being of their communities and emphasized the values universities should promote for refugee students who overcame significant obstacles to access higher education.

Research has also been conducted with Turkish teachers and students who teach and study alongside Syrian refugee students to understand their educational and adaptation processes by considering the perspectives of different stakeholders. In such a study, Ergin (2016) examined the perspectives and experiences of local Turkish students who studied in the same classrooms with Syrian refugee students. The findings revealed that while Turkish students generally held favorable views regarding the internationalization of higher education, they expressed significant concerns about Syrian students' access to higher education in Türkiye. Local students perceived this access as inequitable when compared to the opportunities available to local students. Additionally, they were concerned about the strain on already limited institutional resources and the impact on the job market, especially given the high rates of youth unemployment in the country. However, despite their concerns, local students showed support for their Syrian classmates, acknowledging humanitarian issues, the right to education, and the advantages of internationalization and cultural diversity in the classroom. It is noted in the study that perceptions of Turkish students might differ at universities near the border, where there are more Syrian students indicating that these views might be specific to the research context where English is the medium of the instruction and there are less Syrian students when compared to the universities near the border.

There are few studies looking at the process of learning and/or teaching English (e.g. Hauber-Özer, 2021; Örsdemir-Şağın, 2022; Topluk, 2023). Asmalı (2017) explored the views of Turkish EFL working with refugee background learners in public schools in various parts of Türkiye. The data of the study were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 EFL teachers. Asmalı states that lack of Turkish knowledge of refugees could be overcome by the use of English as an international language, and thus the role of English teachers in public schools is crucial. The researcher identifies three main problematic areas. The first one was that there was not a special English programme for refugee background learners nor were

they receiving any prior classes which would prepare them for the level their mainstream classmates would have. The second finding was that no in-service teacher education was ensured for the EFL teachers who would teach refugee background learners in their English classes. Lastly, it was apparent from the study that EFL teachers developed compensation strategies for refugee students' seemingly low level of English such as positively discriminating refugee learners by giving them extra points in the examinations, providing additional instructions both in daily teaching and in examinations to ease understanding, and lastly boosting their motivation and tailoring the classroom activities to their level of understanding.

In another study on the professional identity of teachers working with refugee students, Topluk (2023) investigated the reflections of in-service English language teachers on their professional identities in the context of teaching Syrian children under temporary protection, as well as their overall teaching experiences. Through a qualitative case study in five primary schools in a Turkish city, and collecting data using metaphors and semi-structured interviews with twelve participants over a three-month period during the 2022-2023 academic year, she revealed that teachers' professional identities were shaped by a range of external and internal factors, including their motivations for choosing their career, personal and professional experiences, self-perceptions, beliefs about teaching and their Syrian students, emotions, thoughts, professional development opportunities, contextual elements, and relationships with colleagues and students. These identities influenced teachers' strategies for overcoming challenges, their efforts to grow as educators, and their ability to create a quality teaching environment and deliver effective English language instruction to children under temporary protection.

Finally, Örsdemir-Şağın (2022) explored the concepts of "the Self" and "the Other" through reflexivity in an EFL setting during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on two groups: EFL teachers and refugee EFL students. She examined how these conceptualizations impacted EFL teachers' language teaching practices with refugee students and the challenges these conceptualizations posed for refugee EFL students in various aspects. The study investigated these issues during the Covid-19 pandemic, the first academic year of face-to-face education following a period of online learning, and also reflected on experiences of online education retrospectively.

Adopting an interpretive research approach, the study employed a multiple case study design to critically analyze both EFL teachers and refugee students. The findings revealed that while The EFL teachers perceived themselves as "motivators for their refugee students" and as "advocates for standardization and equalization," reflecting a global justice perspective (Santos et al., 2007), they perceived their refugee students as "ambitious learners," "isolated individuals," and "attentive individuals." However, the reflexive journals indicate that the teachers also view their students as "flowers thriving through the mud" "worker bees," and "visitors" (p. 182). Despite lacking formal education or training in refugee education, EFL teachers employed specific strategies such as modifying tasks or avoiding certain topics to prevent emotional distress, offering additional support and opportunities in lessons to enhance participation and self-confidence, and incorporating cross-cultural activities.

This study also revealed that refugee students' self-conceptualizations indicated that they saw themselves as survivors who overcame significant challenges in their lives, as individuals who were often misunderstood, and as people bearing the weight of their past experiences. Participants in this study also viewed themselves as "snowdrop flowers," capable of blooming even in the harshest winter conditions, and as "mountains," maintaining strength and stability regardless of external circumstances. These findings highlighted that, despite acknowledging the burdens of their past and experiencing alienation and discrimination, they had a strong belief in their courage to overcome life's difficulties.

All in all, the literature on refugee students in higher education shows that although there are significant barriers to their integration into both educational and societal spheres in the host country, higher education also serves as a site of resilience building and providing a safe environment where othering and discrimination are experienced less. Although existing studies highlight the challenges faced, further analysis is needed on the educational and adaptation processes that Syrian refugee students undergo. As discussed, Türkiye offers opportunities for preparation and access to higher education institutions, making it essential to investigate the subsequent educational experiences of these students in universities in greater depth.

## 2.6. Theoretical Framework

**Intersectionality.** Building on Crenshaw's foundational work (1989, 1991), intersectionality, both in theory and practice, seeks to understand how power is structured in society through multiple, interacting social divisions such as race, gender, and class (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) describe that "intersectionality has always served as a focal point rather than a fixed system, facilitating open-ended exploration of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" (p. 788), and "it does not refer to a unitary framework but a range of positions, and that essentially it is a heuristic device for understanding boundaries and hierarchies of social life" (Anthias, 2013, p. 4).

In the context of globalization, the study of social categories such as ethnicity, gender, and class requires more detailed research, particularly concerning their intersections (Block & Corona, 2014). Focusing on intersectionality is crucial because these social categories are often overlapping and interdependent. For instance, the challenges faced by struggling immigrant students cannot be solely attributed to nationality or ethnicity; they must also be examined in relation to other categories like class, gender, and religion (Norton & De Costa, 2018). Since different dimensions of identity cannot be examined in isolation from one another, and intracategorical differences often present the most compelling aspects of identity research, ignoring intersectionality and adopting a divide-and-analyze approach results in research that offers an incomplete portrayal of research participants (Block & Corona, 2016).

Block and Corona (2016) explain some reasons for the need for intersectionality while researching identity as follows: Firstly, researchers generally recognize that while studies often focus on one aspect of identity, it is impossible to exclude other dimensions. For example, research on racial identity will inherently engage with gender, nationality, and other identity dimensions. Secondly, when researchers examine multiple identity dimensions simultaneously, it is crucial to explore how these dimensions interconnect. Merely stating that race and gender are significant for understanding an individual's experiences is insufficient; there must be an analysis of

how these dimensions are interdependent and interact in social activities. Lastly, there has been a lack of research that adequately addresses intra-dimensional differences and variations, such as the diverse experiences within the label 'Latino,' which may obscure more than it reveals without acknowledging and exploring these internal differences.

Norton (2013) clearly illustrates how gender and ethnicity, along with nationality and social class, intersect in her analysis of the lives of five immigrant women in Canada in her seminal book. Appleby (2013) conducted a study that crossed ethnic, gender, and sexuality divides and found that White Australian men teaching in Japanese language schools faced a particularly complex contact zone, which may have hindered their professional and pedagogical goals. Similarly, Kamada's (2009) study in Japan on the hybrid identities of adolescent girls who were 'half' Japanese highlighted issues of both ethnicity and gender, illustrating how these young women struggled to negotiate desirable identities when confronted with marginalizing discourses. Fought's (2006) research on race, ethnicity, and language is another example of intersectionality in language and identity studies. She demonstrates that understanding a dimension like race requires an awareness of how it intersects with other identity dimensions, such as ethnolinguistic affiliation and social class.

While studies have shown that the experiences of migrants and refugees vary based on their position in the hierarchy of gender, race, power, and sexuality, much research on refugees has overlooked these connections (Carasthesis et al., 2018; Grosfoguel et al., 2015). The "inextricability of racial, gendered, sexual, and class power relations" (p. 5) has led a network of feminist scholars to express concerns about the lack of intersectional research, particularly as the refugee crisis continues to grow (Carasthesis et al., 2018). By treating refugees as a static category, policymakers ignore their complex histories, geopolitical origins, and fluid identities shaped by structural forces, thereby overlooking the multiple factors contributing to identity and community formation (Aberman, 2014). It is evident that migrant advocacy relies on both the avowed and ascribed identities of migrants and advocates, which are always intersectional. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) highlights that our experiences of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual



orientation, and economic status are interwoven, with each aspect influencing and shaping the others (DeTurk, 2020). An intersectional perspective enhances our understanding of the social identities of migrants, advocates, and their intended audiences.

Pincock et. al. (2023) state that an intersectional approach is particularly relevant for analyzing the experiences of adolescent refugees with disabilities in Jordan because it helps to move beyond 'thinking in categories' when it comes to social identities (Hunting, 2014). They warn that intersectionality requires careful consideration of the rationale for analyzing social identities, recognizing that social categories are fluid and interwoven (Hillsburg, 2013), and thus suggest that participants should be allowed to self-categorize and discuss their experiences in terms of identities that resonate with them, rather than those an interviewer assumes are significant (Bowleg, 2008).

Exploring the identity narrations of Syrian refugees in Turkish higher education through an intersectional framework could offer substantial advantages. The complexity of their experiences, involving war, forced migration, displacement, ethnicity, citizenship, language learning and education through and in higher education, necessitates a nuanced approach that intersectionality inherently provides. By adopting an intersectional lens, I tried to capture the multifaceted nature of Syrian refugee students' identities, acknowledging the interconnectedness of various dimensions and how they intersect within the educational context. This approach was utilized to unveil the intricate dynamics shaping their experiences and shed light on the nuanced challenges they face within Turkish higher education. Moreover, employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework facilitated an understanding of how overlapping identities and social structures influence access to educational resources, social integration, and the construction of individual and collective identities among Syrian refugee students in Turkish higher education settings.

**Bourdieu's Sociological Theory.** Bourdieu's sociological theory (1984, 1991) encompasses a wide range of notions and ideas, yet this research focuses on capital, habitus, and field to demonstrate how these concepts can collectively be used to

conceptualize the educational and adaptational experiences of five Syrian refugee students in a state university in central Türkiye. *Habitus* can be defined as the representations of people's behaviors and regulations they make in relation to the social mechanisms that guide their realities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) assert that habitus "is durable but not eternal" (p. 133). It encompasses the culturally and contextually embedded structures that shape an individual's cognitive, physical, and emotional interactions with the world. An individual's habitus is formed through experiences within specific field structures or environments. This concept is instrumental in understanding both the practical and liberating effects of limited educational access for refugee children and youth. It particularly underscores the socialization processes that adjust aspirations to fit the conditions refugees encounter, aligning their perceptions of what is feasible with the logic of their surroundings. Although Bourdieu asserts that habitus is deeply ingrained and enduring, he also recognizes that it is not unchangeable (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012).

The relationship between the social being and the social world is seen to be interdependent. Thus, a person cannot be thought of separately from their habitus. As Reay (2004) puts it, the agency, individual and collective histories, and the trajectories one goes through define what habitus is. Hence, it is suggested that the development of one's "socialized subjectivity" is affected by the social structures they are raised in (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126) and this symbiosis between the social world and the individual world goes on in the later experiences such as in the event of a forced migration.

As social beings, the habitus refugees find themselves in is a defining factor in the quality of their life experiences in the host country. That's why habitus is an important analytical tool when trying to understand how structural mechanisms in the host society influence the social world of refugees, which can also give an idea about the interaction between the pre-and post-migration periods as these two social worlds are not the same and not experienced with the same identities. The internalization of individual's own experiences in relation to the external social world which is constantly changing and in flux in the case of refugees and how they interact with all these result in one's, in this case, refugees' habitus.

The other conceptual tool Bourdieu (1991) suggests is *capital* which can be defined as the collection of one's own resources. Bourdieu (1991) posited that individuals make language choices based on the different types of resources or capital they possess. Using this economic metaphor, he argued that capital can be converted from one form to another. The concept of cultural capital, particularly, gained traction in the language education field after Peirce (1995) used it to explain her participants' investment in learning English. As Bourdieu (1986) puts it, in the accumulated history of their lives, individuals collect some resources in different forms, whether they are symbolic, social, cultural, or financial. When it is looked at from this sense, as each individual takes up a position in a multifaceted social space, an individual, and in the case of this study, a refugee is not defined only by their membership to a specific social class, but also through various social connections available to them and how meaningfully they can articulate their capital through these social relations. Capital encompasses the significance of social relations, and these connections can either produce or reproduce inequality. Mostly, because of their vulnerable position as refugees, they lack most forms of capital, such as friends or family together with institutionalized relationships, which all make up social capital. In terms of cultural capital, they may lack educational qualifications or some objectified cultural goods such as books because of their interrupted educational history or because of leaving all goods, including cultural ones, behind as a result of forced migration.

As for symbolic power, which represents the esteem one enjoys determined by their social status, refugees mostly do not enjoy this prestige as a result of their mostly undefined situation in the host country, and as for the background and reasons of their arrival. Unlike skilled migrants, refugees are mostly unwelcomed by the host country people as they are mostly observed to be a threat to the country's economic, political, and sociological condition (Erdemir, 2022), which results in relatively less symbolic power compared to non-refugee people in the society. Finally, the concept of *field* functions as the space where rules of society are established structurally and constructed in relation to positions of power or their capital, and refers to the setting where agents and their social positions are situated (Bourdieu, 1984). Each agent's position in the field is determined by the interaction between the specific rules of the field and their habitus and capital (De Costa, 2010).

**Life Capital.** Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of *capital* (1991), Consoli (2022) brings a new application of his sociological concept, life capital which I also adopt as an epistemic and methodological lens in this study in explaining five Syrian refugee students' educational and adaptational stories and how these shape their learning behaviors in a state university in central Türkiye. Consoli argues that everyone is equipped with life capital, and defines it as:

“a wealth which every person possesses, a wealth which can be understood through the richness of one's life experiences. Life capital thus entails memories, desires, emotions, attitudes, opinions, and these can be relatively positive or negative and explicit or concealed depending on how the individual manages, shares and employs their life capital” (Consoli, 2021a, p. 122).

What Consoli brings with this approach is “a novel perspective that values our humanity and recognizes the unique trajectories of our stories” (Consoli, 2022, p.1400). The holistic approach suggested contributes to my efforts for which I try to capture the five Syrian refugee students' journeys in their wholeness, not just divided into higher education experiences or instances of structural discrimination they faced in schools, but which starts with their pre-migration era and extends with all the crises and survivals they go through until and in most of their higher education years. In this way, my aim was to respect and embrace the stories of the participants in conducting respectful research in order to do justice to the unique narratives shaped by their experiences, backgrounds, and journeys, mostly filled with extreme crises and resilience. Immersing ourselves in these journeys as researchers and also as an educator can help us gain insight into the complexities that define their lives and to have a more comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences. In this way, we do not just appreciate the nuances and intricacies of refugee existence but also can find ways to make this existence more satisfying for them-which in the end will help not only these populations and the host countries they arrive, but the overall wellbeing of all people interacting, in a world that is in constant flux, dynamism and interaction.

## **2.7. Ontological and Epistemological Orientations**

This study draws on social constructivism, often intertwined with interpretivism (Mertens, 2024). According to Cresswell (2014), social constructivism is premised

on the idea that individuals hold subjective perceptions of reality, shaped by their interactions with the world and influenced by historical and social contexts. Merriam (1998) supports this view, stating that interpretive research acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, each uniquely constructed by individuals. This approach involves inductively generating or developing theories to understand the meaning of processes or experiences. Thus, in this paradigm, truth is interpreted rather than measured, and our understanding is derived from meaningful discussions with others which means humans construct their realities and truths through conversations (Cresswell, 2014). The core principles of the constructivist paradigm emphasize that researchers aim to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the perspective of the participants who experience it (Schwandt, 2000). Additionally, this paradigm underscores that research is inherently influenced by the values of the researchers and cannot be entirely separated from them (Mertens, 2024).

Adopting a social constructivist approach involves recognizing multiple realities that are socially constructed by individuals collectively. Knowledge is obtained through an empathic understanding of participants' lived social experiences. The aim of the research is to describe people's subjective lived realities, experiences, and understandings. Regarding axiological assumptions, subjective values, intuition, and biases are acknowledged as significant and influential in the dialogue of social construction and data interpretation. Consistent with this research paradigm, in this study, a qualitative research method—specifically, an ethnographic case study—is utilized. This method provides access to participants' inner, subjective experiences, where both researcher and participants engage in conversations to co-construct a new reality.

Following this paradigm, during this research, I assumed that reality is socially constructed; it is not an entity that exists outside of the researcher and is waiting to be measured. Therefore, I was aware that multiple mental constructions of reality can be constructed, some of which may be in conflict with each other, and perceptions of reality may change throughout the process of the study. For example, the concept of refugee was socially constructed phenomena that meant different things to different

participants in the study (Mertens, 2024). In this sense, constructivism means humans do not merely find or discover knowledge; rather, they actively construct or create it (Schwandt, 2000).

In terms of ontology, first, as a researcher, I allowed the concepts of importance in the study to emerge as they had been constructed by the participants. Rather than studying the experiences of refugee students in a defined approach, I used various forms of data collection tools to elicit their narratives about their experiences. I sought to gather stories from participants and to hear the firsthand accounts of those who experienced refugeehood in their educational and social contexts. My assumption was the authenticity of refugee students' voices would add to the currently scarce body of refugee students in Higher Education, especially in times of crisis, in a longitudinal way.

In the constructivist paradigm, the epistemological assumption holds that the researcher and the participants are interlocked in an interactive process; each influences the other (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist, therefore, opts for a more personal, interactive mode of data collection, which was an opportunity that the ethnographic case study allowed me to do. By taking the concept of confirmability in the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), I explained in this study that data, interpretations, and outcomes are rooted in contexts and persons apart from me as the researcher and are not figments of my imagination. Data can be tracked to their sources as I shared them in the Findings section and explained the logic used to assemble interpretations that are explicit in the narratives. As in many constructivist research studies, as a researcher, I strived to build a research relationship with my participants, and for this purpose, I interacted with participants in multiple ways over extended periods of time.

All in all, this study, grounded in an interpretivist perspective, sought to comprehend the subjective meanings behind refugee students' educational and adaptational experiences. It recognized that their actions are influenced by their personal interpretations of reality, formed through everyday constructs (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). By exploring the viewpoints of these social actors, the study aimed "to

capture the process of interpretation through which [actors] perform their actions" (Blumer, 1962, p. 188; as cited in Mertens, 2024). Therefore, as the researcher, I provided an interpretation of the participants' interpretations within the context of specific concepts, theories, and literature from the academic discipline.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Chapter Presentation**

Within the scope of this methodological chapter, this section includes research design and the methodological and analytical choices I made to collect and analyze the data. I begin this chapter by explaining the overall research design and go on to discuss the rationale behind choosing the particular research site to collect the ethnographic data for the case study, and how I gained access to the community. Then, I provide the extended and detailed accounts of the participants. This section is followed by the description of the data collection procedures and data collection tools, namely, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, journals and artifacts. In following section on data analysis, I discuss the steps I followed to transcribe, analyze and interpret the data. Then, I discuss my positionality as a researcher in this study. The methodological chapter is finalized by discussing ethical considerations, issues of quality and trustworthiness of the study.

#### **3.2. Research Design**

Qualitative research draws on a variety of theoretical foundations from fields such as sociology, anthropology, educational sciences, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics. Its aim is to achieve a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of human behavior within natural settings (Creswell, 2009). This dissertation adopted a qualitative approach grounded in a social constructivist epistemology, emphasizing close engagement between researchers and participants. Qualitative researchers focus on how individuals interpret their world, which comprises multiple, equally valid realities, rather than a single, unchanging reality (Heit & Rotello, 2010; Highfield & Bisman, 2012). This approach often involves conducting studies within the natural



environments where participants live and work, which is essential for capturing their viewpoints. Flick (2014) also argues that using multiple data sources under a systematic triangulation approach has been a common tradition in qualitative research as it “allows systematically extending the possibilities of knowledge production by using [an additional] methodological approach” (p. 184). In addition to the multiple data sources, prolonged engagement in the field (Wolcott, 1999) allows researchers to gain profound insights through direct interactions. Essentially, the goal is to minimize the "distance" or "objective separateness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1988, p. 94) between the researcher and the research subjects.

Yin (2016) identifies five key characteristics that set qualitative research apart from other types of research within the social sciences. Firstly, qualitative research prioritizes the exploration of human behavior in its natural settings. The significance of findings is contingent upon their reflection of the surrounding conditions, as social phenomena are profoundly influenced by these contexts. Secondly, qualitative researchers actively engage in the research process, immersing themselves in the environment, conversing directly with participants, and sometimes living among them to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This active participation allows researchers to be closer to their data sources, facilitate conversations with relevant individuals, make observations, and access relevant documents, thereby providing a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. Additionally, qualitative research seeks to uncover the perceptions and experiences of the participants of the research study. Besides, unlike positivist paradigms that emphasize testing hypotheses to establish cause-effect relationships, qualitative research often employs inductive analysis. This approach enables researchers to develop categories and themes relevant to the research problem and to generate theories by linking these themes. The final distinguishing feature of qualitative inquiry is its recognition of the necessity to use multiple data sources and to analyze these data holistically to comprehend the social phenomenon under study to a great extent.

**Case Study Research.** This study adopts an ethnographic case study approach. However, before delving into this approach, a thorough explanation of case study research will be provided first. Duff (2012) describes case studies in applied

linguistics as a method of inquiry and theory development aimed at understanding participants' behaviors, performance, knowledge, and perspectives to address specific questions or topics. According to Yin (2012), a case is an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon bound by specific temporal and situational boundaries, with data collected from individuals experiencing the case through a predefined procedure. Similarly, Creswell (2013) characterizes a case study as a qualitative approach wherein the researcher examines a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time. Punch (1998) also emphasizes that the goal of a case study is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the situation. This involves detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information such as observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports, culminating in a case description and thematic analysis.

This research design is interactive and emergent, focusing on examining a particular phenomenon and exploring the connections among its various components. The primary strength of this methodology lies in its capacity to illustrate broader processes or situations in a highly accessible, concrete, immediate, and personal manner, providing depth and specificity that leads to valuable insights for the individual case being studied (Duff, 2012). Case studies are favored as a strategy by researchers when questions beginning with how, what, or why are addressed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Since case study involves an in-depth examination of an individual or a small group of participants, specific conclusions are drawn for that particular participant or group within a particular context (Bell, 2005). Thus, for the themes that emerge from the participants' narrations and expressions, the goal is not to prove a particular aspect or to make generalizations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). That's why, unlike macro-level studies, case studies focus on data at the micro level (Rowley, 2002).

As "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p.40) and employing multiple sources of evidence to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014), case study research explores the lives of real people (Cohen, 2007) in real-life situations, examining how local phenomena relate to broader principles within their real-life context (Yin, 2014). This approach allows researchers

to observe the unique characteristics of individual units or bounded systems within their real contexts, including processes and interconnections within these systems and with larger structures. McCall (2005) argues that case studies are the most effective method for empirically investigating the complexity of intersecting categories in individuals' daily lives. This approach involves examining how multiple, shifting identities and relationships are represented, how individuals identify or disidentify with various groups, and how specific contexts influence these dynamics. This analysis involves exploring the formation of identities, identifying the moments and individuals who highlight these identities, and assessing how certain identities are prioritized by individuals in particular contexts and times (Valentine, 2007). Thus, case study research assumes that exploring the context and other complex conditions related to the case studied are integral to understanding the case (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

By asking “how and “what” questions (Yin, 2003), Yin (2014) identifies stages for conducting a qualitative case study. Initially, he suggests that researchers must justify the suitability of the case study approach for their research, which hinges on the formulation of the research questions and the necessity for "an extensive and in-depth description of some social phenomenon" (p. 4). The second stage involves designing the research to ensure validity and reliability. The third stage focuses on preparing for data collection by (i) formulating questions that yield accurate findings, (ii) being an active listener through relevant follow-up questions, (iii) remaining adaptable and modifying the research design as needed (as in times of COVID-19 pandemic for researchers), (iv) possessing a thorough knowledge of the studied phenomenon to make informed interpretations, and (v) avoiding bias and adhering to research ethics. The fourth stage is data collection, which includes multiple forms of data collection tools for triangulation. Finally, the sixth stage is reporting the findings and disseminating them to a broader audience interested in the field (Yin, 2014, p. 4).

**Ethnographic Case Study.** Ethnography is defined as “the description and interpretation of a culture or social group” (Holloway et al., 2010, p. 76). Duranti (1997) elaborates that it involves “the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices

characteristic of a particular group of people” (p. 85). Supporting this perspective, Heath and Street (2008) highlight that the ethnographic method is a powerful tool for studying the sociocultural context in which a group operates and evolves. It is used to “explore the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture or react to others in response to a changing phenomenon” (Fusch et. al., 2017, p. 923). Effective ethnographic research requires prolonged engagement at the research site (Wolcott, 1999), aiming to minimize the "distance" or "objective separateness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1988, p. 94) between the researcher and the subjects. Wolcott (2009) outlines three essential components of ethnographic procedures: (1) providing a detailed description of the culture-sharing group being studied; (2) analyzing this group in terms of perceived themes and perspectives; and (3) interpretation of the group by the researcher.

Ethnographers have aimed to transcend the notion of a fixed context that is unproblematically tied to a single case, instead conducting ethnographies that are interconnected across sites, grounded in historical contexts, inclusive of their personal histories, and linking micro-processes to macro structures and dynamics (Riain, 2009). Rather than briefly immersing themselves in a site, ethnographers invest significant time and effort to gain access, build trust, and establish rapport with community members, such as students and teachers in a school. Ethnographers must provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the field site, which requires spending an extended period (at least one academic semester) with participants to observe their behavior across various contexts and social interactions (De Costa et al., 2022). This prolonged engagement allows ethnographers to develop an in-depth understanding of the research context.

Since blended designs use the best of both worlds (Riain, 2009), one can blend study designs to be able to use the best of each design that can mitigate the limitations of each as well. Ethnographic research has long been synonymous with case studies, typically rooted in local, well-defined, and self-contained social contexts (Yin, 2014). An ethnographic case study involves prolonged observations in a natural setting within a specific bounded system (Angers and Machtmes, 2005). It utilizes ethnographic methods to build arguments about cultural, group, or community

formation or to examine other sociocultural phenomena (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). This approach allows researchers to collect detailed descriptive information from students over time, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of cultural diversity in their setting. Furthermore, as Fusch et al. (2017) and Goetz and LeCompte (1984) noted, an ethnographic case study can employ various methods to collect rich data for triangulation. This design is grounded in the ethnographer's presence within the time and space of those being studied, learning through mutual experience and situatedness within the social world. Thus, the ethnographer's personal journey is integral to defining the case (Riain, 2009).

An ethnographic case study focuses on a specific site and encourages participants to speak for themselves (Riain, 2009). This design also allows researchers to explore causal links, which is uncommon in traditional ethnographies (Fusch et al., 2017, p. 926). Both ethnographic and case study designs aim to capture the complex uniqueness of each cultural scene through "thick description" (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). In ethnography, "thick description and thick participation" help researchers gain emic perspectives and utilize analytical lenses that highlight what is significant to individuals from their specific socio-historical contexts (Lillis, 2008).

In light of the reflexive turn in social research, there has been increased attention to how ethnographers themselves influence the cases they study. Ethnographers are no longer seen as outsiders uncovering unknown worlds; instead, their embodied experiences are vital resources that also present challenges in defining and generalizing from cases (De Costa et. al., 2022). The fluid nature of ethnographic cases, shaped by the ethnographer's position within the field, raises important questions about how to convey personal experiences and tacit knowledge to readers (Riain, 2009). Understanding local contexts is essential for comprehending broader cultural and social structures, as these contexts are where such structures are created, maintained, and transformed. The connection to ethnographic methodology is evident: practical rationality and judgment evolve primarily through deep, immersive case experiences (Riain, 2009).

On an interpretivist level, in this study, I adopted an ethnographic case study approach to achieve an in-depth and holistic understanding of the meanings and

interpretations of lived experiences of academic and social experiences of SRSs in a Turkish HEI. This approach was chosen because both the assumptions and method of this approach aligned with my objective of exploring the lived and perceived experiences of five Syrian refugee students at an EMI state university in central Türkiye. Using an ethnographic research case study, I aimed to give a voice to a group of Syrian refugee students, who were the central focus of this research in one of the Turkish Higher Education contexts.

By combining the powerful storytelling ability of case methodology, which effectively illustrates broader processes in an engaging and personal manner, with the detailed and comprehensive nature of ethnography (De Costa et al., 2022), the exploration of concepts such as identity, migration, and phenomena like pandemics or integration becomes interpretive. Education for refugees, although sharing some similarities with that of international students, differs significantly and thus requires more specialized research (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012). Refugees may have faced displacement, loss, uncertainty, and a sense of temporariness, alongside the traumatic adjustment to a new environment, culture, and language. These unique circumstances must be carefully considered when providing both basic and higher education. Therefore, refugee education necessitates holistic, intersectional, multi-level research to create a comprehensive framework that addresses the diverse factors involved (Anderson et al., 2004).

Moreover, ethnographic case study facilitates a detailed understanding of learners' experiences, challenges, and viewpoints, highlighting their abilities and perceptions within these contexts. It also explores how learners' identities, migration experiences, and educational development are interconnected within their specific communities, considering the influence of power structures and relational dynamics that shape these environments (De Costa et. al., 2022). Additionally, this method enables researchers to establish rapport, build trust, and develop empathetic connections with participants. By actively engaging with the community, researchers can offer a more comprehensive and humanistic portrayal of the experiences, challenges, and achievements of Syrian refugee students. In summary, utilizing an ethnographic case study to examine Syrian refugees' academic and social experiences in Turkish higher

education, particularly at a time of crisis, is expected to provide a holistic, contextualized, and multifaceted understanding of their experiences, offering insights that other qualitative methods might not fully capture.

In this study, the unit of analysis is the academic and adaptational experiences of a specific group of Syrian refugee students at a state EMI university in central Türkiye. The context is an EMI state university in central Türkiye, and the case is a particular group of Syrian refugee students' academic and social experiences in this setting. These experiences extend from war and migratory experiences of Syrian refugee students to their transition to the host country, from their early schooling experiences in the country to their entry to higher education, from the preparatory school period to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the online education following it. The researcher's purpose is not to identify commonalities or make generalizations about the participants' particular experiences but to focus on understanding their lived and perceived experiences in all their complexity (Stake, 1988). On an interpretivist level, this study aims to capture the subjective meanings of the Syrian refugee students' academic and social experiences, recognizing that their behavior is based on their interpretation of reality using their own common-sense constructs (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). It seeks to understand the perspective of these social actors by capturing the interpretive processes through which they perform their actions (Blumer, 1962). In this sense, the researcher is providing an interpretation of others' interpretations, in the context of certain concepts, theories and literature from a specific discipline.

Ethnographic studies often unfold over an extended period, allowing for longitudinal insights. Researchers can track changes in attitudes, behaviors, and identity constructions among SRSs over time. This longitudinal perspective aids in comprehending the dynamic nature of identity development within the educational environment and how they evolve over the course of their educational journey. This method also allows researchers to establish rapport, build trust, and develop empathetic connections with participants. By actively engaging with the community, researchers can portray a more comprehensive and humanistic portrayal of the experiences, struggles, and successes of Syrian refugee students. In summary,

employing an ethnographic case study in studying Syrian refugees' identity negotiations in Turkish higher education is expected to provide a holistic, contextualized, and multifaceted understanding of their experiences, offering insights that other qualitatively oriented methods might not fully capture.

### **3.3. Research Setting and Participants**

**The Research Setting.** English, which is taught as a foreign language rather than a native or second language in Türkiye, does not hold official status. According to the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) (2016), departments where English is the medium of instruction—either partially (30% of courses) or fully (100% of courses) must offer one-year preparatory programs through the university's School of Foreign Languages which are known as Preparatory Schools. These schools are compulsory for students in fully EMI programs and voluntary for those in partially EMI programs (YÖK, 2016). Students who are required to attend the compulsory education program can take the proficiency exams administered by universities at the beginning of the academic year (YÖK, 2016). If they meet the universities' English language proficiency standards through this examination, they can directly start their respective departments. Universities that use Turkish as the medium of instruction do not offer compulsory preparatory programs; however, they may offer voluntary preparatory programs if deemed necessary by the universities (YÖK, 2016).

In the Turkish higher education system, after completing high school, students must take a highly competitive university entrance exam and submit a preference form listing their desired universities and programs. The CoHE then places students in universities and programs based on their exam scores. Following registration, all students, whether local and international, take an English proficiency test. Those who pass the university's required score continue with their chosen programs, while those who do not are enrolled in English preparatory schools. These preparatory programs, typically lasting two terms, provide English instruction tailored to students' proficiency levels, focusing on four language skills and subskills such as grammar and vocabulary. All students who register to study in an English-medium undergraduate program at the university are required to demonstrate their proficiency

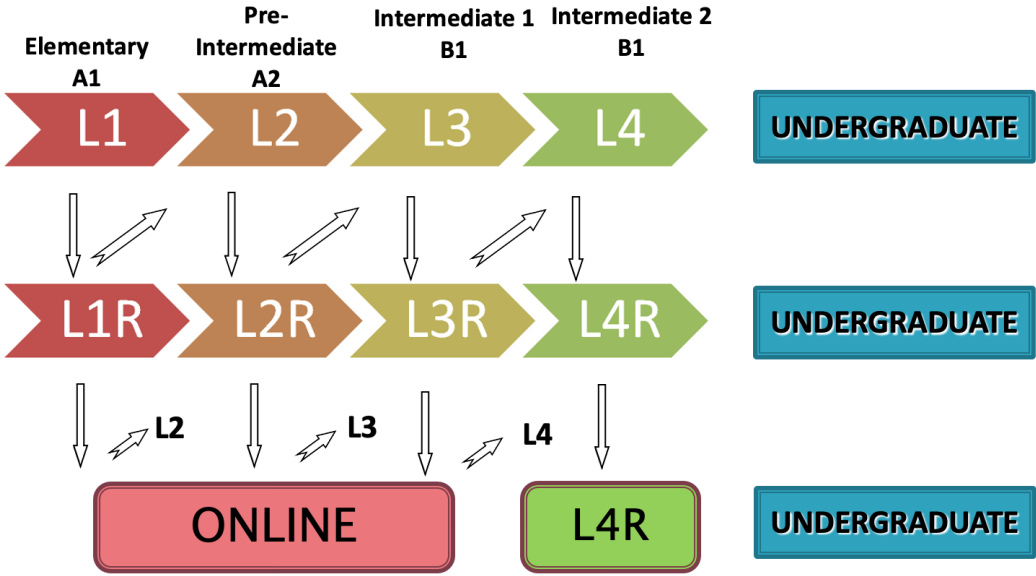


in English before they are entitled to take courses in their respective programs. Upon passing the proficiency exam at the end of the academic term, students can begin their academic programs.

The research context of this study is Newfoundland University (pseudonym), which is one of the leading state EMI universities located in central Türkiye. Newfoundland University is in one of the largest cities in Türkiye and is also recognized as one of the leading higher education institutions in Türkiye for its research projects, international partnerships, and graduate employability (URAP, 2024). At the start of the fieldwork in the 2019-2020 academic year, the university had 66,650 students, including 3,618 international students 349 of whom were Syrian refugee students (YÖK, 2024). In the Preparatory School where the research was conducted, there were 10 Syrian refugee students at the time. The Preparatory School, situated in a small district of a diverse metropolitan area, is home to over 100 full-time lecturers and 3,000 students. I had been working at the Preparatory School of Newfoundland University for five years when I embarked on the study. This extensive professional relationship with the university inspired the conceptualization of my dissertation and the development of the research problem, as also explained in the Chapter Presentation of this chapter.

The university where this study is conducted is an EMI university that employs a 100% English medium in various academic programs. Consequently, the School of Foreign Languages (hereafter referred to as the Preparatory School) at this university offers both compulsory and voluntary preparatory programs. Students in the compulsory preparatory program must complete their studies at the Preparatory School within a maximum of two years and achieve the required language proficiency level to continue in their academic programs. If they fail to meet these standards within the two-year period, they are dismissed from the university. On the other hand, students enrolled in the voluntary preparatory program have one year to attend in English language courses at the Preparatory School. If they do not meet the school's requirements and pass the proficiency exam by the end of this year, they are still allowed to continue in their academic programs without any certification, but they must continue taking English courses as part of their studies.

The Preparatory School provides intensive English courses that last 32 weeks, divided into two academic terms. These terms are further broken down into four modules, each lasting two months, totaling eight months for the academic year (as of the 2019-2020 term). Students typically receive around 25 hours of English instruction per week. The program follows a structured curriculum and testing program to ensure that all learners achieve the learning objectives and demonstrate their proficiency in various language aspects, including reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, through regularly administered assessments. In this research context, the Preparatory School employs a modular system that assesses students bi-monthly and places them in classes based on their proficiency levels. Students are categorized into levels ranging from L1 to L4, corresponding to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels A1 (L1) to B1 (L4). Below is the pathway among levels:



**Figure 2.** Transition among levels at Preparatory School

Since students’ proficiency is assessed bi-monthly, two academic terms are divided into four quarters named Fall1, Fall 2, Spring 1, Spring 2. Students' levels are determined based on the results of a Placement Test administered at the beginning of the academic year, placing them into L1, L2, or L3 classes accordingly. Those who do not take the Placement Test are automatically placed in L1 in the first fall term. Students who start at the L1 level are required to progress sequentially through L2,

L3, and L4, taking the Gateway Exam at the end of each course. An exception is made for L4 students, who take the Proficiency Exam at the end of the semester, instead. As it is illustrated in Figure 2, the students who do not pass the Gateway Exam at the end of each module are required to repeat and take the same module again. If they fail again in the repeat class, then they proceed in online classes until they pass their present module. Students successfully complete the preparatory school once they pass the proficiency exam done at the end of the academic terms. This exam is administered three times in an academic year, and only the students who successfully pass the Gateway exam in their modules are eligible to take the Proficiency exam at the end of the academic term.

Course Evaluation			Gateway Exam	
Progress Test 1	Progress Test 2	Mini Oral Exam	Written Exam	Oral Exam
30%	50%	20%	80%	20%

**Figure 3.** Course Evaluation and Gateway Exam

To graduate successfully, students at Preparatory School are required to attend at least 85% of the total course hours. Failure to meet this attendance requirement results in being deemed unsuccessful, regardless of the examination scores for all students. For their year-end marks, students in the compulsory education program at the Preparatory School need to achieve a minimum score of 70, which is calculated based on various assessments (see Figure 3), in order to be eligible to take the proficiency exam administered at the end of each academic term. However, the rule for the required attendance rate was changed in the meantime.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in December 2019 and was declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), educational institutions in Türkiye were required by government regulations to adopt online education to maintain educational continuity and prevent

the spread of the virus. Consequently, higher education institutions suspended face-to-face instruction and transitioned to online education, where all students had to participate in online sessions of their own classrooms. In the institution where this study was conducted, participation in online education was not mandatory for this reason as before. Technological support was provided to students lacking necessary equipment if requested by the school. After three academic semesters of online education, conducted both synchronously and asynchronously, the Institution of Higher Education decided to return to face-to-face instruction at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year, due to the increasing number of vaccinations. During the first academic year of resumed face-to-face teaching, which was also the period during which the data collection process of the study had started and was already in progress, students completed their Preparatory School studies and passed the proficiency exam, allowing them to continue in their academic programs.

**The participants.** The participants of this study are Syrian refugee students (SRSs). This ethnographic case study used *purposeful criterion sampling* (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2013) to select the site and participants through my role as an EFL Instructor at the school. Although I was working as an EFL Instructor in the school, I did not know or teach any of the participants prior to the study, which helped mitigate any potential pressure on the participants regarding their involvement in the study or concerns about leaving the study later if they wished so. The case was chosen based on pre-established criteria to provide a rich and holistic description of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). The selection criteria for SRSs were: (1) they must be Syrian refugee students, (2) they must be enrolled in a program with 100% English medium instruction, (3) they must be studying at the university's preparatory school offering English language instruction at the time, and (4) they should be studying at a site that should be easily accessible and suitable for prolonged engagement due to the nature of the ethnographic case study. As my goal was to represent a range of experiences, these participants were from different academic programs studying a variety of majors in the preparatory school of the university. An additional reason for the choice of the research site and participants was my teaching position there, making me an insider, which facilitated entry, prolonged engagement, and contact with the participants.

After securing ethics approval from Middle East Technical University (METU) and permission from the principals of the school to conduct research, I was allowed to make a meeting with all the SRSs in the school to explain about the research. In this initial meeting at the school with SRSs, I explained about the nature of the research to them as both an EFL Instructor working there and a researcher from METU. This first meeting took about 45 min. in total. At the end of the meeting, I asked them if they wanted to participate in the research, out of all ten students, all but one agreed to take part in the study. Out of these nine students, two students had the intention of transferring to other universities, so they were not included in the study. One of them had proficiency neither in English nor Turkish to make communication effective between the researcher and the participant, so the study started with six participants (three females, three males); however, while the data collection was going on, one male participant left the country to turn back to Syria as a result of the death of one of the close relatives, and could not turn back. The demographics of the final participants are presented below:

**Table 1.** Background Information of the Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Language Level at Preparatory School (in 2019-2020)</i>	<i>Languages Known</i>	<i>Arrival Date to Türkiye</i>	<i>The Year of Entrance to University</i>	<i>The place and people they live with</i>
<i>Yasemin</i>	19	Female	Computer Engineering	L2	Arabic, Turkish, English	2013	2019	At home with the whole family
<i>Nur</i>	23	Female	Pharmacy	L4	Arabic, Turkish, English	2015	2019	Previously in the dormitory, after the COVID-19, at home with her husband
<i>Ahmet</i>	20	Male	Food Engineering	L4	Arabic, Turkish, English, Russian	2017	2019	Previously in the dormitory, after the COVID-19 at home with the family
<i>Ali</i>	20	Male	Medicine	L2	Arabic, Turkish, English	2016	2019	Previously in the dormitory, after the COVID-19 at home with the family
<i>Bella</i>	24	Female	Physics Engineering	L2	Arabic, English, Turkish	2018	2019	Previously at home with people from Iraq, later, on her own in a rented house

For those who agreed to participate, I administered an initial pre-study questionnaire to collect preliminary information, including students' names, languages spoken at home, year of seeking refuge in Türkiye, if applicable, phone numbers, etc. (see Appendix B). During this first meeting, I also discussed the nature of the research project, the tasks participants would be expected to complete, and the overall aim of the research. I addressed any questions they had about the study too. They were glad to see some people doing research about them. The students were enthusiastic about participating and contributing, even some of the students at the end of the meeting came and shared that they found the research topic interesting and expressed their appreciation for research being conducted about them. Following this initial meeting and the collection of pre-study questionnaires, I proceeded to identify students to ensure representation from different academic programs, arrival dates, and genders.

I conducted data collection over an 18-month period, from March 2020 to September 2021. However, the fieldwork extended from March 2020 to June 2024, spanning four years at Newfoundland University. This university was chosen not only because it has a population of Syrian refugee students but also because it is one of the leading institutions offering English medium instruction. Additionally, my role as an EFL instructor at the Preparatory School facilitated easy access and prolonged engagement necessary for conducting this ethnographic case study. The names of the participants, cities, and the school mentioned here are all pseudonyms. Participants selected their pseudonyms, and all others were assigned by the researcher. The following section provides detailed accounts of the participants to ensure a more comprehensive picture of them.

### **3.3.1. Nur<sup>3</sup>**

Born in Deir-ez Zor to a family of teachers, Nur spent her childhood there until she attended the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when the conflict broke out in Syria in 2011. Her father is a mathematics teacher, and her mother was an Arabic language teacher. Nur's mother had occasionally been hospitalized because of her heart illness and she would have to

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms were selected by the participants themselves. All the names of places and cities were also changed to ensure anonymity.

go to İzmir to see and help her mother sometimes. Nur lost her mother in February 2023 due to heart failure following the COVID-19 pandemic, just at the time when the earthquake hit Türkiye and Syria. Luckily, they were not living in the affected areas. In two months following her mother's death, she had a biopsy for some health problems. The first half of 2023 was surely challenging for her.

Nur remembers her childhood very vividly. She tells she spent a childhood in great prosperity, with all the loved ones together. Her relatives from her father's side were living close to them, and she was happy. While her father was working as a mathematics teacher, her Arabic teacher mother was taking care of Nur and her other two younger siblings; the brother studied at a Turkish university to be a civil engineer, while her younger sister later enrolled in Pharmacy program like her sister; she is going to graduate in a few years.

Nur's a typical day in Syria before the conflict was "ordinary". She would get up around six, have breakfast and go to school by the school bus. She would attend her classes until one in the afternoon and then return home. After having her dinner, she would do her homework, study for tomorrow's classes, and sleep at eight in the evening.

Nur's family had good financial capital allowing her to attend private schools all the time apart from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in high school. She would always sit in the front row of the classroom. She defines herself as a very silent child and a student who rarely speaks. Yet, she was competitive and always hardworking. She did not have a lot of close friends because of her quiet nature but was happy with her introverted style.

During the conflict, Nur's family house in the countryside was burnt while they were not in the city. Nur and her family moved to their other house, and she changed her school as a result of this. After attending this school for one academic term, Nur and her family migrated to Saudi Arabia upon Nur's uncle's call because of the increasing intensity of the conflict which slowly evolved into a civil war in Syria. They did not take anything with them as they were sure of returning back in a few weeks or months when the conflict ended. Yet, it did not happen, so, they stayed one

and a half years in their first resettlement country. Her uncle hired an apartment for them and took care of the family as Nur's father was not able to work there. Nur and her siblings attended a private school with her uncle's children and liked the environment so much. She said that Saudi Arabians never treated her badly; she always felt like she was one of them in Saudi Arabia. Yet, she was not happy with the education quality that much.

After spending one and half years in their first resettlement country, her father was called by his Syrian friends in Lebanon who found a job for him to work. Her father went first; however, there were new regulations in the country which prevented him from working as a Syrian refugee. They heard that the same kind of regulation could be made in Saudi Arabia, and once they settled there, they would not be allowed to leave the country, as is the case with people under temporary protection in Türkiye. Then, they followed the father and went to Lebanon. In this second resettlement country, they lived less than a year. Again, his father's friends, this time, founded a school in Türkiye and invited him to work there. His father went first and arranged everything, then they left Lebanon and arrived in Türkiye as their third resettlement country in 2015.

Nur came to Türkiye in Spring term of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She did not know a word of Turkish when she first arrived. She started attending the Temporary Education Center in İzmir. She speaks of this experience as not a difficult one in TECs, where all other students were also Arabic. Thus, there was no language barrier. His father thought that Nur's learning Turkish was so important, that's why like Yasemin's family, he sent her to a Turkish language course as soon as they arrived. She both attended her school on weekdays and took Turkish classes at the language course at the weekends for eight hours. She says that she learned Turkish in the end, but it took some time as she believes Turkish is a lot different from Arabic.

After graduating from TEC, Nur attended a YÖS course to prepare for the exam. There, she met her future husband, Hüseyin, who was going to study at the Medical School of the same university she would attend. Hüseyin became a primary person in her life by helping her out with her studies. Nur could not make it in her first try, and



to attend the YÖS course for another year, she started working in a clothes shop. The conditions in this job were precarious, causing her to work for twelve hours every day. Her job was to help Arab customers and translating whatever they needed. She worked for one and a half months for a very low wage and left the job as she could not find any time to prepare for the YÖS class after long hours of working. Later, when she was talking about her future aspirations, she said she worked in that job only to be able to pay for his YÖS course; otherwise, she could never work in such a precarious job, and she can't in the future either. I should remind that she had a prosperous life in Syria back then. Moreover, Nur's parents were working in a course where Arabic students would attend. Since they could not teach formally, they were helping with other things like enrollment and stuff in Arabic, so their earning were not much for a family of five.

Hopefully, on her second try, she would be admitted to a Civil Engineering program at a Turkish Medium Instruction university in Aydın, a city in the Aegean Region of Türkiye, although her ideal was always to study a health-related department such as Medicine, Dentistry or Pharmacy. She did not want to be a civil engineer, but her motivation was to be placed in an academic program as her family did not want her to try YÖS for a third time. Once she arrived in Aydın, she took just a few classes and left the school. She went on staying in the dormitory where all her roommates were Turkish and prepared for YÖS for the third and final time.

Meanwhile, her Turkish proficiency was still weak, and she would be otherved occasionally by some of her dormmates related to her weak proficiency in Turkish. They would mock her and question how she was able to be admitted to a program with this level of Turkish. Nur states that she felt so bad, yet their attitude and her increased obligation to learn Turkish, as all the people she was in dialogue with were Turkish now, resulted in her learning it. She believes that sharing her dorm room with Turkish students and watching a lot of Turkish TV series helped her greatest in learning Turkish. Hüseyin had been placed to Medicine School and helped her prepare for the exam as much as he could. Finally, Nur made it and got placed to the Pharmacy program of same university with Hüseyin in the Middle Anatolian region of Türkiye. Her ideal was to be a doctor, and she chose pharmacy when she could not

make it, as pharmacy was “the closest to medicine”. Finally, she informed her family that she got admitted to Pharmacy program in another city, and they were so happy with the news although they were very surprised too. My observation is that Nur was autonomous enough to know what she really wanted and took whatever these ideals required her to do. Initially, Nur did not want to study in an EMI program, yet Hüseyin convinced her to do so, as “they might migrate to abroad one day, and it could be of use”. He was regretting his decision to study Medicine in Turkish and ensured Nur not to do the same mistake.

Nur and Hüseyin married in August 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially I was also invited to the wedding, yet after the pandemic broke out, they had a wedding that was only among family members. Being a married woman and student at the same time meant additional challenges as well as advantages for Nur. As a married woman, she had the responsibility of caring for her home, conducting her domestic duties, cooking, and all other things. Besides, whenever they went to İzmir to see their families, who were coincidentally living in the same neighborhood, Nur stayed with Hüseyin’s family rather than her own family. It was challenging for her at first, but through the years, their connection with Hüseyin’s family lessened, and now, only once a year, Nur goes to see them.

As for advantages, Nur did not have the challenges of living with many people in the same house, only she and Hüseyin were together in their little house that they rented. Already being a student himself, Hüseyin was always understanding to her. They shared his laptop during the COVID-19 pandemic too. Since his classes in medical school were asynchronous, he was able to watch them in the evening when Nur’s synchronous classes ended. This cooperation in every sphere of life was a constant help for Nur, which helped her deal with other challenges more easily. His behaviors as told by Nur confirmed my impressions when I met Hüseyin. A slender, young and silent guy who was going to be a doctor in Türkiye.

Upon being accepted to the English-medium Pharmacy program at the university, Nur started her preparatory school, which was compulsory for EMI program students. The first year was seemingly easy, yet she failed because of unattendance

while going back and forth to İzmir to help out her mother, who was frequently falling ill because of her heart issues. The next year, Nur repeated the preparatory school and passed. Her English proficiency improved a lot in a year as she admitted that she did know English before. In her second year, she studied hard in order not to lose any more years, a wish which was frequently worded by her. She was so sorry for the years lost. The interrupted education years and the three years she spent while preparing for YÖS always haunted her. Her classmates were three or four years younger, and this was making her very self-conscious about this.

After successfully passing the preparatory school, she went on her program in Pharmacy, in the first year of which she was an online student as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This upset her, like other participants, as this was not the university life they were expecting. Still, she successfully passed all her classes and formed a community of Arabic friends there. These students were not specifically from Syria, but rather, other Arabic countries like Iraq, Egypt, Jordan or Lebanon. Since she knew Turkish well, she acted as a mediator for these students as well. When everything had just turned normal in her Spring academic term of third grade, a major earthquake hit both Syria and Türkiye. Although the city she studied or lived in was not affected by the earthquake, all universities in Turkish Higher Education passed to online education once again two years after the COVID-19 pandemic ended. This was a major event nobody expected, as the online education period was something that they had left in COVID times, but all the participants had to adapt to this event and took the Spring Term of 2022-2023 academic year online. Compared to the COVID-19 pandemic period, they were more experienced in online education. They knew what to expect and universities were more prepared too. Nur placed great importance on her studies in Turkish Higher Education: "I have dedicated my life to this department and university." Succeeding was so important and indispensable for her after years of surviving in different countries and educational systems.

Nur holds dual citizenship. She is both a Syrian and a Turkish citizen. Among the participants, she was one of the first to acquire citizenship even before studying at university. A quite young woman in hijab, a pious, determined and hardworking, competitive woman, Nur has a determined and calm personality. Whatever happened

or in what circumstances she found herself in, she always tried to put her best, and went on. She comments on her personality trait by saying that "If I make a decision, I definitely follow through. I do it as if I have to."

Despite her quiet personality, Nur generously shared her life story with me, and kept her contact until now. Once while we were chatting, she admitted that she was so surprised to have told me so much, as she does not speak to people, especially to people out of her community, normally. Then she added, she did this because she knew I was doing something good for her community, by giving a voice to them. I guess this was the motivation for her long-term dedication to an ethnographic study.

Finally, Nur wants to have a future in Türkiye, and thinks of opening her pharmacy store, yet she is not sure if Turkish people would go and purchase from her. She is anxious of not being able to compete with Turkish citizens, although she is a Turkish citizen now too. The idea of migrating one day to another country is always in her mind, yet this is impossible for now, as her husband is under temporary protection and thus cannot move.

### **3.3.2. Ahmet**

Born to a Russian mother and Syrian father, Ahmet opened his eyes in the Northern part of Syria in a city near Turkish border. His father, who went to Russia to study, met her Russian mother there. Her mother left the school and migrated with his father and lived in Syria from then on. Ahmet has a few relatives in Russia, and before the conflict in Syria, he would go there with her mom and elder brother, who spoke Russian very well, in the summer holidays. However, he does not have a deep connection with Russia like his older brother, who was born and raised there until he was three and speaks Russian perfectly.

Ahmet has a large family with two brothers and two sisters and defines their relationship as "we cannot live without each other". Once a week, the whole family, with all the uncles and aunts, would come together at grandfather's house. He has a deeper connection with his older brother, who also studied in a university in the same

city with him in Türkiye. His brother helped him in the preparation process for Turkish Higher Education, suggested him to take SAT instead of YÖS, and scaffolded him at university too. Ahmet was privileged compared to other participants, as he had someone who navigated the pathways before him and could help him while he was studying at university.

His father owns a factory with his brothers. They do trade between Türkiye and Syria. Ahmet has never experienced lack of money, even in war times, and life came easier to him in many ways. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the other participants did not have personal laptops, Ahmet was able to buy a tablet to follow the online classes more easily. He already had a computer. Although he enjoys a prosperous life and good financial capital, my observation is that he is a humble man with good manners.

As a result of his economic capital, Ahmet also enjoyed some other additional rights. Because of the trade that they do between Türkiye and Syria as a family business, Ahmet and his family enjoyed a different identity card ensured to only these kinds of people who do trade. He defined this identity card as “trader identity” which enabled him free mobility between Türkiye and Syria. In this way, he and his family could go to Türkiye whenever the conflict in Syria increased and come back when they believed it was safe again. In such cases, they were living in their own house in Kilis, a Turkish city at the Syrian border. This advantage also provided him with a very easy migration process in which he only passed the border with his identity and went to his home in Türkiye. When Belle’s and Ali’s forced migration stories are considered, Ahmet can be said to enjoy the benefits of his social class.

When we first met, Ahmet was not proficient in Turkish, and we would always communicate in English. His English proficiency was good as he took English classes to prepare for the SAT and was studying at a preparatory school. When I asked about the Turkish proficiency of other family members, he stated that his older brother was very proficient in Turkish as he had many Turkish friends. His younger brother also was also speaking Turkish very well as he was attending a Turkish school, he shared. However, he did not see himself as good in Turkish, which was a constant concern for him: He felt the need, yet he was not invested in learning

Turkish at the time. The same pattern followed for the Russian language, too. Although his Russian mother tried to speak in Russian with him when he was a little child, he said he would always refuse to speak in Russian as “he was Syrian”. This kept on till the day, and although he now feels the need to learn it and understands when someone speaks it, he is not proficient in Russian; it is waiting to be improved. However, he improved his Turkish so much, and in the last casual meeting we did on campus, we did not need to switch to English as we could communicate perfectly in Turkish.

Ahmet remembers that he would always play football in the field and ride bicycles with his friends when he was a child in Syria. On a typical day, he would get up, prepare himself, and take some sandwiches to eat at school. After school, he would go home first and “maybe” do his homework. Ahmet was taking private lessons where he would do the homework with his teacher. He admitted that because he was not a very hardworking student, his father would send him to teacher. His family cared for his education and tried to motivate him in this way. After his private lesson with the teacher, he would return home on a typical day and watch TV before sleeping with his siblings at around 9 p.m.

Ahmet attended a state school although his family enjoyed good economic capital. He always said, “the Syrian education is great” and then would add in a lower voice “before the war”. After he completed his whole educational life prior to university in his city in Syria, Ahmet moved to Kilis where his family had been living permanently since 2017. There, following his brother’s suggestion, he immediately started taking courses for SAT. I need to explain here that, apart from Ahmet, none of the participants took SAT to be admitted to a program in Turkish universities. When compared to YÖS, SAT is an internationally accepted exam while YÖS is only accepted in Türkiye. While YÖS fee is more affordable, SAT is more expensive and not every Syrian refugee is able to take it. His brother was also aware of this fact, and thus directing him to take SAT as fewer people took it, his chances would increase.

In his first try, he could not take enough points, so he went on taking classes of English and Maths for the exam. In his second year of preparation, he finally made it

and got accepted to Food Engineering program in Newfoundland university. As I also explain in the Findings Chapter, his selection process was affected by a variety of reasons. His father wanted him to study a program that would be related to their family business. Although his first decision was biomedical engineering, he was happy with food engineering too.

As he was admitted to an English-medium program, Ahmet started studying at Preparatory school first and was placed at the highest level, L4. While everything was going well for him, he had to attend to the online classes in the Spring term of preparatory school like other students because the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. He left the dorm he was staying and turned back to his family home in Kilis. While he was there, he started helping in family business while also studying for his courses. As a social person, for Ahmet, the pandemic period was one of the worst. Because of the change in his routine, and not having a routine anymore, Ahmet felt his days were spent just in vain. Family business helped him in this and gave him a sense of control and flow at times of COVID. It did not put additional burden on him as it was family business, and he had time to study for his courses as well.

Ahmet is a successful student and has gained scholarships for some exchange programs he applied to while studying in his program. Although he could not go abroad because of the pandemic and other reasons, he was enthusiastic about these kinds of opportunities as a reflection of his multinational identity. In the course of the study, Ahmet also acquired Turkish citizenship and added Spanish to his linguistic repertoire. His biggest ideal for now is to graduate and help with the family business in a way he can whether in Dubai like his brother, elsewhere, or in Türkiye. He is also going to form a family soon as he is going to marry a Syrian girl from the same university. Life is waiting for him apparently.

### **3.3.3. Belle**

Belle was born in Latakia as the only child of her Palestinian family, whose parents sought refuge in Syria after leaving Palestine. Until around age ten, they lived in the city center and then moved to the countryside. Her mother graduated from high

school and worked as an officer, while her father graduated from university and worked for an agency. Her parents got divorced when she was in High School, which had a great impact on her. Mom left for Jordan to work there, while her father stayed and married another woman. Belle is a quiet, beautiful woman. She is good at learning languages, very proficient in English and good at Turkish, and draws in her free times.

Belle spent her childhood in a bit of loneliness and conflict as her parents did not have a happy marriage. She was not allowed to go and play with other children as much as her friends as her parents were protective of her as their only child. Sometimes “I felt a little bit disconnected with friends because they were, after school, they were playing in streets. And they didn't let me, my father and mother.” On a typical day after school, the best thing for Belle was to be alone at home, “just turn on the TV and watch cartoons”. Her mother would be in gatherings with her friends while her father was still working. She remembers her father would remind her “I always work for you from the morning to the evening”. One of her first memories was that in Spring or Summer, she and her father would wake up early and go to buy some “falafel” for breakfast. The sky would be bright blue while there were horses and butterflies in the beautiful green fields, she remembers.

Belle attended a Palestinian school from the first grade to ninth, except for the seventh grade when they were in another city. In high school, she attended a Syrian school as there were no Palestinian high schools there. She was not a particularly social person and did not have many friends apart from a few ones in her circle. She thinks that she attended the best schools and received good quality education. However, she finds herself a bit lazy and it is not easy for her to act. Procrastination was a big problem, and my observations confirm that it went on in university too.

As a Palestinian refugee, Belle is not a Syrian citizen, as Palestinian refugees are not provided citizenships in Syria. This caused othering and discrimination at times in school. Some of her friends would occasionally ask her “why don't you go back to Palestine?” which she would generally answer as “we cannot go back”. “I am trapped here, and I wish I had a country like having a home to call, it's my home. It's



my country. We wish that. But we couldn't have it". She feels belonged to Syria, but just a bit of "you are different" feeling remains, though. I interpret that her experiences of othering and discrimination in Syria prepared her for her second refuge in Türkiye. Refugee identity was not acquired later for Belle, unlike other participants, she was born into it.

After graduating from high school, Belle started studying mechanical engineering in Syria, yet she was not happy with her choice. She wanted to study Arts, but her parents did not find it as a good career choice and wanted her to study engineering. She followed their advice because she believed that "being an engineer is one of the smartest things." After a few years, she left the school as she did not want to study mechanics and started studying Information Technology in another university. She loved it, yet she was not happy with the ongoing conflict in Syria. After losing her hope that conflict would end soon, and "there was no future in Syria", and "I did not want to waste my life", in a place where "everyone was suffering", she decided to leave the country. This was a very challenging decision for a young Syrian woman who was not allowed to go and study even in another city. However, after finding some people on Facebook to help her find smugglers, she made a very difficult solo migration journey with smugglers across the border and crossed the Turkish border after eleven days on dangerous roads. In the chapter following, her migration journey is explained further.

After her arrival to Türkiye, she got help from her Syrian friends who were already living there with their families. Meanwhile, she was thinking of preparing for YÖS in order to be admitted to a program in Turkish universities. However, before she started getting prepared, she saw on the university page that applications were opened. She applied with her high school diploma just in case and was accepted. Belle is the only Syrian student who was accepted without any exams in a program in Turkish Higher Education unlike the common misconception in society that they are always accepted without any conditions. She believes she got accepted for Physics engineering because her physics grades were high on her high school diploma, and officers did not have anything other than it to rely on. She applied to university as a Palestinian. Her admission without exams can be said to be good for her as she did

not have any money to attend courses for exams, besides she was not psychologically prepared to do that either, with the traumas left from her dangerous migration journey.

Upon admission, she started studying at the Preparatory school, which was a seemingly an easy process, as her English proficiency was good compared to her classmates. She was the “foreign and smart” girl of the classroom, and this was a new, empowered identity position for her. After successfully completing preparatory school during the COVID-19 pandemic, she went on her program and is expected to graduate soon.

Belle was able to go on her studies and life in Türkiye through the financial support of her parents and Kızılay Yardım, which is a financial support provided for Syrian women in need in Türkiye. However, these supports were not enough to live a decent life in Türkiye as a student. That’s why, she also worked while studying in jobs like teaching English to kids, helping an Iraqi professor for typing, or working as a translator for hospitals to which Arabic people were applying for some medical treatments. Since she could not work during the COVID-19 period, it was one of the most difficult processes for her.

Belle lives in a modestly rented house, and her landlord does not increase the rent because he sympathizes with Belle, as he has a granddaughter studying in France and sees Belle in a similar light. As Belle is under temporary protection and not a Turkish citizen, she cannot leave Türkiye, as once she leaves, she cannot return. She aspires to work as a physics engineer and dreams of having her own family in the future. Her greatest ideal is to have her own family and a place where she can have roots.

#### **3.3.4. Ali**

Ali was born into a village of Aleppo to a military pilot father and a high school graduate mom who does not work. They moved to Idlib for his father’s job when he was a one-year-old baby, and returned to Aleppo when he was 5 years old. He lived in his village until he was sixteen and then migrated to Türkiye in 2016. The rest of the family arrived a year later as a result of his father’s heart illness which was not

treated during the war. He came to Türkiye and had a surgery at a Turkish hospital. Ali's family lives in Hatay now.

Ali has two brothers and one sister, and he is the youngest of all. The eldest brother did not study at university and works in Türkiye. His sister is married, has two kids and lives with his Syrian husband and children in Ireland. The other brother who is two and half years older than him also studies at a Medical School like Ali in another city of Türkiye. They started studying at university in the same year, but since his brother did not study at an EMI university, he did not study at preparatory school, and thus he is a year ahead of him.

Ali was working with his father and brother in fields at times when he was a child because of the Syrian conflict which prevented them from attending the school. Ali started school in his village and attended together with his brother. When compared to other participants, Ali's educational life was more interrupted because of the war. He did not go on his education for two years because "There is no school because of the war, and we don't go. A missile comes, there's fighting, it hits the school, so we don't go, we're scared." After attending primary school for three years, he could not study at fifth and sixth grades, turned back to school at seventh and eighth grades, but had to stay home again. In the exam done in Syria at ninth grade, he scored a very good point despite his interrupted years in education, and his father thought it would be better for Ali to go to Türkiye and study, as they were thinking that he was not going to be able to take a good education in Syria under those circumstances.

Ali's success, despite years of interruption in his education, can be perceived as amazing, and I was very curious about how he managed as a researcher. He told he was always studying at home whatever that grade required. His sister's husband was an Arabic teacher, and his aunt was a mathematics teacher, and they occasionally helped him too. When I asked how he kept his motivation, Ali stated that it was his father who wanted him to study, yet I believe he really liked learning and studying too. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ali always kept studying without a slight loss of motivation, and he was very autonomous. However, my observation is that studying had turned into a coping mechanism for Ali as he never spared time for his social life. At first, I thought that it was because of the lockdowns, yet in the home

visit I made to Nur, where I also gathered with other female participants, I learned from them that Ali was not socializing with any of his friends much, even with his co-ethnics. This was also reflected in the occasional chats we held; he would always tell me that he either needed to study or work in his YÖS course as a teacher. At times, I remember myself thinking about what he was going to do in the future, when he consumed all his inner energy, as he never charged his batteries.

After tenth grade in high school, which he could not attend again, Ali was sent to Türkiye by his family to reunite with his brother who arrived in Türkiye a year earlier than him to work. As Ali was just sixteen at the time, and the borders were closed to Syrian refugees who wanted to cross to Türkiye, Ali had to make a very dangerous migration journey to pass the border. Like Belle, he did the journey with smugglers. Ali defines the day he could pass the border as "My most successful day was the day I came here because it changed my life."

His migration journey was a very challenging one, as he was trying to pass the border as an illegal immigrant with smugglers. He was arrested in his first try at the border by Turkish soldiers and was put into custody. He spent a night in jail and was released the next day. As soon as he was released, Ali tried to cross the border again, this time with fewer people. This eased their process, and smugglers directly took them to a police station in a city. Ali was alone there; no one was accompanying him, so police officers let him go, thinking that one of the other people was his parent. His uncle, who was already living in Türkiye, went there and took him to his brother. Ali had defined their migration to Türkiye as "only for education, not for migration." When the refuge was a result of educational purposes, it was not conceptualized in this way, and thus, they would not be a refugee but just a migrant who would probably complete their education and return.

As soon as Ali arrived in Türkiye, he started his education at a TEC like Nur; however, since he did not like the quality of education there, he transferred to an İmam Hatip Anatolian High School<sup>4</sup> in Kahramanmaraş. After studying in this school

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<sup>4</sup> "These schools are designed to provide students with knowledge and skills about basic Islamic sciences in addition to the general achievements of upper secondary education (i.e. natural and social

for two years, Ali graduated from high school and took YÖS to be admitted to a program in Turkish Higher Education. He took the highest score in many of the exams universities administered themselves, and was admitted to Medical school at Newfoundland University. Following his success in YÖS, he started to teach at the YÖS course once he was a student, and this experience has been a great marker on his identity. He likes teaching so much that even while studying to be a doctor, he still gives courses through which he can both earn money and feel himself validated and accepted with his teacher identity.

Ali is engaged to his uncle's daughter who is in Syria now and wants to be a Turkish citizen in order to be able to bring her in Türkiye, as it is so expensive and dangerous to bring her with smugglers. Besides, as he still goes on his education and "does not have money", they are waiting for circumstances to get better. Overall, Ali feels himself happy in Türkiye as "Therefore, it helped me a lot, and now everyone knows me because I have stood out in my field of study among Syrians in Türkiye, and now I feel very comfortable in my life and my work" and wants to have a career here as a doctor. For the near future, he does not think of going back to Syria.

### **3.3.5. Yasemin**

Belle once said to me "Yasemin is like one of them, one of the Turkish people". Belle's observation was well-founded; having arrived in Türkiye almost eleven years ago, Yasemin has spent considerable time in Türkiye, and she has native-like skills in Turkish. She was born in a little city in Homs. Her father was a high-ranked officer while her mother was an engineer in Syria. Yasemin has four siblings all of whom are either architects or computer engineers. They live together as a family in one of the cities in Central Anatolia. Family members are so close to each other, and Yasemin does not think of a life separated from them.

On a typical school day in Syria, Yasemin woke up early and would go to school with her brother. She would attend her classes, and then after school ended, she and

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sciences courses). They can be as mixed or same gender (i.e. male/female) schools" (UNICEF, 2022, p. 12.)

her brother would go either home or their grandmother's house. Since her mother was a working mom, for lunch, she would call somewhere and order food for them. After eating, she would rest and watch her mom cook food in their big kitchen in the evening. She says there was a stove in the kitchen where she would go and sit near while chatting with her mom, and often fell asleep. After having dinner, some relatives would visit them, or they would go and visit people. She would sometimes play with her friends in the neighborhood and sleep at around nine in the evening. They were a well-known family in the community, and she was a happy child.

Yasemin states that she was born into a conservative family, yet she was feeling free. She chose to wear hijab at the age of ten by herself although his parents insisted it was too early to do so. She was a successful student studying in a state school. However, after the conflict started, she and her elder sister were sent to Lebanon to her uncle, who was already living with his family there in the Spring term of her sixth grade. They did so because their house had been shot, and they were not safe in the country anymore. Local people were suspicious of them as his father was a high-ranked officer, and the government was suspicious of his father as he could be an ally of opposite forces. Under these challenging circumstances, Yasemin migrated to Lebanon with her elder sister. After spending one academic term there, the rest of the family united in Lebanon and they all fled to Türkiye, to which crossings were not restricted then in 2013.

As soon as they arrived, like other participants, she started school and was immediately sent to a Turkish language course. Yasemin was tired of changing countries and did not want to learn Turkish or attend a Turkish school, yet she had to. Later, while we were talking about her integration process, she evaluated this decision as a very to-the-point one and claimed that she would not have adapted if her parents had not sent her to a Turkish school. Her first year at the secondary school was painful. She did not know Turkish, she was the only Syrian at school at the time, and she felt othering from her classmates sometimes. Yet, there were good peers, who helped her and said, "If you need anything, we are always here." In time, Yasemin learned Turkish to such a degree that, she was called as the "translator of the school". She acted as a facilitator for newly arrived Syrian refugees to the school.

This was to the advantage of both the Syrian kids and the school, as nobody in the school knew Arabic enough to help the newcomers.

After completing her education there, Yasemin attended an İmam Hatip Anatolian High School to “to be comfortable in her hijab”. Unlike Ali, she enjoyed the education there and became one of the top students. The last year passed a little busy as she was both trying to graduate from high school and was preparing for YÖS at the same time. Her ideal was to study at Medical School and to be a doctor, yet when she could not make it, she did not want to try it for another year and was admitted to computer engineering program in Newfoundland University.

Like other participants, she started Preparatory school and successfully passed it. In her program, she has been successful so far without failing any classes and her grades have been impressive. She did her internship in good institutions, and she seems like ready for graduation and work life. Like other participants, Yasemin does not think of returning to Syria, and wants to go on her life here with her family. The biggest issue for her is to find a job now upon her graduation.

### **3.4. Data Collection**

While collecting data, it is recommended to use a variety of sources of evidence (Yin, 2014) from multiple data collection sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to create an in-depth picture of the case (Creswell, 2013). The credibility of the research is also enhanced when the researcher triangulates the data by obtaining it from multiple sources (Wellington, 2000). This approach aligns with the qualitative research paradigm, which advocates for systematic data collection using various techniques (Stake, 1995). Similarly, both Yin (2012) and Creswell (2007) argue that case studies should employ a diverse range of data collection tools, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the case being investigated. Thus, using multiple tools is crucial as they can complement and enhance each other's reliability and credibility in ethnographic case studies. In this section, data collection tools and procedures are explained.

Since I was already an EFL Instructor working in the research setting, I spent the initial period before embarking on the data collection stage, which can be described as the exploratory stage, engaging with numerous international students, particularly Syrian refugee students. I had occasional chats to understand their academic and adaptational journeys. During this time, I also assisted them with their academic challenges, whether they were struggling with essay writing or facing issues with the Registrar's office. I consider this period a preparatory period for a more structured fieldwork. According to Blommaert and Jie (2010), "fieldwork should not be just reduced to data collection, because essentially it is a learning process" (p. 27). Being already immersed in the research site as a person who works there, I began to develop specific ideas, build connections with students and their experiences, and collaborate with colleagues about the SRSs. To document my observations in various settings, I started keeping fieldnotes.

After obtaining ethics approval in January 2020, I started my fieldwork in February 2020 following this initial explanatory stage. Following the recruitment of participants in February 2020, I started conducting classroom observations as part of the ethnographic data collection. The purpose of classroom observations was not to record interactional data but to observe the participants in their educational settings. Each participant was being observed at least once a week in their own classrooms; however, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), face-to-face instruction was suspended, and a nationwide shift to online education was ensured. As the return to face-to-face mode of teaching remained uncertain, classroom observations were excluded from the study in the course of data collection period. From March to September 2020, I maintained contact with the participants through informal conversations regarding the pandemic and online education. During this period, I kept detailed memos and elaborated on how to collect the data during the pandemic. In September 2020, it became clear that face-to-face education would not resume soon, so we decided to use the teleconferencing tool Zoom for data collection, with the participants' consent.

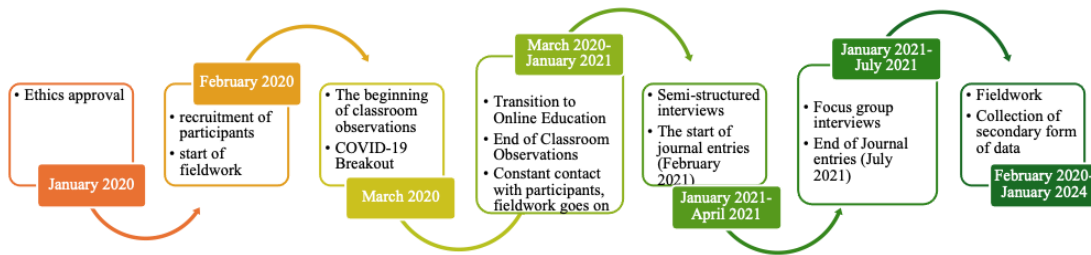
The transition to Zoom was initially stressful due to the lack of physical interaction with the participants, but soon its advantages became clear when we began semi-



structured interviews in January 2021. First, participants were safe at home during the pandemic. Second, the home environment minimized disruptions, allowing interviews to proceed smoothly. Third, when participants could not remember a word in the language they spoke in the interviews, they could easily check it online from any translation websites without losing face. Participants could easily check translations online if they forgot a word without feeling embarrassed. Fourth, video recording as well as audio recording through the teleconferencing tool Zoom enabled me to observe the facial expressions and reactions of participants, providing deeper insights into their thoughts on specific topics. Lastly, scheduling interviews became more convenient since participants were already at home, enhancing our ability to maintain privacy and discuss sensitive topics such as war without external interruptions.

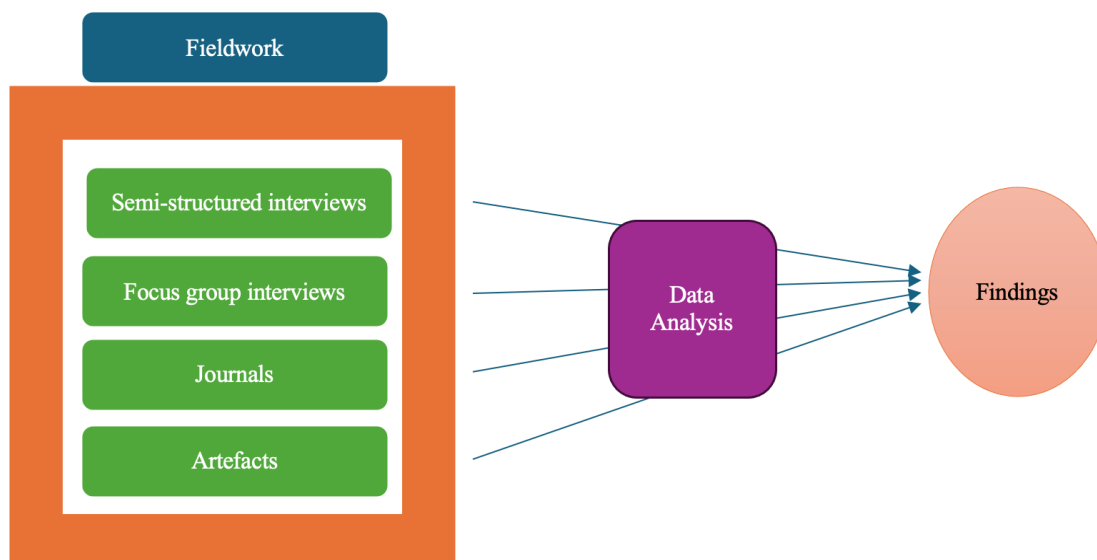
While the one-to-one semi-structured interviews were being conducted, we also initiated monthly focus group interviews. Participants began keeping journals concurrently with the semi-structured interviews, maintaining these journals until July 2021 (see Appendix C for instructions on journal keeping). The primary data collection continued until July 2021. However, the fieldwork and collection of secondary data sources (e.g., smart phone application-based chats, emails) went on until January 2024 through various forms: smart phone application based chats, phone calls, home visits, shared lunches, and coffee breaks.

I did not record all our encounters if they were not for interviews or focus group discussions because in most cases I did only observation in order not to put the participants under pressure and to preserve the naturalness of the context, such as during home visits with female participants. I noted my observations later in order not to forget; first, through voice recordings, and then expanding them into comprehensive fieldnotes related to the encounters. In this way, I tried to ensure the first insights were preserved before they were forgotten. All in all, throughout my extensive engagement with the participants, I observed and collected various aspects of their educational and adaptational experiences through various forms of data collection tools which are explained in detail below.



**Figure 4.** Data Collection Timeline

**Data Collection Tools.** As previously mentioned, collecting data from multiple sources is a key feature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2011) as well as enhancing the credibility of a qualitative study by allowing the researcher to triangulate findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, data sources included four individual interviews with Syrian refugee students (SRSs), five focus group interviews, participant-kept journals, collected artifacts such as participants' study notes and educational documents, and secondary forms of data obtained through fieldwork, including Smart phone application-based chats, emails, phone calls, and shared lunches and coffee sessions. After ethics approval was obtained and participants signed consent forms, data were collected through the following methods:



**Figure 5.** Data Collection Tools

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews provide qualitative researchers with flexibility and open frameworks. They can be designed to collect data that are rich and thick, offering in-depth information based on participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). Interviews allow participants and interviewers to discuss their interpretations of the world and express how they perceive things from their viewpoints (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 349) creating a shared experience between both the researcher and the participant. In this way, this method helps researchers to understand participants' various life experiences, values, ideas, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings (Seidman, 2006) making it one of the most significant data collection tools in ethnographic case study designs (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

To gain an in-depth understanding of participants' viewpoints, this research utilized semi-structured interviews, which allowed essential questions to be asked while giving interviewees the opportunity to address other concerns (Heigham & Croker, 2009) allowing the researcher to collect data in the participants' own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to uncover and describe their subjective perspectives on events (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This method was chosen to understand the unique educational and adaptational experiences of the participant Syrian refugee students (SRSs) both in the host country and their higher education institution (HEI). Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was prepared to stimulate discussions related to the research questions of the study (see Appendix ... for interview guidelines). The use of interview guides ensured comparability, ensuring that specific themes were addressed in all interviews.

Interviews were crucial as they revealed participant narrations, which are highly insightful sources concerning their life stories, experiences of war and forced migrations, displacement and resettlement, and integration into the host society. These stories illuminate the experience of refuge and adaptation, survival, and resilience in unique ways. Since every refugee's experience is unique and specific to the individual, examining their identity narratives was perceived as presenting a wealth of information about the participants, leading to a more nuanced understanding and bringing to light the stories of real people often represented as mere statistics. In this ethnographic case study with only five participants who seem

to be the part of the same country and similar displacement and resettlement processes, different journeys and experiences for each are highlighted. This was also the primary goal of this dissertation: to demonstrate the uniqueness of each refugee student's experience, with the hope of fostering heightened awareness and more harmonious governance of refugee students, especially within higher education, to facilitate a better life and smoother integration. However, as a researcher, I acknowledge that, as self-reports, the interview data do not confirm that these practices occurred exactly as described and are thus not treated as absolute (Tupas & Salonga, 2016). Nevertheless, they provide an understanding of participants' viewpoints and beliefs regarding their experiences.

The four one-to-one interviews (see Table 2 below for details) with each of the five participants were designed as semi-structured interviews, as this method allows the researcher to ask follow-up or additional questions based on the participants' answers to the predetermined interview questions (Creswell, 2013). While all interviews of two participants were conducted in Turkish, all interviews of three participants were conducted in English based. The language of the interviews was left to the participants themselves, and we did translanguaging as needed. Conducting interviews on an online meeting application, Zoom proved advantageous in this case too, as they could get the help of online translation tools as they needed while interviewing. In such cases, the translation of the participants' original statements adopted "an utterance-by-utterance or turn-by-turn translation" (Duff, 2007, p. 155) strategy to generate a complete account of the participants' thoughts without reducing any data and maintain a natural narrative in the English language.

To help participants feel at ease, they were asked if they would prefer to conduct the interviews in English or Turkish, and the sessions were held via the teleconferencing tool Zoom, due to the impossibility of face-to-face meetings during the COVID-19 lockdowns. All interviews were scheduled at times suggested by the participants and were recorded with their consent. The voice recordings were then transcribed for data analysis. If participants provided information during the interviews that could potentially disclose their identities, such information was included in this study only with the participant's consent or, if it was too private, was excluded entirely.

Through the semi-structured interviews, the general aim was to take the participants on a journey from the very beginning to the most recent. In the 1st interview, the questions in the guide focused more on the participants' personal backgrounds. Participants' personal autobiographies were intended to be collected by discussing their family, city and the neighborhood in which they were raised. In line with their initial experiences in their environment, the focus was shifted to their educational trajectories and early experiences of schooling. Relations with peers and significant others were also focused on in this section. The first part of the 1<sup>st</sup> interview was completed with their later experiences of working at a job if any.

In the second part of the first interview, the participants were brought smoothly to the subjects of the war and their start of a new journey in relation to their migratory experiences. Since in this part we were going to discuss very sensitive issues, as a researcher I was very careful and watchful of my participants during the interview. Since we were video-recording at the same time, watching their facial and bodily expressions, I tried to follow any cues that would yield that they were not comfortable while interviewing. I assured them on that they could stop the interview any time they liked, only talked about the things they wanted to, and answered the interview questions they wanted to answer. This second part was particularly meaning-laden and very informative for the research in order to understand their background life and the major changes they experienced with the breakout of the war. The kind of major changes they had, their migratory experiences and reflections of all these to their lives brought important insights on their identity development and educational trajectories impacted from all these naturally.

In the second semi-structured interview, mainly educational trajectories of participants were focused in the interview guide. Upon their arrival to Türkiye, their transitional period to Turkish higher education was investigated. For this purpose, participants were first asked questions on their educational path through higher education. After that, their preparatory school and language learning experiences were on the focus. In this part, participants were again asked questions starting from initial experiences to the most recent ones. Then the focus was shifted to COVID-19 pandemic and their sudden transition to online education at preparatory school.

Lastly the second interview was finished with questions on the contextual use of languages they have in their repertoires particularly in the context of Ankara where they study at the moment and where the study is taking place.

In the third interview, the guide focused on more specific questions about the pandemic and its relation to their departmental studies. Their online classroom experiences in relation to the transition from face-to-face to digital spaces were explored. As the interview proceeded, participants identity as Syrian refugee learners in the online classroom were delved into with more specific questions related. It was also in this part where participants were asked specific questions on their positioning before and then and whether it had been affected and how if any by the recent changes in their educational lives.

Then, with a smooth transition, topics of English and the role it plays in their classroom instruction were investigated under the subheading of English medium instruction. The 3rd interview was finished with a subheading which has questions on Turkish language and Turkish context in general. In this part, participants' language learning experiences, adaptation processes, things they found favorable in the process and difficulties they endured and coping mechanism they developed if any were investigated. Their positioning in the community and the reflections of all these to their identity development were investigated with the specific questions in that part.

The fourth and the last interview was planned to piece together what had been discussed until then. I paid specific attention to summarize and wrap up what we had talked and left the room to the participants to add anything in light of the things they discussed but could not share till then whether because they did not remember or because they did not have time or chance to. Their future aspirations and final thoughts on their integration and adjustment to the host country in general and educational contexts in particular were discussed and the interview was ended with the question of what this research meant for the participants and if they would like to add anything more.

**Table 2.** Overview of the Interview Data

	<b>1st Interview</b>	<b>2nd Interview</b>	<b>3rd Interview</b>	<b>4th Interview</b>
<b>Participants</b>	<i>Duration of the Interview</i>	<i>Duration of the Interview</i>	<i>Duration of the Interview</i>	<i>Duration of the Interview</i>
<b>Nur</b>	99 minutes	95 minutes	91 minutes	24 minutes
<i>All interviews in total for Nur</i>			<b>309 minutes</b>	
<b>Ahmet</b>	128 minutes	106 minutes	93 minutes	26 minutes
<i>All interviews in total for Ahmet</i>			<b>353 minutes</b>	
<b>Yasemin</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> part: 63 minutes 2 <sup>nd</sup> part: 31 minutes In total: 94 minutes	110 minutes	72 minutes	26 minutes
<i>All interviews in total for Yasemin</i>			<b>302 minutes</b>	
<b>Ali</b>	129 minutes	1 <sup>st</sup> part: 73 minutes 2 <sup>nd</sup> part: 63 minutes In total: 136 minutes	105 minutes	31 minutes
<i>All interviews in total for Ali</i>			<b>401 minutes</b>	
<b>Belle</b>	137 minutes	1 <sup>st</sup> part: 67 minutes 2 <sup>nd</sup> part: 44 minutes In total: 111 minutes	87 minutes	44 minutes
<i>All interviews in total for Belle</i>			<b>379 minutes</b>	
<b>In Total</b>			<b>1744 minutes</b>	

**Focus Group Discussions.** To create a dialogical atmosphere, five focus group interviews, once in a month for a period of five months, were conducted in this study. Following Bogdan and Bilken's (1992) suggestions, I initiated the focus group interviews with small talk aimed at finding common ground with the participants. After this introductory conversation, I informed the participants about the purpose of the interview. At the start of each focus group interview, I explicitly stated the purpose of the interview in relation to the aim of the study. Focus group interviews

are valuable as they can generate substantial data in a shorter time compared to individual interviews, though they do not offer the same level of privacy. Therefore, I paid particular attention not to bring up sensitive issues during these group sessions. Participants were specifically asked how and what types of questions to elicit their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions. The collaborative atmosphere of dialogue and sharing stimulated ideas within the group, allowing me to delve deeper into common concerns among participants. This method was particularly useful in uncovering topics not discussed in one-to-one interviews, and sometimes participants continued discussing that day's topic among themselves, while I listened and took notes on my observations. As it was the case in the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, the focus group interviews were also conducted via Zoom. Below is the overview of the focus group discussion data.

**Table 3.** Overview of the Focus Group Discussion Data

<b>Focus Group Meetings</b>	<i>Duration of the Interview</i>
<i>1st Focus Group Meeting</i>	33 minutes
<i>2nd Focus Group Meeting</i>	28 minutes
<i>3rd Focus Group Meeting</i>	35 minutes
<i>4th Focus Group Meeting</i>	39 minutes
<i>5th Focus Group Meeting</i>	37 minutes

**Journals.** The self-report nature of journals distinguishes them from other data collection methods. Journal entries can reveal patterns in the journalist's perspectives and interpretations of events, thereby enhancing the theoretical value of the data (Olorunfemi, 2023). Essential information that might have been overlooked or simply could not be discussed during interviews or observations can be highlighted in diary studies. In their journals, participants recorded their experiences of foreign language learning, as well as their educational and adaptation experiences in Turkish Higher Education and in the host country generally (see Appendix ... for journal instructions). Although I did not request them to write anything private or sensitive related to their lives, some participants shared sensitive information at times. In such cases, I did not include the sensitive data into the study.



**Artefacts.** Artefacts were another data collection tool utilized in the study which included educational documents, study notes produced by the focal participants or simply photos of related items such as their drawings. Having some of the artefacts, like significant documents or study notes they helped me further elaborate on the issues at hand. Whenever I took pictures of the artefacts and wanted to integrate them into the study, I would ask for the permission of the participants each time.

**Field notes.** Field notes were taken in the form of observation notes during my time in the field to capture what I observed and heard (Dennis&Wal, 2010; Jackson, 1990). By taking detailed notes and documenting everything, I observed, saw, and heard, along with thoughts about the study and interpretations, I was able to identify key themes and issues to enhance the validity of the research (Wolcott, 2009). Finally, I also used a reflective journal where I reflected on various stages of the research, challenges faced, possible solutions and insights gained. In total, I recorded 32 hours of semi-structured and focus group discussions and wrote more than 1000 analytic memos, including observational fieldnotes and entries to my reflective journal. In this section, I explained how I collected the data by introducing my data collection tools and the procedures I followed to use each one.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

This ethnographic case study is grounded in the experiences and the various cultural, social and academic resources that five Syrian refugee students at a state EMI university in Türkiye draw on. As an iterative process, I repeatedly moved among collecting the data, interpreting it, conducting fieldwork, and writing. Since I spent considerable time with the participants, I had the privilege to seek their help on matters that needed more clarification throughout the research.

Every scientific study aims to achieve its objectives by bringing various research approaches and techniques together in the best possible and sound way to succeed what it sets out for (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As researchers, we carry the responsibility of establishing robust and logical research plans that meet the standards of the academic community and fulfil our specific research goals. Although

there are numerous methodological choices for research, the key is to create a blend that corresponds to the fundamental beliefs about how knowledge is formed in a study. In this doctoral study, my objective was to explore Syrian refugee students' experiences in Turkish Higher Education in a widened perspective beginning from their war and migration experiences to the present encompassing from their initial schooling experiences in Türkiye to their transition to higher education, from Covid outbreak to online learning experiences, from studying at an English medium instruction university to identity narrations, issues of belonging and othering to coping strategies and building resilience. As a result, the research objective was to document their previous experiences from the period beginning with war and migration that would possibly affect their transition, experience, identity narrations and integration in Turkish Higher Education and in Türkiye. This objective necessitated an ethnographic case study design to observe and document the process in detail, and many data collection tools to document these experiences in an enriched way and finally to triangulate the data collected for issues of quality.

In this quest, I tried to go beyond the confines of individual or group dynamics, aiming to illustrate how these micro-level intricacies intertwined with broader ideological and sociological landscapes. Essentially, in this study, I delved into meticulous analyses and multi-layered interpretations, emphasizing complexity, depth, and critical examination to achieve the objectives of the research. In order to fulfil these pursuits, I embraced Qualitative Research as the paradigm of this study for its nature of complex, contextualized, and in-depth multi-level interpretations (Creswell, 2012). The strength of qualitative research is, although there is no single ideal approach in this paradigm, one can combine and make use of multiple approaches, techniques and tools for the objectives of the research, however, it should also be noted that decisions taken on the research journey should be justified with a strong conceptual ground (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 2012; Saldana, 2011) too. Merriam (2009) summarizes the complex nature of data analysis in qualitative research:

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read — it is the

process of making meaning. Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation. These meanings or understandings or insights constitute the findings of a study (Merriam, 2009, p.176).

With its focus on a small number of research participants, in case study research “the individual’s behaviors, performance, knowledge, and/or perspectives are studied very closely and intensively” (Duff, 2012, p. 95) and “the flexibility in its design” (ibid, p. 95) contributes to study educational trajectories and identity negotiations of this specific group of learners. With case study research’s strength of looking at issues both holistically and in close detail, “the complex and dynamic interactions between the individual and the local social, cultural, and linguistic environment can be observed” (Duff, 2012, p. 98). Therefore, as an iterative process, I moved back and forth between the data and interpretation. Because this research is data-driven, data collection tasks and data interpretation were continually refined as the research progressed. Although I had initial research questions while embarking on the fieldwork, they were constantly revised and became more and more specific in time as the research progressed with analytical steps taken.

Conducting a research study necessitates meticulous data management (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, all data sources were systematically collected, recorded, filed, and stored, with necessary precautions taken to protect the participants' sensitive and confidential data. Field notes, interviews, journals and artefacts were saved chronologically for each participant. After this initial organization of the data, the subsequent step in data analysis was the transcription of the interview data. Since I was within the last month of my pregnancy and it got harder and harder to sit down for longer hours of transcription, I got help from some transcribers based on the consent form they signed about not revealing any of the data to any third person. While transcriptions were being done, I also constantly checked the transcribed data with the original data to ensure quality and match between the original and transcribed versions.

In order to make sense of the data and to identify relevant codes and emerging themes, I watched, read and listened to the data thoroughly and intensely. While

reading the data, I also wrote numerous memos for subsequent phases of coding and theme development. Memos facilitated the connection of various data pieces and enabled the transition from an empirical to a conceptual level. They helped refine and expand codes, illustrate their relationships, and contribute to a more integrated understanding of events, processes, and interactions within the case (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By deeply engaging with the initial reading and striving to interpret the data through extensive analytical memos over an extended period, I was able to navigate through various ideas, which enabled me to generate several preliminary themes at this earliest stage of data analysis.

In preparing the data for coding, I got more familiar with the content and this preparation period also lent itself to some basic analytic processes. It was more like a warming-up stage before the more detailed analysis started. I prepared text-based qualitative data for manual coding and analysis and printed the data, keeping a wide right-hand margin for writing codes and notes. This constituted the layout stage of data preparation: raw data were placed on the left in a column and others beside it. I presented the codes in capital letters in the right-hand margin next to the data with superscript numbers linking the code to the specific data. I circled, underlined, highlighted, and mixed and matched coding methods as I proceeded with the data. I believe coding the data manually first gave me more control over and ownership of the data rather than dealing with the details of the software while coding at the same time. “Touching the data, handling it gets additional data out of memory and into the record. It turns abstract information into concrete data” (Graue & Walsch, 1998, p. 145) (see the Appendix E for representations of coding process)

In coding, as a researcher, I attributed meaning to each datum for the purposes of detecting patterns, categorizing the data, developing assertions or propositions, and other related analytic processes (Saldana, 2015). My purpose was to find repetitive patterns of actions and consistencies in human affairs as reflected in the data by also not leaving peculiarities aside as they could also mean much in the realization of the phenomenon being studied because “incoherencies, paradoxes, ambiguities, processes and the like are certainly key aspects of social reality and worth exploring-both as topics in their own right and as a way of getting beyond premature pattern-

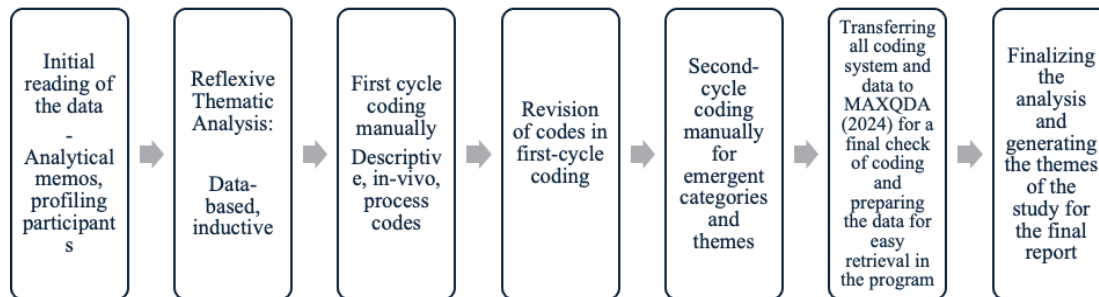
fixing and the reproduction of taken-for-granted assumptions about specific patterns” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 42). In Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the coding process is not constrained by predefined codes or themes due to its emphasis on construction and reflexivity. Therefore, in alignment with the research aims and questions, I pursued an open, interpretive coding approach that involved labeling the data at the sentence or paragraph level and engaging deeply with the data through “reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, and returning” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 332). Specifically, I immersed myself in the data and labelled participants' statements—whether sentences or paragraphs—using an inductive coding process. Throughout this intricate interpretive coding process, which included over a thousand analytical memos, I continuously revisited the research questions to guide the analysis. As the analysis proceeded, I moved from real to abstract and from particular to general.

As “coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities” (Saldana, 2015, p. 44), I did these together. When there arose something significant, or I wanted to make a detailed explanation of something, such as an issue while coding, I stopped and wrote one. These analytic memos later contributed to the study with their rigorous reflection on the data as they brought pieces of detailed work into more coherent units as coding proceeded. Through this recursive analytic reflection informed by etic knowledge themes useful for theoretical explanations emerged.

I started coding as I spell-checked the data, wrote analytical memos along the way and checked my final interpretations with the participants themselves for trustworthiness. Yet, as a researcher I am also aware that by coding, I assign a personal signature on the data, and some other researchers may code the same data differently as we all perceive the social world and actions of it differently. In the first cycle of coding the data, I decided to assign “descriptive codes” as words, short phrases or nouns and “in-vivo codes” from the participants' exact words to the data in the inductive analysis procedure. Process codes (in -ing words) and emotion codes (either descriptive or in-vivo) were also employed in the process. These codes served for both the first and second cycles of coding of the data, so an amalgam of in vivo,

values, descriptive coding for cycles of coding was employed. In Table 4, the analysis process is presented.

**Table 4.** Analysis process



Since I coded manually, the data retrieval was going to be challenging in the write-up process. For this reason, I moved on to the software and transferred all the data and analysis to MAXQDA 2022 and 2024 (VERBI Software, 2022, 2024), and coded the whole dataset on this program for a final time for a more detailed analysis after two cycles of manual coding of the data were ended. This qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with data analysis as coding and managing data in big datasets such as in the ones found in dissertations, “computers can be more efficient and accurate than humans” (Duff, 2012, p.107). I decided to use a software program after analyzing the data manually first because I had the ownership of the data and managed it efficiently with manual coding; however, I needed MAXQDA to collate code lists, record memos more systematically, search among the files, create visual maps, and most importantly retrieve the coded segments with greater ease (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2021). MAXQDA helped me see the data in its wholeness, and not needing to revise any coding gave me the sense that the analysis was finally completed. After saturation was reached and the data were enough to interpret the findings, the analysis was finalized, and the emerging themes were returned to the participants for member-checking in order to verify the findings.

**The Method of Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis.** The analysis of data in the present study adopted the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach that relies on the “researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (Braun and Clarke,

2019, p. 594). As a flexible method, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) allows the researcher to choose from a cluster of methods defined by different conceptual models and research values, facilitating the ownership of one's own theoretical and methodological perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2022). By accepting my active role in coding and theme generation as the researcher, I utilized the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in this research. I first familiarized myself with the dataset with immersion. This first phase was spent with hours of reading, watching and listening to the data and writing my first insights as memos. After this initial immersion process, I moved on to coding the data while still writing extensive memos. After the first cycle of coding, I reviewed the whole dataset and did the second cycle of coding. The coding process was finalized in the third round when I finally felt that there was nothing left to add or change. After the coding process was finalized, I started generating the initial themes from the codes and the coded data. In this process, since I was proceeding with manual coding with pen and paper, I cut all the codes piece by piece and started to generate the initial categories which finally evolved into themes. Hands-on coding and theme generation helped me make the necessary adjustments on the way by just removing the code from one category to another if I needed it. After the completion of all themes, which took a considerable period of time, I gave the final names and finetuned the themes, making all the data set ready for the write-up.

In line with RTA, throughout the research, I was aware that I brought my philosophical and theoretical assumptions to the analysis. Analysis was grounded in the data and was shaped in the analytic process with my researcher positionality. By utilizing RTA to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I acknowledge that the descriptions presented here are shaped by my own perspectives as well as the participants' memories and interpretations of these practices. Knowing that researcher subjectivity is a primary tool for RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I acknowledged this positionality as a source of knowledge, and in this inherently subjective and situated experience, I tried to understand my subjectivity and its reflection on the analysis too. While doing this, I utilized writing extensive memos. Since this was an ethnographic case study, the prolonged nature of the research ensured the immersion and depth of engagement with the data, at times

distancing myself to allow space for reflection and inspiration. As I navigated through the intricate coding process to develop several initial and final themes, I also mapped the connections among the codes using both free and specific analytical memos attached to particular codes. This inquisitive, interpretive, and recursive analytical journey, which occupied a significant part of my life for over a year, enabled me to construct several initial themes and eventually refine them into three final themes. These final themes, along with relevant data extracts, are discussed in the next chapter, but first, in the next section, I elaborate on the issues of quality.

### **3.6. Researcher's Positionality**

The researcher's subjectivity is inherently a part of the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021) as researchers choose a research topic, develop a research plan, and collect and analyze data based on their continuously evolving knowledge and experiences. Ethnography is also inherently personal, and the definition of the ethnographic case is partially shaped by the ethnographer's personal journey through particular situations, roles, identities, networks, institutions, and spaces, as well as their embodied and interactive experiences (Wacquant, 2004; Eliasoph, 2005). The researcher navigates multiple worlds while conducting research, encompassing both the cultural world of the study participants and their own perspective (Dibley, 2011). The more a researcher can acknowledge their personal worldview and recognize the influence of their own perspectives, the better they can understand and interpret the behaviors and reflections of others (Fields & Kafai, 2009).

The reflexive turn in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) and other research approaches call for heightened attention to who the researcher is in many aspects, from her origins to personal history, from her local position to any bias she may have (Blackman, 2007). As some researchers also state (e.g. Rigg, 1991) there is a messiness that comes with sharing the real world of a study with real people. Recognizing how a researcher's positionality or subjectivity can influence the research and understanding the ways in which this occurs ensures that the research remains robust, and these factors do not compromise the process. For this reason, I acknowledge and value the life experiences I bring to this research. My complex life



ecology, characterized by multiple shifting identities, provides unique insights, and any other researcher would likely approach it differently based on their own experiences. Thus, reflexive discussions concerning my positionality can help readers in evaluating the quality of the study and understanding how the researcher has navigated the complexities of the research topic and process.

This research is positioned along with the ethnographic case study tradition within an interpretivist paradigm, and the partiality and subjectivity of the whole process of researching is acknowledged. From a social constructivist perspective, I was an active participant in the study, shaping the way ideas were constructed and exchanged during the collection of data. By choosing to study Syrian refugee students and their identity narrations, I recognize that my interaction with them both as a lecturer in the same school and as a researcher may raise questions regarding the boundaries that shape emic or etic positions. The students might have felt that they were obliged to contribute to the study as I was a (possible) lecturer to them in the school context or because they thought that the data they shared with me might be used against them if they were in conflict with what already existed as an ongoing practice in the school context. Thus, my identity as a lecturer might have shaped the data that participants chose to share with me. However, there were certain advantages which would help overcome the possible adversities.

First of all, although I was one of the lecturers working at the Preparatory School, I had not been acquainted with any of participants prior to the study. Throughout the research process, I had no professional links to their coursework or any other aspects of their educational processes. Besides, after the first year of the fieldwork, they went on their programs, so although we were all at the Newfoundland University, we did not have direct lecturer-student relationship which would possibly affect the research process. Nevertheless, while we were all at the Preparatory School in the first year of the data collection phase, I frequently tried to address their concerns related to their English language learning by helping them and providing professional feedback at times, which is something we do all of our students when they demand help at school. However, I believe this academic help and being there at times of need helped me establish rapport with the participants. In time, our relationship was not

defined or shaped only by the confines of the interviews. In addition to the interview meetings, we also had several opportunities to talk casually sometimes on the campus and sometimes in home visits or informal meetings at cafes or restaurants. I, thus, found many chances to discuss about the details of their ongoing lives apart from through the primary data collection tools. These meetings helped me learn if they got engaged, applied for a scholarship or they just felt lonely in that period of their lives. After all, I believe that these conversations made significant contributions to our rapport-building.

Being a lecturer already working in this context for ten years gave me an invaluable insider perspective. When I started my fieldwork, I had already worked with refugee students and had formed an initial understanding of their experiences at the preparatory school. I developed an understanding of the school, students, and their possible problems, and endeavors. I was familiar with the school cultures, people, whether they were students, teachers, officers, or educational leaders, and languages spoken in the school. Besides, having links with the people in this school would help me in reaching the participants in a way that ensures their trust on the part of me, a person they would open their world to as they knew who this person really was and what she was really doing. Besides, as a colleague of other lecturers, I listened to stories and instances they had with their refugee students. Therefore, I would listen to these narrations from both parts: students and teachers.

Belonging to this school community, I assumed that my position as both a lecturer in this school and a researcher in another school in the same city would help me deal with the peculiarities of the fieldwork and provide me with the time and space for the prolonged nature of the study. With this privileged position I had in the school, I would not just reach the participants easily but also would be able to stay in the field as much as the study required, and reaching out and meeting participants in their natural context was seemingly effortless. When the ethnographic nature of this study was taken into consideration, it was particularly important to be around and reachable by the participants. In this way, I had access to everything I needed while collecting the data, and I did not need to spend a considerable amount of time gaining access to the people, the school, and adjusting. My primary motivation for

choosing this state university in central Türkiye to carry out my fieldwork was to make use of my own personal background and social network to “authenticate as well as assist fieldwork” (Tagliamonte, 2006, p. 26).

By selecting a research site where I was an insider, I was also aware of the risks that might affect the people participating in the study. Possible dangers included accepting to participate in the study with a fear of rejecting a lecturer in the same school they are studying at, thus agreeing to collaborate although one does not want to; answering questions of the study or telling the things only one thinks are desirable for the researcher to hear, and thus not revealing the real ideas one holds; being afraid of what may happen once one rejects participating in the study like being exposed to discrimination or some risks in terms of grading; and lastly agreeing to study, yet not being able to withdraw if one wants to as a result of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Besides, participants might have thought that the critical information they provided to the researcher would be used elsewhere in a way that would cause them harm, or this information would prevent them from gaining access to the services they already have and deserve. However, I was also in a position to assist them in their studies professionally and help them navigate the hardships they might encounter in the school. By discussing all of these risks at the beginning of the study and assuring them about what the research process was going to be like, and also at any point reminding them that they did not have to do anything, or they did not have to go on participating in the study if they did not want to, I tried to overcome all these possible adversities. Whenever an issue came up, I encouraged them to express their ideas and feelings, and we spotted the possible challenges simultaneously in collecting the data, which ensured them the data they shared was safe with me and would only be used for scientific purposes with no private information about them revealed.

Finally, within this extensive and dynamic data collection period and analysis, I tried to understand the essence and experience of being a Syrian refugee student at a state university in central Türkiye, and I took this journey as a research companion. However, during this process, it turned out that I embodied various identities too: a lecturer, a friend, a counselor, a sister, an outsider, a host country citizen, a bilingual

researcher... Striking a balance between my roles as a researcher and, at the same time, keeping close to them posed a challenging task. I often found myself hesitating about how to navigate these roles. At such times, my priority was to uphold academic principles and integrity and ensure the well-being of the students. Then, I tried to be a supportive human being and friend. Another challenge was that while I informed all my focal participants that they could speak in Turkish, English, or a combination of both, and we managed all the interviews with relative ease, I believe the process could have been more effective if I had also known the participants' native language, Arabic. Although they did not have difficulty expressing themselves in English or Turkish and could use online translation tools during interviews on Zoom, they might have expressed themselves better in their first language. The next and final sections of this chapter explain the issues of quality and trustworthiness.

### **3.7. Ethical Considerations**

Upon receiving approval from the Human Subjects Ethics Committee at Middle East Technical University (see Appendix F), I initiated the data collection phase of this study. Before engaging in any form of data collection, I contacted the participants and provided them with informed consent forms, detailing the study's purpose and the procedures involved in data collection. Written consent was obtained from all participants. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves, and the researcher assigned pseudonyms to all other remaining individuals and contexts. I communicated my findings with my participants in the gatherings we held in the form of member checking.

As a researcher working with refugees, like all other researchers working with any subjects, I tried to direct my efforts to individual and social advancement, to preserve vulnerable populations, and to cultivate the integrity of research and the research community I am a part of (Strike, 2012). In the course of this study, I encountered several ethical dilemmas and challenges that necessitated quick reflection and action. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 264) assert, ethics in practice pertains to the everyday ethical issues that arise during research, requiring researchers to reflect on and respond to "ethically important moments"—unexpected and challenging

situations that demand immediate action (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 276). This is particularly relevant when conducting research with refugee students, as their lived experiences of forced migration present unique vulnerabilities and complexities that necessitate a deep understanding of both the context and the individual (Salem, 2019).

Particular care and attention are crucial for researchers working with potentially vulnerable young individuals who may have encountered displacement, violence, and/or trauma (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014; Gateley, 2015). As part of the research objectives, the participants' experiences of war and forced migration were examined too. However, as a researcher, I was always mindful of their reactions and tendencies, ensuring that discussing these experiences did not cause them distress and they could stop anytime they wanted. My aim was to minimize the risk of stigmatization and prevent potentially traumatizing situations for the participants. When participants were ready and willing to discuss these experiences, I proceeded with data collection. My observations that discussing past traumas provided relief were confirmed at the end of the fourth and final interview. Participants shared that this research and discussing their experiences in such detail for the first time helped them feel relieved and also reminded them of their agency and resilience, highlighting how much they endured and how far they came. Focusing on their agency and resilience, rather than emphasizing vulnerability, proved beneficial in the research process not just for collecting data without harming the participants but also for empowering them by inviting them to tell their stories, which meant they both told and listened to their stories from themselves for the first time in such detail.

Also, while presenting my arguments, I prioritized protecting the dignity of Syrian refugee students, ensuring that I used no expressions that would threaten their face. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out, in addition to ethical issues related to obtaining informed consent and protecting privacy, concerns about exploitation and compensation are also crucial parts of ethical decision-making processes. They define exploitation as a situation where "people supply the information used by the researcher and yet receive little or nothing in return" (p. 217). Based on my

observations, this research process provided some additional benefits for my refugee participants.

I did not limit my relationship with the Syrian refugee students to just being a researcher and research subjects. I became close friends with them, listened to their problems, and tried to offer emotional support. Besides through my identity as an EFL instructor, I offered them help in their English language learning journey too. I became a navigator and facilitator between them and the school and the community at a larger scale and became a person they consulted when in need. Thanks to this study, they could gain more information about the school context, developed meaningful relationship with students from other ethnicities, and gained some awareness about different languages, cultures and also met other Syrian refugee students in the school. Additionally, I maintain the academic responsibility of sharing the stories of SRSs and challenging the mainstream refugee discourse in media and politics. This discourse often reduces refugees to mere numbers, portrays them as security and economic threats, or victimizes them as helpless sufferers. This work aims to produce counter-hegemonic knowledge based on grassroots data collected in a research site situated in a state EMI university in central Türkiye.

### **3.8. Issues of Quality and Trustworthiness**

Heath and Street (2008) assert that “every field immersion is by definition unique” (p. 44) because what is observed by a fieldworker cannot be replicated in the exact same way, even by the same participants. For instance, if another fieldworker were to observe the same field with the same participants, they might not draw the same conclusions or notice the same details as the first observer. Consequently, ethnography is described as “inherently interpretive, subjective, and partial” (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 45). Given these conditions, an ethnographer’s responsibility is to persuade readers that the events narrated, and the characters observed are not fictional by providing rich, vivid, and detailed descriptions.

Creswell and Miller (2000) define validity as “strategies used by researchers to establish the credibility of their study” (p. 125) and outline several strategies that an

ethnographer should follow, such as ‘prolonged engagement in the field,’ ‘rich and thick description,’ ‘triangulation,’ ‘member checking,’ ‘external audits,’ and developing ‘self-reflexive accounts’ regarding the clarifying the researcher’s positionality. To ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations and findings, I adhered to each of the procedures recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). For the purposes of this study, trustworthiness refers to two key aspects. First, it means the ability to accurately present the lived realities of participants (Schwandt, 1997). Second, it ensures that the findings accurately reflect the situation and measure what was intended (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Since ensuring trustworthiness is essential for achieving methodological rigor in qualitative research, in this study, several strategies were implemented across various dimensions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

*Credibility:*

- **Prolonged Engagement:** Prolonged engagement and persistent observation involve immersing oneself in the field to understand the culture and verify the data collected. Prolonged engagement in the field and thick, rich description were particularly well-suited to this study as they are hallmarks of ethnographic research (Wolcott, 2009). I immersed myself in the field where I was also an insider for one and a half years for the primary data collection phase and for nearly four years for the fieldwork and the collection of secondary data sources. This duration allowed ample time to collect field notes about the context to create thick, rich descriptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As one of the EFL instructors at the Preparatory School of Newfoundland University, which positioned me as an insider, I was able to spend considerable time in the field to understand the environment, the school culture, its components, and the people involved and observe participants in their natural context. Although I had no professional relationship with the participants, which created a safe distance, my insider role allowed me to stay close and long enough in the field for persistent observation.

- **Triangulation:** Triangulation uses multiple sources, methods, or theories to cross-check the data and methodologies. The advantage of triangulation is that it prevents reliance on a single method or viewpoint, allowing methods to be compared with one another. Denzin (2012) suggested several types of triangulation: data triangulation for correlating people, time, and space; investigator triangulation for correlating findings from multiple researchers; theory triangulation for using and correlating multiple theoretical strategies; and methodological triangulation for correlating data from multiple data collection methods. Methodological triangulation involves using different types of methods for data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure consistency across different data sets, data were gathered through one-to-one semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, journals participants kept, and artefacts collected throughout the study. Data collection triangulation was achieved by collecting data from multiple sources at various times. Researcher triangulation was ensured through regular feedback from my supervisor and the advisory committee on all aspects of data collection and analysis. Peer debriefing was conducted with fellow doctoral students, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants.
- **Member Checking:** Member checking, which involves allowing participants to provide feedback to the researcher, is a necessary component for establishing credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involves verifying the data and findings with participants to ensure accuracy. This is achieved by allowing participants to validate the data themselves, thereby giving them a voice to confirm or deny the accuracy of the interpreted data (Stake, 1995). After data collection was finalized, credibility was reinforced by engaging participants in discussions about the interpretations derived from the data. I discussed in detail how I reached the findings and presented them to the participants for their check during a home visit where we all met.

*Transferability:*

- **Thick Descriptions:** Rich and thick description allows readers to deeply comprehend the situation, aims of the study, and findings. Following Geertz's



(1973) strategy to ensure validity, I provided a “thick description” of the events, detailed accounts of the participants, and the field throughout the dissertation. I offered as many details as possible to the reader about the methodological procedures I used in conducting the fieldwork.

*Dependability:*

- **Clear Documentation:** All stages related to data collection and management, especially coding and analysis, were thoroughly explained. Additionally, the reasons behind specific theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices made during data analysis were documented.
- **Researcher Reflexivity:** Another crucial aspect of achieving dependability is ensuring researcher reflexivity to minimize bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The researcher’s standpoint and personal reflexivity were discussed in the previous section to meet dependability goals.

*Confirmability:*

- **Audit Trails:** All data, including interview recordings, journal documents, and artifacts, were securely stored on both a password-protected cloud drive and a hard drive. I also maintained both digital and handwritten reflexive journals to record field notes and document critical issues that caught my attention while analyzing the data.
- **External audits:** External audits involve an external consultant or researcher examining both the research process and the final product (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout my thesis writing process, I regularly received feedback from my supervisor and the advisory committee.
- **Reflexive Journal:** I kept a reflexive journal and field notes to enhance the study's confirmability. This journal enabled me to document my decisions and feelings about conducting research in the field. Apart from the Word entries I kept, I also made use of the MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2024), to record the journal entries, particularly sometimes attached to data scripts as for the insights while analyzing the data.

In conclusion, this study employed an ethnographic case study design to understand the educational and adaptational experiences of five Syrian refugee students at a state EMI university in central Türkiye. Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, journals, and artefacts. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. By employing the strategies above, I aimed to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study. The findings of the study are presented in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Chapter Presentation

In this chapter, the first part starts with an overview of the themes of the study before a more detailed analysis of the findings are presented. Then the analysis beginning with the war, forced migration and displacement experiences of the participants is presented. In this part, I set the context of the war from the eyes of the participants, present what their initial reactions and impressions were related to the war, how they conceptualized it, and what their initial feelings were based on their experiences.

In the second part, after the analysis of the war, forced migration and displacement; Syrian refugee students' (SRSs) first experiences of schooling in Türkiye, displaying their education in Temporary Education Centers (TECs) and İmam Hatips are presented. This transitional period prior to Higher Education is provided in detail, as it is believed that the later educational lives of the refugee students are intricately related to their previous schooling in many subtle ways. This section is finalized by presenting the challenges refugee students experience.

After setting the context and their early experiences of schooling in Türkiye upon their displacement and seeking refuge in the host country, the analysis of the transitioning phase to Turkish Higher Education is presented. How refugee students gained entry, what kind of steps they were required to take, how their enrolling process was and what kind of factors affected their decisions in the process are given in detail.

Following the transition process of refugee students to higher education, I move on to the analysis of their first years at Turkish Higher Education which is the

preparatory year with intensive English language education at their English Medium Instruction (EMI) universities. In this section, the overall experience of learning English in an EFL context and how refugee students conceptualize this experience are presented by analyzing both challenges and strengths.

After discussing the intensive English language learning experiences at preparatory school, I go on to explain their educational journey by presenting the data on the COVID-19 pandemic. In this ethnographic case study, COVID-19 unexpectedly became a significant part of the higher education experiences of refugee students due to its sudden and unforeseen outbreak, thereby becoming a significant phenomenon in their educational journeys. Their first impressions on the outbreak, school closures following it, the effects of the pandemic on their overall life and educational trajectory with the challenges it brought are presented. This section is finalized how their perceptions of the war and the pandemic, two distinct crises, intersect.

In the section following the COVID-19, the data on online education experiences of refugee students in Higher Education as a result of the pandemic and school closures are presented. As it is with COVID-19, online education has been integrated into the research on the natural, ongoing process of the data collection process in this ethnographic case study. In this section, the analysis starts with online education and the sudden and unexpected transition process from face-to-face education (FtoF) to Online Education (OE). The challenges encountered throughout the process are presented in detail, and this section is finalized with how they evaluate the overall process of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkish Higher Education.

In the last part of the educational experiences of refugee students in Turkish Higher Education, as part of the discussion on Higher Education, English Medium Instruction and how refugee students make meaning out of this experience are analyzed. The analysis starts by presenting the reasons and motivations of refugee students to choose to study at an EMI university. This is followed by the language skills mostly used while studying in an English-medium program. Lastly, the data on

the challenges of studying in the target language in the host country are presented in this section.

In the third and final section of this chapter, the focus is moved from the educational trajectories of the Syrian refugee students to the challenges and coping strategies they use on their way to build resilience in the host country in their integration process. As part of the challenges, the data related to othering and discrimination Syrian refugee students face alongside the financial and emotional challenges they go through are presented with exemplifying extracts for each. After discussing their ideas on return to homeland, this chapter is finalized, showing how they build resilience by navigating the challenges along their journeys and developing coping strategies accordingly.

#### **4.2. Overview of the Themes of the Study**

In this first part, an overview of the themes of the study is presented before the detailed findings related to each theme are explained. In this ethnographic case study, the unit of analysis is the academic and adaptational experiences of five Syrian refugee students at a state EMI university in central Türkiye. The objective of the study was to explore Syrian refugee students' experiences in Turkish Higher Education in a widened perspective beginning from their war and migration experiences to the present encompassing from their initial schooling experiences in Türkiye to their transition to higher education.

Exploring the COVID-19 outbreak period and online learning experiences, from studying at an English medium instruction university to identity narrations, challenges faced in this process to coping strategies and building resilience. As a result, the research objective was to document their previous experiences from the period beginning with war and migration that would possibly affect their transition, experience, identity narrations and integration in Turkish Higher Education and in Türkiye and to investigate how all these intricate factors affect their educational and adaptational experiences in a host country and in its HEI.

**Table 5.** The themes of the Study along with a Description of the Theme and an Illustrative Quote

Research Question (RQ)	Sub-questions of RQs	Theme Description	Illustrative quotes
1. How do the educational experiences of a particular sample of refugee students evolve from their initial learning stages to their integration into Turkish higher education, considering their experiences at EMI universities and the perceived influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the shift to online education?	1a. What are participants' war and migration journey experiences and how do they influence their perceived integration to the host country and its education?	This theme involves war, forced migration, and displacement experiences of the participants; their navigation of transitioning to Turkish Higher Education from initial learning experiences to preparation, decision-making, and enrollment; their English language learning experiences in the Preparatory Schools; the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on their educational and social lives; their online education experiences during the pandemic and (online) EMI university experiences.	<i>"A game, yes, like a game. I didn't believe it [the war], at first I didn't believe it—I mean, I didn't believe it, oh, I am a man, I am not afraid, that's how we thought."</i>
	1b. How do participants navigate the initial stages of learning upon arrival in Türkiye, considering factors such as language barriers, cultural adjustment, and access to education?		<i>"The process was a bit difficult, to be honest, because we needed a residence permit for school. To get a student residence permit, we needed to get a document from the school. Things were quite complicated."</i>
	1c. What challenges do participants encounter during their transition to Turkish higher education institutions, and how do they navigate these challenges?		<i>"I think if my family hadn't enrolled me in a Turkish school, I wouldn't have adapted. For example, I might have gone there unwillingly at first because I didn't know Turkish, I didn't want to go; but if I hadn't gone, I would never have adapted."</i>
	1d. How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence the educational experiences of participants?		<i>"...it [her English] improved a lot. I couldn't speak, even if I knew some things, I couldn't speak. I was tongue-tied, but even in one level, I felt the difference a lot."</i>
	1e. What are the specific challenges presented by the shift to online education for participants, and how do they adapt to online learning environments?		<i>"I experienced something like this for the first time. I mean, I am experiencing something like this for the first time. Maybe, I thought, maybe they could even find a vaccine or something else, I didn't know; but the idea that schools would close never crossed my mind"</i>
2. How do refugee students narrate their identities amidst the challenges of displacement and adaptation to new educational and social contexts in the host country?	1c. What are the unique experiences and challenges faced by participants studying at a particular EMI university and how do these experiences influence their educational trajectories?	This theme explores identity narrations of the participants within various contexts and the coping strategies they developed against the emotional challenges they experienced on their way to building resilience.	<i>"This is the first time we've encountered something like this [online education]. The teachers don't know what to do. And we don't know either"</i>
	2a. How do participants adapt their identities within various learning environments and social contexts?		<i>"I don't want to seem different, because when they know I'm different, I am Syrian, they remember the Syrians who did bad things, and it affects me too in that sense"</i>
	2b. What type of coping strategies do participants develop against the emotional challenges they face on their way to resilience?		<i>"A person who does not believe in themselves does nothing. I always live by these words because everyone should give themselves hope"</i>

### 4.3. War, Forced Migration and Displacement

Refugees may face many challenges starting from the reason that urged them to forced migration to the migration journey which can be immensely challenging. In this first section, I set the scene for the war, and how five Syrian refugee student (SRSs) participants of this study felt at first, how they reacted, and what their initial perceptions were to the suddenness and devastation of war.

#### 4.3.1. The War: Setting the Scene

When the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011 with the conflict rising in April, the participants of the study who were then just children found themselves in the middle of a conflict which they thought would not last long. In this first part, I construct the context with the statements of the participants on initial climate in the country with the beginning of the Civil War, and their related ideas and feelings of how it built itself day by day. Their narrations on war and initial realizations indicate that none of them imagined the possible catastrophic outcomes it would lead to, the conflict was not going to be prolonged, and would be settled soon. Ahmet, whom I asked about his first feelings related to the war explains:

Extract 1

Gizem: Do you remember the time when the war broke out? What did you feel?  
Ahmet: Actually, the... before the war started in Syria, people started to go to the street and ask the government to change it, to change something in our country. And to make things better, but unfortunately, everything was going wrong. Because the government started to be... to... to deal with people violently...violently. So umm, at first, the... the people in Syria think that if they go out, the government will umm, will solve everything, and they will hear to them, but unfortunately, not... That was... that... the government started to kill people to... to use weapons in front of them, everything was violence, with violence. The government didn't deal with people well. So, and I think after that, some countries entered to Syria, and you can say, like... like a game, it's like a game. Now, everything is like, a game, every... for example, there is some countries want something from Syria and they... there are some countries wanted the war to continue in Syria.  
Gizem: Himm.  
Ahmet: So actually, now...now, I don't understand what is going on in Syria... Why and something so... so complicated, do you know?"

Ahmet, Interview 1

Ahmet states that, at first, Syrian people went to the streets to change the bad situation in the country "to make things better"; however, "the government started

dealing with the people violently”. From what Ahmet asserts, it is understood that Syrian people went to the streets to protest the country's ongoing political and economic situation; however, Ahmet claims that, the government did not respond to the people constructively, and he equals the initial turmoil with violence, and repeats this word for a few times. At this point, war is “so complicated”, things are “violent”, with the interference of outside countries into Syria, it is “like a game”. From the statements of Ahmet, his disappointment and resentment related to the government’s perceived unsuccessful management of the conflict and the interference of other countries inside Syrian’s internal affairs can be felt. Ali also defines the war like a game, but from a different point of view:

#### Extract 2

Gizem: What did you feel when the war first broke out, Ali, do you remember? You were ten years old.

Ali: I remember, uh, I felt something playful. I mean, I didn’t think of it as something real or harmful. Something playful... Like when a plane comes, oh, what a nice thing is coming (smiles). So, playful.

Gizem: It felt like a game to you, right?

Ali: A game, yes, like a game. I didn’t believe it, at first, I didn’t believe it—I mean, I didn’t believe it, oh, I am a man, I am not afraid, that’s how we thought.

Ali, Interview 1

The conceptualization of war as a "game" by both Ahmet and Ali illustrates distinct perceptions influenced by their respective experiences. Ahmet interprets war as a game characterized by the interference of foreign countries in Syria's domestic political affairs. Ahmet focuses on an understanding of the geopolitical dynamics and external influences shaping the conflict while Ali, adopts the perception of war as a juvenile game. Ali's young age at the beginning of war and his potential use of denial as a coping mechanism can be a reason of his attribution. By envisioning war as a game and asserting his identity as a "man" who does not experience fear, Ali might have attempted to manage his fear and make sense of the turmoil surrounding him. Belle, on the other hand, stresses the recency and newness of the war:

#### Extract 3

Gizem: How did you feel when it first broke out? How was the air in the country and in the neighborhood?

Belle: We didn't imagine it's gonna be like 10 years of war. Like we just thought it would be like, it was a new thing. So, we couldn't even think what it is. But we were watching TV and we were like getting, we have feelings. Like, maybe they are right, maybe they don't. Like,



but at first, it was just like, new thing like, you can't figure it out. Like you couldn't imagine it's gonna be 10 years, and it's not gonna end soon. You just don't imagine, like you feel it's gonna happen for like, two weeks and will end and everything gonna get to its normal life. But that didn't happen.

Belle, Interview 1

Belle admits that she was not expecting the conflict to be a long one. Her statements indicate that, at the beginning, people were following news, and waiting for the conflict to end, in two weeks possibly. War was completely “something new.” They expected to go back to the “normal life”, yet, as the time got longer, they realized it would not. It is seen that the suddenness and the shock of the war left its place to acceptance in time, but it is also apparent that it was not easy to process instantly. People were going on planning the life as it was in its normal flow. Nur and his family migrated to Saudi Arabia where her uncle lives, however; they were thinking of returning soon:

Extract 4

Nur: But we stayed there for a while. Uh, my father, my uncle is there, in Saudi Arabia. He also sent us a, uh, visa or something. Then he said, we would go, I mean we would go for a few months, and then after the war ended, we would return. We didn't take anything, I mean, we took very few belongings.

Gizem: Uh-huh.

Nur: We went to Saudi Arabia. There, uh, we didn't go to school for the first two months because we were preparing to return.

Gizem: You would return.

Nur: Yes, we would return. We were preparing in the ninth grade; we have something in the ninth grade.

Nur, Interview 1

Nur continued preparing for the high school exam she was supposed to take in Syria in Saudi Arabia. She and her family thought that their refuge would be short, “a few months” and then they would return, even take the exam, and study in high school. As this extract indicates, normalcy was preserved in thought, if not in daily life. However, the tension circulating the country started to be felt more strongly as the war escalated. When asked about her perception at the onset of the war, Yasemin clearly depicts the fear surrounding people and the country:

Extract 5

At that time, everyone was very scared, especially during the time we were migrating, uh, they had started bombing the place where we lived quite a bit, people were very scared back

then, we did not have the friendly atmosphere like before, everyone was confined to their homes, people were afraid to go out on the streets. Like that. In fact, we left our own house and went to another house because we were very well known by then, as my father was a high-ranked officer. Both those against Assad were asking why he hadn't left Assad yet, and we were looked at suspiciously by Assad's side too. So, they deliberately shot bullets at our house, quite a few bullets. That's why we moved to another place, not our own house, uh, we went to another place. Like that.

Yasemin, Interview 1

The tension and fear surrounding the context Yasemin was living at the time can be felt from her statements. It is also apparent that they were in a complicated situation because of his father's critical position as one of Assad's officers. Yasemin claimed that his father was not supporting Assad's regime, although, as a high-ranked officer working for him, he was not perceived to be so. In the end, they were targets for both positions, and this put them in danger as a family which accelerated the forced migration period later. It is also revealed in Yasemin's statements that, in the tension of the war, othering and discrimination started to be felt within one's own country long before it was felt in the country they were going to resettle. This created a challenging situation for both Yasemin and her family where they belonged nowhere. "Both those against Assad were asking why he hadn't left Assad yet, and we were looked at suspiciously by Assad's side too." According to Appadurai (1996), an individual's habitus must be diligently maintained amidst constantly changing life-worlds (p. 56). It can be claimed that Yasemin's habitus was not static. Additionally, it can be suggested that the habitus became a contested space, particularly for her family and her who were now on the target. The fear participants felt seems to have increased, as the intensity of the war increased too, Nur also shares that:

#### Extract 6

We were waiting for Friday every day, teacher. Because Friday was, uh, the most difficult day, one of the hardest days. After Friday, there were immediately some noises, explosions, and so on. Um, also, people were calling out from the mosques. Telling us to get out and such. You should get out and so on; but, um, it didn't affect us much, it didn't affect us much at first. We were only seeing it on the news but then, a few months later, it happened in our neighborhood, um, it came on Friday, it was only happening on Fridays. On other days, nothing happened. Um, after our house burned down, we moved out to another house. In that neighborhood, nothing was happening, I mean we just didn't go out in the evenings. We couldn't go out alone and such. Like that. I didn't experience much of the war, I mean I experienced it for a few days. We immediately, immediately left Syria.

Nur, Interview 1

Nur says that every Friday, they were waiting in fear as it was "one of the hardest" days because "there were immediately some noises, explosions, and so on". Especially in mosques, people were shouting to get out. At first, she said, they were not affected that much, only seeing on news, yet a few months later, "the war came to their neighborhood as well", again only on Fridays. It is also crucial to recognize the evolving nature of her habitus due to this "threat." The adaptability and transformation of participants' habitus are illustrated in the following five data excerpts too, as in time, after realizing that the war would not end soon, feelings of hopelessness and disappointment increased among them. The participants, who were children at the time, came to realize this fact in traumatized ways:

Extract 7

Gizem: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So, when did you realize the situation was serious?

Ali: Uh, nothing serious happened to us before, the planes didn't hit us; but the next year, after a year, the soldiers came to us. They stayed in my village, it was a big thing, a big thing, what was it? Military (military place?) a big military place, what does this mean (asking without knowing the meaning of the word)?

Gizem: Barracks, I get it, I get it. A place-

Ali: They built a place, took it for themselves. We never go there; but nothing harmful happened. Then from us, from my village to them, they hit them, I mean, get out of here, get out of my village, they hit, there was a war. That's why the planes started coming to us, they started hitting us, from that time I saw. I really saw.

Gizem: I understand. How did you feel?

Ali: It was so scary. Uh, I don't know what to do, I don't know what will happen to me, I don't know what will happen in the future, I mean... I don't know when I will die.

Gizem: Yes, it must have been challenging to feel these things as a child.

Ali: Uh-huh.

Gizem: Yes.

Ali: Not just for me, but for all of us.

Ali, Interview 1

Ali described his intense fear when the warplanes began attacking them, which made him realize the war was not just a distant event but a present and terrifying reality. His remarks can be interpreted as experiencing such direct trauma made the war an undeniable part of their lives, rather than something they merely saw on television news. As Ali indicates, this led to a profound sense of uncertainty about the future. He was extremely frightened, unsure of what to do, what would happen, or when he might face death. Yasemin also shares the changes they faced when the intensity of the war increased:

Extract 8

Gizem: Okay. So Yasemin, what major changes happened in your life when the war started in Syria? How did the war change your life?

Yasemin: Uh, for example, that friendly environment I mentioned, it disappeared. For instance, I couldn't go out and play with my friends, even if I went to school, you know, I mentioned going to get ice cream, we couldn't even do that, of course, it was just going to school and coming back. And sometimes I had to go with my brother because my mom could not let me go alone, it was an unsafe environment. Uh, what else can I say...

Gizem: After the changes the war brought about in you, can we say you became a different Yasemin? I mean, how did the war change you, your perspective on life?

Yasemin: Uh, it made me feel like some things aren't that valuable. For example, I realized my toys weren't that important. What's important is my mom, for instance, her safety, my brothers, my father's well-being, those material things aren't that significant, you think, whether you have them or not doesn't matter. Sometimes you miss certain things, but at least you say we got out of the war, we survived. Uh, after that, for instance, the war made me feel more faithful in terms of my belief. You know, the only thing you can trust there is God. Like that.

Yasemin, Interview 1

Yasemin recounted the transformations brought about by the war, such as the loss of sincerity in the society and a sense of normalcy, describing it as an "unsafe environment". The constant threat of attacks can be interpreted to have made it clear that they were in danger, resulting in avoidance of going outside. She realized that some things in life, like her toys, were not so valuable, while the importance of family became paramount. Despite deeply missing her homeland and her former life, Yasemin felt gratitude for her and her family's survival. The forced change in her habitus where once she felt so safe had changed into something new, yet the survival of all her loved ones seems to have made this new habitus to be something to be grateful for. These experiences strengthened her faith in God, leading her to conclude that the only entity one can truly rely on is God in such moments.

As participants shared, schools were not safe during the war either. Belle shared a story, saying, "like I have stories but like... For, for one time, this projectile came to, they sent it from Duma to our university, and a person was graduating at the same time, the same day of his graduation. Just he died. His head has opened and blood and all of this in the university<sup>5</sup>." Belle was a university student at the time of this tragic event, which became a defining moment leading to Belle's eventual forced migration. When recounting this incident, Belle smiled, like other participants who often smiled when discussing tragic events. This reaction surprised me in our

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<sup>5</sup>Participants' lexical and grammatical choices were kept to preserve the authenticity of the data. Only when the message conveyed was not comprehensible were their sentences adapted for accuracy.

interviews, as I anticipated a tense and vulnerable context in which I would have to either comfort them or not proceed with the topic at one point. I later realized that this was a coping strategy, which will be discussed in the following sections.

The pre-migration war period was difficult for all participants, as they faced many challenging events; however, their cases were distinctly unique and different. These differences can be attributed to various factors such as their city of residence, proximity to neighboring countries, social class and economic capital, the significant others surrounding them, their family's occupations, their direct connections with conflicting groups, or any resources they had to facilitate the process within their own country and during forced migration. Nur explains an incident that happened to them, and how they overcame it: “Someone emptied our house and set it on fire. It wasn't just our house, a few houses burned that day, yes, a few houses burned. Three houses burned in our building (Nur, Interview 1).

In this extract, Nur talks about an incident where their house was set on fire during the war while they were staying at another house of theirs. When asked if this happened because of their perceived connection to Assad, the country's leader, Nur denied any such relationship, explaining that they would not support him since their father was elderly and their younger brother was too young. This indicates that, according to Nur, politics was considered a man's job. Additionally, relying on their economic capital as they already had another house to move into, losing one to fire did not leave them homeless. This example illustrates that the degree to which one is affected by war is closely tied to their economic capital. Although it was a traumatic experience, they had the means to continue living during the war. Ahmet, who had strong economic capital as well, and who lived in a region close to Turkish borders, shares:

#### Extract 9

Gizem: Please try to remember your initial feelings when the war first broke out and comment on how these six years [in war] were spent.

Ahmet: I should tell you something that as I told you before, our region was not so damaged... damage like the other cities, you know. So, when, when something happened in our country, our... before I lived in Türkiye, I was able to go and back, go to Türkiye and back to Syria. And when it was happening something in our city, we were going to Türkiye, you know..

Gizem: Were the borders open?

Ahmet: Yeah, yeah it was, it was open, and I was able, with my family to go and back to Syria.

Gizem: Hmm.

Ahmet: That time, and actually we were having a house here [in Türkiye], you know. So, when something happened, we moved to Türkiye before we... we leave here, you know.

Gizem: Mm hmm.

Ahmet: So, but what I can tell you that I didn't... how I can say.. I didn't live, for example, there are other peoples who really, really live in this war and the umm, how I can say? I didn't see what they... they saw, do you know?

Gizem: I understand.

Ahmet: They, yeah. They were... they were damaging more than me. I just sometimes... I saw that, for example, the... the... the plane, how was bombing? No. So, that is what I can say about that.

Ahmet, interview 1

Ahmet appeared to be fortunate because his city did not suffer as much damage as others during the war, likely due to its proximity to Türkiye and possible support from there as one of the Turkish-controlled zones in northern Syria. His village was transformed into a city, he claims- a result that might not be expected in the state of war: "So, I will tell you. It was like, not so big village, it was like, normal. And... It's, I like it so much actually. As you know, I spent most of my life there. But now... now, it's... it... it's like a city now. You can say, because it's near from Türkiye. So near from Türkiye. So, most of the... the... as you know, we... we... we are having a war in our country but our... our village is safe because it's near from Türkiye. So, most of people... most of people, they are working there. They... they living there. So, it... it... it... it became a big city, a city."

This geographical advantage can be perceived to allow them to move back and forth between Syria and Türkiye when the war worsened. From this extract, one gains an understanding that one's experience of war varies significantly based on geographical position, and not all people in a country experience war in the same way. Economic capital also seems to play a crucial role. For instance, in the following part, it will be explained how Nur left Syria directly with her family as they understood the war would worsen; while Ahmet could move freely to Türkiye when the conflict intensified. Having another house in Türkiye provided Ahmet and his family a significant advantage, offering a place to escape to. By comparing himself with other people in the country, he summarizes his advantageous position in the statement, "I did not see what they saw". Ahmet's close ties with Türkiye, even before the war,

will also affect his adjustment and integration into the country which will be shown in the following sections.

Findings indicate that while for some participants, the realization that seeking refuge was necessary came within weeks; for others, it took six years. Participants, upon reaching pivotal moments in their lives, chose to migrate, either alone or with their families. Nur reached this decision within a few weeks, whereas it took six years for Ali. Yasemin migrated with her entire family, in contrast to Belle, who embarked on the migration journey alone. The data reveals that the uniqueness of the refugee experience begins well before finding refuge, rooted in the personal impact of war in one's homeland and at the intersection of various factors shaping the refuge. Their understanding of the need to leave their country evolves from these experiences. Belle says, "At first, you feel it's... You don't know what it is like. But after two years, your hope is gonna end. It's like a conflict between people each other between brother and family feel, a country is the family and it's just a conflict, it's gonna end. And after five years, you have hope. But after eight years, like you can see it, it's not gonna happen soon. The peace won't come soon" (Belle, Interview 1). Belle goes on describing the hopeless situation in the country with a tragic incident that happened in one of the cities of Syria:

Extract 10

Gizem: So, you lost your hope at the eighth year, you say?

Belle: Yes. I was in Syria. Before I left, something happened if you know, "Duma".

Gizem: What happened there?

Belle: It was closed for eight years and people were starving, in this war thing. I can't imagine even how it's happened. So, before I came to Türkiye, they just opened it and they went to İdlib, the people were in Duma. And all the city has no military things like because we were getting projectile. I don't know-

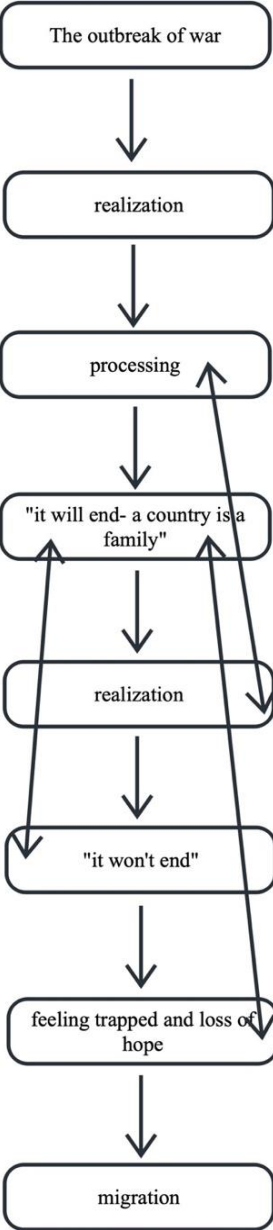
Gizem: Hı-hmm..

Belle: So, we were getting from Duma to the city and from the city to Duma. And it's finished for before I left. So, now there is no guns and fires but, like, that's not all, like they are suffering from lack of money, their water supplies and so. But I felt like before I came here, maybe I didn't feel it's gonna be hope. Even the good thing that peace, there is no war anymore in Damascus, but I felt like it's hopeless. Then, I knew that I can't have a future in there.

Belle, Interview 1

Belle's words illustrate that after enduring years of war, hope diminishes while disappointment intensifies. The overall findings of the context in the homeland

during the war revealed that participants followed a similar pattern: Following the outbreak of war, they spend some time realizing the situation. Once they reach a state of realization, they try to process the reality of their circumstances. Initially, there is a belief that things will eventually improve, as they believe “a country is a family”. However, when the conflict persists, a new realization dawns—they understand that "it won't end." This leads to feelings of “being trapped” and leads to the loss of hope. Ultimately, these experiences drive the decision to leave their country and migrate. Figure 8 presents the path participants followed from outbreak of war to migration.



**Figure 6.** From Outbreak of War to Migration: The Path Refugee Students Followed



Participants' narrations reveal that the period before migration varies, potentially altering the impact of trauma as well. When war breaks out, apart from the unknowable state it brings, it also disrupts the normalcy of everyday life. The data highlight that the pre-war process and post-war desires are often conceptualized as a return to "normal". Thus, it is worth highlighting that it is the desire for the ordinary amidst the extraordinary chaos created by war and its aftermath, the forced migration period starts.

### **4.3.2. Resettlement Following the Forced Migration**

#### **4.3.2.1. Pre- Migration Context and Motivations for Migration**

The findings highlighted that the migration journeys of the participants varied significantly, reflecting their unique experiences during the war. Nur immediately left the country with her family to reunite with a relative in another Arabic country, while Ali endured six years of conflict before migrating. Like Nur, Yasemin migrated with her family, while Belle undertook the dangerous journey alone. Participants' migration journeys highlight the uniqueness of every refugee's experience, spanning from the pre-war period to post-war conditions. In this section, the distinctive migration journeys of the participants, a perspective often overlooked in refugee studies despite being an important "unit of analysis" (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014, p. 298), are presented.

Understanding migration journeys is crucial as they reveal that integration begins long before arrival in the host country. The journey itself and the factors influencing it are significant, as they are the participants' lived experiences revealing the motivations behind migration, whether forced or voluntary and shaping the post-migration and integration periods in the host country (Naidoo et. al., 2018). This can impact the participants' educational experiences and shape their educational trajectories in specific ways. Additionally, in this section, how migration journeys, influenced by the war, intersect with the subsequent experiences of refugees in the host country are illustrated.

Ahmet, who has a strong economic capital and whose family was doing business in Türkiye, had a family house in the host country where they escaped to whenever the war intensified. When asked about the process before his migration, Ahmet says:

Extract 11

Gizem: So, Ahmet until 2017, although you had a house in Kilis with your family, you didn't migrate certainly, right? I mean, completely. You had a house in Syria.

Ahmet: Yes, yes. We was going and back to Syria, yeah.

Gizem: Yeah. What was the reason that you migrated completely to Türkiye?

Ahmet: The reason that I should complete my university studying, and in Syria, it's so bad... going bad, nothing is good. The... the thing is going bad and bad and for studying is so bad. I can't stay there and study there. The first reason is that I should study, I should complete my education.

Gizem: So, did your family move to Kilis because of you?

Ahmet: ...for studying . Yeah. And the... this is the reason... the reason that we have a work here, and we can stay here, and it's better, it's better choice to move.

Gizem: So, you completely abandoned your house in Syria in Idlib ?

Ahmet: Yes.

Ahmet, Interview 1

Ahmet's remarks indicate that Ahmet and his family were in a relatively privileged situation when compared to other participants, as they lived near the Turkish-Syrian border. They had the opportunity to commute between the two countries using a specific identity card provided to them due to their family business, which involved trade between Syria and Türkiye. It can be interpreted from Ahmet's narrations that his economic capital enabled him to navigate the challenges of wartime more easily. Whenever the conflict intensified, Ahmet moved back and forth between the two countries with his family. However, as Ahmet noted, the lack of effective education in Syria ultimately led him to migrate permanently. As it is in the case of Ali, education is highlighted to be the primary motivation for Ahmet's decision to leave Syria and migrate.

In areas where the war was particularly intense, it is understood from the participants' accounts that people initially migrated internally, and leaving the country was not their first choice. However, the findings indicate that when hope diminished, and it became clear that the war would not end soon, they decided to leave their homeland. Ali explains their reason for migration:

Extract 12

Gizem: What happened that made you decide to come to Türkiye?

Ali: Ah, okay, okay, okay what happened... First, my father and mother did not think of coming here, they couldn't think about it. They only sent my older brother here because I was in the tenth grade, no, not tenth, eighth grade, younger, so it was very difficult to come here [for me]. How can a child come here alone, and my father and mother wouldn't come, it was very difficult to come here, they didn't send me, only my brother to study, but not for migration. Then I was in the tenth grade and education stopped, it completely stopped, there were no schools and I was getting good grades, so I didn't want to leave it like that, that's why they sent me too, but they stayed in Syria.

I.: Hmm.

A.: A year later, my father and mother came here because my father had a heart attack eleven years ago; but he had to go to the hospital every year, but he didn't go because of the war, so it got very bad. It hurt a lot, he couldn't breathe well, he was in very bad condition, so it was an emergency situation that he and my mother came here.

I.: Hmm.

A.: After coming here, they didn't go back to Syria. They went to Antalya immediately - Antakya, they went to Mersin. He had surgery. After the surgery, they came here immediately to Hatay and stayed with us.

Ali, Interview 1

Contrary to some public opinion considered prevalent in Türkiye (Cin & Doğan, 2021), in this particular case it is revealed that Ali and his family endured six years of war, and did not choose to migrate as soon as the war broke out. Ali recounts that his family never considered leaving the country but sent his older brother to Türkiye so he could continue his studies. Ali was not sent then, as his family thought he was still too young to migrate. However, when he was in the tenth grade in high school, and schools were closed, literally halting his education, his family decided it was time for him to continue his studies in Türkiye, where his brother was already studying. Ali then embarked on a dangerous journey to Türkiye alone. It is worth highlighting that, he describes his motivation for migration as “just for studying, not for migration”.

A recurring theme in the data was that migration is conceptualized as not the aim but the result of another reason which is mostly education for young participants and is often treated as something temporary. They mostly believe that they left their country because they wanted to study, it was for education or for some other reason, but not for safety, or only because of it. These findings can be interpreted as there is a sense of the denial of migration but seeking some other reasons for ‘moving’. They are not migrating; they are coming for a specific purpose which is generally "education", something noble in their eyes, as it is reflected in the data.

Unlike the brothers, the older members of Ali's family migrated after the boys because the father needed medical examination following a heart attack he had suffered years ago. Without access to necessary medication and regular check-ups, it is understood that he was struggling significantly, and this became the reason for them to follow their sons to the host country. The narrations of the participants suggest that, like Ali's older brother, generally, there is a family member sent like a pioneer, and after one or two years (sometimes less relying on the circumstances in the country of origin), the rest of the family arrives, and the whole family reunites if everything goes as planned as in the case of Ali. The same path is followed by Yasemin and her family too, whose older brother arrived earlier in the host country. The pioneer is mostly chosen among the young and healthy young men of the family, whether to work and make money or to study and find a job. Yasemin, Ahmet, Ali all had an older brother who arrived in the resettlement country before the rest of the family members. It can be interpreted that this also eased the process of adjustment and integration for the later arriving members, as the pioneer already spent some time in the host country, and thus learned how to navigate the challenges.

Additionally, Türkiye was not the first resettlement country for Nur and Yasemin. Within the first weeks of the war, Nur and her family migrated to Saudi Arabia where his uncle was working. Without taking much with them, as they thought it was just for a few weeks and they were going to return soon, Nur and her family faced the suddenness of the war, and this became the second disruption to the sense of normalcy following the war for them. This suddenness is also reflected in Yasemin's statements when she recounts her migration journey which was first to Egypt:

Extract 13

Gizem: Did you move to Egypt as a family?

Yasemin: Initially, my sister and I left. Well, my sister... because my father was still working, we couldn't just leave all of a sudden. That's why my sister and I left first. We left very unexpectedly, like we decided today, and left the next day.

Gizem: How did it happen? Can you tell me?

Yasemin: Uh, my uncle lives in Egypt. He had gone to Egypt before us. My uncle's wife came to Syria to visit her mother. When she came to visit us, she jokingly said, "Let me take the girls too," and my father liked the idea and said, "Yes, let's send them," and then he said, "We will send the brothers too after them." That's how we left. My sister and I. Also, my brother had left for Egypt before us. But before we went to Egypt, he also came to Türkiye.

Gizem: Hmm.

Yasemin: Yes. So, my sister and I left for Egypt, and then about three months later, my mother and my other two brothers came to Egypt. Then we completed the second term [at school]. They waited for me to complete the second term, and then we came to Türkiye.

Gizem: So why did you move from Egypt to Türkiye?

Yasemin: As I said, my brother came to Türkiye. He couldn't find a job in Egypt, and the jobs he found offered very low salaries, very low. That's why he came here. He had friends here. They recommended it, said Türkiye is better. He came here about six months before us, and then my father couldn't go to Egypt because he didn't have a passport, he couldn't fly. He came here across the border. My brother had friends in Ankara, so he came here. My father crossed the border, and my brother picked him up and brought him to Ankara. Then they found a house here, and we came too.

Yasemin, Interview 1

Yasemin and her older sister were sent to Egypt to their uncle, living there with his wife visiting them at the time. This was a sudden and unexpected change in Yasemin's life; there are two possible reasons behind Yasemin and her family's motivation: The first reason was the interrupted educational life she had in Syria, so once she resettled in Egypt, she was going to be able to study. Another reason was the critical situation her father was in. He had a job that positioned him as one of the proponents of Bashar al-Assad, the president of the country, which in turn put him in danger in the neighborhood where most opponents to him were residing.

As in the case of Nur, Türkiye was not the first resettlement country for Yasemin, although she did not stay in Egypt long and migrated to Türkiye after studying there just for one term. She explains the reasons behind this decision as the lack of job opportunities for her elder brother in Egypt and his father's delicate situation. Her father had to migrate secretly without his passport, which meant that to make it to another country as an illegal migrant, he had to cross a border into a neighboring country which was in this case, Türkiye. As it can be observed in these cases, the motivational reasons behind migrations were diverse and specific to the participants. At the intersection of differing identities, participants tried to navigate the challenges they faced and followed the path that was the most suitable and manageable at the time. Unlike Nur and Yasemin, who were accompanied by one or more family members while migrating, Belle and Ali were alone in their migration journey. Belle tells her motivation behind her resettlement:

Extract 14

Actually, there's two reasons. The first one, and the most—The first one and the thing is, I don't want to waste my life in Syria. In Syria, there's nothing. You feel like just war, and

everyone is suffering and you're one of them. And you won't have life. And even if you do your best, like, what you're gonna get? Nothing. And the second thing, I was in conflict with my father and wanted to leave him. I wasn't like, I was feeling just, I'm wasting my life on something like, doesn't deserve this. Like why I'm wasting my life?

Belle, Interview 1

Contrary to other participants, family is not a source of support for Belle, and constitutes one of the reasons for her decision to migrate. When she was asked why she chose Türkiye for resettlement, she explained: “Because it was the cheapest and the easiest for me. Like, I even.. It's not my own money that I came.” As was also found in the study of Hauber-Özer (2021), interpersonal support from family members, friends, classmates, and professors plays a crucial role in the narratives of the participants. Without the necessary support and financial assistance that could be provided by her family, Belle had to rely on significant others in her life, such as her friends and their families in order to be able to cross the border into Türkiye. Since Türkiye was not accepting any newcomers from Syria at the time, she also had to enter as an illegal migrant. She recounts the traumatic migration journey as:

Extract 15

Gizem: Did you travel safely to Türkiye?

Belle: Like, I felt, after I came I had trauma.

Gizem: Why, was it a difficult journey?

Belle: It was the easiest journey of the people. Like people suffered more. But for me, like a little child that his, her parents protect her, it was a completely different thing. Like I couldn't even know I have traumas from it. Nothing happened but like I don't feel safe anymore.

Gizem: Because your parents didn't accompany you, did you feel lonely?

Belle: Yes. And there was a lot of bad people in the road. And... I don't know (laughs).

Gizem: Did something bad happened to you?

Belle: Nothing bad happened to me, but the thoughts of something bad is gonna happen to me... You feel like you are trapped like.. At first when I went there, they said it's easy road. It's- If you go to Iran, to Tahrán, then to the, to the borders of Van and just go there, walked a little bit and everything, everything is okay. So, what happened... We did that, at the borders in Iran, a guy just get close to me. And this was the first thing like, like you, I couldn't feel safe anymore. And then we went to Van. Before we went to Van, they, I, migrants borders, cross the borders. They couldn't let us because they said there is policemen with gun fires. And we couldn't do it the first night. So here it is. The problem like I felt I won't do it, I'm not gonna do it. It's I'm gonna stuck in Iran, in a shitty place. And that's it. So we tried, we tried again and again and I came.

Gizem: So how many days did it take you from Syria to Türkiye?

Belle: I think eight days.

Belle, Interview 1

The impact of the difficult migration journey was evident in Belle's narration. As a lonely young girl without any familiar people accompanying her, she reports that she

had to travel all the way to Türkiye from a route the war was not as intense as it was in other regions. This journey took a total of eight days with extreme danger and uncertainty and left her with a trauma that may not heal in a lifetime. It is worth highlighting that this migration journey has affected her later experiences of adjustment in the host country, and her educational life in Turkish Higher Education too as it is reflected in the data. Ali was also an illegal migrant crossing the border with smugglers which made his migration journey traumatic as well:

Extract 16

A.: I had the determination to come, I had the determination to come, but I was caught at the border by the gendarmerie; but because I had the determination and didn't want to lose, I tried to enter again, and I succeeded. On the second attempt. The first time they caught me, uh, they caught me, and I went to prison for a day and then returned to Syria, and then I came to Türkiye again and I succeeded in entering.

I.: So how long after did you try again?

A.: At the same time. I left the border crossing and immediately tried again.

I.: You tried again immediately?

A.: Uh-huh, I didn't go to my family.

I.: I understand. So did you try to enter again with smugglers?

A.: Yes. The police station, the police station is nearby, I mean they [smugglers] left me, not just me, us [to the police station].

I.: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

A.: Why? To catch us and send us back to Syria and make us pay again and take money again, something like that. They left us near the police station and the police came to us, some people were taken. They didn't see me, because I'm young and very, I mean, I'm very short.

I.: So the police didn't touch you because you were a child?

A.: Yes, no, they didn't see me, they didn't see me. If they see, they would take, they would take me.

I.: How didn't they see you; weren't you among the others?

A.: On the ground, I was on the ground, but there was a child [he refers to himself] there; I mean, a child doesn't come alone; they think like that. They think families come, why is there a child [alone]? That child must have a family here in Türkiye. He is just a child... Something like that.

Ali, Interview 1

Ali's narration of his migration journey illustrates the impact of war on children. When Ali arrived in Türkiye as an illegal migrant, he was only sixteen, still a child. As he was not accompanied by anybody like Belle, he said that he felt intense fear on the way while trying to pass the border, too. After spending six years in conflict in his country, Ali had to endure a dangerous journey with the smugglers, got caught and arrested, and finally had to spend a night in prison. Yet, Ali does not talk about his feelings, as illustrated in his depictions of war: "I am a man, I am not afraid" (Ali, interview 1). The data reveals that at the intersection of his male identity and war

victim identity, he tries to overcome his fear by bringing his masculinity out. It can be interpreted from the data in both Ali's and Belle's cases, it took a lot of courage and resilience to cross the border between the two countries, and this experience has had a lasting impact on their lives.

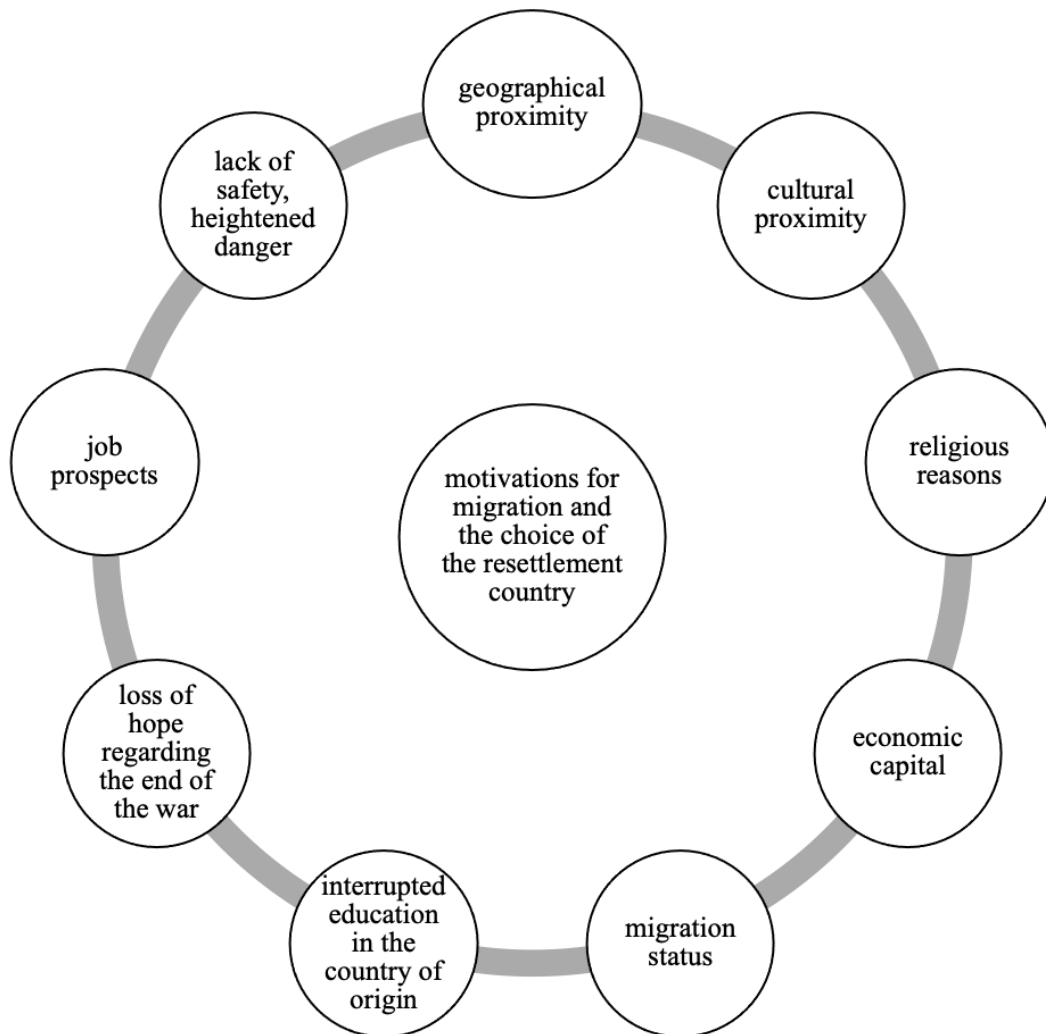
The migration cases of Ali and Belle were challenging because they sought refuge in Türkiye after 2018, when border controls were tightened (Şahin-Mencütek, 2019). Yasemin, on the other hand, arrived in Türkiye from her 1<sup>st</sup> resettlement country, Egypt in 2013 when Syrians were free to pass the border, and the restrictions were not heavy when compared to the later years of the war: "We came to Türkiye through a legal route, only my father could not. We, as a family, came by regular airplane. There were no visas or anything at that time, so there was no problem with our entry" (Yasemin, Interview 1).

It is revealed from the findings that the arrival time, which may not seem as effective as other factors in integration, can have an impact on a participant refugee's life, as can be observed in these cases. Nur and Yasemin arrived earlier, only a few years after the war broke out when restrictions were not put into place. Thus, their transition to the host country was smoother as they indicated. Yet, Ali and Belle had traumatic migration journeys that required them to endure a lot of challenges along the way with the difficult migration journeys they did with the smugglers. Below, Figure 9 presents participants' motivations for migration and the choice of resettlement country.

All in all, findings of the study reveal that the reasons for migration of participants were education "Schools ended, there are no schools, I mean, it's over, I mean, it's wiped out, okay, that's why I came here" (Ali, Interview 1); the proximity and convenience of Türkiye to Syria "The nearest country to us and a good country, that's what my father thinks, I mean, a good country, how to say, brave? No, a strong country and, and, and it accepts Syrians, I mean, sometimes countries, Arab countries don't accept Syrians, for example, Lebanon" (Ali, Interview 1); the cultural proximity of Türkiye to Syria "Yeah. It's not... it's not a new experience and the culture is so near from the Syrian culture. And umm, as I was going and back to



Syria, I was actually used to... I know the Turkish people for example. Yeah, it's not something new" (Ahmet, Interview 1); the perceived danger, lack of safety and fear regarding war in the country of origin "If we stay in Syria, we are very insecure, that's why we left" (Yasemin, Interview 1); and religious reasons "Why not Europe, for example? In Europe, we thought we would have difficulties in terms of religion, for example, as a family, for instance, I wear hijab, my mother wears hijab, my sister wears hijab, and we are somewhat conservative. Our situation there would be bad. So, Türkiye was the best place for the family" (Yasemin, Interview 1). As it is highlighted in the experiences of the participants, selecting a country for refuge and migration emerges not as a straightforward decision but rather as a complex synthesis of multiple factors which, in the end, impact refugee students' educational trajectories in the host country which will be discussed in the next section.



**Figure 7.** Motivations for Migration and the Choice of Resettlement Country

#### **4.4. Navigating the Transitioning to Turkish Higher Education**

##### **4.4.1. From Initial Educational Experiences in Türkiye to Turkish Higher Education**

Following the first major crisis war and the forced migration following it, participants sought refuge either alone or with their families in other countries, mainly the neighboring states of Syria. As explained in the previous part, Yasemin and Nur sought refuge in other Arabic states where they had relatives who could host them for some time until the conflict ended before they finally resettled in Türkiye. Yasemin and her sister had gone to Lebanon to stay with their uncles, while Nur and her family relocated with their uncles in Saudi Arabia. After spending one school term in Lebanon, Yasemin and her family followed her older brother, who could not secure employment in Lebanon and thus migrated to Türkiye in search of better job opportunities. Nur and her family left Saudi Arabia and migrated to Lebanon for the same reason: to seek a suitable job for her father. However, after spending 1,5 years in Lebanon, Nur and her family migrated to Türkiye, their third resettlement country. Belle and Ali, on the other hand, had reported that they endured a very dangerous and traumatic journey across the border to reach Türkiye. Finally, Ahmet had a very smooth transition period and moved to Türkiye, where he and his family already had a house and commuted during the war.

In line with their migration motivations, as soon as they arrived in the host country, participants reported that they started their education. Depending on their arrival date, they started secondary, post-secondary, and higher education. Since their experiences of schooling prior to Higher Education in the host country also affected their subsequent Higher Education experiences, in this section, their previous educational experiences until Higher Education will be briefly explained too.

Nur explains when she started her schooling as "I started [school] almost immediately. When I first arrived, I went to school the next day. My father had enrolled me at that time. Uh, I went the next day immediately" (Nur, Interview 2). A common theme that emerged in the accounts of the participants was that education

had the utmost importance, and it was so critical for participants and their families to start their schooling, which had already been interrupted because of the war in Syria. Learning Turkish was another significant objective that was directly in line with the educational objectives as they explained. Yasemin recounts:

Extract 17

Yasemin: We came here. I think we arrived two months before the schools opened, to the school here. When we came, they immediately put me in a course to learn Turkish (smiles). I think it hadn't even been a week, they put me in [Turkish language course] immediately. At first, I didn't want to go at all. I was already studying in Lebanon, for example, here in 8th grade there is TEOG<sup>6</sup>, in Lebanon they do it in 6th grade, so I had a lot of difficulties in Lebanon for that, and that's why I didn't like Lebanon. I went there [to Egypt] in the second term, and they held me responsible for both the first and second terms [for the exam], it was a very difficult period. As I said, they put me in a course a week later [in Türkiye]. I didn't want to attend to the course because, as I said, I had been constantly studying without a break. I took an exam like TEOG in 6th grade, as I said, I studied continuously, I was really tired. We also came out of the war. I was tired and didn't want to start, but they forced me, saying you will start school and such.

Gizem: Why do you think they cared so much about you learning Turkish, Yasemin?

Yasemin: Uh, I mean, I couldn't go to school if I didn't learn Turkish, we are starting a new life, we don't think about going to another country, so learning Turkish was definitely important. Also, I was already successful at school in Syria, and they wanted me to continue in the same way. So, they insisted a lot.

Yasemin, Interview 1

As in the case of Yasemin, learning Turkish and starting school were so critical that Yasemin did not lose any time and started a Turkish language course in the first week she started living in Türkiye. Learning Turkish was perceived to be so critical that she explains it as “Learning Turkish was definitely important”. In addition to its being the medium of instruction in all Turkish schools apart from some private schools, Turkish was also salient in that “we were about to start a new life, and we did not think of going to another country”. Since Yasemin and her family did not think of resettling in another country, Yasemin had other reasons to learn the host country’s language. It can be interpreted from Yasemin’s statements that years of war and having different schooling experiences in other countries resettled were felt as a burden and drained her. However, her narration also indicates that she had high motivation to learn Turkish and pursue her education in which she found herself

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<sup>6</sup> TEOG (Transition from Basic Education to Secondary Education System) was an exam used in Türkiye to determine students' placement in high schools. The exam was typically taken by students in the 8th grade and played a significant role in determining which high schools they could attend based on their scores. TEOG was later replaced by a new examination system called the LGS (High School Transition System).

successful and to maintain this cultural capital she brought with her in the host country. Findings indicate that Syrian refugee participants had difficulty in both trying to adapt to a new educational system and also learning the Turkish language, which is both the medium and the target in Turkish schools prior to Higher Education. Yasemin goes on to say:

Extract 18

Teacher, if you do not struggle, you cannot succeed. I struggled a lot. In the beginning, for instance, I would take the book while studying at school and translate it word by word. At that time, Google Translate was very bad; it didn't translate at all. Now, it has improved, but back then, it was terrible. I was trying to translate with a regular dictionary, with the dictionary I had in my hand. I went through a very difficult process at that time; I even remember my mom trying to help; for example, she was trying to find the words. Then she would leave me and go and cry, even my mom would cry thinking how this girl would learn. So, it was hard to learn [Turkish] for a month and a half and then go to school. But I think it made a big difference even after a year, even after a term, the teachers noticed it too. I think I made very good progress [in learning Turkish]. Because the people around me were all speaking Turkish, everyone was speaking Turkish everywhere. There was no other language, so you have to learn it.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Upon arriving in the host country, Yasemin started learning Turkish immediately, yet she could attend the language course only for one and half months until schools started. As a result, since she was not proficient in Turkish, she reported that she faced significant challenges at school related to the language. According to her, the challenge she went through was even felt in the family where the mother was feeling sorry for her daughter who was trying to translate every word in Turkish. However, despite these difficulties, Yasemin seems to have made remarkable progress within just one school term, which she believed was visible to her teachers as well. In time, the narrations Yasemin told suggest that, she evolved from the little Syrian girl who did not know Turkish to “the translator of the school” who was called for help whenever a new Syrian arrived at school, which can be interpreted as a significant cultural capital gained that eased both her educational life and the adjustment into the host country.

Turkish, as the language of instruction in all schools, was perceived to be a significant barrier by the participants; however, the findings indicate that the challenges extended beyond language issues. Another major obstacle was the lack of

necessary documents upon arrival, which complicated the enrollment process for refugees. Ali and Yasemin tell:

Extract 19

Gizem: When you first came from Syria, how was the enrolling process for high school?

Ali: Ah, when I first came, I had nothing, nothing with me. No ID.

Gizem: So how did you manage?

Ali: No ID, no family record. I went to the police, and they asked, "How old are you?" I told them my real age. "What is your name?" I gave them my real name. So, they enrolled me because I came from the war, nothing, I didn't bring any documents with me. I went to school, an Arabic school, and they asked, "What do you have with you? School report, documents, what did you bring from Syria?" I said I didn't bring anything. They said, "It doesn't work like this, we need a document from you." In the end, I asked, "So what will I do? Will I not study at all?" They said, "Okay, fine, you can enroll then." I started the Arabic school, then they transferred me from the Arabic school to the Turkish school. I didn't do anything for that.

Ali, Interview 2

Extract 20

Gizem: So, were they able to enroll you in school? How was the process?

Yasemin: Hmm, the process was a bit difficult, to be honest, because we needed a residence permit for school. To get a student residence permit, we needed to get a document from the school. Things were quite complicated. And since I was under eighteen, at first, my father had come from Syria illegally, and he didn't have a residence permit in Türkiye. We needed to get permission from my father because I had moved to another country. I faced difficulties at first because of that. My father was already here, but he couldn't show himself.

Gizem: So, during that time, were you unable to enroll because of your father's situation?

Yasemin: I was able to, we sent a document to Syria. We had it signed by the foreign ministry there, and they sent it, and that's how we got it. That's how we did it.

Gizem: How long did it take? All these?

Yasemin: I think two months.

Gizem: Did you start the school late?

Yasemin: No, no, I didn't start late, I started on time.

Gizem: Did you have any other requirements to meet? I mean were there any other procedures? For example, any specific documents they asked for or anything they told you to do?

Yasemin: Well, since I came from Lebanon, I don't think there were many issues. Because for those coming from Syria, I think they made them take exams or something, but since I came from Lebanon, they directly accepted the documents.

Gizem: So, they accepted you not based on your Syrian identity but as someone coming from Lebanon?

Yasemin: No, no. Like, there's the 6th-grade document from Lebanon, not because you are Lebanese but because you graduated from Lebanon.

Gizem: I see.

Yasemin: As I said, it was like I had taken the TEOG exam, so they accepted directly.

Yasemin, Interview 2

The sudden and often unprepared leave from the country of origin or previously resettled country can result in missing documents for refugees (Dryden-Peterson,

2010). As previously explained, Ali told that he had a very dangerous journey as an undocumented migrant to cross the Turkish border. In the extract, he tells that he went to one of Temporary Education Centers (TECs) to enroll, yet he did not have any required documents including any type of identity card. Although the school insisted on documents, Ali recounts that he was finally accepted without any documents. His desperation about the possibility of not being accepted to school can be inferred in his statement “What will I do if I don’t have them? Will I never be able to study?”

As the narration of Yasemin suggests, the migrant status of a family member could pose another challenge for the enrollment of a refugee participant. Yasemin needed residency document when she arrived in 2013, when temporary protection status had not been implemented yet (see Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion). Still being a minor, she needed the permission of her father who arrived in the country as an illegal immigrant. It appears that the issue of not making himself evident was a significant challenge; however, Yasemin revealed that her family navigated this challenge by sending documents to be signed to Syria, a process which took almost two months. It is understood that her arrival as a Syrian refugee from Lebanon enabled her to be free from exams other Syrians had to take as she already took one similar to that exam in Egypt, and she could get enrolled with the documents she brought from there.

While Ahmet and Belle had already graduated from high school in Syria when they arrived in Türkiye; Ali, Nur and Yasemin were not at that age yet at their arrival dates to Türkiye, so they needed to complete their schooling first before they started Turkish Higher Education. Yasemin, who arrived in 2013 as the youngest among all the participants, directly enrolled in a state secondary school, she tells:

Extract 21

Yasemin: Teacher, as I told you, for example, in the first year I came, I used to go and cry during breaks at school. I never got used to it, the adaptation process passes very difficult. Then you get used to it; there's nothing to do, and life goes on.

Gizem: How long do you think this adaptation period lasted, roughly?

Yasemin: I think it took two years. I mean, it didn't pass like the first day, of course; but for it to completely end, I think it took about two years.

Gizem: During that period, is there something you say, "If I hadn't done this, I wouldn't have been able to adapt; I followed this particular path and was able to adapt"?

Yasemin: I think if my family hadn't enrolled me in a Turkish school, I wouldn't have adapted. For example, I might have gone there unwillingly at first because I didn't know Turkish, I didn't want to go; but if I hadn't gone, I would never have adapted.

Gizem: So, can we say that the school was helpful during this process?

Yasemin: Yes.

Yasemin, Interview 4

Yasemin's statements highlight that school played a significant and facilitating role in adjustment and integration period upon arrival into the host country. Although she reported that she was not willing to attend the school initially due to her lack of proficiency in the target language, which is also the medium of instruction in Turkish schools, she does not regret this decision and attributes her overall adaptation to attending a Turkish school with Turkish students. Yasemin revealed that she was the only Syrian student in the school at the time, a number which she noted would increase in the following years.

Nur and Ali arrived in the host country when they were to pursue post-secondary education. Both attended Temporary Education Centers (TECs) which were closed later (for a wider discussion on the issue, see Chapter 2). While this parallel system facilitated the return to education for Syrian youth by maintaining language and curriculum continuity, it has been criticized for extending segregation and offering a "questionable" quality of education (Aydin et al., 2019; Hadid & Hos, 2021; Tezel McCarthy, 2018,) due to inconsistent oversight and teacher qualifications. Ali tells how he perceived the quality of education there:

Extract 22

Gizem: So, how was your experience at that school? How was the school, Ali?

Ali: We didn't study at all. It was an Arabic school, right? But it wasn't a real school because it was a private school, and sometimes teachers taught classes, and sometimes they really didn't teach anything. They just entered the class, sat down, and looked at their phones, so I mean it wasn't a good school. Since it wasn't a good school, then I went to another school, a Turkish school.

Gizem: So why do you think the teachers weren't teaching? What do you think was the problem with the school?

Ali: The problem with the school was the administration. I mean, it was from the principal. How would it be?

Gizem: So, the principal didn't want the teachers to work? What was the problem?

Ali: No, it wasn't that he didn't want them to; but he didn't supervise them properly, he didn't work, he didn't check the teachers, like, he never came to the school. In the school, if there

are students, if there aren't any students, how can this happen? [he means attendance wasn't taken]

Gizem: They didn't take attendance, you say?

Ali: Attendance! Yes, exactly, exactly! Attendance, they didn't take attendance, like that.

Ali, Interview 2

As the extract also suggests, Ali does not remember his experience in TEC fondly. He admits that he was attending an Arabic school which could be advantageous in a foreign country where he just arrived, yet he did not perceive the instruction as effective as “teachers were checking their phones” instead of teaching or just sitting and doing nothing. He thought that the school principal was not working well either and noted that even students' attendance was not kept properly, which he found problematic. It can be interpreted from his remarks that for Ali, studying at a good school and being successful was so vital that he chose to enroll in a Turkish school instead of a TEC even though this meant missing out on being with his co-ethnics and studying the Syrian curriculum in TEC. Nur, however, had contrary ideas and stated that being with her co-ethnics at TEC was very beneficial in her adjustment to the host country “If it had not been the school, I wouldn't have been able to get used to it at all, but because there was a school [TEC], I had Arab friends and such. They were here before, umm, I learned everything from them, so it was better, I had an easier process. They helped me get adapted” (Nur, Interview 1). Although the instruction was not found to be very effective in TECs by Ali, Nur seems to have benefitted from the experiences of her co-ethnics who had arrived in the host country earlier and had more time to adjust. She believes that this advantage significantly eased her own adjustment process. Having her people in TEC helped as she could turn her face to them when she needed.

The other school the participants attended mostly was İmam Hatip Schools, which are secondary education institutions that combine a religious curriculum with a general education, including subjects such as science, mathematics, literature, and foreign languages, alongside religious studies focusing on Islamic theology, the Quran, and the Arabic language. After leaving the TEC Ali found ineffective, he claims that he had to attend an İmam Hatip High School as he had no other chance as a Syrian refugee in Türkiye:



Gizem: So how did you feel about that school Ali, were you satisfied this time?

Ali: No, I wasn't.

Gizem: Can you please tell why?

Ali: Because İmam Hatip... Umm, in Kahramanmaraş, the Arab schools, the state closed the Arab schools [referring to the closed Temporary Education Centers], okay? There are no Arab schools at all. Umm, Syrians, all Syrians, all Arabs, students, were transferred to Turkish schools. Okay, we went to Turkish schools, but which schools? Only İmam Hatip Anatolian High Schools, that's it. We didn't go to other schools like Anatolian schools, we didn't go to Science High schools, why? We did not go to any other schools, so it is, we did not go to Anatolian High Schools, Science High Schools, why? So, we went to the Turkish... umm, İmam Hatip High School, İmam Hatip School. There were not any other schools available for us, so we did not choose. That's why, we went to Turkish uhhh, İmam Hatip High School. In each class, there were twenty, twenty-two Arab students, only six, four Turkish students.

Gizem: I see.

Ali: In each class, there are four Turkish students, twenty, twenty-two Arabs. So, we didn't learn Turkish at all, I mean, in class, Turks learned Arabic. So, we didn't learn anything and sometimes the teachers, the teachers were Turkish, when they entered the class, they taught; but when they taught, the Arabs didn't understand anything [because the teachers instructed in Turkish]. So, very little... They gave a real lesson once a week, and the other lessons, the other lessons, they didn't really do anything. They would say, "Watch a movie," they would open a movie, and the students would watch a movie, and that was a good thing, they did a good thing. I am happy with that. We Syrians, we Arabs, we are going to take the YÖS exam, we are going to take the YÖS exam, so study for YÖS, study for YÖS. Whoever wants to study for YÖS, study for it in the class then.

Ali, Interview 2

Ali mentioned that after the TECs were shut down, they had no option but to enroll in İmam Hatip schools instead of Anatolian High Schools or Science High Schools, which he seems to have preferred. It can be inferred from the data that he was dissatisfied with this situation because each class had twenty or more Arab students and only a few Turkish students (four to six). He seems to believe that this imbalance in the numbers of Turkish and Arabic students in the classroom hindered his ability to learn Turkish, which he expected to improve by attending a Turkish school. He observed that they learned nothing substantial because the Syrian students did not know Turkish, and the Turkish teachers did not instruct in Arabic as part of the Turkish-medium instruction. Teachers' proficiency in Arabic, which could have been strategically utilized to support learning through translanguaging pedagogies (García & Wei, 2015), was instead seen as an impediment to learning, particularly for Ali in the İmam Hatip context. However, he noted an unexpected advantage: he revealed that the lack of proper classes allowed Syrian students the time and opportunity to prepare for the Foreign Student Examination (YÖS). This exam, which assesses the academic qualifications and Turkish language proficiency of foreign applicants

(further explanation about the exam is in the next section), was crucial for his goal of studying at a university in Türkiye. Ali seems to have utilized the free time to work towards his educational aspiration in this way. It was explained before that lack of Turkish proficiency was a great obstacle for Yasemin in her initial schooling in Türkiye; Ali revealed that he had similar challenges related to the language as he stated, "We understood the classes, but very little because we had just come, we had just started. Some students had attended Turkish schools six years ago, so they understood very well, they spoke [Turkish] very well, but we didn't have Turkish students, so we spoke with Arab students" (Ali, Interview 1). It can be inferred from Ali's statements that participants who had earlier arrival dates to the host country and had started schooling earlier, like Yasemin, had been exposed to the target language, Turkish, and thus already learned it until they started post-secondary education, which facilitated their studies in İmam Hatip High Schools. In contrast, Ali had recently arrived and lacked the linguistic capital of other Syrian students who were proficient in Turkish, which is observed to have affected the quality of instruction he benefitted from.

Findings also suggest that being in higher numbers when compared to Turkish students and knowing Arabic in a school where the Quran and Arabic language are studied seem to have empowered Syrian refugee students. Yasemin, who was the little Syrian girl not proficient in Turkish in secondary school shifted into the identity position of knower. She stated that "I was passing the courses quite easily at the İmam Hatip school" and "Some students, out of curiosity, would ask how to pronounce this word and such [in Arabic]. Especially when I was at school, they would constantly come to me and ask how to say this, how to know this, and so on" (Yasemin, Interview 2). It is illustrated in her remarks that the change at school changed her identity, too, empowering her position and transforming her from the foreigner to the knower. In such cases, identity appears not to be what one always believes it is, but rather what others believe it is. Adapting to the shifts in experiences and the evolving identities related to these experiences is one of the perceived significant challenges for Syrian refugee student participants of this study. Navigating the pathways and building resilience followed when enough care was provided by the significant others at school such as teachers, classmates and school

principals as participants noted. Yasemin recounts her secondary school years in this way:

Extract 24

Yasemin: Especially in the early years of primary school, my teachers were very attentive to me. After that year, after those years, I started to succeed in school because the teachers helped me. I was the only Syrian, so all the teachers helped me. If I didn't know Turkish, they helped me. I mean whatever I could not understand, they taught me. They even placed me in the front rows so that I could hear and understand Turkish better. They treated me well. The principal was also good.

Gizem: What do you think about all these?

Yasemin: The teachers were generally nice, but they paid extra attention because my Turkish wasn't very good. They were really very attentive. They treated my other friends well too, but they took good care of me.

Yasemin, Interview 1

As indicated in the data, effective schools, characterized by supportive teachers, administrators, and peers, seem to play a crucial role in facilitating the adjustment of Syrian refugee participants into the host society. Schools can be perceived as places that not only offer a welcoming context but also provide an optimal environment for acquiring the target language more smoothly. However, findings suggest that the notable challenge remains as the medium of instruction is also the target language refugee students try to learn. Despite this difficulty, the benefits are highlighted by the participants, and care by the school administration and teachers matters as demonstrated in the case of Yasemin. Finally, two excerpts from Yasemin's narrative will be presented to illustrate the conflicting emotions that can arise, thereby highlighting the perceived tension often experienced. The participants' refugee experience seems to be marked by the presence of opposed perspectives, where wishes and desires can conflict:

Extract 25

Gizem: So, considering your identity as both a student and a Syrian, how do you think this process has affected you?

Yasemin: Umm, there are both positive and negative aspects. For example, on the positive side, when you try to prove yourself more, you put in more effort, you study harder, in this sense, it was good. But sometimes when you feel unwanted, you hesitate, and you don't want to be seen that much anymore, in this sense, it affects negatively.

Gizem: Were there such moments that you can illustrate?

Yasemin: Especially in the early days, yes. Once, while I was reading in Turkish, a student started laughing at the back. At that moment, I didn't want to be seen at all, I wanted to be invisible.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Extract 26

Gizem: So, you think you succeeded, and everything went well in the first three years, right?

Yasemin: Mm-hmm, exactly. And especially, I think I have memories in math (smiles). After the math exam, I became famous at school, I literally became famous.

Gizem: Why do you think so?

Yasemin: I got the highest score in the school, and we had just started high school in the 9th grade, so everyone in the school heard about it. Since I got the highest score and I was Syrian, despite my Turkish not being very good, I became quite famous, and everyone knew me. Both teachers and students knew me. For example, when I went to the restroom, someone would greet me, and I didn't know who that girl was, but she would greet me, like that.

Gizem: So, your popularity increased at school you think?

Yasemin: Exactly, teacher.

Yasemin, Interview 1

In extract 25, Yasemin reflects on the dual nature of her experiences both as a student and a Syrian refugee. She articulates the positive aspects, such as the increased effort and dedication she puts into her studies to prove herself, which, in the end, she believes enhanced her academic performance. However, she also expresses the negative impacts and exemplifies it with a specific incident where one of her peers laughed at her while she was reading in Turkish, which resulted in her wishing to be invincible with feelings of shame and grief. Here, the data illustrate the internal conflict and emotional turbulence that can arise from the integration process in a new educational and cultural environment, particularly at a younger age when children may be less considerate about engaging in acts of othering.

In extract 26, contrary to first one, Yasemin recounts a moment of significant academic achievement and its subsequent impact on her social capital within the school. She reports that despite the challenges posed by her limited proficiency in Turkish, she attained the highest score in a mathematics exam, which seems to have led her to become respected and well-known among both students and teachers. Contrary to the feelings she had in the previous extract, Yasemin enjoys this popularity, and this recognition appears to have fostered her sense of belonging and elevated her social standing, as illustrated by the increase in her friendly interactions with peers. These two narratives illustrate the conflicting emotions Yasemin felt. On one hand, she wants to prove her success to gain recognition and respect, desiring to be "seen." On the other hand, she wishes to become invisible to avoid trouble and shame. Overall findings reveal that these initial experiences of the participants at

Turkish schools provided some form of preparedness for the next educational stage: Turkish Higher Education which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.4.2. Refugees' Preparation, Decision-Making and Enrollment Processes in Turkish Higher Education**

**Preparation.** Education has consistently been one of the most significant objectives for Syrian refugee students, forcing them to leave their country of origin or a recently resettled country in search of better educational opportunities either alone or with their families (Bimay, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Jungblut et. al., 2018) Belle and Ahmet had already completed their pre-tertiary education until they migrated to Türkiye. Yasemin, Ali and Nur started their education immediately upon arrival, ensuring no time was lost. In this section, participants' transition to Turkish Higher Education is examined, covering their preparation period, decision-making processes, enrollment experiences and the perceived initial challenges they went through.

In their preparation for higher education, participants who had not studied needed to complete their pre-tertiary education first, which was examined in the previous part. In Türkiye, for a foreign student to be able to enroll in Higher Education, s/he needs to graduate from a high school or a school that is equivalent to it (YÖK, 2024). After obtaining an equivalent diploma, foreign students must present it for recognition and equivalency certification. Additionally, applicants to universities with programs in Turkish Medium Instruction must demonstrate proficiency in the Turkish language. Foreign students need to take the YÖS (Foreign Students Examination), the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), or specific entrance exams administered by individual universities for particular programs and international candidates. The application process requires several documents, including the original high school diploma, high school transcripts, translated copies of the diploma and transcripts into Turkish, an equivalency certificate, exam results, a copy of the passport, placement results, photographs, and a financial assurance declaration (a detailed explanation on admission requirements and procedures to Turkish Higher Education is provided in the Chapter 2).

Findings indicated that for the participants, preparation for higher education was synonymous with preparation for the YÖS. They reported that this period was characterized by significant events that left a perceived lasting impact on their lives necessitating significant investment in time and resources in preparation for YÖS. With the exception of Ahmet, all participants reported that they had strong motivation to take the YÖS to secure admission into programs at Turkish universities. Although Ahmet shared the same ultimate goal, his preparation focused on the SAT, driven by distinct motivations. Ali, unlike Ahmet, prepared for the YÖS through self-study. The data indicate that his autonomy and self-discipline enabled him to thoroughly educate himself on the exam content and achieve success: “I also took the YÖS exam and became the best, the most hardworking student. I got the best score, and started teaching [YÖS]. There was nobody, I studied for it by myself from the beginning to the end” (Ali, Interview 2).

After experiencing years of interrupted education in Syria and attending two subsequent schools in Türkiye that he deemed ineffective, Ali's success in YÖS can be interpreted as significantly enhancing his positive self-image. Through dedicated self-study, despite his young age, he consistently seems to have achieved high scores on the YÖS at various universities. Consequently, he states that his YÖS course invited him to become a teacher, a job he accepted. It is indicated in his remarks that this newly empowered and successful identity profoundly impacted his life and shaped his future aspirations. In embracing this new identity, Ali seems to have found a sense of purpose and direction in his life in the host country. Nur also attended to a course for the first YÖS she took where she also found her future Syrian husband but studied by herself for the subsequent two exams: “I went to YÖS course for one year, then I studied alone. During this process, while preparing for the exam, only my husband, Hüseyin helped me study and prepared me” (Nur, Interview 2).

Nur met Hüseyin for the first time in YÖS preparation course while they were also living in the same neighborhood in İzmir. This serendipitous friendship can be said to have nurtured Nur's preparation process "I first met my husband through a friend. In

the first year, we were together in YÖS. I mean, we were friends. He convinced me to take the exam in the second year. He said, you should take it, you can get a better score. We studied together, I mean, if it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't have been able to get this score. Also, I probably wouldn't have been able to get into pharmacy in Ankara, so thanks to him, I took the exam. And I was convinced, I mean, I didn't think about anything else, I just tried to enter [to university]" (Nur, Interview 1). With the support of Hüseyin, Nur told that she persisted initial failure in the first two exams she took, and ultimately succeeded on her third attempt in her third year. After working in a seemingly precarious job for twelve hours a day in order to pay for YÖS preparation course after her initial failure, the data suggest that she became more determined than ever in order "not to work at an unremarkable and low-paid job" (Nur, Interview 2). Yasemin also prepared for YÖS while also attending İmam Hatip Anatolian High School:

Extract 27

Gizem: How did you manage to start higher education in Türkiye? How did you get into university?

Yasemin: I did it with YÖS. In my final year, the last year of high school, I both studied at school and prepared for YÖS. Umm, I went to a course, although it wasn't very useful, umm, I went there and studied there.

Gizem: Why do you think the course wasn't useful?

Yasemin: Teacher, the thing is, there was only one class. They put everyone there, so there were many very weak students with me, so it wasn't useful for me. Their level wasn't the same as mine. The teacher also tried to teach according to their level. So, it was sometimes a waste of time for me, I only preferred it to ask questions.

Gizem: I see. When did you pass the YÖS?

Yasemin: In my first attempt.

Yasemin, Interview 2

Similar to Ali and Nur, Yasemin also prepared for YÖS primarily through self-study. Although they all attended in preparation courses, it is highlighted in the data that they could not benefit as much as they needed from these courses. Based on Ali's remarks, his proficiency was such that he started teaching in the course and Nur was helped by her future husband. Since Yasemin believed that she was better than her classmates, she perceived the instruction insufficiently challenging and thus saw little reason to continue attending the course. Though, she noted that she succeeded to secure a program in her first try despite the challenging last year of high school and the perceived insufficiency of the YÖS preparation course. Findings reveals that their

success in attaining higher education can be attributed to their self-study efforts, coupled with the resilience and autonomy they demonstrated throughout the process.

Ali can be illustrated as an example to this. Throughout all the interviews and over the years, Ali took great pride in his perceived success in YÖS. Whenever he had the chance, or there was a related issue discussed, he brought up his success in the exam and capitalized on this empowered identity as revealed in the data:

Extract 28

Ali: That is math [referring to YÖS] and I am very good at math, and I remember everything. From the first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, up to the twelfth grade, all are asked in YÖS. Other students don't remember at all; but I remember those topics, those summaries, and I didn't forget, and so I became the most hardworking among foreigners in Türkiye.

Gizem: Yes. How did you get prepared for YÖS Ali?

Ali: I went to a course in the eleventh grade, and I got into university, this university. I scored a hundred. I got into Newfoundland University, I scored a hundred. I got into Samsun University, 19 Mayıs University, and I got the highest score, ninety-six at the time. I got into Harran University and scored ninety-eight and a half, the highest scores. That's why my course [YÖS course], when I studied, paid me, and they asked me to go and teach there.

Gizem: Mm-hmm. You also taught in the twelfth grade.

Ali: Mm-hmm. They asked me to teach private lessons to their students. I accepted and started teaching. I started teaching in the twelfth grade, and I taught my brother, my cousins, my friends, and I took the exam. I scored seven hundred on the exam [I got a hundred in seven different YÖS exams different universities administrated].

Gizem: What is the highest score?

Ali: I mean, seven hundred, seven universities, a hundred is the highest score. I scored seven hundred at seven universities like this; I used to take YÖS at every university.

Gizem: You believe you were very successful.

Ali: Mm-hmm. But I got into twelve universities, and I scored seven hundred, like this. Newfoundland University, Istanbul University, İnönü University, Gaziantep University, something like that, I got very high scores, the highest scores, so I chose the best university, Newfoundland University. But which one was the highest in score [for medical school] Turkish or English at Newfoundland University? They said in English, so I chose the English one. But I don't know English at all. No, not at all; but not very well.

Ali, Interview 1

As Ali previously noted, he struggled significantly during his high school years in Türkiye due to his limited proficiency in Turkish, which significantly hindered his ability to comprehend the lessons. When selecting a university, he reports that he chose an English Medium Instruction (EMI) higher education institution despite his perceived lack of English language skills at the time. As he states, it can be interpreted that this decision was influenced more by the perceived prestige of the university rather than an accurate assessment of his linguistic capabilities. Ali's



success in the YÖS exam seems to have contributed to an overestimation of his competence, creating an illusion that he could excel in any academic environment whether he knew the language of the instruction or not. Consequently, he embarked on a medical degree in a language he did not think he was not proficient at, a challenge he can be said not to be fully aware of at the time and which he would find compelling when he studied in the program as it was revealed in the course of the ethnographic data collection process in subsequent years.

The data reveal that, Ali observed early on that, in order to secure a place in a university program in Türkiye, his success in the YÖS was more crucial than his performance and GPA in Turkish high school. This realization, combined with the perceived inadequate instruction provided by his teachers at İmam Hatip School and the space provided to Syrian students during class hours, seem to have afforded him enough time to invest in preparing for the YÖS “We, as foreigners, don't want the twelfth grade in high school, I mean, we only got the certificate [the diploma]; but we don't want the score because we are going to take the foreign student exam, YÖS. That's why, I studied for YÖS and studied well. I would never get it from high school; it's very difficult” (Ali, Interview 2).

What Ali emphasizes here is worth noting; he asserted that it would not be fair to require Syrian refugee students to take the same university entrance exam with their Turkish counterparts as he faced significant challenges in high school due to his lack of proficiency in Turkish. He also highlights elsewhere that, unlike Turkish students, his education in Syria was frequently disrupted by war, causing interrupted education for years. He emphasizes these lost years to justify his lack of proficiency in subjects taught in high school. YÖS was perceived to be so important that he did not even try to learn the host country language Turkish which he believed was compulsory to learn “I went to a Turkish school, then I started YÖS. After starting YÖS, I didn't have time for anything else, I mean, I was just studying for YÖS and my school. I didn't have time for Turkish.” It can be inferred from his remarks that Ali was totally invested in preparing for YÖS, which he considered the most valuable educational capital at the time to be attained. Besides, in relation to the financial realities of displacement, even when students have time to invest or secure scholarships for

Turkish language learning courses such as TÖMER, these courses often conflict with their work schedules (Şafak Ayvazoğlu & Kunuroğlu, 2019) as it is illustrated in Ali's case. Given their perceived limited time, Syrian refugee student participants appear to prioritize their investments based on their aspirations and the urgency they perceive in achieving these goals.

Similar to Ali, the data indicate that Yasemin and Nur also placed great value on YÖS for their educational aspirations. As Cin and Doğan's (2021) research indicated, attending university was perceived to be as an inherently and highly valuable and capability-enhancing experience for participants in prolonged crises which placed YÖS as a critical milestone to be achieved for the participants. Nur, who took YÖS three times, could not attend YÖS course for her second and third times as her family was struggling financially as a Syrian refugee family in the host country. She reported that she even found a job she perceived to be precarious for which she worked twelve hours a day to make money for the YÖS course "I only worked for education, to earn money, otherwise, I wouldn't have worked those long hours... I mean, it's not arrogance, but I can't work like this, teacher because it's not easy, I mean, for three years, umm, for three years I took YÖS to avoid getting into such a job" (Nur, Interview 1).

As the data illustrate, Nur indicates that she worked primarily to support her education financially. This can highlight a common reality for refugees who may have to balance work and study to sustain themselves in a new country. Nur's emphasis on education over work can suggest a strong aspiration for academic achievement, often seen among refugees who view pursuing higher education as a pathway to better opportunities and integration into their host society (Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017). Nur's desire to continue her education and not work in a job like that in the future seems to underscore the identity struggle she faces, balancing immediate survival needs with long-term aspirations. Her strong focus on being admitted to a program in Turkish Higher Education can be interpreted as how Nur perceives the educational attainment as a means of integrating into the host country and securing a more stable and respectable position in society. The findings indicate that education is crucial in their journey

towards integration and personal fulfilment. Nur, for this purpose, reported that she even lied to her parents and enrolled in a program she did not want to actually attend and changed her city. However, she persisted in taking the exam until she was admitted to the university and program she truly wanted:

Extract 29

- Gizem: So, did you prepare for YÖS for three years and did not attend any universities at all?  
Nur: I did. I went to Antalya for civil engineering.  
Gizem: You can take YÖS again while studying, right?  
Nur: Yes, we can take it; but if, for example, I get accepted to a university in Ankara, it is not possible to enroll in Ankara while still in Antalya. I have to go to Antalya, cancel my registration, then come and register.  
Gizem: You can take it every year and your score doesn't get affected, right?  
Nur: No, it doesn't. I get a different score anyway.  
Gizem: I see. Did you leave civil engineering when you got accepted into pharmacy?  
Nur: Yes, not when I got accepted, I left it as soon as I got in. I mean, I attended classes, but I didn't take any exams in civil engineering. I was preparing for YÖS, so I only had YÖS in mind, that was the best thing for me. But my family couldn't tolerate it after two years of YÖS, so I registered. I studied YÖS there, took the exams. After the exams, I told my family, I took the exams, I got the score, I got into pharmacy, so I'm going to Newfoundland University (laughs).  
Gizem: How did they react to that?  
Nur: They reacted very well, I mean, very nicely. My father dreamed of me becoming a pharmacist, but he said, "It didn't happen; it's destiny." When it happened, he was very happy.  
Gizem: So, can it be said that you almost reached your ideals in this regard?  
Nur: Yes, thanks God.

Nur, Interview 1

As it is seen in the case of Nur, all international students including Syrian refugees have the opportunity to retake YÖS multiple times, even if they are already enrolled in a university as every university has their individual examination for entry as well as the central exam issued by ÖSYM (Measurement, Selection and Placement Center). This provides a significant advantage, allowing them to take YÖS until they achieve their desired placement. This flexibility can be seen as a form of positive discrimination, as Turkish students do not have this same privilege. Turkish students take one central university entrance exam and are required to wait at least one year before they choose and attend a different university or department without a cut off in their scores for the program, they are already enrolled in (YÖK, 2024).

In the case of Nur, she initially enrolled in the Civil Engineering program. Still, she chose not to take the exams seriously as she did not wish to pursue that field. Despite

attending some classes, she aimed to change the city and the program she was enrolled in. Because her family "would not take it for the 3rd time", she took YÖS, went there, but prepared for it secretly. Nur's case could provide an example to the additional challenges and strategic decisions that refugee students must navigate in their educational journey while also navigating the everyday challenges of adjusting to the host country.

YÖS, however, is not an exam administrated or accepted by every university in Türkiye (YÖK, 2024). Some universities choose to accept SAT instead of YÖS, thus limiting the possible options Syrian refugee students have. SAT is, on the other hand, a more expensive exam, requiring a better economic capital, which many refugees may not be able to afford. Among the participants, only Ahmet, who had strong economic capital, took SAT. He was able to attend specific courses for it, could afford the entrance fee and thus had the opportunity to apply to whichever university he wanted to secure a place:

Extract 30

Gizem: So, you prepared for the university in Türkiye by preparing for SAT, right? Did you attend any

courses or get any help from somebody?

Ahmet: Of course, I attended. When I start, I start my education for my preparing for SAT from the zero. At first, I, I took some lessons for English. And it was here in Kilis. Then the same teacher, he was trying to put me in the way for preparing for the SAT. Then unfortunately, I didn't find a mathematics teacher here, in Kilis, for SAT. So, that is what makes me move to another city which was Mersin. I moved to Mersin, and I started attending there for preparing for SAT. There was a teacher for mathematics and English.

Gizem: How many months did you attend that course?

Ahmet: It was.. hmm.. Maybe eight months.

Ahmet, Interview 2

The data suggest that, having the economic capital, Ahmet could prepare for SAT following the advice of his older brother, who navigated the Turkish higher education pathway before him and was studying at a Turkish university at the time. Ahmet found a teacher to study English, and when he could not find mathematics teacher, he was even able to change the city he was living to find a mathematics teacher. At this point, it should be noted that, Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Türkiye are not able to change their cities whenever they would like to

as a result of their temporary protection status (Şahin-Mencütek, 2019). However, with the trader identity granted to him with the means of his family's business between Syria and Türkiye, he was able to navigate these restrictions. Findings reveal that other participants who did not have this economic capital and thus could not take SAT were not able to apply for the universities which only accept students with SAT. For Syrian refugee students, who are not proficient in Turkish, SAT presents an additional advantage, as it is an international exam with no Turkish questions unlike in YÖS. Yasemin explains the advantage of SAT by giving an example from YÖS “In the YÖS exam, some questions are in Turkish. Those who don't know Turkish struggle a lot, saying things like 'I couldn't solve this.' However, the question could have been very easy” (Yasemin, Interview 3).

**Decision-making.** As it is in the case of the preparation period for issues such as how to navigate the entry, which exams to take or what is required to do for entry; findings indicate that the process after obtaining the scores and choosing for the program can also be intricate and challenging. Various factors such as family influence, prior education, and the possibility of taking different exams like YÖS and SAT play significant roles in shaping participants' decisions, and it can be inferred that there are different dynamics at interplay in this decision-making process.

All participants except for Belle are accompanied by their families in the host country, and data indicate that families are consistently involved in every stage of educational journeys of the participants. Yasemin, who did not want to initially start her studies by making a choice, but instead to prepare for another year for YÖS, ended up selecting a program as a result of her mother's insistence:

Extract 31

Yasemin: Since I studied at a Turkish school, the university did not ask me for documents. I already studied English, but I had registered at another university in Konya before enrolling in Newfoundland University. The program I was accepted into there was Turkish-medium. Since I graduated from a Turkish high school, I did not have to provide a Turkish language certificate.

Gizem: What were you going to study in Konya?

Yasemin: Computer engineering, again.

Gizem: So, when you got accepted to Newfoundland University, you didn't start studying in Konya at all.

Yasemin: I wasn't planning to study there anyway, but I registered just in case. I was going to prepare for the YÖS exam again. I didn't want to, but my mother was forcing me, so that's how it happened.

Yasemin, Interview 2

In extract 31, how Yasemin navigates the pathways to higher education is illustrated. Since she is already a graduate of a Turkish high school, she was not asked for a document proving her Turkish proficiency as she was going to study at a Turkish Medium Instruction university. However, when she got a higher score from YÖS in another university, she gave up on the one her mother insisted on and transferred there. It can be inferred from her statements that Yasemin did not want to make a final decision initially and intended to prepare for YÖS again. However, her family's preferences did not align with her own intentions, and it can also be interpreted that the admission system of Turkish higher education also allowed room for these navigations.

When Yasemin was asked if she tried other universities in other cities apart from this one, she explained "I only applied for medicine there. That's why I didn't get accepted. My mother said that if I made an application for anything other than medicine, I wouldn't go anyway (smiles). She said I would get accepted in Ankara anyway. So, I didn't apply" (Yasemin, Interview 2). Based on what Yasemin shared about her family during the interviews, it can be inferred that her family's conservative ideology prevented them from allowing Yasemin to study in another city. At the intersection of her gender and learner identities, her female identity is found to be a determinant of where or what Yasemin was going to study. Cin and Doğan (2021) assert, for Syrian women, in particular, higher education offers opportunities for mixed-gender interactions and the transformation of their gendered identities, from which they are culturally deprived, and higher education could be interpreted as a factor significantly contributing to their ability to build a life they valued. When Ahmet and Yasemin are compared, the data reveal that Ahmet is mobile through the cities, pursuing his interests, even relocating to another city to find a mathematics teacher. In contrast, Yasemin is not granted this mobility because of her gender. The only exception for her was Medicine, a program Yasemin and her

mother were so determined to pursue. She goes on to tell her decision-making process:

Extract 32

Gizem: You chose this university and this department because you were not accepted in medicine, right?

Yasemin: Yes. And also because of my brother. It was actually my second choice; I thought if I didn't get into the first one, I would study this. My brother studies computer engineering. They told me it's very good and I liked it, so I chose it.

Gizem: So why this university? There are other universities here too.

Yasemin: Teacher, the others don't accept students with YÖS. This was my only chance. The others only accept with SAT.

Gizem: What do you know about the SAT?

Yasemin: It is an exam accepted not only in Türkiye but worldwide for university admission. But I need to be very proficient in English for it. For example, it needed to be very, very good. It tests mathematics and English. Mathematics is not very difficult; it's simple—compared to YÖS, it's very simple—but its English part is very difficult.

Gizem: Have you ever taken that exam?

Yasemin: No, I haven't. I didn't even try.

Yasemin, Interview 2

Similar to Ahmet's case, it can be interpreted from Yasemin's remarks that she is also influenced by her older brother, who was studying to be a computer engineer. When asked why she chose this EMI university, it turns out that the other universities in the city accept students for their programs, not with YÖS, but SAT. Since Yasemin believed that her English proficiency was not good enough to take the SAT, coupled with issues like financial challenges, she reports that she did not even try to take the SAT and settled for the only university left in the city where they lived and chose to pursue her studies there. Finally, as for family effect on the decision-making process, Ahmet says:

Extract 33

Ahmet: Actually, I'm still thinking about what to do in the future. As we have our private work... so I choosed my department... like as a food engineering... because actually, we were trade, you know? Our working is trade. So, for... so, always... he always tell me that I... you will choose everything you want I'm with you. But my advice for you not studying... not medicine, not pharmacist or something like medical which your grandfather forced me while I wanted to study something relating to our work.

Gizem: Yeah.

Ahmet: So, yeah, he was...he advised me to study either biomedical engineering or food engineering.

Gizem: Himm.

Ahmet: He advised me for that, but I... my... I was... my first... my first choice was biomedical engineering.

Gizem: Yes.

Ahmet: But I accepted in food engineering, thanks to God. So, I took my father advice.

Ahmet, Interview 2

As it was explained before, Ahmet has strong economic capital with a large family in the trade business. The data indicate that his decision-making process regarding his education is influenced by his family's business and his father's advice. It could be interpreted as a family dynamic where the family effect plays a significant role in shaping career paths. Ahmet's choice of food engineering seems to align with the family's trade business, demonstrating a strategic decision to pursue a field that is in line with their existing business. Although there seems to be no clear relation between biomedical engineering and food engineering, Ahmet reports that his father suggests him to study one of these. Although Ahmet seems to have freedom to choose his field of study, he is essentially provided with two options to choose from. However, Ahmet seems satisfied with his chosen identity, and finds comfort in following his father's advice, who is also his future employer. This extract can provide insight into the interplay between personal aspirations, family expectations, and practical considerations in educational choices showing that different dynamics can exist in decision-making process for entry to Higher Education in the host country. Nur tells her decision process as "I chose my academic program because it's a strong university. I was going to choose either in here or Istanbul. I didn't get accepted into Istanbul, but I got into here. I wanted dentistry or medicine, but I could not, so I chose pharmacy" (Nur, Interview 2).

Nur states that she chose her university because she thinks it is a strong institution, indicating that the reputation and quality of the university were important factors in her decision. It is indicated in the data that she considered universities in only two cities, probably having the same reason with Yasemin, who was not sent to other cities because of her gender. It is revealed from the findings that the intersection of refugee and female identities shape the university and program choice of Syrian female participants in different ways than Syrian male participants. Nur chose pharmacy as her major after Medicine and Dentistry making a compromise based on available options she had like the other participants in the study. Similar to Ali and Yasemin, Nur's interests lied within the medical and health sciences field, even if she admitted that she couldn't pursue her top preferences. Ali, who can be perceived to derive his confidence from his perceived identity as a YÖS achiever, also mentioned



an interesting point by linking his decision-making process to his religious identity, stating that:

Extract 34

Gizem: Did you attend any other universities in Türkiye?

Ali: I became something, with me, every student can be accepted to another university with exam, they can apply for every university. So, a student can get six or seven admissions at a time, six or seven programs.

Gizem: Uh-huh.

Ali: You know.

Gizem: I know.

Ali: At the end, in the end, he can only get one. Yes, but this is a bad thing, why? Because in this application, I got accepted to seven universities. I took places from other students, I mean, I got seven places. I got accepted into medicine at Istanbul University, I got accepted into medicine at Newfoundland University, Antep, Mersin, bla bla something, I mean, I got accepted into medicine. How many places did I get? Seven. Okay, I took places from six people, such a thing, I think it is haram<sup>7</sup>.

Gizem: So, you feel like you took their right?

Ali: Yes, I am taking their right, that's why I didn't do such a thing, I only took YÖS in this city, I am the first, I took it by myself.

Ali, Interview 2

Ali illustrates the flexible nature of YÖS in Türkiye, where students can apply to multiple universities and programs simultaneously. This process allows refugee students to hold multiple acceptances, which they must eventually narrow down to a single choice. Ali expresses his concern over the ethical implications of holding multiple admissions and believes that by securing multiple options, he could have deprived other students of their opportunities, which he views as unjust or "haram" (forbidden in Islam).

His decision to limit his applications to just one university can be interpreted as his attempt to avoid this ethical conflict and to ensure that he is not taking opportunities away from his co-ethnics. This finding reveals that a sense of moral responsibility brought by a religious identity was also a factor effective in the decision-making process of Ali, adding to the other factors. Finally, it was revealed in the data that the decision-making process can be significantly affected by how a Syrian refugee is admitted to a university program. Belle, a Palestinian refugee born and raised in Syria, had a markedly different entry journey when compared to other participants. She tells:

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<sup>7</sup> Not permitted by Islamic law

Gizem: In the entry process, probably you had some time preparing for YÖS. Did you spend much-

Belle: No. I wasn't-

Gizem: -preparing for that?

Belle: No, I was not admitted based on YÖS. I just applied for Newfoundland University and they accepted me without YÖS or TOEFL, IELTS. I applied for Newfoundland University because it, they were opening it and I remember they want- they didn't want YÖS or SAT. And people were talking like they are applying for it. And so I took the chance and applied for it. And they accepted me. And for the department, I was going- I applied for computer science, computer engineering. They didn't accept me. And my first thought was Computer Engineering, then the physical engineer.

Gizem: So, you didn't take YÖS at all?

Belle: Yeah, I just got into a course for three months. And then I switched to SAT. And then I applied to Newfoundland University, and they accepted me without SAT or YÖS. Like I couldn't have the chance to apply the umm, to go to these exams. And just another thing, I think they accepted me in physics engineering, because my physics umm physics marks in high school was so high like, I think it's maybe the reason.

Gizem: I understand. Okay, so you choose computer engineering first, but then you switched to physics engineering. Did they tell you that we can accept you to physics engineering, or did you apply for it?

Belle: Yes, I applied for it. But they accepted me in my second wish. It was physics engineering. I applied because I liked the name. And I was a little bit smart in physics. So, I thought I could do it (laughs).

Belle, Interview 1

Belle's experience can indicate an example of the uniqueness of every refugee participant's experience. Her admission to Newfoundland University did not follow the typical path other participants followed which involved taking standardized tests such as YÖS or SAT. Belle's dual identity as a Palestinian and Syrian refugee may have necessitated an alternative admission route to accommodate her unique circumstances. Unlike other participants who spent considerable time preparing for entrance exams, it is inferred from the data that Belle was accepted into the university based on her high school physics marks, indicating that her academic performance in specific subjects was a significant factor in the admission process. The flexibility and the ability to switch preferences for which program to apply also highlight the dynamic nature of the decision-making process for Syrian refugees in Türkiye. The flexibility in the admission process and the alternative paths provided for some refugee students can be perceived as an advantage provided to the refugees trying to secure admission to Turkish Higher Education. Finally, Belle's choice based on her interest in the name of the program rather than a detailed understanding of the field can also underscore the random and dynamic nature of her academic journey. She navigated the higher education system to achieve her educational goal within the

limits the system provided to her. Adapting and shifting among different identities as necessary (such as being a Palestinian or Syrian at times) is perceived to be a common strategy employed by Syrian refugee participants to navigate challenges, as will be demonstrated in subsequent sections of this study too. Additionally, financial reasons were found to be a significant determinant in university and program choice. Nur explains:

Extract 36

Gizem: So, what do you think about Syrians who try to attend university in Türkiye now?  
[They are talking about university entrance fees]

Nur: It is getting more and more difficult. Now, for example, my sister can't even dream of entering Newfoundland University because, for example, medicine costs 40,000 Turkish Liras. Or pharmacy, 17,000 per semester.

Gizem: What do you think about this?

Nur: They will choose other universities. For example, in Bursa, it's 7,000.

Gizem: Does the fee change according to the university?

Nur: It changes, for example, in Bursa, medicine is 7,000. Much cheaper, and in Istanbul, for example, it's 30,000. I'm talking about medicine. But in Newfoundland University, it's the most expensive.

Nur, Interview 3

Nur reports that Syrian refugees face financial barriers when trying to attend university in Türkiye. The tuition fees, such as 40,000 Turkish Lira for medical school and 17,000 for pharmacy per semester were perceived to be high, which may indicate that economic challenges can limit access to higher education for refugees. Nur illustrates this by giving her sister as example, who cannot dream of attending Newfoundland University due to the perceived high costs.

These findings can raise important questions regarding the fairness and implications of putting a price on university education and programs. This may suggest a system where economic factors play a decisive role in educational opportunities, potentially perpetuating inequalities and limiting access to prestigious programs for those who cannot afford them. This extract indicates how financial constraints can potentially affect the educational aspirations of refugees, possibly preventing them from pursuing their desired fields of study. Due to the perceived high costs, refugees may be forced to consider less expensive alternatives. Nur mentions that universities in Bursa charge significantly lower fees (e.g., 7,000 Turkish Lira for medical school), indicating a need to seek more affordable options even if they are perceived to be

less prestigious or further from home. This variability in tuition fees can be interpreted as adding another layer of complexity to the decision-making process for refugee students.

In this extract, some critical questions about equity and access to education are raised too. The high fees at top universities like those in İstanbul, Ankara or elsewhere compared to more affordable ones in cities like Bursa suggest a disparity that could perpetuate inequalities, making prestigious education accessible only to those who can afford it. For Syrian refugees, who may face additional socio-economic hardships, these financial barriers can potentially present particular challenges. It can be inferred from the findings that the need to navigate these challenges while also dealing with displacement and integration issues can make refugee students' pursuit of higher education even more difficult.

Finally, the data indicate that each refugee participant's experience is unique, even among those from the same ethnic group, due to changing host country policies. It is found out that variations can arise from seemingly minor details such as the year a Syrian refugee started their higher education. Nur, who began her studies earlier, benefits from a policy that exempted Syrian refugees from tuition fees. However, her sister, who starts her education in later years, must now pay these fees due to the changes in policy.

**Rumor.** As for the decision-making process, one final and crucial aspect that influences Syrian refugee student participants' choices has been found to be the role of rumors. Through the interviews and informal conversations, the data revealed that in-group rumors significantly shape the decisions of the participants, even for the major ones. For instance, Belle initially decided not to start her higher education until she took the required exams such as YÖS or SAT. However, when she heard a rumor that the policy on tuition fees for Syrian refugees was about to change, she revised her decision and applied before taking the exams "They were saying something in that year, like for Syrian people, the school will be in umm, you should pay for it. And I can't pay. So, I said, anything better than nothing. But like, it was a rumor. That's what I heard" (Belle, Interview 1). Similarly, when participants encountered a

challenge, they primarily sought help from their co-ethnics and other immediate in-group people. While discussing tuition fees, Ahmet tells:

Extract 37

Gizem: So you don't pay any money to the university right now, right?

Ahmet: Actually, the first one I applied by Russian citizenship, I paid it was for the first turn 7.500

after I change it, I don't know.

Gizem: Okay, so you don't pay any more?

Ahmet: I don't know. Maybe I will pay it because I have more than one [citizenship]. It's the bank on the administration, they will decide. I don't know yet, but I think they will. Because I asked some of my friends, some friends, they told me that they just changed the number of your identity. And maybe they will not ask you.

Ahmet, Interview 3

At the beginning of this study, Ahmet had not yet acquired Turkish citizenship, but he obtained it during the research, and now he holds three different citizenships in addition to the Syrian and Turkish citizenships. In this context, he initially applied to the university as a Russian citizen, therefore paid tuition fees. Subsequently, after acquiring Turkish citizenship, a friend told him that his status would be updated from Russian to Turkish citizen, potentially exempting him from future tuition fees. Ahmet did not verify this information, which can be interpreted as economic issues are not a major concern for him due to his substantial economic capital. In the section on scholarships, it will be described how he applied for a scholarship but never checked on its status. Ahmet's economic capital stands in stark contrast to Belle's situation, who must work to sustain herself, in one of the focus interviews, she shares:

Extract 38

Gizem: What have you been doing lately (laughs)?

Belle: (laughs) There's no happy events.

Gizem: Yeah, nothing changed?

Belle: Actually, they accepted me in Erasmus.

Gizem: Really? What do you think about this?

Belle: But I can't go. I can't go.

Gizem: Why not?

Belle: Because If I went, I can't come back. I don't... I don't know (laughs). It's—

Gizem: Is it about citizenship [she is under temporary protection status]?

Belle: Yes. So I can't go. So I withdrew my application.

Gizem: Really? Didn't you have any other choices? Which country was that?

Belle: Poland.

Gizem: Belle why didn't you choose to go?

Belle: Because if I go, I cannot turn back to Türkiye, they will not accept me because of my status.  
Gizem: How do you know that? Did somebody- did some officers tell you, tell you about that. Or?  
Belle: I asked my friends. And they said that, and we know that if we have mm identification card [temporary protection identity] We can't go out and come back.  
Gizem: Hımm. Did you also check this information with the officers at the university?  
Belle: I was draw it, I gave up on it.  
Gizem: You withdraw your application, totally? How do you feel? I mean, what do you think about this?  
Belle: It's okay, it wasn't my dream or something like that.

Belle, Focus Group Interview 2

Belle's narration in one of the focus group interviews that were held monthly reveals that Belle's decision to withdraw her application was primarily influenced by the information she learned from her peers rather than official sources. This can be interpreted as a result of the lack of accessible, reliable information from official channels or Syrian refugee student participants' reluctance to seek information from these sources. Besides, this conversation took place when the COVID-19 pandemic was still prevalent, and reaching officials could be harder than ever as a result of the restrictions because of the pandemic. However, it should be noted that participants' dependance on potentially inaccurate or incomplete information from their social circles can possibly lead to missed opportunities, thus it can be suggested to universities that they form an effective communication mechanism with international students, particularly refugees in order to prevent missed out opportunities resulting from lack of accurate information.

This extract also highlights an example of the bureaucratic and legal challenges that Syrian refugee students under temporary protections status in Turkish Higher Education may face, particularly concerning international mobility and educational opportunities. Belle's inability to participate in the Erasmus program, despite being accepted, can be inferred to be a direct result of her temporary protection status. The finding suggests that this status restricts her ability to leave and re-enter Türkiye, revealing the tangible limitations that legal and bureaucratic frameworks appear to impose on Syrian refugee students under temporary protection.

Findings seem to indicate that there is an emotional toll that these restrictions may impose on participants. Belle's laughter when discussing the lack of happy events

and her resigned attitude towards withdrawing her application seem to reflect a coping mechanism in response to the systemic barriers she faced. All in all, this extract reveals an example of the intersection of legal, social, and emotional challenges that a participant can encounter studying in a Turkish HEI as a result of her temporary protection status. It can also highlight the restrictive nature of temporary protection statuses and the impact these restrictions may have on the educational and personal lives of the participants. This case can also underscore the need for more inclusive and supportive policies that address the unique needs of Syrian refugee students under temporary protection in Türkiye, and the policies that may need to be adapted or changed by Higher Education Institutions. It may be advisable to reconsider the eligibility criteria for such international programs for Syrian refugee students under temporary protection. Until these seemingly restrictive policies are revised, alternative measures can be explored to ensure that refugee students are not misled or left disappointed by their inability to fully benefit from such academic opportunities even if they could apply and achieve it.

**Enrollment.** After navigating through the preparation and decision-making processes, Syrian refugee students finally reach the enrollment stage, which has its own intricate processes. The enrollment process varies significantly even among Syrian refugee students. For those who have graduated from Turkish schools, the enrollment process is relatively straightforward. However, for others who crossed the border as undocumented migrants and who were unable to bring the required documents, the process has been perceived to be considerably more challenging. Nur, whose enrollment process was seemingly easier, explains:

Extract 39

Gizem: What kind of documents did you provide for university enrollment?

Nur: Yeah, I provided some documents. When I first arrived, I had a temporary identity card for 1.5 years. Since I am Syrian, they asked for a photocopy to avoid paying fees.

Gizem: Okay, you provided that.

Nur: Yes, I provided that. I also provided proof that I am a Turkish citizen. Because I am also a Turkish citizen, they did not ask for proof of Turkish language proficiency. [They did not ask her to prove her Turkish proficiency]

Gizem: The identity card?

Nur: Yes, I gave the identity card. And they also asked for a document from the district governor's office, indicating dual citizenship. I also remember that they asked for photographs and a bank account statement. They asked if I had about fifteen to twenty thousand in my bank account, I got it from my uncle later.

Gizem: Were there any documents they asked for that you didn't have with you because they were left in Syria and difficult to obtain?

Nur: No, because I had finished school [here], so I didn't have any issues.

Nur, Interview 2

In extract 39, Nur's experience exemplifies the relative ease of enrollment for Syrian refugee students who have necessary documentation, a crucial factor that facilitates the enrollment process. Additionally, she reported that she did not face issues proving her Turkish language proficiency as she already graduated from a school in Türkiye. The requirement to complete the 12th grade and provide required documentation can be interpreted as a potential barrier for refugee students who fled from their countries and arrived in the host country without their educational records.

Nur's narration also illustrates the broader issue of documentation for refugees, which may affect their access to higher education. The data reveal the importance of having proper channels and support systems to help refugee students take and validate their academic records. Additionally, it also highlights the disparity between students like Nur, who had some level of preparedness and support as she was already studying in Türkiye, and others who remain unable to pursue further education due to missing documents and lack of channels or support that they can overcome these challenges with. Besides, the bank account asked from Nur can represent even a greater challenge for other students as they may not have the economic capital to provide a record of a bank account either. Yasemin, who had also graduated from a Turkish High School had a smooth transition process as well "I got all the documents I needed from the school. Since it was already a Turkish school, there was no problem. I got the transcript directly from the school, there was no problem, I directly registered" (Yasemin, Interview 2). As it is also indicated in Yasemin's account, transitioning to university from Turkish high schools can be significantly different from arriving from abroad and directly starting at a university. Therefore, not every refugee of the same ethnicity goes through identical procedures while enrolling in HE. Ahmet also explains his enrollment process:

Extract 40

Gizem: So, after you were admitted Ahmet, to Newfoundland University for the engineering department, how was the process? What requirements did you need to meet in order to be enrolled?



Ahmet: Everything I bring it with me. At first when my high school score, when I finished my high school, my high school score didn't appear directly. So I first went to Türkiye, I moved to Türkiye. Then after it appeared, somebody sent it to me from there. Then I went to translate it and do something for, how can I say, just translation and something like that to Türkiye. Actually, it was just some papers like my high school score and SAT score. And, and my passport, they asked me about my passport because I applied as a Russian student you know, so I just have a passport. I'm living here as a Syrian student, as a Syrian person. So I just gave them my passport. Then, after I was, because I applied by my Russian passport and I'm living here as a Syrian person, I faced some problems that I couldn't, for example, I couldn't apply for the student club. Then I go to the administration, and I asked them, I want to transform my application to suit to the Syrian citizenship. So I faced some problems and they accepted.

Gizem: What kind of a process was it Ahmet?

Ahmet: At first it was not a difficult process, but later it was difficult because of me, because of me that I face some problems, at first, I should, I should at first apply by my Syrian citizenship because I live here in Türkiye, by my Syrian citizenship.

Gizem: What was the reason for you to apply with your Russian citizenship rather than the Syrian citizenship?

Ahmet: Okay. When I apply for the SAT exam, I applied by my Russian passport because my Syrian passport was finished, I couldn't apply by it. And in my Russian passport, there is some, some different in my name, just in the alphabet, just some different. So, I scared that they will, for example, they will see a different in my name, when they will see the SAT score, my name in Russian and my application in Syria. So I escaped for that, but for that I did.

Gizem: I see. Now you have a Turkish citizenship as well, right?

Ahmet: Yeah, but I should, I should go to that ministration and tell them, but I didn't do that.

Ahmet, Interview 2

In this extract, Ahmet states that he applied to the university as a Russian citizen, but later regretted this decision due to the complications arising from discrepancies between his Russian passport and his Syrian status. He reports that he changed his application status to reflect his Syrian citizenship, which he thought would ultimately facilitate smoother interactions with the university. The findings seem to indicate that successfully navigating among his various national identities and making such transitions helped Ahmet in specific ways to deal with the perceived challenges he had.

Ahmet's enrollment process can be interpreted to be notably smooth, mainly because he reported that he did not face the typical challenges of fleeing a conflict. Instead, his transition to Türkiye was in the form of a regular migration which seemed to allow him to handle paperwork and other formalities without significant difficulty. This seems to have facilitated his integration into the Turkish education system more compared to other participants who might not have had the same resources or preparation. Yet, he also had his documents translated into Turkish like the other

participants, which is a formal process while enrolling. Although it is a routine process, asking for translated documents can add an additional layer of complexity and cost to the enrollment process for refugee students, who may already be facing financial and administrative challenges which was not a case for Ahmet, but for others in the study. A similar case, related to the citizenships hold and their effect on the enrollment process, is exemplified by Belle: “I bring it [the necessary documents for enrollment] from Syria with all the stamps they wanted from Ministry of Education. Just the high school diploma, and they want another things I didn't have. But they accepted me without it. For example, YÖS or SAT exam, but I couldn't have it that year, so I applied, and they accepted me without them.” When asked how she applied for university, she went on to tell “I remember as writing the nationality, it was Palestinian, but like, for example, the TC ID number (Turkish identity number) of Turkish citizenship, I applied it with my Syrian “identification card” (temporary protection identity)” (Belle, Interview 2).

At the intersection of documentation, nationality, and institutional requirements, Belle’s enrollment process seems to suggest the necessity for flexible institutional policies as they reported to have experienced sometimes in and supportive mechanisms that accommodate the unique circumstances of refugees. By understanding and addressing these populations in Higher Education (HE), it can be indicated that HEIs can better facilitate the integration and overall achievement of Syrian refugee students. Despite not having all the required documents, such as the YÖS or SAT exam results, Belle was still accepted, indicating the flexibility within the system. This adaptability is perceived to be crucial in supporting the educational aspirations of refugees who might otherwise be excluded due to strict documentation requirements.

Belle's use of both her Palestinian nationality and her Syrian "identification card" (temporary protection identity) illustrates the strategic management of multiple identities to meet enrollment requirements and her perceived need to clarify her status as a Palestinian and a Syrian refugee in Türkiye seems to further complicate her situation, underscoring the multi-layered identity issues that a refugee participant may need to handle. This can be observed to mirror Ahmet's experience, where

capitalizing on different citizenships facilitated his access to education. All in all, Syrian refugee students in this study managed to enroll in their desired programs in Turkish Higher Education making their studies possible.

**Scholarship.** Studies reveal that Syrian refugee students may in some instances experience othering based on the misconception that they do not pay tuition fees for Turkish higher education (e.g. Arar, 2021; Arık et. al., 2024; Ateşok et. al., 2019; Aydın & Kaya, 2017). Although there is no current policy related to this in Türkiye, the participants often reported experiencing such incidents. In this section, whether Syrian refugee participants receive any scholarships, and how they handle educational expenses if they do not receive scholarships are discussed. Belle tells:

Extract 41

Gizem: How do you handle additional school expenses, like for books and other materials, and your day to day living costs? And now you need computer and the Internet [in the pandemic] too. I mean, can you please tell what your financial source is?

Belle: I depend on my father and mother and the, the umm “yardım” [financial help].

Gizem: Himm help.

Ghia: The help from the Kızılay Soy. Kızılay [the Turkish Red Crescent] Soy.

Gizem: Kızılay Soy. Okay, it's- Do you get scholarship from there?

Belle: No, not scholarship, it's help for immigrants like Iraqi and Syrian...

Gizem: So, do you receive regular, you know, support from there?

Belle: Yes. Every month but just 120 liras. And every three months is it's 700 liras. But it helps.

Gizem: Are there any other supports that you receive? I mean, are there any scholarships that you have?

Belle: No, because I am big.

Gizem: Don't they provide any scholarships for your age?

Belle: No, for example, Turkish scholarship<sup>8</sup>, if you know it-

Gizem: Yes.

Belle: It has a certain age for it.

Gizem: What is the age limit?

Belle: You have to be 21. Not 23 or 22. So I couldn't apply.

Gizem: Are there any other scholarships that you applied other than that?

Belle: Yes, I applied for the “vakıf” [foundation bursary]. And they didn't accept me (laughs).

Gizem: Himm. So you don't get any scholarships now.

Belle: No.

Belle, Interview 2

As it is indicated in the extract, Belle does not receive any scholarships, relying solely on the financial help from Kızılay and her parents who live in different countries. This finding related to her financial vulnerability and the perceived

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<sup>8</sup> Türkiye Scholarships is a government-funded higher education scholarship program run by the Republic of Türkiye for international students.

insufficiency of available support mechanisms to fully address her needs was shared in her diaries in Figure 8 below as well when she expressed her need to find a job to earn money, particularly under the conditions exacerbated by the pandemic.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in blue ink and reads: "how to gain people. This pandemic gets everything worse. I don't have a place to go, the jobs are not stable. I am just sitting in this room doing nothing".

**Figure 8.** Excerpt from Belle’s Diary

The data from both the extract and her diary seem to indicate that the monthly assistance of 120 liras (in 2020), supplemented by a larger sum of 700 liras every three months, and the financial help she receives from her family could not meet her needs. The support from Kızılay which is not a scholarship, but a financial aid provided to immigrants, can be perceived as a limited but crucial support system available to some refugee students like Belle who are eligible for it. Despite its modest amount, this financial aid appeared to support Belle in managing her expenses.

Another point Belle expressed in the data is that she did not receive any scholarships due to her age. She notes that the Türkiye scholarship has an age limit of 21, making her ineligible as she is older. This seems to constitute a barrier for Syrian refugee students who may start their higher education in later years and, thus, who do not qualify for age-restricted scholarships, limiting their financial resources for pursuing their higher education. Given that some Syrian refugee students experienced prolonged interruptions in their education (Hauber-Özer, 2021), particularly in the first years of the civil war, their being older when resuming their studies can be expected. Belle experienced an instance with her teacher at school one day related to this issue:

Extract 42

Belle: It wasn't a bad person, but she was speaking like “Do you know that Syrians go to college without paying anything?” and she was talking like bad about it. And I was feeling... She didn't know at that time that I was Syrian. I was saying I'm Palestinian. So, I was

thinking like... What do you want? Like, we are, even in Syria, we don't pay for college. So, it's a normal thing for us.

Gizem: Was she a classmate of yours in preparatory school?

Belle: No, she was a teacher (laughing).

Gizem: Himm.

Belle: In the Turkish class, a Turkish course. She was so sweet, but she didn't like Syrians (laughs).

Gizem: So how did it make you feel when you heard this?

Belle: I felt bad because people are talking that we don't pay for college, and we have it for free. So, I felt bad, but like, we don't have another choice. We can't have a lot of money to pay for college.

Belle, Interview 2

As it was also found out in the Hauber-Özer's (2021) study, there seems to be a perceived negative attitude of Belle's Turkish language teacher related to Syrian refugee students' gaining university admission without taking entrance exams. In this extract, Belle shares her teacher's social perception and bias by laughing possibly in an attempt to ease the perceived tension of the situation. Belle recounts the interaction with this teacher who made the comment about Syrians attending college without paying fees without being aware that Belle herself was Syrian as Belle had only revealed her Palestinian identity in that class. In this extract, it is indicated that, apart from host country students themselves, stereotyping and forms of othering could come from a teacher too.

Belle's initial decision to identify as Palestinian instead of Syrian can also be perceived to illustrate the strategic management of identity by adopting a different identity, when possible, in the host country to navigate perceived social biases and to avoid discrimination. This seems to be an example of the strategic decisions participants can make related to the perceived stigma attached to being Syrian and the social pressure that can come with it. Finally, Belle's statement of "we don't have another choice," emphasizes the economic challenges she faces, possibly making being exempt from tuition fees not a luxury but a necessity for refugee students like her. Ali explains:

Extract 43

Gizem: How much are medical books, Ali?

Ali: Very expensive, seven hundred, eight hundred for a single book.

Gizem: How do you manage?

Ali: I am working now. My salary is enough for working, living, staying, and studying because I

never leave my house. Where would I spend the money? Just on those things.  
Gizem: So, you spend your earnings on your education?  
Ali: Just for education.  
Gizem: Ali, do you receive any scholarships from anywhere?  
Ali: No.  
Gizem: Have you ever applied?  
Ali: I applied. I applied for the Türkiye scholarships. Do you know about the Türkiye scholarships?  
Gizem: Yes, I've heard of them.  
Ali: But I got the highest scores among foreign students, yet they never accepted me. I applied twice.  
Gizem: Why do you think the reason is Ali?  
Ali: I don't know, I will ask they didn't accept... What can I do, what more scores can I bring, I don't know. I got seven hundred, seven hundred, meaning [I got seven times a hundred, referring to the YÖS exam] no one else has scored that so far. I don't know what to do. Another scholarship, I applied for that too. For whom? For the Foundation, you know, the Turkish Foundation. They didn't accept that either, I don't know why.  
Gizem: Didn't you apply anywhere else?  
Ali: I applied. Whenever I see a scholarship, I apply, but they never accept; I don't know why.  
Gizem: I see.  
Ali: What more do they want? They should say what they want so that I can do it; but there is nothing.

Ali, Interview 2

In this extract, Ali explains how he manages the perceived financial burden of purchasing expensive medical textbooks. During the pandemic, ethnographic insights suggested that Ali mostly spent his salary for his educational expenses by rarely leaving his home and having barely a social life. While this behavior could be perceived to be understandable during lockdown, he was observed to go on having no social life even after lockdowns were ended. Throughout the study, Ali can be said to continue to lead a seemingly isolated lifestyle, dedicating all his time to studying at Medical School and working at the YÖS course for his expenses. My observation of Ali's excessive working was further supported during a gathering with female participants for tea. Female participants shared that their friends who knew Ali mentioned that he rarely socialized or actually did not have many friends he frequently spent time with. Since all these were speculations and could not be backed up with additional data, and most importantly by Ali, these interpretations cannot be accepted as truth. What can be deduced from this extract is that Ali seemed to feel significant financial pressure on him and relied on employment to support his education. Besides, the data suggest that working and earning his own money helped Ali build a more empowered identity about which he told in one of the interviews "I have not received any money from my family for six years" (Ali, Interview 1) It can

be interpreted from his statements that he cared about being independent both financially and academically.

When he was asked about his attempts to find scholarships, Ali reveals that he applied for the Türkiye scholarships multiple times but was rejected despite having the highest scores among other Syrian refugee students. His confusion and frustration about these rejections can be felt in his remarks, as he seems not to understand why his applications were unsuccessful. Ali's repeated attempts to secure scholarships and the subsequent rejections, even with his perceived outstanding academic performance clearly made him upset, yet it can be inferred that he did not give up, and still applied for scholarships. In the extract 42, it is indicated that he believes scoring the highest points in YÖS would open the doors for scholarships for him, which was proved to be ineffective in his case. It is implied in his belief that his success should have helped him overcome the systemic barriers and secure a scholarship, yet it was not the case.

When Yasemin was asked how she supported herself for educational expenses, she explains: "Well, my family supports me, uh, well, teacher, it is a bit difficult, but we manage somehow" (Yasemin, Interview 2) which can be interpreted as she had perceived financial hardships yet managed somehow with the help of her family. In contrast to Yasemin and Ali who needed scholarship and applied whenever they had the opportunity; Ahmet seemed to have no challenges regarding the financial issues with his strong economic capital:

Extract 44

Gizem: How do you handle your expenses while studying?

Ahmet: I don't have any financial problem because my father is able to give me what I need first, for education.

Gizem: So, you do not get any scholarship from somewhere or somebody?

Ahmet: No.

Gizem: Have you ever applied?

Ahmet: I applied one time, but after that, I didn't look it. I didn't give it so much. I don't know what happened. I just applied.

Gizem: Which scholarship was it?

Ahmet: I don't remember because, you know, it was like my friends called me and he said, he told me that there is a scholarship if you want to apply for it. I told him, okay, it's okay; you can apply for me. I sent to him my information, so I didn't apply by myself.

Gizem: Why didn't you check the result?

Ahmet: I don't know. Maybe I didn't accept. If I accept, maybe. Even I didn't ask my friend what happened. I don't know. I don't remember exactly what happened.

Ahmet, Interview 2

In this extract, Ahmet states that he has no financial hardships as his father, who has his own family business, can support him for his education. It can be inferred from his statements that he seems to feel so assured related to his financial security that he does not even look for scholarships or applies for them once found. It appears that his friend handles the application process for him, and Ahmet does not even check if he got the scholarship or not. The findings seem to indicate that his situation is in stark contrast with Ali's and Belle's cases, who are in need of financial aid, thus apply for scholarships and check their application status constantly, and with Nur's case who wants to look for a job and thus return back on holiday to support her family and writes this in her diary "I returned in the hope of finding a job" (Nur's diary, June 2021)

In conclusion, as the findings indicate, some of the participants of this study needed scholarships to complete their education without needing additional support. Except for Ahmet, all other participants seemed to face economic difficulties, and some participants like Ali, Belle, and Nur either sought jobs or worked to improve their financial situations. It can be inferred from the findings that living under temporary protection status in a host country while continuing higher education studies and working to support oneself financially can be perceived to be challenging, and increasing the scholarship options for these students could be a step to improve their financial situation while studying in higher education.

#### **4.5. Syrian Refugee Students' English Language Learning in Preparatory Schools**

Both local and international students commence their higher education at preparatory schools in English-medium instruction (EMI) universities to support and prepare them for English-medium courses in their academic programs. During this one-year intensive language preparation, students undertake two academic terms of English



language instruction, typically receiving approximately 25 hours of instruction weekly, though this may vary among schools. As it was already explained in the Research Context section of the Chapter 3, the preparatory school in this study uses a modular system, assessing students bi-monthly and placing them in classes based on their proficiency levels. Students are categorized into levels ranging from L1 to L4, corresponding to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels A1 (L1) to B1 (L4). Preparatory schools act as the gateway to higher education, especially for English-medium instruction (EMI) universities (Macaro, 2018; and act as the first environment where students adjust to the demands of higher education. Therefore, the first-year experiences of Syrian refugee students in these programs seem to be pivotal in influencing their ongoing and future educational journeys in higher education. Yasemin talks about her preparatory school experience:

Extract 45

Gizem: How was the experience of learning English in the preparatory school?

Yasemin: Well, teacher, it depends on the teacher. My first teacher was very, very good, really good, very attentive, teaching things well, and was great when we asked questions. The teacher in the second level, I can't say he was bad, but there were two students who were supposed to be in L3, but due to some issues, they ended up in L2. The teacher seemed only to talk to them, not just to me but to others too. Since our English wasn't as good, the teacher preferred to talk to them.

Gizem: How did that make you feel?

Yasemin: It made us feel bad. We came here to learn, so why don't you talk to us? We know we don't know, but we are trying to make an effort.

Gizem: Yasemin, you were preparing for university in the last year of Imam Hatip. If we compare that Yasemin with the one who passed the preparatory school with 84, how much do you think your English improved?

Yasemin: It improved a lot. In fact, I could have passed with a higher score than 84, but I got very nervous. I lost points in speaking, which was actually my best skill, but I still lost points there. But it improved a lot. I couldn't speak, even if I knew some things, I couldn't speak. I was tongue-tied, but even in one level [module], I felt the difference a lot.

Gizem: I see.

Yasemin: It was very effective, especially in terms of speaking.

Yasemin, Interview 2

In the extract 45, Yasemin discusses her varying experiences of English language learning in the preparatory school. She perceives her experience with her first instructor who Yasemin reported was highly attentive and effective in teaching, highly positively. However, it can be inferred from her statements that, Yasemin's experience in the second module was less favorable since she reported that the instructor favored two students who Yasemin thought were misplaced in a lower-

level module. She also tells that she and her classmates felt neglected because of the instructor's focus on these students. This perceived lack of attention probably seems to make her feel undervalued as she protested for this in the extract by saying "We know that we don't know; but we are trying to make an effort".

However, the data indicate that when Yasemin makes an evaluation of the whole preparatory school year, especially when she compares it with her high school level, she indicates that her English has improved significantly. She finds her score in the proficiency test lower than expected, mainly due to her performance in the speaking exam by stating that "I was tongue-tied" probably indicating her anxiety and nervousness in the exam, yet it can also be inferred that she believes there is a considerably perceived improvement in her English skills and the preparatory school was reported to be a positive impact on her English language proficiency. It can be concluded from this extract that participants' preparatory school experience could vary among each module with different instructors for each.

The data indicate that Belle also agrees on the perceived positive impact of the preparatory school on her English proficiency by stating that "it got better after the preparatory school" (Belle, Interview 2). She explained "I feel I have the confidence of talking in English. Like before, I was talking like one word and stop and thinking about the next word. Now I think I can, like, have a sentence without stopping. And I think it's easier. I used it. So, I think it's easier now." While previously struggling with speaking as she had stated in the data, she now seems to feel capable of making complete sentences without hesitation. Her remarks on being able to communicate more seamlessly in English with fluency and ease can be interpreted as she possibly made significant improvement in her language skills which were required for her studies in the EMI program she was going to study.

Nur also commented on the perceived effectiveness of the preparatory school and stated that "Preparatory education had a great impact because I learned English there. I had learned it before, but I had forgotten it. However, there were really good teachers there. Thanks to them, we only translate two words on one page" (Nur, Interview 2). While discussing the effectiveness of her teachers, Nur, as an EMI

student, touches upon the subject of translation. She mentions that, thanks to the perceived effective instruction she received at preparatory school, she doesn't have to do a lot of translation while studying in her current department. The data suggest that she mostly seems to understand the study materials well and only needs to resort to translation for a few words when she doesn't understand something. This can be interpreted as that she is satisfied with the education she received at the preparatory school, and also translation is a strategy she employs frequently while she is studying in her EMI program.

Participants seemed to agree that the perceived effectiveness of the preparatory school lay especially in its medium of instruction at school, which was almost always English. Ali explains: "The teachers teach and speak very well. Sometimes teachers teach English, but they do not speak English themselves. However, in this university's preparatory school, the teachers always speak English in the classroom, so I learn better. I always speak English" (Ali, Interview 3). Ali reports that although he thinks there are some teachers who do not consistently use English, most of his teachers do use it as the primary language of instruction. He seems to believe that this constant use of English in the classroom helps him learn English better. Additionally, he highlights the use of technological tools in the school, particularly for listening activities. Ahmet agrees with him:

Extract 46

Gizem: How was the experience of learning English at the preparatory school as a whole?

Ahmet: It was, for me, it was great, because the hmmm, I was lucky that my teacher was so great. And she are so communicated with us. And she, she, for example, talk with us in English language. For example, if you're interesting for the other class, maybe a teacher, sometimes she, she, she talked in Turkish language. But this teacher was so great. And she was always talking with us in English language. And it was so good for me personally. So, great experience for me. And what is mm, else that I, I get know, some Turkish friends and some other from other nationality friends. It was a good experience.

Ahmet, Interview 2

Like Ali, Ahmet emphasizes that not all teachers consistently use English as the medium of instruction. He perceived himself lucky in that his teacher was different from other teachers who used the host country's language, which is also the classroom language predominantly spoken by Turkish students. He explained more

on this elsewhere too: “The teacher was just talking in plain language. Just the teacher was just talking English and was make us just talking English. That was a good point that make us stronger in our department, in English” (Ahmet, Interview 3). As Ahmet noted too, it can be inferred from the data that participants mostly seemed to expect their teachers to use English only as the medium of instruction and avoid integrating any other languages into their teaching, whether it is the official language of the host country, Turkish, or their native language Arabic. Findings reveal that translanguaging was not expected of teachers, and code-meshing was perceived to be as problematic, seeing instructing in English as “talking in plain language” which is indicated to be favored more in the remarks of the participants. In extract 46, Ahmet concludes by praising the overall perceived effectiveness of the preparatory school and shares his contentment of forming friendships with both Turkish students and those of other nationalities which appears to be one of the many benefits of the preparatory school as participants stated.

Findings suggest that the main reason participants praised the preparatory school was the use of English as the only medium of instruction. In their responses to questions, they were asked regarding the perceived quality of the preparatory school, it can be inferred from the data that the effectiveness of teachers was consistently linked to the language of the instruction they used. Yasemin conveyed her thoughts by stating “The fact that teachers speak English challenges the students, which facilitates our learning” (Yasemin, Interview 3). Belle also expresses: “The teachers were good. For example, in L2, the teacher was just talking in English, it was motivating me. And for example, with, my friends, I couldn't talk in, in Turkish, so I had to talk in English. So, my English got better” (Belle, Interview 2).

The exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction was perceived by Belle as a facilitator to study more. Additionally, she indicates that she had to use English as her primary mode of communication due to her lack of proficiency in the host country language, Turkish. Her statements suggest that this perceived necessity compelled her to use English not only in academic settings but also in her daily interactions with classmates, thus facilitating her conversational skills even more. For Belle, English seems to have served both as a target and a saver during this initial

adjustment period the Preparatory School. When they were asked about their negative experiences if they had any, not using “English only” was expressed as a disadvantage:

Extract 47

Gizem: Are there any negative experiences you had in the preparatory school?

Yasemin: Well, teacher, it depends on the teachers. For example, maybe the school has principles, but the teachers do not follow them. That could be it.

Gizem: Can you please give an example?

Yasemin: For example, not all teachers speak in English. Some teach in Turkish, at least the ones I encountered.

Gizem: Do you think this is a disadvantage?

Yasemin: Of course, it is a disadvantage.

Gizem: Why do you think so?

Yasemin: If you are not challenged, you cannot learn. If I had continued like this with Turkish, I would not have learned it. People always take the easy way out. If they always take the easy way, they will never face challenges and never learn.

Yasemin, Interview 3

It can be interpreted from Yasemin’s remarks that using English exclusively as the medium of the instruction is perceived to be a language policy of the school to which teachers seem to be expected to adhere strictly, at least by Yasemin. Though, some teachers are reported to use Turkish, which Yasemin appears to perceive as inconsistent with the school's language policy as she believes this is a disadvantage while learning English. Her argument seems to be based on her perceived idea that without being forced to use English, students might not face the necessary challenges to learn the language effectively.

While translanguaging could be beneficial in making content accessible and in supporting the comprehension and learning of the target language (Garcia, 2009), Yasemin's perspective highlights a different aspect. The data indicate that her concern was her perceived fear that students might rely on their native language and miss out on immersive language learning experiences if teachers code-meshed. She provides her Turkish language learning journey as an example of this and states that without being pushed out of her comfort zone, her Turkish proficiency could not have improved.

Belle expresses a similar idea and answers the question if she would like her native Arabic incorporated into the language classroom for times when she is challenged in her comprehension of English:

Extract 48

I don't know, like, I'm studying in a Turkish university in English like, and here no one talking Arabic like, like I feel it's my choice that I'm studying here. So, I shouldn't be like... I can't remember some words. Like you shouldn't be talking like...You.. They must talk in Arabic like you choose this country you chose this university like...

Belle, Interview 3

As a Syrian refugee student in Türkiye, it can be inferred from her statements that Belle does not seem to think that her linguistic capital, Arabic in this case, should necessarily be legitimized in the context of an EMI university in a Turkish-speaking country. In the extract, she reveals her sense of agency and choice to study in Turkish Higher Education, and her motivation to adapt to the linguistic environment in a heavily monolingual setting. There is a likelihood that she does not think this is a challenge and seems to think why Turkish students need to "hear it in their mother tongue." It can be inferred from the data in this section that adapting to the host country can be perceived to be one of the many approximations Syrian refugee participants do to fit in.

All in all, these extracts highlight the tension between the benefits of translanguaging and the perceived need for immersive language learning environments as well as refugee participants' experience in the host country where they may not be proficient in the host country language Turkish and thus not be able to understand the classroom instruction. As a result of this expectation related to the language of the instruction, Ali revealed his dissatisfaction to one of his teachers who code-meshed Turkish and English, and asked if she could change her language of instruction:

Extract 49

Gizem: Ali, in the second level [L2 module], did you request your teacher to speak in English when you didn't understand something when she was speaking in Turkish?

Ali: Yes, I initially told the teacher that I got confused in Turkish, and if it could be in English, would you please speak in English? Because the students asked the teacher to teach also in Turkish. That's why, sometimes I don't understand the subjects. I mean, I speak Arabic and English, and they speak Turkish simultaneously, and it gets very confusing in my mind. So, I sometimes don't understand things, and sometimes things get mixed up in my mind, the two foreign languages. The teacher then said, "Okay, I will speak in English," and started teaching in both Turkish and English.

Gizem: So, after you pointed it out, did the teacher still continue speaking in Turkish occasionally?

Ali: No, she did not continue.

Gizem: So, she complied with your request?

Ali: She went on teaching in Turkish, but also started teaching in English as well.

Ali, Interview 2

Due to his limited proficiency in Turkish, Ali asked his teacher if she could use only English for classroom instruction which is expected to be the medium of instruction in the Preparatory School of the EMI university. Ali implies that the teacher considered his request and began incorporating English into her lessons. However, it is perceived from Ali's statements that she continued to code-mesh Turkish and English in the class where most students were Turkish speakers and asked her to teach the same content in the host country language too. This seems to have made it challenging for Ali to communicate his needs, given that Turkish was the predominant language, and other students had no trouble understanding it, unlike Ali. Nonetheless, the data show that he needed to make this request for the language of the classroom instruction, learn English, and succeed in the preparatory school as in order to go on their studies in their academic programs, all students need to successfully complete their studies in the Preparatory School. As a result, while code-meshing in the classroom, the consideration of every student's language repertoire seems to be a must in classes especially where refugee students attend as their unproficiency in the host country language may cause feelings of alienation and can possibly distract them from their studies:

Extract 50

Gizem: Yes, I was actually asking about the advantages and disadvantages for you. For instance, you mentioned one disadvantage; you said that since both sides know Turkish, the teacher sometimes speaks in Turkish, and you don't understand. This is a disadvantage.

Ali: Now, in medical school, there is no such thing, they always speak in English.

Gizem: In the preparatory school?

Ali: In the preparatory school, yes, it was.

Gizem: Yes, what kind of disadvantage was this to you? Is there something other than what we mentioned?

Ali: I don't know Turkish.

Gizem: Uh-huh.

Ali: This is the biggest disadvantage. In my culture, my culture is another culture, that's why things are different, so sometimes they see things better than me, and I don't understand what they mean. Sometimes they make jokes, and I don't get it, I don't think it is a joke because my culture is different. Do you understand me?

Gizem: I understand, I understand very well.

Ali: Yes, this is the biggest thing for me. Another culture, other things, another language, and a different culture, they have it, and I don't have that culture. That's how it is. They say something to the teacher, and I don't see it, sometimes the whole class laughs.

Gizem: Yes.

Ali: I don't understand anything, I don't hear anything, or I hear and understand, but I think there's no need to laugh at this, it's not something to laugh at because it's a different culture.

Gizem: I understand.

Ali: I saw this a lot here in Türkiye.

Gizem: Did this happen often?

Ali: Yes, it happened a lot, and I saw it a lot.

Ali, Interview 2

As in extract 50, Yasemin also expresses her feelings in a similar manner with Ali: “People would sit and talk to each other, laugh about things. They didn’t make me feel bad, but I felt like, “I wish I could understand, I felt I could join you” (Yasemin, Interview 2). Both extracts seem to indicate the perceived impact of language barrier and cultural differences on participants’ educational experiences. It can be interpreted from the data that both Ali and Yasemin feel excluded and isolated due to their inability to fully understand and participate in interactions in their classes at preparatory school. It is implied in Ali’s remarks that his perceived bad experience is compounded by cultural misunderstandings, while Yasemin’s feelings of exclusion seem to be primarily internalized. Ali positions his culture as other “my culture is other”, and as for Yasemin, the feeling of exclusion appears not to be imposed by others but was a self-imposed sense of isolation due to the language barrier which is perceived to hinder her from joining meaningful interactions with her classmates. The data imply that there is a strong desire to understand and be understood, emphasizing the significant impact that language barrier can possibly have on social participation and inclusion. These findings seem to highlight the constant struggle of refugee student participants in their journey to adjust and adapt not only to their school ecology, but also the host country as a whole. In the third part of this section, a deeper examination of the challenges participants face and the coping mechanisms they employ, which contribute to their resilience, will be explained more in detail.

**Learning English in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Context.** In Türkiye, the official language is Turkish, and English is taught as a foreign language. Unlike the English as a Second Language (ESL) environments, students have limited opportunity to use English in natural settings, and their target language learning is mostly restricted to the classroom instruction. Syrian refugee student participants can be perceived to have unique experiences in learning the target language English in the host country as, for most of them, learning Turkish as the host country language was a process still going on:

Extract 51

Gizem: How did you adapt yourself to learning English while your native Arabic is not spoken, and Turkish is the main language spoken? So, did it have any advantages or disadvantages for learning English?



Ahmet: The advantage is that my mother language was not talking just a little bit with friends who is from for example, Arabic, the Arabic countries, but it is I think it's an advantage for me to learn to learn fast, you know.

Gizem: Why do you think so?

Ahmet: Because the language when you want to learn a language, a new language, you should practice it. So, for practicing it, you should just around it with, with this language, you know, especially for me, for me, I want to not just learn English, I want to learn Turkish as well. So, so it's better for me to just around with people who talk, who is talking English and Turkish, sometimes I cannot for example, I can't give my question, for example, in Turkish language I, yeah I take out from the English language, do you know? So this, I think it's something advantage. It's advantage.

Gizem: So you mix two languages, in order to communicate with your friends sometimes. Did you find a lot of opportunities to converse in English?

Ahmet: As I told you in the class was most of time where, during the class, we're talking just to me you know, just sometimes when, when the topic is out from the for example learning English, maybe sometimes the teacher speak Turkish just but during the class and during the, our lesson, she's just talking the English language. So I didn't have any problem with that, any difficult. Yeah.

Ahmet, Interview 2

Ahmet seems to perceive not being able to communicate in his native Arabic in the host country as advantageous for immersing himself in learning the target languages, English and Turkish. He perceives that learning Turkish in the host country is easier due to the opportunity of practicing it. Unlike other participants who find translanguaging problematic, he seems to code-mesh English and Turkish actively to communicate with others effectively. As for English, he appears to consider the classroom instruction sufficient for learning. Belle explains a similar point:

Extract 52

Belle: Can I told you- told you umm tell you my story?

Gizem: Yes, please.

Belle: Like, for the L1 repeat, the teacher was talking in Turkish. She loves, she loves to chat. So, she was talking in Turkish, for me, it was a good thing, because I want to learn Turkish. Like it's not a problem for me but for my friends, they weren't talking enough in English. So, they weren't improving. And for the L2, my teacher was just talking in English, so my friends didn't understand her (laughs). Even in the jokes, or this, she was talking in English. So, it was good for me. I'm improving my English. And it was a disadvantage for my friends, they didn't understand. But umm for example, there was a girl. She moved from our class because she didn't understand her at all (laughs).

Belle, Interview 2

Belle's narration illustrates the intersection of language proficiency and cultural background in shaping educational experiences. As a Syrian refugee student under temporary protection in Türkiye, Belle is simultaneously learning Turkish, the host country language, and English, the target language of instruction in the Preparatory

School. She seems to believe her exposure to both languages is beneficial for her, as she can be interpreted to be motivated to learn both of the languages. However, her classmates, who do not need to learn Turkish as it is their first language and have fewer opportunities to practice English outside the classroom environment in an EFL context seem to face challenges in terms of having enough exposure to the target language based on the reports of Belle. Belle seems to adapt herself strategically to varying situations, and benefit from both cases- whether the language of the instruction is Turkish or English. This process, however, was not without its drawbacks as Yasemin and Ali explain:

#### Extract 53

Yasemin: For example, I would tell my family in Arabic, I would go home and speak Arabic, go to school and speak English in class, and speak Turkish during breaks. Especially in the first month, my head was really aching because of this. I don't usually get headaches, but that month my head was constantly aching because you try to speak three languages at once, trying to speak them all equally well. It was challenging in that sense. Sometimes I would speak one language with a friend and unintentionally switch to another. For example, I would speak Turkish and suddenly throw in an English word. The worst is when I use an Arabic word because they already understand English and Turkish, but it gets very bad when you use an Arabic word. It is not understood, and they ask, "What are you saying?" (laughs). Especially words like "yes" sometimes come out in Arabic. Or my reactions come out in Arabic, which seems strange to them, but that's how it is. Funny things happen.

Gizem: So, you mix languages, English and Arabic?

Yasemin: In the first month. Now, I don't mix them as much. For example, I meant to say "motivated" but said something like "motivate." One of my friends still teases me about this word (laughs).

Gizem: Yasemin, do you think this is a problem? Speaking by mixing the three languages you know, what do you think about this?

Yasemin: Well, teacher, I think it's wrong because, for example, this language is forgotten and isn't used anymore. For example, Arabic is a very rich language, but most people use English words while speaking Arabic. When people speak Arabic, they throw in English words. As this continues, Arabic loses its richness too in that sense. Because it's not just adults; children also start speaking like this, and as it goes on like this, the language is used increasingly less effectively.

Gizem: So, I understand that you think using different languages together is like doing an injustice to those languages?

Yasemin: Yes, it's a bit like that. For example, if two people, two friends speak like this momentarily, it's not a problem, but if the whole society speaks like this, it becomes a big issue.

Yasemin, Interview 2

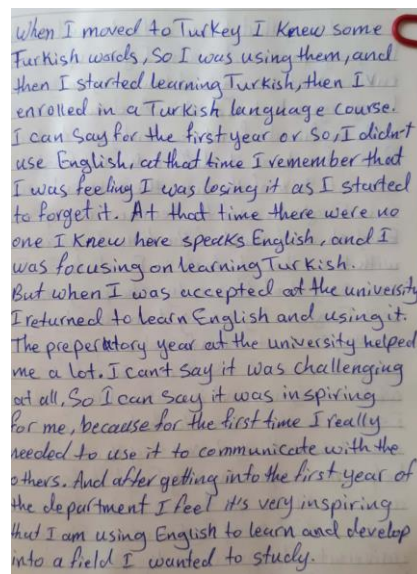
#### Extract 54

It's very difficult, sometimes it was efficient though. Before, in the class, the English teacher asked me to form a sentence. I formed one, but I forgot the sentence. In the same sentence, I used both English and Turkish words and felt nothing. I mean, I was speaking in English, but I took three or four words from Turkish and used them in the same sentence. The teacher looked at me and asked, 'What are you saying? Are you serious?' But I was not speaking anything in English, I mean I just forgot. Then, two or three minutes later, I realized what I

had said, and I thought, 'How did I say such a thing? How did I speak such a thing?' My mind sometimes gets confused like that sometimes.

Ali, Interview 3

In her narration, Yasemin discusses the perceived challenges of navigating multiple languages—Arabic at home, English in class, and Turkish in social encounters. Similarly, Ali also explains his confusion while trying to speak in English but code-meshing unintentionally. Yasemin recounts the cognitive overload of code-meshing especially in the first months, causing frequent headaches. As Syrian refugee students in Türkiye, participants can be said to be embedded in a context where multiple languages are in constant interplay. Yasemin's perceived struggle to keep her languages distinct can imply the broader challenge of maintaining cultural and linguistic identity in a multilingual setting. Her statement about the potential loss of richness in Arabic due to code-meshing English and Turkish can be interpreted as her concern about her linguistic heritage. Yasemin feels that translanguaging practices can do harm to languages if they are used at a societal level. From an intersectional approach to language education, the data indicate that the influence of dominant languages on minority languages creates a potential concern in Yasemin regarding the preservation of linguistic diversity. This issue may particularly be significant in multilingual environments with speakers of various heritage languages, including refugee and migrant communities. The perceived tension felt while managing diverse languages is expressed by Belle in Figure 9 too:



When I moved to Turkey I knew some Turkish words, so I was using them, and then I started learning Turkish, then I enrolled in a Turkish language course. I can say for the first year or so, I didn't use English, at that time I remember that I was feeling I was losing it as I started to forget it. At that time there were no one I knew here speaks English, and I was focusing on learning Turkish. But when I was accepted at the university I returned to learn English and using it. The preparatory year at the university helped me a lot. I can't say it was challenging at all, so I can say it was inspiring for me, because for the first time I really needed to use it to communicate with the others. And after getting into the first year of the department I feel it's very inspiring that I am using English to learn and develop into a field I wanted to study.

**Figure 9.** A Page from Belle's Diary

Belle writes in her diary that after she crossed the border across Türkiye, she enrolled in a Turkish course. As she was focusing on learning Turkish and lacked opportunities to use English in the host country where English is a foreign language and holds no official status, she felt “she was losing it as she started forgetting”. The absence of English speakers around her and giving her full focus in learning Turkish seem to result in feelings of concern about her English proficiency. However, it is also indicated in the data that after being admitted to an EMI university and attending preparatory school, she appeared to be content with returning to using English again. Preparatory school was the place where she found people to use English to communicate for the first time in the host country. Besides, it can be perceived from the data that she did not seem to have difficulty at all and felt further motivated and inspired by learning English for her program requirements.

Both Nur and Belle reported to feel a similar concern about losing their English proficiency when they continued their program during the pandemic: “I am a bit anxious about my English because I forget it, and I don't have the opportunity to practice” (Nur’s diary, October 2021). “In Turkey, it is not effective 100% to learn English, because we have limited aspects of life to use it for now. I mostly use it at the university, but the students are Turkish (They are not native English speakers), and professors are not native speakers of English” (Belle’s diary, no date).

As the diary entries of Belle and Nur indicate, they can be perceived to be constantly concerned about the limited opportunities to use English in the host country, where it is only taught as a foreign language. Despite studying at an EMI university and successfully completing their preparatory school education, the restricted opportunity to use English is highlighted as a constant worry for them in the data. Belle, additionally, implies in her diary that to be able to learn a language most effectively, one needs to learn it from native speaker teachers also indicating that being surrounded by native speakers is perceived to be a huge advantage by her. Belle seems to favor being an ESL student rather than EFL student although she also appears to be aware that the latter means possibly learning the host country language Turkish as well as the target language English.

**The Positioning.** The data reveal that the preparatory school provided a seemingly comfortable environment for Syrian refugee student participants, and no reports of discrimination or othering were made by the participants through the ethnographic data collection process in the course of the study. When Nur was asked of her perceptions related to her positioning as a Syrian refugee student at Preparatory School, she answered “There were many other foreign students. In the last two years, there have been a lot of them. So, I think the Turkish students have gotten used to seeing foreigners in the preparatory school” (Nur, Interview 2). Nur seems to believe that host country students have become used to studying with diverse groups of students over the years implying a change when compared to previous years. It is also interpreted from the data that participants’ “foreign student” identity even put them in a privileged position as the knower, the international student, and multilingual participants of the classrooms:

Extract 55

For example, for Turkish students (laughs) they oh, they were always trying to speak with me Turkish and it was good for me because I, I learned something in Turkish, but they always trying to, for example, don't know why you don't speak Turkish why you still don't speak English, you should learn on the... Yeah, that is exactly what they should do but mm, actually, it was so powerful that they, for example, they would my leg on the first step, you know, they were yeah, they were trying to make me speak Turkish. And sometimes when I don't understand what they say, I ask them for, for example, to try, try to tell me in English.

Ahmet, Interview 2

In this extract, Ahmet describes how he thought Turkish students tried to teach him Turkish, implying their motivation for communicating in Turkish with him as their lack of proficiency in English. It is inferred from his statements that he characterizes this experience as “so powerful” and seems to perceive Turkish people’s not speaking English not because they preferred so, but out of necessity as Ahmet thought they lacked proficiency in English. Ahmet’s case seems to draw a parallel with Belle’s who is also perceived to feel empowered with English “I told you I was good in English. So, I was a smart one [in the classroom]. And a foreigner because I didn't speak English well, I was adapting to Turkish.” (Belle, Interview 2) This interculturality suggests that they build empowered identity among the host country people, especially as the knower, “the smart one”; yet, as Belle also expressed, they were in an in-between stage as they were also positioned as the foreigner who lacked

the proficiency in the language of the host country. Overall, the preparatory school experience was perceived to be both positive and effective by the participants as Yasemin also stated:

Extract 56

My English was very weak when I started the preparatory school. I couldn't even speak the words I knew in English. In that sense, it contributed a lot; I noticed the improvement in my English even in the first month. I was well-prepared for university. If I had taken a full year of English preparatory classes, I believe my English would have been even better.

Yasemin, Interview 3

The major reason why participants “could not take a full year of English preparatory classes” was going to be the second major crisis Syrian refugee student participants were going to face with the whole World: the COVID-19 pandemic which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.6. The Second Crisis: COVID-19 Pandemic in a Foreign Land**

The outbreak of the novel COVID-19 virus in late 2019 led to a global health emergency, which the World Health Organization (WHO) officially classified as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, due to its high infectiousness and mortality rate. This declaration had profound and far-reaching impacts, particularly in the field of education, necessitating a comprehensive restructuring of global systems as governments suspended classroom-based education in schools and universities to stop the spread of the virus (Alarifi & Song, 2024). As curfews tightened globally, educational disruptions became more prevalent. In response, many educational institutions swiftly transitioned to online education to ensure educational continuity (AlQashouti et al., 2024; Pedraja-Rejas et al., 2023). This led to the widespread closure of schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions in many countries to control the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, HEIs halted face-to-face (FtoF) campus education and had to make an emergency shift to online education to adapt to the new circumstances (Sunar et al., 2022).

In the context of this study, the Spring Term of 2019-2020 commenced like any other academic period. Regular interactions with the participants were being maintained

through casual conversations during breaks and occasional meetings in the school canteen. Although there were initial reports of a novel coronavirus outbreak in China, it seemed a distant concern, and the news was being followed with hopes for public health without anticipating its spread to our continent or country. This perception drastically changed when, on March 10, 2020, it was announced that COVID-19 had reached Türkiye, placing everyone in the country in the midst of a global pandemic. Consequently, on March 16, with a nationwide decision, all educational institutions, including HEIs, were closed (YÖK, 2020), abruptly interrupting regular academic activities. Initially, this period was perceived as a brief intermission of two to three weeks, after which normalcy was expected to resume. Similar to these initial expectations, the Syrian refugee student participants did not anticipate the prolonged duration of this period. Belle reflects on her initial response to the school closures:

Extract 57

Gizem: Belle, can you please remember the day of the school closures? How did you feel?

Belle: I felt it's something new. Like you can't figure it out at all. So, it was just a surprise for all of us. And then it didn't open. Like they say the three weeks. And after the three weeks they didn't open, so... Like you feel it's a real problem. At first you don't feel it's a real problem. Maybe it's a rumor (laughs) or something like that. But then you realize it's true. And you have to deal with it.

Gizem: What about, educational issues? How did you handle with the issues?

Belle: For me, I was just, like, I told you, it's not my first time in wasting life. So when it happens, I thought I should study, maybe the school will open like, after a month. So I, I shouldn't like umm, like think about not studying. Like, I just doing my best. So, it might open. But for my friends, they were like surprised, and maybe they were thinking it's the end of the world. So, they didn't study. But for me, I know it's not gonna be, it's not going to be the end of the world. So I should keep going.

Belle, Interview 3

Belle's response, describing the pandemic and the school closures following it as "something new" and "a surprise for all of us," highlights the initial confusion and uncertainty she seemed to experience. The data indicate that this phase of disbelief and adjustment was common among other participants for the sudden disruption, which revealed critical insights to understand their subsequent adaptive behaviors. Belle's approach to the prolonged closure may provide a glimpse of her proactive and resilient mindset. She decides to continue studying despite the uncertainty, possibly reflecting a strong sense of perseverance. This resilience can be interpreted to be informed by her previous experiences of crisis such as war, as she mentions, "it's not my first time in wasting life." It can be revealed from her statements that her

perceived ability to draw on past crisis to navigate the current challenges can underscore the role of prior experiences in shaping her resilience. Ahmet shares his initial reaction too:

Extract 58

Gizem: Ahmet let's remember the day of the school closure. How did you feel when you first heard that the school was closed because of COVID-19?

Ahmet: At first, you know, I didn't know we were waiting the news because the students or the students was talking, were talking about this topic that maybe the preparatory school will close. And their administration still, maybe they will take a decision for tomorrow or something like that. But the same day they take, they took a decision that they will close it, and it will be online. So it was for me, at first, I was happy, of course (laughs) because it was something like I will go to see my family and something like that. But I didn't expect that it will take long time like that.

Gizem: So what did you think would happen at first? I mean, what kind of a future educational life you anticipated, then?

Ahmet: I thought that it just will take maybe a few weeks, then we'll go back to our, to that preparatory school. And we will continue, and we'll take our exam there but I as I told you, I didn't expect that it will take long time.

Gizem: When did you understand that? Well, wow, this is this is going to be long. When did you say that?

Ahmet: When they started to close the schools, and it, it was clear that it took a long time. Because when, when they will take a decision like that, for example, for especially for the who the students who was, who started their, their faculty. Of course, they will take when they take like this decision, they will complete it, for example, at least attempt, for example. Because it's not something easy to say for example, we close now and for the other day, we open it. And all the students, for example, foreign students maybe went back to their countries, it's not something is okay, so I understood from this, that it will take a long time.

Ahmet, Interview 3

Similar to other participants, it is revealed that Ahmet did not expect the COVID-19 pandemic to last long. He shares that he was even pleased that he was going to see his family, who live in a different city, by making use of the interval that the closures would provide. It can be interpreted from the data that, initially, COVID-19 was conceptualized as a short holiday, but it was revealed that the pandemic was more serious than they had expected as they followed the news and realized that it was going to be a part of their lives for a while. During this period, it was observed that the most challenging part of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic for the participants was the uncertainty it brought, much like their previous experience in the war in their country. It was indicated in their statements that both the war and the pandemic broke out suddenly, creating a sense of temporary disruption without a clear end in sight, leading to significant ambiguity about the future. "I did not expect it would take a long time," Ahmet reflected, initially believing it wouldn't bring

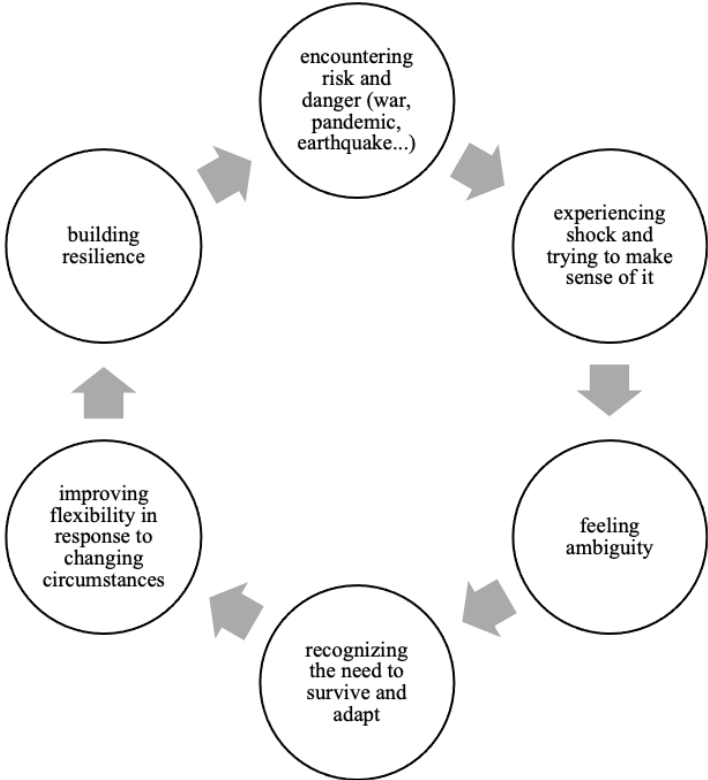


major life changes. However, it was revealed later on that both the war and COVID-19 brought substantial changes in participants' lives. Ali agreed with Ahmet and told that: "It seemed like a holiday" (Ali, Interview 3). However, unlike Ahmet, Ali seemed to enjoy not attending face to face (FtoF) classes as he told "we always attended to the university from 7 to 5 every day, but now we didn't go, it would just be online at home. I thought it would be better so far, I believe it is better" (Ali, Interview 3). It can be inferred that, for Ali who needed a lot of time for his studies at medical school, and for the YÖS course he taught at, school closures and the "holiday" brought by the pandemic was perceived to be a good advantage as he seemed to think that he would not lose any time by commuting to and from school.

Nur also explained her initial reactions as "I experienced something like this for the first time. I mean, I am experiencing something like this for the first time. Maybe, I thought, maybe they could even find a vaccine or something else, I didn't know; but the idea that schools would close never even crossed my mind" (Nur, Interview 3). As Nur indicated, there was a perceived expectation that an intervention, such as the discovery of a COVID-19 vaccine, would cut this "holiday" period, allowing a return to "normalcy." The findings indicate that this expectation was rooted in their previous experiences of resuming life after the war after which they continued their adaptation process in the host country. Initially, COVID-19 was perceived to be like a holiday and was not conceptualized as critical possibly as a result of not expecting its prolonged duration. Besides, this can also be interpreted as a result of its being the first pandemic the whole World was witnessing for a while.

The findings revealed that the primary challenge for the participants was the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the situation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the data it was implied that if participants had known when things would return to normal, the period could have been spent less anxiously and more productively. Nevertheless, the data indicated that life during the pandemic inherently involved the continuous management of ambiguity, and participants had to persevere regardless of their circumstances. As it was explained in the previous sections of this chapter, participants had frequently encountered critical situations characterized by ambiguity and risk particularly as a result of the war and the

subsequent adjustment and adaptation process. It was revealed that this perpetual uncertainty contributed to the development of greater resilience among refugee participants. Consequently, it can be interpreted that risk has become a seemingly constant aspect of participants' lives, fostering a flexibility that arises from the necessity and obligation to adapt. The process unfolds along a trajectory shaped by the participants' experiences as shown in Figure 10:



**Figure 10.** The Path from Initial Reactions to Resilience for Refugee Student Participants

Although there is a certain path followed by the participants based on their experiences and data as shown in Figure 12, it should also be noted that participants often appeared to revert to previous phases too. To illustrate, a participant who could be accepted as resilient and adapted could just spend weeks in despair with feelings of ambiguity, a phase that he/she had already passed through. The data revealed that going back and forth among these phases, yet always bouncing back in a way were natural processes that participants followed. The findings suggest that the initial reactions of shock and the expectation that the crisis would be short-lived gradually transformed into acceptance and adaptation over time as the pandemic persisted

although feelings of regret and anger accumulated in time too: “A year is gone” (Nur, Interview 3). Yasemin describes that period:

Extract 59

Gizem: So, when did you realize that this was really serious and that it would probably last a long time?

Yasemin: Hmm, towards the end of the second semester of last year, in the last month. I thought this would go on like this.

Gizem: How did you feel about your education and future?

Yasemin: Teacher, especially for me, since it's the first year of university, everyone wants to go to university in the first year. Not just for me, but because university life is different and all, I was a bit sad in this sense. I wanted to experience the university life. But, for example, since I am studying in an English-medium program, maybe it has been a bit better for improving my English. For example, in the first two weeks, I listened to the lessons twice to understand them. Then I got used to it, but in the first weeks, it helped in terms of English. You listen to the lesson twice, you understand, if there's something you don't understand, you go back and listen again. In this sense, it was a bit better.

Yasemin, Interview 3

The data reveal Yasemin's evolving perceptions of the pandemic's duration and its multifaceted impact on her university life. When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on her education and future, Yasemin expressed a sense of loss, particularly regarding her first-year university experience. She highlights that the excitement and enthusiasm of the first year of university was just cut short by the pandemic. However, despite the initial disappointment, Yasemin also seems to reflect on a perceived positive aspect of online education. She indicated that she had the opportunity to re-listen to lectures and reviewing class materials multiple times was perceived to be beneficial for her comprehension and language development. Ahmet expresses his feelings not in the same way with Yasemin in his diary that he kept in those days:

COVID-19 has changed a lot of things in my life negatively. Although I used to be free to do anything in my life, COVID-19 has made my life restricted. I was almost see my friends every day and we were always having plans for doing interesting things such as going to the coffee shop or playing football, and sometimes we go to the beach, more and more enjoyable things we have been through before COVID-19. In addition to that it made the education online, I wasn't grateful from that. Literally COVID-19 has killed the social life and made our life bored and depressing.

Ahmet's Diary

Ahmet expressed in his diary that his life became “restricted” which can be perceived to have led to feelings of boredom and depression. Relying on the data, participants

seemed to think that life became "static" all of a sudden "I didn't expect life to come to a complete halt" (Nur, Interview 3), and the data suggest that COVID-19 was conceptualized as something that is "stable" even, "immobile". For a population like refugees who are often associated with "mobility" (Dryden-Peterson, 2010), this could be the first and the most crucial time they experienced immobility. Yet, this time, the immobility was an obligation defined with law with the curfews implemented. It was "forbidden" to be mobile with the lockdowns officially implemented worldwide, in places going through the pandemic. In his diary extract above, Ahmet expresses his perceived dissatisfaction with his life which he indicated became isolated away from his loved ones, and also mentions his perceived unhappiness with the online education. Boredom was frequently reflected in participants' diaries, during the monthly focus group interviews, and in the informal conversations we had on WhatsApp or over the phone during the pandemic. Nur wrote in her diary that "I get bored sometimes, I always stay at home. I need to focus" (Nur's Diary, May 2021) and "We are under lockdown, maybe I haven't left the house for 10 days. I hope the virus ends soon" (Nur's Dairy, June 2021). Yasemin also reflected on the year passed in the fifth focus group discussions held:

Extract 60

Gizem: Yasemin, looking back, what do you think was the most challenging thing for you in this last year?

Yasemin: Hmm, I think it was staying at home all the time. I mean, you don't have an active life. It is just sitting at home and studying. We get really bored. It's very, very boring. Even if you go out, there's nowhere to go, everywhere is closed already. At least we used to go to university before, now that's gone too. So, it's very, very boring.

Gizem: So how did you maintain your motivation to study? You still managed to pass all your classes.

Yasemin: Well, I thought, "This course needs to be studied, it can be completed, it can be passed." I was thinking like that. I thought I would eventually study, so I thought I should finish it now to avoid difficulties in the coming years. Also, my brothers are at home too, they are studying. Seeing them, I got up and sat down to study. That's how it was.

Yasemin, Focus Group Interview 5

As it was reflected in Nur's diary entries, and in Yasemin's statements in the focus group discussion, lockdowns can be perceived to have caused a certain level of stress and despair for young Syrian participants. Nur expresses that she could not focus on her studies "I need to focus" while Yasemin reflected her boredom due to the perceived monotony of her life sitting at home all day in the discussion. However,

the data suggest that Yasemin also seemed to have a strong awareness of her academic responsibilities and the anticipation of future challenges if she did not study. Additionally, it is revealed from her statement that her older brothers, who were also studying in different academic programs in Turkish Higher Education, seemed to maintain their focus and continued studying, which can be interpreted to have motivated her further to continue with her studies. It appears that the support of significant people like her family supported Yasemin in the process through the pandemic to overcome some of the perceived challenges.

The findings of this study also indicate that the isolation caused by lockdowns during the pandemic caused a perceived concern related to participants' proficiency in the host country language Turkish too with the lessened social relations they had with the community. Yasemin illustrates this by sharing that: "In this pandemic period, I can't talk to anyone, I speak very little Turkish, so hmm, language is really ungrateful, if you can't speak it, it goes away, it really goes away. That's why there are occasional stumbles; but still, it's good" (Yasemin, Interview 1). Yasemin's statements imply that refugee participants seemed to have other concerns when compared to local citizens such as maintaining proficiency in the host country language. It can be perceived from the data that, since participants had little opportunity to keep contact with the host country people because of the lockdowns and significantly lessened social life, they appeared to be worried about the perceived decrease in their target language proficiency. It can be inferred from the findings that participants had their own subjective experiences and different concerns related to what they were experiencing during the pandemic. The breaks between lockdowns were reported to be comforting though, as lockdowns seemed to cause boredom the most: "We do nothing, and we cannot go out" (Nur's Diary, May 2020), "Lockdowns will end, I am waiting for it" (Nur's Diary, May 2021).

The data indicate that although participants were going through another crisis in their lives after the Civil War in Syria and the subsequent forced migration journey, compounded by their intersecting identities as refugees and students in a resettlement country, feelings of hope and plans for the future seemed to help to keep their spirit high. Yasemin writes in her diary:

We are in the third week of the university; it has been exactly a year since universities were closed. Time flies, it feels just like yesterday. By the way, I took my first quiz today, and thankfully, I passed it easily. I hope the rest of the quizzes are also easy. Assignments are starting to pile up from everywhere, catch up if you can. Since the weekend is here, I thought I would handle the assignments and visit my friend instead; let's call it a little escape. She has started learning Italian, a beautiful language, it sounds very pleasant, maybe I will start learning it too. First, I want to fully master English, then I will learn another language, I have decided for sure. Learning a new language is so useful for a person. At the very least, it develops one's curiosity and drives them to explore new things. You acquire a new identity. It's like travelling to another country because when you learn the language, you also discover the culture of that language.

Yasemin's diary, March 2021<sup>9</sup>

This diary entry was written by Yasemin when lockdowns were temporarily halted. After a whole year away from school, the data indicate that she still seems to keep up with her studies, passing her quiz despite having also a lot of schoolwork as she reported. Inspired by her friend, Yasemin writes that she plans to learn Italian, but only after she has mastered English implying that she believes new languages should be learned after the one being learned is mastered enough. It can be perceived from her statements that Yasemin's thoughts related to language learning and the identities it brings can portray her as an enthusiastic language learner. In another entry, she writes:

This month has been very busy... I couldn't even understand how it passed. We were given assignments even during the holiday, all the classes piled up, and I started falling behind on assignments. I left some assignments halfway, started studying for exams, and completed most of the assignments. It felt like I was caught off guard by the exams. It was a very hectic month, especially the exam week. Overall, my exams were well. Except for Calculus, I have 3 exams left. But I got through the difficult ones. I have the risk of failing Calculus. I am very worried about it. I studied the most for this course. We as the whole class are struggling with this subject. If I pass this course, I will have completed the 1st year. Without failing any courses, I am so excited. Looking back, I can say that time passed very quickly. When living through it, it feels very hard and as if it will never pass, but once it does, we always feel that it passed quickly. By the way, I felt that I have started to struggle while speaking Turkish, probably because I haven't used it much in the past year. I can't wait for this week to be over; I don't want to stay at home anymore. I've spent a whole year at home, and I'm fed up. I have the fatigue of a year on me, and on top of it, I have spent the entire year at home. Hoping to get rid of COVID soon.

Yasemin's diary, June 2021

Yasemin's diary entry suggests an insight into the perceived academic pressures she faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although she reports that she had a high level

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<sup>9</sup> Not all participants consistently recorded the exact dates of their diary entries. When dates were available, they were included. While some participants wrote their diary entries in notebooks, some wrote them in Word.

of academic workload, like in other spheres of her life as she reports, she seems to show academic resilience in the face of challenges, and adapts and continues to persevere. Completing her first academic year without any failed classes can be interpreted as a result of her resilient mindset and the ability to find motivation and positivity in the midst of challenges. Her previously mentioned concern about the perceived loss of her Turkish proficiency may indicate the broader impact of online education and limited social interactions on language proficiency, particularly for multilingual students such as refugees (Masalimova et. al., 2022). Yasemin seems to be aware that her perceived lack of daily conversational practice in Turkish could lead to a decline in her fluency although it is also shown in her diary entry that her writing skill in Turkish was still sharp. Findings indicate that keeping oneself proficient in the host country language was perceived to be crucial, as through this, refugee participants could navigate the challenges they faced more effectively, thus, it can be interpreted that this linguistic capital seemed to be too valuable to lose for them.

Extract 61

Teacher, I think this year has been an advantage for me, especially for the first month, or I can even say for the first semester. It has been very beneficial for me to understand what university life is like, how I need to prepare for classes, and how final examinations are done. The adaptation process was a bit better. I think I will go to university more prepared. At least you understand the teaching style; high school is very different from university, and you get an idea of what university life will be like. You understand how professors think and how they plan to teach the courses, even if the professors are different, you at least have an idea.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Finally, as it is indicated in the extract, the online education period due to the COVID-19 pandemic could also be perceived to serve as a preparation year for the following years in participants' academic programs. Apart from all the boredom, lack of communication, and other challenges brought on by the pandemic participants reported, Yasemin seems to value the experience of understanding the nuances of university life and preparation for classes. From the data, it can be inferred that the period spent with online education under the lockdown provided Yasemin with a seemingly smoother adjustment process and better prepared her for attending university. Findings show that although this was a forced transitional period, it also

appeared to be advantageous for preparing for higher education life in the resettlement country.

**COVID-War Relationship.** In this final part related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived strong connection participants made between the war and the pandemic will be discussed. While discussing COVID-19, there was a frequent reference to the war days, highlighting the similarities as well as the differences between these two crises in the data. Belle explains it as: “At first you don't realize what it is, and you think it's a stage that it will pass, and then it didn't pass. So, you are getting used to it now. And that's what's the bad thing” (Belle, Interview 3). Belle draws a parallel between the war and the COVID-19 pandemic in her statement, noting that initially, she did not realize the war would last for years, and similarly, she initially perceived COVID-19 as a short-term situation that would last only weeks. She mentions that, like in the war, she "gets used to" and "feels like the same". This was also something Yasemin drew a similar parallel too. It is inferred from the data that Belle perceives this process of “getting used to” as dangerous, relating to her war experiences. There were mixed responses among the participants regarding how much COVID-19 and the war relate. Below, their differing perspectives are revealed:

Extract 62

Maybe it [the pandemic] prepared me, because I told you, at first, you don't know what it is. But with time you get used to it. And like, you feel, you feel everything gonna happen. Like you don't get surprised by things. Like you, you just get used to anything new. I don't want this. I just want a normal life. And now, it's not normal. We are closing our doors on, on ourselves in the home. And (laughs) we are stuck.

Belle, Interview 3

Extract 63

When we were in Syria, we were just thinking about the thing if for example, if a bomb will fall in your head and your whole house, we will there be walls where we can say where, we are not feel good for a reason that maybe they will die or something like that any, any time maybe a plane will come and use a bomb. Maybe it will be you your house will destroy, and you will die. So, I don't think that it is the same. Maybe in some parts, it will be the same, but not like that exactly. That you stay at house, that you stay apart sometimes. For example, when there is a lot of for example, how can say, fires and bombing you will stay at home like that. But the different is in this time you, you are trying to protect yourself from people for example here from not taking the COVID-19 from them and so for that you will stay at house, but in Syria, you will not even in your house, you will not protect yourself. Maybe a bomb will fall on over your head or something like that. You can expect that.

Ahmet, Interview 3



Maybe it's a bit similar in the sense that you stay at home for your safety; but in a war, even if you stay at home, you are not safe. Life somewhat stops in the war, it just stops. Due to COVID, life somewhat stops, too; you can't go out much because of the pandemic. War is somewhat similar; but the most important thing in the war is that you are never safe. Because I have experience before. You don't go to cafes, and during the war, it was the same, you don't go out much, you don't walk around, and I have been through the same things.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Belle seems to believe that the war prepared her in a way for the COVID-19 pandemic and compares the ambiguity brought by the two crises. She reports that the uncertainty in both cases disrupts the sense of normalcy. On the other hand, Ahmet and Yasemin state that the war and the pandemic differ in specific ways. Ahmet seems to consider war to be much more severe, as there is no perceived sense of safety with the constant threat of bombings: "A bomb can fall in your head". However, it can be inferred that he feels one can stay safe from COVID-19 by staying home and following protective measures. Yasemin supports this by saying: "Even if you stay at home during a war, you are not safe."

One can claim that while war is specific to one's country, the pandemic is a global issue, making it easier for everyone to empathize as they all experience it. It can be suggested that being infected with COVID-19 could be perceived to be natural, whereas becoming a refugee due to war was less common, at least less observable during pandemic days. Literature indicates that intersecting identities, such as being both a gay and refugee can complicate the refugee experience (Block & Corona, 2016). Similarly, COVID-19 can be perceived to have brought its own set of challenges, while also creating a perceived sense of equality, as everyone faced the same health risks where the pandemic prevailed. For some period, the world can be claimed to be divided into those infected with COVID-19 and those who were not, with survival being the main concern, regardless of being a host country citizen or a refugee. The focus in the media was also not on refugees for some time, as COVID-19 seemed to carry more news value when compared to more political issues including refugees. It can be asserted that, at least for a while, the whole world was battling together to beat a primary global issue which affected all people regardless of their status.

Overall, the findings reveal that the experience of war can be interpreted to provide support during the pandemic, as participants appeared to know what endurance meant, what it was like waiting for a crisis to pass, and how to tolerate for high-risk situations and extreme uneasiness. It can be inferred from the data that Syrian refugee student participants exhibited flexibility and resilience during the pandemic; however, this resilience can be interpreted to have a counter effect for refugees who might expect some normalcy in their lives at some point. Ultimately, findings imply that these crises and how participants handled them might have also contributed to their adaptation to online education process.

#### **4.7. Syrian Refugee Students' Online Education Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020), governments worldwide responded by imposing lockdowns on various aspects of public life to curb the virus's spread, which also impacted the global educational system, as mentioned in the previous section. Educational institutions developed new methods for delivering instructional programs, and online education became the only viable option in most countries (Producers et al., 2022; Toquero, 2020), prompting them to expand and mandate its use due to the risk of being unable to resume classroom-based instruction any time soon (Altun et al., 2021; Valeeva and Kalimullin, 2021; Zagkos et al., 2022). As a result, the field of education, particularly higher education, faced urgent and unprecedented pressure to transition courses previously delivered face-to-face to online teaching (Toquero, 2020). Online education is believed to benefit both students and faculty by enabling the completion of syllabi and assessments, providing moral support, and reducing stress levels during the COVID-19 pandemic (Reinhardt et al., 2020). The advantages of online teaching and learning include facilitating interaction between faculty members and learners, motivating students, completing syllabi, offering greater flexibility, and allowing content and instruction to be accessed at any time and from any place (Castro & Tumibay, 2019; Singh & Meena, 2023). However, there are also some challenges revealed in the literature too such as lower student participation due to the absence of in-person interactions with faculty, which leads to

mental stress for both students and faculty members (Surkhali & Garbuja, 2020), lack of accessible and affordable internet connections, technical, logistical, and pedagogical challenges due to the unprepared transition from face-to-face to online education, greater self-discipline demanded (Daymont et al., 2011; Egielewa et al., 2022; Jain et al., 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Squire, 2021; Willermark, 2021) and not enhancing student productivity and not meeting the expectations of students for experience-based coursework such as in labs (Syauqi et al., 2020).

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Turkish Higher Education institutions also transitioned to online education in order to prevent the spread of the virus and safeguard the health of students. Initially, students were home for an indefinite period, with no clear timeline for return. Eventually, it was revealed that universities would remain closed, and all students were transferred to online classes (YÖK, 2020). With the exception of Belle, who studied at a virtual university for an academic term in Syria, all participants experienced online education for the first time in this study. In this part, findings regarding their experiences from the initial transition period from FtoF education to online education, the perceived challenges and advantages of online education, their comparison and overall evaluation of face-to-face education and online education will be explained.

**Transition Period from Face-to-Face to Online Education and Perceived Challenges.** Since the transition from traditional, classroom-based education to online education was unexpected and necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the data revealed the adaptation process was perceived to be challenging and took some time. Initially, it was anticipated by the participants that this period would be short; however, as the situation prolonged, students reported that they were compelled to adapt to the new mode of learning. Ahmet explains: “It is a new educational way and so different from FtoF. During the lecture, you just hear the instructor, and all of us, were not talking anything. If anybody has a question, maybe we'll the write at the side of it [to the chatbox]. So I think that face-to-face will be better than online education” (Ahmet, Interview 3). Ahmet describes online education as a “new educational way” and notes that it is so different from classroom-based instruction. He emphasizes the perceived lack of effective communication between lecturers and

students, explaining that when students have questions, they choose to write them in the chat box, probably as students are often muted or choose not to speak up at all.

Yasemin describes the same process as:

Extract 65

In terms of education, well, for some it was good, for some it wasn't. For example, we were about eighteen people in our class. At first, four people were attending, but towards the end, I was the only one attending. So it is. Having other people in the class pushes you to study a bit more. But when it's just you, you get bored, tired of it, and don't want to study anymore. You start wondering when the class will end. In this sense, it was bad because students were not attending.

Yasemin, Interview 3

In this extract, Yasemin notes that although her classmates attended with a higher motivation at the beginning, attendance decreased over time, and in the end Yasemin was left as the only student to attend classes. It can be inferred that from her remarks that the presence of other students in the class motivated her, and she seemed to get bored and frustrated with the process when others were not attending. Unattendance of other students can be interpreted to have been a problem for her. In the medical school, Ali did not report to have any perceived problems related to this issue. However, in the first term following the outbreak in the Preparatory school, he told that his classmates did not attend classes either causing a decline in their lecturer's motivation as he reports: "Only two of us attended the class, and after that, our class was distributed to other classes because our teacher did not want to go on with only two students in the classroom attending" (Ali, Interview 2). It is revealed from what Yasemin and Ali reported that, they could be both perceived to be motivated to join their online classes in the pandemic period even when other local or international students were reported not to be joining the online classes like them. Their situations can be interpreted to be challenging for some reasons that will be explained in the following parts, yet they seemed to keep their motivation and went on their classes autonomously as data suggest.

In their conceptualization of online education, Syrian refugee student participants felt like "we are just numbers, I think" (Belle, Interview 2) by referring to the perceived lack of communication between students and lecturers; Nur explained "This is the first time we've encountered something like this. The teachers don't know what to do.

And we don't know either” (Nur, Interview 3) indicating that neither lecturers nor students could be interpreted to know how to handle the recently faced situation. Findings suggest that nobody including teachers was prepared for the sudden transition from face-to-face education to online education. In one of the focus group discussions, Ahmet shared his ideas further:

Extract 66

Gizem: Ahmet, you were evaluating the last year, it was fully online.

Ahmet: Yes. It was boring, as I said, and because we didn't do the same as the previous students like it. And it's something new for us. I've never experienced something like that. And for me, I didn't like it. I don't see that there I, there is umm, there is something positive to being home and take your lectures by online. So and I umm, I think when we take the lectures face to face, we will be, we will take it more seriously.

Gizem: So what do you mean by taking classes more seriously, can you please explain more?

Ahmet: Yes, yes. It's being online causes some problems in our motivation and focus because we already have studied. I think twenty years I have studied face to face when it comes like suddenly like that. I didn't use to do that.

Gizem: Yeah.

Ahmet: Like just by online.

Ahmet, Focus Group Interview 5

Ahmet seems to find the online classes boring and notes that he was experiencing online education following the pandemic for the first time unlike “previous students”. His remark, “It is something new for us,” underscores the perceived challenge he faces with the unfamiliarity of online education. He appears to see little benefit in staying home and taking lectures online, claiming that this situation causes a lack of seriousness. In his comparison of online education with face-to-face education, he believes “we will take it more seriously” in a traditional classroom setting. Pointing that he spent his entire twenty-year student life in traditional classroom-based instruction, he expresses the challenges he faces in adapting to online education. Belle describes in another focus group discussion:

Extract 67

In online education, we feel like we are not communicating, you know, so we feel like it's virtual reality, not reality. So we are like, getting lazy, and procrastinating so much (laughs). So, in online education, like you feel you are playing a game, not studying. So it's hard to be committed to it. So I've struggled with that. But at the end, I know, I know that it's reality, we need to have a grades and graduate or... This semester, so I worked a little bit, but it's not enough. We need reality.

Belle, Focus Group Interview 1

In the context of online education, data suggest that participants often felt a significant disconnection from the learning environment and expressed this at various times. Belle reports that she perceives online education as a "virtual reality" rather than a real educational experience highlighting a perceived critical challenge in the online learning paradigm. For Belle, FtoF education appeared to be equal to authenticity in meaning. It can be interpreted from her statements that FtoF education was what came as natural, familiar, and authentic, while online education was perceived to be like a game, virtual, unreal, making her feel like she was not doing something real, something that was worth it. It is revealed from her statements that authenticity made face-to-face education more desirable and more natural for her. Lack of effective communication and a sense of presence seem to have caused decreased student engagement in online education as they expressed overall. As it is also indicated by Prodgers et al. (2022), there was a widespread perception that achieving a sense of community in an exclusively online learning environment was challenging, and for some, it was not feasible at all. Central to this sense of isolation was observed to be the inability to physically see, meet, and share pace with fellow students, which potentially inhibited the ability to get to know and connect with others effectively. Thus, in line with the literature, feelings of isolation and detachment from the learning process were implied to be the primary concerns.

Belle's comparison of online education to playing a game also underscores the difficulty in maintaining discipline and motivation in a less structured learning environment which also seems to cause difficulty in commitment as she reports. She expresses: "It's hard to be committed to it. So I've struggled with that." It is inferred from the data that Belle struggled to balance the flexibility of online education with the need for self-discipline and time management, which she thought she certainly needed for academic achievement. The absence of a structured learning environment with "real" experiences seems to have diminished her sense of responsibility and engagement in online learning. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the perceived surreal atmosphere it brought, it can be suggested that the sense of reality was disrupted in the process of meaning-making. It appeared that there were a lot of things to adapt which challenged and complicated the educational processes.

Although participants were not perceived to be happy with the online process, they agreed that it was a necessity during a global pandemic:

Extract 68

But for the period after the pandemic, returning to face-to-face education is more reasonable in my opinion. Because, as I said, especially practical lessons, you can't fully understand them. For instance, in the physics lab, when we need to conduct experiments, we watch videos on YouTube instead. In that sense, it's very bad, nothing is understood. In this sense, it's bad. So, returning after the earthquake [she indicates the pandemic], I mean, I said earthquake (laughs), I mean after COVID, is very reasonable. It's the most reasonable.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Yasemin seems to wish to return to face-to-face education after the pandemic particularly for courses requiring practical application. Her statement “For instance, in the physics lab, when we need to conduct experiments, we watch videos on YouTube instead” emphasizes the perceived challenges she faced during online education, particularly in practical courses like physics labs, where hands-on experiments are replaced by watching videos on YouTube. Her complaint, “In that sense, it's very bad, nothing is understood,” also suggests that she had perceived challenges understanding and engaging with the course material in an online format, particularly for subjects like physics, which she thought required physical participation and experimentation. It is revealed that the lack of hands-on experience decreased the quality of learning, according to her.

Finally, her metaphor “earthquake” for COVID-19 can also indicate the catastrophe of the pandemic. Yasemin's slip of the tongue reveals that she perceived the pandemic as akin to a natural disaster. Infelicitously, Türkiye had a very strong earthquake after two years this interview took place. On February 6, 2023, two massive earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.5 struck nine hours apart on distinct fault lines in southern Türkiye and northern Syria and caused extensive destruction across 11 provinces—Adana, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Malatya, Osmaniye, and Şanlıurfa. These regions, home to approximately 14.01 million people (16.5 percent of Türkiye's population), experienced significant devastation and this resulted in the tragic loss of over 55,000 lives in Türkiye and Syria combined (The World Bank, 2023). None of the participants were in the affected areas, and they were all safe. Consequently, due to

the nationwide decision to shift back to online education following the earthquakes (YÖK, 2023), the participants in this study were required to transition to online education again after the COVID-19 normalization period for the Spring term of 2022-2023 academic year. Shifting the focus back to online education and its perceived quality by the participants, Nur comments:

Extract 69

I am the same, but education has changed. But I am the same; I studied there, and I study here. I made an effort there; I make an effort here as well; but maybe I can't understand all the lessons online. Or I just get a score to pass. Or something like that. But if it were face-to-face, for instance, our friends would ask each other questions. We could understand the lesson, or the teacher did something, for example, held a competition or anything else, and we could understand the lesson then. But online, the teacher only teaches the lesson. Nobody notices whether anyone has understood or not. We just log in, take the most difficult exams, do them, and log out.

Nur, Interview 3

In the extract, Nur reports that her effort remains the same following the shift from FtoF to online education: “I am the same, but education has changed. I studied there, and I study here. I made an effort there, and I make an effort here as well.” This can be interpreted as Nur tries to preserve her resilience and dedication for her education regardless of the perceived challenges of the circumstances. She also reveals challenges in understanding and engaging with online education and contrasts her online education experience with face-to-face learning, emphasizing the perceived benefits of peer interaction and teacher engagement highlighting the importance of collaborative learning and direct interaction in enhancing understanding and retention.

Nur also points out to another perceived limitation of online instruction and criticizes the lack of real-time feedback which she thinks hinders the learning process. Data suggest that the absence of immediate interaction may lead to failure in communication between instructors and students, affecting participants' overall learning experience. All in all, Nur's statement seems to highlight several critical issues in the transition to online education, including challenges in understanding, lack of engagement, and the perceived increase in the difficulty of assessments. Yasemin mentions another layer of online education in the English-medium program she attends upon completion of the Preparatory school:



Extract 70

Gizem: Do you attend classes regularly?

Yasemin: Teacher, it depends on the class, for instance, Turkish classes, History, English classes—I don't- I am not able to attend. I only attend the main classes. Calculus, programming... I attend these but skip the others.

Gizem: So, do you watch the English classes later?

Yasemin: Yes, teacher, by fast-forwarding (laughs). Just to take a look at what they covered.

Gizem: What do you feel when you don't attend English classes?

Yasemin: I don't consider what they teach essential or necessary, but I am not sure about very different topics.

Gizem: What do they do, for instance? Why do the classes feel unnecessary to you?

Yasemin: Teacher, at first, the teacher really wastes a lot of time in class. For instance, the lesson can be covered in ten minutes. The teacher drags out unnecessarily. And there are exercises too. I can do those exercises myself. They are not that dependent on the teacher. That's why I see attending English classes as a waste of time.

Gizem: So, what do you think about these English classes when you compare them with the ones at Preparatory School?

Yasemin: In the preparatory school, classes were more useful, teacher. It's very pointless now.

Gizem: Okay. What is the attendance level of the classes in your opinion?

Yasemin: Well, only about three people attend.

Gizem: Hmm. I see, but you said, you try not to miss the main classes.

Yasemin: Yes.

Gizem: All the classes are recorded, right?

Yasemin: Uh-huh, yes.

Yasemin, Focus Group Interview 4

It can be inferred from the data that Yasemin selectively participates in online classes probably as a result of not finding all course material equally valuable. Like her, other participants also reported that they tended to choose among classes by not attending all courses. It was revealed in the findings that this selective attendance was in a way compensated with re-watching the recordings of each class, which let them access the material at their convenience. However, Yasemin also notes that “I watch the classes I don't attend from the recordings; but watching them later also feels boring” indicating that reviewing a course material asynchronously was perceived to be boring and was not a repeated action for every skipped class for her. Although online education, students have access to more resources and can reuse materials, such as re-watching videos (Önörül and Kurtulmus-Yilmaz, 2020; Martha et al., 2021), their selective participation suggests that participants prioritized courses they perceived as more critical and significant for their academic program. This seems to result in low attendance in some courses, while in other courses, it seems to result in technical problems because of high attendance in the online platform. It is also revealed in the data that, Yasemin perceives the extended duration of her English

course as time-wasting and prefers to complete the exercises instructor shared independently by herself. This can point to a common issue in online education where the lack of direct interaction and engagement can result in students' perceiving the sessions as inefficient and not worth attending (Masalimova et. al. 2022; Prodgers et al., 2022; Singh & Meena, 2023). Finally, Belle indicates that one of the factors contributing to low attendance levels was the non-mandatory nature of course attendance:

Extract 71

I just like, I can tell you, tell you that I depend on myself and studying. Sometimes like, now, I just waste my time. And I don't study like, maybe if we are- you are, if you must go to the classes and hear the teacher while he or she is telling umm, he is umm, teaching. Maybe you will catch some information. But now like, you are not supposed to, or you are- You don't have to, or you, you don't have to attend the classes, so it depends on you.

Belle, Interview 3

It is revealed from Belle's statements that there was a perceived increase in her responsibility to manage her learning in the online environment. It is perceived that the absence of mandatory attendance challenged her motivation to join classes. Her statement can be interpreted as learner autonomy seems to be crucial in online education, and it may become a significant hurdle for students who may not be accustomed to self-directed learning.

In addition to the transitional challenges, while trying to adapt to online education, findings also indicate that participants had difficulties such as ineffective communication with instructors, limited interaction with peers, boredom, low motivation, procrastination, absenteeism, perceived low quality of education, issues with exams like limited duration, and technical challenges. These perceived problems related to online education seemed to challenge them throughout the beginning of online education, when they were in the second academic term of Preparatory school, till the end when they reached the second year of their program.

**Technical Challenges.** Participants reported that they had technical challenges with the online systems used. They revealed that they experienced internet connection issues, lacked necessary equipment like laptops or headphones, and sometimes had to

wait due to teachers losing their connection. Yasemin shares the problem with the system load: “In some classes, we are more than a hundred and twenty people, so the system cannot handle it. Some friends have to watch it [classes] later. There are still system issues even without turning on the camera” (Yasemin, Interview 2). It can be interpreted from Yasemin’s remarks that the large class size, sometimes reaching up to a hundred and twenty students, prevented students from using webcams due to system limitations. The data indicate that the online platform could not support the large class sizes effectively, causing some students to watch recorded sessions later. Technical issues seem to have hindered synchronous interaction and engagement, which Yasemin perceives as crucial for effective learning. Belle shares another challenge:

Extract 72

Gizem: How has your online education experience been?

Belle: I had technical issues, but it was my laptop's fault. The audio was... the settings of the audio were a little bit not adjusted. So, my voice wasn't clear, and I didn't know how to do it. So the teacher struggled with me to understand what I thought I was saying, so there were technical problems.

Gizem: Himm, did you have your own computer and necessary equipment?

Belle: Yes.

Gizem: So, how did you handle with that problem? What did you do to solve it?

Belle: At first, I bought headphones, and it didn't work. And then I tried to adjust it from the settings and fixed but after a long time. Like I wasted, like, two weeks or three weeks (laughs). I don't remember. I didn't know, it's a setting thing. I thought. I thought it was a mechanic problem.

Belle, Interview 3

Belle’s online education experience indicates that seemingly minor technical issues, such as audio settings, can significantly impact the learning experience, causing a few weeks to be lost. It can be interpreted from her experience that the process of troubleshooting and resolving technical issues was perceived to be time-consuming and frustrating for her, disrupting the continuity of her education. It is revealed from this extract that there appears to be a need for adequate technical support and guidance for especially refugee students who may not have the necessary equipment or knowledge related to the technical issues. They may not have a laptop to attend online classes, as in Yasemin’s case who cooperated with her elder brother to use his computer: “The internet connection is a bit weak sometimes, but I didn't experience too many technical problems. I mean, sometimes the connection drops because the

internet is weak, that's all. And I don't have my own laptop, I use my brother's" (Yasemin, Interview 3), or they may have limited internet quota, as in Ali's case: "I have a lot of trouble, and we called the company [for the internet]. They came and fixed it, but nothing changed, so far, it's very bad. It causes problems during my classes, and it affects my motivation" (Ali, Interview 3).

Findings indicate that inconsistent internet connectivity, as frequently reported by the participants, seemed to cause an unstable learning environment for the participants. Yasemin's reliance on shared resources, and Ali's persistent internet issues were the perceived challenges on the way to have an effective online learning experience for these two participants. Data reveal that Ali resorted to using his mobile phone's 4G connection, and the high cost of mobile data usage appeared to affect his engagement and motivation. Besides, he perceived it difficult to follow his courses in medical school from his mobile phone. Belle similarly reports like other participants and notes that: "The internet went off, for the teacher or for me, you can't hear sometimes, sometimes things happen, happen in online, but in face to face, you are like, you can hear, you can listen, you can talk, and there are no technical problems in face-to-face" (Belle, Interview 2). Her statements indicate that she perceived face-to-face education as less problematic where she believes there are no technical problems at least.

**Boredom and Lack of Motivation.** Boredom was another challenge as a result of extended stay-homes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported that they felt extreme boredom, which resulted in decreased levels of motivation, causing further problems in focusing on their studies. Belle expressed her feelings as "In online education, you feel bored like you can't motivate yourself. So that's what's happened" (Belle, Interview 2) while Nur felt in the same way "Since it's online, I can't study. Every day I spend time at home. Neither my family nor... There is no one, only I have my friends here. But, I mean, I can't study because I'm bored" (Nur, Focus Group Interview 1). She highlights the perceived difficulty of keeping focus and motivation at home, indicating that the lack of a structured environment in online education can lead to procrastination and reduced study time. Moreover, her

emphasis on increased isolation from family and loved ones seems to contribute to the stress of staying home. Ahmet notes:

Extract 73

It was like, at first I was attend, mm I was attending all my lectures on you know, it was the hard thing that it was- you always at home, and you feel something boring, because you're always at home and you will open your device and take, take the lectures, then you will again, start studying something. And if it was like face to face, maybe will, you will spend some free time for example, with a friend, sometimes you will need the help from them. Sometimes they will discuss things with them. So, I think it's not easy to stay at home and make all your work.

Ahmet, Interview 3

As Ahmet illustrates, after participants adapted to online education somehow, monotony seems to have taken over, and it is perceived from the data that it became increasingly challenging to keep their focus on their studies. In this extract, it is implied that face-to-face education compels Ahmet to study more, as he perceives it to involve direct interaction with teachers and peers, which he seems to find more stimulating and engaging. Besides he states that “you will need the help from them [peers]” and being at home in isolation for online education meant the lack of this kind of support for him. Just watching the lectures without speaking, as no other students did, is perceived to be a constrain, and the lack of engagement in online classes led to decreased motivation and increased feelings of boredom, as he reported. Participants frequently shared their feelings of boredom throughout the research, and even wrote this in their diaries too as Nur did: “Thanks God I am studying. I am happy” (Nur’s dairy, April 2021). Studying for their courses seemed to be an accomplishment for the participants, as maintaining concentration was perceived to be challenging in most cases. Findings reveal that they were concerned about failing their classes, as none of them wanted to lose any more years by repeating a class, a point indicated by all the participants. It can be interpreted that concern for more loss of time was a prevalent theme among all the participants because of the interrupted education years gone due to the war. The perceived emotional burden Yasemin felt was reflected in her words:

Extract 74

Gizem: How does this make you feel, all the things I mean, what do you think about it?  
Yasemin: Teacher, it's very sad. Really, the situation, it's very serious. Some people don't take it seriously [referring to COVID-19]; but some people are really affected. For example,

my grandfather is continuing his treatment at home because there are no available beds in the hospital; but he should be in the hospital, for instance. Some people don't care about masks and all. That's why the situation is going on like this. Also, teacher, meanwhile people are getting bored. I mean, it's been about one and a half years.

Gizem: Yes.

Yasemin: I mean, a person can't spend one and a half years at home. After a while, one wants to go out, one gets fed up with staying at home. That's why sometimes you can't say anything. I mean, really, people can't stay at home anymore. That's also the case. I don't know.

Yasemin, Focus Group Interview 3

Yasemin is perceived to be pessimistic about her educational future while she was also worried for her grandfather. The impacts of long-term isolation and the desire to return normalcy can be felt in her statements. After years of war and settling in a country, Yasemin's desire for ordinariness can be interpreted to be at such a level that COVID-19 pandemic and the various changes following it were perceived to be a huge disruption to this long-awaited sense of normalcy for her. Findings indicate that various challenges of online education, including boredom, low motivation, technical difficulties, and the emotional impact of prolonged isolation intersected and affected the overall educational experience, the life in the host country, and more importantly the overall well-being of the refugee participants.

**Lack of Communication.** As it was explained before, the lack of effective communication between instructors and students, as well as classmates, was perceived to be challenging for participants. As for refugee participants, lack of communication can be interpreted to be a wider issue which encompassed the whole host country society they were trying to adjust and adapt to. The data indicate that this isolation hindered the process of adjustment and adaptation to some extent especially for more recently arrived refugees such as Ali and Belle. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the ensuing transition to online education, can be interpreted as significantly disrupting the usual social dynamics. This disruption that resulted in prolonged isolation within homes possibly diminished opportunities for interaction and integration between refugees and the host country population. Discourses that brought refugees and host country citizens together were abruptly cut off, leading to a halt in communication and interaction between them. Although this togetherness can also be perceived to be causing some certain levels of tension between the two parts, it was also required for integration (Üstübcü & Elçi, 2022). It can be

interpreted that the pandemic halted this communication and the perceived support systems of refugee participants in the host community which seems to have left them in more loneliness and isolation.

Belle explains the perceived isolation in the educational context related to the lack of effective communication by stating that: “When you are in the same class, maybe you can ask them for the question, or the materials you need to study. But in online education, like you feel you don't know them, you can't ask them more” (Focus Group Interview 1). Yasemin also expresses that “I could not make any friends in online education” in the same focus group interview. For Ahmet, university life was perceived to be a missed opportunity because of the online education period:

Extract 75

This is when, when you are a student you should-- This is a special life it will not, it will not repeat you know. It will not after this four years, this, this four years [university years] will be so great. You will, you will communicate with people. You will, you will have friends, you will. It's something special, you know. So it should be face to face, it's better face to face. Because after graduating, after graduation, you will go just working and trying to make yourself, so these four years it will be so great for students or for the person generally.

Ahmet, Interview 2

In this extract, Ahmet can be perceived to be seeking deeper connections and he does not seem to want to spend his university years by staying home and engaging in online education. Online education in COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as a unique experience for the participants, as it completely hindered real communication in their educational lives for the first time. Yet, in normal times, it can be suggested that it would be quite possible for students and instructors to come together and spend time, interact, share and learn from each other by decreasing these challenges participants felt in the pandemic period. Finally, as for lack of communication, participants persistently reported that they struggled with the perceived ineffectiveness of their communication with their instructors:

Extract 76

Actually, there is no relationship [with instructors] (laughs). They are just mm, they just, they give it, they don't see you. They just give the lecture. Then, when the professor will finish the lecture will ask the student if there is any questions. So just like that, there is no real relationship between the student and their professor. For example, I still don't know. I just know that mm, my doctors and my professors just on there, just how I can say, I just see

them, my-- they don't see me, they know and they just know me in my name with my name you know. We still don't know each other.

Ahmet, Interview 3

#### Extract 77

Sometimes, I watch the recordings later on, but not all the time, because they upload pdf the topics we are taking. And I prefer not listening to. Because the lecture, it's not 100% of the topics. It might be like, for example, the calculus, the mathematics teacher was like struggling with people, like just saying, "Just talk to me, answer the question, no, it's not like this!" So, he was like, he was like all the lecture is about kike.. Talking with the student during all the lecture... I don't know. But there's no relationship, because we didn't have the time to introduce ourselves to each other.

Belle, Interview 3

The extracts from Ahmet and Belle illustrate a perceived challenge in online education which can be interpreted as the lack of meaningful relationships and connections between students and instructors. Belle's and Ahmet's remarks imply that this disconnection impedes effective learning and engagement, as they report that they do not feel seen or valued beyond their names. The perceived absence of personal interaction and instructors' perceived struggle to engage students during lectures can be interpreted to contribute to a less satisfying educational experience which may necessitate a more engaging learning environment for quality instruction in online education. Now, the focus will be shifted to the English Medium Instruction experiences of participants, some part of which were in online education.

#### **4.8. Syrian Refugee Students' (Online) English Medium Instruction University Experiences**

In today's highly globalized world, recognizing the significance of English for internationalization, numerous higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have adopted English medium instruction (EMI) programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (e.g., Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Doiz et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018). Motivated by the internationalization of higher education (HE), universities worldwide view EMI as a strategy to enhance their position in global university rankings and attract international students, along with the associated financial benefits (De Costa, Green-Eneix, and Li, 2022; Macaro, 2018). Macaro defines EMI as 'the use of English language to teach academic subjects (other than



English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English' (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). Considered an umbrella term (Xu et al., 2021), EMI has proliferated in numerous non-English-speaking countries with objectives such as attracting international students, enhancing English language proficiency, advancing disciplinary knowledge, improving local students' employability, boosting universities' prestige, and increasing global competitiveness (Dearden, 2014; Hu & Lei, 2014)

Although EMI policies in HE are considered standard in the globalization era, their implementation is complex and presents numerous language-related challenges that require further examination (Macaro, 2018). Several studies have indicated that EMI has been ineffective due to students' and teachers' insufficient English proficiency, limited disciplinary knowledge, and inadequate pedagogical training (Kuchah, 2018; Werther et al., 2014). Similarly, students have been found to participate less in classroom interactions (Webb, 2002) and face difficulties in comprehending their lessons (Hellekjær, 2010) or articulating their opinions in English (Airey, 2011). Additionally, EMI has resulted in a loss of authentic cultural experiences for international students in local contexts (O'Dowd, 2018). Moreover, it is important to note that most university students in EMI programs in non-Anglophone countries such as Türkiye are foreign language speakers of English. For these students, English serves not only as a tool for their academic pursuits but also as a target language to be mastered (Baker & Hüttner, 2017).

Syrian nationals who arrived in Türkiye due to the Syrian war predominantly enroll in EMI or Turkish-medium instruction (TMI) programs, as the availability of Arabic-medium programs is limited (Gülle & Kurt, 2023). The data indicate that participants of this study had distinct motivations and reasons to study at an EMI university in Türkiye. Their initial EMI experiences can be interpreted to have been unique in that they started their studies in their programs following the Preparatory school during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in online education. In the last part of this chapter, the reasons and motivations of Syrian refugee student participants for choosing an EMI program, their conceptualization of it, the language skills they

frequently need to use in their programs, L1 use, instructors and language use, and the perceived challenges and advantages they encounter will be explained.

**Reasons and Motivation to choose an EMI program.** Findings indicate that participants had various reasons and aspirations for choosing to study in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) program. These included lack of proficiency in Turkish, which seemed to deter them from choosing TMI programs; the desire to learn English while studying; the aim to be on equal terms with Turkish students, for whom English is also a foreign language; the perceived advantages of English, such as its status as a universal language, the language of the world and science; better job prospects that are thought to be brought with English proficiency; the belief that their programs should be studied in English; the abundance of resources and websites available in English; the opportunity to practice English in EMI programs; the idea that learning English would complement learning Turkish as the host country language; and already having proficiency in English. Belle tells: “I don't know the language of it [TMI]. I'm not like 100% good in Turkish. Like, for example, if I didn't be accepted in English [EMI], I would have been struggling now, like really struggling in Turkish” (Belle, Interview 2).

As discussed in previous chapters, English can be perceived to play a significant role in Belle's life after she sought refuge in Türkiye where her native Arabic is not widely spoken. It can be interpreted from the data that English became a lifesaver for her, as she perceived herself as not proficient in Turkish and used English to communicate with the host country people. Based on these experiences, Belle reports that she chose an EMI program to study in Türkiye, acknowledging that without this choice, "she would have been struggling now." Findings also revealed that participants perceived proficiency in English as a significant cultural and linguistic capital. They reported that English is a lingua franca, a universal language that enhances their social mobility and opportunities for communication across different contexts. The data also indicated that participants believed most academic resources related to their programs are in English, which reinforces its perceived value as a crucial form of cultural capital in their educational pursuits. Since English is not an official language in Türkiye, participants seemed to consider their future plans while

investing in it. It can be interpreted from the data that the perceived value of English extended beyond their immediate educational interests, holding substantial importance for their future lives as well.

Belle notes “I feel it's a worldwide language. Everyone is using it... And it's important in every field, like you can meet some people from China, and you can understand them, can meet people like from Türkiye, you can understand them” (Belle, Interview 2). Highlighting its role as a lingua franca, Belle also indicates that “it's a universal language. And now it's the language of science” (Belle, Interview 3). Nur also reports that it is the most widely spoken language and states that she wants to learn it: “Umm, to be able to go to any country, I mean it's the most famous, the most spoken language, that's why I like it... I mean I want to learn, I want to learn more” (Nur, Interview 2). In a similar vein with Belle and Nur, Ali also seems to value English as the most spoken foreign language globally “The greatest language. When you go to any country, they use English. I mean, when I go to another country, I did something, there is English, and medicine is better in English because it is the most comprehensive” (Ali, Interview 2). He perceives English as significant for his medical studies as a medical student. Yasemin adds: “It is the most widely spoken language in the world... I mean, even if you just want to have fun, everything is in English, not just for work, everything is in English” (Yasemin, Interview 2).

Findings revealed that another reason for participants to choose EMI was the belief that it provides cultural capital for their academic lives. Proficiency in English was perceived as highly valuable for academic pursuits, as participants reported that it enhances their ability to excel in their studies and achieve their future career goals.

Yasemin states:

Extract 78

Yasemin: Umm, I like learning it because it is a widely spoken language in the world. I mean, you can communicate with other people a bit more easily. Also, almost all websites on the internet are in English, so whatever you want to learn is in English. Especially in my field, for example, it's in English. If you search in Turkish, you can find very little information, and in Arabic, you can't find anything. That's why I chose English. Anyway, if I were to study in another program, I do not think I would choose English.

Gizem: So, wouldn't it be necessary to know English if you studied in another program?

Yasemin: For example, it would be necessary, but it wouldn't be like in programming. I mean, I think it's wrong to teach programming in any language other than English.

Yasemin, Interview 2

As it is illustrated in the extract, Yasemin indicates the dominance of English on the internet, where most websites are in English, and presents this as a reason for choosing EMI. She underscores the perceived significance of English in her field of study, stating that searching for information in Turkish yields limited results while searching in Arabic provides almost none. This can be interpreted as a perceived disparity in the availability of academic resources in different languages, emphasizing the necessity of English for accessing comprehensive information related to her program. It can be inferred from the findings that Yasemin, who is a very proficient Turkish language speaker, did not choose to study at an EMI program because she would not study at a TMI university, but rather she found English particularly essential for her program, which involves programming, as she reported. She seems to hold very strong views about the indispensability of English for programming and suggests that: “For example, it would be necessary, but it wouldn't be like in programming. I mean, I think it's wrong to teach programming in any language other than English.” This indicates her belief that programming should be taught in English due to the language's prevalence and relative importance in the industry. Nur, on the other hand, appeared to have different motivations at the beginning which were changed by a significant other: “Hüseyin changed my mind. He said, ‘English is better for you; maybe in a few years you might go and work in other places, don't do like me.’ He said, ‘don't study in a Turkish-medium program.’ He said, ‘It's okay to study one year in preparatory school; it's no big deal.’ So he convinced me” (Nur, Interview 3).

Nur initially had begun her studies in a TMI program at another university before taking the YÖS exam for the third time and gaining admission to an EMI program as it was explained in her detailed profile in Chapter Three. It is indicated from Nur's statement that she was convinced to study at an EMI university as she believed she would have more job opportunities in other countries when she studied in English. Belle had the same motivations as the other two participants: “English is very beneficial. And for example, when I studied mechanics this term, I was searching in English. And if I searched in Arabic, I don't know if I could find like a good, a good content” (Belle, Interview 2). These findings indicate that participants seem to assign a critical role to English in facilitating global communication, accessing vast

online resources, and succeeding in specific academic fields like programming, pharmacy and engineering. Participants' perspectives can be interpreted to highlight the broader implications of language learning for refugee students, who may need to navigate multiple languages to achieve their educational and professional goals. This underscores the perceived importance of English as a valuable form of cultural and linguistic capital, crucial for academic success and integration into the global community.

Being already proficient in English language was reported as another reason for choosing to study at an EMI university by the participants. When Ahmet was asked why he chose to study his program in English, he answered "because I studied SAT, I'm... I'm good in English" (Ahmet, Interview 1). In the previous sections of this chapter, Ahmet's preparation process for Turkish Higher Education was explained. His studies for English to take SAT to be admitted to a program seems to have fueled his interest in English more and can be interpreted to motivate him for an EMI university. He also appears to believe that English is a language that can be improved with enough effort "it's a kind of language [English] that you can adapt with it and you can understand it. If you work on yourself hard, you will get the result from it" (Ahmet, Interview 3).

Another reason participants chose an EMI university and program was revealed to be their perceived desire to learn and practice English more. It was indicated in the data that by attending an EMI program, they believed that they could both pursue their academic goals and improve their English skills. Since Turkish is the host country's language, participants generally reported that they would learn Turkish one way or another by already being immersed in the target language in a natural context. Ali illustrates this: "Now I live in Türkiye, I don't know it very well now, but I will definitely learn it. That's why now I am studying in an EMI university, I will learn both Turkish and English. I mean, studying in English, I will have learned two foreign languages" (Ali, Interview 3).

As shared previously, one of main motivation of the participants was found to be their belief that their academic programs necessitated English. They seemed to hold

strong beliefs about which programs were studied with which language and why. Nur explains: “There are more resources in English. Especially when studying medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy, there are more resources in English. One can improve herself better in English. I think that's a very good advantage for us” (Nur, Interview 3). Similarly, Yasemin also shares her idea:

Extract 79

Gizem: What do you think about studying in an EMI program, how is the process, how is the experience do you think?

Yasemin: Umm, maybe at first, students may have difficulties mostly; but for the rest of their education, it contributes a lot, I mean, it has a lot of contributions to overall education. Because if you want to do research, or gather information on the internet, the easiest way is to search in English. In my field, for example, programming languages are all based on English. For instance, we use words like "if, for, while" we use them in English. Knowing their meaning facilitates our studies a lot.

Gizem: What was the reason you chose your department in English in the first place?

Yasemin: If I had chosen another program to study, I would have chosen it in Turkish; but since it was programming, I preferred to study it in English. Because, as I said, all programming languages are in English.

Gizem: I see.

Yasemin: If you don't know English, you're nothing.

Gizem: Hmm. You chose an EMI because of your field. For example, what else could you have studied in Turkish?

Yasemin: If I had studied medicine, I would have definitely studied it in Turkish.

Gizem: Don't you think English is important in this program too?

Yasemin: Teacher, it's important in other fields too; but, for example, think of it like this, if I had studied medicine, it would be a six-year program. And it is already a difficult field, should I study it in a language I am familiar with, or in a language I will learn from scratch, it would have been too difficult. For example, I had already set English as a target to learn, I was already going to learn it but having the program in English would have added more difficulty to my studies.

Yasemin, Interview 3

Findings indicate that both Nur and Yasemin highlight the specific advantages and considerations for studying in an EMI program. Nur emphasizes the abundance of resources in English for fields like medicine and pharmacy, which she believes enhances her learning. Yasemin also discusses the perceived essential role of English in programming and the practical challenges of studying in English for other demanding fields such as medicine. In her statements, Yasemin indicates that it might be challenging to study at an English-medium program at first, but she reports that she believes, in the long run, studying in an EMI program would be beneficial. She strongly believes that “If you don't know English, you're nothing.”

In conclusion, as the data illustrate, the strategic decisions students make when choosing their medium of instruction are based on their academic and professional

goals and are influenced by various factors such as the difficulty of the department, language proficiency, and the long-term benefits of English. Participants believe that while EMI may pose additional challenges for some fields of study, they also seem to believe it offers substantial advantages for other fields such as engineering. It can be inferred that Yasemin's opportunity to choose either Turkish or English as the medium of instruction, as she is proficient in both languages, highlights the importance of language proficiency in providing educational options, a flexibility which was not available to participants who were not proficient in Turkish, and thus did not choose to study at a TMI university.

**Career Prospects.** Participants' future aspirations were also perceived to affect their choice of medium of instruction for their programs. They seemed to believe that studying in their program in English, and continuously learning and practicing the language in this way would enable them to excel in English, providing them with valuable linguistic capital and enhancing their career prospects in the market. Besides, it was indicated in the data that these aspirations were mostly connected with the option of going abroad, as the possibility of seeking refuge elsewhere someday was perceived to be an option considered by most of the participants. Ahmet reveals: "Maybe in the future, I will go for example, to country for, for working, so I will need it. I will need the English language" (Ahmet, Interview 3). It can be interpreted from Ahmet's statement that he perceives English necessary for his academic success, and his future career aspirations which seem to act as a key motivation for learning English. He reports that he will need English for work, possibly in a foreign country. Yasemin also holds strong views about the necessity of English for her future career: "If you find a job, if you don't know English, you won't be hired. English is now required everywhere. I don't believe I will have a life without English" (Yasemin, Interview 2).

All in all, findings indicate that participants seem to consider their career options upon graduation while making significant decisions about their educational lives. Job prospects are perceived to be crucial as it can be interpreted that they need economic stability to stand on their feet and feel secure in the host country. Moreover, under temporary protection status, it can be suggested that they have limited mobility,

autonomy and capital to determine their future lives. These micro-decisions related to their educational lives can be interpreted to empower participants and give them a sense of control in their lives.

**Achieving Equality with Local Students.** The data suggested that one of the motivations for participants to choose an English-medium program was to be on equal terms with Turkish host country students who would also study in a foreign language in an English-medium program. Among others, Nur reported that she believed studying in a foreign language placed Syrian refugee students who are Arabic speakers and host country students who are Turkish speakers on equal terms. She shared her ideas in both one-to-one interview and in focus group discussion: “It doesn't matter for us because we all speak in English. In the same, Turks umm, programs- I mean, we are all in the same situation because we all need to speak a foreign language” (Nur, Focus Group Interview 1), “I made the right choice by choosing English. It would be unfair if I studied in a Turkish-medium program. I would have to study harder than the Turkish students; but now we are all at the same level. We are all studying in a new language in our program. It is better for us” (Nur, Interview 3).

Nur seems to believe that, as a foreign student, choosing an EMI department would provide fair competition with host country students. She notes that she would have had to put in extra effort compared to Turkish students if she had chosen a Turkish medium program. It is indicated in the data that in an EMI program, everyone is perceived to be on the same level, as all students, whether local or foreign, are studying in a new language. It can be inferred based on participants' conception that EMI promotes equity by placing all students on an equal term in countries where English is a foreign language. It can be inferred from the data that refugee students may have different motivations from local students for choosing EMI. It is revealed that Nur did not want to spend extra time by studying a foreign language which her host country classmates would have as their native language. This can be perceived to be a strategic decision and control over educational choices. Findings suggest that participants actively sought pathways and made informed decisions about their educational futures.



**Language Skills in Use.** As it was explained in the previous section, participants expressed one of their motivations for choosing an English medium program in Turkish Higher Education was to learn and improve their English skills further for various reasons. Ahmet explains:

Extract 80

Gizem: What skills I mean among these four, you are called upon to use frequently and you feel you have mastered enough? I mean, now you are studying to be an engineer and among these four skills, which ones do you need the most?

Ahmet: Speaking of course.

Gizem: Does your teacher speak English with you in online classes?

Ahmet: Yeah, they speak English.

Gizem: So do you also need to speak?

Ahmet: No, no. In online, we don't speak at all.

Gizem: Ahmet, I was asking which skills you have to use frequently?

Ahmet: Yes, I told you, speaking.

Gizem: But you said, you don't speak in online classes.

Ahmet: I understand because online you know, because it's online, we don't speak because there, I don't know why but for example, any student have a question. They don't, they don't speak, they write, but they have a right for speaking you know, but all of them don't speak. Actually I think that the speaking is the most, the most thing that the student need because for example, when we will have our education by face to face we will for example the teacher may be the, it will ask for a question for us. So, we should be frequently with, with English and with speaking section.

Gizem: Yeah, what about listening, writing and reading?

Ahmet: Yeah, of course listen.. When you speak, actually I think you will be able to listen and you will be able to understand what I think that, maybe, maybe you know what? Maybe listening section is as I think now the most important because you should, you should understand everything that you just saying, maybe listening section sorry for, himm yeah.

Gizem: So do you ever have to read something? Do they send you something to read?

Ahmet: Yeah, of course we have everything, we have a lot of things, a lot of things to read. For example, they send out the documents for every material it's wrote, and we should read it and understand it. Actually, actually, as we should mm, we should gather all of them, all the skills, skills.

Gizem: Do you think you need to master all of them?

Ahmet: Yeah, yeah.

Ahmet, Interview 2

Ahmet shares which language skills he uses the most and makes a perceived distinction between online EMI and classroom-based EMI. Although he seems to believe that speaking is the most important skill for an EMI student, he also reports that he barely uses this skill in online classrooms. He thinks that the perceived lack of mutual interaction between instructors and students probably stem from the nature of online settings where students do not choose to speak but text their questions and answers in chat boxes of online systems. As the dialogue proceeds, it is revealed that Ahmet would need all language skills, particularly in face-to-face settings. As

discussed in the previous part, online EMI classrooms were perceived to lack effective communication, preventing participants from gaining the perceived benefits of EMI, such as learning and practicing English further. Yasemin does not feel her English proficiency is enough for her program courses:

Extract 81

Gizem: What do you think about your current level of English for your studies?

Yasemin: Umm, teacher, in every class I take, there are new words, once you learn them, it's enough. You already learn them, with each class, you learn along with the classes, it goes like that.

Gizem: You don't learn them before the class, you learn them during the class you say?

Yasemin: Yes, I learn them during the class. You don't know which words the teacher will use to learn them beforehand anyway. Besides, the teachers don't provide the course ppts beforehand. They don't accept that. They give them after the class. So, you learn in the class.

Gizem: So, what do you think about your English skills in general? Are the skills you acquired in the Preparatory School sufficient for your department?

Yasemin: Teacher, language never ends, in every aspect. I need to specialize in all skills; reading, writing, and speaking, so I don't find my English sufficient. I mean, I manage my courses in the program; but it's not enough to be a proficient language user.

Yasemin, Interview 2

As illustrated in the extract, following her education in Preparatory school, Yasemin is perceived to feel not fully prepared for her program studies. Like Ahmet, she acknowledges that she needs all language skills to varying degrees, and as “language never ends,” she reports that she needs to improve her language skills constantly. Figure 11 is a page from Yasemin’s study notes where she wrote the Arabic equivalents of some unknown English words and her notes:

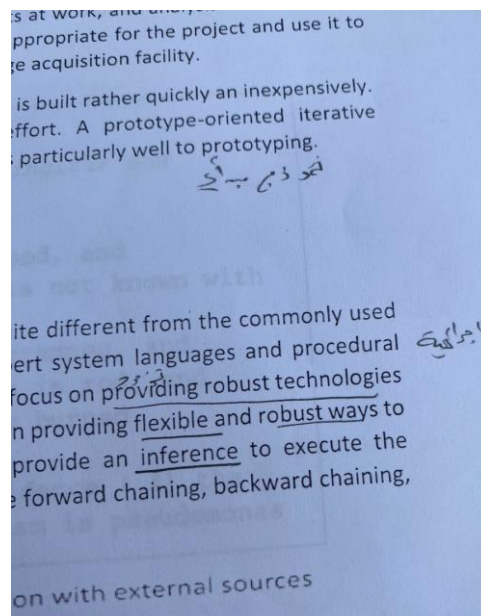


Figure 11. Yasemin’s Study Note from her Second Year

Multilingual practices, such as translingual practices (Canagarajah, 2013) and translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014), involve a range of strategies and practices of mixing and blending languages that are co-present in the EMI classroom. In Figure , such a language practice that Yasemin used is illustrated which can be interpreted to allow her to make use of her whole linguistic and semiotic repertoire for learning purposes in the EMI university context (Palfreyman & van der Walt, 2017). The photos of Yasemin's study notes were taken when the return to universities for face-to-face education was ensured. Throughout the years she studied in her English-medium program, Yasemin wrote Turkish, English and Arabic notes to facilitate her learning based on what she needed while studying. These multilingual notes and acts of translanguaging at times can be interpreted to enable course materials to be more comprehensible and also seemed to keep her ties with her heritage language Arabic, which she only used with her family, relatives, and other Arabic speakers in the host country. Nur shares:

Extract 82

Nur: But for example, especially since I am currently studying in English, there is something like this. Umm, I can listen to the lecture twice. That has helped me a lot because in the first year, in the first semester, my English wasn't that good. Now I can understand all the courses, all of them in English; but because I listen to them [online courses] twice, my English has improved a lot in this sense. But in another sense, I can't speak English very well because I can't use it. I just listen to it.

Gizem: Aren't there any situations where you need to speak and use English in your classes?

Nur: No, teacher, there aren't, not at all.

Gizem: Hmm, Belle is the situation the same for you? The- the others say that they don't have any chance to use English in classes.

Belle: Yes, like the teacher won't ask you anything or maybe he will ask you umm, like for my situation, just once I talked in English, so my English is so bad right now.

Nur: I used to speak English a little, a little. But now I can't speak it at all (laughs).

Nur and Belle, Focus Group Interview 1

In line with what Ahmet and Yasemin shared, Nur and Belle also revealed that they cannot use the medium of instruction in online setting. Findings related to the FtoF instruction phase of their studies upon return from the pandemic did not seem to change about speaking and engaging in the classroom interaction. Belle perceived her English to be so bad although from our ongoing chats, I can confirm that she was as proficient as she was in Preparatory school. The participants' tendency to compare their language skills in Preparatory school with that of in their programs can be interpreted as misleading as it can be suggested that they were not there to practice

English, but to study their specific courses in their academic programs. Findings suggest that the idea that English would be practiced as much as in a language preparation school did not prove to be as expected which led to some disappointments among the participants. However, it can be suggested from the ethnographic data that, in the last year of their programs, English was not perceived to be a concern as much as it did before when it is compared to the increasing concern for the mastery of their fields and worries for their future career in the host country.

**Challenges.** Apart from the challenges that have been explained so far such as the perceived decline in their English language skills and the difficulty in understanding the course material at times; participants appeared to have unique challenges when compared to host country students in terms of the use of L1 (Turkish) in the instructional settings. Findings indicated that they seemed to cope with English related challenges when online by re-watching the course recordings until they comprehended the course content; and once the instruction was classroom-based, they reported that they asked their instructors and classmates for further explanation. Yet, there were still challenges as Yasemin expressed several times in her diary:

Another week has ended, the classes are getting more intense, and more assignments have started to be given. Last week, they started uploading videos for the orientation program; it is a very different class teaching us the topic of “learning how to learn.” Although the content of the course is nice, the name of it is very funny. The lessons are taught in Turkish and include some philosophical topics; however, the class notes they upload are in English, which is weird. This class has made me say I am glad that I know Turkish.

Yasemin’s Diary, March 2021

I have just finished a new exam (transition to university life and life skills), I could not quite understand the importance of the course. I do not care about it, but the class is being taught in Turkish, and the exam is being done in English, which is very strange and ridiculous. Some terms can't be translated, you need to listen to the lecture in those terms, otherwise, there is confusion. You think you understand the lecture and can translate it, but because we don't know those specific terms, we form incorrect sentences. Anyway, the exam was okay.

Yasemin’s Diary, May 2021

Yasemin’s diary entries reveal the perceived complexities and challenges participants may face in navigating a multilingual educational environment in Turkish Higher Education. While Yasemin’s course was being taught in Turkish, the questions in the

exam were in English which seemed to confuse her. This bilingual approach, using Turkish while instructing and expecting students to answer in English can be interpreted to underscore the necessity of proficiency in Turkish for international students including refugees for successful comprehension and participation in their academic context in an EMI setting for which proficiency in Turkish is not required.

Yasemin's statement "This class has made me say I am glad that I know Turkish" can be perceived to illustrate the unequal language practices which can put international students who do not know the host country language into a difficult situation. Moreover, Yasemin also shares the perceived difficulty of translating specific terms between languages which may not be correct all the time. Since the inconsistency between the language of instruction and the language of assessment can be suggested to lead to confusion and lower academic performance among students in EMI programs, ensuring that both teaching and assessments are conducted in the same language could mitigate some of these challenges. It can be inferred from the data that consistent language policies are needed in instructional settings regarding the choice of the medium of instruction in EMI settings. Lastly, participants reported feelings of othering related to the use of L1 in EMI settings. As reported by Nur several times, this appeared to be a prevalent feeling among participants especially in online EMI settings where they reported that they could not understand what was spoken or written in L1, Turkish in this case: "Some of my friends always say, 'Does anyone know Turkish? Can someone write it in English, what kind of news [online news] is this?' It is very difficult for them, I think" (Nur, Interview 3)

Extract 83

Nur: Some of my friends, some of my friends are Arab, but they have just come to Türkiye. They don't know Turkish at all. They said, they told the representative of the class, they asked to write the announcements [class-related announcements] in English; but, umm, they said, we look for news in Turkish, I will send the announcements in Turkish to the group [referring to the class WhatsApp group], I can't do anything else. We use Turkish.

Gizem: Hmm.

Nur: Or the teacher says something, or the teacher is not coming, or something like that. I mean, all the things that students need to know are written in Turkish. They don't write in English at all.

Gizem: Hmm. What do you think about this, Yasemin?

Yasemin: Teacher, since I know Turkish very well, nothing is a problem for me; but, in our group, they try to be understanding, umm, they try to be, umm, considerate. So sometimes they try to translate them into English. Even if it's a joke, sometimes they say, can you translate, and they do. There's never a problem. But generally, they speak in Turkish.

Nur and Yasemin, Focus Group Interview 1

It is indicated in the data that Nur believes being able to understand Turkish allowed her to follow news and announcements on their classroom's WhatsApp group quickly, unlike her friends who often looked for help translating them into English or their native Arabic. Nur also mentioned in the focus group discussion that some newly arrived Arab students requested from the class representative to text announcements in English as they could not understand the Turkish announcements. However, as Nur reported, the representative explained that they primarily use Turkish for communication, which seemed to pose difficulties for non-Turkish speaker Syrian refugee students and other international students. As it can be inferred from Yasemin's case, proficiency in Turkish can be interpreted to prevent her to experience such issues. She indicated that their class group tried to be considerate, occasionally translating jokes or other content into English to accommodate those who didn't understand Turkish. However, it is inferred from the data that Turkish remained the dominant language for communication within the group.

Findings suggest that the use of English as the medium of instruction was not perceived to be consistent in the context of this EMI university by the participants. This finding can be interpreted as primarily because most students in the host country already understand the first language, Turkish, once it is used. However, for other international students, it appears that more inclusive language policies should be employed in order not to leave anyone out, particularly refugee students who seem to be trying to navigate various other challenges in their lives, to which the focus will be shifted now.

#### **4.9. Building Resilience: Challenges and Coping Strategies of Syrian Refugee Students**

In the final section of this chapter, a detailed explanation of the perceived challenges participants faced as Syrian refugee students in the host country, and the coping strategies they developed in response to these perceived challenges will be explained in detail.

**Othering and Discrimination.** The conflict in Syria, which began in 2011, has been observed to cause significant emotional challenges and leave a profound and lasting

impact on the participants. These include the trauma of war and forced migration, particularly for Ali and Belle who were reported to take perilous solo journeys across the border to Türkiye (see the first section of this chapter for a detailed explanation), which seemed to result in a significant source of stress and anxiety for them. These initial emotional challenges can be perceived to be compounded by the difficulty of the adjustment and adaptation process in which participants reported that they faced othering and discrimination both on a societal and structural level. Yasemin narrates:

Extract 84

Yasemin: When I'm in public, I don't really like using Arabic in those places. I don't want the people around me to recognize that I'm Arab. It gives me that kind of feeling. But at home, for example, it doesn't matter to me, I use Arabic. But in some places, I don't want them to recognize that I'm a foreigner.

Gizem: Why don't you want them to recognize that you are a foreigner Yasemin?

Yasemin: It's not just about being foreigner or being different, sometimes being different is nice, it's also good to be a different person too. But when you're different, people's behavior isn't always good.

Gizem: Why do you think people change their behavior towards someone who is different?

Yasemin: Maybe, for example, there was a bad experience with a Syrian person. Maybe they had a fight or something happened, and that person was Syrian. That's why, they hate all Syrians because of that. So, in such cases, you don't want to be seen as Syrian. The mistake of that one person affects me too, even though it's not my fault. So, I don't want to seem different, because when they know I'm am different, I am Syrian, they remember the Syrians who did bad things, and it affects me too in that sense.

Gizem: Hmm.

Yasemin: Or because I am Syrian, I am happy. I can't say I don't like it, but some people don't look at us favorably because of some behaviors of other Syrians.

Gizem: What kind of behaviors are these, Yasemin?

Yasemin: Teacher, for example, once I was on the street with my mother, we were standing on the sidewalk. A man came and shouted, "Why are you standing here?" and passed by. He was angry because we were standing on the sidewalk, and as if people couldn't walk. Although there was plenty of space to walk easily, sometimes it happens like that. Even when you're doing nothing, just standing there, someone does something to you. It's not nice at all.

Yasemin, Interview 2

In this narrative, Yasemin reports a sense of discomfort and self-consciousness regarding her use of Arabic in public spaces, reflecting a concern about being identified as a Syrian. This hesitance appears to stem from a broader context in which being perceived as different, particularly as a Syrian, can lead to perceived negative or prejudiced reactions from others. Yasemin's experience suggests that these reactions can be shaped by prior encounters or stereotypes held by individuals in the host country. It can also be interpreted from Yasemin's narrative that perceived negative experiences attributed to other Syrians can be perceived to result in affecting Yasemin's sense of safety and acceptance in public spaces. Despite this,

Yasemin reports that she acknowledges her Syrian identity as a source of pride, even though she thinks that it sometimes results in unfavorable treatment by others in the host country. It is revealed in the data that she uses various strategies to manage social interactions and reduce the likelihood of negative encounters linked to her refugee status. Her hesitance to speak Arabic in public areas, such as markets or busy locations, can be interpreted as a deliberate effort to avoid being recognized as Syrian, a status she perceives as unwelcome. She seems to adjust her language use to lower the risk of facing discrimination or social exclusion which can be interpreted as a reflection of the ongoing stigma and negative stereotypes associated with Syrian refugees, as she perceives it. Belle also tells:

Extract 85

Belle: I don't know, like, my classmates didn't know I'm from Syria. So maybe, or I didn't get in touch with so much people from because of this online education, like I didn't get enough... Umm.. What was it.. Enough umm.. Stories. I didn't get enough stories to decide how should I feel or what did it mean to me. Like.. Until now? I don't have a lot of story.

Gizem: Why do you think the reason is?

Belle: Because of online education and hiding my identity.

Gizem: Do you hide your identity by stating you're from Palestine? Or do you say nothing?

Belle: Yes, I just say if they, they ask where are you from, I'm from Palestine. But sometimes like, like the other day. I said it. I say "I am from Palestine, but I was born in Syria."

Gizem: What is- Umm.. How is the reaction when you say so?

Belle: It depends on the person, like for that girl, she didn't say anything. Like it's okay. But like, they love Palestinian more than [Syrians], I think.

Gizem: Do you want to tell anything related to this?

Belle: There are not specific stories, but for example, we have a neighbor, she knows us. And she knows we are from Iraq [Belle was hosted by Iraqi refugees from Syria then]. So, she always says that "You are better than Syrians". She always says that "We love you, because you're not Syrian." And she doesn't know I am from Syria.

Gizem: How do you feel when she says so?

Belle: Like, I feel I want to tell her like we are from Syria (laughs).

Gizem: Do you think of telling her one day?

Belle: Maybe.

Belle, Interview 3

In this narrative, Belle reflects on her experience of concealing her Syrian identity. Her decision to present herself as Palestinian instead of Syrian seems to highlight a strategic choice to navigate social interactions in a way that might minimize potential negative reactions as she possibly believed. Unlike other participants, Belle seems to have a range of identities to draw from, which can be interpreted as the diversity and richness that multicultural experiences can bring to her refugee life. Her choice can be interpreted to be influenced by her perception that Palestinians are viewed more favorably than Syrians in certain contexts. Belle's recounting of her neighbor's



comments further illustrates the social dynamics and stereotypes that can influence her refugee experience, where positive treatment is dependent on not being perceived as Syrian. Belle's internal conflict regarding whether she should reveal her identity reveals the complexities of her identity management in an environment where social acceptance seems to be tied to nationality.

Belle's background as a Palestinian refugee born in Syria can be interpreted to present a complex identity shaped by both her Palestinian heritage and her experiences in Syria. Despite Syria's policy of not granting citizenship to Palestinian refugees, Belle reported that she did not perceive herself as marginalized in Syrian society. However, she revealed that she sometimes concealed her Palestinian identity while in Syria too, indicating an early experience with identity management. This background may have equipped Belle with more experience in managing multiple identities compared to other participants. However, the ongoing need to manage and adapt her identity may have long-term psychological impacts, potentially contributing to feelings of vulnerability, especially in light of recent events such as the conflict in Gaza, which began on October 7th. Despite never having lived in Palestine, the conflict was perceived to have intensified her feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and despair, reflecting the deep emotional ties she feels to her ancestral homeland. While discussing about the conflict one day, she texted on smart phone application that:

Extract 86

I have a home [referring to Palestine], but I am homeless. The thing is, I keep feeling homeless. I believe my only dream is to have a home, forever home. A place I don't remind myself it is not mine and I will leave at some point! Maybe financial security will give it to me. So just a place wherever. When I was a child, I used to dream about a hometown. Now I can't.

Belle, Smart Phone Application Chat, October 2023

The data reveals that Belle experiences a profound sense of displacement and a persistent perceived feeling of homelessness, characterized by the absence of a place where she can feel a lasting sense of belonging and security as she explains. Her statements can be interpreted as the possible impact of prolonged displacement and the psychological toll of living in a transient state. Yet, she also reports that she

perceives financial security as a potential, yet uncertain, solution. Like Yasemin and Belle, Ali also tells:

Extract 87

Gizem: Which language do you speak in the public?

Ali: I try not to use Arabic, If I do, I speak quietly, because everyone looks at me, like "he is a foreigner," it's not a bad thing, but they will look, because I'm foreign.

Gizem: Hmm.

Ali: That's why I don't speak Arabic. I don't speak it loudly, so on the bus or while shopping, I either speak Turkish or speak [Arabic] quietly. My friend and I speak quietly, yes.

Gizem: What do you think would happen if you spoke loudly? Did something happen to you?

Ali: No, nothing happened, it's just for no one looking at us.

Gizem: In order for them not to look at you.

Ali: Yes.

Gizem: What would happen if they looked do you think?

Ali: They wouldn't think anything, just that I'm a foreigner, or sometimes some Turks say Syrians are bad people; but I think, it's not all Syrians.

Gizem: Hmm.

Ali: Hmm. That's why, I don't speak in Arabic loudly, umm, to stay away from suspicions.

Ali, Interview 2

In this extract, Ali discusses his conscious decision to avoid speaking Arabic loudly in public spaces, reflecting a perceived concern about how he might be perceived by others in the host community. His preference for speaking quietly in public settings suggests his awareness of being identified as a foreigner, and thus he seems to adopt the codes and behaviors of the host society (Morrice, 2013) by switching to Turkish. It can be inferred from the data that while Ali acknowledges that being recognized as a foreigner is not inherently negative, he seems to think that it may reinforce negative stereotypes associated with Syrians. His behavior can be interpreted as a proactive strategy to avoid potential judgment or negative assumptions, even though he did not report that he personally experienced direct consequences for speaking Arabic loudly. Yasemin follows a similar path:

Extract 88

Gizem: You said you don't prefer speaking Arabic in places with other people, Turks; are there any other places or times when you find it difficult to use Arabic?

Yasemin: Teacher, umm, in places like residence offices or places requiring government documents. Because their looks are not welcoming. For example, if I see the police, I don't speak Arabic. For instance, once I was speaking Arabic with my brother on the phone in a minibus. There were police around, gathering, and I immediately switched to Turkish. Because they look at you as if you are a criminal. So, I immediately switch to Turkish.

Yasemin, Interview 2

Similarly, Yasemin seems to have a heightened awareness of when and where it may be inappropriate to speak Arabic, particularly in settings involving authority figures or government-related activities. Her decision to avoid using Arabic in places such as residence offices or around police officers can be interpreted as a concern about being perceived negatively or even as a potential threat. Since language is often seen as an extension of identity and serves as a prominent marker of it (Norton, 2013), findings revealed that participants were cautious regarding their choice of language and the contexts in which it was used. The switch from Arabic to Turkish in these situations reveals a strategic adaptation to avoid unwanted attention or suspicion, indicating a broader societal pressure and stigma that can affect how Yasemin interacts in public spaces. Nur explains:

Extract 89

Nur: They look at us differently or I don't know, like that. Differently, like you are a foreigner, you don't understand anything. How did you get in here? [referring to getting into university], it happens like that. I mean, I don't want to be different from the Turks. Actually, if I could change my name, I don't know how I can change it.

Gizem: So, if you had the chance to take a Turkish name, would you take it?

Nur: Yes. A name, yes, I would take it.

Gizem: Why?

Nur: I mean, not to be different, and also not to encounter different behaviors from people because I'm a foreigner.

Gizem: Why do you think about being different?

Nur: It is difficult, I don't know, it seems like everything comes easily to us. Like we don't pay school fees and such. No, we are the same. If you are the same as Turks, you don't face issues. Like for example, you get money from the government; but we don't get it, so those things don't apply to us.

Nur, Interview 1

In this extract, Nur can be perceived to have a deep concern about being perceived as different due to her identity as a foreigner. She describes how this perceived difference may lead to assumptions or biases from host country people, particularly in relation to her presence in Turkish Higher Education, which she perceives to be questioned by some people in the host country leading to perceived feelings of not belonging. Nur's willingness to adopt a Turkish name seems to highlight what she would do to avoid being treated differently. This perceived desire can be interpreted to result from a broader perceived concern about being categorized as receiving special treatment, such as the misconception that refugees receive government financial support or other benefits that are not actually available to them.

All in all, throughout the research, the data indicated that there was a persistent focus on the desire for ordinariness among the participants. Refugee students frequently seemed to grapple with the question, “What can I do in order not to be different?” as they tried to adjust and integrate, feeling as if “everyone is aware of you” and “you are different”. The pursuit of invisibility was seen as a way to avoid being othered or stigmatized, even if it meant sacrificing something as fundamental as one’s original name as in the case of Nur.

**Financial Challenges.** Findings indicated that participants experienced financial challenges in the host country. While they reported that they previously enjoyed financial stability in their home countries, it can be inferred that this situation changed due to the war and the subsequent forced migration process to Türkiye. Yasemin shares: “We used to have our own house in Syria, we had lands, we had our own car, I mean we were living a very comfortable life. We came here and started life from scratch, like that” (Yasemin, Interview 4). Yasemin contrasts her current situation with her previous life in Syria, where she reports that she and her family seemed to have a comfortable lifestyle with their own house, lands, and car. It can be interpreted from her statements that the forced migration to Türkiye required Yasemin and her family to start over from scratch.

Extract 90

Gizem: Where do you see yourself in the future? What is Belle doing in the future?  
Belle: I wish I would be graduated from the university and have a job and working and doing something, like just normal life.  
Gizem: Is it in Türkiye or somewhere else?  
Belle: Sometimes I wish it would be in Türkiye, sometimes I wish it's somewhere else, but I don't know what I can do, yeah.  
Gizem: So, when do you wish to be here and when do you think that “No, I won't be here, and I will go somewhere else.”?  
Belle: Sometimes I feel life here treats me good. Like my life is going well here. But I don't umm, I am “blending in”?  
Gizem: Hı-hmm.  
Belle: Don't get into troubles here, like everything is going well. But sometimes I hear people saying like there is no future here in Türkiye and they say that the employment are.. Umm.. Turkish people are struggling, how the foreigners will not struggle. So, I get some doubt.

Belle, Interview 4

It can be inferred from the data that Belle's aspirations for normalcy and a stable future are central to her refugee experience. She seems to desire to graduate from university and to secure employment as an aspiration to re-establish a sense of ordinariness and stability. However, Belle's uncertainty about whether to stay in Türkiye or seek refuge elsewhere seems to highlight the ongoing perceived uncertainty she feels about her long-term settlement. This can be attributed to her perceived lack of future prospects in Türkiye. The economic struggles of Turkish citizens further exacerbate her concerns, as she probably thinks in a country where citizens have challenges, things could be worse for refugees.

**Emotional Challenges.** The emotional challenges reported by participants included feelings of hopelessness, homesickness, fear of failure, struggles with adjustment and integration, concerns about the future, a diminished sense of security, the emotional impact of crises such as war and the pandemic, loneliness, and the perceived difficulty of the process of building resilience. Yasemin tells her feelings of isolation which seemed to make her feel lonely sometimes:

Extract 91

Sometimes you feel it, you feel a difference, there is a barrier. I don't know how, but there is a barrier; but you can't overcome that barrier. For example, the people you are interested in and follow are completely different. Of course, Turks will follow Turkish people, let's say on social media. For example, something happens on social media, all the Turks know about it, they will all talk about it. You will feel lonely there because you don't follow those things. The things you consider important are completely different. You can't find a way, you can't overcome that barrier. If they don't reach out, it doesn't happen.

Yasemin, Interview 2

In this extract, Yasemin describes a perceived sense of social and cultural disconnection that seems to manifest itself as an invisible barrier between her and the host country population. This barrier appears to represent a fundamental difference in interests and experiences according to Yasemin, and in such cases she seems to feel excluded from conversations and social interactions because she does not share the same cultural points with her Turkish peers. Her sense of exclusion can be interpreted to lead to feelings of loneliness in Yasemin although she also reports that overcoming this barrier could be possible and may require active outreach and inclusion by the host country population. As it was indicated by Hauber-Özer (2021),

belonging in the Turkish context can be perceived to be complex for the participants who seemed to feel personal, cultural and religious connections to Türkiye, yet still perceived themselves as distinctly foreign and felt a barrier between. This can be interpreted to have led to a transnational identity as part of a global imagined community (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2016), shaped by their migration histories and life capitals they brought with themselves (Consoli, 2021). The power dynamics influence integration in the host country and integration depends on the willingness of both 'mainstream' and 'minority' cultures to coexist. However, as Baker and Shda (2023) also puts forward, this power is unevenly distributed as language proficiency and familiarity with cultural norms, particularly popular culture, grant the dominant host culture considerable influence over refugees.

Feelings of isolation were most pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic when participants were forced to stay at home due to lockdowns, halting interactions with the host society. Belle described her experience during this time as: “Sometimes I wish if I had more friends, I don't know where I could find them” (Belle, Interview 4). Belle’s statement underscores her increased sense of isolation and disconnection from social networks and interactions due to lockdowns. This can be particularly a negative experience for refugee students who are without their families, as their school friends often become their primary support network. Belle also talked about the perceived differences which caused “barriers” as Yasemin told:

Extract 92

I feel like we have obstacles because we are immigrants and especially Syrians... Like, we feel we don't have home like in Syria or in for Turkish people, they have their parents' homes, their relatives' homes. But now like, you feel like you are started from zero. And do you need to do- You need to build a home here for your children and grandchildren. So, you just feel like it's on you. You have to do something. It's not, I'm not saying it's not my country, but you feel it's not your country. Because you don't have like, a history here. You need history.

Belle, Interview 4

In this data extract, Belle reflects on the sense of displacement and the perceived challenges of starting a new life as an immigrant, particularly as a Syrian refugee. She seems to feel that she does not have the same foundational support as the host country population, such as family homes or established community ties, which she

seems to believe contributes to a sense of belonging. It can be interpreted from her statement that this lack of a "home" or history in the host country creates a sense of responsibility to build a new foundation for future generations, a task that appears to be both necessary and daunting for Belle. Belle does not reject the host country as not being her own, but she seems to believe that truly feeling at home in a country is only possible when one has historical roots there.

**Return.** As Belle conceptualized, participants appeared to miss the country in which they had a history. They shared their feelings of homesickness several times as Yasemin did in her diary: "Life is very hard, I want to go back home, I want to return to my homeland" (Yasemin's Diary, March 2021). Their homeland was not often brought up in our casual conversations, but it was observed that they particularly missed their homeland during difficult times in the host country. It was indicated in the data that their refugee identity meant to be a permanent stranger to a place:

Extract 93

Gizem: So, if the war ends one day, do you say, "I'll go back and build a life there again," or do you say, "It's hard to go now, we'll stay here"?

Yasemin: I mean, I will definitely go there; but I don't know if I will stay. As I said, I will feel like a foreigner there, in my own country; but I will still be a foreigner.

Gizem: How does that make you feel?

Yasemin: Umm, always being a foreigner somewhere, always being a stranger of somewhere feels a bit bad. But over time, you get used to it, it becomes routine life. Umm, I have a dream; but I don't think it will happen anytime soon. Because Syria is getting worse. The war is going on, it's not clear when it will end.

Gizem: Hmm.

Yasemin: I mean, I would like to go; but even now, in terms of safety, even if it is good, if I go, it won't be the Syria I knew. There are no acquaintances left there. They all went to different places. The people in the city where I lived are completely different people, from other places. It won't be the city I knew; it won't be the Homs I knew.

Gizem: You say I won't find the same place if I return.

Yasemin: Exactly, exactly.

Yasemin, Interview 4

Extract 94

Ali: Umm, it's a beautiful thing and the best things in my life; but they are gone, I mean they won't come back again.

Gizem: Are you saying this because your childhood has passed, or because returning to the country is difficult?

Ali: The village is gone and it will never- umm I won't return there, and I mean, it's just me and my family living here, I will never see my relatives again.

Gizem: Didn't your relatives stay there?

Ali: They stayed there, and no, they are gone, because my village is gone, they migrated to other places. To other villages.

Gizem: So, you are saying there is no return to that village?  
Ali: Yes.

Ali, Interview 1

As revealed by Yasemin's and Ali's statements, participants are not planning to return their home country soon as most of Syrians under temporary protection (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021). In these narratives, both Yasemin and Ali reveal the sense of loss and disconnection from their homeland, while considering the possibility of returning. Yasemin seems to have a complex emotional state, acknowledging that while she desires to return to Syria, she expects to feel like a foreigner in her own country. This perceived sense of being constantly displaced is exacerbated by the current state of their country, which can be interpreted to have altered the social and physical landscape of her home city, Homs. Yasemin's reflections can be perceived to highlight the psychological toll of prolonged displacement, where the notion of home becomes abstract and unattainable, even if physical return were possible.

Similarly, Ali indicates the changes in his homeland, particularly the loss of his village and the scattering of his relatives. The data implies that he believes that his displacement is permanent. For Ali, the destruction of his village can be perceived to symbolize the end of a significant chapter in his life, one that cannot be revisited or restored. These narratives underscore the enduring impact of displacement on refugees which makes return fraught with emotional and practical challenges. As a result, it is inferred from the narratives of the participants that the sense of belonging to a specific place is deeply intertwined with the people and the environment that define it through, influencing whether the idea of return is appealing or not.

**Building Resilience.** The narrations of the participants revealed that, in order to survive as refugees amidst crises such as war, forced migration or the COVID-19 pandemic as well as everyday hardships, participants needed to adapt to the challenging circumstances, bounce back from adversities, and grow in the face of various stressors. Building resilience was challenging but achievable, in essence, they navigated numerous challenges with ingenuity and creativity, striving to achieve their goals despite the obstacles (Lenette, 2016; Morrice, 2013).



In her diary, Nur wrote that “A person who does not believe in themselves does nothing. I always live by these words because everyone should give themselves hope” (Nur’s diary, February 2021) It can be inferred from her statements that Nur kept her positive attitude and believed that keeping her hope was crucial. Her diary was full of sentences such as “A person who does not believe in themselves does nothing” which seemed to have been written to give encouragement to herself in tough times such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Belle told:

Extract 95

Maybe I am not feeling good. But I'm living. And maybe tomorrow, I will feel good. So, I should do my best just in case of I live my dreams. I should be... It's like, like I imagined someday I will be fine. Everything gonna be fine and if I didn't do anything, like, if I didn't graduate, I would, like, regret it. Like, why didn't I do something five years ago, why I'm here now, why I'm wasting my life? So, I'm doing my best. I told you like, just in university, but like painting, I don't paint and like I need to paint but sometimes, just, like, you feel like, you don't have the courage to do the thing you love.

Belle, Interview 1

Belle reflects on her emotional state in this extract, expressing both determination and uncertainty. She seems to admit that while she might not always feel good in the present, there is a hope that she will feel better in the future. It can be interpreted that this anticipation motivates her to do her best for the present, to avoid future regret over missed opportunities. It is revealed from the data that Belle's focus on completing her education and pursuing her hobbies, such as painting, highlights a proactive approach to life, in the face of emotional challenges. Belle’s experience reveals that resilience may not be the absence of negative feelings, experiences, or thoughts, but acting in spite of them, however hard they may seem to be. Belle stated this as: “It's not a clear road. It's, it has obstacles on it. But it- like I feel, I'm on my road. Like umm.. They say the journey of a thousand miles is a step” (Belle, Interview 4). Belle used “being on the way” as a metaphor that seems to suit refugees: They are always on the road; both physically and mentally. Ali shares: “Teaching is a better job, a more honorable job, an amazing job; I mean, teaching is a very beautiful job, in my opinion. I enjoy it, and I will continue teaching, and I won't stop. I am thinking of becoming a professor” (Ali, Interview 1).

In previous chapters, it was explained how Ali’s teacher identity in the YÖS course he taught was perceived to empower him. He was an invited teacher in the course

because of the high scores he achieved in several YÖS exams. Ali reveals in this extract that he thinks of teaching as a lifelong career, although he is studying to be a doctor. He reports that he aspires to be a professor so that he will be able to merge both fields. As Ali's case reveals, resilience can also perceive to be about being goal oriented. It can be revealed from Ali's case that setting goals and patiently working towards it can the person 'on the way'. Education should be emphasized here as a crucial field as it provides a sense of continuity and achievement, keeping individuals on their way, as it was reflected in the reports of the participants. Nur exemplifies this: "I feel heard and respected at university. People think about me as a person who studied hard and got into a good program, who will have a good career and secure her future. Or, just me, when I study in a good program, I feel good about myself" (Nur, Interview 2)

Refugees attach great significance to pursuing higher education. Various scholars contend that, despite encountering both academic and non-academic challenges, refugee students exhibit high levels of educational resilience (Mupenzi, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Student et al., 2017). As clearly illustrated, Nur expresses a sense of validation and self-worth derived from her academic achievements. Feeling heard and respected at university seems to contribute positively to her self-perception, as she perceives that she is recognized not only for her hard work but also for her potential to build a career. It can be interpreted that this recognition reinforces her motivation and confidence, highlighting the importance of education in shaping refugee identity and future outlook. Consequently, the participants' experiences underscore the role of education as a source of empowerment and a means of gaining respect and a sense of belonging not just within the academic community but also within the host community overall. Education offers not only knowledge and skills but also a sense of continuity, purpose, and achievement, which can be accepted as the fundamental components of resilience.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that the participants' experiences of war and forced migration influenced their adjustment, integration, and initial educational journeys. The transition to Turkish schools and higher education posed varied challenges from preparation to program admission. Furthermore, participants'

English language learning experiences at preparatory school within the EFL setting revealed that they were content the instruction and found their preparatory year as beneficial for the courses they take in their English-medium programs. The analysis of participants' narratives concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online education further illustrated substantial effects on their educational paths, highlighting how they managed to navigate emerging challenges and evolving circumstances. Furthermore, their experiences of studying at an EMI university also revealed that these students had different motivations and for choosing to study at an EMI university and varying experiences regarding their studies. Lastly, the finding indicated the difficulties encountered by refugee students and the coping mechanisms they employed on their path to resilience. The next chapter discusses the findings in the context of existing literature, presents the implications for various stakeholders, and offers recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

#### 5.1. Chapter Presentation

In this study, the goal was to investigate how particular Syrian refugee students navigated the intricate dynamics of the interplay of their war experiences, forced migration, identity narrations, and educational adaptation. The study specifically focused on how these elements collectively impacted their integration process in a new environment, particularly in the context of Higher Education in central Türkiye. In this chapter, after an initial discussion of intersectional identities of Syrian refugee students with a focus on their educational experiences, the war and forced migration are discussed. Then, for the second section, the focus is shifted to refugee education, and their educational trajectories in relation to the existing literature are discussed by focusing on their preparatory school, the COVID-19 and online education process and EMI experiences as part of their studies in Turkish Higher Education. In the third section, the challenges that participants reported encountering, the strategies they employed to cope with these challenges, and how they built resilience accordingly are discussed. Following these, the implications of the study is presented, and the chapter is concluded with the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

#### 5.2. Intersectional Identities and Their Influence on Refugees Students' Educational Experiences

Research on intersectionality within the context of refugee students in higher education reveals a complex interaction of various social categories influencing their academic experiences. Intersectionality is often viewed as a theoretical framework in

which ethnicity, race, and gender are considered as mutually exclusive categories (Crenshaw, 1989). This underscores the importance of considering the diverse and intersecting factors that influence refugee students' access to and success in higher education. In this ethnographic case study, through an intersectional analysis of Syrian refugee students' experiences in Turkish Higher Education, I examined how various aspects of a refugee student's identity intersect to influence their educational experiences and integration. The findings of the study suggest that these Syrian refugee students faced unique and compounded challenges which need to be reflected on by considering each aspect of their identities holistically. It has been revealed that a comprehensive understanding of the refugee experience may not be achieved without recognizing their intersecting identities and exploring multiple aspects of their lives beyond one or two specific identity categories.

For this purpose, I started my exploration with their war experiences and migration journeys to be able to understand how their identity narratives were influenced and how these experiences shaped later processes of their refugee student experience. These narrations showed that refugee students' experiences prior to their migration also determine their later adjustment and adaptation processes. Clearly, integration began long before the refuge. When a refugee student was already living close to the Turkish border, and occasionally went back and forth for some reason between the two countries, migration journey became just like changing homes, and since the refugee was already immersed in the host country to some degree with these visits, later adaptation process became smoother. Thus, being a Syrian citizen living in an area which has geographical proximity to the future host country eased the transition process.

The social class of the students also intersected with their learner identity and shaped their higher education experiences (Üstübcü & Elci, 2022b). To give an example to this, refugee students in this study who had a higher level of income had less challenges during the online education period in the Covid-19 pandemic because of their economic capital. They did not need to work to cover for their educational or life expenses, or they were able to buy the required technical equipment which determined the quality of their online process. They had relatively smoother process

in the admission process as well, as they could take the expensive entry exams to be admitted to a program in universities, and they were able to pay school fees once they did.

Moreover, the research also highlights the importance of evaluating refugees in their uniqueness, as refugee identity almost always intersect with other identities. Bešić et al. (2020) argued that people can be members of more than one disadvantaged group and suffer from certain forms of oppression. As it was in the case of Belle, a Syrian refugee may be also a Palestinian refugee who is experiencing her second refuge in another resettlement country. These intersecting identities may compound the challenges of refugee experience and particularly impact on their educational processes. While homesickness was a common theme among participants, for Belle, not having “a home” to miss was the reason to feel isolated.

Syrian refugee students face intersecting legal, economic, linguistic, psychosocial, and structural challenges when they want to access higher education (Hauber-Özer, 2023). However, this study indicates that Syrian refugee students also receive certain accommodations and privileges during the admission process in Turkish Higher Education. While entry exams can impose a financial burden, the YÖS exam, administered by universities within the Turkish Higher Education system, provides an opportunity for refugees to apply to multiple universities. There is no limit on the number of times they can take this exam, allowing them to continue attempting until they secure admission to their desired program. However, the tuition fees for refugee students were reported as a financial challenge, necessitating some participants to work while studying to afford their education and continue their academic pursuits just as all other students often do in HE settings worldwide.

Other intersecting challenges included interrupted education, informational and navigational barriers, and language barrier (Erçetin & Kubilay, 2019; Cin & Doğan, 2020). The findings of this study highlighted that refugee students who were proficient in the host country language were able to navigate the challenges more smoothly. Particularly in EMI programs, it has been shown that without the knowledge of the host country language, students have difficulties related to

understanding the course content and the occasional announcements which are mostly made in the local language. Particularly during the online education period, the announcements related to courses, and jokes among the students were made mostly in Turkish, which made the refugee students feel othered and not included. Besides, language barrier acts as a problem in being subject to othering and discrimination too. Students who were proficient in the host country language reported less cases of othering and discrimination while also having more agency and empowerment while dealing with such discriminative acts.

In line with the literature (Cin & Doğan, 2020), it has been found out in this study that higher education functions as a realm of justice where the prevalence of everyday racism, xenophobia, and discrimination is considerably reduced when it is compared to contexts where refugee populations are in contact with the local community (Saygi, 2019) out of educational spaces, especially universities. Thus, higher education has been a site for empowerment where their future aspirations, learner identities, and academic pursuits intersect.

The experiences of Syrian refugee students' access to higher education are also intersectionally shaped by personal ambition, family encouragement, community support, and social and education policy (Cin & Doğan, 2020). In line with previous research, the findings of this study have also revealed that, family support was an important determiner of educational experience overall. Students who received support from their immediate circles were better equipped to handle not only the specific challenges posed by circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent period of online education, but also the everyday difficulties of studying and living in a host country. In line with the resiliency they built, personal ambition was also high among the Syrian refugee students. Their learner identity was motivated by the refugee identity position which they wanted to validate through success.

At the intersection of refugee identity and learner identity, resilience has proved to play a crucial role in shaping the perspectives of refugee students (Özenç-Ira et. al., 2024), empowering them to overcome challenging experiences whether in the Higher

Education context or the local community. By adopting various coping strategies against the challenges they encounter, refugee students were able to navigate, cope with the challenges they faced and built resilience.

In conclusion, without understanding these intersecting identities, a comprehensible understanding of their refugee experience would not be achieved (Trililani et. al., 2023). Factors such as ethnicity, religion, gender, age, migration status intersect to create unique educational experiences, and they need to be analyzed with the accompanying factors such as financial or linguistic capital. Intersectional analysis helped in this study to identify how intersecting identities shaped the refugee experience in the higher education and the host country, and how their academic pursuits and social integration processes were influenced by their intersecting identities.

### **5.3. Understanding the Refugee Students Journeys: War, Forced Migration and Displacement**

This study examined particular refugee student experiences during a poly-crisis era, during which refugees were confronted not only with war but also with the COVID-19 pandemic and a major earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria in February 2023. Although the participants in this study were not in an earthquake-affected area, they were subject to an online education period issued by Turkish higher education institutions following the earthquake. Crises lead to forced migration, and understanding the reasons that lead to forced migration and refugee journeys can, therefore, greatly impact possible actions that can be taken against the causes of displacement (Naidoo et al., 2018). It can also allow us to understand how this forced migration experience impacts refugees and their educational trajectories.

War and forced migration can have profound and multifaceted effects on refugees, impacting their physical, mental, and socio-economic well-being. The immediate consequences include exposure to violence, loss, and trauma, which significantly affect mental health, leading to high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, particularly among women and children (Burgin et. al., 2022, Sarp,



2018; Venkatachalam et. Al., 2023). Although refugees often face harsh living conditions in camps or host countries exacerbating these consequences, in this study, none of the refugees were encamped. Close relatives who arrived earlier or friends who had already taken refuge in the host country played a significant role in facilitating the adjustment process for the participants. Additionally, these connections were a key factor in their decision to choose Türkiye as their country of resettlement.

The impact of war and conflict on refugee students' well-being and education is also a complex and multifaceted issue, but the migration journey, which is also an important unit of analysis (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015), should be investigated as displacement exacerbates the previous traumas related to war. Without Belle's or Ali's very dangerous migration journeys being known, it would not be possible to understand the trauma it caused, in a way their transition process in the host country and educational experiences.

Refugees can migrate due to conflict, persecution, discrimination, family reunification, improved employment prospects, and a better quality of life. (Garcia-Zamor, 2018). Although refugee movement is generally perceived as forced and occur among disempowered individuals who lack autonomy, the findings of this study support Shaffer and Stewart (2021) dispelling the notion that refugees are not actively involved in making decisions about their migration and mobility. In this study, although there were refugees who were so young to travel by themselves, there were also other refugees who actively and autonomously decided on their mobility and how they were going to actualize it. The very risky journeys they made and being able to cross the borders at all cost shows that refugees are not disempowered at all, and they were really autonomous in the decisions they took.

The main reason for migration was not security due to war and conflict in their country, though. Mostly, participants stated that education was the main reason. Years of interrupted education, lack of hope regarding the future of the country, loneliness and isolation with masses leaving their countries led to the decision of migration in the end. This was also a strategy they used in order not to define

themselves as refugees. When someone leave their own countries for not to escape from some kind of danger but for a noble ideal like pursuing an education, they believe this would save them from being positioned as a refugee. Thus, in all datasets of this study, “refugee” appears as a word just a couple of times. Migrant was chosen over the position of refugee.

Finally, contrary to popular belief in the mainstream media and society in the host country, Türkiye is not the first resettlement country for all participants. In all other Arab countries, Syrians share their ethnicity and native language, but for Türkiye, these advantages lose their convenience. Participants shared their motivation to seek refuge in Türkiye as its geographical proximity to Syria, cultural and religious proximity in Syria. Although Global North is one of the most desired destination for most of the refugee population in the World (Lemay, 2021), it is evident from this study that, one’s closeness to the homeland still matters when in refuge. Besides, feeling oneself unconstrained due to their religion or culture was more significant than the perceived development of the country.

#### **5.4. Understanding the Refugee Students’ Journeys in Turkish Higher Education**

As one of the World’s largest refugee hosting countries, Türkiye hosted to 60750 Syrian refugees in 2023-2024 academic year (YÖK, n.d.) in Higher Education institutions. Though this number is high when compared to the 7% of enrollment rate (UNHCR, n.d.) in the higher education in the world, when the benefits of pursuing education at universities is taken into consideration, it is clear that refugee students need to be supported more. Higher education plays an important role in promoting the psychosocial wellbeing of refugee students (Jack & Warwick, 2019). In order to create a sense of belongingness, and providing a sense of stability, higher education creates a cite for refugee students where they can actualize themselves, and continue to work for their future aspirations. Besides, higher education facilitates integration into the host country's economic structures by enabling refugees to utilize, adapt, and enhance their qualifications, training, and previous experiences (Arar et al., 2020b).

This not only benefits the host society but also prepares them for potential contributions to their homelands upon return.

In this study, after years of disrupted education, and feelings of hopelessness related to their futures, Syrian refugees built resilience through their academic pursuits. However, it is also evident from this research that there is need for a holistic, trauma-informed approach to education for refugee students too, with a focus on promoting their wellbeing and sense of belonging by taking their specific needs into consideration. The findings of this study have shown that, refugeeness is a unique experience necessitating individualized ways of approach. Yet, I am also aware that in countries where there is a high influx of refugees as in Türkiye, this may not be as feasible as it is desired. Though, it is worth the effort.

Unique challenges for refugees in accessing higher education can result in exclusion from educational opportunities (Arar et. al., 2020). In this study, lack of financial capital to prepare for admission process was one of the challenges. High-priced entry exams like SAT cannot be afforded by refugees who lack the financial sources. Turkish Higher Education also provides YÖS, as an additional alternative as a more low-cost alternative, yet still, charging for entry exams is a burden on refugee students. Although host country students also pay exam fees, for some refugee students' exemptions may be considered. Belle, who was not able to afford the preparation courses and the exam, was going to give up on her academic pursuits, if she had not been accepted with just her high school diploma and without any exams as a Palestinian refugee from Syria. Although Host country education systems often refuse to recognize the educational credentials of immigrants, in Belle's case, this did not become an impediment to accessing higher education in Türkiye for her.

The transition to higher education varied among participants in this study. Ali, who crossed the border while still in high school, lacked the necessary documents but faced no issues enrolling in TECs although this is a common challenge for refugees worldwide (Lantero & Finocchietti, 2023). Yasemin had to ask a relative in Syria to prepare and send the required documents, which arrived quite late but were still accepted by the school administration. Unlike Yasemin, Ali and Nur, Ahmet and

Belle started their Higher Education in Türkiye without studying Türkiye before. Although it can be said that they did not have necessarily more challenges than the others, transitioning from Turkish schools to Turkish Higher Education was expectedly easier. The preparation and admission process was more complicating for Belle and Ahmet, as they needed to calculate how they were going to navigate the pathways. Yet, Ahmet was lucky in this, as he already had a brother studying in a Turkish university. As I indicated before, having support from family, especially from the ones who navigated the system before, was beneficial.

In line with Özer and Ateşok (2019), this study also found some challenges faced by refugees in accessing higher education, including financial hardship, language issues. However, non-recognition of prior learning was not an issue for the participants in this study. Participants found studying in Turkish Higher Education favourable for the opportunity to learn a new language, which is Turkish, even if they were studying in an EMI program; making friends with Turkish people, and finally, increasing their job opportunities in Türkiye upon graduation. This also indicated a desire for a prolonged stay in the host country where they incorporate their higher education studies into future aspirations.

Since higher education was such a significant asset to attain, foreign student entrance examination, YÖS, held a significant and central role in their lives. Much of our discussion on the admission process was heavily influenced by the discourse surrounding YÖS, to the extent that high school courses were often sacrificed for its preparation. One significant issue identified in this research is that foreign students preparing for YÖS are not invested in their high school courses, as these are not relevant to the exam. This disengagement can lead to a lack of motivation and enthusiasm for their required school subjects, as they perceive no direct benefit from them. Ali was an exemplary case for this, receiving support from his teachers to focus on YÖS during class time. Aligning the exam content more closely with school curricula can potentially enhance these students' motivation and engagement with their high school studies. Providing foreign students with the same curriculum as Turkish schools, yet expecting them to take a different exam, can be demotivating and an additional load for those who try to both study their courses and prepare for

the exam at the same time. However, this difference can have a potential advantage for those, like Belle and Ahmet, who do not study in Türkiye yet need to take the exam for entry to Turkish Higher Education, though.

**English Language Learning at Preparatory School in an EFL Context.** As a model of language support in EMI universities, studying at an EMI university, students are required to study a one-year intensive English program at a preparatory school (Galloway, 2020). In the context of this study, refugee students also studied at preparatory school, and in a modular system, they studied English intensively.

Although some studies such as Asmalı (2017), it was found that some EFL teachers were not content with the proficiency level of refugee students, and they claimed that they basically did not receive any instruction of English in their home countries, all the participants in this study confirmed that they studied English in their schools and had some varying proficiency of it. Their instruction was not effective all the time as there were interruptions in education because of war, yet they managed to acquire some level of English, and did not start from scratch in the preparatory school. Besides, they all achieved to pass the proficiency test at the end of the school term, and were able to begin their studies in their programs. Although from time to time, they had some challenges related to the English as the medium of instruction, these certainly did not result in any drop out or repeating the class, and in line with the findings of the same study, refugee students had positive attitudes towards and were highly motivated to learn English.

Refugee students' motivations for learning English were; the language of the instruction of the university program that they were admitted to, to be able to improve themselves academically, as they believed the language of science is English; to be successful in their programs and finally, if they happen to migrate one day again, to use it abroad. They also believed that since they can work in the host country, they may be required to know English too. Finally, as multilingual learners, they valued learning of any languages and were aware of the significance of cultural capital learning a foreign language would bring.

Participants had other motivations to study at the preparatory school which was compulsory to study unless they passed the proficiency exam implemented at the beginning of the academic term. One motivation was the feeling that they were not yet ready for the academic courses in their English-medium programs. The preparatory school was conceptualized as a real “preparation” for upcoming studies. Learning English extensively for one year both prepared them for English language skills and acted as a transition period for the longer university life. However, studying English for a year was also an additional financial burden on refugee students, adding one more year to study to their programs in universities.

Participants found learning English at preparatory school effective in terms of improving their English language skills. Receiving instruction for all language skills, their being taught in an integrated way, and having good language instructors were among the favored features of the preparatory school. One particularly stressed favored thing was EFL teachers’ speaking in English or using English all the time. Refugee students gave much importance on the language of the instruction and strongly believed that English should be taught through English.

Refugee students tended to resist translanguaging in the institutional context of preparatory schools. In these classes, students typically preferred a focus on the effective teaching and use of the target foreign language rather than the integration of their native language or the host country language into the course content. This preference highlighted their desire to maximize exposure to and practice with the foreign language to enhance their proficiency. Foreign language classes can be different from other content classes in terms of translanguaging because As Dovchin and Wang (2024) state, they carried skepticism about the benefits of translanguaging and even found sharing a common language in a foreign language classroom harmful. Their linguistic repertoire was not a concern in language classrooms, what was important was to learn English effectively, and they believed this could only happen by using and being immersed in the target language English all the time.

Refugee students often faced challenges when the language of instruction switched to Turkish, which some of them were not proficient at. This language barrier caused

distress and exclusion, as students felt they were missing out on learning opportunities and did not understand what the class was discussing. However, there were also benefits noted by some participants regarding the variation in the language of instruction. When instructors used whether English or Turkish or code-meshed the two languages, students perceived advantages. Specifically, speaking in Turkish helped them improve their proficiency in the host country language, which, while not the primary aim of the English classes, was beneficial for their overall Turkish language learning for integration. Conversely, when instructors used English as the language of the instruction, students enhanced their English language skills which is the primary aim in preparatory schools.

However, participants who neither knew English or Turkish found it hard to adapt, as sometimes learning two languages simultaneously became challenging to deal with. Besides, when teachers taught in Turkish, they thought that they were not compelled enough to learn English as expressed before. This was a strong belief among them, that they needed to be pushed to use and speak it, and for this purpose, they did not even want their native Arabic to be used in the classroom. Unlike the overall benefit of making use of learners' linguistic repertoire, these students wanted to hear "English only". Learning English in EFL context proved to be challenging in terms of not finding any venues to practice it, and the availability of conditions that facilitate L2 acquisition (Longcope, 2009). Not using English in their daily lives was a constraint on their ability to improve the target language effectively.

Finally, for refugees who were not proficient in the host country's language, transitioning to university life in preparatory school constituted an advantage. Refugees, if proficient in the language, used English only as this was their only means to communicate with the classmates who were mostly monolingual Turkish speakers. English was both a target and saver in this term for refugees. Besides, being the "foreigner" and speaking English positioned them as the "smart", "proficient language users" in preparatory schools. In such cases, English served as the site where they felt their identity empowered, helping the local students or being the one they always wanted to speak so as to improve their English. Being a

foreigner was perceived positively at the preparatory school, contributing to a sense of social prestige among peers.

**The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Transition to Online Education.** Considering the multidimensional vulnerability of refugees, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on refugee education, exacerbating pre-existing challenges and creating new ones. Supporting the previous studies (Baker et. al., 2022; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022; Shah & Calonge, 2023), the findings of this study revealed that the shift to online education in Türkiye's higher education system during the pandemic introduced a variety of challenges, including difficulty in social and emotional adjustment, financial challenges, and significant academic difficulties. Students reported dissatisfaction with online learning due to inadequate technical infrastructure, digital inequalities, and a preference for face-to-face instruction (Topkaya et. al., 2021). The weak quality of digital content (Durak et. al., 2020) for online platforms was another challenge also found out in this study.

The findings of this study highlight that, initially the Covid-19 pandemic was perceived as a holiday due to the temporary closure of schools, which was expected to last for a short period. However, as the crisis persisted, this perception evolved. Over time, Covid-19 came to symbolize immobility and instability, altering the initial optimistic outlook. The vagueness and ambiguity of the situation were particularly challenging. If there had been clarity on when normalcy would return, refugees and people might have experienced less anxiety and been more productive. However, this necessity to adapt was a familiar experience for refugees, who frequently face critical situations filled with ambiguity and risk. The process typically involved confronting danger, experiencing shock, trying to understand the situation, feeling ambiguity, and then needing to survive by adapting. I observed that this cycle fosters refugees' flexibility and resilience, crucial for coping with changing circumstances. They knew that life is in flux, constantly changing and creating situations that they have to adapt in order to survive.

Covid-19 stopped the integration process by stopping interaction with the host country and its people. Since cultural identity is constructed through interaction with



others (Dervin, 2012), Syrian refugee students had great difficulty in their adaptation and integration process. Although these interactions can sometimes lead to tension, they are essential for mutual adjustment. Feelings of isolation and loneliness were exacerbated as a result of cultural barriers (Samsari et. al., 2024), and the desire for connection was strong among the refugee students. Without keeping this contact with their circles and their school community, they had difficulty in their educational processes too. Without nurturing students' social identities, the goal of self-validation through education could not be achieved either. Although with the transition to online, education continued, the socialization it brought came to a halt because face-to-face education was not perceived to be just about education; it was also about socialization for participants.

Thus, the pandemic significantly disrupted university life for refugee students. The opportunities and experiences typically associated with being a university student were abruptly taken away, leading to another disappointment in their lives. The greatest impact was on their ability to adapt to the host country and its people and to build a better future through face-to-face education (Gomez, 2022). Attending school regularly helps students feel they are making positive strides for their future, developing a student identity within a group context. Additionally, universities serve as casual meeting places for refugees to connect with their co-ethnics, offering a critical support network. The shift to online education severed these vital connections, both with host country individuals and their immediate support circles.

Serving as a reminder of past trauma (Liddell et. al., 2021), the pandemic had a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of refugee students too. The sudden shift to online education and the resultant isolation led to increased anxiety and stress with increasing feelings of exclusion and exceptionalism (Crawley, 2021). Refugee students, who are often more resilient due to their past experiences with crisis and displacement, found some parallels between the pandemic and their experiences of war. The common initial reactions to both included a lack of understanding of the situation, an expectation that it would be temporary, and eventually adapting to the prolonged crisis. However, the constant exposure to crises can also lead to feelings of hopelessness and a strong desire for normalcy in the end.

Sustaining motivation became increasingly challenging, and although there was ample time available, the autonomy to encourage students to engage in learning and studying for their program's courses was not effectively utilized. They claimed that they had a great amount of time, yet no routine. School shutdowns disrupted the routines and socialization of refugee-background students, impacting their wellbeing (Mudwari et. al., 2021). Moreover, at a time when they finally managed to start their higher education after the war and forced migration, and the challenging admission process, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic inflicted the idea among refugees that 'no sense of stability is going to be forever'. For refugee students who experience 'crisis' as the norm in their subjectivities, this was another disruption to normalcy and another crisis to go through and overcome. Participants tried to keep their motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic in various ways, though. Since they believed they lost a lot of time due to disruptions to their education in war, they did not want to lose another year by repeating the courses they were taking. A final challenge during the pandemic time was that since refugees may live in larger numbers at houses, it was found out that it became additionally difficult for refugees to have space and study and focus on their online courses. This challenge became particularly visible for those who needed to share their technical equipment with other family members who also studied.

While the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic was the same for everyone, the ability to cope with it varied significantly between host country citizens and refugees. Host country individuals had more coping advantages, such as being in their homeland with access to familiar support systems, hospitals, and doctors. They battled the pandemic within a familiar environment. In contrast, refugees often lacked these advantages, navigating the pandemic without the same level of support or familiarity with their surroundings. This disparity highlighted the unequal impact of the pandemic, despite the universal nature of the threat. However, as for treatment and support, participants did not report any discrimination, and was equally treated with the host country citizens when infected with the Covid-19 in Türkiye.

From an intersectional lens, additional identities can complicate the refugee experience. Being both a refugee and going through the pandemic period in the host

country was challenging. However, the Covid-19 pandemic was a global issue, affecting people worldwide. This universal experience made it easier for everyone to empathize, as all people in the World were dealing with similar challenges. In line with this, for a period, the media shifted its focus from refugee issues to the global health crisis, as Covid-19 dominated the news due to its widespread impact. This global battle against the pandemic took precedence, highlighting the shared human experience of confronting a common threat.

The Covid-19 pandemic also offered some benefits for refugee students, though. The period of online education at home acted as a preparatory phase for "the real, actual university life." As discussed in the Findings Chapter of this study, the online education period was perceived as virtual and not sufficiently realistic. This perception fostered the idea of preparing for a more tangible and enduring educational experience in the future, suggesting that the current situation was temporary and lacked the authenticity of traditional university life.

In this study, it was found that having been through another crisis, although not a health-related one like COVID-19, like war, helped refugees adapt to the pandemic period. They know what endurance means, what it means waiting for a crisis to pass, how to tolerate for the things which carry a lot of risk and uneasiness. My observation is that they showed flexibility and resilience. However, this also had a counter effect for refugees too who expected some level of normalcy in their lives at some point. Having to deal with crisis after crisis was exhausting for refugees who desired to live a normal life exempt from any disruptions.

In conclusion, while the Covid-19 pandemic introduced new challenges for refugee students, it also underscored pre-existing vulnerabilities and highlighted areas for improvement in educational support systems. The experience of navigating through the pandemic has reinforced the need for comprehensive strategies to support refugee students' academic and social integration, ensuring their right to education and well-being in the face of ongoing and future crises.

**Online Education.** In addition to the challenges brought by the Covid-19, online education period posed some specific challenges too. In alignment with the findings

of Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) and Chakraborty et al. (2020), this study also identified specific challenges faced by refugee students in the online education process. Refugee students were often not required to attend online classes if their instructors did not monitor attendance. Consequently, participants sometimes prioritized certain lessons they deemed important, neglecting others. This selective attendance, coupled with decreased motivation, led to a decline in overall attendance rates, thereby decreasing the quality of the online education experience.

Refugee students often reported feelings of boredom and difficulty in self-motivation too. Technical issues, such as poor internet connection, intermittent internet outages, and difficulty hearing the instructor, were the challenges which made it increasingly difficult to keep motivated. Additionally, the lack of motivation to study was exacerbated by prolonged periods at home due to lockdowns and the absence of meaningful social interactions with friends. The participants frequently mentioned that they did not feel motivated to study without the presence of peers, leading to a lack of competitive drive. In contrast, they believed, face-to-face learning environments typically fostered a sense of obligation to study more diligently.

Another significant challenge was the increased sense of invisibility among students, as the lack of camera use during online classes meant that teachers and students often did not see each other. This anonymity heightened feelings of detachment and isolation, contributing to the perception that online education lacked authenticity. Face-to-face education was perceived as synonymous with authenticity and naturalness, while online education was viewed as virtual and unreal, like a game. This perception led to a diminished sense of investment and seriousness in online education. Participants felt that online education was temporary and not worth the same level of effort as face-to-face education, which they considered was more genuine and worthwhile.

Another particular challenge frequently mentioned by refugee students in this study was related to exam duration and cheating. Instructors often allocated less time for exams to prevent cheating. However, this approach led students to engage in cheating more frequently to manage the limited time effectively and achieve good grades. The findings of this study also revealed that there was a perceived decline in the quality

of instruction, as many students felt that classes were done only to fulfill requirements. The duration of classes was significantly reduced, as longer sessions could not be recorded due to inadequate infrastructure. Additionally, the online platform's limited capacity prevented teachers from uploading all class sessions for students' later review. Frequent system shutdowns and teachers struggling to adapt made refugee students feel that the system was not efficient and was not effectively implemented to meet students' needs during the pandemic.

Additionally, the absence of group or pair work, lack of peer feedback, and minimal interaction in the classroom were challenges encountered too. There was particular concern regarding practice-based courses, such as lab classes. Although instructors could demonstrate necessary procedures online, students were unable to gain hands-on experience, which was a concern for them. Synchronous classes did not facilitate on-the-go questions either, as students tended to avoid asking questions to prevent standing out.

Despite all these challenges, this study has found out that there were some advantages of online education too. All students agreed that the transition to online education was necessary to protect people from the Covid-19 pandemic and prevent any tragic outcomes. They also appreciated the time-saving aspect of online education, as there was no need for commuting any more, saving both time and money, and reducing exhaustion. Finally, the ability to review recorded courses was highly beneficial, particularly for compensating for missed classes and revising and studying the course content with which they had difficulty.

**(Online) English Medium Instruction.** EMI is ‘the use of English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the populations is not English’ (Macaro, 2018, p.19). While EMI has become prevalent all around the world, it is particularly more adopted in Higher Education (Fenton-Smith et. al. 2017). As explained by Kondakçı et. al. (2018), Türkiye has emerged as one of regional hubs for international students, attracted by its geographical and cultural proximity, as well as its cost advantages.

As previously discussed in the Chapter Four, this study reveals that refugee students considered the anticipated difficulty of the program when selecting an EMI university. For inherently challenging programs such as Medicine, the use of English was perceived as a potential disadvantage, as it would serve as both the medium of instruction and the subject matter. Consequently, some students preferred not to increase the overall complexity of their studies by putting the language as an additional challenging factor.

Refugee students' motivations for studying in EMI programs are diverse and complex. The study identified several perceived advantages of English as a Medium of Instruction for refugee students in the host country. English was preferred due to the abundance of resources available in the language and its critical importance for post-graduation career aspirations, particularly in engineering fields. Students believed that improving their English proficiency would enhance their future career prospects (Rose et al., 2020) supporting the related literature. They also wanted to practice even after the preparatory school through their program studies. In this way English was never left behind with an ongoing practice. This belief was underpinned by the perception that English is learned the most effectively with maximum exposure (Rose & Galloway, 2019).

EMI also constituted a significant advantage for newly arrived refugees who are not familiar with the host country's language, as it saves them from spending time learning it. This allows them to commence on their higher education studies immediately. Given the years of education they have already lost because of interrupted education, this time-saving aspect of EMI becomes particularly beneficial.

Another reason refugee students preferred EMI was the belief that it made the medium of the instruction equal for every student, whether they were mainstream or refugee. They believed that studying in Turkish Medium Instruction would be unfair, as it would impose an additional burden on refugees who are not fluent in Turkish, while native Turkish students would have an inherent advantage. They felt that studying in Turkish would require them to invest more effort. Conversely, studying in

English, which is a foreign language for both groups, ensured equality by requiring all students to learn in a non-native language.

The study's findings indicate that teachers function as micro-level policymakers in EMI settings, adapting their methods and rules based on their preferences and the characteristics of their students. As a result, EMI implementation varies according to program requirements and individual teacher decisions. Regarding the use of the L1 in EMI classes, the study found that instructors occasionally translated their speech, particularly when Turkish students requested clarification. Participants reported understanding the need for why native Turkish students needed to "hear it in their mother tongue".

In this study, it was also found that refugees assessed teachers on their English proficiency rather than their content knowledge. Perceived weaknesses in an instructor's English skills could diminish their effectiveness as educators. Additionally, occasionally switching codes was viewed unfavorably. These student perspectives align with their preferences in preparatory school, where refugee students favored English-only instruction. In such cases, when they encountered instructors with perceived inadequate English proficiency, refugee students tended to avoid these classes, especially in online EMI phase, and instead compensated by studying independently.

Although one of their motivations to choose EMI was partly to enhance their English proficiency, this study found that refugee students were unable to practice English as much as they had anticipated, particularly in online EMI settings. In these online classes, teachers predominantly did the talking while students remained silent, resulting in reduced opportunities for speaking practice. Their assumptions failed to consider that learning English is not an explicit goal of EMI. Research indicates that students acquire English skills in EMI contexts more incidentally and implicitly (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018) as it was the case in this study.

Consistent with Galloway (2020), the growth of EMI also underscores a significant demand for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes

(ESP) courses aimed at specialised vocabulary acquisition. Refugee students found it essential to learn and memorize new terminology related to their academic programs, which was not taught in preparatory school. This highlights the need for vocational English training (ESP for EMI) in preparatory schools to support their academic success.

This study has also found that the perceived effectiveness of EMI significantly depended on students' linguistic preparedness, as 'students most likely to succeed in EMI courses are those who enter the course already highly proficient in English' (Galloway, 2020, p. 31). EMI posed challenges for students with weak English skills, such as Ali, who struggled with Medical School coursework despite passing the preparatory school. The efficacy of the preparatory year has been questioned (British Council & TEPAV, 2015), aligning with this study's findings. This raises concerns, particularly for refugee students with interrupted education: do students complete preparatory school without mastering the necessary skills, or are there flaws in assessment allowing underprepared students to pass? Students used recorded online EMI courses to address these challenges, repeatedly watching them to enhance understanding. This advantage of online education helped students transition to face-to-face instruction more competently. Nonetheless, further research is needed to track students and understand how they navigate these challenges more specifically.

EMI was chosen because the students were already immersed in the Turkish language by living in the host country, allowing them to learn a third language. They preferred English over Turkish as they believed it would be easier to practice Turkish as a second language. Conversely, since English was a foreign language, it would be more challenging to study and practice, leading to a potential decline in their English proficiency over time. The tendency for English was also a result of its saver role when they arrived in the host country. Since Syrians and Turkish people do not share a common language, English is the lingua franca. Being in a foreign country, refugees got used to using it for communication already.

Finally, participants expressed concerns about their deteriorating Turkish language skills due to their studies in preparatory school and English-medium programs. They felt that constant exposure to English negatively affected their Turkish proficiency,



with some claiming their Turkish was no longer understood by others. This was a concern particularly expressed during Covid-19 pandemic, which I believe was a result of the lessened contact with Turkish people due to lockdowns. However, whether studying at an EMI university impedes the learning of the local language can be a question to be answered. Additionally, there are concerns about the heritage languages of refugees, such as Arabic, though they currently maintain it through family interactions.

### **5.5. Understanding the Refugee Student Journeys: From Challenges to Resilience**

As discussed in the previous chapter, participants were reported to face various challenges such as feelings of hopelessness, homesickness, fear of failure, struggle with adjustment and integration, concerns about the future, a diminished sense of security, the emotional impact of crises such as war and the pandemic, loneliness, the perceived difficulty of the process of building resilience, financial challenges and instances of othering and discrimination. However, it was also revealed in the study that in order to survive as refugees amidst crises like war, forced migration, or the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as everyday hardships, the participants needed to adapt to difficult circumstances, recover from adversities, and grow despite various stressors.

Refugee students can undergo numerous stressful and traumatic experiences before, during, and after their migration. Mostly, because of their vulnerable position as refugees, they lack most forms of capital, such as friends or family, together with institutionalized relationships, which all make up social capital (Consoli, 2024). They may encounter family disruptions, the loss of loved ones, and exposure to unsafe environments (McNeely et al., 2018). After migration, refugees may also face social exclusion or discrimination stemming from their marginalization within the social system, lack of social status, high unemployment rates, and financial difficulties due to inadequate services and insufficient social support (Gladden, 2012). Furthermore, they are reported to be at a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Silove, Ventevogel, & Rees, 2017) as a result of

the war, forced migration experiences, and subsequent adjustment and adaptation processes. In relation to these challenges, several other stressors might be present in the lives of refugees, including inadequate health services, changes in social roles, feelings of insecurity and gender-based violence (Alzoubi et al., 2017).

In some studies, it is stated that despite efforts to implement inclusive education policies in higher education in Türkiye, discrimination, negative social identification, and social exclusion of Syrians remain significant issues (Arar et al., 2020; Özenç-Ira et al., 2023). However, in this study, in line with Cin and Doğan's study (2021), participants did not report that they faced othering and discrimination in the research context of the EMI university but rather in other contexts such as bazaars in the host country. None of the participants reported a reluctance from academics or Turkish university students to be and study alongside them, and local peers were generally perceived to be supportive by the participants. In line with the literature, in addition to the ones already explained, participants were perceived to have faced significant challenges regarding exposure to unsafe environments, financial difficulties and psychological challenges as they reported. However, no gender-based violence, family disruptions as a result of the loss of loved ones or insufficient social support were reported to be experienced by the participants. They were found to be supported by the significant others such as family and friends they had, and peer and academic support when needed. Three female participants were observed to be comfortable in their interactions with both their co-ethnics and peers in the university context as well as their teachers, and no gender-based challenge was reported by them or observed by the researcher.

While refugees may face various challenges, these stressors may prompt refugees to adopt certain coping mechanisms too (Harvey et. al. 2013) by building resilience and effectively coping with these challenges with the support from their family and community (Pak et al., 2022). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is described as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). The literature has explored various coping strategies employed by refugees under stressful circumstances such as maintaining

optimism, using humor, engaging in planned problem-solving, talking to peers, exploring positive emotions and reinterpreting events positively (Alzoubi et al., 2017; Al-Smadi et al., 2017; Gladden, 2012). In this study, it has been revealed that participants exhibited self-motivation and autonomy to overcome challenges and build resilience in the face of various challenges and stressors. They established multiple objectives and demonstrated autonomy when facing boredom and challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By staying optimistic and concentrating on their available resources and potential actions, they were able to foster resilience.

Resilience is defined as the ability to cope with and manage stress and trauma (Bäårnhielm, 2016) and it is described as a dynamic process that evolves over a person's lifespan and changes over time (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Psychological resilience is defined as the capacity to recover from adversity and functions as a buffer, enabling individuals to navigate traumatic experiences or life crises (Desheids et al., 2016). Three key components essential for defining resilience are suggested: the presence of a stressful life experience with a high likelihood of a negative outcome, the availability of resources within and around the individual to counterbalance this hardship, and the demonstration of positive adaptation despite adversity (Windle, 2011).

Resilience, by its nature, reveals its effects in the context of adverse situations, but individuals can also acquire and utilize resources to cope with these challenges (Hobfoll, 2001; Grüttner, 2019). Thus, psychological resilience can assist refugee students in developing support mechanisms to manage challenging experiences (Demir & Aliyev, 2019). From a life capital perspective (Consoli, 2021) which celebrates the unique trajectories of participants' stories, it has been revealed that refugee participants in this study had life capital and used this in their struggle with challenges, developing coping strategies and building resilience. Their complex life experiences, including exposure to war, forced migration, and interactions with various cultures and people in resettlement countries, as well as the challenges of adjustment and adaptation, have contributed to the development of a unique form of capital shaped by their refugee identity. Since life capital can be understood as a

wealth one possess and which can be understood through the richness of one's life experiences, participants' life capital thus entails "memories, desires, emotions, attitudes, opinions, and these can be relatively positive or negative" and can shape how an individual manages, shares, and employs their life capital (Consoli, 2021a, p. 122). Thus, it can be concluded that despite facing various perceived hardship, the life capital of refugees in this study has been found to be a valuable capital shaping how they exercised their agency, used the individual and collective histories they went through in their habitus (Reay, 2004) to overcome challenges and build resilience.

## **5.6. Conclusion and Implications**

This study aimed to ethnographically examine how particular Syrian refugee students navigated the complex interplay between their war experiences, forced migration, intersectional identities, and educational adaptation higher education in Türkiye. The aim was to identify the challenges faced by these students and explore their views related to educational and social processes to enhance their academic and societal experiences. The goal was to facilitate their journey from access to graduation in host country universities, while simultaneously supporting their resettlement in Türkiye during and after crises.

Overall, this study indicates that the perceived effects of war and forced migration on refugee students are extensive and enduring, necessitating comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address their immediate needs and long-term integration and well-being. In an era of deepening globalization and widening international migration, higher education can play a critical role for displaced people, both for their home countries and for their host countries alike (Arar et.al, 2020). Since ongoing education gives them a sense of agency, refugee education should be supported at all costs, particularly at higher education level.

For policy implications to support Higher Education, equitable policies, quality language instruction, inclusive pedagogies, and supportive interpersonal relationships are essential for refugee students aspiring to invest in their futures during

displacement. Learning their background and facilitating through the transition process can make them feel more at ease in a new country and instructional context. In line with this, enhancing the legal status of refugee students who are under temporary protection is also essential for securing stable employment opportunities and leveraging their human, cultural and social capital for development too. Social policies should support refugee students and their families throughout both pre-tertiary and higher education processes. Establishing a governance mechanism for education and adopting an approach based their capitals would be crucial for these efforts.

The findings of this research offer several recommendations for practitioners. First, successful integration of refugee students in HE should be viewed as a collective endeavor. Therefore, it is advisable to organize more activities that enhance interaction among international students, local students, and academic staff. By doing so, policymakers might consider offering initiatives that support such efforts within higher education institutions (HEIs) and address structural barriers, such as excessive bureaucracy and quota restrictions. Additionally, university management could refine their missions and strategies, which should be reflected in the increased formalization and professionalization of international offices to ensure that HEIs fulfill their role in a more inclusive manner and contribute to the creation of a more equitable society.

Facing more and more migration because of many ongoing reasons, from conflict in areas to climate change, the World is more likely to have refugee students in higher education. Contrary to the belief that refugee students pose some challenges in the classrooms they attend as a result of their past experiences, cultural disparities and their unfamiliarity with the host country' language (Hart, 2009); these aspects can be considered to contribute to the multiculturalism in mostly monolingual classrooms. These unique characteristics are perceived to not only enrich their identities but contribute to overall diversity in Higher Education context with their exceptional individuality.

Encouraging local and Syrian students to engage in joint social, cultural, and academic ventures, along with shared activities and travels, could foster the growth

of the current relationships between them (Ergin, 2016). Besides, in this way, mutual adjustment can be fostered lessening the tension created between groups. Moreover, easy access to Turkish language courses should be increased for Syrian university students to enable them to communicate with Turkish peers more easily and effectively for belonging and competing with feelings of otherness (Ergin, 2016).

In training future educators, it is essential that teacher education programs do not envision an unrealistic, homogenous school environment free from diversity. Instead, these programs are suggested to equip teachers with knowledge and skills that reflect the multicultural realities of schools, extending beyond just higher education discussions. When reviewing the curricula of most teacher education programs in Türkiye, although they contain the necessary components for preparing teachers, it becomes clear that, given Türkiye's unique position as the largest host of refugees, additional and urgent steps are needed. Specifically, integrating more courses to prepare teachers for working with refugee students—who are unlikely to resemble mainstream students—is crucial. This can be accomplished by providing teachers with training on topics such as diversity, equality, multiculturalism, transnationalism, globalization, and its impacts on society and classrooms, all aimed at developing more successful teachers (Karaman & Edling, 2021). Intercultural competence must be a core component of TESOL classrooms, and teachers need to be well-prepared to connect with students from diverse backgrounds, many of whom may have faced significant crises and require not only language education but also a sense of belonging and acceptance. As demonstrated in this study, although universities may not be the initial point of contact with the host society or the beginning of education, they often become the place where a sense of belonging starts or is nurtured, provided the experience is positive and supportive. Therefore, well-trained teachers and lecturers can have a significant impact in classrooms and schools with refugee students, and supporting them in pre-service education is suggested as vital for teaching refugee populations effectively.

Care is also an important characteristic for teachers in all levels working with refugee communities or who have refugee students in their classrooms and schools. The quality of communication among refugees, host country students, and teachers of

refugees has the impact of increasing the quality of relationships and experience of higher education and can have a positive impact on their academic achievement in particular and adjustment and adaptation to the host country in general. In order for refugee students to appropriate mainstream ways of behaving, thinking, believing and living, emancipation is critical too. Teachers are suggested to position refugee students in ways that they can judge the discourse they encounter along with the ones they participate in, to take steps toward emancipation, a critical stance in the World. In this way, the oppression and discrimination they face may not go unseen, and as they create reverse discourses, the power structures that legitimize these acts can be challenged- which in turn is expected to create more freedom and equality in the society as a whole, especially for refugee populations.

Refugee students have different and specific challenges which may be very different than that of mainstream students. Thinking of this population like they are living normal lives exempt from traumas, challenges or crises that they may be dealing with at the time can be a false conception. Treating refugee students as if they were prone to all traumas and necessarily problematic and vulnerable would equally be wrong. As this study has shown, participants have shown resilience through the crisis they have gone through, yet it is also apparent that care, genuine interest, and a sincere approach to them also helped them go through with all these.

Moreover, non-formal intercultural education programs can be established at local level to fit the needs of the especially recently arrived students (Akar, 2010). Another suggestion can be forming a university-school partnership for K12 refugee students in order to train teachers who are interculturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of these students and to equip the teachers with the necessary problem-solving skills and the capability to cooperate with families from diverse backgrounds. The expectation of these teachers from refugee students is also significant in that this also determines the level of investment they put into these students. The more investment and effort mean the more effective results and academic achievement on the part of the refugee students. Freeing oneself from the deficit mode of thinking for refugees can certainly create a more productive and hopeful context for refugee students too, and as a result, they can feel more empowered to do more. As Akşit (2007) also

recommended, local authorities can be empowered to identify and determine the basic academic needs and interests of students in their community and design an agenda relying on these to create a framework of unified system. Cooperating with the students locally can enhance education at all levels.

Lastly, refugee education is a long-term endeavor (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). The significance of our actions largely depends on achieving a shared, negotiated interpretation, which is an ongoing process subject to continual reinterpretation as individuals develop, create, and modify new meanings. These meanings are then placed within different social, historical, and political contexts. It is essential to maintain a constant awareness of shifting perceptions and the dynamic nature of both material and symbolic aspects of the world, including geography. The fluidity faced by modern individuals necessitates such a conceptual framework, demanding awareness, adaptability, flexibility, and understanding. This approach would benefit both the citizens of host countries and refugees striving to rebuild their lives free from physical and psychological constraints.

### **5.7. Limitations of the Study**

While this research has yielded significant findings regarding how the learning trajectories of five Syrian refugee students are shaped by their initial educational experiences through higher education, and how they narrate their learner identity while learning English in the preparatory school, the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online education, and their experiences of studying at an EMI university in an EFL setting in central Türkiye. As with any research, it is not without its limitations. As the inherent nature of ethnographic case studies necessitates a small number of participants, the study employed purposeful sampling with pre-determined criteria; thus, one of the limitations of this study lies in its focus on a single site, a public EMI university in central Türkiye, and on the perspectives of the five Syrian refugee students studying in this context. Other stakeholders and community members were not included in the data; thus, the findings are only limited to the participants' self-reports which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational institutions and settings.



Methodologically, since the initial data collection period coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, although classroom observations were conducted at the beginning of the study prior to it, detailed observations in participants' natural setting could not be achieved due to no access to their home and school environments as a result of the implemented lockdowns. Moreover, data collection for interviews and focus group discussions was online and no face-to-face interviewing was possible. So, most of the observed practices occurred during online interviews and focus group discussions during the pandemic. Thus, the practices observed were largely those prompted by my questions rather than naturally occurring behaviors. However, as the study was an ethnographic case study which spanned over three years, after the pandemic, occasional home visits, and casual meetings at different places such as cafes, on campus or places where participants agreed were made.

Another challenge was the complexity of exploring the complex interplay between the participants' war experiences, forced migration, intersectional identities, and educational adaptation and integration processes in the host country. Analyzing the rich data from ethnographic case study proved difficult making it challenging to focus on certain aspects while ignoring others to maintain a neat and concise study. This approach inevitably led to some limitations. For instance, while issues such as migration journeys, initial schooling process in Türkiye, the entry to HE, the COVID-19 pandemic period and transmission to OE and their experiences of studying at an EMI university were addressed, many other topics such as the effects of temporary protection status and gaining citizenship process, participants' Turkish language learning processes and how it affected their integration to the host country, issues of belonging and relations with the host country people in the process of integration, some other challenges such as living in a state of in-betweenness, their relations with co-ethnics and how this affected their lives in the host country had to be overlooked. Although all these emerged organically from the data and deserves further investigation, the scope of this dissertation, which concentrated on how the learning trajectories of five Syrian refugee students are shaped by their initial educational experiences through higher education, and how they narrate their learner identity while learning English in the preparatory school, the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online education, and their experiences of

studying at an EMI university in an EFL setting in central Türkiye in the context of forced migration, did not allow for a comprehensive exploration of these issues. These issues, however, could be a direction for future research.

Given that some participants might have struggled to articulate their thoughts in English or Turkish due to their proficiency in these languages, it would have been stronger if the researcher had proficiency in Arabic or an Arabic translator could be recruited. However, since participants had been living in the host country for at least one year and were already studying at preparatory school to learn English and already reported that they had English proficiency based on their previous studies in their country; there were no encountered challenges in interviewing with participants in English. Besides, they chose the language of the interview themselves between English and Turkish. While two participants were interviewed in English, the other three participants were interviewed in Turkish. Out of these three participants with whom the interviews were conducted in Turkish, two were very proficient Turkish speakers one of whom was living in Türkiye since 2013 and the other since 2015, so they did not have any perceived challenges related to being interviewed in Turkish. Only one participant was not very proficient in Turkish, but Zoom contributed to the process in this case, as he was able to use online translation tools synchronously while being interviewed. We also code-meshed between English and Turkish, which facilitated the communication. However, if the researcher had known Arabic, participants would have probably been more comfortable and could have explained themselves more clearly and accurately.

Furthermore, the researcher's role as an instructor in the research site may have influenced the study too. While being an insider facilitated access to participants, it might have also affected the responses participants provided during interviews. However, it should be noted that the participants did not take any courses from the researcher, and thus there seemed to be no power issues related to coursework and grading. Besides, the prolonged nature of the ethnographic study is also believed to provide the rapport with the participants and the researcher. Moreover, participants took courses for a year in the preparatory school where the researcher worked and then went on their programs in different faculties and buildings on different

buildings, so the participants and the researcher did not share the same context apart from the first of year of the study at Preparatory school. However, since both the participants and the researcher were all in the same university context, participants were easily reachable for the extended nature of the study. Moreover, researcher's dual identity as both an insider and a researcher likely strengthened the study by providing insights that an outsider might not have had. So, the understanding of the research issue and the interpretation of the results may have been influenced by the multiple roles I held; however, my position and background as a researcher and English teacher in the research context has been transparently outlined in this study with an intent to help readers consider my reflexive stance when necessary.

Another limitation related to this was that studying with a vulnerable group of Syrian participants was not easy, as sometimes I had to fluctuate among many identities I had to balance. Throughout the research process, I had to embody multiple identities: an EFL instructor, a friend, a counselor, a sister, an outsider, a host country citizen, and a bilingual researcher. Balancing my responsibilities as a researcher while maintaining a close connection with the participants proved to be a complex task. I frequently found myself uncertain about how to manage these roles. Maintaining an appropriate distance as a researcher while also being close enough to provide necessary support was a difficult balance to achieve.

Finally, given that nearly all participants had experienced trauma, and the study relied on self-reported data, the findings may be subject to biases such as selective memory. In the data collection process, some of the questions in interview guidelines were intended to ask for retrospective data, but in the long run, not all ethnographic data were collected retrospectively, such as COVID-19 period, online education and studying at an EMI university experiences. However, for the findings related the war and forced migration period as well as the initial schooling and adjustment experiences in Türkiye, participants memories were relied on.

### **5.8. Suggestions for Further Research**

Given the limitations and scope of this study, several suggestions for future research can be proposed. Future research could benefit from including more research

contexts and participants to be able to reflect a wider perspective by expanding their methodological approaches to capture the diverse perspectives of these stakeholders such as teachers, principals and refugee students' local and international peers. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of refugee students' academic and adaptational processes by incorporating the voices of these various stakeholders.

For future research, a larger project that includes researchers with a refugee background alongside a local team could produce richer data too. Collaborating with a research team, similar ethnographic case studies could be conducted in various regions of Türkiye. The insights gained from these studies could help shape policies concerning refugee access to and within higher education, providing opportunities for comparative studies across the diverse regions of the country. Additionally, international collaborations could also enhance the educational outcomes for refugees on a global scale, applying the study's findings to develop more effective policies.

As an alternative direction for future research, participatory research could be preferred over ethnographic case study, involving subjects not only in the data collection process but also in the interpretation and theorization stages, ensuring equal investment from both sides (Saygı, 2019). This approach would make published research studies accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences. To achieve this fully democratic collaboration between researchers and participants, research partners from outside academia can also be financially supported and legally employed in research projects, regardless of their educational background.

Investigating universities that struggle with supporting refugees would also enhance our understanding of the dynamics of refugee education in HEIs. For this purpose, future studies can also employ quantitative methodologies that could extend the findings of this study to a larger sample, further enriching the research on refugee students in the host country. A further suggestion is that, to gain a more comprehensive understanding, it would be beneficial to include universities, not just EMI but also TMI from various regions across the country to have a comparative

perspective too. Additionally, as stated, the study focused on only Syrian refugees. Refugee students from other countries who constitute a large refugee population in Türkiye such as such as Ukrainian or Afghan, would also be represented in research. Future research would benefit from involving these migrants from other nationals. Finally, a potential direction for future research could involve incorporating the perspectives of Turkish students and how these perceptions influence classroom dynamics and outcomes when refugee students are present. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of "other" and the impact of refugee crises on citizens of refugee-hosting nations, contributing to policy planning aimed at fostering social cohesion between communities.

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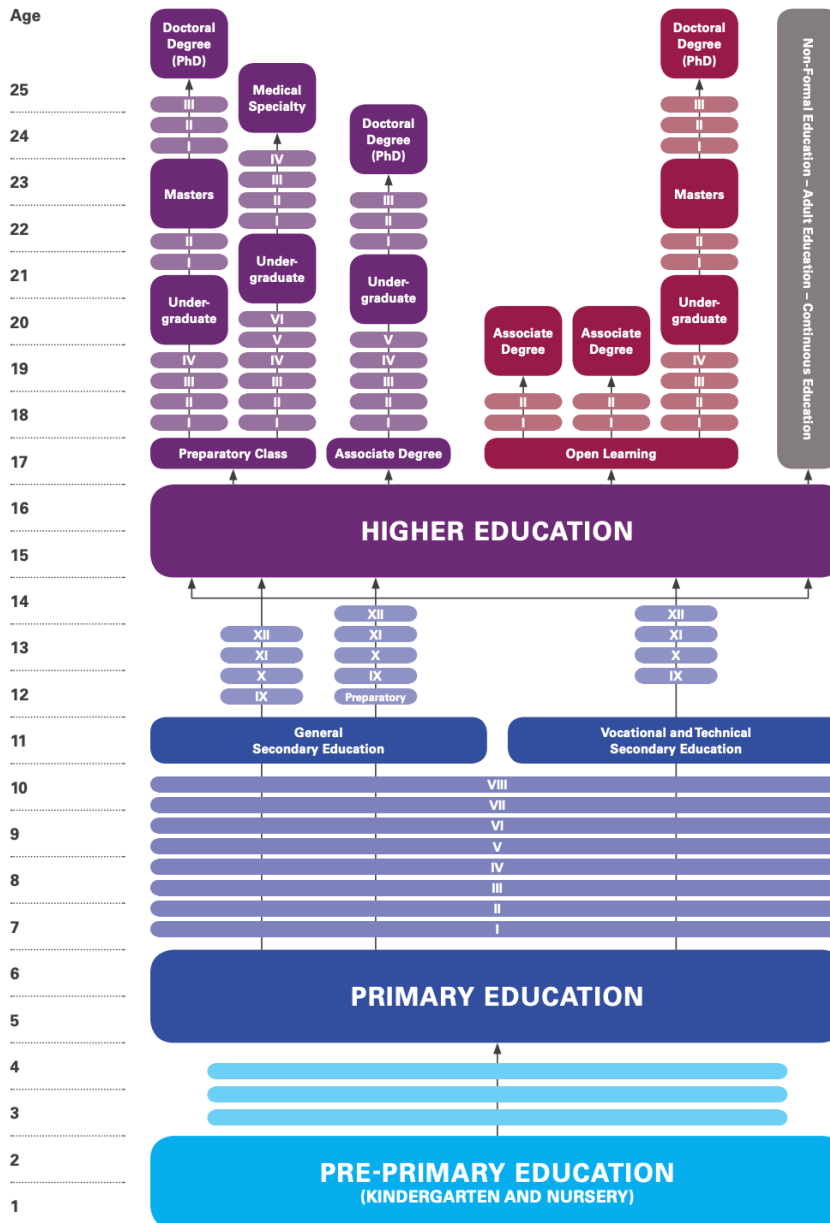
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## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM



Turkish public education system (MoNE, 2020, p. xxv)

Source: Reprinted from UNICEF (2022)

<https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/media/15931/file/The%20education%20response%20for%20Syrian%20children%20under%20temporary%20protection%20in%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20report.pdf>

## B. PRE-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

### Pre-study Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, “Positioning of Migrant Students (Syrian Refugees: Negotiations of Learner Identity in an EFL Program in Central Turkey”. This pre-study questionnaire is designed to provide some background information about you and details about your language learning experiences and practices at school and elsewhere. It will be used strictly for research purposes only, and your confidentiality is guaranteed. You may fill this out and hand it over to Gizem Doğan.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Country: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Year of arrival to Turkey: \_\_\_\_\_

Year of entrance to university: \_\_\_\_\_

Your department: \_\_\_\_\_

Your current module if available: \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 1: Personal and background information

1. Mobile number:
2. Email address:
3. Please answer the following questions so that we can have a better understanding of your living arrangements.

4.1. Who do you live with in Ankara? Please tick all that apply below.

Mother

Grandmother

Cousin

Father

Grandfather

Friend

Brother

Uncle

Sister

Aunt

4.2. Where do you live in Ankara?

- In a shared flat with friends
- At home with parents
- In a dormitory
- Other (please indicate)  \_\_\_\_\_

4.3. Which of the family members below did you live with in Syria? Please tick below.

- |                                  |                                      |                                 |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mother <input type="checkbox"/>  | Grandmother <input type="checkbox"/> | Cousin <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Father <input type="checkbox"/>  | Grandfather <input type="checkbox"/> | Friend <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Brother <input type="checkbox"/> | Uncle <input type="checkbox"/>       | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Sister <input type="checkbox"/>  | Aunt <input type="checkbox"/>        |                                 |

5. What languages or dialects does your family speak at home?

6. What month and year did you move to Turkey?

7. Who did you move to Turkey with?

8. What was your grade/year level when you left Syria?

9. What school were you attending when you left Syria?

## C. INTERVIEW GUIDES

**Project Title:** Positioning of Migrant Students (Syrian Refugees): Negotiations of Learner Identity in an EFL Program in Central Turkey

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Length of Interview:**

The purpose of the current study is to explore how refugee students are positioned and position themselves within and beyond the instructional context, how their learning trajectories are shaped and how they negotiate their learner identity accordingly within the context of an EFL program (and at their departments) at a university in Central Turkey.

Note: *Depending on which language you are most comfortable with and competent at, these questions may be asked in English, Turkish, or a combination of both.*

### *Interview Guide #1: Personal Background*

1. Let's discuss your personal history/ autobiography:

#### *Family, the city and neighbourhood*

- a. Where were you born?
- b. Where did you grow up?
- c. What was your childhood environment like? Please try to remember and visualize your city/ village.
- d. How was your upbringing?
- e. What can you tell about your family?
  - i. How was your family life?

- ii. What languages or dialects did you speak at home?
- iii. What languages do you speak now with the people you live with?
- f. How was your community life/ the life in neighbourhood? What are the specific instances/ stories you want to share with me?
- g. Can you please now try to remember and tell me a typical day from the moment you woke up to the time you fell asleep?

*School*

- h. When and where did you start school?
- i. What are the initial instances and stories of school that you remember when you go back to your school years? Let's take it from:
  - i. the primary
  - ii. secondary
  - iii. post-secondary
  - iv. (if any) university
- j. How would you define yourself as a student?
- k. What were your feelings about the school, teachers and peers?
- l. What were your ideals for your future then? When you compare what you do now, what do you think about it?
  - i. If you think you have achieved what you aspired for, what do you think the reasons are?
  - ii. If you think you have not been able to achieve what you aspired for, what do you think the reasons are?

*Friends/ Peers*

- m. How was your relationship with your peers in your peers in
  - i. Primary
  - ii. Secondary
  - iii. High school?
- n. What are the specific instances that you remember with your friends?
- o. How do you think your friends helped you in school and in life?
- p. How do you think your friends hindered you in some way in school and in life?



*Work*

- q. Have you ever worked at a job?
  - i. If yes, when and where did you start working?
  - ii. What was/ were your job(s) like?
  - iii. What was the reason that you worked for?
  - iv. If you worked both in Syria and in Turkey; how would you describe these two different jobs in two different contexts?
- r. What do you think about your current job?
  - i. Why have you started working in it?
  - ii. What do you think about the intellectual and emotional connections between your work and your life as a student?

*The War and the Start of a New Journey (after a break)*

- 2. We have talked about your background and how your life was before the breakout of the Civil War in 2011. Now, let's go on with the period you migrated to Turkey.
  - a. How was the context in your neighbourhood and country prior to your migration?
  - b. What was the reason for your migration?
  - c. How did you decide to migrate to Turkey?
  - d. Who did you come to Turkey with?
  - e. Had you been to another country for a living before you arrived to Turkey?
  - f. Can you please try to remember how was the process of migration?
  - g. How would you define this experience?
- 3. What kind of major changes did you have in your life with the breakout of the war in Syria?
  - a. What have you experienced through and after these changes?
  - b. What were the initial feelings, experiences you had when you first arrived to Turkey in relation to
    - i. The migration experience
    - ii. The country

- iii. The people
    - iv. The social life
    - v. And school (if you attended)
  - c. What has changed in time?
  - d. What do you think the reasons are for this change if any?
- 4. Let's talk about your life afterwards.
  - a. How long have you been Turkey now?
  - b. How has your life journey been so far
    - i. in Turkey?
    - ii. In the EFL program/ in the preparatory school before your transition to your department?
    - iii. In your department?
  - c. Where did you stay before the pandemic?
    - i. How was the experience?
    - ii. How has the change after the pandemic affected you?
  - d. Where do you live and stay now?
    - i. Who do you stay with?
    - ii. What do they do?
- 5. Which one of these are you mostly in contact with
  - a. Syrian friends
  - b. Turkish friends
  - c. Others (please specify)
  - d. None?
- 6. Where do you spend most of your time
  - a. Now
  - b. Before the pandemic?
- 7. What do/did you mostly do there?
- 8. What major life trajectories/ stories/ instances would you like to talk about if you would?

*Interview Guide #2: Educational Trajectory*

*Arrival to Turkey and The Transition to Higher Education*

### *Preparation for Higher Education*

1. We have talked about some dimensions of your personal background such as your childhood, neighbourhood, friends... We also talked about your migration to Turkey, but now I would like to go deeper with you on your education. Let's talk about your educational path in Turkey through Higher Education.
  - a. When did you start school upon your arrival to Turkey?
  - b. How was the process? What requirements did you need to meet?
  - c. How did you manage to start Higher Education in Turkey?
    - i. You needed to have identification documents, academic transcription etc. to start studying at the university you are currently attending in Turkey. How did you handle these procedures?
    - ii. Transportation costs, additional school fees (books and other materials) and day-to-day living costs... How do you handle these?
    - iii. Does/did someone support you?
    - iv. Do/ did you get any scholarship from somewhere or somebody?
    - v. How did you get this scholarship?
    - vi. What were the specific requirements you needed to meet for it?
    - vii. How does/did this scholarship help you in your studies?
  - d. Is this your first university experience in Turkey, Syria and elsewhere?
  - e. Why have you chosen this university and this department?
2. How did you prepare for the university in Turkey?
  - a. Did you attend any courses or get any help from somebody or someone?
  - b. Were you supported by any significant others in your life?
3. What is life like for a Syrian refugee student at a higher education institution?
4. What are the advantages you have experienced in Turkish Higher Education so far?
  - a. What are the things that you have found favourable?

5. What are the challenges you have experienced in Turkish Higher Education so far?
  - a. What happened? How did you cope with these challenges?

### *Preparatory School and Language Learning Experience*

#### *Initial Experiences*

6. Now that you have managed it to university, let's go on with your preparatory school year and language learning experience in general.
  - a. Where and when did you first begin to learn English as a foreign language? How do you find this experience?
    - i. How many years have you studied English in total?
  - b. What are your general thoughts on English language?
    - i. What do you like about English, if you do?
    - ii. What do you dislike about English, if you do?
    - iii. What urges do you experience to learn English?
    - iv. What role does English play in your educational and future roles?

#### *At Preparatory School*

- c. Why did you study English at preparatory school?
- d. How was the experience of learning English at Preparatory School?
  - i. How was learning English different, if it was, than that of your previous experiences?
  - ii. What helped you learn English?
  - iii. What prevented you from learning English better?
- e. How do you feel about your English now compared to one year ago at preparatory school?
  - i. What changes have you noticed in how you use English?
- f. How would you evaluate your language learning performance at the preparatory school?

- g. Assess your English language skills in terms of reading, writing, listening and speaking. What do you think about your strengths and weaknesses related to these skills?
- i. What skills, if any, you are called upon to use frequently and feel you have mastered enough?
  - ii. What skills, if any, you are called upon to use frequently but feel you have not mastered enough?
  - iii. What would you like to improve in your use of English?
- h. What type of academic and social activities did you participate to develop your English?
- i. What about inside of the language classroom...
    - i. What type of English activities seemed to help you the most?
    - ii. Was there any particular kind of feedback from your teachers or other students that you found helpful (and not helpful)?
    - iii. What do you think about your experience of working with other learners (Turkish learners or other migrant learners) for some activities or tasks in the English class time?
      1. How did you find it: helpful or discouraging, why?
      2. Who did you prefer to work with mostly? Why?
        - a. Alone
        - b. With other Turkish students
        - c. With other Syrian students if any
        - d. With other migrant students if any
        - e. Teachers if they could help
    - iv. How did other people speak with you in classroom and elsewhere?
    - v. What type of emotional or academic support did teachers provide you, if any?
    - vi. What did you experience while learning English where English is also a foreign language?
    - vii. How did you adapt yourself to learning English while your native Arabic is not spoken and only Turkish is the main language spoken?

1. Did this have any advantages for your learning English?
  2. Did this have any disadvantages for your learning English?
- viii. How did you find learning English with a community of Turkish students?
- ix. What are the stories of adaptation that you have experienced while studying at the preparatory school?
- x. How did you position yourself in this context?
- xi. How did you think your
1. Teachers
  2. Peers
  3. Educational leaders
  4. Significant others position you?
- xii. Were there any differences in how you were positioned based on context? For example, did you notice any differences when you were in the canteen and in the classroom?
- j. Can you please tell any specific instances/ stories/ happenings that you want to share?

*Covid-19 and sudden transition to online education at Preparatory school*

- k. On 12<sup>th</sup> March, the preparatory school you attended was closed with the nationwide decision of university closures because of Covid-19. How was the remaining 3 months until you passed the preparatory school?
- i. What were the advantages of online education?
  - ii. What were the disadvantages of online education?
  - iii. What were the major differences you experienced whether it be positive or negative?
  - iv. How do you think that your positioning changed with the transition to online education?

- v. Did you experience any changes/ differences in how you were positioned by
  1. Your teachers
  2. Friends
  3. And other significant others you may want to share?

### *In The City*

7. Now, let's talk about the city and your use of languages.
  - a. When did you start living in Ankara?
    - i. Do you still live in Ankara or live in somewhere else after the pandemic?
  - b. What changes have you noticed in yourself/ in your life since you started living in Ankara?
  - c. Which language do you choose to use where?
    - i. At home
    - ii. At school
    - iii. In public
    - iv. In class (online or face to face)
  - d. What are your reasons for your specific choices of languages?
  - e. In relation to the positions and the interaction between languages and identity, what changes do you realize in your identity when you speak
    - i. Arabic
    - ii. English
    - iii. Turkish?
  - f. How do you feel yourself/ how do you define yourself when you use each of these languages?
    - i. What do you think the reasons are for these identity shifts?
  - g. What identity do you like best? Why?
    - i. In which situations do you feel the most powerful?
    - ii. In which situations do you feel the least powerful?
  - h. What do you think about your use of native language (Arabic) in classroom, on street or elsewhere?

- i. Do you speak in your native language in places with people who share it?
  - ii. What do you think other people who are present at those places think about it?
  - iii. How does this affect you and your use of the language?
- i. When and where do you find it the easiest to speak English/ Turkish/ Arabic if you do?
- j. When and where do you find it the most difficult to speak English/ Turkish/ Arabic if you do?
- k. Where do you feel yourself heard and respected?
  - i. Where do you feel yourself the most comfortable?
  - ii. Where can you feel more like yourself?
- l. Have you ever not done something in Ankara or not gone somewhere because you had to use English or Turkish?
- m. Is it possible to have a good life in Ankara, Turkey without learning English, Turkish?
  - i. Do you know people like this?
  - ii. How do you make sense of their experiences?
- n. What are the instances that you have ever felt good about using a specific language, can you please tell me when and why did you feel in that way?
- o. What are the instances that you have ever felt bad about using a specific language, can you please tell me when and why did you feel in that way?
  - i. Has anyone made you feel bad
    - 1. because you could not speak or understand English
    - 2. because you could not speak or understand Turkish or
    - 3. because you are an international student/ you are from Syria/ you are a refugee based on the language you used?



1. In the previous interview, we talked about your educational path; your transition to Higher Education, preparatory school and language learning experiences, and the city for the contextual use of languages. Now, let's talk about the pandemic and the process since as for your departmental studies.
  - a. How is your and your family's health?
  - b. Has one of you ever had Covid-19?
  - c. Now let's remember the day of the school closure. How did you feel?
    - i. What did you think would happen? What kind of a future educational life you anticipated then?
    - ii. How was the process out of school?
    - iii. How did you concentrate on your studies?
  - d. You had to make a sudden transition to online education. Let's talk about this experience.
    - i. Did you have any technical problems related to online education?
    - ii. How was the transition from face-to-face education to online education?
    - iii. What are the stories of adaptation that you have experienced while studying online at your department after covid-19?
    - iv. What do you think about the advantages of online education after Covid-19 have been, if any?
    - v. What do you think about the disadvantages of online education after Covid-19 have been, if any?
  - e. What sort of language-related problems, if any, do you encounter in your classes?
  - f. What do you think about the ongoing overall process of online education?
  - g. How would you evaluate your learning performance here?
  - h. What do you think about the current situation: should online education go on or should we return back to classrooms for face to face education?
    - i. What changes do you anticipate once we return back?

2. Now let's talk about your identity as a Syrian refugee learner in the (online) classroom.
  - a. How do you find your relationship with
    - i. Your lecturers
    - ii. Peers
    - iii. And significant others (if any)?
  - b. How do you position yourself within and beyond the school context?
    - i. What specific roles do you seem to have?
    - ii. What specific roles seem to be appointed to you by significant others?
    - iii. How do you see yourself in Turkish online instructional setting?
  - c. What type of changes do you realize in your roles and positioning when you compare face to face education with online education?
    - i. Which of these changes do you favour? Why?
    - ii. Which of these changes would you like to have not? Why?
    - iii. What do you think about the possible reasons for these changes?
  - d. When we think of your identity both as a learner and as a Syrian, how do you think that the process has affected you?
    - i. Which of the changes do you think should be extended and you favoured?
    - ii. Which of the things do you think is better to be ended?

### *English as the Medium of Instruction*

3. Let's talk about English and the role it has in your department.
  - a. You are studying at a department in which English is the medium of instruction. What do you think about the whole process?
  - b. How has your educational process been so far in your department?
  - c. Do all your lecturers use English as the medium of instruction?
  - d. What kind of advantages do you think EMI has on your education?
  - e. What kind of disadvantages do you think EMI has on your education?
    - i. How do you handle the problems you face?

- f. What do you think about the effect of the training you had in Preparatory School on your current departmental studies where English is the medium of the instruction?
  - i. What are the strengths of the programme you have realized?
  - ii. What are the weaknesses of the programme you have realized?

*Turkish Context*

- 4. I would like to learn your Turkish language learning journey.
  - a. Where and when did you first begin to learn Turkish as a second language, if you did?
    - ii. Did you attend any specific courses or schools to learn Turkish?
    - iii. At which level are you?
    - iv. Do you have any diplomas or documents that show your level, can I see it? (artefact collection)
  - b. Why did you start learning Turkish?
  - c. How do you find learning Turkish, how was the process of learning Turkish?
  - d. How do you make sense of learning two different languages (both English and Turkish) simultaneously, if you do?
  - e. What kind of benefits do you think learning Turkish has enabled you, if any?
  - f. What kind of drawbacks do you think learning Turkish has caused you, if any?
- 5. How do you think that learning or not being able to learn Turkish (yet) has positioned you in the society in general and at your school in particular?
  - i. What do you think the reasons are for this positioning?
  - b. How do you think that learning Turkish has affected your identity?
- 6. What are the stories of adaptation that you have experienced while living in Turkey?
  - a. How do you think Syrian refugees are treated or respected in Turkey?

- i. If you think that Syrian refugees treated well, what do you think the reasons are?
- ii. If you think that they are treated badly, what do you think the reasons are?
  - 1. How does this affect you
    - a. As a Syrian
    - b. As a student here
    - c. As a resident in Turkey?
  - b. What are the examples of welcoming, embracement by Turkish people that you have observed, if any?
  - c. What are the examples of prejudice against Syrian people by Turkish people that you have observed, if any?
  - d. What did happen this week or this month that made you feel comfortable because of your language or your identity?
  - e. What did happen this week or this month that made you feel uncomfortable because of your language or your identity?

*Interview Guide #4: Last Interview (this may be attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> interview as well, not to make it a separate one)*

- 1. Given what you have said about your life before in Syria and now in Turkey, how do you understand being a refugee learner in Turkish context? What sense does it make to you?
- 2. Given what you have constructed in these three interviews, where do you see yourself in the future?
  - a. Would you like to have a future in here like having your job or family?
- 3. What do you think about staying in Turkey or migrating to another country? Do you think of returning back to Syria?
  - a. What motivates you in this decision?
- 4. What do you think about your integration and adjustment
  - a. To the country
  - b. To the society



## **D. INSTRUCTIONS FOR JOURNALS**

### **Why am I being asked to keep a journal?**

As a participant in the study “Positioning of migrant students (Syrian refugees): Negotiations of learner identity in an EFL program in Central Turkey”, you can help us gain better insight about foreign language learning by sharing your own reflections on your positioning and your language learning trajectories. We want to know what you experience in learning English, what you may find challenging about learning English, and how the people in your immediate context (your teachers, classmates, friends beyond school context) shape your language learning experiences.

### **What kinds of things should I write about?**

You can write about anything that you feel is related to your foreign language learning and identity. This can include:

- Why you think language learning is valuable or not valuable
- What you believe learning a foreign language involves
- What you find challenging and/or inspiring about learning English in Turkey
- How different factors at home/ dorm or school affect your language learning
- How you feel you are positioned, what specific attributions you think are attached to you
- How you position yourself in this context as a foreign language learner, what factors affect or shape these positioning

### **How often should I write in my journal and how long should my entries be?**

Please try to write in your journal at least once a week, if possible. An entry can be anything from a 2-3 sentences to a page or more.

**Who will read my journal entries?**

Your journal will be read by Gizem Doğan and Assoc. Prof. Dr. A. Cendel Karaman.

**How do I keep and share my journal?**

You can keep a hard copy journal and handwrite your entries, or keep an electronic journal and type in your entries in Word or in any other digital format you prefer. If you wish to keep a hard copy journal, we can provide a notebook for you. You can share your journal with us at any time, but all journal entries need to be handed in. You can email your e-journal to Gizem Doğan at [gizemakilli@gmail.com](mailto:gizemakilli@gmail.com) (or share the digital format in some other way) or we can collect the hard copy journal from you at a convenient time. We are happy to provide feedback on your journal entries, if you wish so.

**If I have questions, what should I do?**

Please email Gizem Doğan at [gizemakilli@gmail.com](mailto:gizemakilli@gmail.com) , or call or text her at 0537.....

## E. CODE SYSTEM

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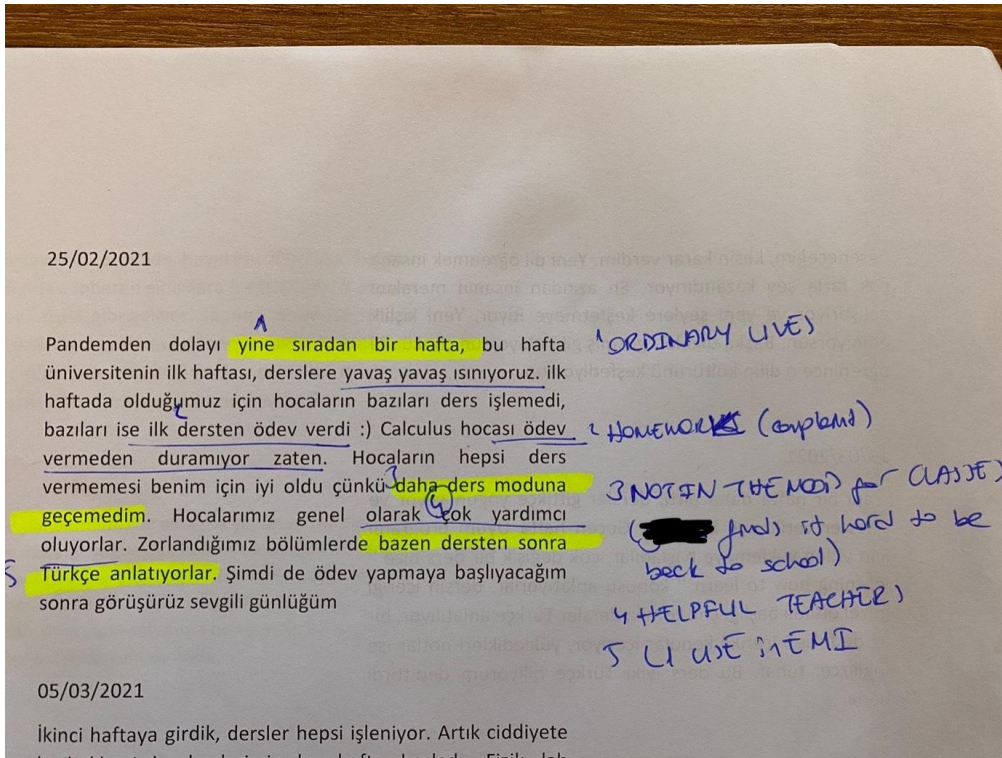
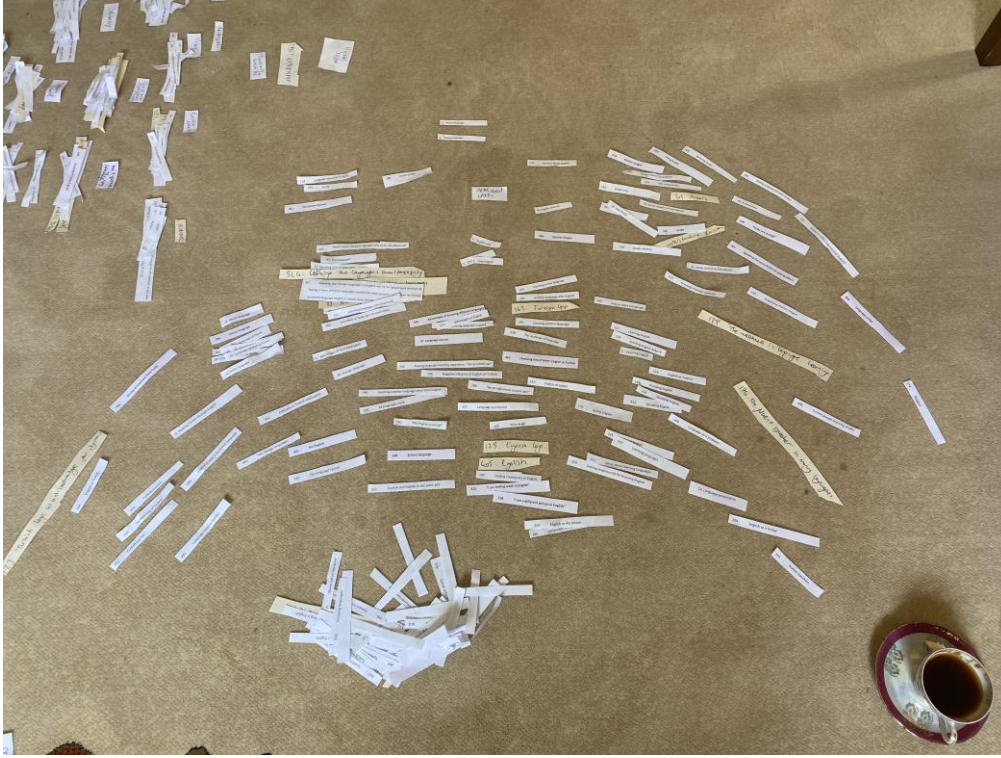
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## F. REPRESENTATIONS OF CODING PROCESS



Documents (880 Paragraphs)

Belle Personal Life

454 G.: Yes.

455 **G.D.: They started studying.**

456 G.: The Acceptancy... It wasn't... I can't... (Laughs)

457 **G.D.: You miss the acceptance dates?**

458 G.: Yes. For the first term. So, I got accepted in the second term.

459 **G.D.: Okay. So, then you start studying there.**

460 G.: Yes. For just one semester, and then I came here.

461 **G.D.: Why?**

462 G.: Actually, there's two reasons. The first one, and the most—

463 **G.D.: Yes, yes? Okay, go ahead.**

464 G.: The first one and the thing is, I don't want to waste my life in Syria. In Syria, there's nothing. You feel like just war and everyone is suffering and you're one of them. And you won't have life. And even if you do your best, like, what you're gonna get? Nothing. And the second thing, I was in conflict with my father and wanted to leave him. I wasn't like, I was feeling just, I'm wasting my life on something like, doesn't deserve this. Like why I'm wasting my life?

465 **G.D.(01.05.29) : Yeah. Okay, we will come back to this Ghina, but I want to give a break**

Retrieved Segments

Documents

- Documents
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    - Belle 785
    - Ali 1157
    - Ahmet 917
    - Nur 837
    - Yasemin 1197
  - Focus Group Interviews
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...prior schooling in Syria

...reasons for migration

...before migrating

Quotations

...war

Quotations

## G. APPROVAL OF THE METU HUMAN SUBJECTS ETHICS COMMITTEE

UYGULAMALI ETİK ARAŞTIRMA MERKEZİ  
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İlgi: İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu Başvurusu

Sayın A.Cendel KARAMAN

Danışmanlığını yaptığınız Gizem DOĞAN'ın "Türkiye'nin İç Anadolu Bölgesindeki Bir Üniversitenin Yabancı Dil Programındaki Suriyeli Mülteci Öğrencilerinin Konumlandırılması ve Kimlik Müzakereleri" başlıklı araştırması İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu tarafından uygun görülmüş ve 009-ODTU-2020 protokol numarası ile onaylanmıştır.

Saygılarımızla bilgilerinize sunarız.

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## H. CURRICULUM VITAE

### PERSONAL INFORMATION

Surname, Name: Dođan, Gizem

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Date and Place of Birth:

email:

### EDUCATION

Degree	Institution	Year of Graduation
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High School	Alanya Foreign Language Intensive High School	2006

### WORK EXPERIENCE

Year	Institution	Job Title
2014- Present	Ankara University	Lecturer
2010-2014	Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University	Lecturer

### PUBLICATIONS

Dođan, G. & Mirici, İ. H. (2017). EFL instructors' perception and practices on learner autonomy in some Turkish universities. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(1), 166-193.

Dođan, G. (2017). The effect of gender and L2 proficiency on learners' motivational dispositions and vision. *International Journal of Language Academy*, 5(16), 66-83.  
<https://doi.org/10.18033/ijla.3585>

## I. TURKISH SUMMARY/ TÜRKÇE ÖZET

### EĞİTSEL YOLLARIN VE KİMLİK ANLATILARININ İZİNDE: KRİZ ORTASINDA TÜRK YÜKSEKÖĞRETİMİNDEKİ SURİYELİ MÜLTECİLERLE İLGİLİ BİR ETNOGRAFİK DURUM ÇALIŞMASI

#### Giriş

Türkiye'de 3.111.047 Suriyeli mülteci (geçici koruma altında) bulunmaktadır (DGMM, 2024). Suriye ve diğer komşu ülkelerden gelen mülteci akınıyla birlikte Türkiye'de yükseköğretime devam eden öğrenci sayısı belirgin bir şekilde artış göstermiştir (Yılmazel & Atay, 2022). Mülteciler, tüm vatandaşlar ve kendileri için ücretsiz olarak sunulan eğitimlerini tamamlamaları, mezuniyet sonrasında istihdam edilmeleri ve ev sahibi ülkede sivil topluma anlamlı bir şekilde katılabilmeleri için gerekli olan dirençliliği kazanmaları teşvik edilmektedir. 2023-2024 akademik yılı itibarıyla Türkiye'deki üniversitelerde 336.366 uluslararası öğrenci eğitim görmektedir (YÖK, 2024) ve bu öğrencilerin 60.750'si Suriyeli mültecilerden oluşmaktadır.

Mülteci öğrencilerin yükseköğretime erişimde karşılaştıkları engelleri nasıl aştıklarına dair araştırmalar, özellikle Türkiye gibi yerinden edilme bağlamlarında sınırlıdır (Hauber-Özer, 2023). Bu durum, kısmen Küresel Kuzey'deki yeniden yerleşim ülkelerine kıyasla daha sınırlı erişim imkânlarından kaynaklanabilmektedir (Morrice vd., 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Yüksek öğretime ulaşmış başarılı mülteci öğrenciler tarafından kullanılan stratejilerin incelenmesi, eğitimciler, karar alıcılar ve eğitim sonuçlarını iyileştirmeyi ve öz yeterliliği teşvik etmeyi amaçlayan yardım kuruluşları için değerli bilgiler sunabilir. Bu ayrıca, mülteci öğrencileri çaresiz kurbanlar veya kamuya yük olarak tasvir eden perspektife de meydan okuyabilir. Her mülteci deneyiminin kendine has olduğu artık yaygın bir şekilde kabul edilmektedir; bu nedenle mülteci öğrencilerin sıkça karşılaştıkları kişisel zorlukların yükseköğretime katılımlarını nasıl etkilediği de sonraki eğitimsel ve

uyum sağlama deneyimlerine odaklanarak daha fazla araştırılması gereken bir konudur (Baker & Shda, 2023). Literatürde, Türkçe yeterliliğinde eksikliğin mülteci öğrencilerin eğitim katılımını engellediği sıkça belirtilmektedir (örn. Arar vd., 2020; Arar, 2021; Ateşok vd., 2019; Aydın & Kaya, 2017; Baban vd., 2016; Dereli, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Ergin & de Wit, 2020); ancak, İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversitede ne tür deneyimler yaşadıkları konusunda daha az araştırma yapılmıştır. Yerinden edilme bağlamlarında yükseköğretime sınırlı odaklanılması, mülteciler için yükseköğretim imkânlarının varlığı, bu fırsatlara erişimleri, yükseköğretimden beklentileri ve bu kurumlar içindeki deneyimleriyle ilgili araştırma boşluklarına yol açmıştır (Fincham, 2020).

Araştırmalar genellikle yükseköğretime erişimdeki engellere (Arar vd., 2020; Ateşok vd., 2019; Bimay, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Hauber-Özer, 2021; Kondakçı vd., 2022; Yavcan & El-Gahli, 2017) ve mültecilere ilkökul ve ortaokul düzeyinde kaliteli eğitim sağlama ile ilgili konulara odaklanmıştır; ancak, mülteciler için yükseköğretim konusu hem akademik yazında hem de politika düzeyinde neredeyse hiç araştırılmamıştır (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012). Türkiye’de de mülteci ve göçmen öğrencilerin Türk Yükseköğretimindeki eğitimleri ve akademik uyumlarına dair pek fazla araştırma yapılmamıştır (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2021; Yılmazel & Atay, 2022). Ayrıca, bu araştırmalar genellikle sınırlı bir zaman dilimine odaklanmaktadır ve mülteci öğrenciler üzerine neredeyse hiç etnografik araştırma yapılmamıştır (Hauber-Özer, 2021 hariç).

Bu bağlamda, bu tez çalışması, mülteci öğrencilerin öğrenme yolculuklarının Türkiye’deki ilk öğrenme deneyimlerinden yükseköğretime kadar nasıl şekillendiğini ve buna bağlı olarak öğrenen kimliklerini nasıl anlattıklarını, özellikle hazırlık okulundaki İngilizce dil öğrenme yolculuklarına ve İngilizce eğitim veren üniversitelerde eğitim görme deneyimlerine odaklanarak, keşfetmeyi ve anlamayı amaçlamıştır. Krizlerle dolu olduğu kadar direnç inşa etme süreci de olan Türk yükseköğretimindeki mülteci deneyimini ele alarak, bu çalışmada, en fazla mülteciye ev sahipliği yapan ülkelerden birinde, mülteci öğrenci deneyimlerinin çeşitliliğini ve karmaşıklığını keşfetmeyi hedefledim. Çalışma şu araştırma sorularına odaklanmıştır:

1. Belirli bir mülteci öğrenci grubunun eğitim deneyimleri, İngilizce eğitim veren üniversitelerindeki tecrübeleri ve COVID-19 pandemisinin, özellikle çevrimiçi eğitime geçişle birlikte algılanan etkisi dikkate alındığında, ilk öğrenme aşamalarından Türk yükseköğretime entegrasyonlarına kadar nasıl gelişmektedir?
  - a. Katılımcıların savaş ve göç yolculuğu deneyimleri nelerdir ve bu deneyimler, ev sahibi ülkeye ve onun eğitim sistemine algılanan entegrasyonlarını nasıl etkiler?
  - b. Katılımcılar, Türkiye'ye geldiklerinde, dil engelleri, kültürel uyum ve eğitime erişim gibi faktörler dikkate alınarak, öğrenmenin ilk aşamalarını nasıl aşmaktadır?
  - c. Katılımcılar, Türk yükseköğretim kurumlarına geçiş sırasında hangi zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır ve bu zorlukları nasıl aşmaktadır?
  - d. COVID-19 pandemisi, katılımcıların eğitim deneyimlerini nasıl etkilemektedir?
  - e. Çevrimiçi eğitime geçişin katılımcılar için sunduğu zorluklar nelerdir ve katılımcılar çevrimiçi öğrenme ortamlarına nasıl uyum sağlamaktadırlar?
  - f. İngilizceyle eğitim veren bir üniversitede eğitim gören katılımcıların deneyimleri ve karşılaştıkları zorluklar nelerdir ve bu deneyimler, onların eğitim yolculuklarını nasıl etkilemektedir?
2. Mülteci öğrenciler, yerinden edilme ve ev sahibi ülkedeki yeni eğitimsel ve sosyal bağlamlara uyum sağlama zorlukları karşısında kimliklerini nasıl anlatmaktadır?
  - a. Katılımcılar, çeşitli öğrenme ortamları ve sosyal bağlamlar içinde kimliklerini nasıl uyumlandırmaktadır?
  - b. Katılımcılar, dayanıklılığa giden yolda karşılaştıkları duygusal zorluklara karşı ne tür başa çıkma stratejileri geliştirmektedir?

## **Alanyazın Taraması**

### **Kimlik**

Weedon'ın (1987) öznellik kavramına göre dil, benlik duygumuzu şekillendirir ve kimlik, çoklu, dinamik ve bir mücadele alanı olarak görülür (Darvin & Norton,



2015). Sosyal kimliğin çoklu, bir mücadele alanı ve deęişime tabi olaran post-yapısalcı kavramlarından yola çıkarak (Karaman & Edling, 2021), öğrenciler tarih dışı ve tek tip bireyler olarak deęil, karmaşık bir geçmişe ve kendilerine özgü çok sayıda farklı isteęe sahip bireyler olarak ele alınır (Peirce, 1995). Norton (2013), kimlięi, bir “bireyin dünyayla olan ilişkisini nasıl kavradıęı, bu ilişkinin zaman ve mekân içerisinde nasıl şekillendięi ve kişinin geleceęe dair olasılıkları nasıl deęerlendirdięi” şeklinde tanımlamıştır (s. 45). Birçok çağdaş bilim insanı kimlięi, çeşitli tarihsel ve materyal faktörlerden etkilenen, akışkan, bağlama baęlı ve bağlam üreten bir kavram olarak kabul etmektedir.

Artan sayıda araştırma, göçmen dil öğrencilerinin, hem Batı (ör. Fotovatian, 2012; Miller, 2003; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2013; Rawal & De Costa, 2019) hem de Batı dışı bağlamlarda (ör. De Costa, 2016; Gu, 2015; Hauber-Özer, 2021) yeni diller öğrenirken ve ev sahibi toplumlarla sosyalleşirken kimliklerini nasıl inşa ettiklerini incelemiştir. Bu çalışmalar, özellikle ulusötesi etnik azınlık öğrencilerinin ev sahibi topluma entegre olmak için hedef dili kullanarak kimliklerini nasıl müzakere ettiklerine odaklanmıştır. Bu çalışmalar, sınır ötesi azınlık öğrenenlerinin genellikle dezavantajlı konumlarda olmalarına rağmen, mevcut kaynakları kullanarak arzu edilen kimlikleri müzakere etmeyi başardıklarını göstererek, kimlikten etkilenen karmaşık dil öğrenme süreçlerine dair deęerli içgörüler sunmuştur.

### **Türkiye’de Mülteciler ve Göçmenler için Yükseköğretim**

Hâlihazırda, Türkiye’de 129 devlet üniversitesi, 75 vakıf üniversitesi ve 4 vakıf meslek yüksekokulu olmak üzere toplam 208 yükseköğretim kurumu bulunmaktadır (YÖK, 2024). 2023-2024 akademik yılında, Türkiye’deki yükseköğretim kurumlarına toplam 7.081.289 öğrenci kayıtlıdır (YÖK, 2024). Bu öğrencilerin 336.366’sı yabancı öğrencilerdir ve bunların içinden, 2011 yılında 608 olan Suriyeli mülteci öğrenci sayısı 2024 yılında 60.750’ye yükselmiştir (YÖK, 2024). Bu, Türkiye’deki yükseköğretim kurumlarının, dünyadaki en büyük mülteci öğrenci nüfuslarından birine ev sahiplięi yaptığını göstermektedir.

Yükseköğretime erişim, mülteciler ve göçmenler için hayati bir can simididir; çünkü bu, onlara uluslararası alanda tanınan beceri ve nitelikler kazandırmakla kalmaz, aynı

zamanda izolasyon, marjinalleşme ve insan potansiyelinin israfını da önlemeye yardımcı olur (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Morrice, 2013). Mültecilerin başarı ve refahını desteklemenin yanı sıra, yükseköğretim, mültecilerin yaşadığı ev sahibi toplumun refahını, istikrarını ve güvenliğini artırmada da önemli bir rol oynar (Zeus, 2011). Yükseköğretime yapılan yatırım, yalnızca küçük ve elit bir mülteci grubuna fayda sağlayan bir yatırım değildir (Dryden-Peterson, 2012); bu, mültecilerin hem ev sahibi ülkede hem de geri dönmeleri durumunda memleketlerinde ömür boyu faydalanabilecekleri kültürel sermaye için bir yatırımdır.

Göçün ilk yıllarında, acil durum önlemleri kapsamında, Türkiye'deki Suriyeli öğrencilerin eğitim ve öğrenim olanaklarını artırmak amacıyla çeşitli politikalar uygulanmıştır. Bu geçiş dönemi boyunca, Türkiye, 350 Geçici Eğitim Merkezi (GEM) kurmuş ve bu merkezlerde Suriyeli öğretmenler, Suriyeli öğrencilere uyarlanmış Suriye müfredatı ile Arapça eğitim vermişlerdir. Eylül 2012'den beri, Türkiye, YÖK aracılığıyla yükseköğretim kurumlarına erişimi ve geçişi kolaylaştırmak amacıyla çeşitli yollar denemiştir. Bu politikaların bazıları, mülteci öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları ekonomik zorlukları hafifletmeyi amaçlamaktadır; örneğin, uluslararası öğrencilere yönelik özel sınavla Türk yükseköğretimine erişimlerinin sağlanması, ancak diğer uluslararası öğrencilerin ödediği harçlardan muaf tutulmaları veya onlar için özel olarak sunulan çeşitli burs imkânlarının bulunması gibi (Dereli, 2021). Ayrıca, ilk dönemde, Suriyeli öğrenciler, eğitim sürecine dahil edilmeleri amacıyla, Suriye sınırına yakın illerde bulunan yedi üniversiteye "özel öğrenci" statüsünde yerleştirilmişlerdir (Seydi, 2014). Özellikle üniversiteler tarafından resmi belgelerin temin edilmesi konusunda bürokratik işlemleri azaltmış ve Türkçe veya herhangi bir yabancı dilde daha esnek programlara girmelerine olanak tanıyan bir dizi değişiklik uygulamıştır.

Mülteci öğrencilerle ilgili yükseköğretimde yapılan daha önceki çalışmalar, genellikle mülteci öğrencilerin üniversitelere kabul almaya çalışırken karşılaştıkları dilsel, psikososyal ve yapısal zorlukları ve ev sahibi ülkede eğitim görürken yaşadıkları deneyimleri araştırmaktadır (örn. Arar vd., 2020; Ateşok vd., 2019; Bimay, 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Erdemir, 2022; Fincham, 2020; Hauber-Özer, 2021; Hauber-Özer, 2023; Kondakçı vd., 2022; Yavcan & El-Gahli, 2017). Bunların

içinde, İngilizce öğrenme ve/veya öğretme sürecine odaklanan çalışma sayısı azdır (örn. Hauber-Özer, 2021; Örsdemir-Şağın, 2022; Topluk, 2023).

Yükseköğretimdeki mülteci öğrencilerle ilgili alanyazın, bu öğrencilerin, ev sahibi ülkede hem eğitimsel hem de toplumsal alanlara entegrasyonları önünde önemli engeller olmasına rağmen, yükseköğretimin aynı zamanda dayanıklılık inşa etme ve ötekileştirme ile ayrımcılığın daha az yaşandığı güvenli bir ortam sağlama işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir. Daha önce de belirtildiği gibi, mevcut çalışmalar zorlukları vurgulasa da, Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin geçirdiği eğitim ve uyum süreçleri üzerine daha fazla araştırma yapılması bir ihtiyaç olarak öne çıkmaktaydı. Tartışıldığı üzere, Türkiye, yükseköğretim kurumlarına hazırlık ve erişim için fırsatlar sunmakta, bu da bu öğrencilerin üniversitelerdeki eğitim deneyimlerini daha derinlemesine incelemeyi gerekli kılmaktadır.

### **Kavramsal Çerçeve**

**Kesişimsellik.** Küreselleşme bağlamında, etnisite, cinsiyet ve sınıf gibi sosyal kategorilerin incelenmesi, özellikle kesişimlerine ilişkin daha ayrıntılı araştırmalar gerektirmektedir (Block & Corona, 2014). Kesişimselliğe odaklanmak önemlidir çünkü bu sosyal kategoriler genellikle örtüşür ve birbirlerine bağlıdır. Örneğin, zor durumda olan göçmen öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorluklar yalnızca uyruk veya etnisiteye atfedilemez; bunlar aynı zamanda sınıf, cinsiyet ve din gibi diğer kategorilerle de ilişkili olarak incelenmelidir (Norton & De Costa, 2018). Kimliğin farklı boyutları birbirinden bağımsız olarak incelenemeyeceği ve kategori içi farklılıklar sıklıkla kimlik araştırmalarının en çarpıcı yönlerini oluşturduğu için, kesişimselliği göz ardı etmek ve bir böl-parçala yaklaşımı benimsemek, araştırma katılımcılarının eksik tasvirini sunan araştırmalarla sonuçlanır (Block & Corona, 2016).

**Bourdieu'nün Sosyolojik Teorisi.** Bourdieu'nün sosyolojik teorisi (1984, 1991) geniş bir kavram ve fikir yelpazesini kapsar, ancak bu araştırma, beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin Türkiye'nin merkezindeki bir devlet üniversitesindeki eğitim ve uyum deneyimlerini kavramsallaştırmak için bu kavramların nasıl birlikte

kullanılabileceğini göstermek amacıyla *sermaye*, *habitus* ve *alana* odaklanmaktadır. Habitus, insanların davranışlarının temsilleri ve onların gerçekliklerini yönlendiren toplumsal mekanizmalarla ilişkili olarak yaptıkları düzenlemeler olarak tanımlanabilir. Bu, bireyin dünyayla olan bilişsel, fiziksel ve duygusal etkileşimlerini şekillendiren kültürel ve bağlamsal olarak yerleşik yapıları kapsar. Bir bireyin habitusu, belirli alan yapıları veya ortamlar içindeki deneyimlerle oluşur. Bu kavram, mülteci çocuklar ve gençler için sınırlı eğitim erişiminin hem pratik hem de özgürleştirici etkilerini anlamada bir araçtır. Bourdieu'nün (1991) önerdiği diğer kavramsal araç *sermaye*dir ve bu, bireyin sahip olduğu kaynakların toplamı olarak tanımlanabilir. Bourdieu (1991), bireylerin sahip oldukları farklı kaynaklar veya sermaye türlerine göre dil seçimleri yaptıklarını ileri sürmüştür. Son olarak, *alan* kavramı, toplumun kurallarının yapısal olarak belirlendiği ve güç konumlarına ya da sermayelerine göre inşa edildiği yer olarak işlev görür ve kişilerin ve onların sosyal konumlarının yer aldığı ortamı ifade eder (Bourdieu, 1984). Kişilerin alandaki pozisyonu, alanın spesifik kuralları ile onların habitus ve sermayeleri arasındaki etkileşimle belirlenir (De Costa, 2010).

**Yaşam Sermayesi.** Bourdieu'nün sermaye kavramından (1991) hareketle, Consoli (2022), sosyolojik kavrama yeni bir boyut kazandırarak, bu çalışmada beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin eğitim ve uyum hikayelerini ve bunların Türkiye'nin merkezindeki bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenme davranışlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini açıklamak amacıyla, epistemik bir çerçeve olarak benimsediğim yaşam sermayesi kavramını ortaya koymaktadır. Yaşam sermayesi, “her insanın sahip olduğu, bir kişinin yaşam deneyimlerinin zenginliği aracılığıyla anlaşılabilir bir zenginlik” olarak tanımlanır. Yaşam sermayesi, bu nedenle, bireyin yaşam sermayesini nasıl yönettiğine, paylaştığına ve kullandığına bağlı olarak nispeten olumlu veya olumsuz ve açık ya da gizli olabilen anılar, istekler, duygular, tutumlar, görüşler gibi unsurları içerir” (Consoli, 2021a, s. 122).

## **Yöntem**

### **Araştırma Tasarımı**

Bu tezde, sosyal yapılandırıcı bilgi kuramına dayalı nitel bir yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. Bu yaklaşımda, araştırmacılar ile katılımcılar arasında yakın

etkileşim vurgulanır ve genellikle katılımcıların yaşadığı ve çalıştığı doğal ortamlar içinde araştırma yapılmasını içerir, bu da onların bakış açılarının yakalanması için esastır. Yorumlamacı yaklaşımla, bu çalışmada, Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin bir Türk yükseköğretim kurumundaki akademik ve sosyal deneyimlerinin nasıl anladıkları ve yorumladıklarını derinlemesine ve bütüncül bir şekilde anlamak amacıyla etnografik bir durum çalışması yaklaşımını benimsedim. Duff (2012), uygulamalı dilbilimdeki durum çalışmalarını, katılımcıların davranışlarını, performanslarını, bilgilerini ve bakış açılarını anlamaya yönelik, belirli sorulara veya konulara yanıt aramayı amaçlayan bir araştırma ve teori geliştirme yöntemi olarak tanımlar. Heath ve Street (2008), etnografik yöntemin, bir grubun faaliyet gösterdiği ve evrildiği sosyo-kültürel bağlamı incelemek için güçlü bir araç olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Wolcott (2009), etnografik çalışmaların üç temel bileşenini de şöyle özetlemektedir: (1) aynı kültürü paylaşan incelenmekte olan grubun ayrıntılı bir tanımını sağlamak; (2) bu grubu algılayan temalar ve bakış açıları açısından analiz etmek ve (3) araştırmacı tarafından grubun yorumlanması.

### **Araştırma Ortamı ve Katılımcılar**

Bu çalışmanın araştırma bağlamı, Türkiye'nin merkezinde yer alan önde gelen, İngilizceyle eğitim veren devlet üniversitelerinden biri olan Newfoundland Üniversitesi'dir (takma ad). Newfoundland Üniversitesi, Türkiye'nin en büyük şehirlerinden birinde yer almakta olup, araştırma projeleri, uluslararası ortaklıkları ve mezun istihdam edilebilirliği açısından Türkiye'nin önde gelen yükseköğretim kurumlarından biri olarak tanınmaktadır (URAP, 2024). 2019-2020 akademik yılında saha çalışmasına başlandığında, üniversitenin 3.618'i uluslararası öğrenci ve bunların 349'u Suriyeli mülteci öğrenci olmak üzere toplam 66.650 öğrencisi bulunmaktaydı (YÖK, 2024). Araştırmanın yapıldığı Hazırlık Okulunda o dönemde 10 Suriyeli mülteci öğrenci bulunmaktaydı. Bir metropolün ilçesinde bulunan Hazırlık Okulu, 100'den fazla tam zamanlı öğretim görevlisi ve 3.000'den fazla öğrenciye ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Okulda, 32 haftaya yayılan ve iki akademik dönemi kapsayan yoğun İngilizce dersleri verilmektedir. Öğrenciler, genellikle haftada yaklaşık 25 saat İngilizce eğitimi almaktadır. Hazırlık Okulundaki eğitimlerini başarıyla tamamlayan

öğrenciler, eğitim dili İngilizce olan çeşitli akademik programlarda eğitimlerine devam etmektedir.

**Katılımcılar.** Bu etnografik durum çalışmasında amaçlı ölçüt örnekleme kullanılmıştır (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). Katılımcıların araştırmaya seçilme kriterleri şunlardır: (1) Suriyeli mülteci öğrenci olmaları, (2) %100 İngilizce dilinde eğitim veren bir programa kayıtlı olmaları, (3) o dönemde üniversitenin İngilizce dil eğitimi sunan hazırlık okulunda öğrenim görüyor olmaları ve (4) etnografik durum çalışmasının doğası gereği, kolay erişilebilir ve uzun süreli etkileşime uygun bir mekânda eğitim görüyor olmaları. Aşağıdaki katılımcıların bilgileri verilmiştir.

<i>Takma İsim</i>	<i>Yaş</i>	<i>Cinsiyet</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Hazırlık okulundaki dil seviyesi ( 2019-2020'de)</i>	<i>Bildikleri diller</i>	<i>Türkiye'ye geliş tarihleri</i>	<i>Üniversiteye giriş tarihleri</i>
<i>Yasemin</i>	19	Kadın	Bilgisayar Mühendisliği	L2	Arapça, Türkçe, İngilizce	2013	2019
<i>Nur</i>	23	Kadın	Eczacılık	L4	Arapça, Türkçe, İngilizce	2015	2019
<i>Ahmet</i>	20	Erkek	Gıda Mühendisliği	L4	Arapça, Türkçe, İngilizce, Rusça	2017	2019
<i>Ali</i>	20	Erkek	Tıp	L2	Arapça, Türkçe, İngilizce	2016	2019
<i>Bella</i>	24	Kadın	Fizik Mühendisliği	L2	Arapça, Türkçe, İngilizce	2018	2019

### **Veri Toplama**

Bu etnografik durum çalışmasında veri kaynakları arasında dört bireysel görüşme, beş odak grup görüşmesi, katılımcılar tarafından tutulan günlükler, katılımcıların çalışma notları ve eğitim belgeleri gibi toplanan materyaller ve cep telefonu uygulama tabanlı sohbetler, e-postalar, telefon görüşmeleri, paylaşılan öğle yemeği,

kahve buluşmaları gibi saha çalışması yoluyla elde edilen ikincil veri türleri yer almaktadır.

## **Veri Analizi**

Bu çalışmada, araştırmanın hedeflerine ulaşmak için karmaşıklığa, derinliğe ve eleştirel incelemeye vurgu yaparak titiz analizler ve çok katmanlı yorumlamalar yapılmıştır. Bu yinelenen bir süreç olarak, veri ve yorumlama arasında sürekli bir etkileşimle gerçekleşmiştir. Mevcut çalışmada veri analizi, “araştırmacının verileriyle yaptığı düşünsel ve sorgulayıcı etkileşim ile analitik süreçle kurduğu özdeşimsel ve dikkatli ilişki” (Braun ve Clarke, 2019, s. 594) üzerine dayanan yansıtıcı tematik analiz (RTA) yaklaşımını benimsemiştir. Araştırmacı olarak kodlama ve tema oluşturma sürecinde aktif rolümü kabul ederek, bu çalışmada RTA'nın altı aşamasını (Braun & Clarke, 2021) kullandım. İlk olarak, veri setine derinlemesine odaklanarak aşinalık kazandım. Bu ilk aşama, verileri saatlerce okuyarak, izleyerek ve dinleyerek ve ilk çıkarımlarımı notlar şeklinde yazarak geçti. Bu ilk derinlemesine süreçten sonra, verileri kodlamaya geçtim ve bu sırada kapsamlı notlar yazmaya devam ettim. İlk kodlama döngüsünden sonra, tüm veri setini gözden geçirdim ve ikinci kodlama döngüsünü gerçekleştirdim. Kodlama süreci, üçüncü turda, yorumlarıma ekleyecek veya değiştirecek bir şey kalmadığını hissettiğimde tamamlandı. Kodlama süreci tamamlandıktan sonra, kodlardan ve kodlanmış verilerden ilk temaları oluşturmaya başladım. İlk okumaya derinlemesine odaklanarak ve verileri uzun bir süre boyunca kapsamlı analitik notlar aracılığıyla yorumlamaya çalışarak, veri analizinin bu en erken aşamasında birkaç ön tema oluşturmayı mümkün kılan çeşitli fikirleri ortaya çıkarabildim. Veri analizi için takip ettiğim adımlar şu şekildedir:

Verilerin ilk okunması

Analitik notlar, katılımcıların profillemesi

Yansıtıcı Tematik Analiz:

Veri tabanlı, tümevarımsal

İlk döngü kodlaması manuel olarak

Betimleyici, in-vivo, süreç kodları

İlk döngü kodlamasında kodların gözden geçirilmesi

Manuel olarak ortaya çıkan kategoriler ve temalar için İkinci döngü kodlaması

Tüm kodlama sisteminin ve verilerin MAXQDA'ye (2024) aktarılması, kodlamanın son kontrolü ve verilerin programda hazırlanması

Analizin tamamlanması ve son rapor için çalışmanın temalarının oluşturulması

## **Güvenilirlik**

Creswell ve Miller (2000), geçerliliği “araştırmacıların çalışmalarının güvenilirliğini sağlamak için kullandıkları stratejiler” olarak tanımlar (s. 125) ve bir etnografin izlemesi gereken birkaç strateji önerir, örneğin: 'sahada uzun süreli katılım,' 'zengin ve ayrıntılı betimleme,' 'veri üçgenleme,' 'katılımcı kontrolü,' 'dış denetimler' ve araştırmacının konumunu netleştirmeye yönelik 'öz-yansıtıcı açıklamalar' geliştirme. Yorumların ve bulguların güvenilirliğini sağlamak için Creswell ve Miller (2000) ve Lincoln ve Guba (1985) tarafından önerilen her bir prosedüre bağlı kaldım.

## **Bulgular ve Tartışma**

Bu etnografik durum çalışmasında, analiz birimi, Türkiye'nin merkezindeki bir İngilizceyle eğitim veren bir devlet üniversitesinde okuyan beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin akademik ve uyum deneyimleriydi ve çalışmanın amacı, Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin Türkiye Yükseköğretimindeki deneyimlerini, savaş ve göç deneyimlerinden başlayarak, Türkiye'deki ilk eğitim deneyimlerinden yükseköğretime geçişlerine, COVID-19 salgınından çevrimiçi öğrenme deneyimlerine, İngilizce dilinde eğitim veren bir üniversitede eğitim görmekten kimlik anlatımlarına, bu süreçte karşılaşılan zorluklardan başa çıkma stratejilerine ve direnç geliştirmeye kadar geniş bir perspektiften keşfetmekti. Aşağıda, araştırma soruları mevcut literatürle ilişkilendirilerek tartışılmış ve bulgular sunulmuştur.

**Araştırma Sorusu 1: Belirli bir mülteci öğrenci grubunun eğitim deneyimleri, İngilizce eğitim veren üniversitelerindeki tecrübeleri ve COVID-19**



**pandemisinin, özellikle çevrimiçi eğitime geçişle birlikte algılanan etkisi dikkate alındığında, ilk öğrenme aşamalarından Türk yükseköğretimine entegrasyonlarına kadar nasıl gelişmektedir?**

**1a. Katılımcıların savaş ve göç yolculuğu deneyimleri nelerdir ve bu deneyimler, ev sahibi ülkeye ve onun eğitim sistemine algılanan entegrasyonlarını nasıl etkiler?**

Göç öncesi savaş dönemi, katılımcıların tamamı için zorlu geçmiş, birçok zorlu olayla karşılaşmışlardır; ancak, durumları belirgin bir şekilde benzersiz ve farklıdır. Bu farklılıklar, yaşadıkları şehir, komşu ülkelere yakınlık, sosyal sınıf ve ekonomik sermaye, çevrelerindeki önemli kişiler, ailelerinin meslekleri, çatışan gruplarla doğrudan bağlantıları veya kendi ülkelerinde ve zorunlu göç sırasında süreci kolaylaştırmak için sahip oldukları kaynaklar gibi çeşitli faktörlere atfedilmiştir. Katılımcıların anlatımları, göç öncesi dönemin farklılık gösterdiğini ve bu durumun travmanın etkisini de potansiyel olarak değiştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Savaş patlak verdiğinde, getirdiği bilinmezlik durumunun yanı sıra, günlük yaşamın normal akışını da bozar. Veriler, savaş öncesi sürecin ve savaş sonrası arzuların sıklıkla "normale" dönüş olarak kavramsallaştırıldığını vurgulamaktadır. Bu nedenle, savaşın ve sonrasının yarattığı olağanüstü kaosun ortasında sıradan olana duyulan arzu ile zorunlu göç sürecinin başladığını vurgulamak gerekir. Katılımcıların göç motivasyonları ve yeniden yerleşim ülkesinin seçimi, coğrafi yakınlık, dini nedenler, ekonomik sermaye, göç statüsü, ülkelerindeki eğitimin kesintiye uğraması, savaşın sona ermesine dair umudun kaybı, iş imkanları, güvenlik eksikliği, artan tehlike gibi sebeplerden kaynaklanmıştır.

**1b. Katılımcılar, Türkiye'ye geldiklerinde dil engelleri, kültürel uyum ve eğitime erişim gibi faktörleri dikkate alarak öğrenmenin ilk aşamalarını nasıl aşmaktadır?**

Göç motivasyonları doğrultusunda, katılımcıların anlatılarında ortaya çıkan ortak bir tema, eğitimin en üst düzeyde öneme sahip olduğu ve savaş nedeniyle zaten kesintiye uğramış olan eğitimlerine başlamanın katılımcılar ve aileleri için son derece kritik

olduğuydu. Türkçe öğrenmek, katılımcıların açıkladığı gibi, eğitim hedefleriyle doğrudan örtüşen bir diğer önemli hedefti. Bulgular, Suriyeli mülteci katılımcıların hem yeni bir eğitim sistemine uyum sağlamada hem de yükseköğretim öncesinde Türk okullarında hem araç hem de hedef dil olan Türkçeyi öğrenmede zorluk yaşadıklarını göstermektedir. Tüm okullarda eğitim dilinin Türkçe olması, katılımcılar tarafından önemli bir engel olarak algılanmıştır; ancak bulgular, zorlukların dil meselelerinin ötesine geçtiğini göstermektedir. Bir diğer büyük engel, mültecilerin kayıt sürecini zorlaştıran gerekli belgelerin eksikliği olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca, okulların, ev sahibi ülkeye varışta uyum ve entegrasyon sürecinde önemli ve kolaylaştırıcı bir rol oynadığı da ortaya çıkmıştır.

### **1c. Katılımcılar, Türk yükseköğretim kurumlarına geçiş sırasında hangi zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır ve bu zorlukları nasıl aşmaktadırlar?**

Türkiye'de Suriyeli mülteciler için hangi programa başvurulacağına dair tercihlerin değiştirilme fırsatı ve esnekliği, karar verme sürecinin dinamik doğasını da vurgulamaktadır. Bazı mülteci öğrenciler için kabul sürecindeki esneklik ve sunulan alternatif yollar, Türk Yükseköğretimine kabul sağlamaya çalışan mülteciler için bir avantaj olarak algılanmıştır. Suriyeli mülteci öğrenci katılımcılarının tercihlerini etkileyen karar verme süreci açısından ise söylentilerin rolünün önemli olduğu bulunmuştur. Görüşmeler ve gayri resmi sohbetler yoluyla elde edilen veriler, grup içi söylentilerin, katılımcıların, hatta büyük kararlarında bile, kararlarını önemli ölçüde şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymuştur. Yükseköğretimden önceki süreçte Türk okullarından mezun olanlar için üniversiteye kayıt sürecinin nispeten daha kolay olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Ancak, belgeleri olmadan sınırı geçen ve gerekli belgeleri getiremeyen diğerleri için süreç oldukça zorlayıcı olarak algılanmıştır.

### **1d. Katılımcılar hazırlık okullarındaki İngilizce dil öğrenme deneyimlerini nasıl değerlendirmektedir?**

Katılımcılar, ayrıca hazırlık okulunun İngilizce yeterlilikleri üzerinde olumlu bir etkisi olduğunu algıladıklarını belirttiler ve eğitim dili İngilizce olan programlarındaki eğitimleri için gerekli olan dil becerilerinde önemli bir ilerleme

kaydettiklerini bildirdiler. Bulgular, katılımcıların hazırlık okulunu övmelerinin ana nedeninin, İngilizcenin tek eğitim dili olarak kullanılması olduğunu ortaya çıkardı ve öğretmenlerin etkinliğinin, kullandıkları eğitim diliyle ve bunu ne kadar etkili bir şekilde kullandıklarıyla tutarlı bir şekilde ilişkilendirildiği sonucuna varıldı.

Katılımcılar, ev sahibi ülkede kendi anadilleri olan Arapçayı konuşamamanın, hedef diller olan İngilizce ve Türkçeyi öğrenmeye kendilerini daha iyi vermek için avantajlı olduğunu gözlemlediler. Aynı zamanda, bazıları için evde Arapça, sınıfta İngilizce ve sosyal karşılaşmalarda Türkçe gibi birden fazla dili kullanmanın zorluk yarattığını da belirttiler. Katılımcılar ayrıca ev sahibi ülkede İngilizceyi kullanma fırsatlarının sınırlı olması konusunda sürekli endişe duyduklarını ifade ettiler.

#### **1d. COVID-19 pandemisi, katılımcıların eğitim deneyimlerini nasıl etkilemektedir?**

Katılımcılar, pandemiye ve sonrasında okulların kapanmasını "yeni bir şey" ve "hepimiz için bir sürpriz" olarak tanımlayarak, yaşadıkları başlangıçtaki kafa karışıklığı ve belirsizliği vurguladılar. Veriler, bu ani kesintinin yarattığı inançsızlık ve uyum sağlama aşamasının katılımcılar arasında yaygın olduğunu ve sonraki uyum davranışlarını anlamak için kritik içgörüler sunduğunu göstermektedir. Hem savaşın hem de pandeminin aniden patlak verdiği ve belirgin bir sonu olmayan geçici bir kesinti hissi yarattığı, bu durumun geleceğe yönelik önemli bir belirsizliğe yol açtığı belirtilmiştir. Bu nedenle, katılımcılar için en büyük zorluk, COVID-19 pandemisinin neden olduğu durumun belirsizlik olduğu belirlenmiştir. Katılımcılar, özellikle üniversite deneyimlerinin ilk yılına dair bir kayıp duygusu yaşadıklarını dile getirdiler ve üniversitenin ilk yılındaki heyecan ve coşkunun pandemi nedeniyle aniden kesildiğini vurguladılar. Hayatın "kısıtlandığı" algısı, bu durumun can sıkıntısı ve depresyon hissine yol açmış olabileceği şeklinde yorumlanabilir. Sokağa çıkma yasakları, genç Suriyeli katılımcılar için belli bir düzeyde stres ve umutsuzluğun yanı sıra can sıkıntısına da neden olmuştur. Pandemi sırasında uygulanan sokağa çıkma yasaklarının neden olduğu izolasyon, katılımcıların ev sahibi ülkenin dili olan Türkçe yeterlilikleri ile ilgili algılanan bir endişeye de yol açtı çünkü toplumla kurdukları sosyal ilişkiler azaldı. Verilerden aynı zamanda,

sokağa çıkma yasağı altında çevrimiçi eğitimle geçirilen dönemin, katılımcılar için görünürde daha sorunsuz bir uyum süreci sağladığı ve onları üniversiteye devam etmeye daha iyi hazırladığı sonucuna da varılmıştır. Bulgular, bu zorunlu geçiş döneminin, yeniden yerleşim ülkesinde yükseköğretim hayatına hazırlanmak açısından avantajlı algılandığını göstermiştir.

### **1e. Çevrimiçi eğitime geçişin katılımcılar için sunduğu spesifik zorluklar nelerdir ve çevrimiçi öğrenme ortamlarına nasıl uyum sağlarlar?**

Geleneksel, sınıf tabanlı eğitimden çevrimiçi eğitime geçiş, beklenmedik ve COVID-19 pandemisi nedeniyle gerekli olduğundan, veriler uyum sürecinin zor olarak algılandığını ve zaman aldığını ortaya koydu. Başlangıçta, katılımcılar bu dönemin kısa süreceğini öngördüler; ancak durum uzadıkça, öğrencilerin yeni öğrenme biçimine uyum sağlamak zorunda kaldıkları bildirildi. Çevrimiçi eğitim "yeni bir eğitim yolu" olarak tanımlandı. Çevrimiçi eğitim bağlamında, veriler katılımcıların öğrenme ortamından önemli bir kopukluk hissettiklerini ve bunu çeşitli zamanlarda ifade ettiklerini gösterdi. Katılımcıların yüz yüze eğitimi gerçek ve doğal olanla eşdeğer gördükleri belirlendi. Etkili iletişim eksikliği hissi, genel olarak ifade ettikleri gibi çevrimiçi eğitimde öğrenci katılımının azalmasına neden olmuş gibi görünmektedir. Veriler, katılımcıların çevrimiçi eğitimin esnekliği ile öz disiplin ve zaman yönetimi gereksinimi arasında denge kurmakta zorlandıklarını gösterdi. "Gerçek" deneyimlerle yapılandırılmış bir öğrenme ortamının olmamasının, onların çevrimiçi öğrenmeye karşı sorumluluk ve katılım duygusunu azalttığı bildirildi. Ayrıca, katılımcıların bölümlerindeki tüm ders dersleri eşit derecede değerli bulmadıkları için çevrimiçi derslere seçici olarak katıldıkları ortaya çıktı. Tüm derslere katılmak yerine, dersler arasında seçim yapma eğiliminde olduklarını bildirdiler. Bu seçici katılımın, derslerin her birinin kayıtlarını tekrar izleyebilme ve materyale istedikleri zaman erişme imkanı sayesinde bir ölçüde telafi edildiği belirlendi.

Teknik sorunların bir parçası olarak, katılımcılar internet bağlantısı sorunları yaşadıklarını, gerekli ekipman (dizüstü bilgisayar, kulaklık gibi) eksikliklerinin olduğunu ve bazen öğretmenlerin bağlantılarını kaybetmesi nedeniyle beklemek

zorunda kaldıklarını ortaya koydu. COVID-19 pandemisi sonrasında uzun süreli evde kalmanın bir sonucu olarak can sıkıntısı başka bir zorluk olarak ortaya çıktı. Katılımcılar, aşırı can sıkıntısı hissettiklerini ve bunun motivasyon düzeylerinin düşmesine yol açtığını, bu durumun da derslerine odaklanma konusunda daha fazla sorun yarattığını bildirdiler. Katılımcılar bir şekilde çevrimiçi eğitime uyum sağladıktan sonra monotonluk ön plana çıkmaya başlamış ve katılımcıların derslerine odaklanmayı sürdürmeleri giderek daha zor hale gelmiştir. Öğitmenler ve öğrenciler arasındaki, aynı zamanda sınıf arkadaşları arasındaki etkili iletişim eksikliği de katılımcılar tarafından başka bir zorluk olarak algılanmıştır. Son olarak, mülteciler ve ev sahibi ülke vatandaşlarını bir araya getiren söylemler aniden kesilmiş ve bu da aralarındaki iletişim ve etkileşimin durmasına neden olmuştur.

**1f. İngilizceyle eğitim veren belirli bir üniversitede eğitim gören katılımcıların benzersiz deneyimleri ve karşılaştıkları zorluklar nelerdir ve bu deneyimler, onların eğitimsel yolculuklarını nasıl etkilemektedir?**

Veriler, bu çalışmanın katılımcılarının Türkiye'de eğitim dili İngilizce olan bir üniversitede eğitim görme konusunda belirgin motivasyonları ve nedenleri olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu nedenler arasında, Türkçede yeterlilik eksikliğinin onları eğitim dili Türkçe olan programları seçmekten caydırması; eğitim görürken bir yandan İngilizce öğrenme isteği; İngilizce onlar için de bir yabancı dil olduğu için Türk öğrencilerle eşit şartlarda olma amacı; İngilizcenin evrensel bir dil, dünya ve bilim dili olarak algılanan avantajları; İngilizce yeterliliğinin getirdiği düşünülen daha iyi iş olanakları; seçtikleri bölümlerin İngilizce olarak okunması gerektiğine olan inançları; İngilizce olarak sunulan kaynakların ve web sitelerinin bolluğu; eğitim dili İngilizce olan bölümlerinde okurken İngilizce pratiği yapma fırsatı; İngilizce öğrenmenin ev sahibi ülke dili olan Türkçeyi öğrenmeyi tamamlayacağı fikri; ve zaten İngilizce yeterliliğine sahip olma durumu bulunmaktadır. Katılımcıların İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversiteyi seçmelerinin bir diğer nedeni, bunun akademik yaşamları için kültürel sermaye sağladığına olan inançlarıdır. Katılımcılar, İngilizce yeterliliğinin akademik çabalar için çok değerli olduğunu ve çalışmalarında başarılı olmalarını ve gelecekteki kariyer hedeflerine ulaşmaları şansını artırdığını bildirmişlerdir. Halihazırda İngilizce dilinde yetkin olmanın, katılımcılar tarafından

bir İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversitesinde eğitim almayı tercih etmelerinin bir diğer nedeni olarak bildirilmiştir. Çalışmada ortaya çıkan bir diğer neden de, katılımcıların İngilizce öğrenme ve bunu pratiğe geçirme arzuları olarak ortaya çıktı. Veriler, İngilizce eğitim veren üniversitelerin bir bölümünde okuyarak katılımcıların hem akademik hedeflerini takip edebileceklerine hem de İngilizce becerilerini geliştirebileceklerine inandıklarını göstermektedir. Türkçe, ev sahibi ülkenin dili olduğundan, katılımcılar, doğal bir bağlamda hedef dile zaten maruz kalarak bir şekilde Türkçeyi öğreneceklerine inandıklarını bildirdiler. Daha önce paylaşıldığı gibi, katılımcıların ana motivasyonlarından birinin, akademik programlarının İngilizce gerektirdiğine olan inançları olduğu ortaya çıktı. Hangi programların hangi dillerle ve neden okunduğuna dair güçlü inançlara sahip oldukları görüldü. Veriler, katılımcıların İngilizce dilinde bir program seçme motivasyonlarından birinin, aynı zamanda ev sahibi ülke öğrencileriyle adil şartlarda olma arzusu olduğunu da öne sürmektedir. Sonuç olarak, verilerin gösterdiği gibi, öğrencilerin eğitim dilini seçerken yaptıkları stratejik kararlar, akademik ve profesyonel hedeflerine dayanmaktadır ve bölümün zorluğu, dil yeterliliği ve İngilizcenin uzun vadeli faydaları gibi çeşitli faktörlerden etkilenmektedir. Çalışmada, İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversitede okurken bazı zorluklarla karşılaşıldığını da ortaya çıkmıştır. İngilizce dil becerilerinde algılanan düşüş ve ders materyalini zaman zaman anlamada zorluk gibi; katılımcılar, Türkçe kullanım açısından ev sahibi ülke öğrencilerine kıyasla benzersiz zorluklarla karşılaşmış gibi görünüyorlardı. Bulgular, katılımcıların çevrimiçi ortamda İngilizce ile ilgili zorlukların üstesinden gelmek için ders kayıtlarını anlayana kadar tekrar tekrar izlediklerini ve eğitim sınıf tabanlı olduğunda ise öğretmenlerinden ve sınıf arkadaşlarından daha fazla açıklama istediklerini bildirmişlerdir.

## **Araştırma Sorusu 2: Mülteci öğrenciler, ev sahibi ülkedeki yeni eğitim ve sosyal bağlamlara uyum sağlama sürecinde kimliklerini nasıl anlatmaktadır?**

Suriye'deki çatışmanın katılımcılar üzerinde önemli duygusal zorluklara neden olduğu ve onlar üzerinde derin ve kalıcı bir etki bıraktığı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu zorluklar arasında savaşın ve zorunlu göçün travması bulunmakta olup, bu durum katılımcılar için önemli bir stres ve kaygı kaynağı gibi görünmektedir. Bu ilk

duygusal zorluklar, katılımcıların hem toplumsal hem de yapısal düzeyde ötekileştirme ve ayrımcılıkla karşılaştıklarını bildirdikleri uyum ve adaptasyon sürecinin zorlukları ile birleşmiş olarak algılanabilir. Katılımcılar bazen, kamusal alanlarda Arapça kullanma konusunda rahatsızlık ve tedirginlik hissettiklerini, Suriyeli olarak tanımlanmaktan duydukları endişeyi yansıtarak ifade ettiler. Bu, eğitim bağlamında değil, ancak daha çok toplumsal düzeyde bir zorluk olarak ortaya çıktı. Bazı katılımcılar, yabancı kimliklerinden dolayı farklı algılanma konusunda derin bir endişe duyduklarını da bildirdiler. Bazen bu algılanan farklılığın, özellikle Türkiye Yükseköğretimindeki varlıklarıyla ilgili olarak, ev sahibi ülke insanları tarafından varsayımlar veya önyargılara yol açabileceğini ve bu durumun, ev sahibi ülkeye aidiyet hissinin azaldığını hissetmelerine neden olduğunu ifade ettiler. Bulgular, katılımcıların ev sahibi ülkede mali zorluklar yaşadığını da gösterdi. Daha önce kendi ülkelerinde finansal istikrara sahip olduklarını bildirmiş olsalar da bu durumun savaş ve ardından Türkiye'ye zorunlu göç süreci nedeniyle değiştiği sonucuna varılabilir. Son olarak, katılımcılar tarafından bildirilen duygusal zorluklar arasında umutsuzluk, vatan özlemi, başarısızlık korkusu, uyum ve entegrasyon mücadeleleri, gelecek endişeleri, güvenlik duygusunun azalması, savaş ve pandemi gibi krizlerin duygusal etkisi, yalnızlık ve dayanıklılık oluşturma sürecinin zorluğu yer almaktadır. Sonuç olarak, araştırma boyunca veriler, katılımcılar arasında sıradanlığa duyulan arzuya odaklanıldığını gösterdi. Mülteci öğrencilerin sık sık "Farklı olmamak için ne yapabilirim?" sorusuyla boğuştuğu ortaya çıktı ve görünmezliği sağlama çabasının, ötekileştirilme veya damgalanma olasılığından kaçınmanın bir yolu olarak algılandığı görüldü.

Veriler, katılımcıların sosyal etkileşimleri yönetmek ve mülteci statülerine bağlı olumsuzlukla karşılaşma olasılığını azaltmak için çeşitli stratejiler kullandığını da ortaya koydu. Katılımcıların anlatımları, savaş, zorunlu göç veya COVID-19 pandemisi gibi krizler ve günlük zorluklar arasında hayatta kalmak için, katılımcıların zor koşullara uyum sağlaması, zorluklardan sıyrılması ve çeşitli stres faktörleriyle yüzleşirken ilerlemesi gerektiğini ortaya koydu. Dayanıklılık (ya da direnç) oluşturmak zor ama mümkündür (Lenette, 2016; Morrice, 2013); özetle, zorlukları aşmak için ellerindeki bütün sermayeyi kullanarak hedeflerine ulaşmak için çaba sarf ettikleri bu çalışmada ortaya çıkmıştır. Dayanıklılığın aynı zamanda

hedef odaklı olmayı da içerdiği belirlenmiştir. Katılımcıların karşılaştığı bazı durumlar, hedefler belirlemenin ve bu hedefler doğrultusunda sabırla çalışmanın, onlara “yolda olma” hissi verdiğini ortaya koydu. Bu çalışmada yükseköğretimdeki eğitim, bir süreklilik ve başarı duygusu sağlayan, bireyleri yolda tutan ve katılımcıların raporlarında da yansıtıldığı gibi, aynı zamanda onlara duyulma ve saygı görme hissi veren, akademik başarılarından kaynaklanan bir onaylanma ve öz-değer duygusu elde ettikleri önemli bir alan olarak vurgulanmaktadır.

## **Sonuç**

Bu çalışmada, belirli Suriyeli mülteci öğrencilerin savaş deneyimleri, zorunlu göç, kesişimsel kimlikler ve Türkiye'deki yükseköğretimdeki eğitimsel uyum arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi nasıl yönettiklerini etnografik olarak incelemek amaçlanmıştır. Bu öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları belirlemek ve onların eğitimsel ve toplumsal süreçlerle ilgili görüşlerini incelemek, akademik ve toplumsal deneyimlerini geliştirmeye katkı sağlamak için hedeflendi. Amaç, ev sahibi ülke üniversitelerinde eğitime erişimden mezuniyete kadar olan yolculuklarını kolaylaştırmak, aynı zamanda krizler sırasında ve sonrasında Türkiye'de yeniden yerleşmelerini desteklemek adına katkı sağlayabilecek bir çalışma yapabilmektir.

Genel olarak, bu çalışma, savaşın ve zorunlu göçün mülteci öğrenciler üzerindeki algılanan etkilerinin geniş kapsamlı ve kalıcı olduğunu, onların acil ihtiyaçlarını ve uzun vadeli entegrasyonlarını ve refahlarını ele almak için kapsamlı ve koordineli çabalar gerektiğini göstermektedir. Derinleşen küreselleşme ve genişleyen uluslararası göç çağında, yükseköğretim, yerinden edilmiş insanlar için hem ana ülkeleri hem de ev sahibi ülkeleri için kritik bir rol oynayabilir (Arar vd., 2020). Sürekli eğitim, onlara bir birey olma hissi verdiğini için, mülteci eğitimi, özellikle yükseköğretim düzeyinde her ne pahasına olursa olsun desteklenmelidir. Politika önerileri olarak, yükseköğretileri desteklemek için, eşitlikçi politikalar, kaliteli dil eğitimi, kapsayıcı pedagojiler ve destekleyici kişilerarası ilişkiler, yerinden edilmiş mülteci öğrencilerin geleceğine yatırım yapma amacı taşıyanlar için esastır. Bu araştırmanın bulguları, eğitim alanındaki uzmanlar için de birkaç öneri sunmaktadır. İlk olarak, mülteci öğrencilerin yükseköğretimde başarılı entegrasyonu, kolektif bir



çaba olarak görülmelidir. Bu nedenle, uluslararası öğrenciler, yerel öğrenciler ve akademik personel arasındaki etkileşimi artıran daha fazla etkinlik düzenlenmesi tavsiye edilebilir.

Bu araştırma, beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin öğrenme süreçlerinin, yükseköğretim boyunca başlangıçtaki eğitim deneyimleriyle nasıl şekillendiğine ve hazırlık okulunda İngilizce öğrenirken öğrenen kimliklerini nasıl anlattıklarına, COVID-19 pandemisinin algılanan etkisi ve çevrimiçi eğitime geçiş ve Türkiye'nin merkezindeki bir yabancı dille eğitim veren üniversitede eğitim alma deneyimlerine ilişkin önemli bulgular sağlamış olsa da, her araştırmada olduğu gibi, bu çalışmanın da sınırlamaları vardır. Etnografik durum çalışması, doğası gereği az sayıda katılımcıyı gerektirdiğinden, çalışmada, önceden belirlenmiş kriterlerle amaçlı örneklem kullanmıştır; dolayısıyla, bu çalışmanın sınırlamalarından biri, bu bağlamda eğitim gören beş Suriyeli mülteci öğrencinin bakış açılarına odaklanmasıdır. Diğer paydaşlar ve topluluk üyeleri veriye dahil edilmemiştir; dolayısıyla bulgular yalnızca katılımcıların kendi raporlarıyla sınırlı olup, bulguların diğer eğitim kurumlarına ve ortamlara aktarılabilirliğini sınırlamaktadır. Çalışmanın bir diğer sınırlaması da, ilk veri toplama dönemi COVID-19 salgınıyla çakıştığından, çalışmanın başında sınıf gözlemleri yapılmış olmasına rağmen, katılımcıların doğal ortamında ayrıntılı gözlemler, uygulanan sokağa çıkma yasakları nedeniyle ev ve okul ortamlarına erişim olmadığı için gerçekleştirilememiştir. Bazı katılımcıların, bu dillerdeki yeterlilikleri nedeniyle İngilizce veya Türkçe düşüncelerini ifade etmekte zorlanmış olabilecekleri göz önüne alındığında, araştırmacının Arapça yeterliliğine sahip olmaması veya bir Arapça tercümanın görevlendirilmemesi de, bu çalışma için bir sınırlama olarak kabul edilmelidir.

Bu çalışmanın sınırlamaları ve kapsamı göz önüne alındığında, gelecekteki araştırmalar için birkaç öneri sunulabilir. Gelecekteki araştırmalar, öğretmenler, müdürler ve mülteci öğrencilerin yerel ve uluslararası akranları gibi paydaşların çeşitli bakış açılarını yakalamak için metodolojik yaklaşımlarını genişleterek daha fazla araştırma bağlamını ve katılımcıyı dahil ederek daha geniş bir perspektifi yansıtabilir. Bu tür yaklaşımlar, bu çeşitli paydaşların seslerini dahil ederek, mülteci öğrencilerin akademik ve uyum süreçlerinin daha kapsamlı bir şekilde araştırılmasını

sağlayabilir. Son olarak, gelecekteki arařtırmalar için başka bir potansiyel bir yön de, Türk öğrencilerin bakış açılarını ve bu algıların, mülteci öğrencilerin varlığında sınıf dinamiklerini ve sonuçlarını nasıl etkilediğini incelemeyi içerebilir. Bu, "öteki" kavramının ve mülteci krizlerinin mülteci barındıran ülkelerin vatandaşları üzerindeki etkisinin daha kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlayarak, topluluklar arasında sosyal uyumu teşvik etmeye yönelik politikaların planlamasına katkıda bulunabilir.

Sonuç olarak, mülteci eğitimi uzun vadeli bir çabadır (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Eylemlerimizin önemi büyük ölçüde, bireylerin, yeni anlamlar geliřtirdikçe, yarattıkça ve deęiřtirdikçe sürekli olarak yeniden deęerlendirilmeye tabi olan ortak, müzakere edilmiş bir yorumu başarmaya baęlıdır. Bu anlamlar daha sonra farklı sosyal, tarihi ve politik bağlamlara yerleřtirilir. Coęrafya da dahil olmak üzere, dünyanın hem maddi hem de sembolik yönlerinin dinamik doęasının ve deęişen algıların sürekli farkında olmak esastır. Modern bireylerin karřılařtığı akışkanlık, farkındalık, uyum sağlama, esneklik ve anlayış gerektiren böyle bir kavramsal çerçe zorunlu kılmaktadır. Böyle bir yaklaşım hem ev sahibi ülke vatandaşlarına hem de fiziksel ve psikolojik kısıtlamalardan uzak bir şekilde yaşamlarını yeniden inşa etmeye çalışan mülteçilere fayda sağlayacaktır.

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