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“I am not the same after my ERASMUS”: A Qualitative Research

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Abstract

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Keywords

The ERASMUS Program, Turkish Participants, Pre-Service Teachers of English, Qualitative Research

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“I am not the same after my ERASMUS”: A Qualitative Research

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No data has been found about the influences of the ERASMUS program on Turkish pre-service teachers of English who participated in the ERASMUS Mobility Program. Thus, in this study the researcher aims to evaluate the ERASMUS Mobility Program regarding its contributions to the progress of Turkish pre-service teachers of English and the problems they encountered during the process. The sample group of the study consisted of 23 pre-service teachers and a background questionnaire, interviews, group discussions and essay papers were used for data collection. The results indicated that the ERASMUS process has some significant benefits to language skills and professional and personal development of the pre-service teachers of English; however, it also brings about some potential problems. Finally, some practical recommendations are noted. Keywords: The ERASMUS Program, Turkish Participants, Pre-Service Teachers of English, Qualitative Research

Education has a key role to play in the European Community (EC), which has moved towards economic, monetary, and political union (Jones, 1991; Pepin, 2007). In other words, education unity among the EC countries has been important in the process of unifying Europe. Thus, with the thoughts of strengthening a regular, determined and democratic society, the education ministries of 29 European countries initiated the process of unifying education by signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999 (Dolasir & Tuncel, 2004). The Bologna Process has played a considerable role in the development of European higher education with a leadership role in bringing about not only political and economic union but also a union in research and development (Luttikhot, 1989). Furthermore, the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) program, which was accepted in 2000 as the final step of higher education, is very important in providing qualified human resources sharing scientifically gained knowledge, continuing development of skills for changing needs, and educating young people towards European ideals (Dolasir & Tuncel, 2004). To conclude, teachers' and students' mobility, one of the main goals to be achieved by the European Union education policies, is the key element of the program (Pineda, Moreno, & Belvis, 2008). Thus, the ERASMUS program involves student mobility, teacher/staff mobility, joint curriculum development, and intensive teaching programs as noted by Puigpelat (1989) and Martin (1990). On the other hand, as underlined by Rivza and Teichler (2007), student mobility is in a growth trend while information does not confirm consistent growth according to various criteria and measures. In other words, it is obvious that there exists a strong need for scientific research to evaluate the ERASMUS program in terms of its efficiency, outcomes, impacts, and the need for it. In this way, it is possible to identify the possible contributions and problems, to present solutions and recommendations, and finally, to make recommendations about further research. For this

reason, issues such as the needs, beliefs, and perceptions of Turkish students participating in the program seem to be important areas to investigate. Thus, the perceptions of the participants regarding the possible contributions and problems during the participation process are a significant issue to evaluate the program in terms of the efficiency, outcomes, and impacts of the process. To this end, there exists a strong necessity to evaluate the process in terms of participants' perceptions of the program for the implementation and participation to understand the benefits of the program and the problems encountered during the participation process as the Council of Higher Education of Turkey is taking steps to implement the ERASMUS program and encouraging Turkey's universities to participate the program.

One of the limitations concerning studies on the ERASMUS program is that there is a serious lack of qualitative and holistic studies that aim at reflecting the participants' perceptions towards the program, as previous studies mainly consisted of descriptions, reports, opinion papers, survey studies using statistical analysis, discussion papers, and evaluations on the formal procedure of the program. Thus, using a qualitative research design to investigate the contributions of the program and the problems before, after and during participation in a holistic way, it seemed necessary to investigate participants' perceptions towards the program in terms of the program's contributions and the problems they encountered.

As Mizikaci (2005) highlights, Turkey is a signatory country of the Bologna Declaration, and follows all of the requirements for the integration into European higher education. In this sense, student involvement and participation seem important steps to integrate into the European higher education system. However, a problematic area is that though the number of the students in the ERASMUS program from Turkey has considerably increased, the studies on ERASMUS-related issues still seem fairly limited. For example, while the numbers of the students participating in the program were 1,142 in 2004-2005, 2,852 in 2005-2006, and 4,438 in 2006-2007 academic years (National Agency, 2008), only one paper appeared from Turkey. Yet, it was an evaluation paper that focused on the chronology of Bologna process (Dolasir & Tuncel, 2004). To conclude, issues such as the needs, beliefs, and perceptions of Turkish students participating in the program still remain an untouched research area. The issue on Turkish students' perceptions towards the program seems to be an important area to investigate.

The last issue is that the participants in the ERASMUS program from Turkey mainly consist of students from language teaching departments, language-related departments like tourism, or departments where intensive language preparation classes are taught. As an example, during the 2009-2010 academic year, among the 15 participants of the program from Balikesir University, 12 students were studying in the English Language Department. As this student population mainly consists of English language departments, the scope of the present research was confined to the pre-service teachers of English studying in English Language Departments (ELT). A qualitative study seemed necessary to find the factors that affect the participation process in a deeper perspective due to the low number of the EFL pre-service teachers who participated in the mobility the ELT department, and the lack of research regarding the contributions and problems of EFL pre-service teachers in Turkey in relation to the ERASMUS program. The title of this paper was inspired by a Facebook group shared by ERASMUS participants from various countries. Furthermore, as not only the personal opinions

posted on the group page but also the author's observations of the ERASMUS students revealed that the ERASMUS program has considerable influences on ERASMUS students' lives, the scope of the present study was confined to the contributions of the ERASMUS program and the problems the participants encountered. In other words, as underlined above, the present study was guided by three motives. Firstly, although many survey studies, research reports, and opinion papers have been published on the ERASMUS program and related issues, qualitative and holistic studies in terms of participants' perceptions towards the contributions of the program and the problems they face seemed too limited. Secondly, while the number of the students participating in the program from Turkey as a candidate country has increased enormously, no study has been conducted on the perceptions of Turkish participants towards the program. Thirdly and lastly, as students from language departments mainly preferred participating in the program due to the fact that language is not a barrier for them, the data are needed to evaluate the program in terms of its contributions and the problems encountered. In sum, the study investigated the EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the contributions of the ERASMUS Mobility. Speaking more specifically, it examines the contributions of the program and the problems the participants encountered before, after, and during the participation process. In a broader perspective, it is assumed that the conclusions derived from the current study will contribute to the related literature in terms of the integration of Turkish participants into the European higher education system. Moreover, the results can be evaluated to see the problems and contributions of the program, as Mizikaci (2005) underlined that student involvement is increasingly sought in matters of administration, quality assurance, academic mobility, and curricular reform. In addition, as outlined below, given that no study has been conducted on EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the program while The Council of Higher Education of Turkey is taking steps to implement the ERASMUS program, and encouraging the universities to participate the program (Mizikaci, 2005), it is a strong necessity to evaluate the process in terms of participants' perceptions of the program for the implementation and participation to understand the benefits of the program and the problems encountered during the participation process.

Literature Review

The studies reviewed in the study indicated that the research activities on the program mainly focused on a variety of issues. To begin with, some of the studies have focused on issues concerning research, development, and cooperation between universities (Bruce, 1989; De Wit, 1995; Luttikhot, 1989; Maiworm & Teichler 1995a), exchange policy (Sayer, 2006; Papatsiba, 2005; Teichler, 1991), and employment (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996; Teichler & Janson, 2007). Moreover, research on educational issues focused on multicultural education (Clarke, 2005), autonomous learning (Gieve & Clark, 2005), e-learning (Pursula, Warsta, & Laaksonen, 2005), and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS; Absalom, 1990; Maiworm, Steube & Teichler, 1992; Maiworm & Teichler, 1995b). In terms of fields and departments, studies only concerned Business Administration, Chemistry, History, Geography, Agriculture, Science, Engineering, and Law and Economics (Blacksell, 1992; Holmes, 1997; Ruffio, 1996; Monasta, 1991). Additionally, some studies focused on the factors that may affect

the program (Enders, 1998, Otero, 2008; Teichler, 1991, 1996), whereas limited studies appeared on the individual characteristics of ERASMUS students (Pineda, Moreno, & Belvis, 2008; Pirrie, Wilson, Powney, & Hamilton, 2002; Teichler, 1996).

Problems Related to the ERASMUS Participation

The problems before, during, and after the participation have also been submitted to investigation. First, in a study that examined the uses of the term “recognition” in relation to the ERASMUS program in Europe (Teichler, 1990), some obstacles to recognition and particularly to full recognition of study abroad were identified. Coordinators also reported specific recognition problems within the ERASMUS program. In another survey study, Teichler (1991) presented the results of a survey that examined the experiences of 3,212 ERASMUS grant students studying in other Economic Community countries in Europe. The study identified certain problems faced during the study period abroad and the integration into the academic and social life of students at the host university. Moreover, in a survey study, Maiworm and Teichler (1995a) administered a survey to 2,682 local directors of ERASMUS program. The results demonstrated that 15% of the directors observed serious academic problems among ERASMUS students regarding taking examinations in a foreign language, differences in teaching and learning methods, class and group size, and a too-high academic level of courses. Lastly, Kehm (2005) focused on the ERASMUS program in Germany and analyzed the barriers to student mobility and possible solutions.

The Contributions of the Participation to Culture and Language

Culture has also been one research issue that has been studied in the ERASMUS program. First of all, in an experimental study to evaluate the ECTC (Maiworm, Steube & Teichler, 1992), the results showed that knowledge of the host country’s culture and society increased substantially during the study abroad period. In another study, Chambers (1994) focused on the appreciation of German culture. Additionally, in a survey study, Maiworm & Teichler (1995b) found that knowledge of the host country’s culture and society increased substantially.

Language was another significant research area in terms of ERASMUS. As an example, Chambers (1994) discussed the development and implementation of a student exchange program between the University of Leeds in England and the Institut fur Praxis der Theorie der Schule in Kiel, Germany. The focus was on appreciation of language. In a study conducted by Maiworm and Teichler (1995a), a survey was administered to 2,682 local directors of the ERASMUS program. Fifteen percent of the directors observed serious academic problems among ERASMUS students regarding taking examinations in a foreign language. In a similar survey study (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996) that investigated the impact of the ERASMUS program on former students’ study and employment patterns and attitudes, language proficiency was a factor among a wide variety of variables. In another study, Woodcock (1996) described Greek language preparation for English students participating in the exchange program as a part of their primary teacher training. It was concluded that self-directed preparation can be improved by an outline of the stages in the learning of Greek, the availability of required support

materials, progress checks, and testing of students in Modern Greek. As for academic reading practices, Taillefer (2005) aimed at identifying possible culturally dependent sources of literacy problems in Law and Economics students in Great Britain, France and Spain. Nearly 600 potential European study-abroad candidates participated in the ERASMUS program and 169 of their university teachers from 17 universities in the three countries completed a questionnaire on first language reading practices. The results revealed that academic reading practices were considered to be more important overall in Britain, significantly less so in Spain, while France displayed some characteristics of both British and Spanish approaches. Teichler and Janson (2007) emphasized that the ERASMUS program is linguistically valuable. Similarly, Jenkins (2009), whose study focused on English as lingua franca (ELF), found that ELF communication seemed to be raising the awareness of its communicative effectiveness among the participants in the European Union's ERASMUS Program.

Given that the study focuses on the perceptions of Turkish pre-service teachers of English towards the ERASMUS program in terms of the program's contributions and the problems encountered by the students, some drawbacks can be noted in relation to the review presented above. Firstly, as stated previously, though Bruce (1989) noted that inter-university cooperation program is a vehicle designed to promote European awareness among European higher education institutions and that promotion of European awareness through education is considered vital to the development of an integrated European community in terms of teacher education, no study was found on the needs, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards the ERASMUS program with regard to Turkish pre-service teachers. Furthermore, given that limited fields such as Business Administration, Chemistry, History, Geography, Agriculture, Science, Engineering, and Law and Economics were examined in relation to the program, there is a strong need for studies on English teacher training. Secondly, while the papers on the ERASMUS program consisted of survey studies, formal reports, and opinion and evaluation studies, qualitative studies that aim at investigating the perceptions and problems holistically are fairly limited. Thirdly, although some studies under review focused on the cultural aspects of the program, the literature review found no study on the cultural perceptions of Turkish participants. Moreover, due to a general situation in which there may exist some negative perceptions towards Western or Turkish culture, the perceptions of Turkish participants towards other cultures seem a significant research area. Fourthly, because the studies reviewed mainly focused on the problems of directors and coordinators, the research on participants' problems also seems limited. Finally, as the present paper focuses the perceptions and problems of Turkish pre-service teachers of English, perceptions towards linguistic issues appear to be significant. Yet, as the relevant literature showed that the studies cited on linguistic issues mainly dealt with the communicative effectiveness of ELF, problems concerning the language proficiency examination, and German and Greek languages, it is necessary to examine the perceptions of Turkish pre-service teachers of English and their problems in terms of linguistic issues. As a result, the main purpose of the study is to evaluate the ERASMUS Mobility Program regarding the participation of Turkish pre-service teachers of English. Speaking specifically, the study aims to examine the efficiency, outcomes, impacts, and needs of the ERASMUS Mobility Program in terms of the perceptions of pre-service teachers of English who participated in the program. For this purpose, the study focuses

on the benefits of the ERASMUS participation process to Turkish pre-service teachers of English, and examining the problems they encountered during the process. With these concerns in mind, the researcher has two research questions:

1. What are the contributions of the ERASMUS participation process to the progress of Turkish pre-service teachers of English?
2. What are the problems of pre-service teachers of English in the ERASMUS participation process?

Method

The study was carried out qualitatively as it seeks the answer of question *how* EFL pre-service teachers perceive the ERASMUS Mobility in terms of the contributions and problems. Thus, prior to conducting the research, a research proposal that included an outline demonstrating the significance, purposes, research methodology, tools, the rationale of sampling, the role of the researcher, and data collection and analysis procedure was presented to the head of English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Necatibey Education Faculty of Balikesir University. The plan also specified the criteria for choosing participants, their numbers, location and the approach of the research. The study was based on grounded theory as it included no hypotheses dealing with real concerns of the participants, aimed at finding and solving the problems in a wide range of variation, and seemed appropriate for the steps of data analysis such as coding, selecting, and categorizing data (Glaser, 1992). After the International Review Board's (IRB; also called the Independent Ethics Committee or Ethical Review Board, a board that is designated to approve, monitor and review behavioral research involving humans with the purpose of protecting the rights and welfare of the subjects participating in research) approval that was sought through the administration of the Education Faculty was granted, the author attempted to locate the participants. As the existing research involved a background questionnaire, interviews, essay writing, and focus group discussions a claim for exemptions was presented. Namely, it was emphasized that their privacy would be respected and participation was voluntary. Speaking more specifically, it was highlighted that the research would be conducted with respect for the participants, that there were no outstanding risks for participating in the study (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005), and that the participation would be beneficial to the students planning to participate in the mobility programs. The study participants were informed before, after, and during the research process about the aims, procedure, outputs and ethics of the study. For this purpose, it was stated that the dignity of the participants would be respected, that there was no psychological or social risk, and that the benefits of the knowledge gained would be shared. In addition, the informed consent form that stated they participated in the research consciously was signed by each participant (Law et al., 2007). The researcher delivered the forms to the faculty administrator. As a result, they stated that they voluntarily participated in the study. Next, the study was conducted after explaining the research ethics and purposes of the research to the students.

Sample Group

The sample group of the study consisted of 23 pre-service teachers studying in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of the Faculty of Education at Balıkesir University. Sixteen (69.6%) participants were female and seven (30.4%) were male. The mean age was 21.5 in the range of 20-24 years old. Five (21.7%) of the participants were sophomores, six (26.1) were juniors, and 12 (52.2%) were seniors. They were chosen as they were the only pre-service teachers who participated in the ERASMUS program. The total number of participants was 23. The numbers and placements of the participants were six (26.1%) in Denmark, seven (30.4%) in Spain and ten (43.5%) in Poland.

Tools

The data collection instruments consisted of a background questionnaire, interviews, focus group discussions, and essay writing. The background questionnaire asked the participants about their age, gender, the host country, and their duration of stay. In the interviews, the researcher asked them about their opinions on its contributions to their development, and the problems they encountered during their participation in the ERASMUS program. Furthermore, during focus group discussions they talked about their experiences. Finally, each participant produced an essay paper on their opinions and perceptions about the mobility program. To sum up, the research was conducted qualitatively as the tools were used to provide data from the subjects' perspective to answer the research question as it did not seem possible to arrive at conclusions holistically and heuristically in a quantitative study.

Procedure

Before presenting the research procedure, some notes should be given to show the appropriateness of the research methodology. First, as the number of the participants from the department was limited to 23 pre-service teachers, it was not possible to carry out a descriptive research. Second, as there are no studies on the issue in terms of EFL pre-service teaching in Turkey, a qualitative approach was used for both a deeper understanding of and description of the research issue and for developing a questionnaire for further descriptive studies (Law et al., 2007). The study employed a two-step procedure: (a) data collection; and (b) data analysis.

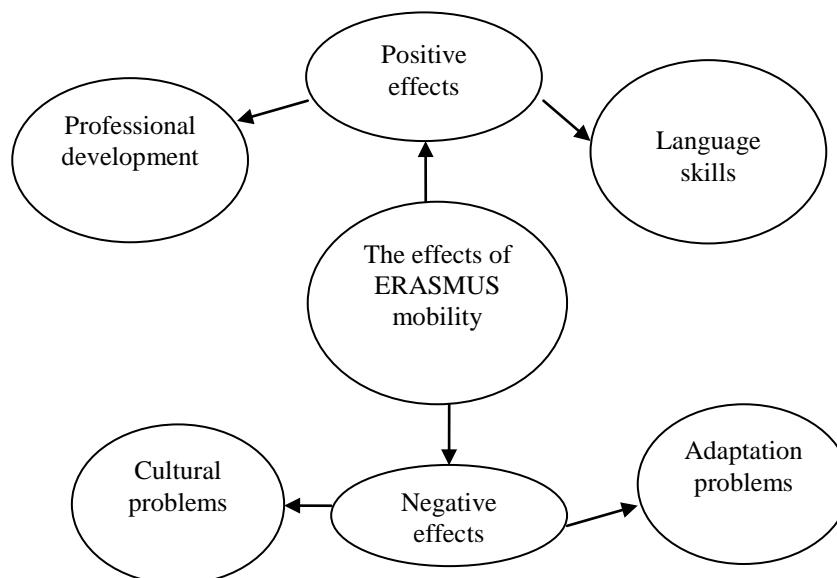
Step 1: Data collection. At the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2009-2010, the participants were informed about the data collecting tools and the procedure of the study. It should be highlighted that the researcher was also one of the trainers of the participants in the department. As the research purpose, relevancy, and importance were stated clearly to the participants, and as they declared that they participated in the study voluntarily, it was assumed that they reflected their experiences in research setting (Law et al., 2007). Four instruments were used to ensure the validity of the obtained data: a background questionnaire, interviews, group discussions, and essay writing. First of all, as the study focused on the contributions and the problems related to the ERASMUS participation, the data collected were confined to the issues

mentioned. For this purpose, the researcher interviewed each of the participants individually about the contributions of the program and the problems they encountered during their participation process. Then, after completing the interviews, the researcher and participants met to discuss the possible contributions and problems in three classroom sessions. Each of the sessions took one hour a week. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews and discussions. Finally, after one month, the participants were asked to prepare an essay in Turkish or English on the relevant issues to compare the findings to the other data obtained from interviews and discussions. Finally, the data were analyzed as explained below.

Step 2: Data analysis. First of all, the data notes from interviews, group discussions, and essays were contextualized separately in lines. Second, in the concept mapping process, the data noted line by line were transferred into three concept maps derived from the data sources, as in the sample below. In order to validate the findings and to see if the data are valid, the data derived from the sources were compared using the concept maps. The data seemed similar following a comparison of the statements in each concept map. In other words, similar statements indicated that the data ensured validity. Third, in the categorization process, the data were divided into two sections: (a) the contributions of the ERASMUS mobility; and (b) the problems the participants encountered. In other words, during this process, the scope was confined to contributions of the program and problems. Finally, the data from the concept maps were combined and presented in numbers and frequencies in two tables (See Appendixes 1 & 2). The whole analysis process was conducted by the researcher. As the data were collected from three different sources, and all of the students in the department participated in the program, it was assumed that the saturation of the data was achieved to meet the purposes of the study (Law et al., 2007). The data collection process was carried out as it was previously planned.

The data obtained from each source were analyzed separately and transferred into three concept maps. A sample of the concept maps is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample Concept Map



Role of the Researcher

The author completed his PhD dissertation on the use of computers on testing EFL writing skills and started to train pre-service EFL teachers. Though he is interested in interdisciplinary research on the relationships between technology, language testing and writing, he also decided to conduct research focusing on the contributions of the ERASMUS mobility and the problems during the process after his personal observations. First, during an intimate communication with the participants, he observed that they are affected both negatively and positively before, after, and during their participation process. Second, after a reading study, the author noticed that there is serious lack of research on the contributions of the participation in terms of both Turkish students and pre-service teachers of English, and on the problems during the aforementioned process. Furthermore, as the students who plan to participate in the program needed to have more information about the program, it seemed necessary to carry out a systematic study in order to respond to their questions. In other words, the outcomes of the research are directly related to the needs of the students in the department and lead to contributions to the related literature due to lack of research. Third, the author also intends to research the issue to develop a scale to measure quantitatively the contributions of the ERASMUS mobility and the problems, and to narrow the topic for further research after obtaining the factors affecting the participation process.

Results

The results of the research are divided into two sub-sections. First, the findings on the contributions of the ERASMUS program and the progress of Turkish pre-service teachers of English are presented. Then, the results concerning the problems that the participants encountered are given.

Contributions of the ERASMUS Program

The findings indicated that participation in the ERASMUS program has some considerable contributions to the language skills of Turkish pre-service teachers of EFL. First of all, the pre-service teachers of English believe that their participation improved their listening and speaking skills in English. In addition, they stated that the program helped improve their reading and writing skills, develop their pronunciation and acquire vocabulary. Secondly, the participants underlined that they used English intensively in meaningful contexts due to the natural language settings. They also highlighted that they gained awareness about various accents of English used by their international friends, as one the participant stated below:

My perceptions towards language changed completely. First, I understood the nature of a language by using it in a real setting. In time, I gained more self-confidence in language learning because I was aware that the language I use had a function and context.

Thirdly, the findings show that the participation process has considerable contributions in terms of affective states as the participants think that they had overcome communication apprehension and increased their self-confidence in learning and using English. Finally, the participants emphasized that they acquired a second language used in the country visited.

Another significant contribution of their participation in the program concerns their professional development process. For the participants, they firstly benefited from the participation process by obtaining information about a different education system applied in the target country. The pre-service teachers stated that they had the chance to compare different education systems in native and target countries. For instance, they became aware of the differences between exam-centered and process-based learning environments, as one highlighted below:

With the help of ERASMUS, I had the chance to compare Turkish and Catalan and Spanish education systems, and gained general ideas and beliefs about European education system as well. I realized that our system is still based on teacher-centered learning. In fact, in Turkey, we are still making our students memorize by heart and do not give enough importance to projects and group work. But in Spain, I observed that the teachers are not forcing students to memorize everything; they were only talking about the general frames of the topics and leaving the rest of the topic to the students, and asking them to make a research, develop their own theses to support or to negate the target method or thesis.

Secondly, the Turkish pre-service teachers underlined that they obtained knowledge on various language teaching methods and techniques to use in their further professional life, as one of them stated:

I got to know their educational system. I grasped many opportunities to learn how ELT is facilitated. It was very beneficial for me to compare the system of ELT with that used in my country. Besides, I observed different techniques of teaching English and their applications. It provided me with an opportunity to use these techniques in my teaching practice.

Finally, the participants believe that their professional development makes it easier to find a job in Turkey and abroad. Moreover, they had more specific experiences in terms of teaching English to children and of getting professional help from the lecturers they studied with during and after their participation in the program.

One of the considerable contributions of the program concerns the personal development of the participants. First of all, the pre-service teachers believe that they gained awareness of how to cope with difficulties during living in an unfamiliar country and how to live on their own without their families, as one of them highlighted:

I have had the opportunity to see how adults get to manage their problems, without any help coming from outside. I lived on my own, so I know now how it is like to be a grown-up.

Furthermore, they stated that they increased their self-confidence by studying and living in a different country and can solve the problems concerning socialization and adaptation to new social environments, as follows:

In my opinion, ERASMUS is a program that helps participants adapt to different life conditions, and that gives opportunities to solve the problems experienced during the adaptation period. In this sense, for me, ERASMUS contributed more to my personal development rather than my academic life.

The pre-service teachers think that their participation is beneficial to learn how to use limited money to live, to solve logistical issues such as passport, visa, and tickets problems, to form international friendships, to change their perceptions towards global thinking, and to present their experiences on their CVs. To sum up, they feel that they discovered themselves in terms of their personality, competences, likes and dislikes, and achievement.

For the pre-service of teachers participating in the ERASMUS program, the participation process offered opportunities to change their perceptions towards the target and native countries. First of all, they emphasized that their participation positively changed their perceptions toward not only the country they visited but also toward their native country. One student stated:

I was really worried about what I heard about Poland before I went there. It was told me that Poland is not a safe country, for instance. I was really anxious. When I started to live there, I saw that I could go out alone at night, and that I could travel the whole country without any fear.

Speaking specifically, they believe that they gained awareness about the perceptions of the people in EU countries towards Turkey, while they increased their awareness of how to change the negative perceptions of the participants from various countries toward other countries and peoples. Lastly, they underlined that they obtained information about the political and economic situations of different countries, as well as the history, geography, and international relations of the country where they lived.

The findings suggest that the participation process also seems to change the participants' perceptions of culture. First of all, the participants stated that they increased their awareness of both native and target culture and had opportunities to compare various cultures due to their international friends and experiences in the target country. In addition, they said that they obtained knowledge of different lifestyles and universal and humanistic points of view towards various cultures. That is, they believe that they can create a common culture among individuals from different cultures. One participant stated:

My ERASMUS experience helped me change my life. For example, I started to think globally about culture. I learned that people from different countries can share a common culture to live together, and can live all together despite the differences. I discovered that there are some

unchangeable principles and truths that combine every individual in the world.

Finally, the participants highlight that they had opportunities to introduce their native culture to foreigners and learn about cuisine of various countries during their participation process.

In terms of recreational activities, some benefits are noted by the participants. For example, they stated that they had the time to visit some other countries in Europe for recreational purposes and to travel the country they visited, for example:

In Turkish, there is a good proverb that aims to compare studying or travelling in terms of learning new things. The ERASMUS helped me learn by both traveling and studying. I visited five countries in Europe. This was a unique opportunity to travel in Europe.

Overall, the program seems to have been beneficial for them in terms of participating in recreational, cultural activities such as the cinema, theatre and concerts and improving their organizational skills as they stated that they had experiences about organizing recreational activities during their time abroad.

Problems Encountered by the Participants

The findings indicate that the pre-service teachers of English encountered some problems before, after, and during their participation in the ERASMUS program. To begin with, some of the pre-service teachers of English stated that their language skills did not improve during their participation process. That is, for instance, they state that they had communication problems with the people in the target country, native students, and lecturers as they preferred speaking their native language outside and inside the classroom, as one participant commented:

I had problems with my roommates. The reason was that I did not speak Catalan and they did not speak English. Dormitory office was not showing respect to the ones like me. Thus, I had to change my room. Apart from accommodation, the language spoken in the sessions were Catalan, not even Spanish (to be honest not in my classes as being ELT Classes). My other ERASMUS friends, who do speak Spanish well, from the other departments, were always complaining about the Professors that they only spoke Catalan although they could speak Spanish and English. Also, I should confess that it is hard to find Catalans who use English as a means of communication. They are quite strict about not using a foreign language in their own country, especially not using Spanish in Catalan region. That was the common problem for ERASMUS students as far as I observed.

Secondly, some of the participants complained that they had limited benefits in terms of their professional development, as they believe that the ERASMUS students had no difficulties in passing the courses when compared to the native students. In addition,

some of the participants said they believed that they had some difficulties with adapting to the education system in the target country. Another dimension of the problem appears to be that they also had difficulties with the education system in the home country when they came back. Stated one participant:

When I look over the things I experienced at the university in Denmark, I had an awareness of how many things I had to memorize back in Turkey, most of which were bound to be forgotten after passing the exams. So I said to myself, what is the point in swallowing so much information if I am going to unlearn those things that I came to know spending hours on them. These thoughts discouraged my willingness to study or at least study in a traditional sense.

Finally, the data suggest that the participants experienced some problems related to their adaptation process during their time in the program. For example, some participants expressed feeling depressed due to homesickness and the problems about making new friends. Also, some suffered from problems concerning adaptation when the program ended, as one stated:

As I came back to Turkey I was at a loss. This place was emptiness for me as the harmony I had in Turkey no longer existed. So I was right at where I began after all the way I came through. All in all, it is traumatic for an ERASMUS student to revert their way of life so often.

Other problem areas are the formal procedure of the participation process, cultural and logistical issues, and problems about recreational activities. First of all, some of the participants found the formal procedure complex before, after, and during the participation process. They also expressed difficulties about finding equivalent courses at the beginning of the program. Secondly, the participants said they suffered from some culture-related issues such as culture shock at the beginning of the program, negative judgments of the people about nationality and religion, perceptual differences about living with people of the opposite sex, and alcohol consumption at dormitories, as one pre-service teacher noted:

When I started to live in a dormitory with international students, I had some difficulties. Some students had some negative judgments about Turkish people and my religion. This made me a bit troubled at the beginning. Thus, it took long time to make friends from Western countries. For example, it was difficult to express them that my eating habits were related to my religious beliefs. Yet, after a very long time, good relations with them helped them change their negative judgments and prevented my troubles.

Next, the pre-service teachers of English shared that they were exposed to negative judgments as some of the Turkish participants do not consume alcohol because of their

religious beliefs and they also complained that excessive recreational activities prevented them from studying efficiently, as stated below:

All the students at the dormitory I stayed were ERASMUS students. And, mostly, they were wasting their time for entertainment. After a while, I thought that I was a tourist rather than a student. Some liked this situation much but I felt bored of wasting time for going to clubs every evening.

Lastly, some participants underlined that they experienced some logistical problems. To begin with, they stated that they encountered some problems as they did not have enough information about the public transportation system in the target country and town they were studying when they first arrived there. Next, they had difficulties with their eating habits due to religious and cultural diversity and the climatic conditions. In addition, some of the participants complained about the amount and delay of the grant. Finally, they think that the mentorship system does not work properly, as one stated below:

One of the considerable problems was that the person called “mentor” was not aware of his responsibilities. I was the lucky one that I saw him only on the first day when I arrived in Poland. Most of my friends never met their mentors.

In conclusion, the results indicate that the ERASMUS process has some significant benefits for the pre-service teachers of English who participate in the ERASMUS program, while it also has some problems. Briefly, the ERASMUS process has considerable contributions to language skills and professional and personal development of the pre-service teachers of English. Furthermore, the participation process has valuable benefits on the perceptions towards culture and creates opportunities for recreational activities. On the other hand, there exist some problems regarding the participation process. For example, the participants experience problems related to language, professional development, adaptation to the target and native environment, formal procedure, and cultural, logistical and recreational issues.

Conclusions and Discussion

Two main results were obtained from the study. The first is that the ERASMUS process has contributed considerably to participants’ language skills and knowledge, their professional and personal development, and their perceptions towards culture and recreational activities. Secondly, it causes some problems in relation to language, professional development, adaptation to the target and native environment, formal procedure, and cultural, logistical and recreational issues. Mainly, the participation process helps pre-service teachers improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing, pronunciation skills and vocabulary in English as a foreign language. It also increases self-confidence and reduces communication apprehension, and creates an awareness of contextual use of English as a second language learned in the target country. The program is valuable for the professional development of pre-service teachers of English as they increase their awareness of various education and instruction processes and systems, and gain knowledge about language teaching methods and techniques. Their

participation also makes them gain professional teaching experience, and gives opportunities in terms of employment in both Turkey and abroad. Furthermore, the participants gain self-confidence, awareness and experience for coping with difficulties of living and studying abroad, create positive perceptions towards their native, foreign, and common culture created by international students, and find time for recreational activities. Nevertheless, the participants suffer from a lack of communication in English with the local people, their foreign friends, and lecturers, adapting to the new environment at the beginning of the program and to their native environment when the program ends, and the difficulties of making international friends. Furthermore, they complain about the complexity of formal procedures, the mismatches between the curricula of two universities, logistical problems, negative perceptions towards the Turkish participants in terms of cultural and religious issues, and finally, the problems related to the amount and delay of the grant and the mentorship system.

The discussion of the results found in the study in comparison to the findings of previous studies can be summarized under six headings. First, the results of the present study indicate that the ERASMUS participation has significant contributions to participants' language skills as it is underlined by Teichler and Janson (2007) that the ERASMUS program is linguistically valuable. Furthermore, the results of the present study suggest that the participants are also aware of using the language contextually, they gain self-confidence, and they overcome communication apprehension, much as Jenkins (2009) found that ELF communication seemed to raise the awareness of its communicative effectiveness among the participants. Secondly, though Maiworm and Teichler (1995a) observed some problems about the differences in teaching and learning methods, the present study found that the participants have positive perceptions towards language teaching methods and techniques, and find the program valuable for professional development. Thirdly, the present results show that the participation gives opportunities in terms of employment in both Turkey and abroad while Teichler and Janson (2007) suggested that that the ERASMUS is expected to have a positive impact on subsequent employment and work. Fourthly, as found by Clarke (2005) that exchange students appeared willing to take greater risks in learning during their year abroad, the participants in the study gained self-confidence, awareness, and experience for coping with difficulties of living and studying abroad. Also, the present findings demonstrate that the participants have positive perceptions towards not only the European culture as noted by Bruce (1989) but also toward their native culture and a common culture created by international students. Additionally, the findings in the present study are similar in terms of cultural awareness to the results reported by Maiworm, Steube, and Teichler (1992), Chambers (1994), and Maiworm and Teichler (1995b). Fifthly, in terms of the problems encountered by the ERASMUS participants, it was found that they suffer from a lack of communication in English with the local people, their foreign friends and lecturers, and that they experience difficulties about adaptation to the new environment at the beginning of the program and to their native environment when the program ends, much as Teichler (1991) found that students faced some problems during the study period abroad and their integration into the academic and social life at the host university. Similarly, Maiworm, Steube, and Teichler (1992) found that the participants complained about the complexity of formal procedures and the mismatches between the curricula of two universities. Lastly, the results of the present study contribute to the relevant

literature on the negative perceptions towards Turkish participants in terms of cultural and religious issues that were investigated previously. Given that the ERASMUS participation process has made considerable contributions to the progress of Turkish pre-service teachers of English, some practical recommendations can be made. First of all, considering that the ERASMUS program presents considerable contributions to not only the language development but also to professional and personal development of pre-service teachers of English, there is a strong need to increase the number of the pre-service teachers who participate in the program. Specifically speaking, as the program offers valuable opportunities of having experience for the comparison of various educational systems, instruction processes, and particularly language teaching methods and techniques, Turkish pre-service teachers should be given more opportunities to be instructed about European institutions of teacher education. Secondly, there is also a strong need to solve potential problems encountered by Turkish ERASMUS participants. As an example, more intensive language courses in the target countries are needed about the native languages of target countries in order to resolve the communication problems with local people, their foreign friends and lecturers. To add, in order to overcome the problems about adaptation to the circumstances in target country and their native country when they return, some orientation programs should be organized by the ERASMUS offices in both target and native countries. By this way, participants should be informed about potential problems related to public transportation systems, religious issues and the negative perceptions towards religious issues before and after the participation process. The orientation process is also needed for the lecturers and students in the target country before the process starts. Furthermore, the formal procedure should be simplified so as to make the application process easier and the universities should also work cooperatively to solve the mismatches between the curricula by considering the unifying role of the ERASMUS mobility in European Community. In addition, the amount of grants should be revised and the problems concerning the delay of payment should be solved. Lastly, host universities need to revise the mentorship system in order to offer effective and valuable help to the participants.

The findings obtained from the study have three significant contributions. First, the data on the contributions and problems can be beneficial to and guide the integration process of Turkish higher education into the European system in terms of the English teacher training process, and used for the evaluation of the current system in Turkey as a candidate county in a critical process in which the Council of Higher Education of Turkey takes steps to implement the ERASMUS program, and encouraging the universities to participate the program. Moreover, the results can be used to evaluate and revise the program by educational policy makers in terms of efficiency, outcomes, impacts of the program and the needs analysis for it on a European scale. Second, the study will contribute significantly to the relevant literature due to the lack of research on it. Speaking specifically, as the research focuses holistically on the contributions and problems regarding the ERASMUS participation, and explores the factors regarding the contributions and problems in relation to the program; the findings of the study may guide researchers to investigate the aforementioned issues descriptively and quantitatively in a narrower scope. Third and last, the study results can help to interpret the perceptions of cultural differences between European and Turkish communities, and

to solve the potential problems in educational and instructional context during the process of integration of Turkey into European Union.

As a final note on the limitations of the study, the subjects of the study were limited to 23 Turkish pre-service teachers of English in the ELT department at Balikesir University, Turkey. The scope of the study was confined to the data collected qualitatively using interviews, group discussions, and essay papers. Given that the present study examined holistically the contributions and problems regarding the ERASMUS participation process, further studies should focus both quantitatively and qualitatively on the problems encountered by the ERASMUS participants in a deeper and more analytic perspective.

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Appendix 1

Contributions of the ERASMUS program to the progress of EFL pre-service teachers

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
<i>Language skills</i>		
My language skills and knowledge improved.	11	3.4
I considerably developed my listening skills in English.	10	3.1
I considerably developed my speaking skills in English.	10	3.1
I improved my reading and writing skills.	8	2.5
I improved my pronunciation.	7	2.2
I improved my vocabulary.	8	2.5
I learned the second language used in the country I visited.	9	2.8

I learned how to use the language I know in meaningful contexts and used English intensively in various settings.	4	1.2
I had awareness of the <i>world Englishes</i> .	3	0.9
I had a high level of self-confidence in learning and using English.	6	1.9
I overcame my communication apprehension in English.	4	1.2
<i>Perceptions towards native and target country</i>		
My participation increased my awareness about the perceptions of the people in EU countries towards Turkey.	5	1.6
My participation helped positively change my perceptions towards my country.	3	0.9
My participation helped positively change my perceptions towards target country.	3	0.9
The program helped me see how to change the negative perceptions of the participants from various countries towards other countries and peoples.	5	1.6
I learned much about the history and geography, and international relations of the country I visited.	5	1.6
I had a chance to learn much about political and economic situations of different countries.	3	0.9
<i>Professional development</i>		
I gained knowledge about a different education system.	16	5.0
I had a chance to compare different education systems of native and target countries.	12	3.7
It helped me learn various language teaching methods and techniques to apply in my professional life.	12	3.7
I believe that I can find a job easily in my country because of my experience in ERASMUS program.	7	2.2
I had professional help from the lecturers during and after the program.	4	1.2
I believed that I can work as an English teacher in any country.	4	1.2
I had experience of teaching English to children.	2	0.6
I noticed the differences between exam-centered and process-based learning.	4	1.2
<i>Personal Development</i>		
I had awareness of how to cope with difficulties when living in an unfamiliar country.	9	2.8
It was a good chance for me to add my experience on my CV.	5	1.6
I learned how to live on my own without my family.	7	2.2
I increased my self-confidence by studying and in living a different country.	7	2.2
I learned how to use limited money to live.	9	2.8
I learned how to take decisions on my own.	6	1.9
I learned to take risks and responsibilities about life.	5	1.6

I gained a broader vision of global thinking.	4	1.2
It helped me about socialization and adaptation to new social environments.	5	1.6
I learned how to solve logistical issues such as passport, visa and tickets.	4	1.2
I felt that I discovered myself in terms of my personality, competences, likes and dislikes, and achievement.	3	0.9
I formed strong friendships with students from different countries.	3	0.9
<i>Cultural contributions</i>		
I found opportunities to introduce my native culture.	11	3.4
I noticed cultural similarities and differences between Turkish and western culture, and increased my awareness about various cultures as I had friends from different countries.	12	3.7
I increased my awareness of the target culture.	16	5.0
I increased my awareness of my native culture as I had a chance to compare different cultures.	7	2.2
I gained knowledge of different life styles.	9	2.8
I gained universal and humanistic points of view towards various cultures.	5	1.6
I learned that individuals from different cultures can create a common culture among them.	3	0.9
I learned about the cuisines of various countries.	4	1.2
<i>Recreational activities</i>		
I had enough time to visit some other countries in Europe for recreational purposes.	6	1.9
I had opportunities to travel the country I visited.	7	2.2
I participated in cinema, theatre and concert activities.	6	1.9
My experiences helped me organize recreational activities after I came back to my country.	3	0.9
Total	321	100

Appendix 2

Problems encountered by EFL pre-service teachers during the ERASMUS program

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
<i>Language skills</i>		
My language skills did not improve as I expected.	3	3.1
I had communication problems with the students from the target country.	3	3.1
Teachers used their native language instead of English during classes.	2	2.1
My language skills did not improve as nobody speaks English outside the school, and had communicational problems with the people in the target	6	6.3

country as English was not common.

Procedure

The formal procedure is too complex before, after and during the participation process.	4	4.2
It was difficult to find the equivalent courses.	4	4.2

Adaptation

It took much time to adapt to the target country.	3	3.1
I had difficulty in adapting to my native country when I came back.	4	4.2

Professional development

Erasmus students were more tolerant about passing the courses when compared to the native students.	3	3.1
After seeing a different education system, it was difficult to adapt to the traditional system in my native country.	3	3.1
It was difficult to adapt to the education system in the target country.	5	5.2

Cultural problems

I experienced a culture shock in my first weeks in the target country.	4	4.2
I noticed some negative judgments towards the Turkish and Islam.	3	3.1
It was difficult to live in a dormitory where both male and female students stay.	2	2.1
It was strange to consume alcohol among the participants.	3	3.1

Recreational activities

There are too many recreational activities that prevent studying.	4	4.2
I noticed some negative judgments about my negative attitudes towards alcohol during recreational activities.	5	5.2

Personal Development

I felt depressed as I missed my family and friends in my country.	6	6.3
It took a long time to make international friends.	4	4.2

Logistical problems

I experienced some problems when I arrived in the target country due to the lack of information about the transportation system.	3	3.1
I had problems about using the public transportation system.	4	4.2
My mentor was not helpful to me.	5	5.2

Climatic conditions affected me negatively.	2	2.1
It was difficult to change my eating habits in a new country.	4	4.2
The money provided was not enough for my expenses.	3	3.1
The grant was not paid on time.	4	4.2
Total	96	100

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