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Intercultural Sensitivity Orientations Prior to Short-Term Study Abroad: A Qualitative Study on Prospective English Language Teachers

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Abstract

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Keywords

Intercultural Sensitivity, Interculturality, Short-Term Study Abroad, International Exchange Programs, Language Teacher Education, Qualitative Case Study

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Intercultural Sensitivity Orientations Prior to Short-Term Study Abroad: A Qualitative Study on Prospective English Language Teachers

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Short-term study abroad programs can contribute to the multidimensional development of prospective language teachers. However, participants' intercultural sensitivity orientations prior to the mobility period can significantly influence the quality and quantity of the outcomes gained from such programs. Therefore, in this qualitative case study, we explored the intercultural sensitivity orientations of a cohort of prospective language teachers from Turkey who prepared to study at three different universities in Italy. We also explored the participants' perspectives regarding the potential contributions of short-term study abroad to their ongoing language teacher education processes. Following an interpretive analysis of qualitative data, our findings revealed that the participants aligned largely with ethnocentrism although there were individual differences concerning the levels of intercultural sensitivity. Their intercultural perspectives generally lacked complexity and reflected popular, unwarranted discourses surrounding study abroad. Based on these findings and discussions, we made several recommendations for further research and preparation of future participants. Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity, Interculturality, Short-Term Study Abroad, International Exchange Programs, Language Teacher Education, Qualitative Case Study

Introduction

With the advent of complex technological and transportation activities, people navigate, more than ever, across different social spheres, and thus need to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes to behave and communicate across these social contexts (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Wilkinson, 2012). In that regard, a number of scholars have underscored a pressing need to integrate intercultural (communicative) competence (IC) into educational agendas so that the world can be transformed into a state in which every living being learns from one another and continues to transform the social realms (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This ethos of IC encourages people to exhibit humility and see the world from alternative perspectives and, therefore, paves the way for dialogue and collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds.

In language education, the recognition and promotion of IC is not a luxury. As Baker (2011) argues, there is no target culture(s) to include in language education; instead, there is a world of ambiguities and challenges that should be embraced and managed by both teachers and learners through non-essentialist and critical perspectives (Holliday, 2011). Such a task might be challenging to achieve with every single language learner, but it is not impossible with interculturally competent language teachers. In that regard, language teachers are expected to develop an awareness of global interconnectivity, respect diversity, and embrace social justice (Cushner, 2011; Phillion & Malewski, 2011), thus, for the interests of this article, to develop critical interculturality. A language teacher, who embraces critical interculturality, can help culturally and linguistically diverse students grow and can prepare them for an

increasingly diverse and interconnected world that is also imbued with power relations (Dervin, 2016; Sercu, 2006). However, concerning the integration of this interculturality ethos into language education, the question of teacher preparation continues to be a focus in language teacher education (LTE) research (Byram, 2014).

In order to help language teachers develop (critical) interculturality, theory may not suffice alone; there must also be experiential learning opportunities (Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Zhao, 2010). Considering the situated and experiential nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), several teacher education programs from different parts of the world continuously exert efforts in the integration of cultural immersion opportunities into their program components (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2019; Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). One such effort is the Erasmus exchange program that makes it possible for higher education students to study in another European country for a temporary period and to benefit from academic and sociocultural experiences. Since Erasmus students usually spend one semester in another European country, the program can be viewed as a short-term study abroad opportunity, as Engle and Engle (2003) assert that short-term study abroad programs last between three and 23 weeks. Such short-term study abroad opportunities can leverage intercultural challenges and can allow participants to experience otherness that is considered essential for interculturality growth among student teachers (Marx & Moss, 2011; Medina, Hathaway, & Pilonieta, 2015). Such opportunities, further, can enable program participants to confront and reflect on their potentially ethnocentric, essentialist worldviews (Bennett, 1993) and stereotyped opinions, which are known as exaggerated beliefs associated with a category (Allport, 1954). Although short-term study abroad participants may not completely disidentify from such exaggerated beliefs and essentialism, they, through their first-hand experiences, are highly likely to reflect more deeply on people's cultural and personal multiplicity (Medina et al., 2015). In other words, they may develop non-judgmental reflexivity through which they may view individuals as a complex amalgam of their various identity dimensions, personal histories, and worldviews (Holliday, 2011). Short-term study abroad, in fact, seems to have made such an impact to several extents on the interculturality development of various language teachers (Allen, 2010; Çiftçi & Karaman, 2019; Karaman & Tochon, 2007, 2010; Marx & Moss, 2011; Medina et al., 2015; Pray & Marx, 2010; Shiri, 2015; Trent, 2011; Youngs & Youngs, 2001).

However, complex interculturality development may not emerge merely through participation in short-term study abroad programs. Rather, interculturality development is highly likely to be shaped by participants' personal histories and worldviews prior to such experiences. The growing literature on intercultural programs shows that intercultural sensitivity orientation prior to a mobility period has a remarkable effect on the quality of the period and on the gains of international exchange programs (Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Bown, & Martinsen, 2014; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Byram & Feng, 2006; Goldoni, 2013; Jackson, 2008b, 2010; Martinsen, 2010). However, the efforts that investigate individuals' pre-mobility intercultural orientations/conceptions are limited, particularly in LTE contexts. Therefore, there needs to be an increase in such efforts since accumulated/emerging findings may help language teacher educators revise and refine relevant structures or study abroad components within their LTE programs. As an indirect result, study abroad participants can engage in sophisticated, reflexive instances of interculturality and therefore may increase chances for complex linguistic and interculturality development (Coleman, 2013). Therefore, considering the significant influence of pre-mobility conceptions on mobility gains, we aim to explore and interpret intercultural sensitivity orientations of one particular cohort of prospective language teachers from Turkey prior to their Erasmus mobility period in Italy. In addition to the focus on intercultural sensitivity orientations, we also aim to understand how the participants anticipate the Erasmus program may contribute to their ongoing LTE processes, as their future-oriented thought patterns regarding short-term study abroad can corroborate the findings

regarding their intercultural sensitivity orientations and therefore can offer a more in-depth description of the cohort at hand.

In this study, we specifically aim to build upon the study conducted by Çiftçi and Karaman (2018) who investigated preparation experiences of prospective English language teachers from Turkey who chose to study in England within the Erasmus program. Utilizing an in-depth qualitative methodology and a sociocultural framework that underscored individual variations and complexity, they revealed that participants' preconceptions of experiences were mainly shaped by groundless optimism, *naïveté*, and varying levels of intercultural (in)competence. They also found that the intercultural orientations were inextricably affected by the participants' different life orientations, mindsets, and personal histories. Although their findings signaled complex and individual intercultural sensitivity orientations, their participants overall demonstrated a discursive tendency toward essentialist and naïve perspectives in terms of interculturality. This tendency among study abroad candidates can be a threat to linguistic and interculturality development. If not explored deeper and tackled strategically, such discourse patterns may continue to reproduce a discourse of tourism in the nexus between LTE and short-term study abroad. Consequently, programs such as the Erasmus could be considered as a "sponsored vacation" (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011).

To prevent the discourses that may reproduce short-term study abroad programs as uncritical "vacation" in LTE and to expand/reconsider Çiftçi and Karaman's (2018) findings, we aim to offer another in-depth qualitative investigation with a different cohort of prospective English language teachers. This time, the focus is on different individuals who chose to study in Italy. With the help of such further investigations, it is possible for us to identify ways to tackle uncritical, ethnocentric, and essentialist cultural perspectives and to reveal, if any, different patterns or further multidimensions around contextual and individual variations in short-term study abroad research in LTE.

In order to evaluate and interpret our participants' intercultural sensitivity orientations, we employ Bennett's (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) thanks to its long-lasting position in the field of intercultural relations (Cushner, 2011; Jackson, 2008a, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The DMIS is a useful means to document what specific sensitivity levels international mobility candidates demonstrate prior to their mobility period (Jackson, 2008a, 2011). According to the DMIS, people exhibit certain, non-linear developmental patterns in terms of developing intercultural sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). The first developmental stages are ethnocentric (Denial, Defense, and Minimization) in which "the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality" (Bennett, 1993, p. 30). The second stages are ethnorelative (Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration) in which people evaluate their cultural perspectives in the context of other cultures with an acceptance of cultural multiplicity; the speakers thus achieve a higher level of criticality, sophistication, awareness, and sensitivity toward intercultural issues. Jackson (2011, p. 172) summarizes the intercultural sensitivity levels as follows:

Denial measures a worldview that simplifies and/or avoids cultural difference. *Polarization: Defense/Reversal* measures a judgmental orientation that views cultural differences in terms of "us" and "them." In *Defense*, "us" is uncritically viewed as superior, whereas in *Reversal*, the opposite bias prevails. *Minimization* measures a transitional worldview that emphasizes cultural commonality and universal values. With limited cultural self-awareness, individuals in this phase may not pay sufficient attention to cultural differences. *Acceptance* measures a worldview that can comprehend and appreciate complex cultural differences, while *Adaptation* identifies the capacity to alter one's

cultural perspective and adapt one's behavior so that it is appropriate in a particular cultural context (*italics in original*).

Based on the participants' reports and with the help of the DMIS, it is, then, possible for us to describe and interpret intercultural sensitivity orientations of the participants prior to their mobility period. In line with our research aims, in this study, we explore the following research questions:

- How do individual prospective English language teachers describe their intercultural opinions prior to their Erasmus mobility period? What levels/patterns of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) do they individually and collectively reveal?
- How do prospective English language teachers anticipate the Erasmus program will contribute to their ongoing LTE processes?

Before moving on to a detailed discussion of our methodological choices that clarify our research processes, we provide a brief discussion of our research context and our roles involved in the research processes. Since our worldviews, personal histories, and preconceptions can significantly influence the collection, analysis, and discussion of data (Creswell, 2012), we attempt to bracket our personal experiences and assumptions and aim to help readers see our background and viewpoints concerning the scope and conduct of this study.

The Research Context and the Role of the Investigators

Our target LTE program is located at one of the major research universities in central Turkey. The program, in its official website, claims to provide prospective English language teachers with a solid foundation in the English language, English literature, language teaching methodologies, educational sciences, and linguistics. It further assures that the graduates can teach English at all levels from primary through tertiary. A considerable number of graduates teach English at various higher education institutions in Turkey. A notable number of graduates also pursue graduate studies within the years following their graduation.

While studying at our target LTE program, student teachers have a chance to visit another country within the Erasmus exchange scheme. The prospective English language teachers who consider applying for an Erasmus grant must complete at least one semester in the LTE program, and the applications are received for the following academic year. During the application period, the applicants use a digital online system to make choices among the available host universities. Following their choices, the applicants are required to take the English Proficiency Exam for Exchange Programs (EPEEP) that is offered by the home university. After the announcement of their exam results, the applicants are ranked according to the 50% of their Cumulative Grade Points Average and 50% of their EPEEP score. Following the final placements, the candidates are expected to decide on the length of the period that they plan to spend in the target context. In this respect, they have two options: either one semester or two semesters. If they decide to spend only one semester, they need to specify their semester choice: either the fall or the spring semester. For this study, we chose to scrutinize one cohort that chose to study in Italy for the fall semester 2016–2017 (see also Participant Selection and Participant Profiles under Methodology section for further details).

We recognize that our previous experiences and assumptions regarding international student mobility may interfere with our interpretations of participants' perspectives. We, therefore, need to ensure the bracketing of our previous experiences, biases, and preconceptions related to short-term study abroad programs before we describe and interpret the participants'

intercultural sensitivity orientations. However, the ability to set aside personal preconceptions during the research processes is more about being reflexive than being objective since any human conduct always bears elements of subjectivity, and it is sometimes impossible to put aside some personal issues since we may not be aware of them (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). “[T]he process of bracketing is, therefore, an iterative, reflexive journey” (Ahern, 1999, p. 408). In this respect, relying on our own previous experiences, we believe that short-term international experiences hold the potential to be transformative since participants are highly likely to confront different realities from their own established thought frameworks. In that regard, participants have a chance to experience being *the Other* and to view cultural patterns from both inside and outside. Such experiences may also offer chances to develop language skills and may help participants increase chances of employability for their later lives in an increasingly neoliberal world. We believe that every language teacher candidate should be provided with an opportunity to participate in a short-term international mobility program. However, those who choose and can afford to study abroad for a temporary period may not have a second chance to compensate for the lost opportunities. Therefore, we also believe that preparing study abroad candidates for (critical) interculturality is essential. In that regard, it is vital to learn more about their interculturality perspectives, which we aim to explore in this study by building upon a previous study.

Regarding the researchers-researched relationship, the first author works as a research/teaching assistant while the second author works as a faculty member/teacher educator at our target LTE program. Neither of us offered/assisted any courses taken by the participants at the time of research, and the first author conducted the whole data collection procedure. While collecting the data, the author occasionally underscored his role as a researcher, not as program staff. Therefore, he tried to establish a rapport with them. He, for example, informed them often about the details of the study, shared his own previous intercultural experiences, helped them with their preparation, and enjoyed some social gatherings with them. He, further, participated in their online messaging group where they shared their questions, experiences, and problems related to their preparation processes. The second author supervised the whole research process and took important roles in data analysis and interpretation. She also contributed significantly to the write-up process.

Methodology

Recently, increasing attention has been drawn to whole people and whole lives in study abroad and interculturality research (Beaven & Borghetti, 2016; Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013; Coleman, 2013; Isabelli-Garcia, Bown, Plews, & Dewey, 2018; Kinginger, 2015). Therefore, the current focus is on the individual and context-specific nature of interculturality development (Bloom & Miranda, 2015), inasmuch as “study abroad is a complex, fluid, and multi-dimensional phenomenon, in which contextual and individual variations play a prominent role in shaping individual experiences” (Van Maele, Vassilicos, & Borghetti, 2016, p. 2). Further, Coleman (2013) notes that “individual trajectories are in fact the essence of recent study abroad research, in which the focus has shifted from quantitative to qualitative, from product to process, from a search for generalizability to a recognition of complexity and variation” (p. 25). We adopted a descriptive case study approach in this study to investigate and describe complex and dynamic interculturality patterns among particular individuals (Baxter & Jack, 2008; MacDonald & O’Regan, 2012; Yin, 2014). Case studies tend to yield detailed and contextualized data that can lead to “a full and thorough knowledge of the particular” (Stake, 2000, p. 22). Useful insights can also be drawn for similar contexts through transferability or “relatability” of the qualitative findings that emerge from a case study (Stake, 2000). Overall in this study, we, first, focus on each individual’s account of his or her

intercultural sensitivity orientation and then seek larger convergent/divergent patterns emerging from these individual accounts.

Ethical Issues

We conducted this study under the approval of the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects and collected a written consent from the participants. In the consent form, we described in detail the procedure for data collection and purpose of the study. We also informed the participants that we would ensure the confidentiality of their data and their personal information. Further, we gave them an option to withdraw from the study at any time. After the last interview, we gave the participants a debriefing form that informed them about the study in further details. Lastly, after we completed our data analysis phase, we asked the participants to share their opinions on the data they provided and on our interpretations of the data, which is known as the member checking procedure (Creswell, 2012).

Participant Selection and Participant Profiles

For this study, we recruited from one cohort that chose to study in Italy for the fall semester 2016–2017 (four months), all four students, namely Ahmet, Burak, Figen, and Göksu (pseudonyms; see Table 1 for a detailed background of the participants). We chose this particular cohort deliberately, as Italy was the most popular country destination among the prospective language teachers in the research context. The participants chose to study in Italy, mainly due to their interests in the Italian language and life in Italy. Otherwise, they had other available country options as well, such as England, Germany, Greece, Poland, and Spain. Nevertheless, they were not completely detached from their ongoing LTE processes, as they were accepted into an equivalent program at their host Italian institutions. In this case, they gained a chance to develop their Italian language skills and explore life in Italy in addition to their academic studies in the field of English language teaching.

Table 1. The background information of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Previous experience abroad and its type (if any)
Burak	Preferred not to disclose	18	1	Had no experience abroad.
Ahmet	Male	22	3	Spent a few months in the United States within a summer work and travel program.
Figen	Female	22	3	Had no experience abroad.
Göksu	Female	21	3	Was a board member of an international student society, Travelled frequently to different European countries.

Data Collection Procedures

In line with the research aims, the first author conducted three semi-structured, audio-recorded, and face-to-face interviews over a six-month preparation period with each participant. During the first interview, he encouraged the participants to tell about themselves and their decision-making process for the Erasmus program. In the second and third interviews, he focused on the details of their thought patterns and preparation experiences with more emphasis on interculturality issues and LTE processes. The last interview took place within the

two weeks before they commenced their Erasmus mobility period. During the last two interviews, he encouraged the participants to envision their future, possible experiences in Italy. Therefore, the interviews overall scrutinized past, present, and future in an interrelated way in order to explore the participants' (inter)cultural lifeworlds and worldviews in-depth (see Table 2 for focus areas and purposes of the semi-structured interviews).

Table 2. The focus areas and purpose(s) of the interview guides

Interviews	Focus Areas	Purpose(s)
Interview 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal background (socioeconomic, educational, and language) • Decision-making process for short-term study abroad • Reasons for the choice of the host country and university • Initial feelings toward living in a different country and educational system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To collect information on the participants' background • To explore the reasons for the Erasmus mobility decision • To elicit recent and initial perspectives toward the mobility period
Interview 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans, motivations, expectations, and concerns toward the mobility period • Possible gains related to ongoing LTE processes • Knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward the target society and host university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To elicit the participants' interculturality perspectives/worldviews • To explore present meaning-making of future intercultural experiences • To explore how the participants envision the possible influences of the Erasmus program on their future life and career
Interview 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning-making of the whole preparation period • Reflections on the issues emerging from the previous interviews • Final feelings prior to the mobility period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore final feelings and thoughts prior to the mobility period • To have a holistic understanding of the preparation period and interculturality understandings

Data Analysis

During the analysis of the data, we utilized an analytical tool (MaxQDA) to code, construct code lists, retrieve coded segments, write memos, search texts, and create maps for connections between codes and themes. The first step in the data analysis was to transcribe each interview. Following the transcription of the interviews, we read each transcription several times to create initial codes and memos before reaching a synthesis of each participant's intercultural sensitivity orientation and of statements regarding the possible contributions of

the Erasmus program to LTE processes. This initial coding phase, which employed descriptive coding, was informed by our research questions and theoretical framework that describes different levels of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). During the coding of the data, we followed the two cycles of coding described by Saldaña (2009). We deployed “First Cycle” methods during the initial coding of the data and then utilized “Second Cycle” methods that involved analytic skills such as reorganizing and reanalyzing before reaching a final list of themes.

Following these two cycles, we mapped the emerging issues showing the networks and connections among codes, memos, and emergent patterns, and then formed final themes. The final themes not only reflected the commonality but also consisted of differences (Saldaña, 2009). As we are motivated to place a greater emphasis on the idiographic analysis due to recent highlights in the literature, each step involved analyzing each individual case before underlining convergences and divergences among the cases under broader themes. Therefore, the final themes reflected dominantly individual thought patterns. However, after completing these theme formation phases, we also deployed interpretative endeavors to offer common patterns and to bring depth to the themes in line with the theoretical foundations and research questions. In the very end, an in-depth picture of the individual cases and common patterns emerged under two broad themes in line with our two research questions.

Findings

Following the whole analysis procedure, two main themes emerged, first, to detail the existing orientation of each participant’s intercultural sensitivity and, second, to synthesize how the participants evaluated the potential, imagined impact of the Erasmus program on their ongoing/future professional life. In that regard, the final two themes are (1) *Ethnocentric or ethnorelative? A close look at each participant’s intercultural sensitivity orientation* and (2) *Short-term study abroad: The imagined contributions to ongoing LTE processes*.

Ethnocentric or ethnorelative? A close look at each participant’s intercultural sensitivity orientation. Since in this study we focus predominantly on each individual participant’s account of his or her intercultural sensitivity orientation, we start this section with a brief representation of each participant’s intercultural sensitivity orientation in relation to Bennett’s (1993) intercultural sensitivity levels. After that, under our second theme and following discussions, we present larger convergent/divergent patterns emerging from participants’ perspectives.

Göksu: Oscillating between defense/reversal and minimization. Having taken several Italian language courses and visited Italy for a week as a tourist in the past, Göksu was eminently motivated to study in Italy. Since she was also a board member of an international student society and therefore took a few trips to other European countries in the recent past, interculturality was not an alien notion to her. When asked about her impressions of Italy, she portrayed people who live in Italy as similar to those who live in Turkey and even depicted “Italians” as “Christian Turks.” Further, she reduced the complexity of the whole country and its culturally diverse inhabitants to a “Northern-Southern Italy” division:

People who live in the South are more relaxed and friendly. On the contrary, people in the North are colder and richer. I actually prefer to hang out with people from the South, as they are more outgoing and hospitable just like us, Turkish people. (Second Interview)

Göksu signaled an ethnocentric perspective, as she tended to generalize salient cultural patterns to large groups of people and to minimize cultural complexities based on her short observations. Such an essentialized cultural view, which was also observable across her other cultural perspectives regarding the life in Italy/Europe, placed her between defense/reversal and minimization stages of the DMIS. Interestingly, however, Göksu did not approach the life practices in her own home country with the same essentialist attitude since she thought that her country characteristics could not be reduced solely to the geographical area in which she resided, as she claimed that even every small city in Turkey had its own unique and dynamic characteristics. Even if she accepted the complexity of cultural practices within her home country context, she, however, tended to see her own local culture(s) or cultural routines, within which she grew up, superior to the cultural practices in some other parts of Turkey. For example, she thought that “rakı” (a popular alcoholic drink in Turkey) is a better representation of “Turkish culture” compared to “ayran” (a non-alcoholic yogurt beverage), thereby again reflecting ethnocentric tendencies.

Admiring some European countries, Göksu also tended to extol some cultural characteristics in Europe and to denigrate “Turkishness.” Here are a few statements to illustrate this point:

People in Europe are more open-minded. No one tries to fix other people. In Turkey, however, we always interfere with people’s choices in lifestyles. We are totally bound to conservative traditions. (First Interview)

I am completely dissatisfied with my life here in Turkey. I wish I could take every Turkish citizen who thinks like me to a European country and settle down in there. That would just be great. (Third Interview)

Since she criticized some aspects of her home country and viewed “European” cultural practices as superior, her statements, most of the time, occupied a place in the defense/reversal level of the DMIS. Interestingly, however, she also noted that she defended her country unconditionally whenever she was in “foreign” contexts. Nevertheless, once in the home context, she regarded herself as superior to the “conservative Turkish communities” and denigrated “Turkishness” *vis-à-vis* “Europeanness,” all of which indeed document an ethnocentric tendency, which oscillates between defense/reversal and minimization.

Figen: Standing on a thin line between ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. Similar to Göksu’s exalted feelings, Figen was excited about her upcoming mobility period thanks to her “long history of learning the Italian language.” Unlike Göksu’s case, Figen, however, was more tolerant of different worldviews and diverse lifestyles “thanks to her family members” whom, she thought, represented different political camps. However, she believed that “people should not take a blind alliance with fixed ideologies,” but instead should look for “flexible and collaborative ways” to resolve emerging human problems. In that regard, she seemed to be aware of complexities and multiplicity among individuals and human societies. However, what she lacked in her personal history was an intense, sophisticated experience of face-to-face intercultural communication. Nevertheless, she was enthusiastic about having online exchanges with people who were particularly from Italy. She, in fact, created her own chances to develop some forms of language skills for her upcoming experiences in Italy, but with no deliberate guidance. When asked what she thought of those online communication instances, she stated that she “did her best to enjoy the exchanges,” which indeed indicated her openness to communication with people from diverse backgrounds.

On the other hand, however, she sometimes lost her critical side while communicating online with people from Italy since she tended to accept their superficial cultural views without

critical evaluation. For example, similar to Göksu, Figen also started to believe that South and North were divided with an “invisible” line in Italy. Further, she sometimes adopted *us-them/we-they polarization* or resorted to stereotyped perspectives while referring to “the Italian way of doing things”:

I will do my best to adapt to their culture, as I will spend almost five months there. I might have thought not to give up on our cultural values if I were to spend a few days there. However, I will try to behave and live like them. I will try to adapt to their way of doing things. (Second Interview)

Drawing rigid boundaries between her “cultural values” and “their way of doing things,” she essentialized and solidified different forms of lifestyles and ignored possible similarities or hybrid and fluid forms of cultural practices among human societies. Furthermore, when asked about her opinions regarding life in Italy, she immediately understood it as the particular types of food consumed there: “Pizza, spaghetti... These are what come to my mind. And I think I will consume these too, as I will not be able to consume pork meat.” She could not consume this type of meat because of her religious faith, which is completely acceptable. However, when asked about her opinions regarding alcohol consumption, which is also forbidden by her faith, she stated that she prefers “not to be present at the contexts where alcoholic beverages are consumed,” since she believed that people would lose their self-control. Since she tended to think that people would lose control over their behaviors and thought processes once intoxicated, she did not want to interact with them and, by arguing so, she indirectly planned to avoid many socialization opportunities abroad. Although she signaled awareness of individual variations among people and complex cultural differences, her perspective regarding alcohol consumption signaled ethnocentric tendencies.

Figen was motivated to get to know new people from the host country—as long as they were sober—and was eager to learn more about different cultural practices and perspectives. However, she was not wholly able to set aside her ethnocentric perspectives, perhaps because she did not have abundant chances to experience face-to-face communication with people from diverse backgrounds and to experiment with her cultural framings. Overall, Figen’s statements signaled both ethnocentric and ethnorelative perspectives. Therefore, it was not possible to place her on a particular point along the continuum in the DMIS. Nevertheless, she demonstrated a remarkable number of ethnocentric statements that included *we-they polarization* and disapproval of certain social practices such as alcohol consumption.

Burak: Minimizing cultural differences yet acknowledging partiality of worldviews. As the youngest participant in this study, Burak did not want to disclose his gendered identity, but he accepted to be referred to as “he” in this study. Burak defined himself as someone “unusually outgoing.” He, just like Figen, had no experience abroad prior to the Erasmus mobility period. However, he claimed that he had always known there was a world beyond Turkey thanks to his international acquaintances from multiplayer online games. Further, throughout the interviews, he insistently highlighted the cultural relativity of identity categories and thus avoided labeling other people as, in his words, “stupid” or “deficient” just because of their identity categories. In this respect, he did not think himself superior to “people who came from different nations, ethnicities, and religions.” In that regard, his self-claimed marginalized gender position may be a significant factor in his acceptance of different identity categories or social positions.

Due to his gender identity, Burak did not feel completely free in Turkey, as he believed that the communities with which he had been interacting were not inclusive enough to tolerate his lifestyle. However, due to his self-claimed marginalized position, Burak could inevitably

reflect on possibly different worldviews among people: “I usually don’t assume people’s backgrounds when communicating with them since we are all unique and different. Instead, I try to find common points to talk about.” He was indeed uneasy about simplistic and discriminatory discussions on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. However, Burak too accepted “the Northern-Southern Italy division” without a deep critical reflection. He was even relieved when he learned that the Italian city that he would live in was closer to the North, as he believed and told, “The North is more European,” thereby highlighting an ethnocentric reversal perspective. Life in the South, from his cultural point of view, would not offer anything “new” because his hometown in Turkey, which was located on the Mediterranean coastline as well, offered him the same geographical conditions, climate, and “culture.” In his opinion, people in Southern Italy would have “similar lifestyles” and characteristics to those who lived along the Mediterranean coastline. This self-perceived similarity was, in fact, one of the main reasons behind his recent decision to learn and improve Italian language skills. Further, he did not expect a “shocking difference” in Italy since, according to him, Italians were “humans too, they had two ears, two eyes...”

At this point, depending on Burak’s statements, it is possible to place him overall at the minimization level along the DMIS continuum. In this level, there might still be unresolved denial or defense issues, but individuals usually resolve their dissonances by referring to the sameness of human groups. However, we cannot confidently claim that Burak did not develop ethnorelative understandings since a considerable number of his statements also exhibited an acceptance of potential partiality of worldviews among individuals and human groups. Similar to Figen’s case, we cannot place him clearly on a point along the DMIS continuum despite his prevalent statements signaling minimization.

Ahmet: Sweeping away the last pieces of ethnocentrism. Ahmet is another participant who had previous experiences abroad. He spent almost three months in the United States (US) for a summer work and travel program prior to his Erasmus application. Toward the end of his work and travel experience, Ahmet received sad news: the sudden death of his father. As part of his recovery process following, in his words, “this traumatic experience,” Ahmet decided to apply for the Erasmus program in order to have further international experiences and to have “a fresh start.” Of course, his decision was not entirely determined by his sudden loss. He had a growing interest in improving his Italian language skills. Further, following his experiences in the US, Ahmet no longer felt a commitment to any nation-state as he thought, “Countries are imaginary spaces with imaginary borders.” Relying on his growing cosmopolitan mindset, he started to view people as unique individuals rather than as simple members of larger cultural groups: “Culture must be something subjective; I believe every single person has a unique version of culture in her/his mind and life.” Having acknowledged the complexity of individuals and cultural differences/similarities, Ahmet largely aligned with ethnorelativism.

While pondering upon the possible reasons behind his growing ethnorelative mindset, Ahmet noted that he largely owed it to the novels he read and to his first-hand social experiences and observations in the US where he realized that there were unequal power distributions among different racial and ethnic communities. In that regard, he stated, “people claim that there is no racism in the US, but I think they explicitly discriminate against, for example, Hispanic or black people, especially in the job market.” To him, these people were deprived of equal life opportunities since they were offered low-profile jobs and low-quality education. Such observations and reflections regarding power relations within different cultural contexts indeed indicated that he moved beyond simplistic, stereotyped, and essentialist understandings associated with particular nation-states. However, the most intriguing evidence showing Ahmet’s growing ethnorelative perspectives was his critical analysis of stereotypes regarding “Northern-Southern Italy”:

I think we have stereotyped opinions about people in Italy. Our Italian-language instructor told us that people in the South are friendlier. She also told that people in the North are more aristocratic. However, I will myself decide on the validity of these claims. I don't really like stereotypes, as I believe people are more complex than the stereotypes depict them. Even here, in just one classroom, there are many different people even though they all claim to be Turkish. (Second Interview)

This extract exemplified a strong counter-discourse against stereotypes held toward the so-called Southern and Northern Italy. Contrary to what other participants came to accept, Ahmet rejected the exaggerated differences among different human groups in Italy. Although Ahmet's perspectives were mostly ethnocentric, he, however, occasionally revealed some ethnocentric perspectives as well. For example, he tended to think that he would observe similar social interactions, events, or consumption patterns to those he observed in the Mediterranean coast of Turkey; therefore, he believed he would not have a tough adjustment period in Italy. Such small portions of ethnocentric tendencies might be resolved as soon as he spends a considerable amount of time in the host context.

Short-term study abroad: The imagined contributions to ongoing language teacher education processes. To ratify the individual accounts reported under the previous theme and to move toward larger patterns emerging from different individuals' accounts, we also scrutinized imagined contributions of the Erasmus program to LTE processes from participants' own lenses. We, therefore, carefully examined participants' future-oriented thought patterns and preparation experiences concerning their ongoing LTE and intercultural sensitivity orientations.

Interestingly, all of the participants tended to envision several alternative career plans for the possibility that they would not be satisfied with the language teaching profession in the future. Nevertheless, all of them were determined to complete their ongoing LTE processes. Their imagination of alternative career options, in fact, was largely influenced by, in their words, "the low economic status and prestige of language teaching profession in Turkey" and "the monotony of the teaching profession." With such concerns, they cultivated a growing interest in alternative job prospects where they could use their accumulated linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that would be possible, from their perspectives, thanks to their upcoming international experiences and their studies at their "prestigious" home university. When asked about these alternative career plans, Göksu imagined herself as a white-collar worker working within the human resources department at a large multinational corporation; Burak considered pursuing graduate studies in the field of linguistics; Figen imagined to enroll in a master's degree program in the field of English literature and meanwhile to translate texts to support herself financially; and Ahmet did not have a concrete alternative plan but he was a bit nervous about his upcoming language teaching career. However, none of them completely discarded the option of language teaching for their career plans.

Nevertheless, when invited to think about particular contributions of the mobility period to their ongoing teacher education processes, they believed that they would have ample chances to observe different instructional techniques or delivery methods in the host educational contexts and therefore that they might expand their teaching repertoire in terms of new techniques, assessment methods, and classroom communication skills. In this respect, Göksu shares her expectations as follows:

After all, I will study at a different university, which is I think a well-known one in Italy. I will take different courses there from different instructors. This difference will most probably contribute to my teaching repertoire and understandings of language teaching. I admit that we have good instructors here, but, as I said, I will be able to observe different teaching methods and grow as a language teacher candidate. (Second Interview)

Besides, Figen noted that:

A language teacher should be tolerant of differences. If student teachers can meet different people and different ideas abroad, they may become more tolerant of the differences among their future students. More importantly, they may become more responsive to their students' needs. (Third Interview)

Figen was not the only participant who thought that Erasmus experiences would help them become more open-minded and “tolerant of the differences.” Burak also believed that language teachers with international experiences would reduce their prejudices toward other people, as they would themselves be “different” in the context of a different country. Ahmet was another participant who thought that teaching is a profession that must be evaluated “beyond the transmission of content knowledge.” In his image of teaching, the language teacher must also be someone who has developed effective communication skills, which he thought might be possible through international experiences. Göksu similarly pointed out that having international experiences might enable language teachers to make their lessons “more enjoyable” since they can share “interesting memories” from their own international experiences. Therefore, Göksu claimed that they could motivate their students to learn languages and “explore the world beyond their classrooms.”

On the other hand, these participants did not believe that their experiences in Italy would help them develop their English skills. They assumed that most people living in Italy including their classmates would not be competent enough in the English language, as Göksu put this into words as follows: “I heard that their English proficiency is quite low although they are all willing to help foreigners” (also note her use of we-they discourse/polarization). For this reason, they attached particular importance to their Italian language proficiency and wanted to improve their Italian language skills, as Burak expresses: “I am not planning to speak English once I live in Italy. What I plan to do is to speak Italian as much as possible. Perhaps I can resort to English when I fail to express myself in Italian.” In fact, prior to their mobility period, the participants took several elective Italian courses at their home LTE context from the same language instructor thanks to whom they developed a rough—sometimes-stereotyped—knowledge repertoire about life in Italy. The decision to study in Italy was primarily shaped by those Italian courses and the language instructor whom encouraged them to live in Italy and to look for ways to improve their Italian skills.

From participants' statements, it was clear that the most significant factor behind their Erasmus decision was to build upon their existing Italian language skills and, therefore, to expand their linguistic repertoire as prospective language teachers. That is why they particularly chose to study at Italian universities even if they had chances to study in other European countries. Having an authentic opportunity on the horizon, the participants took some self-regulated actions in improving their language skills during their preparation period. They watched Italian movies with Italian subtitles, listened to Italian songs, and read graded books in Italian. However, although they exerted significant efforts in the improvement of their Italian language skills, they did not sufficiently highlight the importance of intercultural skills. The following statement by Figen best exemplifies this: “My main aim is to improve my Italian

skills, not to travel a lot or meet many people.” With this statement, she treated additional language acquisition processes as disconnected events from real-life intercultural interactions, which was a prevalent attitude among the participants.

Although they had language learning as the primary motivation, they did not come up with concrete strategies on how to improve it in the host context. They, in a sense, believed that being present in an Italian-speaking context would automatically render language-related gains. In that regard, they held naïve expectations and seemed to have been influenced by dominant discourses of study abroad without a deep critical reflection, though some of them had ethnorelative tendencies concerning interculturality. Therefore, the participants arguably did not prepare well for their mobility period, particularly in terms of (critical) interculturality. Developing sophisticated levels of interculturality prior to a mobility period can maximize/optimize linguistic and interculturality gains that might be possible to reach through short-term study abroad experiences. With this in mind, we move on to our discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this article, we set out to describe intercultural sensitivity orientations of a cohort that consisted of four prospective English language teachers who studied at a Turkish university. These student teachers prepared to study at three different Italian universities within the Erasmus program for one semester. The impetus behind this case study was a common caveat in the literature: participants’ intercultural sensitivity prior to an international mobility program might significantly influence the quality and quantity of the outcomes gained from such programs (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Byram & Feng, 2006; Goldoni, 2013; Jackson, 2008b, 2010; Martinsen, 2010). Driven by this caveat, our interpretive analyses based on the DMIS (Bennett, 1993) revealed that most of the participants aligned mainly with the ethnocentric perspectives although they stood on different, multiple positions along the ethnocentric or sometimes ethnorelative continuum. Ahmet was the participant whose statements reflected mostly ethnorelative viewpoints. Figen was another participant who also unfolded a significant number of ethnorelative statements despite the prevalence of ethnocentrism in her statements. On the other hand, Burak and Göksu aligned mostly with ethnocentric stages, namely defense/reversal and minimization.

While qualitative research does not target positivist generalizability, findings can convey a lot about interculturality understandings even through a small population. Readers, therefore, should evaluate this study in terms of its theoretical transferability rather than its empirical generalizability. In this way, they can establish a connection between our analysis and their own personal and professional experiences. Thus, our findings could be relatable to other similar contexts (Stake, 2000). In that regard, our findings support what Çiftçi and Karaman (2018) found out in their study in which participants were arguably not well prepared for their upcoming mobility period in terms of interculturality, criticality, and reflexivity.

The participants in our study did not highlight intercultural aspects of short-term study abroad and tended to believe that being present at the target context would be sufficient to improve their language repertoire, thereby lacked a plausible awareness of the sociocultural and affective factors involved in short-term study abroad. Although this argument does not necessarily postulate that these participants will fail to benefit from their Erasmus experiences, having language-learning motivation alone may not maximize/optimize opportunities to get to know new people and practice/expand language and intercultural skills once abroad. The participants, therefore, needed to develop more critical and complex understandings of cultural concepts prior to their mobility period, as the understandings of interculturality that do not mold interlocutors into few static identity categories are essential for intercultural, linguistic,

professional, and personal development (Coleman, 2015; Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Martinsen, 2011). Clearly, “in this globalized, interconnected world, intercultural competence is as vital as foreign language competence and it is simply naive to assume that they will develop automatically and simultaneously” (Jackson, 2011, p. 183). Language teacher educators or people who are responsible for the preparation of study abroad candidates, therefore, should not assume that having a certain level of language proficiency or language-learning motivation is a good predictor of interculturality development and personal expansion.

However, the participants should not be blamed for their intercultural unpreparedness, as preparation to study abroad must be a systemic concern that may involve teacher educators, participants, home and host institutions, student services, international offices, and national and supranational organizations. Therefore, systemic efforts or preparation programs involving multiple parties that are competent at different dimensions of short-term study abroad should be developed in order to offer a sound preparation period. For the participants in this study, there was a need for a well-defined and guided intercultural preparation program that could involve the development of language and intercultural skills. Through a carefully designed curriculum that can be deployed before, during, and after students’ experiences abroad, future participants can maximize/optimize the outcomes of the mobility programs in terms of linguistic skills and (critical) interculturality (Bloom & Miranda, 2015). To help future participants prepare better for their mobility period, systemic efforts can benefit from existing approaches or projects such as Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers (IEREST; <http://www.ierest-project.eu/>), which offer a set of teaching modules in order to help study abroad participants stimulate intercultural awareness and personal growth before, during, and after the mobility period. The main aim is to prepare and help participants reflect critically on stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and static understandings of cultural notions. In that regard, helping participants develop an ethnorelative mindset is crucial, as this mindset paves the way for complex conversations with oneself, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions around cultural issues, considering unequal power relations among human groups, and challenging ideas about both the Self and Other. Therefore, intercultural preparation programs based on (critical) interculturality activities can help student teachers develop an ethnorelative mindset and benefit from short-term study abroad (see also Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin, & Murphy, 2016; Jackson, 2015 for further ways to stimulate IC).

Since, in this study, the participants’ motivations did not go beyond typical study abroad promises such as improving language skills and having a good time, it could be argued that they were encouraged with plain promises of abundant gains. In other words, they were influenced by the dominant study abroad ideologies (Härkönen & Dervin, 2016). If they rely excessively and naively on such ideologies, they may end up with a touristic agenda and return with fewer intercultural or linguistic gains than expected. Instead, as part of their preparation, the future participants should be encouraged to evaluate critically the presentation of particular countries and study abroad programs through media, word of mouth, and literature in order to prevent a disparity between reality and expectations. In addition to the efforts that are taken to help participants develop intercultural sensitivity, reflect on people’s personal and cultural multiplicity, and acknowledge power relations, program participants can also be guided “to reflect more in-depth on their own goals -why they wanted to study abroad- and to deconstruct ready-made discourses on the experiences of mobility” (Härkönen & Dervin, 2016, p. 43).

Finally, yet importantly, a few words should be reserved for the methodological aspects of further research efforts. Although the extant literature on (critical) interculturality, theoretical perspective of the DMIS, and case study methodology collectively helped us to frame and coherently design our research, further research efforts may also consider assessing intercultural sensitivity over longer timescales and therefore may follow further complex and longitudinal procedures involved in the interculturality development through short-term study

abroad. In addition, such comprehensive studies can collect data on the co-construction of interculturality in real time communication (Dervin, 2016), which could also be triangulated by a number of other introspective and retrospective methods (see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009 for a review of IC models; Fantini, 2009 for different ways to assess IC; and Dervin, 2010 for a critical review of assessing IC). With the help of such increasing complex and critical efforts, language teacher educators can effectively revise and refine LTE structures and study abroad components. As a result, study abroad participants can increase chances for engaging in sophisticated, critical, and reflexive instances of intercultural communication and, therefore, can increase chances for complex, multidimensional linguistic and intercultural growth.

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