

As an EU Education Programme, the Effect of Erasmus Exchange Mobility on Intercultural Communication and Language Learning¹

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Abstract: Erasmus Programme is one of the European student exchange programmes established in 1987. This programme provides students the opportunity of studying and internship and also staff can teach or train in different European and Programme Countries through the programme. Since 1987, the number of students and staff participating in the programme has been growing. In this study, the impact of Erasmus program on outgoing students in terms of intercultural communication and language learning will be evaluated. As a method, qualitative research method is used and data are obtained by applying semi-structured interview technique. Descriptive method was used to analyze research data. A Number of questions were asked to the students of Selcuk University who went to Polish Institutions within framework of Erasmus Exchange Programme in order to evaluate the impact of the programme. The dimension of the foreign students' communication with each other will be tried to be determined through the questions of the study. The results of the study show that Erasmus Exchange Programme is successful to provide opportunities for intercultural encounters and increases the effect of language learning.

Keywords: Erasmus Programme; Exchange; Language Learning; Students

1. Introduction

Today, changes in communication and transportation technologies have shortened the distance between countries. Shortening the distance quickly brings together people from different cultures. Interactions between people from different countries, languages, religions and races are gradually increasing and intercultural communication emerges as a concept to be emphasized (Yazıcı & İrem 2010, p. 30).

¹This article is oral presented 5th International Congress on Education Sciences and Learning Technology (ICESLT) in Sarajevo Bosnia Herzegovina

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Intercultural communication defines any interaction between two or more members of different cultural groups such as international, inter-ethnics, ethnic intergroups and interracial groups etc. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2017, p. 1). According to Arent (2009, p. 2) intercultural communication is the “sending and receiving of messages across languages and cultures. It is also negotiated as understanding of meaning in human experiences across social system and societies”. Other cultures means those who speak a language that is different from ours, who live different country or region and who live in the same city but who belongs to different social group (Arent, 2009, p. 6).

In short, intercultural communication involves people from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures or subcultures and interaction with them (Özdemir, 2011, p. 34). Even though, culture influence the way we listen to, speak to and understand other people, mostly we are not aware of that (Arent, 2009, p. 6). Cultural differences are the important issue for studies addressing intercultural communication. In order to recognize the nature of the differences, good knowledge of other cultures is a quite necessary step (Albu, 2015, p. 7).

Communications between people of different cultures and between people of the same culture are the transaction process in which people transfer their feelings, thoughts, information, symbols to each other. However, the fact that the people involved in the communication process come from different cultures means that they do not share the same beliefs, the same values and the same rules of conduct. This can transform communication into a difficult and complex process beyond predictability. (Üçegöz, 2003, p. 31).

Mobility of students in a different way is quite popular in a global world. EU educational programmes are support educaion, training, youth and sport in Europe. Erasmus Programme is one of the exchange programmes which is financially supported by European Union (EU). It offers opportunity for people of all ages. Erasmus Programme has a quite important role to foster the intercultural communication competence. Therefore, it is clearly said that Erasmus Programme is the name of intercultural communication in education.

2. EU Educational Programmes and Its Application at Selcuk University

EU Educational Programmes are the best way to carry out the EU education policy. In general student mobility programmes enhance both internationalization level and intercultural relation of the country. By these programmes, on one hand students find chance to increase their self-confidence and contribute to career development (language learning, different education system, different application on field) on the other hand they find opportunity to meet people from different cultures.

EU has started to put into practice educational programmes which is called "COMETT" in 1987. The other educational programmes are SOCRATES I-II (1995-2006), LIFELONG LEARNING (2007-2013) and ERASMUS+ (2014-2020). Erasmus+ student exchange programme is one of the programmes which is integrated into Erasmus+ 2014-2020 strategy. Programme encourages structured collaboration of higher education institutions to sustain the vision of internationalization, and it identifies intercultural competences as a key priority area (European Commission, 2015)

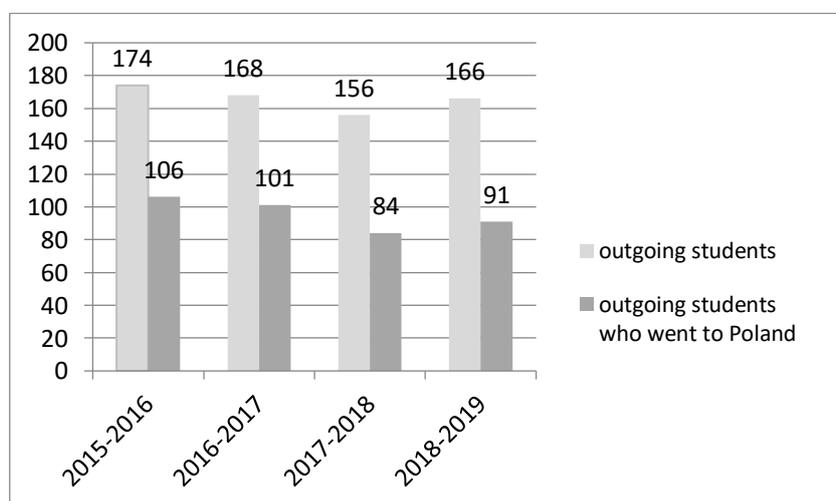
Erasmus is a programme which aims to increase the quality of higher education and includes participation of 31 countries from Europe. The program has enabled more than 1,5 million students to study in another country since 1987 (Yalçinkaya, 2018). Even though mobility of students is supposed to serve quite a few goals of higher education, it can be clearly said that there are two basic goals. Firstly, international experiences help students to improve their personality and social knowledge to be able to adapt to unfamiliar situations and to act appropriately. Secondly, international experiences help not only to improve knowledge of a foreign language but also to gain different qualifications. It helps to contribute to later employment ability and perhaps a career in an international area (Kehm, 2005, p. 19).

Erasmus Program is also an important step for the solution of intercultural communication problems. Because it is seen that the people who participated in this programme have an effective culture change process. Intercultural change is the result of a certain cultural interaction of individuals from different cultures.

Outgoing students may have different challenges in order to adapt to host country's national culture. These challenges will effect adaptation of the students (Şahin, 2017). Koskinen and Tossavainen (2004) carried out a study about intercultural

competence of the students while studying abroad. The research stressed that generally the students struggled with feeling of anxiety, frustration and ignorance during their adaptation from home to host culture. The local language was the most important challenge when the students first arrived in the host culture. There are also several factors that effect Turkish Erasmus student's adaptation to the different cultures. Therefore, this study also aims to analyze what factors effect Turkish student's levels of adaptation to different cultures by using qualitative research method.

Selcuk University has been a part of Erasmus Exchange Programme since 2004. Since this date Erasmus Programme has been active for the use of students and academic/administrative staff. This university has over 500 agreements with 27 EU countries such as Spain, Portugal, Poland, Holland, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Romania, Hungary etc. Even though there is quite number of agreements between Selcuk University and over the European Institutions, the most popular destinations for students are Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Latvia, France, Greece, Slovakia. One of the reasons of choosing this destination is similar life conditions. Despite the cultural differences, students choose the country which they can easily cover their living expenses. There is the number of outgoing students between 2015 and 2019 academic years in the Graphic 1.



Graphic 1. Number of Outgoing Students between 2015 and 2019

Erasmus programme began as an exchange programme at Selcuk University in 2004. As mentioned before, Poland is most preferred destination for students in Selcuk University. The number of outgoing students who went Polish institutions

between 2015-2019 is given in Graphic 1. It can be clearly said that each year more than half of the total number of outgoing students was sent to Poland. For example, 106 of 174 students were sent to Poland in 2015-2016 academic year.

3. The Study

The aim and Importance

The aim of the study is to evaluate the effect of Erasmus exchange program on intercultural communication and language learning. To analyze students opinion, qualitative research method is used and data are obtained by applying semi-structured interview technique.

In literature there are several studies investigating the effect of Erasmus Programme on many topics. For example, Di Pietro and Teicler (2014; 2001) have analysed the impact of Erasmus on subsequent employment. The association between student mobility and graduates' work field is investigated by Di Pietro. He declares that there is a positive association between having an international education experience and finding a job because during their study abroad, students gain qualifications and skills needed to enter the labour market (Önen, 2017, p. 343). Theichler executes that more mobile students are employed than nonmobile students and take on job assignments with international components. Aslan and Jacobs (2014) studied on experiences of Ankara University Erasmus mobility students. They focus on their study was to analyse the reasons of the participating in the Erasmus mobility. The results of study also indicates the validity of our study. In this study, it was emphasized that language learning and living in a foreign culture are the primary reasons of participating in the programme. Our study can be also a resource for researchers in this field.

4. Methodology

Nine graduate students who went abroad within the framework of the Erasmus Programme participated in the study. While data is collected, qualitative research method is used. The research data was collected through a focus group interview form. Descriptive method was used to analyse the research data. The students were chosen by using the method of maximum variation sampling. There are some reasons for using this method. A maximum variation sample enables to identify the key dimensions of variations and then find cases that vary from each other as much

as possible. Because of detailed descriptions of each case, this sample can bring high quality. What is more, detailed descriptions have critical importance and they are useful for documenting uniqueness (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Therefore, the reason of the choosing this method is enabling to analyze the experiences of students with different background and get the detailed descriptions of each case. The thematic analysis was used while analyzing the data.

Participants

The study was conducted with 9 students who had been studying in the Polish Higher Education Institutions for one or two semester within framework of Erasmus+ Programme. They were studying for 2016-2017 spring term of their university education in Poland. It was their first visit a foreign country.

It was difficult to contact with the students because they had already graduated. Therefore, finalizing the interview took more time than expected. Even though there are many agreements between Selcuk University and the European Institutions in Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Latvia, Portugal, Bulgaria, Germany, Romania, Hungary, the most popular destination for students are Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Latvia France, Greece and Slovakia. As it can be seen in the table, participants consist of those who did their Erasmus in Poland. The reasons for these decisions are similar life cost and a quite number of Erasmus + Agreements between Selcuk University and Poland. As it can be seen in Table 1, students who participated in this study has been studying different departments such as Electrical and Electronics Engineering, International Relations and Public Administration etc.

Table 1. Participant List

Participant	Department	University	Country
P1	Electrical and Electronics Engineering	Lublin University of Technology	Poland
P2	English Language and Literature	PWSZ Krosno	Poland
P3	Mining Engineering	AGH University	Poland
P4	Public Administration	The Witelon State University of Applied Sciences	Poland
P5	International Relations	Marie-Curie Skłodowska	Poland
P6	International Relations	Adam Mickiewicz University	Poland
P7	Law	University of Opole	Poland
P8	Business Administration	Lublin University of Thechnology	Poland
P9	English Language and Literature	PWSZ Krosno	Poland

The data was collected by using an online semi-structured interview form. The interview form was sent to the students via e mail. And the students sent back their answers via e mail. The interview included eight open-ended questions. The interview consists of two parts. The first part includes demographic questions such as information about host institution and department etc. The second part consists of interview questions. It can be said that this study has some limitations. Firstly, the interview was applied to 9 students who only went to Polish institutions. And therefore, the results do not represent all the Erasmus students of Selcuk University.

Findings

In order to analyze, students' decision-making processes, the study investigated reasons for participating in Erasmus Programme and how Erasmus Programme effects student's language learning. The finding also shows how students perceive the different culture and provides information about how students' adaptation to different cultures is managed. Officially Erasmus process consists of three phases as before, during and after the mobility. Therefore, analyzing the research questions are divided into three parts.

Before Mobility

In order to analyze students' decision-making processes, we asked students about their motivation factors of participating in Erasmus Programme. Most of the students stressed that they want to improve their English language skill, learn different language and about new cultures.

One student declared:

P6: "I was wondering about other cultures, languages and life in abroad. Also, I wanted to survive the life alone where I am not used to live. So, I decided to be an Erasmus student and I directed my life according to this aim."

Another is as in the following:

P2: "I wanted to take part in Erasmus Mobility because I wanted to improve my English. We learn English not because to know all grammar structures but because to communicate with others. Going abroad was the best way to improve it."

P4: "I want to compare quality of our education and contribute to my personal development, study in any European university, witness different cultures with an international exchange program and establish friendships with students coming from different countries."

P3: "Because Erasmus is a well-defined international mobility program and I knew it will help me to groom my abilities and personality. That was the main reason behind my decision to take part in Erasmus mobility."

P5: First of all, I wanted to explore new places and culture. Second, I was student in Turkey but after my prep-class I could not find much practice in English. Then I had the opportunity in the host university.

P9: Since I was a student of the Department of English Language and Literature, I applied to the Erasmus exchange program to use this language more effectively and to evaluate the educational opportunities abroad. The main aim of the participation is to use English as a communication language in a different country, learn it as well as cultural differences.

As it can be seen from the answers, the first and important motivations of the student's participation of the programme are to explore a different culture and improve language skills.

During Mobility

This section will help to understand students' satisfaction regarding the education process in host country.

Participants were asked about whether they encounter any difficulties or not in the host university. Many participants stated that during the mobility they did not encounter any difficulty.

P1: I did not have any difficulty. They were quite kind and nice.

P7: No. I did not.

P4: I did not have any problems about my university in Poland

Only one student declared:

P2: I did. Educational system was quite different from my own university so trying to understand and analyze the system took time a little.

P9: I did not encounter any problems in terms of education at the university I attended, and I even had the opportunity to learn by studying different educational models.

In order to analyze relation between local students and Erasmus students, participants were asked to answer the question: "How was your relationship with the local students in the university? Did you encounter any prejudice?" Even though most participants stated that during the mobility their relationship with the local students are quite good, some participants stated there was a prejudice at the beginning. But, it has changed during the time.

Students declared:

P4: When I was there, I did not face any prejudice.

P2: Actually, most of them were really nice and friendly, especially who took part in Erasmus mobility before. They could empathize with foreign students.

P4: I could say that our friendship is really good. Polish students were polite, friendly and hospitable towards us. Certainly, some people were prejudiced against us. That is normal but they overcame their prejudices while they knew us in time. Some of students are still prejudiced.

P8: I had very sincere relations with local students. I still have contact with them and we visit each other in Turkey or in Poland.

P9: I did not have any problems about communication or cultural differences with most of my friends at university. But they are biased with a few classmates about Islam and Turkey's political position. I've been exposed sometimes. But I overcame those prejudices after we met and developed our relationships.

Many international students experience difficulties when encountered with a new and foreign culture. These difficulties can be about education system, culture and general problems such as food, communication and status (derived from: Tutkun, 2006). Many universities organize orientation week for both incoming and outgoing students who participate in exchange programs. These weeks make it easier for them to acclimate to their new environment. In order to analyze participant opinion, they were asked to answer the question: "Did you encounter any problem that has to face before, during or after the mobility? (Language, courses, cultural differences etc.)". Although the students encounter difficulties, they emphasized that the host university helped to deal with difficulties.

Students declared:

P5: No. **My university Erasmus Office was taking care of us** till the process end. As far as they informed us.

P3: Difficulties are everywhere and good things come along with hurdles. I encountered some problems related to course registrations and schedules clashes but host institution helped me to resolve all the issues related to my academics.

P2: Most of the local people did not know English that's why social life was a little difficult. My Spanish friends who could speak English helped me about that.

P1: I had problem when I came back to Turkey. I could not get used to live in Turkey. Because many things changed. Even my friends were not like how I left them before Erasmus. I missed my friends and moments in Poland.

P9: The biggest problem I experienced was related to the length of the documents I sent and received. Apart from that, the process continued smoothly and completed.

After Mobility

At the last phase, questions were involved about determining opinions about the contributions of Erasmus mobility to students. By completing a part of their education at a foreign university, students want to develop their competences such as foreign language, cultural development, survival in a new environment and

adaptation to change. Awareness, respect for others, cultural awareness and an international perspective are now a very important part of university education (Pitman & Broomhall, 2009). In order to analyze participants' opinion about contributions of the programme were asked in the question: "Please evaluate your Erasmus experience in terms of its contributions to your cultural accumulation?". The majority of students stressed that the programme contributes to their cultural accumulation.

Students stated:

P1: Erasmus was a chance for **me to see many cultures** at the same place and at the same time. This is not what you can make even with a lot of money. I have seen many cultures in a short time so it influenced my personal development.

P2: Knowing **new cultures** and comparing your culture with other cultures is something different. I liked learning new things about different cultures with experiences. I also noticed that they may know something which is not true about my culture I had to explain what they know wrong about my culture and religion.

P3: It was a wonderful experience. It taught me a lot of things related to **other cultures**, new experiences and new people. Although, I had taken too many courses at my host institute and spared quite less time for myself but still it was amazing and full of excitement

P6: I had opportunity to develop my foreign language, **meet new culture** made many contributions to my personal development, my self-confidence increased and I visited many countries in Europe what is more I have so many friends from abroad.

P9: The Erasmus Programme has contributed tremendously to my cultural accumulation. The relations I established, friendships, cities I visited, countries, gave us the opportunity to learn about the history of Europe. Each of them left an incredibly valuable and positive impact.

Culture is a collection of all of the more highly formed and learned patterns of behavior that have been passed on from generation to generation by means of lifestyle, language and similar tools of a human community (Timeturk, 2012). In this context language learning is an important cultural instrument that enhances intercultural communication. Studies show that students who travelled to a country where the people speak a language other than English reported improvement in their language skills. This is also accurate in our research. To understand the contribution of the programme, participants were asked to answer the question to

“Please evaluate your Erasmus experience in terms of its contributions to your language learning?” Even though the students of Selcuk University are mainly going to country where the people speak other than English, they stated that they had great improvement in their language skills. Despite mostly classes thought in local language, students are always together with the international students. This is the main reason of the improvement.

Students stated:

P4: I developed **my foreign language so effectively in academic field**. The biggest influence it is the fact that there are foreign academicians. By the way, I learned a little more Polish, but now I forgot.

P5: The practice is most important role of a learning foreign language. I had the opportunity after pre-class. There were many English lessons. Also, there was a native scholar who gave me some lessons in my host university. The period was quite fruitful for me.

P1: Before going to Erasmus, I had problem about talking in English. When I had to talk in English for communicating with others, my English advanced itself. After Erasmus I became a confident person about language. Also, I learnt local language. It was a great chance for me.

P2: I had the opportunity of practicing English for a while so I think I improved it when I was abroad and also I learned Spanish a little by trying to talk to local people.

P9: In terms of learning and improving new language Erasmus is really beneficial programme. In particular, I realized that I could easily understand the local language in a basic level for 5 months. In mean time I realized that I could speak English without hesitation and fear of doing it wrong.

In their study, Messer and Wolter found a positive relationship between being an exchange student and starting a high salary job (Messer and Wolter, 2007). In order to analyze these relationship in this study were asked in the question How did the Erasmus exchange program contribute to job and career development after graduation?

P4: The impact of erasmus mobility have effected on experience and carrier development. Although I have not had a job yet, I think my CV is fine.

P3: After Erasmus I feel that my exposure to job market is quadrupled and I can find a lot of good opportunities in future.

P1: Erasmus affected my career in very positive way. Most of companies were interested in my Erasmus experience even during job interview. I think Erasmus made me more valuable.

P6: It really influenced my approach towards my future career, now I'm much more open to different fields of work. Regarding social values, I find Erasmus helped me to build myself up socially and made me to be more accepting towards different cultures and social values.

P7: Everyone does not have international education and work/internship experiences so this experience can make a difference in international business networks for future career. About social life, if I want to contact any friends from Europe, I can easily reach them and we can become a partner for making a new project.

P8: In global world, if you are international person, you are always one step ahead. Everyone can study, work etc. but cannot be social. To reach success, being social is important nowadays.

P9: Thanks to Erasmus, I understand that how I can advance in my career, how I can be the best in my work and how I can improve my work in different areas. My employee accepted me because they thought that I could be a teacher with a world view, open to different cultures and free from prejudices. This effect was largely due to my Erasmus mobility. Erasmus opened a wide door for me.

In general, students see studying abroad, living in another country and travelling is a good opportunity (Van Hoof ve Verbeeten, 2005) to develop their intercultural communication. Intercultural communication experiences enable students to know, discover and teach to be tolerant to the other cultures. The last research question addressed to effect of the programme on students intercultural communication skills. Participants were asked to answer the question: "Did Erasmus Programme effect your intercultural communication skills?"

Students stated:

P3: Yes, of course **it groomed my intercultural communication and intellectual skills many folds**. Thanks to Erasmus, now I feel a lot more comfortable to talk to different people and audience coming from different backgrounds.

P1: Thanks to Erasmus that I know many people from all over the world. **Now I do not have any preconception to any person.** I respect to every idea.

P2: I had many friends from other countries and in one country all of us tried to deal with the problems that we faced and we had same feelings with different people from different countries and also had something in **common so this affected our communication I think.**

P5: Thanks to the possibility I could meet foreigners in closely. **Everyone shared their cultural identities and patterns.** Then I learned to be friend with strangers quickly. Anymore I have many friends in world scale

P9: My interest in different cultures was always present. I can say that my interest has increased by 10 times with Erasmus Programme. The thing I've been experiencing was so solid.

Conclusion

Erasmus is the name of intercultural communication in education. Since popularity of exchange programs has grown in recent years, higher education institutions encourage their students to participate in mobility. This study shows what extent Erasmus Programme may affect the intercultural communication, career development and language learning. The result of the study indicates us Erasmus Programme is one of the effective ways to know and appreciate other culture. All participated students stated that they were very pleased during their study abroad and would recommend it to others. Erasmus Programme has affected students positively in many aspects especially personal and professional development. Students stated that they had great improvement in their English skills, even though they were from the country where people did not speak English.

Actually, during the Erasmus period, the main challenges are communicating and orientation to the new environment. Furthermore, experiencing new education system is an important challenge during the mobility. Even though students also agreed that they faced the challenges in many cases during the mobility, they overcame these difficulties with the help of the host university. After the mobility, students agree that programme has affected their academic career positively.

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