

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF ERASMUS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Erasmus+ is a European Union framework programme which provides service in the fields of education, training, youth and sport. It also comprises mobility for higher education students and staff. This qualitative study examines Istanbul University HAYEF ELT students' Erasmus experiences. It aims to investigate the contribution of the programme and the challenges students encounter as an Erasmus student. The results reveal that the programme contributes to the students' cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, personal and career development. The students have the greatest difficulty in the pre-Erasmus period. Paper work is the most challenging issue for the students in this period. On the other hand, the main problem students encounter during the Erasmus programme is communicating and socialising. After the Erasmus, the majority of the students suffer what can be referred to as "the post-Erasmus syndrome".

Keywords: Erasmus students, Erasmus experiences, the challenges of the Erasmus+ programme, post-Erasmus syndrome

HASAN ALI YÜCEL EĞİTİM FAKÜLTESİ İNGİLİZ DİLİ EĞİTİMİ ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN ERASMUS TECRÜBELERİ

ÖZ

Erasmus+ eğitim, öğretim, gençlik ve spor alanlarında hizmet sağlayan bir Avrupa Birliği çerçeve programıdır. Program yükseköğretim öğrencilerinin ve öğretim elemanlarının hareketliliğini de içermektedir. Bu nitel çalışma İstanbul Üniversitesi HAYEF İDE öğrencilerinin Erasmus tecrübelerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, programın katkısını ve öğrencilerin Erasmus öğrencisi olarak karşılaştıkları zorlukları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sonuçlar programın öğrencilerin kültürel birikimine, dil edinimine ve akademik, sosyal, bireysel ve kariyer gelişimlerine katkı sağladığını göstermektedir. Öğrenciler en çok Erasmus öncesi dönemde zorlanmaktadırlar. Bu dönemde öğrenciler için en zorlayıcı durum kağıt işleridir. Diğer taraftan, Erasmus programı süresince öğrencilerin yaşadığı en büyük problem iletişim kurmak ve sosyalleşmektir. Erasmus'dan sonra ise öğrencilerin çoğu "Erasmus sonrası sendromu" olarak anılabilecek bir süreç yaşamaktadırlar.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: *Erasmus öğrencileri, Erasmus tecrübeleri, Erasmus+ programın zorlukları, Erasmus sonrası sendromu*

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of university students are benefitting from studying abroad by means of the student mobility programmes. With these programmes in which students receive a part of their formal education in a foreign country, students can find the chance to develop their language skills, meet different cultures, raise their cultural awareness and take courses in multicultural classes. They can also develop their social skills, make international friends, boost their self-confidence, and build professional contacts for use after graduation. Besides, as Kehm (2005) suggests, studying abroad facilitates the development of students' personality and the development of qualifications for their future careers. Kehm (2005, p. 19) summarizes the benefits of studying abroad as follows:

A. International experiences help to develop the personality by broadening the horizon of the individual student and provide him or her with sufficient flexibility and cultural as well as social knowledge to be able to adapt to unfamiliar situations and to act appropriately.

B. International experiences also help to gain a number of qualifications—beyond an improved knowledge of a foreign language—that contribute to later employment ability and perhaps a career in an international context.

Similarly, Di Pietro (2014) proposes that student mobility programmes help students gain the necessary skills and experiences employers are seeking from new graduates. Especially, for students who pursue an international career, mobility programmes may provide students with better working opportunities abroad. Di Pietro (2014) also states that studying abroad may increase the employment chances of students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. On the other hand, student mobility is an important opportunity for the students who cannot go abroad as well. As Kehm (2005) states students are taking advantage of “getting to know foreign cultures by mingling with students from abroad at their home university” (p. 19). This is called “Internationalisation at home”.

However, as Sigalas (2010) points out, studying abroad can also be a stressful experience for the students. No matter how much effort home and host universities put in to help students integrate in the new environment, students still have to struggle with a series of challenges

such as seeking for accommodation, adapting to a new environment and a different educational setting, experiencing acculturation difficulty, and combatting with home sickness.

During my years as an Erasmus departmental coordinator at Istanbul University, I have observed that our students do also encounter difficulties in their Erasmus year. While some students struggled more with the application procedures before the mobility programme, some struggled more during their stay in a foreign country. There were also some students who had difficulties after the Erasmus experience. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of difficulties students encounter in the Erasmus programme and investigate in what respects they benefit from it.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

2.1. Student Mobility

Student mobility can be simply defined as sending own students abroad and hosting foreign students for a length of time. Thus, as Murphy-Lejeune (2008, p. 16) suggests “a mobile student is a double agent: s/he is considered as outgoing from her country of origin and as incoming in her chosen country of study”. The volume of the student mobility, both incoming and outcoming, is considered as the indicator of the degree of internationalisation in a certain higher education institution.

2.2. Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the general term used for the framework programme which provides support for different age and target groups in the fields of education, training, youth and sports. It is the new European Union programme which has come into effect in January 2014 and which comprises the years 2014-2020. The previous programmes which had been directed within the Lifelong Learning Programmes, such as Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, and Grundtvig, and the Youth in Action Programme and the five international cooperation programmes (Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and the Industrialised Countries Instrument Education Cooperation Programme) were brought together under the Erasmus+ Programme (Ulusal Ajans, n. d.). Briefly, since its foundation in 1987, the Erasmus Programme has passed through three phases:

1st phase under the Socrates Programme (until 2007),

2nd phase under the Life Long Learning Programme (2007-2013)

3rd phase under the Erasmus+ Programme (starting in 2014)
(Zerman, 2014, p. 17)

The Erasmus+ Programme aims to help people gain new skills, increase their employment opportunities and strengthen their personal development regardless of their age and educational background. The programme covers education, training, youth and sports. The main reason for giving the name Erasmus+ to the programme is due to the fact that the name 'Erasmus' is more widely known in public compared to the other names of the programmes stated above (Ulusal Ajans, n. d.).

The selection of the students for the programme is mainly based on early school performance. As Di Pietro and Page (2008, p. 396) put forward, "the number of applicants is higher than the number of places available, universities have to set up selection processes that are based on past student performance". Thus, students who have good academic records have higher chances to be selected than their peers who have poor academic records.

2.3. Previous Studies on Student Mobility

The increase in student mobility has greatly impacted the interest in student mobility research in the last two decades. Some studies (Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Llanes & Munoz, 2009; Hernandez, 2010; Llanes, Tragant, & Raquel Serrano, 2012) focused on the effects of mobility on students' L2 development, such as the development of oral skills, listening skills, writing skills and vocabulary acquisition after mobility. Some examined the challenges of mobility. For instance, Camiciottoli (2010) examining the challenges of European student mobility puts forward that Italian business students have difficulties in understanding the course content during their Erasmus period abroad. Therefore, she suggests a pre-departure lecture comprehension course based on a corpus-based study which identifies the basic linguistic, discursive, and disciplinary features of business lectures. The study aims to increase the effectiveness of the course and address the specific needs of exchange students. Based on the findings of the study, Camiciottoli (2010) proposes enhancing the lecture video materials with high-tech digital recordings with speakers from diverse L1s in order to help students comprehend different accents.

On the other hand, some studies (Di Pietro, 2014; Teichler, 2001) have been conducted to shed light on the impact of Erasmus on subsequent employment. Di Pietro (2014) investigates the association between student mobility and graduates' job prospects. He states that there is a positive association between having an international education experience and finding a job because during their study abroad, students acquire qualifications and skills needed to enter the labor market. Similarly, Teichler (2001, p. 212) argues that more mobile students than nonmobile students:

- take on job assignments with international components,
- are employed abroad,
- are assigned work abroad (if employed by a home country employer),
- assess their professionally relevant competence highly, and
- experience a smooth transition to employment.

In a recent study, Aslan and Jacobs (2014) investigated the experiences of Ankara University Erasmus mobility students. The focus of the study was to examine the main reasons of participating in Erasmus programme, identify the good practices and understand whether the good practices differ according to a host country. The study reveals that language learning and living in a foreign culture are the primary reasons of participating in the programme. The good practices students experience in academic dimension are courses, instructors, academic development opportunities and language learning opportunities. In terms of social dimension, the good practices for the students are guidance, attitudes toward students, flexible bureaucracy and multicultural learning environments. With respect to the physical dimension, the most liked attributes of host universities are accommodation, technical facilities, facilities for study and facilities for handicapped students.

In a similar vein, Yücelsin-Taş (2013) investigated the problems of Marmara University Erasmus students studying in the Department of French Language Teaching. The problems of students are categorized in three periods: before, during and after the mobility. The results reveal that the most important problem encountered before going abroad is the late arrival of documents from the host universities. The major difficulty during the study abroad is the lack of sufficient foreign language competence. The most important problem after the mobility is the equivalence of courses. The study also reveals that the

programme contributes mainly to the students' linguistic and personal growth.

Although there are many research studies on Erasmus students, there are only a few studies (Aslan & Jacobs, 2014; Yücelsin-Taş, 2013) which shed light on the experiences of Turkish Erasmus students. Since I was appointed as the Erasmus departmental coordinator in 2012, I have observed that our students have a number of difficulties during their study abroad. In fact, during my informal conversations with the students, I noticed that while some students encounter difficulty before they go abroad, some have difficulties abroad. There are also students who encounter difficulty when they return. On the other hand, each year when the Erasmus applications start, usually a group of students have doubts about whether or not to apply to the programme and ask me the questions regarding the contributions of the programme. There are even some students who receive acceptance to the programme but decide not to go and turn down this opportunity because of the hearsay that the programme has many drawbacks. The present study aims to contribute to the growing body of research in Erasmus+ student mobility by investigating the Erasmus experiences of Istanbul University English Language Teaching students and graduates.

3. THE STUDY

This qualitative study investigates Erasmus experiences of students and graduates of English Language Teaching (ELT) department at a state university in Istanbul, Turkey, with an online survey. Content analysis was used as the research technique to analyse the data collected. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) state:

One of the enduring problems of qualitative data analysis is the reduction of copious amounts of written data to manageable and comprehensible proportions. Data reduction is a key element of qualitative analysis, performed in a way that attempts to respect the quality of the qualitative data. One common procedure for achieving this is content analysis... (p. 475).

It is 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use' (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18).

3.1. Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether and to what extent participants believe Erasmus to have contributed to their academic, social, cultural, personal, and career development and language acquisition. It also aims to investigate whether participants have had any difficulties in the Erasmus programme, and if they had, which period (before, during, or after) of the Erasmus programme was more challenging for them.

The study primarily addresses the following research questions:

1. How do HAYEF ELT students perceive their Erasmus experiences?
 - a. Do they believe that Erasmus has contributed to their academic, social, cultural, personal, and career development and language acquisition? If yes, to what extent?
2. Do HAYEF ELT students encounter any difficulties in the Erasmus+ programme?
 - a. If yes, in which period (before, during, or after the Erasmus) do students have the most difficulty?
 - b. What type of challenges do the Erasmus students encounter in each period?

In pursuit of the answers to these questions, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are used. The data is collected through a survey which consists of three parts including demographics, and open and closed-ended questions that yield information through Likert-scale, multiple choice and rank-order scale. The first and second parts of the survey are analysed quantitatively. The data collected through the open-ended questions are examined through content analysis.

3.2. Significance of the Study

The results of this study will be beneficial to students who would like to apply to the Erasmus+ programme. With the help of this study, the students can learn the contributions of studying abroad and will be better able to see the drawbacks of the programme. This study is also expected to be useful for departmental and institutional Erasmus coordinators. They may raise awareness of the challenges students encounter throughout the programme. Thereby, according to the needs of the students, the coordinators can organize orientation programs

before students go abroad. Moreover, as a result of this study, the coordinators can better guide the candidate Erasmus students.

3.3. The Participants of the Study

The study is conducted with the voluntary participation of 30 ELT Department students and graduates who participated in the programme from 2010 to 2015. The majority of the participants, 19 out of 30, are graduates who have experienced student mobility during their study at Istanbul University between 2010-2011 and 2013-2014 academic years. However, this group mainly consists of newly graduates; that is eight participants are in their first year of graduation and similarly eight participants are in their second year of graduation. On the other hand, two participants are in their third year and only one participant is in his/her fourth year of graduation. The rest of the participants were students in the 2015-2016 academic year. Although a gender-based analysis is not within the scope of this study, it should be noted that the majority of the participants are females, which reflects the common fate of Foreign Language Departments in Turkey. Male students usually do not prefer to study at philology or foreign language teaching departments. Similarly, six out of 30 participants are males and 24 of them are females in this study. Table 1 below presents a detailed description of the participants. It shows the number of graduate and student participants, and the grades of the students. Besides, it displays the Erasmus year of each participant, the gender, and the host country and city of the participants.

Table 1

The Distribution of Participants by Education, Year of Doing Erasmus+, Gender, and the Host Country/City

	Participant		Academic Year	Gender	Country / City
	Student / Grade	Grad			
1	sophomore		2014-2015	M	Germany/Bremen
2		X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Berlin
3	junior		2014-2015	F	Germany/Bremen
4	junior		2013-2014	F	Germany/Bremen
5		X	2010-2011	F	Germany/Munich
6	junior		2014-2015	F	Spain/Granada
7		X	2013-2014	F	Germany/Cologne
8		X	2011-2012	F	Spain/Zaragoza
9	sophomore		2014-2015	F	Germany/Flensburg

10	X	2013-2014	F	Spain/Zaragoza
11	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Cologne
12	junior	2014-2015	F	Germany/Flensburg
13	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Berlin
14	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Bremen
15	X	2012-2013	M	Germany/Cologne
16	X	2013-2014	F	Germany/Munich
17	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Berlin
18	X	2013-2014	M	Germany/Berlin
19	junior	2014-2015	F	Germany/Frankfurt
20	X	2013-2014	F	Germany/Cologne
21	junior	2014-2015	F	Germany/Cologne
22	X	2013-2014	F	Germany/Munich
23	X	2013-2014	F	Spain/Zaragoza
24	X	2013-2014	F	Germany/Frankfurt
25	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Frankfurt
26	X	2011-2012	M	Germany/Cologne
27	junior	2014-2015	M	Germany/Cologne
28	junior	2014-2015	M	Poland/Krosno
29	X	2012-2013	F	Germany/Bremen
30	sophomore	2014-2015	F	Poland/Krosno

Table 2 below presents the distribution of the participants by their host universities. As can be seen, the majority of the participants consist of those who did their Erasmus in Germany. In fact, there is a general tendency among our students to prefer Germany over other options. This might be because our department has Erasmus+ agreements mainly with the German universities. However, although there are several other options such as Palermo University, Italy; Granada University, Spain; Pardubice University, the Czech Republic; the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece; and Krosno University, Poland, students' first choice is generally Germany. This might be because our students mostly have relatives and acquaintances in Germany and also German is usually preferred as the second foreign language by the students. These factors may account for the students being more familiar with Germany as an academic setting.

Table 2

The Distribution of the Participants by Their Host Countries and Universities

Host Country	Host University	No. of Students
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Germany	Humboldt University of Berlin	4
	The University of Bremen	5
	University of Cologne	7
	The Goethe University Frankfurt	3
	The University of Flensburg	2
	Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich	3
Spain	University of Granada	1
	University of Zaragoza	3
Poland	PWSZ Krosno	2
Total		30

Finally, as for the grade level of the students, except for three participants all of them did their Erasmus in the third grade. The three students, on the other hand, did their Erasmus in the second grade. As a departmental policy, we usually encourage our students to go in the third grade, and in the spring term. This decision is mainly related to the students' academic competencies. Technically, however, they can apply and go at any grade. Furthermore, because of the institutional policy, which aims to provide the Erasmus opportunity to a large number of students, Erasmus grants in Istanbul University are available only for six months. However, through their own means, they can continue their study abroad for another six months. Generally, most of the students prefer to stay for six months, as is the case for the participants of this study.

3.4. The Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected by means of an online survey. In order to encourage the participation of the graduates who have benefited from Erasmus programme, using the online survey was inevitable as they work as English teachers in different regions of Turkey. The study was introduced in the HAYEF ELT social media group. Then, the survey link was sent as an e-mail to the participants who volunteered to take part in the study. The survey consists of three parts. The first part includes ten questions for demographics such as the education status of the participants, e.g. *I'm a student / I'm a graduate*; the academic year of the Erasmus+ mobility, e.g. *2012-2013*; the name of the host country; and the name of the host university. The second part of the survey consists of a Likert-scale, a multiple choice, and a rank-order

scale questions. In the Likert-scale question, participants are asked to answer the question: “*Please evaluate your Erasmus experience in terms of its contributions to your cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, and personal development*”. In the multiple choice question the participants were asked to answer whether or not they had any difficulties in the Erasmus+ programme (pre-Erasmus, during the Erasmus, and post-Erasmus). The third question was a rank-order scale asking participants to grade the three periods of Erasmus from the most challenging to the least challenging period. The last part of the survey consisted of three open-ended questions. These questions asked participants to explain in detail the challenges they encountered in each period of Erasmus. There was also a follow-up question as “*If you haven’t encountered any difficulties, please specify*”.

Before the main study, the data collection instrument was piloted with ten voluntary participants. Then, some of the questions were revised and a few new items were included in the survey based on the feedback provided from the Erasmus students. After the pilot study, the data collection process started and lasted for three weeks.

3.5. The Data Analysis

The data analysis starts with downloading the online survey responses and randomly assigning a number for each Erasmus student, such as S1, S2, and S3. As stated above, the first part of the survey consists of some demographic information. Based on the responses given in this part, a data summary sheet was generated. Thereby, it became easy to examine the profiles of the participants. The second part of the survey, which consisted of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and rank-order scale questions, was analysed quantitatively in terms of frequencies and percentages. The third part of the survey was analysed qualitatively. In the analysis of the open-ended questions a content analysis was performed.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Perceptions of HAYEF ELT Students on the Contributions of Erasmus

The first research question of this study aimed to identify how HAYEF ELT students perceive their Erasmus experiences. The participants were asked to reflect on the contribution of Erasmus to

their cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, personal and career development. The answers were elicited through a Likert-scale question in the survey. Table 3 below displays the perceptions of the Erasmus students on the contributions of the Erasmus programme.

Table 3

The Contributions of Erasmus to the Development of HAYEF ELT Students and Graduates

	had no effect	had too little effect	had an effect	had much effect	total number
Academic development	0.00% 0	10.00% 3	53.33% 16	36.67% 11	30
Language acquisition	0.00% 0	10.00% 3	33.33% 10	56.67% 17	30
Social development	0.00% 0	6.67% 2	33.33% 10	60.00% 18	30
Cultural accumulation	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	13.33% 4	86.67% 26	30
Personal development	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	26.67% 8	73.33% 22	30
Career development	6.67% 2	20.00% 6	53.33% 16	20.00% 6	30

The overall results reveal that the participants believe the Erasmus programme has affected them positively in many aspects. The participants put forward that they have benefited from the programme mostly in terms of cultural accumulation and personal development. While 26 out of 30 participants (86.67%) suggest that Erasmus has much effect, four participants (13.33%) state that it has an effect on their cultural accumulation. Similarly, 22 out of 30 participants (73.33%) believe that the programme has much effect and eight participants (26.67%) propose that it has an effect on their personal development. Social development is perceived as the third most improved area during the Erasmus with the percentage of 60.00 as having much effect on 18 out of 30 students. However, two out of 30 participants believe that Erasmus has too little effect on their social development. Career development is the only domain defined by students as having no effect as two participants (6.67%) state that it

has no effect on their career development. On the other hand, only six out of 30 participants (20.00%) believe that the programme has much effect on their career development.

Most of the participants believe that Erasmus affects their academic development. While 11 out of 30 participants (36.67%) state that Erasmus has much effect, 16 participants (53.33%) believe that it has an effect. However, three out of 30 participants (10.00%) put forward that Erasmus has too little effect on their academic progress. Similarly, most participants think that language acquisition improves during the Erasmus. Only three out of 30 participants (10.00%) state that Erasmus has too little effect on their language acquisition.

4.2. The Challenges Students Experienced in the Erasmus+ Programme

The first research question of this study aimed to identify how HAYEF ELT students perceive their Erasmus

The second research question of this study aimed to identify whether or not HAYEF ELT students encounter any difficulties in the Erasmus+ programme. The answers to this question were elicited through a multiple choice question in the survey which was formulated as: *“Did you have any difficulties in the Erasmus programme (including the pre-, during, and post-Erasmus periods)”* and the choices as *“a) I had great difficulty, b) I had difficulty, c) I had little difficulty, d) I did not have any difficulty, and e) I have no idea”*.

The results revealed that all the participants had difficulties in the Erasmus+ programme. However, the degree of difficulty experienced by the students differed. While 16 out of 30 participants (53.33%) asserted that they had difficulty, 13 out of 30 participants (43.00%) stated that they had just a little difficulty. Only one participant (3.33%) stated that she/he had great difficulty in the Erasmus programme. None of the participants reported that they had no difficulties in the programme.

The Erasmus process practically consists of three phases -before, during and after the Erasmus programme. The sub-research question aimed to identify the phase that participants believe is most challenging for them. The answers to this question were elicited through a rank-order scale question. The participants were asked to rate the phases on a scale of 1 to 3, assigning 1 to the most challenging

one. The results reveal that the period *before the Erasmus* is considered as the most challenging phase of the programme. As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of the participants, 23 out of 30 (76.67%), believe that the period *before the Erasmus* is most difficult. As for the least challenging period, half of the participants (50.00%) state that *during the Erasmus* is the least challenging period of the programme.

Table 4
The Most Challenging Phase of the Erasmus Programme

	1 most challenging	2 challenging	3 least challenging	Total
Before the Erasmus	76.67% 23	10.00% 3	13.33% 4	30
During the Erasmus	10.00% 3	40.00% 12	50.00% 15	30
After the Erasmus	13.33% 4	50.00% 15	36.67% 11	30

The last research question aimed to identify the challenges encountered in the pre-, during and post-Erasmus periods. The answers to this question were elicited through three open-ended questions in the survey which were formulated as: “*What difficulties did you encounter in the pre-Erasmus period (the period that starts with the application process and ends when you go abroad)?, Please explain in detail. If you did not encounter any difficulties, please specify*”; “*What difficulties did you encounter during the Erasmus period (during your stay in the host country)?, Please explain in detail. If you did not encounter any difficulties, please specify*”; and “*What difficulties did you encounter after the Erasmus programme (the period that starts when you come back to your home country)?, Please explain in detail. If you did not encounter any difficulties, please specify*”. The data collected with these open-ended questions were analyzed using a content analysis approach. In the analysis of the responses, a bottom-up inductive approach was adopted and the process was data-driven.

4.2.1. The Challenges in the Pre-Erasmus Period

As the study reveals, HAYEF ELT Erasmus students have the greatest difficulty *before the Erasmus*. It is, therefore, more important to

understand the type of challenges faced by the students in this period. All the participants in the study were asked to explain in detail what difficulty they had in the pre-Erasmus period. Of the 30 participants, all provided an answer for this open-ended and optional question. First of all, the answers to this question were compiled together. Then, the data were read and re-read, coded and re-coded, and finally organized in themes. The resulting frame exposed five main themes: *the paper work, the selection of the courses and preparation of the learning agreement, communicating with the Erasmus offices, the visa procedures, and accommodation.*

Among five themes identified in the data, the most prevalent one was “the paper work”. This reveals that in the pre-Erasmus period the Erasmus students encounter the greatest difficulty in *paper work*. The extracts below are taken from the participants’ responses to the question: “*What difficulties did you encounter in the pre-Erasmus period (the period that starts with the application process and ends when you go abroad)?* More than half of the participants address the difficulty of the excessive paper work. They state that preparing, compiling and submitting the required documents for applications is quite challenging in the pre-Erasmus period.

S1: We had great difficulty in preparing the documents and communicating with the host university.

S5: Preparing the necessary documents.

S6: The documents the host university had to send arrived too late and this delayed my visa application.

S7: The biggest difficulty I have experienced before the Erasmus was the everlasting paper work.

S9: I had difficulty in providing the required documents.

S11: I had great difficulty during the process of preparing the required documents.

S12: Preparing and submitting the documents on time caused stress on me.

S15: I had difficulty when compiling the necessary documents for the Erasmus application.

S18: First of all, the documents that are requested from you to get visa are insulting. All kinds of necessary, unnecessary documents are requested from you and your family.

S19: The difficulties about compiling the documents required to submit for Erasmus.

S20: The excessive paper work made me tired.

S21: Since my place of residence was in another city and I had to go to my family and come back, tracking the document process was sometimes challenging.

S22: In short, we were not informed much about document - paper work ... before the Erasmus... The documents part can be very troublesome and wearing.

S24: During the application period, I think I had difficulty in having access to adequate information about course selection and tracking the documents.

S25: I had difficulty in assembling the document, finding answers to my questions about the Erasmus period.

S27: Before the Erasmus period one of the most challenging situation for me was assembling the document.

S28: I had to make late application and this made the process challenging for me. I had to prepare my documents in the last month and this tired physically.

S29: I remember having many difficulties in the pre-Erasmus period because of the excessive paper work.

S30: While preparing the documents and agreements there was no one to help me as I was the first student to go to that school.

The second most prevalent theme was observed to be “the selection of the courses and preparation of the learning agreement.” Almost half of the participants stated that they had encountered difficulties in the process of course selection and preparation of the learning agreement (LA). The recognition and accreditation of the courses taken in the host university is implemented after the Erasmus programme; however, in the pre-Erasmus period students have to confirm the courses they are going to take and get the LA signed by the Erasmus coordinators of the home and host universities. In this period, it is important for the students to choose the most suitable courses, though they will have a chance to add and drop the courses when they go to their host universities.

S2: I had difficulty in choosing the courses as the content of the courses in the host university was different from our university. ... I had to take masters courses so that they mesh with the courses at our university.

S5: While preparing the learning agreement, the courses were not opened at the host institution and I had to make the selection according to the courses of the previous semester and thereafter I had to change them.

S7: ... The application procedures, visa procedures, communicating with the host school, searching the course equivalencies, and on the other hand trying to find a place to stay... all were things that required personal effort.

S8: During the selection of the courses, the fact that whether the courses would be substituted or not was a challenging critical issue.

S9: ... I had difficulty while choosing the courses.

S14: The situation I had great difficulty in was that although I had completed the ECTS, I was not free to choose the courses I wanted.

S23: During my course selection I was not informed properly either by my home school or the host school.

S24: During the application, I think I had difficulty in having access to adequate information on course selection and document tracking.

S26: I had difficulty in matching the courses in the Erasmus application process. Apart from that I did not have much difficulty.

S27: ... Apart from that the process of matching the courses can also be seen among the factors that increase the stress.

Next most prevalent theme was identified to be “communicating with the Erasmus offices” in the data. The common sub-themes under this broad theme were “the attitude and behavior of the officers” and “receiving no replies or delayed responses from the Erasmus offices.”

S1: We had the greatest difficulty in document assembly and communicating with the host school.

S2: Application procedures, visa procedures, communicating with the host university, searching the course equivalencies; on the other hand, trying to find a place to stay.

S8: Afterwards, the challenging part for me was the communication problems with the host school.

S12: ... Also, because the Erasmus office filibustered, did not make the document tracking properly, and did not help, I and my friend who accompanied me had difficulty.

S13: In the application period, we had difficulties contacting the host school as they did not respond our mails or responded late.

S14: ... Besides, the Erasmus office in my school was not caring and collaborator. This exhausted me in many respects.

S22: A person working in the Erasmus head office was very bad-tempered.

S23: After I had sent mails for tens of times, the host school sent my learning agreement just the day before I departed. Thus, I handed it in to the Erasmus office at the last moment.
S29: From time to time I and my friend who accompanied me had difficulty because in the Erasmus office we did not get much attention and did not get enough information.

As can be understood in the extracts above, communicating with the Erasmus offices of the home and host universities is a challenging issue for some of the Erasmus students in the pre-Erasmus period. The other common themes were observed to be “the visa procedures” and “accommodation.” However, these topics were mentioned by fewer participants indicating that they were less challenging issues.

S3: Except for the process of obtaining visa I did not have difficulty before the Erasmus...

S6: I had received my visa just two days before my flight date and I even thought not to go if the visa hadn't been approved until that day.

S7: ... The most challenging thing was accommodation. Thinking of not having somewhere to stay when I arrived at the city was very stressful. (It was an unnecessary stress but I did not think so at that time....

S8: In short, I had difficulty in all the procedures including the visa and the uncertainty until departure.

S11: ... In particular, I had great difficulty in finding a dormitory although I had made the required applications on time. It was such that I had to buy my flight ticket and leave without having a place to stay.

4.2.2. The Challenges During the Erasmus Period

The results reveal that almost all of the participants had difficulty during their Erasmus stay abroad. Only five out of 30 participants did not experience any difficulty during the Erasmus. All the participants were asked to explain in detail what challenges they encountered during the Erasmus period. Of the 30 participants, all provided an answer for this open-ended question. Then, the data were examined, coded and finally organized in themes. The results revealed five main themes: *communication and socialising, the differences in the education systems, language problems, economic problems, and culture shock.*

The problems encountered vary from person to person; however, there are some common problems that most students have experienced.

Among five themes identified in the data, the most prevalent one was “*communication and socialising*”. Most of the students had difficulties in communicating and socialising with the domestic students and other Erasmus students.

S1: In the class it was difficult to communicate with the German because they were very indifferent to the newcomers in the classroom...

S3: I had problems with socialization. As I couldn't stay together with people, I lived by myself and somehow isolated myself...

S8: At the beginning, apart from not being able to communicate directly with the Spanish as the social circle was always Erasmus students, it was good...

S12: In terms of socialising, I generally couldn't take part in the Erasmus group I was in...

S13: At the beginning we couldn't come together with other Erasmus students because the scheduled activities for uniting the Erasmus students at the host school were insufficient...

S15: I don't think I have experienced culture shock. However, the people with whom I had to communicate in that country were not open to communication and were not helpful...

S21: Apart from that it was very difficult for me to make friends with the local people.

S23: My housemate was Spanish. In order to improve my language I especially wanted to stay with a Spanish; but he/she was such a cruel person that we made three sentences at most in six months.

S28: I did not have too much difficulty. I only had some difficulty in socialising at the beginning.

S30: We had some problems with the Polish students at the dormitory because of their religious bias.

The second most prevalent theme was observed to be “*the differences in the education systems*.” Some students stated that the differences in the education systems of the two countries encountered problems for them during the Erasmus. The common sub-themes classified under this theme were “*the grading systems*”, “*the requirements of the courses*”, and “*the way the lessons are taught*”. These variations across the universities were a big challenge for most of the students during their study abroad.

S3: The school was very challenging because of the difference in the education system. The assessment types (oral exam,

one-hour-presentation, term paper) which I was not accustomed to, caused difficulty.

S5: I had difficulty as the education system was different from the one in my country. It was difficult for me –as I was not accustomed to- to read the articles given every week.

S6: I did not have any expectations in academic terms before I went; but anyhow I did not expect such an unsystematic education.

S8: As the grading system of the school was based on portfolio system and was assessed according to the general semester success, it was different for me.

S13: The difficulty we experienced academically in the first stage was that the grading system of the school was different from ours and from the systems of other universities in Germany (modular system).

S19: I had difficulty in the academic field. This is because Germany, as in everything, had maintained order in education and the differences were many.

S26: As their education system was a bit different academically, that is, instead of an exam-oriented system, adjusting to a presentation/project-oriented system took some time.

The third most prevalent theme was observed to be “*language problems*” in the data set. The study revealed that some students encountered language problems during their Erasmus stay. The students who did not know the native language of the host country had great difficulty, especially when the people did not know English. On the other hand, the results suggest that students did not have difficulty in communicating in English.

S6: I had preferred Spain especially due to its culture and language; but the language spoken in Granada was very much different and it was difficult to follow the people while speaking. I had great difficulty in the beginning as most people did not know English; but I cannot say that this has helped much to improve my Spanish...

S8: It challenged me as I did not know the mother tongue of the country at all.

S10: At first I had language problem but later I learned it.

S18: First of all, a little language. Of course, it can be overcome in time.

S19: There were of course other difficulties; a different environment, culture, language, different people...

S27: The most challenging thing for me was learning German. I can say that I have had a sort of language shock.

Another common theme emerged from the data was “*economic problems*.” The results revealed that some students encountered economic problems during their Erasmus stay, even those who had received a grant.

S3: ...as I couldn't live together with people, I isolated myself by moving into a house. Consequently, I caused an economic problem and spent three times as much of the grant.

S5: As I went without a grant, I had financial difficulties. The fact that the currency of the country I went was Euro and it was a big city played a big role in this issue.

S7: Economically, the grant was paid one month later after I went. During that one month, the rent, travel expense and the 200 Euro I had to pay to the school for the students' card (with this card we could travel Cologne and its province free of charge for six months), I spent lots of money. Therefore, it is necessary to save some money apart from the grant.

S8: Economically, because of the variation in the currencies the grant was not an adequate amount.

S21: Although I received grant, I had to get big support from my family. If my family couldn't help, I would have a hard time economically.

The last major theme identified in the data was “*culture shock*.” The results show that it is considered as challenging as the economic problems. Some of the students had difficulties in getting accustomed to a new culture during their study abroad.

S7: Culture shock is inevitable. At the beginning, we used to walk on the cycle lane and heard the bikers' horn beeps for many times. Also, the people I didn't know would greet me when they saw on the street. It also took time to get accustomed to this.

S19: There were of course other difficulties; a different environment, culture, language, different people...The processes are different, the bureaucracy is different, and the most important of all 'the money' is different.

S20: Though for a while I experienced culture shock. For example, people were free to do everything, this surprised me

at the beginning, I got accustomed to it in time and no longer found it strange.

S27: Of course at the beginning getting to know some cultural differences and getting used to these took some time.

S29: I did not encounter any difficulties in the country I went; but because I went into a different culture getting to know that culture and accommodating took my time. In particular, the life style of the youth has caught my attention because compared to our country they have quite comfortable and free life standards.

4.2.3. The Challenges in the Post-Erasmus Period

Half of the participants, 15 out of 30 (50.00%), state that post-Erasmus period is the least challenging phase of the programme. However, as the results indicate, Erasmus students do also encounter some difficulty in this period. All the participants were asked to explain in detail what difficulty they encountered in the post-Erasmus period. After the data analysis, two main themes and two sub-themes emerged. These two main themes were “*adaptation*” and “*recognition of the courses.*” Among these themes, the most prevalent one was “*adaptation.*” The majority of the students stated that adaptation, which is recently called *the post-Erasmus syndrome* by Erasmus students and Erasmus coordinators, was the most challenging issue after the Erasmus programme.

S8: I was among the luckiest as my courses were recognized except for a few; but after I came back, in the first three months I couldn't adapt, then I moved on my life. Adaptation was the biggest problem.

S9: After I came back to Turkey I had difficulty in adapting here.

S14: When I came back, even in small cases I would remember and would dream of going there again one day. I was among those who experienced the post-Erasmus syndrome.

S15: ... In fact, I had great difficulty after the Erasmus. I felt as if I were in a place that I did not belong to. I noticed that I was postponing the tasks I had to perform and I was extremely bored of everything I had to do.

S21: When I returned, my adaptation period was a bit difficult. From time to time

I miss the simplicity there...

S24: ... Although I had an adaptation problem when I returned from Erasmus, this did not last too long.

S28: I experienced some adaptation problems after I had returned. But it did not last too long; I overcame the difficulties thanks to my previous experiences.

As can be seen, the adaptation problem is very common among the Erasmus students. This theme; however, was further broken down into the following two sub-themes as it was a broad one: “*adaptation to the school*” and “*adaptation to the city*.” Some of the students had difficulty mostly in adapting to the school. When they came back to their home university, they encountered difficulties in adapting to the lessons, teaching methods and exams.

S1: I can say that I have really experienced the post-Erasmus syndrome. Because while having a very comfortable life there and while living like a holiday, suddenly after a long time, you take responsibilities again. In the way the lessons are taught there are differences again. In short, I had difficulties and experienced this in the exams as well....

S4: ... After I had accustomed to the education system there, it was difficult to adapt to the system in Turkey because most of the opportunities (to be free to take the course I want on the day I want and from the teacher I want) offered in Bremen were not available in Turkey.

S11: The courses I had taken were recognized but even so the 4th grade 2nd term was a little difficult with the traineeship because I couldn't take all the 3rd grade 2nd term courses.

S13: but because the requirements and the difficulty of the courses I had taken there was very different, this affected my general academic average negatively. The adaptation period took a while as the return from Erasmus coincided with our last year at school.

S19: ... The third was the problem with the school. We went to Germany, took education, we moved one step further OK; but, when we came back here the courses made us feel as if we fell behind.

S26: ... but in terms of adaptation to academy, I had a little difficulty because of the transition from a presentation / project based education to an exam oriented education.

S28: ... Academically, I had a little difficulty at the beginning of the 4th grade as in our country it is mainly an exam oriented education. I realised that during the Erasmus I got accustomed to making presentations and finishing project paper.

Next sub-theme under the theme of “adaptation” was “adaptation to the city.” The results revealed that some students had great difficulty when they came back to Istanbul. The students stated that they had experienced the culture shock because of the crowd, the traffic jam and the lifestyle.

S3: I experienced a big adaptation problem. It was very difficult for me to spend five hours in Istanbul traffic again when I would go to school by bicycle in ten minutes. I can say that I experienced the culture shock when I came back to Istanbul...

S5: ... Also, after I came back the adaptation period was difficult for sure. Istanbul seemed to me tiring after a city like Munich.

S7: The biggest difficulty I experienced after the Erasmus was that I couldn't cross over for a few days in Istanbul. When I got used to the order in Germany, Istanbul was like a chaos.

S18: ... But the adaptation was difficult. It took time to run red light.

S19: The time when I returned from Erasmus was more shocking for me than the time I left. The first shocking thing was the crowd and the traffic jam. When I accustomed to see few people, wide area, few buildings in Germany, though for four months, all the things here were too much for me.

S20: ... After I had accommodated and accustomed to the life-style in Germany for five months, I experienced the culture shock again in Turkey. I feel as if I will turn back again.

S27: After the Erasmus, the most challenging point for me was the adaptation period. Actually, I hadn't expected to have such a difficulty. After getting used to the life style in Germany, and when I accommodated myself and was happy, it was really difficult to be obliged to leave this environment, which I thought had the ideal living conditions. Especially in the first month I had great difficulty.

The second major theme identified in the data was “recognition of the courses.” The results reveal that the process of receiving the recognition of the courses taken at the host universities was considered by the participants as another challenging issue after the Erasmus programme.

S5: I had difficulties in receiving the recognition of the courses. I went to Germany. I had attended a German course

but it was transferred as BB to my German grade at my home university. While the level of German course given at my home university was very simple, the one I had taken there was intermediate...

S12: ... As for the recognition of the courses, I didn't know for sure which of the courses were recognised because our course recognition process started too late. Although I was informed via telephone, I didn't know the final version of the recognition. Therefore, last semester I took a course (elective) again, though it had been recognised...

S14: The recognition of the courses was one of the biggest problems. The thought that whether the courses I invested in would be recognised or not worried me too much. Even if they were recognised, how their grades would be transferred stressed me out.

S15: ... Although I did not have a serious problem about receiving the recognition of the courses, I had worries about the fact that my Erasmus courses would not be recognised when I turned back.

S17: The process of course recognition was challenging. Because of the modular system and the worry about the compatibility of the courses, while selecting courses in Germany I had difficulties.

S30: I had some difficulties in readjusting to the school as the courses that were not recognized were not from the semester I went.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the literature on student mobility, the results of the present study is in line with those of the previous studies. As for the contributions of the Erasmus Programme, Teichler (2001) states that "ERASMUS students continue to consider ERASMUS as a very valuable experience in terms of cultural experience and personality development. Academic progress also tends to be viewed positively. Generally speaking, the students are very satisfied with their ERASMUS experience" (p. 211-212). Similarly, the participants of the current study are pleased with their Erasmus experience. They believe that the programme contributed to their cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, personal and career development.

The difficulty in the document preparation (Endes, 2012) and delays in documents (Yücelsin-Taş, 2015) are problems evidenced in the

literature. The current study revealing that paper work is a challenge for Erasmus students confirmed the results of pre-mentioned studies. On the other hand, contrary to the findings of Aslan and Jacob's study (2014) presenting accommodation as a major problem for Erasmus students, we found that though emerged as a problem, accommodation was considered by the students as one of the least challenging issues. The present study reveals that participants of the Erasmus+ programme perceive it to contribute to their cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, personal and career development. Among these aspects, the programme seems to have contributed mainly to the participants' cultural accumulation, personal and social development.

The findings suggest that Erasmus students encounter some difficulties in the programme. The pre-Erasmus period is considered as the most challenging phase of the programme. In this period, students have the greatest difficulty in paper work. Preparing and submitting the required documents for the applications is a very stressful process for the students. The second most challenging issue is selecting the courses to be taken at the host university and preparing the learning agreement. Thirdly, students have some communication problems with the Erasmus offices of both the home and host universities. Finally, visa applications and finding accommodation are relatively less challenging issues in the pre-Erasmus period.

During the Erasmus period, the main difficulty encountered by the students is communicating and socialising. The difference in the education systems is another challenging issue in this period. Especially, the variations in the teaching methods, requirements of the courses and grading systems cause problems for most of the students. Moreover, most of the students who do not know the native language spoken in the host country face some language problems. However, they do not experience any problems about communicating in English, which might be because English is their major branch. Finally, culture shock and economic problems are other challenging issues for the students during the Erasmus period.

After the Erasmus, the majority of the students go through the post-Erasmus syndrome. The main problems are getting accustomed to the school and the city again. When they return to their universities they have difficulties in adapting to the lessons, teaching methods and exams. On the other hand, when they return to their home city they

encounter culture shock. They have difficulties in adapting to the traffic, crowd, and the lifestyle. Lastly, the process of receiving the recognition of the courses is another common problem among the students after the Erasmus programme.

5.1. Implications of the Study

The study reveals that Erasmus+ programme has several contributions to students. Thus, Erasmus departmental coordinators and instructors should encourage students to participate in the program and Erasmus institutional coordinators should support and send as many students as possible. On the other hand, while students gain invaluable experiences in this student mobility programme, as the results suggest every student experience some difficulty. The degree of difficulty varies depending on the phases of Erasmus programme. For example, in the pre-Erasmus period the main problems are preparing the required documents, selecting the courses, and communicating with the Erasmus offices. Then, the Erasmus offices should arrange orientation programs before students go abroad so that students can raise awareness towards the possible problems they might encounter in pre-, during, and post-Erasmus periods and learn how to overcome these problems. Besides, as the results reveal one of the main problems during the Erasmus period is culture shock, the orientation programs should also include seminars on interculturality. On the other hand, in many partner universities a student mentor (buddy) system is available that assigns incoming students to locals. The buddy student is responsible for assisting the incoming Erasmus student with solving practical and administrative issues. Such a system can also be provided for the outgoing students by their home universities. In this case, the buddy student will be the previous Erasmus student who has been to the same country or university. Finally, the students also have some economic problems during the Erasmus. Therefore, the grants provided for the Erasmus students should be increased to a sufficient level.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The present study also has several limitations that need to be discussed. First of all, the majority of the participants consist of female students. Thus, it mainly reflects the challenges of female students. The mobility programme may have affected males and females differently. Thus, future studies can investigate whether there is a

difference between male and female students in terms of the challenges encountered in mobility programmes. Finally, the study only examined the experiences of English Language Teaching Department students. Therefore, the results do not represent all the students of Istanbul University. In order to be able to draw a conclusion about Istanbul University Erasmus students, a further study should be conducted with the participation of all faculties of Istanbul University.

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