

The Impact of the Erasmus Student Mobility on Turkish Pre-service EFL Teachers: Contributions and Challenges of the Experience¹

Erasmus Öğrenci Hareketliliğinin Türk İngilizce Öğretmen Adayları Üzerine Etkisi: Kazanımlar ve Zorluklar

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Abstract: In today's globalized world, the dynamics of education are changing each day. As a result of this situation, the Erasmus exchange program has made it easier for Turkish students to have study abroad experience. The primary goal of this study was to investigate the perceptions of Turkish prospective EFL teachers regarding the contributions of Erasmus exchange program to their academic, language, social, cultural, personal, and career development as well as the problems that they encountered before, during and after Erasmus mobility. The study was carried out with 37 Turkish prospective EFL teachers. Mixed methods design was adopted in the study. Data were collected via an online survey developed by Önen (2017) and semi-structured interview. The second part of the survey was analysed quantitatively and a qualitative analysis software called MAXQDA 2020 was used for the content analysis of semi-structured interview. Results revealed that the participants believed they benefited from Erasmus program mostly in terms of personal and cultural development. Their language development was mainly related to speaking skills and fluency. It was also found that participants encountered many problems in the Erasmus process. They believed that "pre-Erasmus" was the most problematic process. While a lack of information and paper work were the main problems encountered before the Erasmus, "during the Erasmus process" mainly academic and financial problems were encountered. Some participants experienced "post-Erasmus syndrome" after the Erasmus mobility. Findings are discussed in the light of related literature and suggestions for further research are presented.

Keywords: Erasmus exchange program, international student mobility, prospective EFL teachers, contributions, problems.

Anahtar kelimeler: Psikolojik danışman adayı, akademik başarı, psikolojik sağlamlık, bilişsel esneklik, öz-yeterlik

Öz: Günümüzün küreselleşen dünyasında eğitimin dinamikleri her gün değişmektedir. Bu durumun bir sonucu olarak Erasmus değişim programı Türk öğrenciler için yurt dışı eğitim tecrübesi edinmeyi daha kolay hale getirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türk İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının Erasmus değişim programının akademik, dil, sosyal, kültürel, kişisel ve kariyer gelişimlerine katkıları hakkındaki görüşlerini; ve Erasmus öncesinde, sırasında, sonrasında karşılaştıkları problemleri araştırmaktır. Bu çalışma ölçüt örneklem yöntemi ile belirlenen 37 İngilizce öğretmen adayının katılımıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada karma yöntem kullanılmıştır. Önen (2017) tarafından hazırlanan çevrimiçi anket ve yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme yoluyla nitel ve nicel veriler toplanmıştır. Anketin ikinci bölümü nicel olarak analiz edilirken, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin içerik analizi için nitel veri analiz programı MAXQDA 2020 kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların Erasmus programından özellikle kişisel ve kültürel gelişim açısından yararlandığına inandıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Dil gelişimleri daha çok konuşma becerileri ve akıcılık konusunda gerçekleşmiştir. Aynı zamanda katılımcıların Erasmus sürecinde birçok problem yaşadıkları saptanmıştır. Katılımcılar, Erasmus öncesinde daha fazla problem yaşadıklarını belirtmiştir. Erasmus öncesinde yaşanan temel problemler bilgi eksikliği ve evrak işlerinden kaynaklanırken, Erasmus sırasında genellikle akademik ve finansal problemler yaşanmıştır. Bazı katılımcılar Erasmus hareketliliği sonrasında günlük hayatlarına adapte olmakta zorluk çektiklerini belirtmiştir. Bulgular ilgili literatür ışığında tartışılmış ve ileriki araştırmalar için öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erasmus değişim programı, uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliği, İngilizce öğretmeni adayları, katkılar, problemler

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Introduction

Together with the advances in science and technology, life in the 21st century has changed considerably. As Osterhammel and Peterson (2005, p.3) suggest, "the world is becoming noticeably smaller as distant lands are being linked ever more closely together". Although there is not a universally accepted definition of globalisation, various definitions have been proposed by some researchers. In today's globalized world, the dynamics of education have also changed. Consequently, education at all levels has been a vital component of the

successful globalization progress (Bloom, 2008). The teachers, who are described as "the communicator, educator, evaluator, an educated human being and the agent of socialization" by Fillmore and Snow (2000) have an important role at this point. In order for teachers to take on these functions, they need to adapt themselves according to the needs of the 21st century and help the students become more autonomous and self-confident learners. Especially EFL teachers, who introduce a new language and a new way of communication to the students should continuously develop

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themselves and broaden their own perspectives before they can expand their students' horizons. Teacher training is the first step to achieve an education of high quality and there are many ways that prospective EFL teachers can develop themselves during their university education. International student mobility can be a medium for achieving this goal. The majority of the studies on the Erasmus program were carried out with university students from different departments (Cantez, 2020; Çepni et al., 2018; Jacobone & Moro, 2015; Kohn, 2015; Özmen, 2019; Papatsiba, 2005; Raikou & Karalis, 2010). On the other hand, only a small body of research focused specifically on the Erasmus experience of Turkish prospective EFL teachers (Aydın, 2012; Caner, 2019; Çiftçi, 2016; İltir, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010; Önen, 2017; Yıldırım & İlin, 2013). Aydın (2012) states that the participants' views on the potential contributions of mobility experience are a remarkable issue to investigate. Considering the issues mentioned above, it can be seen that there is a need for obtaining more information on the Erasmus exchange program, especially in ELT context. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the contributions of the Erasmus exchange program to Turkish prospective EFL teachers' academic, language, social, cultural, personal and career development. Also, the problems encountered by the participants before, during and after the Erasmus process were examined.

Literature Review

Together with globalization, it has become easier for people from different countries to come together and exchange goods, services, ideas, and information. The societies go beyond their borders and their interdependence increases day by day. Consequently, the people's thoughts are moving from the national level to the international level (Balay, 2004). In addition, higher education has become the most crucial target of globalization (Kohn, 2015). With the aim of educating students and enriching their worldview, universities have established more connections with the world and adopted "a borderless education approach" as a key strategy (Kohn, 2015, p.15). Knight (2008, p.21) defined internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, inter-cultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Teichler, 2017, p.180). He stated that internationalization has a potential to improve quality and add value to higher education and it can be used as a tool for enhancing various dimensions of teaching, learning and research (Knight, 2008). Ward (2015) also argued that one of the crucial goals of higher education institutions is internationalisation. Consequently, international mobility has become an important part of higher education policy.

International Student Mobility

The development of an individual's skills can be achieved mainly through education and universities are the best places for this. With the aim of educating students and enriching their worldview, universities have established more connections with the world and adopted "a borderless education approach" as a key strategy (Kohn, 2015, p.15). With the intention of understanding the character of international student mobility, Teichler (2015, p.16) presents four distinctions made as a result of in-depth analyses:

1. "Inward" versus "outward" mobility;
2. "Foreign students" and "study abroad" versus student mobility;
3. Temporary mobility (credit mobility) versus mobility for the whole degree programme (degree mobility);
4. "Horizontal" versus "vertical" mobility;

Any move of a student from one to another country is "outwards mobile" (from the perspective of the country and "sending" institution) and "inwards mobile" (from the perspective of the country and the "receiving" institution). Various terms such as "incoming" and "outgoing" students, "inwards" and "outwards" or "inbound" and "outbound" mobility are employed.

If statistics report the students' nationality rather than mobility, the appropriate terms are "foreign students" and "study abroad students". According to Teichler (2015), the distinction between "foreign students" and "study abroad" on the one hand and "student mobility" on the other needs to be underlined.

When it comes to "temporary" vs. "degree" mobility, different terms are employed: the former might be called "temporarily mobile", "short-term mobile" or "credit-mobile" students, while the latter students "mobile for the whole study programme", "degree-mobile" or "diploma-mobile" students. The logic of these two types of mobility is clearly distinct: degree-mobile students move to another country and study in another educational system to eventually get a degree. On the other hand, temporarily mobile students experience another educational system only for a short period of time.

Among the four distinctions of student mobility, Teichler (2015) puts and emphasis on the third distinction, horizontal and vertical student mobility. The term "vertical mobility" depicts "the move of a person to a country and to an institution of higher education which is viewed to be superior in academic quality than the country and the institution where this mobile person comes from" (Teichler, 2017 p.191). In contrast, "horizontal mobility" refers to moves whereby the academic quality of the institution and possible country of destination is more or less on equal terms with that of the institution of origin and of the country of origin. Learning the value of diversity in another country is claimed to be achieved through horizontal mobility rather than vertical mobility. Temporary horizontal mobility has gained popularity in Europe, especially together with the Erasmus exchange program.

The Erasmus Exchange Program

The name of the Erasmus program comes from the abbreviation of its official name (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). In addition, this abbreviation refers to Dutch Desiderius Erasmus (1465-1536) who was the writer, greatest scholar of the northern Renaissance and the figure of the early humanist movement. During the 1970s, the promotion of student mobility gained importance. As a result, the Joint-Study Programmes (JSP) were established in 1976 and remained active until the start of the Erasmus program in 1987. Soon after its beginning, the Erasmus program was perceived as "the flagship of the educational programmes" administered by the European Union (Bracht et al., 2006, p.7). It was seen that the program helped international student mobility become a normal option for university students instead of a marginal

phenomenon. Turkey participated in Bologna Process in 2001, and Turkish National Agency was founded in 2002. Two years later, in 2004, Turkey joined the Erasmus program. As stated by European Commission (2012 p.14), “the Erasmus program aims to improve the quality of higher education by promoting inter-country cooperation between European universities, recognizing students’ degrees academically and contributing to the development of transparency”.

Studies with Turkish Prospective EFL Teachers

There is an increasing body of research on the impact of the Erasmus exchange program in Turkish context as well. Majority of these studies were conducted with the students from the other departments (Demir & Demir, 2009; Ersoy & Günel, 2011, Ünlü, 2015). For instance, Ersoy and Günel (2011) evaluated the Erasmus Exchange experience through the eyes of foreign prospective teachers who came to Turkey in the framework of the Erasmus program. They discovered that foreign pre-service teachers' cross-cultural experiences helped them improve their professional abilities and contributed to their personal growth. Diverse field experiences were also mentioned as helping participants comprehend the need of incorporating a multicultural perspective into their classrooms.

The studies that focused specifically on the Turkish prospective EFL teachers are small in number. Caner (2019), for instance, examined the perceptions of 19 prospective EFL teachers qualitatively regarding the contribution of short term Erasmus experiences to their career development. The analysis of the data revealed that studying in an international environment positively affected the participants’ future profession by raising their awareness of active learning, inclusive practices and international education policies. In addition, with a more holistic approach, Aydın (2012) conducted a qualitative study and collected data from 23 prospective EFL teachers through a background questionnaire, interviews, group discussions and essay papers. The Erasmus program improved participants' language abilities and knowledge, their professional and personal development, and their attitudes toward culture and recreational activities, according to the findings. On the other hand, it also brought about some potential problems related to formal procedure, adaptation process, linguistic and cultural differences. In a similar vein, Önen (2017) found that the participants benefited from the program mostly in terms of cultural accumulation and personal development. It was also found that the pre-Erasmus period was reported as the most challenging period by the participants especially due to the paper work. Kaçar (2021) investigated the impact of the Comenius language assistantship program on the sociolinguistic perspectives and meaning schemes of 15 Turkish EFL pre-service teachers in different intercultural educational situations in Europe in a recent qualitative exploratory case study. Semi-structured interviews and reflective journals were used to gather information. Although participants' social and educational backgrounds influenced their assessments of international teaching experiences, the findings revealed that they shared a sociolinguistic perspective.

In addition to these studies, a qualitative meta-synthesis on the role of short-term international experiences in language teacher education is noteworthy. Çiftçi and Karaman (2019)

examined how short-term international experiences contributed to the continued development of pre- and in-service language instructors in a meta-synthesis of 25 qualitative studies. They grouped all aspects of development into three categories: professional, linguistic, and intercultural. According to their findings, short-term international experiences can considerably contribute to the multidimensional growth of language teachers. However, as they point out, such precise regions of increase have yet to be substantiated in the literature with sufficient data.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study has been conducted using the triangulation design model, which is the most common approach to mixed methods (Creswell et al., 2003). In the light of this method, the current study combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. The purposes and procedures of the current study were granted approval from the local ethical committee of the Dokuz Eylül University (15.05.2020 / 87347630-42104268-1663).

Research Questions

This research aimed to investigate the Erasmus experience of prospective EFL teachers in terms of its contributions and challenges by proposing the research questions below:

- 1) To what extent does Erasmus program contribute to prospective EFL teachers’ ...
 - a. ... academic development?
 - b. ... language development?
 - c. ... social development?
 - d. ... cultural development?
 - e. ... personal development?
 - f. ... career development?
- 2) Do prospective EFL teachers encounter any problems during the Erasmus process?
 - a. If yes, in which period (before, during, or after the Erasmus) do prospective EFL teachers have the most problems?
 - b. What type of problems do prospective EFL teachers encounter in each period of the Erasmus process?

Participants

The study was conducted with the voluntary participation of 37 prospective EFL teachers who participated in the Erasmus Exchange Program for at least one semester. A complete overview of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

In the present study, an online survey and semi-structured interview were applied as data collection tools.

Online Survey

An online survey developed by Önen (2017) was used to collect data and it was applied via Survey Monkey. The survey is divided into three sections. The first section contains ten demographic questions, such as the participants' educational status. The survey's second section includes questions on the Likert scale, multiple choice, and rank-order scale.

Table 1. The Gender, year of Erasmus, and host city/country distribution of participants

Background Information	N	%
Gender		
Female	27	73
Male	10	27
Academic Year		
2014-2015	4	10,8
2015-2016	5	13,5
2016-2017	3	8,1
2017-2018	11	29,7
2018-2019	9	24,3
2019-2020	5	13,5
Duration		
6 months	37	100
City / Country		
Koszalin / Poland	6	16,2
Warsaw / Poland	4	10,8
Gdansk / Poland	1	2,7
Budapest / Hungary	7	18,9
Coimbra / Portugal	4	10,8
Antwerp / Belgium	4	10,8
Joensuu / Finland	3	8,1
Madrid / Spain	3	8,1
Copenhagen / Denmark	2	5,4
Vilnius / Lithuania	1	2,7
Kaunas / Lithuania	1	2,7
Daugavpils / Latvia	1	2,7
Total	37	100

The open-ended questions focused mostly on the problems encountered during the Erasmus process. Thus, deeper information regarding the contributions of the Erasmus program was gained through the semi-structured interviews. By this way, the survey and the interview complemented each other. Prior to the main study, for the validity of the survey, a pilot study was conducted. Based on input from Erasmus students, several of the questions were updated and a few new elements were added to the survey.

Semi-structured Interview

In order to gain a deeper understanding about the participants' Erasmus experience, the semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 volunteer participants selected randomly out of 37 participants who had completed the survey. The interviews were conducted via Skype and lasted 40 minutes for every individual. To assure reliable results, 20% of the qualitative data have been analyzed by another rater who is an expert in qualitative research. The inter-rater reliability between the two raters for 20 percent of the data was measured by the use of the formula suggested by Huberman and Miles (2002) and the interrater reliability between two raters has been found to be 93%.

First, the online survey was sent to the participants via e-mail. Out of 37 participants who completed the survey, 10 volunteer students were randomly chosen for the semi-structured interview sessions. The data collection procedure was completed in eight weeks.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data obtained through the online survey was performed via Survey Monkey. The survey's second section, which included Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and rank-order scale questions, was quantitatively analyzed, while the third section was qualitatively analyzed. Then, the analysis of the semi-structured interviews started. First, the audio-recorded interviews were immediately transcribed by the researcher. Verbatim transcription technique was used at this stage. For the content analysis of the transcribed interviews, a qualitative analysis software called MAXQDA was used to assist with coding and categorizing the data, identifying emerging themes, and selecting exemplars to illustrate the participants' Erasmus experiences.

Results

The Erasmus Program's Overall Contributions to the Participants

Table 2 contains the opinions of the participants regarding the effect of Erasmus experience on academic, social, cultural, personal, language and career development. Accordingly, 33 out of 37 participants (89,2%) think that Erasmus program has many effects on their personal development. Similarly, 29 out of 37 participants (78.4%) believe the program has had a significant impact on their cultural development. Language and social development are seen as the third contribution of the Erasmus program, with 22 out of 37 participants rating it as having a significant impact (59.5%). Almost half of the participants believe that the Erasmus program helped them

improve their academic skills. Erasmus has had a significant impact on the academic growth of 17 out of 37 participants (45.9%). Last on the list is career advancement. Only eight out of 37 participants (21,6%) believe Erasmus has had a significant impact on their professional development.

Table 2. Results for the Erasmus program's contributions to participants

	had no effect		had too little effect		had an effect		had much effect	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Academic Development	1	2,7	6	16,2	13	35,1	17	45,9
Language Development	0	0	2	5,4	13	35,1	22	59,5
Social Development	0	0	4	10,8	11	29,7	22	59,5
Cultural Development	0	0	1	2,7	7	18,9	29	78,4
Personal Development	0	0	0	0	4	10,8	33	89,2
Career Development	4	10,8	7	18,9	18	48,6	8	21,6

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants' Academic Development

Table 3. Findings on the academic development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Academic Development	Experiencing a different education system	23	38,3
	Producing projects	10	16,7
	Learning how to do research	7	11,7
	Being able to think critically	6	10
	Better presentation skills	6	10
	Using time efficiently	4	6,7
	Being more organised	4	6,7
Total		60	100

As it is indicated in Table 3, among seven themes identified in the data, the most frequently mentioned contribution regarding the academic development was “experiencing a different education system”. One participant who did Erasmus in Finland expressed his ideas as follows:

“The education system was more student-centered in Finland. Since I was not used to being an active learner, it seemed weird at first. The students were in charge of their own learning. Of course, this is much better, but it was something new for us even if we study educational sciences.” (Participant 2, Male)

Another striking sub-theme which emerged under academic development was observed to be “producing projects”. For example, one participant mentioned a school project they produced voluntarily:

“We produced many enjoyable and educational projects throughout the semester. In one of these projects, we organized activities voluntarily in order to throw the students, parents and teachers together. One professor wore a clown costume and painted his face just for this project. I think the projects

that we produced there made me more self-confident.” (Participant 3, Female)

The third most attended sub-theme was “learning how to do research”. Below is a quote from a participant who commented on his research homework:

“For the first time, I took exams such as routine exam, book exam, essay writing... The exam system was different from the system in Turkey. I managed to write a thirty-page article for a course, which was very challenging. Until that homework, I knew neither how to write a bibliography nor how to do research in general.” (Participant 2, Male)

The utterances of another participant who did Erasmus in Belgium are presented below:

“I made a great effort for a research homework. It was highly detailed. While I was doing that homework, I also learned how to do such a detailed research.” (Participant 5, Female)

On the other hand, there were a few participants who stated that the Erasmus program did not contribute to their academic development at all. The reason for this situation was explained by one of the participants as below:

“I cannot say the Erasmus program made a big contribution to my academic development because most of the courses I took weren't related to ELT” (Participant 7, Male)

The participants' general perceptions of their academic gains were positive. On the other hand, there were a few participants who were not happy with the quality of education provided by their host university.

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants' Language Development

As it is seen in Table 4, among six themes identified in the data, “speaking fluently” and “communicating in a meaningful context” were the most prevalent ones. They think that they improved their English speaking skills and became more fluent.

The next most prevalent theme was “increased self-confidence in using English”. It was revealed that most of the participants' attitudes towards mistakes had changed. One participant stated,

Table 4. Findings on the language development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Language Development	Speaking fluently	20	26,3
	Communicating in a meaningful context	20	26,3
	Increased self-confidence in using English	15	19,8
	Being exposed to various accents	10	13,15
	Being able to think in English	6	7,9
	Learning the language of the host country	5	6,6
Total		76	100

“I speak English more self-confidently after my Erasmus experience. During small talks, I still make some mistakes, but I do not let these minor mistakes slow me down anymore. Everybody makes mistakes, so I continue speaking” (Participant 9, Female)

The overall results show that the contribution of Erasmus experience to the participants' language development was mostly related to their speaking skills. They became more fluent and self-confident by communicating in a meaningful context. They also gained awareness about various accents, learned to think English and had a chance to learn the language of their host country.

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants' Social Development

As displayed in Table 5, the data revealed four sub-themes, the most prominent of which was "adaptation to new environments". For example, one participant commented:

"During the Erasmus program, I was in a completely different environment. I not only went abroad and travelled but also lived there. Thanks to this experience, now it is easier for me to adapt to new contexts." (Participant 6, Male)

The second most common motif discovered was "forming international friendships". One of the participants commented on forming international friendships during ESN events:

"There was a group of voluntary students who organized activities every day. The name of the group was ESN (Erasmus Student Network). Thanks to those activities I made many friends from different countries" (Participant 8, Female)

Table 5. Findings on the social development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Social Development	Adaptation to new environments	26	32,5
	Forming international friendships	23	28,7
	Opportunities for recreational activities	22	27,5
	Having fun and taking up new hobbies	9	11,3
Total		80	100

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants' Cultural Development

As displayed in Table 6, among six sub-themes that emerged under cultural development, the most prevalent ones were "gaining knowledge about various cultures and lifestyles" and "gaining a broader perception towards various cultures".

"My accommodation was arranged by the school. I shared a flat with the other international students. By this way, I met new people, learned about their cultures and lifestyles. I could see our similarities and differences as well as their world perspective." (Participant 9, Female)

The next most common sub-theme was shown to be "the idea of being a global citizen". The following sample interview response illustrates this situation:

"Throughout my Erasmus experience, I had many friends from France, China, America, England, Africa... I realized that all we are global citizens of the World. No matter which country we come from, we are just humans sharing the same planet, experiencing the same emotions..." (Participant 9, Female)

Overall, most of the participants believed that the Erasmus experience had a positive impact on their cultural development. The most frequently mentioned cultural gains were learning about various cultures and lifestyles as well as

gaining a broader perception of various cultures and the idea of being a global citizen.

Table 6. Findings on the cultural development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Cultural Development	Gaining knowledge about various cultures and lifestyles	22	22,7
	Gaining a broader perception towards various cultures	22	22,7
	The idea of being a global citizen	19	19,6
	Learning about the cuisine, religious and national festivals of various cultures	18	18,6
	Learning about the history, geography and international relations of different countries	14	14,4
	Opportunity to introduce the native culture	2	2,1
Total		97	100

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants' Personal Development

As it is seen in Table 7, 12 sub-themes emerged under this theme. It was revealed that the interview findings were in line with the survey results which were illustrated before. Most of the participants stated that the biggest contribution of Erasmus program was to their personal development.

Table 7. Findings on the personal development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Personal Development	Learning how to cope with challenges	19	11,9
	Gaining survival skills	17	10,7
	Self-realization	17	10,7
	Being open to differences	16	10,1
	Sense of being able to succeed	16	10,1
	Stepping outside of comfort zone	16	10,1
	Self-confidence	14	8,8
	Gaining a broader perception	13	8,2
	Being eager to take more responsibilities	12	7,5
	Developing leadership skills	9	5,7
	Being more patient under uncertain circumstances	6	3,8
	Learning how to use limited money	4	2,5
Total		159	100

The most prevalent theme was "learning how to cope with challenges".

"By means of the Erasmus program, I learned how to cope with challenges. I felt stressed and confused from time to time

but it was a great opportunity to improve myself and grow up.” (Participant 1, Female)

The next most prevalent themes were “gaining survival skills” and “self-realization”. One participant shared her experience as follows:

“Trying to find accommodation, signing the rental contract, paying the bills, getting a resident permit... It was the first time I needed to deal with these tasks. It was stressful, but I learned valuable survival skills, which I appreciate.” (Participant 1, Female)

The participants’ remarks also revealed that their Erasmus experience created opportunities for self-realization. One participant, for example, commented,

“... I discovered myself at the same time. I realized what I really want, what I’m capable of doing and what I cannot do.” (Participant 1, Female)

The next most prevalent themes were “being open to differences”, “sense of being able to succeed”, and “stepping outside of comfort zone”. For example, one participant pointed out that she felt more encouraged to try new things:

“Before I went to Poland, I felt worried. If I have this chance again, I will probably not worry at all. I feel more encouraged to try new things now.” (Participant 4, Female)

The statistics also revealed another frequent theme: “self-confidence”. For example, one participant commented,

“Accomplishing the things such as getting a residence permit, paying the bills and rent, made me feel more self-confident. Certainly, the people who participate in the Erasmus program have increased self-confidence.” (Participant 1, Female)

Overall, it can be argued that almost all participants considered the personal development to be the most important contribution of the Erasmus exchange program.

Contributions of Erasmus Program to the Participants’ Career Development

It is illustrated in Table 8 that among six sub-themes that emerged under career development, the most prevalent one was observed to be “learning about various education systems, language teaching methods and techniques”. For example, one participant reflected her ideas as below:

“Theoretical and applied courses were equally important in my host university. Applied courses were much more beneficial for me. I learned many different language teaching activities” (Participant 3, Female)

On the other hand, one participant stated that the language teaching methods and techniques adopted in his host university were not different or inspiring, and he did not believe the Erasmus experience would make any contribution to his future career:

“I took courses from five different teachers. The methods they used were similar to what I saw in Turkey, so there wasn’t an extra contribution of the program to my career.” (Participant 7, Male)

The following prevalent sub-themes were observed to be “having a chance to compare different education systems” and “feeling more self-confident in making future plans”:

“I definitely think that the Erasmus experience will contribute positively to my career. I had a chance to study in a European context and make comparison between different education systems thanks to this program. By this way I

believe, I will better be able to adopt teaching methods suitable for my students.” (Participant 5, Female)

Table 8. Findings on the career development of prospective efl teachers

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	F	%
Career Development	Learning about various education systems, language teaching methods and techniques	20	30
	Having a chance to compare different education systems	16	24
	Feeling more self-confident in making future plans	16	24
	Job opportunities in Turkey and abroad	10	15
	Openness to different job opportunities	3	4
	Opportunities for internship	2	3
Total		67	100

The Problems Encountered by the Participants in the Erasmus Process

According to the data gathered from the survey, nearly half of the participants (43,2%) admitted to having a lot of problems. It is clear that the prospective EFL teachers encountered many problems in the Erasmus process. The vast majority of the participants (56,8%) had more problems before the Erasmus. On the other hand, 27% of the participants stated the most problematic period was “during Erasmus”.

The problems in the pre-Erasmus process

A deeper knowledge about the type of problems encountered by the prospective EFL teachers was gained through the semi-structured interview and open-ended questions in the survey. As seen in Table 9, the most common motif was discovered to be “lack of information and insufficient guidance”.

Table 9. Findings on the problems encountered before the Erasmus program

	F	%
Lack of information and insufficient guidance	16	25
Paper work	12	18,75
Finding equivalent courses and preparation of Learning Agreement	12	18,75
Visa procedure	11	17,19
Communication problem between the host and sending institution	6	9,38
Finding accommodation	4	6,25
Financial Problems	3	4,69
Total	64	100

“I had difficulty due to the lack of information about the Erasmus procedure. Everything seemed to be daunting at first. Unfortunately, I couldn’t receive enough information from my school.” (Participant 3, Female)

Next most prevalent themes were “paper work” and “finding equivalent courses and preparation of learning agreement”. Almost all of the participants agreed that it was quite stressful to deal with excessive paper work.

“Dealing with the paper work was stressful. The documents I collected were as thick as a book. Completing the necessary signatures also took a long time.” (Participant 2, Male)

Another common theme that emerged under “the problems in the pre-Erasmus process” was “visa procedure”. The following sample interview response illustrates this situation:

“The visa procedure was extremely difficult for me. It was the first time I had to apply for visa, so everything seemed to be complicated. Moreover, the regulations had changed when I made the application. Consequently, I could receive the visa twenty days before my departure. I felt stressed until the last moment.” (Participant 8, Female)

Overall, it can be argued that the problems encountered by the prospective EFL teachers in the pre-Erasmus process were mostly related to the formal procedure such as collecting documents and signatures, applying for visa, as well as finding equivalent courses and preparing the learning agreement.

The problems during the Erasmus process

As Table 10 indicates, thirteen sub-themes were identified in the data, and “academic problems” was the most frequently mentioned problem encountered by the prospective EFL teachers during the Erasmus mobility.

The following sample interview response illustrates this situation:

“There was a lack of pedagogical lessons, so I was trained like a philologist because my school could not agree with the Educational Science department of the host institution. The teachers were nice but the education was not of good quality” (Participant 7, Male)

Table 10. Findings on the problems encountered during the Erasmus program

	F	%
Academic problems	18	18,1
Financial problems	17	17,1
Socialization	11	11,1
Paper work	9	9,1
Accommodation	9	9,1
Climatic conditions	9	9,1
Lack of recreational activities	8	8,1
Mentorship system	5	5,1
Sanitary problems	5	5,1
Language problems	4	4,1
Communication problems with the teachers	2	2,1
Culture shock	1	1,1
Food and drink problems	1	1,1
Total	99	100

The second most common sub-theme was discovered to be “financial problems”. One participant, for example, reflected that;

“Finland had higher levels and economically, it was much more expensive than Turkey. The grant I received was insufficient. I spent more than 1000 euros per month, and this could be a disadvantage for the students going without a grant.” (Participant 2, Male).

The next most common sub-theme was shown to be “socialization”. One participant, for instance, shared her thoughts on this issue as follows:

“When I met new people from new cultures, I had some shyness at first. I was not very involved in the groups of friends for a short time, but I got over it in a week.” (Participant 12, Female)

The other sub-themes that occurred under “the problems during the Erasmus process” were “paper work”, “accommodation” and “climatic conditions”. One participant mentioned the difficulty of editing the learning agreement:

“Even during the Erasmus I had to do some paper work, which was tiring. Unfortunately, some courses were cancelled when I was there, so I had to make changes in my learning agreement. It was difficult to find new courses since we were in the middle of the semester and the exams had already been over.” (Participant 9, Female)

The problems in the post-Erasmus process

As can be seen in Table 11, only 3 sub-themes emerged under the problems encountered “after the Erasmus” process. The biggest problem that most of the participants encountered after the Erasmus mobility was the difficulty in adapting back to their hometown, which can be described as “Post Erasmus Syndrome”.

“When I do shopping everything looks too expensive. I have been comparing the economy of two countries since I returned from Erasmus. I also missed some foods that I cannot find here. My lessons in Turkey are more stressful. Nevertheless, I tried not to let this situation spoil my mood for a long time. I could adapt to my normal life in a few weeks.” (Participant 8, Female)

The second most common motif discovered was “academic problems”. One student said that his diploma grade dropped after the Erasmus mobility:

“I had problems with my grades. Although I got high marks there, my scores were low here due to the fact that the grading systems of two schools were different. I did not get the grade I deserved and my diploma grade has dropped.” (Participant 2, Male)

As a whole, it was indicated that the problems encountered after the Erasmus mobility are not as diverse as the problems encountered before and during the Erasmus. The biggest problem after the Erasmus period was the post Erasmus syndrome, which means the difficulty in adapting back to normal life in the hometown.

Table 11. Findings on the problems encountered after the Erasmus program

	F	%
Post Erasmus Syndrome	9	52,9
Academic Problems	6	35,3
Paperwork	2	11,8
Total	17	100

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to look into the contributions of the Erasmus exchange program to Turkish prospective EFL teachers, as well as the problems they faced before, during, and after the program. The findings show that the Erasmus program had a favorable impact on the participants in numerous ways. According to Teichler (2001), the Erasmus program is a worthwhile experience, particularly in terms of cultural and personal growth. Also, the participants of the current study appreciated their personal and cultural gains

most. It was concluded that Erasmus experience played a vital role in the personal growth of the participants. The literature on the subject reveals a substantial beneficial relationship between the Erasmus program and personal contributions. The results of the current study are also corroborated by some studies conducted with Turkish prospective EFL teachers (Aydın, 2012; İltter, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010; Önen, 2017). The majority of this research found that the Erasmus program benefited potential EFL teachers mostly in terms of personal development, which was also the case in the current study. For instance, the participants in İltter's (2013) study were observed to become more self-confident and improve their intra and interpersonal skills. Similarly, Aydın (2012) discovered that prospective EFL teachers gained awareness of how to cope with difficulties, increased their self-confidence, learned how to manage limited funds, took risks and responsibilities in their lives, and most importantly, discovered themselves in terms of personality, competences, likes and dislikes. These personal gains were also mentioned by the participants of this study.

When it comes to *cultural and social development*, the results parallel the studies conducted with Turkish prospective EFL teachers (Aydın, 2012; Caner, 2019; İltter, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010; Önen, 2017). In İltter's (2013) study it was found that the participants had a wider perspective of different cultures and formed many international friendships. Therefore, the Erasmus program seems to foster social and cultural awareness of the future teachers of English.

In terms of *language development*, it was revealed that our participants underlined the improvement in their speaking skills. Previous studies (Aydın, 2012; İltter, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010; Önen, 2017) also demonstrated that Erasmus exchange program had a significant impact on the language development of the participants. There seems to be a slight difference between the findings of our study and Aydın's study. As mentioned previously, the participants of the current study expressed their linguistic gains by focusing on speaking skill and fluency development. However, the participants in Aydın's study reported improvement in their reading and writing skills as well. On the other hand, the participants in İltter's (2013) study emphasized the positive effect of Erasmus program on their language development, especially in terms of speaking skill, which is in accordance with our study.

On the other hand, *academic and career development* seems to take place based on different factors. The majority of the earlier studies (Aydın, 2012; Caner, 2019; İltter, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010) conducted with Turkish prospective EFL teachers support that participating in the Erasmus program contributes to the participants' career development in various ways. For example, in a contemporary study, Caner (2019) examined the perceptions of 19 prospective EFL teachers regarding the contribution of the Erasmus experience to their career development qualitatively. It was found that studying in an international environment positively affected the participants' future profession by raising their awareness of active learning, inclusive practices and international education policies. In terms of the professional gains such as experiencing different education systems, learning about new language teaching methods, practicing their teaching skills through internship opportunities, and feeling more self-confident about future employment, the findings of the current study are in line with the findings of the abovementioned

studies. However, these gains were not reported by the majority of the participants in our study. Moreover, according to survey results, only 8 out of 37 participants believed Erasmus had many effects on their career development. In this respect, our findings corroborate the findings of Önen's (2017) study in which the career development was perceived as the least improved domain during the Erasmus program. This result might be due to the fact that some participants could not take courses related to their major since there was not faculty of education at their host institution or some lecturers did not speak English and they could not get efficiency from their professional experience. Accordingly, it can be argued that the contributions of Erasmus program on the academic and career development depend on some variables. Although Caner (2019) underlined the role of the host institution's curricula, she concluded that the prospective EFL teachers had many professional gains regardless of the qualities of the host countries or the host institutions. In this regard, the current study contradicts with Caner's study, because, in our study, the participants' perceptions regarding their career development differed based upon their host university.

The current study's findings also revealed that the participants encountered various *problems* before, during, and after the Erasmus process. More than half of the participants (56,8%) regarded "*the pre-Erasmus process*" as the most problematic period. Similarly, the participants in Önen's (2017) study perceived the pre-Erasmus as the most challenging period. There are also other studies which revealed that prospective EFL teachers encountered a wide range of problems throughout the Erasmus process (Aydın, 2012; Çiftçi, 2016; İltter, 2013; Kızılaslan, 2010; Yıldırım & İlin, 2013). According to these findings, it can be assumed that the Erasmus program requires its participants to be ready for a long and demanding process since there are many points to consider in each period. The current study confirmed the earlier studies by revealing that paper work before the Erasmus mobility was a big challenge not only for prospective EFL teachers (Aydın, 2012; Çiftçi, 2016; Önen, 2017), but also for the other Erasmus students from different departments (Endes, 2012; Maiworm, Steube, & Teichler, 1992; Yücelisin-Taş, 2015).

The most problematic issue *during the Erasmus process* was found to be academic problems that stemmed from various reasons. There are several studies which reported similar results in terms of academic problems (Aydın, 2012; Önen, 2017; Yıldırım & İlin, 2013). For instance, Yıldırım and İlin (2013) carried out a mixed-method research in order to explore the problems encountered by 55 prospective EFL teachers during their Erasmus mobility. It was indicated that participants encountered academic problems due to the difference in education systems. On the other hand, our findings in terms of academic problems encountered during the Erasmus mobility contradict with Engel's study (2010) in which the participants rarely reported academic problems during the Erasmus mobility. Financial problems were also encountered by nearly all of the participants in the current study. Although the students received a monthly grant and they spent it reasonably, the amount they received was not enough to cover their all expenses. Earlier studies found similar findings on this issue (Aydın, 2012; Engel, 2010; Önen, 2017). Aydın (2012) stated that the prospective EFL teachers in his

study expressed their dissatisfaction with the amount and timing of the monthly payout. Similarly, in Engel's (2010) and Önen's (2017) study the participants frequently mentioned their financial problems. As for the problems related to accommodation, our findings contradict with Önen's (2017) study in which accommodation was considered as a minor problem and correspond with the studies which presented accommodation as a major problem for the participants (Aslan & Jacobs, 2014; Engel, 2010; Yıldırım & İlin, 2013). These differences might be due to the fact that the quality of facilities provided by each institution is different. With regards to the cultural problems, a surprising result which was different from the earlier studies was observed. For instance, in Yıldırım and İlin's (2013) study, the analysis of the Socio-cultural Adaptation scale, reports and interviews indicated that students had issues on affective, behavioral, and cognitive levels. The problems such as climate, sanitary problems, accommodation, academic and language related problems were also mentioned by our participants. However, eating habits were the most cited problem in their study while it was mentioned only once in our study. Besides, only one of the participants in our study mentioned that he experienced culture shock, while in Yıldırım and İlin's (2013) and Önen's (2017) study it was experienced by most of the participants. This situation might be explained by the unique characteristics of the participants and to what extent they were open to differences.

After the Erasmus process, although the participants did not encounter as many problems as before and during the mobility period, most of the participants experienced "the post-Erasmus syndrome". This issue, which is referred to as post-Erasmus syndrome, can be described as the difficulty experienced by the participants in adapting to their school and old lifestyle in the home country again. Actually, since most of the students travel abroad for the first time in their lives thanks to the Erasmus program, this finding is not surprising and it might be normal to experience this feeling. Similarly, it was also found in Aydın's (2012) and Önen's (2017) studies that the prospective EFL teachers had trouble adapting to classes, teaching techniques, tests, traffic and the lifestyle in their hometown in the post-Erasmus process. Another common problem encountered after the Erasmus mobility was the recognition of the courses, which was also observed in Aydın's (2012) and Önen's (2017) studies. Although the Erasmus program brings many academic benefits, there are also several problems which result from the unique education system of each host country. The majority of those who took part in this research complained about the drop in their grade-point average because of the different grading systems of their host and home institutions. Moreover, some students could not receive the remaining part of their grant due to the fact that they failed some courses. Despite all these problems, they described the Erasmus program as a valuable opportunity and stated they would participate again if they had a chance. The main conclusions derived from the quantitative and qualitative data are as follows:

1. The quantitative and qualitative data revealed that participating in the Erasmus program aided the potential EFL instructors' personal and cultural development the most.

2. The quantitative data suggested that the Erasmus program had a good impact on the majority of participants' language development, and the qualitative findings revealed that their language development was mostly in terms of speaking competence and fluency development.
3. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that the Erasmus program also contributed to the social development of the participants. They formed many international friendships and joined a wide range of social activities during their mobility.
4. The quantitative data showed that the Erasmus program had the least impact on the academic and career development of the participants. However, the qualitative data suggested that some participants gained valuable academic skills and regarded the Erasmus program as a beneficial experience for their career prospect.
5. The data revealed that the participants faced a variety of issues prior to, during, and following their Erasmus mobility. According to the quantitative evidence, the pre-Erasmus period is recognized as the most difficult period. Also, the qualitative data showed that they encountered more problems during their mobility period.
6. The qualitative data revealed that the main problem encountered in the post-Erasmus process was "post-Erasmus syndrome" which can be described as the difficulty experienced by the participants in adapting to their old lifestyle in the home country and school again.

Implications of the Study

According to the findings of the study, the Erasmus program has a favorable impact on the development of future EFL teachers in a variety of ways. As a result, more students should be encouraged to participate in Erasmus. However, it is clear that participants face a variety of issues during their time in the Erasmus program. The formal procedure should be reduced to make the application process easier, given the high degree of bureaucratic issues reported by participants in the Erasmus process. Also, pre-Erasmus courses should be designed by the Erasmus coordinators in order to provide the participants with sufficient guidance throughout the process.

In addition, nearly all participants in the study reported that their monthly grant was not enough; therefore, the amount of the grant should be revised. It is proved in many research that more and more students from moderate socio-economic background have a chance to study abroad thanks to the Erasmus program. That's why, it seems essential to increase the grant amount to minimize the financial problems faced by the participants.

Also, the quality of the education provided by the host institution plays a vital role in the academic contributions of the Erasmus program. Thus, the Erasmus offices should choose the institutions to make agreement with more meticulously and solve the mismatches between the curricula.

Finally, the Erasmus offices should organize more comprehensive and informative orientation programs in order to inform the Erasmus participants about the potential problems they will encounter before, during and after the

Erasmus mobility as well as the coping strategies that they could use when they need.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study is limited to 37 prospective EFL teachers and it cannot be generalized to all Turkish prospective EFL teachers. In the literature, there is a limited number of research which focus solely on the prospective EFL teachers' Erasmus experiences. Thus, further research can be conducted with more prospective EFL teachers studying in different parts of Turkey. Additionally, in order to gain a different perspective on the issue, the Erasmus program can be investigated through the eyes of foreign prospective EFL teachers who came to Turkey in the framework of the Erasmus program.

Furthermore, by relying solely on the participants' opinions, this study explored the contributions of the Erasmus program as well as the challenges faced during the process from a holistic perspective. To document program outcomes, the majority of studies relied on self-reports. Despite the fact that such reports provide insight into the influence of foreign programs on participants' growth, they remain subjective. Pure qualitative approaches might not be able to completely describe the participants' experiences. Thus, in further research, a pre-test and post-test design can be adopted to analyze the phenomenon empirically.

Moreover, for further research, prospective EFL teachers who did not participate in the Erasmus program can be included in order to explore if there is a difference between the development of the Erasmus and non-Erasmus students. Similarly, a comparison between Turkish and foreign prospective EFL teachers' Erasmus experience can be made in order to examine if the impact of the program changes based on the nationality of the participants.

Finally, future research might focus on the long-term consequences of foreign programs on participants' lifestyles and teaching methods. Most studies appear to have lost contact with participants after they completed the training, according to Çiftçi and Karaman (2019). There is a need for follow-up studies and longitudinal analyses, which may enable researchers to explore whether the participants made any changes in their lives or not.

Author Contribution Rate

Both of the authors took equally active roles in the writing process of this article. All authors have read and confirmed the final version of the article.

Declarations of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest as part of the study.

Ethical Declaration

The purposes and procedures of the current study were granted approval from the ethical committee of the Dokuz Eylül University (15.05.2020 / 87347630-42104268-1663).

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