

Perceptions of In-service English Language Teachers Involved in Erasmus Exchange Programs on Culture and Teacher Identity¹

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the participation of five in-service English language teachers and aimed to find out how in-service English language teachers with overseas intercultural experience evaluate the effects of this experience on their language teacher identity. The data of the study were collected through semi-structured interviews and metaphor elicitation. Content analysis procedure was employed to explore the obtained qualitative data. The results of the study showed that the participants all regarded Erasmus Exchange Program as an opportunity in their personal and academic life. They all mentioned that interacting and negotiating with people from different cultures changed their “opinions and attitudes” about the people and culture of other countries. Also, they all stated that this experience raised some “cultural awareness” about their own culture and the culture of other countries. Also, they said that this experience improved their “language skills” specially speaking and listening. They also said that Erasmus experience also affected their “intercultural identity”. They all confirmed that their teacher identity has influenced after their experience as an Erasmus student.

Keywords: English language teachers, teacher identity, culture, Erasmus Exchange Program

Erasmus Değişim Programlarına Katılan İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Kültür ve Öğretmen Kimliğine İlişkin Algıları

Özet

Bu çalışma, beş İngilizce öğretmenin katılımıyla gerçekleştirilmiş ve yurt dışında kültürlerarası deneyime sahip İngilizce öğretmenlerinin bu deneyimin dil öğretmeni kimliği üzerindeki etkilerini nasıl değerlendirdiğini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamıştır. Araştırmanın verileri yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve metafor çıkarımı yoluyla toplanmıştır. Elde edilen nitel verileri keşfetmek için içerik analizi prosedürü kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın sonuçları, katılımcıların tamamının Erasmus Değişim Programını kişisel ve akademik yaşamlarında bir fırsat olarak gördüklerini göstermiştir. Hepsi, farklı kültürlerden insanlarla etkileşimde bulunmanın ve konuşmanın, diğer ülkelerin insanları ve kültürü hakkındaki “görüşlerini ve tutumlarını” değiştirdiğini belirtti. Ayrıca hepsi bu deneyimin kendi kültürleri ve diğer ülkelerin kültürleri hakkında bir miktar “kültürel farkındalık” yarattığını belirtmişlerdir. Ayrıca bu deneyimin özellikle konuşma ve dinleme “dil becerilerini” geliştirdiğini söylediler. Ayrıca Erasmus deneyiminin “kültürlerarası kimliklerini” de etkilediğini söylediler. Hepsi, Erasmus öğrencisi olarak yaşadıkları deneyimden sonra öğretmen kimliklerinin etkilendiğini doğruladılar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce öğretmenleri, öğretmen kimliği, kültür, Erasmus Değişim Programı

Introduction

Language learning journey, in expanding circle countries, was a weight on learners’ shoulders till last decade due to the scarcity of language input behind classroom walls. Nowadays, availability of educational exchange programs like Erasmus provides a great opportunity for all the learners to develop themselves personally and professionally and helps them to build cooperative relations with other nations. In Brown’s (1986) view, learning a foreign language destinably involves learning about the culture of that language too.

Therefore, learning English language in foreign language context such as those in countries like Turkey opens new prospects for the learners to join the global English-speaking community (Çelik, 2018). According to Pulverness (2003), people who are involved in language teaching should realize that there is an implicit relationship between culture and language. Bada (2005) emphasizes that teaching L2 would be erroneous and imperfect if the culture of the target language is not studied. He explains that language study will be meaningless for L2 learners if they know nothing about the people and culture of the target language. McKay (2003) claims that language teaching is affected by culture in two ways. Firstly, culture

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influences the language linguistically, for example it has an influence on semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Secondly, it affects the language pedagogically. For instance, it influences the language material preferences.

Intercultural competence is an important part of foreign language teaching and learning. Byram (1997) states that although most of the syllabi and guidelines emphasizes the significance learning about the culture and intercultural competence, still there is an absence of attention to the cultural and intercultural aspects in education programs. According to Byram (1997), knowledge, skills, and attitudes are the components of intercultural competence which are completed by the values one possesses due to belonging to a number of social groups and more importantly to a society.

Accordingly, teachers' intercultural communicative competence and intercultural identity are very important. Byram (1997) believes that teachers and learners should be aware of the cultural phenomena of their own and the other societies. Also, they should develop skills of analysis and interpretation of unfamiliar social and cultural data from a foreign society. Çelik (2018) explains that "the period between learners' L1 culture and learners' L2 culture is called "intercultural" period". Learners generally move from L1 culture to L2 culture as they become specialized in L2, that is, when they become bilingual. As a consequence, learners' self-conceived cultural identity moves from L1 to L2. By learning L2, the learner goes beyond limits and adopt the new communities' cultural identities and becomes the member of multiple communities in order to make a new and mixed linguistic identity (Çelik, 2018). Some scholars (Atay & Ece, 2009; Kırkgöz, 2017; Vasilopoulos, 2015) have studied the mutual relation between language and culture.

Atay and Ece (2009) studied identity construction of Turkish pre-service English language teachers, who introduced themselves as Muslim-Turkish. The results of their study revealed that these pre-service English language teachers developed Western identity because of their exposure to English language and culture. This Western identity along with their proficiency in English allowed them to precede their cultural limitations and interact with people of other cultures who do not have similar vision of world. They stated that Western identity does not impact their Muslim and Turkish identities and that they could accommodate the new element in their identity.

In another study, Vasilopoulos (2015) investigated L2 identity construction in Korean context. He studied self-identity and social identity of Koreans who lived in an English-speaking country for more than four years. He wanted to analyze how using of English in daily life affects and forms self and social identity. The results of his study indicated that Koreans were hiding their ability in speaking English and also their L2 identity. He understood that native-like English speech was discouraged among Koreans because it was regarded as a pretension. In conclusion, Vasilopoulos (2015) said that these Koreans negotiated and formed their multiple identities within the compass of L1 context, Korea and stated their L2 identities along with their L1 identity.

Kırkgöz (2017) analyzed the Fulbright experiences of Turkish Foreign Language Assistant grantees to examine the impacts of Fulbright experience on grantees' eventual understanding of education, democracy, and intercultural issues. The obtained data from this study showed that several transformations have occurred in the grantees' viewpoints because of their Fulbright experience.

Pennycook (1994) states that "English language teaching occupation is not culturally, politically, socially, or economically neutral; rather, it has an important role in the construction of roles, relations, and identities among teachers and students". Çelik (2018) indicates that

English teachers develop an intercultural competence and teacher identity even though they did not have a real contact with the target culture. In order to support intercultural exchanges and development of intercultural identity, different exchange programs like Erasmus have been offered to university students. Considering the significance of language teachers' intercultural communicative competence and their intercultural identity this study focuses on English teachers' intercultural identity in relation with their overseas experiences during their education. Thus, present qualitative research aims to answer the overarching question. How do language teachers with overseas intercultural experience evaluate the effects of this experience on their language teacher identity?

Method

The current study aims to unveil the insights of the 21st century language learners' identity perceptions. To achieve this aim, a qualitative research design was adopted as Merriam (1988) claimed such studies focusing on perceptions of those being studied; make great contribution to the knowledge and implementation of practices. Additionally, Hatch (2002) supports such research designs stating that qualitative data reflects the participants' insights gathered from a set of questions questioning how each individual perceive their own experience.

Participants

The participants of this study were five in-service English language teachers (3 females and 2 males) who were studying Master degree in English Language Teaching Department in a state university in Turkey. They all graduated from English Language Teaching Department from state universities in Turkey too. All of the participants spent one semester in one of the European universities during their studying in BA. Therefore, they were sharing common educational and cultural characteristics. They were aged between 24-34 years old. These five participants were selected through purposeful sampling method from among 14 Master degree students from the same class. The five participants chosen are thought to be "key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich cases" (Suri, 2011).

Instruments

The data for this study were collected via semi-structured interview and metaphor elicitation. The questions for these three data collection tools were developed by the researcher based on the existing related literature on English Language Teaching. For the intelligibility and reliability concerns, the questions were checked by three experts in this field. The purpose of these data collection tools was to find the answer to the question of "How do language teachers with overseas intercultural experience evaluate the effects of this experience on their language teacher identity?"

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from semi-structured interview and metaphor elicitation were analyzed using content analysis procedures. This analysis occurred with data being organized according to themes or reoccurring patterns (Merriam, 2009). This stage in data analysis process is often referred to as open coding because the researcher is "open" to any comments or questions that might be worth exploring (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). The transcription of each participant was validated by the member check (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The emerging themes reflected the five in-service English language teachers' perceptions on their overseas intercultural

experience on their English language teacher identity. Data from the sources were triangulated to ensure the reliability of the data collected. Finally, the themes and categories identified were checked by three experts in the field and agreement with regard to the categorizations and themes identification was reached.

Findings

This section includes the answers to the research question and its sub-questions with the support of participants' excerpts.

Semi-structured Interview Data Analysis

According to Girvan and Savage (2010), the appealing feature of interview in social science research and educational is because of its capacity to generate a holistic understanding of the subjective lived experience of the participants. Interviewing is one of the major data collection tools of qualitative research as it focuses on people's lived experiences, individual perceptions, attitudes, and viewpoints (Creswell, 2009, 2013). Interview is an efficient and flexible tool for data collection which allows for investigating events and conditions through the viewpoints of the actors themselves (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). It allows researchers to delve deeper into interviewees' world as it allows for asking further explanation spontaneously and thus, minimizes possible misunderstandings.

The present study employed semi-structured interview. As stated by Creswell (2012), semi-structured interview is a data collection method that is based on asking questions within a predetermined thematic outline. Semi-structured interviews are often qualitative in nature and the questions are not set in order. They are usually used as an exploratory tool in marketing, social science, survey methodology, and other research fields. Semi-structured interviews must have a degree of structure in their implementation. This is attained by creating an interview schedule so that all the participants receive some common questions in the interview process. The semi-structured interviews in the present study were conducted and aimed to find out "How do language teachers with overseas intercultural experience evaluate the effects of this experience on their language teacher identity?"

The following sub-questions also were asked to each participant. The first one was, "How do you evaluate your overall Erasmus experience? The second question following the research question of this study was "How do you evaluate the intercultural experience during Erasmus Exchange Program?"

All of the participants of this study explained that Erasmus Exchange Program provided them a great opportunity in their personal and academic life. They all mentioned that interacting and negotiating with people from different cultures changed their "opinions and attitudes" about the people and culture of other countries. Furthermore, they all stated that this experience raised some "cultural awareness" about their own culture and the culture of other countries. Also, they said that this experience improved their "language skills" specially speaking and listening. The following excerpts show the participants perceptions about their overall "Erasmus experience" and "intercultural experience".

"When I went abroad, I felt like a fish out of water since the things around me were completely unfamiliar to me. However, when I came back, upon completing the program after a semester, the fish was all alone in the ocean again. The culture shock I had experienced during and after my visit was two-dimensional. Although Spanish culture did not have much in common with Turkish culture, the adaptation to the new one was not so difficult as the one in my hometown after I returned. To help us understand the way they live and their culture, the professors

invited us to their houses for an overnight stay, which was a real-life experience making us feel as if we were in one of the foreign movies. This experience can be regarded as a combination of professional training and a cultural journey. Thanks to the program, I still use the knowledge and the tenets that I had learned there. I could develop my speaking skill there and this changed my whole academic life.” (Participant 1)

“My Erasmus experience was amazing. I had a chance to meet people from different cultures and language. Being exposure to English language was quite beneficial to me. Also, the new people I met made me realize that there is a whole different world around me. Stepping out of my comfort zone was frightening at first but later I found out that what makes me scared actually will develop my role as a teacher at the future. I have gained a global perspective of new ideas and have different viewpoints of what is happening around me. I also realized my approach to the issues is actually connected to my culture and the language. Different people from different cultures think the same way. Before going to Erasmus Program, I had some bias about the European culture. I thought that European people think that Turkish people are conservative. But I realized that my roommate, for instance, had no prejudice against us. Then I noticed that is actually me who has the bias.” (Participant 2)

“I have been in Poland as an Erasmus Exchange student in 2018. It was my best experience in my life. I met many amazing people from different countries with different political opinions and different religions. All these experiences were not only about studies and university. I was living in an international environment, met friends from all over the world, enjoyed different activities, and traveled a lot. There through my interactions with people from all around the world in class or out socially, not only did I learn about their culture and their experiences, I learnt a lot about my own. I learned about similarities and differences of our culture with other cultures and realized the unique and shared features of my own country. Through the extensive Erasmus networks in Krakow; events, trips and societies such as ESN, I was exposed to new experiences with new people and new lines of thinking and also language skills. I was surrounded by people wanting to make the most of their time out from Erasmus, and for me it was a unique chance to remove myself from the responsibilities and old habits of back home and adapt to a new lifestyle. As I was far away from my family, friends, and all the influences and everything that is familiar, it was a chance for me to improve myself. To see who am I on my own, as an independent human being. This part was particularly important. Being abroad pulled me out of my comfort, which was the best way I think I could grow as a person.” (Participant 3)

“For me, joining the Erasmus Exchange Program was the greatest opportunity and I understood that the beauty of life in the world is not just about the place we live in. I experienced a culture shock because I was going from a very small village from Eastern Turkey to one of the beautiful cities in Europe. Everything was new for me, from people clothing style and food to their way of entertainment. At first, I was very silent in my classes and I could not have interaction with my classmates and people around me, but then I started to attend in activities and the entertainments which were held at the university. Little by little, I could make friends and started to learn about their culture and life. In short, it was an incredible experience for me that changed my attitude and view point about the life, people, and the culture of other countries and nations” (Participant 4)

“Due to reasons such as a quality education and life opportunity, university students tend to meet people from different countries. Some universities in Turkey offer their students the opportunity like Erasmus Exchange Program to go abroad and develop themselves personally and academically and also become familiar with different cultures and people and introduce

their own culture to them. Thanks to this experience, not only did I improve my language skills, but also, I got to know lots of people from different cultures as well. I learned many things about foreign cultures and education systems which helped me to find my way in my future personal and professional life. I also learned about the cultural diversities and become more familiar with the term cultural awareness.” (Participant 5)

The third sub-question following the research question of this study was “How do you evaluate the effects of this experience on your language teacher identity?”

All of the participants of this study confirmed that their Erasmus experience changed their “point of view” as a teacher. They said that joining lessons in a different country with teachers from different culture taught them a lot of things about classroom and teaching. All of the five participants stated that their “teacher identity” has affected by Erasmus Exchange Program, their “behaviours” as a teacher, “self-confidence”, and “opinions” about the students and classroom. The excerpts below indicate how the Erasmus Exchange Program has affected teacher identity of the participants of this study.

“The overall experience can be said to be the most effective touch both in my personal life and in my identity as a teacher. The teacher model I transformed into after my intercultural experience was much more effective and had stronger impact on the students because I had concrete evidence in terms of a foreign country’s lifestyle and culture. Now that I have been able to compare the two countries, I can see the good and the bad sides of them in different areas, but especially in education. The school environment, the libraries, the good practices, and the teaching methods and techniques still stand as good examples for me and they are the reinforcements for my teaching career. Still, I challenge myself with this leading figure and I see it as the reason for a change. Even the simplest things that I learned there such as Web 2.2. Tools, differentiation, and tiered vocabulary concept have their roots in there and still apply them in my classes. The visuals of the barbecue parties, the Catholic church visits, and the musicals or concerts are so vivid in my mind that I live them again while transferring them to my students. I had also collected some authentic materials such as menus, brochures, maps, bills, and receipts from the cities I visited. I still use those materials in my classes and they take students’ attention as they are from the real-life materials. My identity as a teacher had been shaped its form during this overseas experience. Since I was an unexperienced pre-service teacher but ambitious, I believed that this experience helped me shape my identity globally. Frankly, I can suggest that any EFL teacher have such a vitally important experience for both their teaching skills and their identities as a teacher.” (Participant 1)

“Culture, language, and beliefs are bounded together and I believe it is a must for a teacher to use them in an appropriate way in his/her classes. Contacting other cultures was the best opportunity I have ever had in my teaching life. With the new perspective I have, I teach my students to be respectful of other cultures, languages, and lifestyles. Going abroad with Erasmus made me realize that I did not know myself very well. As a language teacher, my perception has changed as a whole. I have changed my teaching approach from grammar translation method to communicative approach. I created activities to make my students speak. As we are in a globalized world, I focused on my students to speak effectively. I also changed my speaking assessment process. Intelligibility is more important than accuracy, that is what I have learned during my Erasmus experience.” (Participant 2)

“We were optionally observing high school students’ lessons related to pedagogy once a week and it was a great opportunity for me to see a different teaching practice. Sometimes guest speakers were visiting our lessons and were giving lectures about different subjects. The students were actively listening to the lectures and it was increasing their enthusiasm. It was

inspiring to see that we can increase students' enthusiasm by making a small change in our lessons. There, I realized that we as a teacher have a big responsibility about our students and lessons. I learned that to make education attractive to students is not so difficult. The only thing we need is to understand what our students need and want.” (Participant 3)

“The geography in which people live can cause great advantages and disadvantages over their imagination, perspective, and horizons. The geography I live in had narrowed my imagination and I had low self-confidence. Bu, going to Erasmus Exchange Program changed my point of view. Sometimes I think if I were a teacher without this experience, what kind of teacher I was now. Certainly, I would have reflected the effects of my geography and culture on the classroom environment. After my experience as an Erasmus student, I realized that the biggest obstacles were not concrete, but intangible, it started and ended in our minds. As a result of enough effort and interest, I learned that there are few things that a person cannot achieve. Now I carry these positive effects to the classroom. Now I am much more confident, have few prejudices, imagination, and a multicultural character and most importantly, there is a teacher who is the best role model for his students and inspires them in and out of classroom. Let me explain; Students are much more motivated when they look at the past of a teacher who was born in the same city, speaks the same language and has the same culture as them. This gives them self-confidence and faith. The examples from the closest environment seem much more realistic to the students and make it more possible to reach the goals.” (Participant 4)

“I can say being there changed the way I teach as well. I started focusing on communicative skills more and more and make my students familiar with cultural diversities by using different activities. I put some cultural elements to the language teaching process and localize the language to some extents. I figured out that my students got more interested in my classes after these changes. As a teacher, I became more open-minded there and gained self-confidence. In general, I can say that the Erasmus Exchange Program enriches the academic and professional life of the students benefiting from the program, increase the language and intercultural communication skills of the students, and increases the self-confidence and self-awareness of the pre-service students.” (Participant 5)

Metaphor Elicitation Data Analysis

Using metaphors helps researchers to elucidate, interpret, classify, and summarize a behavior, person, product, brand, or other phenomenon. According to Goatly (1997), a metaphor occurs when a unit of discourse is used to refer unwontedly to an object, process, or concept, or colligates in an unusual way.

In this study, to explore the participants' perceptions about Erasmus Exchange Program metaphor elicitation technique was used. The five participants were asked to evaluate their experience with one, two, or three metaphors.

The first participant evaluated this experience firstly as a “journey” that you want to take again and again because you know that you will never be the same again. And secondly as a “culture gourmet” who never gives up tasting a piece from other cultures.

The second participant stated that Erasmus experience was as an “opportunity” for me because I had a chance to see new places, know new people, and change my perception about different cultures and gain a new perspective on my teaching experiences.

The third participant of this study expressed Erasmus experience as a “magnificent opportunity”. Knowing people from different nationalities, personalities, countries, religions, and culture all changed my opinion about the world.

The fourth participant used “learning standards” metaphor to evaluate Erasmus experience. He explained that it was like developing from demo account to premium account. The last participant said that Erasmus experience was like a “magical box”. You will never know what will happen unless you open that box, yet the only thing that I am sure about is you will find lots of things that make you happy in that box.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interview and metaphor elicitation from five in-service English language teacher revealed that the Erasmus Exchange Program had a positive and efficient effect on them both personally and professionally. They explained that this experience raised their cultural awareness, changed their opinions and point of views about the world and other cultures, and also improved their language skills. They stated that without living with people of the target language and being exposed to their culture, they could not be able to achieve these goals. They also said that Erasmus experience also affected their intercultural identity because they learned English in the countries that English is spoken in all their educational institutions.

The participants of this study also emphasized some kind of transformation in their thinking, behaviour, and point of view as teachers. They added that their self-confidence increased after Erasmus experience and they are more confident in their classes. They said that their opinion about students and classroom also changed. They are now more humanistic than before and they facilitate the learning process for their students. They explained that they are now more understanding about their students and this influences the behaviour of their students too. They all confirmed that their teacher identity formed after their experience as an Erasmus student in European universities. Burke (1974, cited in Kim, 2008) talked about a motto “No construction without destruction”, he said that construction of a new identity requires the replacement of some characteristics of L1 culture with those of L2 culture. Therefore, without living this experience these students could not reform their beliefs and identities as English teachers.

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