

TEMPORARY STUDY ABROAD: LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF ERASMUS STUDENTS

KISA SÜRELİ YURT DIŞI EĞİTİMİ: ERASMUS ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN DİL ÖĞRENME DENEYİMLERİ

Assistant Professor Dr. Gökçe DİŞLEN DAĞGÖL

Adana Science and Technology University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies, gdislen@adanabtu.edu.tr, Adana/Turkey

ABSTRACT

Study-abroad gains more importance in today's globalized world. Spending one or two semesters abroad through Erasmus Programme, university students find the opportunity to have various experiences from different aspects. One of these aspects is undoubtedly language learning. Studying abroad is expected to pose influences upon students' language learning process. Therefore, the present study dealt with the language learning experiences of three mobility students. Since the study took the form of case study, different qualitative data collection tools were used to explore the participants' experiences in depth. The participants went from Turkey to Poland temporarily as a member of exchange programme. The data were subjected to content analysis. The results showed that temporary study-abroad had a positive effect on the students' language learning approaches even though they had problems in a foreign environment.

Key words: Temporary study abroad, language learning experiences

ÖZ

Yurt dışında eğitim görmek, günümüz globalleşen dünyasında daha da önem kazanmaktadır. Erasmus Programı ile bir veya iki dönemi yurt dışında geçiren üniversite öğrencileri, farklı açılardan çeşitli deneyim kazanma fırsatını bulurlar. Bu açılardan biri de şüphesiz dil öğrenmedir. Yurt dışında eğitim görmenin, öğrencilerin dil öğrenme sürecini etkilemesi beklenmektedir. Bu nedenle, çalışma üç Erasmus öğrencisinin dil öğrenme deneyimlerini ele almaktadır. Vaka çalışması olduğu için katılımcıların deneyimlerini derinlemesine inceleme amacıyla farklı nitel veri toplama araçları kullanılmıştır. Katılımcılar, değişim programı ile Türkiye'den Polonya'ya gitmişlerdir. Veriler içerik analizi ile incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın sonunda, farklı bir ortamda problem yaşamalarına rağmen, yurt dışında eğitim görmenin öğrencilerin dil öğrenme yaklaşımlarında olumlu bir etkisi olduğu bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kısa süreli yurt dışı eğitimi, dil öğrenme deneyimleri

1. INTRODUCTION

University education is a multi-faceted process which opens academic, social and cultural gates to the students. One of these gates is Erasmus Student Exchange Programme, which offers students to visit and study European countries during their university education. "Erasmus is the single largest programme at the European level aimed at facilitating organized student mobility, teacher mobility and cooperation between universities across Europe" (Deakin, 2013, p.466).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the framework of Erasmus, university students pursue a part of their education in another country which is a member or candidate member of the European Union, and the courses taken in the new country are accepted in their home country when they return (Tekin & Hiç Gencer, 2013). Therefore, this system prevents probable disconnection students may feel for their courses. Erasmus Programme brings about more general benefits, as well. It may enhance foreign language learning raise awareness in other European cultures, extends business

or policy views, let students reach specialist knowledge which is not available in their own countries and provide a symbol of European cooperation (Wilson, 2011). Freed (1995 in Deakin, 2013) asserts that integration of immersion in the native speech environment with formal classroom setting offers the best atmosphere for learning a second language. This positive exposure to the second language paves the way for the cultural awareness, as well. “Students’ intercultural communication skills, intercultural adaptability and sensitivity as well as cross-cultural understanding can also be improved by periods spent studying abroad” (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Bauwens et al., 2008; Feast, Collyer-Braham, & Bretag, 2011; Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992; Williams, 2005 in Deakin, 2013, p. 469). Tekin and Hiç Gencer list benefits of Erasmus Programme in university students as follows:

- ✓ Learning about different cultures
- ✓ Easy and cheap overseas journeys
- ✓ Biographical change
- ✓ Academic and professional career

Speaking generally, experience gained through this Erasmus Programme presents itself as the essence of positive aspects. From the language learning perspective, students find the opportunity to apply what they know and practice language skills. This lays the foundation for a kind of experiential learning.

Experiential learning holds great significance in learning process since it holds practice within its body. As Kolb (1984) remarks, it puts an emphasis on the experience, and objects to denying the role of consciousness and subjective experience in learning. Therefore, the author supports the combination of experience, perception, cognition and behaviour. Li, Mobley and Kelly (2013) state that experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as a process in which knowledge is formed by the transformation of experience. The researchers also add that experiential learning “emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process and regards learning as a holistic process of adaptation to the world, which involves the integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving” (p.35). Kolb and Kolb (2005) mention six propositions on which experiential learning theory is constructed:

- ✓ Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes
- ✓ All learning is relearning
- ✓ Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world
- ✓ Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world
- ✓ Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment
- ✓ Learning is the process of creating knowledge

As it is apparent, experiential learning is not a passive process focusing only the concept of experience. Learning is more dynamic, active and progressive in this theory. Thinking and constructing present themselves as key parts of this learning. As Seaman and Rheingold note (2013, p.156), “you cannot learn from experience unless you reflect”. The authors also echo Boud, Keogh and Walker (1895, p.19) and note that the process in which “people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” has become central to experiential learning. Moon (1999, p.4) asserts that “reflection implies a form of mental processing with a purpose or/ and an anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution”. As the author adds, reflection appears to offer more processing than would occur when simply remembering something. Boud, Keogh and Walker (2005) put forward that if people sharpen their awareness of what reflective learning can include and how it can be affected, then it is possible for them to enhance practice of learning and help others in the learning process. Therefore, reflection is not a simple activity, and as Roskos, Vukelich and Risko (2001) point out, it is an intense and multi-faceted concept that can be investigated from multiple angles and at multiple levels. The researchers refer to Dewey (1901, 1933) and report that reflection consists of several mental steps such as “confusion, anticipation, analysis, elaboration, decision making and action”, and of certain personal qualities such as “open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility” (p.596). All in all, within the framework of experiential learning, transformation of experience paves way to knowledge, which constitutes the essence of learning (Kolb, 1984). As a matter of fact, it is not just question of formal learning; experiential learning has a bond with the development of cultural knowledge. “To develop cultural intelligence, one must progress through a series of stages ranging from simply reacting to external stimuli to adjusting behaviour in anticipation of subtle changes in cultural context. Experiential learning is key to increase cultural intelligence” (Thomas & Inkson, 2005, p.5 in Li, Mobley & Kelly, 2013, p.34). However, Erasmus Programme, offering students the opportunity of

experiential learning, may bring out unwelcome results from the cultural perspective, as well. That is to say, students are likely to face the problem of culture shock.

Culture shock constitutes a serious problem for students visiting a foreign country. Rajasekar and Renand (2013, p.144) defines culture shock as “the anxiety or stress that is caused by being in a new and foreign environment and the absence of the familiar signs and symbols of the home country”. The researchers refer to Winkelman’s (1994) description of culture shock as the uncertainty leading people to experience anxiety, depression and isolation. Xia (2009) argues that increase in the feelings of depression, anxiety and helplessness may hinder learning the new culture better; psychological disorientation may have a negative impact upon decision making and problem solving skills, which may end up with the difficulty of adaptation to the new environment. Juffer (1987 in Dongfeng, 2012) provides five reasons for culture shock: confronting a new environment or situation, ineffectiveness of intercultural or interpersonal communication, threat to emotional or intrapsychic well-being of the guest, the need to change the behaviour appropriately and regain positive reinforcement from the new environment, growth experience. As it is obvious, culture shock is not a one-layered concept; it is in interaction with different element. Allison, Davis-Berman and Berman (2012) refer to Oberg (1960) and list six components of culture shock:

- ✓ psychological strain
- ✓ sense of loss and feelings of deprivation
- ✓ feelings of rejection by the new culture
- ✓ confusion in role expectation, values and feelings
- ✓ surprise and anxiety at realization of cultural differences
- ✓ feelings of impotence at inability to cope with, or integrate into the new environment

Composed of different dimensions, culture shock may instill psychological burden into students as a result of encountering new and foreign setting. However, it develops in process. As Edwards-Joseph and Baker (2012, p.719) specify, “it is cumulative building up slowly from a sequence of small events that are hard to identify”. Culture shock is believed to develop in stages. Lewis and Jungman (1986, in Dongfeng, 2012) developing Oberg’s theory claim five or six stages of culture shock: the preliminary stage (events that occur before departure), spectator phase (initial weeks or months of living in another culture), increasing participation phase, shock phase, adaptation phase and re-entry into home culture. Thus, culture shock takes shape in phases, which implies its processual side.

All in all, Erasmus, which is a common student mobility programme, provides the students with the chance to gain various experiences. Whether positive or negative, all these experiences contribute to broadening their perspectives. From language learning aspect, it presents the opportunity to feel, use and improve the target language in real environment, which paves the way for experiential learning. Such kind of learning helps students to internalize the language better. However, exposure to a pretty new and foreign environment brings the problem culture shock together. Even though it may cause psychological problems for a while, adaptation to the new atmosphere may break the obstacles and students can get most out of Erasmus Mobility Programme.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted as a case study. It dealt with the experiences of the university students who participated in Erasmus Mobility Programme. This study is qualitative in nature.

Three university students constituted the participants of the study. To go in detail, students were enrolled at Faculty of Engineering and Business, which means they got compulsory English class as foreign language at university. This study aimed to reveal Erasmus students’ experiences with respect to foreign language; therefore, students were chosen through purposive sampling since Erasmus students were the target group. However, the study did not take into account the gender, age, and the country the participants went to.

At the start of the study, participants were asked to write a general overview of their experiences when they went to another country without limiting them to only what they experienced in terms of foreign language. Through this, it was aimed to get a general picture of students’ opinions. After general overview, narrowing their experiences down to only language learning, they were asked to write journals over four weeks. Students wrote and sent four-week journals which focused on their experiences about language. In addition, students were administered to open ended questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of six questions. The first question asked the probable benefits of going abroad via Erasmus Programme in learning language. The second question elicited changes, if any, in their opinions about language learning after Erasmus programme. Probable problems in terms of language were the focus of the third question. This question also included three sub-

questions such as whether they had the relevant problems, the reasons of those problems and the ways of coping with them. Apart from these questions, the fourth one asked about their recommendations for a student who would go abroad through Erasmus programme. The following question aimed to reveal changes in themselves comparing their situation before and after Erasmus. The last question was about the basic reasons for participating in such an exchange programme. As another instrument, participants were given a written interview, as well. Interview was comprised of five questions. The first question concerned about significant incidents, if any, about language learning abroad. The second question was about the points the students had difficulty in terms of language. The students were also asked whether they had an important memory about communication. Likewise, they were questioned about any striking memory worth sharing. As a last question, they were asked whether their Erasmus experiences had an effect on their future plans on language learning. All in all, report giving a general picture, journals, questionnaire and interview were used as instrumentation in this study.

The data obtained through self-report, journals, open-ended questionnaire and interview were subjected to content analysis. How many times the ideas occurred were identified and recurring ideas were categorized and interpreted.

4. RESULTS

The data were analysed qualitatively and the findings of each instrument were propounded in charts as follows.

Findings of Self-Report

Findings of self-report mirror a general overview of the participants when they first arrived in their target countries where they would continue their education. These findings presented a general picture of what they had experienced and felt at the start of their educational journey.

Table 1. Findings of Self-Report

<p><u>Problems</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation problem • Delay in arrival • Adaptation problem • Physical problems • Lack of communication with family • Language problem • Eating problem • Non-English speaking people • Delay in grant-deposit • Lack of interesting activities • False expectations about courses • Misconceptions about Erasmus (2) 	<p><u>Personal Feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No sense of belonging • Sense of being abandoned • Regret • Unhappiness • Homesickness • Like a fish out of water • Wish to return • Gloomy • Sense of being imprisoned • Easy adaptation • Culture shock
<p><u>Changes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative change in self-perception (2) • Becoming sensitive • Broader perspective • Gaining self-confidence • Gaining new points of view • Ability to live in another culture • Raise in awareness in language learning (2) 	<p><u>Positive points</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly atmosphere (2) • Problems solved after 1 month • New friends • New language • Practising English • Easy to find local special food • Introducing Turkish culture

Table 1 presents the students' personal overview of what they experienced when they started their Erasmus journey. Apart from physical problems, they voiced language problems such as non-English speaking people and communication problems. They also realized that they had misconceptions about Erasmus programme. Lack of interesting activities and false expectations about the courses were among the problems mentioned by the students. As a personal feeling, at first they seemed to have negative emotions such as no sense of belonging, regret, homesickness, culture shock. Only one student claimed to adapt to the environment easily. However, despite all these unpleasant feelings, they remarked that they went through positive changes in themselves. Rise in language learning awareness, gaining self-confidence, sensitivity and broader perspective were self-observed by the participants. However, two of the participants detected a negative change in their self-perception. In addition to all these, students pointed out positive sides of what they experienced such as friendly atmosphere, establishing friendships, learning new language and cultural exchange.

Findings of Journals

Students were asked to write their experiences regarding language over four weeks. Findings of the journals reveal the students' observations and opinions week by week.

Table 2. Findings of Journals

1 st Week	2 nd Week	3 rd Week	4 th Week
<p><u>Language related problems</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of terminology knowledge (2) Problem in host country language (2) Non-native English speakers 	<p><u>Communication strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of English (2) Use of machine translator Communication without speaking (2) Movie Simplification of language 	<p><u>Positive change</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better adaptation Better comprehension (2) No more shyness to communicate First presentation in English Less difficulty in English Better at using simple expressions Development of new strategies Improvement of vocabulary Less use of dictionary Less use of translation programs Less complaint about vocabulary Structural knowledge 	<p><u>Attitude change</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less negative about the difficulty of English Love of using English Eager to make longer sentences Value of persistence in learning Awareness in factors affecting language Less close to other languages than English
<p><u>Personal change</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of new ideas Conquest of fear in speaking English Opinion change about Erasmus Self-awareness about language 	<p><u>Positive change</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effort Progress Less difficulty Knowledge in target culture Eagerness to speak Consideration of new ways to learn 	<p><u>Personal feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Happiness to be there (2) More pleasure out of English Self-confidence 	<p><u>Activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentation in English (2) Cultural exchange Follow of news in English
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer cooperation (2) Introduction of Turkish culture Opportunity to speak and think in English 	<p><u>Negative experience</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mistakes because of speaking fast Sense of anxiety in speaking Problems in host country language Lack of vocabulary Regression in language 	<p><u>Negative senses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty of presentation in English Sense of stress Suspicion about having enough knowledge Displeasure in language learning 	<p><u>Improvement</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better use of vocabulary Better at English Self-confidence
	<p><u>Social relation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time spent with friends (2) 		

Table 2 propounds the participants' four-week report of their journals. They mentioned problems, personal changes and opportunities. As language-related problems, they complained about lack of terminology knowledge, problem of host country language and thus difficulty in finding English speaking people. As a personal change, self-awareness about language, experiencing opinion change about Erasmus programme and coping with the fear of speaking English

Students' responses to what they experienced in the second week of their journal writing were dealt with in Table 2. They expressed their experiences under four headings as communication strategies, social relation, positive changes and negative experiences. As a communication strategy, they remarked using English and accordingly machine translation as a communication tool. Effort to communication without speaking was also among their answers. As a positive change in the second week, progress, less difficulty and more motivation

to speak, increase in target culture knowledge were identified while lack of vocabulary, sense of anxiety, mistakes due to speaking fast and problems in the host country language were stated as negative experiences. They also spent time with friends.

In table 4, students' experiences in the following week were categorized as positive changes, negative senses and personal feelings. Better comprehension, better adaptation, less difficulty in English, better usage of simple expressions, vocabulary improvement, less use of translation programs and development of new strategies were expressed as positive changes that students observed in themselves. As personal feelings, their responses sensed more positive such as happiness, pleasure and higher self-confidence. However, there were also negative affections such as sense of stress, difficulty in having presentation in English and suspicion about having enough language knowledge.

In the last week of the journal writing process, students mentioned their activities, attitude change and improvement. Activities included presentations in English, cultural exchange with foreign friends and follow of news in English. They pointed out their attitude change mostly in a positive way such as less negative about English, love of English, motivation to use longer sentences, appreciation of persistence and awareness of factors affecting language. Only one student stated feeling less close to other languages than English. Higher self-confidence, better use of vocabulary and the language were the observations that they saw in themselves as improvement.

Findings of Questionnaire

The findings of the open-ended questionnaire dwelled upon the benefits of Erasmus programme in terms of language, changes in the students' opinions about language learning, probable problems that any Erasmus will experience, advice of the participant students and probable changes they experienced after getting involved in Erasmus programme. The questions were as follows:

Q1: Did you benefit from going abroad through Erasmus Programme in terms of language learning? If yes, what kind of benefits are they?

Q2: Did your opinions about language learning change after you went abroad via Erasmus Programme? What sort of changes are they?

Q3: Do you think a student that goes abroad through Erasmus will experience language problems? If yes, what problems can s/he have?

- a) Did you experience the problems that you mentioned?
- b) What were the reasons for those problems?
- c) How do you think one can cope with these problems?

Q4: What do you recommend about language for a student who will go abroad through Erasmus Programme?

Q5: Comparing your situation before and after you went abroad, can you see any changes in you? At what points can you talk about these changes?

Q6: What were your fundamental motives for participating in Erasmus Programme? What kind of aims did you have? Did you realize your goals?

Table 3. Findings of Questionnaire

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	
Language related benefits Better at language, Use of host country language, Better at communication, Benefits of grammar, Opportunity to use English	Affective changes Conquest of fear, Wish to go abroad	a)Yes (2) Expression of personal needs, Inability to use language in different context, Inability to understand what is said, Culture shock	c)Personal Being calm, Being rational, Being planned, Making effort (2), Practising, Being conscious about language, Being open to language	Personal Not being afraid (2), Being rational, Making effort (2), Developing a vision about language, Breaking prejudices, Showing interest, Being open to language, Having self-confidence	Personal Less optimistic, View of life, Sense of survival abroad, Better self-confidence, Self-awareness about language tendency	Intrinsic Self-questions about language, Discovery of Europe, Knowledge on target culture, Test of language skills

<u>Affective benefits</u> Less fear of speaking, Positive change in attitude, Self-confidence, Self-awareness about language level	<u>Language related changes</u> Tendency for all languages, How to use language items, Learnability of English , Improvement of communication methods	<u>a)No (1)</u> No with sufficient level of language	<u>c)Language related</u> Learning different languages, Sending students to abroad, Showing interest in native language	<u>Language related</u> Attending language course, Improving vocabulary, Having communication skills	<u>Language related</u> Vocabulary improvement, Better speaking	<u>Extrinsic</u> Career, High grades
<u>New thoughts</u> Awareness of personal effort Inadequacy of living abroad Different language uses of different cultures	<u>Awareness</u> Need for effort, Different factors in learning, Intrinsic motivation, Inadequacy of English in some parts of the world	<u>b)Personal reasons</u> Inadequate importance (3), Lack of practice, Lack of effort, Boredom, Myth about language learning				
<u>Negative ideas</u> Non-native English speakers, Not language focused programme, Benefit for beginners						

Regarding the benefits of Erasmus Programme, students expressed both advantages and negative ideas. As language related benefits, getting better at language and communication, opportunity to use both English and host country language, benefitting from grammatical knowledge were put forward. Similarly, less fear of speaking English, higher self-confidence, positive change in attitude and acquisition of self-awareness about language level were among the affective benefits that the students identified concerning the Programme. This exchange programme helped to develop new insights as well. Importance of effort and insufficiency of living abroad in language learning were understood, and cultural varieties in language uses were seen through this programme. On the contrary, they also developed new but negative ideas about the programme. It was seen that there are non-native English speakers, the programme was not language focused and it is useful for beginner students not the ones in higher language levels.

Students experienced opinion changes after participating in Erasmus Programme. As in benefits, changes were seen in feelings, language and awareness. Conquest of fear and higher motivation to abroad were identified affectively. As language related changes, tendency for all languages, insights into usage of language items, learnability of English and improvement of communication methods were listed by the students. Need for effort and intrinsic motivation and existence of different factors in learning were realized in this programme.

Inability to use language in different contexts and understand what is said as well as culture shock was stated as regards the probable problems any Erasmus student will experience about language. That sufficient level of English may prevent probable problems was cited once.

Concerning the reasons for the problems experienced in exchange problem, students showed giving inadequate importance to language learning, lacking practice and effort, and false beliefs about language learning as the causes of the problems.

In addition to problems, students also suggested ways of coping with them. Personally, being calm, rational, planned, conscious and open to languages and making effort were shown as the coping methods. Furthermore, learning different languages and sending students to abroad were referred as a way of handling with the problems. Similar to problem solving skills, being open to languages, rational, self-confident and not being

afraid as well as making effort were suggested as advice for Erasmus students on personal level. Language courses, vocabulary improvement and communication skills were cited as language related advice.

As regards the changes after Erasmus Programme, gaining sense of survival abroad, self-confidence and self-awareness about language tendency were seen as a personal change, and vocabulary improvement along with better speaking were experienced as a positive change.

As for the reasons for joining in Erasmus Programme, students stated discovery of Europe, wish to learn about the target culture and test language skills as intrinsic motivation. Moreover, extrinsically getting a career and high grades were put forth.

Findings of the Interview

Findings of the interview shed light into the participant students' critical incidents in the target environment, points they had difficulty, important and striking experience with language and the probable effects of Erasmus on their future plans.

Table 4. Findings of the Interview

Critical incident	Difficult points	Important memory
Personal Persistence, Effort (3), Curiosity , Practice, No pressure, No fear, Adaptation, No sense of feeling at home, Sense of belonging to culture, Interest, Awareness,	Personal Language of host country, Lack of vocabulary, Inability to understand fast speakers, Translation in mind, Inability to tell an expression	Negative Lack of communication until one month
Learning-related Language in natural environment, Practice-based learning, Effective learning, Internet-aided self-learning	Other No one to correct the mistakes, Non-native English speakers	Positive Communication without second language
Other Importance of good institution		

As important events that they experienced during their visit, students remarked effort, practice, persistence, curiosity, interest, awareness, adaptation and sense of belonging to the culture but no sense of feeling at home. Importance of learning language in natural environment was also understood. Practice-based learning and internet-aided self-learning were also regarded as important. The difficulties were felt in the language of host country, vocabulary, communication with fast speakers, and communicating an expression.

Excerpt 1: *Some instructors' not knowing English was a dead-end for us. We could not communicate.*

Excerpt 2: *Lack of vocabulary and fast speakers ... I continually translate from Turkish to English, and English to Turkish in my mind, which was suffocating me and decreasing my motivation to speak*

Students mentioned both positive and negative memories regarding their visit. Lack of communication until one month and lack of comprehension on phone calls were stated as negative memory while communication using different language was pointed out as a positive memory. In addition to all these, three students believed the positive effect of Erasmus programme on their future plans concerning language.

Excerpt 3: *I realized that only one language is not enough. I am going to continue taking language classes when I return to Turkey*

Excerpt 4: *Now I know how to study not just for passing an exam. I have to read and write. (...) I will invest in education, especially in language learning*

Excerpt 5: *I am more aware of language learning methods now. I want to improve my English; this has not changed. (...) Additionally, it was important to realize my level, weak and strong points in language and sometimes to receive warnings.*

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study, based both positive and negative experiences concerning foreign language, aims to reveal them from the perspectives of three Erasmus students through four different data collection tools. To be able to go into the depth, the study benefitted from students' self-reports, weekly journals, open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The study focused on Erasmus mobility programme since it is of high importance to go abroad and show progress academically and culturally in today's globalized world. As Yağcı, Çetin and Turhan (2013) indicate, the aim of the Erasmus programme, conducted in many European countries since 1987, is to improve the quality of education and European dimension. Likewise, as far as employability and careers in life are concerned, investigating students' experiences is significant for gaining more insight into the mobility among young people (Nilsson, 2013).

Self-reports that students wrote concerned about their first impressions and general views about their experience. Their first reports centred around general problems such as accommodation, lack of interesting activities and grant-deposit problems. Language problem and non-English speaking people undoubtedly presented themselves as expected. In the study conducted with Erasmus students studying in Poland, Lipowski (2012) reached the conclusion that the basic reason for problems with study-abroad is still represented by language barrier, and one of the causes of inability to understand the courses stems from low level of Polish. Misconceptions about Erasmus constitute another important issue that self-reports uncovered. It is safe to say that students seem to have had higher expectations about this programme before they went abroad. However, it is definitely hard to set clear ideas in the early weeks of their arrival. Their personal feelings turned out to be mostly negative such as homesickness, culture shock, unhappiness, regret, no sense of belonging, sense of felling abandoned and prisoned. In a study carried out by Tamas (2014), similar findings such as culture shock, language barrier, financial difficulties, accommodation problems, distance from family and friends were revealed as the disadvantages of the program. However, in the present study the participants did not abstain from referring to positive points of Erasmus programme. Practising English and new language other than English were among the positive sides mentioned in the self-report. They seem to be pleased with friendly atmosphere. Moreover, new friends and introduction of Turkish culture were listed as positive point. Students also mentioned their first changes. These changes were all positive except for the idea of negative change about self-perception. Two students appear to have more positive self-concepts before. This result can also be regarded as students' journey into the self, which allows them to shape their self-concepts. However, language awareness, broader perspective and higher self-confidence were among the positive changes they went through. Students in another study by Zerman (2014) were found to have higher self-confidence, tolerance and open-mindedness.

When it comes to their weekly journals, a wide range of opinions were elicited, and the scope was narrowed down to language-related experiences as opposed to self-reports. Language related problems in the first week of the journal were lack of terminology knowledge and host-country language. Since they pursued their undergraduate education abroad, it is quite reasonable to have difficulty in English terms of their study field. Given the fact that they did not study at a university where medium of instruction was English, they were likely to see those terms for the first time. Similarly, non-native English speakers constituted communication barriers since the students received the English language education at university in Turkey. In a study by Yuvayapan (2015) it was also both quantitatively and qualitatively found that Turkish Erasmus students had a lot of language problems while they were studying abroad. Furthermore, they also mentioned changes they experienced. These changes seem to be positive such as coping with fear of speaking English, experiencing opinion change about Erasmus programme and raising their language awareness. Considering it was their first journal, these changes can be said to be noteworthy. Positive changes are followed by opportunities such as peer-cooperation, introduction of Turkish culture and chance to think in English. As a matter of fact, all these interactions such as peer cooperation and talking about their own culture require use of target language, which indicates that they started to use the language more. The process can be facilitated such effort since difficulties in collaboration due to language barriers were expressed as a negative aspect of the Erasmus Programme in a study done by Ajanović, Çizel and Çizel (2016). In the second week of the journal, students began to mention communication strategies. As a main communication tool, they used English; they also tried to communicate without speaking. Machine translators and simplification of the language were among those strategies. Hierarchy Hypothesis suggests that when individuals cannot attain their communicative goals, they develop a tendency to select the least cognitively demanding choice to avoid misunderstanding (Cai & Rodriguez, 1997).

There were positive changes in the second week of the journal, as well. These were making more effort, showing progress, having less difficulty and more knowledge in target culture, getting more eager to speak

and considering new ways to learn. When their previous fear of speaking and difficult times with English are thought, eagerness to speak and less trouble in English can be regarded as important steps in their journey of language learning. What is more, given that culture and language learning are interrelated topics, getting acquainted with target culture is an expected result. Language cannot be taught without culture, and culture cannot be taught without language, and getting familiar with cultural elements is important for improving communicative skills, utilizing authentic language, getting more motivated to learn language and developing intercultural and international language (Chahak & Basirizadeh, 2012). Time spent with friends was also among the points that they voiced. Despite all these positive changes, there were also some negative points put forth by the participants such as lack of vocabulary and mistakes due to speaking fast. However, speaking anxiety seemed to remain still in the relevant week. Learners' personal, social and academic contexts are adversely affected by English speaking anxiety (Chowdhury, 2014). Another interesting finding is that one participant who was relatively better at English, claimed to have language regression. It may be because of the fact they went a country where English was not the native language. Accordingly, non-native English speakers were among the negative points.

In the third week of journal writing process, there were more positive changes mentioned. Better comprehension, less difficulty in English and no more shyness to communicate were counted as favourable changes in terms of language. Therefore, it can be noted that Erasmus programme helped students to conquer their fear and troubles in English. This exchange programme is also seen to contribute to vocabulary improvement, use of dictionary and translation programs less. When compared to their self-reports, their personal feeling turned into positive ones such as happiness, pleasure and self-confidence. Nonetheless, it seems utopic to expect stress-free environment; thus, sense of stress was again mentioned as negative experience that was followed by difficulty in having presentation in English, which can be justified since it was the first time of presenting in target language.

In the fourth week of journal writing, eagerness to make longer sentences, love of English and awareness about the factors influencing language learning came to the stage; additionally, persistence in learning seems to be appreciated, which is represented by attitude change. Better use of English and following news in the target language were other positive findings regarding Erasmus programme.

The study conducted by Natarova (2011) found changes in behaviour, language skills and orientation. In the present study, students benefitted from Erasmus Programme in terms of language, feelings and thoughts. Better use English, better communication and opportunity to use English were among the basic benefits of the Programme. From the affective point of view, less fear of speaking, more self-confidence and awareness were the positive outcomes of the Programme. Additionally, it allowed positive change in attitude. Another important point is that importance of making effort was appreciated. Lack of motivation sometimes results from low attendance, participation and performance (Jafari, 2013), which signals that students can get more willing to learn if they take a step. Therefore, it is safe to say that when learners exert an effort, they can get the results, which can encourage them to study more. Awareness in different languages is also experienced during this Programme. However, not only positive sides but also negative sides of the Programme were expressed by the students. The Programme was criticized for being not language-focused and being suitable for beginner level students. Lack of opportunity to use language among non-native speakers of English may cause such a belief; likewise, student's prior high expectation about language improvement may lead to negative perception. However, as it is known, Erasmus is not a language teaching programme; it provides chances to use the language in natural environment. Context is influential upon language learning and use of language in target culture helps students to form multifaceted strategies in interacting socially (Collentine and Freed, 2004). Nevertheless, the participants experienced positive changes; it was realized that English is something that can be learned, communication methods were improved, and awareness on how to use language items were reached. This Programme also increased the will to go abroad again. Likewise, in a study carried out by Berg (2014), Erasmus Programme was found to encourage most of the students to work abroad in future. Despite these positive points, the programme was not problem-free for students. Expression of personal needs, inability to use language in different contexts and inability to understand what is said were among the problems that students experienced. For a student who did not grow up in natural environment in terms of foreign language, it is quite normal to have hard time in expressing himself/herself. Students attributed these problems to insufficient importance given to language, lack of effort, lack of practice and false beliefs about language learning. Therefore, they provided mostly personal coping strategies such as being calm, being rational, being planned, making effort, practising, being conscious about language, being open to language. Sending students to abroad and learning different languages were other problem solving methods. Hence, the participants recommend not being afraid, being rational, making effort, developing a vision about language, breaking

prejudices, showing interest, being open to language, having self-confidence. It is clear that most of their suggestions concern the affective side of learning. Emotions occupy an important role in language learning because they lay behind the motives for learning the language, and it also allows teachers to determine their approaches to students so that they can prevent negative feelings and improve positive ones to achieve fruitful learning (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013). Considering that affective factors highly influence language learning process, their suggestions seem quite sound for those who will go abroad. In addition to affection, attending language course, improving vocabulary and having communication skills were among the language-related suggestions. As it is obvious, students seem to attribute both problems and solutions to the self, which implies attaching responsibility to the students themselves. However, the study conducted by Yıldırım and İlin (2013) the most frequent coping strategy at micro and macro level presents itself as peer support. Culture shock constitutes another problem, which is expectable for one who continues living in a very different culture. Culture shock is multi-dimensional and it can stem from different aspects of it such as struggle to adapt psychologically, feelings of deprivation, rejection by member of new culture, role conflicts and higher awareness of the target culture (Furnham, 2004). Therefore, culture shock should be dealt with from different perspectives. When students considered their situation before and after Erasmus, it is clear that they experienced mostly positive changes such as sense of survival abroad, better self-confidence and self-awareness about language tendency personally, and vocabulary improvement and better speaking academically. They participated in Erasmus Programme for different reasons such as discovery of Europe, knowledge on target culture, test of language skills intrinsically, and high grades and career extrinsically. Concerning the issue, Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016) state that, studying abroad provides students with various experiences both linguistically and culturally, allowing them to understand the world better, and they add that it can enhance employment possibilities if it is supported in transition from campus to career. Likewise, hands-on career development, language and cultural knowledge acquisition were the motives of the students who would study abroad (Slayers, Carston, Dean & London, 2015).

It is also worth noting that their critical incidents were mostly composed of positive constructs such as effort, persistence, pleasure, awareness and no pressure. The positive changes were named as important events that influenced them. Within the framework of language, learning in natural environment and making practice were important, which was followed by effective learning. Despite these positive points, language of the host country constituted a difficult point as stated before. Therefore, knowledge of the related language is important for the survival in the community; this can also be a problem if the medium of instruction is not English in the institution the students go. Lack of vocabulary and difficulty in understanding fast speakers were other problematic issues. Hence, it is quite useful to make listening practices before going abroad. Students' building their own sentences about the things they experience in their daily life even when they travel in a bus can be a good vocabulary practice, allowing them to use a variety of words. This way they can get used to benefitting from different alternative words. This can also help students express what they want to say, which is counted as another problem.

All in all, students had both positive and negative experiences during their temporary study abroad. They experienced problems both in English and the host country language. Since they participated this programme as a part of their university education, they had to use the language not only for social but also for academic purposes in Poland. Even though they had difficult times in terms of using language, they tried to cope with the situation and completed the programme, putting different types of awareness and benefits into their bag.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Studying abroad provides university students with opportunities to get acquainted with foreign language in natural environment, which allows them to shape their approaches to language learning. While sense of failure, anxiety and inadequacy are quite natural feelings, students can also get more conscious of language learning, developing new strategies and breaking their misconceptions about language. In order to lessen the probable problems abroad, instructors or authorities should not show study-abroad as stress-free part of their life before they go. Students should be aware of the potential problems, and trained to cope with them. This way, they can enhance their problem solving skills. Similarly, they should gain the habit of learning autonomously and taking the responsibility of their learning. This sense of independence can boost their self-confidence, which results in fruitful learning. Furthermore, the language course that is given to students before they go abroad should be more systematic and regular. A few-week courses may not yield the expected results. Students can get familiar with terminologies in English for Specific Purposes class; it is especially important for departments whose medium of instruction is not English. Cultural awareness should also be raised among students to avoid culture shock. Additionally, students should be able to contact their universities easily; they should be

encouraged to focus on what improves them personally and academically. In further studies, reverse culture shock can be investigated among temporary study abroad students, and it can be examined whether they can apply what they gained abroad in terms of language learning when they return their own countries.

REFERENCES

Allison, P., Davis-Berman, J., Berman, D. (2012). Changes in Latitude, Changes in Attitude: Analysis of the Effects of Reverse Culture Shock- A Study of Students Returning From Youth Expeditions, *Leisure Studies*, 31(4), 487-503. DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2011.619011

Ajanović, E., Çizel, B. & Çizel, R. (2016). Effectiveness of Erasmus Programme in prejudice reduction: contact theory perspective. *Turističko poslovanje*, 17, 47-60.

Berg, V. (2014). Evaluation of the Outcome of European Students-Teachers' Participation in the Erasmus Exchange Programme (2008-2011) A Survey of Students' Knowledge, Thoughts and Feelings before and after their Erasmus Exchange. *Journal of the European Teacher Education Network*, 9, 33-45.

Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D. (2005). What is reflection in learning? in Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D. (2005) (eds.) *Reflection: Turning Experience into learning*. RoutledgeFalmer: United States of America

Cai, D. A., & Rodríguez, J. I. (1997). Adjusting to cultural differences: The intercultural adaptation model. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 6(2), 31-42

Chahak, S. M., & Basirizadeh, F. S. (2012). The study of culture on foreign language teaching. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 2(6), 522-524, DOI: 10.7763/IJSSH.2012.V2.161

Chowdhury, S. (2014). Learners' foreign language speaking anxiety: a tertiary level scenario in EFL class, Doctoral dissertation, BRAC University

Collentine, J. & Freed, B.F. (2004). Learning context and its effects on second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26, 153-171, DOI: 10.1017/S0272263104062011

Deakin, H. (2013). How and why we should encourage undergraduate geography students to participate in the Erasmus programme, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 37(3), 466-475, DOI: 10.1080/03098265.2012.731043

Dongfeng, L. (2012). Culture Shock and Its Implications for Cross-Cultural Training and Culture Teaching, *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(4), 70-74, DOI:10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120804.1433

Edwards-Joseph, A. & Baker, S.B. (2012). Themes Caribbean Overseas Students Perceive Influence Their Levels of Culture Shock, *College Student Journal*, 46(4), 716-729,

Furnham, A. (2004). Education and culture shock. *Psychologist*, 17(1), 16.

Jafari, S. S. (2013). Motivated learners and their success in learning a second language. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(10), 1913-1918, doi:10.4304/tpls.3.10.1913-1918

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall: New Jersey

Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D.A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.

Li, M., Mobley, W.H. & Kelly, A. (2013). When do global leaders learn best to develop cultural intelligence? An investigation of moderating role of experiential learning style, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 12(1), 32-50, doi: 10.5465/amle.2011.0014

Lipowski, M. (2012, June). Experience of Erasmus students studying in Poland. In *Management Knowledge and Learning International Conference*, Celje, Slovenia (pp. 20-22).

Méndez López, M. G., & Peña Aguilar, A. (2013). Emotions as learning enhancers of foreign language learning motivation. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 15(1), 109-124.

Moon, J.A. (2004). *Reflection in learning and professional development*. RoutledgeFalmer: United States of America

- Natarova, T. (2011). Intercultural communication experiences of foreign students with a focus on their perspectives of national, cultural and ethnic identity: Case of Exchange and Degree Students in Jyväskylä, Finland. Master's Thesis, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
- Nilsson, P. A. (2013). Expectations and experiences of temporarily studying abroad. *História: revista da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto*, 3, 183-198
- Nilsson, P.A. & Ripmeester, N. (2016). International student expectations: Career opportunities and employability. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 614-631
- Rajasekar, J. & Renand, F. (2013). Culture shock in a global World: Factors Affecting Culture Shock Experienced By Expatriates in Oman and Omani Expatriates Abroad, *International Journal of Business and Management*, 8(13), 144-160.
- Roskos, K., Vukelich, C. & Risko, V. (2001). Reflection and learning to teach reading: A critical review of literacy and general teacher education studies, *Journal of Literacy Research*, 33(4), 595-634
- Slayers, V., Carston, C.S., Dean, Y. & London, C. (2015). Exploring the motivations, expectations, and experiences of students who study in global settings. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 368-382
- Seaman, J. & Rheingold, A. (2013). Circle talks as situated experiential learning: context, identity and knowledgeability in learning from reflection, *Journal of Experiential Learning*, 36(2), 155-174, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913487887>
- Tamas, A. (2014). Advantages of study abroad from the students' perspective. *International Journal of Teaching and Education*, 2(4), 67-88
- Tekin, U. & Hiç Gencer, A. (2013). Effects of the Erasmus programme on Turkish universities and university students, *Trakya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 15(1), 109-122
- Wilson, I. (2011). What should we expect of Erasmus generations, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(5), 1113-1140, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02158.x
- Xia, J. (2009). Analysis of Impact of Culture Shock on Individual Psychology, *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 1(2), 97-101, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v1n2p97>
- Yağcı, E., Çetin, S. & Turhan, B. (2013). Erasmus programi ile Türkiye'ye gelen öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları akademik güçlükler [Challenges faced by the students who came to Turkey via Erasmus programme]. *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi [H. U. Journal of Education]*, 44, 341-350
- Yıldırım, R. & İlin, G. (2013). Some reflections on cultural adaptation of Turkish Erasmus students of ELT department. *Çukurova University Faculty of Education Journal*, 42(2), 111-121
- Yuvayapan, F. (2015). A program evaluation of an English course for Turkish Erasmus exchange students. *International Journal of Language Academy*, 3(1), 39-56
- Zerman, S. (2014). The Impacts of Study Abroad Opportunities on International Students. Dissertation: Rochester Institute of Technology.