EFFECTS OF ERASMUS+ EXPERIENCE ON THE INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES OF TURKISH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

[1]PINAR ERSIN, [2]DERIN ATAY

[1]Marmara University
[2]Bahcesehir University

Abstract - Being an interculturally competent and sensitive global citizen has been an educational goal for higher education institutions across Europe and Turkey. Erasmus+ is one of the most popular student mobility programs, and Turkey, although a non-EU member state, has been part of this program since 2009 to provide Turkish students with opportunities for cultural diversity. Research, mainly conducted in Europe, shows that student mobility programs contribute to the students' L2 language acquisition (Kinginger, 2011), critical thinking (Nguyen, 2012), and intercultural sensitivity (Stier, 2006). The present study was conducted with 19 Turkish pre-service teachers (PTs) of English who had participated in the Erasmus+ program for one academic semester studying in different European countries. The aim of the study was to find out to what extent Turkish PTs could reflect the cultural knowledge they gained in the program in their lesson plans. Analyses of lesson plans revealed that PTs started integrating different cultural aspects to their teachings and this is important in teaching English as PTs share their own experiences with the learners who have limited cultural exposure.

Keywords - Erasmus+ Student Mobility, Exchange Programs, Intercultural Sensitivity, Pre-Service Teachers, Teacher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus program was launched in 1987 as part of European Union's (EU) Lifelong Learning Program. Erasmus, whose name serves as an acronym for European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, is the flagship of all educational programs administered as part of EU's educational policy. It was initially formed to create student, academic, and administrative staff mobility among higher education institutions in different European countries. Then, the EU aimed at expanding the scope of the program to include the non-EU member states (European Commission, 2010). With Turkey's inclusion in the program in 2004, the number of program countries raised to 33 including other non-EU member states. The program was renamed as Erasmus Plus (Erasmus+) for 2014-2020 period incorporating education, training, youth and sport (European Commission, 2018b).

The Erasmus student mobility is the most common action that the program offers and it has three major objectives: to benefit students educationally, socially, and culturally; to promote cooperation between institutions; and to contribute to well-qualified, open minded, and interculturally experienced future professionals (European Commission, 1996).

In line with its objectives, the program provides many benefits for participating university students. Students who participate in the program spend a study period of 3 to 12 monthsat another higher education institutionin a different country, encountering numerous intercultural interactions with other participants from different societies. The program opens up wide learning opportunities through formal planned university education in the host countries, non-formal and informal opportunities. Furthermore, participating in intercultural dialogue, learning how to adapt to different cultures develop a multicultural background for students (Aba, 2013). ESN Surveys support the idea that Erasmus students become more open-minded, involve in wide social networks, and develop intercultural dialogue (Krzaklewska&Krupnik, 2008).

Turkey became a member of the Erasmus program in 2004and its inclusion in Erasmus program is unique in the sense that it is a non-EU country with a different cultural context. Turkey has with roots in the lands of several various civilizations so it is a country in which Eastern and Western cultural values coexist (Oguz, online).More than 130 Turkish higher education institutions hold the Erasmus University Charter, which enables them to take part in the program (Oner, 2015).As more and more Turkish universities get integrated into the Erasmus+, it has become the most popular exchange program for Turkish university students. The number of applicants has gradually increased but the number of available places in the host universities is limited. Therefore, the applicants need to go through a selection process. The selection is based on the applicants' high academic achievement and foreign language proficiency.

1.1. Studies on Students with Erasmus Experience

The relationship between the Erasmus student mobility and personal and professional development of the students has been intensely studied in recent years (Dwyer, 2004; Findlay at al., 2006). Some studies focused on positive contributions of Erasmus experience, such as language skills (Kinginger, 2011), critical thinking skills (Nguyen, 2012), and highly valued skills like adaptability as a market value for employment opportunities (Papatsiba,

2006). Some othersinvestigated students' attitudes towards European citizenship and identity (Llurda et al., 2016), and their attitudes towards cultural difference and intercultural competence (Barta, 2011; Gutierrez et al. 2015).

There are only a few studies that shed light on the experiences of Turkish university students (Mirici et al., 2009; Penbek et al., 2009; Ekti, 2013; Aslan&Jacops, 2014; Mete, 2017)or that were conducted in Turkish context (Oner, 2015; Aksoy et al., 2017). Penbek et al. (2009) and Mete (2017)conducted studies to find out intercultural communication competenceof the students. Unlike the presented studies above that examined the experiences of outgoing Turkish students, Oner's (2015) and Aksoy et al.'s (2017) studies aimed at examining the intercultural experiences of incoming European students.

1.2. Studies on Pre-service Teachers (PTs) with Erasmus Experience

As expectations from teachers have evolved, teacher education programs have to implement necessary changes and include additional support for PTs.Thus, exchange programs such as Erasmus become vital in teacher education programs(Lee, 2009).

There have not been sufficient studies on the efficiency of the Erasmus student mobility in teacher education programs. There is a low number of studies conducted outside Turkey, examining mostly PTs' satisfaction levels and benefits from the program (Papatsiba, 2006; Sigalas, 2010).

Likewise, the number of studies conducted with PTs in Turkey is also limited, examining PTs' opinions about the contributions and challenges of the program (Unlu, 2015; Onen, 2017), theirmanagement strategies to adapt to a new culture (Yildirim&Ilin, 2013) as well as European incoming PTs' intercultural experiences in Turkish universities (Ersoy&Gunel, 2011).

To illustrate, Unlu (2015) conducted a study with 8 Turkish PTs who study at different teaching departments. The major impetus for the study was to find out Erasmus+ participants' opinions regarding the academic, cultural, and personal benefits of the program. Results of the semi-structured interviews revealed that PTs obtained different professional and personal gains. In a similar vein, Onen (2017) conducted a study with 30 Turkish PTs with the aim of investigating the contributions and the challenges of the program. Results indicated that the program contributed to the cultural accumulation, language acquisition, and academic, social, personal, and career development of the PTs.PTs faced the biggest challenge in the "before mobility" period: paper work. During the mobility, the biggest challenge for PTs was communicating and socializing. After the mobility, PTs suffered from the "post-Erasmus syndrome": problem of adaptation to own school and home city.

In another study with Turkish PTs, Yildirim and Ilin (2013) aimed at examining PTs management to adapt to a new culture and their perception of self. Data were obtained by using three different data collection tools: Sociocultural Adaptation Scale, PTs' reports about their exchange period written after the mobility, and semi-structured interviews. 55 PTs took the scale and 39 PTs were interviewed. Findings of the study revealed that PTs experienced "culture shock" and faced with problems both as individuals new in a foreign country (at the macro level) and as students new in the English Language Teaching (ELT) academic community (at the micro level). The problems that they encountered can be grouped in three different levels, which are affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Therefore, PTs developed coping strategies such as getting support and assistance from peers or spending effort to be a good model of Turkey to overcome the adaptation problem. Finally, PTs' perception of self showed a direct connection with how they are viewed and treated by the locals in the host country. To cope with the problem of prejudice against Turkey and Turkish students, PTs were eager, ambitious, and motivated to change this wrong image to be legitimately accepted in the host country.

The present study aims to contribute to the relevant literature by addressing the following research question:

Will there be any effects of participating in the Erasmus program on PTs' approach to language teaching? If yes, to what extent?

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants and Context

19 volunteering Turkish PTs participated in Erasmus+ student mobility program at different years of their study took part in the present study, to find out the effects of the program on their teaching approach. They spent one academic semester of 3 months, either Fall or Spring, studying at a different European higher education institution in different countries, which are Poland, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, and Czech Republic.13 of them were female with the remaining 6 male, all of which had a plan to study abroad in the future. None of the PTs had lived or studied abroad before participating in the program.

All PTs were enrolled in the teacher education program; i.e., department of ELT, at a highly competitive state university in Istanbul, Turkey. Department of ELT is a four-year undergraduate program that aims at equipping prospective English language teachers with theoretical and practical aspects of teaching profession. In addition to providing courses in methodology, the program also organizes practicum in various selected school for PTs to acquire adequate practical skills for teaching as a foreign language in their final year of the study.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

Data for this study were collected by means of thelesson plans prepared by PTs.Lesson plans were utilized with the aim of finding out whether Erasmus+ experience influenced PTs' teachings or not and if yes, analyzing the extent to which PTs make use of the intercultural knowledge they gain in their teachings. Lesson plan format was not a structured one; instead, it was a form that involved a lot of free writing, explaining how PTs implemented the lesson in their classes.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data were collected between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 academic years. Lesson plans were collected on voluntary basis after PTs had their Erasmus+ experience. Six PTs (out of 19) returned their lesson plans. Four of them were in their last year of the study at the department and two of them were graduates, teaching English as a foreign language at different schools. PTs were provided with several course book chaptersabout health and fitness, the environment, and carnivals and were asked to plan a lesson based on any one of the chapters of their choice.Then, they were asked to implement it either at practicum schools or at the schools they are currently working. Finally, they were asked to share their decision making process in the preparation of the lesson and report how they prepared it. They sent the lesson plans back to the researchers via e-mail after the implementation. PTs were free to use either Turkish or English in reporting the lesson plans which were analyzed using content analysis technique. Responses of the participants were classified into codes in terms of the purpose of the study. Then, similar codes were gathered into more conceptual categories. Finally, interpretive themes emerged from these categories. To ensure consistency and inter-rater reliability, both researchers coded the data separately and compared their categories.

III. RESULTS

When lesson plans were analyzed, one main theme was the PTs' utilization of realia (mostly pictures) and examples from their Erasmus+ experience. Some examples of realia PTs utilized included pictures of a carnival that takes place in Rijeka, Croatia while studying Carnivals chapter (PT3) or real-life objects used in cooking for Let's Eat Healthily chapter (PT4). For example, one of the PTs told her students about the fresh food procedure in Zadar, Croatia while going over Let's Eat Healthily chapter in Health and Fitness unit. The procedure involved lowering the prices of fruit and vegetables in the evening to finish them to be able to bring the fresh and healthy ones the next morning (PT3). The same PT, while covering Reuse and Recycle chapter in the Environment unit showed plastic and glass bottle recycling machine in Zadar. Then she continued her lesson as follows:

While showing the pictures, I gave a small speech about how clean Zadar was and how I was trying to be careful about the environment. I told my students that the recycling machine can be found in every shopping mall, how useful it is and how it works: giving the bottle and getting the money. Afterwards, I asked them to come up with a new recycling machine with its own special working procedure. I believe that it was a very useful example for the use of this chapter because it is both real and genius! Students saw, literally, how important it is for us to protect our environment and how easily we can actually achieve this by seeing the importance given to this issue in different countries. (PT3)

Similarly, another PT explained how he made use of his Erasmus+ experience in the same chapter as follows:

Turkish people have prejudices against food from different countries. They are used to their food culture and they love praising it. So, I added some food examples from Turkish culture and other cultures to draw attention of my students. In doing so, I told my students that there was a kebab restaurant in every corner in Krakow. They call it kebab but in fact it is döner, it tastes a bit different and it's much bigger in portion while a lot cheaper than in Turkey. This experience of mine really caught my students' attention and they laughed at it while listening. Then, towards the end of the lesson, I wanted to have a short Speaking session. For this, I told them that the Greek people I met in Krakow claimed that yogurt and baklava were theirs. I asked my students' opinions and how they would react if they were in my place. This started a lively discussion in my class. (PT10)

Another main theme derived from the lesson plans was the PTs' integration of positive aspects and newly learned practices of the host country's education system into their lessons. All of the PTs found the comparison of both systems beneficial for their teaching career. Interactive (in the sense of communicative) and enjoyable language teaching techniques (PT4, PT5), less formal relationships between teachers and students unlike the strict discipline at Turkish schools (PT1, PT4), teachers' encouraging and self-confidence building approach to their students (PT1, PT5), more time spent on problem solving, and physically active teachers and students, regardless of age level are some of the aspects PTs tried to integrate into their classes. The following narratives will give a more tangible picture about the integration of some other positive aspects of host education systems:

When I was in Denmark, I saw the power of collaboration and cooperation. The students in HerstedvesterSkole (where I did two weeks of internship) always worked together and their Speaking fluency was off the charts. My Erasmus+ mobility showed me the strength of pair work and group work. When students work together, each skill

improves greatly. Therefore, while covering the Let's Eat Healthily chapter, I asked my students to work in pairs and brainstorm on their favorite food and if they knew any food from another country. It went well. In HerstedvesterSkole, the students were always asked to get in groups and create a PowerPoint presentation on their laptops. I found this amazing. So, I added this to my lesson. I asked my students to get into groups and create a healthy meal by using their imagination. I asked them to prepare a PowerPoint presentation for the next lesson to present to their classmates. (PT6)

When I first went to Germany, I attended a German language course. In the course, we had an exact similar lesson, like this one in this chapter. It was also about eating healthily. Our German teacher gave a different task to each group. Our task was to bake a cake. As a group, we went to a supermarket, we examined the products, we looked at their names, w took notes, we wrote down their weights. Then, we baked a cake. To decorate it, we bought some fruit. Our teacher brought a kitchen scale, a precision one, to the classroom. In class, we used it to weigh the strawberries. This lesson influenced me positively. I not only interacted with my group members all the time but also learned in a more fun and enjoyable way. Therefore, I decided to use real-life objects in my lesson on Let's Eat Healthily. If I hadn't experienced this German lesson, I wouldn't have thought of covering my own lesson like this. Of course, here at the Department of ELT we learn a lot of things but I wouldn't have thought of asking my students to go to a supermarket. I knew what task-based approach was but only theoretically. In Germany, I experienced how task-based approach was really practiced. I saw how effective it was by experiencing. Therefore, I followed my German teacher's procedure and I did almost the same things while teaching Let's Eat Healthily to my students. They seemed to enjoy themselves a lot. (PT4)

A final predominant theme seen in the lesson plans was the reflections of the positive contribution of the Erasmus+ experience to the PTs' teaching life. All of the PTs mentioned that they developed an ability to consider things from a different point of view. They have been using this ability to help their students overcome prejudices and gain perspectives. In addition, they expressed that they are a source of inspiration and a model for their students (PT1, PT3, PT6); they are more flexible in terms of discipline (PT1, PT5, PT10); and they are able to put theory into practice, at least they are trying to, because they were able to see how theory was put into practice and their relation more clearly during their studies as Erasmus+ participants (PT4, PT5). Being a more creative teacher and teaching English in a less traditional way were two striking issues highlighted by the PTs. The following examples are helpful in illustrating the issue: I realized the importance of being creative and deconstructing the stereotypes. The point is not using the system that is imposed on you as it is. Listening to your students' needs and drawing a path accordingly is more efficient and fruitful for students' learning. My belief in this has increased a lot. For example, one week we went to a middle school for observation and in one of the lessons the class teacher implemented an activity. The teacher reflected a poster of an advertisement on the board and asked her 8th graders to discuss it in groups. In the ad, there was a man and a woman, all naked, except for their genitals were covered with tree leaves. The teacher asked the students the message the ad was trying to give and the students shared their ideas. There were students who were not talking seriously but the teacher's reaction was just to ignore those students. I found this weird, I mean talking about a poster like this. On the other hand, I liked it. In Turkey, children, we are raised in a reserved way but in Denmark, it's not the case. In the lessons, students are provided with contents in which they can freely express themselves. (PT1)

As a teacher candidate, I want to show my students that English is not composed of grammar and vocabulary. I want to be trainer in this direction. I don't want to choose the easy way like most of the people do. I want to achieve the difficult. So I keep telling my students that saying "I know English" doesn't mean "I know a lot of words." It means being able to understand your interlocutor and communicate with him or her. I am using this as an educational method. I am trying to teach English in a more realistic and enjoyable way. For example, I took a course in Poland, we had 2-week intensive theory-based lessons and then we prepared activities and presented them, like microteaching. I can easily tell that I broke my taboos. I would never think of singing in front of my students because my voice is awful. But I did it in my microteaching there. Now I am singing and even dancing in my class here to add fun to my lessons. I am observing the teacher at the practicum school and she is not even aware of teaching English in a more communicative way. My lessons would have been more like hers, more traditional if I hadn't gone to Erasmus+. (PT5)

To conclude, one of the PTs impressive words summarize the whole journey:

If I can share at least half of my Erasmus+ experience with my students, they would be as lucky as I had once been. (PT3)

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to find out to what extent participating in the Erasmus program would affect the lesson plans of Turkish PTs of English.

Before participating in the program, PTs were curious, enthusiastic, and excited about living abroad and meeting people from different cultural backgrounds. They seemed to be open-minded to

people from different cultures because they saw getting to know them as a valuable experience and contribution. Without any prejudices, PTs foresaw that they would enjoy experiencing the cultural differences. It looked like PTs' curiosity towards interaction engagement was predominant.

PTs said that they would integrate positive aspects of what they have experienced into their teaching although they did not specify these points in their answers to open ended questions. Lesson plans helped the researchers see what positive aspects PTs integrated into their actual teaching. They integrated many of the newly experienced practices ranging from more interactive techniques to better rapport into their lessons. For instance, they observed that more discipline does not mean a rapport.

Finally, PTs described the perceived contribution of the Erasmus+ experience to their professional life. In the lesson plans, the reflections of this contribution were seen at different levels. Intercultural experiences, lifelong learning skills, academic and personal development opportunities are provided by the program as suggested by Lee (2009).

As a result of rapid globalization, schools have increasing number of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, teachers need to be equipped with sufficient academic, social, and cultural experience to deal with these students in such schools. Teacher training programs provide an opportunity for cross-cultural experience through Erasmus+ program.

The study can be seen as a type of feedback, assistance and help in determining the functionality of the program/how functional the program is in the process and for the faculty of education.Teacher education programs should ensure that their curriculum is recognized at the international level and attract more students and further studies should be conducted through actually observing PTs' teaching practices in real classroom settings instead of relying on their lesson plans.

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