

Teacher Candidates' Opinions on Erasmus Student Exchange Program

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Abstract

This study contains teacher candidates' opinions who spent a portion of their educational career abroad as participants in the Erasmus Program regarding the academic, cultural, and personal gains of the program. Using the Quantitative Research Method, this study focuses on phenomena that researchers are aware of, but on which they do not have detailed information. As such, it has been designed as a phenomenological study. The work group of the study consists of students from Erzincan University's Faculty of Education who participated in the Erasmus Program during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 academic years. As the data collection tool, a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher was used. The data collected for the study were analyzed using the Content Analysis Method. Upon the analysis of the data, it was concluded that the teacher candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program obtained different academic, cultural, and personal gains. It may be suggested that these acquisitions will be beneficial for the teacher candidates both in their professional and daily lives. When the aims of the Erasmus Program are considered, it is observed that the expected effects of the program (for the participants in this study) have been achieved. More detailed studies may be conducted in the future to reveal the Erasmus Program level of success in terms of participants' changes experienced and observed in issues related to academic, cultural and personal improvement.

Keywords: Erasmus Program • Teacher candidates • Phenomenological study • Semi-structured interview • Content analysis

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Educational systems are relatively new mentions for countries, coming mainly with industrialization. While educational policies were once considered a national issue, with the globalization, this they have gained an international characteristic, causing their respective policies to change in line with a globalized world. Today, this change is particularly visible in higher education services. The qualified labor force and the financial support brought by the higher education market have been influential in the formation of this process (Gül, 2013; Knight, 2004; Marshall, 2005). Turkey has been conducting studies to provide equal opportunities in schooling, to ensure the balance between supply and demand, and to decrease the differences between welfare levels throughout its various regions. While establishing a university in each province has been the first step in this direction, efforts to ensure a certain standard of *quality* are still in progress. In this vein, student exchange programs have shown particular progress (Erdoğan, 2014). Today, student exchange programs have gained functionality on the global level, and Turkey has focused on European Union (EU) agreements during this process. Turkey has worked to become a member of the EU, and one of the negotiation titles, which is also important for Turkey, is the issue of education. Turkey has played an active role in the process because it wants to obtain positive results from the negotiations on education and wants to increase the quality of higher education on the global level (Aba, 2013; Bologna Process, 2010; Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı [DPT], 2000; Tekin, 2011; Ulusal Ajans, 2005; Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2007).

Turkey, as well as EU member and other candidate countries, has formed a National Agency responsible for the introduction, function, observation, and evaluation of student and lecturer exchange programs. On December 22, 2002, Turkey signed agreements with the EU Commission on financial support and on what work needed to be done in order to become an EU member. Furthermore, Turkey signed the Preparatory Measures Agreements on the Leonardo, Socrates, and Youth programs as well as the Socrates Program Pilot Applications Agreements, finishing preparations by December of 2003 (Topçu, 2011, p. 9).

The basic aim of these processes is to form a European Higher Education Field (EHEF) and prepare an action plan to ensure the quality of the higher education in Europe (Yağcı, Çetin, & Turhan, 2013). One of the important components of this field is the Erasmus [European Scheme

for the Mobility of University Students] exchange program (Boyacı, 2011; YÖK, 2007). The Erasmus Program was formed to ensure the mobility of students, lecturers, and administrators among countries and to support the acceptance of the diplomas and educational processes being excepted throughout Europe (AB Eğitim ve Gençlik Programları Merkezi Başkanlığı, 2005; Kış & Konan, 2012; E. Şahin, 2013). As one of the EU's educational programs, Erasmus aims to promote an understanding that will develop communication, integration, respect, and tolerance among people from different cultures (Demir & Demir, 2009; YÖK, 2007). In addition, it holds that receiving education and/or professional training in another country would provide participants with dynamic experiences and knowledge. It has been observed in the light of the studies conducted by Success and Stories (2007) that today's employers extend more opportunities to those individuals who have spent time studying abroad, who have obtained foreign language proficiency, who cooperate well with other, and who are able to understand different cultures. When student exchange programs are evaluated, it is observed that students have begun to prefer European universities for higher education purpose, causing the face of higher education in Europe to have changed. The Erasmus Program has formed an environment of global competition on all vocational levels and areas having international characteristics. Becoming increasingly widespread throughout the world, the globalization process has brought with it competition in both the educational and in other fields (Duman, 1991). Therefore, the issue of teacher qualifications and proficiency as a profession, being one of the important elements of the education process, has found itself on the international agenda.

With the changing roles in the teaching profession, the process of teaching teachers has also experienced changes. In other words, the skills of teacher candidates preparing themselves to function under changing conditions and competition have become important aspects in the teacher training process. For this reason, with the international specialties and qualifications, being able to think at a global level and gaining proficiency have become basic necessities for all professions having international characteristics (Güven, 2001). For this reason, student exchange programs have, in recent years, gained tremendous importance in terms of training teacher candidates (Delmartino & Beernaert, 1998; Lee, 2009). In this context, it is important for teacher training programs to ensure

Table 1
Data on the Students Studying Abroad as Part of the Erasmus Program

Number of the Students going abroad	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
	1,142	2,852	4,438	7,119	7,794	8,758	10,065	10,263	12,358

(National Agency (Ulusal Ajans), 2014)

that the process spent in educational faculties not only be recognized at the international level, but should also work to increase the number of students participating in such programs (Maden-Sakarya, 2010). Believed to provide participants intercultural experiences, the opportunity to learn about different cultures, lifelong learning skills, and opportunities for academic and personal development, the Erasmus Program, is considered to be very instrumental for teacher candidates (Bakioğlu & Certel, 2010). Student and lecturer exchange programs participating in the Erasmus Program have reached high numbers in Turkey in recent years. The majority of universities in Turkey are seeking ways to better integrate themselves into the program, and when the number of students studying abroad as part of the program is examined as of the year 2004, the reality becomes clear.

The feedback received at the higher education level regarding whether these activities successfully fulfill the aims of the programs is of utmost importance. The opinions of the teacher candidates on the functionality of the Erasmus Program are particularly important for the teacher training process. However, the low number of studies conducted on this issue makes understanding the program difficult. In fact, current studies are focused mainly on participants' expectations and levels of satisfaction from the program (Elmalı, 2013; Gül, 2013; Önder-Kasapoğlu & Balci, 2010; Özdem, 2013; E. Şahin, 2013; Tekin, 2011), the effects of the programs on academic life (Certel, 2010), the success of the program in terms of strategical cooperation (Yılmaz, 2009), the intercultural interaction dimension (Göksu, 2011; Sancak, 2009), cultural adaptation (Yıldırım & İlin, 2013), evaluating the program in terms of joining the EU (Kalaycı, 2011), academic challenges experienced in the academic process (Yağcı et al., 2013), lecturers' opinions on the program (Kış & Konan, 2012), the reflections of the program on foreign language learning (Ekti, 2013; Mirici, İlter, Saka, & Glover, 2009).

A few studies have examined teacher candidates' opinions regarding the Erasmus program, their expectations and experiences from the program (Kumral & Şahin, 2011), intercultural dialogue and interaction (Demir & Demir, 2009; Ersoy, 2013;

Ersoy & Günel, 2011; M. Şahin, 2008), and the program's contributions language learning (Yücel-Seyhan, 2013).

When looking at studies conducted outside of Turkey, it is observed that these studies mostly aim to determine student satisfaction levels and expected benefits from the programs (Keogh & Roberts, 2009; Papatsiba, 2005; Sigalas, 2010; Teichler & Janson, 2007). Eurydice (2009) points out that there is a low number of the scientific publications on this issue, pointing to the necessity of studying how efficient international student and lecturer exchange programs are.

The current study aims understand how teacher candidates from Erzincan University's Faculty of Education who spent a portion of their educational career abroad in the Erasmus Student Exchange Program benefited from the cultural, professional, and social environments of the countries in which they studied. The current study may also be considered a form of feedback for Erzincan University, helping to determine how functional the Erasmus Program is in the teacher training process and for the faculty of education. By taking the aims of the Erasmus Program and participants' expectations into consideration, the study has been prepared under three major themes, specifically Academic Gains (vocational knowledge, vocational experiences, and professionalism), Cultural Gains (learning about different cultures, education-training in multi-cultural environments, and attitude toward different cultures), and Personal Development Gains (foreign language learning and self-confidence). Based on these aims, answers have been sought for the following sub-problems via a semi-structured interview format consisting of eight questions:

- i. What are Erasmus students' opinions regarding their academic gains at the end of the program?
- ii. What are Erasmus students' opinions regarding their cultural gains at the end of the program?
- iii. What are Erasmus students' opinions regarding their gains in personal development at the end of the program?

Method

The Design of the Study

The study has been conducted using the phenomenology design. The phenomenology design focuses on the phenomena of which researchers have knowledge, but which they do not know in full detail. In this study, the experiences, perceptions and inclinations of the teacher candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program have been examined in detail by analyzing their own statements from interviews conducted. The phenomenology design has been used in this study, as it not only facilitates data examination, but it also ensures the meaning of the domain of the study, that is to put forth flexibly.

Participants

The participants of the study consist of students from Erzincan University's Faculty of Education who studied in universities abroad as participants in the Erasmus Student Exchange Program during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 academic years. In determining the university and participants to be used for this study, Criteria Sampling, one of the Purposeful Sampling methods, was used. The Criteria Sampling method means that a study's participants consist of people, events, objects, or situations that share a set of defined characteristics. In determining the participants, the criterion "participating in the Erasmus Program" was selected as the basis, as is in accordance with the aims of the study. The low number of students who participated in the Erasmus Program during the defined periods attracts attention. For this reason, pre-interviews

were performed with other students who had previously participated in the Erasmus Program. The seven participants who participated in the program during the 2011-2012 academic year, and one of a total of two participants who participated in the program during the 2012-2013 academic year were interviewed. Those participants not included in the study stated that they did not have the time to participate, and the planned interview was not performed with them. Participants' information is given in Table 2.

The genders, ages, branches, classes, destination countries, and university names in which they studied are given in Table 2. The participants, (five female and three male) went to three different European countries (Poland, Portugal, and Italy) as part of the Erasmus Program. In addition, participants had not had any previous experience traveling abroad, be it for educational, personal, or any other reasons. The participants' families earned a middle-class income.

The participants participated in an informative meeting organized by Erzincan University's International Relations Office. During this meeting, the teacher candidates were told about possible problems (food, accommodation, communication, and health) and were given contact information both in their destination countries and in Turkey in case they experienced any problems. The participants did not participate in any orientation program, be it in Turkey or in their destination countries.

Table 2
Data on the Study's Participants

Code Names and Age	Gender	Field and Grade	Destination Country	Destination University	Period
Tayfun (22)	Male	Social Sciences Teacher (3)	Portugal	Universidade Lusefonade Humanidades e Tecnologias	2011-2012 Autumn-Spring
Tuna (21)	Male	Social Sciences Teacher (3)	Portugal	Universidade Lusoфонade Humanidades e Tecnologias	2011-2012 Autumn-Spring
Esin (21)	Female	Class Teacher (3)	Portugal	Universidade Lusoфонade Humanidades e Tecnologias	2011-2012 Spring
Özge (20)	Female	Class Teacher (3)	Italy	Universitadegli Studidi Macerata	2011-2012 Autumn
Dilay (22)	Female	Mathematics Teacher (4)	Portugal	Universidade Lusoфонade Humanidades e Tecnologias	2011-2012 Spring
Pınar (21)	Female	Computer Teacher (3)	Poland	University of Information Technologyand Management	2011-2012 Autumn
Murat (22)	Male	Computer Teacher (3)	Poland	University of Information Technologyand Management in Rzeszow	2011-2012 Autumn
Aylin (20)	Female	Science Teacher (3)	Portugal	Universidade Lusefonade Humanidades e Tecnologias	2012-2013 Autumn

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data for this study. While the interview form was being prepared, pre-interviews were performed with five other Erasmus students who were not included in the current study, but who fit the same criteria as the participants in the study group. The teacher candidates were composed of two individuals from the Social Sciences department, two from the Classroom Teacher Department, and one from the Mathematics Teaching Department. In these interviews, teacher candidates were asked their reasons for choosing to participate in the Erasmus Program, how they made such a decision, and their expectations from the program. After considering the data obtained, a draft interview form was prepared. The draft interview form was then sent to two lecturers, one from the Educational Programs and Teaching Department and the other from the Educational Management Department. After the form was examined by these two individuals, it was brought to its final form according to the recommendations made. The form, after it was given its final form, consisted of eight semi-structured questions focusing on the purposes of the Erasmus Program and the expectations of the teacher candidates who participated in the program.

After the interviews, the participants' reasons for choosing the Erasmus Program were collected under four themes, which are given in Table 3.

Table 3
Teacher Candidates' Reasons for Joining the Erasmus Program

	Themes
<i>Reasons for Joining the Erasmus Program</i>	Meeting new cultures (7)
	Improving foreign language (5)
	Academic development (4)
	Developing self-confidence (1)

When Table 3 is examined, it becomes clear that teacher candidates' reasons for choosing to participate the Erasmus Program centered mainly on academic, cultural, and personal development. The themes stated by the teacher candidates in this study are in accordance with the findings separate studies conducted outside of Turkey (Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Raikou & Karalis, 2007; Rodriguez, Bustillo, & Mariel, 2011; Sainz & Miranda, 2006; Teichler, 2004, p. 398; Teichler, Gordon, & Maiworm, 2001).

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in a one-to-one format in the researcher's room with each interview taking 45 minutes on average. The reason for conducting the interviews in the researcher's room is because the participants stated that they would feel more comfortable in that room. In order to ensure that the interviews are made in a reliable environment based on empathy, the decision as to where to hold the interviews was left to the teacher candidates' discretion. Since the interviews were held on those days which participants felt appropriate and comfortable, not all of the participants were interviewed on the same day, causing it to take 15 days to complete the interviews. During the interviews, voice recordings were made which were then put into writing later. The interview transcriptions were then sent to the Erasmus students for them to check and to gain their approvals for usage. Two of the participants interviewed requested an additional interview after reading their interview's transcript, stating that they had something to add relating to academic gains. For this reason, an additional interview of fifteen minutes was conducted for each of the two participants separately. Interviews were translated into English in the next period, Turkish made. The translation process is done by a sworn translator who both speaks English and Turkish.

Validity and Reliability Studies

While validity in qualitative studies is related with being convincible and conveyable, reliability is related with being confirmable and consistent.

i) In order to increase the internal validity (being convincible) of the study, the issue was formed while the interview questions were being developed and after the pre-interviews, the relevant literature was examined. Specifically, the current researcher examined previous studies focusing on the efficiency and functionality of the Erasmus Program. Afterward, the study questions and their scope became clear. In this context, such concepts as *academic*, *cultural*, and *personal development* came to the forefront. After the interviews were conducted, the texts were put into writing and then sent to those interviewed in order to be checked. By doing this, participants' approval was also obtained. The questions prepared by the researcher were prepared in such a structure so as to collect relevant data, leading to a study wide enough to cover the subject's themes, but narrow enough so

as not to cover the irrelevant data. While the data collection tool was being prepared, participants were informed in detail. By doing so, it was ensured that the data collected reflected reality.

ii) In order to increase the external validity of the study (being conveyable), the activities performed in our methodology were explained in detail. Specifically, the study's method and design, its participants, the data collection tool, the data collection process, how the data was analyzed and evaluated were explained in detail and supported with tables.

iii) In order to increase the internal reliability (consistency) of the study, the researcher, together with an experienced lecturer proficient in qualitative studies, encoded the data which were then compared with each other to measure the consistency ratio. After examining previously published studies on the same subject were examined, it was determined that the results in the literature and the data of this study were in accordance with each other. In addition, the study's subject matter and method used were congruent with each other.

iv) In order to increase the external reliability (verifiability) of the study, the researcher defined the activities performed during the process in detail. The raw data obtained during the process and the voice recordings are being kept for possible future examinations. After the researcher finished collecting the data, he made it into a report which he then sent to the participants asking for their feedback. As a final step, participants' feedback was examined by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The inductive analysis method was used in analyzing the data obtained for the study. Inductive analyses are conducted so as to reveal the underlying concepts of the encoded data and the relations among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The inductive analysis for the current study was performed in three stages. In the first stage, the data obtained as voice recordings were put into writing. In the second stage, the researcher, together with another lecturer experienced in qualitative studies, encoded the data separately. In the third stage, to ascertain reliability between the encoders, the Reliability=Consensus/ Consensus +Dissensus X 100 formula was applied on the encodings performed by the two separate encoders (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The accordance level between the two encoders was found to be 81%.

Findings

In this section are presented the opinions of students studying in a School of Education within Turkey regarding how effective the Erasmus Program is. The findings were evaluated under three main themes by taking the study questions into consideration. In order to provide a general picture, participants' perceived academic, cultural, and personal development gains are given in Figure 1.

Teacher Candidates' Opinions Regarding the Academic Dimension of the Erasmus Program

It is observed that the most intense viewpoints given by the teacher candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program are about the heading of *academic acquisitions*. The sub-themes of this are given in Table 4.

When Table 4 is examined, it is observed that the teacher candidates mentioned eight different sub-themes while discussing the academic dimension of the Erasmus Program. Among these sub-themes, *being able to think in a multi-dimensional manner, interactive learning, professionalism, self-expression skills, developing different teaching strategies, research-examination, using one's time efficiently, and producing projects* are seen as gains that teacher candidates experienced as a result of the Erasmus Program. Although the Erasmus Program states to have been established to promote cultural interaction, academic gains appear at a higher level. The fact that academic gains are emphasized by almost all the teacher candidates from every departments indicates that the Erasmus Program is perceived as important in one's academic development.

The teacher candidates mostly related multi-dimensional thinking and acquiring self-expression skills with those teaching techniques teaching one how to think, the classes one takes, and the lecturers performing these activities. Below are example statements made by the participating teacher candidates:

Özge: I would like to say that most of my exams were oral. These exams were extremely helpful for me. I think that *oral exams* make bigger contributions to the students compared with classic exams. This increases students' *interactions with their lecturers to a very high level*, and teaches you many things because it is in a conversation style, and you can learn how to see the things from another person's perspective.

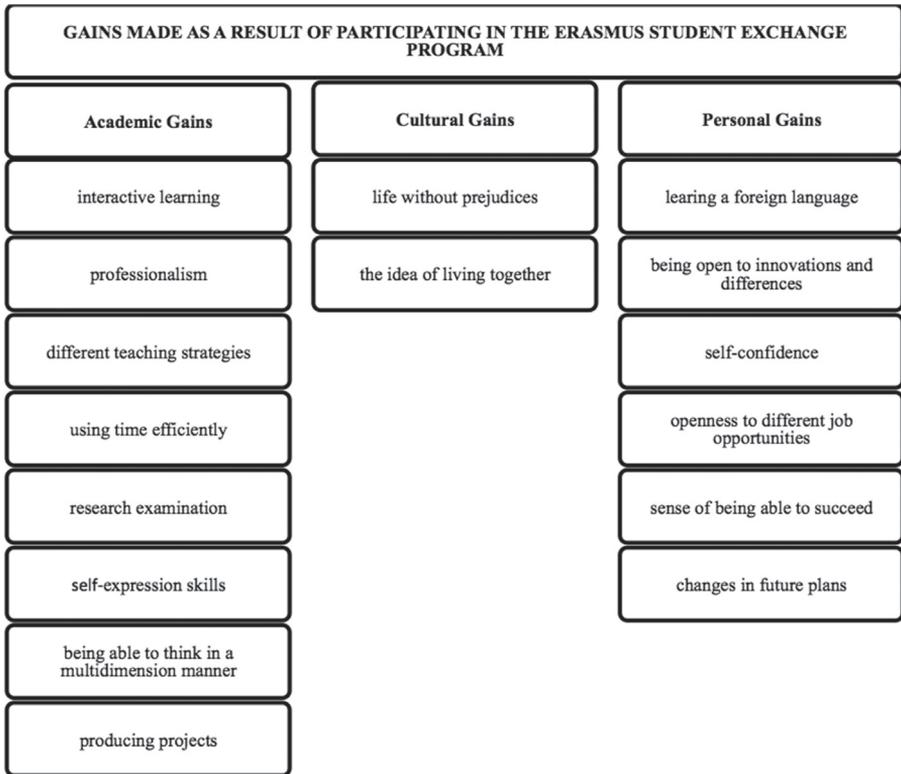


Figure 1: According to the teacher candidates' opinions, the benefits of the Erasmus Program in terms of academic, cultural and personal development.

Since it was a *face-to-face interaction*, they continuously gave me the key words and told me to think about it in this way, look at it from that point of view, showing me *how many sides* the matter had. I think the classes I took in Italy allowed me to gain *different perspectives*.

Another sub-theme under *academic gains* is *interactive learning*. The teacher candidates stated that they had made heavy use of computers and the Internet during their time abroad, mentioning

that distance education opportunities were realized through the use of e-mail groups. Teacher candidates' sample statements regarding interactive learning are as follows:

Esin: I made very good use of the educational opportunities presented to me there. I can say that *Internet use* was at an extremely high level. I mean I wouldn't want to take the same classes in my own country [Turkey]. For example, I learned every detail about *distance learning* in an *applicable*

Table 4
Findings on the Academic Gains of the Teacher Candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program

Main Theme	Sub-Theme					
		Class	Social	Mathematics	Computer	Science
Academic Gains	Being able to think in a multidimensional manner	+	++	+	++	+
	Interactive learning	+	+	+	+	-
	Professionalism	++	++	+	++	-
	Different teaching strategies	++	-	+	+	-
	Using time efficiently	+	+	-	+	-
	Research Examination	+	-	-	+	+
	Self-expression skills	++	+	+	+	+
	Producing projects	+	-	-	-	-

way, with projects and presentations. I learned its advantages and disadvantages by using it myself. I think they are really good at *using the Internet and computers in a productive manner*.

Pınar: The things I learned about in my network design classes were always being performed *over the Internet*, and so were the tests. The students were given “Cisco” [a company that plans, installs, maintains, and develops the information networks of banks, multi-national companies, and internet service providers] certificates, which are valid all over the world. I found the opportunity to participate in the first stage of the exam and now I have two certificates. My teacher told me that even if I were to go back to Turkey, I could take the exams online and included me in the courses. Using the internet in such a way was unbelievable. We shared information and talked over the Internet even at midnight. And I forgot to mention how fast the Internet was. The assignments and projects were sent *via the Internet one week in advance, and we completed them with computer programs*. I can say that I received an excellent and very effective academic education.

It is possible to suggest that the teacher candidates had extensive use of the Internet and computers during their education abroad. Their opinions on distance education, an aspect of education that has become more widespread recently, are important. The teacher candidates stated that they had learned the theoretical and applicable dimensions of the topic, thereby making it is possible to suggest that they made important gains in using the Internet and computers for educational purposes.

The participants related their opinions on the two academic sub-themes of *professionalism* and *using their time efficiently* together with discipline, caring for the quality of work performed, behavior styles, and caring for and listening to everybody as well as other similar ideas. The teacher candidates expressed their experiences on being professional by making comparisons with their own country [Turkey]. In addition, it is possible to suggest that the participating teacher candidates underwent a process of social learning. Below are one teacher candidate’s opinions on this subject:

Tayfun: The most important thing that the Erasmus Program contributed to my learning was academic and vocational in nature. Caring for *job discipline* and *using the time efficiently* were also among the things I acquired there. In fact, the people there also cared for some of the same values as in our country [Turkey]. However,

they are different from us in that they work with *a level of discipline and in a professional manner*. This happens when everybody does his or her work on time and with the proper care. The staff members there performed their jobs with an especially high level of quality. We had many difficult moments in the university, and we didn’t know what or how to do anything. I don’t think any other people knocked on the International Relations Office door as much as we did.

Özge: Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors there taught me many very important lessons on *how to behave toward my own students if I become a teacher in the future*. Most important for me was that the lecturers answered my e-mails even at midnight. And their *sincerity* in answering my questions impressed me a lot and made me consider my future job *more positively*. My experiences *guided me in the work I do and will do in the future*, and they will continue to influence me.

Today, educational studies are conducted in a research & examination-based style, being encouraged in this direction. With this in mind, another aspect of the Erasmus Program how it effects both research & examination and project-based studies. The teacher candidates received answers not only on how to obtain the information they needed, but also on how to use the information while performing research & examination and while producing projects. One of the teacher candidates stated the following on this subject:

Aylin: You have to accept anything given to you without asking and searching here [in Turkey]. Maybe this isn’t the case for everybody, but it is for most people. The things I observed there are quite different, they guide you to conduct *research*. Actually, they teach you what to look for and what there is to obtain in the first place. That way, you can *develop a variety of different perspectives*.

It can be suggested that according to the teacher candidates’ opinions, the Erasmus Program not only has positive effects on education, but also makes positive contributions to teacher training programs and in providing vocational development.

Teacher Candidates’ Opinions Regarding the Cultural Dimension of the Erasmus Program

Since the main goal of the Erasmus Program, as stated by the program itself, is to promote intercultural sharing and understanding, participants’ perceived cultural gains have been included among the

Table 5
Findings on the Cultural Gains of the Teacher Candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program

The Main Theme	The Sub-theme					
		Class	Social	Mathematics	Computer	Science
Cultural Gains	Life without prejudices	++	++	+	++	+
	Idea of living together	++	++	+	++	+

research sub-themes and are considered as one of this study's sub-problems. Teacher candidates' opinions regarding the cultural dimension of the Erasmus Program are given in Table 5.

After examining Table 5, it becomes clear that the teacher candidates mentioned two different sub-themes within the cultural dimension of the Erasmus Program, being (1) *a life without prejudices* and (2) *the idea of living together*. By evaluating of teacher candidates' statements, the dynamics of this situation may be more clearly understood:

Dilay: I encountered many cultural differences in Portugal. The language, religion, food, and well, everything was different. We learned about these differences in time. Not only did we learn the culture of the people of Portugal, but also the culture of other friends coming from different countries. We had so many friends from different countries; it was fun to learn their interesting cultures. We even tried to understand the people who didn't know English. Because not everybody knew English, and because we didn't speak Portuguese, we sometimes tried to express ourselves by drawing things. All these experiences caused us to develop different perspectives. Actually, we *learned how to live together with friends* we hadn't even known the day before.

Tayfun: Although there were so many people from different places, *respect and solidarity* was at the top level every high. People didn't not care about what you were or what you did. In fact, and they didn't not even ask questions about these kinds of things. Although they were helpful, warm-blooded people, they had led a monotonous lifestyle. They had worked at the when it was time for work, and they had bars and fun at during the weekend. I encountered *many different cultures* in this country, but they did not have coexisted without any problems. Actually, I know that we [Turkey] also had a *multi-cultural structure*, but I observed that here in this country [Portugal], that *culture is just like aone's private affair, life*, if you don't not bother anyone, you don't not have any problems. People live their own cultures and everybody has a specific activity and way to entertain amusement for themselves. Nobody

asks questions about *who at somebody else is*.

When the statements of the teacher candidates are examined, it is clear that they had both a multi-cultural and an intercultural experience. They explained this situation by talking about the cultural differences in their countries of travel, and the cultures of the other participants coming from other countries. The teacher candidates discussed the multi-cultural structure of more than one cultural element living together in the same area, explaining that this situation caused no problems. This idea was encoded as *living together*. Although the teacher candidates mentioned the cultural differences that they had encountered to be important, they also stated that the real experience was in the way that the different cultures were welcomed by their host society. The teacher candidates discussed their experiences of living together, making statements to help explain how their living conditions really were. Statements of this sort have been encoded as *life without prejudices*, another sub-theme of the cultural dimension of the Erasmus Program. The notion of *life without prejudices* is understood by the teacher candidates through how they are related to the concepts of understanding, love, respect, sharing, and trust. Examples of some of the teacher candidates' opinions are presented below:

Esin: Of course I encountered different cultures. I observed saw that the attitude towards the cultural differences in the people living there was that of, as "*Never find it odd!*" On the contrary, they always tried to learn something by asking *why, how*, and other similar questions. The sincerity of these questions and the fact that they were asked to learn something new was could be understood by seen on their faces. of the people. Actually, I felt that the Europeans people had learned *how to live together*. In fact, they trust each other....

Aylin: My Erasmus experience didn't not cause many vocational and or cultural changes in me. However, I must say that *I respect different cultures now and that I don't not find them odd*. Actually, I can say that in that country [Portugal], I saw *how rich and beautiful my own culture* was. The People's way of life, conditions of

people, their beliefs, and cultures influence their behaviors., and Actually, this is in fact considered as odd by us [people of Turkey].

It is observed from the teacher candidates' statements above that the Erasmus Student Exchange Program has many cultural implications. It may be suggested that participants' understanding of *living together* and *life without prejudices* increases as a result of their experiences. In addition, this experience helped the participants in learning the importance of their own culture. In short, the Erasmus Program was beneficial not only in their learning about other cultures and in showing them how differences can be welcomed, but also in arousing an awareness on their own cultural values. Although the participants were from different departments within the School of Education, their opinions about their experiences intersect at this point. Consequently, it may be suggested that the Erasmus Program is effective in increasing teacher candidates' cultural awareness.

Teacher Candidates' Opinions Regarding the Personal Development Dimension of the Erasmus Program

The last main theme evaluated was participants' opinions on personal development. The teacher candidates' perceived personal development gains as a result of participating in the Erasmus Program are given in Table 6.

Under the theme of *personal development*, participating teacher candidates evaluated the aspects of *learning a foreign language, being open to innovations and differences, developing self-confidence, being open to different job opportunities, gaining a sense of succeeding, and changes in future plans* as being among the benefits of the Erasmus Program. It may therefore be suggested that learning a foreign language, becoming open to innovations and differences, and developing one's self-confidence are among the gains of the Erasmus

Program for teacher candidates. The quality of the education received is in direct proportion with participants' own attempts to make use of the different opportunities available to develop their levels of self-confidence and sense of success. As such, it may be suggested that the Erasmus experience motivates teacher candidates to do their work with more care and efficiently, even in their daily lives. Teacher candidates' opinions on this issue are presented below:

Dilay: At first, I felt very nervous about going to a different country, I was scared. I felt that language my language wasn't good enough. *How would I express myself, what would I eat, where would I stay?...* However, one week after arriving, I felt as if I had been there for years. The Portuguese people were very warm and helpful. What would I have done if the situation it had been different? I would have managed it somehow. It was a good experience for me. *My self-confidence* increased. *My sense of being successful* increased. I made many friends, many of which I still keep in touch with. As a result of this experience, I found the opportunity to see different places.

The teacher candidates stated that they had the opportunity to practice their language skills. After considering the teacher candidates' statements, it becomes obvious that both the theoretical and practical aspects of language learning improved as a result of their conversations in the dormitories on personal attempts as opposed to in an academic environment. Such notion are apparent in teacher candidates' statements below:

Pinar: When I consider the educational opportunities there, I remember that almost every staff member at the university could speak fluent *English*. Some of them could speak at the top level exceptionally well, and they gave us lectures. Thanks to this situation Because of this, my foreign language skills improved tremendously. However, the most learning

Table 6
Findings on the Personal Development Dimension of the Teacher Candidates who participated in the Erasmus Program

The Main Theme	The Sub-theme					
		Class	Social	Mathematics	Computer	Science
Personal Development Gains	Learning a foreign language	++	++	+	++	+
	Being open to innovations and differences	++	++	+	+	+
	Developing self-confidence	+	+	+	+	-
	Openness to Different job opportunities	+	+	-	+	-
	Sense of being able to succeed	+	+	+	-	-
	Changes in future plans	+	-	-	+	-

occurred while we were having conversations with friends from different countries. We talked about anything and everything with them, about food, religion, and cultures. We even spoke English at the dormitory and Polish in the streets. Learning a different language was the most wonderful experience in my life.

Murat: Before I started the program, I attended a language course [in Turkey] where I learned the Polish language at a basic level. In the following weeks, I also improved my English. therefore I think that the Erasmus Program fulfilled the goals it set out to achieve. However, since most of the teachers at the university couldn't speak English fluently, we had to solve this problem on our own by studying more. In any case, even if the teachers had been able to speak fluent English, if we hadn't been willing to learn, we couldn't have learned anything.

It may be suggested that the teacher candidates' language learning and self-confidence gains helped them to become aware not only of their professions, but of the greater world. Among the personal development gains experienced as a result of participating in the Erasmus Program are learning how to innovate, not considering education as a means of obtaining a job, and being able to make use of different opportunities. The teacher candidates stated that they had already held certain beliefs, at least theoretically, before participating in the Erasmus Program. The Erasmus Program provided the teacher candidates with the opportunity to perform many things that they had wanted to do, but could not do for one reason or another. This fact is easily understood from their statements below.

Özge: I can say that this experience helped me develop different viewpoints and to think differently about my profession. For example, not everyone who studies in the School of Ed. become teachers there. In fact, they might deal with trade or tourism [after graduating]. In addition, a fifty year old person can even study at the university. We had such a person in our class. Although I can't remember his name, I know for sure that he wasn't studying to become a teacher, he was studying just to learn something new. For these reasons, my opinion on this issue has definitely changed. Right after the Erasmus Program, I went to South Korea. I think one learns more and become more efficient not when he or she reads, but by traveling. I think we have to be open to innovation. Even the answers on my exam papers have changed as a result of this program.

Murat: I can say that my way of thinking has also changed. I've become open to innovations. I realized that I had previously led a calm and quiet life and was withdrawn into my own shell. My future plans have changed; the number of choices for me has increased. I knew it was there but I did not dare to think of these options. This could be achieved by reading books, but maybe the courage to go and see different countries, live, can be really useful for everyone.

As is seen in participants' statements, the Erasmus Program may also influence participants' career perceptions and future working lives. The Erasmus program has certainly influenced these teacher candidates' career perceptions, causing them to give more importance to the teaching profession than they had before participating in the program. As a result, it may be claimed that the program leads its participants to being more open to differences and innovations in their professional lives.

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

The current study has aimed to determine the opinions of the students from Erzincan University's Faculty of Education who studied abroad as participants of the Erasmus Student Exchange Program for a portion of their education in one of the EU countries. Participants' opinions regarding how effective the Erasmus Program is are of particular importance as knowing whether the program's goals have been achieved or not will provide important data on how to develop the future of the program.

Based on the findings, the following conclusions may be made in the light of the Erasmus Program's effects on participants' cultural acquisitions: The Erasmus Programs provides participants with intercultural experiences and an opportunity to observe what a multi-cultural structure is. The teacher candidates in this study understood the idea of "what a multi-cultural structure is" as meaning people from many different parts of the world living together despite differences in language, religion, dress, and behaviors. Based on their intercultural experiences, the two basic concepts on which the teacher candidates focused were *life without prejudices* and *living together*, mentioning that different cultures were able to live together with trust, respect, and acceptance. They showed as evidence the fact that they had received the same interest and trust not only from the other participants, but also from their host culture. The

teacher candidates stated that living a life together in spite of so many differences would only be possible if individuals were open to confronting their prejudices. Some of them even stated that the environment in which they lived during their studies abroad could serve as an example for their future life. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the Erasmus Program played a role in removing participants' cultural related prejudices. The teacher candidates stated another important issue while they were making these evaluations; namely, that they gained an awareness of their own culture, its importance, and its richness. Such a gain may have been provoked by spending time in a culture they are not used to and by the difficulties they had faced during their stays. The study's findings on participants' cultural experiences show similarities with previous studies conducted by (Aktan & Sari, 2010; Demir & Demir, 2009; Elmalı, 2013; Ersoy, 2013; Ersoy & Günel, 2011; Gül, 2013; Kumral & Şahin, 2011; Özdem, 2013; Sancak, 2009; E. Şahin, 2013; M. Şahin, 2008; Tekin, 2011; Yıldırım & İlin, 2013).

Another theme stated by the teacher candidates was the program's *academic gains* and how they were able to benefit from the host university's academic facilities. On the other hand, the participants' vocational gains were more than their cultural gains despite the fact that the Erasmus Program's main goal is of cultural exchange. When the fact that the Erasmus Program is slotted as a culturally interactive program is considered, the findings on participants' academic gains are original findings. The teacher candidates stated that they had acquired both *multi-dimensional thinking* and *self-expression* skills as a result of their communication and interaction with others in their host country. Here, teacher candidates' finding the opportunity to communicate face-to-face in another language may be cited as the reasons for this. In addition, both class sizes being small, and one-to-one lessons may have influenced participants' thinking and expression skills. *Interactive learning* is another issue discussed by the teacher candidates. Today, the use of the computers and the Internet in educational has gained a formidable place in the teaching profession and experience. It is observed in the students' statements that the teacher candidates' most frequently used terms were the *Internet, computers, e-mail, and assignments*. The teacher candidates stated that they had conducted their assignments and projects over the Internet, adding that except for when they were in class, their lecturers answered back without much delay.

Their lecturers' behaviors while teaching were referred to as *being professional* by the teacher candidates. The fact that their lecturers were very good at their jobs, answered students' questions in detail, and responding to their e-mails even at midnight impressed the teacher candidates. As such it may be suggested that the teacher candidates underwent a social learning process in regards to their future profession as teachers, indicating that the behavior of teachers toward their students plays an important role making the Erasmus Program effective. As a matter of fact, Özdem (2013) reached similar findings in his study.

The teacher candidates stated that their abilities to conduct research, perform examinations, and use their time efficiently had improved, stating that their lecturers' questions and assignments were all directed toward having students conduct research. In this process, the participants stated that their host university's library and Internet facilities were of very high quality, adding that this situation allowed them to develop their research and examinations skills. The teacher candidates may have felt the urge to study not only as a result of the stress caused by living in another country, but also as a result of the interest and the discipline they observed in their fellow students. However, their gains in learning how to conduct research, perform examinations, and use their time efficiently were all made possible as a result of the Erasmus Program, with the teacher candidates stating that they would use what they learned in their professional lives as well. These findings on academic gains are in accordance with those of the studies conducted by Certel (2010), Önder-Kasapoğlu and Balcı (2010), E. Şahin (2013), M. Şahin (2008), and Yılmaz (2009).

In terms of personal development gains, the participants explained that the Erasmus Program helped them to *develop their foreign language skills, become open to innovations, develop a sense of self-confidence, an openness to different job opportunities, a sense of success, and being open to changing in their future plans*. One of the stated aims of the Erasmus Program, improved participants' language skills is the most oft-cited personal gain by the teacher candidates in interviewed in this study. This is a concrete evidence showing that the program has succeeded in fulfilling the goals that it had set out to achieve. Although the participants stated that traveling to a university and studying in a language that they did not know very well made caused them stress at first, they also stated that they had not only overcome this stress by the end, but that such

a situation actually was the source of numerous benefits. Although the participants in this study did have at least a basic knowledge of English, as is evidenced by the requirement of all Erasmus Program participants to teach an English test before participating, it is worth noting that they stated to have improved their language skills as a result of the conversations in non academic settings, such as in their dormitories, as opposed to in their universities. The results of the studies conducted by Ersoy (2013) and Ekti (2013) show similarities with those of this study. The teacher candidates' statements on this issue show that although English education in their own country of Turkey is good on the theoretical level, it has some problems on the practical level and in providing venues to apply it. Since students' practical language skills improved during their studies abroad, it may be suggested that the Erasmus Program is effective in improving language skills. These findings are similar to those of Demir and Demir (2009), Ekti (2013), Elmalı (2013), Ersoy (2013), Gül (2013), Göksu (2011), Kalaycı (2011), Önder-Kasapoğlu and Balcı (2010), M. Şahin (2008), Ünal (2011), and Yücel-Seyhan (2013).

As a result of their personal experiences, the participants witnessed gains in their levels of *self-confidence development* and in their *openness to innovations and differences*. Although the first time one studies abroad may be difficult, as attested to by the participants in this study, overcoming them brings with it numerous opportunities for growth. At first glance, issues of accommodation, food and drink, establishing communications with one's host culture, and not knowing anybody else in the host country appear as difficulties, the participants in this study stated that they were, in fact, not problems at all, adding that how one was affected by them was each individual's own decision. Such statements show an increase in self-confidence. In fact, some of the participants traveled to a different country with their own means afterward. Similar results in previous studies conducted on the personal gains of the Erasmus Program may be found in the studies by Aktan and Sarı (2010), Elmalı (2013), Ersoy and Günel (2011), Gül (2013), E. Şahin (2013), Ünal (2011), and Tekin (2011).

The Erasmus Program is also effective not only in aiding participants' future personal and profession success, but also in opening up to them a wider

variety of job opportunities. In Turkey especially, when the such as not the self-confidence, go to the first trips abroad, to experience a different culture, fear of communication challenges faced by graduates of the School of Education are considered, the benefits provided by the Erasmus Program become more important and attractive. The participants of this study stated that they were now open to working in jobs other than their original field of study, to the point that some of the participants had even changed their future plans and world views. These findings are in accordance with those of previous studies conducted by other researchers (Bakioğlu & Certel, 2010; Elmalı, 2013; Ersoy & Günel, 2011; Göksu, 2011; Papatsiba, 2005; M. Şahin, 2008; Ünal, 2011; Yağcı , Ekinci, Burgaz, Kelecioğlu & Ergene, 2007).

As observed, staying in a country composed of a completely different cultural heritage allowed participants the opportunity to acquire a wide variety of knowledge and skills. Among the knowledge, concepts, and skills learned as a result of participating in the Erasmus Program are learning how to establish areas of cooperation with lecturers of different cultural heritages, being a cultural ambassador of intercultural dialogue, being a model, efficient citizen, becoming a life-long learner, integrating into another social, and improving one's academic knowledge and experience. Based on the results of this study, it may be concluded that the Erasmus Program has successfully achieved its academic, cultural, and personal gains that it had set out to.

Just as the quota of participating students must be increased in order to make more use of the Erasmus Program, so must sufficient orientation services be provided so as to ensure that the process is conducted in a beneficial way. Agreements on teacher training processes in particular should be increased and teacher training programs improved so as to ensure the personal and vocational development of the teacher candidates before they actually start to teach. Based on the results of this study, future studies should be conducted while focusing on the sub-themes listed under the cultural, academic and personal gains.

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