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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PLACE OF JOINING ERASMUS+ PROGRAM IN PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Research Article

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Abstract

This phenomenological research aims to explore the place of the Erasmus+ program (EP) in enhancing pre-service English teachers' (PSETs) professional development. Additionally, this study targets learning about their experiences in the EP and their recommendations on how the program could be ameliorated to better serve prospective PSET participants. The data collected through in-depth interviewing were analysed adopting an inductive approach. The findings revealed that the PSETs believed participating in the EP helped them to develop their speaking skills and broaden their extant knowledge of different cultures, yet they overwhelmingly pointed out that since some courses they took at the host universities were not directly related to the field of English language teaching, the EP did not significantly contribute to their professional development. The findings also demonstrated PSETs' suggestions concerning how to improve the EP to alleviate the problems they confronted for other PSETs whose future plans contain participating in the program.

Keywords: EP, in-depth interviewing, initial English language teacher education, professional development, PSETs

1. Introduction

The EP, popular among university students (Bell, 2016), is developed to support Europeans in “education, training, youth and sport”, and it targets “stimulating the sustainable development of its partners in the field of higher education and contributing to achieving the objectives of the EU youth strategy” (European Commission [EC], 2019). One of the youth strategies embedded in the EP is aiding young people in taking responsibility for their own learning through surmounting diverse challenges to be faced in the program. The youth goals, mirroring the conceptions of European youth, involve “connecting EU with youth, equality of all genders, inclusive societies, information and constructive dialogue, mental health & well-being, moving rural youth forward, quality employment for all, quality learning, space and participation for all, youth organizations & European programmes” (EC, 2019). Moreover, a comprehensible emphasis is placed upon mutual learning between member states in the EP.

PSETs' professional development has been explored from a wide range of perspectives, from the role of initial English language teacher education program (e.g., Darwin & Barahona, 2019; Ramdani & Widodo, 2019) to that of field experience (e.g., Choy, Wong, Goh & Low, 2014; Jones & Ryan, 2014; Makina, 2019); yet, no study has been undertaken to scrutinize the effect of joining the EP on PSETs' professional development and to explore their experiences of the EP. The present study thereupon targets investigating the role occupied by the program in PSETs' professional development, their experiences in the program, and uncovering their suggestions for improving it.

1.1. Literature Review

Relevant literature encapsulates limited number of research exploring the advantages of participating in the EP, the findings of one of which demonstrated that the benefits of joining the EP encompassed professional development, and improvement in linguistic, social and intercultural skills (Golubeva, Parra & Mohedano, 2018). In the same vein, enhancing professional and personal development was reported as a profit to be reaped by joining the EP in the study done by Salajan and Chiper (2012). Another advantage of participating in the EP was reported in the literature as the greater likelihood of finding jobs and the higher chances of asking for higher salaries as against non-participants (Iriondo, 2019). According to Roy, Newman, Ellenberger and Pyman (2019), the outcomes produced by participating in international student mobility programs involved cultural, language, personal and employment ones.

The reasons university students set out to study abroad were explored in the study conducted by Jeanpierre and Broadbent (2016), the results of which showed that learning about a different culture, being away from home, building up self-confidence, learning a language, increasing the chance of employability, and improving final year grades were the reasons lying behind the desire to participate in the EP. The most significant motive for the subjects in the research carried out by Juvan and Lesjak (2011) to participate in the EP was related to professional and personal growth. Likewise, the research undertaken by Llurda, Balsa, Barahona and Rubio (2016) demonstrated that participating in the EP enabled students to feel more comfortable about using a foreign language and that their enthusiasm to improve their proficiency in that language grew by virtue of joining the program. The study done by Messer and Wolter (2007) revealed that the reasons for participating in the EP involved increased probability of getting a post-graduate degree or that of being employed with higher starting salaries. The results of the research undertaken by Llanes, Tragant and Serrano (2012) showed that joining the EP led to the development in participants' speaking skills and that individual differences played a prominent role in learning a second language in the program.

A set of determinants such as cost of living in the host country, language, climate, educational background and distance are identified as the factors affecting mobility flows most (Gonzales, Mesanza & Mariel, 2011). Reasons behind not participating in the EP were investigated in the research carried out by Beerkens, Otero, Wit and Huisman (2016), which revealed that home-ties and lack of interest in the program were the prevalently stated reasons by students for not participating in the program irrespective of their nationalities.

The problems that are likely to be encountered in the EP were pinpointed in the study by Delmartino and Beernaert (1998) as the obstacles with coordinating student mobility, students' unwillingness to learn a not-widely spoken language, non-conformity between the education systems and organizations of the academic years of the home and host university. The significance of informing students on the advantages of being a part of the EP could increase the number of students having benefitted from the program to date (Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, Wit & Vujić, 2013).

This research was undertaken with an eye to seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. What are PSETs' evaluations of their experiences in the EP?
2. To what extent does joining the EP contribute to PSETs' professional development?
3. How could the EP be improved to better serve prospective PSET participants?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and The Context

This study was designed as a phenomenological research, in which, according to Creswell (2014), “the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 14). Considering the primary purpose of this research, which was gaining a full understanding of the lived EP experiences of the PSETs, and the rationale behind employing phenomenological research, the reason for the research design used in this study could be uncovered. In the context of this study, PSETs are to fulfil the following requirements to join the EP:

- a) The student applying the program needs to be a full-time student enrolled in the institution.
- b) The average grade of the applicant should be minimum 2.70 over 4.00.
- c) The applicant needs to have sufficient ECTS, which is 60 ECTS per academic year.
- d) Not exceeding the time frame of 12 months on the condition that the applicant has benefitted from Erasmus + or lifelong learning program before.
- e) The student should be at least a first year student to apply for the program (Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, 2019).

PSETs meeting the above-mentioned requirements could take both the written and oral exam administered by the commission set up by the Rectorate of the university. 50% of their final grade is determined by their exam scores while applicants’ general academic average is worth the remaining 50%.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used in selecting the study participants consisting of 28 PSETs studying at a state university. Ten participants were male while the rest were female. The mean age of the participants was 22.04. Six of the participants were fourth-year students while the remaining were third-year students when this research was carried out. All of them participated in the EP in the spring term of the academic year 2018/2019. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was obtained before commencing to collect the data. The name of the participants will not be mentioned to protect their confidentiality and each participant is assigned a number such as PSET 1, PSET2 etc.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviewing was administered with an eye to gathering data in that Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) point out “in-depth interviews ... may be the best means of accessing a rich, detailed, first-person account of ... experiences” (p. 58). The date and time of the interviews were determined by keeping in sight participants’ convenience. Each audio-recorded interview lasted 30-35 minutes and transcribed verbatim.

The interview questions were produced after reviewing the literature on examining higher education students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of participating in student mobility programs. Thereafter, the questions were emailed to two English language teacher educators to ensure they would serve as the agents to find answers to the research questions and to avoid the probability of leading participants’ responses due to the choice of words used to formulate them. In light of the feedback offered by the teacher educators, the questions were reworded. Afterwards, the interview was conducted with five PSETs having participated in the EP before and studying at a different university to make sure the questions were clear for the interviewees. In view of the five PSETs’ answers to the questions, minor changes were made to them, and

then, the process of preparing interview questions was finalized. Below are the questions asked in the interviews.

- 1- What was your EP experience like for you?
- 2- What do you think about the effect of your EP experience on your professional development?
- 3- What differences and similarities are there for you between the teaching styles of the lecturers who have been teaching you at your home university and those of the lecturers who taught you at the host university?
- 4- How do you think the EP could be developed to better serve PSETs wishing to participate in it in the future?

The first question in the interview was asked in an attempt to seek answers to the first research question, yet the answers given to it were also referred to as presenting the findings on the second research question. Interviewees' responses to the second question were used to find answers to the second research question. The answers given to the third question in the interview contributed to the findings with respect to the first and second research questions and the last question in the interview was posed to look for answers to the third research question.

An inductive approach was applied in the analysis of the collected data. Two coders, one of whom is the researcher, read through the transcriptions in their entirety several times to gain an overview of them, coded them, and created categories from them. An iterative process was gone through during the analysis via rereading the transcriptions in order to be able to arrive at a deeper understanding of the responses of the PSETs, which helped the coders to achieve a consensus over the discrepancies between the categories they created and to refine them. Afterwards, themes were developed. Member checking was used to validate the accuracy of the data and their interpretations, which was realized by sharing the findings with ten participants to make sure the results reflected what they had in their minds (Creswell, 2012).

3. Findings

3.1. PSETS' Evaluations of Their EP Experiences

The analysis of participants' responses on their evaluations of their experiences in the EP indicated that they had both positive and negative experiences.

3.1.1. Positive experiences

The analysis of participants' positive experiences in the EP led to the emergence of the themes of heightened intercultural awareness, higher level of self-confidence, development in speaking skill, and opportunity for comparing and contrasting education systems of the home and host universities.

Heightened intercultural awareness

The participants stated that by virtue of joining the EP, they enhanced their intercultural awareness. They had the chance to gain information about different cultures, and also to provide information about Turkish culture to the EP participants of different nationalities. Following are the statements of two participants that could typify other participants' opinions on increased intercultural awareness enabled by participating in it.

I had two Georgian, eight Korean, 2 Japanese, 1 Greek, 1 Italian, 5 Polish friends and many others from different countries. With my Korean friend, we came to İstanbul and hanged

around when the program was continuing. I introduced our culture to him and we stayed in my uncle's house, he learnt many things about Turkish culture and promised to invite me to Korea. (PSET 19)

I built a close friendship with a Spanish student and an Italian one. I cooked Turkish meals for them and they cooked their traditional meals for me. We spent time, visited European countries together, and I realized that we really resembled each other. I hadn't thought before that people from different countries could get along well with each other that much. (PSET 1)

Higher level of self-confidence

Another theme that developed from the content analysis of participants' positive experiences in the EP is the increased level of self-confidence. Knowing that their families would fall back upon them whenever they needed support led the participants not to take responsibility in their home country; nevertheless, being alone at the host institution abroad helped them to learn to survive by solving any problem they had thought they would never be able to overcome on their own without receiving help from family members.

The biggest contribution of joining the EP was feeling more self-confident. I confronted many problems and fortunately solved them. If I had been in Turkey when I had those problems in my life, I would have not been able to solve them myself. After the EP, I am now more self-confident, and I will not ask my parents to do something for me anymore. (PSET 6)

Development in speaking skill

Having the chance to improve their speaking skills through practicing speaking without being paralysed by the fear of being subjected to people's humiliation appears to be participants' common gain brought by the program. Two participants' statements could epitomize those of others.

I spoke merely English for three and half months in lessons, and I needed to speak it to survive in real life. This helped me develop my speaking skill. The only place where I spoke Turkish was the kebab saloon I went to. (PSET 14)

I did not have self-confidence before participating in the EP to participate in discussions in lessons because I believed that I would be ridiculed by my classmates if they heard my English. Then, when I decided to join the EP, the drive for me to join the program was getting a chance to practice speaking and I did so. Now, I think I can speak better because I have really developed my speaking skill. (PSET 17)

Opportunity for comparing and contrasting the education systems of the home and host universities

The participants stated that they also had the opportunity to compare and contrast the education systems of their own university and that of the host university when they were in the EP. Participants' responses showed that while there were participants viewing the teacher educators working at their home university as more friendly than the ones in the host university, there were participants claiming that the importance attached to student learning in their host universities was higher than the one placed on it in their home university as, according to them, exams mattered more in the home institution.

After taking the courses in the program, I started to think that I am a lucky student because I believe that our instructors are friendly people and I can talk to them anytime I need help but the instructors at my host institution were more serious and the only way I could talk to them was sending emails. (PSET 17)

I went to university X and had a chance to observe how student teachers are educated in that university and compared it with the way student teachers are educated at my university. The thing I have realized, for example, is that Turkish students are more concerned about the exams and the scores they get, but exams are not very important at university X; I mean, permanent learning is more significant than students' scores on exams. (PSET 9)

3.1.2. Negative experiences

Participants' responses in relation to their experiences in the EP showed that they had negative experiences in the program as well as the positive ones, originating from the difficulty in having communication with local people, and the troubles with the courses that they selected or had to select.

Problems with communicating with the local people

Some participants stated in the interview that they confronted problems with communicating in English with the local people at markets and at dormitories. It was highlighted by the participants that particularly elderly people did not speak English.

I really do not know why the local people did not want to talk to us in English because most probably they could speak English, at least could answer very basic questions, but they insisted on speaking in their mother tongue. Interestingly, the security staff at the dormitory did not talk to me in English, either. I used google translation to ask my questions or requested a local friend to help me with translation. (PEST 16)

Problems with the selected courses

Nine of the participants stated in the interview that they encountered acute problems with some of the courses they had selected and approved by the coordinator of their own university and that of the host university. The reasons for the serious problems with the selected courses could be found in the statements of one of the PSETs given below.

I selected courses before I went to university X by looking at the courses offered at the department on the website of the university. When I arrived at the university, I realized that three of the courses I had chosen were no longer offered and when I talked to the coordinators, they told me to choose from among other courses, but choosing different courses and getting them approved took one and half months. Well, you know, I was in university X for just four months and spent third of it on finding courses the contents of which were in line with the content of the courses offered at my own university in the same term. (PSET 8)

3.2. The Effect of the EP on PSETs' Professional Development

The second research question was posed with a view to investigating whether or not joining the EP contributed to participants' professional development. The findings revealed that, except two participants, the PSETs believed that participating in the EP contributed to their professional development to a certain extent. The participants not believing that joining the program enhanced their professional development pointed out that the courses they took at the host institution were not directly related to English language teaching but to general knowledge and/or literature. Additionally, they stated that it was not a matter, because they had invaluable experiences in the EP, which was more significant to them. The analysis of the responses of the PSETs conceiving that joining the EP contributed to their professional development to a certain extent led to the construction of the themes of improvement in speaking skill and the likelihood of integrating the accumulated intercultural knowledge they gained into their instructional practices in the future. Nonetheless, those participants also underscored that some of the courses they took in the host university were not relevant to English language teaching.

Improvement in speaking skill

All the participants believing that joining the EP enhanced their professional development stated that being able to speak English well was a significant part of their profession and joining the EP helped them develop their speaking skills. The statements of one of the participants could mirror the opinions of others on the impact of the program on improving their speaking skills.

Thanks to God, I decided to join the EP and went to university Y. I really could not speak English before going to university Y, and because of that, I was feeling terrible. I used to ask questions like ‘What am I doing here?’, ‘Can I become an English teacher?’ because speaking English well is, I believe, one of the qualities of a good English teacher. If I had not joined the program, I would not be able to speak English now. I am sure about that. (PSET 4)

The likelihood of integrating accumulated intercultural knowledge into teaching

The PSETs stated that the wide knowledge they gained on different cultures could be used in the lessons they would teach in the future. They accentuated that English is the lingua franca of the world, and hence, integrating the knowledge of different cultures into teaching it might enrich the content of lessons.

I have lots of friends from different countries now and we spent time together, hanged around together and got to know each other and each other’s cultures. I can use this knowledge in my lessons when I start to teach so that my lessons can be more enjoyable for my students. Any person can read about Spanish, Italian or English culture but I experienced them and I believe this has contributed a lot to my professional development. (PSET 3)

3.3. PSETs’ Suggestions Concerning How to Ameliorate the EP for Prospective PSET Participants

The third research question was asked in an effort to figure out PSETs’ recommendations with regard to what initiatives could be undertaken to improve the EP. The content analysis produced three themes: placing less number of Turkish students in the same host institution, training EP coordinators on how to support EP participants and widening the number of the countries on the list to offer more alternatives to applicants.

Less number of students of the same nationality should be placed in the same host institution.

Studying at a university with numerous students of the same nationality was criticised heavily in the interviews. The major concern the participants expressed in regard to the large number of students of the same nationality placed in the same host university was the probability of speaking in the mother tongue more in place of English.

I believe that a rule should be established to predetermine the maximum number of students to study at the same university. For example, no more than 10 students of the same nationality can go to the same university. Then, I guess the program can be more useful for PSETs because their friends will be mostly foreigners and they will have to speak English with them. (PSET 11)

Training EP coordinators in how to support EP participants

The possibility of having things run smoothly before the start of, during and at the completion of the program was bound up by the participants with getting in contact with coordinators regularly and easily. It was highlighted in the interviews that the participants encountered intractable problems as a result of not being able to reach coordinators who did not check their e-mail boxes on a daily basis, and thus, did not respond to their questions on

time. Therefore, the participants pointed out the necessity of warning coordinators to reply participants' e-mails rapidly. Another recommendation concerning EP coordinators was training them in how to fully support EP participants because they did not view coordinators as knowledgeable enough about the program.

Multiplying the number of the countries on the list to offer more alternatives to applicants

The number of universities with which a university signs agreements for E+ study mobility programs varies from university to university. The participants in the present study complained about the insufficiency of the number of universities with which their home university signed agreements.

We had really limited choices as to the universities we could select. I had a different country in my mind but I had to go somewhere else because that country was not on the list and I was really disappointed about not being able to go to the country I had imagined. (PSET 2)

4. Discussion

This phenomenological research was conducted to investigate PSETs' evaluations of their experiences in the EP, the contribution of joining the EP to PSETs' professional development and to figure out their suggestions for ameliorating the EP to better serve prospective PSET participants. The results demonstrated that the participants raised their awareness of other cultures and introduced Turkish culture to other EP participants; that is to say, participants' intercultural awareness was heightened as a consequence of participating in the EP. This finding is congruent with the findings of the studies carried out by Golubeva et al. (2018) and Roy et al. (2019). PSETs' higher level of intercultural awareness subsequent to participating in the program parallels the objectives of the EP specified by the EC (2019) because fostering intercultural exchange is one of the primary objectives of the EP. Another positive experience the participants had in the EP and reported in this study is building up self-confidence to handle any problem they could confront in their lives in the absence of help they usually get from family members. Enhanced self-confidence is also likely to cater for the PESTs in their future professional lives as they will obviously face problems in their professional lives with students, parents, administration so on so forth, and their boosted self-confidence can support them in overcoming them.

Another theme that developed from the responses of participants' evaluations of their experiences in the EP was developing oral skills, which is in compliance with a number of studies on investigating the impact of student mobility programs on participants (e.g., Llanes et al., 2012; Llorca et al., 2016; Juvan and Lesjak, 2011). Conceiving the EP as a means to improve speaking skills is undeniably crucial for PSETs studying in EFL settings inasmuch as they have limited opportunities for using English to communicate in their daily lives. Participating in the EP can, hence, substantially contribute to the development in their speaking skills. Another point worth underscoring is the significance of improving speaking skills to an English teacher as students imitate their teachers, and for this reason, teachers should be good models for them by speaking English well.

The participants had the chance to compare and contrast education systems of the home and host universities in regard to how assessment and teaching was conducted. One of the issues raised by the participants was that exams occupied a significant place in their home university, creating a strain on the PSETs while exams were not that much significant in the host universities, instead, profound importance was given to student learning. The participants experiencing the positive impact of prioritizing student learning rather than exams may try to convert dreary and exam-oriented lessons into interesting, enjoyable and learning-centred lessons in the future.

The PSETs voiced the problems with the selected courses in the host university, because the courses presented on the web site as offered were no longer taught, which they learnt when they arrived at the university, and finding courses in place of them took a long time. Universities' websites need to be updated regularly in order that students can start to take the courses they have selected on time and do not lose time trying to choose other courses the contents of which are congruent with those of the ones in their home university. Furthermore, the cooperation and collaboration among Erasmus coordinators needs to be promoted to help EP participants tackle any problem with the courses they have selected.

The findings as to the research question of if participating in the EP enhanced PSETs' professional development revealed that the improvement in their speaking skills was the most remarkable contribution of the EP to their professional development. The need for speaking in English in the EP to survive on campus, in lessons, at dorm, and to socialize with other students seems to be the motive for the participants to develop their speaking skills. Moreover, the probability of reflecting the knowledge of different cultures the participants obtained in the program in their teaching practices in the future was presented as one of the positive impacts of joining the EP on their professional development. Since English is no longer a property of the countries where it is the native language, enriching lessons by sharing their experiences in the EP and the knowledge of different cultures could make English lessons more interesting and enjoyable for students than merely following the coursebook.

In line with the findings on the PSETs' negative experiences in the program as regards the selected courses, one of the suggestions put forward by the participants to ameliorate the EP for the PESTs planning to join the program was training the coordinators in how to advocate EU participants better. Organizing trainings for EP coordinators could serve as a means to ameliorate the program considering the roles they play during the application process, after EP participants start to get education in the host university, and at the completion of the program. Another theme reported in the findings is imposing a quota to the number of students of the same nationality to study at the same host university, which makes more sense keeping in mind the urge PESTs feel for practicing speaking English more. Some students may have a tendency to come together with the students from their own country whereas there could be another group of students trying to keep away from them to engage in communication in English more. The PSETs also recommended their university to sign agreements with more universities in diverse countries not to restrain applicants by few choices. Providing a list involving a wide range of universities from which students can select the university they want to study at might motivate them more.

5. Conclusions

This paper concerns whether participating in the EP enhances PSETs' professional development. The review of related literature on PSETs' professional development unveils notwithstanding the fact that professional development in initial English language teacher education has been investigated from a wide array of aspects involving on-campus and school-based learning, no research has been carried out heretofore to scrutinize the contribution of participating in the EP to their professional development. The results in this research showed that even though participating in the program did not considerably enhance their professional development; it took a fundamental role in improving their speaking skills, perceived to be particularly significant for PSETs. The recommendations offered by the participants need to be taken into account seriously by the authorities responsible for the EP not only in the context of the present study but also abroad so that the obstacles PSETs may encounter in the program could be surmounted with their support.

6. Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

The data in this study was collected from 28 PSETs, which is insufficient to generalize the findings to broader population. For this reason, more research in which higher number of participants participates needs to be undertaken. To be able to compare and contrast the experiences of PESTs of different nationalities in the EP and the differences in the effect of the program on their professional development, researchers from different countries could produce a paper together.

7. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

8. Ethics Committee Approval

The author confirms that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country.

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