



## RESERACH ARTICLE

# PREPARING TURKISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FOR ERASMUS EXPERIENCE: BARTIN CASE\*

Kenan Çetin<sup>a</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Since Turkey started participating in Erasmus+ program in 2002, the interest in studying abroad has been growing in terms of popularity among Turkish students. With the aim of better preparing these students before their experience abroad, Bartın University decided to implement a language course for the outgoing students, and the researcher was responsible for the speaking lessons. The researcher implemented a plan that mainly included dialogue preparation, acting out and getting to know each other activities, icebreakers, and giving presentations in different contexts related to real life situations. The data was collected with the participation of four students who agreed to participate in the semi structured interviews during their stay. The result of the interviews indicated that the students felt positively towards the pre-departure speaking course and the situation-based dialogue exercises generally enabled them to better cope with the challenges they faced while they were studying abroad. Moreover, the participants also expressed that they made use of the phrases they practiced in the lessons during their stay abroad and that they could easily adapt to the similar icebreaker activities organized during the orientation weeks of the universities abroad. This study concludes with suggestions towards future pre-departure courses in preparing language learners for studying abroad.

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**Keywords:** Erasmus mobility, Pre-departure course, Dialogue activities

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## ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# DİL ÖĞRENEN TÜRK ÖĞRENCİLERİ ERASMUS DENEYİMİNE HAZIRLAMAK: BARTIN ÖRNEĞİ\*

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### ÖZET

2002 yılında Erasmus programına katılımından bu yana Türkiye’de öğrenciler arasında yurtdışında okuma ilgisi yaygınlaşmıştır. Bu öğrencileri yurtdışı deneyimlerine daha iyi hazırlamak adına Bartın Üniversitesi, Erasmus hareketliliğine katılacak öğrenciler için dil hazırlık kursu düzenlemiştir ve araştırmacı konuşma bu kursun konuşma derslerinden sorumludur. Bu amaçla, araştırmacı gerçek hayatla ilişkili ve farklı bağlamlarda gerçekleşen diyalog, eyleme vurma, birbirini tanıma ve sunum yapma aktiviteleri içeren bir plan uygulamıştır. Bu çalışmanın verileri yurtdışı deneyimleri sırasında görüşmeye katılmaya kabul eden dört öğrencinin katılımı ile yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden toplanmıştır. Görüşmelerin bulguları incelendiğinde öğrencilerin kursa ve durum bazlı diyalog aktivitelerine karşı olumlu görüşte oldukları, ve bu aktivitelerin yurtdışında karşılaştıkları zorluklarla baş etmede onlara yardımcı olduğu sonuçlarına ulaşılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, katılımcılar ayrıca aktiviteler sırasında pekiştirdikleri kalıplardan yararlandıklarını ve yurtdışındaki uyum sağlama aktivitelerine daha kolay adapte olduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Bu çalışmanın sonucunda gelecekteki öğrencileri dil açısından hazırlayan kurslara yönelik öneriler ortaya çıkmıştır.

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**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Erasmus hareketliliği, Hareketlilik öncesi ders, Diyalog etkinlikleri

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## Introduction

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The history of student mobility dates back to when the countries began to develop after the industrial revolution and the globalization of the world, economic growth and easier transportation lead to many student mobility programs, enabling millions of students to study abroad. After the foundation of European Commission in 1950s, and the integration of higher education in their agenda in 1970s, student mobility took its first official steps in 1987 with the establishment of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus). As stated in their official booklet, European Commission (2018) explain some of the aims of Erasmus as; contributing to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, sustainable development of the partnering countries in education field, and promoting the European values. In 2016, 725.000 people studied, trained or volunteered abroad within the scope of the program and nearly 3.900 higher education institutions were awarded mobility grants (European Commission, 2017).

Turkey first joined the mobility scheme in 2002 and signed a new contract under the name Erasmus+ in 2014, and since then, the interest in studying abroad has been growing; 16.089 Turkish students went abroad during 2015/2016 academic year. The announcement made in 2013 by the Turkish Ministry of European Union Affairs that Turkey was the 3rd most participating country in the program in the academic year of 2013-2014 with the total amount of 162 universities indicates that Turkey aims to establish and improve its participation in mobilities.

It can be stated without hesitation that studying abroad is undoubtedly an effective way to improve foreign language abilities (Aslan & Jacobs, 2014; Kalpper & Rees, 2015; Kinginger, 2011; Papatsiba, 2005; Sasaki, 2007; Teichler & Jahr, 2001; Teichler, 2004). Many studies can be found in the literature regarding the contribution of Erasmus programme in language learning. Andrade (2016) found out that after a 10-month study abroad program, Chinese students had substantial gains in TOEFL scores, and self-perceived English ability in speaking and listening. Llanes, Arno, and Mancho-Bares (2016) stated in their study that the students who studied abroad for a term improved their general English proficiency and written lexical complexity. In their study, Aslan and Jacobs (2014) found out that Turkish outgoing students mostly benefit from Erasmus mobility “to improve foreign language knowledge and skills” (p. 62). Klapper and Rees (2015) observed that students who studied abroad received proficiency gains in German language. Kinginger (2011) draws the conclusion that the literature indicates a positive impact of studying abroad on language competence. Papatsiba (2005) also claims that studying in a foreign academic system leads to acquiring linguistic competence. In his study, Papatsiba also points out that students studying abroad faced issues in professional and informal communication, and they were mostly able to improve the linguistic aspect of their experience abroad at the beginning of their stay. In a more recent study, Mete (2017) interviewed the students who stayed or studied abroad, and she concluded that the students should be given a comprehensive pre-departure course to cover the problems which may cause difficulty in communication. In order to address the linguistic issues mentioned by Papatsiba (2005) and Mete (2017), a considerable amount of empirical studies can be found in the literature regarding preparing the students for their mobility abroad by implementing courses. Accordingly, Camiciottoli (2010) aimed to better prepare Erasmus outgoing students by preparing business lectures for the students before their mobility, and his post-course questionnaire and results of the interviews indicated that the students benefited from the courses. Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan (2008) found out that a five-week Spanish training course on listening skills before studying abroad provided comprehension gains and improved the participants’ levels of confidence and self-perceived ability. In Turkish context, Gündüz and Kılıçkaya (2017) prepared a listening and speaking training course with authentic and graded authentic materials for Erasmus outgoing students and the results of the interviews indicated that all the students were in favor of the use of authentic materials and they benefitted from the course during their stay.

Similar to the mentioned studies, this study aimed to find out to what extend pre-departure speaking course is beneficial to Turkish Erasmus outgoing students. In addition, this study also aimed to define possible factors to be taken into consideration in the future pre-departure speaking courses aiming to better prepare the Erasmus outgoing students. In order to pursue these aims, the research-

her, who was responsible for the speaking lessons, conducted semi-structured interviews during the students' mobility. The interviews aimed to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the views of Erasmus outgoing students towards the pre-departure speaking course in terms of preparing them for their experience abroad?
2. What are the views of the Erasmus outgoing students towards their experiences and the difficulties they face abroad in terms of communicating in English?

## Method

This study benefited from case study as a qualitative research method. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) state, a case study "focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, and seeks to understand their perceptions of events" (p. 253). The reason for making use of the principles of case study design is that this study aims to determine the views of Erasmus outgoing students towards the influence of the pre-departure speaking course. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) also point out that a case study "highlights specific events that are relevant" (p. 253). Accordingly, this study presents additional views of the students towards the difficulties they faced and their suggestions towards improving the pre-departure courses.

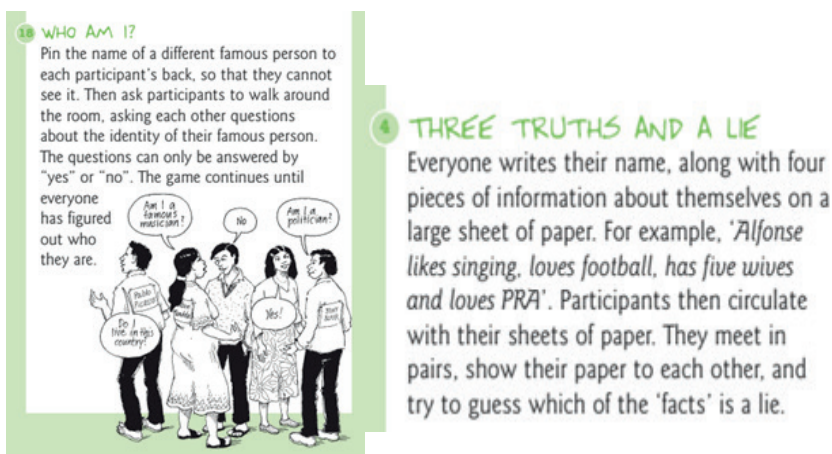
## Research Setting

This study was conducted at Bartın University with the participation of Erasmus outgoing mobility students. In order to better prepare these students for their experience abroad, Bartın University offers a pre-departure courses, and during the fall term of 2017, three skill based English courses for listening, speaking and writing were separately prepared by a language instructor and two research assistants working at the university. The researcher was responsible for the speaking lessons and prepared a course which included dialogue-based and situation-specific activities. The content table of the speaking lessons is presented in Table 1 and in addition, Figure 1 and Figure 2 describe three sample activities which are included in the lessons.

**Table 1.** *Content of the Speaking Lessons*

Week	Topics/skills covered in the lessons	Learning activities
1	Introducing oneself and others Use of adjectives Likes / Dislikes	Pair work: Introduce your friend Asking for specific information: Who am I? Group presentation: Introduce Turkey
2	Getting to know each other Describing things and people Asking for specific information	Pair work: Pick a question and ask your friend Pair work: Three truths and a lie Group discussion: Let's talk about our majors Find the profession (Students get ID cards and tasks to find a specific person)
3	- Discourse markers; linkers (Firstly..., then..., for example...) Asking for directions Finding out information Story telling	Public speaking: Speaking about a pre-determined topic without giving it away and others guess what it is Dialogue writing & acting out: At the airport Dialogue writing & acting out: At the train station Dialogue writing & acting out: Pick a course
4	There is.../There are... Asking for directions Making plans Making reservations	Pair work: Picture describing Dialogue writing & acting out: At the bus station Dialogue writing & acting out: Making a reservation to a hostel Group work: Picture story: Put the pictures in order
5	Finding out information Asking for specific information	Dialogue writing & acting out: Arriving at your hostel Dialogue writing & acting out: Problem solving dialogues Dialogue writing & acting out: At the bank

As shown in Table 1, the activities in the lessons consist mainly of dialogue writing and acting out activities and were mainly done in pairs. While most dialogue activities were situation or location-specific, some of the pair work activities acted as a warm-up activity aiming to prepare students for the future activities. Two examples of these warm-up activities are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



**Figure 1.** Two Sample activities: Week 1: Who am I? & Week 2: Three truths and a lie. Source: Alliance (2002). 100 ways to energise groups: Games to use in workshops, meetings and the community. Progression: Brighton, UK



**Figure 2.** Sample activity: Week 4: Picture story: Put the pictures in order (Each frame is given to a different student and they put the story in order verbally without showing the pictures). Source: English Daily (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.englishdaily626.com/essays/image/072.jpg>

### Participants

During the fall term of 2017-2018 academic year, 17 students passed the Erasmus test and were granted the opportunity to participate in Erasmus mobility. While 6 students did not join the pre-departure courses, 4 students decided not to study abroad; therefore, the final total number of participants who attended to the courses and went abroad was 7. From the 7 students, 4 of them agreed to participate in the interviews included in this research and their characteristics and language proficiency exam results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Demographic Statistics of the Participants

Participants	Age	Department	Country of Outgoing Mobility	Speaking Exam Score	Grammar Score	Erasmus Exam Final Score
Participant A	21	Mathematics Teaching	Spain	85	72	75.25
Participant B	20	Mathematics Teaching	Spain	40	54	50.50
Participant C	20	Molecular Biology and Genetics	Poland	85	80	81.25
Participant D	21	Environmental Engineering	Poland	85	76	78.25

Table 2 shows the results of two separate tests of English which was administered by the School of Foreign Languages at Bartın University. The speaking and grammar language tests were prepared by 3 other instructors in the field and the mean score of the two exams made up the final exam score which determined a pass or a fail for the students.

It is important to note that in a verbal non-formal interview after the pre-departure courses, all of the participants stated that they were fully dedicated to participating in the mobility without hesitation and they had full support from their families and friends and they had a positive attitude towards studying and living abroad.

### *Data Collection*

In line with the aims of this study, the data were collected through semi-structured online audio-based interviews conducted 3 months after the arrival of students to their hosting institutions, in April 2018, since it was the most suitable time for all the participants. In addition to questions aiming to collect demographic information and warm-up questions on Erasmus, the main questions included in the interviews are as follows:

- a) Did you face any difficulties in communication in English during your stay abroad? If so, can you describe the situations and how you overcame the difficulties?
- b) Have you found the pre-departure courses useful? If so, in what ways have you found it useful?
- c) Have you made use of any language points you learned in pre-departure speaking lessons during your stay? If so, how or in which situations have you made use of the course?
- d) Has there ever been a case where you made use of the dialogues you prepared and acted out during the lessons in the pre-departure speaking course?

### *Data Analysis*

The semi-structured interviews of the participants were transcribed, and the transcriptions were analyzed through codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe codes as “labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study.” (p. 82). During the analysis of the data, this study made use of descriptive coding in which labels are assigned to data in order to summarize the words or phrases. Moreover, this study also made use of narrative description which describes the composition of the codes for the presentation of the data. In narrative description, codes are transformed into narrative and supported by the field notes in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The drafted questions of the interviews were sent to three experienced academic experts in the field, and in accordance with their suggestions, some spelling and wording adjustments were made, and a question was omitted. After the analyses, the transcripts of the interviews and the codes were shared separately with one academic expert who was experienced in qualitative analysis and necessary correspondence was established through verbal agreement on the integrity of the results.

### **Findings**

This study aimed to find out to what extent pre-departure speaking course is beneficial to Turkish Erasmus outgoing students and define possible factors to be taken into consideration in the future pre-departure courses aiming to better prepare the Erasmus outgoing students. The findings of the research questions are presented in the following sub-sections.

#### *Research Question 1*

To answer the research question ‘What are the views of Erasmus outgoing students towards the pre-departure speaking lessons in terms of preparing them for their experience abroad?’ and determine the views of the students towards the language course and the speaking lessons, in particular and the findings of the interviews are included in three themes.



### *Students views towards the pre-departure courses in general*

All the participants (4) showed positive attitude towards the pre-departure courses in general (including speaking, writing and reading courses).

*Participant D: "Even though I passed the proficiency exam I did not feel competent enough; that is why I felt that taking the English course was what I needed. "*

*Participant B: "I think I benefitted from the courses in general although I think it could have been better if we had more preparation to the courses."*

*Participant A: "I think it helped me communicate better a little."*

*Participant C: "In general I made some use of the things I learned, even after 3 months."*

### *Students views towards the pre-departure speaking course*

They stated that the speaking lessons benefitted them in; providing confidence in speaking, learning by doing, and meaningful practice before their experience. Moreover, they all thought they enjoyed and had fun during the lessons and that enabled them to learn better.

*Participant D: "In general, I think my proficiency improves in speaking classes. We talked to each other in class a lot; I think it helped me gain confidence. We had speaking, reading and writing classes but here we do more speaking. It would make sense if there are more speaking lessons; when students speak more they can feel readier and more confident. When people arrive to a foreign country they must speak, and they need confidence for that and many of my friends doing Erasmus faced the same issue, people need confidence and it builds up in time; therefore, I think it is better if that confidence starts in Turkey."*

*Participant A: "Although I cannot say the speaking lessons made me reach a new level, I found it to be the most useful since we had fun in the classes and I prioritize practice and I think I learn when I enjoy what I am doing."*

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They mentioned that while staying abroad, they made use of the language points which they learned during the lessons. While one student explained that using 'their lives' in the lessons was useful, another student stated that since she acted natural during the lessons, she used similar sentences abroad. Moreover, they participated in activities similar to the ones in the course and they felt as if they were ready to be a part of the activities.

*Participant C: "I made use of some situational things such as what to say at airport or which words to look for on the screen of ATM. We also played some games here; we played a game 'finding your mate' where one person is, for example, Rose and she finds Jack in the crowd by finding out information about the people. Also, we played this game in Bartın about finding the lie, when they were explaining that game here I knew in an instant what to do."*

*Participant B: "Since my English proficiency is not very high, I mostly try to make use simple things that I learned such as how to say, 'Excuse me' or 'Can you help me?'. If I ever need help and cannot understand someone, I immediately look at my friends to intervene, but I also do that in English classes."*

*Participant D: "For example we drew a map of Turkey in Bartın and everyone introduced their cities, I liked that activity because we used our lives directly in the lessons and I found it useful; it helped me better introduce where I am from. People ask me about Turkey or Ankara here and I sometimes say similar things to what I prepared during our first day."*

*Participant A: "Sometimes I realize when I am talking that I repeat some of the things I practiced during the lessons. That may be because I tried to be casual and natural during our activities in Bartın."*

### *Suggestions towards the program*

Three of them suggested changes to the overall program; they stated that they would like the overall language course to be more Speaking-based, one of them stated that it needs to be built more on their needs, and two of them stated that it should be extended to be at least 8 weeks.

*Participant A: "It was not very reasonable that the courses were at the weekend and I think it should be extended at least 2 or 3 weeks. I also think all the skill-based lessons can be based on how we can use them in real life."*

*Participant B: "I don't think 5 weeks of time is enough; 8 weeks should be the limit. I would have liked it more if we had more opportunities to prepare for classes, like having homework before classes. For example, if I knew we had to talk about how to order a meal at restaurant one week, I could prepare at home on that topic."*

*Participant C: "I liked that we learned things which would absolutely be useful abroad, and it could be even more towards what we need; for example, people at my level of proficiency have trouble in presenting a talk in past tense so we could focus more on that."*

## **Research Question 2**

To answer the research question 'What are the views of the Erasmus outgoing students towards their experiences abroad in terms of communicating in English in their daily lives and courses?' and determine the views and suggestions of the students towards the experiences they had and difficulties they faced during their stay abroad, the findings of the interviews are presented in the following theme:

### **Participants' experiences of communication in English**

Three of them felt shy about speaking initially, and they started to adapt to communication with foreigners gradually. Only one of them reported that she had no problem at all.

*Participant D: "During the first two days, there were instances where I did not understand a person and I agreed and nodded without understanding. I was hesitant about initiating conversations at first; but the people here were very encouraging, they came up and started chatting with me and then I started gaining confidence."*

*Participant B: "I mostly spend time with my Turkish friends here, and when my English is not enough, they support me. During the first weeks I was hesitant about even saying a word and then both my Turkish and foreign friends encouraged me to speak here."*

*Participant C: "I could not adjust to any communication during the first three or four weeks, I thought the less I talk, the less I make mistake and I did not even say hello to people. After I attended to orientation week and meeting events I slowly started to speak more. Now I only hesitate to one of my friends who speaks perfect British English."*

*Participant A: "I did not have any problems in communication; I have no problem understanding or expressing myself generally."*

They all stated that they had no problem when they had small talk in groups; however, two of them state that when they had to have a deeper and more detailed one-on-one conversation with someone, they felt they ran dry. Two of them stated that they have overcome communication problems when they stopped caring about making mistakes, especially in grammar, and they started speaking more in conversations.

*Participant C: "For example someone asked me why I liked Atatürk, and I tried to explain that he was a leader during the times of war; I wanted to explain this in more detail. Before I came, I did not think talking about personal opinions would be this important, but now I wish I practiced talking more."*

*Participant D: "It was hard to have one-on-one conversations with people at first; but I overcame my fear quickly. I used to be more cautious about how I talk but now I just talk without thinking if I would make a mistake on grammar or pronunciation."*

*Participant A: "I noticed that I tend to have more simple conversations than deep meaningful long conversations, although; it may not be directly related to language proficiency, I think it is a cultural issue, too. I overcame this problem by trying to ask what they have said again and if they could re-phrase it."*





Two of the participants stated that they felt positively towards making a presentation since the audiences do not have a significantly higher English proficiency than them.

*Participant D: "I do not see presentations as a problem because usually I can see that I am understood by others and they ask simple questions."*

*Participant C: "Most of the time I do not get asked a direct question and teachers usually ask if I understood the topic. I have not yet made a presentation but even if I make one, I think I would make even a better one than Turkish since they (classmates) do not speak English better than me"*

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to put forward the views of the Erasmus outgoing students at Bartın University towards the pre-departure language course, in particular the speaking lessons. Moreover, this study also aimed to find out the communication experiences and difficulties the students faced during their stay abroad to better shape the future courses with the same aim of preparing students for Erasmus mobility.

The results after examining the interviews showed that the attitude of the participants towards the course was positive; they were content with the courses and they were willing to participate since they were sure that the content of the course would definitely be useful and serve a purpose during their stay abroad. The participants also stated that they made use of the course in their daily lives while they were abroad. The positive attitudes of the students were generally expressed by how much they made use of the language points and their self-confidence. This finding is in agreement with a study conducted by Camiciottoli (2010) in which the students stated they benefitted from pre-departure course. It is not uncommon to come across positive attitudes from the students towards pre-departure courses in the literature (Buthod & Hidaka, 2016; Camiciottoli, 2010; Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015; Mantha, 2016). Moreover, the participants also stated that using real life related topics and the activities in the lessons was beneficial, and they could associate the language points in the activities with their use in the future, after they travel abroad. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Gündüz and Kılıçkaya (2017) in which they found out that students were in favor of the use of authentic materials in classroom.

One of the topics included in students' views towards the course was timing and schedule. The participants suggested that the duration of the course should be extended to at least eight weeks. The fact that views towards timing and scheduling towards the course was brought up by the participants carries importance in terms of better shaping the future courses. This finding shows consistency with a study conducted by Buthod and Hidaka (2016) which aimed to implement a pre-departure course on nursing profession in English. They put forward that timing and scheduling is an important factor to be taken into consideration for pre-departure courses, and they go on by stating that with the right timing and scheduling the students focus better.

It is also noteworthy to state that, evidently, a common difficulty seems to be one-on-one conversations where interlocutors talk and share detailed personal opinions; future courses can focus on this specific situation. One student stated that she only had problem during speaking with a native speaker of English and two students reported that since they were in English as a foreign language setting, they were not anxious about giving a speech or making a presentation in English. These remarks support Mete's (2017) findings regarding communication problems which occurred during Erasmus exchange. She reported that the students sometimes had problems in expressing themselves; furthermore, English proficiency was an influence on their acculturation process. These findings may differ depending on the country of destination; as students may feel more self-conscious if they stay in a country where English is the official language.

It can be concluded from the study that future pre-departure courses which aim to better prepare Erasmus outgoing students need to be shaped more communicatively and related to real-life situations. Future research may include and integrate materials regarding interculturality to pre-departure courses; for instance, integration of the Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers (IEREST) (2015) project in Turkish context. A similar study was conducted in Italian context by Holmes, Bavieri, and Ganassin (2015) which indicated that using materials pre-departure enabled students identify variety and complexity in themselves and others. Language proficiency might play an important role in such studies.

Moreover, it can be said that the pre-departure speaking course addressed the students' need towards providing them with practice and experience on the interactions in English. Overall contentment towards the course points toward the importance of implementing pre-departure courses to better prepare Erasmus outgoing students. This conclusion is in line with Mete (2017) who reported a lack of pre-departure training in her study after the participants stated that the only training they received was a two-hour session informing them about the paper works. No matter the duration, studying abroad is a demanding experience, especially for undergraduate students who may not be able to adapt easily. One of the aims of this study was to better prepare the students and the overall positive attitude supports the conclusion that a pre-departure course may indeed serve this purpose. Therefore, the current study can be considered as a promising demonstration of effectiveness of pre-departure courses in preparing the Erasmus outgoing students in terms of communication in English. It can be concluded that this study reports key factors to be taken into consideration for the preparation of future pre-departure courses. Future studies on the topic may also include a language need-analysis of the selected students and focus on the related language points. Furthermore, integrating activities which address potential cultural conflicts and strategies towards solving them into pre-departure courses may help the acculturation process reported in Mete (2017).



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