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The Factors Determining the Motivation to Participate in Erasmus Program for Turkish EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the factors determining the motivation to participate in Erasmus program for Turkish EFL students. The participants for the study included a total of 287 (87 male; 200 female) students enrolled in the Department of Language and Literature at Karadeniz Technical University. Data for the study were collected using a questionnaire conducted to comprehend students' perceptions and understand the reasons that lead them to be a part of this program. Results of the study showed that the most influential reasons for participants to study abroad were the desire to improve the language skills and to experience European culture. Results also indicated that there were perceived barriers on their way hindering students from applying study abroad program. The most recurrent reasons for not participating in the program were family and money issues and the fear of the difficulty in adapting to the university in a foreign country. This study includes suggested implications for the universities to increase student participation in Erasmus program.

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Keywords: motivation; study abroad; EFL; Erasmus program

1. Introduction

1.1. Erasmus participation

Universities have been meant to be international since the beginning as it can be understood easily from the name itself. Students from different parts of the world travel to other countries to extend their educational experiences, and to meet different visions of world. Besides, information and knowledge is international. Briers, Shinn, and Nguyen

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(2010) support in their article the idea that an important characteristic of millennials (today's university students) is their propensity to construct knowledge out of their experience (p. 6). Starting from this point of view, it must be quite common for students in Turkey to take part in study abroad activities at universities in different countries. However, students have drawbacks to be a part of the program.

Erasmus Program allows students to travel to a different country in an academic year for 3-12 months and supports students financially. The financial support is not paid back after graduation however it does not cover all of the expenses for the Erasmus period. As it is retrieved from the Turkish National Agency; “Erasmus Program is not a ‘language education program’, it is not a completely ‘scholarship’ program, and it is not a ‘certificate’ program’. However, it cannot be rejected it is a program that provides language education and scholarship.

1.2. Theoretical background

Erasmus Program is an opportunity for Turkish EFL students to experience different cultures and to practice their foreign language skills outside the university since most EFL students in Turkey don't have the chance to use the target language outside the classroom. As there are some influential reasons to participate in Erasmus, there are also barriers on their way hindering them from applying the program.

Huják (2015) argued that all kinds of mobility and exchange programs contribute to the personal and professional development of students, regardless of the length and destination of the program. She also expressed that since the students may apply to the Erasmus program for between 3 to 12 months, gains are expected to be higher than in short programs—e.g., summer schools (p. 59). Erasmus mobility program contributes to students' language proficiency, to social and personal development, to acting as an independent individual. Besides, as Goel, Jong, & Schnusenber (2010) point out:

...students who had completed a study abroad program tended to exhibit a relatively high level of openness and ambiguity tolerance. Moreover, these students tended to view study abroad experiences as an opportunity to make new friends and contacts and as a means to enhance one's career (p. 254)

Openness and ambiguity tolerance are other contributing factors to participation for study abroad programs. Also it is clearly seen that it is important to enhance students' career. Another advantage of Erasmus program, “students who participate in exchange programs tend to be a little more mature than their peers who did not study abroad (Frisch, 1990). Black and Duhon (2006) contributed to the advantages of the study abroad programs saying that the program is “life-changing” because it helps the students in their personal growth, cultural awareness helping to acquire different ethnic, national or religious perspectives. Considering these views, it is clear that there is an agreement

on the advantages of studying abroad programs. However there are some factors influencing students' choice of the participation in Erasmus program. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) call these factors as “push and pull factors”. There are two stages in the decision of choosing an international study place; at the first stage push factors are essential when the student wants to leave the home country and at the second stage pull factors play the role of choosing the destination. And to them, there are six factors influencing student selection of a host country; knowledge and awareness of the host country, personal recommendations of the host country from their parents, or friends, cost issues, environment, geographic proximity, and social links (whether the students have family or friends in the host country). When the six factors are evaluated, each of them might be motivating or discouraging.

In their study, Movassaghi, Unsal, and Göçer (2014) confirmed the long-term impact of study abroad on students' personal, professional, and academic lives in terms of the career path, world-view, and self-confidence (p. 78). Students in Turkish EFL context are aware of the motivating factors; cultural enhancement, personality development, foreign language proficiency, being one step ahead of the colleagues in job applications, being an independent individual, etc. However, they are also aware of the discouraging factors such as financial problems, fear of unknown, lack of social links, feel of the programs are not compatible with the degree and career goals, fear of failing because of language problem, etc. Hackney, Boggs, and Borozan (2012) concluded in their research that predicting study-abroad participation is a complex process that is influenced by personal and situational factors, as well as the study-abroad program characteristics (p. 140). There are a lot of studies trying to underline the factors in the process of attending the study abroad programs. However, it is a complex process and each country has their own factors except from the common factors.

1.3. Research questions

The purpose of this study is to get a comprehensive picture of the factors determining the motivation to participate in Erasmus program for Turkish EFL students. The main questions are; “What motivates them?” and “How much do these factors influence them?” To find out the answers of the questions, the study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the encouraging factors for the students to apply for the Erasmus program?
2. What are the most perceived barriers that discourage students to apply for the Erasmus program?
3. Are there any gender differences in motivation to participate in Erasmus program in Turkish context?

2. Method

2.1. Setting and participants

287 students studying at the department of English Language and Literature, Karadeniz Technical University participated in the study. 131 participants were daytime students and 156 participants were evening students. 31, 4 % (90) of the participants were first year students, 30, 3% (87) of the participants were second year students, 22,3 % (64) of the participants were third year students and 16 % (46) of the participants were fourth year students. The participants from all levels consisted 30,3 % (87) male and 69,7 % (200) female students.

2.2. Research design

A quantitative research design was used to determine the motivations and barriers of students to apply for Erasmus program. The students completed a questionnaire regarding their personal reasons for whether or not applying for the program.

2.3. Instrument

In this study, quantitative data collection method was employed. A questionnaire (see Appendix A) adapted from Meszaros (2011) was used to collect the data. The items in the questionnaire inquired the perceptions and motivations that impel students to participate in Erasmus program. The participants were asked to indicate to what degree he or she agreed or disagreed with the given statements by choosing 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

3. Results

3.1. The main motivators to study abroad

The first research question aimed to understand the participants' three biggest motivators. These motivators were calculated without the consideration of gender (Figure 1).

■ to improve my language skills ■ to learn about different cultures ■ to improve my academic knowledge

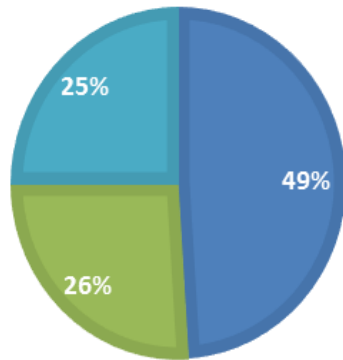


Figure 1. Main motivators to study abroad

The results show that most essential reason for the students to study abroad programs is “to improve the language skills” (49%). The second main reason is “to learn about different cultures” (26 %). The third reason is “to improve academic knowledge” (25 %).

3.2. Females’ and Males’ Motivation to Study Abroad

■ to earn life experience ■ to improve my language skills ■ to learn about different cultures

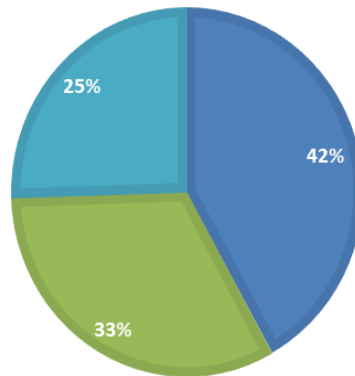


Figure 2. Males’ motivation to study abro

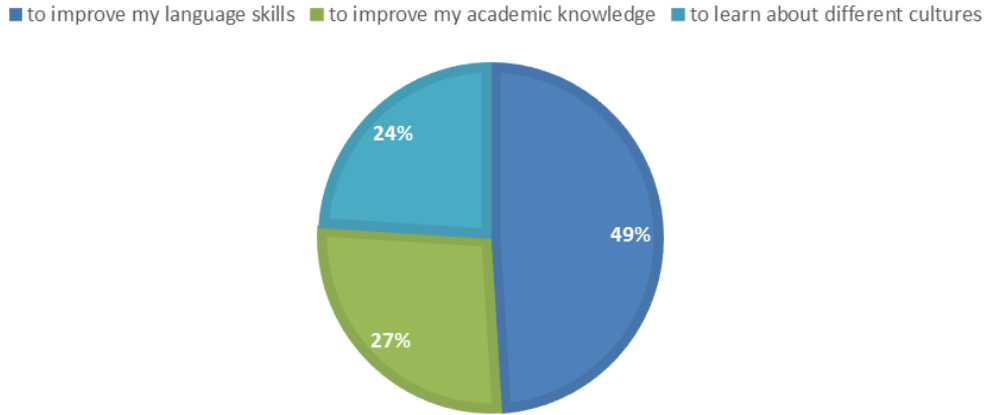


Figure 3. Females' motivation to study abroad

49 % of female students stated that they apply for study abroad programs to improve their language skills. On the other hand, 42 % of the male students stated their main motivation is to earn life experience. Improving language skills is the second motivation for the male students. Learning about different cultures is the third motivator both for males and females. When we look at the common percentages, it is clear that the most influential motivators are the improvement of the language skills and learning about different cultures.

3.3. *The perceived barriers for not participating in study abroad programs*

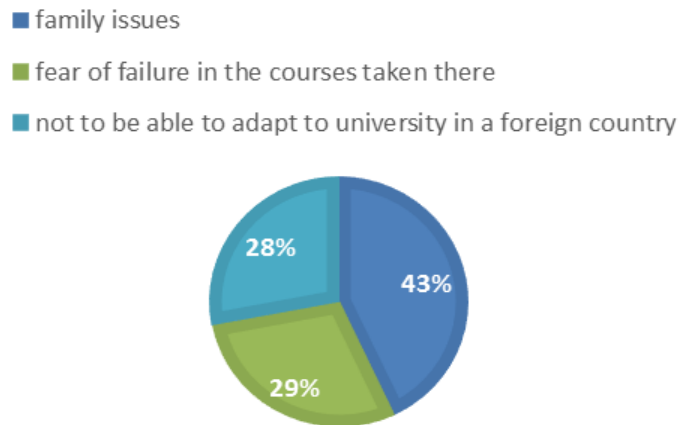


Figure 4. The perceived barriers for not participating in study abroad programs

Results also showed that there are perceived barriers that may hinder students from applying to study abroad. The first reason is “family issues” (43 %). The second reason is “the fear of failure in the courses taken there” (29%). The third reason is “not to be able to adapt to university in a foreign country” (28%).

3.4. Females’ and males’ perceived barriers

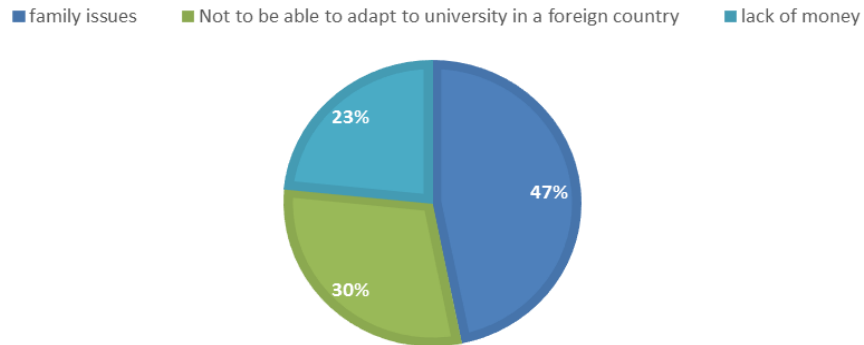


Figure 5 Females’ perceived barriers

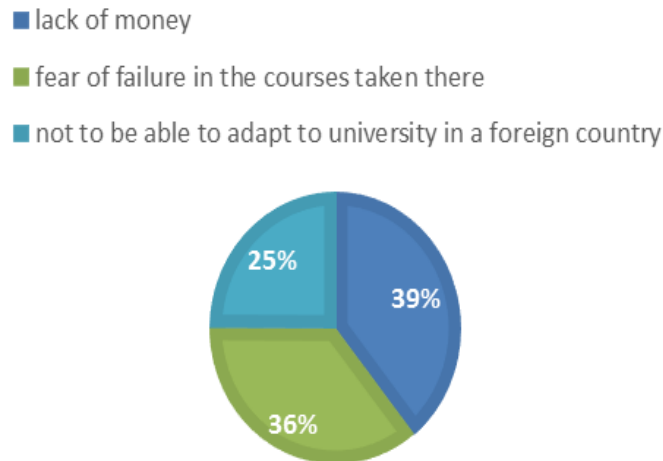


Figure 6. Males’ perceived barriers

The main demotivator for female students is “family issues”. Almost 50% of the responders answered this. A lot of students stated that financial issues and not to be able to adapt to university in a foreign country are another important demotivators. As for the males, “lack of money” is the main demotivators for not applying study abroad programs.

3.5. Important factors for the participation in erasmus program

Table 1. How much do the motivators influence the students?

	N	Mean	SD
1- To earn life experience	178	4.37	.961
2- To improve my academic knowledge	177	4.19	1.048
3- To please my parents	178	2.27	1.292
4- To improve my language skills	176	4.57	.774
5- To study in a foreign university	177	3.87	1.123
6- To have fun	177	3.83	1.173
7- To benefit my future career	178	4.39	.94621
8- To make international friends	177	3.60	1.093
9- To learn about different cultures	176	4.06	1.077
10- To live independently	175	3.00	1.356
11- I have friends or relatives abroad	178	2.30	1.397
12- Because most of my friends apply	178	2.16	1.298

As shown in Table 1, the improvement of the language skills ($M= 4.57$) and the future career factors ($M=4.39$) influence the students the most. The results also show that the friends and family don't influence students very much.

Table 2. How much do the demotivators influence the students?

	N	Mean	SD
1- Fear of study abroad	109	2.12	1.340
2- Fear of new places	109	1.83	1.093
3- Insufficient language knowledge	105	2.20	1.311
4- Lack of money	109	2.84	1.497
5- Not to find suitable places to stay	108	2.54	1.383
6- Fear of being alone	108	2.37	1.457
7- Family issues	109	3.12	1.540
8- Fear of failure in the courses taken there	109	2.77	1.486
9- Not to be able to adapt to university in a foreign country	109	2.73	1.398
10- Have a job at the home country	108	1.77	1.232

The students chose family issues (M=3.12) and the lack of money (M=2.84) for the main demotivators. The least demotivating factors are “having a job at home”, and “the fear of new places”.

4. Discussion

In the study, encouraging and discouraging factors to participate in Erasmus program were evaluated in a Turkish context. A questionnaire was offered to the students and they were asked to rank the items according to their importance. The results showed that students are influenced by both academic and social issues. Earning life experience, benefiting from the experience in their future career and improving the language skills were the main interests for the students. The results can be interpreted to suggest that students are interested in applying their knowledge and skills that they have acquired in their university education and in gaining new experiences. On the other hand, family issues, adapting to a new university and lack of money were the main demotivators.

Gender difference was also observed in the results. The main demotivator for the female participants is family issues but it is not an issue for male participants. This difference gives us a hint about the sociocultural atmosphere of Turkey. Female participants also feel more family pressure on them. The main demotivator for the male students is lack of money. It is also a hint about the economical atmosphere of Turkey. Erasmus countries are mostly European Union countries which have a currency that is more valuable than Turkish currency and it is a problem for Turkish youth to take part in the program. As seen above, some crucial differences were prominent. However, in general, they shared same considerations such as financial concern, life experience, improving foreign language skills, and benefiting from the program in their future career.

4.1. Implications

The research exhibits the drawbacks and motivation of the students in Turkish context clearly. To get the maximum advantage out of the program, the encouraging and discouraging factors affecting the students must be considered by universities and government. Universities might be more active in the process helping the students to get financial supports, scholarships, housing, and making students more willing to participate in study abroad programs. Given that so many of the students studying in the universities in Turkey receive financial support from their families, providing funding for those who are not from higher socio-economic groups will increase the participation. “Family issues” was found to be a main demotivator for participants. Most Turkish parents have hesitations about sending their daughters abroad on their own. They worry, for instance, about their security and about where they will stay. Therefore informing parents about the program and its processes is also important.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of this study is that it explored the promoting and inhibiting factors toward studying abroad specifically in EFL students. We see the similar and different encouraging and discouraging factors between female and male respondents. The study gives an opinion what should be done to raise the level of the participation process. It is a source for further investigations of the issue.

The sample size in this study is not large so cannot be regarded as representative of all EFL students in Turkey. However, information about the Erasmus motivation of these students will be relevant for the international relations offices of universities and foreign language departments in providing opportunities of international experiences for students. Since studying abroad is of high interest to EFL students, providing such opportunities could create valuable practice of foreign language skills for them.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire

Dear friends,

This questionnaire is designed to find out your motivation of applying for Erasmus.

Thank you for your contribution.

Gender: Male Female

1. Have you ever applied for Erasmus program?

a. YES

b. Not yet, but I will.

c. NO



What is/was THREE REASONS for you to apply for Erasmus? Rank the following factors from the most important (1) to the least important (3).

-To earn life experience
-To improve my academic knowledge
-To please my parents
-To improve my language skills
-To study in a foreign university
-To have fun
-To benefit my future career
-To make international friends
-To learn about different cultures
-To live independently
-I have friends or relatives abroad
- Because most of my friends apply (peer pressure)
- Other (Please write).....

Who does/did motivate you the MOST to apply for Erasmus ?

- a. Myself
- b. Family
- c. Friends
- d. Teachers
- e. International Relations Office
- f. Other Erasmus student/students
- g. Other:

What is/was the THREE REASONS, why you don't/didn't want to go for Erasmus. Rank

the following factors from the most important (1) to the least important (3).

- Fear of study abroad
- Fear of new places
- Insufficient language knowledge
- Lack of money
- Not to find suitable places to stay
- Fear of being alone
- Not to be able to adapt to university in a foreign country.
- Fear of failure in the courses taken there
- Family issues
- Have a job at the home country
- Other (Please write)

Who does not/did not motivate you the MOST to apply for Erasmus ?

- a. Myself
- b. Family
- c. Friends
- d. Teachers
- e. International Relations Office
- f. Other Erasmus student/students
- g. Other:



If you answered YES or NOT YET BUT I WIL above, please complete this part.	If you answered YES					If you answered NO					
	Does not influence at all	Influences slightly	Influences moderately	Influences to a large extent	Influences to a very large extent	Does not influence at all	Influences slightly	Influences moderately	Influences to a large extent	Influences to a very large extent	
To earn life experience	1	2	3	4	5	Fear of study abroad	1	2	3	4	5
To improve my academic knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	Fear of new places	1	2	3	4	5
To please my parents	1	2	3	4	5	Insufficient language knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
To improve my language skills	1	2	3	4	5	Lack of money	1	2	3	4	5
To study in a foreign university	1	2	3	4	5	Not to find suitable places to stay	1	2	3	4	5
To have fun	1	2	3	4	5	Fear of being alone	1	2	3	4	5
To benefit my future career	1	2	3	4	5	Family issues	1	2	3	4	5
To make international friends	1	2	3	4	5	Fear of failure in the courses taken there	1	2	3	4	5
To learn about different cultures	1	2	3	4	5	Not to be able to adapt to university in a foreign country.	1	2	3	4	5
To live independently	1	2	3	4	5	Have a job at the home country	1	2	3	4	5
I have friends or relatives abroad	1	2	3	4	5	Other:	1	2	3	4	5
Most of my friends apply(peer pressure)	1	2	3	4	5						
Other	1	2	3	4	5						

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