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Can Erasmus Exchange Programs Help Undergraduate Tourism Students Improve Their Language Skills? An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

Erasmus+ supports inter-European exchanges for many students each year. The participants were asked to take a pre- and posttest with online language support (OLS). The study measured students' English development via OLS pre- and posttest scores from 2015--2021. Mixed methods with an explanatory-sequential design were utilized in this research. This study demonstrated a notable enhancement in students' test scores within competency levels B1--B2. Integration *through joint display analysis helped clarify the quantitative results. Practical and theoretical implications of student exchange programs for language improvement, including length of stay, interaction, and self-confidence, are presented.*

Keywords: Erasmus+, Online Language Support, Lingua Franca, Language Development, Tourism Students

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INTRODUCTION

The strategic objectives of universities increasingly emphasize cultural learning through study abroad (SA) programs, globally oriented courses, and language learning (Taguchi et al., 2016). SA provides opportunities for language acquisition, especially among students seeking intercultural experience (Llanes et al., 2016). The Erasmus Exchange Program (EEP), which has supported over three million students in the past 30 years (European Commission, 2023a), offers such experiences to undergraduate learners. EEP is associated with gains in language proficiency, self-confidence, independence, and cultural awareness.
Online linguistic support (OLS) is a digital platform used by the European Commission to enhance language learning (European Commission, 2023b). While prior research on Erasmus has focused on tools such as GPA and language learner beliefs (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Llanes et al., 2016), studies using OLS scores remain limited. This research applies OLS for the first time in the context of tourism education, offering a standardized and objective measure of linguistic progress.

Students join SA programs for various reasons, with language development being a key driver for tourism students (Marinesco, 2017). Since these exchanges receive substantial EU funding (European Commission, 2023c), measuring their effectiveness is essential. This study examines the role of OLSs and the length of stay (LoS) in language development, investigating students' lived experiences through a mixed-methods approach.

Given the limitations of single-method approaches, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted (Fetters et al., 2013), combining quantitative outcomes with qualitative insights. The rationale for this approach is developmental: qualitative sampling and analysis are guided by quantitative results (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Accordingly, the study aims to do the following:

(1) quantitatively assess the impact of EEP on language proficiency;
(2) examine the influence of LoS; and
(3) Explanate these findings through qualitative exploration.

The findings from this research can inform Erasmus program implementation and contribute to the limited literature on language learning in tourism education while offering a framework for future methodology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because the research used a mixed approach, which requires a longer explanation than a monomethod does, we had to summarize the important topics in the literature review.

English as a Lingua Franca Study Abroad (ELFSA)

A growing body of research has emphasized that second language development during study abroad is a multidimensional process influenced not

only by instructional exposure but also by social interaction and emotional adjustment. Specifically, self-confidence has emerged as a critical mediator between social engagement and language gains, particularly in the speaking and listening domains (Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018; Hessel, 2019). Students who feel accepted and supported in their host environments are more likely to participate in conversations, take linguistic risks, and develop communicative competence. Accordingly, exploring how self-confidence interacts with social integration and language acquisition provides essential insights for evaluating the impact of programs such as Erasmus.

English is now widely used as a lingua franca in study abroad programs, but it is not the official language of the host country. This is a relatively new context for English language learners studying abroad. According to Köylü (2016), this context is known as English as a Lingua Franca Study Abroad, or ELFSA. As suggested by Seidlhofer (2001), the rise of English as a lingua franca justified the reconsideration of traditional native speaker models, according to which learners seek to become proficient, international English users rather than native-like competence. Most previous studies have noted that students' general language proficiency increases following their SA experience (Borràs, 2023; Llanes et al., 2016; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). Hessel (2019) emphasized the value of interaction with foreign students as a means of fostering L2 acquisition, L2 self-motivation, and intercultural learning while studying abroad. Recent studies confirm these findings, highlighting the cognitive and academic benefits of studying abroad. In addition to linguistic development, international students' emotional and social experiences have also gained scholarly attention. For example, Mohamad and Manning (2024) conducted a comprehensive review of the concept of belongingness. They emphasized that students' language gains are often interconnected with their ability to feel accepted and integrated into the host environment. Their findings suggest that institutional support, peer relationships, and early-stage orientation activities are critical in enabling students to develop both linguistic and intercultural competence during their study abroad experience. Loes & An (2024) demonstrated that participation in international study programs enhances critical thinking, adaptability, and cognitive flexibility, reinforcing the broader value of studying abroad beyond mere linguistic gains. However, studies that compare language development across multiple student cohorts over several years—including the pandemic period—using a unified assessment tool such as the EU's OLS and a mixed-methods design remain underexplored in the literature. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The OLS pre- and posttest scores significantly differ in favor of the posttest score.

Online Language Support (OLS)

Participants in Erasmus+ can make the most of their time abroad by using OLS to improve their language skills. Students in higher education may find it challenging to take advantage of European opportunities for education, training, and youth mobility due to language barriers. This is among the reasons why the OLS system is so important. OLS tests and language assistance are available to over 350,000 Erasmus+ participants each year. The OLS is for college students interning or studying abroad for 3–12 months (European Commission, 2023c; erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu). OLS language assessments can help Erasmus+ students assess their academic and social readiness for abroad. The language assessment does not disqualify Erasmus+ participants. This makes exams stress-free. Participants can also take an online language course before and during their trip. Erasmus+ students can access the OLS assessment with their institution's password. Jin et al. (2024) examined the effectiveness of online curricula in study abroad settings and reported that structured online mentoring programs significantly enhance students' intercultural competence and language development. This suggests that OLSs could play a key role in reinforcing students' language skills and cultural awareness before and during their mobility experience.

Length of stay (LoS)

Previous studies on the length of stay (LoS) have yielded conflicting results. Several researchers (Hirai, 2018; Dwyer, 2004; DeLoach et al., 2021; Grieve, 2015; Alcón-Soler, 2014; Davidson, 2010; Leonard & Shea, 2017; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009) have reported a positive relationship between LoS and the development of language proficiency. However, fewer studies (Llanes Baró & Serrano, 2011; Avello et al., 2013; Beltrán, 2014; Isabelli, 2003) reported no significant correlation. Notably, Lara et al. (2015) identified a negative association between these variables. Recent studies further highlight the complexity surrounding this topic. Tseng et al. (2024), in their meta-analysis, demonstrated that language gains during study abroad depend not only on the duration but also significantly on the quality of immersion and frequency of interactions with native speakers. Zhou and Rose (2023) similarly reported that Chinese students studying in the UK often remained within their native-speaking social groups, limiting their authentic interactions in English. These studies suggest that while LoS remains an important consideration, it is most effective when combined with active engagement in the host language environment. In support of this view, Nada et al. (2023), through retrospective interviews with Erasmus alumni, reported that longer stays alone did not guarantee linguistic improvement without adequate institutional support. The participants in their study frequently reported experiencing confusion, inadequate guidance, and inconsistent recognition procedures—even during extended mobility periods. These findings emphasize that the effectiveness of LoS for language

development is closely linked to how well students are prepared and institutionally supported before and throughout their mobility.

However, limited research has been conducted on the impact of EEP on students' proficiency in English as a Lingua Franca. Previous studies have focused on language development; however, it is important to consider student experiences when evaluating this phenomenon. The language development process for undergraduates requires an MMR due to limitations in previous studies. This study could assist higher education officials in understanding the role of EEPs in language proficiency in Türkiye's undergraduate tourism education system. It could serve as a source of inspiration for future research. We anticipated that OLS scores would differ before and after the program, depending on the duration of students' EEP participation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is a significant relationship between LoS and OLS test scores.

METHOD

In accordance with Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), this study employed a mixed-methods sequential methodology. A study quantitatively compared the results of pre- and post-OLS tests in the first phase. After the start of the process, interviews were conducted to analyze the explanations of the OLS results and the role of LoS in language enhancement.

Integration strategies

This section outlines the study's integration strategies for the three MMR integration levels. Figure 1 illustrates a two-phase design in which quantitative data (OLS scores) were collected and assessed initially, followed by interviews and analysis via three integration strategies.

An explanatory-sequential design was employed to facilitate integration at the design level. The purpose of this study was to investigate how EEP improved the linguistic skills of undergraduate students in Türkiye via quantitative OLS scores and qualitative interviews with tourism undergraduate students for whom the scores differed based on the quantitative results. The fact that undergraduate tourism students were expected to know more foreign languages than students in other fields was a factor in their selection. The study used MMR, which demonstrates a predominantly quantitative pattern, with a greater emphasis on quantitative data (QUAN) than qualitative data (qual).

Method integration was achieved by connecting. In an explanatory-sequential approach, quantitative data are first assessed and then used to establish qualitative sample criteria (McCrudden & McTigue, 2019). The current study purposely selected participants for follow-up interviews from three groups based on OLS scores. The extreme-case sample identified students whose OLS scores increased, did not change, or decreased. Extreme-case sampling involves connecting a type of method-level integration to a dimension

of interest and a distribution of individuals along that dimension (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

Joint display was used as an interpretation and reporting strategy, in accordance with the guidelines provided by Fetters et al. (2013). The display involves the implementation of an integrated results matrix, which serves as a visual representation of both quantitative and qualitative data interpretations within a single display (McCrudden & McTigue, 2019).

Given the joint display used in this study, the quantitative section of the matrix contains the primary results, including the examined period, number of OLS test outcomes categorized into three groups, average LoS, pretest-posttest results, and LoS and OLS comparison results. For readers' comprehension, the qualitative section included sample illustrative quotes for each grouping. These quotations were color-coded and categorized into three themes. Finally, meta-inferences were used to assess the relationships between qualitative and quantitative data (Table 3).

Study I: Quantitative phase

In the quantitative phase, OLS test results were used. The EEP offers student language help online (European Commission, 2023b; erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu). Before joining EEP, students must complete an English placement test. A second placement test is performed after mobility. The examination results were A1 -, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. The lowest level is A1-, and the highest is C2. In this study, the OLS grading system was operationalized on a scale ranging from 1--6, where 1 represents the lowest achievement and 6 represents the highest achievement.

The study included all EEP participants at a major state university in Türkiye. After IRB permission, the two-stage OLS exam results of all the undergraduate EEP participants from 2015 through 2021 were supplied to us. The level of confidence in the representativeness of our sample can be considered high, given a margin of error of 5% for the population. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect differences in the performance of students who experience EEP, as they are required to take the OLS assessment both before and after program completion. The study sample consisted of 342 Erasmus+ participants in total, distributed across six academic years from 2015-2021. The number of participants varied by year, with the largest cohort in 2017–2018 (n = 86) and the smallest in 2016–2017 (n = 36). The average length of stay (LoS) across all years was 6.5 months. A gradual decline in LoS was observed over time, starting from 7.1 months in 2015–2016 and decreasing to 5.8 months by 2020–2021. This decline may reflect changes in program design, institutional policies, or external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A paired-samples t test was employed for mean comparison if the pretest and posttest results differed significantly by year. Significant relationships between OLS outcomes and LoS were examined via correlation analysis. After controlling for years, we examined the link between the OLS score difference

and LoS via partial correlation analysis. Figure 1 presents the quantitative data analysis.

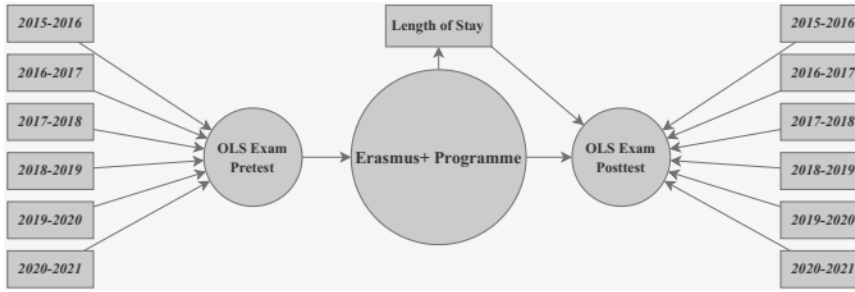

Figure 1. Quantitative Analysis Process.

Study II: Qualitative phase

A phenomenological study, a key qualitative research strategy (Emiliussen et al., 2021), fits this study's research questions. We described the experiences of tourism undergraduate EEP students to determine whether outcomes in the quantitative phase could be supported. Tourism students are selected based on their foreign language skills, which are crucial to the hospitality and tourism industries (Zahedpisheh et al., 2017).

We divided the participants into three groups based on OLS scores: those with lower scores than the pretest scores (f = 65; 19%), those with unchanged scores (f = 144; 44.11%), and those with increased scores (f = 133; 38.89%). Before conducting the interviews, we asked the international office for their contact information. They refused to share the data because it included private information. We extended the interviews to include EEP participants from the Faculty of Tourism. At that time, we were able to connect with nine students. We then randomly selected two students from each group (for a total of six), using extreme-case sampling to select potential students for follow-up interviews. We asked the students if they were willing to participate in the study, and all of them provided their consent. This approach enabled us to assess different undergraduate students studying tourism in the three groups outlined by Ivankova et al. (2006). The first author set the schedule and conducted the interviews online and face-to-face. The characteristics of the students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Tourism Undergraduate Students Interview

Students	Gender	Total LoS (month)	Erasmus host country	Pre-OLS test score	Post-OLS test score	Difference
S1	Male	4.5	Poland	B2	B2	⬌ No change

S2	Female	12	Poland	B1	B2	Increase
S3	Female	10	Poland	B1	B1	No change
S4	Female	9	Poland	B1	B2	Increase
S5	Female	6	Hungary	B2	B1	Decrease
S6	Male	2.5	Poland	B1	A2	Decrease

A semistructured interview with four questions and some probes was used in the qualitative phase. The interview questions were based on quantitative results. A tourism undergraduate student from outside the study group was used for the pilot test. The student feedback indicated that the questions were adequate. The interviews lasted 91 minutes, with the least 13 minutes, the longest 18 minutes, and an average of 15 minutes. Accordingly, the purpose of the interviews was to address the following questions:

- Why did some students' OLS scores not improve after they participated in the Erasmus program?
- How have some students' language scores improved?
- Why has some students' language proficiency remained the same as before they joined the Erasmus program?
- Why are the OLS and LoS results unrelated?

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then converted to MS Word. The interview and research questions were linked via deductive coding. The deductive approach uses research objectives, research questions, and interview questions to derive initial codes from relevant literature or established knowledge (Azungah, 2018). For example, we found no significant relationship between LoS and OLS scores. However, quantitative data alone were insufficient to obtain this result, so qualitative data were needed to confirm this finding. In doing so, we used codes to show LoS's role and meaning in the student's EEP experience.

The two authors of this study read the texts separately multiple times to understand the students' EEP experiences. The interview data were classified into different sections. The proposed method helped us uncover new data categories and understand the underlying causes. Independent coding results were repeated until the two researchers agreed.

The interviews were analyzed via directed qualitative content analysis (DQICA) (Kibiswa, 2019). Compared with inductive techniques, DQICA is commonly distinguished by a higher level of structuring. The initial categorization for this study was guided by the quantitative phase and the unique characteristics of the subgroups identified during the quantitative phase. Ultimately, 12 codes were employed within the context of the three overarching themes. Furthermore, the three codes were identified by probing queries.

The data were thoroughly examined, and relevant excerpts were assigned corresponding codes. Through peer debriefing (Miles & Huberman, 1994), another researcher independently generated codes and inferences to triangulate the inferences. The codes and themes were agreed upon to accurately represent the students' rating criteria. Semistructured interviews with probes, in vivo

coding, peer debriefing, and examination and resolution of contradictory evidence were employed to verify inferences and data (Ivankova et al., 2006).

RESULTS

Quantitative results

The Erasmus+ Exchange Program (EEP) participants achieved an average posttest score of 3.29, an improvement from the average pretest score of 3.00, across the six academic years from 2015--2021. This suggests that the program contributed to enhancing students' language proficiency, generally elevating them to the B1–B2 CEFR levels.

A year-by-year analysis revealed that posttest scores increased steadily, except from 2019–2020, when social restrictions and the transition to online learning—due to the COVID-19 pandemic—likely limited opportunities for meaningful interaction. Trends in pre- and posttest scores, along with average length of stay (LoS), offer further insights. The highest LoS was recorded from 2015–2016 at 7.17 months, and the lowest was recorded from 2020–2021 at 5.84 months. The pretest scores ranged from 2.72--3.46, whereas the posttest scores ranged from 3.00-3.72, indicating modest but consistent improvements across the period. The most significant gain occurred in 2015–2016, where the posttest score increased from 3.17 to 3.70, paralleling the highest LoS. Conversely, 2016–2017 had the lowest posttest score (3.00) and one of the shortest LoS durations (6.64 months).

Interestingly, from 2020–2021, despite the reduced LoS (5.84 months), posttest scores (3.72) remained relatively high, suggesting possible adaptations to digital tools such as OLSs and remote learning strategies during the pandemic. The paired-samples t test revealed that the OLS scores improved significantly from pretest to posttest [t =−5,336, df=341, p=.000]. The difference of 0.28363 points between the average of the pretest (M=3.0088, sd= .910) and posttest (M=3.2924, sd= .932) results was statistically significant. Thus, it can be argued that the students' language skills improved following their EEP. Accordingly, H1 was supported.

The results of the correlation analysis indicate that there was no statistically significant relationship between the OLS outcomes, which refer to the difference between post- and pretest scores, and the length of stay (LoS) (r =10.3; p>0.05). Furthermore, after controlling for the impact of years, the partial correlation test revealed that the relationship between the difference in the OLS scores and LoS was not statistically significant ($r = 0.09$; $p > 0.05$). Thus, it can be inferred that LoS in the context of EEP did not have a significant effect on OLS outcomes. Therefore, H2 was not corroborated.

Qualitative results

Three overarching themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (I) general evaluation of online language support (OLS), (II) development of language skills, and (III) perceptions of the length of stay (LoS). Fifteen codes were identified, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Summary of Themes and Codes by Students*

Themes and Codes	Students					
	S1	**S2**	**S3**	**S4**	**S5**	**S6**
Theme I: General Evaluation for OLS						
OLS was sufficient	+	+	+	+	-	-
Speaking ability should be measurable	+	+	+	+	+	+
Theme II: Development of Language Skills						
Better overall	+	+	+	+	±	±
Interaction	+	+	+	+	±	±
Increase in speaking ability	+	+	+	+	+	+
Increase in listening ability	±	+	+	+	+	+
Increase in reading ability	NS	+	NS	-	±	NS
Increase in writing ability	NS	NS	NS	-	±	NS
Increase in self-confidence	+	+	+	+	+	+
Contribution of the school	-	+	NS	±	NS	NS
Theme III: Length of Stay (LoS)						
LoS was sufficient	±	+	+	-	-	-
The role of LoS	±	+	+	+	-	-
Codes Emerged Through Probing Questions						
Curious about the host country's language	NS	+	+	NS	NS	NS
Visit to other countries	+	NS	+	NS	NS	NS
COVID-19	NS	NS	+	NS	NS	NS

Note: (+): the participant exhibits the feature, (-): the participant does not exhibit the feature, (±): the participant neither exhibits nor does not exibit, NS: not specified

Theme I explore students' general views on the OLS system. While some participants described the OLS as adequate, those who showed no improvement in their OLS scores criticized it for emphasizing grammar and failing to evaluate communicative competence. For instance:

"*OLS is horrible. They allow one word in a sentence. Language flexibility is absurd... Additionally, OLSs have poor work schedules.*" (Student 6, LoS = 2.5 months, OLS score decreased)

"*The grammar test is not important. They do not test daily conversation skills... The results do not match speaking ability.*" (Student 5, LoS = 6 months, OLS score decreased)

Theme II captures perceived improvements in speaking, listening, and self-confidence despite limited gains in test scores. Some students reported modest

improvements attributed to immersion and face-to-face interactions. As Student 6 stated,

"*Speaking face-to-face gave me a confidence boost... It helped me think quickly in English.*"

Students also emphasized their ability to express themselves more freely and feel progress, especially in oral communication. For example:

"*I was focused on grammar and had little speaking practice. I spoke more freely... My public speaking skills improved. I also got used to hearing different accents while listening. Reading improved as we browsed English materials for presentations.*" (Student 3, LoS = 10 months, OLS = no change)

Student 4 (LoS = 9 months, OLS increased) reinforced this notion:

"*I believe it is about confidence. I became more expressive and learned new phrases. Vocabulary development helped me feel more confident during the exam.*"

Theme III emphasizes the impact of LoS. Several students who did not improve their OLS scores attributed this to a stay that was too short for meaningful linguistic development:

"*Five to six months are too short for English learning. Adaptation alone takes 1–2 months.*" (Student 6)

"*Better results come with more time. I made international friends and could have joined more communities if I stayed longer.*" (Student 5)

On the other hand, students who stayed longer highlighted the advantages of extended interaction:

"I stayed for a year. It was a very good environment socially, full of interaction." (Student 2, OLS score increased)

"*I was there for a year, always socializing... Staying longer leads to better results. I started thinking in English instead of Turkish.*" (Student 3)

Interestingly, two students reported an active interest in learning the host country's language alongside English. This was observed among those who stayed longer (10–12 months). Another pattern revealed through probing questions was that travel to other countries during the Erasmus program enhanced intercultural engagement and perceived language gains. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a negative factor, with students citing reduced interaction and lower confidence as consequences.

"*COVID-19 truly limited interaction. That definitely affected both confidence and progress.*"

Results of the integration of mixed methods

As shown in Table 3, data integration revealed expansion, confirmation, and The posttest results indicated that students' OLS exam strategies explained the score discrepancies. Students whose scores declined exhibited a negative attitude toward the OLS exam, whereas others had a more positive outlook. This suggests that attitudes toward the exam influence outcomes, a phenomenon referred to as the "halo effect." The exam content explains these differences: some students found the test beneficial, whereas others felt that they lacked

measurement skills. Additionally, the absence of spoken assessments made it challenging to evaluate all the students' language abilities fully.

Participation in the EEP program significantly improved the OLS test results, supporting the pretest–posttest analysis (H1). Between 2015 and 2021, the average OLS score increased from B1 to B2. Qualitative findings also confirmed that the Erasmus program enhanced students' language skills, particularly speaking and listening, even for those whose test scores declined. This alignment between the quantitative and qualitative findings reinforces each other, confirming the results.

However, while the quantitative results revealed no significant relationship between the LoS score and OLS score (H2 was not supported), the qualitative data suggested otherwise, leading to the following conclusions. Several factors may explain these inconsistencies: differences in measurement tools (standardized tests vs. in-depth interviews), misalignment in online language tests (Chapelle & Voss, 2016), and the complexity of language acquisition in study abroad contexts (Isabelli-García et al., 2018). Self-assessment variations may also contribute, as students may have greater awareness of their skills in qualitative interviews, despite high test scores. Real-life language use differs from controlled test environments, with cultural adaptation and social integration playing crucial roles (Dewey et al., 2013). Individual differences in study-abroad experiences further impact outcomes (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). While quantitative tests capture a single moment of performance, qualitative interviews reveal experiences over time, showing that language development does not always align with test results (Sasaki, 2011). Additionally, ambitious personal goals can lead to dissatisfaction despite strong performance (Mercer, 2012). These inconsistencies highlight the complex nature of language learning in study-abroad contexts and call for further research (Coleman, 2013).

Table 3 *Joint display analysis*

Quantitative findings *Statistics*			**Qualitative findings** *Themes and quotes*	**Mixed methods meta-inferences**
Period	2015-2021		**Theme I- General Evaluation for OLS** P1: OLS was not easy. It would improve my stay. I would recognize my own contributions and return as something significant. OLS helped me assess myself at the end by determining what I added to myself. Grammar was examined but not speaking. **P3:** It was deemed necessary to employ OLS analysis in order to determine our current level. **P6:** Grammar exams have limited impact. The questions were mostly knowledge-based and did not reflect daily dialog. Thus, these findings were unlike spoken communication. I'm usually bad at testing. I think verbal communication was distinct.	***Expansion*** Considering the apparent influence of students' attitudes toward assessments on examination outcomes, there needs to be reinforcement of the quantitative findings in light of the qualitative findings.
Number of Participants	342	↑ 133		
		↓ 65		
		↔ 144	**Theme II- Development of language skills** **P2:** I had problems listening and talking. It impacts all of these, notably	***Confirmation*** All students

Average LoS (Month)	6,5	speaking and listening. I initially used Google Translate. I then spoke freely. After two to three months, you get over it. I went from shy to confident. OLS test results did not surprise me. Erasmus simplifies and naturalizes. I have improved at speaking and listening. **P3:** My speech improved. I focused on grammar and had little speaking experience. Speaking became easier. Improved speech. I'm used to hearing new things as I listen. Literature was impacted. Preparing presentations required constant English-language research. I think this happened. **P5:** P5 significantly improved my speaking and listening skills. Because the instructors' English was like ours, it was ineffective for reading and writing. I lacked English confidence before leaving. I won. Since I could not conduct deep talks before the last month, I think I'm fluent. It helped me a lot. English books benefit me like listening does. I listened poorly. Listening improved most. **Theme III- Length of Stay** **P1:** I do not think it would change much for me if the time was longer, since I moved as much as I could during that time. Therefore, I said it was enough, even though I could have gone on longer. **P2**: I used to be unsure of myself, but after about two to three months, you get used to it and get over it. I think at least two to three months are needed. **P3:** I stayed a year. People could socialize there. I talked to everyone. I might not have made it if I hadn't stayed. I started thinking in English instead of Turkish. English made sense. You improve over time. I recommend staying for four months. **P4:** I believe the minimum duration should be five months. However, I believe I acquired confidence one month after leaving. **P5:** Longer was needed. You know 5–6 months to learn English is short. Self-improvement begins after 1-2 months in residence. I wanted to stay, but there was no way I could. Six months is insufficient. Exiting students should stay at least one year. Although I adapt quickly, the process took two months. **P6:** More time would have been better. Adaptation was the first phase. I have met people from diverse cultures in recent weeks. I could meet more people if I stayed longer. Thus, time is valuable.	agreed that the Erasmus program had a positive effect on their speaking and listening skills, regardless of whether their scores increased, remained constant, or decreased. This is consistent with the quantitative result that there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest results in favor of the posttest. ***Discordance*** The quantitative results indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in the pretest and posttest scores based on LoS. However, it is noteworthy that the students emphasized the importance of the LoS.
Significance (Pretest-Posttest)	0,000		
Significance (length of stay)	0,792		

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that participation in Erasmus Exchange Programs (EEPs) significantly enhances students' second language acquisition, particularly speaking and listening skills. The results align with those of Tseng et al. (2024), who conducted a meta-analysis and reported that study abroad programs yield medium-to-large effect sizes in language learning, with a focus on structured immersion settings. Similarly, Loes & An (2024) demonstrated that participation in study abroad programs enhances critical thinking and cognitive flexibility, which indirectly benefits language development.

Notably, no significant correlation was found between the length of stay (LoS) and language proficiency improvement, which aligns with past research (Isabelli, 2003; Llanes Baró & Serrano, 2011). However, qualitative insights suggest that LoS increases confidence and engagement, which indirectly aids in language acquisition (Hirai, 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Grieve, 2015).

Furthermore, Zhou & Rose (2023) highlight that students who actively engage in international peer interactions experience greater linguistic gains,

whereas those who remain within L1-speaking groups see minimal improvement.

The first phase showed that the EEP helped students improve their language skills, with OLS scores increasing from B1 to B2 over time. The second phase interviews confirmed this conclusion. The interviews revealed that the most noticeable language growth occurred in speaking and listening. However, the significant improvement in exam scores indicates an improvement in reading and comprehension skills. Erasmus is expected to improve students' language skills, even though it is not primarily a language development program. These findings imply that SA can improve L2 English acquisition in countries where English is not the primary language. This aligns with earlier research indicating that students' overall language proficiency improved after their study abroad experiences (Borràs, 2023; Llanes, Arnó, & Mancho-Barés, 2016; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018).

The statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between length of stay and language development. This finding is consistent with prior studies (Isabelli, 2003; Llanes Baró & Serrano, 2011; Avello et al., 2013; Beltrán, 2014). Conversely, extended stays could enhance OLS outcomes, as demonstrated by the meta-inferences derived from the integration, despite the lack of evidence linking the two in the quantitative study. This result, which was derived from data integration, is consistent with findings from prior studies that LoS positively influences language development (Hirai, 2018; Dwyer, 2004; DeLoach et al., 2021; Grieve, 2015; Alcón-Soler, 2014; Davidson, 2010; Leonard & Shea, 2017; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009).

Ultimately, engaging with fellow European students at EEP enhances their self-confidence and aids in language development, underscoring the growing importance of LoS. Hessel (2019) emphasized the importance of interaction among international students as a method to promote L2 acquisition, L2 self-motivation, and intercultural learning while studying abroad, as supported by this research. However, students who avoid interaction will not undergo this development. As a result, the findings of this research contribute to understanding the outcomes of prior investigations.

Theoretical implications

This study establishes a novel theoretical framework by integrating length of stay (LoS), social interaction, and self-confidence into a holistic model of second language acquisition. Unlike prior studies, this research emphasizes how extended mobility periods and meaningful peer engagement enhance linguistic confidence, particularly in the speaking and listening domains. In support of this, Tseng et al. (2024) underscore the effectiveness of structured interventions, such as role-playing and digital assessments, in fostering communicative ability. Similarly, the study confirms that online language support (OLS) is a reliable tool for tracking measurable language development, which aligns with the findings of Zhou & Rose (2023), who highlight the impact of digital interaction on second language learning. An unexpected yet important finding is the

negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Ellis, Jola, & Cameron (2024), students who participated in Erasmus during this period demonstrated lower OLS outcomes, likely due to reduced face–to-face interaction, underlining the continued importance of physical socialization in language acquisition.

The conceptual model developed through qualitative meta-inference positions LoS as a foundational element of the Erasmus+ experience. Longer stays facilitate deeper immersion, creating conditions for more frequent and meaningful interaction and the development of self-confidence. These two factors, acting as mediators, contribute jointly to language proficiency gains. In this structure, interaction is both an outcome of the EEP and a pathway through which LoS influences skill development. Self-confidence, in turn, emerges from successful social engagement in the host context. Together, they form a synergistic mechanism that supports linguistic growth.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study reaffirms the value of LoS in promoting cultural learning and language immersion. It also addresses inconsistencies in prior findings by offering empirical validation of LoS's mediating effects. Finally, the visual representation of variable relationships (LoS → interaction/self-confidence → language ability) offers a novel, integrative model to guide future research and program development.

Practical implications

In addition to language learning, Erasmus programs equip students with essential intercultural and professional skills. Prior research has emphasized that international mobility fosters global competence, adaptability, and professional networking—key attributes for careers in tourism and hospitality. Given the significance of LoS, it is strongly recommended that Erasmus coordinators negotiate longer student stays. Studies show that students who spend extended periods abroad build stronger professional networks, enhancing postgraduate employment prospects. Zhou & Rose (2023) further reinforce this by demonstrating that students who remain abroad longer tend to integrate better and improve their language skills.

Additionally, Jin et al. (2024) emphasized that structured intercultural training and mentoring programs significantly enhance students' adaptation and professional skills. Institutions should incorporate networking events, intercultural training workshops, and structured online language exchanges to maximize the benefits of the Erasmus experience.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the qualitative phase included only six participants selected through extreme-case sampling. While this approach allowed for rich narrative insights, the small sample size limits the

generalizability of the qualitative findings. Future studies may employ a larger and more diverse group of participants, possibly using stratified sampling to enhance representativeness.

Second, the study relied on pre- and posttest scores from the online language support (OLS) system, which emphasizes grammar and reading. As several participants noted, OLSs may not adequately reflect improvements in communicative or oral skills. Future research could incorporate alternative language proficiency assessments that evaluate real-time speaking and listening capabilities, such as interview-based CEFR assessments or discourse analysis.

Third, the study focused on a single university in Turkey. While this provides an in-depth contextual understanding, the results may differ in other institutional or national settings. Comparative studies involving multiple universities and countries would provide more comprehensive insights into the impact of the Erasmus program.

Fourth, the study occurred during a period affected by COVID-19, which limited social interaction and may have suppressed participants' language development. Follow-up studies in fully postpandemic contexts could provide cleaner comparisons and test the resilience of these findings.

Finally, the current research focused on English as a second language without exploring other host country languages that some participants attempted to learn. Future research could examine multilingual development during Erasmus mobility, particularly in non-English-speaking environments.

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