

## Interculturalism and My Experiences in Sweden: A Journey through Language and Culture

Interculturalism is an essential aspect of our increasingly globalized world, characterized by the interaction and coexistence of diverse cultures. It involves the blending of cultural perspectives, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration among people from different cultural backgrounds. I spent a semester abroad in a small city in the south of Sweden called Växjö. My semester abroad in Sweden offered a heartfelt immersion into interculturalism, where learning Swedish and interacting with other international students significantly shaped my understanding of cultural diversity and communication.

Embarking on my semester abroad in Sweden, I decided to take a Swedish for beginners' course as part of my coursework. Learning a new language (with the help of Duolingo), especially as an adult, is very difficult and presents a set of challenges and rewards. Initially, the complexity of Swedish phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary was daunting. The language's melodic intonation, characterized by its pitch accent, often left me confused more often than none. However, the structured approach of the course, combined with immersive practices like daily conversations and cultural activities, gradually eased my anxiety.

Learning Swedish extended beyond mere linguistic proficiency. It became a gateway to understanding Swedish culture, traditions, and societal values. Engaging with the language allowed me to appreciate the delicacy of Swedish etiquette, such as the importance of punctuality, the concept of "lagom" (moderation and balance), and the emphasis on egalitarianism. These cultural insights enriched my interactions with locals and deepened my appreciation for the Swedish way of life.

One of the most enriching aspects of my semester abroad was living with 14 other students from different countries. Our shared living environment became a melting pot of languages, traditions, and worldviews. My roommates come from various corners of the globe, including Spain, Japan, Korea, America, Saudi Arabia, and China. This diverse cultural mosaic offered daily lessons in interculturalism, as we navigated the complexities of living together while respecting our individual backgrounds.

Our interactions were not confined to English, the lingua franca of our group. Eager to share their cultures, my roommates took it upon themselves to teach me their native languages. Each language lesson was a cultural immersion, revealing the nuances of communication unique to each culture. Learning basic phrases in Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and Chinese was both challenging and exhilarating. These sessions often extended into cultural exchanges,

where we discussed traditions, festivals, and customs from our respective countries. Language is inherently tied to culture, serving as a vehicle for expressing cultural identity, values, and social norms. My journey of learning Swedish and other languages during my semester abroad highlighted the profound interconnection between language and culture. Each language lesson provided a window into the cultural psyche of its speakers, enhancing my understanding of their worldviews and societal structures

For instance, learning Swedish underscored the value Swedes place on simplicity, clarity, and inclusivity. The language's straightforward grammar and minimalistic expression reflect these cultural traits. Similarly, my short experience with Japanese revealed the deep-rooted cultural emphasis on respect, hierarchy, and group harmony, as evidenced by the language's honorifics and nuanced levels of politeness. This interplay between language and culture was evident in my interactions with my roommates as well. Conversing in their native tongues often led to discussions about cultural practices, societal norms, and historical contexts. These exchanges fostered a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human experiences and the ways in which language shapes our understanding of the world.

While I was learning about my roommates' cultures and languages, I also had the opportunity to share my South African heritage with them. Teaching my roommates about South African culture and trying to teach them Afrikaans was a rewarding and enlightening experience. I introduced them to the rich history, diverse traditions, and unique aspects of South African society. We often held cultural nights where each of us would present aspects of our culture. When it was my turn, I shared stories about South Africa's vibrant music and dance traditions, our diverse cuisine, and the significance of events like Heritage Day.

I also spoke about the country's complex history and the journey towards democracy, providing a broader context for understanding contemporary South African society. Teaching Afrikaans was particularly interesting. Afrikaans, with its roots in Dutch, has a unique linguistic structure and vocabulary. I taught my roommates basic phrases, greetings, and common expressions. These lessons often turned into lively discussions about language evolution, colonial history, and cultural exchange.

Living in such a culturally diverse environment necessitated a high degree of intercultural competence. We had to navigate differences in communication styles, social expectations, and daily habits. This process required patience, empathy, and a willingness to learn from one

another. Over time, we developed a shared cultural space where mutual respect and understanding flourished.

Our shared meals became a focal point of intercultural exchange. Each week, we took turns preparing dishes from our home countries, transforming our kitchen into a global culinary hub. These meals were more than just culinary experiences; they were cultural narratives, offering insights into our heritage and traditions. Cooking and sharing food fostered a sense of community and belonging, bridging cultural divides and creating lasting bonds.

In addition to my experiences in Sweden, I had the opportunity to travel through Europe during my semester abroad. This travel further enriched my intercultural journey as I encountered diverse languages and cultures across the continent. Each country presented a unique linguistic landscape, challenging me to learn and adapt to new modes of communication.

In France, I attempted to pick up basic French phrases, appreciating the language's melodic flow and its role in expressing French culture. In Germany, I was struck by the precision and structure of the German language, reflecting the country's emphasis on efficiency and order. My travels through Italy introduced me to the passionate and expressive nature of Italian, a language that beautifully captures the spirit of Italian culture.

One of the highlights of my European travels was the time I spent in Amsterdam. As a South African who speaks Afrikaans, I found an unexpected connection with the Dutch language. Afrikaans, a derivative of Dutch, allowed me to understand and communicate in Dutch to a certain extent. This linguistic familiarity provided a unique cultural bridge, making my experience in Amsterdam particularly memorable. Exploring Amsterdam's rich history, vibrant arts scene, and dynamic multiculturalism offered profound insights into Dutch culture. My ability to engage with locals in Dutch, although imperfectly, enriched my interactions and deepened my understanding of the city's cultural fabric. This experience underscored the power of language as a tool for connecting with people and places on a deeper level.

To assist with learning multiple languages simultaneously, I relied heavily on Duolingo. This language-learning app became an invaluable tool in my journey. Duolingo's user-friendly interface and gamified approach made language learning engaging and accessible. I dedicated time each day to practice Swedish, as well as Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and Chinese through the app. Duolingo's bite-sized lessons and interactive exercises helped reinforce vocabulary and grammar rules, making it easier to retain new information. The app's emphasis

on repetition and spaced learning was particularly beneficial in managing the complexity of learning multiple languages at once.

My academic experiences in Sweden significantly contributed to my understanding of intercultural learning. The Swedish education system emphasizes collaboration, critical thinking, and open dialogue, fostering an environment conducive to intercultural exchange. Group projects, class discussions, and presentations often involved students from diverse cultural backgrounds, creating opportunities for intercultural learning and collaboration. One memorable project involved analysing the impact of globalization on local cultures. Working with classmates from different countries, we shared perspectives and insights from our respective cultures, examining how global trends influenced our societies. This project highlighted the importance of considering multiple viewpoints in understanding complex global issues and underscored the value of intercultural collaboration.

Additionally, courses on international relations and cultural studies provided theoretical frameworks for understanding interculturalism. These courses explored concepts such as cultural identity, intercultural communication, and global citizenship, offering deeper insights into the dynamics of cultural interaction and exchange. The academic rigor and diversity of perspectives in these courses enriched my understanding of interculturalism and its significance in today's globalized world.

My semester abroad in Sweden, immersed in a multicultural living environment and learning multiple languages, profoundly impacted my personal growth. It challenged me to step outside my comfort zone, embrace uncertainty, and develop greater cultural sensitivity. I learned to appreciate the beauty of linguistic and cultural diversity, recognizing the value of different perspectives in enriching our collective experiences.

Interculturalism also taught me the importance of adaptability and open-mindedness. Living with people from diverse backgrounds required flexibility and a willingness to adapt to new situations. This adaptability extended to my academic and social life, enhancing my ability to navigate complex intercultural interactions with confidence and ease.

Additionally, my experiences in Sweden underscored the significance of lifelong learning. The process of acquiring new languages and cultural knowledge is ongoing, requiring continuous curiosity and engagement. This mindset of lifelong learning has influenced my approach to future endeavours, both personal and professional, fostering a commitment to growth and self-improvement. Interculturalism, as experienced during my semester abroad in Sweden, is a

dynamic and transformative process. It involves the continuous interplay of language, culture, and personal interactions, shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it. Learning Swedish and living with a diverse group of international students enriched my academic journey and broadened my horizons, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and intercultural competence.

My experiences in Sweden demonstrated that interculturalism is not merely about coexistence but about meaningful engagement, mutual respect, and collaborative learning. It is a testament to the power of cultural exchange in bridging divides, fostering understanding, and creating a more inclusive and interconnected world. As we navigate the complexities of our globalized society, the lessons of interculturalism remain invaluable, guiding us towards a future where diversity is celebrated, and cultural differences are embraced.