

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)

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INTRODUCTION

I recall the first time I discovered what Spanish stereotypes were: I was participating in a volunteering programme when a boy from Poland asked me why bullfighting was so popular in Spain (he thought it was animal abuse). I didn't really understand the question because back then - and even today - bullfighting was going through a crisis in Spain due to animal rights protests and the rejection by a large part of the population. That's how I discovered the first stereotype foreigners have about Spaniards. It didn't take me long to realise I also had stereotypes, and they were in fact not true at all.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL STEREOTYPES?

Being Spanish often means being asked if you eat paella every day, how many flamenco dancers are in your family and if you can survive a day without taking a siesta. Most of the time, we just laugh at such questions, but personally, I thought they were very silly. It wasn't until I moved to London for my Erasmus that I unconsciously asked questions that made just as little sense: none at all.

Thanks to my Erasmus semester in London, I've been able to understand the cultural differences in our daily lives. I got to know how citizens from other European countries see Spanish people and why they have that perspective. And that's because their way of thinking has been shaped by a concrete cultural background with different traditions, languages...

To be honest, at first, I wasn't really fond of the stereotypes Spanish people are given. But I realised I also had them. To give a brief example, I always thought Germans were unfriendly and quiet (also probably because I had never met one in my entire life). But when I met a girl from Berlin who became one of my closest friends during those months, my whole perspective changed. I had no doubt that all the stereotypes Spanish people have about Germans are actually not true (or at least, not in any of the many Germans I'm now friends with).

If we reflect on the other point of view, my German friend thought Spanish people were rude and not nice to foreigners. She explained to me that this was a stereotype based on the fact that people from Barcelona have a "Tourist go home" graffiti in every street. Personally, I live in Barcelona and I am aware of the tourism massification that is destroying the city, but thanks to her sincere explanation, I was able to understand her personal experience with Spanish people and why she had that vision of us. I realised then that we were on the same page and we had just discovered how important stereotypes are when talking with a foreigner.

I consider that the good part of stereotypes is breaking them in order to demonstrate that every country is different but we all do have something in common: every citizen of every country is different from every other citizen, and that is what makes us humans. Not every Spanish person is loud when they speak, not every Italian is obsessed with fashion and not every Dutch loves techno and hardcore music.

The Cambridge Dictionary describes "stereotype" as "a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong". I strongly agree with this, even though these ideas can apply to some people. For instance, I have friends from Seville (Andalucía, southern Spain) who have a family member who sings flamenco and another who can dance it. Does this mean every citizen of Spain knows how to do any of these things correctly? Of course not. I came to the conclusion that it is best to laugh at stereotypes and try to explain to foreigners why they are not real instead of just getting mad at them.

BREAKING THOSE STEREOTYPES: MY EXPERIENCE LIVING ABROAD

I have always considered myself to be an independent person: when I turned 18, I moved alone from Valencia, my home city, to Barcelona, simply because I wanted to study my degree there. I did an Erasmus in London during my third year and now that I'm starting my fourth and last, I'm moving to Belgium in another international programme.

Living abroad means opening your mind and being aware of the differences in culture and customs that coexist with our daily lives. One example that changed my view of thinking is religion: in Spain, my group of friends consisted of atheists. It was not until I moved to London and lived in the university accommodation that I was aware of the number of people my age who do have strong beliefs.

I remember how talking to a girl from Morocco changed my opinion on Islam: in Spain, this religion is considered to be against women's rights (which I did believe in the past). I asked this girl how it could be considered "equal" for women to be fully covered while men could show their shoulders, head, or neck. And she told me something I still think about to this day: "There is no difference between a hijab and a Franciscan nun habit". This statement is true since both covered everything except the face, and in Spain it is completely normal for nuns to dress like that. She and I weren't arguing, but she completely won and changed my opinion.

This made me realize that not meeting people from different parts of the world or different religions makes you more judgemental. I also acknowledged that women (for instance, this Moroccan girl who was living in my corridor) are also unfairly used to fuel Islamophobia: there are women who decide to wear crop tops and there are women who decide to wear hijabs, and both decisions should be respected.

Another thing that really had an impact on me was the prejudices some other people had: she was asked many stupid questions, for example, if she could have a bank account. And she of course could, but the religious scrutiny applied to Muslim women is not applied to Christians: I had a friend from the United States, and when she said she was a Christian, nobody asked her if she was against abortion, LGBTQ+ rights... That really made me change my whole perspective of viewing religions, because even though I'm an atheist, I do believe and support religious liberty, now more than before moving abroad.

I'm now aware of the racism and Islamophobia that I unknowingly held in the past, and this is something that I wouldn't have acknowledged without moving abroad and living with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. I also think that the place you are born does really play a role in what you tolerate and what you don't. I never thought I would consider Spain to be such a narrow-minded country. Comparing the stereotypes I had regarding my background with the ones my other European friends had, I was unpleasantly surprised.

However, I am very grateful I got to live there for 4 months because I learned many things that can only be understood by leaving your home country and living abroad. That's why I decided I wanted to do another Erasmus, because I believe meeting people from different cultures changes the way you think for the better and destroys stereotypes that have indirectly been taught since you are a child.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

I consider international experiences to be an essential part of a young adult's personal development. Before the one that changed my life - my Erasmus - I had already done two volunteering programmes with my university. Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona) organizes a language tandem in which a local student (in this case, me) helps an exchange student improve their level of either Spanish or Catalan. I did this programme with a boy from Poland named Alek and a girl from Lyon named Manon. They helped me improve my English and French, and I helped them with both Spanish and Catalan.

Thanks to these language tandems, I was able to better appreciate the cultural differences that are reflected in our vocabulary: I tried to explain to Alek the meaning of "guiri", but I was not able to find a word in English that conveyed the same meaning. When Spanish people use this word, they mean "tourist" or someone from a foreign country. It is not exactly the same as "tourist", because it was originally used as a pejorative term, even though now it is used most of the time without any discriminatory connotation.

I remember he asked me "So, I am a guiri then, right?" and I struggled to answer the question. That was because the native language shapes the way we view and interpret things, and I could not simply say "Yes" or "No" without providing a more detailed explanation. I don't remember what I answered, but that question left me thinking for a while about the way Spanish people address foreigners.

Another difficult explanation I had to give to Manon was the meaning of the word "gabacho", a contemptuous word in Spanish that refers only to French people. I thought she would know it because it has historical roots in the relations between Spain and France. When she told me she had never heard of it, I tried to explain it without being disrespectful – but soon I realized I could not.

Both of these uncomfortable situations made me realize how the language you speak plays a fundamental role in the way you view and even approach people from different countries. Therefore, we should all be more careful with the words we use. It's acceptable for a language to have swear words that cannot be translated into any other language. This can be due to cultural aspects, the history of the country, or regional customs. What we as a society should not normalize is the creation of words that disrespectfully refer to a concrete ethnicity, religion, race or any other characteristic that distinguishes a community of people.

This volunteering programme helped me not only to improve my conversational skills in French and English but also to empathize more with foreigners. This is something I have carried with me since that moment, and it was essential while I was living in the UK. During those months, I felt as Alek and Manon did when they studied in Barcelona. I tried to adapt as much as possible to British students and asked as many questions as I needed in order to understand some aspects of the university system. I am very grateful I chose University College London because it is a highly international university and I was not the only one who noticed many differences compared to the system we have in Spain.

CONCLUSION

I think the EUCI seminars helped me to embrace what I had already acquired: having intercultural awareness and living international experiences are two important factors that help your development in both the academic and the personal fields. I think the more you can talk with people from different backgrounds and from different religions or political systems, the better. I am now able to appreciate the culture of my country and what makes it unique. But I also stopped taking for granted many things about people from different countries. I guess this is one of the many ways we have to stop racism and xenophobia so as to become a better and more inclusive society.