

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

The Fall of Stereotypes

Yasmin Rech

LT Lingue, Civiltà e Scienze del Linguaggio

Destination: Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Yasmin Rech sets out to convince the reader that the more you travel the lighter your bag of stereotypes becomes.

I believe that as we leave for a foreign country, we carry with us a bag of stereotypes, ready-made knowledge and beliefs, which often prove to be wrong. Truth is, the less you travel, the heavier this bag gets. I spent four months living and attending university in the Netherlands thanks to the Erasmus+ program. My life there as an exchange student was mainly spent in two different environments: my host family and the university, both of which were melting pots of cultures. In the former four different nationalities coexisted: the host dad was Dutch, his wife was French, there was me from Italy, and another exchange student from Greece. Needless to say, differences emerged straightaway. Differences could be found for instance in habits, in behaviour and in eating as well. I was once cooking some rice at lunch and as the Dutch host dad and his son saw me, they asked me rather puzzled if I was really going to eat rice, a 'hot meal', for lunch. It's nice to see that what is normal for one person, is totally absurd for another. What they called lunch, namely slices of bread with peanut butter and a glass of milk, appeared to me more like breakfast; what I called lunch was for them more like dinner. This is nothing but culture. It's fun to realize how we all draw from our bag of ready-made knowledge, as we start knowing new people from countries different than the ours. This is what I could acknowledge both in the host family and at university: when approaching people, we use the same mechanism. You start with a simple 'What's your name?', followed by 'Where are you from?', and as we hear the answer we start gathering all the information we have about that country, like a sort of brainstorming. I could see this mechanism at work in my own group of friends. It was a rather diverse group, where five different countries came all together. More specifically: Sweden, Canada, Scotland, Korea and Italy. I met my Swedish friend first. As my brainstorming began, I started saying everything that I could associate with Sweden, although it was not much. In fact, all I had was: cold weather, snow, the ABBA and

Ikea. So I asked if she enjoyed skiing and if she did that a lot. Here came my first disappointment: she had never skied in her whole life. On the other side, she started applying her knowledge - or so-called knowledge - of Italy. According to her and to my other friends as well, since I was Italian my sustenance mainly depended on pasta and pizza. A general disappointment was in the air as they understood that I'm not actually a pasta lover. Another stereotype destroyed. When I met my Canadian friend, one of the first things I asked her was if she could speak French. I could tell she was rather annoyed by this question, and I could later understand why. In fact, she told me that every single person she met sooner or later got to that question, inevitably. And the answer was again disappointing: no, she could not speak French, although being Canadian. Examples like the ones mentioned above are endless, and they all show the same thing. The more you travel, the more you learn to 'pack' lighter, since your personal bag of stereotypes becomes almost - if not completely - empty.