Six Myths about Stays Abroad

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Stays abroad are not new. In the Middle-Ages, for instance, thousands of (privileged) *homo peregrini academici* traveled around Europe and studied in various prestigious universities (Paris, Bologna, etc.). What is new in the 21st century is the fact that moving to another country for 3-6/12 or more months to study is becoming a reality for an increasing number of students. At least, that is the case in Europe where programs such as the EU Erasmus-Socrates programme has allowed nearly 2 million students in 20 years to take part of their degrees abroad, by easing administrative hindrances and allocating mobility scholarships. For language learning, this has been a bonanza since study abroad means learning/practicing foreign languages. For about a decade now, qualitative research on the impacts of study abroad on mobile students has expanded (see short bibliography at the end of the article). Results show converging analyses of stay abroad experiences, which I have summed up as that of *liquid strangeness* (for full details check Dervin 2006 or 2007a) as students only spend a short time in the host country and usually remain with other international students.

Myth 1 – “It’s normal to say that my stay abroad changed my life because I discovered my(real)self”

This comment is common among students who have studied abroad. They generally consider *discovering oneself* as a major impact. For a discourse analyst like me (who has a postmodern constructivist approach to identity), this claim is quite interesting. To me, identity doesn’t exist because it is co-constructed by interlocutors. In other words, people identify on a permanent basis – according to interlocutors, emotions, contexts of encounter, etc. (cf. Dervin 2007b on dissociation and intercultural learning). Discovering one’s real self is therefore impossible since self is shaped and created all the time. Studies abroad probably help students to gain in confidence since, for most of them, it’s their first time away from home and they have to count on themselves (or strangers) a lot more. Yet the experience can’t forge their selves for good (in fact, if somebody finds their „self“ or „real self“, does it mean that they didn’t exist before and that they will remain the same for the rest of their lives?). The expected outcome of stays abroad could be e.g. to be aware of everyone’s diversity and unending changes in who people are.

Myth 2 – “I have become French now” (a Finnish student)

When one spends some time abroad, people expect, upon return, that one has become an Other, a representative of another country or at least, that one has acquired some local “characteristics”. Yet, nation-states, national cultures and identities are imagined and imaginary. Becoming a “representative” of the host country is not possible (unless its nationality is granted) because there are millions of very different and diverse people living in that country (men, women, teenagers, children, young, old, poor, rich, educated, unschooled people…). Who could be the reference point that covers ALL these people and that could help to become “French”, “Spanish”, “Japanese”…? Nobody. Some of the students that I have interviewed explain that they have become “French” or “Finnish” or “American” by using stereotypes such as “I am always late now”, “I have become more silent” or “they taught me how to speak loudly”. Needless to say that such comments can be damaging for the image of the nationals of...
host countries since the students will generally pass as “specialists” on the host culture and people.

Myth 3 – “if you know the local language, it helps you to meet the local culture during your stay abroad”
This myth is actually widespread in some approaches to intercultural communication that can be described as functionalist (Dahl 2006). In my opinion, this argument is not always founded. First of all, people never meet cultures but they meet other people. Secondly, in a world, which is more diverse than ever (or liquid, according to Zygmund Bauman 2000), one should talk of the local culture in the plural: a national culture is usually imagined because, as I said before, its “representatives” cannot all share the same features (in terms of habits, thought, intelligence, emotions, attitudes, etc.). As for knowing the local language, yes, it does help to know it, but one cannot assume that knowing a local language can help to appreciate and understand all the people that one meets abroad (as is also the case in one’s own country in one’s own language). Finally, the use of lingua francas such as English is very common in stays abroad. Lingua francas can facilitate communication and allow people to meet, discuss, socialize and become friends, without speaking the local language.

Myth 4 – “Her culture was so different that I couldn’t understand her” (a Russian student refers to her French flat mate).
This myth is a good example of what Martine Abdallah-Pretteille and Louis Porcher (1996) call the “culture-alibi”. In other words, the fact that the student’s flatmate is from a “different (imagined) culture” serves as an explanation for misunderstanding and in this sense the flatmate’s national culture pre-determines her actions, thoughts, attitudes, emotions, etc. Once again is this really the case? If it is true, then the Russian student will never be able to understand 70 million other Frenchmen... Faced with enigmatic situations, individuals will often resort to this alibi in intercultural communication and be unable to go beyond impressionistic perceptions of the other.

Myth 5 – “I didn’t want to meet people from my own country when I was in Italy, I wanted to learn a new language and a new culture”
Myth 5 is also based on a common misconception which I have called the avoidance of the same syndrome. To meet someone from one’s own country abroad seems unbearable to some people as they want to experience something different and meet local people – and students sometimes pay a fortune to do that, so in a way the argument is justified. Nevertheless, behind this argument, there is the subconscious idea that the same is a mere copy of oneself and that s/he has nothing exotic, new or different to offer. Based on what I stressed supra, people are more complex than that and the company of someone from one’s country can be as enriching as that of any other stranger – even abroad. If meeting the locals is difficult, I have always wondered why people resent speaking the local language with people from their own country. I do not see a problem in that. Besides, as Mari Ayano (2006: 25) puts it: “For international students who have difficulty in building a good close relationship with the host students, it is crucial to have a supportive relationship within their own national group, and it is even more important for their survival in daily life in an unfamiliar environment”.

Myth 6 – “Thanks to my stay abroad, I don’t have stereotypes anymore”
Getting rid of one’s stereotypes on one’s own country (auto-stereotypes) and on the host country (hetero-stereotypes) is also one expected outcome of stays abroad. Living in a different country and getting to meet diverse people should help to do the trick. Yet, this goal is far too idealistic as we know that one cannot but classify self and others – by means of stereotypes - in a complex world as ours. The creation of stereotypes is very unstable and it is based on who we are talking to, where we are, how “free” a conversation is, our emotions, etc. Therefore, stays abroad probably help to confront one’s representations with realities but they cannot erase all our stereotypes. What is often described as the contact hypothesis (meeting people from one
specific country helps to get rid off negative stereotypes, cf. Sherif et al. 1961) has never been scientifically proved (and probably never will…). In my own research, I have come across many students who claim that they have got rid of their stereotypes on such-and-such nationality but who, at the same time, use stereotypes in their narratives on their stay abroad.

**Helping language learners to go beyond the myths**

The myths that I have listed in this article are just a sample of some of the ideas that are circulated and (co-)constructed by foreign students, their families, friends, the media, universities, official parlance, etc. on stays abroad.

Helping language learners to go beyond these myths, before, during and after stays abroad is an emergency an a moral duty. The functionalist approach, presented above, does not seem to be the right answer to preparation because it only offers recipes on the other (i.e. how one should react with such and such people) which can do more harm than good. The approach that I have introduced in my own department is based on the analysis of the myths and imagination related to intercultural encounters in stays abroad. That is why I believe that a didactics of (physical but also virtual) mobility is essential in language learning and teaching. To me, it is essential that students acquire a range of savoir faire that allow them to become aware of and go beyond stereotypes (theirs and those of the other). Theories on games of identity and strangeness and the use of tools derived from anthropology and discourse analysis in investigating mobile students’ interviews, texts, podcasts or weblogs - even if they are destabilizing for most “conditioned learners” - are necessary in what we could call a didactics of mobility in language learning/teaching and could make students’ stays abroad more fruitful in terms of intercultural learning.


Other references are available on my website: [http://users.utu.fi/freder/](http://users.utu.fi/freder/)

1 The extracts used in this paper are taken from the website *Erasmus programme 20 years* (http://www.20erasmus.eu/experiences/browse) and interviews that I have conducted of Erasmus exchange students in Finland and France.