The Erasmus experience: halcyon days of hypermodernity?
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Homes are always provisional

A researcher’s praise of Erasmus

For a researcher working on intercultural communication, who specializes in discourse analysis like me, the Erasmus program is a good opportunity to collect exciting data, because it brings together people from different countries, who have now become ubiquitous in institutions of higher education. As Erasmus “groups” are constantly in nascendi (students never stay more than 9 months in the host country), the phenomenon allows various societal and intercultural issues to be looked at such as the creation of relationships, adaptation to host countries, management of identity, the development of intercultural competence… In other words, it is one of the best laboratories available for researchers.

Over the past seven years, Erasmus has been part of my research agenda (with an emphasis on language students, students of other disciplines and trainees1). First, I studied the development of intercultural competences of Finnish students of French who had taken part in an Erasmus in France. Later, I examined how the students who come to Finland talk about time and friendship and develop representations on it based on nationalities (Finns are punctual, Spaniards are late...) at the end of their stay. I also analysed how students perceive the use of lingua francas. Recently, I have looked at how French Erasmus students relate their daily lives in Turku. I concentrated on how the students enacted, constructed and expressed their identities by resorting to other people and their own selves during research interviews. Along the years, I noticed that my results and those of other researchers (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Papatsiba, 2003; Byram & Feng, 2006; Byram & Dervin, Forth.) had a lot in common with the descriptions of what is referred to as hypermodernity2 (Aubert, 2004), i.e. the times we live in. This led me to lay down two hypotheses: 1. Erasmus students are the archetypes of hypermodern individuals and 2. the Erasmus experience could be the halcyon days of hypermodernity, in the sense that it can potentially prepare students for its good and bad sides, in a somewhat safe and fun “lab-like” environment (some students have described the Erasmus as “a bubble”, “a cruising ship”, “a summer camp”, “a cocoon”…).

In this chapter, I will try to clarify and justify these hypotheses, and the fact that the Erasmus experience could be one of the greatest training periods for hypermodernity. I will also explain the fact that, in the categories of strangers that I have defined (solid/liquid and fizzy strangers; Dervin, forthcoming), Erasmus students are located in the liquid strangers’ category. The subsequent necessity to further reflect on strangeness

1 For example, many French students of Teaching French as a Foreign Language need to undertake a traineeship abroad and choose the Erasmus program as a way of sponsoring their training period at a partner institution of higher education.

2 Some scholars prefer the terms postmodernity or supermodernity to describe our era. Because there is a lot of confusion in the use of these concepts, I will stick to hypermodernity in this chapter and not debate about which concept is more appropriate (cf. Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Maffesoli, 2003).
within Erasmus mobility will also be discussed. The final section looks at how the Erasmus experience could be improved through preparation for mobility.

Liquidity/solidity and the Erasmus experience

Several distinguishing qualities have emerged out of the research on hypermodernity, which seem essential to understand the experiences of Erasmus students. As I am interested in intercultural communication within student mobility, the first aspect that has become apparent is that the notions of identity and culture are less and less valid and have been highly criticised in research terms as we have reached a time when every individual is more and more known to have multiple identities (they identify all the time and live through a permanent odyssey, Albrow, 1999). Both culture and identity are therefore misnomers as they suggest singularity and unicity (identity finds its roots in the contraction of the Latin idem and idem, which means same and same). The hypermodern individual borrows from numerous “cultures” (Hannerz, 1996; Amselle, 2001) and belongs to uncountable (sometimes short-lived) communities or peg-/cloakroom communities: “Cloakroom communities are patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hooks in the cloakroom” (Bauman, 2004: 31). As every individual “pegs” diverse communities and interlocutors (be they in physical or virtual encounters through the Internet), they identify and adopt identification strategies. Zygmund Bauman (2000) has elaborated the revelatory image of liquidity to sketch these aspects. This is one reason why national and cultural identities should be seen in terms of identification and culturality (processes rather than objects, people are not “robots programmed with ‘cultural’ rules” Abu-Lughod, 1991: 158) since they are mutable.

On the other hand, in response to this very confusing phenomenon and its resulting heterogeneity, people resort to solid identities (delimited identities, e.g. stereotypes based on a national identity) to adapt, to seduce, to manipulate, to distance themselves... In other words, in intercultural encounters, national cultures and identities may be used to provide trouble-free explanations and serve as discursive ploys (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006): “Culture is now widely employed in a discourse that denies human agency, defining individuals through their culture, and treating culture as the explanation for virtually everything they say or do” (Philips, 2007: 9). An illustration of this is the myth of “the unicity of the self” (one has one solid identity) which is still very much present in the media but also, and this is interesting for us, in the discourse of Erasmus students, even though it is increasingly overruled (Flahaut, 2006).

Looking at my research results, it is clear that Erasmus students live through this solid/liquid world fully but that they realize – up to a point - that people are both solid and liquid (i.e. people from such or such country do not always correspond to stereotypes). In most cases, research shows that solidity seems to take the cake, especially when students talk about the locals... we will come back to this later. Erasmus students

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3 Though they are still used as variables in research on student mobility, cf. Lam, 2006.
4 cf. the latest advertising campaign of a cosmetic brand which claims that its products can help men to find their “real self”!
5 cf. my study on the messages left by students on the Erasmus 20 years-website in which most students assert that they found their “real selves”... without any single explanation of what it means, Dervin 2007a.
also confirm creating *peg-communities* ⁶ (Aubert, 2004: 16) to which they seem to belong solely for the duration of the stay abroad – and sometimes beyond but no research has evidenced that yet. This is why Erasmus communities could be the largest *être-ensemble* ("being-togetherness") that European countries are “producing” at the moment.

**Erasmus and heterotopia**

Erasmus students have an unusual position in host countries because, in certain countries, accommodation is provided in specially designated areas of campuses and living areas (general case in Finland for instance), which has a big impact on the social inscription of the students (Murphy-Lejeune 2000: 22 & Papatsiba 2003: 173). I have used Michel Foucault’s concept of *heterotopia* (1967) to delineate this aspect (Dervin, 2007b). Heterotopias are spaces that are *kept out of sight* either to control them (case of refugee camps for instance) or to conceal them (cemeteries, hospitals…). The students often see this state as a sign of segregation. If we look at my “fieldwork” for example, Turku, students are accommodated in halls of residence (12 students per floor) reserved for exchange/international students or in shared flats (with other exchange/international students) – which, of course, reduces the opportunities to meet local students. The same goes for languages, as the students do not know Finnish or Swedish, they take course either in English (mostly English as a lingua franca) or in another language. This means that contacts with locals are once again restricted as courses are often created especially for them⁷.

A direct consequence of heterotopia (the fact that Erasmus students are *absent-present* in the local country) is the multiplication of representations (stereotypes) on the locals (ethnocentrism and exoticism too, cf. Murphy-Lejeune, 2003: 89) and on their own national and Erasmus *tribes*. I found for instance in my data that students develop extremely negative stereotypes about the students’ own countries (ex: their foreign language skills are either limited or better than others, they are too arrogant…) and that the locals are generally seen as nice but cold, and distant (and sometimes even xenophobic) – though, once again, research results show that they rarely get to “meet” locals apart from tutors, teaching staff and shop assistants.

**Hoaxes on strangeness**

Unlike other kinds of strangers (refugees, workers…), Erasmus students seem to have a good image in the host countries, they are neither tourists nor migrants (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003: 200) and, though they are “transparent” in the host society (do we often hear about them in the media for instance?), representations on them are usually positive (Papatsiba, 2003: XIII).

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⁶ During my data collection for all the above-mentioned research projects that I have had, I have only met very few students who were able to step outside their Erasmus tribes and find their ways into Finnish tribes. A study on them should be envisaged in order to reveal the strategies that they opted for.

⁷ Some institutions have tried to impose “meetings” with local students (through awarding credits to both types of students) in order to create links between them. Though this initiative is potentially good, no systematic research has been done on its real impacts on the encounters and relationships among the students. Let me ask two provocative questions here: is it really necessary? Can “juggled” and credit-motivated encounters work?
As far as how the students’ perception of their own strangeness is concerned, it emerges from my research that students develop representations on it during their stays abroad (Dervin, 2007b & forth.; cf. also Murphy-Lejeune ibid.: chapter 5) – and this probably promotes the biggest misunderstanding and hoax of the Erasmus experience. This is where my triple categorization of strangeness helps to figure out this point:

- **Solid strangers** are people who have moved to a different country and plan to stay there. They usually manage to get a job and a family, learn the local language(s), etc. In other words, they become “attached” to the host country and fit in\(^8\) (but of course, they are free to “leave” any time).

- **Fizzy strangers** would be, e.g. in higher education, international students. They may wish to stay in the host country after their studies or not, but at least they are in the host country for taking a whole degree. They may learn the local language and be highly involved with locals.

- **Liquid strangers**, finally, are just passing. They know when they arrive and they usually have a departure date. Their presence as strangers in the host country is therefore just temporary (though some might stay but again, hardly any researcher has concentrated on this issue).

These three ideal-types of strangers have an impact on the experiences that people have in a certain country, in terms of learning, adaptation, well-being... Unfortunately, many Erasmus students believe, prior to their stay abroad (and probably during), that they will be solid strangers and that they will easily find their place in the host society and, in the case of Finland e.g., learn Finnish (which is not impossible in itself but proves to be very difficult to learn in 3/6 or 9 months). Solid strangeness is unattainable for Erasmus students as, once again, they tend to form peg-communities with other Erasmus students or international from the very first days onwards (Murphy-Lejeune 2003: 174, Dervin, forth.).

Another interesting point is that Erasmus peg-communities tend to be precarious, though the students are usually seen in large groups in campus areas and seem to have strong links (cf. how this is “documented” in the film *the Spanish Apartment* (Klapisch, 2001\(^9\)). In my studies, I have showed how Erasmus students are both putting forward an image of faithful/unfaithful relations to their communities: on the one hand, Erasmus tribes are described as families, protective cocoons… but on the other, because the students are always together, they feel that they are prevented from meeting local students / people (Dervin, 2006a & 2007b) and fulfilling their dream of solid strangeness (Dervin, 2007b: 38-39). It’s noteworthy that, in the interviews that I have led for my research, students oscillate between words such as friends and mere acquaintances to talk about their relationships with other Erasmus students. Sometimes, discourse on the others (especially in interviews done at the end of their stay) shows that there is some kind of “tiredness of being together” (de Singly 2003: 70). Besides, expressions of superficiality and weariness of endless encounters with many new people are omnipresent in the students’ narratives. Zygmund Bauman and Alain Ehrenberg (1998), in their analyses of hypermodernity, have depicted the same phenomena (cf. Bauman’s book *Liquid love*, 2003).

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\(^8\) Some would even argue that solid strangers have become like the locals. I couldn’t disagree more though...

\(^9\) Released in Finland under the name *Espanjalainen kimppakämpä* (2004, NSFilm).
Finally, we need to remember that Erasmus students are under a lot of pressure from people left behind in their countries and even from themselves, as far as learning is concerned. Sometimes, some students even confess having deliberately tried to avoid people from their own country during their time aboard because they wanted to meet “different people” and speak foreign languages (I have termed this the “same-refusal syndrome”). From my data, I can also say that students feel awkward, see ashamed, about the fact that they have to admit that they aren’t able to meet the locals and that they haven’t always learnt the local language(s) when they go back to their country. In addition, many believe that they could have become different, and in most cases, a local during their stay. They realize very quickly that this is impossible as the process of becoming a local would involve “copying” one imaginary model (with 6 million diverse Finns for instance, what could be a typical Finn?). As I see it, all this could be avoided (and the coinciding disappointment) if students were made aware of them.

Preparation for intercultural communication, liquid strangeness and mobility

From what we have seen, the Erasmus time could be a good occasion for reflecting on some of the myths that envelop strangeness, stays abroad and hypermodern relationships. For that, proper and long-term guidance needs to be provided to the students as many researchers have demonstrated that people who travel a lot or spend extensive time abroad are not more open-minded compared to others (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999; Phipps 2007: 30) – and sometimes they are even worse-off. This is why I would suggest both a proactive and theoretical approach to preparation.

There are many examples of didactic experimentations in the literature but nothing really consistent has been implemented yet (Anquetil, 2006; Roberts et al., 2001; Jackson, 2006; Dervin, 2006b). In order to do that, official institutions such as the EU need to set some clear targets, for instance, in terms of intercultural competence. Even though the development of this competence is an “official objective” of the program, a clear definition of it is urgently needed. Nevertheless, helping students to build up savoir-faire seems to be the emphasis to envisage. “Knowledge” and unscientific claims about local countries and people should be avoided at all costs as they often lead to more stereotypes and become cultural straight jackets (e.g. what is the use of telling Erasmus students that Finns are shy and enjoy alcohol very much\(^{10}\), when we know that this is pure imagination?).

As a result, training is necessary before (coordinated by the sending institution), during (host partner) and after the Erasmus experience (coordinated by both institutions?). Training could be composed of the following modules (cf. Dervin, 2006ab & 2007b, c & d, forth.):

1. Theorizing intercultural encounters and the construction of identities

Reading theories on the issues presented below is a crucial point as it helps students to find potential explanations for what they experience abroad:

\(^{10}\) These are some of the stereotypes that I heard in one lecture on Finnish people during an orientation week organized by a Finnish institution. The presenter was not Finnish…
The plurality of hypermodern individuals. One could for instance acquaint students with the notion of dissociative acts (Dervin, 2007d) and their consequences, solidification or the use of one’s national culture/identity in discourse and interaction (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003: 20, e.g. when somebody asserts not being able/willing to do something because that’s not the way it works in their own country). The formation of stereotypes should also be theorized.

- The consequences of être-ensembles (tiredness of being with the same people, feelings of segregation, impressions of superficiality in relationships, heterotopias…). Zygmund Bauman’s works will be of prime interest here.
- The meaning of strangeness/foreignness in our times and their effects on relationships created e.g. abroad or in virtual space.

2. Looking at liquidity/solidity and otherness
Theorizing these elements should be accompanied by experimentations either in vitro (through documents such as texts, podcasts, autobiographies, former Erasmus students’ narratives11…) or in vivo (ethnographical visits, Second Life…, Hine, 2005). The main objective could be to observe contexts of intercultural encounters and strangeness and deconstruct them through observations, observation-participations, as used in anthropology and ethnography. The main idea would be to give students the opportunity to look at themselves and others, as well as reflect on their own discourse and attitudes. This would help them to accept that they are diverse and liquid themselves – and if students realize that then they will most probably accept the diversity of others more easily and refrain from drawing too many stereotypical conclusions12.

3. Be reflexive about the time spent abroad
The third component of the training could involve guiding the students through the use of diaries that could be used by the students to reflect on their daily experiences. These diaries could be weblogs, podcasts, or simple paper diaries that the students could either share with other students, with people left behind in their home country, with a “guide” (lecturers, tutors…) or keep for themselves. The following questions could be regularly taken into consideration: what did I learn about myself? About others? About strangeness? About being abroad?… This should also be an occasion to let emotions surface.

Conclusion

Let’s go back to the quotation by Said which I inserted at the beginning of my article and which has guided us throughout this article: “Homes are always provisional”. If this is true (and surely it seems to apply to hypermodern “identity”), then I hope that the hypotheses that I laid down in this chapter concerning Erasmus will convince some readers of the links between what we experience on a daily basis and what students go through over periods of three, six or nine months abroad. Temporariness, a key-word for

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11 Cf. e.g. http://www.20erasmus.eu/
12 An interculturally correct approach to stereotypes, which would involve trying to get rid off all the students’ stereotypes, would be counterproductive, as stereotypes cannot but be resorted to. An emphasis on how they are constructed should be one of the didactic orientations.
the future, definitely seems to characterize the multifaceted Erasmus program and contribute to it being halcyon days of hypermodernity.

Though I haven’t really offered any fixed answers to some of the problems that I presented, one thing is for sure: there is still a lot of work that lies in front of us, both to continue to understand the Erasmus experience and to make Erasmus a greater learning opportunity for our students by demystifying some of its myths and hoaxes...

Bibliography


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