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Intercultural Dossier – “That’s so British!?”

Studying abroad in Northampton

XY

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1. Introduction

1.1. Studying in Northampton – Expectations and Aims

I felt very delighted and privileged when I was selected as an Erasmus Student at the University of Northampton. I had never been abroad for more than two weeks before I went to Northampton. Hence, I saw great potential in improving my language proficiency as well as my intercultural competence. As I aim to become a teacher of English this aspect will be very relevant for my future career since I am convinced that an experience abroad will promote my competence to organise and present an authentic intercultural discourse. A main focus for my professional development is to represent and teach the English language with its culture in the most authentic way as possible. Thus, from my point of view an experience abroad is essential in order to develop these competences.

I was very much looking forward to sharing knowledge, gaining experience of an authentic cultural exchange and to immerse as a student as well as a person in the English society. I was very curious and enthusiastic to explore Northampton, to acquaint myself with the English lifestyle and its habits and to encounter multiculturalism and international students from all over the world. Such an experience abroad offered me the opportunity to meet authentic representatives as well as to connect with them on a friendly basis. I saw an amazing chance to not only grow academically but also personally.

1.2. Study abroad program and Course of Studies

Since I am studying English Studies in a dual-subject Bachelor program (for teaching profession), spending at least three months in an English-speaking country is obligatory. The English Seminar of the University of Münster has several corporations with universities from all over the world and one of them is in Northampton. I received one of the three Erasmus places and got the chance to finish my “Cultural Communication” module abroad as a student at the University of Northampton. Unfortunately, the choice of courses was very limited, because I could only choose out of three courses. Nonetheless, I was very happy with my timetable as the courses dealt with interesting topics and perspective on English and American postcolonial literature. I studied the course “Publicity and Privacy: American Authors and Celebrities” with which I could cover the requested number of credit points stated in the module guidelines. I had to submit two assessments in order to pass the course – a blog post and an essay. On a voluntary basis I also attended the course “Gothic Worlds” to not only get to know

different teaching methods, but also more of English Literature as the first course set its focus on American literature.

2. Main Part

2.1. English Stereotypes

The ‘English culture’¹ is associated with practices like drinking tea, going into a pub at 4 p.m. and traits like being polite in the sense of being reserved, indirect and saying “Sorry” and “thank you” more in one sentence than you can count. When I went to England, I was aware of the fact, that stereotypes are always exaggerated and overgeneralised pictures (Hinton, 2000, p. 11). Yes, probably a lot of English people do like tea, but I also met a couple who preferred coffee. And yes, going into a pub at 4 p.m. is something that some English people do but I also know a few German friends who like to drink a beer at 4 p.m. as well. Something that I found extraordinary was the music scene in pubs. I am a musician myself, and I was amazed by the thriving music scene in Northampton. Open mic sessions in a cosy pub seemed to be very common – as the stereotype had promised. I visited the “Mail Coach” and the “Fish pub” every Wednesday and every Friday to make and enjoy some music.



England is associated with great musicians like Ed Sheeran and Billy Locket, starting their global career in an English pub. I actually saw Billy Locket playing in a pub by coincidence. Against the stereotype I always thought that those flourishing music scenes only exist in bigger cities as London. To my surprise the stereotype turned out to be true. I also visited small cities like Leamington to explore the life music in pubs. It was such a richness to connect with musicians and to create a beautiful piece

¹ This paper understands ‘culture’ as “shared meanings” (Hall, 1997, p. 1) – of having a similar way of “making sense” (Hall, 1997, p.1) of the world. Nonetheless, this set of shared meanings may differ from person to person since no group can ever be homogenous.

of music together on stage. Communicating via music was less challenging than communicating via language. During the time in Northampton my language proficiency as well as my ‘cultural knowledge’ has enhanced a lot. I would like to refer to an example in which I noticed a misunderstanding due to differences in the process of meaning making. I asked a question at an information desk in university and the woman replied:” I am afraid that I can’t help you.” I took her sentence literally. What I thought what she meant was “*I assume/am afraid that I can’t help you, but I will have a look*”. What she actually meant was “*I cannot help you*”. It became clear in the moment where she was starring at me in a confused manner – while I was still standing in front of her, waiting for her to check the information – until she repeated her first sentence. I assume that this misunderstanding origins in a different conception of politeness. It is common knowledge that English speakers tend to be more implicit and indirect in their messages. I assume that in Germany negative information are usually formulated in a more direct way. I increasingly learned to decode the hidden messages until it was as simple as making music together. Exploring the underlying norms and codes of ‘English culture’ could be interesting under the aspects of politeness theories (e.g., face saving strategies) but this would go beyond the scope of this paper. While reflecting on those generalised ‘cultural’ assumptions in terms of politeness, it is important to consider that an average tendency can never do justice to an individual.

2.2. “That’s so British!” – Englishness and its Powerful Status

I was very lucky getting the chance to live in the UK about four month and thus, to gain authentic knowledge about the ‘British culture’². “That’s so British!”– I caught myself several times saying this sentence while being in England. When reflecting the situations which made me say this sentence, it becomes clear that the person in those specific moments reproduced a typical or stereotypical behaviour of what I understood under ‘being British’ or rather said ‘being English’. Stereotypes can be very powerful. They offer a specific lens of observing people and engaging with other ‘cultures’. I often caught myself categorising persons under the concept ‘British’ or ‘English’ just because I’ve seen them once sitting in a tearoom. Speaking with Barthes, a cup of tea – as a sign – is linked on the level of connotation to the concept of ‘Englishness’ (Hall, 1997, p. 38). In this section I want to have a closer look at the phenomena of ‘being English’. When engaging with cultural stereotypes it is important to think

² Terms like ‘Englishness’ or ‘culture’ are always indicated in quotation marks due to their constructive nature.

of them as social constructs. Stereotypes – as well as the culture they are associated with – are man-made. The stereotype ‘Englishness’ is an overgeneralised picture of what is considered as ‘English culture’ (Hinton, 2000, p. 11). They reduce the complexity of the world (Lippmann, 1922, p.16). This paper aims to critically reflect on ‘being English’ and its status, using examples from my personal experiences in Northampton.³

Following the Dictionary Englishness is “the quality of being English or of having characteristics regarded as typically English” (“Englishness,” n.d.). When I think of ‘Englishness’ many positive associations like politeness, attractive accent, orderly queuing, and proudness come straight away into my mind. Hence, ‘Englishness’ seem to be a quality that is normatively loaded. Before I went to Northampton I hadn’t really thought about ‘Englishness’ in a critically way. But there is an exclusionary element in the concept of ‘Englishness’. First of all, it is important to mention that ‘Englishness’ creates a homogenic picture of the people and ‘culture’. It does not allow multiple identities and thus, reduces subjects to overgeneralised traits. Hence, to categorise a person under a stereotype always needs a reflection, especially when the construct is loaded with negative associations. It seems to be general knowledge that the ‘English Etiquette’ is considered as something positive and prestigious. ‘Englishness’ seems to be a quality that cannot be simply achieved just by getting the British nationality. I want to look at a specific situation I experienced in order to approach the status of ‘Englishness’ critically. A friend in Northampton – his name is Gowtham – wanted to invite a woman he seemed to like. For some reason he didn’t establish contact with her. I was shocked by his explanation. He said: “I am not a Steven.” With the name “Steven” he referred to the normative construct of an ‘English man’. But what does it exactly mean to embody the construct of an ‘English man’? Is it the accent? The specific sense of politeness? The fact to drink and like Yorkshire tea? I think it is much more complicated than that. Gowtham immigrated from India but has been living in the UK for years. The assumption that he does not identify himself with ‘Englishness’ is not the fact I want to highlight, but the exclusion and lack of agency in this specific situation that he probably felt. In that respect I want to refer to another situation. A friend I studied with was afraid that he will not get a job in England because he does not sound ‘British’ enough due to his Indian accent. The inherent normativity of ‘Englishness’ seems to have an exclusionary dimension. I can imagine that

³ I am aware that I reproduce stereotypes to a certain degree as soon as I reflect on them in this paper to explore my experiences abroad in a critically manner.

‘Englishness’ and the ‘English Etiquette’ have their roots in history. It could be interesting to enter this topic scientifically. Those two situations deeply cut into universal topics like power relations, discrimination, cultural and national identity and belonging. To reflect on the phenomenon academically in the light of such wider concepts and history would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Due to personal reasons, it was important to include the reflection on the concept of ‘Englishness’. Up until the key moments outlined, I often found myself romanticising the idea of 'being English' and the British accents, neglecting its exclusionary effects. I must admit that one reason for choosing Northampton was to acquire the British accent due to its positive connotations. When I was back in Germany a friend of mine said in an ironic manner: “Your English has become so posh! You spent too much time in England.” By connecting the adjective “posh” with the British accent the assumption is supported that the international reputation of ‘Englishness’ has probably an elitist and prestigious connotation.

I also found traces of this perceived elitist national identity of an Englishman in Northampton. I visited a beautiful tearoom called “The Eccentric Englishman”. The logo entails icons like a cylinder, a monocle, and a moustache – all symbols are connotated with intelligence and richness and are probably referring to great thinkers of English history. The name in combination with the logo portrays the Englishmen in general as an elite and visionary ‘cultural group’. It is interesting to think about the establishment of those hierarchies between



„The Eccentric Englishman“ in Northampton

different accents and cultural stereotypes. In University I learned that the prestige of an accent or ‘culture’ are often related to political power. For example, English has become a lingua franca over the years due to a specific reason. The English Empire spread their language in colonies around all over the world. It is shocking to find traces of those tragic histories during the colonial period in today’s distribution of languages and hierarchies amongst them. Language indeed reflects world.

2.3. “That’s so British?!” – Exploring Northampton’s Multiculturality

The stereotype of ‘Englishness’ does not represent the cultural variety of the people who are living in England. England is multicultural. The multiculturalism was reflected in the diverse population of students at the University as well. On campus there even is a “Multi Faith Centre” where all students could pray in his or her religion. Once a week the centre supplies food made by volunteers and organises gatherings I attended on a regular basis. Hence, I was privileged to access England from different perspectives. In Northampton I spent most of the time with Muhilan – a friend I was studying with. Muhilan, who is originally from Tamil Nadu – took me to places which would probably not be considered as “tourist spots” typical for visiting England. He connected well with the community of “British Indians” and kindly introduced me. I drank Indian Chai, attended “Diwali”, and visited the “Shri Venkatesvara Balaji Temple” in Birmingham. “British Indians” are the largest ethnic community in the UK” among many (“BAME,” n.d.). Besides the fact that the homogeneous conception of ‘British culture’ cannot do justice to any individual, I also distance myself from a rigid conception of ‘national English culture’ due to the constituting multiculturalism of England. ” India’s historic ties with Britain mean that different aspects of Indian culture⁴ like food,



Diwali Celebration in Northampton

music and yoga have a strong influence on British life today.“ (“BAME,” n.d.). The Indian Tea called Chai and the dish Curry⁵ are almost perceived as national, according to a British friend. Moreover, some Indian festivals like “Holi” or “Diwali” have become very popular. “Diwali” is celebrated in October. It is an Indian “new year celebrations [and] is a festival of new beginnings and the triumph of good over evil, and light over darkness.“ (“BAME,” n.d.). I was

⁴ At this point it is important to mention that there is not only one Indian ‘culture’ as well. Every state in India has its own language and traditions, so the ‘culture’ of “British Indians” has been influenced by several.

⁵ Muhilan told me that the word „Curry” was established by British colonizers who had brought the dish from India to the former British Empire. The spices were adjusted to the British taste. The Curry as we know it doesn’t exist as such in India.

lucky to be in the right place at the right time. Diwali was celebrated in Northampton as well with everyone being invited. There was a big parade of light figures. The streets were filled with people and children holding a lantern in their hands.⁶

England is multicultural, so thinking the ‘English culture’ as one homogenous entity of shared meanings does not seem suitable. The typical “Yorkshire tea” consists of leaves imported from India which were just blended in Yorkshire (“Why is it called ‘Yorkshire tea’?,” n.d.). So even one of the strongest national symbols of Great Britain is in its nature foreign. So why not to think “Englishness” – the quality of ‘being English’ – more diverse as well.

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Visiting the “Shri Ventkateswara Bajaji Temple”
in Birmingham

3. Conclusion

Studying in Northampton was an extraordinary experience. It not only enhanced my language proficiency but also broaden my mind in so many different directions. Due to the great diversity of individuals, traditions, and religions – I got the pleasure to encounter – my personal picture

⁶ Muhilan said that the parade with light figures is usually not part of a Diwali celebration. In Tamil Nadu Diwali is celebrated with oil lamps and a family meal.

of 'Englishness' has altered. The typical English stereotype – which has been largely medialised – marginalises the richness of diversity that England offers. In Northampton I had the privilege to build up friendships with people from all over the world, who facilitated “eye opening” moments in terms of seeing the bigger picture when it comes to power relations and language. The experience made me feel more like a world citizen with all the responsibility that comes with it. As a teacher I want to set a focus on portraying 'culture' not in a homogenic way but in way that show variety and diversity in what it can mean to 'be English'. It is important to me to include a power-critical perspective since a 'culture' is always embedded in social relations and history. I think I achieved my goal as I can say that I have not only grown academically but also personally.

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International friends from all over the world

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..... Münster, 30.06.2022

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(Resolution of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers, 17. July 2002)

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I hereby declare that this assignment “Intercultural Dossier – ‘That’s so British!?’” is my own work, that I have not used any sources or aids other than the ones listed, and that those parts of the assignment which are based on other works – including electronic media – in wording or content have definitely been marked as such and are accompanied by a bibliographical reference to the source.

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