

## EXPERIENCE REPORT

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When we are born, little do we know about the world. This statement stays the same throughout our life despite becoming more knowledgeable. We indeed learn with every experience we endure in our life, but living in another country is one we should experience on our terms given the opportunity. By the same token, it is also one we should think about thoroughly because it implies more than just agreeing with the conditions of a contract. It involves hard thinking, maturity, and a journey of self-recognition. In the following paragraphs, as part of my experience report, I will describe my experience while living in Germany: a roller coaster of highs, lows, and, most importantly, lessons of all sorts.

To begin with, a short description of my actions and background about my situation and myself is needed so you understand who I am. I am a student in the master's in applied Linguistics program at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEMéx for its acronym in Spanish). My coordination and some teachers informed us of a scholarship to stay for five months in Germany to have an intercultural experience. In preparation for the exchange, I first gather and wrote all the necessary paperwork for the scholarship and visa. Once both were approved, I prepared a strong sum of money to spend on good and basic things and services I would need: Transportation, lotion, pans, duvets, and food are but a few examples. It is necessary to say that, at least for me, the amount of money needed for the Visa and my survival in Germany came from bank loans and a scholarship granted by the TRANSLANG team. Regarding the latter form of funds, the amount of money was sufficient to cost my living abroad.

Now that you know a little bit about me, reader, it is time to talk about expectations. Expectations are something we must deal with, especially when traveling to another country and a culture that is, in general terms, unknown to us. When I discovered that I would be spending five months in Germany, I tried to keep my expectations low. Having them like that allowed me to enjoy my stay on my terms: living my life with the rhythm I wanted, visiting places I found attractive, and relating to people in social circles I'd like to be in. Despite this, I did have basic expectations: a better transportation system, perceiving a different type of respect than that of my country, and more silent places are but a few examples.

These basic expectations were met, but there were also other aspects I would have never thought of, which a few I will mention. Funnily enough, the transportation system is better than in Mexico even though the Germans usually complain about it being late, which is true. Learning that the Germans are not cold and serious people, but rather warm and friendly was indeed a shattered expectation, especially for me, who comes from a culture that is considered

“friendly”. Regarding life in Germany, I truly liked it: Every place was silent and no loud music could be heard in the street. Everyone would respect your personal space and your time. Finally, most things would work in a schedule, which I found helpful because it gives control over your plans’ schedule. For example, if you want to travel to a town near Hildesheim, you would check the trains schedule so that you return home at a certain hour to catch the bus. Every tool is at your disposal.

In addition to my intercultural experience, which I will talk to you about later, I attended undergraduate and graduate classes. On the one hand, my Cognitive Grammar course gave me an insight into how language is closely related to thought because the professor would give examples in German, English, and Spanish. This allowed me to understand deeper the German language and mine as well. On the other hand, both courses, *Teaching English with stories* and *Challenges of Inclusive Teaching: Supporting Language Acquisition in English Classrooms*, showed me how different are the German and Mexican systems to become a teacher. In short, becoming a basic education teacher needs further preparation than in Mexico due to all the variations that are considered in the teacher training programs. Thus, these academic courses further my idea of becoming a knowledgeable person to talk about topics related to both language teaching and education. One cannot talk about themes that one has not thought deeply enough and face with different points of view.

Even though traveling, visiting cultural landmarks, and attending courses were part and parcel of my exchange, there is life outside them and I did so through my daily life. Firstly, the accommodation and the city were receptive to me. Despite not speaking any German, both my roommates, an Iranian and a Hungarian, were gentle to me and introduced me to how things work in Germany (trash separation, cleaning, transportation, and silent hours are just some examples.) Hildesheimers were also kind to foreigners since they would help you if you asked for help as was the case when I bought coffee at *Tchibo* and an old man helped me know what was the gift that included my Costa Rican coffee.

School workshops and activities were also another way to immerse myself in the German society. From my Latin and ballroom dance workshop, I learned how the Germans usually need a structure to be functional. This was a huge cultural shock in terms of dancing because while my German counterparts needed to count, learn the choreography, and make sure they were not off rhythm, I would only go “with the flow” of the music. Additionally, I made incredible friendships from my Judo workshop where I got to know people who needn’t necessarily train to become sportsmen, but would only do it for fun and have a good time with the rest. They taught me to have fun and that the culture of alcohol consumption is not as punishing as the one in Mexico, which leads me to say that alcoholic

beverages are not the problem, but rather how people are educated and behave around them.

Now, dear reader, you would wonder whether I studied German while there. The quick answer is now. However, I learned German with my interaction with the Germans. As a language teacher, I wanted to live myself the old saying “the best way to learn a language is to live in the country” and, funnily enough, it is more complicated than just saying yes or no. Additionally, wondering and learning things on your own is an enriching cultural experience one should carry on when in another country. To begin with, communicating goes beyond verbal utterances. You can get your message through by many means; this I learned when I bought a *Vollkornbrot* (whole grain bread): I first ask for it in German, but we, the seller and I, conveyed through body language that I wanted it sliced and not *im stuck* (the whole piece). Moreover, I knew I had grasped the tip of the survival German language when I could sustain a conversation in German with a lady to buy bread and a coffee to go, when buying a ticket with a discount for a museum, and when my Mexican partner and I bought a roasted chicken.

Secondly, and the interesting part, is that culture is everywhere. You can learn a lot from a culture by observing, interacting, and making your mental notes only to later discuss them with another person. This is how I learned that the Germans work in a schedule (by dancing, taking the trains to the towns, and noticing that even a concert has a start and an end at the time the event marks it), they value walking (by going outside with strong wind gusts and still seeing elderly and middle-aged people walking alone or with their dogs), and the value of every person in their society (by helping when needed, respecting your personal space and being kind to the others.)

To conclude, my stay in Germany, though full of hard blows like the death of my best friend, Christmas times being alone, an ended relationship, and a couple of sessions with a psychologist, was an experience that brought a change. Understanding how language and thought are related, that working on a schedule is not as bad as I thought, and understanding new views of social values such as respect, personal space, friendship, and joy has made me grow as a person. A growth I would gladly share with my close ones and every person that is willing to listen to me. As for the next exchange students to live in Hildesheim, I suggest saving lots of money for the first two months, planning your weekend, and, above all, being willing to live the experience the way you want it. Do not let others convince you of carrying on their plans. Live the experience according to your personality and your objectives because living abroad is not extended tourism, but a valuable opportunity to find yourself.