

Anna Ćwidak in Ålborg

Anna Ćwidak from Poland was a Comenius assistant at Ellidshøj Skole in Ålborg in 2007-2008. Here she taught English and participated in different projects and cultural events. Being confronted with a school system that was so radically different from home made her aware of her own teaching methods. In turn, she also challenged stereotypes by introducing the contemporary Polish culture.

Reception at school

Information about the subjects I could choose to teach and about suggested timetable I got long before my arrival in Denmark. My week had been planned so that I was coming to school only four times a week. That gave me 3 days weekend that I could spend travelling and getting to know Denmark.

As Ellidshøj School doesn't use any programme of instruction or detailed timetables when to realise material, that I know from Polish schools, teachers gave me freedom of choice topics and ways of carrying out lessons.

My contact teacher in the host school, Holger C. Andersen, teaches mainly English and Danish, so it was he who I had most of my lessons with. He used to be the person I could always talk to or ask for help when I had any problems. He helped me deal with all the formalities after my arrival, advised me what to visit in Denmark and how to get to different places. Apart from my contact teacher from school, representatives of local authorities responsible for Comenius Project in the region of Northern Jylland, Britta Skov and Susanne Schmidt, were taking care of me. That was mainly organising my accommodation and co-financing payment for the rent.

All the teachers and employees of the school were always ready to help me. They were glad to talk with me about student's problems, they commented my lessons and were telling me what I did well and what should be changed. I received exactly that help I was hoping to get and during most of my staying there I could feel free to spend time and get to know Denmark on my own.

Enthusiastic attitude towards my presence at school haven't changed from the warm welcome to the sad moment of farewell. I was gladly participating in all the projects students were working on and all the school festivals or parties. I took part in the project about cultures of different countries, run in the school run on Danish Health Day, I was with the youngest children during 'The Week of Christmas Traditions' and participated in GPS-Run in the historic centre of Aalborg.

What is more, together with a friend from Poland we organised for children 'St. Andrew's Fortune Telling'. Following the example of previous assistants, together with the assistant from Finland we prepared 'Polish-Finnish Project' that we realised in both my and her school.

Working conditions in the host school

The host school turned out to be little village school. In the whole school, grades 0-7, there were 78 pupils at all. Lessons lasted from 8:15 until approximately 13:50 (depending on the grade). Together with my contact person at school we decided that in each grade I should have 1-2 English lessons. The rest of the subjects I'd chosen myself. I had 14 classes a week. Apart from that I was participating in all school festivals and projects realised by children and I was visiting kindergarten children (0 grade).

I had a full access to the all facilities you could find in the school. When I needed it I could use school computers, printers, copying machine, art supplies and all the rooms with their fittings (I got the key to the school building). Ellidshøj School was equipped very well and I could find there everything I could need for my lessons. If I something was not available at school I was placing an order and the school would purchase the materials I needed.

As Ellidshøj is a little village, where not many things happen, the local authorities rented me a room in the city centre of the nearby bigger city, Aalborg. At school nobody expected me to stay there on afternoons (anyway, school was closed after 15:00) and everyone encouraged me to get to know Danish culture and Danes while taking advantage of all the entertainment that living in the city could offer to me.

Subjects and teaching methods

My duties were preparing and carrying out lessons that were in my schedule. However all the teachers were giving me freedom of choice the topics and ways of carrying on lessons. What is more I could freely change and modify my schedule. I often participated in projects realised in younger grades that meant missing classes with elder children.

Apart from that during all my assistantship I was writing an English diary that was published at a school's website. My contact teacher at school translated my diary into Danish so that even children who don't know English could read it. My diary seemed to be the most interesting for teachers who were curious about my comments on cultural difference and

Danes seem to be enthusiasts of 'learning by playing', especially in lower grades. They often suggested that I should organise lessons so that children will have fun and thereby realise how hard learning is. During my lessons I often used PowerPoint presentations I made myself. What is more I was preparing games, quizzes and searching the Internet for funny stories and interesting exercises. At Science we were performing experiments together with kids. At Art I was trying to familiarize children with Polish artists and introduce new techniques. At Domestic Science we were cooking Polish traditional dishes according to the recipes that I prepared and translated. I often worked with students individually. Then even weaker students could find courage to talk with me in English.

When it came to the youngest students, who haven't started English classes yet, my presence and participation in their projects was the most important. I was teaching them simple games and dances I know from Polish Scouts Association and I was presenting Polish traditions in various ways to them.

Just from the beginning of my staying in Denmark I started to think of establishing a partnership with any Polish school. It resulted in exchange of PowerPoint presentations and e-mails with two parallel grades from Polish school (5th and 6th grade from General Music School 1st and 2nd Level in Gdansk).

Living in Denmark

When I was moving to Denmark I knew hardly anything about the country and its culture. Northern Jylland and the city where I arrived were completely unknown to me. Before my departure from Poland I'd bought tourist guides, maps and books on Danish history and culture. I was getting to know Denmark according to a plan and systematically that astonished Danes themselves. During four months of my assistantship not only I visited almost all the country, got to know Danish fine arts, music, architecture and design, but also experienced life in Denmark. Active participation in a school life enabled me to get to know many interesting Danish customs and traditions. Contact with Danish teachers from Ellidshøj School showed me how Danes' everyday life looks like and how their lifestyle is different from Polish one.

Denmark is a modern country, less 'Scandinavian' than the rest of Scandinavia, country where welfare service is highly developed. During all my staying on the assistantship I was surprised discovering that everything there is 'for people' and both authorities and the society are trying to minimize bureaucracy and facilitate access to information. Fixing any matter in the office was a pure formality. Everyone treats foreigners, who don't know the language, with understanding there and most of the documents have been translated into English.

Danes take care of their health. I was happy to join them jogging and sign up to training groups at the gym and swimming pool. Cycling trips appeared to be the best way of getting to know nearest and further neighbourhood. Active lifestyle goes there together with healthy diet and concern about one's appearance. I've learn a lot observing Danish healthy lifestyle.

Denmark turned out to be a diverse country. To begin with the varied landscape, through different dialects of the language, different styles of buildings and to finish with cultural differences between regions that are easy to spot. While it's past have been almost forgotten it is still worth knowing and worth appreciating Danish achievements of the last hundred years. Just after my first visits in Danish museums and fine arts galleries I fell in love with their Modern and Contemporary Art. Original and innovative architecture and characteristic design for the everyday articles made me appreciate the aesthetic of the surroundings.

Denmark is a little country that remains in the shadow of its powerful neighbours: Germany, Sweden and Norway. It contends with similar problems as other European countries. Danes are interested in politics. Autumn's elections to the parliament were raising emotions alike that Poles experienced at the same time because of elections in our country.

As in all Western Europe, the continuing inflow of the large number of immigrants is a problem in Denmark. Danes see that because of the population decline and the development of the country they need still new labour. However they expect from the immigrants that, since they decided to live in their country, they will try to assimilate themselves into Danish society, to accept Danish values, customs and language. Meanwhile, part of the newcomers shut themselves away in their own small societies, they cultivate their own traditions and lifestyle, which not always fits to the Danish customs.

Danish teaching methods

Danish schools differ from Polish schools very much. It's not only because the equipments and functional solutions in the buildings are different, but above all it's because of methods being used there. Teachers in Denmark can feel free when it comes to both choosing the aids

and the content of teaching. They don't need to realise top-down programmes or syllabuses. That is why lessons of all the teachers vary from each other.

It seems to me that in Denmark one of the goals is to make children like school. Teachers are trying to minimize the stress that can be experienced by pupils. These more creative are coming up with their own ideas how to make the lessons more exciting and attractive to students. Others use ready made, well-tried methods of active-learning teaching.

In my school it was popular to combine grades for working at projects. Sometimes there were 2-3 grades combined but twice a school year in the school week-long projects are realised and all the pupils are in them. I had the opportunity to participate in of such project-weeks when children were getting to know cultures of five different countries from five continents. Students were divided into five groups each working on other country. They were making posters, cooking traditional food, making little books on the topics chosen by themselves, creating simple art crafts (examples of traditional folk art from the country). I had the opportunity to join the group working on my homeland, Poland. I was answering hundreds of questions concerning our history, culture, language, nature and life in Poland.

As at school there are enough computers (both stationary and laptops) for almost all the students and all the computers are connected to the school network and to the Internet, they are very often used as a tool during various lessons. While teaching English, science, art or telling children something about Poland I usually used the computers and equipment available at school. PowerPoint turned out to be an excellent tool to show complicated ideas in a simple way or to illustrate what I wanted to say.

Danish schools are really concerned about teaching practical subjects. School is fitted with a kitchen, carpentry workshop, art workshop, needlecraft and sewing workshop and the music room with variety of excellent musical instruments. Children are learning there useful basic skills that are indispensable in adult life. They know how to use basic tools, they can cook and play the instruments. After each lesson they clean the workshop or classroom.

Teaching subjects such as science or art in a foreign language was a real challenge to me. As children in lower grades didn't understand English well, I must have been choosing the simplest word and support myself with written text, illustrations and gesticulation. Thanks to translations, that were usually offered to me by the teachers in lower grades, my lessons were understandable for all the children. Language barrier encouraged me to looking for and using teaching methods other than traditional. I was trying to motivate students and encourage them to active participation in the lesson. Carrying out scientific experiments together with children

turned out to be an ideal solution for science lessons. The results could have been easily written down in students' mother tongue and all the conclusions were drawn on the observations, so usually there was no need of my own comments: children enjoyed sharing their own observations.

Other lessons that I carried out: art, P.E. or domestic science were rather practical and even when children hadn't understand everything before the work started, it was easy to correct all the misunderstandings later, during classes, or demonstrate how to do the task. At the same time pupils really took advantage of these lessons as they need then to use English for an everyday use, for simple communication. Even students, who were rather silent during English lessons, in the school kitchen or art workshop weren't shy and they talked with me in English.

Comenius Assistantship was my first long term and more formal contact with children at school. At the beginning I was anxious about how children would respond to my presence at their lessons. After all first day at Ellidshøj School filled me with optimistic feelings. Family atmosphere at the school, exceptional warmth between all the people there make both the teachers and the students feel that they can always rely on others and won't be left alone with their problems.

Students always can count on the support from schoolmates or teachers. During breaks in the teachers' room pupils' behaviour and learning difficulties are systematically discussed. As all the teachers know all the students discussion can be constructive and give concrete solutions to the problems. Thanks to immediate diagnosis most of the problems are nipped in the bud. During all my staying in the school I haven't seen any serious incident. During the lessons students behave properly. They know precisely where their freedom ends.

I feel that observing how you can build real relationships, community at school, how warmth and good example influence students behaviour, was the best lesson for me that I'll try to use in the future in my own work.

Comenius Assistantship was for me not only a teaching practice period. Apart from observations and trying out various teaching methods, I get to know how educational system in another country looks like. Visit in the neighbouring school, where a friend of me was an assistant too, and talking with teachers enabled me to gain some knowledge about good and bad points and problems of Danish primary schools. My staying in Denmark made me aware of flaws and gaps in Polish educational system but also taught me to notice its good side.

Conscientious collecting of materials, observations and ideas for and from my lessons resulted in a few hundred pages report that in the future will be for me the source of practical knowledge, ideas and teaching materials.

Language

During my staying in Denmark I was using English everywhere. Never before had I the opportunity to use everyday English for such a long time. I'm sure it resulted in the improvement of my language skills. During assistantship I was using Danish libraries where I could have been borrowing English magazines, books and films. Now I feel much more comfortable and confident using English.

Teaching English in Danish school made me aware of the differences in teaching methods between the countries where the second language is not related to the students' mother tongue (Poland) and ones where we can find a lot of similarities (Denmark). Danish students are meeting different difficulties than their Polish peers when learning English. Many elements of the language can be acquired just by association with Danish. That's why other teaching methods are used in Denmark than in Poland.

I decided to take the opportunity to learn some basic Danish. As I didn't manage to sign up for a language course I was using audio courses available at the library. During lessons children often were trying to teach me some Danish words and basic expressions. That made them sensitive to the fact that language so natural for them can be really difficult for foreigners.

As in the school there were no extracurricular activities in the afternoons, I was trying to weave teaching Polish to other lessons. Children liked this way of learning. Usually we were learning Polish equivalents of new English words. During Polish-Finnish Project that was realised in two schools we were teaching children Polish and Finnish numbers. In lower grades I was teaching pupils Polish songs and rhymes.

I was surprised how difficult the Polish pronunciation was for Danish people. My demonstrations of Polish were usually greeted with laughter.

The European dimension

Most of the Ellidshøj School students either had never heard of Poland or hadn't be interested in our country before my arrival in Denmark. Now they know where Poland is, which language we use, they are aware that we are in European Union and that life in our country

looks more and more the same as life in Denmark. I was trying to tell them as many interesting facts about our history, nature, monuments, famous Poles, fine arts, folk customs and traditional cuisine as it was possible. For the youngest interesting was the comparison between Polish and Danish Christmas traditions and getting to know fortune telling tradition on St. Andrew's Day or the custom of putting small gifts into children's shoes on St. Nikolai's Day, the 6th of December.

It seems to me that my staying at Ellidshøj School helped adult Danes to discover that Poland is no longer that poor, grey, sad country that it seemed to be twenty five years ago. Children made friends with their peers from Poland and get to know that some of them have exactly the same interests as they have, that they listen to the same music and watch the same TV programmes. Breaking stereotypes worked both ways. I myself discovered in Denmark a lot of things that I never expected to find there.