

## Dorrit Damgaard Andersen i Ungarn

**Dorrit var fra december til maj 2004 Comenius sprogassistent på Szilágyi Erzsébet Gimnázium és Kollégium - et gymnasium i Eger, Ungarn.**

### **Work conditions**

I was to teach 12 lessons every week and in return for board and lodging 2 extra hours every week in the evening, an opportunity to get extra practice for the students living at the student hostel. Apart from this official lesson plan I had several extra lessons preparing particularly 'needy' students for their exams. On average I have had three such lessons a week. On my own initiative I have taught three teachers at the student hostel – at the beginning in return for them teaching me Hungarian. When I got a private teacher in Hungarian I just taught them English, on average twice a week. Around exams my workload increased.

I taught only English during my stay, as this was the need they had, and the school hadn't considered me giving lessons in Danish. At the end of my stay, however, the school expressed an interest in getting another Danish Language Assistant who might also give Danish lessons. I did not take part in other than English lessons due to the language barrier.

My lesson plan was very varied. I had eight different classes from all four years, some in groups of 4 so I taught the whole class over a period of 6 weeks, others in groups of 10 or so whom I had every second week, and others again in groups of 5 twice a week etc. Some students were replaced with others when they passed their exams. Generally, I think it worked well, but it did make it quite difficult to learn their names (I asked for class-photos with names, but no such thing existed), and it took a while for me to get to know all the students.

I have taught all the classes alone right from the beginning. I had no books as the students came to my classes mainly to practise their speaking skills. Thus, I have spent a lot of time making materials and preparing questions. I found several web sites that have been extremely useful, and I relied heavily on newspapers and television for ideas. My teaching methods were naturally very communicative, and also rather experimental, as this was my first time teaching. With the

more advanced classes I have been able to discuss many different topics, whereas with the pre-intermediate classes I have done a lot of pair work and group work.

It has been very challenging to make my own materials as well as very time consuming. There was no direct check-up on what I did or how I did it, and I didn't feel there was much time to discuss methods or materials with my supervisor or the other teachers. Besides, I was the only one who had the opportunity to spend the entire length of each class on talking – and thus it was difficult to compare experiences with the other teachers as they of course also spent time on homework, grammar, written exercises etc.

Although I wasn't supervised in my classes, my supervisor and the teachers of the other classes I had did ask the students what we were doing and how they were liking it, so I did get some positive feedback due to that.

The Szilágyi Erzsébet Gimnázium was in an ongoing programme co-operating with other European schools when I was there, and they have participated several times in Comenius programmes.

I have arranged with my supervisor to help them make contact with a Danish secondary grammar school either for a student exchange or other kinds of communication.

I was only connected to the Szilágyi Erzsébet Gimnázium és Kollégium and during the day only taught their students in the student hostel building. The conversation classes that I held twice a week in the evening were aimed at all the hostel residents which also meant students from other secondary grammar schools.

## **Reception**

On arrival at the Szilágyi Erzsébet Kollégium, where I was to stay, I was 'assigned' a student to help me find my way round and answer any questions I might have over the next days – which was very helpful. I was introduced to the teachers at a staff meeting, and the following week the school had three visitors from an English partner school, whom I was able to join in observing lessons and being shown round the school. The lesson plan followed at the end of that week. I was given completely free hands at what I wanted to do with the students, the school didn't have anything planned out that I was to follow. I believe the main incentive for them was to give the students an opportunity to speak with a non-Hungarian English speaker and for the students to speak as much as possible in smaller groups than the regular classes allowed for. This freedom was great on one hand as it gave me a chance to be creative and inventive, but on the other

hand it was – as already mentioned – also very time-consuming, and at times frustrating because it was a constant pressure to think of new topics, without any textbooks to rely on. One teacher helped me out with some materials, but generally I didn't feel any one of the teachers had much time to discuss this, so at times I felt quite alone with the work I did.

As mentioned above, all my classes were held at the student hostel a few minutes walk from the school due to practical reasons, I believe. I liked the room which was smaller and more easily manageable than the regular classrooms at the grammar school, but it also meant that I rarely spent time in the staff room if I had afternoon lessons at the hostel -which I did three days a week. For this reason and because the teachers were just generally busy, I didn't spend much time with but a few of them. Being a secondary school teacher and teaching at the hostel also made me feel somewhat in between. Although most of my time was spent at the hostel I didn't have a seat in their staff room, they taught non-academic subjects and had a more care-giving function than the grammar school teachers and most of them didn't speak any English at all. I found this position somewhat frustrating at times, particularly because there wasn't a very efficient line of communication between the grammar school and the hostel with regard to cancelled classes etc. A few times I found myself without students – not knowing why. The trip up to the school to find out what the problem was, perhaps finding the kids and making my way back to the hostel with them meant that the class would be reduced to nothing, so after the first two times I simply didn't bother to go up to the school. Phoning the school was a problem for me due to the language – but I did have a phone in my room so my supervisor (or the class teachers) had the possibility of reaching me there.

Due to the language barrier I was very dependent on others informing me of the activities at the school and in the local community, I couldn't just read the posters or the local newspaper. As my supervisor was rather busy there wasn't any one person who did this consistently and I have several times been informed about ceremonies, school holidays or parties at the last moment because of this. My lack of Hungarian knowledge definitely inhibited my integration in the school life and the local community considerably.

The hostel manager, however, was very good at inviting me to accompany the students on excursions, the school skiing holiday, theatre shows etc, so I have been taken good care of in many respects. Likewise a few of the grammar school teachers have invited me on their own initiative to go sightseeing or visit them privately.

## **What have I learned**

A long-term stay in a foreign country is always rewarding in terms of gained perspective on how the country works and its people live. On the surface I experienced Hungary as a land of contrasts and very split between old and new in every sense. During my stay, however, I was surprised at the similarity in the Hungarian and Danish mentality, which I encountered.

Naturally, the Hungarians have their own customs and there are overall differences in the way people live, but many of these differences stem from the slightly lower standard of living that some Hungarians still have compared to the average Dane – and I believe this will even out over the next years.

I think many of the similarities come from both countries being relatively small countries, and I think this also affects the Hungarian view of the European Union, as it is my experience that Hungarians share many of the same concerns as Danes about being an integral part of the European Family. From my lessons and discussions with teachers it is obvious that there are supporters as well as opponents to the European Union. Generally, I felt a certain reluctance to discuss politics which surprised me, I think the average Hungarian feels slightly removed from the decision making process in national as well as regional politics.

However, there does seem to be certain optimism in discussing Hungary's future as a member of the EU paired with a great sense of national pride, and I think it will be exciting to see what the inclusion will mean for the Hungarian people over the next few years. I am definitely curious to go back and see for myself.

With regard to the Hungarian language it proved to be a bigger hurdle than I had imagined. I took some lessons for two months before I left Denmark, but I wasn't offered any help with language lessons from the school, and it took me a while to find a private teacher. The school seemed to think that my learning Hungarian wasn't necessary, as I was there to concentrate on the English. After a few months I found a private teacher, though, and had a total of 16 lessons. I learnt enough to manage basic shopping and café visits, but not enough to make any kind of conversation.

Being a language assistant in English I tried to encourage the students (and teachers) to speak English to me also outside the lessons, which meant that I had very little opportunity to practice Hungarian. I did find it necessary with some Hungarian skills though, as many shop assistants, store holders, ticket offices etc. did not master any foreign languages.

My lack of Hungarian knowledge meant that there were several teachers that I couldn't speak to – many of them were also rather hesitant to use the English they knew. I feel it also limited my possibilities for socialising quite dramatically.

The assistantship has given me an insight in the Hungarian educational system, which has been very interesting and has helped set the Danish system and how we do things in perspective. The level of English in the secondary grammar school was different from the Danish level. I found that the lessons in Hungary were focused on developing communicative skills mainly, whereas the equivalent English lessons in Denmark revolve around literature, authentic texts, social and cultural awareness etc. The Hungarian exam form is also very 'free' compared to the Danish, in that the students have the possibility of sitting the language exam several times a year, and there are no required texts needed to pass these exams.

Accordingly, the lessons that I taught did not have to contain any specific content, I was free to choose what I did with the classes. This was also possible because my lessons were an addition to the regular classes, I didn't take over any one class, but had a number of classes. Because I never had more than 16 students at the same time – and often less – my lessons provided an opportunity for the students to talk more than in their normal lessons, and my goal was to encourage them to do just that. Although the teaching methods cannot be transferred directly to a Danish secondary grammar school due to these differences in content, I learnt a lot from experimenting with the classes, varying each lesson through different topics, introducing games, and various ways of organising group- and pair-work.

At the end of the assistantship I did an evaluation with most of the students which was very positive and which also helped point out for me the things that I did well.

Through the six months I learnt very valuable lessons about the tasks you are faced as a teacher and how I personally deal with those task. I gained an insight in different types of teaching situations such as dealing with groups of various sizes and students with very different abilities and I thereby learnt a lot about myself as a teacher, which I am sure will be helpful in any future teaching situation.

### **Improvement and transfer of credits**

Although I didn't learn as much Hungarian as I had imagined, it was exciting to get a taste of it. With a minor in linguistics I am interested in languages in general, and it has been a great opportunity for me to get acquainted with a lan-

guage from a different language family. I believe it also helps me as a language teacher to know and recognise the frustration that sometimes results from struggling with a new language.

As far as teaching abilities go, I believe practical experience is essential to understand abstract theories. The assistantship has been a chance for me to get some experience, and attempt to put theories into practice.

The assistantship is not transferable as part of my education – but I do believe it is a very valuable addition and that it has provided me with some hands-on practice and an awareness of my own skills which I will certainly draw from in the future.

### **How did the students benefit?**

Since I was at the school as an English Language Assistant, and the school as already mentioned hadn't considered me giving Danish lessons, I didn't feel a great interest for anybody taking Danish lessons. The students have quite a heavy workload, and I think it should have been offered as a substitute for something else in order to be successful. Accordingly, I mainly introduced the students to a few Danish phrases, the numbers etc.

Towards the end of my stay I did an exhibition about Denmark with information and pictures on everything from eating habits over politics to the royal family. There was also a section with information about the Danish language and I had copied a H. C. Andersen fairytale in Hungarian and Danish to enable them to see Danish in writing and compare the two. The posters were put up in the hall and were read by both teachers and students, and used for teaching purposes as well. Furthermore, whenever I found it appropriate I tried to compare the given situation and/or topic to the Danish equivalent – for instance around the Christmas and Easter holidays and in relation to topics we went through be it divorce, neo-nazism or alcohol. As part of the Hungarian language exams involve talking about pictures, I have also made great use of Danish postcards and guidebooks.

With regard to the understanding of European issues I did a topic on the European Union with all of the more advanced students, in relation to the Hungarian inclusion into EU on May 1st, which I think was educational for both parties. Throughout my stay they have had the chance to ask questions not only on the Danish membership of EU but also on the different topics we have discussed which I believe has given them an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of another European country, and of the importance of working together with other countries on many issues.

Judging from the evaluation that I did towards the end of my stay I think the students enjoyed my classes particularly because we discussed 'everyday' topics from newspapers, the internet, television etc, rather than typical textbook topics and the students could speak freely, which they rated as a nice change from drilling particular sentence structures. I believe the lessons had a great deal of relevance for them and I hope I gave them a sense of language study as something, which can be fun and educational at the same time.

### **Practical problems**

I had no problems with the journey or with the living conditions at the student hostel. I had all the facilities I needed, however, it was a bit lonely at weekends when the building for the most was completely empty.

The scholarship was just enough to manage, but wouldn't have gone far had I not got board and lodging in return for extra hours at the hostel, but I do know the scholarship is meant as a supplement.

### **Room for improvement**

My assistantship did not involve a great deal of supervision – or rather – none at all. I realise it was my own responsibility to ask for supervision, but I felt my supervisor was too busy, and I was uncomfortable asking for time consuming attention. In the beginning I think I was flattered at their trust in my abilities, and when time passed and I started to feel that things were going ok, I just let it slide. However, I do feel that feedback from one or two teachers on how the classes were held and how I was handling my job could have been very useful and helpful, particularly in the first one-two months.

At the beginning of my stay, my supervisor arranged for some students to take me round town to make me acquainted with the area. Indeed it was a help, and in addition I think I would have liked if the supervisor or another appointed person who had the time and who wanted to - could have introduced me to the cultural facilities and possibilities the town or city had to offer, as naturally different age groups have different interests, and it might have been an opportunity to socialise with one or two teachers, which I didn't feel there was much opportunity for. As already mentioned, I think it was particularly relevant because the language barrier was a problem for me.

It would also have made everything easier if there was just one person who was responsible for giving me the relevant information about arrangements at the

school. There were a few teachers who were very considerate and checked with me whether I was informed, which more often than not, I wasn't.

I would also have liked to attend an introduction meeting – or any other informal gathering - at the Hungarian Socrates National Agency. As the assistants arrive at several different times a year maybe some kind of quarterly gathering could be an idea - it definitely would have provided a welcome opportunity to meet with the other language assistants. I found it was difficult to take the initiative to meet with other assistants myself due to the workload, but I think some kind of contact could have been helpful.

Instead of introduction meetings the Hungarian Office sends out a welcome pack, but I didn't receive one from my supervisor. When I learned about the material from the office in mid-January I felt uncomfortable asking my supervisor where this material was, as I had been an assistant since the beginning of December.

### **Advice for other assistants**

Do bring materials (postcards, guidebooks, magazines, recipes, money, little souvenirs to use as gifts etc.) from your home country – as pointed out in the guide for language assistants.

If you are going to a country whose language you don't speak - do take an intensive course in the language before you go – and do insist the host school will help you find a teacher upon your arrival.

Do insist on supervision of the lessons, I think I didn't pursue it further because I had a sense that it was going well, but I am sure I could have learnt a lot from constructive feedback.

Don't stay too long if you don't speak the language – it is easy to feel isolated when you cannot communicate, but don't let it discourage you from going in the first place.