

Valeriu Mihai Pânoiu in Fredensborg

Valeriu Mihai Pânoiu from Mioveni in Romania was a language assistant in Fredensborg, where he taught English and French at three different schools. Here he told the pupils about Romanian and East-European history, culture and music – e.g. about Dracula, Nicolae Ceausesco. Moreover, Valeriu got to learn about the Danish teaching methods, which is less formal than the Romanian ones.

The assistantship was the result of the cooperation between the six schools in Fredensborg-Humlebæk Kommune, Denmark. They received two language assistants in order for them to be working in three schools for a period of two months. Thus, my work was shared between Fredensborg Skole, Asminderød Skole and Endrup Skole. My colleague-language assistant was from the Czech Republic. She was working in the other 3 schools and we shared a flat that our hosts had rented for us.

The schools I worked in belong to the public school system (which is called "Folkeskole" in Danish), covering the ages from 4/5 to 16/17 years (from the preparatory class - 0. grade to the 9th grade/optionally 10th grade).

I discovered an excellent work environment in the Danish schools, where the relationship between teachers and students is rather informal. In consequence it is friendly and attractive for students, stimulating initiative and responsibility. These two qualities are also prevailing in the teachers' case, who are more relaxed, without any stress, especially because they are given complete professional trust and respect, independence and freedom of choice by higher authorities (school leadership, inspectorates), who do not exert any form of pressure or control.

Teaching at three different schools

I have been in touch with almost all the students in the three schools, following certain teachers regularly (assisting, teaching, spreading information about Romania) and some others occasionally (in order to promote the language, the culture and the civilisation of my country, or to perform activities with the support of the materials brought from home — such as dancing and singing Romanian songs).

I have mainly attended English and French lessons, involving some times didactic materials (handbooks, tapes, CDs) from Romania. For example: texts (accompanied by exercises and discussions) about Dracula or Ceausescu's regime, listening to Romanian folk music and drawing, dancing to Romanian music, projecting pictures (with IT support).

I have also attended Art lessons (doing some of the mentioned activities - singing, dancing, drawing), Cooking lessons (I have baked Romanian cakes with several groups of children in each school), Physical Education (playing different

games and speaking English with the pupils), Religion (telling about orthodox rituals).

Furthermore, I have had the chance of giving all the classes I taught special lessons about the language, culture and civilisation of Romania. I was completely in charge with these lessons (held in English). I relied on the students' interests (the method most used was conversation), focusing on geographical data, historical events, traditions, mentalities, differences and similarities in thinking and behaviour, portraits of famous men (leaders - Stephen the Great, Nicolae Ceausescu, the Royal Family, related otherwise with the Danish Royal Family; legendary characters - Dracula; musicians - George Enescu, Gheorghe Zamfir; sculptors - Constantin Brancusi; sportsmen - Nadia Comaneci, Ilie Nastase).

Changing between three schools required continuous adaptation to the "rhythm" of each teacher. This way, I got to know the differences between the methodologies followed and the alternative handbooks (differing from school to school and from teacher to teacher) and also the common turning points (such as the importance of the audio-visual materials in teaching languages). As for the didactic methods, I mostly used: discussion, debate, explanation, role-play and exercises.

Taking part in the school projects

I took part in various school projects (Denmark is well-known for them: twice or three times a year traditional courses are interrupted for a couple of weeks and students focus only on a theme they have chosen): "Indian week" with the 5th graders (Fredensborg Skole - I joined the children who read stories, lived in a tepee, dressed and "hunted" like American Indians); guided tour of Copenhagen in English (10th grade, Asminderød Skole: each student documented himself on an important site in Copenhagen and on the last day each of them performed his presentation in front of the chosen site). Or assisting pupils in the 1st grade (Asminderød Skole) in putting on a Christmas play.

At Endrup Skole students in the 9th grade were running a project in the German lesson about the communist regime in East Germany; I was asked to fill in some details and to present another face of the communism (which I did for 4 hours, in English).

I have also conceived a questionnaire for the 6th graders in Fredensborg Skole (about European countries, capitals, neighbours, languages, records and curiosities), which turned into a project in the 8th grade at Endrup Skole. This ran during several Geography lessons, which often needed to be supported by historical, cultural and linguistic information.

One of the most exciting activities for me was the group work in the 5th grade (Endrup Skole): the class was divided into 3 groups which I had in turns just for myself for different lessons (English, singing, dancing, cooking) in which they were forced to gain self-confidence and to improve their English oral expression.

The History lessons had usually a European and global approach, but we also tried a parallel overview: in the 8th grade (at Fredensborg Skole) I came up with some facts about the history of Romania and the students did the same (even with video support) with Denmark' s history (again, in English).

Perfect planning and coordination

The host institution established contact with me immediately after the project obtained the grant. Before starting my activity in each of the 3 schools, my coordinator teachers (one for each school) had already informed the entire staff about my stay, and therefore got the links with the teachers interested in having me in their lessons (assisting and teaching and/or spreading information about my home country).

The schedule was ready before the start of my assistantship at each school and it only needed occasional adjustments (caused for example by new teachers who showed their interest in the project). The number of hours per week situated on the average recommended (under 16 hours/week).

The irreproachable planning set the basis of the success! The three coordinating teachers were permanently aware of my activity and had regular contact with each other. The evaluation was both continuous, final (oral discussion and/or written report) and for internal use (suggestions for further improvements, benefits for the Language Assistant, students and the other teachers). The head-teams of each school offered their full support to the project (group-work in the entire community, allocation of funds from the budget, stimulating teachers' interest in working with the Language Assistant). And the host institutions had planned every practical detail before starting the project: from finding accommodation and supporting a very important amount of the payments to helping the Language Assistants integrate into the social (welcome and farewell parties) and cultural life (visits to museums and tours around Denmark covered by the schools budget). I also had full access to IT sources, teaching materials (the teachers provided me with handbooks, exercise books) and library services.

Living in Denmark

Going beyond a tourist' s possibilities and really living like an every day Dane proved to be a very 'modelling' experience. The hospitality, the sharp and yet subtle irony, the lack of prejudices, the opening towards new cultures set a very comfortable atmosphere for me.

The language assistantship was a way of taking a look outside for the Danish students and inside for me. I have also discovered that learning about the other' s

history, culture, society is a great tool for learning about yourself and about your own origins, past and present. Comparative associations (for example teaching about Romanians' ancestors made automatically the connection with the Vikings' era) brought up questions about my country that I had never asked myself before.

Getting to know, hear, read about artists and their work, exploring on site the history and geography, feeling how fond they are about involving themselves in ceremonies regarding the Royal Family transformed a puzzle into a global picture. H.C. Andersen gave the motto to the inhabitants of the country: "to live is to travel". And that says everything about open horizons. And Denmark is indeed a country where children are brought up like in a fairy-tale world ('eventyrland') - not least due to the social welfare protected by the state!

The European dimension

The most important revelation regarding European issues was for me the importance of the implementation of international work in schools, especially in the language lessons. The students at Asminderød Skole were chatting on-line in English with their mates from Spain and Italy, the name of the project being "European Teens Tour". All the three schools were running and preparing visits and student exchanges with students from other EU countries (mainly the Netherlands and Germany). I didn't take part in these projects, but my Czech colleague and I were invited by Cirius National Agency to a Conference having as a theme the promotion of international work in Danish schools. We met so many teachers eager to get international contacts, and those interested in hosting a Language Assistant got any requested information from the two of us, one of the coordinating teachers and one of the headmasters. There was even a page in Danish on the Internet created to promote the language assistantship:

<http://www.emu.dk/gym/internationalt/samarbejde/sprogass.html>.

I have also made contacts with teachers participating in the programme "European School Projects", dealing for example with language programmes with IT support, contacts who might prove very useful in my future career.

Future plans

My Danish stage offered me a wonderful formation. I needed the self-confidence I have gained, as for opening myself practically towards didactic methods and international approaches in teaching languages – and I must say that cooperation with a European partner seems a very tempting and soon possible plan. At the end of my assistantship there is a French teacher job waiting for me in a Romanian upper secondary school.

Altogether, I have learned very much about the utility of methods based on conversation in language classes (discussion, debate, brainstorming, play-acting). The 'question – answer'-method functions well not only between teacher and students, but it is also extremely efficient in group-works. And because of the e-mail exchange projects (like "The Image of the Other") conversation transgresses not only traditional lessons, but also countries and cultures. Other important gains in terms of teaching skills, apart from those already enumerated, include: time management, fluidity of the lessons, involvement of media means (audio-visual, Internet, press articles), guiding the students towards finding the researched information themselves.

Owing to the whole school system and relaxed atmosphere, I learned to deal with students and ensure respect within the limits of informal relationships. Furthermore, I believe the most important gain for the school of having a Hungarian language assistant was that my presence and the materials brought from home made everything for the students more concrete. It was a wonderful opportunity for them to correct and to create new images and representations about another language, culture and civilisation - and a very good exercise aiming at learning more about European diversity.

The Culture, History, Geography, Language lessons had implicitly a European approach. Students got to know more about space and time, past and present, causal chains, mentalities, European currents, political, social and artistic movements, conflicts etc.