

German Language Assistance in Colaiste Muire Ballymote, Ireland

From October 1st of 2021 all the way to May 31st, 2022, I have had the distinct pleasure of being allocated to the secondary school *Colaiste Muire Ballymote* in the North-West of the Republic of Ireland. My role was that of a German language assistant, doing my best to convey both language and culture of the German language family. Not only did I learn a lot from my stint in Ireland, but I also believe I have matured as a teacher and – while it certainly was not always easy – learned to work within a vastly different educational system. The following report outlines my duties and experiences during that time and should showcase lessons learnt from teaching.

First of all, I was allocated to Ballymote, Sligo through the Austrian exchange service (OeAD), specifically their *Weltweit unterrichten* programme. If it hadn't been for the covid pandemic I would have gone to Ireland the year before; however, the pandemic complicated things to such a degree that I chose to defer my language assistance to 2021/22. The OeAD requires each applicant to provide a letter of motivation, two separate letters of recommendation by university professors and an interview before deciding on the final assistants. The interview in particular was an early chance at clearing up basic questions; what was expected of us, what our legal status was, but also how we might handle certain situations in the classroom. It was clear to me after this interview that I had to scale back my aspirations concerning the German language level in Ireland – more on this further down.

After applicants are chosen, the OeAD follows up this procedure with a whole prep week, designed to prepare the future assistants for their task and give them the tools necessary to succeed. Our week was only four days (due to Covid) but it was a productive one nonetheless. We were situated in St. Pölten and, along with all the other assistants going to schools all over Europe, had a variety of seminars dealing with topics such as classroom communication, language teaching basics, cultural teaching, German grammar basics (badly needed) or open teaching techniques. I include these four days in this report because I want to stress one of my most treasured take aways from this program: the people in it. From the get-go all assistants got along like a house on fire, sharing experiences from university, suggesting lesson plans and having an overall good time. The most interesting part for me was how diverse our backgrounds were; yes, most of us had some sort of teacher training, but the variety in age, subjects and

teaching experience was truly remarkable. It is those connections that proved invaluable when one of us faced a new challenge – there was always someone in a similar situation.

Having completed this prep week, I wanted to tackle three main things straight away: getting in touch with my school, finding accommodation and sort out my financial situation. Getting in touch with my mentor was easy enough since I had her mail address since I got the allocation back in May of 2021. Accommodation was already a bit harder, for two reasons: the Irish rent market is both very volatile and very short term. I easily wrote about fifty messages to landlords, receiving a grand total of three messages back – two rejections and one message asking why I am bothering for a room this early on. Let reiterate this for future assistants: Irish landlords will think you crazy for looking for accommodation three or two months in advance. It is customary in Ireland to hand your landlord your notice and move to a new flat – all within two weeks. Having realized this I asked my school for help; they sent a letter confirming my employment which helped a lot in generating more replies and I ended up finding a room a mere three weeks before my departure to Ireland.

I ended up with a rent of 95€ per week plus monthly bills (things like trash bins, internet, or water) for a generous room in a semi-detached house in Sligo, sharing with four other Irish lads. The weekly rent format might be confusing, but it can often be found in Ireland. Living in Sligo it was an alright deal – a colleague allocated to Dublin was paying upwards of 700€ for a room. The housing crisis in Ireland is real and ongoing; my tip is to get help from your school (some colleagues were able to live with their teachers), have a look at both [rent.ie](https://www.rent.ie) and [daft.ie](https://www.daft.ie) and to not lose hope. As mentioned, the Irish housing market is very spontaneous and de-regulated, so things can happen very quickly – it definitely takes some getting used to, especially for us Austrians.

Concerning my financial situation, it went as follows. Basically, language assistants get some pocket money from the Irish ministry of education; however, this usually barely covers rent and basic expenses. Therefore, I recommend two things: first, the Erasmus+ mobility programme, in which you can enrol either as a student or post-graduate. Second, the federal state government of Upper Austria offers the *Internationalisierungsprogramm für Studierende* (IPS) which, especially in the beginning, was of great help to me. Overall, these options make things easier, but I would still recommend to either do some tutoring or extra hours in school to give yourself some spending money – more on that later.

Before that, arriving in Ireland; I flew to Ireland on the 24th of September, both to have same time to settle in and to visit my school beforehand. I thought about going by ferry (there is also an EU fund for green travel, check it out) but it ended up being way to expensive by train. Consecutively, I moved in on the 25th and visited my school the next day. A great thing about Ireland are the ubiquitous student fares; whether it is buses, trains or even cinema, usually there will be a student price. My school was located in Ballymote, a small town about twenty minutes by train from Sligo. I was lucky to have the train option, some colleagues were assigned equally remote schools and ended up commuting with their teachers by car every day. Public transport in Ireland in general is not great outside of Dublin; buses routinely are late or cancelled altogether, schedules are inadequate, and bus will just drive by bus stations if you don't wave them down.

Nonetheless, I made it to my school on time and met my mentor, the principal, and my students for the first time. The Colaiste Muire in Ballymote is quite a small and very rural school with only about 400 students; I was their very first language assistant. I noticed from the beginning that the classes were very quiet, especially considering they were meant to be learning a language. The OeAD seminars had prepared us not to expect too high a level of proficiency, but the silence in the class was to me, as a language teacher, unusual. On my first day, after meeting the staff, I had a sit down with my mentor. She was very welcoming and easy going and tried to assure me that me not having studied German at university would not be a problem. We also agreed on a planning session Monday; to future assistants, this was not ideal, push for something like Friday – you want to plan your lessons the week before.

This was a sign of things to come. While everyone was extremely friendly and welcoming, the relaxed nature concerning planning and prepping classes was very unusual for me. Classes only last for forty minutes, for some reason without a five-minute break in between, resulting in about half an hour of real teaching time per class. Irish secondary school starts with junior cycle (13-15), followed by an optional transitional year (TY), followed in turn by the senior cycle (16/17-17/18). There is no mandatory repeating of a year like the Austrian *Sitzenbleiben*, so students and parents alike pay little notice to the end of term reports. At end of both the junior and senior cycle are lengthy, standardized exams, the Junior and Leaving Certificate, respectively. The Leaving Certificate in particular decides what courses at university a student might apply for; hence, this is the single most important exam for every student. I go into this much detail to explain why the whole Irish system is oriented towards this one, final exam and, consequently, why the classes seemed so silent when I first met them.

The German Leaving Certificate syllabus was one of the most frustrating things for me. It allots for a written and an oral part; however, the oral part consists of the same five role play scenarios, the same five picture stories and same seven topics of general questions – every single year. Understandably, this results in German students learning these scenarios and stories by heart, repeating the same scripts over and over again, until they can recite to you every minute detail. Being fluent in German, unfortunately, is not really encouraged. This was a huge mental leap for me to make. As an English teacher back in Austria, I really struggled with the lack of both communication and use of target language in the classes. My students, in turn, were equally surprised to have a teacher asking them questions in the target language and trying a more open approach to language learning. It took me about until Christmas to accept this different system and find my place within it.

That place being that of a kind of cultural ambassador; as a language assistant, you are not there to change the system (which by the way the Irish themselves recognize as not ideal). What you can do is generate interest and understanding for a different culture altogether. So, what did I do? Besides helping the students in small groups with pronunciation, I showed them Austria beyond the usual Sissi & Mozart tourism ad. I explained weird traditions like *Krampus*, *Rauhnächte* or *Fasching*. I took them to the school kitchen and baked *Vanillekipferl* and *Apfelstrudel*. I made sure they learned about the differences in language of the German dialects. I included contemporary Austrian music and movie where possible. We compared their lives to that of Austrian adolescents. I tried talking about clichés they had about German speaking countries – and clichés we might have about Ireland. I also made sure they could differentiate between Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

In short, wherever possible I tried to highlight some cultural aspect. Over time, the students themselves warmed up to this and started asking questions and participating more in classes. I also agreed to do supervision and substitution classes, which not only earned me some money but also gave me the chance to connect with the students outside the rigid German class setting – I highly recommend it. Similarly, I volunteered for every school trip possible, accompanying the students to Gaelic football games, to museums and on field trips into the gorgeous Irish landscape. Additionally, I started asking fellow teachers in the staff room whether I could sit in on some lessons. This was highly interesting, since some subjects do not exist in Austria. For example, Home Economics is not just cooking and ironing, it also deals with budgeting and getting a mortgage, something that is sadly absent from Austrian schools. They also do regular guidance classes where students can weigh their future prospects. Last but

not least I also got to teach some History (my second subject in Austria is GSKPB), which was just a blast. The teachers got me to teach some lesson on the Holocaust, Austria's role in that and the World Wars and especially how we deal with it now – easily my favourite lessons.

Adding to these positive experiences, I want to mention both free time and my Erasmus friends. The language assistant scheme stipulates that the assistant should have a free day per work week, usually Mondays or Fridays. I strongly advise to take advantage of this and travel, see and hike as much of the country as possible. Ireland has an insanely gorgeous landscape with some spectacular wild areas. I would also advise to attend the networking events by both the OeAD and the German Goethe-Institute. I found many friends and good colleagues throughout Europe, all in Ireland in similar situations to me. In Sligo alone there was a German, a Spanish and a French assistant, with more colleagues in the surrounding town and villages. I had some great adventures with these folks and these relationships are the most treasured take away from this program for me. Not only is a network great for emotional support or troubleshooting a teaching issue, it also gave me insights into the German, French, and Spanish educational systems. I feel now a lot more confident evaluating the Austrian system within the rest of Europe.

Everything considered, my language assistance was a transformative experience. While I had to grapple with adjusting to a very different system, I am convinced I matured as both a teacher and a person. Living abroad changes your perspective, making you re-evaluate things you took for granted. It is now clear to me that the Austrian system, while by no means perfect, has some aspects to that it does very well – especially when it comes to language teaching. I want to thank the OeAD for the chance to participate, the staff at the PHOÖ International Office for their logistical support and both Erasmus+ and the Federal State of Upper Austria for their financial support, without which I wouldn't have been able to embark on this journey.

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