

Sharing Languages - Edinburgh students work with refugees in Germany

Ellen Smith, Julia Pisarek, Rachel Lonie, Anna Phelps, Nick Heaney and Helen McDiarmid

University of Edinburgh

Abstract: Last summer twenty students from the University of Edinburgh travelled to Germany for a project to help the integration of refugees. Recognising the importance of language in order to integrate, we led a summer school for children in order to maintain and develop their German whilst they were not at school over the summer holidays. We also attended a local refugee café where refugees came to meet others in a similar situation to them and locals who were offering advice. Here several languages could be heard, using any means to communicate and interact with each other. During our time there we experienced ourselves some of the challenges of integration. Whilst living in a German village we had to support each other with our range of language abilities just as we had seen happening in the summer school and at the refugee café.

Keywords: higher education, refugees, Germany

Introduction

In July 2016 twenty students from The University of Edinburgh travelled to Germany to take part in a project to help refugees, who had recently arrived in the area. We were all studying German in either our first or second year of study. We were concerned about the circumstances refugees across Europe found themselves in. The situation at the time was unpredictable, and we were not sure what to expect upon our arrival. During the three weeks we spent on this project, we led a summer school for refugee children at a school in Bad Kreuznach. We also visited the Bon Café - a meeting point for refugees, where adults could receive advice, meet locals and other people in a similar situation. The project also provided us with the opportunity to improve our German through a language course and through interacting with the locals and the refugees (many of whom already spoke German quite fluently). The experience was ultimately a very uplifting one, and we were all encouraged and impressed by what the local community was doing to welcome refugees to Bad Kreuznach.

Bad Kreuznach and the Crucenia Realschule

Bad Kreuznach is a town in Rhineland-Pfalz, Germany. Many refugees have been accommodated there, and also in Bad Münster am Stein-Ebernburg, the neighbouring town. Thanks to the kindness of many locals, the twenty of us were able to stay in an empty church house in a nearby village called Zotzenheim. In July 2016, Zotzenheim was yet to host any refugees. There were however some living in nearby Sprendlingen.

The Crucenia Realschule is a school in Bad Kreuznach of around 700 pupils, the majority of which have come to Germany from other countries. Most of the children we worked with were from Syria, but there were also pupils from Afghanistan, Somalia and Iran amongst other countries. This multicultural environment is why so many refugee children are schooled there.

When the refugee children first arrive at the school from abroad they attend all classes in German, alongside their German-speaking peers. They also attend around 20 hours of intensive language classes per week, in order to speed up their learning process. Because of this, children end up in mixed age groups as the classes are set according to their language skills and their ability to pass exams and tests in German. Only when the children are able to study Biology, History, and other subjects at a similar level of German to their native-speaker peers, will they be allowed to progress with their studies. This means that their general studies may be put on hold for up to two years. Though this process sounds, and is, very challenging, we found that the children do make progress quickly. However, it appears that most of their progress is lost during the summer holidays, when many of the refugee children do not use German at home. This is where our work with the children began.

Our group travelled to Bad Kreuznach, four days a week, to organize a Summer School for the refugee children attending the Crucenia Realschule. The project was co-created by a student teacher from Bad Kreuznach, who was doing a work placement in the school at the time. When we arrived in Bad Kreuznach, we noticed that the pupils could communicate with considerable fluency within familiar contexts, but when we moved outside the classroom it became clearer that there were limits to the breadth of their vocabulary. Our job was not only to help them maintain their language skills, but also to help them feel more comfortable in their environment, and to give them an enjoyable summer filled with games, activities, and field trips.

Whilst working with the children, the motto of the Crucenia Realschule, “Es ist normal verschieden zu sein”, particularly resonated with us. This phrase translates to, “It is normal to be different”, and we saw this idea being embraced by everyone at the school. The children in our groups were of all different ages (from 9 - 16), and came from several different countries and cultural backgrounds, yet there were never any arguments or fights between them. It was incredible to see how they had all adapted to the situation they had found themselves in. What was especially inspiring for us was seeing the children, who were more confident in their German language skills, helping others who had perhaps only been in Germany for a few weeks.

The Realschule was not just a school, but a community. It was a really supportive environment not only thanks to the teachers, but also thanks to the pupils, who would often help each other out. It was something quite special to be a part of.
Rachel Lonie, 2nd year German and Politics.

Activities

We tailored our activities to small groups (around 6 school pupils and 3 students), in which we worked over the two weeks. We organized a trip to a barefoot walking path, played mini-golf, went paddle-boating, organised scavenger hunts, went to the cinema, but also baked and cooked in the school. Learning in different environments allowed the children to have fun whilst developing new vocabulary. A benefit of working in small groups was that the children received a lot of one-to-one attention; this helped boost their self-esteem, made them feel more comfortable in the group and more familiar with us. The groups were of mixed abilities, and it was a privilege to see the children helping not only each other, but us as well.

We found that some of the younger children responded really well to learning through songs, whilst some of the older ones engaged in healthy competition provoked by tongue twisters. These are examples of some of the ways we tried to integrate language learning into all of our activities. We printed photos of what we had done each day, and then asked the children to write something about that day to keep in personal folders. This suited the range of abilities we had in the groups and offered the school, the children and their parents a record of their time spent with us.

Overall, the majority of our activities were based outside the classroom and we encouraged the children to use their German in local shops and at the market. In a way, this echoed our experience in learning a language, as we also had to apply our German skills during our time living and working in this new and foreign environment. Seeing us struggle with our language at times meant that the children could relate our process of learning to their own. Many of the children helped us with our German - this reciprocal manner of learning really became the core of our project. Everyone was taking part in their own process of learning a language and we were there to help one another.

Learning German

In the mornings we had our own German Summer School in Zotzenheim, conducted by Annette Götzkes from the University of Edinburgh, who was the main organiser of the whole project. We covered German language and literature that was connected to the experiences of refugees and immigrants in Germany. The lessons were engaging, educational, and effective not only because we improved our German, but because they helped us to connect to the experiences of the people we were meeting from all different backgrounds.

Between the twenty of us, the level of German skills varied, and this led to us supporting each other, not just in the classroom, but also in challenging situations, such as talking with locals in the village. Having a range of abilities meant that those of us with lesser capabilities were challenged to meet the level of more advanced students. We could easily learn from one another and help each other out when we were struggling.

Personally, I was inspired by the students who could communicate far better than I in German and it motivated me to continue to push myself in challenging

situations like group conversations with the Zotzenheim locals. Ellen Smith, 3rd year History of Art.

Ausländerpfarramt and The Bon Café

The Ausländerpfarramt (www.auslaenderpfarramt.de) serves as a contact point for all foreigners, and focuses on pastoral care for migrants and refugees. It coordinates a project called „Ankommen in Rheinland-Pfalz“ which supports the incoming refugees by providing advice for their asylum application. Furthermore, the people at the Pfarramt help refugees with orientation and integration into the community by organising events and activities. As language acquisition plays a crucial part in the integration of refugees, the Pfarramt also coordinates and trains volunteers to provide German lessons.

Another example of welcoming refugees to Germany can be seen through the weekly ‘Bon Café’, which is also organised by the Ausländerpfarramt and based in a church building in Bad Kreuznach. The Bon Café provides an environment where people can come together and hear their native languages, share their stories and advice (and cake!). Each Wednesday we would come to the café and spend time with the people there, the majority of whom were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iran. This part of the project was especially uplifting but also challenging. As we played cards and talked with the refugees we were overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness and compassion we experienced. We all made friendships there that we will never forget.

It was inspiring to witness the support given by people from the local community, and the many different forms it took. It was normal for there to be four languages spoken in one conversation, and working in this environment made us realise the significant role language plays when trying to integrate into a new community. Similarly, but of course on a lesser level, we were experiencing this living in a small German village.

What really struck me was the courage and strength of the refugees considering all they have been through. How they could be in such high spirits all the time. They would always put others before themselves. Nick Heaney, 2nd year Engineering.

Interviews

While spending time in the Bon Café we conducted interviews in German and English (and in Farsi and Arabic, with the help of translators) with several refugees, the coordinator of the initiative and later also with the trainee teacher, the director of the Crucenia Realschule, and with pedestrians in Bad Kreuznach. This part of our project provided us with a large amount of material to use in the dissemination of our work, and enabled us to begin to create a documentary about what we learned during our time in Germany, as well as an exhibition at the University of Edinburgh.

In conducting these interviews, we learned about a wide range of attitudes and heard many different perspectives. We found it really important to be able to provide a contrasting perspective to the usual media coverage of the issues surrounding refugees.

*When I signed up to take part in the project I didn't anticipate the range of stories we would be exposed to - everyone we met had had different experiences, and it was really insightful and eye-opening to be able to interact with people from so many backgrounds, and to hear their own opinions on the situation.
Julia Pisarek, 2nd Year German & Politics*

Creative Writing

As well as participating in language classes, we also had the privilege of taking part in poetry workshops with poet Georgi Gill, who came to work with us from the Scottish Poetry Library. In these sessions we discussed poetry about the experiences of asylum, and learned new writing techniques, such as free writing - writing without really thinking for a few minutes, in order to provoke thoughts, which would then be turned into poetry. In each session, we had time to write for ourselves. We all produced poetry about migration, connected to how we felt about the refugee crisis, or how we were inspired by the people we had met. The workshops helped us process the work we were doing and the thoughts we were having.

I'm really grateful that we had the opportunity to write our own poetry. Although it seemed to me that it would feel out of place on our trip, it was exactly what I needed. It gave us a space to reflect on what we were doing and to process the emotions of our work. Anna Phelps, 2nd year German & History

<p>One-on-one</p> <p><i>Hot-boxed and sat opposite With no air but each other's He stuck up a statistic shield. Against his war, About the war of his country, The war in his words much different From the war down his throat. His eyes are betraying him, My mind in ten places, His mind in one.</i></p>	<p>Pustablume</p> <p><i>“Wie sagt man mm..?” This delicate firework Caught between a finger and thumb Then cupped in small hands Wished on Then released A perfect orb of secrets</i></p> <p><i>By Ellen Smith</i></p>
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Back in Edinburgh

We keep in touch with the friends we made in Germany and hope that similar projects will take place in the future. An exhibition presenting our project, as well as the work of other students from the Edinburgh College of Art, who are engaging with the current rise in the number of people seeking asylum in Europe, was available to view at the University of Edinburgh's George Square Campus¹. The exhibition aimed to provide an environment where people are free to learn, reflect and engage with our project, with the experiences of refugees in Europe, and with wider issues surrounding migration². We have also presented our project to college students to demonstrate how learning languages can have a positive impact in the wider world during and after university. To further disseminate our work and to counter popular sensationalism in the media, we produced a documentary which is to be made available to schools and other institutions. There is also a short blog about our experience³.

Conclusion

This experience really proved to us that language is an integral part of life. Language can sometimes be seen as a barrier, however what we saw at the Bon Café, the Summer School and in our time in the village proved that it is far from it. Instead, we saw multiple translations happening during one conversation, with all of the speakers working together to ensure everyone could communicate and be involved. As the project coordinator herself mentioned in an interview we did with her, "we will communicate with our hands and feet if we must." Nobody's voice was ever lost. Language is something that connects us all, and in a time of such uncertainty in the world, we could all draw from the communication and understanding we witnessed in Bad Kreuznach.

¹ <http://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/history-of-art/news-events/students-run-integration-project-for-refugees-arriving-in-germany>

² <http://www.studentnewspaper.org/edinburgh-students-experiences-working-in-a-german-refugee-camp-detailed-in-new-exhibition/>

³ <https://goabroadfund.wordpress.com/2016/08/30/volunteering-with-refugees-in-bad-kreuznach-germany-chris-dobson/>