



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



GOOD PRACTICE

COMENIUS ASSISTANTSHIPS

Good practice guide for host schools and assistants



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1

INTRODUCTION

Each year up to 1 500 future teachers participate in the Comenius Assistantships. They spend between 3 to 10 months in a school in another European country, assist with classroom teaching, support school projects and often teach their native language. It gives them the opportunity to enhance their knowledge of other European countries and education systems and to improve their teaching skills. The action supports language teaching in the host schools¹, improves the language skills of pupils working with the Comenius assistant in any subject and increases both their motivation to learn languages and their interest in the assistant's country and culture.

A Comenius Assistantship is much more than what happens inside classrooms, and this guidebook for assistants and host schools reflects that. It is based on the experiences of assistants, schools and National Agencies (NAs) and is intended to be practical. We hope that it will help host schools and assistants get the most out of the Comenius Assistantship action.

The following pages give a general overview of the European Union's Comenius Programme and of Comenius Assistantships in particular.

Section 3 of this Guide is aimed at host schools. It describes how the school can support the assistant to make a real contribution to the academic and social life of the school and the local community. This needs to be prepared before the assistant arrives. Comenius assistants can make a lasting contribution to the school's life and to the linguistic and cultural awareness of its pupils. The section also tackles common problems in organising the assistantship and shows how schools can avoid or solve them.

Section 4 of the guide focuses on the tasks of the Comenius assistants. It describes how to prepare for an assistantship and gives advice on how to cope with the challenges of integrating into the host school and adapting to the various types of teaching situations an assistant might encounter. It also looks at possible activities outside the school, contacts with peers and within the local community.

In addition the Guide provides four annexes:

- Annex I covers accommodation.
- Annex II is a list of resources assistants could usefully bring with them from home.
- Annex III is a list of ideas for informal activities to help motivate pupils to learn more about the language and culture of the assistant's country. Most of these ideas are taken from suggestions by schools and Comenius assistants themselves.
- Annex IV contains a model grant agreement between the host school and the assistant.

1 In this guide the term 'host school' is used to mean any institution receiving a Comenius assistant.

2

COMENIUS ASSISTANTSHIPS — THE BACKGROUND

Since 2007 the Comenius Programme, which includes the action Comenius Assistantships, has formed part of the Lifelong Learning Programme. It addresses school education and targets practically everyone involved in this area: pupils, future teachers, teachers, schools, teacher education institutes, universities, local and regional authorities in school education, parents associations, NGO, etc.

LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMME			
Comenius	Erasmus	Leonardo da Vinci	Grundtvig
School education	Higher education & advanced training	Vocational education and training	Adult education
Transversal Programme			
4 key activities – Political development; Language learning; ICT; Dissemination of best practice			
Jean Monnet Programme			
3 key activities – Jean Monnet Action; European Institutions; European associations			

The Comenius Programme aims to boost knowledge and understanding among young people and educational staff of the value and diversity of European cultures and languages and help young people acquire the basic life skills necessary for personal development, future employment and active European citizenship. Both aims are well reflected in the Comenius Assistantships action, which aims to:

- give future teachers the opportunity to expand their understanding of teaching and learning to a European level, enhance their knowledge of foreign languages, other European countries and their education systems and improve their teaching skills;
- improve the language skills of pupils at the host schools and increase both their motivation to learn languages and their interest in the assistant’s country and culture.

Comenius assistants spend between three and ten months in pre-primary, primary or secondary schools in another country participating in the Lifelong Learning Programme. They often help teach foreign languages or use a foreign language to teach and work with pupils. They receive a grant for subsistence and travel expenses. It also covers travel costs to attend an induction meeting in the host country, and – if needed – to finance linguistic as well as pedagogical preparation in “Content and Language Integrated Learning” (CLIL).



Who becomes a Comenius assistant? Either students whose aim is to become teachers or future teachers who have completed their studies but have not yet been employed as a teacher. They are citizens or permanent residents of countries participating in the Lifelong Learning Programme.

By no means are all Comenius assistants native speakers of one of the most taught languages in Europe. They represent the whole spectrum of European languages and culture. For citizens to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the European Union, they must be able to communicate in as many European languages as possible. It is important for the languages that tend to be the main vehicle for international communication are widely spoken, and this is increasingly the case. However, it is equally important to promote the use of languages that are not widely taught to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity and to allow European citizens to exercise their right to live and work anywhere in Europe.

A key aspect of Comenius Assistantships is that they introduce or build on a European dimension in the host school and community. Assistants raise pupils' awareness of another European culture and help break down prejudices. They are often speakers of languages not already taught in the host school, so they bring to the school and local community a linguistic and cultural resource which they may not otherwise encounter. Their contribution can be especially important where both the assistant and the partner institution are from a country whose main language is less widely used. Many Comenius assistants will mainly concentrate on work in the classroom, but often there is scope for engaging in more unusual or innovative activities, such as joint European projects (e.g. Comenius School Partnerships or eTwinning). See [Annex III](#) to this guide for more ideas.

The presence of a Comenius assistant under a European programme also provides tangible evidence to pupils of the benefits and potential of the European Union, and may inspire them to seek further information on how they too can participate in such programmes. National Agencies can provide information on this. In addition, many Comenius assistants are well informed about European issues and can help schools expand pupils' knowledge of the European Union and enhance their critical awareness of it, while combating stereotypes.

Further details of all actions under the Lifelong Learning Programme, the LLP Guide for Applicants and application forms can be obtained from National Agencies. Information can also be found on the Commission's website at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/comenius/doc990_en.htm

The list of LLP National Agencies may be found on the same website at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc1208_en.htm

3

GOOD PRACTICE FOR HOST SCHOOLS

With a Comenius assistant you receive the support of a future teacher who is both a native speaker of another European language and an ambassador of another European country.

You add a new European dimension to your school community. It offers the chance to broaden the curriculum, organise lively lessons, create new extra-curricular activities and has extra benefits in terms of staff training, activities for parents and the school's work with the local community.

Your school will need to invest some time to prepare the assistantship project in order to make it as imaginative and fruitful as possible for everyone concerned. This section aims to guide you through this process.



3.1

BEFORE THE ASSISTANT ARRIVES

Checklist

- Discuss with all relevant staff
- Draw up an outline of the Comenius Assistantship project
- Make staff and pupils aware that an assistant will arrive
- Appoint a mentor
- The mentor should attend the relevant meetings at the National Agency
- Contact the assistant as soon as possible
- Cooperate with other institutions if you “share” an assistant
- Draw up a draft timetable, consulting staff and the assistant
- Not more than 12–16 hours of school-based work per week
- Send the assistant documentation on the school and the local area
- Suggest resource material the assistant should bring
- Help the assistant with accommodation
- Make sure the assistant is insured for risks connected with work
- Check whether the assistant has adequate health insurance
- Clarify the legal position with regard to assistants
- Seek any necessary advice from the National Agency



3.1.1 Discuss with all relevant staff

Even before submitting an application for a Comenius Assistantship, all interested members of staff should discuss how the assistant should be integrated into school life and which activities they should support. To ensure a successful project, the decision to apply should be collaborative and everyone involved should be aware of the aims and objectives of Comenius Assistantships. The work of the Comenius assistant should not be confined to the language classroom. There are many ways in which an assistant can also contribute to teaching other subjects and collaborate with non-language staff (see 3.4.1).

3.1.2 Draw up an outline of the Comenius Assistantship project

The application should express clearly what the school would like to do with the Comenius assistant. All innovative aspects, the added value which the assistant will bring to your school and the ways the assistant will contribute to teaching in your school should be included in the application.

Schools should ask themselves:

- Which subjects are to be involved?
- What additional arrangements need to be made for teaching the assistant's mother tongue?
- Which teachers and classes will work with the assistant (classes other than language classes should be included see 3.4.11 for ideas)?
- What special projects/visits/exchanges could the Comenius assistant be involved in?
- In what ways can the project be linked with the local community, including parents and local enterprises?
- What resources will the school need to invest in the assistantship to make it a success?
- Ideally, how long should the assistantship be and at what time of the year would it be best for it to start? You will need to agree with the assistant on the duration of the assistantship and also on the start/end dates. We recommend accepting the timeframe and the dates suggested by the assistant as he/she usually has good reasons for them, e.g. exams.
- How will the school help the assistant find accommodation? Will it be possible to offer free or inexpensive meals at the school canteen?

Once the school has been informed by the NA that it is to receive a Comenius assistant, the general plan for the project needs to be worked on, in consultation with the assistant. Preliminary work to prepare for his or her arrival can begin at once. The more comprehensive the preparations, the easier the integration into the school and its way of life are likely to be.



3.1.3 Make staff and pupils aware that an assistant will arrive

One very important aspect is to ensure that all staff in the school is aware of the date of the assistant's arrival, his or her name and what he or she will be doing. There have been cases where only one or two teachers at a school know that an application has been made, and the others are mystified at who the new arrival is and why he or she is there. This can be very demoralising for the assistant and can mean that opportunities are missed.

The arrival of an assistant should be explained to pupils and their parents before the assistant arrives. The objectives of the Comenius Assistantship and how the assistant will contribute to school activities should be clear.

3.1.4 Appoint a mentor

Assistants need a key point of contact in the school. Schools must appoint a mentor, who will be responsible for welcoming the assistant and assuring his or her integration into the school and local community. The mentor will normally be a member of staff with whom the assistant will work, and with whom he or she can be expected to feel quickly at ease. Effective communication between mentor and assistant is very important: it should always be in a language that both speak well, even if it is not the mother tongue of either.

Mentors should be aware that a certain amount of extra work is involved and should only accept the job if they are sure that they are able to give the assistant the time and help necessary.

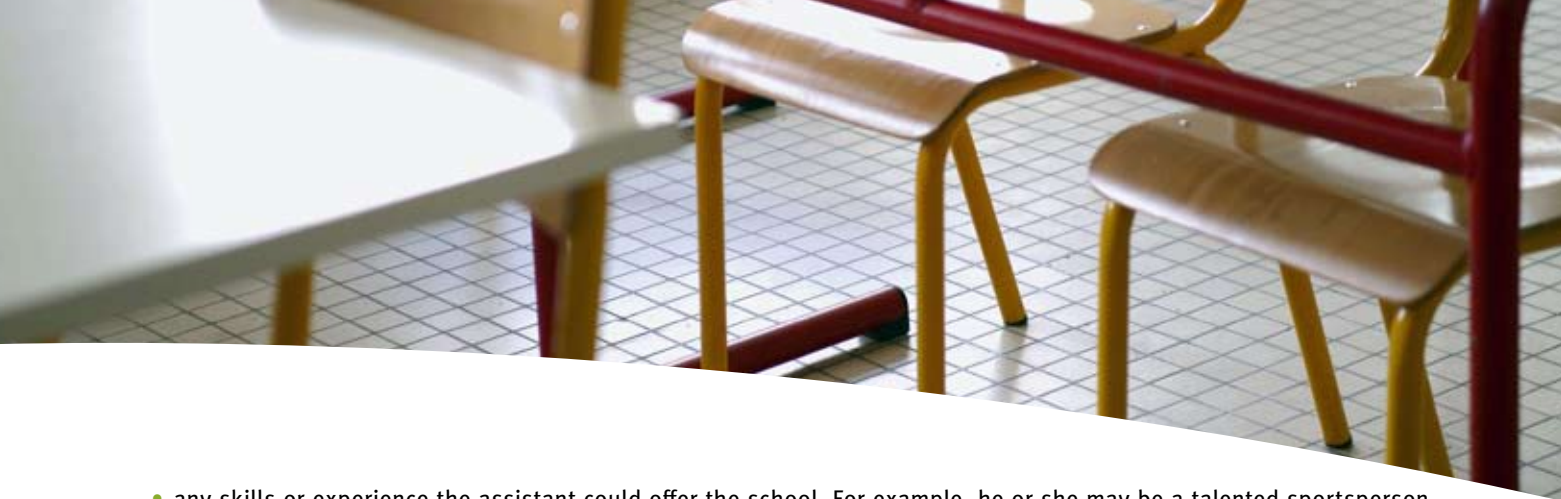
3.1.5 The mentor should attend the relevant meetings at the National Agency

Many National Agencies organise preparation or induction meetings for host schools. The mentor should typically represent the school at these meetings. Attendance is strongly encouraged, although in most cases expenses must be met by the school or relevant authority. They will give mentors an overview of their role during the assistantship and the various expectations of them.

3.1.6 Contact the assistant as soon as possible

Once the Comenius assistant is selected and the school has received confirmation, the school must contact the assistant, probably through the mentor. The earlier this is done and the more care the school takes to ensure that the assistant's questions are answered, the more confident and enthusiastic the assistant will normally be about the forthcoming assistantship. Close contact also helps minimise the possibility of assistants turning down the assistantship. This can occur, and although National Agencies try their best to find a replacement, vital time is lost and a replacement cannot always be found. The assistants can be contacted by telephone, e-mail or mail to answer questions and to provide as much information as possible. The following points could already be clarified prior to arrival:

- the extent and nature of the assistant's teaching experience, if any;
- what he or she hopes to gain from the assistantship;
- his/her preferences with regard to the subjects to be taught and the age range of the pupils;



- any skills or experience the assistant could offer the school. For example, he or she may be a talented sportsperson, musician, or actor;
- the level of his or her proficiency in the native language of the host country, and how the school might help to improve this. The school could, for example, arrange an intensive course on arrival, conversation exchanges with teachers, or evening classes locally;
- if the assistant already speaks the local language, whether he or she would like to undertake part-time training or study in other subjects, formal or informal (e.g. evening classes), so that, if possible, the school can help arrange this;
- if the assistant is not proficient in the local language, which languages does he or she speak, so that the school can, where possible, provide members of staff who can help with any necessary interpretation;
- his or her leisure interests, in order to provide information on the social and cultural events within the local community.

The mentor should give the assistant his or her private telephone number and personal e-mail address in case further questions or difficulties arise. This is especially important if the assistant and the school are matched just before or during the summer holidays.

3.1.7 Cooperate with other institutions if you “share” an assistant with a neighbouring institution

In most cases Comenius assistants work in a single school, but sometimes they may be allocated to two or three schools. The importance of thorough preparation prior to the assistant’s arrival is even greater if an assistant is to work in more than one school. Right from the beginning, the schools involved must coordinate properly to ensure that the assistant gains the desired experience. Timetables should not require the assistant to make too many journeys between schools. Schools should pay for any such journeys. The assistant will usually meet daily travel expenses to and from his or her accommodation, although some schools also help with this.

Each institution involved should designate a mentor, but one person should be given overall responsibility. All mentors involved should have regular contact with each other as well as with the assistant, both before and during the assistantship.

3.1.8 Draw up a draft timetable, consulting staff and the assistant

The work plan must be approved by both the Comenius assistant and the host school(s). After initial contact is made with the assistant, the teaching staff may be involved in planning the assistant’s timetable, reflecting the information that the assistant has given and ensuring that he or she is given as wide a range of experience as possible with different age groups and subject areas (see Section 3.4 for suggestions on this).

It is important to leave plenty of room for flexibility and for the assistantship to develop naturally. The timetable should only be finalised after the assistant’s arrival, in direct consultation with him or her. Although changes may be necessary, an early outline can be very helpful. Schools must, of course, respect the terms of Comenius Assistantships. It must be clear to everybody involved that the assistant is not a substitute teacher, nor purely a resource for examination practice, although helping small groups to prepare for national examinations can be a legitimate part of their role. Remember also that assistants should be given an opportunity to teach their mother tongue (see 3.4.1, 4.4.1 for further details).



3.1.9 Not more than 12–16 hours of school-based work per week

The assistant should have between 12 and 16 hours of ‘school-based’ work per week. This means contact hours, in other words any time spent with pupils and any time spent on other work on behalf of the school, such as assisting with European projects or working with parents or the local community. Regular timetabled duties such as managing language clubs or holding conversation classes should be included in the 12–16 hours, even if they take place at lunchtime or after school. However, time spent preparing lessons, whether on school premises or not, is not included.

The assistant may work more than 16 hours, if he or she agrees. He or she may also undertake paid work, in the school or outside it, provided this does not interfere with the assistantship. It may be advantageous for the assistant’s working hours to be confined to four days a week, in order to allow study time — perhaps including observation of other lessons in the school, or private language studies — on the fifth day of the week.

3.1.10 Send the assistant documentation on the school and the local area

Schools should ensure that assistants are aware of exactly how to get to the school, which airport/railway or bus station is most convenient, the timetables and fares for bus and train travel to the school, etc. As much relevant documentation as possible about the school and the surrounding area — such as the cost of living — should also be sent. An outline of the school curriculum and how the assistant’s subjects fit in, together with a general indication of what kind of levels of linguistic and/or subject-related knowledge assistants can expect from their pupils should always be sent. A calendar showing holiday dates is very important. Maps, basic tourist and cultural information and the timetables and routes of local public transport can also be useful. Only general information is necessary at this stage. More detailed information, such as textbooks or information on shops and entertainment in the host area can also form part of a ‘welcome pack’ given the assistant on arrival.

3.1.11 Suggest resource material the assistant should bring

In addition, the school may wish to provide the assistant with a list of resource material that it considers useful to bring. This is particularly important where authentic material in the assistant’s native language is not easy to find in the host country, as will often be the case if the assistant is from a country with a less widely used language. Examples of material that has been useful in the past are given in Annex II. If the assistant is asked to incur significant expenditure to buy materials such as pre-recorded videos, DVDs, learning software, etc. this must be reimbursed on arrival.



3.1.12 Help the assistant with accommodation

It is also very important to discuss the assistant's accommodation needs and how these might be met, given the fact that assistants have only a very limited amount of money available to spend on rent. For many assistants, this will be the single biggest concern they have about their forthcoming assistantship, and any help the school can provide is likely to be very welcome.

At best, the school might be able to provide free or inexpensive accommodation for the duration of the assistant's stay, although it should be borne in mind that assistants' wishes will differ. Some will be delighted to stay with a family, if that option is offered, while others will want independence and seek to rent a flat or to share one with people their own age. In some countries it has often been possible for schools which are near a university to arrange for assistants to rent a room in a student residence. At the very least, the school should ensure that the assistant has somewhere to go temporarily on arrival, perhaps with a teacher's family or, if this is not possible, in a moderately-priced local hostel or hotel. It should also provide any information it can about the local accommodation market — level of rents, whether furnished accommodation is easily available, what is usually provided and what the tenant must supply, legal provisions, etc. When looking for accommodation, it is important to keep in mind that assistants may feel isolated in small place where there are limited possibilities to meet people of their age. Advice on finding accommodation is provided in Annex I.

3.1.13 Make sure the assistant is insured for risks connected with work

Insurance is a very important aspect that has caused some misunderstandings and occasional problems.

The school must ensure that the assistant is insured at the workplace, against accidents and injuries to third parties, on the same basis as the rest of the school staff. The school or relevant authority must meet the cost of this insurance. In some cases this may involve simply informing the relevant authority in local or national government of the assistant's presence in the school. Where a school has its own separate insurance policy, the assistant's name must be added. If the rest of the school staff is not covered by such insurance, the assistant must be given clear advice on usual practice in the host country concerned.

3.1.14 Check whether the assistant has adequate health insurance

It is the assistant's responsibility to take out adequate health cover. In some cases, particularly for assistants who do not come from the EU, it is necessary to ensure that the assistant has health insurance valid in the host country. For assistants resident in one EU country and doing their assistantship in another, this will require no more than obtaining from the authorities in the assistant's own country the European health insurance card², which is identical in all the Member States. The insured person can then benefit from a simplified procedure for state health care that might become necessary during a temporary stay. However, additional health cover may be necessary if the full cost of any necessary treatment is to be reimbursed. Well before the assistant's arrival, the school should ensure that the assistant is fully informed about the health system in the host country because he/she has to be prepared and take any necessary steps to acquire sufficient health cover in good time before leaving his/her home country. Assistants must also ensure that they have adequate insurance for personal possessions and against accidents (including damage to third parties) outside the school.

2 Please find more information on the European Health Insurance Card on the following Internet address: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=559&langId=en>.



3.1.15 Clarify the legal position with regard to assistants

A related subject that schools must take into account is the law in their own country governing personnel other than fully qualified teachers taking responsibility for pupils' wellbeing and safety. The National Agency can advise schools on this. It may be necessary to clarify with the Ministry of Education what the assistant's status is in this regard, in particular if he or she is to take part in activities or visits outside the school premises. Assistants should not take sole responsibility for leading groups of pupils in such activities.

Schools must ensure that assistants have fully understood their legal rights and responsibilities within the school, as well as any disciplinary rules to which they are subject. Assistants should also be aware of child protection issues concerning the host country and school.

Assistants from countries outside the EU may need to obtain a visa in order to be able to start their assistantship. This procedure may be lengthy and support from the host school is often necessary.

3.1.16 Seek any necessary advice from the National Agency

Both before and during the assistantship, the host school should not hesitate to seek advice from the National Agency in its country. Most National Agencies now have several years of experience of dealing with assistantships and are likely to already have encountered many of the questions and problems the school may have.

3.2

INTEGRATION INTO THE SCHOOL

Checklist

- Meet and greet the assistant on arrival
- Allow time to settle in
- Guided tour of the school and introductions to staff and pupils
- Arrange a structured induction period
- Meeting with the mentor at the end of the induction period



Arriving in a new country at the start of a working visit is inevitably a stressful experience, but the host school can do much to help the assistant settle in quickly. The school should allow the assistant sufficient time to adapt, and not expect him or her instantly to be at ease in what may at first be strange surroundings.

3.2.1 Meet and greet the assistant on arrival

Both the head teacher and the mentor should ensure that they are available to greet the assistant on arrival at the school. If possible, arrangements should be made to meet the assistant at the airport or railway station and give him/her a lift to his/her initial accommodation.

3.2.2 Allow time to settle in

It is never easy to adapt to both a new personal environment and a new work environment at the same time. Many assistants will prefer to be given a few days to get accustomed to their new accommodation and perhaps to have a look around before going to the school to meet the teachers and pupils. Others prefer to go to the school almost immediately. The dates that the assistant will arrive in the local area and the first day in the school should be clearly established with the assistant.

3.2.3 Guided tour of the school and introductions to staff and pupils

During the first couple of days at the school, the assistant should be given a guided tour of the school and introduced to all of the staff he or she is likely to be in regular contact with during the stay, and also to all senior staff. Since it is always confusing to meet many new faces at once, this process will be made easier if the assistant is also given a directory of the school — if possible including photos — showing all the teachers' names and jobs. Assistants should be invited to staff meetings. The assistant is also likely to be in contact with secretaries, librarians, caretakers, etc. and should meet them as soon as possible.

The assistant should be shown where to obtain classroom supplies such as books, chalk/board, pens and paper, and where common facilities such as the staff room, photocopiers, coffee machines and notice boards are found. He or she should have access to all the relevant teaching materials and textbooks used in the school. Copies of textbooks should be provided free by the school — assistants have a very limited income and should not be expected to buy their own. The assistant should also have access to a computer connected to the Internet. If the school considers giving a key to the facilities to the assistant, they should make sure that the assistant is adequately covered by insurance for loss of the key. If possible, the school can also offer subsidised/free meals to the assistant.

If the school has an internal magazine, it is a good idea for it to publish an interview with the assistant. Ideally, this would coincide approximately with his or her arrival, so if possible it may be helpful to conduct the interview in advance by telephone or e-mail (further interviews can be conducted later, for example shortly before the assistant's departure). If the school holds daily or weekly events at which staff and students are all present, as is the tradition in some countries, it may be useful for the head or a senior teacher briefly to introduce the assistant at one of these occasions and to take the opportunity to explain why he or she is at the school and what he or she will be doing. This has the advantage of demonstrating



that the new arrival is there with the authority of senior staff and must be respected in the same way as any other teacher, despite the fact that relations are in practice likely to become less formal. However, this sort of mass introduction can be intimidating for some assistants and should only be done if the assistant welcomes the idea. An alternative is to introduce the assistant to each class in the school in turn. It is sometimes best with younger pupils simply to introduce the assistant at first as ‘a teacher from another country’ rather than risk confusing the children and undermining the assistant’s authority by describing him or her as an assistant or student teacher.

3.2.4 Arrange a structured induction period

The first two or three weeks of the assistantship should be treated as an induction period during which the assistant is not asked to take part in any teaching. The duration of the induction period and the activities involved may differ according to circumstances, such as how much previous teaching experience the assistant has and the duration of the assistantship overall. This is the best way to help the assistant understand the life of the school and the context for the work he or she will be doing. Plenty of time should also be left for the assistant to accomplish all the tasks outside school, which are likely to be necessary in the first few days after arrival.

Experience has shown that assistants who have been trained as future language teachers but who have participated during the induction period in classes in subjects other than languages have often been motivated by the experience. This has helped to overcome initial reluctance to the idea of being involved in the teaching of non-language classes (see 3.4.11).

The induction period can be used to observe lessons spanning the whole school curriculum and age range and to visit local resources such as libraries or language-teaching centres. It may also be interesting to arrange visits to neighbouring schools. If the assistant is interested in visiting neighbouring schools, the host school should help make contact with them. In cases where the assistant does not speak the local language, part of the induction period might most usefully be spent following an intensive ‘survival’ course. Particularly if the assistant has little teaching experience, it may be useful for the regular observation of lessons to continue beyond the induction period.

To obtain maximum benefit from an induction period, it is essential to give it some structure. For instance, the mentor and the assistant can draw up a timetable for lessons he or she will be expected to attend. Observation should not be seen purely as a matter of passively sitting at the back of classroom. It may be useful to focus the assistant’s attention by asking him or her to pay particular attention to certain aspects of lessons, such as the way language teachers help ensure they are understood when speaking the language they are teaching or how discipline is maintained. Assistants can also be asked to make a list of ways in which teaching in the host school differs from what they have experienced in their own country.

Before the assistant starts being involved in lessons, the teachers should always make sure that pupils know who the assistant is and why he or she is there. It is essential for the mentor to warn colleagues that the assistant may ask permission to attend their lessons. Staff should make clear that they are interested in hearing about the assistant’s first impressions and that they will be glad to answer questions.



3.2.5 Meeting with the mentor at the end of the induction period

At the end of the induction period, time should be set aside for a meeting between the mentor and the assistant, to finalise planning for the following period and for the mentor to do his or her best to allay any worries which may have arisen during the induction period. The assistant should be encouraged to speak frankly about any problems he or she has noticed or about differences between the host school and the schools in his or her own country. At around this stage, mentors should clarify with assistants two particular personal details, accommodation and finance. Has the assistant found somewhere to live with which he or she is happy? Has payment of the grant arrived from the assistant's National Agency? This will normally be paid into a bank account in the assistant's own country and he or she will then transfer funds to the host country.

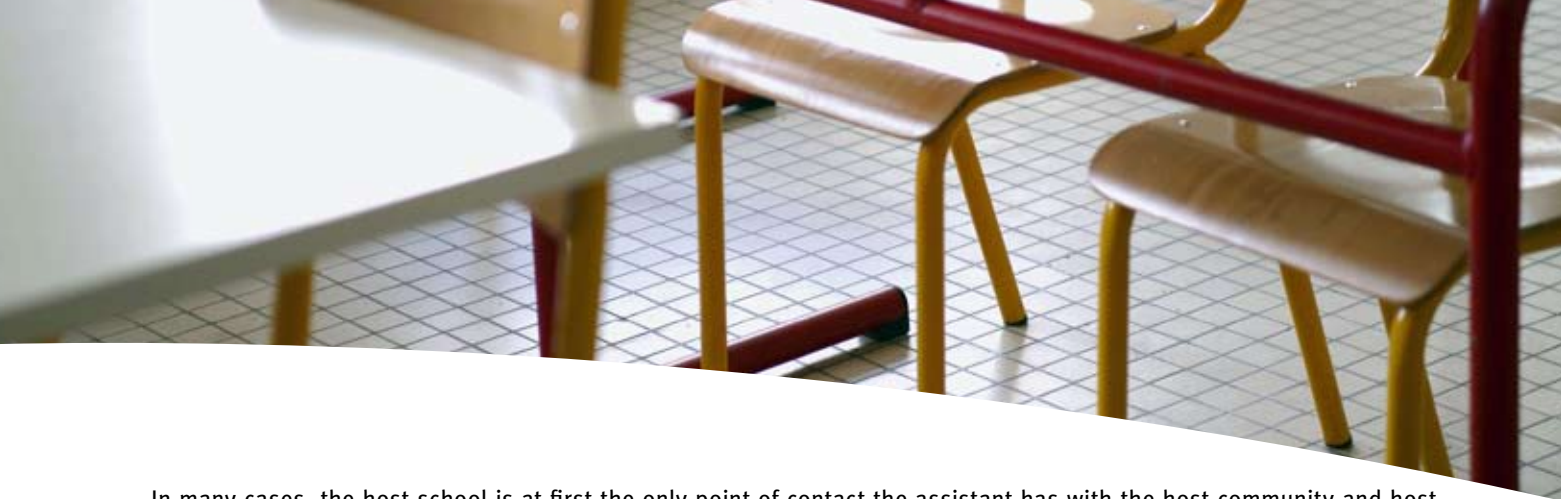
A regular time should be agreed with the assistant for future meetings, which should be at least weekly (see [3.4.14](#) and [3.4.15](#)). It may also be useful to discuss with the assistant the form in which he or she will keep a record of the assistantship (see [4.4.13](#)).

3.3

INTEGRATION INTO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Checklist

- Invite the assistant to social events
- Provide information about leisure activities in the area
- Help the assistant to make contact with others in the same situation
- Offer help with administrative formalities



In many cases, the host school is at first the only point of contact the assistant has with the host community and host culture. Even if the school is a model of best practice in welcoming the assistant while he or she is on the premises, problems can arise outside school hours.

The worst is often loneliness. This can often be a problem for teachers newly posted to schools in unfamiliar areas of their own country. It can be far worse for an assistant who comes from another culture and who may not speak the local language confidently. Reports show that a significant number of assistants suffer from feelings of isolation at some point in their stay, although this is almost always temporary.

Mentors also need to be conscious that assistants are sometimes very young and may have little experience of being away from home, particularly if they are from a country where it is traditional to attend the local university. Some may have never lived outside their parents' homes before, and can find independence rather daunting. Of course, many assistants will be fiercely independent and require little help in adapting to their new surroundings. But the mentor, without trying to act as a replacement parent, should be available for those who do need practical guidance, or even just a friendly face to talk to.

3.3.1 Invite the assistant to social events

There is a great deal teachers can do directly to alleviate initial loneliness, for example by occasionally inviting the assistant to meals and by ensuring that he or she is included in any group social outings to restaurants, cinemas, choirs, orchestra etc. Indirect help can also be offered. It may well be that the assistant shares interests with some members of staff, especially if they are close in age. The mentor can help bring people together in this situation.

3.3.2 Provide information about leisure activities in the area

One way for assistants to combine making friends and improving their linguistic skills is to join clubs or adult education classes, for example connected with a sporting or cultural interest. It can be difficult for a newcomer to find this information, so it is often useful for schools to collect information of this sort and include it in the assistant's 'welcome pack'. It is also useful for schools to inform assistants about where to find information on informal social events such as concerts, theatre, cinema etc.

3.3.3 Help the assistant to make contact with others in the same situation

In an ideal world, assistants would all have many friends of their own age among the local community and with whom they would speak the local language to boost their linguistic development. In many cases, however, assistants' social circle tends to include other young foreigners away from home. The National Agencies will have lists of Comenius assistants working in the same area (and possibly also of Erasmus students from the assistant's own country studying at a local university). In countries where national assistantship programmes operate in addition to Comenius, schools themselves or the local educational administration will probably also be aware of other assistants under those schemes. It is often very helpful for assistants to have contact with those in a similar position with whom experiences can be compared and problems shared, and schools may be in a position to facilitate this.



3.3.4 Offer help with administrative formalities

Although serious administrative problems are rare, many assistants who have not spent time in another European country before can experience confusion over administrative procedures, especially if they have difficulty speaking the local language. Sometimes one of the most valuable ways in which a mentor can help the assistant is by accompanying him or her to perform necessary formalities such as registering with the police, social security authorities and a local doctor in countries where that is necessary. The assistant may also need help with opening a bank account and, if he or she is living in a flat alone, with dealing with gas, electricity and telephone companies.

3.4 IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Checklist

- Give the assistant an opportunity to teach his or her mother tongue
- Use the assistant outside language lessons
- Use the assistant imaginatively
- Involve the assistant in developing teaching materials
- Use the assistant as a cultural as well as linguistic resource
- Give the assistant a wide variety of experiences
- Consult the assistant in planning lessons
- Use the assistant with pupils needing special support
- Use the assistant with gifted pupils
- Make sure all pupils in a class have access to the assistant
- If the assistant has an interest/ability in new technologies, use it
- Link the assistantship with the local community
- Help the assistant with any discipline problems
- The mentor and assistant should hold weekly meetings
- Encourage the assistant to express ideas
- Issue the Europass mobility certificate
- Keep in touch with the assistant after he/she leaves your school



To some extent, problems of integration and practicalities such as accommodation will present similar challenges for most Comenius assistants. It is, however, much more difficult to identify a set of common experiences regarding the work assistants will do. Assistants go to many different types of host institution with different educational cultures and with pupils of varying ages and abilities. Assistants themselves have different levels of teaching experience and confidence. Some will require help with basic teaching techniques, while others can be very self-sufficient. Most are speakers, native or not, of languages that are already taught in the host school. Some are not. For these reasons, assistants should not be considered as ordinary teachers who can easily replace missing staff. Neither should they be responsible for the formal evaluation of pupils.

The following advice could not possibly cover every situation which might arise and is not intended to be in any way comprehensive. It seeks only to set out some general principles and to make some suggestions based on reports from previous Comenius assistants and from National Agencies. Like the list in Annex III, it is designed to provide initial ideas to assistants and schools rather than serve as a handbook.

3.4.1 Give the assistant an opportunity to teach his or her mother tongue

For many pupils, contact with the Comenius assistant is the first time they have come into closer contact with somebody from that linguistic and cultural background. This is often true even if the assistant is from a larger participating country with a widely used language, and is more likely to be the case if the assistant's language is less widely used.

This situation provides a very important educational opportunity to raise pupils' awareness of the diversity of European cultures and languages (see also 4.4.1). Schools are therefore required to ensure that each Comenius assistant teaches his or her mother tongue (preferably within normal school hours), even if this is at a very basic level.

This is not usually a problem if the assistant's mother tongue is already taught in the school. In cases where it is not, and particularly if the school is subject by law to a centralised curriculum which leaves little time for additional subjects, imaginative solutions may need to be found. Language teaching can be incorporated into other school subjects. 'Language clubs' (see Annex III) can be set up at lunchtimes or after school, with pupils throughout the school invited to attend. Project work on the assistant's country can also be organised, perhaps involving several school subjects, and in some cases the assistantship can be linked to preparing or carrying out a Comenius School Partnership project or an eTwinning project with a school in the assistant's country.

At the same time, schools should remember that Comenius assistants are not necessarily trained in the teaching of languages in general, or in teaching their mother tongue in particular, and thus may at first find it difficult to adapt to teaching their mother tongue, especially if little support in the way of text books, etc. is available. In some countries, pupils at school do not study the grammar of their own native language to any great extent, so staff should not be surprised if assistants do not always find grammatical explanations easy.

One problem for assistants teaching less widely used languages has been that it has been difficult to obtain teaching materials and assistants have had to produce everything themselves. Some good ideas on multilingualism can be found on the Europa website: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/multiling_en.html, or on the Lingu@net website: <http://www.linguanet-europa.org/plus/en/home.jsp>.



3.4.2 Use the assistant outside language lessons

Comenius Assistantships are open to future teachers of any subject and many assistants have already worked successfully in lessons that are not primarily language lessons. One general benefit of this is that it can help younger pupils who have had little previous contact with foreigners to see the assistant as a 'normal' adult with broad interests and knowledge rather than exclusively the representative of a foreign language and culture. More specifically, history and geography are obvious examples of areas where assistants may be able to provide a useful input, especially but not exclusively in lessons concerning their own country. Assistants may have professional or also personal knowledge and interest in other academic subject areas or in art or sport. They can also be very useful in project work on issues such as the environment or European topics.

There are also various ways in which assistants can be used to integrate a language component into other subjects (this methodology is called CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning). Research shows that one of the most effective ways for children to make progress in a foreign language is to receive lessons in other subjects given in that language. Pupils who attend multilingual schools, for example, often become fluent in several languages. The learning of a language through working on a European school partnership project (Comenius School Partnerships and eTwinning), which can also include any school subject, is also very effective.

The assistant can be involved in different stages of a European school partnership project. He/she may help find and contact schools in his/her own country. Then, the assistant may help with linguistic preparation of teachers and pupils involved in the project. The assistant may help support communication between the schools and carry out project work with pupils in or outside lessons (e.g. within a European Club – see Annex III, Part II). The assistant can also attend the project meeting in his/her country or help organise the project meeting in the host school.

Any school can use a Comenius assistant to offer its own pupils a taste of such benefits, even if this simply means introducing a few words of vocabulary connected with the subject of the lesson. But more sophisticated techniques can also be used, especially where the assistant's mother tongue is on the school curriculum or where he or she is a very fluent speaker of another language on the curriculum. Some ideas are given in Annex III.

An interesting survey on CLIL in European schools was published by Eurydice. It is available in paper and in pdf format (in English and in French) from the website <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/Eurydice>.

3.4.3 Use the assistant imaginatively

All schools are encouraged to ensure that the assistant also plays a part in non-traditional lessons (see 3.4.11), and that he or she provides a resource and performs a function that an ordinary teacher could not perform as well or as easily. Taking a large class of students through written grammar exercises, for example, is unlikely to be the best use of the assistant. A list of some of the more original activities, which have been successful in the past, is included in Annex III.



3.4.4 Involve the assistant in developing teaching materials

Assistants should also be encouraged to develop their own teaching materials, as part of the training aspect of the assistantship. If this task is undertaken in collaboration with teachers, it can be particularly beneficial to both assistant and institution. The assistant can learn from the pedagogical experience of the teachers, and they in turn can take advantage of creative ideas a freshman may have. Many of the materials thus produced can be of use to the school long after the assistant has left.

3.4.5 Use the assistant as a cultural as well as linguistic resource

Pupils are much more likely to be motivated to learn a language if they are interested in the culture, and particularly the popular culture, which goes with it. Comenius assistants should be given the opportunity to convey that culture, and should be encouraged to use their imagination in devising ways of doing so. This can do much to combat stereotypes and to make pupils aware of the diversity and complexity of Europe. This is especially important for assistants from countries with less widely used languages, who can introduce pupils to ways of life they know little about. Many assistants can also introduce students to regional cultures, and in some case to minority languages.

In most cases, of course, there is an overlap between linguistic and cultural classroom activities. To take a simple example, pupils are more likely to remember the names of foods in the target language if they take part in an interactive activity involving a mock visit to a shop or restaurant or organise a party at which typical dishes are served, than if they are simply shown cards with pictures of food. Popular songs and games can be an effective tool for teaching vocabulary. Videos of real films, television programmes or commercials from the assistant's country, used imaginatively, can be successful – some ideas are in Annex III. Assistants can also use significant historical events or folklore in their country as a basis for helping pupils to learn and practice language.

3.4.6 Give the assistant a wide variety of experiences

Comenius assistants should have contact with the widest possible range of pupils in the school in order to get familiar with various teaching techniques. In pre-primary and primary schools, this should include the youngest pupils. Ideally, Comenius assistants will be given some experience in teaching whole classes alone – although the physical presence of a permanent teacher may be required by law in some countries – as well as acting as a support teacher in such classes and taking smaller groups within or outside a class. Teachers should at all times be aware of what the assistant is doing and what results are expected, just as they are for their own classes. The assistant in turn should always have a list of exactly which pupils are expected to attend any class or small group he or she is teaching.



3.4.7 Consult the assistant in planning lessons

In striking a balance between the various types of activity, the assistant's own wishes must be taken into account, along with the mentor's and other teachers' judgement as to whether he or she is ready for whole-class teaching, given the assistant's level of experience and confidence and the particular circumstances of the school. Assistants should in any case always be involved in planning any lesson in which they are to take part, in whatever capacity.

As a general rule, assistants can be given increased unsupervised responsibility as their stay in the school progresses.

3.4.8 Use the assistant with pupils needing special support

One of the stated priorities of assistantships is to give extra help to pupils who are less advantaged and who need special support. There are many ways in which this can be approached, both within the main classroom with the assistant acting as a support teacher, sitting with and helping the pupils in question, and in separate withdrawal groups.

For example, when learning a foreign language, difficulties may be caused by a lack of motivation, in which case simply having contact with a native speaker (or a foreigner who does not speak the pupils' mother tongue) is an excellent stimulus. If pupils have special educational needs, learning difficulties, or are disabled, such contact will still be valuable in itself. But the assistant cannot fairly be expected to help without detailed guidance from permanent teachers, and particularly from those specialised in dealing with such pupils. He or she should only be left alone with such students, even in small groups, if the assistant already knows them and what to expect from them, if the lesson has been carefully planned beforehand and provided that the assistant is clearly willing and able to take on the task.

3.4.9 Use the assistant with gifted pupils

Assistants can also be very useful for giving intensive extra practice to the higher ability students in a class. When planning this sort of activity, it is important to ensure that the aims are clear, e.g. the classic conversation class, consisting of an unstructured chat between the assistant and students, is useful from time to time but is likely to be dominated by one or two students and is unlikely to produce the best results if this is all the assistant ever does with small groups. Again, see Annex II for ideas on different subjects.

3.4.10 Make sure all pupils in a class have access to the assistant

All the pupils in a class should have at least some opportunity to work with the assistant. If he or she is seen to be monopolised by any particular group of pupils, it can cause resentment. Frustration can also be created among more motivated pupils if they feel that their access to the assistant is too strictly rationed or rigidly structured.

Many pupils will approach the assistant on their own initiative outside the classroom to seek further help or advice, but many host institutions have found it useful to include one or two periods per week in the assistant's timetable which are outside normal school hours, at lunchtime or after school. At its simplest, this can involve the assistant being available in a designated room for all pupils who wish to ask for help with some work or just to come in for a chat in the foreign language.



3.4.11 If the assistant has an interest/ability in new technologies, use it

Another area in which host institutions are encouraged to make the maximum possible use of Comenius assistants is in the use of new educational technologies and the development of distance teaching. Assistants can play a very important role in helping pupils gain maximum benefit from new technology. Assistants can, for example, set up electronic links with institutions in their home country, help pupils produce word-processed and graphic material in the target language, guide them and help them understand Internet sites in the target language.

Assistants can also help pupils to make use of the initiatives run by European Schoolnet. This network promotes virtual collaboration among European schools and provides them with a whole range of various ICT-based projects. This platform is accessible via the address www.eun.org. European Schoolnet also runs some activities, such as eTwinning and Spring Day in Europe, on behalf of the European Commission. eTwinning (www.etwinning.net) promotes virtual school partnerships in Europe and Spring Day in Europe (the project website changes every year – you will find it at www.eun.org) helps raise awareness about current European issues. See Annex III for more ideas on how to use these initiatives in the classroom.

3.4.12 Link the assistantship with the local community

In the past, some schools and assistants have found very rewarding ways of using the assistantship to work with the local community. Some assistants, in collaboration with local companies, have organised exhibitions on aspects of their country of origin or offered food tastings. Pupils can also be involved in these events. Other assistants, often whose mother tongue is a less widely-used language, have offered classes open to local people as well as to pupils, parents and teachers. The local media can also be contacted and informed of the assistantship.

3.4.13 Help the assistant with any discipline problems

One point that is very clear from the final reports submitted by Comenius assistants is that the nature of assistants' relationship with pupils is likely to differ greatly between countries and between host establishments. In all cases, assistants should be carefully briefed by the mentor on the school's disciplinary policies and the limits to acceptable behaviour. In some countries, for example, teachers and even head teachers are addressed by pupils and colleagues using their first name, while in others such informality would be unacceptable. Obviously, any adult's relationship with pre-primary or primary pupils is likely to be conditioned to some extent by the large age difference, but even here, it should be clear to the pupils that, while the assistant is not just another teacher, he or she must be obeyed and respected.

This balance is even more difficult to achieve in secondary schools. Most pupils will be motivated by contact with the assistant, will want that contact to continue and will understand that an informal relationship can only be maintained if it is not abused. Very few Comenius assistants have reported serious and continued discipline problems, but when they do, or the mentor or other teachers suspect a problem, schools should take action immediately. Wherever possible, this should be done in consultation with assistants, who should normally be advised on how to deal with the problem themselves rather than have it taken completely out of their hands. Assistants' confidence can be severely affected by misbehaving pupils and by the feeling that the solution is outside their control.



3.4.14 The mentor and assistant should hold weekly meetings

On the same note, it is worth underlining again that it is vital to hold informal but regular evaluation meetings with the mentor to exchange ideas and assess progress, help solve any problems, discuss the work programme for the period ahead and, if necessary, amend the assistant's timetable. These sessions can also be used to help assess whether the school itself is achieving the goals which it set for the assistantship project.

3.4.15 Encourage the assistant to express ideas

These meetings also provide an opportunity for creative thinking. While Comenius assistants will clearly benefit from being part of an institution full of experienced teachers and with a different educational culture from their home country, schools can also learn from Comenius assistants. Many of them, after all, are wholly or partly trained teachers in their own right and while the enthusiasm of youth may sometimes lead to a certain naivety, an outsider coming in to a school for the first time can bring an original approach which can be very useful, especially if the mentor helps to channel and refine that thinking.

In many cases, assistants will have the confidence to make suggestions directly to all the teachers with whom they work, but in others they may fear rejection or feel that it is not their role. The weekly meeting therefore provides an opportunity for the mentor to encourage the assistant to put forward and discuss his or her own pedagogical ideas.

3.4.16 Issue the Europass mobility certificate

As a host school you should issue a Europass mobility certificate at the end of the assistantship. This certificate specifies the tasks carried out by the assistant and is recognised in all EU countries, and as such will be valuable for the assistant's future career.

Ask your National Agency or consult the Europass website for more details on how to proceed (<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/vernav/InformationOn/EuropassMobility.csp>).

3.4.17 Keep in touch with the assistant after he/she leaves your school

Keeping in touch with the assistant after he/she leaves your school can be enriching not only personally but the link established may lead to further European cooperation with the school when the assistant starts his or her teaching career.



An example of good practice – An assistant of Czech and Slovak origins in a German pre-primary and primary school

Monika worked as a Comenius assistant in a German village school, which provided primary education for 140 pupils from the village and neighbourhood. The school had a Comenius partnership with four other European schools. The project was called “One Voice – Celebration through the languages”. That was also the main purpose for inviting a Comenius assistant – to help the pupils and teachers to prepare for this project. However, Monika was involved in other activities, some of which included the local community (participation in village festivals).

The first part of her work at the school focused on English teaching. First, she taught English regularly in the fourth grade as the compulsory subject. Gradually, the first-graders, second-graders and the oldest children of pre-primary school took up regular English lessons. Three English classes for adults – mostly the parents of pupils – were also introduced. The English lessons were also a way of making and enhancing contact and communication between the nations with different backgrounds.

Her work to prepare for the Comenius project “One voice”, focusing on Easter traditions, was crucial. Monika was supposed to present the country, and of course the traditional Slovak Easter, to all pupils involved. They were taught some basic information about Slovakia, some typical songs, chants, dances and customs and even tried to cook some traditional food. Four pupils, who were due to attend a project meeting in Slovakia, were given Slovak language lessons. The Comenius project culminated to visit the participating school in Slovakia where German children and teachers presented what they learnt about the country. Thus, the assistant’s work was not only recognised but it was also a solid base for absorbing the new knowledge and experience.

Monika’s work also included participation in musical and artistic projects. She presented to children some Czech music and artists and let pupils get to know them through their own creative activity. She also organised artistic workshops, where children used traditional Czech techniques of colouring textiles.

Apart from teaching, Monika was involved in everyday school life and participated in school trips and excursions.

4

GOOD PRACTICE FOR ASSISTANTS

By taking part in a Comenius Assistantship you can gain a wealth of experience that is valuable for your future teaching career and beyond. You'll be able to add a new language to your repertoire, to improve the one that you speak already, and develop your teaching skills, whilst living and working abroad.

An assistantship gives you an opportunity to use your creativity to the full in teaching your subject/s or your language and culture in language lessons, non-language lessons, extra-curricular activities and in the wider community.

You will need to invest some time and thought in your assistantship to make sure that it gives you the experience you are looking for. This section aims to help you do just that.



4.1

BEFORE LEAVING FOR THE ASSISTANTSHIP

Checklist

- Contact your host school
- Make a list of the information you need
- Get your mentor's contact details
- Make sure the dates of the assistantship are clear
- Agree an outline timetable
- Make sure the timetable is for 12–16 hours
- Make sure you will have the chance to teach your mother tongue
- Collect resource materials to take with you
- Understand the host education system
- Start learning the language of the host country
- Investigate the possibility of obtaining student status
- If visas etc. are necessary, apply for them early
- Make travel arrangements well in advance
- If you are taking your car, know the law
- Get the necessary health cover and other insurances
- If your National Agency organises an information meeting, attend it



4.1.1 Contact your host school

Preparation, by both the host school and the assistant, is vital to ensuring that the assistantship goes smoothly from the start. Make contact by telephone and/or e-mail as well as by letter if necessary. In most cases, the school will contact you first, but if this does not happen within a couple of weeks, you should take the initiative. Provide the school with as much information as possible about yourself and your interests. Send them a picture and a mini-CV so that the mentor can introduce you to the whole school community even before you arrive.

4.1.2 Make a list of the information you need

Perhaps the first step for a prospective assistant is to make a comprehensive list of things you need to know before leaving. This list can be drawn up even before your first contact with the host school and updated as new questions occur to you. Obviously, you will want to be as fully informed as possible about the school itself, but there are also likely to be many other general questions about the host community. In many cases, the school will send you much of the information you require, but if it does not do this spontaneously, do not hesitate to ask. You can also seek information from the host country or region's official representations in your country (embassy, consulate, tourist office, etc.). Use the internet to search for any specific information on the host country you might need.

4.1.3 Get your mentor's contact details

Once you are in contact with the school, make sure that you have the name and contact details of the person who will be supervising your assistantship. If you will be working in more than one school, you should have a contact in each. However, it should be clear that one institution, and one mentor, has overall responsibility. If the mentor agrees, you should obtain a private telephone number so that you can reach him or her outside school hours, or during the summer holidays which often immediately precede the beginning of assistantships.

4.1.4 Make sure the dates of the assistantship are clear

A number of things need to be discussed before you leave. Basic practicalities such as the date of arrival and departure, as well as the dates of starting and finishing the assistantship itself, must be clear. Where possible, schools will arrange for someone to meet the assistant at the airport or railway/bus station.



4.1.5 Agree an outline timetable

Both parties should also agree on the outline of the assistant's timetable. This may be merely an indication of approximately how many hours will be spent doing which type of activities with which age groups, rather than a detailed weekly plan. In any case, flexibility is essential if the assistantship is to be used creatively. It should be clear that what is drawn up at this stage is only provisional and may be modified later.

The assistant must be fully consulted on his or her timetable, and you should not be afraid to put forward your point of view. It is very important at an early stage to let the school know if you have particular preferences or skills which may be useful, for example in sport, music, drama or art. Remember, however, that you may not be able to have exactly the timetable you would like and that the education system in the destination country may be very different from your own.

4.1.6 Make sure the timetable is for 12–16 hours

Nevertheless, there are two things that you can and should insist on. The first is that the timetable should provide for between 12 and 16 hours every week, unless you are willing to do more. This includes time with pupils, whether within or outside normal school hours, and any time spent on other work on behalf of the school, such as assisting with European projects or working with parents or the local community. Preparation of lessons is not included.

Many assistants enjoy their work so much that they are prepared to take on additional duties. However, you should not agree to do any extra hours at this stage, until you have been in the school for a while and have a better idea of what is involved. For that purpose, the assistant establishes with the mentor an agreement specifying the rights and obligations of the assistant and host institution and containing a work programme covering the duration of the assistant's stay.

4.1.7 Make sure you will have the chance to teach your mother tongue

The second aspect to which assistants should pay attention is that, although in many cases you will also teach other subjects and languages, you are entitled to spend at least some of your contact hours teaching your mother tongue, even if it is not normally taught at the host school. This applies regardless of your native language: plurilingualism is a key EU objective, and all assistants can help pass on the message that all languages, not just those spoken most widely, are of value to pupils.

Remember that in some host countries there are official curricula, which schools must follow, and this can make it difficult to schedule classes in subjects not on the curricula. But various solutions have been found in the past, including introducing an element of simple language teaching into other school subjects such as geography or history, often where the class covers the assistant's own country. Some assistants have also offered classes in their native language at lunchtime or outside school hours, attended by interested pupils (and sometimes parents and teachers, too). Such classes must be counted as part of your normal contact hours. It may also be possible to work with several teachers to organise project work on your country, and in some cases to connect the assistantship with either the preparation or implementation of a project under the Comenius school partnership or eTwinning with a school in your country.



4.1.8 Collect resource materials to take with you

You should also discuss with the host school what teaching materials you should bring with you. These may differ according to the subject you will be teaching or the age of the pupils involved. If you are asked to teach your own language and it is already on the curriculum, the school may already have available material such as tourist brochures, transport timetables, newspapers and videos and may ask you to bring more specialised items. If your language is not usually taught in the school, it may have little or nothing of its own available. A list of things which have proved useful in the past is contained in Annex II. If you are asked to spend any significant sums of money on materials, you should confirm before buying anything that the school is willing to reimburse you. Keep all receipts.

4.1.9 Understand the host education system

In order to prepare properly for the assistantship, it will be useful for you to do some reading in advance about the education system in the receiving country. Ask the host school to send you any relevant documents. It may be worthwhile to visit your local educational bookshop, where comparative studies may be available. Information on national education systems can also be found through the 'Eurydice' European database, which has a comprehensive Internet site at <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/Eurydice>.

4.1.10 Start learning the language of the host country

Reports from assistants often stress the enormous benefit of beginning to improve your language skills before your departure. If you are going to a country or region whose main language you do not speak fluently, you should spend some time studying the basics, if possible by attending a class or if not by using self-teaching materials, which are available for all European languages, often in the form of interactive CD-ROMs as well as on paper. If a regional language is widely spoken in your host region, it is also useful to learn at least a few phrases of that. You can ask your National Agency for financial help for linguistic preparation. Your National Agency can also give you information on EILC (Erasmus Intensive Language Courses) which you are allowed to attend and which are given in countries where less widely used and taught languages are spoken. It may also be worthwhile asking your host school if it can help arrange for you, shortly after your arrival, a period of intensive language learning, perhaps as part of your induction period (see 4.2.4).

4.1.11 Investigate the possibility of obtaining student status

If you want to enrol in any kind of educational activity (linguistic or otherwise) during your assistantship (see 4.3.3, 4.3.4), it is advisable to research the possibilities and make arrangements before departure, as far as possible. This is especially true if you want to register at a university in the host country. If you are not going to a university town, distance learning may be possible. As well as allowing you to pursue your studies, this may give you student status and access to the discounts and advantages that go with it. In some countries, student status can sometimes be obtained by following a certain number of hours of language lessons in official institutions other than universities. Other assistants may be able to obtain student status by registering (or remaining registered) at a university or other institution in their own country and getting an international student card. Please note that, while assistants are encouraged to undertake studies, the assistantship must at all times take priority if, for example, there is a clash of timetables.



4.1.12 If visas etc. are necessary, apply for them early

Within the EU and European Economic Area (EEA = EU + Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) citizens of EU/EEA member countries can move freely without visas (but see 4.1.15 for medical formalities and 4.3.7 for formalities which may be necessary on arrival). Visas are likely to be required for all assistants going to or coming from a non-EU/EEA country. In some cases, medical certificates may also be required. If you are one of these assistants, as soon as you have been notified of your destination, you should contact the relevant country's embassy or consulate in your home country for information and application forms. Applications may take two months or longer to process. If you have particular difficulties, contact your National Agency. Please note that, although you are unlikely to face problems if you act in good time, the granting of visas is at the discretion of national immigration authorities.

4.1.13 Make travel arrangements well in advance

If you are going to be travelling to your host country by air, or certain high-speed trains, you should book your return ticket as soon as possible, as the cheaper tickets often sell out quickly. Normally, travel costs form part of the grant which is paid out to you from EU funds via the National Agency in your home country. It is in your own interest to ensure that you get the cheapest possible tickets.

Before booking any tickets, speak with your future mentor to ensure that the route you have chosen is convenient and economical. For example, a direct flight to a regional airport may at first appear more expensive than flying to a capital city, but in some countries domestic train fares to the final destination may be costly.

4.1.14 If you are taking your car, know the law

Some assistants may decide to drive to their destinations. Well before your journey, check the host country's rules on importing cars for personal use. In most cases, few formalities are necessary for stays of less than a year by EU citizens in other EU countries. Existing registration plates can usually be retained and existing driving licences are valid. But in all cases, and in particular where a non-EU country is involved, you should check with the relevant embassy or consulate in your country. You must also ensure that your car is covered by insurance valid in the host country.



4.1.15 Get the necessary health cover and other insurances

It is your responsibility to take out adequate health cover. You should contact your national sickness insurance authorities, which can advise you on your entitlement to health care during your stay abroad. If you are an EU citizen, you might be granted a European Health Insurance Card,³ which entitles you to free or cost-reduced state health care if you fall ill or suffer an injury while abroad.

Extra insurance is also available for repatriation in the case of serious illness or accident, and we recommend you obtain this. Assistants going to or coming from non-EU countries will in many cases need to arrange all of their health insurance privately. One relatively cheap possibility may be long-term travel insurance policies available via travel agents, but always make absolutely sure that these are valid in the destination country and cover you for working visits as well as holidays. If you need further advice on health insurance, contact in the first place your National Agency.

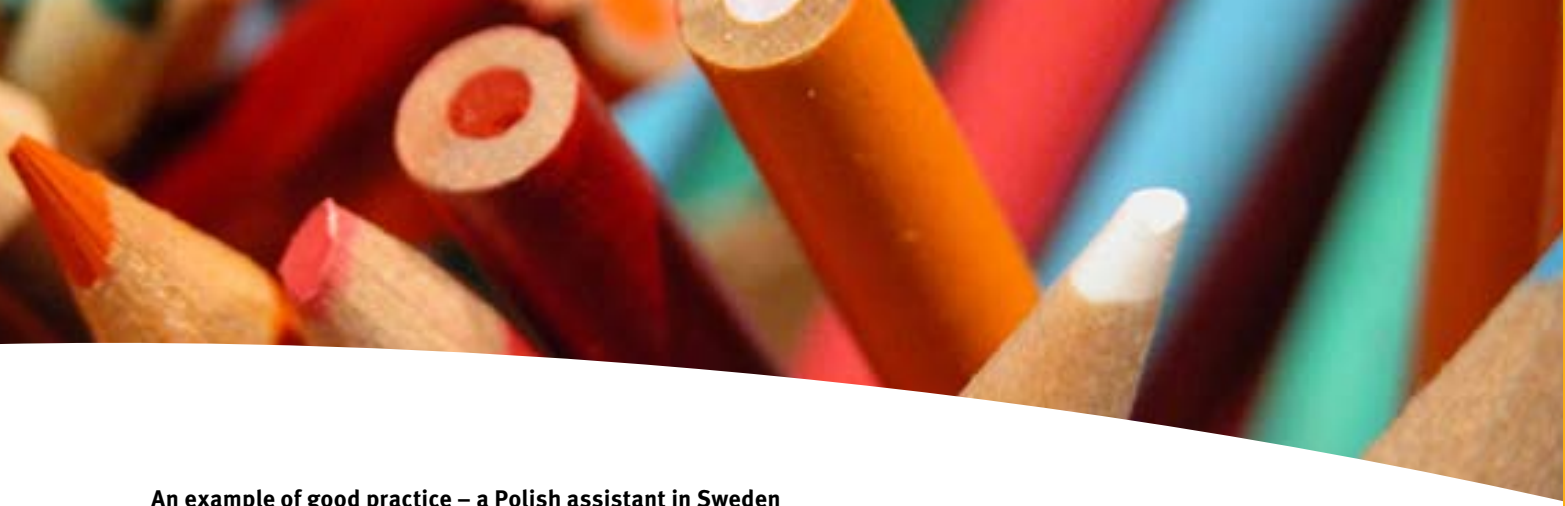
In most cases, your host school or the responsible authority in the host country will insure you against accident or injury to third parties caused in the course of your work. Check the position with your host school to make sure that this is being arranged. If it is not, contact your National Agency for advice.

In all cases, you are responsible for obtaining insurance for your personal possessions and against accident or damage to yourself or third parties outside the school premises. Make sure that such cover is valid in your destination country.

4.1.16 If your National Agency organises an information meeting, attend it

Many national agencies organise preparatory meetings for assistants before they depart. Do not miss this opportunity to get any extra information you need and to meet other new assistants as well as assistants from previous years who will be able to tell you what to expect. If you are unable to attend, ask your National Agency for copies of any written information distributed at the meeting and if possible for the contact details of a former assistant who went to the same host country. (NB. Host national agencies hold induction meetings for assistants recently arrived in their host country — see 4.3.5).

³ More information on the European Health Insurance Card is available at the following internet address: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=559&langId=en>



An example of good practice – a Polish assistant in Sweden

First of all, Tomasz collected all necessary materials, which took a considerable amount of time before the assistantship actually began. In order to select the most appropriate teaching aids, Tomasz had to get to know Swedish culture, the school system, common ways of teaching foreign languages and find out about the preferences of Swedish teenagers, their leisure activities, the most popular TV programs, etc. After some initial, mostly web-based research, he started looking for appealing texts to read, communication-oriented speaking activities (one of the most important points was to find a selection of language games), authentic cultural materials and audio-visual aids that would be used in the classroom. He also decided to contact experienced teachers and use the good advice they gave him in his preparations.

In the meantime, he collected material depicting Polish history and culture (pictures, tourist guidebooks, history books, maps and brochures) in the form of a multimedia presentation. Tomasz also contacted the Polish embassy in Stockholm – which worked out perfectly – for advice on his arrival to Sweden and the future need of materials promoting Poland. Key to preparing for the assistantship was successful communication with the host school. He sent many messages with questions concerning the organisation of school work, class sizes, working hours and other practical issues. Thanks to his future mentor being eager to respond and provide all the necessary details, he moved to Sweden without fear or anxiety.

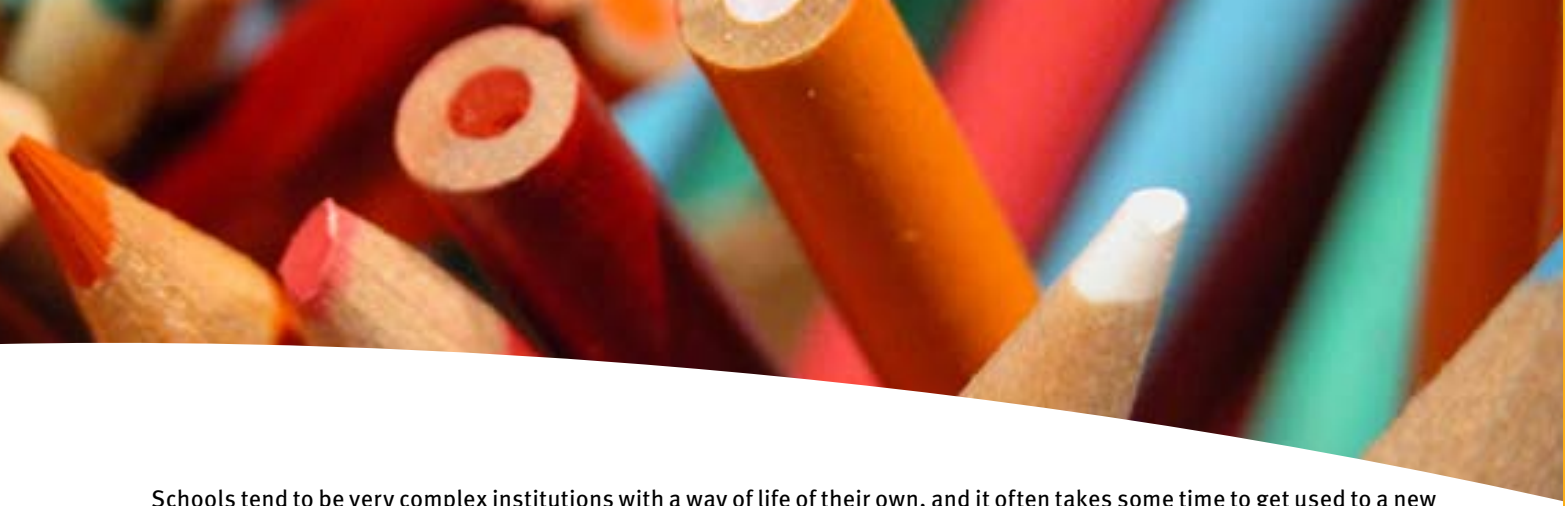
Thanks to the project coordinator, he could predict potential teaching problems and find suitable solutions. The project coordinator helped him find suitable accommodation (a student room situated around two kilometres from the school), solve administrative issues and get to know the school rules. All teachers and school staff were given prior notification of his arrival and could discuss with his mentor their plans to involve him in their lessons. All those factors contributed to the effectiveness of the assistantship and meant he was able to start conducting his first classes within a few days of his arrival.

During one of the first meetings with the school's headmaster, project coordinator and his mentor, they decided that it was essential to agree on a schedule of his lessons before starting work. Different factors were taken into account while discussing the content and timeframe of the timetable. First of all, the host school set out their expectations and the tasks they would like him to perform. Secondly, he described the type of assignments he would like to be given, his personal interests and strengths. This attitude on both sides meant that they were able to create a working plan that included variety of tasks, teaching activities and gave him the chance to attend Swedish language lessons. However, he was free to change his working hours in order to meet as many pupils as possible. The school headmaster, together with Tomasz's mentor, allowed him to work with different age groups, participate in various classes (teaching history, social science, etc.). They agreed that it was important to give students the chance to participate in the project to keep them interested in it (for example, everyone should be given a chance to take part in 'Polish Club' meetings).

4.2 INTEGRATION INTO THE SCHOOL

Checklist

- Respect cultural and educational differences
- Introduce yourself to all staff
- Understand that teachers are sometimes very busy
- Use the induction period to think carefully about the assistantship
- Offer to help teachers during the induction period
- Offer to help with extra-curricular activities — sport, clubs etc.
- Meet your mentor at the end of the induction period
- If you have problems, speak to your mentor first



Schools tend to be very complex institutions with a way of life of their own, and it often takes some time to get used to a new school even when it is in one's own country and within a system with which one has grown up. It is all the more challenging when the educational culture is also different.

It is therefore not unusual for Comenius assistants to feel a little disorientated at first, especially if they arrive at a time when the school term is already in progress. You will need time to adapt to the host school and vice-versa. Do not be despondent if things do not go smoothly at first. However, integration is usually a very quick process and it is very rare for assistants to experience lasting problems in feeling comfortable in the host institution. Be prepared for serious work and do not expect others to tell you all the time what to do and when. Independence and self-reliance are very important. Be also prepared to be flexible, come with a sense of humour and never be afraid to ask for help.

4.2.1 Respect cultural and educational differences

Possibly the most important thing to bear in mind at all times, and especially during the early stages of the assistantship, is that practice in the host school may be very different from that in schools in your own country. Observe and be sensitive to these differences without making value judgments. Remember that institutions can be managed and pupils can learn in many different ways. The examples of potential differences given below are some of the most common, but there are many others.

Relationships between members of staff and between staff and pupils may be more or less formal than you have been used to. Pedagogical principles may also be very different and may at first appear rather shocking if you have been trained in another country, especially given that most assistants' training is very recent. For example, in some educational systems, classroom work tends to involve groups of pupils working together. In others, the teacher usually addresses the whole class throughout the lesson. This type of difference can be particularly evident in language lessons, where another aspect, which differs between countries, is the emphasis that is put on oral as opposed to written work. Within oral work, the emphasis on effective communication compared to that given to speaking 'correctly' may vary. In some systems there will be frequent use of translation exercises. In others these will never be done.

Some educational systems use a great deal of testing and sometimes rank pupils in order of success. In others, this is uncommon. The level of freedom teachers have to determine the content of their lessons also varies. Sometimes the national curriculum is very detailed, in other cases only broad outlines are given.

Attitudes to discipline differ. In some countries, most schools require pupils to wear uniforms. The principle behind this is not authoritarian, but one of equality between pupils from different income groups. Sometimes a certain level of talk in classrooms is accepted, while elsewhere silence is required.

The role of teachers in upholding discipline also varies. In some systems, all teachers have equal responsibility and must look after pupils during breaks, sometimes on a rota system. In others, specialist staff are employed for this and a normal teacher is responsible only within the classroom. In some systems, older pupils may also play a role in maintaining order.



4.2.2 Introduce yourself to all staff

Normally your mentor or head teacher will introduce you to most of the school's staff soon after your arrival. But if this does not happen, do what you can yourself to ensure that you are known to everybody, both teachers and other staff such as secretaries and caretakers. You should do this even if you are not a fluent speaker of the language of the host country, but bear in mind that some of your new colleagues may find it difficult to communicate with you. Do not expect them to do all the work in getting to know you.

4.2.3 Understand that teachers are sometimes very busy

You will probably have many questions to ask about the management of the school and will be eager to speak with teachers about the kind of work you will be doing with their classes. Do not be discouraged if they do not have the time to talk to you immediately. Choose a moment when they are relaxing rather than one in the middle of a hectic school day. It may also be worth making a list of what you need to know and asking your mentor if he or she could organise, and attend, a short meeting with each of the teachers you will initially be working with.

4.2.4 Use the induction period to think carefully about the assistantship

In most cases, before you are asked to begin your regular timetable, the school will organise an induction period of at least a couple of weeks, during which you will not take an active teaching role but will get to know the life of the school by observing lessons and other activities. But this does not mean sitting passively at the back of the class. Your mentor may suggest some points to consider. But even if not, you should use this time to assess the differences between the host school and your own school and the schools you have visited during your training. Taking notes may help you to concentrate and make it easier to report back to your mentor later.

Make sure you observe a wide variety of lessons. Think about how to motivate pupils of different ages and levels, especially if you are not used to teaching the age group you are observing. Pre-primary and primary school children, for example, will be very easy to motivate for a short while through the use of games and songs, but will have a short attention span. Older pupils may need convincing intellectually that what they are doing is useful, but once this is achieved will work autonomously. If you are assigned to a pre-school institution, be also prepared to be integrated into the daily routine of children, which includes preparing meals or going for walks, as well as more formalised group activities. The key question to ask yourself at this stage — and indeed throughout the assistantship — is what contribution you can make to pupils' learning and to the life of the school and local community. Remember that what you have to offer, especially knowledge of languages and cultures not normally taught in the school, is of great value and that you are there not to do what teachers do already but to add a new dimension.



4.2.5 Offer to help teachers during the induction period

The induction period will normally be organised to some extent for you, but you should always ensure that you speak personally to all teachers whose lessons you wish to observe, in order to ask their permission and to ask if there is any way you can make yourself useful in the lesson, for example by sitting with and helping a particular group of pupils.

4.2.6 Offer to help with extra-curricular activities — sport, clubs etc.

In some schools, a great deal of activity goes on outside formal lessons, and busy teachers are often delighted to have extra help, for example with school sport or with producing school drama or musical events, which are very common in some countries. Such assistance will gain you goodwill and will also enable you to have a better insight into the culture of the host country, both educationally and more generally. In some cases it may also be an opportunity to meet pupils' parents.

4.2.7 Meet your mentor at the end of the induction period

It is essential to set aside time at the end of the induction period for a meeting with your mentor. Before this meeting, you should prepare a list of questions you wish to ask and points you want to make. If as a result of the induction period you have any new ideas on classes or activities with which you would like to be involved, now is a good time to say so. If you are having any difficulties with accommodation or other personal matters, seek advice.

Do not be afraid to speak frankly, but tactfully, about any problems you have noticed or about differences between what you have seen and schools in your own country. Comenius assistants should always be aware of their own relative inexperience and accept that teachers in the host school are likely to have many years of accumulated knowledge and practical experience of what works and what does not for their pupils. You can learn a great deal from these teachers. But they can also learn from you, and if you are tactful, most teachers will be willing to allow you to experiment with your own ideas.

A regular time should be agreed with the mentor for future meetings, which should be at least weekly. It may also be useful at this stage to discuss the form in which you will keep a record of the assistantship (see 4.4.13).

4.2.8 If you have problems, speak to your mentor first

This happens very rarely, but if at any stage in the assistantship you are unhappy about something or feel that you are not being treated correctly by the host school, first speak tactfully and in confidence to your mentor. If this does not lead to a solution, contact the National Agency in your host country and explain the problem. If you still feel that the situation has not been resolved, speak to someone at your National Agency.



An example of good practice – An Italian assistant in Bulgaria

The Comenius Assistantship certainly honed my adaptation skills, which are necessary whenever you change your daily routine, relations with family and friends, when you have to accept a new “rhythm” in your life. I must say I enjoyed the “Bulgarian rhythm”.

Nevertheless, sometimes I felt a bit down, so I tried to imagine and reflect on what some Bulgarians were telling me about economic problems that many Bulgarian families were facing. After all, I was not the only person with problems, there were more serious ones. So I taught myself to enjoy life and my time in Bulgaria to appreciate this once in a lifetime Comenius experience and my work with the students.

I learnt to listen carefully to people, mainly students, and to understand their needs, especially because at the very beginning communication was a bit difficult since I did not speak Bulgarian at all. I was also very interested in trying to understand their aspirations as young people and their mentality. I found out that they wanted to visit other countries as only few of them had had the chance to travel outside of Bulgaria.

This experience also taught me to be patient, since it takes time to learn a foreign language, to understand another culture, different people, to be far away from your country. But now I have some new good friends of different ages: teenagers, adults, children. It is really rewarding to have international long lasting friendships.

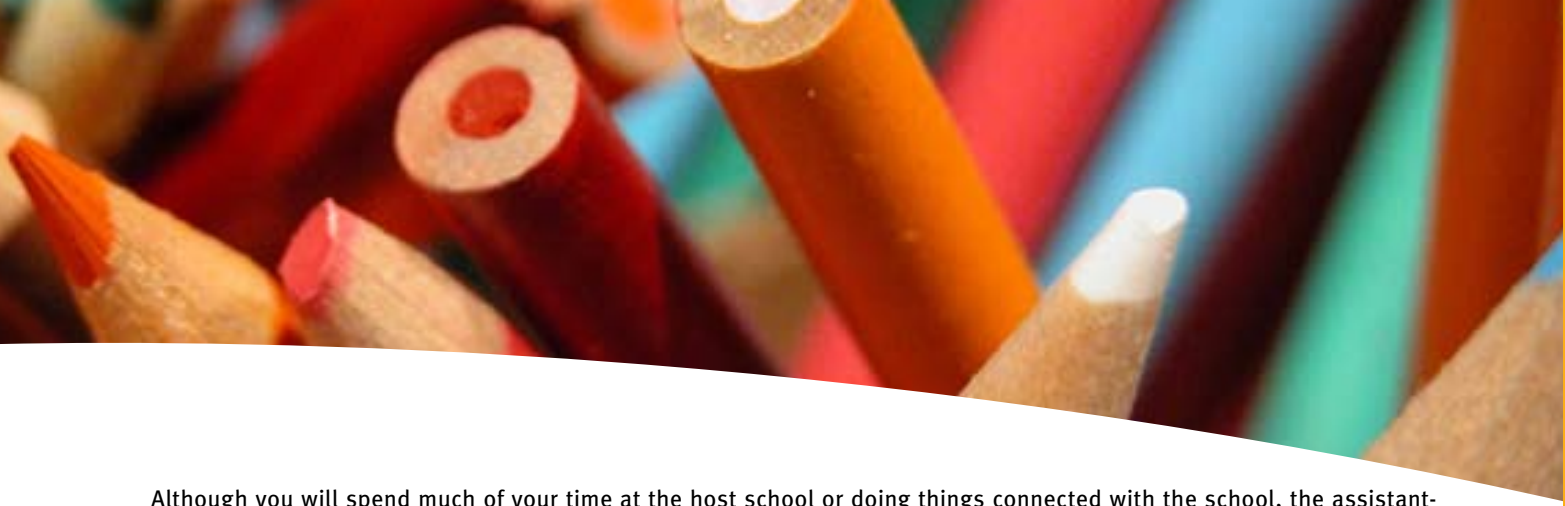
I interviewed some of the students and it seems that most of them enjoyed the lessons in Italian and were happy to have an Italian assistant at school. They told me they learnt interesting new things. I also had positive feedback from my tutor.

4.3

INTEGRATION INTO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Checklist

- Be aware of cultural and religious differences
- Try to use the local language wherever possible
- Find out about language classes or exchanges
- Consider joining a local club or evening class
- Do not miss the induction meeting
- Ask the host National Agency for a list of other Comenius assistants
- Complete all necessary formalities (police, health, etc.)
- Consider contacting the local media



Although you will spend much of your time at the host school or doing things connected with the school, the assistantship is also an opportunity to experience more widely the culture of another country. During a relatively short stay, it can sometimes be difficult to integrate fully into the life of the community around you, especially in large international cities. If you spend much of your free time with other foreigners, there is no reason to feel that is any kind of failure. However, there is a number of ways in which you can increase your chances of meeting local people and of making progress in the local language.

4.3.1 Be aware of cultural and religious differences

It is very likely that if you are doing your assistantship in a country which you have not visited before, you will for a while feel a little culturally disorientated and be unsure what behaviour is expected of you. But if you are open and treat differences with your own culture as an opportunity to learn rather than as a threat, you should soon begin to feel more at ease. Remember that it is more normal in some cultures than in others for people to begin conversations in public places such as cafés or shops and that in some places it is unusual to be invited to people's homes unless you are a close friend. What may appear as either coldness or over-friendliness to you may be quite normal in the host culture. Other traditions may also be very different. For example, one point, which can lead to embarrassment, is that in some countries it is normal to drink quite large amounts of alcohol over a meal or during an evening out. In others more than a couple of glasses will be regarded as bad behaviour and could lead to not being invited next time.

Remember also that, while animated discussion on serious issues such as politics and religion can in some circumstances be interesting and informative for all concerned, you should not risk offending your hosts by bringing up such matters at an inappropriate time or place. Different cultures have different customs in this respect. And you should always avoid being over-critical — remember that your own country and culture is no better (or worse) than the host one.

4.3.2 Try to use the local language wherever possible

Even if you are not fluent in the language of the host country, practice as much as you can. For example, try to begin conversations in shops, etc. in the local language. You may find that many people you meet try to help you by using your own language or another language you can understand. But where possible, explain politely that you prefer to speak the local language at least part of the time. Do not be discouraged if at first you have difficulty in understanding or if the language is spoken differently from how you are used to. In many regions of Europe local dialects can at first seem very strong, but it is usually possible to 'acclimatise' fairly quickly.

It is also very useful to watch television in the language you are trying to learn, especially news programmes where the pictures or your knowledge of current events give you a good grasp of the general context. Films, whether at the cinema or on the television, which have a soundtrack in a language you know well but subtitles in the local language, can also be very useful.



4.3.3 Find out about language classes or exchanges

The best way to make progress is usually through a combination of immersion in the language and more structured learning. In many countries, local authorities, universities or chambers of commerce run free or very cheap classes in the home language.

Private language schools may also be an option, particularly but not exclusively in countries with more widely used languages. But be aware that standards and costs vary widely and, before enrolling, take advice from your mentor or from acquaintances who have already followed classes.

A cheaper and often very convenient option is an exchange, whereby you teach your partner your language for a few hours a week, and he or she teaches you the local language. Obviously, teachers at the host school are ideal partners for this, but may not have the time. An alternative exchange partner may be an older pupil, but you should take care in this situation not to create jealousy among other pupils who may see your spending time with one individual as favouritism. If you cannot find a partner through the host school, you could try putting an advertisement on a university or other local notice board.

If you already have a reasonably good command of the language you are learning, the exchange can take the form of simple conversation. But if you are a beginner, you will need to ask your partner to provide more structured practice, perhaps using a textbook.

4.3.4 Consider joining a local club or evening class

In your host school, you may find yourself giving classes in other subjects using your mother tongue or another foreign language. This is a good way for them to learn languages. In the same way, learning to do something while using the target language is a good way for you to improve your own linguistic skills. In many towns and cities, and even some smaller communities, there are opportunities to join informal evening classes and clubs in art, photography, local history, creative writing, cooking, wine tasting and many other subjects. If there is a university near your host school, it may accept non-examination students, at little or no cost, to attend on an informal basis lectures and classes offered to full-time students.

This can also bring you together with local people with interests similar to yours. In some countries, evening classes tend to lead to considerable social contact.

The best source for information on evening classes will depend on the country — it may be the town hall, public library, or university — but teachers at your school will probably be able to point you in the right direction.

4.3.5 Do not miss the induction meeting

Comenius assistants are usually invited to an induction meeting by the National Agency in the host country. In most cases, this will be soon after your arrival, although the fact that assistants do not all arrive at the same time of year can mean the meeting is not until well after the earliest arrivals have begun their work. You are strongly encouraged to attend this meeting, and your school will be delighted to give you the necessary time off. Your National Agency will grant you a certain amount of money to attend the induction meeting. If you arrive in the host country after the induction meeting has already been held, contact the host National Agency and ask them to send you any documentation available.



4.3.6 Ask the host National Agency for a list of other Comenius assistants

Even if you are lucky enough to make friends with local people, there are likely to be times when you want to compare notes or discuss common problems with people in the same situation as yourself. If the induction meeting does not take place immediately, the National Agency in the host country will be able to put you in contact with other Comenius assistants working nearby. In the past, some groups of assistants have set up networks (for example through mailing lists) to share teaching materials, and even worked together to create Internet sites.

4.3.7 Complete all necessary formalities (police, health, etc.)

In every country, there will be some formalities to complete on or soon after arrival. Make sure you know what is necessary, as there may be differences between countries. In some, for example, you should register with a generalist doctor when you arrive, in order to be eligible to receive treatment when you need it. In some countries you will need to register with the local police or at the town hall.

While you will not usually have to pay national taxes on your Comenius grant, it is possible in some countries that you will be asked to pay certain local taxes, particularly if you rent a flat in your own name. Any such payments will often be at a reduced rate. Even if you do not have to pay, you may be required in some countries to make a declaration or to provide documentation establishing your exemption. Another point you may want to clarify if you are going to or coming from a non-EU country is the law on accepting paid work in addition to the assistantship. If you do take such work, your duties as a Comenius assistant must always take priority over any other commitments.

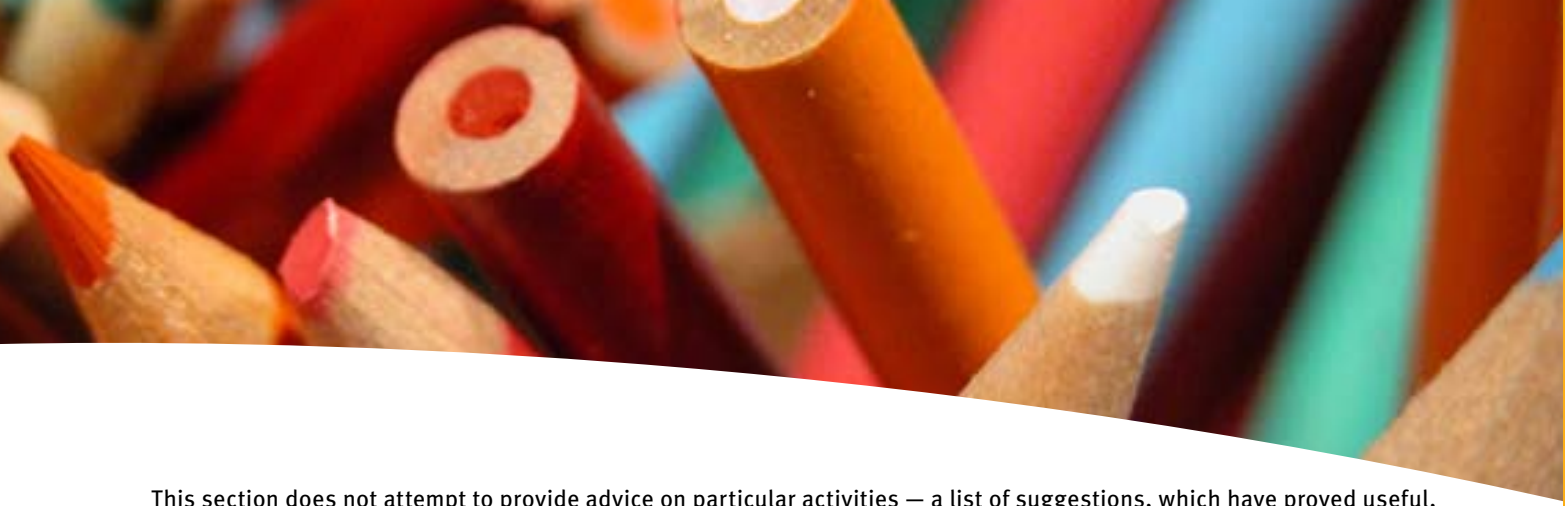
4.3.8 Consider contacting the local media

It may be worth contacting the local newspaper (or asking the school to do so), particularly if it is a small publication, although even larger regional newspapers often have specific sections dedicated to particular towns or villages. The local press is often short of news, and would be delighted to interview you. Local television or radio stations may also be interested. Several previous assistants have found this a very good way of making the community in general aware of their arrival. The resulting article can also be very useful in terms of attracting the attention of local people and enterprises with whom you may later wish to collaborate in organising activities for your students. If an interview is arranged, take some time beforehand to prepare the message you want to communicate.

4.4 IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Checklist

- Teaching your mother tongue/your subject needs determination and planning
- Aim for informality but ensure respect
- Plan and evaluate all lessons thoroughly, with the teacher if possible
- Speak mainly the language (in which) you are teaching
- Speak clearly, but usually at normal speed
- Grade your language
- Discuss with teachers how you should correct pupils' mistakes
- Gain as much experience as possible with different types of class
- Suggest activities and materials
- Try not to be limited to the traditional classroom
- If you have discipline problems, speak to your mentor
- Every week, evaluate with the mentor what you have achieved
- Keep a file on your assistantship
- Ask your host school for a certificate



This section does not attempt to provide advice on particular activities — a list of suggestions, which have proved useful, is at [Annex III](#) — but gives some general hints on classroom techniques. In applying these ideas, it is important also to consider cultural and educational differences and not to enter into conflict with the policy of the host school (see also [4.2.1](#)). Some of the following advice is relevant to all situations and all types of lesson or activity. Some deals specifically with language teaching, which is still the most common activity during a Comenius assistantship. Most applies whether you are teaching your mother tongue or a second language.

4.4.1 Teaching your mother tongue/your subject needs determination and planning

When teaching your mother tongue, remember that speaking a language perfectly does not make you a perfect teacher! You may well need to work hard at it, especially if it is not normally on the school curriculum and all your pupils are beginners. But assistants who introduce a new language into a school usually find the results especially rewarding, provided they have a coherent strategy from the start and do not expect miracles. If it is difficult to find teaching materials for the language concerned, see if you can adapt ideas from materials in other languages or share thoughts with other assistants from your country (see also [3.4.1](#)). Textbooks, particularly simple reading books, aimed at very young children who are native speakers of the assistant's language can often be used, with some adaptation, to teach that language as a foreign language to slightly older children in the host country. To encourage attendance at voluntary lessons, arrange for participants (pupils, teachers and/or parents) to receive a 'diploma' from the school. If you encounter scepticism from pupils or teachers, debate with them and try to persuade them that teaching your mother tongue, even if it is a less widely spoken language, is of benefit. Some of the arguments you can use are:

- pupils' general awareness of languages and cultures can be developed by learning about a new country and language from a real representative of that country;
- it is never possible truly to understand an individual and his/her culture unless you have some knowledge of that person's language;
- to learn about Europe properly, pupils need to understand even
- its smaller countries and language communities;
- the more languages one knows, the easier it is to learn more;
- if it is the language of a neighbouring/close country, there are many business and cultural contacts;
- many languages share lexical or structural similarities
- (e.g. Danish/Swedish/Norwegian, German/Dutch, Finnish/Estonian, Polish/Russian/Czech/Slovak/Slovene/Serb/Croat/Bulgarian, Portuguese/Italian/Spanish/French/Romanian) so learning a little of one may help them understand others;
- speaking English and French is fairly common. A little knowledge of something more unusual can be an advantage on the job market.

When you are teaching a language that is not your mother tongue, remember that you do not need to speak it perfectly to teach it well. Creativity and good planning are more important.

Some Comenius assistants will spend much of their time teaching non-language subjects. This, too, will be challenging, as you might be teaching your subject in a foreign language, but this will give you the opportunity to experiment and acquire new skills, and give pupils a different cultural perspective on the subject involved.



4.4.2 Aim for informality but ensure respect

Assistants usually have a different relationship with pupils than that of a teacher. Pupils should normally feel that they can approach the assistant informally, but also that he or she is a full member of staff and cannot be disobeyed.

Your initial contact with pupils will be very important in determining the nature of your longer-term relationship with them. It is better to begin relatively formally and then relax than to do everything possible to 'be friends' straight away. Bear in mind, when you are working with pupils within a lesson led by a teacher, that you may later need to handle the same pupils on your own and so be able to demonstrate a certain authority. Avoid appearing amused at misbehaviour and never do anything that may undermine the teacher's authority.

In many cases, as the assistantship goes on, with older pupils in particular there will be a clear difference between your relationship with them in the classroom and outside it. The latter may be a relationship of equals, but in the classroom it should be clear that, although the atmosphere is informal, you are in charge. You should also take care that if you socialise with certain older pupils, you are not perceived to favour them in class.

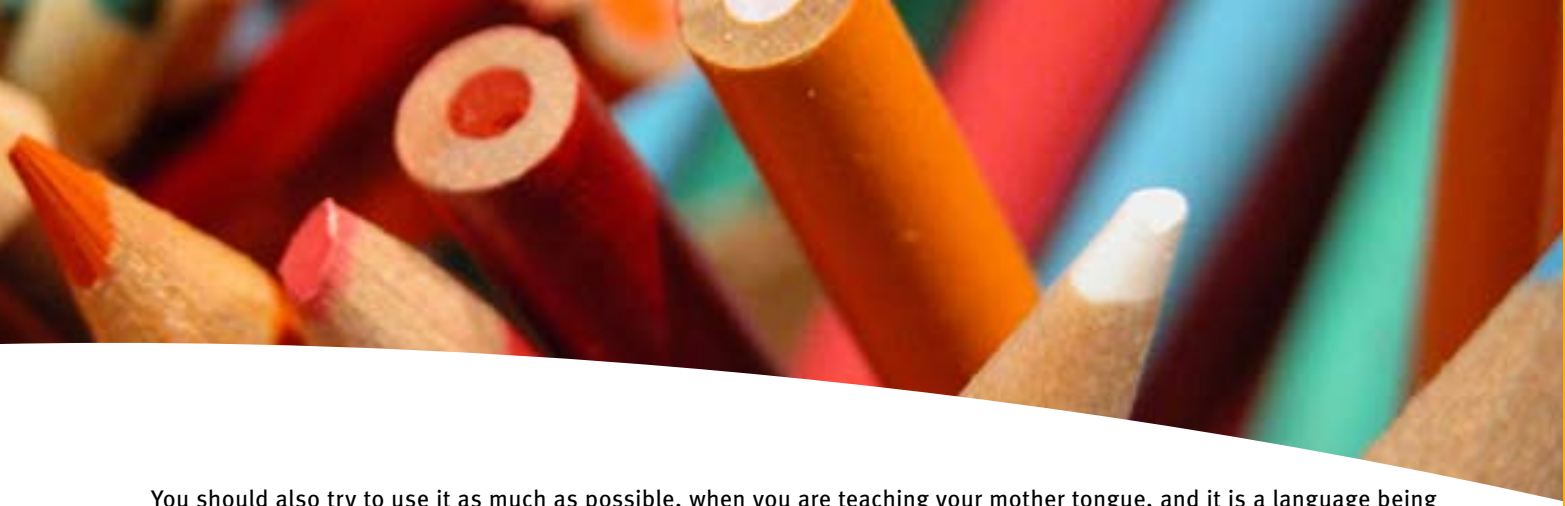
4.4.3 Plan and evaluate all lessons thoroughly, with the teacher if possible

Ideally, all lessons in which you are to take part will be carefully planned in collaboration with the teacher, with a written lesson plan setting out who will do what. In reality, this will not always be possible. But you should always try to speak to the teacher before the lesson and to have a clear idea what the aim of the lesson is and what your role will be.

Afterwards, again ideally with the teacher, you should evaluate how successful you were in achieving your own aims within the lesson and discuss what might be done differently next time.

4.4.4 Speak mainly the language (in which) you are teaching

In some schools, language teachers may use only the target language in lessons. In others, they will also use the pupils' mother tongue. You will need to discuss this with teachers, but it is generally preferable for you, at least when you are in a language classroom and particularly if you are with another teacher who can speak to the pupils in their own language, to speak only the language being taught, whether or not it is your mother tongue. Pupils will then understand from the start that if they want your help, they must use the target language. Nevertheless, it can sometimes be easier (for example if you are alone with a group of beginners) to translate some items of vocabulary or grammatical explanation into the pupils' own language — the most important thing is to draw a clear line between circumstances where use of the target language is required and those where pupils' mother tongue is permissible.



You should also try to use it as much as possible, when you are teaching your mother tongue, and it is a language being learnt by most pupils in the school, when you are involved in teaching other subjects and when you are outside the classroom altogether. There are various imaginative ways in which you can integrate a language element into other subjects (as already mentioned, this methodology is called CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning). Learning languages by working on a European school partnership project (Comenius School Partnerships and eTwinning) is also possible, and such projects can be integrated into any school subject. Have a look at [Annex III \(Part 2\)](#) for more concrete ideas.

4.4.5 Speak clearly, but usually at normal speed

When you are teaching your mother tongue or another language you know very well, you should always speak as clearly as possible but ensure that pupils (except perhaps absolute beginners) get plenty of exposure to speech at normal or near normal speed and to your normal vocabulary. After all, one reason you are there is to provide a realistic experience of dealing with a native or fluent speaker. Even if pupils have difficulty at first, they will usually gradually become accustomed to the assistant's voice and speech patterns.

4.4.6 Grade your language

However, it is necessary to 'grade' the language used depending on the situation. If you are giving instructions or explaining a detailed point to pupils, they will need to understand more or less every word. You should therefore speak more slowly and avoid using complicated constructions or vocabulary. At first, this may require some advance planning, but it quickly becomes second nature. In other situations where pupils only need to understand the gist of what you are saying, it is appropriate to speak more naturally. Indeed this can often be a useful comprehension exercise.

4.4.7 Discuss with teachers how you should correct pupils' mistakes

One sensitive issue where there may be significant differences between host schools is their policy on correcting pupils' mistakes. Many teachers will tend towards the 'modern' view that too much correction, in particular of oral language, can discourage pupils from communicating, and thus be counter-productive. In particular, pupils should only be helped while they are speaking if it is clear they are searching for a word. Otherwise, correction should be done once they have finished. If a conversation takes place between several pupils, the teacher should listen and make notes, and then afterwards correct only the three or four most frequent or most serious errors. Pupils will not in any case remember any more and any further correction will be wasted.

Other teachers will have a more traditional view and argue that pupils should get used to speaking correctly as early as possible, or errors will become habitual and impossible to correct later.

Matters such as this should always be discussed with teachers and the assistant — while free to put his or her own point of view diplomatically and in private — should respect their wishes and the policy of the school.



4.4.8 Gain as much experience as possible with different types of class

If the assistantship is to be of the maximum benefit to your development as a teacher, you will need to gain as wide a variety of experience as you can. If, a few weeks into the assistantship, you do not feel this is happening or you think of new ways in which you can be useful to the school, speak to your mentor. Try to get experience with different subjects, with pupils of a wide range of ages, with small groups and, as you become more confident, with whole classes. It is often worthwhile, too, to continue observing other teachers' classes throughout the assistantship, and not only during the induction period – your view of the way they do things may develop as you become more experienced in teaching in the school.

4.4.9 Suggest activities and materials

As has already been mentioned, teachers often have very little time for longer term planning. One way in which assistants can be enormously helpful is by suggesting activities that can be done in the classroom and offering to help teachers by preparing resource materials. This can also be a very good way of playing a positive role in non-language lessons and ensuring that teachers are aware of the extra potential you have to offer. In addition to the resources you may have brought with you (see [Annex II](#)), you may be able to obtain prepared teaching packs and other useful aids from your own country or region's embassy/consulate/cultural institute/tourist office in the host country. Do not forget that the Internet is a very rich source of teaching resources. However, it is important to select and use them carefully and target them to your pedagogical aims.

4.4.10 Try not to be limited to the traditional classroom

Obviously, much of your work will take place in traditional classrooms. But there are other opportunities. Open formats such as language clubs are possible, where pupils come voluntarily at lunchtime and after school for activities such as reading, playing games or watching videos. The assistant acts as a resource, helping where necessary. You may also be able to use the school premises to provide classes – in languages or other subjects you know well – for parents, teachers and the general public.

Within or outside the framework of European programmes, assistants can help create and develop links between the host community and their own local area, sometimes in collaboration with businesses or local authorities. The internet is often very helpful for this.

Discuss these matters with your mentor. The school may well have had experience in the past, which you can draw on.



4.4.11 If you have discipline problems, speak to your mentor

If you have disciplinary problems with certain pupils, do not shout or lose your temper. Do not feel that you have failed in any way. You may well find that you are not the only one who has had difficulties with the pupils concerned.

However, do not let the problem get out of hand. Take action early. Wherever possible, do not leave the problem to be solved entirely by others. Even if the easiest thing is to call in a senior teacher to restore order, that may only be a short-term solution. Instead, seek advice from your mentor or the class teacher and with their help, work out a strategy for dealing with the problem.

4.4.12 Every week, evaluate with the mentor what you have achieved

You should have weekly, timetabled meetings with your mentor. These discussions need not be long, but they should enable you to bring the mentor up to date on what you have done during the previous week, what you have achieved and where you feel more work on your part may be necessary. You should also discuss your timetable for the following week and suggest any changes. Agree with your mentor two or three points on which to concentrate during the following week's work.

You should not hesitate to speak frankly with the mentor about any problems you may be experiencing either inside or outside the school.

4.4.13 Keep a file on your assistantship

You should keep a simple record of your assistantship, with copies of all your weekly timetables and lesson plans where you have them, as well as any observations on learner behaviour, cultural and educational differences between the host country and your own etc. This will be of personal value to you as a record of your progress and will also help you to fill in the (obligatory) report on your assistantship. It might also be worth keeping a virtual diary (weblog) of your assistantship to share your experience with your colleagues at university/teacher training college, your friends and family.

You should also keep at least two copies of any resource materials you prepare, one set to remain with the school after your departure, the other for you to take home. It may prove very useful in the future, whether to show to potential employers as proof of your talents or to be used in the classroom in your subsequent career. Your National Agency may also ask you to supply copies of materials to pass on to future assistants, particularly if you have been teaching a less widely used language for which materials are difficult to find.

You should also stay in touch with the host school. The links you make may be very enriching personally, and may also help you start international projects in your subsequent career and keep your knowledge of the language of the host country alive.



4.4.14 Ask your host school for a certificate

If you are still a student, it will depend on your home institution whether your assistantship will be formally recognised. However, in the interest of your future professional career, it is worth asking the host school for a certificate specifying the dates and the duration of the assistantship your main tasks as an assistant and your performance. Ideally your host school would fill in a Europass mobility certificate, which is recognised throughout the EU. Ask your National Agency or consult the Europass website for more details (<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/vernav/InformationOn/Europass-Mobility.csp>).

An example of good practice — A Romanian assistant in the United Kingdom

After returning home from England, Maria was visibly changed by her experience, although she confesses that the impact was more visible a few months after her return when she became a qualified teacher of French: “It is only now that I realise how much the assistantship helped me develop my knowledge and teacher skills. I dare say, without exaggerating, that without this wonderful chance to have an insight into another education system, I would have been a mediocre teacher. The assistantship gave me all the knowledge and skills a teacher needs to enjoy a great career in teaching”.

The fact that she met a lot of enthusiastic teachers during her assistantship gave her the chance to work on new projects with schools in England and with other schools where Comenius assistants she had met started teaching.

Furthermore, Maria published a number of articles about her experience as a Comenius assistant in magazines and newsletters for teachers. She also attended an induction seminar for future Comenius assistants and shared her activities and experience with them. As a French teacher in a state secondary school in Romania, she posted information and pictures from her assistantship to encourage students to take part in the Comenius programme.

5

CONCLUSION

Previous experiences have shown that Comenius Assistantships have great potential to introduce the European dimension to the school, improve the quality of language teaching and increase the variety of languages being taught at all levels. A Comenius Assistantship is enriching for both the host school and the Comenius assistant. With almost 1 500 assistants working in schools all over Europe, up to three hundred thousand pupils benefit from the scheme every year.

The vast majority of individual Comenius Assistantships were a great success. This is thanks to the efforts of all concerned. Each assistantship is different. For example, assistants teaching their mother tongue in a school where it is not on the curriculum and where every learner is a beginner face a different challenge from assistants teaching pupils who have been learning a language for some time and who may be studying for public examinations at fairly advanced levels. But whatever the situation, assistants and host schools who invest hard work and imagination almost invariably find the experience of taking part in a Comenius Assistantship immensely rewarding.⁴

The European Commission hopes that this guide will allow Comenius assistants and host schools to benefit from the accumulated wisdom and experience of those who have gone before them. However, the Commission does not want to stifle the creativity of participants, which has been and will continue to be the Comenius Assistantship scheme's greatest strength.

Future Comenius Assistantships will certainly present new opportunities which are not covered here. This guide is based on practices and activities that have been successful since the assistantships scheme began in 1995. Participating schools and assistants will continue to be imaginative and innovative (e.g. in using CLIL methodology, using new technologies for international collaborative projects or being more involved in pre-primary schools) and are certain to come up with many new ideas which will make assistantships even more successful in the future.

⁴ You can read about some excellent assistantships which were awarded a European prize in the Comenius brochure *Mobility creates opportunities* which can be found in pdf format (in EN, FR, DE and SI) at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/educ-training_en.html#Comenius-mobility



ANNEX I ACCOMMODATION

Many assistants find that accommodation is their greatest concern before departure. It will never be easy to find suitable accommodation at a suitable price in some destinations, particularly in major cities. However, there is much you can do to improve your chances of finding something appropriate and this Annex is designed to help you with some general advice. In some cases, accommodation is arranged before departure, while in others assistants find accommodation after arrival.

For some fortunate assistants, host schools are able to provide or arrange accommodation at a cheap rate, sometimes within the school premises. Bear in mind, however, that if you have no car, the school is a long way from the centre of a town and public transport is not good, this can be a bit isolated outside school hours. Sometimes new assistants can take over accommodation from previous assistants. If this is offered to you, establish before leaving what will be provided and what you need to take/buy on the spot in terms of linen, cutlery, etc. However, it is not always possible for schools to provide accommodation and you should not expect to be so lucky. What you are entitled to expect from schools is help in finding a temporary place to stay on arrival — a hostel, cheap hotel or room in a family house or flat — and advice and assistance with regard to somewhere longer term. Whatever the accommodation arrangement, if you are asked to sign any documents seek advice from your mentor, especially if you are not fluent in the language of the host country. Particularly in large cities, it is advisable to take someone with you when you go to view accommodation, for security as well as for language reasons.

Living with a family

Many Comenius assistants in the past have lived with a family, often the family of a teacher at the host school, throughout their stay and have found this an excellent way of having close contact with the host community and of improving their language skills. If you are offered a room in a family house, think carefully before saying no — remember when thinking about accommodation that the Comenius grant will not cover the cost of a luxurious flat on your own. Living in a family will usually ensure comfort and security at a reasonable cost, which might compensate for any feeling of loss of independence.

But be absolutely sure before accepting that you have agreed with the hosts the exact terms on which you will stay. What contribution to household expenses is expected from you? Are meals included? Will you be able to use the kitchen? Will you have access to a telephone (you will normally have to pay for your own calls)? Will you be able to invite friends to your room? Will you be expected to be home at a certain time in the evenings? In some cases, assistants have come to arrangements with the host family to give language lessons or to help look after children or with housework in return for free or cheaper accommodation. But again, the exact terms need to be clear from the start. Even if everything does appear to be clear and the terms acceptable, it may well be advisable to agree with the host that the first month will be a trial period after which either party can end the arrangement.

Student residences

Another advantageous form of accommodation sometimes offered to assistants in larger towns and cities is student residences, although in many countries this is rarely possible. If such an offer is made, it is usually much better value than anything you are likely to find on the private rental market, while at the same time offering you the same independence you would have living in a flat. Such residences are also often near city centres, where it can be difficult or impossible to find other accommodation. Again, however, you need to be absolutely sure of the terms before you accept a university room. Will you have a room on your own? Will meals be provided? If not, will you have access to university restaurants? If you move out, will you be liable for the fees for your whole scheduled stay?



Sharing flats and houses

Many assistants live in flats and houses shared with other people, usually of around the same age. Normally, each person has a bedroom and everybody shares the kitchen, bathroom and sometimes a living room. In some countries, such as the UK, this is very common amongst the native population, both students and young employed people. In other countries, young people tend to live alone in studio flats. Each has its advantages.

Sharing is cheaper; it usually gives access to more space and can be a good way of making friends. But the experience of living in shared accommodation often requires tolerance and a spirit of compromise on all sides and adapting can be difficult for those used to living either alone or in the family home. Just as for any other type of accommodation, ensure that you have understood the terms before accepting, in particular the size of the room you will have, whether electricity and gas bills are included in the rent, and if not, how much they are likely to be. You will want to find out the length of the daily journey to the host school, and the cost, as well as to be satisfied that the house or flat is in a secure area. Finally, you should also ensure that you can leave without unreasonable financial loss if you are not happy.

Sometimes flat shares are arranged by the school or through a local university before the assistant arrives, although more usually assistants find them themselves by replying to advertisements in local newspapers or on notice boards in student cafeterias. It is a good idea to ensure that you have met the people with whom you will be sharing before definite acceptance!

Obviously, if you do share accommodation, it can be particularly beneficial to your language skills and cultural experience to share with native speakers of the language of the host country. But that can sometimes be difficult to arrange, especially in countries where flat sharing is less common and there are not many local people looking for or offering this kind of accommodation. In some cases, if you are going to work in a large town, the school or the host country's national agency may be in a position to put you in touch with Comenius assistants from your own or other countries who will be working in schools near to yours. You may be able to agree with them to look for accommodation together.

Living alone

Of course, in some cases, Comenius assistants who wish to are able to find small flats in which to live alone, particularly in smaller towns where costs are lower. Just as for any other type of accommodation, it is wise before accepting to think carefully and to ensure that you have full information on the commitment you are taking on. One fundamental matter is whether the flat will be let furnished or unfurnished. Be aware that in some places furnished flats can be very difficult to find.

In most countries (there are some exceptions), you should not normally pay an agency any money to find you a flat — this is sometimes illegal and agents are permitted to receive commission only from the landlord. Before signing any contract carefully work out your budget, bearing in mind that you will probably want to keep some money for socialising and travelling. Make sure that the contract covers only the period you will need the flat. In some countries, it is normal for rental contracts to run for several years, with very high financial penalties for tenants who want to cancel the contract early. Seek advice from your mentor to make sure any arrangements to pay a deposit comply with the law of the country. In some countries this money should be paid into a bank account to which neither you nor the owner has access without the other's agreement. In other countries, the deposit is paid directly to the landlord and he or she returns it when you leave. When you move in, ask the landlord to draw up an inventory for you both to sign, to avoid disputes over missing items or damage.

ANNEX II RESOURCES ASSISTANTS CAN BRING

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list but merely to give some ideas. Assistants and host schools should discuss together before the assistantship what the assistant might be able to bring.

Photos of family and home area
Taped recordings of friends and family talking about 'a typical day in my life'
Maps of home town or city
Tourist brochures for the assistant's home area
Postcards
Posters
Calendars
Cuttings from local and national newspapers, particularly with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • job or accommodation advertisements; • theatre and cinema programmes • horoscopes
Magazines and comics aimed at the age groups to be taught — those including questionnaires are particularly useful
Taped pop and traditional songs — preferably with the lyrics typed out
Board games
Transport timetables and route maps
Videos of films, television news, weather forecasts and advertisements
Taped radio news, weather forecasts and advertisements
Pages from mail order catalogues
Restaurant menus
Typical recipes
Children's imitation coins in euros and/or the assistant's national currency
The timetable from a school in the assistant's country
Letters from pupils in a school in the assistant's country
A few packets of sweets from the assistant's country (for pre-primary and primary schools)
Local/regional objects/costumes



ANNEX III SOME IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES

Again this annex is not intended to be exhaustive. Each suggestion is meant to be a starting point for further thought rather than to serve as a lesson plan. Activities are divided into various sections, but these are not definitive. Some of the suggestions can be adapted for different levels and for older or younger children.

These are informal though effective activities, which are easier for a teacher to manage if an assistant is involved as a language resource and to share supervision of pupils divided into groups. Most are suitable whether assistants are teaching their mother tongue or another language in which they are confident. A few can be done in the pupils' mother tongue, with the assistant's input being mainly cultural. Some are also aimed at non-languages lessons.

Exercises commonly found in text-books are not included.

Part one – in the language classroom

1. All ages

Mystery board

This is mainly for assistants introducing a new language into the school. To create interest in your language, try pinning up on a prominent notice board in the school a new item from your country (pictures, short vocabulary lists, recipes, travel tickets, newspaper articles) every day for couple of weeks. Say nothing to pupils, then once enough curiosity has been aroused, announce the start of lessons in the language: 'if you want to know more, come to Room x at time x'. Maintain the notice board even after the lessons have started.

Calendar

(For beginners) A calendar in the assistant's language is pinned up. At the beginning of each lesson, pupils must say the date in the target language.

Bingo

Teach numbers up to 10 or 100 and then give pupils a bingo card with a random selection on or ask them to choose five numbers and write them down. Call out numbers one by one in random order. Each time a learner has the number you call out on his/her card, he/she crosses it out. The first learner who has crossed out all his or her numbers is the winner and must shout 'bingo' (or a word in the target language).

Also works for the alphabet.

Interviews

Teacher interviews the assistant about an aspect of his or her life. Pupils fill in a multiple-choice worksheet. (NB this requires careful preparation.) The interview can also be taped or videoed to practice particular language points or for further use in later classes.

Pupils can also interview the assistant. For more advanced classes the assistant can remain silent unless the pupils' questions are correctly formulated.



Role plays

The teacher and assistant can together conduct either structured dialogues or more informal role plays, before pupils are asked to try. Role plays can often be based on authentic material supplied by assistants, such as street maps (asking directions), transport timetables or tourist brochures (asking for information). Assistants can also do role plays with pupils, for example telephone conversations in which pupils have to obtain information.

Drama

It may also be possible, either in class or as an extra-curricula activity, to produce full plays or extracts of plays in the target language, whether these are based on established works or created by the pupils themselves. This can be a very effective boost to language learning.

Memory test

The class teacher or language assistant shows a picture for ten seconds, after which pupils try to recall as much as possible. The assistant asks questions to help the pupils e.g. how many people were in the picture? Was there a dog?

Drawing words

The class is divided into small groups of three to five pupils. The pupils cannot talk to each other during the whole activity. A representative of each group comes to the teacher who writes down a word on a piece of paper so that it is visible only to the representatives of the group. Once they have seen the word, the representatives go back to their groups and try to explain the word through pictures. All talk is prohibited! Once the group guesses the word, they write it down and show it to the teacher. The group who guesses the first gets a point. The teacher decides on the number of the rounds. For each round, there is a different representative of the group. The group with the highest number of points is the winner.

Shopping list

Pupils are given a shopping list and are asked to make a list of the shops they need to go to. They then pretend to go into the shops and ask for what they need, with the assistant playing the role of the shopkeeper each time. If some real or simulated money from the assistant's country (or euros) is available, this can be used to pay.

Supermarket alphabet

Start by saying 'I went to the supermarket today and I bought some apples'. First learner must repeat and then add something beginning with 'b', next learner must repeat what the first one has said and add something with 'c', and so on until the end of the alphabet. This can be played in smaller groups as a competitive game — when a learner cannot remember correctly all the items bought, he or she is out, until only one person is left. If several people are still in by the time you reach 'z' begin again at 'a', so that the next person has to remember 27 items, and so on.

Vocabulary bank

A selection of new vocabulary (not too much at once) which has come up in lessons, with a translation or picture and perhaps some examples of use, is first displayed for a week on card around the room, then stored in a revision box pupils can consult.

Songs

There are many ways songs can be used as listening comprehension. Writing out the lyrics with words blanked out for pupils to fill in is a useful example. This is even more effective if pupils are asked to guess the missing words from the context of the rest of the lyrics, before they actually hear the song.



Quiz

At the end of your assistantship, hold a quiz about your country and language, either in each individual class, or if it can be arranged with all pupils of a particular age group whom you have taught. Provide small prizes for the winners.

2. Especially for pre-primary and primary schools

Colouring

Young children can be given an outline picture to colour in, following simple instructions from the assistant.

What's in my bag?

A number of items, for which pupils have previously learnt the vocabulary, are put into a bag held by the assistant. Pupils can feel the bag and have to guess what is in it.

Displays

The class makes a display of information and material about the assistant's home country, if possible to be shown in a communal area such as a school corridor or hall. Food can also be prepared.

Find your partner

Give half the class a picture each and the other half a word or phrase corresponding to the pictures. Each has to find his or her partner and then each pair displays their word and picture to the class. As a follow-up, each learner receives a sheet with the pictures in one column and the words in the other, and has to match them all correctly.

Performing songs and nursery rhymes

The assistant teaches the class to sing a simple song, which they can be asked to perform at a school occasion or for parents.

Teddy will teach you today

With very young children, bring in a teddy bear or similar toy and say 'Teddy will teach you today, but he only speaks language x'.

Puppet shows

The assistant can create characters using simple glove puppets available in toy shops and get children to make up the stories. If they are complete beginners in the target language, this can be done in their own language and the assistant can then 'perform' the dialogue in both the children's language and the target one, teaching vocabulary on the way.

Animals

Bring in a selection of pictures of animals. Ask the children questions: 'which animal is biggest/smallest/cuddly/frightening/your favourite etc'. Depending on the level the children have in the target language, the questions can be either in the target language or in their own language. If the latter, tell them when they have answered: 'That animal is called a x in my language' then at the end call out all the names of the animals and get the children to show you, which picture corresponds. Finally, point to the pictures and get the children to give you the names. This exercise can be adapted to other lexical groups (foods, clothes, etc).



Noises

The assistant imitates various noises (e.g. animals, weather) or brings a tape with sound effects, and pupils have to identify them.

Fairy stories

Make sure the fairy story is well known in the host country, or arrange with another teacher for him or her to tell it in the children's own language. Then tell it in the target language. Pin up or give out pictures relating to the story, which children have to put in order. Then get them to role play parts, if their level is high enough.

Complete the story

Give pupils an extract of a fairy tale from your country (or another story). The pupils have to guess (either out loud or in writing) the beginning or the end of the story (depending upon where the extract is taken). Then, compare the pupils' contributions with the original story. This will bring curiosity and often fun into the classroom.

Cooking and baking

Young children in particular love to cook and bake. The assistant should bring along easy local/regional recipes and help children prepare dishes that will introduce a taste of his/her home country.

3. Especially for secondary schools

Quiet correction

Pupils are divided into groups and given an activity to perform, for example putting a series of comic strip pictures in the correct order, although any group oral activity is suitable. All discussion must be in the target language. The assistant circulates between groups asking questions and quietly correcting language mistakes.

Group presentations

The class is split into groups of three or four and given/asked to choose a subject for a presentation of ten minutes or so in the target language. Ideally, the subjects should involve some research in the library/on the Internet. They can be connected to what is currently being taught in other parts of the curriculum. Groups work together over three or four lessons, with the assistant acting as a facilitator, before each group gives its presentation to the rest of the class, using overhead projectors, photographs, etc. Presentations can be recorded on cassette or video.

Newspaper article reconstruction

The assistant finds a short article — no more than 200 words if possible — from a newspaper in his or her native language. The article will preferably be a general interest item narrating an unusual event or a crime story. Pupils are divided into small groups. The assistant writes on the board ten important words from the article, in the order they occur. Using those as a clue, pupils are given ten minutes to work out what the article is about and to try to reconstruct it, speaking and writing only the target language, while the assistant circulates helping and correcting. A member of each group is then asked to report to the class. The assistant writes five more words from the article inserting them into the correct place in the order, and the groups are asked if they have changed their minds or want to add anything. Then the class is given the whole article to compare with their guesses.



Other newspaper activities

- Matching headlines to articles;
- Giving pupils an article without a headline and getting them to suggest one;
- Transposing headlines into normal language (works well in English and other languages where headlines do not follow normal grammatical rules);
- Giving pupils an article with the paragraphs in the wrong order and getting them to rearrange it correctly;
- Comparing a newspaper in the target language with one from pupils' own country (especially effective if each paper has articles about the same European or international news items);
- A news board with a regularly updated selection of articles (news, features, cartoons etc) from newspapers and magazines in the assistant's language.

Radio news

The assistant listens to a radio news programme in the target language and makes a list of the items covered, changing the order. Pupils, working in groups, play the role of news editors and have to decide a suitable order while the teacher and assistant circulate helping them. They then listen to the programme to see if they agreed with the real editor, and after listening a couple more times rewrite the script for the programme. The teacher and language assistant both circulate as they are doing this, and then each group in turn leaves the room with the assistant and the tape recorder to record their script, taking the time to make detailed corrections, while the teacher does other work with the rest of the class. Finally, the class listens to all the scripts. (This activity may take more than one lesson.)

What's my job?

One learner is given a piece of paper with a profession written on it. Others ask closed (yes/no) questions e.g. 'do you work indoors?' to find out what the job is. The learner who guesses correctly is then given another piece of paper with the name of a job on it, and answers questions in turn. This sort of activity can be done with the class divided into smaller groups if the assistant and the teacher both monitor and help.

Job interview role plays

Many variations on this theme are possible. All need to be prepared well with vocabulary, etc. and can be preceded by filling in application forms — real ones if these are obtainable from a local company or employment service. For example, students can be asked to apply for interesting jobs (astronaut, head of the United Nations, European Commissioner, football manager). Those playing interviewer and interviewee can be given characteristics e.g. nervous, arrogant, aggressive. This can also be done as a more serious exercise with older pupils and can include a discussion on employment or be linked with a career lesson in their own language.

Who am I?

Each learner is given a sticker with a famous personality's name on it, and puts it on their forehead so that everyone else but themselves can see it. They then have to find out who they are by asking closed ('yes/no') question (e.g. Am I a man? Am I dead? Am I a film star?).

Charades

Write some words on different pieces of paper, give one to each learner and divide them into two or more groups. One person in the first group has to mime the word and his colleagues have to guess the word. If they can't, the next group gets a chance to guess it. Each group has a number of turns until all the words have been done, and they get one point for each correct guess. This can also be done with higher level groups by using description instead of mime.



Poems/stories

Ask pupils to list five words each they particularly associate with their town or school. Put the resulting list on the board. Then ask them to write a poem/a story, alone or in groups. They are not obliged to use the words on the board but most will do so.

Poetry reconstruction

Read a poem, preferably one with rhymes, to the class, then divide them into groups and give them the poem cut up into small sections. They have to put it together again in the right order. Alternatively, leave out the last word in every other line and get them to try to remember what it was — the fact that it will rhyme with the line before will help them.

Grammar/vocabulary/spelling betting

After the class has done a piece of work, either oral or written, the class teacher or assistant picks out common mistakes they have made. On a piece of paper with three columns, he or she then puts a correct version of each target word/construction in one column (chosen at random) and two wrong versions in the other two. Pupils are put in groups of three or four and told each group has EUR 100. The assistant asks them to place bets of up to EUR 50 on what they think is the correct answer from the first set of three possibilities. Groups discuss for one minute, using only the target language or they are fined EUR 10. Each must then say what it thinks the correct answer is and how much it wants to bet. Those who are right win the amount they bet, those who are wrong lose the same amount. The same procedure is followed for all the other sets of three. The group with the most money at the end is the winner.

Do it yourself vocabulary

Give each learner a complex text in the target language at above their normal level. Ask them to read it and ask general questions on the gist. Do not give any vocabulary explanation, but give out a translation in their own language with certain words highlighted. Pupils must find the translation of those words in the target language, using the first text as their source.

Categories

Hand out a table with a number of categories e.g. animal, part of the body, food, profession etc. Then choose a letter — each learner has to find a word beginning with that letter for each category and get one point for each word found.

Yes/no game

A learner volunteers to answer questions from the rest of the class. He or she must not use the equivalent in the target language of the words 'yes' or 'no'. Once he or she does use one of these words, the person who asked the question takes over as the respondent. This game can also be played in groups.

Liar

Pupils ask each other or the teacher and/or assistant a short series of questions (3–6) about their life, interests etc. The respondent must answer all of them truthfully except one. Group must then discuss and guess which answer was untrue.

Home made trivia quiz

The class is divided into groups, each of which must prepare ten questions under a particular subject area. This can include sport, pop music, films or school subject areas like chemistry, geography, history. In the latter case, integration with classes in these subjects may be possible.



Blank screen

The assistant plays a short video passage — 30 seconds or so — several times with the screen blanked out. He or she then asks questions to encourage the class to guess, in detail, what the picture on the screen would have shown during the passage e.g. what type of people, how they are dressed, their body language, the room or landscape. Pupils then see the video and compare with their guesses.

Tell me what happened

Pupils sit in pairs with one facing the screen and one facing away. A short passage — a couple of minutes — of video is played and the pupils who have not seen it, but have heard the soundtrack, have one minute to ask their partners ‘yes/no’ questions to find out as much as possible about what happened.

‘Dubbing’

Pupils are shown a short video dialogue — 30 seconds — in their own language and then are divided into small groups who, without translating word for word, write and perform it in the target language. The assistant circulates making suggestions and correcting.

Part two — Beyond the language classroom

Some of the activities described below take place in lessons on subjects other than languages. Many involve going outside the confines of the school, either physically or via virtual links.

Language club

The assistant can set up a club which pupils (and possibly teachers and parents) attend voluntarily at lunchtime or after school. This can take many forms and cover any or all languages, whether they are usually taught in the school or not. The assistant can give lessons in his or her mother tongue, especially if that is not on the normal curriculum. Self-teaching materials, books, videos and games can be provided and members encouraged to ask the assistant for help in using them. Pupils, under the direction of the assistant, can teach parents and teachers languages they have been learning during school time.

TV/video club

If the school is lucky enough to have satellite television or access to a good range of videos in foreign languages, the assistant can set up a film/television club for pupils to watch (suitable) programmes from his or her home country.

Section of a lesson in a foreign language

The assistant introduces the theme of the lesson (on any subject) using the foreign language, and asks for questions and ideas, before the subject teacher takes over. Or the assistant takes small groups for a few minutes each, and encourages them to discuss the subject of the lesson in the target language.

Information gap

Pupils in a lesson on any subject are given a task for which they require certain information, which the assistant has. The end product may be in pupils’ native language or in the target language, but the assistant answers questions only if asked in the target language. (Using this type of technique effectively requires close collaboration with the subject teacher.)



Hear in one language tell in another

Following a history or geography lesson with some connection to the assistant's home country, given in the pupils' own language, pupils are asked to choose an element of the topic covered on which either they give a talk for one minute or write a one-page essay in the target language. The assistant helps and corrects mistakes. Alternatively, the assistant gives the lesson in the target language (and if possible hands out some written material in that language) and pupils do the exercise in their own language. These exercises, and many possible variations upon them, allow language and other lessons to be combined and simulate the situation in which people need to receive information in one language and disseminate it in another, especially at work. This is in practice a much more commonly needed skill than word for word translation.

Signposts

The assistant adds colourful signs in his/her language (perhaps also with the pronunciation) to those used throughout the school, in corridors and outside special rooms, e.g. the word for "staff room", "laboratories", "head of school", "music room", etc. The assistant can then also offer a guided tour through the school building (once he/she is familiar with the premises) so that the children may also hear how the words are pronounced.

Snack-bar

In schools, you often find a small snack-bar, kiosk, sometimes even a dining hall. In cooperation with the person who runs it, the assistant could prepare a list of items sold in his/her mother tongue which can be posted next to the one in the local language. Or, alternatively, the assistant can prepare small flags with the names of the objects which can be pinned to the relevant articles.

Historical comparisons

After the class has had a history lesson on a particular period in their country, the assistant gives the next lesson describing the same period in his or her own country. Pupils can be given a simple worksheet to fill in, perhaps with multiple choice questions.

Language day

The assistant stays with one class for its whole school day and helps in all lessons, speaking only the target language. This needs to be carefully planned with all the teachers involved and is more successful if the assistant always has information the pupils need.

School/class newspaper

The school or class produces a newspaper in one or more foreign languages, on events in the school, local area or nationally. It may be possible to obtain assistance from the local newspaper to produce this professionally. The results can be distributed to pupils, parents, and more widely in the local area, perhaps with vocabulary lists or even full translations of the articles to help readers. They can also be put on the Internet. Crosswords and language games can also be included.

Video diary

If the school has a video camera and the assistant has contacts with a school in his or her home country, a small group of pupils can make a video diary of a day in the life of their school and swap it with one made by the other school. This need not necessarily be done wholly in the assistant's mother tongue if pupils are not sufficiently proficient in that language, although it will be useful to introduce an element of it. (If a swap of such videos with the other school can be arranged, each school can use mainly its own language and treat the activity as a comprehension one.)



Tourist video

Older pupils can make a video ‘advertisement’, with the assistant’s help, for their local area. If possible this can be sent to pupils at a school in the assistant’s country, who can then ask questions by e-mail or letter. Again, this needs not be done wholly in the assistant’s mother tongue.

Internet searches

If the school has access to the Internet, the assistant can research web sites in his/her native language and draw up an exercise where pupils have to fill in a questionnaire for which the answers can be found from those sites. Pupils are given the site addresses and the questionnaire, which they complete with the assistant helping as necessary. This can be done in small groups, with pupils taking turns to leave the main lesson.

E-mail collaborative projects and eTwinning

E-mail links can be set up with a class in a school in the assistant’s own country, perhaps one that he or she attended as a pupil. Small groups of pupils can be withdrawn from the main lesson at a set time each week to exchange messages with their counterparts. If e-mail links are not possible, ordinary post can also be used.

The e-mail collaborative projects can be further developed through eTwinning. This European initiative supports virtual school collaboration through ideas and ICT tools available for free at the European portal www.etwinning.net. To get access to the partner-finding and collaborative tools schools have to register. The on-line registration is easy and also accessible from the European portal. The schools can carry out projects on any topic, in any language and during as much time as they decide. This flexible initiative may be very enriching for the assistant’s teaching skills and may foster a European dimension in the host school. The European portal is a source of inspiration for collaborative projects in any subject.

Opinion poll

As part of an exercise in a non-language class, pupils make up questionnaires in their own language on a particular theme, e.g. travel, should smoking be allowed on public transport, how do you get to work, what is your favourite food/pastime, views on Europe. They then go out into the community collecting answers. The questionnaire is then translated into the assistant’s language — by the pupils if their level is good enough — and sent by e-mail or post to a school in the assistants’ country, where pupils use the same questionnaire in their own community. (If those pupils too have produced a questionnaire, they can be exchanged and each group can translate the other’s questionnaire). The results in the two countries are then compared.

Book week

Arrange with a local bookstore a week of books in the assistant’s language or about his/her country, with the assistant present at certain times to speak with customers. An informal reception with food from the assistant’s country can be organised in parallel and local personalities invited.

European Union week

European Commission -Representations (in EU countries) and Delegations (outside the EU), which are found in all national capitals, can supply a wealth of printed material, videos, etc. on European themes. This is often also available from local information points and can be used as a basis for an exhibition for pupils, parents and the local community. The exhibition can also include pupils’ own work (essays, projects, videos, newspapers, etc.) produced with the assistant’s help. The exhibition can also be linked with the school participation in the project Spring Day in Europe, which is run every year by European Schoolnet (www.eun.org) on behalf of the European Commission.



European Club

European Union week could be one of the activities of the European Club which might be offered to pupils throughout the assistant's stay in the school. This club may focus on any topic related to the EU or EU countries, and it also may be an opportunity for deepening work on European projects, such as Comenius School Partnerships, eTwinning or Spring Day in Europe. Interactive activities introducing the European Union to young pupils are available at <http://europa.eu/europago/welcome.jsp>.

Country week

A series of activities can be organised over a week or longer, all connected to the assistant's home country. Traditional food can be offered in the school canteen or in cookery lessons. The assistant can help pupils and/or parents to organise activities on cultural themes from his or her home country, such as cooking, wine, music, dance, theatre and film. This type of activity can be especially effective around the time of festivals like Christmas, when traditional celebrations from the assistant's home country can be introduced into the school.

It can also be taken outside the school, with activities or a display in a local public library, cultural centre or other community building.

Story book

Pupils write stories in foreign language(s) — there is no need to worry too much about spelling and grammar — which are then 'published' in a book. If the school, or the assistant, has contacts with schools in other countries, the book can be sent to them or swapped for one they have themselves produced. Pupils can then exchange comments, by letter or e-mail, about the stories.

Art/poetry/short story competition

Pupils are invited to enter a competition, judged by the assistant and inspired by his or her country. The best work wins a prize. (It may even be possible to arrange with a local travel agent and/or the assistant's contacts at home for the winner to receive a journey to the assistant's country). This idea can be extended to parents and the local community, with advertisements placed in public buildings, supermarkets, etc.

Business project

A project can be set up to demonstrate to pupils the real importance of languages in business. This is particularly fruitful if done in cooperation with a local business, which has frequent contact with a country where the assistant's mother tongue, or another language he or she knows, is spoken. If the school curriculum includes business studies or economics, subject teachers can be involved along with the assistant, and the target language introduced into lessons on these subjects. Activities might include practising writing business letters in the target language, e-mail contact with businesses in the target country, making a video in the target language about the local business, comparing business practice in the two countries, etc.

Model agreement between host school and assistant

General rules

The assistant's main task is to cooperate with and support teachers in the classroom. The assistant's work programme may include working with small groups, team-teaching with the teacher responsible, leading conversation classes, supporting project work as well as shadow-teaching. The assistant must not be left unsupervised or employed as a regular substitute teacher.

The assistant should have between 12 and 16 hours of 'school-based' work (time with pupils or other work on behalf of the school) per week. This does not include a lesson preparation.

The school's responsibilities

The school will:

- appoint a mentor who will arrange regular weekly meetings with the assistant;
- introduce the assistant to all staff in the school at the beginning of the assistantship;
- give the assistant the opportunity to observe a variety of classes during the first days of the assistantship so that s/he can get an overview of the school culture and curriculum;
- in direct consultation with the assistant, draw up a timetable which takes into consideration the particular professional interests of the assistant;
- give the assistant the opportunity to teach his/her mother tongue, in form of lessons or extra-curricular activities;
- do their best to fully integrate the assistant into school life;
- inform the assistant of all the school rules and regulations relevant for employees;
- support the assistant – like any other member of staff – to their best (i.e. by providing free access to books and other media, access to copy machines, PC, Internet etc.);
- facilitate contacts with the media in order to further promote the practical dimension of the Comenius programme;
- give the assistant the opportunity to take part in an induction meeting organised by the host national agency;
- help the assistant to find accommodation.

The assistant's responsibilities

The assistant will:

- do his/her best to fulfil his/her tasks in a committed way;
- carefully prepare for his/her assistantship;
- support the school to establish contacts to his/her home country;
- accept all school rules and regulations relevant for employees;
- inform the school in cases of illness or unforeseen absence as customary for employees;
- inform the school as early as possible if due to unforeseen circumstances the assistantship cannot be completed as agreed upon.

This agreement may be subject to change with regard to national, regional, local or school-based regulations. The agreed timetable should be attached to the agreement. The agreement should be signed and dated by both parties.

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