

# Foreign Language Assistant – German

by Ina Terhaar, 2017

In July 2016, I graduated in Music and English from the Folkwang University of the Arts/University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, with a qualification to teach these subjects at grammar and high schools. I believed that, before entering the professional work life as a foreign language and music teacher in German schools, gaining more educational and hands-on experience on how to teach a foreign language would be of great help. Thus, I applied for a position as a foreign language assistant in New Zealand – a country I was always interested in not only because of its remoteness (only from a European perspective, of course) but also because of its rich and diverse culture.

I regarded the position of a language assistant not only as a great opportunity to gain teaching experience but also to improve and adapt my knowledge and competencies other areas such as language level and authenticity of language use, foreign language didactics as well as intercultural knowledge. Furthermore, I thought that being a language assistant in a school abroad gives insights into country-specific education plans accompanied by different learning and teaching methods. And all this proved right during my 11-months lasting employment as a German language assistant at four different schools in Auckland.

But apart from the many advantages language assistant positions can offer for teachers-to-be/trainee teachers, there are maybe even more important aspects when it comes to the students and teachers benefitting from having a language assistant. For the students who



*Ina and her students from Westlake Girls High School*

just started to learn the foreign language, the language assistant is often the first “authentic” speaker of the language they encounter (if the teacher is not a native speaker) and they are mostly very keen to try out everything they’ve learned so far. I can recollect many funny situations with Year 9 students where we worked in small groups and the students were eager to present how much they’ve learned so far, what words they could remember, which ones they found funny or which ones they already knew without having learned them in class. For them and for me it was thus easy to connect and bond over exchanging language knowledge and background. Being able to use what they’ve learned in the classroom, being understood by a native speaker and being able to understand certain phrases a native speaker says resulted in a growing self-assurance among the students to actually use the language. Also, they became more curious about not only the language but also the culture connected to it and I was often bombarded with many questions about cultural similarities and differences.

In language classrooms, the language assistant is an “authentic and live example” of the language and culture learned and this often (though not always) distinguishes the assistant from the teacher. Not only the students but also the teachers and last but not least the school as such thus benefits from having a language assistant when it comes to teaching and learning cultural knowledge and awareness - as it hardly can get any more authentic than having a “real German” in the classroom, who can give first-hand answers to questions such as “Do all Germans wear Lederhosen and go to the Oktoberfest?” or give a presentation about how one celebrates “Karneval” in Cologne.

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However, for the language teachers having a language assistant is not merely a boost in opportunities to teach cultural knowledge. Having another teacher around also helps to vary teaching methods. I frequently found myself working with small groups of students, focusing on students with special educational needs or with more advanced learners while the teacher was working with the rest of the group. Then sometimes the benefit of the assistant can be simply having someone on hand who can check the students' grammar and language while they are working on their tasks. And last but not least, assistants can help with the lesson and material planning and preparing as well as introducing new ideas (regarding topics, material, teaching methods etc.) that can broaden the teachers' repertoire as well.

Alongside the many positive experiences I could gain throughout the year, I was highly impressed by the teachers' great efforts, who, despite decreasing numbers in students learning a language, put so much hard work into the foreign language teaching in New Zealand. With the nowadays fast changing world and globalization in view, it seems to me of great importance today to educate and train our students to become liberal and open-minded "world citizens" – and learning a foreign language (or even more than one) is probably one of the most crucial and important means to achieve such a goal.

All in all, I believe this year to be a very successful one, certainly for me and I can only hope for the students and teachers as well. All the experiences and insights I gained throughout the year will surely affect my own approaches and methods to teaching and learning and I consider them a highly valuable personal gain to me and my choice of profession that I can draw on in my future as a teacher back in Germany.