

# Study visit to Münchner Volkshochschule

May 9-13, 2022

Participants: teachers of Estonian as a second language at Tartu Folk High School, Estonia

Tartu Folk High School <https://rahvaylikool.ee/> (established in 1987) is the biggest non-formal adult training centre in South Estonia. Tartu Folk High School aims to implement the idea of lifelong learning and welcomes adults of all ages. Different fields in TFHS are languages, computer classes, arts, textile arts and handicraft, culture and music, health and beauty, psychology and self-development, flower arrangement and gardening. We also teach Estonian to newly arrived immigrants all over Estonia since 2016.

Study visit to Münchner Volkshochschule took place within the Erasmus+ project “Development of Quality of Adult Education and Involvement of New Target Groups at TFHS”. One aim of it was familiarization with the methodology of language learning for newly arrived immigrants in Finland and Germany. Münchner Volkshochschule has been chosen as destination because the school, although much bigger in number of students and courses is operating similarly to us and has a long and deep experience in teaching new immigrants as well as running open courses for everyone interested in self development.

Annette Born, Head and Lecturer in the German for Work Department at the Münchner Volkshochschule (Fachgebiet Deutsch für den Beruf, Kurse Deutsch für den Beruf, Firmenkurse, Beratung Deutsch und Beruf), had put together a very interesting and varied program for us. We were first introduced to the learner's enrolment process, potential learning paths and the volume of courses at the Münchner Volkshochschule. Practice followed immediately: we had an exclusive opportunity to observe 11 different language lessons with different levels (A1.1 - B1), intensity (regular course, intensive course), target group (adults, students of different ages) or focus (general language, language for work) in the classroom and also online and follow online and on-site counseling for new learners. We also got to know the study buildings where the courses took place. We are very grateful for all the additional information about the organization of language courses.

To enter the language course (Integration course), the student must apply for a certificate of eligibility from the Migration Board (BAMF). Before the language course, the learner takes a language test and participates in counseling, after which he or she is directed to a suitable course at the level and pace (three levels: fast learners, slow learners, alphabetization course).

We appreciate highly the opportunity to observe the language classes. We found that as language teachers we share the same methodological principles - learning takes place in the target language and the main focus is on development of communicative skills. The structure of the language and grammar is taught in the meaningful context.

Connections with real life were made in almost every language lesson. For example, in a class related to renting an apartment, all the students talked about the rental prices in the capital of their country of origin, and the teacher gave examples about herself. In the elementary course, we listened to interesting mini-presentations about the students' homeland. In one lesson, the students talked about their previous learning paths. In the online lesson, advanced learners introduced the kitchen utensils that are important to them. Interesting comparative moments arose and adult learners were able to draw on their life experiences and talk about topics that were important to them.

The atmosphere in the classroom was friendly and the students felt free to express their thoughts.

One of the principles we were told before attending classes was how important it is to support the student's identity by bringing the learner's mother tongue to the classroom. We saw different techniques that we plan to use in the future. For example, on the topic of food, learners were asked to think about what food names are similar to food names in their mother tongue. We found that linking language studies to the learner's mother tongue has an enforcing effect on them.

It also turned out that many German language teachers and other staff at the Münchner Volkshochschule had an immigrant background, and several said they were former students at the same school. Teaching through personal experience gives the teacher a good understanding of what a learner with a similar background and learning experience expects and needs and how best to support the learner.

Several courses are taught by two teachers - for example, if the course takes place four times a week, each teacher will give the course twice a week. This system seemed to suit teachers themselves, but it also provided a richer language environment for the learner.

Although different courses use study materials from different publishers (eg Hueber, Klett), the structure of the material is quite similar by topic. As the teaching materials (textbook + workbook, as well as the methodological guide for the teacher) are comprehensive, they greatly facilitate the preparation and work of the teacher for the lesson.

Teachers mostly followed the textbook in their class, but also used additional tasks. A good example was a group lesson, where, according to the teacher, the first half of the meeting is always dedicated to repetition (using different additional tasks) and the second half to a new topic. The course also had a very pleasant rhythm: an appropriate amount of frontal input from the teacher alternated with immediate practice and pair and group work. The whole group was active throughout the meeting and everyone had the opportunity to talk a lot.

To point out some differences in methodology, in some language lessons we felt that the teaching was a little bit too frontal. We saw several excellent tasks and task types that would have been great to do in pairs. When done frontally, they took more time and most learners were rather passive. There is certainly a link to the Covid restrictions, which do not yet allow students to communicate freely, and on the other hand, it is clear that sometimes the teacher wants and must listen to each student's response. As we only have observed a part of each session, it is not fair to draw any conclusions and we don't want to do that. It can be, that the pair or group work was scheduled to be the very next activity.

Textbooks in German as a second language were very interesting for us. There were several new task types for us that we would like to try in our work. There was also a section in the study material for the development of study skills for each lesson. We found it particularly interesting as many students with limited formal schooling also have very limited or no study skills. The material of the German for Work course was impressive - the material seemed to cover the employee's language needs well.

Münchner Volkshochschule is a very large school in terms of courses and students, but we saw and experienced that each student receives individual attention and is warmly welcome. We also saw how much Münchner Volkshochschule has done for war refugees from Ukraine in a very short time, offering both on-site counseling, Hotline and courses for adults and children, using as playful and interactive methods as possible.

We would like to thank Annette Born and her colleagues for welcoming us and organizing this interesting week, for all the additional material and information! We are very grateful to all the teachers whose classes we have attended – we were welcomed with interest and joy!

We had a unique opportunity to take time off and dedicate ourselves to self-improvement for a whole week. Observing other teachers' lessons is one of the best ways to get new ideas but also confirm that some of your choices were right, see different teaching styles and study groups working. The received impulse makes you think about dozens of small nuances in your work again. And – on the other hand - the role of the observer provides an opportunity to see the bigger picture and reflect on the principles of adult learning. In each language lesson we have visited, we found something to take over or to help reflect on our own activities!

Thank you!

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May 26, 2022