

The story of the mixing gadgets

Six o'clock in the morning I woke up, a minute before the alarm was going to run. Like almost every night during our stay in Norway, the Express & Connect song is still resonating in my head. Please please, Brother sister will you speak with me, Use a language any kind, Leave your shyness all behind etcetera. All the words that Alice fit in the Ry Cooder adaption of *Little Sister* fleet through my mind in the melody that sticks in the brain. (click) please please please

But now, on the last morning before early departure, it is the title of this blog that I wake up with. A funny story about how an idea can be transformed to something completely different.

It started during our preparation for the Norway meeting with the Dutch group. Six people joined our group this time, Kaori-Helena and Ria for the first time. We had an evening to prepare before travelling. Four of us – Els, Jenny, Alice and me -were also present the last journey in Madrid. Els remarked that sometimes during the dinners and informal activities in Madrid, it happened that the nationalities were not really mixing. This was also due to two large groups of one nationality with some participants who were starters in learning English and had a mother tongue that few of the others mastered. Els suggested that we should pay more attention to the mixing of the countries during informal activities. The way to tackle this, we thought, might be a mixing gadget: We were going to bring tulips in different colours to give one colour to each country and then ask everyone to make a colourful bouquet from each table.

We send a mail to our international coordinators, to let them know that we would bring some mixing gadgets for the first evening. Then the idea of the gadgets started a life of its own. First Christel from Belgium send an email, that they would also bring some gadgets. Carlos from Spain made a special section for the mixing gadgets on the website; putting on the site all sorts of typically items from the countries of our project. He sent an email to ask every country to bring some gadgets as a present to the group.

Although the items on the site were very well chosen, I saw the international dimension in every Dutch picture: the tulips originated in Turkey, the Van Gogh picture was from his house in France, Rembrandt painted a biblical scene from the Middle East etc. Many typically national symbols also have international associations. I don't believe in a 'essential' culture of a nation, although I do believe that there are also national characteristics of every culture. Humankind has been travelling, trading and migrating so much and nowadays every culture has elements that were once strange.

Our mixing gadgets would be paper tulips, and Kaori from our group knew how to fold them in a origami way. She bought the paper and put it in her luggage. Then we left Schiphol on about the busiest day of the season. Some of our bags were shipped to Munich and we missed the paper for the first evening.

The programme that the Norwegian hosts, Thuy and her wonderful colleagues Lill, Sonja, Christi, Ellen, Cathrine, Kirsti, Kathy, Anne, Torill, Tone, Svein Arne, Barbara put together was so tasteful, interesting and intense that we didn't have room for mixing gadgets whatsoever on the first and second evening. When Kaori started to show how the origami tulips are made, her table was soon full with others of different language groups, who enjoyed it to make something together with their hands. A connecting experience of learning by watching and doing, and laughing. Sorin, from

Romania and Belgium knew and taught us how to make other origami flowers. The next evening the Polish learners of English treated us with a play of the well known story of Little Red Riding Hood in English. They did great, had fun and we laughed a lot. During the workshops it turned out that the school was very good in addressing a multi lingual audience, for instance by employing former pupils as translators. There were beautiful workshops for our learners without much language : games that the Danish team, led by Inger Lisa, organised, the rhythm in language learning by Pjotre and Anne Christine and the singing of Norwegian songs that Sonja led. Other workshops used drawing of identity circles to think about oneself, about what obstacles (negative) and possibilities (positive) one encounters when learning a second language and exchange with the others, or taking digital photo's to think of and communicate new words. Besides that Jenny taught all of us the *Oslo Connect Chi Gong*, movements without words that turned out to be very effective in connecting us as a group.

The third night a musical dance performance in the Theatre impressed us all. And the last evening at last we really wanted to give the presents. But there was not really any need anymore for a gadget, although the presents still were really tasteful, funny and typical. Mixing of nationalities had happened spontaneously. Alexandra from Poland laughed her lungs out with the guys from Turkey and the girls from Spain, about the unexpected sounds one can make while really trying to pronounce the name of a person with a different mother tongue. And all that: growing of ideas – making it into something new and laughing together is the biggest present from our EU learning partnership Express & Connect.

Dineke Stam 6 May 2011

