

BEST PRACTICE: School exchange or: How to make the most of your foreign guest

Preparing and running a school exchange is not an easy task: Organizing transport and accommodation for the students, putting a sightseeing programme together and looking after a lot of small things and worries makes you often forget the main educational point of it: the (nearly) daily visits to the classrooms of the partner students. Very often the staff – especially outside the language department – is not sufficiently prepared for hosting extra kids in their classroom let alone successfully integrating them into their lessons. They simply continue with their everyday routine and often leave the guests sitting bored at the back of the room. This can lead to a certain tension and even hostility if teachers feel and communicate that such an exchange only costs them and the students valuable academic time. Exclusion of the guest students from the classroom cannot be the answer and defeats the object of the exchange. Every effort should be made by all staff involved to make use of the foreign element in the classroom and to see it as enrichment to the curriculum. It might, however, be necessary to adapt to the capabilities of the guests and find areas in the subjects that relate more or less directly to their assumed knowledge so that it can be positively exploited – in their language, e.g. in the foreign language classroom or an immersion class – or in the language of the host country if the guests are sufficiently able to communicate in it.

The guests' capabilities should of course not only be exploited in their partners' classrooms but by any interested teacher in any of their (language) classes. Again the visit should be well prepared and not only consist in the task: "Now ask them any question you like." Small groups of children can prepare interviews with one or two guests on a certain topic (see list below), note down the answers and later report in class. All this can be done in the foreign language or the mother tongue, depending on the communicative abilities of the students involved.

One should keep in mind as well that in a way the young guests act as a kind of "school inspectors" always comparing and rating their new classroom experience against their experience from home. This will be widely communicated after the exchange and should of course be as favourable as possible. The following list contains food for communication for a number of subjects. In a perfect world the chosen areas of teaching should be communicated to the guests before the exchange starts so that they can prepare themselves and possibly bring books, web addresses or other materials from their country to support the subject.

Please note: Most of the activities mentioned could be used for a time-limited email project as well.

**What integrating activities can I do with exchange students from another country? How can I make their background and knowledge useful for my lessons?
What do we already know – what can the guests contribute and add to our knowledge?**

Geography / Social Studies / Language:

- Local environment (mountains vs. flat countryside, farming vs. industry, locating the place on the map, city map, size, number of inhabitants etc.)
- Tourist attractions of the area
- Housing and living conditions (architecture, building materials, insulation, density of housing, available space, room-plan, renting or buying, heating & cooling, house-prices)
- Work and family (parents' jobs, working hours, income, spare time)

- Pollution and the environment (what do you do for the environment, recycling activities etc.)
- Transport (how do you get to school / work / spare time activities? time, costs etc.)
- Industry in the area, unemployment (what happens, if somebody is unemployed),
- Connections between the countries involved (immigration, import/export, language, tourism etc.)
- Holidays and festivals in the countries involved (How do you celebrate what?)

Language +:

- School and education of the countries involved: subjects, school times, school rules, teacher-student relations, uniform, extra-curricular activities etc.)
- The political systems of the countries involved
- Media in the countries involved (Press, TV, Radio) and you.
- Spare time activities / what do I do with (how much?) pocket money?
- Prices for “universal” goods (bread, milk, *BigMac*, *MarsBar*) in the countries involved.
- What I can do at what age in the countries involved. (driving, drinking, smoking, discos etc.)

Music:

- Favourite music styles / artists with examples (present your “hit list”)
- Music education in school / privately: Playing an instrument?
- (Contemporary) composers /musicians of the countries involved
- Specific musical instruments of the countries involved

Art:

- Specific styles or forms of art typical for the countries involved
- Famous artists and their works from the countries involved
- Making their own souvenir with the assistance of their partner

Biology:

- Flora and fauna of the countries involved
- Pets and favourite animals
- Plants at home (house & garden)
- Fruits and vegetables (availability, seasons etc.)

Sports:

- Playing games (e.g. soccer, tennis, basketball, volleyball) in “national” teams
- Competing in athletics in “national” teams
- Teaching the basics of a “new” game (e.g. baseball, cricket, voelkerball) to the guests

History:

- The founding and the basic history of the respective cities / towns
- War history: Have the countries involved ever fought each other or fought together against another nation?

Home Economics:

- Exchanging recipes from the countries involved
- Teaching each other to cook meals from the countries involved