

## Language@KI

Ann-Kristin Sandberg, Otto Huanuco Rios, and Emily Eriksson

*Karolinska Institutet/Stockholm, Sweden*

In 2013, the International committee, which is part of the Student Union at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, started a new project where Swedish speaking students were to teach international students basic Swedish. The project was named Language@KI.

Language@KI now plays a great part in the Internationalization efforts at the institute. There has always been a clear gap between native Swedish students and international students. Especially in the lower levels of education, due to the relatively new international programs at bachelor's level. There appears to be a social barrier where International students are not always included in social activities due to miscommunication and therefore do not get to experience the full Swedish student life. This is a classical problem seen in every aspect of society, not only in university context. The International committee's main focus is to break these barriers and integrate native Swedish students with the international students. Those goals are partially achieved by arranging Swedish classes free of charge for current students and employees at Karolinska Institutet. The Language@KI project aims to provide international students with the idiomatic tools needed to socialize with greater ease. The project has had remarkable success. When the project was first launched, 20 teachers and 200 students applied to take part. This demonstrated the need of a language project at Karolinska, and perhaps at every university that has an international collaboration.

There are currently two project managers responsible for coordinating the language courses that take place once every semester for a duration of 10 weeks. The project managers are passionate about integration and enjoy helping other people. This specific project attracted them because they see the importance of communication and interactions across cultures and social barriers. They see great potential in the fact that Karolinska has such an extensive international environment and want to help put this potential into action. It is important to not study constantly, but to have a clean break occasionally where the focus of other activities such as managing this project is a great contrast and helps manage psychological wellbeing.

Both have previous experience of teaching Swedish to immigrants and therefore know what challenges a teacher may encounter.

Every semester, there are three levels of Swedish classes: Basic -, intermediate – and advanced level. Each class takes place at campus for two hours, one evening per week. International students who wish to attend can apply for the level they think will suit them best. Participation is free and the teachers do not receive financial compensation, therefore the lessons are based solely on the teacher's motivation to teach the students, and the students are more free and can apply the course to their specific needs. The classes take place at campus which is convenient for those who would not have the time to make it to a class further away.

Teachers for the classes are recruited from all educational programs at Karolinska Institutet and they apply for one semester at a time. After a short introduction to the task by the project managers, they are also offered to take part of material and help produced by previous teachers. Typical textbooks may include books such as "Swedish for immigrants". However, teachers have great freedom to design their lessons on their own, and because the teaching groups are small-scale, they are encouraged to communicate and adapt the lessons to the interests and needs of the students. For participants in basic classes it may be to focus on listening, understanding and talking. For participants on an advanced level a more integrative conversation but also reading and writing could be of interest.

The group sizes vary between 6-15 participants. In the intermediate and advanced classes the participants are mostly master- and doctoral-students which means that they will study in Sweden for 2-4 years. Participants of the basic level are often exchange students staying for approximately 5 months or less. In the previous semester (autumn 2017) the participants came from Germany, the Netherlands, Balticum, Ireland and Spain, but it is not uncommon that there are students from Asia and Africa too.

When interviewing with some of the teachers, they were asked what made them apply for the task. It became clear that they knew that language is of great importance for participation in different groups. When presented with the opportunity they felt encouraged to help students be able to communicate and engage in groups other than the international community. One of the teachers was also involved in the

International Buddy Program. This is also an International Committee project, where a Swedish student is paired up with one or two incoming students to show them around the city and to be a local “buddy” they can turn to. Many students of the biomedicine program are graded based on merits coming from extracurricular activities when applying to go on exchange to another university in their sixth semester. Teaching at Language@KI gives extra merits and therefore many biomedical students showed interest in joining the project. Some quotes from the teachers:

*“I know what barrier language is ...”* R1

*“It feels so good if I can help, it is fun and I learn a lot...”* R3

*“I learn about their cultures and actually about my own as well.”* R2

*“I need to show that I am interested in internationalizing to be able to go for a second period of exchange during my bachelor”.* R1

They were also asked if they encountered any challenges along the assignment. The role was new to them and they strived to do a good job.

*“To teach adults who are older than me and who have also come further in their academic career”* R3

*“Sometimes I could not answer a question and that felt uncomfortable and also when they were very silent...I did not know how to interpret that.”* R2

*“To be able to provide really good teaching and get the participants to engage in 100%”* R1

*“To plan and create content for a 2-hour lesson. It's a long time and I get pretty tired”.* R2

No one, neither project leaders nor teachers, receive any financial compensation for their participation in the activity. Thereby, we asked the teachers what they could think of as profits/benefits for their own part of being a teacher.

*“My self-confidence has increased and I'm a bit more used to standing in front of a group, I think I will benefit from that later in my own education”* R2

*“I was happy to see my participants learning and developing.”* R3

*“I started to reflect on teaching and learning, group dynamics, psychology and I have become more analytical...”* R1

*“I have got some new friends and so have the participants.”* R2

*“Since I have only lived in Sweden for 8 years this was an opportunity for me to improve my own Swedish too”* R1

On the other hand, they can show their certificate of participation in the activities and count this as a merit when applying for studying abroad as a part of their program. The student union support these activities by renting premises, offering financial support to fix the Swedish traditional “fika” (coffee and cake) at each lesson, and also for an “end of semester” dinner for all involved. Quite often this end of semester dinner is arranged as a “knytkalas”, meaning that participants bring food from their home country for others to taste. This is a very appreciated event and many people who have not participated in the project also attend and bring their own food. This is a great way to interact and learn about each other. Conversations about the different types of food presented are usually started between guests and it is the

committee's hope that you will walk away with more than a full stomach: maybe also new knowledge and interest in what is outside your own safety zone.

The activity creates integration as opposed to segregation. It is free of charge and provides everyone with the possibility to participate. The project is not only aimed at helping international students meet new friends. There must be a meeting point halfway, so the Committee works to encourage native Swedes to take the opportunity to engage with people they do not have the chance to meet in their everyday life.

Although there are 12 participants on the list, the attendance varies constantly. The advantages of having a small group is that a safe climate is created where everyone can speak and be listened to, to be seen. Not all students come to all the study sessions. This turns out to be a disadvantage for the teachers since it is a challenge to get all participants engaged and kept at the approximately same level.

Participants in the Swedish classes found out about this activity through oral information in the first introduction week and later also on social media such as via Facebook. They claim to have known about other courses provided outside of KI, which are not free of charge, and some thought that they may attend a course like that later, to improve their skills. The project was considered an excellent way to kickstart their Swedish-skills and they add that they would certainly recommend fellow students to attend a Swedish class by Language@KI.

Participants in the Swedish classes also brought up the importance of being able to master a language to be included in different groups. They showed great appreciation for their teachers and also an understanding for the fact that the teachers may have no previous experience in this environment:

*"She was so nice and so kind. Once we finished earlier because we went through the material quite quickly..."* R4

*"She wanted to teach us what she knew was important to us e.g to know how to find what we needed in the supermarket and she also asked us about our needs..."* R5

What seems to be of highest importance and value to the participants was to talk. And talk. And talk. They appreciated the small size of the group because they dared to speak up and there was enough room for everyone to be heard too.

They thought of using their knowledge in the supermarket, to join a committee in the Student Union and to make friends with Swedes.

The project is constantly evolving due to new project managers with new ideas and innovative input. The Union has shown great support and interest in helping with recruitment of teachers by doing PR on their website. An idea to create more material for the teachers regarding the outline of the lessons is also in progress.