

## **The University's Sprachtandem: Great interest in the cultural exchange**

Learning to speak a foreign language, getting to know different cultures and making new contacts - that's the idea behind the language exchange program.

The CAU has been offering this program since 2014 and on a regular basis the WB, together with the Graduate Center, organise events for all colleagues, PhD students and postgraduates under the heading 'Meeting Other Interesting new people – Kiel University's Sprachtandem'

Barah Mhrez came to one of the first event in 2014 when she was a PhD student at the university. She was successful on her first try: "I got to know my Tandem Partner here, she was able to support and help me in two languages, German and English". Whilst Mhrez was learning German, her Tandem Partner was interested in Arabic. Barah and her Tandem Partner Nicole not only met up to learn each other's language. Nicole showed her the tourist information office and told her a lot about the history of Kiel. "You quickly come to realise that there is a great interest in the cultural exchange and warmly welcoming people," says Barah. Her Tandem Partner arranged outings for her family and arranged outings and met her husband and sons. "Nicole was present at the defense of my doctoral thesis and supported me in the writing of e-mails: the proofreading also helped me improve my written German. We quickly became real friends," recounts Barah.

Learning a language and appreciating a culture consists of much more than what any textbook can illustrate. And this is precisely what the project wants to teach its participants. The organisers of the project assist in the search for a Tandem Partner, offer support and suggestions for the first meetings and provide the platform for getting to know each other. The interested parties register online and provide information about themselves. "The team is very supportive as a suitable pairing is important. Gender, hobbies, age and also secular and religious beliefs can be significant, as you need to find somebody who is best suited to you," says Barah.

Today, Barah not only benefits from the project within the university field. She works as a translator for the AWO, makes use of her improved German and English and can look back on a significant experience: How important it is to reach out to others and help them get started in Kiel.

## **Sprachtandem at the CAU: First-hand experience**

Ehsan Biniyaz (32) is from Iran and has been in Germany for three years. He's writing his doctoral thesis at the CAU, works as a research assistant at the institute for landscape ecology and geoinformatics and supports international and national PhD students at the International Centre and Graduate Centre as a tutor. He's been part of the Sprachtandem Project since 2014 and talks about his achievements in an interview with the institute of further education (WB).

### **WB: Ehsan, how did you become aware of the project?**

Ehsan: I received an email from the Graduate Centre. I had just moved to Kiel and wanted to learn the language.

### **Do you remember your first event?**

The first event I attended was on the 05.12.2014. At the time I registered for several groups: German/ English, Arabic/ English/German. In the end, I stuck with the German/ English group.

### **How was the group organised?**

At the kick-off event we decided on a group coordinator. She was very committed and organised the first group meeting. It is very important to have a 'keyperson' in the group, someone who holds the group together and organises things. But she wasn't the only one, the group collaborated very well. We all made suggestions for the next meeting and which events we could all attend together.

### **You're using the past tense, does the group no longer exist?**

Sadly no, most of the doctoral theses have been written, several members of our group are back in their home countries, for instance China, and some have had to relocate due to work or have welcomed an addition to the family, like our group coordinator. I was invited over to her house shortly before Christmas alongside another former member of our group. We are still in contact within the group. We write emails, just recently I received New Year's greetings sent from several different countries.

### **How often did you get-together, especially in the early days?**

We met up at least once a week but during special times, like the Kieler Woche or Christmas, even more frequently.

### **What was the most exciting discovery?**

It was very interesting how patient the group members were. They were always friendly, which is a wonderful quality. I think it is especially helpful for the beginning as you need to have the courage to start speaking in a new language.

The exchange on the topic of proverbs was very interesting as we found many similarities between German and Persian sayings.

**What should you pay particular attention to, is there any advice you would like to share?**

I wasn't part of a one-on-one Tandem, but my experience as part of a group is surely similar. I think it is important that there are no prejudices, you need to be compatible with one another and if this isn't the case then you should be honest and speak your mind. In general, openness is essential.

**Was this project able to help you find your way around Kiel, your new home?**

Yes definitely! The cultural events which we visited together were great. They were also an opportunity to meet new people, exchange views and get to know the culture, a little better. The project is great for PhD students who want to establish new contacts and learn the language.

**Did the project also create new opportunities for employment, responsibilities and networking?**

Absolutely, it assists in the development of your communication skills. What really helped was when another member of our group sent me a job posting. I myself wasn't even aware of the existence of such jobs and wouldn't have known where to look for them. She said: "the job really suits you." I sent in my application and got the job. Now I work as a tutor for international PhD students at the Graduate Center and at the International Center of the CAU Kiel.

**How did you perceive the work of the project team?**

It was very, very important! Without the organizational work many things wouldn't be possible: the moderated events, having a contact person, and support in finding a group. The team repeatedly draws attention to the events which take place several times a year. There are always new PhD students joining the project and they are always very thankful for the support and care they receive – especially when they are new to Kiel.

**So you are of the opinion that it wouldn't be possible to limit the project to an online-service?**

No, that wouldn't be feasible. There are so many online platforms and it simply doesn't work. You would be missing a direct contact, the project is dependent on the personal dialogue and trust.

**Is there something left you would like to share about the project?**

Yes, it is important to me to thank all who supported and accompanied me on my way here in Germany, especially at the beginning. Special thanks to the M.O.I.N. team, my Tandem group, the "German as a second language", and all the colleagues from the institute for landscape ecology and geoinformatics (Professor Duttmann) and of course I want to thank my friends. All these people have been very important to me! They talked to me, they listened and they were very patient.