

The Little English Library

Inspiring Children's Love of Language

by Helen Redding

'Mighty oaks from small acorns grow.'

When Tatia Gruenbaum heard she was on the shortlist for the School Library Association's Inspiration Award 2015, she would have been hard-pressed to find a better phrase to sum up her hard work. Just two years ago, Tatia, a lecturer living in the Netherlands, single-handedly launched an English-language children's library. It was the first space of its kind in the country to be devoted to books for children who speak English as a first language, or who are learning English. The unique project is now a much-loved part of the community and its support of language learning is rapidly expanding in new directions.

When Tatia first arrived in Breda from the UK with two young children, it became apparent how concerned ex-pat parents were about providing their children with books. Local suppliers of English-language books were scarce and expensive, and whilst local Dutch libraries did have some provision, the range was insufficient.

Tatia explored various options to solve the problem, including an exchange system where books for loan could be carried between toddler groups and coffee mornings. She decided that what was needed was a permanent children's library offering open access. The Little English Library was born.

'The original idea,' says Tatia, 'was to create a free library service for English-speaking children. There is a vibrant international community in Breda and I thought it would be great to support our children's English literacy skills.' It soon became clear that there was also a strong interest from the Dutch community. English is taught in the Netherlands at primary school level and Dutch parents want to be able to support their children's language learning. For Tatia, the realisation dawned that this had the potential to be a far wider-reaching project than she had originally envisaged.

With no previous library experience, Tatia had a lot of research to do. 'In my mind I tried to visualise how it would run, so I simply searched the internet for "how to set up a library",' she explains. Once armed with a plan, her first challenge was to find a location. 'The place that stood out was the Montessori School,' says Tatia. 'They were redesigning their own library space and could offer me a dedicated zone and shelving for around 1,200 books.' What's more, the school had an open door policy which meant that every child, regardless of which school they attended in Breda, could access the library. Creating the library in a Dutch primary school also made it a truly community-based environment where both Dutch and non-Dutch families could feel comfortable.

The next step was to fill the shelves – not an inconsiderable task if you don't have a budget for it. To tackle this, Tatia launched the 'My Book Has Wings' campaign amongst friends and local schools to encourage children to donate a book they



no longer wanted. 'It got a lot of attention via social media,' says Tatia, 'and the books soon started coming in.' With books arriving from the Netherlands as well as overseas, the stock count quickly reached over 1,500.

Thanks to some funding from Tatia's employer, Avans School of International Studies, she was able to purchase furnishing, lighting, chalkboards and book bags. A local language teaching school sponsored the library cards. How reliant has the project been on the small pockets of funding it received? 'Very, very reliant,' Tatia explains. 'There was no money. I've done lots of knocking on doors. We don't need masses of money but we do need money to do things.'

In March 2014, The Little English Library opened its doors. Fast forward two years and it is now home to 2,000 books for children aged 0-12 years, plus audio books, magazines and story bags. With nearly 300 members (including children from 16 different schools) and a team of dedicated volunteers, around 650 books are being checked out each term. 'People really appreciate it,' says Tatia. 'That's what's great about this project – the amount of love it has been shown by the community.'

People's generosity didn't abate once the library was up and running. 'I found myself with donations still coming in and space was getting a bit tight,' says Tatia. She was receiving enquiries from all over the Netherlands and this gave her an idea. In March 2015 the 'Books in a Box' campaign was launched. 'If a school wants books,' explains Tatia, 'they can contact me and I will send them a mix of new and used books for different ages. Around 1,000 books have been packed up and sent off and I've started to receive wonderful photos of English corners popping up in Dutch libraries.'

Nearly a year in and requests for Books in a Box continue to be high. Its popularity reflects how difficult many teachers at Dutch primary schools find it to integrate English books into their classes. Not one to miss an opportunity, Tatia set about devising new ideas to address this issue. No longer purely a physical library, the project soon became a vehicle for supporting English language learning in schools.





In October 2015, Tatia launched SWAP 20, a book-lending programme for teachers. 'Primary school teachers based in Amsterdam, Breda and The Hague are able to borrow up to 20 books at a time. Teachers choose books according to theme, reading needs and pupils' interests and we send them books from the library.'

Interest in Tatia's latest project has come not only from schools but also from day-care centres with international playgroups. The centres currently involved in the scheme mean at least another 100 children are benefitting from the library's resources.

The library is rapidly gathering partners who share its vision. In Amsterdam and The Hague, the SWAP 20 project is being run in partnership with the renowned American Book Center (ABC). The ABC is the largest independent source of English language books in Europe. Their contacts and links with children's book publishers are giving the SWAP 20 project a much appreciated helping hand. So much so that at the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair SWAP 20 was rated as 'ingenious' by many children's book publishers.

In Amsterdam, nine schools are part of SWAP 20. One bookshop in Amsterdam has joined the scheme for teachers and has set up a lending corner in their building. 'Once a month, they organise a 'round the teapot' event for teachers to chat and return books, plus they invite publisher representatives,' explains Tatia. 'They also give schools the opportunity to buy any of the borrowed books for 5 euros. Most are sold and the bookshop restocks their lending corner every month.'

What stands out about Tatia is that not only is she passionate about literacy, she never stops moving the project forward in new directions. Her latest focus is on supporting teacher training academies and early English teaching. Working with the ABC, the library has donated a collection of English-language children's books and resources to the Primary Teacher Training Academy (PABO) of Avans in Breda. 'It's fabulous to see how they have embraced this donation,' says Tatia. 'Calls are already coming in from other PABOs so hopefully we will be able to support a few more.'

Tatia is also currently working with a local school and the ABC to create 'selection packs' to help Dutch primary schools set up their own English language libraries. Often these schools only have a very small, limited budget – anything from 50-200 Euros – and have no idea which books to purchase. If schools know that what they are buying has been pre-selected and tested, Tatia hopes the selection packs will give them the

confidence to develop their own English libraries, building on what the packs provide.

With the success of the library and its offshoot projects, it is no surprise that it found itself shortlisted for the School Library

Association Inspiration Award 2015. Tatia originally entered for the previous year's Award but the SLA felt the library needed time to settle



and mature. Tatia reapplied the following year: 'I was delighted to be shortlisted as our project is so different. It helped confirm the value of the work being done,' says Tatia. 'The SLA Award is a very meaningful one as they do so much for librarians, libraries and writers. It was an honour to be able to present the library to the judges.'

Although the library didn't win the Award, its place amongst the finalists and its recognition on a national level have added weight to the project. 'It has already opened doors,' says Tatia. 'The town library in Breda has asked to work with us, and I'm speaking at an English Beyond Borders conference in April.' The project is also progressing through the rounds of the British Council's ELTons Awards 2016 in the Local Innovation category. The awards recognise innovation in English language teaching.

In less than two years the Little English Library has become a brand name for bringing English books to children in the Netherlands and there is potential for it to make a positive impact further afield. In 2016, for example, the Books in a Box campaign is expanding. 'Books in a Box Around the World' will provide children's books to rural primary schools in developing countries. 'The new campaign was born after I received several book donation requests from people supporting educational charity projects abroad,' says Tatia. 'Learning English can make all the difference to the children's future.' The first box went out in January to a school in Ghana.

'It would be great to see a children's English book corner in all the teaching academies and primary schools in the Netherlands,' says Tatia. 'My ultimate dream would be for the British Council and/or large publishers to support the project and implement it in as many countries as possible.' She also hopes the library will continue to provide opportunities for her to spread the word about how to use English books effectively in the classroom.

With Tatia's never-ending drive, it's hard to imagine The Little English Library not achieving its long-term goals. The library is an inspirational example of what can be achieved with scarce budget and an enormous amount of passion. 'The interest and support from communities has been terrific,' says Tatia. 'In a nutshell, it's always been about getting English books to children, parents and teachers, and ultimately about inspiring children to read English.'

Find out more

Website: www.littlelibrary.nl

Twitter: @LittleLibraryNL

Pinterest: www.pinterest.com/littlelibraryNL

Facebook: www.facebook.com/thelittleenglishlibrary

■ *Helen Redding (hlvaux@yahoo.co.uk) is a freelance writer and editor.*

