

Anna Lise's story

I studied German and French at university before teaching languages in and around London, but I also speak Danish. My mother came from Denmark and I spent most childhood holidays in Denmark with my non-English speaking grandparents. Danish has been an added bonus in my life on many occasions, but this incident was particularly special, demonstrating clear communication, social empathy and human understanding.

I was travelling on the London Underground many years ago. A rather dishevelled old lady was sitting nearby, surrounded by carrier bags stuffed full of clothes. A group of Danish teenagers – a lively bunch - got on the train and began chatting to one another in Danish, rather rudely and loudly, about the old lady. Just as the inner teacher in me was coming to the fore and I was about to tell them off in Danish for being rude, the old lady simply keeled over.

Well, I take my hat off to the young Danes who immediately went to the old lady and spoke to her gently – in almost perfect English now – to check she was OK. They offered her water and some chocolate, and apologised for being loud. The old lady came round slowly, thanked them for their concern and accepted the water. And here's the magical moment - she did this in perfect Danish! You should have seen the teenagers' faces as they realised that she had understood everything they'd been saying about her.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the teenagers got off at the next station. The old lady just smiled and then dozed off again.