

Interview Alumnus of University of Leiden: Wilma Siera



I met with Wilma Siera, a feisty woman with multiple careers on her CV already, on a sunny (and chilly!), Wednesday afternoon at Lebkov near Leiden Central Station. She currently works at the Hogeschool Leiden in the Commercial Economics department.

She graduated from Leiden University in 1984 receiving her 'doctoraal'. At the time the study was called English Language and Literature and it took 5.5 years to complete (not counting the 6 months of mandatory pedagogic training). Now the study is 4 years in total (if you do an MA as well), and the pedagogic training would take you up to a year as well.

Before she started her study Wilma already had a vibrant career; traveling all over the world. She did a secretarial training in college before she went to England to work as an au pair. After that she headed to Switzerland and to Germany where she had a few jobs in various hotels. Wilma then moved on to a freelance agency where she had a couple of different jobs as well before she moved to bigger things.

At age 25 she worked for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which meant she had to go to Kenya, Zambia, and, as she said; "Yemen! Of all places." She really enjoyed the traveling but felt as if the job was a bit simple. She envisioned seeing those young diplomats when she was 50 saying "miss, can you find this for me?", "oh miss, can you get that for me?". It was not something she could see herself do, so she considered

what the next step would be. "I was 29 when I went to university."

What made you choose English then as a study? *I was in England as an au pair. I really liked the country, I liked the culture, and I read lots of books. My boss in Kenya had said that I wasn't good enough to be a secretary. He thought I was too intelligent but I forgot things – the enclosures and such. I thought English was quite interesting, that's why I started reading.*

What kind of expectations did you have of the study, and what would happen afterwards? *Well, I didn't think I would become a teacher! That was never the plan. I thought that if you had a certain level of education you could see what you'd do later on. I considered maybe going back abroad or something, but that didn't work.*

Though becoming a teacher was never the plan, she did start with giving English language trainings to business people. She trained them in language, presenting, negotiating – everything they needed.

What did you enjoy the most about the trainings? *The people are very enthusiastic. That was very very good. I usually gave the trainings on 1-on-1 basis, but sometimes in groups of 4-5 people. There was this one chap who had a very high position in a Dutch company. His English was absolutely horrid. He was upset and afraid because he had to take English classes. We met twice a week, 4 hours in total for about 6 weeks. I had to train him*

because he had to go to a conference in Sweden. We worked very hard. I even had an alarm clock and he had to make a presentation in 2 minutes. When he came back from the conference, he came back with some flowers; he was over the moon! He said that he could even joke in English now. I think that's so great; in a few weeks, with very specific training, you can help them to get over their shyness and insecurity. I really enjoyed that sort of thing.

Needing a change of pace she went to Lisbon to get her TEFL. On her return she needed a job so she started teaching (substituting for someone who had fallen ill) at VMBO level at a school in the Schilderswijk in The Hague. *"I must say, at the end I quite liked it. I feel sorry for those kids because they had academic subjects and they couldn't sit still for more than 5 minutes. What I did was to tell them we would make English magazines. I had 14 subjects; 7 were mandatory and 7 they could choose for themselves. They loved it! They liked it because they were doing something with their hands, they didn't even mind the compulsory part because the other parts could be about anything they wanted."*

At that time she was also teaching at IKEA in Delft. They had a project going on – everybody needed to be taught a certain level of English, even the cashiers. While she was also doing other trainings at IKEA, they asked her if she wanted to do it for a few years. Wilma applied for the job, while at the same time applying for another one. *"At the same time I saw one [job opening] at Hogeschool Leiden. I thought I'd give it a try. I wasn't really nervous or anything about it at all. I sent them a letter and 5 days later they hired me."*

Since then Wilma has taught as Hogeschool Leiden, starting at with the Communication department. There she designed the courses and taught for 6 years. For a while she also combined that with English classes at the Law department. Last year Wilma moved on to Commercial Economics where she also designed the courses. She still teaches at that department today. When asking her which job taught her the most, she said that all of them taught her something important. While being a VMBO teacher she learnt that not everybody is academically inclined, so you shouldn't push them. *"They should be doing things with their hands rather than sitting listening to you lecturing for many hours a day."* She also mentioned; *"I studied literature, so I was not trained as a teacher. I had to develop my other professional skills in English, that is what I learnt at the Hogeschool."*

One thing she has really enjoyed while teaching at the Hogeschool for the past decade is that she gets to work in many different department, learning different types of English; *"You learn all the new terms. I am now learning marketing terms. It's fun because of the extra dimension, especially when you stay at the same school for years. I really enjoy teaching. I find the chemistry of the class room very exciting and energetic!"*

When asking her if she had any advice for the students studying English right now, she gave us this: *"One hour of teaching is two hours work. You have to be alert constantly. You have to maintain the student's attention so you're always busy. Teaching is quite a tough job. A lot of people who start teaching resign after 6 months and go do something different. It can be a very nice job but that depends on where you are and if you can*

survive in the beginning. Don't ever start with a full time job. If you have a full time job [at the beginning] you will have a burnout in a few months, and you'll be so upset by that that you probably won't want to continue your career in teaching. Try to start with 3 days a week, if you can afford it. It can be quite tough but it can also be very rewarding."

As Wilma does not teach any literature at the Hogeschool, she has set up a book club with some of her friends. They meet every 6 weeks to discuss the book they have been

reading. She is currently also busy with setting up her own website which offers English trainings to professionals.

I thoroughly enjoyed speaking with Wilma in the interview we had together. She gave me a lot of insight into both the educational system as well as how diverse ones career can be (especially when you don't expect it!). I hope that the readers of *The Angler* enjoyed reading this article as much as I enjoyed speaking with Wilma.

James Lokas