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Personal experience and practice on the methods used for intercultural foreign language learning (the case of the German language)

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Abstract

There is no doubt that we are living in times of great change. While we teachers prepare our students for the challenges of the XXI century, we are aware of the many changes taking place globally. Population displacement continues to occur around the world, bringing intercultural contacts between groups who speak different languages and bear different cultures. In various parts of Europe as elsewhere in the world, the drafters of school programs include intercultural objectives in school curricula and teachers find themselves as they face the challenge to promote and support the absorption of intercultural competence through teaching. This is true for teachers of different subjects, but mostly for those who teaches foreign languages. The teaching of foreign languages is multicultural in essence. So, today is expected that all teachers of foreign languages promote the gaining of intercultural competence in their pupils and students. The objective of the teaching of foreign languages is not more defined considering the absorption of communicative competence in a foreign language. Nowadays, teachers are required to teach their students the intercultural communication competence. Being able to face intercultural experiences requires a person to possess a range of skills and cross-cultural features. This article aims to provide an overview of the methods used for interdisciplinary teaching. By means of concrete exercises, ideas for an intercultural learning of the German language will be presented with the aim that they can be an impetus for their use in other languages as well.

Keywords: Intercultural, competence, German lessons, teaching, learning, methods, applications

INTRODUCTION

For the mediation and transmission of intercultural knowledge, which makes it possible to acquire intercultural competences by students, it is very necessary to use comparative methods, that is, which highlight the differences, but which also include personal experiences. The same opinion is shared by Kastrati-Hyso (2008) while talking about the approach of a comparative pedagogy between the native language A and the foreign language B. This enables pupils and students to establish relationships of similarities and differences between two cultures. Intercultural competence cannot be shown and described to students, let alone given to them as "homework" (Witzenleiter, 2020). But if it becomes part of the lessons, then each teacher can create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, which would help the students to be open, thus promoting cooperative learning.

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"As long as intercultural learning is understood as such, as long as it cannot be undertaken to include it in a catalog of learning objectives, i.e. to derive from intercultural learning a subject or to gather a range of knowledge and specific skills, the notion of intercultural learning can serve in multiple teaching and mediation contexts" (Bausch, Herber and Krumm, 1994).

There are a variety of methods for organizing learning and creating intercultural learning environments. Some related ideas are given by Tomal and Stemplesk (1998) in their book on promoting "Cultural Awareness".

As examples of methods that promote intercultural learning, we will mention here two of them, treated in the aforementioned book, as well as some possible teaching procedures and techniques.

- Lesson "Same or Different"

The purpose of such a lesson is for the students to know the peculiarities, differences and similarities of the native and foreign culture. This lays a foundation for tolerance and acceptance of all people in their diversity. This does not mean that for the topic "Family" the students will be presented with an imaginary German family, but that the differences or similarities of lifestyles between cultures will be discussed. If students manage to understand well the idea of "Same" and "different", other topics can be treated in this way according to this method, such as theme "Clothes". Students can research in groups how people of another culture dress and then present their findings to the class in the form of a collage.

- Role playing game

Role play is a good method that can be practiced in classes with different language levels. However, it should be considered that in elementary level classes, they do not speak the foreign language very well and as a result, students can only present role play scenes through gestures and mimicry. The goal is for students to put themselves in the role of other people and manage to experience and understand emotions in certain situations. In a role-playing game, there is an opportunity for students to step away from themselves for once and embody an imaginary character. This creates an opportunity for students to change perspective and foster empathy.

However, such methods should not be exaggerated, as they serve as a means to achieve the goal (Bausch, Herber and Krumm, 1994). The methods should help to achieve the objectives of intercultural competence and enable students to gain knowledge and experiences. It is thought that teachers have developed a methodology, which is part of their professionalism as teachers (Gogolin, Georgi, Krüger-Potratz, Lengyel and Sachfuchs, 2018). This means that teachers have sufficient methods (sometimes unconsciously) that create a learning environment where students can be open to the foreign. Intercultural didactics aims to expand communicative competence in intercultural situations (Müller, 1994), and, to talk about true intercultural didactics, teaching methods must consider the definition of teaching goals, the selection of teaching contents, as well as the type of teaching control. It is very important that the teaching methods support the learning process and that the teaching contents leave room for comparison, since comparison is a key element in the intercultural learning process. Also, the selection of teaching materials should be such as to create the possibility of discussion and contain elements and information about the country, the people, their culture and tradition. However, these are not entirely sufficient, as an

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effective intercultural learning requires students to achieve "intercultural competence". Precisely in order to achieve such a goal, students must be ready to communicate and interact, be able to exchange criticism and be tolerant towards foreigners. Authenticity is another important point that the methods and teaching materials of intercultural learning must have, or be ensured through interaction in the lesson, which can be achieved through a good and careful planning and organization of the lesson. When we talk about authentic cultural material, we mean simulating real situations as much as possible. Examples of such situations, which take place during the foreign language class, are: "At the doctor", "At the post office", "At the tourist agency", "At the train station", "At the counter", etc. The concept of "foreigner" is also of particular importance. The "foreign", that which is different, must be part of the teaching content, since only in this way can students reflect on themselves or reflect and argue critically (Venetiku, 2014). The methodical aspect is as important as the didactic one, even though there is no special methodical concept for intercultural learning, but there are summaries of materials, ideas, and concrete methodical instructions for the process of intercultural learning, some of which will are also presented in the next paragraph of this paper. It should also be said that such materials enable a lesson different from the traditional one, where the teacher is at the center of the lesson, but they give importance to the role of the student in the learning process. Based on this, it turns out that the teaching methods must be very diverse, since only in this way can we have a diverse course of the lesson. The use of diverse teaching methods also suits the different types of students who are in a certain class where teaching is given. In this way, each of them can find themselves and adapt best by becoming an active part of the lesson. Holzbrecher (2014) describes the importance of methodology and teaching methods as follows: "Reality as we perceive it and the means by which we try to perceive the world are inextricably linked to each other. The ways and instruments that are learned to deal with the world retain an essential role in the formation of structures and the benefit of experiences".

Seeing the importance that the intercultural learning process is gaining and the place it is taking, the publishing houses in Germany (obviously this also applies to all other languages) have started to create materials that present the intercultural aspects. This is also observed in the inclusion of these aspects and elements in contemporary textbooks for learning the German language. However, the criteria for creating the right and appropriate materials are almost too few. Therefore, the opinions regarding the criteria that will be presented here are the result of participation in numerous qualifying seminars related to intercultural learning, as well as personal perspective. The teaching material used in the lesson must first of all be "friendly" for the students (Rizk-Antonious, 2019). The notion of "friendly" means in this case that the materials are satisfactory and suitable according to the age, but also practical, so that the students reach the goal of the lesson. This also means that the material should challenge the students, so that the latter receive information and experiences, going beyond the status quo. Not only the layout, but also the language of the materials to be used, should be appropriate for the grade level. As mentioned, the importance of authentic materials is completely unavoidable, since authentic materials provide students with an image of a culture, without the need for prejudice to be included in the creation of teaching materials. Authentic materials would thus be a children's book, a newspaper page, a list of dishes, or in higher language classes: an application letter, a real letter, etc. Anything can be possible as long as it fits the theme of the lesson. Cross-

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cultural learning materials include aspects of civilization and provide opportunities to compare, reflect and ask questions, which leads to a better understanding of others and their culture. After presenting some of the methods, it is important to find materials, teaching exercises or concrete ideas and proposals, which include intercultural learning. For this reason, in the following paragraph, some teaching exercises will be shown, which can be useful for an intercultural lesson.

Guidelines, materials and concrete exercises for intercultural learning

If we are going to deal with the topic of intercultural learning, then questions inevitably arise about how we can encounter "the others", or the "different" and how such a meeting and contact should go, in order so that it turns out as positive as possible. Does the notion of "being interculturally competent" mean?

- to know as much as possible about other countries, their culture, customs and traditions?

- to speak as many foreign languages as possible?

- to know as much as possible about your background and culture?

- be tolerant of other cultural and religious values?

Is simply having contact with people of other cultures enough?

In order for students to be as capable as possible in intercultural situations and as interactive as possible, we will present below some methods, exercises or instructions, which contain special aspects related to intercultural learning. The selection of these materials and examples is focused on teaching German, but they may be useful and of interest for their use in teaching other foreign languages. Some of these materials are more useful in classrooms with students from different cultures, but they also show a lot about the differences and similarities within the same culture.

"I do or I don't?"¹

Two boards are placed in the center of the classroom. In one is written "I" and in the other "I not". The teacher directs different questions while the students are positioned respectively on one of the tables. If someone has a hard time deciding, they can stay somewhere between the two tables.

Questions:

- · Which of you wakes up early?
- · Who knows more than two foreign languages?
- Which one has more than two sisters or brothers?
- · Who does sports regularly?
- Who plays a musical instrument?
- · Which one has ever been to Germany?
- Which of you still lives in the country/city where you were born?
- Do any of you have any grandparents or parents of foreign origin?
- Which one is a vegetarian?
- · Who prefers to eat non-traditional, but foreign cuisine?

• ...

This exercise is suitable for discussing the topic of "difference" or "different". It is about understanding how different and diverse the students of a class are, even if they are

¹ The idea is taken from the exercise "Commonalities and differences" in "Intercultural Competence". Guidelines for international projects in vocational education. Network for Democracy and Openness to the World in Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany.

from the same culture. It is also important to know that one sometimes belongs to the majority and sometimes to the minority. Questions such as:

- Was it always easy for students to find the right positioning?

- In which of the two groups "minority" or "majority" did the students find themselves more often? Which of the questions was this unexpected?

- How easy or difficult was it for the students, who could not or did not want to be positioned in either of the two tables?

- "The gnome of our garden"

Cultures are very dynamic and constantly changing. What we understand today as "German culture" has been developed for centuries and has been influenced or continues to be characterized by the influence of other cultures and traditions. *Development:*

The four corners of the classroom are needed for this exercise. The teacher leads respectively from one question and the four possible answers (or... or); each of them belongs to one of the angles. Students answer the questions by placing themselves in the corner where they think the correct answer is. The correct solutions are then given on the projector or electronic board.

Questions:

From which country/culture do the following customs and objects originate?

Wind music and marches

a) USA, b) Germany, c) Turkey, d) China?

Porcelain

a) India, b) Germany, c) Switzerland d) China?

- Potatoes
- a) South America b) Germany c) Egypt d) China?
- · The word Handy/ Mobile phone
- a) Germany, b) England, c) USA, d) France?
- Television
- a) Switzerland, b) USA, c) Russia, d) Germany?
- •Umbrella
- a) Italy, b) China, c) Germany, d) South America?
- Garden gnomes
- a) Turkey, b) Japan, c) Russia, d) Germany?

Solutions:

• Wind music originates from "Mehter Marşı/ Marshi Mehter" (music of the military band of the Ottomans), which after the Turkish wars became part of the military band in Austria and the south of Germany.

- Porcelain was invented in China.
- Potatoes originate from South America.

• Although the word Handy sounds English, it was created in Germany. In English, the mobile phone is known as mobile/phone, while in American English, cellphone. However, recently the German word for mobile phone "Handy" is enjoying popularity in the USA.

• Russia W

• Vladimir Kosmič Svorykin invented in 1923 the image recording device, i.e. the first device for electronic scanning of images into electrical signals.

 \bullet The umbrella originates from China. In the year two thousand before the new wind, it was first used as a sunscreen.

• Garden gnomes are very common in Germany, but their ancient origins are from Turkey. They remind us today of the movie "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". Their material can be made of stone, marble and recently of cloth. They were originally created by slaves who worked in the mines to preserve "magical powers". Today they serve to decorate gardens and home environments. It is thought that today around the world there are about 35 million of them, about half of them are in Germany.

- "The Story of My Name"²

Names represent an important part of our identity and individuality. Addressing others by name shows a sign of appreciation for them. But by discussing names with students in the classroom we learn more about personal histories, family and cultural values.

Development:

All pupils/students introduce themselves with the relevant name (first name, last name, nickname) and tell something about themselves:

- whether he likes it or not.
- what is the origin and meaning of the name.

- who named them.

- if they wanted to be called differently; if so, what would they like to have been named.

- if they had any special experiences in everyday life or in special situations.

The importance of names is also related to the character of proper names. It is the name that identifies the individual and distinguishes him from others. The correct pronunciation of the name is also very important, as this is the only way we understand that it is about us as individuals. In all cultures, names are very important. Many of the names have a long history. German names are often of Greek, Latin, German or Jewish origin. In Albania, in the system before the 90s, there were influences of religious cultures (Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim) and Western and Russian cultures, but the names were mostly Albanian-based. After the advent of democracy, the opening with the various countries of Europe and mass migration had an impact on the establishment of names of foreign origin. Also in other cultures, e.g. in the Islamic and Christian worlds, names reflect a broad, millennia-long culture, as well as religious and family traditions.

"I am me and much more"

We all belong to different groups and from time to time we become part of many different roles, since we ourselves are different. Unfortunately, we often tend to perceive people as the same based on certain characteristics.

This exercise aims to raise awareness that each person belongs to many different cultural groups. Even the corresponding values and rules can be quite different. But this is precisely what makes identity and individuality.

 $^{^2}$ Such an exercise was also developed with third-year German students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Tirana, in the subject of general linguistics.

Development:

- The students are divided into groups of four and everyone takes a piece of paper, on which they draw a diagram in the shape of a circle.

- Everyone thinks for himself which group he or she belongs to and marks it in the diagrams. Groups can for example focus on the following categories:

- Family (brother, daughter, only child, etc.)
- Leisure groups
- Profession
- · Interests (environmentalist, tour guide, museum speaker/Cicero...)
- Virtues
- Religion
- Then everyone presents their diagram. Similarities are marked with the same color.
- At the end, the similarities and differences of the whole group are presented.

To make the assessment, students can find something more about their own and others' belonging to these groups. They can also learn more about the similarities and differences, as well as the diversity of the group, beyond stereotypical perspectives. The following questions may help with the assessment:

- How many groups and which were similar?
- How many groups and which were different?
- Which groups do you belong to and which ones do you not? Why?
- Which of the group affiliations can people decide on?
- Which of them are immutable?
- How important is belonging to different groups for you?

" My house"³

Words such as home, hometown, homeland, homeless, longing for the homeland, holidays in the homeland, etc. are frequent. But what is and what does the word homeland, birthplace or when we say "my home" mean? Is it about the place where we were born and live? Or do we mean the mother tongue, family, society, favorite food, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, tea, prayers, favorite places, or simply that bakery or coffee shop near the house?

First task: Students take pictures with a camera of the places that make up their home for them. Perhaps these can be things (things, objects) or people, which have a personal value for them.

Second task: Then they discuss with each other what "my home" means to them? They can write a few sentences or a short text for each photo and a small "exhibition" can be created in the classroom.

Third task: Students ask their parents or grandparents what "homeland, hometown, home" means to them, what is important to them, and then students discuss in class whether there are differences or similarities with the answers or perceptions of theirs.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the word "Heimat" was used mainly in geographical and legal contexts and meant the place of birth and origin. But today, this word does not necessarily mean the place of birth, but also certain places where "our roots" lie. So, it can be about concrete, tangible things, but not, such as people, objects,

³ Such an exercise was also carried out during summer courses as a student of German studies at the "Friedrich-Wilhelm" University in the city of Bonn, Germany. Unable to photograph the footage, the internet came to our rescue to find the photos.

smells, noises or sounds that convey the feeling of warmth and security. For people who decide to go to another country, it is not rare that they find themselves and experience a feeling between "two worlds". In order to feel at home in a foreign country, these people can connect the memories and symbols of the country of origin with those of the new living environment. If such a thing is accepted by the new community, only then can you feel part of the "new home".⁴

- "What is typically German?"⁵

Germans are fond of salted pork legs and sauerkraut, reliable, hardworking, punctual and humorless. Does such a thing stand? What do students think is typical German?

Development:

- Students are divided into groups of 4 or 6 people (depending on the number of students in the class). Each group is provided with a small cardboard or plastic box, pencils and flyers.

- Each of the students of a group writes on the leaflets "typical German" characteristics.

- Each group selects from the collected notions a total of eight, which are the most appropriate and then place them in the box.

- Then all the groups present their box with the relevant notions and explain why they have chosen exactly those notions.

- All completed flyers are hung on the board or on the walls in the classroom and compared. If there are recurring notions, they are set aside in the table.

Materials needed: box, flyers, pencils

The following questions are helpful for class discussion:

- Which notions were mentioned most often?
- Do you identify yourself with such notions?
- How do such attributes make you feel?
- What do you think others say about "German culture"?
- What can the notions "culture" and "stereotypes" have in common?

However, it should be made clear to pupils or students that such cultural standards (all Germans are punctual and separate their rubbish) are not applied by all individuals.

"My personal bag/box"⁶- (What is important to you?)

Imagine such a situation: next month you will leave your hometown and move to another country. In addition to preparing for the new situation, in this case you ask yourself the question of what has characterized your life so far. What is important for you to take with you? What traditions, values, or objects would you like to preserve as part of your life? Music, books, family photos, clothes, gifts for certain holidays, a soccer ball, worn family items...?

Development:

- "Pack" your personal bag/box thinking about what you would bring in it.

⁴ According to Human Rights – Your Rights: Diversity Makes You Good, Youth Foundation, Baden-Würtenberg, 2008.

⁵ The idea of this exercise according to: Handschuck, Sabine; Klawe, Willy. Interkulturelle Verständigung in der sozialen Arbeit: ein Erfahrungs-, Lern- und Übungsprogramm zum Erwerb interkultureller Kompetenz. Weinheim, 2010, p.76.

⁶ Idea borrowed from: Bertelsmann Foundation, Anti-Defamation-League: A world of diversity – Praxishandbuch, 2004.

- Present your bag/box to the class and compare the contents of your bag with that of other students.

Materials needed: colored pencils, paper, magazines, shoe boxes.

Definitions of culture are countless, but for our context of intercultural learning, culture is a system of concepts, attitudes, and orientations that serves as a guide for people of a particular group. Cultures change constantly with the influence of external factors (foreign cultures) and internal factors (subcultures). Acquiring culture is a continuous process, it is not born, but learned; the basis of culture is taken from childhood. Important factors are family, school, spouses, friends or work colleagues. Cultures are also linked to social and historical contexts. If we were to ask our grandparents what they would have taken with them, it would probably be quite different from what we could imagine.

- - "Cultural glasses" - What do you see?

It is about an explanatory model, through which the difference between monitoring and evaluation becomes clear. Each of us has "invisible glasses", through which we perceive our human being and our environment. Depending on the experience, origin and environment we speak through gestures, language, symbols, manner of behavior, which are very different. It is not about concrete glasses, which we can put on to improve vision, but we can imagine and think as if we always have them with us from time to time, but they differ from one person to another. This is why the question arises: "What do you see?"

Directions: Cut pictures of people, objects and symbols from newspapers and magazines. These may be brought by the teacher to the classroom, or may have been previously assigned to the students. The question that can then be addressed to them is: "What do you associate with these pictures? Why?".

Examples may be: a man in a wheelchair, a church, young men wearing jeans, national flags, a woman with a headscarf, car brands, mosques, a monk praying, a woman with a cigarette in a cafe, children making noise, two boys hugging ...

Visible symbols of a culture are for example art, theatre, music, traditional cuisine, clothing, language etc. Their hidden part (values, norms, assumptions) can be perceived by outsiders in a limited way. So starting only from the visible part of these symbols, we cannot understand the importance of their meaning or behavior. While in a certain culture baggy and baggy jeans are seen as youthful, for other generations such as grandparents, this type of clothing is considered "messy". Only if we know the cultural contexts and backgrounds, then everything can be explained and understood. Therefore, it is extremely important to remain sensitive in intercultural encounters, both with acquaintances and strangers.

- - "Walking around the city" - What do you see?

How diverse is your city and what has influenced the image of the city today? In this regard, working groups can be created with pupils and students, which will research the city. The fastest group wins by completing the following tasks:

- Look for a store that sells German products/food (in the same way for Italian, French products, etc.) and ask the staff for a typical traditional product.

- Find three street names, which refer to three important personalities of the Germanspeaking peoples. What do these names indicate? - Ask people on the street where you can eat good ice cream.

- To request a monument on a certain road. Who and what does this monument remember?

- To ask about the churches or mosques of the city and how many members these religious communities have?

- ...

Preparation: In advance, you should search for places that are important, as this is easier.

Materials needed: city map, camera, note-taking task sheet.

"Intercultural meetings"

The projects that can be developed with certain groups of other cultures are also very attractive and special. Such a project is carried out as part of the summer school every year in several countries of Albania. Students from Germany come for the summer school in Albania to get to know more about this country. The project is supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Such intercultural projects enable the meeting of young Albanians (students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages) with German students. Albanian and German students have similar, but also completely different interests in terms of culture, sports, leisure activities free, environmental protection, etc.

- Divided into groups, the German students are accompanied by Albanian students and together undertake a tour of the city of Tirana.

- If they wish, they can spend an afternoon together (they can go to a bar, but they can also play football, tennis, basketball, etc.

- They can also plan a weekend together in one of Albania's countries.

Such meetings help students to know more about each other's culture.

"Interview - Do you speak German?"

An exercise with a lot of interest, also proven with the students in the practical language class in the department of German studies, is conducting interviews with locals or with Germans living in Albania. In the first case it is about that category that has lived for a long time in Germany, while in the second case it is about those who live and work in German institutions in Albania, or tourists. The main purpose of this exercise is to reflect on the image of your country and the image of the other country, Germany. Students can also talk about stereotypes and dispel prejudices. As a social form for performing this exercise is working in groups. It should be noted that interviews are conducted outside of school hours. This exercise can be carried out at almost all levels, but at the initial level the interviews cannot be conducted in German, but with the natives in their native language, i.e. in Albanian. It is therefore more recommended at higher language levels, so that the interviews are conducted in Germany.

Development:

The teacher/pedagogue divides the pupils/students into small groups and during the lesson the questions can be prepared by the pupils themselves in the class or brought ready by them and then discussed about which may be more appropriate. Here are some ideas about formulating questions:

Interviews with Germans:

- How would you characterize the Albanians? Mention some of their features and qualities.

- What are the reasons why you live in this country/why you chose to visit this country?

- Can you mention your positive and negative impressions?

- In your opinion, what is typical Albanian for as long as you have lived here?

- ...

Interviews with locals:

- Is German, in your opinion, difficult? If so, which part of the language do you find most difficult?

- How long have you mastered the German language? Where and how did you learn it?

- How would you characterize the Germans? Mention some of their features.

- What were the reasons for your stay in Germany?
- Have you had positive or negative impressions?
- In your opinion, what is typical German?

- ...

Then the interviews are conducted and finally the conclusions are presented the next lesson in the form of a poster, report, wall newspaper, etc. From personal experience, this is an exercise that motivates the pupils/students a lot and prompts them in discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we can say that in this paper, the necessary methods for the mediation and transmission of intercultural elements, for the way of organizing the lesson and promoting intercultural learning were presented. Emphasis was also placed on the selection of materials that represent reality as closely as possible, that are as varied as possible and that are student-friendly. Further attention was given to giving examples of concrete exercises, useful for an intercultural lesson, which help the teachers to organize the lesson, but also the students to be able to communicate and interact during different intercultural situations.

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