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Intercultural language learning

Weaving it into the tapestry

1. Introduction

Research in language teaching and learning, intercultural training and learning, and in technology-based teaching and learning has grown exponentially in the past two decades, with new powerhouses emerging (like Australia); with neuroscience meeting post-structuralist discourses on culture; with virtual game design meeting pragmatics. In short, demands on language teachers have exploded.

At the same time, many universities in Germany have tried to outsource language courses to private enterprises or cut the budget for language centres to such an extent that the latter rely heavily on freelancers (with *Lehrbeauftragten*-status). Here, the question arises of how academic institutions can actually practice (teach) what they preach (publish). What added value do language courses at an academic institution give to students? What can an institution do to ensure the latest research is applied in the classroom? And what would a programme or course that tries to incorporate recent ideas by the more well-known scholars of the field look like? In this article I wish to propose a few answers and present a best-practice example from our institution.

To put it in a nutshell: I am convinced that the added value of language teaching at an academic institution by professionals has to do with the fact that language learning can be woven into the tapestry of intercultural learning; in other words, that when the two become inseparable at the institutional, the programmatic and the methodological levels, language programmes at universities are particularly successful.

I will present my ideas on how this can be achieved by beginning at the macro and then proceeding to the micro level. The first part will be brief, and highlight some of the features of our institutional, or more precisely,

departmental situation that allow us to achieve the above- mentioned tapestry. In the second part I will point out how UNIcert has been invaluable in sharpening our languages profile. In the third part, I will have arrived at the micro-level. UNIcert provides a framework and sets standards, but does not operate like a franchise company. Fortunately, institutions that run UNIcert have quite a lot of freedom in deciding how they fill the spaces between the programmatic scaffolding.

2. The Institutional Level

As recent research has borne out, language and culture are inseparable; Kramsch's statement that "each time we speak we perform a cultural act" has become commonplace (cf. Kramsch 1993). Looking at traditional language teaching at, say, commercial language schools, this is not usually the approach that their language instructors take. The linguaculture does have a place, but the approach tends to be positivistic (cf. Corbett 2003).

Unfortunately, this does not create interculturally competent speakers of a foreign language. On the contrary, "culture as artefact", as Martin East put it, tends to perpetuate stereotypes, present the other as strange and leave it that way (East: 2012: 63). So does talking about cultural patterns of thinking on the surface level (e.g. in reading comprehensions, from which the usual "Ten Do's and Don'ts" may derive).

Here, the question arises as to how an academic institution can meet at least some of the demands that have been formulated by the *IcLL* community, which include those by Kramsch, Byram, and Houghton.

In my opinion, our institution has found an approach that works, because it has ensured that intercultural learning and language learning cannot be separated. On an institutional level this means that our language programmes, which are all UNIcert, are part of our *Fakultät für Studium Generale und Interdisziplinäre Studien*. Our language centre, *Zentrum für Sprachen und Kulturstudien,* is a virtual construct, and its very title suggests that languages are always linked to cultural studies. The languages of English, Spanish, French, and Italian are represented by full professors and some full time lecturers who teach as well as coordinate the programme (although we do hire adjunct faculty or Lehrbeauftragte, as well). Professorships are advertised for Language X AND cultural studies and/or intercultural communication. When a post is filled, the professor will not only take over UNIcert courses but also teach modules in the department's consecutive master's programme in "Intercultural Communication and Competence" or the part-

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