

Research note

European and German Culture from a Historical and Present Day Viewpoint at Seminars for General Knowledge

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This research note tries to give some information on the relation between culture seminars and German language classes as well as about suggested ways to motivate students to become more interested in German culture within its European context. My studies are based on findings about culture seminars for students in their first year from several faculties at Yamagata University over five years. The following aspects will be given consideration. 1. Learning and teaching conditions have to be considered as they have changed during that time. 2. The choice of topics was left to a certain extent to the students. All topics were taught with their historical background. Different groups of students from different faculties seem to have chosen similar topics. 3. Teaching goals in such seminars could not only be awareness of cultural stereotypes and tolerance but also awareness of the importance of historical backgrounds and the acknowledgement of the right to be different. 4. Teaching methods and testing in large classes are suggested to be simple whereas teaching material and media use can be of great variety and very differentiated.

Key words : learning and teacher's conditions, topics, teaching goals, teaching methods

Introduction

As reading culture seems to decrease among students, the number of students is going down and as restructuring at all Japanese universities is cutting down on various subjects, the subjects German as a Foreign Language and Studies on German Literature and Language have been pushed into a situation of defending their interests, their *raison d'être*, and into reflection on how to create a more attractive version of these subjects. One way to do this might be laying some emphasis on conveying more cultural knowledge via seminars on German culture in its European context. This leads, however, to

the question of the relation between culture seminars and language classes. Based on my five years work as a lecturer at Yamagata University having taught both kinds of classes I shall suggest ways that might help to improve the present problematic situation.

Learning and Teaching Background

I want to emphasize that I agree with Krumm (Krumm, 1995) who considers intercultural and cultural knowledge, above all, to be essential learning goals in foreign language classes. For seminars about German culture in its European context these goals might even be considered most important.

The students of Humanities, Social Studies

and Engineering Studies in their first year in Yamagata, as in many other Japanese universities at present, have to decide on learning a second foreign language. They can choose between Chinese, German, French and Russian. At the same time they can, for general knowledge, either take part in a seminar on European and German culture, taught by a German native speaker or in a seminar on European history, taught by a Japanese professor of history. Those culture seminars are not supposed to be language classes. Contents and teaching methods depend on the teacher.

In 2003 and 2004 students in their second year could take part in a facultative seminar on German culture instead of a literature and language seminar, as was offered before, in an effort to raise the number of participants. This proved to be a good decision as the number of students increased from 3 to 25.

Topics

In a facultative culture seminar for first year students of various faculties a topic frame can be given. Within this frame students can choose six topics from a list. This should guarantee a learner orientated teaching style. The students can add more topics to this list.

In the years 2000 and 2002 the topic frame was European Culture History. The seminar started with the Stone Age, went on to the Dark Ages (European Migration) and the Middle Ages. In both years the students chose as further topics Renaissance, Baroque, Romanticism and the Hitler Regime.

In the years 2001 and 2004, referring to the book "100 deutsche Jahre" (Fischer, 1998), the topic frame was the same: 100 German years. Given a list of 52 topics from the book, each topic with a 30 minutes video sequence, the students chose the following topics:

2001: 2004:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Cars | 1. Germany as a Nation |
| 2. Jokes and Humour | 2. Eating and Drinking |
| 3. War | 3. Fashion |
| 4. Hitler | 4. Sports |
| 5. Eating and Drinking | 5. Festivals. |

The order of the topics refers to the popularity of the topics. All topics describe the time between the years of 1900 and 2000; material about the present day situation was added.

In the year 2003 the topic frame was again pointing at everyday life within a wider range of time. Most popular was the time between 1980 and now, second in popularity was the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), then the Middle Ages and finally the Renaissance. The following topics were chosen, the order according to their popularity:

1. Family life
2. Eating and Drinking
3. Music and Dance
4. Sports
5. Germany as a Nation.

According to the number of participants in the year 2003 the topic frame might have been the least popular (30 students). Perhaps the students had to choose too many different things at a time. Second in popularity seems to have been the history of German culture within its European context (2000: 27 students, 2002: 92 students). In both years the

students showed great interest in the Hitler regime. Most successful, however, seemed to be the choice from 52 topics about everyday life (2001: 47 students, 2004: 118 students).

Teaching Goals

Teaching certain topics within their historical dimension, especially everyday topics, can be justified by the fact that everyday behaviour is always the result of experiences and developments from the past, as Picht points out “Alltag ist keineswegs ahistorische Gegenwart. ... Akteure der Alltagskommunikation sind ... in den Entwicklungsprozess ihrer Gesellschaften eingebunden.” (Picht, 1995, p. 93). Therefore a teaching goal can make it clear to the students that there is an impact of the past on present everyday life in a foreign culture as well as in one’s own culture. Koreik writes in this context about a collective or general memory (“kollektives Gedächtnis”, Koreik, 1995, p.70) and general structures of behaviour (“allgemeine Verhaltensstrukturen” , Koreik, 1995, p.64). He refers to the German social psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, who in their book “Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern” (The incompetence of mourning) wrote about the results of their studies on the impact of Hitler’s National Socialism had on Germans in West Germany after World War II. Additionally Koreik refers to the psychologist Maaz, who wrote about the psychological situation of East Germans after the fall of the Wall in his book “Der Gefühlsstau” (Hold-up Emotions). Both seem to have found general structures of behaviour,

too (Mitscherlich, 1977; Maaz, 1990).

As the European culture, and therefore the German culture, too, has its roots not only in ancient Greece and Rome, but also in Arabian countries, it can be a teaching goal, to be able to recognize and think about the ways in which various cultures in Europe influence and have an impact on each other. Often quoted examples are numbers and mathematics with their origins in Arabia, or Europe, who was an Asian princess (perhaps Phoenician), or the apostle Paul who was born in Turkey (Burgdorf, 2004). Intercultural connections can also be traced in literature and music. Here an additional teaching goal might be to attract attention to German literature by not only letting the students read translations but also giving them texts in their original language.

In this era of globalisation everybody can try to be open to other cultures and also try to define one’s own identity by various cultures. The German author Zehra Cirak, who was born in Turkey, once wrote about this process as follows:

Ich bevorzuge weder meine türkische noch meine deutsche Kultur. Ich lebe und sehne mich nach einer Mischkultur. ... Also würde ich am liebsten japanisch aufwachen auf einem Bodenbett mit transparenten Scheintüren. Dann würde ich gern englisch frühstücken, danach ... chinesisch arbeiten, fleißig und eifrig. Am liebsten möchte ich französisch essen und tierisch satt römisch baden. Gerne will ich bayerisch wandern und afrikanisch tanzen. ... (Ackermann, 1996, p.134)

(My translation: I prefer neither my

Turkish nor my German culture. I live and long for a mixed culture. ... Therefore willingly I would like to wake up in a Japanese manner on a futon in rooms with transparent sham doors. Then I would like to have an English breakfast, then ... I work in a Chinese way, hard-working and industrious. My favourite food would be French, and with a full stomach I would like to take a Roman bath. With pleasure I would hike like a Bavarian and dance like an African. ...)

If one assumes that in a seminar on culture intercultural learning is supposed to take place, further teaching goals can be set: to overcome stereotypes and to think of other cultures not as better or worse but as something on one's own level as something different (Steinmetz, 2001, p.119; Ackermann, 1996, p.134). Another teaching goal might be, as Steinmetz claims (Steinmetz, p.120), to understand one's own culture better, in comparison with others and instead of just being tolerant to assure other people their right to be allowed to be different (Steinmetz, p.121).

Teaching Methods

Especially in classes with 93 or 118 students it is not possible to have discussions in class. Students should always be given the opportunity to ask questions during or after class, at office hours or via e-mail. To present the contents as interesting as possible worksheets made from various non-fiction books, literature and books on art can be given to the students; e.g. the swan's song

from Carmina Burana can be listened to from a CD while the students are reading the text in translation and can read the original text as well. Another example for conveying a good insight into medieval times is the Book of Hours by the Duke of Berry (Dufournet, 1995), as well as some excerpts from Eric Rohmer's film "Perceval le Gallois", with Japanese subtitles.

Not each German lecturer for German can read and write Japanese language fluently. Therefore English, or Japanese or a combination of both, according to the teacher's competence, could be spoken in class. Worksheets could be written in English and explained in Japanese. Additional material in English and Japanese is recommendable. There are many films with Japanese subtitles, e.g. in connection with the topic History of Dance excerpts from Zeffirelli's film "Romeo and Juliet" or from the film "Elizabeth", and programs on Japanese television that can help to convey contents in an interesting way, e.g. excerpts from the TBS program "World Heritage Sites". CDs and art exhibition catalogues can have the same effect.

To find out about the students' achievements after each topic there can be given a written multiple choice test. At the end of the semester each student can choose one topic from the topics that were taught in class and be given another different multiple choice test on the chosen topic.

Results and Consequences of my Culture Seminars

According to a questionnaire at the end of the last semester most of my students

obviously liked my homemade cakes, due to the topic eating and drinking and seasonal festivities, best. Quite a number of them showed interest in going to Germany, which materialized in two home stay trips to Gießen, near Frankfurt, which I organized and accompanied together with a very good friend in Gießen. During those trips in March 2004 nine students and in the same year in September eight students took part in a morning language course, daily half day excursions and a one day excursion to Frankfurt within nine days. My impression was that my students fully enjoyed these trips. Two of them want to study in Germany. A forerunner to this was an intensive course in Tokyo of one week which I organized together with the language school Heidelberg in Shinjuku. Some of the students stayed with friends or relatives, others in one of the former Olympic buildings at Yoyogi Park. My impression at the end of each semester was that the students' intellectual perspectives have broadened remarkably.

I started these seminars, which took place during the winter semesters, with 27 students. After that the number of participants increased to 47, then 92, after that in sank to 30 and in the last year it rose again to 118. In the last two years it was noticeable that the majority of students in the culture seminars had chosen German as a foreign language, too, possibly to supplement their language classes.

Besides all this a longer time for studies in German language and culture is probably the best incentive for trying to pass one of the

international German tests like Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache (ZdaF), Zentrale Mittelstufenprüfung (ZMP) or Zentrale Oberstufenprüfung (ZOP) which can prove to be useful at job hunting or studying in one of the German speaking countries.

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