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Editor:

Colin Wringe
Department of Education
University of Keele
Keele, Staffordshire
ST5 5BG
Telephone (0782) 621111 Ext 3422

Reviews Editor:

John Trafford
Division of Education
University of Sheffield
Sheffield S10 2TN

Published by:

Association for Language Learning
16 Regent Place
Rugby CV21 2PN
Telephone (0788) 546443

Advertising Enquiries to:

Christine Wilding
Secretary General
Association for Language Learning
16 Regent Place
Rugby CV21 2PN
Telephone (0788) 546443

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Friederike Klippel
University of Dortmund

Approaches to the Teaching of 'Landeskunde' at Elementary and Intermediate Level¹

Every German pupil has to learn English for some years in secondary school, a few even begin at primary level. Syllabuses and teaching materials for English include many aspects of British and US American 'Landeskunde', e.g. basic information on the everyday life of young people in the target cultures, but also texts about the British parliamentary system or extracts from American history. The other English-speaking cultures, be it Canada, Australia or India are rarely included at this level. Generally speaking the textbooks used in German schools to teach basic vocabulary and structures concentrate on a British setting for texts and illustrations at elementary level, and on the United States at intermediate level. ESP (English for special purposes) or adult education courses may put a different emphasis on the cultural component.

A great number of reasons are being put forward for the inclusion of 'Landeskunde', i.e. cultural studies, in a foreign language curriculum. These may be grouped under three headings and will be discussed in turn: the language-culture link, content and context in language learning, and cultural awareness.

The language-culture link

There is widespread agreement that language learning carries a strong element of cultural learning, although a few language teachers still view the language purely as a formal system of rules and exceptions and would like to teach it as such. But since even they use one of the current textbooks for the first years of English instruction, their pupils receive some information on the target cultures, so that all English language teaching in Germany incorporates 'Landeskunde' to some extent.

Among linguists there are considerable differences in the way the relationship between language and culture is interpreted. Some like David Crystal and Hans Galinsky (cf. Galinsky 1983) see a very close link, where the cultural heritage is reflected in the semantics, structures and pragmatics of a language as well as in the nonverbal behaviour of its speakers. Learning a foreign language then means acquiring the foreign culture as well. Some kind of cultural information seems to be indispensable for successfully communicating with speakers of other languages. Quite a few misunderstandings in the communication of speakers with different nationalities stem from a clash of their respective cultural presuppositions rather than from mere linguistic failure (cf. Strevens 1987). This kind of cultural misunderstanding can also happen between people from different English speaking cultures like Canada, India or New Zealand. While living in New Zealand I was once asked 'to bring a plate' to a party. At first I thought my hosts wanted me to boost their supply of crockery, and it was only after talking to other New Zealand friends that I discovered the cultural dimension of the phrase: I was expected to contribute some food to the party.

This little incident illustrates the fact that a lot of English cultures or perhaps rather cultures in English have emerged. Linguists like Braj Kachru (1982) postulate a multicultural background for the English language in our world and thus refer to different Englishes. The advocates of the strong link between language and culture, irrespective of whether they view this link as mono- or multicultural, tend to concentrate on the differences between the learners' culture and that of the target language for the language learning process.

In contrast to this view the similarities between all western cultures are stressed by those who see a weaker link between language and culture. They emphasize the international charac-

ter of English and its widespread use as the language of natural science, computer technology and youth culture within other language environments. Western cultures might seem very similar in the fact that in certain areas English is ubiquitous. A walk through a German city centre with its shops will show you innumerable signs, labels and names of products in English. Yet, under this layer of seeming international conformity based on English, cultural differences are lurking to trap the unwary. At the phonetic level there is a lot of mispronunciation with sometimes hilarious results, e.g. sweatshirt /i:/. At the semantic level there is loss of meaning and of the associations in the original culture: 'whiskas', 'pedigree chum', 'bounty' do not make sense in German, a few people only might know the technical term 'Pedigree'; the other way round: how many English speakers understand the semantics and the history of the name 'Volkswagen'? Some words get taken over and acquire different shades of meaning: in German youth slang 'checken' means 'to understand'. The strong presence of American soaps on German TV might suggest that we are familiar with American culture. But all films are dubbed, and nobody has as yet tried to find out what cultural message is put across by an actor with American body language and mannerisms talking German. When objects like TV series or products are transplanted from one culture to another they are redefined even if they are not renamed. The superficial similarity between many aspects of western cultures should not mislead us into presupposing a uniformity underneath.

Seen in this context foreign language learning is also a process of acculturation (cf. Acton/de Felix 1986). Someone speaking a foreign language with native speaker competence, a true bilingual, in fact, is also bicultural. Learning a foreign language then is accompanied by getting to know and integrating a foreign culture into one's own personality. Acton and de Felix (1986) define four stages in the acculturation process, which they call the tourist, survival, immigrant, and citizen stage. They postulate an acculturation threshold between the survival and the immigrant level. As is evident from their use of terminology, their concept is based on people learning the target language while living in the target culture. Therefore the development of acculturation cannot be transferred directly to those pupils learning a foreign language at school in their own country, who may never visit the target culture. Still, the gradual process of becoming familiar with another culture is an integral part of their foreign language courses as well. At the elementary and intermediate stages the learners are not likely to progress beyond the survival level in their language and cultural competence. That means that they are still firmly rooted in their own language and culture, but are able to communicate in a basic sense within the foreign language and culture.

Content and context

The growing interest in the cultural component of foreign language courses coincides with a shift back to meaning in foreign language teaching in general – the renaissance of meaning connected with the communicative approach. It is no longer unimportant what one talks about as it sometimes was in the era of the pattern drill. 'Landeskunde' provides a great number of interesting things to read and discuss. In fact, 'Landeskunde' can make foreign language learning meaningful in more than one sense. Apart from furnishing the learners with stimulating and informative texts and learning activities, it is also a necessary component of a communicative course. Context plays a crucial role in successful communication, but context is

culture-specific, it needs to be interpreted through our knowledge of culture. Learners of English need to be able to use certain strategies to avoid or clear up misunderstandings even before they have reached an advanced level of cultural and communicative competence. Candlin (quoted in Baxter 1983, 310) calls this ability interpretive competence. A good way of acquiring this interpretive competence lies in the encounter of authentic communicative situations either in texts, films or in reality. These situations illustrate different ways of reacting to people and events, and they also provide some language practice in the ability to politely find out about meanings and intentions.

'Landeskunde' in the English language class is not restricted to supplying information on the English-speaking world. A second very important aspect lies in enabling the pupils to talk about their own culture in English. This is especially important in the preparation of class trips to an English speaking country and other forms of meeting native speakers of English. In many of these encounters an exchange of information on one's own culture and country takes place. Questionnaires filled in by host parents and exchange pupils in British-German exchanges reveal that talking about one's own country and customs figures prominently in a catalogue of topics or conversation; and some pupils indicated that they did not feel very competent in describing their culture in the foreign language (cf. Speight 1987; Kappe/Smith 1988). Learning about culture, then, works both ways: learners need to present their own culture in the foreign language as well as understand what they are told about their partner's. Thus cultural knowledge and awareness is created both for the home culture and the target culture.

Finally, there are general educational arguments for integrating cultural content into the foreign language curriculum. It can be very motivating and interesting for the learners to find out something about the countries where English is spoken. A lot of pupils are very curious about everything English when they start to learn the language. This interest should be kept alive and be fostered, because it contributes to success in learning. Gardner and Lambert's research (1972) has revealed the importance of a positive attitude towards the target language and its speakers. In a study of lower stream pupils Hermann (1978) found that knowledge about the target culture strengthens the motivation to learn the foreign language. Perhaps one might say that for most pupils who learn English at school, a course of instruction that emphasises culture is more satisfying, more efficient and more interesting than one which teaches only the bare bones of language structure. Textbooks try to follow this line of reasoning by providing texts and illustrations with a strong 'Landeskunde' component.

Cultural awareness

A further vital element of cultural studies within the foreign language class has only been mentioned in passing so far, i.e. the development of cultural awareness in the learners, which is just as, if not more important than the acquisition of knowledge about the target countries. Only if a foreign language course can improve our awareness of different cultures, our own as well as others, if it builds up our sensitivity towards other people and their world view, only then can foreign language learning contribute to global understanding and enrich the development of the learners' personalities. Schools enhance an ethnocentric attitude, foreign language classes should counteract this (cf. Bock 1980, 265) by bringing more of the world into the classroom. Some of the aims might be: awareness of one's own cultural values, awareness of the existence of cultural presuppositions, awareness of cultural differences; acceptance of different cultural patterns, suspension of judgment, empathy.

Achieving these different types of awareness and openness is not easy. Language learning is strongly linked to each individual's personality. Learning another language consequently reshapes the learner's personality to a certain extent, and may be connected with feelings of security and anxiety. Security is generated by things being familiar, by one's own language and culture in contrast to the foreign one. A lot of people find it difficult to accept diversity, they are frightened by 'strange'

behaviour and customs. But these are by no means the only possible feelings stimulated in foreign language learning. There is also the excitement of meeting new and interesting ideas, of finding out about another set of countries and peoples. 'Landeskunde' can help to establish a culture-sensitive attitude and provide a framework for familiarisation with the target cultures, and, thus, lead to cross-cultural understanding. Attitudes cannot be memorized like a list of irregular verbs. They have to grow in the learners' minds through their active participation, their curiosity, their interest in establishing contact with English-speaking people, their willingness to suspend their value judgments and to keep an open mind.

Goals and methods

Three kinds of goals can be deduced from the the relationships outlined so far: the first one concerns information about the target and the home culture, the second one the interpretation and comparison of cultural items, and the third one the creation of cultural awareness and an attitude of acceptance and empathy. Information does not mean the accumulation of unconnected facts about the target country and culture, but rather the generating of a general knowledge frame so that the learners may understand and integrate new pieces of information and have material for comparison. It is unlikely that anyone will define the exact contents of this 'Landeskunde' knowledge, but most foreign language teachers might agree on the areas of cultural knowledge which are specified in the current curriculum for comprehensive schools in Nordrhein-Westfalen (Richtlinien 1980) summarized as follows:

Socio-cultural knowledge necessary for communication; comprises knowledge about the daily life and the cultural environment of both speakers; German pupils have to be able to inquire about the other person's life and describe their own.

Knowledge about living in the foreign country and its culture (as prerequisites of understanding) includes: survival knowledge, knowledge about nonverbal behaviour, living conditions and cultural facts.

- (1) survival knowledge, e.g. topography, traffic, using the telephone, knowing where to obtain information;
- (2) knowledge about the cultural connotations of certain terms, e.g. breakfast, tea, football (Am. English);
- (3) knowledge about nonverbal behaviour, e.g. shaking hands;
- (4) knowledge about common activities and customs, e.g. food, clothes, saying thank you, apologizing, use of first names;
- (5) knowledge about spare time activities, e.g. sport, weekend activities;
- (6) knowledge about people's behaviour at special occasions, e.g. celebrations, holidays, illness;
- (7) knowledge about life and work, e.g. shopping, housing, laws about minors, working conditions;
- (8) knowledge about institutions, e.g. family, neighbourhood, churches, school systems;
- (9) knowledge about groups and processes within the society, e.g. social classes, political parties, European community;
- (10) knowledge about values, e.g. hygiene, national and social symbols, ideals and idols, educational values;
- (11) knowledge about stereotypes assigned to Germans in the target culture, e.g. food and table manners, orderliness, obedience.

It would be unrealistic to demand that all these topics are dealt with in depth at elementary and intermediate level, teachers and textbook authors have to be selective. This is where the teachers' interests come into play, where he or she can augment the textbook. By comparing both the 'Landeskunde' in the textbook and the teacher's own contributions with this list, one can make sure that most of these topics receive attention at some time. It depends, of course, on the age of the learners and their foreign language competence, which topics can successfully be dealt with at a certain stage. With absolute beginners 'Landeskunde' will revolve around the daily life of their peer group in the target culture, e.g. a day in the life of 12 year old Frankie in Birmingham or Buffalo. The pupils will learn about

'Landeskunde' activities

1. FINDING OUT

activity	level	cultural focus	place
Observation			
observing people's behaviour in particular settings, e.g. in shops, at bus stops, at pedestrian crossings	from elementary	own culture or target culture	outside school
watching TV programmes, films, or slides about the target culture with specific observation tasks in mind, e.g. clothing, ways of greeting etc.	from elementary	target culture	classroom
looking at visual representations of the foreign culture, i.e. paintings, cartoons, sculptures	from elementary	target culture	classroom museum
Collecting evidence			
finding examples of the target language and culture in one's own country, e.g. in Britain: AUDI adverts, kindergarten, ersatz etc.; in Germany: shop names, products recorded on town walk	from elementary	own language and culture as well as target language and culture	classroom town
Reading			
reading non-fictional texts about one aspect of the target culture	from intermediate	target culture	classroom
reading simple stories	intermediate	target culture	classroom
Interviews			
interviewing a visitor to the class, e.g. a foreign language assistant, about aspects of their culture	from intermediate	target culture	classroom

2. COMPARING AND CREATING

activity	level	cultural focus	place
Exchanges			
exchanging parcels with a partner class, e.g. containing objects for the celebration of Christmas	from elementary	own culture (for sending) target culture (for receiving)	classroom
exchanging letters with a partner class	intermediate	as above	classroom
exchanging sound cassettes with a partner class	intermediate	as above	classroom
exchanging video letters with a partner class	intermediate	as above	classroom and outside
Creating			
creating posters and displays	intermediate	target or own culture	classroom
making videos about one's own country, e.g. school life, town festivals etc. in the foreign language to send to partner school or twinned town	from intermediate	own culture	mostly outside classroom

3. ENCOUNTERS AND EXPERIENCE

activity	level	cultural focus	place
Personal contacts			
pupil exchanges	intermediate	own and target culture	school and outside
class visits to the target country	intermediate	target culture	outside school
Multidimensional tasks			
values clarification techniques, i.e. recognizing one's own values	intermediate	own culture	classroom
role play and simulation, e.g. encountering types of problem situations from the target culture	intermediate	target culture and own culture	classroom
culture capsules, i.e. experiencing one aspect of the target culture in lots of ways, e.g. food	intermediate	target culture	school and outside

the interests, the school and spare time activities of young people. One may introduce them to examples of youth culture, be it sports, types of publications (e.g. cartoons or magazines), music or clothes. Information and insight are closely linked to individuals from the target countries. At a later stage the perspective widens to include less personal and incidental pieces of information, to create an impression of the fabric of society, its intuitions and history. But if 'Landeskunde' is to remain interesting, a human angle is necessary here as well.

Considering the second aim of 'Landeskunde' in the foreign language class, topics and texts should illustrate both differences and similarities between the cultures, so that there is ample scope for comparison. In order to allow the learners to find their own interpretation of culture, topics, facts and ideas are presented from different angles. This avoids the false conclusion that there is just one correct view of things. Comparison is indeed a fundamental strategy for intercultural and intracultural learning (cf. Bock 1980). When learning about another culture we should not measure it against our own in order to judge, but to learn, to understand and to accept.

The act of comparing is also a focus for the methodological side of 'Landeskunde' teaching. Materials and situations have to be accessible and manageable for the pupils. Understanding therefore is a condition for grasping something of the foreign culture as well as for organising learning situations. And understanding is most likely to grow from learning activities which involve the whole person, and from interaction with speakers of the foreign language. At beginner's level especially, a learning-by-doing-approach seems to be advisable. This can be the reciting and acting out of nursery rhymes and action songs with young learners or the creation or collages and posters about a topic taken from their own or the target culture and dealt with in the target language. For intermediates learning-by-doing progresses to role play, finds its expression in creating an English language corner in the classroom or the school paper, and may culminate in a project on the American Indians, for example, or English cookery during project week. But the teaching of 'Landeskunde' with an emphasis on involving the whole person is not confined to an action-centred approach. It also comprises the in-depth study of texts and materials, which in themselves present a variety of information and modes of presentation from the intensely personal, like diaries, letters or interviews, to the starkly factual, like statistics. The selection of texts is one of the most important issues of 'Landeskunde' at an advanced level and will therefore not be taken any further here.

The methods for helping the pupils learn about culture in their foreign language class can be ordered in clusters around the three goals. In the information cluster, enquiry techniques like skimming or scanning a text, like devising questions about something, like observing people's behaviour displayed in visual sources or in real life, and like listening and making notes play a major role. It is obvious from this short list that cultural learning does not require a completely new set of teaching and learning activities. All the techniques mentioned are taken from the common repertoire of foreign language instruction. In the area of interpretation and comparison the pieces of information derived from texts, personal experience, or authentic materials are analysed and discussed. Awareness, then, results from experience with an insight into one's own and the foreign culture which comes with more intensive contact. But this contact, be it on a personal or a textual level, needs to be prepared so that information, interpretation and comparison play together to further cultural understanding.

The table on page 60 lists a number of 'Landeskunde' activities suitable for the elementary and intermediate stages of foreign language learning under consideration here. They are roughly grouped according to their dominant goals, but the divisions between techniques are rarely clear-cut, and teachers may well employ one set of methods for a different purpose. The emphasis lies on those types of learning activities which involve the pupils as individuals and make their learning multi-dimensional.

The activities listed in the table reflect some techniques for 'Landeskunde' teaching in foreign language classes in Germany

and elsewhere. However, a lot more goes on in the classrooms of dedicated teachers which we do not know about, because the teachers involved have not published descriptions of their teaching ideas. As the pupils grow older and more confident in the foreign language, the ways of learning culture can be far more varied. Although there is by no means a clear-cut progression in the topics, materials and methods of cultural learning, certain trends can be observed: In the case of the topics dealt with, there is a movement from the daily lives of individual young people to society at large, and also from the ordinary to the extraordinary. The materials used grow in complexity as the course progresses, and throughout the years considered here there is an emphasis on authentic texts and on direct contact with the target culture. Not all texts used in class have to be completely within the learners' range of lexical and grammatical knowledge. More complex materials might be used for skimming or scanning exercises, where only parts of the information contained in a text have to be understood. At the end of the German 'Sekundarstufe I' (tenth class) pupils are able to deal with simple foreign language texts and films without step by step guidance by the teacher. That means that they can find out a lot about cultural topics through their own reading. Cultural studies are not always confined to the foreign language class. There is a lot of scope for intercurricular cooperation. Teaching another subject like history or geography of the foreign country in the foreign language can be a powerful path to cultural learning. Sometimes extra skills are needed in order to reap the full benefit of a cultural activity. This is where the teacher becomes very important.

A foreign language taught in the way described here requires well-trained, knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers. Interest is often created and maintained by teacher involvement. Teachers who can bring the target culture into the classroom, who for instance talk about their own travels and contacts in English speaking countries are even more important than the text-book. The personality of the teachers and their interest in their subject are a decisive factor in the learners' attitude towards this subject. Of course, that does not mean that all teachers have to have the same interests: it does not really matter if the pupils' curiosity for the target culture is fired by the teacher's interest in Scottish castles or her love for the Californian lifestyle or even a fascination with something out of the way like sheep farming in New Zealand. Just because it is their teacher's hobby horse it can prove to be the easiest access to the other culture. A genuine interest in one or more aspects of the target culture on the part of the teacher ensures that the teacher's curiosity and his or her willingness to learn continue. In this way teachers and pupils can discover new areas of investigation together. This personal approach, of course, is complemented by the more systematic 'Landeskunde' in textbooks and materials.

Ideally, foreign language teachers have spent some time abroad and maintain contacts with the target culture. The qualities which Baxter (1983, 309f.) ascribes to the 'effective person overseas' constitute part of the good foreign language teacher's profile: flexible, full of respect for the different culture, a good listener, cooperative, sensitive, in control, and able to make contact. Add to these a high degree of foreign language proficiency, a big repertoire of different skills and teaching techniques combined with methodological imagination and a pinch of humour and you might have an ideal mixture. We need teachers like these who create an atmosphere of lively interest in other peoples in their foreign language classes if a united multicultural Europe is to be a possible future.

Note

1. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the 1989 Manchester Symposium on 'The social and cultural impact of foreign language teaching'. I would like to thank all participants of the symposium for a stimulating discussion which helped me to clarify my own thoughts on the subject.

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Who to contact?

NCET Information Officer, or Roger Blamire, Modern Language Co-ordinator, National Council for Educational Technology, Science Park, Coventry CV4 7EZ. Telephone (0203) 416994 (electronic mail 84: MTT085).

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