

A Total German Approach: Reflections of Teaching in the Target Language

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Abstract

In this brief paper I write about my reflections on teaching the first half of an introductory German as a Second Language course (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*) exclusively in the target language. I compare and contrast my teaching in the target language with my past experiences in using a multilingual approach. The reason for recording my reflections was to learn more about my own teaching in terms of my successes, problems and concerns related to teaching in the target language. In teaching previous German courses, I used a multilingual instructional approach made up of a language combination of German, English and Japanese that did not adhere to any set classroom language policy as to when or how long I should teach in any one of the three languages.

Rationale for Teaching in the Target Language

The rationale behind my decision to teach exclusively in German was twofold. First, there was a need to prepare for an upcoming change in the foreign-language curriculum at my university. Several of the introductory foreign language courses were designated to be instructed exclusively in the target language in the following year with one of my introductory German courses being among them. In the past I had instructed German through a combination of German, English and Japanese.

The second reason dealt with my concern in providing my students with as much comprehensible input in German as possible. Although the majority of the lessons in my previous courses were in German, I would sometimes utilize English or Japanese when explaining a point that was particularly challenging for my students to understand. Since the class met only once a week, it seemed expedient for me to use any linguistic tool at my disposal.

I received positive feedback from past students in regard to my multilingual approach in teaching German (Bulach, 2016). According to Crouse (2012), “today’s language classrooms increasingly reflect ACTFL’s recommendation that communication in the target language comprises at least 90% of instructional time.” (p 23). However, I often thought that I was committing a disservice toward my students by speaking in another language when they could be receiving additional comprehensible input in German. Why not teach 100% of the time in the target language? My goal then was to provide 100% of my input in the first half of the course in German. The challenge for me was whether I would be up to the task of making the content comprehensible enough for my students.

The Students

There were 35 students in my target language class who came from the Faculty of Literature represented by several majors. As is typical of students entering universities in Japan, all of those in my class had studied English at the secondary level for six years, but this was the first German course for them.

The Content

Lesson time and teaching efficiency were factors in my instruction. The class met once a week for 90 minutes for a total of fifteen times in the semester. For the purposes of my research, I instructed the first 8 class meetings exclusively in the target language, followed by 7 sessions using a multilingual approach consisting of mostly German but also some English and Japanese.

The textbook for the first semester German course was *Schritte I* published by Hueber Verlag. This is a standard textbook commonly found in German as a Second Language classrooms throughout the world. The content is designated for students to reach the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and prepares them for managing daily communicative situations that they might encounter in German-speaking countries. There are a total of seven units that cover topics related to greetings, family, shopping, the home, free time, children and school. Each unit introduces linguistic items in short readings combined with listening support as well as speaking, listening and vocabulary exercises. A workbook is attached to

the back of the textbook with each section corresponding to a respective unit in the textbook.

Although grammar is not overtly emphasized in the textbook, a few grammatical points are listed on one page at the end of each unit but without instructions. These grammar points are found in the various exercises of each unit and in the corresponding workbook sections.

The first three units in the textbook were covered in the first semester, while the following four units were covered in a higher-level course.

Reflections

=====Target Language Lessons=====

Week 1:

- Students responded energetically to hearing me introduce myself in the TL and going over TL sounds;
- Taught greetings in the TL-students easily grasped the content;
- Distributed and went over a list of common classroom questions used in the classroom. Students appeared to understand them;
- A good first start.

Week 2:

- Reviewed classroom questions – good responses;
- Continued with greetings/ introductions but modeled dialogue with other students;
- Used many gestures and facial expressions in my modeling.

Week 3:

- Got my first quizzical looks from students in regard to teaching the conjugations of “sein” (the verb “be”) and “haben” (the verb “have”) and how to use them;
- Two students came up to me after class to say that they didn’t understand how to use “sein” and “haben”. They spoke to me in English. I provided an explanation to them in German, but not sure if they understood;
- Some students still don’t have dictionaries – more essential now that I don’t translate the vocabulary for them.

Week 4:

- Students appear to understand the conjugation patterns with other verbs but helpful if they looked up the meanings in their dictionaries, stressed to students the importance of reviewing vocabulary before class;
- Positive reaction and comprehension of simple conversation drills;
- Mingle sheets (list of questions that students ask each other) are helpful to get students to talk to each other in the TL, students seem to like it.

Week 5:

- Students required more time than students in multilingual classes in comprehending interrogatives. Easier if I had used English equivalents to help me explain;
- Explained basic sentence structure. Extensive repetition;
- More writing on board.

Week 6:

- Good response to conjugation drills. Overall good comprehension;
- Started with possessive articles, wish I could just translate them into English;
- Have become more insistent about students looking up vocabulary before class.

Week 7:

- Tiring to explain so much when they could simply look up the words in a dictionary to review their homework.

Week 8:

- Explained the usage of articles (masculine, feminine, neutral), both definite and indefinite, in the nominative case, more time-consuming than usual;
- One student asked for clarification in Japanese after class. I explained the nominative case again.

=====Multilingual Lessons=====

Week 9:

- Reviewed the nominative case again but used some English and Japanese. Students seemed to comprehend better;
- Started with negative articles, compared and contrasted with English—very easy to explain.

Week 10:

- Presented adjectives and negation with “nicht” (not), easily understood by comparing/contrasting with English equivalents;
- Worked on describing places of living—ad libbed about living in an apartment in Germany.

Week 11:

- Continued with describing places of living. Read a short story (one long paragraph) in the workbook section out loud about a person describing his home, then translated directly into English. Noted students writing English above the German words. Would have been more time – consuming if only in German.

Week 12:

- Instructed numbers in German – easy for students;
- Started with teaching how to tell the time in German, did not use English or Japanese, but students asked me in English for clarification;
- Taught how to use split infinitive verbs – explained in German, then in English.

Week 13:

- Explained the accusative case in German – challenging for students, then explained in English and Japanese;
- Practiced sentence structures in nominative and accusative cases. Used a bit of English and Japanese.

Week 14:

- Continued with accusative case in German only;
- Went over daily activities, used TPR at first, then mostly German, but some English and Japanese.

Week 15:

- Continued with daily activities, mostly German but used English for difficult points;
- Students responded to questions in German about their daily activities.

Discussion

Prior to starting the course, I held the strong conviction that maximum exposure to the target language would serve to enhance my students' acquisition of German by having them negotiate meaning with me in it at all times. I believed that this would set the stage for students to make attempts, no matter how small they were, in using German more freely in the classroom.

My students were very enthusiastic to learn German through German in the first few weeks. The acquisition rate in the first three lessons was very similar to what I had experienced in my multilingual German classes. Students learned the sound system, responded eagerly to my stock of basic classroom questions and commands that I had provided them, were able to answer my questions in unison and performed the dialogues with one another without problems. They were also adept at learning verb conjugation patterns.

I quickly discovered the importance of the list of common classroom questions that I had provided my students on the first day of class. I anticipated my students' needs prior to the start of the course, but I quickly expanded the number of questions on the list as the course progressed. The list was a common reference sheet for my students. I received unsolicited questions from students who often referred to the list.

The major drawback to my exclusive use of the target language was in how it limited the degree to which I usually *ad lib*, use humor, and tell anecdotes in English or Japanese. My tendency to add *a bit of color* to my lessons contributes to a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and lowers my students' affective filter, but my students' lack of knowledge of German made it more difficult for them to engage in these tangential asides in the target language lessons. This all changed after the ninth week, however, when I started to use English. Students immediately understood me, although I made sure to keep my personal remarks to a minimum.

By staying in the target language, I became more aware of how much I relied on my gestures, body language, and facial expressions to aid me in helping my students understand the content of my lessons. I do this in my multilingual lessons as well, although I do not think to the same degree. At the same time, I found that relying on so much non-verbal language was more tiring for me than when I used verbal explanations.

Also, I realized that the written word was more essential in my target language lessons. In my multilingual lessons I wrote on the board but often translated directly from German into English. In this way, students could rely on their English language knowledge and compare and contrast German and English sentence structures. I found this to be a very beneficial way to teach German. There were enough cross-linguistic similarities between the languages to provide clarity to specific usages and even the differences enhanced my students' general understanding when I pointed them out. I refrained from resorting to this teaching strategy in my target language lessons in order to stay completely in the language. It became quickly apparent to me, however, that my avoidance in doing so resulted in having to write twice as much as when I used English. The amount of my writing decreased once I was able to use German and English from the ninth lesson.

Conclusion

Although writing about my reflections in teaching German through German and other languages is not an empirical investigation, it did offer me insights into the advantages and disadvantages of teaching in the target language. I believe there is a place for teaching exclusively in the target language but success is largely dependent on the amount of time and effort that the instructor has or puts into it. Based on my perspective as a language instructor, having English and Japanese to teach German made it easier for me to achieve my pedagogical goals within a limited time frame.

References

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