

Incorporating Culture in the German Language Classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, I briefly describe my experiences teaching German culture in target language courses over two years with the aid of digital technology at a Japanese university. I knew that teaching the target culture can motivate students to improve their skills in the target language but factors such as time constraints, a lack of available resources, and a reluctance to overly depend on my own cultural experiences kept me from including culture as a regular lesson component to the same degree as I did with other language skills. During the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to online instruction, however, I became more comfortable using digital technology, which made me reassess the teaching of German culture in my language courses.

The Courses

The courses discussed in this essay covered four semesters ranging from basic introductory German from the A1.1 level to the A1.2 on the CEFR. The students were non-German majors from various departments in the Faculty of Literature. Lessons were a duration of 100 minutes and took place once a week for a total of 14 weeks each semester.

I instructed students via Zoom in the first year but switched to face to face instruction in the following year. I used Google Classroom as the designated Learning Management System through which I managed, organized, distributed class materials and weekly assignments. I conducted the class mostly in German but occasionally used English or Japanese whenever I thought it was advantageous to do so, although I first provided explanations in German. I conducted 70%~75% of my instruction in the target language.

Reactions to Culture as an Educational Component

The First Year

My less than enthusiastic view of the role of culture in the language classroom all changed when I switched to synchronous online instruction. Because of online instruction, I became much more reliant on using my PC to teach German. Due to the suddenness of having to teach my students online, I became concerned with their motivation levels. As the

weeks filled with online lessons went by, some of my students informed me in breakout room sessions about their desire to meet and get to know their classmates better outside of class.

I reflected on how I could get my students to meet each other online not just for the purpose of completing the assigned coursework but to find an enjoyable and interesting way through which they could use the target language. Culture seemed to be the perfect medium for achieving this goal. I researched the internet and found abundant YouTube videos about German culture, some of which were specifically made for German language learners, others that were targeted for the general German-speaking public and some that used English interspersed with German for the international audience. I covered the following cultural topics: formal versus informal talks, food (recipes, restaurants, eating at home), interacting with neighbors, interests, and student life. I found a YouTube video for each topic. I created a few questions related to the content contained in each video, put the questions on separate Google Documents and posted them under the Google Classroom heading of German Culture (not required). I explained to my students that they were not required to answer the questions and that completing or not completing them would not impact their final class grade in any way. If they did choose to do the exercises, however, I encouraged them to work together and so I put everyone into random groups of four to five students on Google Classroom. I informed students they could ask me questions pertaining to the cultural exercises whenever they wished via the comment section in Google Classroom Assignments, but I also allowed them to communicate on other platforms as long as they included me and their group members. In addition, I gave them the option to complete the exercises individually if they wished and submit their results to me via email.

By the end of each semester, all students had completed all of the culture exercises. I was able to monitor their participation via their texts and noticed they communicated mostly in Japanese with each other. I received a small number (12) of questions, three of which were written in German. Students did not feel comfortable with using Google Classroom's Comment Section, however and everyone opted to use Line instead. Line is the most popular mobile messenger app in Japan. I also found Line more accessible than Google Classroom, as I tend to view Google Classroom on my PC but Line on my smartphone. I refrained from texting students even though I was tempted to do so now and then. Students were quick to text with each other about answering the culture exercise questions even though their comments often went off topic.

I posed a simple, open-ended question to students about their thoughts on the German culture exercises at the end of each semester. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive with some stating they found the cultural content interesting, while most saying they enjoyed texting with their classmates and getting to know them better, albeit virtually. Their positive reactions gave me the impetus to introduce culture as a regular lesson component in the following academic year.

The Second Year

The higher-level courses in the following year were made up of almost the same students who had taken the lower-level courses in the previous year. Unlike the first year, I incorporated the culture exercises into the regular coursework for which students received points upon completion. As a lesson component, I limited video viewing to 10 minutes at a time. If necessary, I had students complete any unfinished video viewing outside of class.

In the first semester, the majority of the lessons were online while the last several weeks were conducted face to face. While online, I continued to use the same approach to teaching culture as I had done in the first year with the main difference being that I showed videos during class time. When face to face classes resumed, I continued to rely heavily on Google Classroom for posting assignments, supplemental materials and the culture exercises and related YouTube videos. The topics aligned closely with the textbook content: work culture, healthcare, polite versus impolite language, and festivals.

When time permitted, I showed a few minutes of videos interspersed with my explanations. I encouraged students to watch the videos in their entirety outside of class and instructed them to submit their digital assignments to Google Classroom. Students were very attentive while watching the video segments in class and listening to my related explanations. Since the class took place during the last period of the day, students were in no hurry to leave and two or three of them would usually approach me after the lesson to ask additional questions regarding the cultural points I had just presented.

Why not culture?

My many years as a second language instructor and researcher provided me with opportunities, experiences and time to develop my teaching strategies and techniques up to the point where I was confident about my skill set. In my German language courses, I focused primarily on teaching students speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar and to a

slightly lesser extent reading and writing. I did not place culture on an equal footing with these other skills. But why not? I knew of its ever-increasing importance in L2 classrooms. As Dema and Moeller (2012) point out, “the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for K-12 Learners include sections on both cultural competence and linguistic performance and delineate how well students should perform in L2 linguistic and cultural domains as a result of foreign language instruction (p. 78).

I was very familiar with German culture in general, but simply put, I felt constrained by time, what I thought was a lack of available resources and more than anything, a reluctance to continue explaining my own cultural experiences. According to Wintergerst and McVeigh (2014), culture is a dynamic concept and ever-changing (p. 3). Prior to my experience with online teaching, I would ask myself whether my personal cultural experiences were representative of German culture in general. I shared the notion that “culture” can mean different things to different people in different contexts. (Nieto, 2001, p. 135). Was the way I viewed culture relevant to young people, not only to young Japanese university students but also to young Germans? I was not so sure.

In the past, I avoided bringing up any discussions of culture in the classroom, because it was not sufficiently addressed in the textbook and searching for supplemental materials was time consuming and difficult. I did take pictures of certain cultural episodes from my visits to Germany and shared them with my students, but I realized they provided insufficient background information. Of course, I knew about YouTube, but I underestimated its pedagogical impact in a foreign language classroom until I looked into it for purposes of online learning and discovered that even reputable German language learning organizations such as the Goethe-Institut and Deutsche Welle were very much involved in their use as an educational tool. (Chorna et al., 2019, p. 297) It was only after looking at such videos that I began to see and appreciate the high degree of professionalism involved in their production. I realized I could easily show students the target culture and how young people throughout the world were experiencing German culture.

Spending time on teaching culture during a lesson was definitely an issue but I soon discovered that students easily accessed my assigned online materials, such as YouTube links, outside of class, and did it with enthusiasm. I had not appreciated how adept my students already were in using digital technology and the motivation they showed in completing online work was much greater than when they used paper and pencil. Using digital technology

during class also addressed the problem I had been having in finding the time to fit culture into a lesson. “What is striking about the use of YouTube is that students are learning without knowing that they are learning” (Saed et al., 2021, p. 2). Learning was indeed taking place.

The easy access to authentic materials available on digital technology makes it difficult to choose not to include culture in the foreign language classroom. The classroom is in reality an artificial environment in which to learn any language even though teaching approaches, strategies and techniques have greatly advanced in the past few decades. Teaching the target culture through a textbook greatly mirrors this same lack of realism. Internet technology, however, has proven to be a game changer in foreign language education, particularly in the area of intercultural instruction. Instructors can now bring the target culture into the classroom, and as Dai (2011, p. 1033) notes:

Through multimedia and network technology the teacher can offer students not only rich sources of authentic learning materials, but also an attractive and friendly interface, vivid pictures and pleasant sounds, which to a large extent overcome the lack of authentic language environment and arouses students’ interest in learning.

In my own classes, teaching culture with the aid of YouTube videos was of immense value. For the first time, I could actually show students the customs and beliefs inherent in German culture even at the most basic levels of everyday life. Technology has allowed us bring the target culture into the classroom and make it as important as other language skills.

Conclusion

Although most language instructors would agree that cultural knowledge is important in any foreign language study program, educators are still unclear about how to incorporate it into our curricula. We tend to focus on getting students to achieve tests results that evaluate students’ proficiency levels in speaking, listening, reading, writing vocabulary, grammar but often overlook culture as a discrete educational component. In my own case, I was reluctant to teach it in depth, because it took time away from my instruction of other language skills, the recognition of my own lack of knowledge about finding appropriate resources and my unwillingness to use my personal experiences as the basis of cultural knowledge. My view of the difficulties in teaching culture went through a radical change as I improved my knowledge of how to use digital technology in the classroom. With the aid of digital technology, specifically using YouTube videos, I recognized that it enabled me to incorporate culture into

my German language curriculum.

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