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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Foreign language instruction occupies a unique position at the university, in contradistinction both to foreign language instruction at other institutions and to other subjects of university instruction. My awareness of this position plays a central role in my teaching. Thus, explaining my teaching philosophy will require first explaining the doubly unique position of the subject I teach.

In many settings, for instance at a community college or in a computer-based course, the goal of foreign language instruction is to build proficiency in communication skills for purposes of business or pleasure. The currently dominant paradigm of communicative language teaching is well suited to this goal. However, the university language classroom must address a more complex end; namely, enabling students to engage critically with literature, culture, and history in another language. This sort of learning requires more than mere communicative language teaching, and will sometimes require teaching in a manner out-of-step with some of the common practices of a communicative approach.

The insights into culture, literature, and history only available to a foreign language student give the foreign language classroom a special place at the university. The 21st century university must educate students for a multicultural, multilingual world. In order to think critically about this world, students must learn to think critically about their own language and culture, and foreign language study plays a necessary role in the development of this kind of self-reflexive thinking. Through learning foreign languages, students can gain meaningful insights into the role of language in identity formation, cultural differentiation, and power negotiation. To do this, however, students have to begin developing linguistic and cultural self-awareness at the earliest stages of language learning, and this requires moving beyond a style of teaching that overemphasizes immersion in the target language at the expense of the kind of higher level thinking that requires use of the first language.

Having said this, I am not an opponent of a communicative approach, and many of my teaching practices are informed by this tradition. Mine is a classroom in which students use the target language in order to accomplish meaningful tasks. It is a classroom in which culturally authentic materials are integrated into lessons. It is a classroom largely aligned with Stephen Krashen's five hypotheses, in which I seek to keep student's affective filters lowered while providing rich, comprehensible input.

During the first week of class, even in the first semester of German, I do not utter a word of English to my students. My first priority is for the students to become comfortable learning inductively in a target-language only environment. During these first days, we develop a set of characters for an ongoing class narrative – this is a sort of “TPRS-lite” activity, in which we work together as a class to tell a story over the course of the semester, with plenty of instructor introduced twists that allow many new grammatical forms and lexical items to be introduced through the story. In the first days we also formulate class rules and the students become accustomed to my frenetic, energetic teaching style. I believe student motivation is the single
most important aspect in learning, and thus I hope to infect my students with my enthusiasm.

Even in the opening days, and even at the most basic level, I include tidbits of literary and cultural history whenever possible. For instance, when teaching colors, I hand out different-colored German books. “Welche Farbe hat das Buch von Theodor Fontane?” Trivial as it may seem, such activities assure that even first semester German students have begun to develop a familiarity with German literary figures, and if nothing else, it demonstrates to them that there are such figures, and reminds them of the depth of the language they are studying, which extends not only to the more complex utterances they hear from their instructor or in authentic videos, but also back in time through the literary tradition.

As the class progresses, opportunities for critical reflection and deeper engagement with language and culture multiply. One important way in which I cultivate such opportunities is “Fremdsprachenfreitag.” I set aside the last half-hour of most weeks to discuss cultural and linguistic topics in English. The topics range from migration to morphology, and I seek to address issues that have come up during class in German but deserve the students’ full intellectual capacity. Even on the first day of German 1, students encounter concepts which demand serious consideration, for instance, gender in language. It is vital that we include meaningful discussion of these concepts as part of foreign language education, and a treatment commensurate with the intellectual abilities of our students requires that we give up the notion of an “immersion” environment, in which only the target language is used. (Though, as said above, I believe in providing rich, comprehensible input, and thus, apart from the Fremdsprachenfreitage, I conduct my class entirely in German.)

I believe that in-depth exploration of the cultural, linguistic, and literary topics that naturally arise when studying a foreign language is a vital part of foreign language education, particularly at the university level, and it is through such exploration that foreign language learning can assume its proper role in the university. Too often, we treat the learning of language as an obstacle to be overcome on the way to studying literature, rather than recognizing the tremendous potential of the language classroom for helping students develop sophisticated ways of thinking about the world around them. By exploiting this potential, we can develop in foreign language classes students who are more adept at handling cultural and literary information in any language. To reach this end, students must develop the ability to think critically about the foreign language, and about language generally, and they must begin to develop this ability in their first semester of study. Helping students develop this ability, and helping them gain new insights into language and culture which will serve them in every aspect of their studies, is the principal goal of my German classroom.