SPEAKING OF AND IN LANGUAGES: TOWARDS MORE DISCERNING ASSESSMENT IN THE INTERNATIONAL CLASSROOM

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Culture and Language Policies in the EU: course background

- Offered since 2009–2010 as part of a Cultural Studies Bachelor degree at JKU, Linz
- Elective course for exchange students (e.g. Erasmus) and other international undergraduates
- Objectives: introduction to subject-related terminology and overview of key aspects of European cultural and language policies (original policy papers, programs, implementation at EU, national, regional, local levels)
- Language of instruction: English (B2)
Student diversity — resource and challenge

- Class make-up: EU (55%), US (15%), Russia (10%), Asia (10%)
- Richer in-class discussions of why plurilingualism matters, the state of regional/minority languages, the growing M + English + 1 trend, etc.
- Unequal participation due to different educational background, widely ranging English skills, cultural attitudes

Providing fair feedback and assessment
Initial assessment criteria and tools

- **Major focus on content** (key facts, trends) and its **interpretation** (comparison, reflection) – 60% of grade

- **English language** competences in speaking and writing – 40%

- **Assignment formats**
  - ✓ Midterm in-class exam (facts, interpretation)
  - ✓ Short homework write-ups, quizzes (summary, comparison)
  - ✓ Group presentations (compile national policy profiles)
  - ✓ Presentation evaluation (individual choice of presentation to sum up and reflect upon – final course paper)
  - ✓ Participation and contribution to presentation group work
Traditional assessment in the international classroom

- Unfair to non-native English speakers (in all assignment formats)
- Unfair to international students familiar with other educational systems, class activities and assessment criteria
- Apparent advantage to English native speakers
Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as an extra layer in teaching and assessment – a combination of attitudes, values, knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviors which allow us to:

- Understand and respect those whom we perceive as culturally different from ourselves
- Interact effectively and appropriately with such people
- Establish positive and constructive relationships with such people

(Barrett, 2013)
Intercultural communicative competence in teaching and assessment

- More equal involvement of all students in class work
- More balanced and comprehensive observation of student effort and continuous performance
- Indispensable to the dynamic of mixed student groups
- Closely related to the course subject matter
- Increasingly promoted by the Council of Europe and EU institutions as a vital objective in educational curricula (Barrett et al., 2013)
- Specific focus in language teaching at JKU
A three-pronged approach to assessment – a simple model

- Intercultural competence
- Content
- Language
Bringing teaching and assessment together

Additional course objectives incorporating ICC:

1. Stronger focus on the interdependence between language and culture
   - language as a cultural product and catalyst
   - vocabulary and grammar skills < cross-cultural interaction
   - linguistic competence affords more than better social mobility and employment chances

2. EU language and culture diversity does not only depend on policy documents and projects – it is sustained by individual effort to explore the cultural “self” in relation to its “others”
Pedagogical methods to encourage and evaluate ICC

- Experiential learning – encountering cultural differences, comparing, analyzing, reflecting
- Cooperative learning – team work toward a common objective; individual and group responsibility
- Sample activities:
  - Discussion of texts about multiple perspectives on one’s own culture (e.g. H. Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema”)
  - In-class pair interviews about cultural attitudes – interviews may take place in more than one language
Towards performance-based assessment (Summer 2014)

- Assignments incorporating Content, Language and ICC, with a focus on student experience:
  - Quiz 1 – define/compare terms + self-assessment with regard to intercultural awareness and class experience
  - Midterm exam – factual answers + comment on a situation requesting cultural understanding and flexibility
  - Quiz 2 – analysis of ICC related terms/theories, comparison to own experience
  - Short homework paper – following pair interviews, students lay out in writing their individual experience, challenges, assumptions and conclusions (based on preliminary questions)
  - Reflective essay – final paper centered on learner’s experience as presenter, team member, listener
Quiz 1: Initial student feedback

- One-paragraph answers to:
  - One content-based question
  - Two questions asking for opinion, personal experience
    - decentering oneself from one’s own culture
    - perceived communicative challenges in course, JKU in general

- Responses:
  - About half of students have experienced their culture through the eyes of a cultural other; the rest are largely willing to do so
  - More than half think that cultural differences are of minor importance; those who struggle point to the advantage of English native speakers, different educational background, stereotypes
Expected outcomes

- As developing Intercultural Communicative Competence is a life-long process, the most realistic attainment target would be an overall positive change toward deeper reflection on the relativity of cultural norms, multiperspectivity, the role of language in self-expression.

- Assessment will draw on:
  - short homework paper following pair interviews, final reflection essay, final group interviews
  - holistic observation of student growth, individual effort
Culture and Language Policies in the EU: long-term objectives and approaches

- Assessment tools to test in future semesters:
  - culture and language portfolios (incl. e-portfolios)
  - Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Council of Europe, 2009)
  - ethnographic element for deeper cultural immersion
  - readings and class discussions in other languages


THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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