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)

Culture and Language Policies in the EU: first experience in Summer 2013

- ☐ 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

A likely solution ?

□ **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
- Indispensible 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
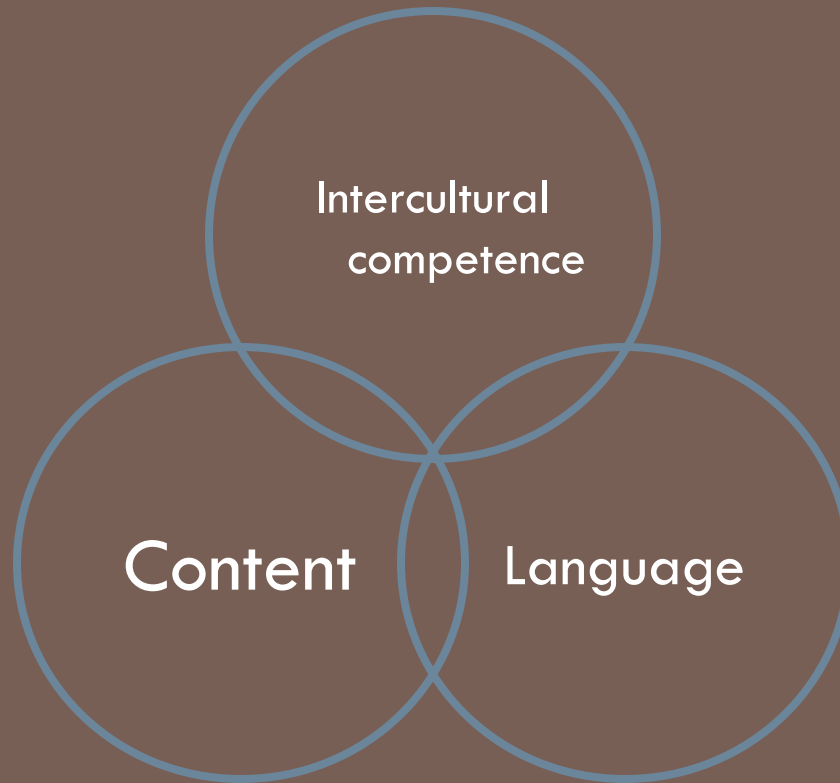
Language

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"

Shifting approaches to learning: Summer 2014

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

Sources

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION !

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