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CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES IN THE GERMAN-FOR-BUSINESS COURSE

The foreign-language classroom has seen significant changes over the last two decades. Methodology of language acquisition changed (ACTFL 1986) and national standards for language teaching from Kindergarten to college were developed (ACTFL 1996). Both these phenomena have caused a shift in emphasis away from the instructor towards the student. Instructors no longer lecture in front of the class, but instead actively engage the student in the learning process. The national standards set a framework to enable students to communicate in the target language in real-life contexts (Shultz 5).

This shift in emphasis makes it imperative that instructors know exactly what their students are learning and how they are learning. (See Cross for details on how and why students learn.) A number of techniques have been developed towards this end, which have become known as classroom assessment techniques or CATs. The best-known collection of these is the handbook *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Angelo and Cross published in 1993. This article will not concern itself with the rationale for assessment, but will detail the author's experience with the use of classroom assessment techniques and tools in German-for-Business courses. (See Banta, Palombo, and Phye for classroom assessment in general.)

The primary aim of classroom assessment is "to educate and improve student performance and not merely to audit it" (Wiggins 1998, 7). It is learner-centered and ongoing. It is not separate from instruction, but an integrated part of teaching and learning. Classroom assessment techniques produce non-graded, anonymous statements by students after a class period or a special topic. They can be administered in a synchronous or asynchronous manner. They can be simple or somewhat complex. They can be done by paper and pencil or electronically. (See

USMA for ideas on electronic assessment.) They provide a “snapshot” of student comprehension, which enables the instructor to adjust the following class period in line with the results of the assessment. Results are shared with students in a timely manner and this feedback enables them to improve their performance and understanding before being tested and graded. “Testing cannot provide... a way to help students systematically to self-correct their performance” (Wiggins 1998, xi). Two studies in 1994 showed that the use of CATs positively effects retention and student satisfaction (Kalina and Catlin 5; Nummedal).

Some classroom assessment techniques are more suitable to assess for technical skills, such as specific abilities relating to a subject matter. Others are more suitable to assess for competencies such as understanding connections or tolerance of ambiguity. Therefore, the first step in classroom assessment needs to be the establishment of teaching goals for the section one wants to assess. Is it knowledge of a concept like currency reform or something more abstract like understanding a profound cultural difference, or maybe synthesis of a large body of information? The next step consists of explaining the procedure to the students and how the feedback they will receive will aid their learning and understanding. It is imperative that they understand that we learn through receiving and using feedback. (See Rennie for a preliminary assessment checklist.)

THE MINUTE PAPER

One of the most basic CATs is called the “Minute Paper” (Angelo and Cross, 148–153). Judging by the number of web pages where this technique is mentioned it appears to be the most popular CAT. Harvard professors have called this technique one of the most effective innovations in their teaching (Quoted in Wiggins 1998, 94). It is useful for assessing course-related knowledge and skills and shows to what extent students see the “big picture.” Time and energy required on the part of the instructor are low. Students are asked to spend a couple of minutes to answer the following questions: “What was the most important point you learned today?” and “What important question remains unanswered?” This provides manageable information of student comprehension and highlights issues needing to be clarified. Addressing major points during the next class period eradicates misunderstandings and helps students proceed with their studies. Since results are quick and

easy to analyze, this technique is very useful in large classes. To gather the same insight from homework assignments from thirty students would be much more time-consuming. The instructor may vary the question posed to the students, for example by asking about the most surprising element, maybe the most disturbing idea or the circumstances that differ most from the American setting.

The examples below are all derived from a recent German-for-Business course dealing with topics in economics and were translated by the author. The class topic was the upcoming enlargement of the European Union by several new members from Eastern Europe. Two of the comments to the first question were:

- 1) I had considered this a purely economic matter and had not realized that it has political consequences.
- 2) I previously thought about the EU in terms of banana wars and not something to be taken seriously by Americans.

Some of the comments to the second question were also very interesting:

5. I am in the Reserves. If Poland becomes a member of the EU would I really have to defend their borders against the Russians?
6. Why will some untrained person without German skills be able to work in Germany without work permit and I cannot, even though I speak the language and know the culture?

These answers show some misunderstanding about the roles of EU and NATO. Obviously, our discussions had touched on some personal resentment that had not been voiced in class. Without this assessment technique, the instructor might not have been aware of these issues in time to address them.

A variation of the Minute Paper is called the “Muddiest Point” (154–158). Assessment techniques do not come any simpler than this one: “What was the muddiest point in today’s topic?” However, it provides large amounts of useful information with a minimal outlay of time and effort. It forces students to identify what it is they do not understand and articulate it, which is not an easy task. It is a very useful technique for

topics where large amounts of information are passed on. A word of warning may be useful here, sometimes the points raised cannot be answered in a short time during class and may need another form of response. The following three examples are cases in point. They are responses to the “Muddiest Point” halfway through discussion of the subject “Aufbau Ost,” the economic reconstruction and restructuring of the former East Germany.

- 10) Why do Germans have such a funny attitude towards money and wealth?
- 11) When are they going to get over this guilt thing?
- 12) I don't understand this socialism stuff.

Sometimes the ego of the instructor better be strong: “There isn't one point, I don't understand any of this stuff.” Most of the time, though, points can be cleared up very quickly and to the benefit of all students. In this class, students posted all their responses anonymously to the instructor on a web page bulletin board and the instructor then shared the results with all the students and suggested material for extra reading. This method was chosen because “a fair assessment is one in which students are given equitable opportunities to demonstrate what they know” (Suskie 7).

ONE-SENTENCE-SUMMARY

For assessing skills in synthesis and creative thinking, the author used two CATs which the students thoroughly enjoyed and wanted to do later as homework assignments and not just as quick assessments. The first of these is called the “One-Sentence-Summary” (Angelo & Cross 183–187). Students write a long, grammatically correct summary in one sentence: “Who does what to whom, when, where, how and why?” It forces students to be at the same time creative and concise about a large body of information. The instructor can scan these sentences quickly and draw conclusions. Care needs to be taken that the information can indeed be summarized in this way. If the instructor cannot do it, the students probably cannot either. This assessment exercise translates very easily into a homework assignment where at times an inelegant sentence is turned into an informative polished piece of short prose.

This technique has a major advantage in a German-for-Business course. It helps students to grasp complex material and to explain it back in non-technical language. The majority of students in these courses at our institution have advanced oral proficiency because they lived two years in a German-speaking country on missionary service before entering our program. On the other hand, they usually have no background in business or economics and struggle with many of the topics discussed, even in their mother tongue. Quick and easy assessment becomes crucial under these circumstances.

During discussions about the conditions necessary to make currency reform a success in Germany after the Second World War, students were asked to write a one-sentence summary. This was one of the results:

Who	Ludwig Erhard	Ludwig Erhard
Does what?	hebt ..auf	abolishes
To whom/what?	Preiskontrollen	price control
When?	im Sommer 1948	in summer 1948
Where?	im Radio	on the radio
How?	gegen den Willen der Alliierten	against the will of the allies
Why?	um den Erfolg der Währungsreform zu garantieren	to guarantee the success of currency reform

INVENTED DIALOGUE

Currency reform also provides the example to demonstrate the CAT called “Invented Dialogue” (203–207). In contrast to the previous techniques, this one is time-consuming both for the students and the instructor. Students are asked to invent reasonable quotes that fit the character of the speakers and the context which is set by the instructor. Students may use two historical contemporaries and imagine a dialogue between them or cast a personality from the past with one from the present. This is an advanced-level task where students have to be creative

and synthesize their information and perhaps extrapolate beyond their classroom knowledge. It is an excellent partner exercise and may be extended later into a homework assignment and performed in class. Having to invent brief appropriate dialogue fosters higher-order thinking skills and makes abstract concepts more concrete. This technique demonstrates that information alone does not give judgment. It works better after students are thoroughly familiar with a topic as they perceive this task, rightly so, as a considerable challenge. By popular vote in the class, the following dialogue was considered the best out of twenty:

- Erhard: Denk' dran, Helmut, niedrige Steuern, wenig Regierung, das richtige Umtauschverhältnis. Dann kann nichts schief gehen.
- Kohl: Aber dann wählt mich ja keiner!
- Erhard: Wenn das neue Wirtschaftswunder mit den "blühenden Landschaften" kommt, wirst du wirklich der "Kanzler des Jahrhunderts."
(Erhard: Remember, Helmut, low taxes, little government, the proper exchange rate and nothing can go wrong.
Kohl: But then nobody will vote for me.
Erhard: When the new economic miracle with the "flourishing landscapes" will arrive, you will really become the "Chancellor of the Century.")

This refers, of course, to Ludwig Erhard, in charge of currency reform in 1948, which was a great success and was one of the reasons for Germany's subsequent "economic miracle." There are many parallels to currency reform under Helmut Kohl in 1990, which was not deemed an instant success. The "flourishing landscapes" were promised by Kohl to the citizens of East Germany, a quote which came to haunt him in later years.

RSQC2

Another one of the students' favorite CATs is called RSQC2 (344–348). The letters stands for Recall, Summarize, Question, Comment and Connect. It is modular and guides students quickly through summary, evaluation and synthesis. It requires low levels of time and energy on the part of instructor and students. It provides students with the opportunity

to integrate new information with previously acquired knowledge. It is particularly useful in a German-for-Business course where students often lack preparation in the business background, but have good language skills. This technique can be used very effectively after a longer topic with intricate ramifications to other topics. For advanced-level classes it is useful sometimes to use just the two C's, Comment and Connect, to demonstrate the ability to synthesize information and to connect ideas. If students are able to adapt knowledge to novel situations, they have understood the causal relationships. This approach reflects the way students will be expected to use their knowledge and skills on their future jobs. In addition, this assessment technique demonstrates which values students emphasize in contrast to the instructor. It is structured enough for students to carry out the task relatively fast. It helps learning by forcing students to attach the new information to a category already established and to concentrate on major points of the course.

RSQC2 became the favorite technique of this group of students. They requested to be tested in a similar way where connections and comments became the most important item. As a result, tests consisted of a few meaningful quotes which students had to connect and comment upon. The resulting work was more thoughtful and perspicacious than previous exams. At times, when used as an assessment exercise and short comments were expected, students wrote lengthy paragraphs because they wanted to connect the new information to knowledge acquired in other classes or in the work place.

RSQC2 was used at the end of a discussion of the recent tax reform passed in Germany. Students were asked to summarize the important changes in tax rates, comment on the consequences for the "Deutschland AG," connect this topic to "Standort Deutschland," and formulate a question if anything remained unclear. Four-fifth of the students mentioned all the important rate changes and their time frames and made connections between the three topics. Two students did not understand the term "Standort Deutschland" as signifying the attractiveness of Germany as a recipient of foreign direct investment, which is influenced by a reduction in the corporate tax rate. Another two students did not understand the symbolic meaning of "Deutschland AG" as the interconnection between large corporations and banks, holding large parcels of shares of each other and therefore having representatives on the supervisory boards of each other. The tax reform provided a clause

that these holdings when sold will be totally exempt from capital gains tax. This will likely lead to a restructuring of corporate Germany. The two students wrote that share prices of the “Deutschland AG” would rise and that they would buy some soon for the virtual portfolio they have to keep for this class.

CONCLUSIONS

The above examples show that classroom assessment techniques are crucial in a German-for-Business course to find out quickly and early what students are learning and understanding. Homework assignments in a large class can take a long time to correct and test time is too late to affect student learning. CATs enable the instructor to adapt material quickly and appropriately and can prevent unnecessary repetition. Students have the opportunity to ask questions after they have contemplated the material and they can do so electronically at a time convenient to them. These techniques also provide a chance for the less vocal students to express their opinions and questions. One of the most important advantages may be that this type of assessment shows students that their conceptions are provisional and constantly need to be revised. This awareness may foster the desire for life-long learning. With the help of regular classroom assessment students will be taught “as if learning mattered most” (Angelo 1999, 3).

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