Teaching Philosophy

My philosophy is based on the conviction that students' needs, interests, and personal experiences need to be the center of a communicative and meaningful language learning and teaching process. I firmly believe that the teacher is not the only one who can provide valuable input and insight. Every student brings her or his own little suitcase filled with personal experience, cultural background, interests, and ideas to class. I am grateful for that and willing to make use of these different backgrounds. My aim is to create a learning environment that is more than just a classroom filled with people, a board and a teacher. I see students as equal partners. This principle given, my approach also involves the following three points.

1. Knowing Students' Interests and Needs

In my three years of experience as a German teacher I came to realize that good intentions and enthusiasm are not of much help if students are just not interested in a certain topic. Following not only my intuition but also current research (Long, 2015, Rod, 2003, Willis & Willis, 2007), I always have one goal for my students in mind: learning to communicate in German. This ability is not only the most rewarding but also the most useful one. Students can actually speak in German, negotiate meaning, and complete real-life tasks such as buying groceries or applying for a job. This, too, means that it is my role as a teacher to first find out and evaluate what exactly it is that a particular group of students and also individual students want to be able to do at the end of their language learning process. And even if I then know that, for instance, most students are planning on going abroad for one reason or the other, there are still countless approaches and details to consider. Are there many students interested in business-related topics? We can, for example, learn in class how to succeed in an interview for an accountant position rather than in an interview for a translator or industry job. The basic phrases and pragmatics would still be the same (How to properly introduce yourself, how to dress, how to talk about work experience ...) and yet, it can be done in a way that specifically addresses students' needs and interests. In short, I see it as my responsibility to help students become the future (German speaking) self they envision to be, and I fully agree with Michigan State University's school motto: "Advancing Knowledge. Transforming Lives." All I would like to add to this is "with German!"

2. Teaching for Life

As I indicated before, it is important to understand students as different personalities with different interests and backgrounds. This means, one class will never be the same as the others. And this has two implications: 1. Students' lives consist not only of school and homework, and 2. I, too, will learn

something new from every class. I want students and myself to not only learn for school and grades but also for life. At MSU I have learned that it is important for students' desires to match the curriculum. Here the learning goals include: Analytical Thinking, Cultural Understanding, Effective Citizenship, Effective Communication, and Integrated Reasoning (*Undergraduate Learning Goals*, 2015). These are skills that are also essential in life outside of school, while meeting new people, while finding one's way around in a new (or their own) culture, or while dealing with spoken or written texts, etc. Therefore, I think that it is imperative not only to explicitly teach knowledge, but also to focus on those underlying mental and cultural skills.

3. Being flexible

Much research has been done on teaching methods, assessments, and definitions of cultural competence (cf. Schulz, 2007, Long, 2015). Everything always seems to be in motion, and the way of teaching I was taught in my graduate program might, in a few years, not be the best option anymore. Therefore, it is crucial that I keep myself and my teaching and assessment methods up to date, and that I never stop striving for better options and insights. I want to only rely on carefully chosen sources and research, which means, I will always try to stay on top of things and to improve my own skills. This also means that I will work with the curriculum and textbooks that are given to me. At the same time, however, I will apply my knowledge and skills, such as the insight that task-based language teaching is highly desirable, to adjust activities and lesson plans in the realm of my responsibilities and my given authority in order to make them compatible with the principles of task-based language teaching (Ellis, 2003).

References

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