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THE CHALLENGE OF  
TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCE:  
BACKGROUND READING OF TARGET CULTURE  
CURRENT EVENTS ARTICLES

ABSTRACT

At the lower and intermediate-levels of language instruction, students do not have sufficient language proficiency to inform themselves about current events in the target language. Knowledge of current events is an important part of cultural competence and should not be absent from instruction because of linguistic restrictions. This article proposes to remedy this problem, by creating out-of-class reading assignments of current events articles from US and international English language news sources. The article provides practical information on selection criteria for articles, suggests news sources, and gives examples of assignments.

KEYWORDS: culture, current events, reading

INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of foreign language education? The answer to this seemingly simple question is complex and clearly has changed within the profession in the last ten to fifteen years. Linguistic skills and proficiency in the language no longer are the exclusive purpose of instruction; other skills have steadily gained prominence. Generally, these are lumped together in the broad category of “culture,” including the now outdated concepts of “big-C” culture (e.g., the arts and history), and “small-c” culture (e.g., foods, customs, and traditions). The strongest newcomer in this area is intercultural communication, which originated in the social sciences. In its practical application, this approach uses various activities such as the culture assimilator to sensitize students to the core values of members of another cultural background. These activities have found only limited application in foreign language education today. In its landmark 2007 report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World,” the Modern Language Association clearly stressed the importance of skills other than linguistic and literary, focusing on “translingual and transcultural competence” (235).

In the field of Language-for-the-Professions, the need for transcultural competence of students has been recognized both by academics and business leaders. As most areas of the economy are affected by globalization, products and services are often developed, produced, marketed, and sold by international teams of employees, who may have to work together on one particular worksite or collaborate via video-conferencing and Internet technology with colleagues on another continent. Representatives of the business community consistently stress the role of transcultural competence of their employees (Parkinson, 2009; Del Vitto, 2008). This includes a number of aspects, including (1) a base-level foundation of general knowledge about the other country, such as geography, history, society, politics, economics, and current events; (2) an understanding of basic core values of the other culture to facilitate interaction at a personal level, and (3) an understanding of professional practices and professional cultural values to facilitate interaction at the professional level.

The struggle for language teachers to help our students attain transcultural competence is just as intense for instructors in Language-for-the-Professions courses as it is for traditional language courses. Class time is a precious commodity. Many transcultural competence topics are complex and cannot be adequately taught in the target language, if the students are not at least advanced speakers on the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) oral proficiency scale. Switching into English is counter-intuitive to the teacher grounded in teaching for communicative competence. At the very least, frequent switching into English interrupts the flow of a class taught in the target language.

## BACKGROUND READING

The purpose of this article is to propose a model for improving students' foundation of general knowledge about the target country with a special focus on current events. Through out-of-class assignments given via the instructor's online course management tool, students follow current events of the target country by reading selected articles from the English language press (both US and international). Even though the examples presented here are for novice and intermediate-level students of German, the method can be used by teachers of any modern foreign language.

Specifically, the article will

- (1) Present examples of suitable sources of print/video/audio English language news items.
- (2) Present criteria for selecting news items based on their cultural relevance, timeliness, and relation to student interest.

- (3) Present how these materials can be used in a German-for-the-Professions course in an online environment. Articles are posted via an instructor-created HTML page in a course management tool and examples of discussion activities are provided.

## IDENTIFYING SOURCES FOR NEWS REPORTS

Because of the World Wide Web, we have instant access to the online editions of news organizations from around the world. Considering the overflow of information provided on the Web, it is important for instructors to act to some degree as information literacy specialists and steer the students to news sources that maintain high journalistic standards.

The following listing of news sources is by no means comprehensive. In my experience they have proven to be reliable sources of high-quality news articles about the world outside the US, including Germany and the European Union.

*The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com>, subscription fee) is a prime source of international news. One can find articles by going to World > Europe. All major events are covered and background articles are provided. An interesting feature is the section “Times Topics,” providing key information about a country’s political and economic development in recent years. These “Times Topics” are updated on a regular basis.

*The Economist* (<http://www.economist.com>, free access to the online edition with registration) provides a wide range of articles, not just on economics and politics, but on social and cultural issues as well. An interesting feature is the section “Country Briefings,” providing a summary of geographic and economic data, together with the most recent articles about the particular country. *The Economist* brings a European perspective to the news.

*The Christian Science Monitor* (<http://www.csmonitor.com>, free access to online edition) has always been an excellent source of international news reporting. The World > Europe section provides in-depth coverage of European events.

*The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk>, free access to online edition) is a leading news source from the UK with solid international coverage.

*Der Spiegel* (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/>, free access to online edition) is the most comprehensive source of English-language news by a German publication with in-depth coverage of German and international news. *Der Spiegel* often presents series of articles on particular themes (for instance, immigration in Europe).

*The World* on Public Radio International (<http://www.theworld.org>, free access) is a daily hour-long news program, broadcast on many NPR stations. All broadcasts are archived and available with additional reading material on the program's website. The program is also available as a podcast.

*Made in Germany* (<http://www.dw-world.de>, free access) is an old standby for instructors of business German and continues to be an excellent source of video news in both English and German. The weekly half-hour program covers current trends in the economy. In recent years, the program has added some extensive series, such as "Die Weltmeister," a series featuring export-oriented small and midsize German companies. Many of the segments on this program can now be downloaded as mp4 files and then be permanently available on an instructor's computer.

### SELECTION CRITERIA

Given the daily flood of news stories, selecting appropriate articles can be a challenging task. An obvious criterion is the thematic match to any topic the instructor may be covering at the time. However, the kind of background reading suggested in this article is usually not tied to specific thematic lessons in class. It is done out-of-class, being supplementary in nature, and provides thematic background reading and sharpens students' critical thinking skills through engaging discussion board activity. In selecting a news report for the type of project described in this article, I have found the following criteria useful.

- (1) It presents an issue that is significant to the politics, economics, society, or culture of the country.
- (2) It presents an issue that is culturally "loaded," in other words, it deals with an aspect of a commonly accepted core value of the target culture.
- (3) It presents an issue that lends itself to a comparison with the US. Some of the "hot topics" dominating the US news cycle are also prevalent in Europe (illegal immigration, unemployment, health care).
- (4) It covers a topic likely to generate interest among today's college students.

In general, I have found it useful not to use articles that exclusively deal with the "hard news" of the day without providing background information on the issue. For example, it is not advisable to have students read about the party congress of a specific political party in Germany unless they have a

basic knowledge of the German political system. On the other hand, topics of a social, cultural, or economic nature often are more accessible without detailed background knowledge.

## EXAMPLES OF NEWS ARTICLES

To further illustrate these guiding principles, some examples from the news relating to Germany of the first half of 2011 are pertinent. They were used in a general education course on the European Union in the summer of 2011, and can be used as English-language supplementary current events reading in beginning and intermediate-level German courses.

### *1. Overall Significance of News Item*

Perhaps one of the most significant news items of the year 2011 has been Germany's decision to discontinue the use of nuclear power by 2022 and at the same time to increase its efforts at producing energy through renewable sources. "Germany Votes to End Nuclear Power by 2022," in *The Guardian* (June 30, 2011) covered this well.

Significant issues often are not restricted to a particular country, but, in the case of European languages, should be viewed in a European context. The issue of multiculturalism is an example: "Why Europe Is Turning Away from Multiculturalism ..." *Christian Science Monitor* (March 4, 2011). Chancellor Merkel's statement of 2010 that multiculturalism "has failed" in Germany has reframed the debate on integration of non-Germans in Germany.

### *2. News Items with Cross-Cultural Information*

"Women Nudged Out of German Workforce." *New York Times* (June 28, 2011). This article is part of a series entitled *The Female Factor: The Role of Women in the 21st Century*, published both in the *International Herald Tribune* and in the *New York Times*. The article outlines the history of women in the German workforce and concludes that a deeply ingrained mindset about the primary responsibility of women as caretakers of children results in an unusually low percentage of women in high-level corporate positions in Germany.

"German Group Calls for Ban on Social Kissing in the Office." *The World on PRI* (August 11, 2011). This human-interest story at the end of a broadcast of "The World" addresses the increasing occurrence of the social kiss in Germany, a custom commonly known in France and Southern Europe. The news report includes an interview with a representative from a German etiquette society who states that the custom clashes with traditional German customs.

### 3. News Items Lending Themselves to Comparisons with the US

“Illegal Immigration: Related Articles, Background Features and Opinion Pieces about the Topic.” *Der Spiegel*. International ed. (May 25, 2011). <[http://www.spiegel.de/international/topic/illegal\\_immigration](http://www.spiegel.de/international/topic/illegal_immigration)>. In a series of articles, *Der Spiegel* addresses various aspects of the topic, such as Denmark’s recent decision to reinstate border controls, despite the Schengen Agreement, which lifted them across Europe. The topic of illegal immigration is hotly debated in the US and lends itself to comparisons with Europe, which is struggling with this issue as well.

### 4. Student Interest

“When It Comes to Facebook, EU Defends the ‘Right to Disappear.’” *Christian Science Monitor* (April 6, 2011). Social media, such as Facebook, play an important role in the lives of today’s students. The article addresses recent changes in European Union rules concerning data security, an issue that has been given considerable attention in Germany for many years.

## ASSIGNMENTS

Online course management tools such Blackboard, WebCt or Sakai allow the instructor to capture news articles from the online edition of a newspaper and create a permanent HTML page for the particular article. This process is fairly easy to complete, preserves the original font and photos, keeps any links to further information that may be active in the article, and most importantly provides a safe storage place and a permanent “home” for the article that is always accessible.

Well before the beginning of the semester and throughout the semester, I perused the above-mentioned news sources on a regular basis, selected suitable articles, and created a repository of news reports in the resource folder of my institution’s course management tool. I then grouped articles into various subcategories.

Once a wide selection of articles has been collected, the all-important task of developing assignments begins. Online course management tools allow a variety of activities to make sure students engage with the material. Tests, quizzes, or writing assignments can be developed as forms of assessment.

Following sound principles of blended/hybrid learning, where a portion of the allotted class-time is conducted online, it is advisable to engage students in discussions as much as possible (Picciano and Dziuban, 2007). Especially in the online environment, frequent instructor-student and student-student interaction is critical for effective learning.

Therefore, discussion board activity was the form of assessment chosen for the background reading activities described here. Students were informed at the beginning of the course that their postings to the discussion board needed to be at least two solid paragraphs in length, and needed to address the questions raised by the instructor prompt. Students had to provide a supported opinion on the particular topic.

The background reading activity was used in a five-week intensive summer course. Twice a week, the instructor posted a discussion prompt based on a single article, or on a series of connected articles, located in the resource folder of the online course management tool. Students were given a deadline by which they had to post their response.

In addition, students had two additional tasks as part of the discussion board activity. Once a week, they were required to locate a current events article relating to the course topic in a US or international news publication, summarize it, state their opinion, and post their response on the discussion board. Finally, everyone was required to post a substantive comment on an article summarized by a classmate. The background reading and discussion activity was graded based on the thoroughness of the postings.

## SUMMARY

A sound knowledge of key current events in the target country is an important aspect of transcultural competence. Because of the linguistic complexity of news articles, most students in beginning and intermediate-level language courses, including those with a professional focus, do not have the language proficiency to read complex texts in the target language. The supplementary English-language background reading activities of current events described in this article provide a systematic approach to integrating current events into language courses.

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