

**THEO HARDEN & ARND WITTE.** (Ed.). (2000). *The Notion of Intercultural Understanding in the Context of German as a Foreign Language*. Bern: Lang (German Linguistic and Cultural Studies, Bd. 7). 290 pp. ISBN 3-906758-63-X/US-ISBN 0-8204-5079-0. DM 87,-.

This volume provides a forum for heterogeneous and at times controversial discussions relating to the notion of intercultural understanding. The collection of articles provides a fine balance between theoretical discussion as well as a range of culture-specific examples from England, Saudi Arabia, Belgrade, India and Mexico. The volume is prefaced by an excellent introduction which connects theory to the practice of teaching German as a Foreign Language. A discussion regarding the relationship between language and culture, including a presentation of differing notions of culture, leads to a presentation of the changing role of culture throughout the history of language teaching methodologies, bringing the reader up to the point of departure for an intercultural approach to language teaching. Cultural understanding is explored using three paradigms for understanding, universal, relativistic and individualistic including the application of these to foreign language teaching and learning. The open-ended question 'Is the foreign language classroom the place to set the process of language-reliant cultural understanding in motion?', sets the scene for three complementary sections reflecting the scope of research into intercultural understanding.

### 1. Theoretical considerations

This section begins with Heringer's article "How to improve your understanding" which presents a programme for improving naturally existing strategies and techniques for understanding. Neuner's article, "The 'Key Qualifications' of Intercultural Understanding and the Rudiments of Intercultural Foreign Language Didactics and Methodology", discusses the potential of foreign language instruction to contribute to the development of the learner personality and elaborates on a catalogue of teaching principles involving intercultural tasks, exercises, and approaches. Witte's article, "How to be an Alien – learning a Foreign Language and Understanding Culture" looks at the repercussions of Intercultural Language Teaching for didactics as a whole and explores the concept of understanding from both psychological and philosophical points of view. The importance of facilitating linguistic and cultural awareness through the understanding of both native and foreign culture within a dialogical paradigm is stressed; this leads to an examination of different levels at which culture can be penetrated.

Problems associated with vague definitions of concepts related to intercultural communication and learning are the focus of Hu's contribution "Intercultural Learning and its Difficult Aspects – An Analysis of the Criticism in Relation to a Controversial Concept." An overview of criticism directed at intercultural concepts focussing on issues such as ethnic grouping and cultural-ethnic differences ends with a plea to move toward more operationally useful intercultural concepts. A different standpoint is taken in Harden's article "The Limits of Understanding", where after pointing to the general trend for humankind to understand very little of other cultures and peoples, he argues that the procedural knowledge necessary for intercultural understanding lies beyond the scope of the classroom. The author argues furthermore that learners are in this sense better served by being prepared for an experience of misunderstanding and life as an outsider.

The section concludes with Krumm's article, "The language of our Neighbours – How Realistic is a Concept of Multilingualism in a Multilingual and Multicultural Europe?", which brings the role of European language policy in relation to intercultural understanding into play and discusses the importance of alternative approaches to, focuses on, and policies toward foreign language education.

## 2. The role of literature

This section represents a recognition of the re-emergence of literature in foreign language education and illustrates the scope for a variety of texts to promote intercultural understanding. Bredella's contribution, "The significance of Intercultural Understanding in the Foreign Language Classroom", presents an analysis of a novel for young readers, illustrating how aspects of the text can be applied to the process of intercultural understanding by promoting self-discovery through the mediation between the perspective presented in the novel and the reader's own perspective, as well as by examining problems with judging experiences through one's own cultural framework.

The potential for newspaper advertisements, a tool of growing popularity in intercultural foreign language teaching to promote intercultural understanding is discussed in Kniffka's article, "Alien Reading – Newspaper Ads in Intercultural Understanding". Arguing that exposure to authentic texts and materials of everyday communication is necessary to achieve cultural understanding, Kniffka draws on examples and experiences with Saudi students and illustrates problems with differing, culturally determined expectations as well as arguing for a culture-contrastive analysis as a preliminary step towards intercultural understanding.

Fuchs in her article, "How to be a Pilgrim and a Cartographer at the Same Time – Some Deliberations on Intercultural Understanding", examines the problems involved in observing the Other with a sense of wonder whilst at the same time maintaining a degree of detached observation. After presenting some recent 'Self-Other' debates, Fuchs analyses a piece of enlightenment travel writing to examine the author's success in transcending preconceived notions of both Self and Other. Possibilities for translations of literary texts to work in conjunction with the source text as a link between the familiar and the unfamiliar are explored in Strümper-Krobb's contribution, "Understanding Culture and Cultural Differences through Literary Translation Studies". Rather than considering the difference between linguistic, literary and cultural systems between the two versions as a disadvantage, she argues that it is an interesting aspect which relates translation to other fields of intercultural studies. Possibilities for texts in translation to enhance learner understanding are illustrated along with a demonstration of how comparing source and original text can promote discussion of culturally specific elements in the text.

A key area of intercultural studies, the use of stereotypes to promote a re-examination of Self and Other is examined by O'Sullivan & Rösler in their article, "We're not like that!- Using stereotypes of the Learners' Culture in Target Texts to Increase Intercultural Awareness". Rather than viewing stereotypes as negative and something to be avoided, O'Sullivan & Rösler argue for the use of stereotypes of England and the English in books for young readers to gain an understanding of stereotypes as a cultural construct and, subsequently, to develop strategies for dealing with them.

### 3. Empirical section

This section draws on a range of personal experience and anecdotes beginning with Hentschel's article, "Cold at Heart – Some Personal Observations on Intercultural Misunderstandings", based on personal experiences gained during a stay in Belgrade to focus on an extremely important area in intercultural studies, viz. intercultural misunderstandings related to behaviour – verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic. The article proceeds with a range of personal accounts regarding non-verbal and verbal communication as well as situational understanding as a source of misunderstandings, including her own frustrations at trying to overcome or deal with these without reverting to feelings of annoyance or dismissal.

Ganeshan takes a similar approach in "Intercultural Mis(s)-understandings between Indians and Germans – Some Observations from an Indian Perspective", illustrating through personal letters the potential for intercultural misunderstanding between the two cultures. Rall's contribution "Last Glances of the 'Imperial Eyes' – Co-operative Principle and Intellectual Styles in the Mexican Foreign Language Classroom" concludes the volume with a more politically oriented viewpoint, discussing the role that a colonial mentality and associated feelings of inferiority play in intercultural understanding in a Mexican context. Examples are used to illustrate how Mexican views toward specific countries can interact with views and behaviours of visitors from these countries to affect negatively intercultural understanding.

Though the volume is expensive, it does provide an eclectic selection of articles reflecting the wide range of ideas, approaches and possibilities within the field of Intercultural Understanding. Those seeking definite answers may be disappointed, for the strength of this volume lies in the questions it raises and not necessarily in the answers it provides. Readers already familiar with the field will not be surprised by the content but nonetheless satisfied by its breadth of coverage. For this reason, the volume fully deserves a place in any library section devoted to intercultural studies. The volume assumes a certain degree of background knowledge, but nevertheless provides an excellent starting point for those wishing to acquaint themselves with the field of Intercultural Understanding and to use it as a starting point for further research in any of the specific areas presented.

CREE OLIVER-FOLEY  
(Monash University, Australia)

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