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Learning English, and Teaching English – and linking the two together

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Abstract: Degree courses in modern languages, especially those for students wishing to become teachers, tend to consist of different modules with little connection to each other and may have insufficient emphasis on improving language skills. This paper presents the concept and structure of a language course designed to address such issues. It is holistic in approach and focuses on developing students' awareness of language learning processes; the insights acquired by the participants can be applied to any learning or teaching situation.

Fremdsprachliche Studiengänge, besonders die für zukünftige Lehrerinnen und Lehrer, bestehen häufig aus verschiedenen Modulen, die nur zum Teil aufeinander bezogen sind und der Verbesserung von Fremdsprachenkenntnissen einen relativ geringen Wert beimessen. Der folgende Artikel stellt einen Sprachkurs vor, der darauf abzielt, sich speziell diesen Themen zu stellen. Der Kurs ist ganzheitlich in seinem Ansatz und konzentriert sich darauf, das Bewusstsein von Studierenden für die Prozesse des Fremdspracherwerbs zu schärfen; die von den Teilnehmenden erworbenen Erkenntnisse lassen sich auf jegliche Lern- oder Lehrsituationen anwenden.

Key words: language learning, language teaching, language awareness, higher education, teacher education and training, authentic materials, a good learning environment; Sprachen lernen, Sprachen lehren, Sprachbewusstheit, Hochschulbildung, Lehrerbildung, authentische Materialien, eine gute Lernumgebung

1. Introduction

[I]t begins with a very simple question: What are people actually able to do and to be?

(Nussbaum 2011: x)

This paper is intended as food for thought. It presents a very particular kind of advanced level (English) language course taught at a German university, and called 'Learning English, Teaching English' (LTE). It was based on the premise that it is possible and productive to link the actual learning of a language with acquiring insights into both learning and teaching. It was designed in such a way that participants could not only become aware of the variety of factors involved in the learning of a language and make use of these insights to further their own learning, but also consider the consequences for the teaching situation.

The course was taught in various forms over a number of years in the Language Institute of the university¹; the participants were primarily students majoring in English. The content, structure and methodology of the course reflect an understanding of the needs of the students not only as university language learners but also in terms of lifelong language learning, and possibly as teachers, whereby teaching is seen as including private tuition for example, peer teaching/learning, adult education in evening classes, or working with refugees.

Why offer a course of this kind? How does it fit in to the regular programme of a course of studies? The motivation and rationale for the course will be set out in detail later. First, however, I would like to provide some general background about the context in which this course was conceived and developed.

1.1. The context

The immediate context was the Language Institute itself, and the University with its structures, policy and regulations on study programmes. During forty years of teaching at university, seeing myself as a lifelong learner of languages and of how to teach them, I had ample opportunity to observe learner behaviour, to study theories, to design new courses and try out different ways of doing things, to make mistakes and learn from them. I was also fortunate enough to have the time and freedom to do so. Although study regulations define which courses must be offered, scope remained for initiative when deciding on the contents and methodology, or offering other courses in addition.

The wider context was the German Education system, one special feature of which is the highly selective school structure with its vertical and horizontal divisions². Closely connected to this is another feature: due to the allocation of responsibilities between the federal government and the individual states, each state has a certain amount of freedom in shaping its education system, including Teacher Education and Training. As school structures and types thus vary from state to state, so also do the Teacher Education and Training programmes. In my case, for example, the vast majority of future language teachers learn English at a particular type of secondary school, the ‘Gymnasium’, and are educated and trained to teach at a ‘Gymnasium’, thus moving only within a closed circle³.

To these contexts I would add the international, as some of the most important early influences on my thinking and my approach to teaching (languages) came from the English-speaking world. One example was the passionate commitment to reforming the education system in Britain towards democracy and equality (cf. Rubinstein 1973). By the end of the seventies Britain had battled its way through a radical education reform affecting all levels of education, and the whole of society, the biggest change being the removal of all measures of selection for the secondary school level through the setting up of comprehensive schools. This structural change was closely connected to a rethinking of the curriculum and to promoting methods of teaching based on an understanding of how people learn. With regard to the education of teachers (cf. Whitbread 1973: 181): “Reform of the content of courses cannot alone provide the necessary intellectual discipline and independence. Lectures and tutor-dominated discussions should largely give place to methods of teaching that involve more active participation and self-programming by students, and transfer the onus for learning to them. This is the object of some of the newer teaching methods now in use (in schools)⁴.” At the same time, English Language Teaching in the UK and the US was fertile ground for innovative thinking (e.g. Blair 1982; Stevick 1980; Widdowson 1978). There was a strong focus on the active learner, on taking responsibility for your own learning, and learning how to learn (e.g. Wallace 1980; Ellis & Sinclair 1989).

Thus, although the context was the German Education system, my perception of my role as a university language teacher and my expectation of education in general and language teaching in particular were strongly influenced by what was going on in education outside Germany.

1.2. The motivation and rationale for the course

Observing learners' behaviour and reflecting on it can help teachers identify common strengths and weaknesses. It becomes interesting then to compare their actual competence with what they were expected to learn at school.

According to the State Ministry of Education Guidelines the primary aim of foreign language teaching is the development of communicative competence. In addition to a systematic knowledge of grammar and lexis, the following are also listed: acquisition of language learning strategies, learner autonomy, the development of language learning competence, language awareness, the ability to evaluate their own language level, intercultural competence, the development of personality and sense of identity, empathy, respect, tolerance, and the ability to see things from a different point of view (Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg 2004, my translation).

This is an impressive but rather intimidating catalogue of items⁵ which raises many questions including: Is it realistic? How is each item defined? Do pupils actually learn these things? Limiting a consideration to only two items: acquisition of language learning strategies and a systematic knowledge of lexis, I would judge from observation and experience that many language students did not acquire these at school. Setting aside all doubts about the realisability of the above aims, for me as an English language teacher at a university where there was a separate course of studies specifically for future language teachers at a ‘Gymnasium’, one major question was: if it is expected or at least desired that learners at school should acquire all these skills, strategies and competences, who is responsible for making sure that the teachers themselves are competent in all these fields? Where and when does this happen within the cycle of learning and training of a teacher: from the pupil learning at school to the language student/future language teacher learning at university, through the period of teacher training and finally back in school as a fully fledged language teacher?

Narrowing this down: What do future language teachers learn at this university about learning languages, and about teaching them? Or rather: what are they expected to learn? And are these things linked in any way (the assumption being that they should)? A partial answer is provided by the study regulations; a full answer would require a major project.

The study regulations (as valid from 2002):

Students of modern languages are required to attend a certain number of lectures and seminars on Literature and/or Linguistics taught in the relevant Department, and practical language courses taught in the Language Institute such as Oral Communication or Translating Skills in the case of English, as well as an Area and Cultural Studies course. The weighting is heavily towards Literature and/or Linguistics, rather than practical language courses.

Future teachers also attend courses on Education, Personal Competence, Ethics and ‘Fachdidaktik’ i.e. the methodology of teaching a particular language at a Gymnasium. The latter are taught by Secondary school teacher trainers attached to a ‘Lehrerseminar’, who visit the university for some hours per week during term time⁶.

In sum, language students, in particular future language teachers, are expected to learn many different things. This is not in itself something negative. However, students appear to me to have little chance to draw the threads together and make connections between the disparate things they are taught, and reflect on them. Nor does it look as if they are encouraged to

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connect their own experience of being a language learner inside and outside of institutions with all the information on languages and literature, or, in the case of future language teachers, the theories of learning and teaching put forward in the various seminars and lectures. It is the course for future teachers that conveys to me most strongly an impression of fragmentation or disjointedness.

The above is my personal opinion of the situation at one university; it is based on observing and talking to students, visiting lectures and seminars taught to them in other departments, and on the regulations for the relevant study programmes. As far as language teacher education and training is concerned, it is an opinion shared by many others, including experts in the field, with regard to the situation at other German universities. A collection of critical views on language teacher education and training across Germany (cf. Bausch, Königs & Krumm 2003) expresses dissatisfaction with many aspects of the status quo including the lack of coordination of subjects and contents⁷.

As a teacher of English in the Language Institute, I had no influence on the weighting of individual components in any course of studies, far less on policy decisions. What I could do was try to make sure that the little time students were required to spend in language classes was used effectively. Apart from helping students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become competent users of the language in the widest sense, we could ensure that our classes, whether practical language or Area and Cultural Studies, were themselves examples of good teaching practice⁸.

To go a step further, as research shows that making connections between things i.e. linking rather than listing helps ensure long-term learning⁹ I set myself the challenge of creating a course which would bridge at least some of the gaps between the islands of knowledge acquired by the students. It would be taught in the Institute, would be neither a regular language course nor a seminar. It would be holistic in approach, would treat learning and teaching as related processes, and all language students as potential language teachers of some kind. It would give the students opportunities to make connections between literature and culture, language and linguistics, learning and teaching, theories of learning and their own learning, and personal development. It would be my job to provide these opportunities. Obviously all classes in the Institute have to take into account factors such as the requirements of study regulations (and how much or how little freedom of choice students have), 90-minute once-weekly classes, and the necessity for grades, but the course did actually come into existence and found its place on the Institute's programme. It was called simply 'Learning English, Teaching English' (LTE).

2. Learning English, Teaching English - the course

The underlying principles can probably best be summed up as general humanistic principles of education, combined with a belief in the necessity to at least try to "practise what you preach". It was not intended as a seminar on theories of language learning or teaching, or to provide a 'How to Teach' set of rules. What it does do is offer many ideas for encouraging students to think about both learning and teaching, and most importantly, what is experienced here as referring to English can be applied to the learning and teaching of any language. It can be seen as a task-based workshop, and as an adventure, for all involved¹⁰.

2.1. The course structure and content

Having grown out of forerunners, the course itself continued to develop over a period of many years¹¹. There was a definite structure, but no single path to be followed, hence no week by week programme distributed in advance. I built up a bank of ideas, materials (almost all in English) and tasks to which I constantly added, and from which I could draw, depending on the focus of each particular class and on the needs and interests of the participants. The tasks ranged from the small e.g. discussing a set of statements on learning English, to the larger e.g. creating materials for use in school, or even a group project for outside class. All take as their starting point the experience of the participants, and have as their aim an increased awareness of the processes and factors involved in learning a language and teaching it, combined with a better command of the English needed to handle the wide variety of issues encompassed by the topic.

2.2. Participants

The course was always attended by a good mix of participants, including some who had grown up with two or more languages and cultures or had spent a year abroad, exchange students, and occasionally students who had already had some experience of teaching at school. Thus there was always a variety of experience of learning languages, of different education systems and cultures, and a variety of expectations. Certainly not all were aiming at becoming school teachers or indeed teachers of any kind. However, some gradually realised, through a growing awareness of language learning processes, that it could be very rewarding to 'teach', whether English or German or any other language, in adult evening classes for example or to help refugees to integrate, and some re-thought what they were doing when giving pupils private tuition. My experience has been that all students of language can profit from greater awareness of learning in general, not just those who are studying to become teachers.

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2.3. Course description

Below is the description of a Learning English, Teaching English course as it appeared in the programme of the Language Institute for the winter term 2012/2013, when it was taught for the last time.

Target Group: This course is for all students who would like a different perspective on both learning and teaching English. It presupposes a willingness on the part of the participants to reflect on their own language learning experience.

Course Aims: The general aim is to help participants, who are themselves going to be life-long learners of English, to become more aware of the many interrelated factors involved in learning English or any other language.

We will first consider learning, not in the abstract but with particular relevance to the participants. We will be asking questions such as: What kind of strategies have you developed to help you learn English? How can you assess your level? How can you set yourself realistic goals?

Our teaching perspective will come from the idea that the job of the teacher is to create the kind of environment in which people can learn, so what would this environment look like? How do you choose suitable materials, tasks, activities etc.? We will then focus on exploiting authentic materials. There will be a little background reading, but the class will focus mainly on practical tasks.

Materials: All materials including a good bibliography¹² will be provided.

Requirements: Regular active participation in all activities and assignments.

At the first meeting of class the students are given a copy of the above and encouraged to comment and query. To this I always added some quotes to consider e.g. from Krüger (2008) or Widdowson (1997).

3. Structure of the course in two parts

The course falls into two main parts: 'You as the learner', and 'You as the teacher'. Both involve the participants, including me, in thinking about things, experiencing things, doing things – from two different but related perspectives: that of the learner and that of the teacher. The parts are separate in concept, but linked in practice, and there is obviously some overlap. The first part is concerned with the learner since it is clear that for teaching to be effective it must fully take into account what is known about how people learn.

For both parts some idea is provided below of the steps which could be taken and the topics covered. In a few cases more detail is given to reflect my intention for the whole course, namely that the students should gradually understand that it is not just what we did, but how we did it and why, which is important. If it had been intended to simply transmit knowledge, this could have been done in a seminar.

3.1. You as the learner, with the focus on the students reflecting on their own behaviour as learners

The first two tasks involve issues such as learning as a social and cooperative activity, group dynamics, the role of the teacher within the group. The next focus on the students' beliefs about learning, and how they see themselves as learners.

From strangers to belonging together. 'You look like someone who ...' is a particularly effective way of starting as it not only gets the students talking to each other with a practical purpose, but also addresses the fact that we tend to judge people from appearance, something that everyone working with other people should keep in mind. It is also an introduction to the importance of listening. In other words, it is not just an Icebreaker. The idea and some of the items were gratefully taken from Civikly & Schuetz (1994).

It begins with the students having to leave the comfort zone of tables and chairs to stand with me in the middle of the room, an awkward situation, which we talk about. They are given a list of statements and asked to move around, talking briefly to as many of the others as possible (including me if they wish), beginning each interaction with: "You look like someone who ...", and see if they can find someone to fit each statement on the list. Examples are: likes to dance; can live with books and papers scattered all over the place; can keep calm in an emergency; likes to spend their spare time with other people.

After a while we stop and talk about the people they have found and whether their guesses were good or not. ("Three people said I look like someone who can keep cool in an emergency, but I can't. I panic! How can people think that?") Next they are asked to think about two things they are really passionate about, then move around again to see if they can find someone with the same interests.

A student once commented they enjoyed it so much that they resented being stopped (teacher in control) so we also discussed that. By the end, I always had the impression that there was already a feeling of trust, and a sense of somehow 'belonging' together. This is essential for later discussions.

Thinking about learning a language is the next step. The idea and some of the items were gratefully taken from Péchou (1983). The handout, 'Language Learning - some opinions', has the following information:

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This is a list of opinions on language learning that I have heard or read. Your task, in small groups, is to tell the others which of the statements (if any) you completely agree/disagree with, and why. Also discuss any statements you find particularly interesting, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with them.

I feel I have a different personality when I speak a foreign language
 In the language class I don't want to talk about me - I want to talk about important things
 I can't learn anything by talking English to other Germans
 I can't learn anything if my teacher doesn't correct me all the time
 I want a grade for everything I do, otherwise I don't know how good I am
 You never know two languages equally well
 I hate "performing" in class
 [...]

What was your most negative/positive experience of language learning?
 What do you hope for at university?

All the statements are relevant to the students' own experience; each single one raises a host of questions and could easily be the topic of a seminar. For this class, apart from encouraging meaningful communication, the value of the task is that reflecting on and discussing these statements brings some very important things to the fore:

- the variety of opinions on language learning;
- the strength of people's opinions on language learning;
- the value of their own experience of language learning;
- the divergence of opinions on this within the class;
- the complexity of language learning;
- the fact that it involves more than the intellect;
- it involves the emotions;
- whole cultures are involved.

Thus, despite the superficial homogeneity of the class (all in higher education, all at an advanced level of English, all motivated to learn languages) it becomes clear that there is diversity of experience and opinion¹³, and that communicating on this can be an interesting experience. The students have also had the chance to reflect on their own personal hopes and expectations of studying at the university.

It was, too, an opportunity to draw attention to the value of non-intrusive correction.

In all courses I kept the amount of interrupting and correcting (intrusive correcting) to a minimum. This does not mean that the teacher opts out; rather I tried to make sure students are exposed to enough correct and authentic English to cope with each separate situation. Within the statements on the sheet there is already most of the English they need to talk about their own experience. Of course they will still make mistakes, especially with tense and aspect:

*I learn Spanish since two years.

*I am listening to Italian every day.

Mistakes like these from their group discussions can be put on the board, at one side, with an asterisk. Usually someone realises that correction is needed and eventually the class reaches the correct form. This brings out the fact that often we develop the ability to recognise mistakes, but that does not mean we no longer make them. What has to happen for us to take the next step?

My suggestion: As the language teacher, at some suitable stage in this course I made a Language Focus sheet which, although it was based on their own language weaknesses, highlighted the correct forms in a systematic way. In classes such as Oral Proficiency where this was a regular feature, participants soon became familiar with the kinds of language focused on. If the correct forms are constantly recycled and brought to the students' attention, the students gradually develop an ear for certain things, become able to monitor the language used by themselves and their classmates, and are able to help each other out if something goes wrong (cooperative learning).

All of the activities outlined above prepared the ground for questions such as:

What do you believe about language learning?
 What type of learner are you? What level are you at?

To help them think about these I used quotes from various sources including Ronowicz (1999), Sheerin (1989) and the newspaper Scotland on Sunday. The latter provided a text on different learner types with tips for capitalising on strengths (Black 2000: 2-5):

[...] Are you a Kinesthetic Learner? You are the kind of person who feels everything. You are the one most likely to faint in the biology class at the sight of blood. If someone takes a fit of the giggles you are the first to join in and the last to be able to stop [...].

The tone of this text appealed to the students, and made them more interested in the message, and acting on it. It is typical of the kind of text chosen for use in this class: short, relatively informal, and posing interesting questions. For those seriously interested in any topic the Bibliography provided further reading.

Another good resource with regard to their own learning is the European Language Portfolio as it encourages a broad view of language learning (Council of Europe 2017). The Self-assessment checklists of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which introduce the idea of sets of descriptors for different skills at different levels and formulate the items as ‘Can do’s’, have a motivating effect (Council of Europe 2017).

The final question for the students in this part is: What are your language aims for this term? How can you reach them? Students choose as a personal objective one item from the level C1 checklist and think about how they might reach it. They discuss their ideas together in class the following week so that they can help each other decide whether their objectives are realistic or not. Later they report on their progress, and at the end of term write a few lines about what they have actually done.

You as the learner – our path so far

A brief *summary* of what we have done and thought so far is a good way of rounding off the first part of the course, and always included further comments and questions of direct relevance to the students as learners. For example:

Finding out how to reach your goals: [...] In order to improve your English and acquire the necessary skills you might have to attend more language classes than the bare minimum you are required to attend in accordance with the study regulations.

[...] read, listen, view for pleasure. You could follow popular TV series, as situations and dialogue are repetitive, hence good for learning.¹⁴ Some have on their website a brief outline in narrative form of the events in each episode. [...] buy a magazine on your hobby. Reading in the other language on something you know a lot about in your first language is one of the easiest ways to learn, and having a complete magazine in print is a goldmine of language information in comparison to web pages. If you seriously consider these steps for yourself, you will move a long way along the path, not only to becoming a more effective learner yourself but also to becoming an effective teacher. You could look at the goals in the English syllabus for school and consider whether the materials and methods are compatible with them or not. For example:

According to the Ministry guidelines¹⁵, reading skills involve the following: „... Erschliessungs-, Markierungs- und Strukturierungstechniken anwenden; selbständig neuen Wortschatz erschliessen (Wortbildungslehre, *intelligent guessing*, Vernetzung der gelernten Sprachen)“.

So, what point is there in setting tasks like this:

“Read the following text and answer the questions. The difficult words are given.”

3.2. You as the teacher, with the focus on teacher behaviour and the attempt to create a good learning environment

Keeping in mind what we thought about ‘You as the learner’, the next step is to consider what the consequences are for ‘You as the teacher’. First, some completely open questions, all of which lead to considerable discussion:

What is a good teacher?

What do you believe about teaching?

What do you believe is the main factor involved in how you teach?

Wright (1987) provides good questions to help the thinking. Here, as with the discussion about learning, it becomes clear that everyone has their own beliefs about teaching, and these are influenced by their educational and cultural background.

Finally, is there something special about being a good language teacher? Knowledge? Skills? Emotional intelligence? Can you learn these things?

If we agree that ultimately the teacher’s job is to create the kind of environment in which learning can take place then we have to ask: What is a good learning environment?

Based on their own experience, students usually first come up with features which should not be present, such as the learning environment should not be boring, not always the same, not so much teacher giving instructions, people shouldn’t feel stupid or afraid, not so much emphasis on tests, not so much sitting still, topics shouldn’t be so dead, not so much frontal teaching.

To move from “should not be” to positive “should be”, we worked through various topics and tasks, considering what goes on in a classroom, understood as any place of teaching, to eventually come to some conclusions about what is generally more conducive to learning and what tends to hinder it.

En route, the students invariably come up with ideas such as learning can be fun; learning happens best when you are active, it needs to be realistic, continuous and self-motivated; the teacher should encourage cooperation, raise awareness, show interest, encourage rather than force, be open-minded, not always allow just one solution, and involve the learners.

3.2.1. Some example topics and tasks

Only a few examples are given here to show how topics and tasks are interwoven, and how topics can be linked.

Approaches to language teaching. *Immersion schooling* is a very productive topic to start with as most students are not familiar with the concept and find it intriguingly different from their own experience. It can be introduced through newspaper articles, as they are neither academic nor theoretical but written for the general public. “Accent on foreign language drive for classrooms” (Fraser 2000) focuses specifically on Gaelic-medium schools in Scotland. It is easy to pick out the arguments in favour of immersion schooling, and those of the sceptics.

The most effective medium for this topic is, however, film. “A child's guide to languages”, a documentary from 1983, looks briefly at methods such as ‘Total Physical Response’ and ‘Suggestopedia’, but focuses on Immersion Schooling, presenting a French immersion school in Canada as an example. There are comments from experts on Language Teaching, but the truly impressive and thought-provoking aspect of the film is seeing English-speaking children behaving quite naturally in French. No amount of written material on immersion schooling (or TPR or Suggestopedia) can produce the same powerful effect as the visual image.

Before watching, students are given only a minimum of information on the content. All they are expected to do is watch carefully, especially the learners’ faces, and make some comments on their impressions. Later they watch again outside class and work their way through a set of quotes with gaps. Watching twice, for two different purposes, is a good strategy.

Some of the quotes:

The language is made (comprehensible) and nobody needs to (speak) until they are ready.
 Reducing (anxiety) so that the learners are in a state of relaxed (attentiveness).
 The classroom gives the (comprehensible) input you cannot get (outside).
 They do have an (accent).
 Immersion teaching doesn't depend on (age).

The students are now in a position to think about these statements and discuss them. Questions to round off the discussion:

What do you think the central principles of Immersion Schooling are? What features do all the methods shown in this film have in common? Is there anything that could be accepted as a kind of central principle for all language teaching? What has changed since this film was made? What is the situation in Germany? Would Immersion Schooling make sense here?

Good reading on the topic can be found in Krashen (1989). It was first published in 1985, making it contemporaneous with the film, in which he himself appears. Krashen is neither an oracle nor the bible, but easy to read, and the students are encouraged to read attentively and question. They can decide what questions they would ask him if he came to our class.

In this way students become familiar with the concept of immersion schools, the idea of language acquisition in general in contrast to formal language teaching, and they also experience useful strategies of acquiring language themselves.

More approaches to language teaching in two very different texts. Maley (1983) deals briefly but in a nicely provocative way with some more approaches to language teaching. The text is clearly structured, with headings including: Errors and mistakes; Eureka!; Input and Intake; Needs analysis; The decline of the textbook; The negotiation of meaning; The politics of the classroom. This gives the readers the chance to think about the contents before they start reading.¹⁶

Richards & Rogers (2005) provide more detail and depth. From the table of contents students choose a chapter that interests them personally e.g. Total Physical Response or Neurolinguistic Programming and report on it briefly to the whole class. The final chapter ‘The post-methods era’ can be read by everyone, the task being simply to choose the two points they find most interesting and tell their neighbours. Some commented later that they really liked this task, in comparison to being asked to summarise the whole text as they were more accustomed to¹⁷.

Motivation and the classroom context. A good way to approach this is Parrott (1993: 53):

Brainstorm ways in which the teacher can positively affect the motivation of her students. It may help you to think of these in terms of short-term measures (i.e. within individual lessons) and long-term measures (i.e. over a term, year or course). Compare your list with the following and add points to your list as appropriate. Reject any points in this list that you disagree with.

Seating arrangements. We were lucky to have simple furnishings which allowed flexible seating arrangements and free movement, and even a carpeted floor to sit on, a very different situation from the standard seminar room or lecture hall. However, instead of being categorical about good/bad seating arrangements, we asked: Which seating arrangement facilitates which teaching purpose/lesson phase? (cf. Vale 2007: 92-94). This combines well with questioning the purpose and value of lectures.

Classroom scenarios. Scrivener (1994: 1) has a drawing of a typical classroom situation, still valid today, with the question: “Decide what assumptions about the roles of teacher and learners underlie the teaching approach in the classroom picture below.” We also asked: What might a teacher-centred classroom look like? A learner-oriented classroom? A learner-centred classroom? What about two teachers team teaching? And what about class size?

To focus specifically on *the language classroom*, we worked with a rough sketch of teacher and learners in an easily recognisable scenario, with comments added on the role of the teacher (in this case knower and examiner), the learner (here it is recipient), and the view or definition of language (language as a finite set of items to learn). The students imagine more scenarios and draw them, adding information for each on “Teacher as ...”, “Learner as ...” and “Language as ...”. These are an excellent basis for discussing what is going on in each of the scenarios and what concept of language/learning it is based on.

Teaching vs. Testing. Testing is a topic sometimes raised by the future teachers. One way of showing that testing and teaching are two different things is the following: I handed out a short grammar test, which was quite a shock for the students as they did not expect to be tested in any way in this class. I collected their papers, and returned them at the start of the next session, marked in red pen (simply right or wrong), with the number of points scored. This was unnerving, especially for those whose score was very bad.

Asked how they felt about all this, and if they had learned anything from it, they agreed that they had not learned any grammar, and had no idea how to learn from the test¹⁸. It was not a pleasant experience for any of us, but the point had been understood: testing is not teaching, unless you do something with the test. (In this particular case some students decided to attend a Grammar class.)

Using a textbook creatively, Acting, Vocabulary work, and Do homework assignments make sense? From Greenall & Swann (1986) I used an adapted version of ‘Sorry sir, sorry, sorry’, as the topic is one that the students can relate to and the text is funny, being about an exasperated traveller at Washington airport. We worked our way through the unit almost as if they themselves were learners until finally the whole airport scenario was acted out, involving a great deal of explaining, complaining and apologising. At the next stage the class stepped out of their learner role and returned to being students in the LTE class, to talk about their experience.

Whenever students asked about unfamiliar words in a text without stopping to think about them first, I took the opportunity to do some vocabulary work. I gave tips with good examples: try to guess the approximate meaning from the co-text and context; check the meaning and use in a good learner’s dictionary; organise words in a meaningful way (linking not listing) so that you will recognise them when you see them again and eventually be able to use them yourselves. Once students have acquired these vocabulary and reading skills themselves, they will be able to teach them. This point makes a good link between teaching English and their own learning¹⁹.

Finally, to round off ‘Sorry sir’, I suggested they choose a homework task themselves. This was met at first with blank looks until I explained that set homework, a fixed feature of (school) classes, instead of being an effective follow-up can be a demotivating waste of time. Some examples from English and German made this very clear. I asked them what was interesting for them in the text, or what they would like to know more about, and left them free to decide individually on their own homework.

The following week not everyone brought along their ‘homework’. This is normal, as some cannot deal with a situation where they are free to decide what they want to do, so they do nothing. Those who did do it enjoyed it thoroughly: one checked websites for the current airfares; another searched for the now defunct airline Pan Am and discovered that you can still buy souvenirs. Occasionally, however, although a student may enjoy doing their chosen homework, the result is not very useful. The reason for this may be that the word ‘homework’ itself is unfortunate, as ‘homework’ is associated with ‘school’, and thus with certain kinds of exercises rather than meaningful tasks. They may be so drilled into doing mechanical transformation exercises (*Put all the verbs into the past tense; change all the direct speech into indirect speech*) that they cannot immediately see that this can lead to non-sense. As I had not expected that to happen, this was a clear case of teacher learning too. The topic of homework is a very good one for an LTE class and deserves to be looked at carefully, not just in terms of whether homework can influence grades, but rather in terms of what value it has for each learner.²⁰

Reading for pleasure, and Motivation. ‘Just Read’ is a documentary in which the English poet Michael Rosen works with children and teachers, support staff and parents at a Welsh primary school to turn it into a school in which everyone reads, with pleasure. It is a pleasure to watch, and at the same time highly relevant for the students, many of whom admit to not reading much (English) for pleasure themselves; some have commented that from so much analysis of literature they have lost their pleasure in reading.²¹

Using poems in class is also related to *motivation* as learners, even young ones, enjoy writing some lines themselves. As in most classes, at the end of term I asked the students to write a short poem, quite spontaneously, about their experience of the class. They enjoy this and make good use of the opportunity to express their feelings²², summing up their experience of the class while looking together for words that more or less rhyme or rhythm. The poems are only for insiders; I have, however, included a few lines of one below, titled “This class”.

In this class, time goes by fast
[...]
We’re playing games, for once
write beautiful poems
and work with texts, famous ones.
It’s hot and we’re sweating
we should spend more time at the lake
but these thoughts don’t keep us

from learning
 and learning to teach, like
 learning to bake a cake.
 We take some ingredients and
 put them together
 to create a good learning atmosphere,
 forever.

The question of *criteria for selecting materials* is a good topic for an LTE class, as it has to do with relevance for the intellectual, emotional and linguistic level of the learner. The materials for the LTE class were chosen carefully to meet the criteria for relevance, and let the students see that the non-contemporary is not necessarily irrelevant as issues may be addressed which Germany is only now facing. This is the case with the challenge of teaching immigrant children²³, as described in Scott (1978), or of inclusion in education. In other words, the 'old' in one country may be the 'new' in Germany.

Using authentic materials i.e. material published in English for the purpose of communicating something in the English-speaking world, not published for the purpose of teaching English. Students can be encouraged to build up their own collection of 'texts' or realia from the English-speaking world, from supermarket receipts to songs, biscuit wrappers to bestsellers, anything they found meaningful in some way. Being examples of language in context, they are ideal for long-term learning. As teachers, the students could use their collection to create a portfolio of additional materials for each unit in the textbook or even produce their own textbook.

To introduce the idea of using authentic materials in the classroom, advertising material from big chain stores with food, drink, cosmetics and clothes was distributed and the students asked what they as teachers would do with them. I would specify a target group e.g. adult learners, intermediate level, evening classes, then specify a different one to let the students see you can use the same materials for different groups, but in a different way. Sometimes the students were really surprised to be given 'junk' to work with and were rather at a loss as to what to do with it. As students tend to think in terms of making gap texts or asking questions on individual words, a good approach is to consider what a native speaker would do with these ads and flyers. What would they read them for? Would they talk about them with other people? They might tell friends about the special offers, or maybe make a list of things to shop for. A language teacher can of course do many other things with the texts than a native speaker would do, but thinking from the native speaker/authentic communication angle is a good starting point.

What I myself used to consider junk is in fact a goldmine of information on language and way of life. I admitted this freely, giving examples from my own experience of teaching. For beginners of any age, advertising material of this kind is wonderful as there are illustrations and simple text, enabling learners to show and then say which things they like. The illustrations and the name of the thing can be the start of a personalised picture dictionary. The advanced could comment on prices, on the culture and lifestyle represented, and even make comparisons with Germany, as the same kind of advertising material is also available for free here.

Similarly, popular fiction deserves a place in class too. As examples, some passages from the novel by Blake (1988) on communicating with signs, close descriptions of Comanche people and their very vivid names, such as 'Smiles A Lot', and 'Wind In His Hair', and the diary entry of the protagonist John Dunbar ('Dances with Wolves') from April 27, 1863: "Have made first contact with a wild Indian. One came to the fort and tried to steal my horse. When I appeared he became frightened and ran off ... Am taking steps to prepare for another visitation."

And for those who feel newspapers are only usable for their 'serious' content I offered some counterexamples. A few lines from Scotland on Sunday (Forsyth 2010), quoting a man looking back at his experience of being a ball boy at a big international football match with Real Madrid. It has to do with being young and passionate about something, and having an idol:

At one point, Gento lost his boot after a tackle near the touchline so I picked it up and handed it back to him. After that, I didn't wash my hands for about two weeks. When the game was finished, the Real Madrid officials gave us a club badge. I still have it in a drawer somewhere.

Also from Scotland on Sunday (Smith 2010), a picture and the heading:

NATIONAL TREASURE. With a mix of Turkish flair and Teutonic discipline, Mesut Özil is the pot of gold at the end of Germany's rainbow squad.

3.2.2. A good environment for learning

The teacher's job, we were agreed, is to create this environment. But what is a good environment for learning? The following provisional "conclusion", from a great deal of work and thought, serves as a very useful guideline:

a relaxed atmosphere; interesting and relevant topics; interesting and relevant tasks;

where the learner has the chance to be active; be in control (of some things); make decisions (sometimes); puzzle things out.

To tie the threads together the students now had the opportunity to *create a unit for use in school*, based on *exploiting authentic materials*. Although 'school' could be understood as evening classes for adults or private tuition, usually everyone wanted to create something for use in a regular school, as they all have experience of being a pupil.²⁴ First we collected ideas about topics that the age range six to eighteen are likely to be interested in, topics of intrinsic interest, things that matter to them, even though they may seem trivial to an adult. Next we asked: Which aspect of a particular topic would be most interesting for a particular age group?

In effect, almost any topic can be chosen, but it must be looked at from the point of view of the particular learner. From there it can be expanded to open up new perspectives. With advanced level adult learners, for example, talking about the World Cup in South Africa led to a well informed discussion on the work of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'.

Given a framework for planning a lesson, with Unit title, Topic, Language focus, Aims, Activities, Materials, Follow-up, students were asked to do the following:

- Choose a target (age) group that you think you know about: What do they really like, what are they really interested in?
- Choose a topic based on this (forget the Ministry and curricula).
- Look for authentic materials.
- Choose interesting, relevant, realistic, meaningful tasks/activities.
- Decide what the language focus is going to be.

The last two points require some language awareness from the students beyond the usual categories of 'grammar' and 'vocabulary'. They need to be reminded that grammar is not an add-on, but an integral part of language, which occurs naturally in communication and conveys meaning; just because a linguistic study of (a) language reveals structures and categories, this does not mean that a language has to be taught that way. Unfortunately, it seems that when they think about school they revert to seeing grammar as something that is separate, difficult, slightly threatening. We looked again at some authentic materials I had brought in and considered interesting things to do with them at all levels, primarily to communicate on a topic, but at the same time teaching grammar in context. "I like the Argentinian flag best. My favourite player was born in 1995. Who is the youngest in the German team? Are players too old at 35? Tomorrow X plays Y. I think X will win. Yesterday was a great match. If X had scored another goal, they would have won."²⁵

They also have to think in terms of the language functions realised in the text and those required by the activities. They need to decide what they want the learners to be able to understand, and what they hope the learners will be able to use themselves, and with what level of accuracy²⁶. This language awareness is extremely important for future teachers of all kinds²⁷.

The students thoroughly enjoyed preparing their materials, figuring out interesting tasks and becoming aware of the language required. In class they had the chance to show what they had prepared and explain what they would do.

As with 'You as the learner' a brief *summary* helps recap the important steps of 'You as the teacher'. Some example extracts from a summary:

- We looked at roles, expectations and values, views of language learning and views of language teaching.
- We looked briefly at some language teaching methods and at Immersion Schooling, in order to puzzle out what it is that effective methods and approaches to language teaching have in common, and came to the conclusion that they try to create a good environment for learning.
- We asked ourselves what the features of a good environment for learning could be, and decided that the teacher's job is to create this good environment. From then on we adventured our way through a variety of texts and activities to consider how we could create such an environment in practice [...]
- We looked at possible constraints on the language teacher in a regular school e.g. 45-minute lessons, lack of flexible space, being obliged to use a particular textbook, possibly with demotivating topics, texts, exercises; the terrible necessity to test and grade learners, teaching vs. testing, the danger of teaching to the test, and worse still, the danger of reducing what is taught to what is easily testable. We thought about how you can motivate learners in school despite the difficulties.
[...]
- We thought about how to deal with texts, and who does what in the classroom. We realised that the average classroom is one in which the teacher is in almost total control. I picked out one item "Who sets the homework?" for us to think about other options than just "the teacher sets the homework". Thinking about the question of homework assignments made everyone stop and question the purpose of these, especially since not all learners have a Mum or Dad at home whose English is good enough to help them, or the money to pay for extra tuition²⁸ [...].

Although the students contribute ideas and questions at every stage, they may still have some questions open at the end of term. One example was: How can I evaluate the success of a class I teach and the learning of my pupils? This is a complex question, with no short answer, but it took us back to the distinction between teaching at school with its own formal and official system of testing and grading, and teaching elsewhere.

As we ourselves had to deal with the question of grades for their performance in this class, I turned it into a topic for discussion. We thought back on the various things we had done and considered which of these should contribute to the grade

and in what way. I produced a draft evaluation sheet, handwritten on purpose so that it did not look too final or official, with the items that I as the teacher felt were legitimate. We discussed these, including the allocation of points 3,2,1 or 2,1,0 e.g., to have a rough idea of how many points a minimal ‘performance’ would earn and how many points a maximum ‘performance’ would earn.

This involves teacher and students together reflecting on what they have done in class and why; on how much time should be spent on evaluating; and particularly in a class where the evaluation of the participants’ English also plays a role it is very important to make sure that those who are enthusiastic and active but whose English is not so good also have the chance to get a good grade. In other words, focusing on the obligatory end of term evaluation and grading of their own ‘performance’ raises so many points for reflection and discussion that I find it much more fruitful and effective than thinking about grading in the abstract.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Student feedback

To evaluate the LTE class from their point of view the students had two different opportunities. One was writing a poem as above, and the other was completing an evaluation and feedback sheet. It is short, uncomplicated, and gives the students the chance to offer their own ideas.

Some of the questions are below; scales were provided from ‘really interesting’ to ‘dead boring’, or ‘a lot’ to ‘very little’, or ‘Yes’, ‘Partially’, ‘No’.

How would you rate this course from really interesting to dead boring?
 How much do you feel you learnt?
 Be honest! How much effort did you put into this course?
 Given the aims of this course (Please read the course description carefully!): Do you think we/you reached them?
 What would you definitely have liked more/less of?
 Any other comments on this course?
 If you could give first year students of English some advice, what would it be?
 [...]

The written feedback was very positive. This is not surprising with a non-compulsory class where all the participants are there because they want to be. The small class size, the informal and meaningful interaction, the cooperation, the non-intrusive correction and working with authentic materials are all typical features of regular language classes and are as such greatly appreciated by all students, whether from Germany or abroad. As far as the actual subject matter of this LTE course is concerned, occasionally someone would admit to still wishing for concrete rules on how to teach English at school, but that is a wish I could not fulfil. I could only help them grasp the bigger picture. As a participant once wrote in comment on the class: “I expected to become sensitized and to get some ideas for learning and teaching something and the course filled exactly these empty spaces [...] And as a ‘side-effect’ it was good practice for talking English.”

The following are only a few more examples of the many insightful comments from participants over a period of years. “The course gave me lots of occasions to reflect on my own attitudes towards a wide range of things from teaching methods to my personality.” “I also learned some teaching methods by watching you at work.” “I am motivated to take more responsibility for my process of learning as well as for finding different ways of teaching. This might be due to our project on self-directed learning. But I think it’s also inspired by the enlarged perspective on human needs and abilities that I gained from the class.” “I became very conscious of the fact that we have conventional authoritarian teaching methods deep in our minds and that it is difficult to change this.” “I liked this course very much, it was a very good idea!!! It was very interesting, not too much work (very good) and it was fun!”

“Practise what you preach” is a good maxim for a teacher to keep in mind; however, it is even better not to preach/lecture (too much), but rather to give the learners opportunities to find out things for themselves. Better still, especially in language classes, is letting the learners experience things for themselves. This is what I tried to do, and judging from students’ behaviour in class and from their comments on the course, I believe it worked. I also believe that this course was a genuine and unique opportunity for the students to make connections between all their fields of study and their own experience of language learning, and to draw the threads together. It was certainly a genuine opportunity for the teacher to go on learning.

I would like to leave the last word here to a young woman who was once a participant in the LTE class and is now a teacher herself:

I might not have been very good with writing emails etc, but I’ve thought of you quite a lot in the last few years.
 You know, your learning environments and your ‘tasks’ instead of ‘exercises’ did make an impression:-)

4.2. Looking towards the future

Having looked back at the origins of this course, and at the last time I taught it, I would now like to look towards the future. I believe that language classes can and should play a major role in all modern language degree courses, and that they can be the ideal setting for cooperative learning, personal development and “drawing the threads together”.

Perhaps this paper will encourage someone to try out something similar, to use the concept and develop it in their own way, for their own learners. Thanks to changes in attitudes towards education in general (‘Inklusion’) and teacher education at universities in particular (‘Qualitätsoffensive’), as well as increased interest in teaching and research in German as a Foreign Language, there should now be more acceptance for course concepts of this kind, and perhaps even support. As said above, it is a learning opportunity for all involved. Furthermore it comes at no additional cost.

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Notes

¹ The University of Konstanz, in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

² For a diagram see the website of the The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz): [Online at www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/Dokumentation/engl-2015.pdf, 04.07.2017].

³ The education system as a whole has come under scrutiny from outside e.g. UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Muñoz (2016), and from inside, and dissatisfaction with the status quo has increased. The highly selective school system contrasts sharply with that of countries where schools are fully comprehensive and non-selective, and has been much criticised, as discriminatory, divisive, and undemocratic. The Inclusion Debate is now providing the framework for a new perception of the need for radical change. Attitudes towards education are changing, and the close connection between an education system and the society it is embedded in is clearly articulated e.g. at the GEW Conference in Frankfurt am Main, September 2016 *Eine für alle - Die inklusive Schule für die Demokratie*. In Forum 03: *Inklusive Schule - in welcher Gesellschaft wollen wir leben?* these were put forward and statements of intent, with a strong focus on active acceptance of diversity, including new cultures of learning. Much of the current debate is reminiscent of that in Britain in the sixties and seventies. [Online at <https://www.gew.de/inklusion/bundeskongress-eine-fuer-alle/diskussionsforen/>, 02.07.2017].

⁴ To see with my own eyes reforms such as open classrooms, team teaching, flexible curricula and parent involvement I visited various schools in Britain in the late seventies.

⁵ The more recent 'catalogue' at national level appears equally intimidating: Kultusministerkonferenz (2012).

⁶ Study programmes change over time. It may be the structure, or the name: from "Englisch - Lehramt an Gymnasium" to "Bachelor of Education (Lehramt am Gymnasium)". It may be the content: up until 2002 there was no provision in Baden-Württemberg for 'Fachdidaktik' courses at university (nor for student internships at school). The weighting of contents may change. In the case of the course of studies for future teachers of English the weighting towards Literature and Linguistics has remained [<https://www.uni-konstanz.de/studieren/vor-dem-studium/studienangebot/bachelor-of-education-lehramt-am-gymnasium/englisch-lehramt/>, 07.01.2017].

⁷ Dissatisfaction with the current state of Teacher Education and Training at universities has led the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) to a "Qualitätsoffensive", a drive for improvement which will fund projects by half a billion euro and run in two phases till 2023. The focus here is on networking and cooperation between the parties involved (though it is not clear whether this includes Language Institutes and practical language classes), and changes to the contents taught. Key concepts are connection, cooperation, inclusion, heterogeneity. Surprisingly, however, the photographs presented on the website [<https://www.qualitaetsoffensive-lehrerbildung.de/>, 05.02.2017], mainly reflect traditional frontal teaching.

⁸ Klippel (cf. Bausch 2003: 121) makes the point with reference to language teacher education that you do not learn how to teach by listening to a lecture, and that students at university should be given the chance to experience innovative ways of teaching. I would modify that slightly: you do not learn how to teach or how to learn by listening to a lecture. Students should be given the chance to learn in more suitable and effective ways.

⁹ This is a very simplistic way of expressing complex theories of learning such as are critically reviewed in Salkind (2008). For Constructivist theory in particular see Neubert, Reich & Voß (2001).

¹⁰ This may sound frivolous, but it is not. For a discussion of learning as an open process for both learner and teacher see Neubert et al. (2001).

¹¹ Prior to 2002 and the introduction of methodology courses and school internships I had designed and taught many different courses in some way related to teaching. For example: Text Book Analysis (based on English textbooks students had been taught with in school, and disliked), which developed into re-writing units of textbooks and creating their own materials; courses based on understanding factors involved in learning and teaching, including observing classes. My experience with all of these fed into the LTE course described here.

¹² The Bibliography provided details of the books referred to in class and many more, both theoretical and practical, all available in the university library, and all in English. I chose books which I considered to be particularly 'readable'. They included Lightbown & Spada (1993), Woods (1996), Ellis R. (1997, 2012), Ur (1999, 2010), Williams & Burden (1997), Nunan (2004). A permanent fixture was Scott (1978). Although its focus on immigrant children makes it highly relevant in Germany, or indeed the whole of Europe today, it offers much more than this, and it is warmly recommended for anyone who wants to 'teach' any age group, anywhere. It was written by a teacher of English to young immigrants in Britain at a time when there was as yet no stable concept of how to approach the teaching of English to any age group at all. She recounts her experience, the problems, challenges and dilemmas she was faced with, and with great honesty comments on her own emotions.

¹³ An important point to keep in mind when setting up classes for refugees.

¹⁴ Students need to be reassured in print, about reading, listening, viewing for pleasure as a valuable part of learning a language.

¹⁵ Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg (2004).

¹⁶ Every text we read was approached in a different way, depending on the purpose, to give students experience of effective reading strategies. The same applied to watching films.

¹⁷ After class I once took paper and pen and made a diagram of how I saw some of the issues we had been thinking about. The fact that some things were crossed out and nothing had been typed up carefully helped students understand that there is no fixed way of seeing things and thinking about them. Also, if they want to remember long-term what is in any text and how they connect it with some other text, they need to turn it into a clear visual image themselves.

¹⁸ Something similar can be done in an LTE class with the correcting of written work, using a variety of methods. Which method helps the writers to learn? Which is more akin to testing than teaching? See also my website [http://www.findyourfeet.de/usr/doc/FyF_cm_writerreader.pdf, 05.07.2017].

¹⁹ Experience has shown that students have considerable weaknesses in using a monolingual dictionary effectively (e.g. understanding the relevance for meaning of parts of speech or of grammatical distinctions such as count/uncount nouns), and in using effective ways of learning vocabulary. Special courses have to be offered in these areas to help students in their early semesters, as they are basics for their whole course of studies.

²⁰ For information on a study carried out by the Technische Universität Dresden on homework see Morgenstern (2008).

²¹ The information material for an international conference at Hildesheim University in 2010 on *Children's Literature in Language Education - from Picture Books to Young Adult Fiction* helps make the point that reading 'just' for pleasure is a perfectly legitimate activity. No testing, no anxiety. Stephen Krashen was one of the plenary speakers on 'Free Reading: Still a great idea' and Michael Rosen is quoted: "Children who come from homes where books are being read get access to the kinds of abstract and complex ideas that you can only get hold of easily through exposure to extended prose. The rest are being fed worksheets" [Online at www.childrenslit.de, 03.07.2017].

²² There are many moments in this class where feelings play a very important part. How much this is made explicit and reflected on depends on the circumstances. For anyone who wishes to underplay the importance of this in an academic context I would suggest Tschechne (2014).

²³ For the dilemma faced by Germany today with respect to teaching immigrant children see for example Sadigh (2016).

²⁴ In other classes, too, students were enthusiastic about creating materials for use in school, e.g. Area Studies Scotland [Online at <http://www.findyourfeet.de/scotland.php>, 07.07.2017].

²⁵ It is not that I am a passionate football fan, but it is a topic that captivates millions. International events such as the Olympics or World Football Championships are excellent generators of text, with newspapers and magazines providing materials for free such as pictures of flags and football strips, brief descriptions of athletes and players, as well as event schedules, reports, interviews, comments, tables of results, and information on the host country.

²⁶ This approach to teaching grammar requires the teacher to have a good command of the language themselves. They have to be aware of the language being used and make sure that their own input is correct.

²⁷ It is this awareness which makes it possible for people working in any way with refugees in Germany today to identify the language they need in order to be able to cope with basic situations in their new lives. Similarly, this awareness can help public authorities to produce information material which is written in clear German.

²⁸ See also Gruber (2008) for a comment on private tuition as a lucrative business.