

TEACHERS OF GLOBAL ENGLISH ON THE FRONT LINE: A CASE STUDY FROM GERMANY

Large numbers of volunteers in Germany are now teaching elementary German to recent immigrants from Africa and the Middle East. Since most of these teachers have little or no training in language didactics and most of their students are pure beginners whose native languages have little in common with German, the outcome has often been disappointing. To help address this problem, an association of English teachers in Munich has launched a project to show volunteer teachers in local immigrant-support organizations how some of the methods and activities used for teaching English as a global language can also be applied in the German language classroom. Experience has shown that the most useful methods in this context are the lexical approach and the communicative approach. The first approach focuses on teaching lexis and groups of words with little or no reference to grammatical rules. The second stresses the use of word groups or "chunks" to perform specific linguistic functions and advocates the use of classroom exercises involving the performance of practical communicative tasks. When successfully applied, the lexical and communicative approaches turn the language classroom into a kind of playground in which learners develop speaking and listening skills primarily through active participation in teacher-student and inter-student activities. The Munich teacher-training project has, accordingly, three main steps: (1) the selection of lexical and communicative activities from among those that have proven effective in teaching English to beginners, (2) the adaptation of these activities for use in German classrooms and (3) their presentation to teachers working in local immigrant-support organizations. Although designed to address one particular pedagogical situation, the project also provides an insight into how initial instruction in any language can be made more effective: by maximizing the use of classroom activities based on the lexical and communicative approaches.

Key words: *classroom as playground, communicative approach, English as a global language, German as a foreign language, lexical approach.*

The background: A two-phase process

Because of crises and conflicts in their home countries, large numbers of people from the Middle East and Africa have immigrated to Germany in recent years. Over a million immigrants from those regions entered the country in the summer and autumn of 2015 alone. An additional 300,000 are expected to arrive this year. In response, the German government has decided not to intern the new arrivals in special camps, but to place them in various types of smaller-scale temporary accommodation in cities, towns and villages throughout the country. Recognizing that few of the recent immigrants will be returning to their homes in the near future, the government has also taken steps to facilitate their successful integration into the German workforce and society at large. One of these steps is to offer German courses financed, organized and run by the Federal Agency for Immigration and Refugees (BAMF) and taught by trained teachers of German as a foreign language. However, there are still far too few of these BAMF courses. Consequently, the waiting lists in many localities are long. But the immigrants cannot wait. They must learn quickly to speak German to at least some extent if they are to have any chance of integrating at all. To address this problem, local volunteer groups have been formed in communities nationwide. These groups – called aid associations or *Helferkreise* – organize small classes and arrange individual coaching to provide immigrants with an introductory knowledge of German until they can get places in BAMF courses. As a result, there is now a two-phase process for teaching German to immigrants in Germany in which the *Helferkreise* are, in effect, on the front line providing immigrants with immediate language training, and the BAMF program is on the second line offering them more conventional long-term instruction.

The challenges

The *Helferkreise* are not without support. For example, *Flüchtlingshilfe München*, an immigrant-support group in Munich, has developed picture dictionaries of some of the most useful German lexis in ten different languages. These dictionaries, which are available online at <http://fluechtlingshilfe-muenchen.de>, are now in use by immigrants nationwide. German publishers have also produced inexpensive course books designed particularly for immigrants. One of the most widely used of these is *Bitte Einsteigen*, published by Klett / Langenscheidt [4]. These books and the accompanying online material are generally well illustrated and focused on presenting clearly and simply the everyday language that new arrivals require: for example, the Latin alphabet, the numbers, the days of the week and expressions for greetings, introductions, telling time, asking for information, shopping, visiting the doctor and so on. There is also a wide range of material available for new teachers of German as a foreign language [1 (for example)], explaining both basic didactic methods and the particular approaches suitable for teaching refugees.

Nonetheless, the problems confronting German teachers in the *Helferkreise* are formidable. As a rule, the immigrants in their classes are highly motivated and understand the importance of learning German. Therefore, they want rapid success. However, there are a number of factors holding them back. For example, virtually all the immigrants are pure beginners with no prior knowledge of German. Most have little or no experience of formal, classroom-based language learning. Their native languages – Arabic, Pashtu, Dari, Somali and so on – are generally very different from German in pronunciation, grammar, lexis and script. Traumatized by their recent experiences and overwhelmed by the precarious situation in which they now find themselves, many immigrants have difficulty concentrating for long periods of time. The teachers in the *Helferkreise*, on the other hand, are generally not well equipped to deal with the extremely difficult pedagogical situation in which they find themselves. Although well-meaning individuals, most have no experience as language teachers, any knowledge of their students' native languages or any first-hand experience of the cultures from which their students come. Under these circumstances, they are often unable to communicate effectively in the classroom and, since they are inexperienced in using the teaching materials at their disposal, frequently teach over their students' heads – overburdening them with unnecessary vocabulary or focusing on inappropriate grammatical constructions, for example. Consequently, the language instruction provided by the *Helferkreise* is often inadequate. However, until more and better resources are available, these volunteer groups are still the most effective organizations in Germany for teaching elementary German to immigrants.

A role for English teachers

In this situation, is there anything that experienced teachers of English as a global language can do? Not much, it seems. Despite certain obvious similarities, German and English are very different languages. This is apparent from their basic grammars. For example, English has a relatively simple adjective / noun system but a complex verb system. In German, on the other hand, this situation is exactly reversed: the verb forms are relatively few and simple, but the noun system – which includes articles, adjectives and pronouns – is heavily inflected at some points, with multiple case and gender endings. Therefore, elementary instruction in one of these languages will – it appears – necessarily have a different focus from elementary instruction in the other: the first will prioritize verb grammar and the second the grammar of nouns, articles, adjectives and pronouns. But, of course, effective language instruction does not focus exclusively or even primarily on grammar. It focuses first and foremost on effective communication. And for this, knowledge of lexis – that is, of individual vocabulary items and their combination in fixed phrases – and the ability to perform certain standard linguistic functions are the key. Furthermore, the didactic methods used to teach elementary lexis and elementary linguistic functions are not language-specific. Consequently, the methods that work well in the elementary English classroom should, with the appropriate changes in the appropriate places, also work well in the elementary German classroom. It is only necessary to know what those methods are and how to use them. And it is precisely here that experienced teachers of English as a global language can assist their colleagues in the German *Helferkreise*.

The two most effective didactic methods commonly used to teach elementary global English are the so-called lexical approach and the so-called communicative approach. The first is usefully described by Michael Lewis in *Implementing the Lexical Approach* [5]. According to Lewis, language consists not simply of individual words combined in grammatical structures but of what he calls "chunks" – that is, more or less fixed groups of words that are used repeatedly in standard discourse. These chunks are of four different types: (1) individual lexical items such as "dog", "soup", "thank you" and "on the one hand", (2) collocations like "do a favor", "make dinner", (3) fixed expressions such as "Not too bad, thanks" and "How long will it take?" and (4) semi-fixed expressions such as "It's / That's not my fault" and "Could you pass the ___, please?" For this reason, foreign language instruction should focus on enabling students to use these chunks correctly and effectively [5, p. 5-12]. The communicative approach – or, as it is sometimes called, "communicative language teaching" – is in some ways closely related to the lexical approach since it, too, insists that students should learn to use correctly more or less fixed groups of words rather than concentrate on the proper application of grammatical rules. However, the communicative approach also stresses the use of such groups of words to perform specific functions in specific communicative situations and advocates the use of classroom activities that, among other things, involve real communication and the performance of tasks meaningful to students themselves [6, p. 64-83]. Both of these methods – the lexical and the communicative approach – have been around for decades. Consequently, they have provided the basis for a vast range of activities for use in the global English classroom. These activities – language games and tasks of various descriptions – allow students to learn and practice the language they need in order to communicate successfully in the situations they are likely to encounter in real life. They can be easily tailored to individual student needs and capacities. They can generally be performed orally and, hence, depend only secondarily or not at all on reading and writing skills. They are particularly well suited to teaching lower levels since they enable students to communicate successfully in their target language very early in the learning process. And last but not least, students generally find them very enjoyable.

The classroom in which the lexical and communicative approaches are applied skillfully and consistently is, in fact, an arena in which students learn to communicate by actually communicating with their teacher and among themselves. It is a kind of educational playground in which they are the main actors, developing language skills of practical utility in their own lives through active speaking and listening. That, at least, is the way they work in theory. Here is a description of a simple, frequently used classroom activity that illustrates how they work in practice [2, p. 11-12; 3, p. 10-11]:

1. The teacher has all the students stand in a circle in the middle of the classroom.
2. He / she introduces himself / herself and says where he / she is from: "Hello, I'm... I'm from ..."

3. He / she throws a ball to one of the students and asks, "And you?"
4. This student says his / her name, says where he / she is from, throws the ball to another student and asks the same question.
5. When every student has had at least one turn, and before the group loses interest, the teacher changes the rules so that the students now give both their own names and then name another student: "I'm I'm from This is He / she is from...".
6. The ball is then thrown to the student named.
7. The process is then repeated until every student has had at least one turn.

This activity, which can be adapted to introduce, practice and review a large range of structures and lexical items (for instance, "I can ... / But I can't ...," "He often ... / But he never ..." and "I'd like a / an... / What would you like?"), teaches chunks of language without explicit reference to grammatical rules (lexical approach) through active student-teacher and inter-student communication (communicative approach). Furthermore, it – and other activities like it – are well suited for teaching elementary German in *Helferkreise* courses. In the first place they do not require that the teacher and students share a common language since they can be explained with pictures and by pantomime. Second, they do not require that students can already read the Latin script. In fact, they can be used to teach the Latin script. And third, they enable students to have communicative success early on in their learning experience. The teachers of German to immigrants only have to use them. And this is something that experienced teachers of English as a global language can help them do: they can show teachers in the *Helferkreise* how to turn their classrooms, too, into educational playgrounds with the help of activities based on the lexical and communicative approaches.

But neither these activities nor the approaches on which they are based specify the actual lexis and linguistic structures that teachers of German to immigrants should focus on. That is, they do not specify what features of German should be prioritized in *Helferkreise* classes. To specify this, other considerations come into play. One is that the lexis and structures taught must be tailored to the students' particular needs and interests. Another is that they must be presented in a readily comprehensible way – with adequate opportunities for practice and review. And a third is that the focus of instruction must be restricted to only those features of German that are essential for practical, day-to-day communication and not include features that – even if basic to the language in some respect – can be dispensed with in real-life communicative situations. Here, too, teachers of English as a global language can offer guidance. For they have come to see that many of the features of native-speaker English should not be the focus of the instruction they provide – since these are of only secondary importance or of no relevance at all for speakers of global English – and they can, accordingly, help teachers in the *Helferkreise* determine what they should include in their lessons and what they should leave out.

A project

There are two areas, then, in which teachers of global English can support teachers of German to immigrants: they can familiarize these teachers with activities based on the lexical and communicative approaches and advise them in selecting and prioritizing the content of their lessons. To provide such support to *Helferkreise* in the Munich area, the Munich English Language Teachers Association (MELTA) has launched a project comprising these main steps: (1) the selection of lexical and communicative activities from among those that have proven effective in teaching English to pure beginners, (2) the adaptation of these activities for use in teaching German to pure beginners and (3) their presentation to German teachers working in local volunteer organizations. To implement steps (1) and (2) – the selection and adaptation of appropriate lexical and communicative activities – a team of German and English teachers has compiled a set of classroom methods and materials that can, in principle, be used to teach beginning learners in any language. To implement step (3) – their presentation to teachers of German to immigrants – workshops with the following components are being conducted at *Helferkreise* in and around Munich:

- (1) Experiencing the challenge of foreign language teaching: first steps in Arabic or another "exotic" language;
- (2) Input vs. output: What can we reasonably expect pure beginners to learn in their first few lessons?
- (3) Suitable vs. unsuitable content (comprehensible input);
- (4) Methods and materials: activities based on the lexical and communicative approaches;
- (5) Working effectively with course books and online material;
- (6) Learning to learn: approaches for self-learning;
- (7) The way forward: preparation for more advanced study.

The project, which will run into next year, is actually very modest in scope. It will not reach more than a few hundred German teachers at most, and it will not begin to solve all the pedagogical problems the *Helferkreise* are facing. But it opens up a new area of cooperation between teachers of different languages and has potential implications for elementary language instruction in general.

Conclusion

A series of political crises in Africa and the Middle East has precipitated an educational crisis in Germany: there has been a huge, sudden and unanticipated increase in the need for instruction in German as a foreign language. The response, which has necessarily been somewhat improvised, has been to create a two-phase process of language instruction for immigrants. The first phase consists of volunteer-taught introductory classes focused on elementary fluency and the second of more advanced government-sponsored courses focused on accuracy. Although the didactic methods applied in the first phase overlap to some extent with those applied in the second, they also differ in some important respects:

1. They cannot presuppose that all students are able to read Latin characters or that they have extensive experience of classroom language learning.
2. They must enable students to communicate effectively in the real day-to-day situations that they are likely to encounter as immigrants.
3. They must succeed quickly since students in introductory classes must be able to communicate almost immediately in the German-speaking environment.
4. Therefore, they must focus primarily on teaching lexis and developing students' speaking and listening skills.

The didactic methods applied in *Helferkreise* classes must, accordingly, be very practically oriented and rapidly effective. Fortunately, these methods – the lexical and communicative approaches – are already at hand. Teachers must only be trained to use them.

Time is short. Under the pressure of rapidly advancing globalization, the need for effective, practical language instruction is increasing dramatically worldwide. Although unique in some respects, the German experience provides a useful insight into how that need can be met in the initial stages of teaching any language – namely, by maximizing the use of classroom activities based on the lexical and communicative approaches. Machiavelli says somewhere that a good crisis should never be wasted. If the insight it provides into the didactic methods to be applied in first-phase German instruction is acted upon universally – that is, everywhere pure beginners want to achieve rapid communicative success in a foreign language – the current crisis in which teachers of German to immigrants now find themselves will not have been wasted either.

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Пеппі Г. Р.

ВИКЛАДАЧІ ГЛОБАЛЬНОЇ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ПОПЕРЕДУ: КЕЙС-МЕТОД ІЗ НІМЕЧЧИНИ

Щоб допомогти добровольцям без спеціальної методичної підготовки навчати імігрантів елементарної німецької мови, асоціація викладачів англійської мови в Мюнхені започаткувала проект, що демонструє, як деякі методи навчання глобальної англійської мови можна застосувати у навчанні німецької як іноземної мови. Найефективнішим виявився кейс-метод, що сприяє розвитку розмовних та аудитивних умінь імігрантів. Створений для розв'язання конкретних педагогічних ситуацій, він успішно реалізується й у навчанні елементарної іноземної мови.

Ключові слова: кейс-метод, ігровий майданчик, комунікативний підхід, глобальна англійська мова, німецька як іноземна мова.

Пеппі Г. Р.

ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛИ ГЛОБАЛЬНОГО АНГЛІЙСЬКОГО ЯЗЫКА ВПЕРЕДИ: КЕЙС-МЕТОД ИЗ ГЕРМАНИИ

Чтобы помочь добровольцам без специальной методической подготовки обучать иммигрантов элементарному немецкому языку, ассоциация преподавателей английского языка в Мюнхене запустила проект, который демонстрирует, как некоторые методы обучения глобальному английскому языку можно использовать в обучении немецкому как иностранному языку. Наиболее эффективным оказался кейс-метод, который способствует развитию речевых и аудитивных умений учащихся. Созданный для решения конкретных педагогических ситуаций, он с успехом реализуется и в обучении элементарному иностранному языку.

Ключевые слова: кейс-метод, игровая площадка, коммуникативный подход, глобальный английский язык, немецкий как иностранный язык.

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