

Working with literature in foreign language teacher education

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In this Open Educational Resource, we describe a low-key collaboration between a literature and a didactics teacher in foreign language teacher education. The collaboration was part of the EU funded ConnEcTEd project (Coherence in European Teacher Education; 2020-2023). The example described in this document is built around a German text (Wolf Biermann's "Stasi-Ballade", 1974), but we believe the model to be transferrable to other short texts (e.g. poems, other song texts, excerpts from novels) and to other contexts (e.g. English, French, Spanish teacher education).

Wolf Biermann's "Stasi-Ballade" is available at YouTube, please hit "see more" to get to the lyrics:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2K47KkZc_M

1. Background

Teacher education is often characterized as fragmented (Darling-Hammond 2006). In order to create more coherence, we need measures that can connect theory and practice as well as different theoretical domains (content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge; cf. Shulman 1980). Such measures can contribute to a raised sense of meaningfulness and manageability of the program among students (Antonovsky 1997). The example described here aims at contributing to this.

2. German in Norwegian schools and in teacher education

In Norway, German is optional in most schools from grade 8. Ca. 20–25% of the student population learn German. The curriculum emphasizes communicative goals, but teachers are also expected to give their students room to "explore and present artistic and cultural expressions from areas where the language is spoken and explain one's own experiences" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020).

The example in this OER stems from the 5-year MA program at the University of Oslo ("Lektorprogram"). Students participating in the program prepare for teaching in grade 8 until 13 (age 13 until 19). They always choose two school subjects and follow separate strains of CK courses as well as combined PK and PCK courses. E.g., students becoming teachers of German have their language, history and literature courses at one department and their pedagogy and didactics courses at another department. Teacher cooperation between departments is not facilitated by the university and thus dependent on private initiative. This ConnEcTEd example can function as a showcase for such a direct cooperation.

The courses involved in the OER are TYS1300 and PROF4045. TYS1300 is a German modern literature course open for teacher students as well as language students not aiming to become teachers. The course takes place in teacher students' first or fifth semester (depending on which school subject is their main subject). The course provides an introduction to central parts of German-language literature after 1945 and to literary analysis and interpretation. The syllabus texts represent the two post-war German states, the united Germany after 1989 as well as Switzerland and Austria. In addition, the subject deals with German-language authors who had gone into exile during the Second World War, texts by authors from other countries with German-speaking minorities and texts by authors from other cultures and language areas who now write and publish in German. Taking into account that the students have different backgrounds and different linguistic abilities, we have chosen texts that are not too long or too difficult, but at the same time represent a kind of canon. A certain consistency with what many read in

upper secondary schools in German-speaking countries has also been taken into account. Likewise, the availability of the texts is important, although this is rarely a problem with new texts.

PROF4045 is a course in seventh semester combining pedagogy and didactics. School practice is also included in the course. Didactics teaching is organized in separate groups for each school subject, but French, German and Spanish students constitute one group. The course builds on previous PROF courses. Topics taught are amongst others assessment, differentiation, and intercultural competence.

3. Observation-based cooperation

The cooperation between the German literature teacher (CJ) and the foreign language didactics teacher (GD) built on a previous cooperation between GD and a pedagogy teacher, which had proven to be both meaningful and easy to carry out. GD observed CJs course in the autumn of 2022, making notes without interfering. After each unit, GD and CJ sat down to discuss CJs experience and GDs impression. Each discussion was guided by the same, basic questions: Can the text discussed in the unit be used in schools (and how)? and What were the various methods used in CJs teaching (and what can teacher students learn from this)? As a result, CJ became more conscious about his teaching and GD started to think about possibilities for linking parts of his didactics course to the literature course.

If you would like to carry out your own observation, please keep in mind to plan enough time for the discussion in order to allow for in-depth discussions. To our experience, it was also important to refrain from criticizing the teaching observed; instead, we both tried to be open for suggestions.

4. Working in the literature course

In TYSK1300, students meet once a week for a two-hour seminar, accompanied by a one-hour weekly lecture. The lectures provide introductions of the authors plus the literary and historical context. The lectures include very little student activity, as opposed to the seminars.

The seminars have several – perhaps too many – goals. Understanding of the text is one. This means that work on literary approaches, analysis, and interpretation (without this becoming too theory-heavy). Another goal is to enhance the students' skills in written German and to prepare them for the portfolio assignments. A third goal is oral training. We do not demand prepared student presentations at this level but expect that all students take part in the facilitated group work and discussions.

The seminar session is prepared by the teacher by posting the primary text and other relevant material in the Canvas learning platform in due time (together with messages of a practical nature). The seminar also depends on the introduction of the author in the lecture.

5. Text of choice: Wolf Biermann's "Stasi-Ballade"

The mandatory subject TYSK1506 – Germany from 1945 to the present – which takes place in the spring semester, deals with the same era with an emphasis on politics, society and culture, and so the two courses are meant to complement each other. The method in TYSK1300 requires that the students have read the text(s) to be discussed in advance, so that we can benefit from the flipped classroom effect. However, this is not always the case. The teacher then might prefer to choose texts that are so short that they can be read in class. Those who have prepared the reading at home will nevertheless have the advantage of knowing the text better. Wolf Biermann's "Stasi-Ballade" is an example of such a relatively short text, with its difficulties, however but also with a strong connection to what my colleague does in TYSK1506 when pre-1990 Eastern Germany as a surveillance society is thematized.

The seminar starts with a recapitulation of the lecture, which in this case dealt with the literature of Eastern Germany in the 1970s. Then we listen to Biermann himself performing the ballad, and after that

CJ presents a list of questions that should bring us closer to the text, enable us to discuss historical and linguistic difficulties, disclose allusions and question the text's relation to the ballad genre. Groups are formed, partially by the teachers, typically 3-5 students in each. Some groups work silently, others discuss from start on. The groups have around 15 minutes before we start sharing our findings and views in plenum. The students are supposed to use German both in the groups and in plenum, but since the language level is most often very unequal, it is difficult to be strict in this matter. The main goal of this seminar must be to make the students reflect and express themselves. To create an open forum where everyone feels comfortable to speak one will have to lower some of the requirements now and then.

The experience gathered from the seminars in autumn 2022 tell us that Biermann's ballad is indeed suited for this group of students: The theme (Stasi), the genre (epic poetry), the style (seemingly simple and forward language), and the possibilities to discuss both society and poetry seems to be attractive. I suppose, or hope, that the students can find the ballad usable also when they start teaching themselves, or at least that the way we worked with it can serve as a model. – A way of developing this course along its main idea could be to incorporate the written assignment in the work during class: Each student could at least once during the course take the role as a referent and hand in the summary of what we discussed a day or two later.

6. Working in the foreign language didactics course

Foreign language didactics is organized in combined French, German and Spanish groups for most of the semester. Some of the lessons are organized in small, language-specific groups. This makes it possible to discuss topics twice, first at a more general level, close to theory and the curriculum (which is common for all foreign languages in Norway) and after this in a hands-on matter in a small, German speaking student group preparing for their upcoming school practice. I plan on carrying out a two times two-hour unit. Both lessons will be centered around group-work, resulting in a lesson plan students can take with them when they are sent to their practice schools mid-period.

Lesson 1, foreign language didactics

-Short introduction referring to relevant study literature as well as the curriculum's competence goals: Students have to get acquainted to different text types and they should get the possibility to explore "cultural expressions", see above. Main point: These goals can (and, due to an insufficient number of teaching hours, maybe even should) be combined by reading, understanding and experiencing short, literary texts in class in school.

-Plenary discussion based on the following question: When you think of the literature courses you have been attending, what types of texts did you read? Do you remember certain texts you would like to work on in school? Why/why not? As a result of this discussion, the teacher lists relevant text types at one side of the table and reasons for/against using certain texts/text types in school on the other side.

-A short comment about the possibility to learn from different teachers' approaches to teaching, based on my observation of CJs teaching and reflections on my own teaching. Main point: Know what you do (and why), and be transparent about your reasons for doing this in a certain manner.

-Group discussion (mixed groups; French, German and Spanish) based on the following question: Choose one literary genre and write down one example for each language. Discuss how you have worked with these texts in your literature courses and find out together what you would need to adapt in order to work with the same texts in foreign language class in school. My role during group discussions is to remind students they have to adapt their concepts to a school setting.

-Short plenary presentation round, I comment on each group's work referring to the aspects that were central in the lesson: content and methods.

Lesson 2, German didactics

-In this lesson, students work in pairs. They design in detail a two-hour lesson based on one of the texts they have read in German literature class. In accordance with the curriculum, the lesson should provide students with an understanding of the content of the text (reading) and give them the opportunity to experience German culture through the text and/or with the text as a starting point. At this point, students know which school they will be sent to, and they will therefore be asked to adapt their plan to the classes they can expect to teach. My role during this workshop is to be available as a partner that students can test their ideas on and to invite the groups to think about how they can use the text to introduce their students to important aspects of German history and how these insights can inform a discussion about e.g. technological developments in Norway and Germany today.

-Lessons plans are to be uploaded at the end of the lesson.

-Students present their plans in a short plenary session.

7. Conclusion

The school subject German has so far played a minor role when planning the syllabus for the literature. But when the course is soon to be revised, and according to the plan combined into a larger course with TYSK1506, this consideration will come into play. The experience gained from the observation in autumn 2022 will then be of great value. The connection between literature and history is highly relevant for German as a school subject and also for other school subjects, like History and Social Studies, providing students with opportunities to see the short text they read in a broader historical and cultural perspective.

Literature

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