

ConnEcTEd podcast, Oslo, intercultural competence/German literature

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(G) Good morning, welcome to this podcast. My name is **Gerard Doetjes** (G) and I'm an associate professor of foreign language didactics at the University of Oslo. Also, I am the director of the National Centre for Foreign Languages. And today I'm together with **Christian Janss** (C), also at the University of Oslo. Please, Christian, say something about yourself.

(C) Hello and good morning from me as well. I am a professor of German literature at the University of Oslo. And yes, I'm in charge of our small German section here up at the language department, which also contains the other European languages and comparative literature.

(G) So Christian, we have been working together on a very small but very interesting project, I think. We're going to talk about this today. But before we do so, I think I need to say something about the ConnEcTEd project and also something about the background for our small adventure.

(G) So the University of Oslo is one of the partners in the ConnEcTEd project, which is an Erasmus+ project finishing right now. We are done in September 2023, which is in one month. And in this project, we have been working together with universities from Finland and from Germany and from France and from Croatia, which has been very interesting because everybody does teacher education a bit different, which gives us the possibility to learn from our colleagues.

(G) We have been doing something which I have felt the need for a very long time. At the University of Oslo, teacher education is basically organized by the Department of Teacher Education. But of course, there are a lot of different subjects involved in teacher education, and those subjects are not part of the Department of Teacher Education. For example, German is at the Faculty of Arts, which isn't far, but still, it's another part of the organization. And this means we need to find each other and actively say we want to work together. And this is something we finally got done this year, last year, and I'm very happy that we did.

(G) So this is something we are going to tell a bit about today, but I'd like to give the word back to you, Christian. Just for the listeners, maybe you can tell something more about your background and what you actually do at the university.

(C) My background is German literature, comparative literature, and Russian. But I teach German literature together with my colleagues here in our section who teach language and also culture, history, politics. And so what I do in teaching, the first year students who come to me are partly bachelor students, and partly they come from other studies and choose one or two 10 ECTS points from our German subjects.

(G) So I didn't know this to start with, but now I've seen it. So you actually have mixed groups with students learning German and doing courses in literature, history, etc. to become a teacher, but also students who just study German because they think it's interesting and they want to have a degree in German.

(C) So yes, that's right. You can take a normal bachelor degree in German. So yes, and the first year consists of 40 ECTS language courses, 10 points literature and 10 points history, politics. And so it's in this small unit literature that we cooperated in.

(G) So this actually, it's only 10 ECTS in the first year, which is nothing basically, or very little, which reminds a bit of the school subject German. In Norwegian schools, the curriculum is basically, it's very focused on communicative competencies. So this is what teachers do most of the time. But the

curriculum also tells teachers they should work on culture and intercultural competencies, which is the transversal competence we are discussing today. This is the kind of competence you can use across very different settings, and which I think is one of the main reasons we need to teach our children foreign languages is just to get to know other cultures and also the history of other countries in order to be able to understand the world a bit better. You're going to meet a lot of different people in your life. And that's where intercultural competence comes in very handy. We just need to understand that people are different in some ways and not so different actually in other ways. So maybe that's the connection between what you do and what I do and what teachers do in schools.

(C) Yes. And I think you're absolutely right on that. This has also to do with two things, at least the way we teach, or at least the way I try to teach, we will come back to that, I believe. But also the curriculum in my course, and also in the politics and history course of my colleagues. So in my course, we try to read texts written after 1945, not only from Germany, but also from Switzerland, Austria, Romania, and also immigrants who have come to Germany during the last decades and have started to publish in what in the beginning was their second language. And also some of the exile authors who went abroad after 1933 and who remained there for a while, at least, they also represent German literature in this very broad sense. So I think that also belongs to the intercultural or cultural competence that we try to underline in the course. That's perhaps a little bit different from what you have the time to do in school. I'm not quite sure.

(G) Well, I think from the point of view of foreign language didactics, it's of course, what we do in didactics courses is very close to the school subject. We need to prepare students for work in school, and we need to give them the tools they need to be able to teach German language, but also teach about and let kids experience German culture in schools. But I really think students need a broad... They need a... Well, they need a... Here is my English coming in. I just don't have the word. I think students teaching, preparing for teaching German, they actually need to know a lot about German culture. They should have read a lot of literature, and they should read more and they should know more than what you can teach in school. Because they need to adjust from class to class and from time to time what they do in classes. And the example we have been working on together is a text from Wolf Biermann from the 70s, about Eastern German Stasi spying on him as a singer-songwriter, a person with a troubled life, and then he knows that the Stasi knows everything about him, also about his marriage. And this, of course, is one text amongst many texts a teacher could use in school. And to make the right choice, they need to have met these texts in university. It doesn't mean a teacher needs to work with Wolf Biermann in school, but the teacher has a choice and also has seen you teaching about this text and has worked together with you as a literature professor on this text. And this gives the students some insight and also some tools to work with this in school. But my perspective, of course, there is one layer that needs to be added, and that's the transfer from literature class in university to the classroom in school. It's, of course, a completely different setting. And that's what my contribution should be.

(C) I think that what I gain from our cooperation is to have these two thoughts in my mind at the same time that I'm going to, I'm here at the university, I represent, so to speak, a tradition for dealing with text, interpreting, making the historical context available and so forth. But we also, of course, have a set of theoretical and methodological approaches to literature. And this has to be balanced with the other part, the other strain or the other way of teaching. When you have teacher students in the classroom, you have to think that these people are hopefully going to use either this text or at least this approach to a text when they go out and meet their pupils. So that balance might be difficult, but I think it's manageable.

(G) So now we're already discussing what we have learned from each other, but we didn't tell the listeners yet what we have been doing, actually. Maybe we should say something about the project.

(C) Yes, good idea.

(G) So your course comes first. And sometime later, my course comes in the five year master teacher education design, which made it possible for me to ask you, can I please, Christian, come and visit your course and just sit in the back and observe what you're doing? So this was basically my question to you. And I know you had to think about this a little bit, maybe. Let's just talk about this. How was it for me for you to let me sit there and observe you? Was it strange? Was it? Yes. Did it affect your teaching? What happened?

(C) Well, when I was asked to be shadowed by you for an entire semester, well, you didn't come to all the sessions, but nevertheless, that was the intention. So I was initially a little anxious at the thought of someone sitting and silently observing me in the back of the classroom. But eventually, I came to expect that it was the teaching you observed, the dynamics, how the topic was treated and what was happening in the classroom and not so much my performance or achievement. So that calmed me a little bit down after first or second time you came to us. I must say the conversations we had afterwards, sometimes also beforehand, were very important to de-dramatize this observation situation.

(G) This was also part of our very low-key project design. I did observations. We talked a bit before the course just for me to have an idea of what you were going to teach about. And then afterwards, we sat down with a coffee and took some time to just tell each other what we had experienced.

(C) I must also say that we have known each other professionally for some years. I think that's an advantage, but not necessarily. It has a lot to do with how you presented the project. And yes, the conversations were very important. As I can judge, I think the students, they didn't bother at all that you were there.

(G) No, no. That was also my impression. They looked twice at the back of the classroom. Oh, the guy is there again. And then they just did their thing.

(C) But of course, I told them in the beginning before you came that you were going to sit there to observe me, and not them. Which was not quite true, but I think that calmed them a little bit down.

(G) No, but actually going through my notes from the observations, I didn't write down a lot about the students, but more on a general level. Never this one student did this or the other student that. Yeah. Groups working speak Norwegian with each other, which is interesting. It's a German class, the text is German, you speak German, but still in group work, students sometimes choose to speak Norwegian. I don't think, also thinking about what happens in school, it's not necessarily wrong. I don't think it's a thing one needs to be very strict about, because it's also about experiencing a text, a work of art, basically. These feelings, these things happening in your head and in your body, it's not so easy to put this in words in a foreign language.

(C) No. Do this in Norwegian first, and then it's okay. Yeah, that's right. And it's the same in the courses with my colleagues, they have the same experience. And some say, okay, we will start, make a soft start and let all speak Norwegian in the beginning, and then move on to make the whole class use German in every part of the class. But I think that's difficult, because once you have started to speak, use Norwegian, it's difficult to say, yes, from the next Monday on, we will speak only German.

(G) I don't know if we discussed this in our coffee breaks, but I think you actually adjusted, adapted to the situation in the classroom. You always started out speaking German, but sometimes when students, you try to engage everybody in the plenary discussions. And sometimes if a student wasn't comfortable speaking Norwegian, German, sorry, started a sentence in Norwegian and looked a bit at you like, is it allowed to speak Norwegian? Confirm, just keep on speaking. Yeah, that's the kind of adaptations you'd also expect from a teacher in school. Of course, it's a German subject. So the goal is to get kids speaking German, of course, but that doesn't happen on one day. So for a teacher, it's great to see that also in university, there is this kind of flexibility that makes adaptations to individuals possible. Some kids, some students, they speak German without even thinking about it, and some others don't dare to speak German in plenary sessions. That's okay to adjust a bit, I think.

(C) Yes, I hope so. And I believe so too. And sometimes the subject itself has to decide, because if there is a student with an interesting view on, let's say, Dürrenmatt's *Die Physiker*, which we read last time, and we will read it this semester too. And I think we will have a lot to say about it now that everyone hopefully has seen the Oppenheimer film, the responsibility of the scientist and so on. And I don't want to end the discussion, which might develop in an interesting way, because someone doesn't find the right words in German. So... Of course, yeah. And you can always write it on the whiteboard.

(G) Yes. I also saw you doing this. So actually, I didn't expect us to be discussing so much teaching methodology to start with. I expected actually us to be mainly talking about the literature, maybe also the possibilities of using certain texts in school. But we ended up quite often also discussing the way you've been teaching.

(C) Yeah, that's true. Yeah.

(G) The variations in the methodology and the group work and the pair work and the individual work and the plenary sessions and dynamics in the classroom, which is of course, very transferable to didactics classes. And from there to student school practice. I think my main takeaway from our cooperation isn't necessarily the literature. It's also very interesting, but it's the possibility I now have to say to my students, okay, think back to the literature course you had with Christian. What did you do? How did you work with this text? Try to remember how these sessions were composed, because this is what we are going to transfer to school together. We need to make adjustments because students in school are not so as interested in German literature as you are, but our job is to make them interested. So we need to adjust the design of the lesson.

(C) Yeah. Yeah. And then this, as I said, also was very helpful to me just to discuss and to go through what was happening, actually, what choices did I make more or less consciously? And it made me think about what works and what doesn't work that good. But then I understand that I also should have visited at least your course.

(G) We'll do that next time.

(C) Yeah.

(G) I think we need to tell something, or maybe you can tell something about this Wolf Biermann text. We're referring to the text, but we haven't talked about the text yet a lot. So maybe you can just tell us. Yes. What is this text about? Very short. What is it called? I actually can't remember. I'm sorry.

(C) Stasi Ballade, Ballad of the Stasi. And it's a song which Wolf Biermann performed many times with his guitar, and it's quite well known. And it's an ironical, funny text with a straightforward language about how it is to be under surveillance of the Stasi all the time. With references to also tragic fates

during this era. And of course, a text that was impossible to perform in the GDR. But as you may know, Wolf Biermann had to leave GDR and settled in West Germany.

(G) So this is 50 years ago. So next year. Yes. Isn't it? It's 50 years old. So yeah. How can we work with these kind of texts today at the university, but also in schools? It's a big leap from the 70s to our situation today. Eastern Germany is gone and long gone.

(C) Yeah. Well, I think it's machbar, as we say in German, we can do it. We have some help in the city of Berlin, which is a magnet for many Norwegian students and pupils. They go there, many know the city, at least they know about the Cold War and about the wall that went through the city. So that's a good starting point. Why was there a wall? Why was a wall built in 1961 that divided the city into two halves? And from then on, it's easy to talk about the two Germanys and the Cold War situation, the Soviet Union and its relationship to the West and how the GDR society developed under the sovereignty of the Soviet Union and the big differences between the Western and German parts of Germany. And from then on, you can go down to life in GDR. What was it like if you were an unpolitical person doing your things, going to work and not opposing in any way? It was perhaps in many ways, OK, but once you wanted to express opinions that were in opposition to the Communist Party and to the leaders of the country, you will get into trouble. And I think young people will understand that, that you're not free to express yourself, what happens then.

(G) And so 50 years, OK, yes, it's a long time ago, but I think they can relate in many ways. And of course, I said Eastern Germany is gone, long gone, but in a way, it's still there. It still affects day to day life in Germany today. And it's a very important politically. We're talking about culture and intercultural competence. It's something the kids need to know about Germany because it is.

(C) Yeah. And if you want to understand different attitudes, different voting in nowadays Germany, differences in the view on Covid and the measures against Covid, you have to understand that this country was divided a couple of years ago.

(G) And there is maybe one thing more, because looking at the curriculum for the school subject, one of the points in the curriculum is that teachers should let the students explore historical events and also try to find connections to the students own background, which is a very interesting way of putting it, I think, because this makes foreign language teaching not only about the foreign language and the culture, it makes the school subject German also about the Norwegian students in their Norwegian setting and their lives here in Norway. They can use what they learn in German class to think about what's happening today in their lives here at home. That makes it possible also in German class, for example, using this text to talk about what does Facebook do to us? What does AI do to us? How different is it from being looked at all the time by the state? At some level, it isn't that different, maybe. So, this is something German teachers can give students some new ways of looking at. This part of history is not known, not very known in Norway, at least not amongst 13, 16 years old.

(C) No, of course not.

(G) Their parents didn't even know each other in 1990 when the Mauer went down. This needs to be talked about in German class. Students need some context and then today, here, my life in Norway can be a good point of view to start with.

(C) Yes, I think it's there are many things that should be very interesting, as you said, to compare GDR's surveillance system with nowadays artificial intelligence invading our lives. Although the differences are also, of course...

(G) Yes, of course. It's not the same, but there are some, maybe some aspects that...

(C) But I teach also when the students move on in their studies, we also read dramas by Bertolt Brecht. Last time we read Mutter Courage and the setting is the 30 years war between 1618 and 1648. It's not difficult to relate to that war. You have to explain certain things, of course, but certain historical events and the development and why was there a war at all and why were there so many Swedes in Germany at that time fighting? But the core and the main idea of the drama to depict the individuals plays in this war is understandable for everyone, I think, also today.

(G) So this leads us to the conclusion. There are many short texts, novels, poems, song texts, in German from 1600, 1700, 1800, 1900, doesn't matter. They can be used also today in university and in school. If you, we, everybody that teaches these things provide the context and provide the framework to talk about the text, what it means for us today, maybe.

(C) Yes, that's right. And I think our cooperation led to, at least for me, an awareness about the necessity of thinking through what kind of text and what kind of subjects is suitable at this level for this mixed group that I have each fall semester.

(G) So now I have been observing your course. You haven't observed my course yet. I still have to do the didactics course with the students I've been observing in your course. So this is what I'm going to do this semester. And of course, didactics isn't only about literature. It's not only about literature. So a lot of the seminars will not be about literature. But when I'm teaching about culture, literature, intercultural competencies, I'm going to pick up on either Wolf Biermann or Bertolt Brecht or maybe something newer. Maybe you can, I can ask you for one tip to conclude with today. You have maybe a very fresh text from Germany you think you could use and I could use and my students can use in class.

(C) Ah, yes.

(G) I didn't ask you this beforehand. So this is a surprise. I'm sorry.

(C) Yes, perhaps. I'm not quite sure. Perhaps I can recommend one of the interesting new voices who started out in another language, but now write and publish in German. And it's, it's I write it down also. His name is Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus.

(G) Dreyfus. Yes.

(C) And he has written many things, but also in amongst other things, Birobidschan, about a strange project. Stalin wanted to establish a Jewish city far away in Siberia.

(G) I've heard this. We need to, we need to dive into this.

(C) Yes.

(G) You can do this with your students. I do it with my students and then we find out if this is of use for the classroom in schools. Maybe there is a connection to the Ukrainian war right now.

(C) Might be. And talking about Ukrainian authors writing in Norwegian, in German, it's at least one. Her name is Katia. One second. Katja Petrowskaja. I think she's, she seems very interesting. And she, she is, she has moved from Ukraine to Germany. I'm not quite sure when she moved, but she's now writing about her origin in German, publishing in German. It's quite popular.

(G) That's also a, I think it's a very interesting part of German literature is the migrant literature. If in another perspective on German society. So this is something we might want to talk about next time we're discussing literature as a part of teacher education, German literature. I think for now we're going to stop this podcast. Maybe one last question. What is going to happen at your department?

Are you going to follow up on our cooperation? Maybe try to get some colleagues to join you, or maybe you can join some other colleagues. Is this a, it was a very low-key thing we did. Is this something that can be transferred to other parts of the university?

(C) That's, that's what I think. So, and it's, it's, it's, as you say, it's very easy to conduct. And it's very useful. You, you get a lot out of it without a really having to invest a lot, your time, of course. So I, I informed my, my head of department and head of education at our department about the project, of course, and that we have developed a model and also now have made this podcast. And so I hope they will contact me to, to hear about my experience. And of-course I will be there for anyone who wants to know more about this, this, this way of cooperating, which I find very useful.

(C) (G) Thank you.