

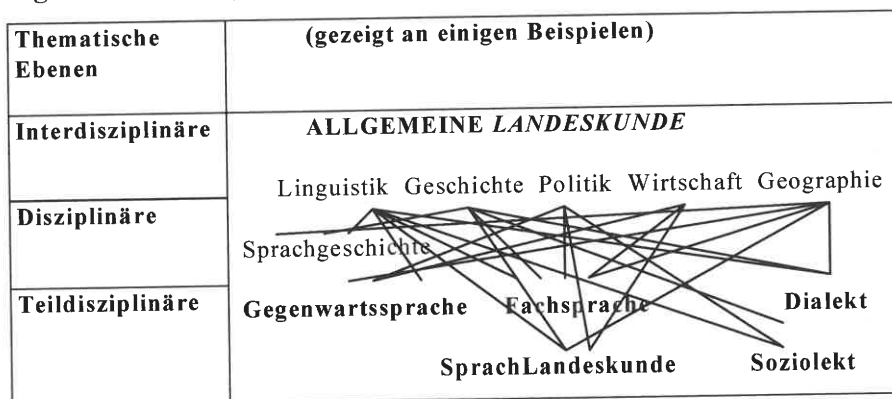
***Landeskunde*: its role and functions in the Irish German-language classroom**

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What exactly is *Landeskunde*?

Today, there is rarely an article dealing with *Landeskunde* ('Cultural Studies') that does not refer at the outset to the long-established and ongoing difficulty that exists in defining this subject (Koreik 1995: 1). It has been referred to as, amongst other things, an *Unfach* ['non-subject' or 'misconceived subject' – *ed.*] (Schmidt 1980: 289), an 'unmögliches Fach aus Deutschland' ['an impossible subject from Germany' – *ed.*] (Gürttler and Steinfeld 1990: 255), and a 'Polyhybrid' (Zapp 1983: 1). Various factors contribute to the confusion surrounding the actual term *Landeskunde*, one of the most crucial being the almost endless possibilities for the selection, justification, and mediation of materials which qualify as suitable to be taught under the term *Landeskunde*. However, one point upon which all are agreed is that the teaching of *Landeskunde* involves the teaching of culture, where culture is defined as a set of rules, beliefs, traditions, and customs which are commonly observed by a particular group of people in a particular society. The model put forward by Lipold (1989: 37), shown in Figure 1, encompasses and summarizes very clearly the various topics which have always been considered part of *Landeskunde* and shows clearly how they are connected to one another.

Figure 1: Model of the components of general cultural studies



While Lipold's hypothesis is very detailed, illustrating the various components of *Landeskunde* and how they are interconnected with one another, it neglects to mention areas such as psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology, which are often referred to as relevant to *Landeskunde*. Althaus and Mog (1992: 8), in a later definition, include philosophy in their definition of the actual aims and functions of *Landeskunde*, although they also exclude psychology, anthropology, and sociology:

Sie [die Landeskunde] soll Fremde mit der Geschichte, den politischen Strukturen und Institutionen, den sozialen und kulturellen Verhältnissen, mit Philosophie, Literatur und Kunst eines Landes vertraut machen, sie soll selbstverständlich auch Einblicke in die Mentalität, die Lebensweise und den Alltag seiner Bewohner geben. ... [Die Lehrenden] sollen darüber hinaus zugleich Vorurteile abbauen, Stereotypen auflösen, Völkerverständigung fördern; sie sollen über das Fremdverstehen die Selbsterfahrung der ausländischen Lernenden schärfen, Haltungen und Wahrnehmungsweisen verändern.¹

Literature as Landeskunde

Although literature in all of its forms has always been an important element of foreign language teaching, the actual role played by it in foreign language class is varied and has been the subject of much debate. Literature generally appears in the foreign language class in two forms, either as factual or documentary material or as literary texts (novels, prose, poetry, short stories etc.). Because of their pragmatic structure and factual content, factual texts (e.g. newspaper or magazine articles, instructions, notices, etc.) are ideal for helping to develop the practical, communicative skills which a learner would need for successful communication with members of target language countries. Literary texts, on the other

¹ It [*Landeskunde*] should make foreigners familiar with the history, the political structures and institutions, the social and cultural attitudes, with the philosophy, literature, and art of a country; it should obviously also give insights into the mentality, the way of life, and the everyday life of its inhabitants. ... [The teachers] should also at the same time undermine prejudices, dissolve stereotypes, promote international understanding; they should, through understanding of the foreigner, sharpen the self-awareness of the foreign learners, change attitudes and ways of perception. [— ed.]

hand, are used as a means of enabling the learner to examine closely details of social or political situations in a foreign culture or society, and to aid the learner in the formation of complex perspectives and opinions on the relationship between his or her own country and the target language country. Literary texts in which great attention to detail is shown by the author with regard to scenery or emotions in a story achieve reader involvement in the story through the aesthetic and emotional dimensions present in the work. Through deeper involvement in the story, analytical abilities are nurtured and discussion of and comparison between one's own culture and the target language culture are fostered, paving the way for the formation of more complex perspectives and opinions.

Why Landeskunde?

Landeskunde is an integral part of learning a foreign language for several reasons. Firstly, language and culture cannot be separated. Language does not merely reflect a cultural reality but is in fact a part of that reality. This interdependence of language and culture is explained by Byram (1991: 18), who sees language as

not simply a reflector of an objective cultural reality. It is an integral part of that reality through which other parts are shaped and interpreted. It is both a symbol of the whole and part of the whole which shapes and is in turn shaped by socio-cultural actions, beliefs and values.

To teach language as a phenomenon independent of culture would be almost irreparably damaging to the learner's fundamental perceptions of the foreign culture. Where such a situation arises the learner will view the foreign language in the light of his or her own customs and culture. The foreign language will thus not actually be understood as being the product of a different set of norms, beliefs, practices, and social phenomena but as having the same socio-cultural origin and context as the learner's own language (Byram 1991: 18). The second reason that cultural studies are such an important part of foreign language teaching is that foreign languages have long been recognized as a discipline in which intellectual development is merely *one* of the aims. When learning a foreign language, certain modern and social conditions, as well as

other personal dimensions, at least justify, if not necessitate, the inclusion of cultural studies in the foreign language class (Buttjes 1991: 48). Growing awareness of neighbouring cultures has ensured that the world is fast becoming less of a large planet and more of a global village, resulting in a growing sense of dependency amongst countries, which in turn necessitates intercultural communication, competence, and understanding through foreign languages. There are also of course many immediate personal benefits for the individual foreign-language learner. *Landeskunde* contributes in many ways to the creation and fostering of cultural awareness in the learner towards one's own culture and towards foreign cultures and those who live in them. While it is not the responsibility of the foreign language class to acculturate the learner to the foreign culture, it would be hoped that following successful learning the learner should develop a critical understanding of the foreign culture which would eventuate in the learner positive attitudes towards, and enhanced enjoyment in, foreign travel and encounters with members of a foreign culture (Byram 1991: 103). This critical understanding should also create an increased sense of one's own cultural identity within both one's own and the target language society (Neuner et al. 1997: 71).

***Landeskunde* in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate curricula in Ireland**

The role of *Landeskunde* varies greatly at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level in Ireland. At Junior Certificate level the main method of teaching foreign languages bears strong resemblance to the materials used and teaching methods practised in the Communicative Approach: the emphasis is placed on teaching basic communicative skills for living, or at least surviving, in the foreign culture. The German syllabus for Junior Certificate is a communicative syllabus, centred around 'using and understanding the target language as a means of communication and instruction in the classroom' that aims to 'equip pupils with a competence in the target language which would equip them to provide themselves with basic necessities in order to avoid misdemeanours and/or serious embarrassment' and to 'furnish pupils with linguistic skills which will make it possible for them to pursue at least some aspects of their general interests through the medium of the target

language' (Department of Education Junior Certificate Programme 1989: 47-48). Thus, it can be surmised that the general objectives of the Junior Certificate syllabus centre on the development of pragmatic skills which may be used by the learner in performing practical communicative tasks in the target language.

Landeskunde at Leaving Certificate level

All Leaving Certificate programmes emphasize the importance of self-directed and independent learning and the importance of a spirit of enquiry, critical thinking, problem solving, self-reliance, initiative, and enterprise (Department of Education n.d.: 2). In the foreign language class at Leaving Certificate level, particular importance is placed on 'critical thinking' and 'problem solving'. The Senior Cycle of foreign language education in Ireland has three sets of main aims: general aims, behavioural objectives, and assessment. Behavioural objectives are further divided into three categories: 'Basic Communication and Proficiency', 'Language Awareness', and 'Cultural Awareness'. The communicative element of foreign-language learning of the Junior Certificate syllabus is retained in the Leaving Certificate syllabus (Department of Education 1995a: 2), although a purely communicative approach at Leaving Certificate level was considered to be too functional and unfocused for students at that level. 'Cultural Awareness' thus assumes a role of greater importance than it previously occupied at Junior Certificate level (Sherwin 1997: 61). The Leaving Certificate syllabus emphasizes the development of learner autonomy. For example, learners must employ strategies to deduce meaning from texts and contexts and would therefore need to use not only linguistic knowledge, but also cultural knowledge and awareness of the social context implicit in the language used (Sherwin 1997: 61). While Cultural Awareness is mentioned in relation to the Junior Certificate syllabus, it is explicitly stated by the Department of Education that the Leaving Certificate syllabus aims to develop this awareness further (Department of Education 1995a: 2).

The difficulty for teachers and learners of German in secondary schools in Ireland lies in the fact that there are differing structures and emphases within the teaching methods in operation for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate courses respectively. On the one hand, the role of *Landeskunde* evolves from a secondary to a primary concern within the foreign language class; that is

to say, from a supporting role at Junior Certificate level (due to the influence of the Communicative Approach) to a predominant role at Leaving Certificate level (due in part to the influence of the Intercultural Approach). On the other hand, the context of *Landeskunde* changes from structured (always presented in a communicative context) to less structured (the context of *Landeskunde* material can be considered more flexible: communicative situations which may illustrate cultural norms and standards in target language countries are often presented, but there also is increased contact with literature, and exchange programmes to Germany are common in fifth year in the Senior Cycle). The differences in the learning processes involved in Junior and Senior Cycles respectively is attested to by the Department of Education: 'Students ... move from a state of dependency to a more autonomous and participative role' (Department of Education 1986: 6).

The Transition Year as a possibility for minimising inconsistencies between the portrayal and mediation of Landeskunde at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels

Although the Transition Year is compulsory in most secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland at present, it remains an optional year in some schools and is undertaken at the discretion of the individual student. One of the main objectives of the Transition Year was to assist students in beginning to take responsibility for their own learning (Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland n.d.: 4). Because the Transition Year is seen primarily as a preparatory year for students before they progress into Senior Cycle, it has been suggested by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland that the Transition Year could be used as a 'window' in the pupils' school career in which the pupil could be gradually introduced to a teaching method that encourages open discussion on and comparison of abstract topics (Association of Secondary School Teachers of Ireland n.d.: 3). If this were the case, pupils would have an opportunity to make a gradual transition from a learning context within a very structured framework to a more autonomous learning method which is more discussion- and thought-oriented — something which in the current educational system in Ireland would appear to be recommendable (Department of Education 1995b: 50).

If such a scheme were to begin, then much attention would have to be paid to those topics which could be used in the learner's progression from the third year to the sixth year. The current rules and regulations as set out by the Department of Education prohibit the use of Leaving Certificate material in the Transition Year (Department of Education 1995b: 50). This rule in itself is fair, as it is not the intention of the Transition Year to be academically challenging; rather, it should contribute to the aspirations and the character development of the learners. However, the exclusion of Leaving Certificate themes from the Transition Year curriculum will render it all the more difficult for a teacher to choose themes for the learners, given that almost all of the suitable themes are 'reserved' for the Leaving Certificate. In any case, it should be recommended that a solution should not be long forthcoming, given the interested and concerned discussion taking place (see Sherwin 1997).

Ambiguities in the choice of Landeskunde content for the Junior and Leaving Certificate course

There is one final problem with the teaching of *Landeskunde* which underlies the process of making the transition from the Junior Cycle to the Senior Cycle: there are no official regulations from the Department of Education regarding which cultural topics must be taught, and to what extent. At Junior Certificate level it is often the case that 'culture' in its own right, i.e. not being exclusively used as a context for practising communication skills, is allotted very little lesson time and is frequently viewed as a 'filler' before the bell rings. While this is, with some exceptions, often the situation of *Landeskunde* in Ireland at Junior Certificate level, it is also attested to by Byram (1991: 17) as occurring in Great Britain. Those aspects of the target language culture which are discussed and the amount of time allotted to them are entirely at the discretion of the teacher. This current practice leads to inadequacies and inconsistencies across the board in the amount and content of the knowledge that each third-year student acquires. Equally, at Leaving Certificate level the attitude towards the amount and type of *Landeskunde* which should be dealt with is ambiguous. On the question of topics to be covered in the syllabus, the only topics which are clearly defined in the Leaving Certificate are those mentioned in the list of topics which must be

prepared for the oral examination. Consequently, as at Junior Certificate level, there are no concrete rules or regulations at Leaving Certificate level as to what exactly should be taught. The topics for the oral examination are accorded priority as the individual teacher sees fit. Certain teachers may have a preference for specific topics and may ignore others. It would not be unfair to suggest that what teachers need at both levels in order to introduce some kind of structure to the teaching of *Landeskunde* are both (a) a list of topics which must be taught, provided by the Department of Education for their didactic value, and (b) adequate guidelines for the teaching of the topics, i.e. methodological aids or suggestions for teachers. Such suggestions, if put forward by the Department of Education could well prove to significantly reduce the present inadequacies and inconsistencies which exist amongst different teachers and different schools.

Empirical research into the role of *Landeskunde* in secondary schools in Ireland

Until 1998, no empirical research had been carried out regarding the state of *Landeskunde* in Irish foreign language classrooms at secondary level. Taking this into account, it was decided that it would be very interesting and useful to discover the opinions of secondary school pupils concerning Cultural Studies in their language class and to discover how, if at all, it affected the learning process and pupil attitudes towards and perceptions of the German language, culture, and society. Purely theoretical research for such a topic would not suffice, as by its very nature it would not produce concrete data and information which would be immediately relevant to a practical classroom situation. It was decided, therefore, to carry out empirical research in the form of a questionnaire distributed among a number of secondary school students in County Kildare. The answers provided by the students composed the core of the study. The aims of the questionnaire were as follows:

- (a) To establish the role played by Cultural Studies in the foreign language class as estimated by the students in that class. Does it play a large role, a small role, or is it non-existent?

- (b) To assess the importance of cultural studies in learning a foreign language. This question differs from the above in that a pupil may feel that Cultural Studies is a very important part of learning a foreign language but it may play a very small role in German class.
- (c) To establish the popularity of cultural studies amongst students of German.
- (d) To establish the effects of Cultural Studies on the learning process in the foreign language class. Does it encourage or discourage learning? Does it have a positive or a negative effect on the learning process?
- (e) To establish the current perceptions, prejudices, and knowledge of young Irish students of the German language, the German people, and Germany.
- (f) To establish whether there is a connection between students' perceptions of and prejudices about the amount and type of Cultural Studies to which they are exposed.

The questionnaire was composed of 25 questions and a blank map of Germany into which students had to mark a number of cities and the border between the former East Germany and West Germany. The questionnaire can also be divided into different sections according to the topics to which the questions relate, as there are several clusters of questions which relate to a single issue. Following is a brief description of the areas dealt with by the questionnaire.

Questions 1-3 aimed to establish the background of the individual respondent and whether or not he or she had had any previous contact with a native German speaker. Questions 4 and 5 were multiple-choice questions regarding personality and appearance traits in relation to German people. These questions were included in order to establish the level of stereotyping (if any) present among students. Questions 6 to 14 were general knowledge questions about the geography, politics, history, and economy of Germany. Questions 15-19 concentrated on pupils' opinions of the German language, the structure of their German class, and Cultural Studies. Questions 20-25 concentrated solely on *Landeskunde*, its role in class, the materials used in teaching this part of German class, and the various aspects of the topic upon which pupils felt

their teacher concentrated. Questions 24 and 25 included spaces where the pupils could elaborate on the answers they provided.

The design of the questionnaire was carefully considered. Both closed and open questions were included. For the most part (questions 1-14) closed questions were used, except in those areas where an open question would yield more information. Closed questions were used to elicit concise, limited answers which required no elaboration. Questions 15-25, on the other hand, are open questions. They become more opinion-oriented and thus require the students to consider their reasons for providing the answers they do.

The questionnaires were distributed in April 1998 to two co-educational secondary schools in County Kildare. The respondents were the first-year, third-year, and sixth-year groups of students of German in each school. In all, 95 questionnaires were returned out of 95 distributed. Characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

School Year	Proportion of Total	Female	Male
First	40%	62%	38%
Third	30%	74%	26%
Sixth	30%	44%	56%

Careful consideration was given to the selection of respondents. First-year students are new to German; therefore their newly formed opinions on the subject would be particularly interesting. Third-year students would have formed more definite opinions on the language and most of them would have decided whether or not they would continue with German after the Junior Certificate examination. Sixth-year students are another important group as they would have decided whether or not they would continue to study German in third-level education.

Study findings: pupil attitudes towards Landeskunde

Several important findings emerged from the study. *Landeskunde*, in the opinions of students from all three groups, was considered an important, enjoyable, and interesting part of German class, and the overall perception of *Landeskunde* was a very positive one. The majority of pupils (55% of Sixth Year, 51% of Third

Year, and 65% of First Year) claimed to enjoy *Landeskunde* and considered it to be interesting, relevant to their language class, and a reasonably important aspect of learning a language.

The role of Landeskunde in the classroom

Despite the positive views of the pupils about *Landeskunde*, the reality of its position in the classroom situation was not as encouraging. When asked if they would prefer more Cultural Studies in language class, most students (89% of Sixth Year, 85% of Third Year, and 62% of First Year) answered in the affirmative, thereby implying that they were dissatisfied with the amount of cultural material dealt with in class time. When asked about the role of Cultural Studies in the language class, the majority of students (89% of Sixth Year students, 79% of Third Year students, and 55% of First Year Students) responded that it played a 'small role'. Several students also stated that Cultural Studies played 'no role at all' in their classes. Taking the responses of the students regarding their own opinions of Cultural Studies (very positive) and their responses regarding the actual role played by *Landeskunde* in the language class, it became apparent that there existed a grave discrepancy between pupil expectations and wishes regarding *Landeskunde* and its position in the reality of the classroom.

Limited knowledge of the target language country (Germany)

A very important finding of the study was that pupils at all levels possessed a very limited general knowledge of the target language country (Germany). Very few students seemed able to correctly name five German cities or rivers out of five, as was requested of them, or were able to mark in at an even remotely correct spot the former German border in the map provided. An equally small number were able to name eight famous German people out of eight, or five companies out of five. It might be of interest to point out that of all the groups of people mentioned by the students (musicians, sporting personalities, scientists, literary figures, etc.), one of the groups that is least mentioned is that of German literary figures, indicating insufficient contact with German literature in class. Those who are mentioned are mentioned by surname only, e.g. Grimm and Goethe. There was also some confusion regarding nationality, with Adolf Hitler and W. A. Mozart (Austrian), ap-

pearing as two of the most prominently mentioned names on a list of famous *German* people.

Stereotyping and instrumental motivation

Another noteworthy conclusion elicited from the survey was the high incidence of stereotyping and instrumental motivation among pupils of all groups. For instance, 63% of respondents in Sixth Year, 34% in Third Year, and 23% in First Year considered the average German to be blonde-haired and blue-eyed. Some 56% in Sixth Year, 51% in Third Year, and 50% in First Year felt that the average German person is tall, thin, and athletic. Both of these results appear to show that there is a steady increase in the dominance of a stereotypical image among students as their schooling progresses. It would thus appear that students begin secondary school with a very open mind (some of the first-year students took extra care to add comments to make sure that their reluctance to generalize did not go unnoticed), which seemed to dissipate as schooling progressed, to be replaced with an unimaginative, unchallenged view of the target language country at sixth-year level. The only possible conclusion in the light of this finding is that in the course of their secondary school studies, the students are being exposed to a stereotypical image of German people in the language class.

Conclusion

Based on the above results, and on additional findings which cannot be elaborated upon due to space limitations, it became apparent that the most effective mediation of knowledge about and interest in the country of the target language, as well as one's own country, can be achieved through the use of a comparative approach in the German-language classroom. Such a comparative approach would compare the history, geography, literature, lifestyles, and many other aspects of both German and Irish culture. Through comparison with their own country, learners achieve a clearer understanding not only of the similarities between their country and the target language country, but also of the differences. Without distinct comparison with one's own country, many pupils are likely to feel that there may be vague differences between their own and the target language country of which they are not particularly aware (and which therefore are not of major im-

portance), but that the one major (and therefore the most important) difference is that of language.

Naturally, not all aspects of the cultures can be compared. There are many elements of a culture which are implicit in that culture only, and which are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to decipher by a non-member of that culture (anthropology operates with the term 'cultural code', which refers to an implicit, almost subconscious, code of behaviour and beliefs within cultures). However, as many concrete, tangible, comprehensible aspects as possible of the target language culture should be made prominent in the language class and compared in-depth with the same aspects of the learner's own culture. Through comparison of their own country with the target language country, the pupils will not only begin to see the target language culture in the light of their own, but also their culture in the light of the target language culture.

However, it is not only a comparative approach which is desirable in the classroom, but also an *integrated* approach. The use of several media in an integrated fashion (games, print media, literature, music, project work) should benefit the foreign language learner in many ways. Variation in methodologies and social forms of interaction used in the foreign language classroom offers the learner a range of portrayals, settings, and themes relating to the target language country and will not restrict the learner to an unchanging method of portrayal which, due to repetitiveness, is likely to become mediocre and consequently uninteresting.

A variation by the teacher in both the content and mediation of cultural studies should also help to reduce the amount of stereotyping and instrumental motivation in the foreign language class. Frequent exposure to many varied elements of the target language culture should both awaken the pupils to the differences between people and develop an interest in more than one aspect of German culture (e.g. the fact that there is more to learning German than job prospects; note that 35% of the total sample in the current study cited job prospects as the main reason to study German). If the pupils feel that *Landeskunde* is enjoyable, interesting, and important, then the role played by *Landeskunde* in class should reflect this and not directly contradict it (as it appears to do in the schools in this study). Through using a wide variety of teaching materials in an integrated fashion and as a means of comparing the learner's own culture and that of the target language, teachers of

German might be able to begin to respond to the needs and preferences of the pupils and succeed in making *Landeskunde* into what the pupils want — an accessible feature of the language learning experience. Quite simply, if pupils are interested in a subject they will want to learn (more) about it.

Finally, and importantly, it is worth mentioning that it is not only differing aspects of culture, of *Landeskunde*, which should be integrated into the foreign language lesson. The two key aspects of foreign language learning, *language* and *culture*, should be united or integrated if a truly balanced approach is to be achieved. Just as language should not be taught without culture, neither should culture be taught to the detriment of language learning — this practice would completely defeat the point of the language class. A language class should comprise language and culture in equal parts in order to impart to the learner a balanced, all-encompassing experience of learning a language.

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