

Content Area Teaching Philosophy

The Canon:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “canon” as, “a general rule, fundamental principle, aphorism, or axiom governing the systematic or scientific treatment of a subject” (OED, 1989). The canon for any given content area is, more simply, the information deemed necessary and important for students to learn about that subject. Some educators believe that the idea of a canon limits their freedom to choose what they want to teach their students. These people maintain that they should be able to decide what they include in their curriculum, without being limited by a set list of the information they must teach. Other educators believe that having a set canon gives them a guideline for their curriculum and increases the likelihood that their students will leave their class with a knowledge of what is “important” in that particular content area. I agree with both groups of people. On one hand, I do not think that I should be limited in what I choose to teach or in what I choose to add to my curriculum. On the other hand, I see the importance of having a canon of knowledge that is considered necessary and important for my students to learn. In my opinion, these two beliefs are not mutually exclusive. I believe that I can teach my students what is deemed important in the canon without being limited in what I can do with my curriculum; I will still be able to add elements of my choosing, as well as present information in a creative way.

Elements of the Canon – German Grammar:

In German, as in any language, there are certain grammatical rules that every person learning the language must know in order to be able to correctly use and comprehend the language

through speaking, listening, writing, or reading. In German these include articles, sentence structure, adjective endings, cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive), prepositions, verb conjugation (for both strong and weak verbs), and tenses, as well as many other important aspects of the German language.

Some educators and scholars argue that grammar should not be explicitly taught; instead it should be taught implicitly through conversation, much in the same way that grammar in one's first language is taught and learned. However, these people fail to take into consideration the fact that many people never actually learn the grammar rules of their first language. Most native English speakers can use English correctly, but many of them have difficulty explaining why some structures are right and others are wrong; the most common explanation is, "it just sounds right." Although some people may argue that it is not important for students to know the rules of English as long as they are able to use them correctly, I believe that it is important for people, especially students, to know why things are either correct or incorrect. The important aspects of grammar need to be explicitly taught in order for a student to build a foundation for the language and to understand and begin to recognize their own mistakes. Furthermore, many students pick up the majority of their knowledge of the grammar of the English language through learning the grammar of their second language, so teaching explicit German grammar has twice the amount of positive outcomes for students.

Elements of the Canon – German History and Culture:

Learning about other cultures is an incredibly important experience for all students. Students who are introduced to aspects of different cultures are often more open and understanding than students who have not learned about or experienced cultural differences. This

acceptance of foreign cultures, coupled with the fact that foreign language learners are usually excited to communicate in their second language, encourages communication between students from around the world.

There are certain aspects of German history, most notably the transition of Germany from many states to one large country, the Holocaust and Germany's role in World War Two, the division of the country into East Germany and West Germany, and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany, that I believe all students learning German should study. Just as topics such as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement are important for students to understand important issues in modern American society, looking at German history is crucial for students to understand important issues in modern German society.

Knowledge of German culture also fosters understanding of German society. Learning about German foods, fashion, music, literature, art, and even government gives students a basic understanding of life in Germany. This enables students to find both differences and, more importantly, similarities between their own life and culture in America and the life and culture in Germany.

Theoretical Beliefs:

There are a number of recognized methods for teaching a second or subsequent language, ranging from the Reading Approach, which focuses on the written language with minimal attention to pronunciation or spoken communication, to the Audiolingual Method, where all new information is presented in the form of a dialogue, to Total Physical Response, in which students learn by physically responding to commands that are given in the target language. All of these

methods have both positive and negative aspects. I believe that a foreign language can be best taught by combining two different methods, the Grammar-Translation Approach and the Direct Approach.

The Grammar-Translation Approach:

The Grammar-Translation Approach is very traditional, and there are some aspects of this approach with which I do not agree. First, classes are primarily conducted in the students' first language, so the students receive very little practice in understanding and communicating in the target language. I believe that students need to both hear and use their target language as much as possible to foster both a greater understanding of and a higher level of comfort with the language. Also, in this approach a large amount of emphasis is placed on the translation of texts, but little emphasis is placed on the context or meaning of the texts. The sentences of a text are merely seen as disconnected grammar exercises rather than important and meaningful components of a whole text (Kerper-Mora, 2002). I believe that it is as important for students to understand the meaning of a text as it is for them to understand the individual sentences.

Despite these more negative aspects, there is one part of the Grammar-Translation Approach that I find incredibly important; in this approach important elements of grammar are explained in detail. This explicit grammar instruction provides rules and framework for language students (Kerper-Mora, 2002). Without this instruction students are left without a context for their mistakes and successes using the language. By learning the rules of grammar explicitly, students are able to understand the language and, hopefully, begin to recognize and corrects their mistakes, which is a necessary skill for effective language learning.

The Direct Approach:

The Direct Approach is a more modern approach to foreign language teaching and learning. As with the Grammar-Translation Approach, there are aspects of this approach with which I do not agree. First, grammar is never explicitly taught in this approach. The rules of grammar are generalized and “learned” implicitly through the students’ use of the target language (Kerper-Mora, 2002). Emphasis is placed on using the target language frequently, but not necessarily on using the target language correctly. Also, in this approach, the students’ native language is never used. I believe that this can lead to confusion, especially in earlier language courses. Some use of the students’ native language is not only beneficial but also necessary.

There are also aspects of the Direct Approach that I believe are very appropriate for foreign language learning. In this approach, students are encouraged to speak the target language as much as possible without worrying about any mistakes they may make. I believe that students need to practice speaking their target language as much as possible in order to build their level of comfort. Also, proponents of the Direct Approach consider culture an important aspect of learning a foreign language (Kerper-Mora, 2002). I think that culture is an incredibly important aspect of language learning. Teaching students about new and different cultures fosters an acceptance of that culture. It can also spark an interest in students to learn about other new cultures or to communicate with people from other parts of the world.

Combining the Grammar-Translation Approach and the Direct Approach:

The Direct Approach was originally designed as a reaction against the explicit grammar instruction of the Grammar-Translation Approach (Kerper-Mora, 2002). Therefore, it may appear strange to try and combine these two approaches, which are so fundamentally different

and at completely opposite ends of the spectrum of language teaching methods. I believe, however, that these two methods can be effectively combined. Students can speak the target language and learn about the culture of a foreign country, while still learning the explicit grammar rules that provide a context and framework for the language.

I believe that a foreign language can best be taught by blending the emphasis placed on grammar in the Grammar-Translation Approach with the emphasis on speaking and culture from the Direct Approach. In my classroom, I will encourage my students to speak as much as possible without worrying about making mistakes; in fact, mistakes will be celebrated as an important learning tool. I will also teach my students the rules of grammar so they will actually be able to understand and correct the mistakes they make. If students make mistakes and they are not corrected, learning does not take place. Likewise, if students make mistakes and are corrected, but they do not understand the grammar rules behind their mistakes, they may not accept their mistakes, learn from them, recognize them, and be able to avoid them in the future.

Works Cited

Canon. (1989). In Oxford English Dictionary [Web]. Oxford University Press. Retrieved February 11, 2007, from <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

Kerper-Mora, J. (2002, July 26). Second-language teaching methods: Principles and procedures. Retrieved February 11, 2007, from San Diego State University College of Education Web site: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/ALMMethods.htm>