

Introduction to the International Classroom

Further Resources I Germany

Alexandra's international classroom

Alexandra Schmidt is an associate professor of Forest and Environmental Policy at a German university, with 10 years of research and teaching experience. Last year she was asked to teach her first course in English: a Master's level course in urban sustainability. She had enjoyed teaching the German version of this seminar-based course to German students in previous years, and had developed a number of effective teaching and learning activities over the years, including group discussions, short writing assignments, and student presentations. Her main concern was about teaching the course in English. She felt that she was pretty good at speaking English and was used to reading research literature in English, as well as sometimes writing in English. However, she did not feel entirely comfortable with the idea of teaching in English as she was not certain that she would be able to express herself precisely enough when teaching. Nevertheless, since she had so much experience teaching the same material in German, she was cautiously optimistic about the outcome.

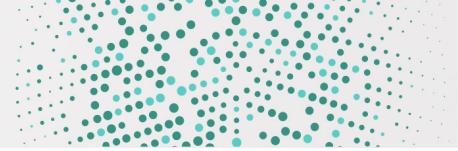
Similar to previous years, there were about 30 students in the class. This time, however, the class consisted of 15 Germans and 15 international students, the majority from Europe, a few from Africa, and a couple from North America.

The course unfolded quite differently from what she had expected. First of all, Alexandra noticed that she was spending more time on the course than usual. The international students sent her emails with all kinds of questions, not only about the course but also about housing matters and other personal issues affecting their lives in Germany.

Alexandra also had to spend much more time preparing for her course by looking up words in English and writing out her lectures and shorter presentations. But all in all Alexandra felt that her lectures and other teaching activities went well, and by the end of the course she was feeling more confident about her ability to teach in English – at least the students didn't complain, but she also noticed that they weren't keen to ask questions in class.

The classroom dynamics were also quite different. The international students and the German students spontaneously formed separate discussion and project groups, and at first this seemed to work well, at least for the German





students because it gave them the chance to speak in German in their discussion activities; on the other hand, she noticed that in the international student groups, some of the students said very little. Similarly, in the class discussions, the German students contributed more frequently, and she had to spend much time and effort eliciting answers from some of the international students – often failing to really engage them. It seemed as though they were unprepared or had difficulty expressing themselves. However, about mid-semester the students all gave oral presentations in class, and Alexandra thought that the students’ abilities to present in English varied considerably regardless of nationality. Even so, during an oral evaluation at the end of the course, one of the German students announced that while the German students liked the international students and in principle didn’t mind having them in class, the German students thought it was a waste of time working with some of the international students and listening to their presentations due to their ‘poor language skills’. The discussion got heated, and a couple of the international students accused the German students of ‘ethnocentrism’.

Finally, the results of the written exams – a 15-page paper on a topic of the students’ choice – were less than satisfactory. The scores were lower than in previous years, and a few of the students were caught plagiarizing. Many of the international students’ papers did not contain enough critical analysis, and some excessively cited Alexandra’s own work and her comments made in class. A few of them used translated sources from their local contexts that Alexandra had never heard of. In general, the English-language reports were simply not as well written as the ones she had previously assessed in German in terms of their content, structure and language.

Alexandra realized that there were quite a few things she needed to change next time she was to teach this course.

version June 2019



The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



You are free to share, copy, redistribute and build upon this work provided that a clear reference to the source is given, which is:
www.equiiip.eu