

DESCRIBING DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Describing differences and recognizing similarities is one of the key competencies that pupils should learn in a number of different subjects.

Very often it is only a skill to learn, but in our case it is more because the topics are often closely linked to issues important to pupils' everyday life. Therefore, when discussing these difference and similarities in class, the teacher also learns about the pupils. This is very important, since a teacher needs to understand his or her pupils, so that the optimum environment for teaching is attained. Besides, teachers can manage conflicts in classroom by bearing differences and similarities among pupils in mind and can be a role model for the latter, which is a milestone for gaining self-confidence.

To show the importance of teaching and learning how to describe similarities and differences the chapter starts with some impressions from the lessons. Afterwards, we will take a closer look at the similarities and differences in the teaching groups themselves. The main part however, will be the results of the research, concerning the teaching of similarities and differences during the lessons.

IMPRESSIONS

We found that pupils can get highly motivated by describing differences and recognizing similarities. The 11th graders were the most distinct example for getting motivated by learning something about similarities and differences. They got to

know their peers' opinions about family values while the discussion was going on about the different colours in the map on whether 'children should learn tolerance and respect for other people at home'. They got more and more motivated while the discussion was going on. Moreover, pupils can think critically about the reasons for certain similarities and differences between countries in the maps from the Atlas of European Values if teachers encourage them to think about the differences in the maps. Some of the 9th graders stated that the location of some countries is the main reason for them to be coloured similarly or differently.

Discussing similarities and differences in the classroom may pave the way for pupils to learn respect for others, since taking different values into consideration is the best way to learn to tolerate differences. That way, pupils can empathize with other peers, which was the case for the 11th graders while analysing the map in view of differences and similarities among countries.

TEACHING GROUP (DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES)

During the Turkish-German exchange 42 lessons were held by ten mixed teams. Every team consisted of one German and one Turkish student. It should be mentioned that the Turkish participants studied English language and literature, while the German participants studied geography. That means, the students were teaching together without having the same subject background. However, the content of the EVE-project is not directly connected to one specific subject. Thus the content, as well as the concepts, can be used in a range of subjects. Hence, it is an interesting fact that the lessons took part in different subject lessons during the exchange in Istanbul.

Secondly, one can state that most of the students preferred 'marriage' or 'relationship between children and parents' as their topic. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that all lessons were held in higher grades.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Twenty students participated in the German-Turkish exchange in February 2011; i.e., ten students from each country. Every participant of the project was asked to fill in a questionnaire after each lesson. The results of the questionnaire are the data base for the following sections of the chapter. The questionnaire is partially standardized to get a better overview of the experience of the students during the lessons.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part is about statistical data and the second part is about teaching differences and similarities. The part

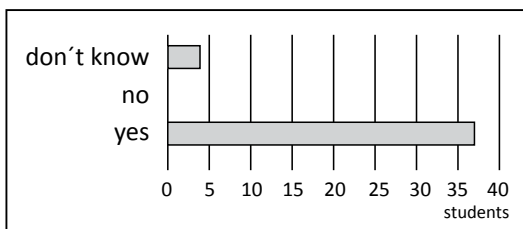
on statistical data contains information on the lesson (class, type of school, focus question). The part on teaching differences and similarities focuses on:

- » *The strategies used.*
- » *Whether similarities and differences were discussed during the lesson.*
- » *The way of teaching similarities and differences.*
- » *How easy or hard it was for the pupils to understand and describe similarities and differences.*
- » *Problems that came up during the effort.*

USE OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

To find out, whether similarities and differences were taught during the lessons, the students were asked to tick ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘don’t know’. Graph 1 shows the quantitative results.

An interesting point is that nobody chose ‘no’ and only four students stated ‘don’t know’. Therefore, one can assume that all students taught similarities and differences during their lessons. But the fact that four students ticked ‘don’t know’ also leads to the question why these students were not able to give an explicit answer.



Graph 1: Use of similarities and differences during the lesson

THE WAY OF TEACHING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

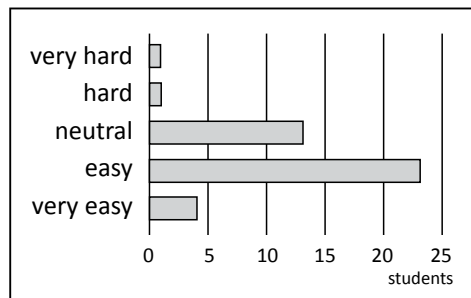
The participants of the German-Turkish exchange were asked to write down how they taught similarities and differences. All participants wrote down teaching methods as well as strategies. Concerning the teaching methods, one can easily classify the given answers into three categories. These categories are discussions, comparisons and work with the maps of the Atlas of European Values. It should be added that all categories are represented nearly equally. Concluding from this, one can state that these categories were considered as very useful and effective for teaching similarities and differences. All methods used imply processes of reflection. One can suppose that some pupils needed help to describe similarities and differences; i.e., ideas from other classmates or detailed questions, for example.

Especially discussions and comparisons are an adequate instrument to involve pupils in classroom interaction and therefore trigger deeper thinking processes.

UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

To describe differences and similarities certain skills are necessary. One can assume that pupils have different preconditions concerning these skills. Therefore, it was a necessity to research how easy it was for the pupils to understand and describe differences and similarities.

To answer this question a five-step scale was presented to the students. They were asked to tick how easy or difficult it was for the pupils to describe similarities and differences. Possible answers were: very easy, easy, neutral, hard and very hard. It should be added that this data results from the perception of the student teachers. But, of course, it has to be supposed that the opinion of the pupils during the lessons and the impressions of the student teachers during or after the lessons are not necessarily identical. Graph 2 shows the quantitative results.



Graph 2: Difficulty level for describing differences and similarities

The graph shows the frequency of occurrence of the ticked answers. According to the results of the questionnaire, most of the pupils found it easy to understand differences and similarities. However, thirteen student teachers ticked 'neutral'. This leads to the question what is meant by the term neutral in this context.

Possible meanings are:

- » *Some pupils found it easy and some pupils found it hard.*
- » *The student teacher was not sure whether the pupils found it easy or not.*
- » *The student teacher was unable to give a statement.*

We suppose that the main reason for ticking 'neutral' was that some pupils found it easy and some pupils found it hard. The different experiences of the pupils can

be seen as one cause. Another cause can be the mood of the pupils or simply the fact that they were taught by external teachers.

The two student teachers who ticked 'hard' or 'very hard' taught together in the same class. Their main reasons for this choice were language problems on the side of the pupils.

To summarize, one can suppose that all pupils were more or less able to describe differences and similarities during the lessons. However, it is difficult to interpret from the data in how far pupils were really able to identify and understand similarities and differences.

PROBLEMS

The participants of the German-Turkish exchange were asked to write down the pupils' problems with the task and to describe these problems. Things listed were: language problems, lack of interest and concentration, method or strategy, work with the maps, working speed. Some student teachers also mentioned that the topic was too specific. This is not surprising due to the fact that the student teachers held only one lesson per class and the lessons were taught in different subjects like English, Turkish, geography or mathematics as well as in different grades. Would it have been helpful to have more than one lesson per class or to have more information about the class before planning the lesson?

The two most frequently mentioned problems were language problems and problems working with the maps. The language problems were directly connected to the age of the pupils. The lack of communication skills in a foreign language also seems to be caused by the social background as language problems were mainly recognized while teaching in state schools. The content as well as the concepts of EVE can be used in a range of subjects. Unfortunately, working with the maps needs subject specific skills and knowledge. For this reason, one can suppose that problems which arose during the work with maps result from a lack of certain skills and knowledge.

The fact that the participants taught only one lesson in each class as external teachers seems to be the main reason for a lack of interest and concentration. In connection with the lack of interest and concentration some student teachers described some typical incidents as for example: pupils, who were playing with their mobile phones or talking and the absence of the regular teacher.

METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Some participants of the German-Turkish exchange group mentioned problems with the methods and strategies. Relating to the questionnaires one can notice

differences in that some methods and strategies were seen as more useful than others. The usefulness depends on the context as well as the focus question. Furthermore, it should be added that the subjective perception of each of the student teachers seems to influence how successful a method or strategy is. While cross-checking the questionnaires one can find different points of view and different perceptions even in one teaching team.

In general, the following methods and strategies were noted as very useful for teaching similarities and differences:

- » *intelligent guesswork*
- » *traffic light game*
- » *discussions*
- » *comparisons*
- » *work with maps*

Intelligent guesswork and the traffic light game are adequate strategies to start a lesson. Therefore, these two strategies were used by many teaching groups. We are unable to conclude anything from the number of times a strategy was used, because it was requested to use every proposed strategy once during the German-Turkish exchange. Therefore, the usage of the strategies does not reveal anything about their usefulness.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it is crucial for teachers to let their pupils become aware of differences and similarities not only within the classroom, but also within Europe where many nations with different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds live together. We got the impression that the pupils, with whom we conducted our lessons, have benefited from the focus questions, maps and various strategies. Therefore, we believe that they were able to grasp what differences and similarities mean and what role they play in their shaping their points of view.

The student teachers in the German-Turkish exchange group have different educational backgrounds, but this did not lead to them experiencing any problems based on their educational knowledge. The subjects which were almost uniformly chosen by the student teachers as the foci for the lessons were ‘marriage’ or ‘relationship between children and parents’. Most of the student teachers were aware of the fact that they taught similarities and differences through techniques, such as discussion, comparison and showing maps. Discussing and comparing items in groups or pairs, brought the pupils to question the reasons for similarities and differences among various European countries.

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate explicitly that most of the pupils grasped similarities and differences easily. Nevertheless, the pupils had to cope with certain problems, such as language problems, a lack of interest and concentration, methods or strategies, working with the maps and the working speed while they were busy understanding the issue of similarities and differences. The most frequent of these problems were language and map based problems. Language problems were hard to deal with in state schools, since the proficiency of some pupils did not enable them to participate in the activities effectively. The reason for the lack of interest and concentration may be due to the single lessons we held. Moreover, the success of some methods and strategies was heavily depending on the context of the lessons and on the focus questions.

All in all, the exchange of German and Turkish groups was really beneficial, because the student teachers' perception of similarities and differences was revealed, possible problems were determined, the effectiveness of certain strategies was tested, the student teachers' awareness of their teaching was measured and the Turkish students' point of view on similarities and differences among various European countries regarding the concept of 'family' was studied.