

# DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aims of this project was to help the student teachers recognise the differences and similarities between their cultures and question the possible reasons for both common and different points of view. Throughout the exchange programme, both groups (German and Turkish) observed differences and improved their tolerance by understanding and accepting these differences. Due to the fact that the student teachers deepened their own understanding, they could help their pupils to look beyond the surface and deepen their understanding as well.

In this chapter, our aims are

- » *To give an idea of what we mean by deepening understanding and which concepts we could include in our lessons to deepen pupils' understanding of the differences between countries.*
- » *To show how we used the maps in the Atlas of European Values.*
- » *To tell about our own experiences in schools.*
- » *What the student teachers did and which strategies they used to achieve deepening understanding.*
- » *How the pupils reacted to the lesson.*

## WHAT IS DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Deepening understanding cannot be defined as a narrow concept, since it is a whole process on its own. We do not only look at the given data or facts on the surface and absorb them, but we interpret them according to the answers we give to why-questions and how we shape our ideas. In this way, we can improve our understanding of our own values and ideas as we question them and understand, accept, and respect the different views of other people.

The theoretical knowledge that affects our own ideas including some academic concepts and arguments helps us understand possible reasons which lie behind the existence of differences and similarities in attitudes and values between different countries and cultures. Although these academic concepts and theories are quite useful in deepening our understanding of the reasons they focus on, there might be some missing points or some theories might simply be insufficient. Hence, as teachers we should provide some other ways, so that our pupils will be able to analyse the data on attitudes and values critically. Technically, we could either ask why-questions explicitly or make the pupils think about the data or facts implicitly. That is how we hope that our pupils will achieve deepening understanding in our classes.

## WHICH CONCEPTS WERE OFFERED TO EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUNTRIES?

Modernisation is considered to be one of the key concepts, which have a great significance in explaining the differences between countries. According to modernisation theory the process of modernisation began when economies shifted from agricultural societies to industrial ones leading to major changes in the labour market. The changes in peoples' living standards brought about cultural and social modernisation. This gave way to individualistic values replacing more collectivistic values in societies. In these 'modern societies' individual freedom and independence gained more importance. Every country is seen as occupying a different place of this modernisation process (see figure 1), which may help to explain differences between countries. However, some differences cannot be explained only by modernisation. We have to include other factors such as globalisation, cultural heritage, language, religion, geographical position, and educational system.

We asked the student teachers whether they explained modernisation and cultural differences during their lessons or not. While a few students explained these concepts and factors explicitly, most of them preferred an inductive approach to make the pupils come up with these explanations on their own. The student teachers used various strategies to achieve deepening understanding. Most of

them used why-questions, so that the pupils could discover arguments on their own and detect whether they have any stereotypes of or prejudices against other countries. Why-questions led to discussions and made the pupils question their answers, which led to some of the pupils changing their ideas. Other student teachers gave the pupils a chance to see cultural differences through the scenarios they had developed and discover the reasons for differences and similarities with the help of maps. Although different strategies were used in the classes, the fact that there was no correct answer to explain the differences between the countries was emphasized by the student teachers. Even though all of the student teachers had intended to include explanations for modernisation and cultural differences whether implicitly or explicitly, only few of them could do so due to the lack of time.

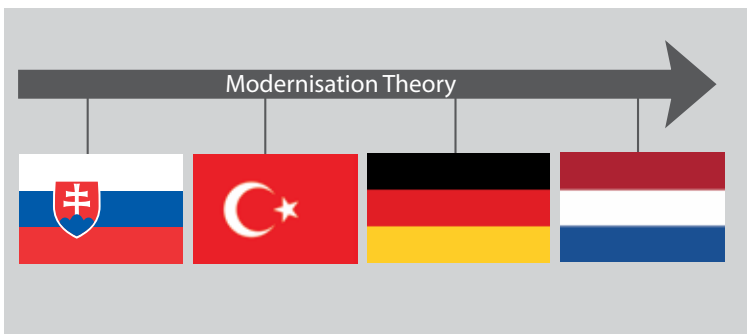
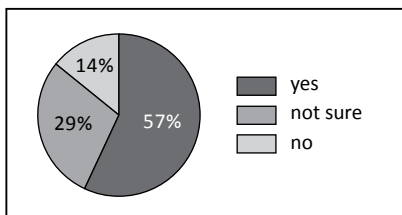


Figure 1: Proposed places of the countries in the modernisation process

## MAPS

Using maps should not only be an important item in geography lessons but also in other lessons. Reading maps is very similar to other reading activities, like reading a coordinate system. The only difference between maps and coordinate systems is that coordinate axes show cardinal points and x, y-directions and in contrast to that maps have a scale and a legend.

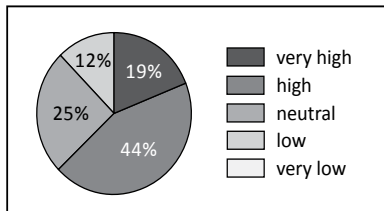
During our lessons in Turkish schools, all student teachers used maps. About 60 % of the teachers used maps intentionally to deepen understanding and only 14 % of them used maps only to provide information or to clarify points in question (see graph 1).



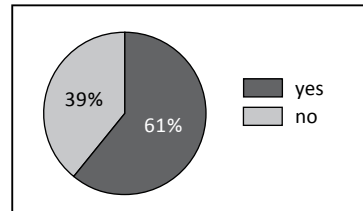
Graph 1: Did you use maps for deepening understanding?

Afterwards, the student teachers rated the influence that using the maps had on deepening understanding and on reaching the aim of the lesson. To do that, they used a scale from 'very high' to 'very low'. 63 %

of the student teachers assessed that the maps had a positive, 25 % a neutral and only 12 % a low influence (see graph 2). That shows that using maps has a high impact on achieving deepening understanding.



Graph 2: How useful were maps for deepening understanding?



Graph 3: Did you offer an explanation of the map used?

Having seen that the maps were quite useful, we asked the student teachers whether the maps were explained or whether the explanation was unnecessary.

During 61 % of the classes, the maps were explained (see graph 3). Although the pupils were used to reading maps, explanations of the maps were necessary. The pupils had problems with the interpretation of the maps, because they lacked background information and sometimes they could not find the countries that were shown on the maps. They also had problems comparing countries and connecting their ideas to the maps. That shows that more time should be given to reading maps because that would also help pupils improve their general knowledge.

Finally, we must admit that working with the maps may provoke some difficulties at the beginning, but after an introduction period it can help reach deepening understanding.

## SUMMARY OF THE APPRECIATION AND PERCEPTION OF THE STUDENT TEACHERS

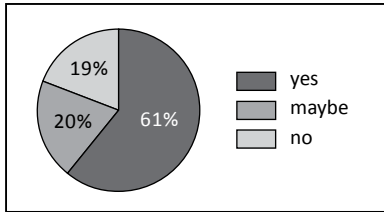
This section deals with the student teachers' perceptions of how they achieved deepening understanding.

More than 60 % of the student teachers said that they achieved deepening understanding in their lessons (see graph 4). This result correlates with the statement that approximately half of the student teachers supposed that it was easy to achieve deepening understanding.

On the one hand, these results depend on the efforts of the student teachers such as choosing the right type of question and the choice of the strategy (role play and discussion were mentioned as successful strategies). On the other hand, achieving a deeper understanding depends on the pupils and their maturity. Furthermore, motivated pupils help to reach deepening understanding. However, the explanations for the failure of achieving deeper understanding are defined differently. Most of the student teachers mentioned their time management, a

wrong selection of strategies and difficulties in map reading. Moreover, the pupils had less experience and therefore there was a lack of explanations and missing background information. Also some had severe language problems. Finally, the pupils were unmotivated, not concentrated, stressed and tired which had a negative effect on achieving a deeper understanding.

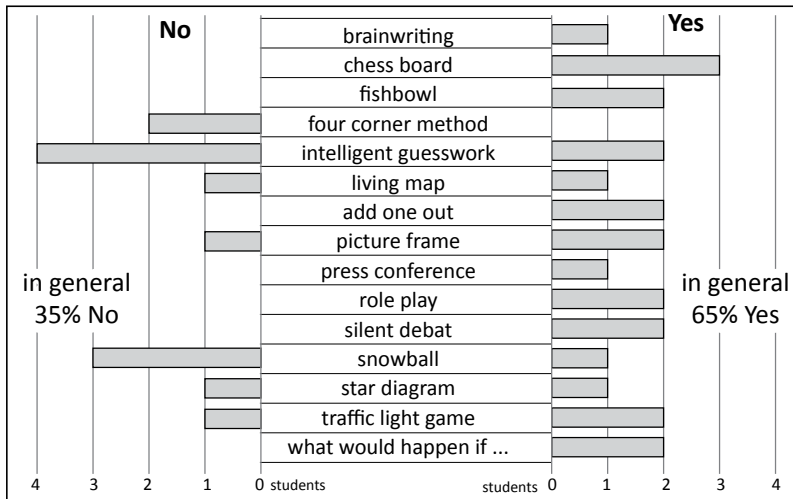
Focussing on the strategies, 65 % of the student teachers said that the strategies were helpful to achieve deepening understanding, especially the strategies chessboard, fish bowl, odd one out, role play, silent debate and what would happen if ... (see graph 5).



Graph 4: Could you achieve deepening understanding in your lesson?

In contradiction to these positive strategies, the student teachers mentioned the strategies four corner method, intelligent guesswork and snowball as inappropriate to reach a deepened understanding. The main problem student teachers had with the four corner method was the abstract theoretical pattern which the pupils should try to detect. Thus, the content of the task seemed too complicated. The reasons why the strategies intelligent guesswork and snowball were not seen to work were that they are not as valuable as the others in achieving deepening understanding.

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Graph 5: Did your strategies help to achieve deepening understanding?

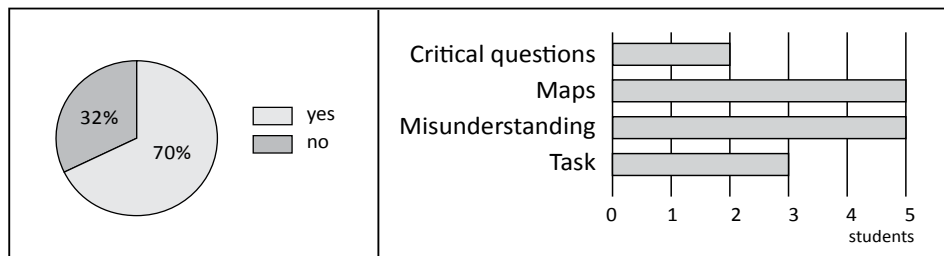
Finally, we asked the teachers how they responded to a pupil who offered an explanation which they did not fully agree to. The aim of the question was to name some teaching skills that advance deepening understanding. Surprisingly, most of the student teachers used the same skills like asking why-questions. Furthermore, they inspired the audience to start a class discussion and gave the pupils positive

and encouraging feedback. Besides, the teachers contrasted facts on the map with the pupils' statements in order to force them to find out counterexamples. But all in all, nearly every student teacher mentioned that for achieving a deeper understanding it was useful to make sure that no right or wrong answer exists.

## SUMMARY OF THE APPRECIATION AND PERCEPTION OF THE PUPILS

According to the pupils' evaluations, approximately 85 % of the pupils saw the lessons as being innovative, new and successful. They emphasized their opinions with arguments like 'we never used these strategies before' or 'we did not use maps in the lessons'.

In nearly 70 % of the classes pupils asked questions about the lessons. In order to comprehend the different graphs, it is important to notice that the student teachers could point out more than just one type of question or comment in graph six. But what kinds of questions were asked? Most of the questions were about misunderstandings due to language problems. The pupils also asked questions about the tasks because most of them were not used to solving these kinds of tasks. This is the same for the maps, as well as the data and statistics, which were also new to them. The pupils mentioned that they had problems with the content of the maps and that they misinterpreted them because of the scale.



Graph 6: Did the pupils ask questions about the lessons?

Furthermore, the pupils had difficulties in comparing and connecting maps, in reading the black and white copies and in working with the maps in general because they lacked topographical knowledge and background information on the differences between countries. Also they did not always know correct word definitions. Besides, the pupils asked important critical questions such as 'Does the migration background or history of the countries affect the results?' and 'Are 1000 people in every country enough for such a huge project?' This aspect shows that the pupils tried to reach a deeper understanding of the topic.

This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that 84 % of the pupils reacted very quickly to the explanations. All in all, the pupils were quite active and interested.

They made comments, participated in discussions, and gave examples for Germany and Turkey, referring to the topic of the project – ‘Family’.

As summary, two aspects should be mentioned: The topic family qualifies for achieving a deeper understanding because of the personal connection to the pupils. The fact that most of the pupils communicated and interacted directly, worked energetic and focused on the topic is proof for that. Secondly, the pupils should be mature enough and therefore we can conclude that deepening understanding is easier to achieve with older pupils.