

Seeing myself makes a difference

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A Research Driven Approach to building a German Program by providing Access to Ethnic and Culturally enhanced Curriculum.

Key Concepts for the Design of the German Program that will attract students of color. Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and cognitive psychology has shown in the last four decades that in order to grow a German program that includes an increased number of diverse students, students require access to ethnic and cultural appealing resources embedded in the curriculum, culture, and club events.

“Peters (1994) expressed the belief that low enrollments may be explained by theories of social and cultural distances. He suggested embracing an Afro-centric German curriculum to include non-European Germanic groups. Peters echoed the beliefs expressed by Davis and Markham (1991) who had earlier called for “[B]lack experience in foreign language culture,” especially in historically Black colleges.” (Moore 2003)

As world language educators seek for answers as to how they can grow their programs, the passage of every student has to be evaluated and built in the culture of the classroom, curriculum, and extra-curricular activities. Numbers plummeting due to unrelatability, unawareness, and stereotypes that have been embedded in the stakeholders’/enrollees’ thoughts during course selection, have stifled the growth of German programs across the country. At the turning center of this unceasing maelstrom lies the ultimate educational challenge: how to effectively recruit students of color and brown students to not only take German, but to maintain their learnings by continuation of enrolling in more levels than two is of the essence in German language education.

The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed it thus, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Study of a foreign language enables the learner to escape self-defeating provincialism, to look objectively at his world.” Study of a foreign language enables the learner to escape self-defeating provincialism, to look objectively at his world. Black students, through foreign language study, as by no other means, learn indelibly and irrefutably that minority status does not mean inferior, that different means neither better nor worse. Study of a foreign language can, as no other subject, develop self-confidence in the learner. Reinert explains, “Each language which a person can control gives him another way of understanding the world, another insight into reality. The greater his understanding to reality, the better chance he has of exerting some control over reality and having real control of his own destiny.” The goal is for students to succeed in their studies. (Hubbard 2014)

In a quantitative study of 7,069 high school students in an ethnically diverse school district in Texas students' motivation in foreign language study was examined. Through survey data Pratt (2012) found that African-American students who enrolled in a foreign language had the same initial motivation as students from other ethnic backgrounds. But the African-American students' continued motivation in foreign language courses and interest in post-secondary study of the language was lower than that of other ethnicities. (Hubbard 2014)

In a high-school classroom many African-American students' first experience with exposure to a second language as part of their future endeavors is their first encounter. This means that as educators, one has to make a consistent first great impression to want to get to know the students as a whole. From pronouncing and remembering their students non-traditional names to inquiring about the students' interest and hobbies are no longer sufficient. Educators have to get to know the students as a whole, including their background, their home environment, and their glows and grows. Establishing this foundation and continuously being there as an advocate for the student guiding them through their school year as a mentor will open up the potential for the student to trust their educator and therefore build a professional relationship that will motivate the student to continue with their language acquisition.

The challenges of students enrolling in German programs has been an ongoing equation that educators have attempted to solve. With black students in the past being usually counseled out of the German field with the reasoning that the language would be too difficult to acquire and that they would never need it is now being tackled by district supervisors such as Amy Anderton in Dallas Independent Schools (DISD). Through educating academic advisors how valuable the German language is in many occupations, increasing literacy skills academically, and delivering AATG literature with cultural exposure, Anderton has managed to increase the German program offerings and enrollment from 58 students to 902 in three years which are predominately African-American and Latino.

As a non-person of color it is imperative to familiarize oneself with the African-American culture and to connect students to the ethnic-diversity of German speaking countries. The idea that Germany is the stereotypical destination for Lederhosen and Dirndl with Caucasian dominance is perspective from the past. While some of these still exist, they are not what make German speaking countries what they are. Providing visual representation with peer profiles and current successful Afro-Germans, music, stories, and current events. A Eurocentric curriculum is problematic and tends to marginalize students and create a norm that alienates many students of color. Specifically requesting feedback after units, especially in first semesters, allows students of color to give honest feedback and an opportunity for the educator to incorporate activities that relate to diversity of German speaking countries. Hence in the subsequent unit, showing clips that reflect themselves is no longer foreign, but creates a connection and sparks a curiosity in the students that makes them want to learn more.

Teaching the reader “Neben mir ist noch Platz” by Paul Maar, to German 3H students requires for the perspectives of each character to be evaluated carefully and highlighted in ways for students to come to their own conclusions that the refugee main character did not need to be saved, but that with the little that she had, she was content to have and satisfied with her life in comparison to her native German counterparts. In addition, teaching the students how tolerance is measured and perceived in the reader has to be given as an opportunity for them to evaluate and understand. The struggles that the main character endured can be explored and made relatable for students to get to know each other on a deeper level in order to grow a close-knit community in the classroom.

As students begin and continue their language learning, educators are tasked with making lessons enjoyable, remaining in the target language with comprehensible input built in on a daily basis, and not allowing structure to be the sole focus of instruction. All of these strategies can be implemented and with easy access to the social media groups on Facebook, provide guidance in multiple ways to ask formal and informal questions creating a community that now has become a reliable resource. The “Alle lernen Deutsch” committee has a working list of literature, clips, and movies that can be easily implemented in instruction and can be found on Facebook as well. In addition, as AP teachers, the AP German Community is a site with resources covering all six global themes. Within all of these, there is some access to publications that will allow the current and future students to see themselves in a curriculum.

Students enjoy club events that provide an in-depth view of culture embedded activities. While there are many traditions in German speaking countries, access to these social events should not be limited to students taking German. To gain buy-in from students of all different ethnic backgrounds, inviting them to open meetings or fundraisers will allow the student of color to make them feel like they can be a part of the cultural gathering. This action builds self-esteem, character, and school community. An example of the Wildcat Waffle Wednesdays, hosted by the German club students of Plano Senior High School, allows students from the entire school to partake in eating a traditionally fresh made waffle and learn German phrases, regardless if they have a foundation in the language or not. Students from diverse backgrounds making friends, building comradery at a German event, peaks the curiosity to learn more and partake more in activities that result in growing a German program, because they get the opportunity to test if they can speak the language.

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