Aha moments in the language classroom

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CLEF meeting, 13 Nov. 2010
What are Aha! moments?

• **Critical incidents.** Events that have critical significance in a given context because they contribute positively or negatively to an ongoing activity or phenomenon. Critical incidents or telling moments can be observed and gathered in various ways, but typically respondents are asked to tell a story about an experience they have had.
  
  Ex. “I like challenges, but this class is ridiculous”

• **Epiphanies.** An epiphany is a sudden understanding of larger relationships, causes and effects, that serve to explain why someone said something or acted in a particular way.
  
  Ex. “You always talk about challenges. We in the old world, we only have problems”.

• **Teachable moments.** A teachable moment is an unplanned opportunity that arises in the classroom where a teacher has an ideal chance to offer insight to his or her students. A teachable moment is not something that you can plan for; rather, it is a fleeting opportunity that must be sensed and seized by the teacher. Often it will require a brief digression that temporarily sidetracks the original lesson plan so that the teacher can explain a concept that has inadvertently captured the students' collective interest. Other times it serves to anticipate potential errors or misunderstandings in future classes. Ultimately, the teachable moment could evolve into a full-blown lesson plan or unit of instruction. For ex. the word “challenge”.
  
  Ex. The BP oil spill: An environmental challenge or a criminal human action?
  Ex. The 2008 financial crisis: a challenge or a corporate scandal?
How do you recognize an Aha! moment?

Students:

• Intriguing silences ("German chestnuts")
• Misunderstandings ("Civil servants")
• Sluggish responses ("Lunchbreak")
• Incorrect responses ("Wasserfarben")

Teacher:

• Alternative decisions ("Dresden")
• Missed opportunities ("Flair"; "dreams")
Intriguing silences

German II (1993). The students have read a short story by Yuksel Pazarkaya “German Chestnuts” 1980.

Ender, a young 2d grader, considers himself to be German. He was born in Germany, the son of Turkish parents. German is his native language. One day Stefan, his best friend, refuses to play with him. “You are not German” he says. Already the year before that, the other children had prevented him from collecting chestnuts in the school yard. “You are a foreigner (Ausländer). These are German chestnuts. If you touch them, you’ll get a beating”. At home, Ender asks his parents: “Am I German or am I Turkish? who am I?” The mother doesn’t dare tell him the truth. The father says: “You are Turkish, my son, but you were born in Germany” and he comforts him with the promise that he will speak with Stefan.

T. What do you associate with the word ‘foreigner’ (Ausländer)?
Ss. Silence
S1. different?
T. yes, people who are different, who are strangers (writes anders, fremd on the BB)
   In America, who is a foreigner?
Ss. Long silence
S1 (hesitantly) In Germany foreigners are all the people who don’t look like Germans (long silence)
S2. Here in America …you can … look different. Here many…accents…bad English…less education
S3. even no English!
S4. (to himself) are there any foreigners in America?
How do my students understand the story?

“Write in your own words a 4-5 sentence summary of what the story is about.”

1. This story is about a youth. He is called Ender. And he has a problem because his friend told him that he is not a German. And wherever Ender goes, people say to him that he is not a German. He is a foreigner from Turkey.

2. There is a Turkish child, who is called Ender, who lives in Germany. He was born in Germany, and he speaks German best. He goes to a German school, and his friends are German. But the German children are nasty to him and they say that Ender is not a German, because his parents are Turkish. It will be more difficult when he is older.

3. His father cannot answer the questions well. The story asks the question that if a ‘foreigner’ is born in Germany, he is both a German and a Turk. How can this man know what to do? He is in the middle of two unfriendly sides.

4. He wants to know – who am I? This problem often comes when one is a foreigner. It is a question ‘What is the difference between us? But there is no difference in reality apart from that it is superficial. The chestnuts are a symbol. It means that we make our differences.

5. It is about what is and is not German. German prejudice says that one cannot be different. So, who is Ender? How can one become German?
Interview with S5, a white, male student from Los Angeles, a few weeks later.

S5 “It is about what is and is not German. German prejudice says that one cannot be different. So, who is Ender? How can one become German?”

kinda nice to read it again. Those are definitely, I think, the things that still stick out for me the most . . . Personally, I find it a rather German story . . . It looks like the children, who are saying you are not German, seem to have a sense of what it means to be German

CK: Are you saying that here it is more difficult to say who’s American?

S5. Yes and no. Because I think …by default you’d end up saying everyone is American. Because there are no lines that you can draw. It would be hard to define what American culture is. Yes… you’re American, you live here.

CK. What does it mean to be American?

S5.  hm…so much of …what it means to be American is …to distance yourself from those kinds of notions. I think …um…where….being American isn’t as important as …the specific niche you fill, or …how your life works out individually.

CK: So even asking the question …marks you as non-American?

S5.  Right.

(see Kramsch, Claire. 2003. From practice to theory and back again. In M.Byram & P.Grundy (eds.) Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning. Multilingual Matters, 4-17.)
How do German students understand the story?

Sample summary Class 10b Gymnasium Passau:
In the short story “German Chestnuts” by Yuksel Parzakaya, the boy Ender is confronted by hatred of foreigners. When his best friend Stephan does not want to play catch with him in the break, Ender is sad, hurt. But when furthermore in the afternoon two children bully him because he is not German, he begins to think. However even his Turkish parents cannot give him an answer to his identity question, since Ender in fact was born, brought up and goes to school in Germany, and therefore should be German.

Sample summary Class 9a Humboldt-Schule Leipzig:
It is about a small boy whose parents are from Turkey, but who himself was born in Germany. Legally then the boy is a Turk, but he feels German and therefore does not understand why he is called a foreigner by other children. His parents can’t or won’t give him a proper answer to this. The boy stands between two cultures and does not know to which he really belongs. The story is about enmity towards foreigners in Germany and the problem of the integration of ‘foreigners’.

Sample summary Class 9a Realschule Lubeck

Problem formulation: The problem lies in the fact that a Turkish boy does not know where he belongs because of racist remarks.

Summary of content: Ender is not allowed to take part in a game because he is a Turk. Children stop him from collecting chestnuts for the same reason. Because he is now unsure, he asks his mother to explain. She avoids answering him. So he speaks to his father, who explains the facts to him and intends to re-establish the past situation (without racism)

My own opinion: My opinion is that the problem of hatred of foreigners is too big for it to be handled by one person talking.
Misunderstandings

German II (1993). Students have read a three paragraph-long short story by Peter Bichsel (1964) *The civil servants* that pokes fun at the conformism, pusillanimity, sense of duty, but also at the petty power wielded by bureaucrats.

“At twelve o’clock, they come out of the gate, each holding the door open for the next one, all in their coats and hats and always at the same time, always at twelve o’clock. . . During lunch, they are afraid of the way home for it seems to them suspicious and they don’t love their work, but it must be done, because people are standing behind the window, because people have to come and because people have to ask. Then nothing is suspicious to them any more and the information they have makes them happy and they deliver it sparingly. . .”

“Write a 4-5 sentence diary entry by one of the civil servants”

1. I am a civil servant and it is my first day at work. The whole day I thought that maybe this is not for me. But I also think that the job is very important, because I need the money. I am nervous. Maybe the work will get better.

2. All my days are the same. I don’t like that because it is boring. I want to be a little different. I want to be independent. But tomorrow I will come again out of the gate at twelve o’clock

3. I don’t like my work. I am tired especially when so many people stand in line and ask questions. But I think of my wife, my children. They need clothes and they must eat! I should not write in my diary. I should not think of vacation! I must work … always work.

Sluggish responses

German III (1998). Students have read a short story by Wondratschek *The Lunchbreak* about a young secretary taking her lunch break at the local café, her thoughts and dreams, her indecisiveness and insecurity.

“she sits at the street café. She immediately crosses her legs. She has little time. She leafs through a fashion magazine. Her parents know that she is beautiful. They don’t look upon it favorably.

For example. She has friends. However, she doesn’t say this is my best friend when she introduces a friend at home.

For example. The men laugh and look over to her and imagine how her face would look like without sunglasses.

The street café is overcrowded. She knows exactly what she wants. At the next table there is a girl with legs, too.

She hates lipstick. She orders a coffee. Sometimes she thinks of films and thinks of love films. Everything must be fast . . .”

T. What is the story about ?
Ss. A girl. . . She has friends. . . She hates lipstick. . . she thinks of love films
T. What is this painting about (Conrad Felix Mueller *Portrait of a young girl*, 1915)?

S1. The girl looks sad
S2. she looks shy, young
S3. Uncertain?
S4. she cannot decide?
S5. She is longing for something
S3. The colors of her cheeks are the same as that of the wall.
S5. The chair behind her is rectangular, she is round
S6. The spikes of her collar look like a dog’s collar
T. “How does this painting express in colors, shapes, volumes, vectors, what the text expresses in words, clauses, punctuation marks, paragraphs”?

S1. In the picture the red color hides her. In the text it says that she hides behind her sunglasses.

S4. In the picture the girl is pensive. With the background mostly red, her eyes are very obvious, one can see the direction of eyes leading off the page. This gives the idea of pensiveness.

T. and in the story?

S2. in the story this is expressed through words like “she could be very late; she could fall in love”.

T. Do you think the girl in the painting wants to break free?

S5. everything on the table and the background is in rectangular shapes. The girl is more round.

T. How do you interpret that?

S5. she wants to break free of the routine, but she is in the circle? (hand gesture) of her dreams

T. but what do you make of the fact that the color of the girl’s skin is the same as the color of the wall?

S3. she is a prisoner of her routine

T. How is this expressed in the text?

S4. there are no real action verbs in the story. No movement in the image either: both her hand and her face are part of the background
Other possible responses (from Chinese teachers of German in X’ian)

- The girl’s white dress represents her inner world, the red wallpaper represents the outer world, like in the text some sentences represent what she feels and thinks, others depict the setting.

- The white of the dress and the round forms of the girl represent simplicity and indefiniteness. This is expressed in the text through the accumulation of short, simple main clauses, often without a verb.

(see Kramsch, Claire. 2001. Language, culture, and voice in the teaching of English as a foreign language. *novELTy* 8:1, 4-21)
German IV (2003). Students were assigned to read a passage from East German author Thomas Brussig’s novella *Watercolors*. A graduating senior is called to the office of the school principal, Dr. Schneider, who takes him to task for his lack of motivation. The teacher divides the class into groups of three and gives each group a passage from the text to summarize the direct speech into indirect speech, using conjunctive I, the grammar point for the day. Group 1 had the following passage:

“Schneider leaned forward. “Our society expects each graduating senior to make a commitment (*Partei ergreifen*) to the state who has paid for his education, a commitment to defend our country by doing a longer national service. . .”

The group wrote on the BB:

“Schneider says that society expects graduating seniors to serve the Party (*der Partei dienen*) well and to defend their country by doing a longer national service.”

Why did the students in group 1 think that *Partei ergreifen* means to “serve the Party”?

(see Byram, Katra & Claire Kramsch. 2008. Why is it so difficult to teach language as culture? *The German Quarterly* 81:1, 20-34)
Alternative decisions

Intermediate German class taught in Germany by German teacher to American undergraduates.

The students were given to read the night before a short text by Erich Kästner on the bombing of Dresden that was featured in the textbook Schmidt, S & Schmidt K. Erinnerungsorte. Deutsche Geschichte im DaF-Unterricht. Cornelsen, 2007, followed by questions on the text.

“Yes, Dresden was a beautiful city. You can hardly believe how beautiful it was. But you must believe me! Today, none of you, however rich your father might be, can take the train and go there to see if I am right. For the city of Dresden doesn’t exist any more. Except for a few remains, it has disappeared from the surface of the earth. The second world war in a single night and through a small flip of the hand wiped it out. Its incomparable beauty had been built over centuries. A few hours were sufficient to magically make it disappear from the surface of the earth. That happened on the 13th of February 1945. Eight hundred airplanes dropped explosives and fire bombs. What remained was a desert. With a few giant ruins that looked like stranded oceanliners.” (Erich Kaestner When I was a little boy, 1957 my translation).

Which information does Kaestner give his young readers regarding the bombing of Dresden on 13 February 1945 and its consequences?

What linguistic features did you notice in this text?

How do you feel about the way Kaestner described the bombing of Dresden? Which information do you have yourself?

Can you imagine that there might be good, i.e., legitimate, reasons in times of war for destroying a whole city and killing its inhabitants?

Do you know of cases throughout history where such reasons were given? (my translation)
T. What do you associate with the name Dresden?
Ss. bombing… Caspar David Friedrich…protest movements…
T. how do you feel about the way Kästner tells the story of the bombing of Dresden?
S1. Kästner didn’t say who did it nor why
Ss. No reasons given !!!
T. Why didn’t he?
(long silence)
S2. because the Germans feel guilty (5.0)
S3. bombing Dresden was the only way to get Germany to its knees
T. to *force* Germany to its knees. *In die Knie zwingen* (writes on board)
S4. German texts always favor passives, where no one bears responsibility whereas English prefers the active voice=
T. =but the text doesn’t have a single passive! (5.0)
S5. the text has a performative effect - is that the correct word? It hides the truth
T. is the story appropriate for children? What information do they get? (3.0)
S1. I wouldn’t tell the story like that to children nowadays. I would give them the historical truth. (my translation;
Later, at a meeting with the students

CK: Why didn’t you ask your teacher what he felt about the bombing of Dresden and the way Kästner told the story? After all, he is German and has a native speaker’s perspective.

S1. The language classroom is not really the place to learn about values, history and culture.

S2. Cultural articles are used to pique our interest, but we don’t have the vocabulary to talk about political topics.

S3. Yeah, some German instructors want to raise our consciousness about us being Americans. It’s debilitating.

S4. The language teachers are great. They are facilitators, catalysts, they are not professors. They understand the science of language. They know we need to talk to each other, so they remain back seat riders.
Later with the teacher:

CK: Why didn’t you tell your students how you understand the way Kästner tells the story?
T. I am very aware of the discrepancy in linguistic abilities between them and me. I will only engage in such a discussion with people on equal linguistic footing.
CK: So how would you explain why Kästner didn’t name those who dropped the bombs?
T. In 1957, Kästner was a pacifist and the most vocal opponent of the rearmament of Germany. He didn’t want to raise children who would put all the blame on the Allies, as had been done by the Nazis at the time. He didn’t want children to grow up ‘like them’. In this text, Kästner is by no means politically neutral. In fact there is another passage of this text that reads: “To this day the allied governments are in a dispute about who murdered Dresden. To this day they discuss whether 50 000, 100 000 or 200 000 dead lie under the nothing. And nobody wants to take responsibility. Each one says it was the other’s fault. Alas! What’s the point? You will not bring Dresden back to life. Neither its beauty nor its dead! In the future, punish the governments, not the people! And don’t punish them after the fact, but immediately! Simpler said than done? No. Simpler done than said.”
On 13 February 2005 Germans commemorated the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden. Write a short statement that you would have told or written your 12 year-old niece or nephew on that day.

Sample statement from an American teacher of German:

“Do you want to know what I am thinking about today? Sixty years ago today the city of Dresden was completely destroyed. Grand’mama Margret was then exactly your age and Uncle Hans lived right in the middle of the city. The second World War was almost ended and the people hoped that at last peace would come. It was already the second time that we Germans had started a terrible war that had cost millions of people their lives. Just at that time so many bombs fell on Dresden that a whole city was destroyed – and Uncle Hans was buried in the ruins of his house.”

Compare the German and the American texts: Love of the city vs. love of the people, beauty / pride vs. empathy, tragedy vs. moral drama, pacifist vs. retributive justice.
T (personal communication):

„In the meantime I have come to the sad realization of how difficult it is as a German to discuss such things with a group of US American students without giving them the feeling of my pinning them down or even accusing them of being American. With international groups of students it is easier because you can talk of many similar cases, as on the posters that the city of Dresden has commissioned for the 60th anniversary of the bombing and that give a list of cities that were equally totally destroyed in times of war like Baghdad or Groosny. Dresden 1945 was only one of them. It is easier then to lead the discussion away from Dresden itself toward more general issues of war and peace. As an American, your position is surely less controversial, less suspect than mine.“

(see Kramsch, Claire. 2010. The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. Language teaching)
Missed opportunities

German IV Lesson is on Vienna with a short excerpt from Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of dreams*.

1. **Teacher explains the expression “Wien hat Flair”**
   T. *Flair* means ‘cool’ (writes *Ansehen* (prestige) on BB)
   To live in Vienna has flair. How would you characterize where you live?
   do you say you are from the U.S.? From California? From the Bay Area? Or from Berkeley?
   S1. It depends who your interlocutor is
   S2. We are afraid of….the feelings of the other people … what they think of us

   CK notes: Opportunity to teach the symbolic value of having *flair*. Class, status. How are they expressed in the U.S.? Bring back distinction between T/V, teach facework in social life.

2. **Groupwork. Students in groups of 3 are to write down a dream** they had, then give it to another group to interpret and guess whose dream it is. One student raises her hand:
   S1. Which tense do you use to write up your dream? and do you use indicative or subjunctive ?

   CK notes: Opportunity to comment on the ability of language to construct reality, not just refer to it, and to choose the narrative time for events that, like dreams, reside purely in their telling.
Summing up

- *Aha moments* emerge retrospectively by replaying the lesson in your mind or by observing other teachers’ lessons.
- These moments can be reflected upon, enriched through discussions with other colleagues and/or through further reading.
- They should be collected and written down in a logbook.
- They will help you to anticipate events in other classes with other students.
- They ultimately help you to better understand your teaching practice, the opportunities and limitations of your pedagogy.
- They sometimes can provide material for sharing with other colleagues through presentations at conferences and published articles.

I encourage you to submit your aha moments and how you have dealt with them to the electronic journal: *L2Journal*, of which I am the editor-in-chief.

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THANK YOU!