Essay-Writing in Foreign Language Teaching: Some Didactic and Methodical Reflections in the Case of German[1]

1. Problems with university - didactics

Sometimes we are forced to teach a subject which we have not studied, much less studied how to teach. To wriggle oneself out of such a situation may lead in the end to sufficient experience to present some ideas and reflections in connection with the exercise of essay-writing in a foreign language. It appears that in the field of modern languages the case of a lecturer who is fluent in his language and an expert in the respective literature, but has to refer to his undergraduate recollections with respect to essay-writing is not all that seldom. A postgraduate curriculum does not normally contain such a course - so that a student and future lecturer may well advance in general knowledge, maturity and abilities in research and learning, but not in the practice of a special skill which he is suddenly supposed to teach to a new generation of undergraduates.

Moreover, the lack of university didactics is deplorable not only in this special case. Even where the subject is a less cloudy one than essay-writing, the learned specialist is left alone with the problem of didactic and methodical presentation of his subject and will stick to the ancient advice of "rem tene verba sequuntur", - not always to the benefit of students. If the matter is clearly outlined and the lecturer sufficiently knowledgeable, a student may be expected to swallow and digest the dish as it is. But didactics and method are more than seasoning or sugar-coating: to apply them means to structure the subject matter according to the specific situation of teaching, not only to make it palatable, but to make it digestible in the first place. (See Bibliographical Notes 1). Unstructured presentation may lead the less genial student to memorizing what he has not really understood and thereby avoid running into a real disaster when examination time comes. The most amazing cases of memorizing without being asked to do so have actually made me think a lot about the methodical approach.

[1]Late Professor Edith Ihekweazu presented this paper at the 4th Annual Conference of MLAN at the University of Ife in 1979. The observations and suggestions are as interesting and thought-provoking today as they were then.

2. Objectives of a course in essay-writing

Obviously, the problem becomes more acute with a subject like essay- or composition-writing. The subject is not so much a matter as a method, and then we need a didactic concept and a way to teach that method of writing. Nor is that all. We also need a plan to assess our success in teaching, that is a yardstick in marking the students' performance in that very subject.

Before we attempt to tackle these problems we should put the basic question, why do we insist to carry that troublesome subject in the curriculum for advanced students? Where lies the importance of this exercise? Essay-writing comes in at a time when a student has, or should have mastered the grammatical problems of the foreign language, when he feels at home in the vocabulary and stylistical expressions and has acquired some knowledge of the cultural background. That is normally the case after the year-abroad and the above pre-requisites should be regarded as the major results of the year-abroad programme. So, the display of abilities in language and style should form only the minor part of the exercise of essay-writing and the major part of the lecturer's attention and red ink should not be attracted by grammatical errors and stylistical lapses. That may be seen as an ideal, and we shall come back to the still existing practical problems later on. What we maintain now is that the polishing of language and style should form only *one* aspect of the standards to be achieved in a course of essay-writing. What then is our *main objective*?

Undergraduate students are in their majority still in a phase of forming their own personality, of widening their horizon of experience and general knowledge and of establishing their own identity in the encounter with their environment. Part of this process of forming one's personality is to develop the ability to scrutinize a problem in all possible aspects, to assemble, sort out and arrange materials and ideas, to present a point of view in a well-founded, rational and circumspect way. This general educational goal of a course in essay-writing is certainly based on essay-writing in the mother-tongue where the additional obstacle of looking for the adequate expression and maybe also the correct grammatical form does not exist to such an extent. (See Bibliographical Notes 2). But for students being advanced enough in the mastery of a foreign language these basic considerations should not be overshadowed by other aspects. We hold the view that the main objective of a course in essay-writing should be the training in the discipline of reasoning logically, critically and impartially

and in the ability to present the subject-matter as clearly and briefly as possible. This ability, once achieved in its basic principles can be put into various types of literary applications and practical use, like the preparation of memoranda, speeches, submissions and articles in the various aspects of publications.

Most essays deal only with a topic in its various ramifications in which the onus falls on the writer to present his case without any attempt at dogmatism, bearing in mind other possible and plausible points of view. One could thereby be trained to be analytical and also elastic so as to be able to accommodate unforeseen view points. The importance of spreading such an attitude to resist the temptations of irrationalism and demagogy is actual enough in each society.

Such an aim makes the course more complex and less formalistic, all methodical measures would be covered by a central purpose, that is, unity of subject matter, brevity and clarity in presentation and implied denial of exclusiveness so as to recognize other standpoints.

3. Motivation of students

The clear motivation of the lecturer to get involved in a comprehensive and tolerant discussion on relevant issues with the students and to guide them in the method of a written presentation, will also help to motivate the students to take the topic under discussion serious, to think thoroughly about it and to organise their materials and ideas in a convincing manner. As soon as a student gets the impression that a topic is nothing but accidental ploy in which to display an arrangement of phrases without any commitment to the contents and meaning of the exercise, he would take the course as an unchallenging sandbox play and would soon lose interest. He would also perhaps not improve on already available resources of vocabulary and stylistical expressions. If, on the other hand, he realizes that the discussion of a topic is of equally genuine interest to student and lecturer, he will feel the challenge and the intrinsic motivation to make his own contribution orally and in writing. The result will be not an empty flow of phrases but a substantial discussion. In his attempt to express his own views and ideas the student may, however, encounter problems of finding the adequate expression; he could make mistakes or at least exhibit stylistic shortcomings. This is an opportunity for the instructor to expand on vocabulary and method of presentation thereby improving also on the mastery of the language.

4. Choice of topics

As we have already seen, the basic educational goal of the course implies a certain type of topical themes. There exists a certain tradition to elaborate on basic human values and virtues, such as duty, tolerance, honour, freedom, friendship, etc.; mostly dressed up in suitable quotations of well-known philosophers and writers. (See Bibliographical Notes 3). This type of themes is one of the reasons for the spreading of boredom and lack of motivation in the classroom. Even attempts at actualisation of such topics must appear far-fetched and artificial. If we as lecturers are sincerely decided to get engaged in a real discussion with the students, to give them a challenge to present their own original and substantial points of view, we have to choose topics of actual and common interest. A good way of getting students involved from the beginning, is to discuss and select suitable topics together with the students at the beginning of the session. To get students involved in the planning of a course guarantees an optimum of continuous co-operation and discipline in carrying out their assignments. Students coming from a year-abroad in a country where the language of their studies is spoken, where they go through the experience of a foreign culture and a completely different way of life, have got enough problems to chew on and enough questions to ask with respect to their own environment at home. In view of that, the course in essay-writing can also serve the purpose of taking full advantage of the year abroad, not only by utilizing the language skill but by discussing extensively the problems and questions arising from it by way of comparison with actual problems in their own environment. For instance, in our own course in the current session, we agreed on the following framework embracing four major themes:

i. Students and politics
ii. Problems of economic development
iii. Educational systems
iv. What is ideology?

All these topics were suggestions from the side of the students, their interest in them being based partly on current political events like the students' crisis or the particular situation of transition in Nigeria, and

partly on the experiences and observations made during their year-abroad programme in Germany.

5. Methodology

Having established our didactic goal and surveyed in partnership with the students the possibilities of realisation, it is time to talk more concretely of methods, how to lead a general discussion of any of these topics into a styled composition.

a. *Discussion of topic*

The first stage is always an open discussion with the aim to sort out the various aspects of a given topic. This discussion will of course be held in the foreign language and already make available a certain foundation in specialized vocabulary and terminology. The broader topic will be split up into various subheadings, e.g. with reference to our first example, "Students organisations", "Participation in University politics", "Reasons for student's protests", "Measures and tactics of students protests" etc.

b. *Introduction of materials and information*

At this stage, sources of information and materials, both in English and the foreign language (German) will be brought in. They serve as:

i. means of information about a problem or conflict under different circumstances;
ii. stimulation for further considerations and discussions;
iii. material for additional stylistical and, if necessary, grammatical exercise.

In the case quoted we used newspaper-cuttings and some chosen passages from publications about the students' unrest in Germany from 1968 and compared them with reports about the recent student-crisis in Nigeria. During this period of interpretation, evaluation and discussion, smaller assignments in writing can be given, like reports on certain conditions, summaries, translations, memoranda on specified issues etc. From these short essays the lecturer could weigh how far the students have succeeded in acquiring the necessary versatility in vocabulary and style adequate to the topic. As the case may be, one could switch in some translation

exercise of topically related texts. For grammatical revision students should be sent home with some special assignment according to their individual need.

c. *Specification of topics*

Out of the open discussion and the review of various related pieces of information some central and more specified problems will emerge within the framework of the working title.

"Students and Politics", e.g.: "Should students demand participation in certain decision-making bodies of the University"?, "Functions of the Students Union", "Which measures should students use to achieve their objectives?" or "Is violence acceptable under any circumstances?"

d. *Arrangement and planning*

After the exhaustive preparatory work such themes cannot be dealt with in a superficial and impressionistic way. Students will now be enabled to sit down and work out a plan, in which the arguments, facts and materials gathered before can feature in an appropriate context and carry weight in a chain of reasoning. These plans for a comprehensive essay will be worked out by the students individually and brought back into the class discussion for critical analysis. The discussion at that stage should not be so much centred around a certain opinion but should screen the consequences and logic of the whole construction, the sequence of arguments and the weight- and evidence of the materials brought in. Certainly it cannot be the purpose to unify all suggestions into a standard structure or formation, it only has to be made sure that each individual plan has its own unity of purpose and prospective harmonious presentation. At that stage the group-work goes over into the hand of the individual student. With all materials and guidelines at hand, *he* has to *write* the essay himself. About a week should be given to him for the exercise.

e. *Assessment and criticism*

The ball is then thrown back into the yard of the lecturer in his role as a marker. Before he picks up his red marking pen he should again reconsider his own yardstick and his own position. There are two extremely different traps into which he can fall. There may be masterpieces of fluent and

persuasive style, absence of grammatical errors, which can cause elation and satisfaction with the student's performance. The other trap is that the presentation of an opinion or a point of view, which disagrees with his own, makes him so annoyed that he subconsciously finds more errors and mistakes than absolutely necessary. Assessing an essay means neither counting mistakes, nor judging opinions. (See Bibliographical Notes 4). Divergent or even heretical views should be assessed in the context of the argumentation. An outspoken criticism may sometimes be judged a better essay than an obedient conformity to what the student has explored on the lecturer's own standpoint. This is of particular importance, if actual topics like student-politics are the theme. We have certainly left behind us the times, when in 1915 a German student in an Augsburg College wrote on the topic: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" declared: "This quotation, that it is sweet and honourable to die for one's fatherland can only be seen as a piece of purposeful propaganda. It is always hard to die, be it in bed or be it on the battle-field, and the hardest certainly for young people. Only empty-headed fools can go so far in their vanity to talk about the easy jump through the dark entry, and they talk so only when they believe themselves far away from that last hour. If death comes near, they take their shield on their back and run away, like the emperor's fat court fool, who thought out this quotation."

Because of this essay B. Brecht, the above student, was almost expelled from his school in an authoritarian system, where dispositions of mind or convictions are evaluated and where loyalty is a yardstick of marking. Another example from Brecht's school career may warn us to take the counting of mistakes too serious; having received a bad result he used red ink to mark mistakes in places, where obviously everything was immaculately correct. The headmaster had to admit erroneous marking and brought up the result. (See Bibliographical Notes 5).

Overestimating the absence of mistakes and finding too many mistakes in essays with unwelcome contents are the faults which are easily committed when marking an essay without taking sufficiently into consideration the previous methodical steps of instruction. The formation of the whole essay, the richness and variety of thought, the logic and consequence of joining the ideas together and the originality of critical approach should be the major aspects of judgement.

This principle has to be made clear to the student by not only giving him an assessment like B or C, but by making this mark fully understandable to him, by detailed comments, if necessary, positive suggestions on how to change certain passages, how to fill gaps in the argument. Depending on the number of students, each completed essay should be fully discussed, either individually or in class, so that students have the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes and those of others. Such a procedure, of course, takes time; but, this is highly necessary to make the students think and not only write.

It could certainly be argued against this concept of a course in essay-writing, that the language aspect may be too much neglected over the content-oriented discussion. Particularly in a language like German, where students come normally into their first year without any preliminary language preparation, a standard required for this type of course may be difficult to assume. In that case some more time may have to be spent on idiomatical and stylistical exercises, but these must always be tied up with the topical themes of discussion. We should always bear in mind that we are not training interpreters or translators, but are trying to impart to students together with the language per se a broad enough background knowledge of civilisation and actual problems of a foreign culture, to give them the ability to understand and discuss those issues in relationship to their own environment. A grammatical error in an essay should therefore upset us less than narrow-mindedness or superficiality. Certainly, we would work with a better basis and better results, if we had students who have gone through a propaedeutical language training, e.g. in a secondary school, or if we had one year more in the curriculum fully devoted to language training. But since these conditions are not yet feasible in languages like German, Russian, Portuguese, Italian etc., we have to think about priorities. In a first degree course one would rank perfection in grammar, though one feels the mistakes often painfully, behind the broader didactic goals outlined above. To integrate the essay course into the programme of German studies will be of more use to the students, whether they happen to end up in a completely different field of employment or whether they pursue the subject, which must be necessarily in a German-speaking country, as conditions are now.

6. Summary

In summary, on the basis of a reasonable mastery of the language after 3 years (including one year abroad) a course in essay-writing should not put its whole emphasis on achieving the highest possible standard of grammaticality, but should aim at

i. thorough reflection and logical presentation of a relevant topic within the thematical context of the whole course in the foreign language and civilisation;
ii. the expansion of actual vocabulary and terminology and idiomatic expression in the relevant fields of interest;
iii. the eradication of remaining weaknesses in grammar.

Methodically this can be achieved by

i. choosing - together with the students - topics embracing the year-abroad experience *and* actual problems of the present environment;
ii. thorough discussion of all possible aspects of the given topics in class and of the possibilities of arranging them in writing;
iii. supplying written sources and materials of actuality and discussing them in relation to the topic;
iv. obtaining out of these materials the necessary exercises for vocabulary expansion and stylistical practice;
v. discussing the performances of the students under the aspects of content, arrangement and expression;
vi. lastly, giving additional grammatical revision on individual basis in cases of acute need, without consuming the precious hours of class instruction.

It may have become obvious that such a course is not mainly examination-oriented, but based on the intention to awaken some intrinsic motivation in the students in discussing certain issues and in training their own ability to present their views in a convincing way. An examination paper of such a course should then be set in a way that the student can make use of the materials offered during the session, but of course without giving him a distinct forecast for a ready-made essay.

Bibliographical Notes

The bibliography is incomplete because some of the reference books were not available in time.[2]

1. One of the standard works on didactics in the German discipline of education is:

Erich Weniger: *Didaktik als Bildungs-Lehre*. Weinheim 1962 (4th ed.).

The critical discussion of German as a subject in German secondary schools can also be of use for the teaching of German as a foreign language. Cf.

H. Ivo: *Kritischer Deutschunterricht*. Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1971 (3rd ed.).

C. Burgery: *Deutschunterricht - Ideologie oder Aufklärung*. Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1970.

2. Of limited use are textbooks for German secondary schools, particularly with respect to methodology. The texts and examples, however, are designed for another age group than University undergraduates. Cf.

B. Sowinsky, F. Haugg and H. Popp: *Verstehen und gestalten. Bd. 6. 10. Schuljahr*. München: Oldenburg, 1974.

R. Hensch, K.H. Kaisch: *Deutsches Sprachbuch für Gymnasien. Bd. 3 Oberstufe (11. bis 13. Schuljahr)*. Hannover/Kiel: Schroedel/Hirt, 1969 (3. Aufl.).

Hueber-Verlag offers some titles which might be helpful in the instruction in essay-writing:

[2]Readers should remember that this paper was presented in 1979. Bibliographical notes are therefore largely outdated, and no effort has been made to complete the bibliographical data supplied by Professor Ihekweazu. Perhaps this will be a challenge to other lecturers of German to prepare an updated annotated bibliography of essay-writing for the teaching of German as a foreign language in Nigerian universities.

M. Gebhard: *Deutsche Aufsätze*. (four volumes from "Unterstufe" to "Oberstufe").

H. Lobentanzer: *Der sichere Weg zum Prüfungsaufsatz*. (four volumes).

G. Kirchhoff: *Fertigkeit Schreiben*. (two volumes).

For English language cf. the following two books. Since both refer to English as mother tongue and to school education, they are of limited value for foreign language teaching:

M.C. Rodgers: *New Designs in the Teaching of English*. Scrantan, Penn.: International Textbooks Company, 1968.

F.D. Flower: *Language and Education*. London: Longman, 1972 (5th ed.).

3. One of the textbooks in use in German secondary schools has the significant title *Reich der Werte* (Kingdom of Values), ed. by Lehmann/Glaser in 1959 (Diesterweg). "Obedience and duty" are here flanked by "conscience and responsibility" and "loyalty and respect."

   A publication from the leading publishers in the field of German as a foreign language has the title *Gedanken großer Deutscher* (Thoughts of Great Germans, 1969). 500 quotations are supposed to give stimulus for "discussion and essay-writing."

4. A critical analysis of the way of commenting on essays is given by U. Sonnemann: "Gereiztes vom Rande. Aufsatzmarginalien als Denkverbote." *Schulen der Sprachlosigkeit: Deutschunterricht in der Bundesrepublik*. Ed. by U. Sonnemann. Hamburg: Hofmann und Campe, 1970.

5. Both incidents are quoted from:

Marianne Kesting: *Bertolt Brecht. In Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Hamburg 1962.