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Enhancing German Language Learning in Malaysia: Challenges and Opportunities in Adopting the Discursive Approach

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the general situation of German language education in Malaysia, focusing on the growing interest in learning the language and the challenges faced in its instruction. The research utilizes a descriptive qualitative methodology, gathering data through literature review and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Findings indicate that the interest in learning German has significantly increased in recent years, driven by academic, professional, and personal motivations. However, the study identifies several challenges, including limited resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, and online content in German, as well as varying teaching quality across institutions. Additionally, the partnership between Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) and Study Germany, a Malaysian educational consultancy, is highlighted as a case study, revealing issues in teaching Landeskunde (cultural studies) due to resource limitations, insufficient teacher knowledge, and cultural differences between Germany and Malaysia. The study suggests that improving resource availability, teacher training, and curriculum development are essential steps to enhance the quality of German language education in Malaysia. Moreover, the integration of a discursive approach in teaching Landeskunde is recommended to provide deeper cultural insights and address the challenges identified.

Keywords: German language learning; Malaysia; discursive approach; Landeskunde.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The situation of German language learning in Malaysia has generally evolved with the increasing interest in studying the language (Lee, 2021). This is reflected in the growing interest among students and professionals in Malaysia to learn German for academic, professional, and personal reasons. German is increasingly offered as an option in high school and university curricula, with many schools and universities incorporating German programs into their foreign language offerings. However, despite the rising interest, there are still limitations in available resources for learning, including the availability of quality textbooks, teaching materials, and online resources in German and Malay. The quality of German language teaching also varies, with some institutions having strong programs and qualified instructors, while others struggle to meet desired teaching standards.

The relationship between Malaysia and Germany, in terms of trade, higher education, and culture, influences the interest in learning German. Career opportunities in fields such as engineering, science, tourism, and international trade, where knowledge of German is considered a valuable asset, further drive this interest. To improve German language education in Malaysia, efforts should focus on enhancing resources, teacher training, institutional collaboration, and curriculum development.

Recently, the German Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) has collaborated with Study Germany, a Malaysian language institution established in 2011. This collaboration involves sending several UM alumni to teach at Study Germany. Study Germany assists Malaysian and international students in pursuing their dreams of studying in Germany by providing comprehensive German courses, vocational training guidance, and university application support. Despite these efforts, Study Germany faces challenges, particularly in teaching *Landeskunde* (cultural studies about German culture, history, geography, politics, and social life).

These challenges include limited resources, insufficient cultural knowledge among some teachers, and difficulties connecting German cultural topics to Malaysian students' daily lives. The discursive approach to teaching German *Landeskunde*, which focuses on understanding language use in various social and cultural contexts, offers potential but is still hindered by issues such as lack of relevant and high-quality materials and cultural differences. This study aims to explore the application of the discursive approach in German language teaching in Malaysia, identify challenges, and seek effective solutions to address these obstacles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Culture Studies (*Landeskunde*) in German Language Learning

Culture studies, or *Landeskunde*, are a crucial component in teaching German as a foreign language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache/DaF) because they provide a deep and relevant context for the language being learned. The term *Landeskunde* encompasses various research approaches and teaching concepts related to country and culture-specific content in German language education, including methods and strategies for presentation, delivery, mastery, and application (Bettermann, 2010). It can be likened to the English term “ethnography”, a methodology for understanding cultural practices, meanings, and beliefs of unfamiliar social groups.

As language teaching evolves to view language as a means of communication and interaction with people from different cultures, it naturally shifts towards ethnography. Understanding German culture, such as customs, values, history, and traditions, enhances students' communication skills and provides them with a broader and deeper insight the learning process. Cultural knowledge helps students avoid misunderstandings, adapt to social norms, and better appreciate the nuances of the language. Integrating culture studies into the German curriculum supports the development of cross-cultural skills essential in today's global world.

2.2. Cognitive, Communicative, Intercultural, and Discursive Approaches

In teaching German as a foreign language (DaF), various didactic approaches like cognitive, communicative, intercultural, and discursive offer different methods to enrich students' learning experiences. The cognitive approach focuses on mental processes involved in understanding and internalizing language structures and rules. In contrast, the communicative approach emphasizes language use in real-life contexts, prioritizing students' ability to communicate effectively in everyday situations. The intercultural approach integrates cultural understanding as a key component of language learning, encouraging students to recognize and appreciate cultural diversity.

Meanwhile, the discursive approach emphasizes analyzing and producing texts within broader contexts, teaching students how language is used in different types of discourse and social situations. Combining these approaches provides a comprehensive framework for learning German, integrating cognitive, communicative, cultural, and discursive aspects.

Cognitive Approach

In the 1950s, foreign language teaching focused on the language system itself, with cultural content as mere supplementary material. In the cognitive approach, also called the factual-cognitive approach, the main focus is on conveying information such as political, economic, geographical, or cultural facts, which provides an objective overview of the target language culture (Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek et al., 2020).

This approach tends to emphasize "high culture" or tourist attractions. For example, Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek et al. (2020) mention descriptions of Goethe's life, the political system of German-speaking countries, as well as information about the size, population, state capitals in Germany, or tourist attractions in German-speaking cities. It was based on the concept of traditional "high culture" rather than the broader view of culture encompassing everyday life. This approach provided an objective overview of the target culture but lacked depth regarding daily life and practical cultural understanding.

Communicative Approach

In the 1970s, there was a significant shift in foreign language didactics, in line with educational reforms in Germany. Language was no longer seen merely as a system but also as a means of communication. The communicative approach began to emphasize students' ability to handle everyday situations related to communication in the target language countries. This approach, which started developing in the 1970s, aims to help students communicate effectively in various situations.

Its main focus is to enable students to act appropriately in everyday communication contexts (Bettermann, 2010), using real-life communication actions as examples. Since then, the focus of teaching has shifted to students' ability to express their intentions clearly in everyday situations in German-speaking regions.

In this context, cultural teaching focuses on specific actions needed in communication, with the main goal being success in language use and understanding everyday cultural phenomena. Consequently, disciplines such as politics, history, and sociology became less important, while the relevance of everyday topics that support the correct use of language increased. The selected topics should reflect real situations faced by students linguistically. Teaching materials are expected to accurately reflect the reality of the target language with an emphasis on content rather than grammatical errors. In this way, culture becomes an integral part of communicative didactics.

Intercultural Approach

In the intercultural approach, perception is crucial as it involves interpreting reality through personal experiences and cultural background. This approach in foreign language teaching not only focuses on the language itself but also explores foreign cultures to enhance contextual understanding. It includes both linguistic and non-linguistic actions. In the early 1980s, experts in teaching German as a foreign language began integrating learners' perspectives into material development.

This shift emphasized both language and cultural knowledge, encouraging learners to develop strategies for understanding foreign meanings and becoming sensitive to differences. The intercultural approach also highlights the need for reflecting on one's own culture and training learners to evaluate unfamiliar contexts. The intercultural approach aims to improve communicative competence in intercultural settings by emphasizing both understanding one's own culture and other cultures. It extends the communicative approach by focusing on reflective ways of handling differences and enhancing foreign understanding and orientation abilities. The intercultural approach requires individuals to develop skills, strategies, and abilities for engaging with foreign cultures.

This involves empathy—the ability to understand and share others' feelings—and perception, which is an active and subjective interpretation of reality shaped by personal experiences and cultural judgments. This means that we always interpret based on our values, prior knowledge, and experiences (Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek et al., 2020).

The term “intercultural competence” is criticized for oversimplifying the relationship between cultures by focusing too much on comparison. It is argued that viewing national cultures as homogeneous and uniform does not reflect the complexity of societies and can reinforce stereotypes.

Discursive Approach

The discursive approach to culture studies has evolved to address the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge in a globalized world. Unlike earlier methods, which treated culture as static and separable from language, the discursive approach views culture as fluid and constructed through discourse.

Claus Altmayer describes this approach as focusing on the negotiation of meaning and knowledge within discourse. In this view, cultural objects are not found in an “objective” world but are linguistic statements that shape social reality.

For instance, discussions about food, family, or health are not just about what is consumed

but also about how these topics are talked about and the meanings attached to them. This approach emphasizes the development of discursive skills, enabling learners to participate in meaning-making and engage with a variety of discursive positions.

The discursive approach, which replaces the intercultural approach, aligns with current cultural studies findings and emphasizes that cultural knowledge is inherently linked to and occurs within language use and discourse. Unlike the intercultural approach, which can oversimplify cultural comparisons, the discursive approach sees cultural knowledge as constantly evolving and negotiated.

3. METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research is Focus Group Discussion (FGD). FGDs typically consist of a small group of individuals with similar characteristics, which allows participants to share their views on a specific topic in the presence of others (Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Group discussions can be highly productive as group dynamics enable participants to interpret their experiences through interaction, making it more effective than individual interviews between the researcher and participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011; Moloney, 2010).

In this study, FGD is used to gain in-depth insights into the situation of learning German in Malaysia, specifically at Study Germany. The discussion involves a small group of participants, including German language educators and experts. The researcher poses open-ended questions and encourages interaction among participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, challenges, and needs in learning German. The data obtained from the FGDs are analyzed thematically to identify patterns and key themes relevant to the research objectives, providing a comprehensive and contextual overview of German language learning in Malaysia, particularly at Study Germany.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

The FGD conducted at Study Germany, Kuala Lumpur, with educators and lecturers from various universities in Kuala Lumpur, revealed several key findings related to the application of the discursive approach in German language teaching:

Application of the Discursive Approach

Educators explained that the discursive approach has been implemented in German classes using authentic materials such as articles, videos, and conversation recordings. These materials help students understand language use in real contexts and provide insights into communication in various social situations in Germany. Students are encouraged to participate in class discussions that focus on interpreting and analyzing texts and their meanings. However, the full implementation of the discursive approach is limited due to the constraints of class hours and exam-oriented learning objectives.

Many educators feel pressured by a packed curriculum and exam preparation, resulting in limited time for in-depth discussion and critical analysis. According to Byram & Wagner (2018), language teaching that focuses solely on the country where the target language is used is considered inadequate. Modern language teaching needs to prepare students to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and teach relevant skills, attitudes, and knowledge (ibid.).

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the advantages of the discursive approach, educators encounter several significant challenges. One major obstacle is resource limitations; educators often struggle to find adequate and high-quality German materials. The scarcity of textbooks, teaching resources, and online content hinders their ability to fully implement this approach. Additionally, cultural differences present another challenge.

Both educators and students find it difficult to connect learning materials to the local Malaysian context, as the cultural and social differences between Germany and Malaysia complicate the understanding and application of certain discursive topics. Furthermore, some educators feel they lack deep knowledge of German culture, which impairs their ability to present material in an engaging and informative manner.

Solutions and Strategies

To address these challenges, several strategies have been proposed. First, providing specialized training for educators in the discursive approach and *Landeskunde* can greatly enhance their understanding of German culture and improve their teaching strategies. Such training will equip educators with the skills needed to present material more effectively and engage students more deeply. Additionally, fostering institutional collaboration between educational institutions in Malaysia and Germany is crucial.

By sharing resources and experiences, including the exchange of teaching materials and joint training programs, institutions can help bridge the gap created by resource limitations. Finally, developing a curriculum that incorporates local contexts into learning materials will make the content more relevant and relatable for students. This approach will enable students to connect discursive topics to their everyday lives in Malaysia, making their learning experience more meaningful.

4.2. Discussion

The findings from the FGD reveal that the discursive approach holds significant potential for enhancing students' understanding and skills in German. This approach helps students not only master language structures but also grasp the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used. However, implementing this approach requires adequate support in the form of resources, teacher training, and institutional collaboration.

Resource Limitations

Resource limitations are a major challenge affecting the effectiveness of the discursive approach. Efforts must focus on providing high-quality and relevant teaching materials. For instance, the book “Mitreden: Diskursive Landeskunde für Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache” adopts the concept of discursive *Landeskunde* and offers an innovative approach to teaching culture within the context of learning German as a foreign or second language. It emphasizes cultural understanding through analysis and participation in various forms of discourse, exploring how knowledge about culture can be built through interactions within texts and social situations.

Additionally, the book “Vielfalt LEBEN. Deutsch als Zweitsprache A1–A2” addresses the lack of diversity in previous teaching materials by featuring various family models and lifestyles, thus challenging existing notions of normality. This is particularly important given that previous textbooks often represented only white, middle-class individuals and avoided socio-political topics (Hägi-Mead, 2017).

Teacher Training

Teacher training is crucial for enhancing educators' knowledge and skills in teaching the discursive aspects of German. For example, Fornoff & Schaller-Fornoff (2024) conducted a workshop at Goethe Institute Tiflis in summer 2022 to clarify theoretical and methodological foundations in *Landeskunde* and demonstrate effective ways to teach cultural content. They identified a lack of up-to-date knowledge among educators about German culture, especially among those who had never visited Germany or had been away from the country for a long time. The workshop, held in October 2022, focused on updating teaching materials and approaches, addressing current issues in *Landeskunde*, and providing information on theoretical and practical didactics.

Teacher training is necessary because multilingual orientation and intercultural openness often conflict with educators' ethnocentric attitudes (Göbel, 2019). Student language needs are frequently overlooked, and addressing diversity can be challenging (ibid.). Olshtain & Celce-Murcia (2005) highlight that a major barrier to implementing discursive communicative approaches is insufficient training in discourse analysis for teachers. They argue that training often focuses only on grammar and language skills, while practical discourse analysis training is still rare.

Providing additional training, reading materials, and conferences is essential. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication training is needed due to the multicultural nature of many classrooms. Integrating teaching material development into teacher training and development to effectively connect language learning theory, teacher cognition, and experience.

Curriculum Development

Developing a curriculum relevant to local contexts is also critical for applying the discursive approach. By integrating local contexts into learning materials, students can more easily relate discursive topics to their everyday lives, thereby improving their understanding and participation in class discussions. A discourse-oriented curriculum should consider context, text types, and communicative goals, unlike linguistic curricula that often overlook contextual features (Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2005). Research on discourse in classrooms and teaching materials can enhance the application of this approach.

Reflecting on the teaching of German and teacher training in the Netherlands, Sabine Jentges (2023) discusses integrating reflective language and culture learning into school curricula. She refers to Suzanne Immers's (2020) reflective cultural learning model, tested and evaluated in the eMMA (electronic multimodal exchange portfolio) project between the Netherlands and Germany. Immers (2020) describes a cyclical model for reflective cultural learning in the German-Dutch context, encouraging students to continuously reflect on cultural understanding from various perspectives.

5. CONCLUSION

The study on German language learning in Malaysia highlights both the growth and challenges within this field. While the discursive approach, which focuses on cultural context and discourse, offers a promising method to enhance students' understanding, its implementation is hindered by resource limitations, inadequate teacher training, and cultural differences. The study reveals that although educators at Study Germany employ authentic materials and encourage discourse-based learning, constraints like a packed curriculum and a lack of relevant resources affect the depth of this approach.

Addressing these challenges requires improving resource availability, enhancing teacher training on German culture and discursive methods, and developing curricula that integrate local contexts to make learning more relatable for Malaysian students. By overcoming these barriers, the discursive approach can significantly enrich German language education, offering students a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of both the language and its cultural applications.

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