Students' perceptions of classroom activities. The case with German in Australian and Ukrainian universities

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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES.

THE CASE WITH GERMAN IN AUSTRALIAN AND UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES

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This article reports on the findings of a project dealing with students' perceptions on classroom activities in the German language class. We are using a cross-country comparative approach in order to bring together two various contexts surrounding one process – teaching/learning German as a foreign language, and to highlight each country's uniqueness in the choice of teaching methodologies and classroom activities. We found that students from both Australia and Ukraine greatly valued the traditional activities *doing grammar exercises* and *having their errors corrected*. At the same time, they also favoured activities associated with the communicative approach such as *discussing various topics* and *making dialogues*. The variable of country showed differences mainly with the activities: *writing dictation* and *learning texts, poems and dialogues by heart.* The tertiary foreign language education is viewed from a broader social, political perspective, as well as each country's distinctive pedagogical traditions.

1. Introduction

Concerns have been raised in departments of foreign languages at Australian universities as the number of student enrolments in European languages have decreased in the past few years (Horst 1998; Schmidt 1998: 470). Some language departments have also registered students' high discontinuation rates (Roever & Duffy 2005). No doubt, Australia's social and political circumstances have not created favorable conditions for the wide appreciation for foreign, particularly European languages. This is something that language departments can do little about. Many of them have been closed or restructured, and some are still fighting for their existence due to lack of funding (Baldauf 1996; Schmidt 1998; Truckenbrodt & Kretzenbacher 2001). On the other hand, there are other issues within the departments' reach, which include the questions of How and What to teach. Thus, Baldauf argued that one of the ways to attract Australians to pursue the study of languages is to "develop language plans which include more innovative thinking about how languages are

organized and taught" (1996: 2). Similarly, Truckenbrodt and Kretzenbacher (2001) emphasized the importance of updating teaching methods and the curriculum as one of the possible ways of improving student numbers. However, if some changes have to be made in order to attract new students and to retain existing ones, we have to be aware of what students themselves think about their language class. In the end, they are "the most important actor[s] in the drama" (Nunan 1988: 88). This situation triggered our interest in examining in more detail students' perceptions of traditional[1] and communicatively oriented[2] activities.

1.1. Students' perceptions on language teaching and learning

Many researchers investigating students' perceptions of or beliefs about aspects of language learning have made it very clear that we need this sort of knowledge in order to predict expectational conflicts, tensions which might arise between students and teachers and dissatisfaction with the language course. Horwitz (1988: 283), for instance, noted that even before starting their language course at university, most students already have preconceived notions of different aspects of language learning which "seem to have obvious relevance to their understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes". Kern (1995: 71) asserted that the knowledge of learners' beliefs about language learning is important in order to predict student frustration, lack of motivation and even quitting foreign language study. The latter concern was looked at in more detail by a small scale survey conducted by one of the language departments at an Australian university. The study revealed that amongst the reasons for students quitting their study of language were large workload, wrong placement level and clash of timetables as well as dissatisfaction with the teaching methodologies and content of the language class (Roever & Duffy 2005). Many students pointed to the overuse of traditional teaching techniques, such as translation and exercises from textbooks, rote

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[1] By 'traditional' we mean activities associated with the Grammar-Translation method of teaching and its modifications. Focus on form rather than meaning is the underlying principle of such activities.

[2] By 'communicatively oriented' we mean those activities which are directed towards the development of communicative skills and generally reflect the objectives of current communicative approaches, such as Task-Focused Instruction. Such activities are often mediated through the target language, focus on meaningful communication rather than language form, and involve negotiation and sharing of information (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 165).

leaning, the dominance of the teacher in spoken activities, and the playing of videos without discussion afterwards. Some students would have preferred the teacher to use English when they had difficulties understanding grammatical points. Error correction, if used in an encouraging way, was welcomed by students. They generally valued integrated and relevant content in the language class, where a range of materials is used and they are directed towards the development of all of the four language skills, speaking in particular. With regard to the content of the language class, many students gave preference to contemporary topics drawn from various sources, such as newspapers, the internet and television. The importance of learning colloquial and useful 'survival' language for everyday situations was also emphasised by students.

There are not many studies dealing with the foreign language learning context, but those available showed that students taking courses in foreign languages highly valued both communicative and grammar-oriented activities (see, for example, Horwitz 1988; Kern 1995; Rao 2002). Horwitz described a paradox arising with regard to the use of communicative approaches in language teaching. On the one hand, many students supported communicatively-oriented activities and strategies (for example, their willingness to guess). On the other hand, when the communicative approaches are used, students complain if their every mistake is not corrected or if they are expected to say something they have not practised. At the same time, if the mistakes are corrected in oral production, this too is likely to lead to students' indignation.

1.2. Second language versus foreign language

As mentioned above, several studies have tried to investigate students' perceptions of classroom activities and language learning in general. However, we have to draw a clear line between second and foreign language learning settings. In the former, we have to account for the fact that language learning takes place in the target language environment and that the learners come from different cultural backgrounds. These factors affect the choice of learning strategies and teaching methods, as well as students' goals, motivations and expectations from language learning (see for example Nunan 1988: 95). Yates and Williams noted that in contrast to the EFL class, where often the traditional approach

dominates, the ESL class has a larger scope for interaction and is characterised by learners' interest in developing speaking skills (2003: 193).

2. The role of context in foreign language learning. The case with German

Some researchers have already stressed the important role of external factors in shaping students' opinions on classroom activities. Kern (1995), comparing the results of his study with those of Horwitz, noted that "[d]ifferences between the two groups remind us of the importance of considering contextual factors (e.g. institutions, curriculum and composition of the student body)". Chinese EFL students at Hong-Kong University were shown to highly value rote learning and grammar. Peacock (1998) suggested this might have been due to fact that Chinese students were used to the traditional approach from secondary school. Another study sought the opinions of Chinese teachers on communicative language teaching. In the context of wider curriculum, traditional teaching methods, class sizes and schedules as well as the communicative needs of learners, teachers considered communicative methods not relevant for most students' needs (Burnaby & Sun 1989).

Studies on international education emphasize the importance of considering 'the critical sociopolitical trends and issues that characterize contemporary times' (Mathie & Greene 2002). Comparative educational research provides us with knowledge about foreign practices which is needed for better understanding of one's own system (see for example Nicholas 1983). Mallinson noted that only by seeing the uniqueness in the way others carry on education can one genuinely appreciate the distinctiveness of education at home. One should look at particular cultural contexts, as they account for this distinctiveness (1975, cited in Schriewer & Holmes 1990). In practical terms, a cross-country comparison, we hope, will allow those involved in the teaching process to adopt a more critical approach in the choice of appropriate teaching methods, taking into account students' opinions and needs in regard to German language learning arising from the country's social and political context.

For our Australian-Ukrainian study we identified three groups of interrelated factors which are particularly relevant in shaping the process of language learning in the two countries

and are linked to students' and teachers' perceptions of classroom activities: socio-political climate, each country's distinctive pedagogical tradition, and students' motivation for language learning.

2.1. Socio-political climate

One group deals with socio-political situation within the country and the global processes. Despite its multilingual and multicultural character, Australia is doubtlessly an English-speaking country. The attitude towards 'otherness' in general and foreign languages in particular is changing. These changes and their effect on learning languages other than English (LOTE) were extensively discussed by Clyne, Lo Bianco, Ozolins, Truckenbrodt and Kretzenbacher to name a few. The position of foreign languages as an academic discipline was and remains rather unstable. The National Policy on Languages (1987) recognised German as one of the nine languages of 'wider teaching' (Lo Bianco 1987; Clyne 1991). It also emphasized the value of languages and "the need for all members of the community to extend their linguistic resources for the common social good" (Scarino & Papademetre 2001). In early 1990s, a shift occurred in government policy which led to the adoption of a more rationalistic approach towards LOTE learning. Literacy in English became the highest priority. The 1994 report of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognized the 'strategic' importance of only four Asian languages: Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. Naturally, these processes affected the situation of foreign (particularly European) languages at Australian universities. Many departments had to be restructured and reoriented in order to survive. The principle of 'consumer demand' started to dictate the contents of academic programs and defines the 'usefulness' of this or that subject (see, for example, McGuiness-King 2003). Asian languages, on the other hand, began to strengthen their positions, as they are applicable to later employment in the Asia-Pacific region. The processes of learning and teaching also had to shift their emphasis towards more practical knowledge such as the acquisition of communicative skills. This rationalistic approach is still in place and can be seen in the government's recent decisions to support mainly Asian languages (Schneider 2004).

In Ukraine, the German language holds a strong position due to its closeness to German-speaking countries and the strong reciprocal political, economic and historical connections.

For about 150 years until 1917 a large part of Western Ukraine belonged to the Austrian empire. The German language was therefore widely spoken in that part of Ukraine and was naturally an important component of the school and university curriculum. Nowadays, it is one of the most widely taught languages throughout all of Ukraine in all levels of education. In many schools and tertiary institutions, particularly in the faculties of Economics and Law, it is compulsory to study two foreign languages: English and German (Oguy 2003: 454). German language departments have been amongst the most prestigious and have very competitive admission processes, primarily because German offers a wide range of opportunities for employment and travel.

The present circumstances in Ukraine require a new philosophy in education and new pedagogical approaches that allow the needs of students to be addressed adequately. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Ukraine has become open to the processes of globalisation and market economy, and is on its way towards integration into the European community. The pro-European agenda of the newly elected president Yushchenko is an indication of the fact that this process is currently taking place and is welcomed by the Ukrainian people. In foreign language education the Common European Framework (CEF) is being adopted to a greater or lesser extent in schools and tertiary institutions. In fact, the European language portfolio has already been implemented in the Ukrainian *Derzhstandart* (lit. 'state standard', the national benchmarking document) on foreign language learning and teaching (see Kryuchkov 2002: 13). Specifically, the CEF provides recommendations as to the planning of language programs, the contents of examinations, and assessment criteria. It also provides criteria for language proficiency which "will facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, and accordingly will aid European mobility" (CEF 2001: 1). The question of modernising and re-visiting the objectives of language programs as well as the importance of looking at students' needs are currently being widely discussed by teachers and scholars in Ukraine. Nikolayeva, for example, notes that in considering the role of the Common Framework at more advanced stages of language learning, it is necessary to take into account changes in the nature of the needs of learners and the context in which they live, study and work (2002: 35). It has to be noted, though, that these new developments in foreign language teaching and learning are being significantly slowed down by a chronic lack of funding. Many Ukrainian foreign language

departments desperately need to update textbooks and purchase elementary electronic equipment, such as photocopying machines.

2.2. Pedagogical factors

The second set of variables includes teaching methodologies that have been in practice in an educational setting. Chomenko (2001) noted that there is no one-suits-all model of foreign language learning/teaching, because these two processes are related to a country's unique socio-cultural past, present and future, i.e. its tradition, present circumstances and the goals to be achieved.

A quick look at the history of foreign language teaching in Australian universities reveals that the tertiary foreign language has rather consistently followed the major trends in language teaching arriving from Britain, Canada and the USA. In Australia, the Direct Method was gradually replaced by the old-new Grammar-Translation approach, which dominated in the language class during the first two decades after the WWII (Barko 1996). The 1960s were marked by the arrival of the Audio-Lingual method and then by the Audio-Visual approach in the 1970s. In the 1980s the era of communicative methodologies started. Such sensitivity for new approaches and methods in language teaching was to a large extent triggered by the social situation of the late 1960s and 1970s. The growing population in Australia started to question the need for formal intellectual disciplines, of which languages were considered one. School children were freed from the obligation to learn foreign languages as a prerequisite for entry into universities. In these circumstances, language departments, which were greatly dependant on public funding, had to find their own ways to survive (Barko 1996). The adoption of more innovative approaches which would make the study of language more 'user-friendly' and satisfying to the needs of students was the solution.

The socio-political and pedagogical canvas in Ukraine during this time looked different. Like other republics in the Soviet Union, Ukraine was separated from the Western world. Thus the local pedagogical traditions were not greatly affected by the impulses from outside (see Chomenko 2001). Soviet linguists themselves were trying to develop new intensive methods to address the declining interest in foreign languages. Although foreign languages were an indispensable part of the then centralised school and tertiary education

system, the acquisition of practical knowledge was out of question. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine took an all-embracing approach towards learning as a means of raising broadly educated citizens imbued with the spirit of communism. Societal needs rather than personal preferences or practical considerations defined the structure of school and university curriculum. In language education too, the acquisition of practical skills was not a priority; nor were the Soviet learners motivated to learn to speak the language, because the opportunities to travel, work or study abroad were almost non-existent (Katskova 2004). Thus the new methods, such as those by Petrusinskij, Gegetschkori, Kitajgorodskaja et al. were aimed at raising students' motivation for learning languages. Many of them emerged as a variation of Suggestopedia, developed by Lozanov[3] (Chomenko 2001). The common distinction of the new methods from the traditional ones was an orientation towards the development of communicative skills in a relaxed friendly atmosphere. However, the influence of the new methods was not dramatic nor was it long lasting. New progressive ideas of language teaching often were understood and exercised by a relatively small pedagogical elite. The majority of school and university teachers preferred to continue on the old path, using familiar textbooks abundant in grammar topics and translation exercises accompanied by texts full of communist ideology.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the orientation towards Europe, Ukraine became open to the challenges of globalisation and market economy. The shift in the socio-political situation and emergence of new tasks in language education required reconsideration of the content of the language class as well as teaching methods that would be more appropriate in the current socio-political context. Nikolayeva (2002) noted that the role and objectives of language education started to be looked at in a new way, namely one that would help learners to use the language for communication. Our recent observations of language teaching at several universities in Ukraine showed that this process is occurring rather slowly. Traditional ways of teaching and outdated textbooks are still used in the language class. Such a situation can partly be attributed to the chronic lack funding and partly to the

[3] Suggestopedia adopted one of the principles of Soviet psychology: that all students can be taught a subject matter at the same level of skill (Richards & Rodgers 2001).

fact that pedagogical traditions from the past are still in hearts and minds of many teachers and course designers.

2.3. Motivation

The third component in the chain of interrelated social factors that helps shape the language learning process is students' motives for studying German. Whereas students' motivation for foreign language study is a separate field, in this paper we will only acknowledge the effect of motivation on the content and aims of language class, and students' perceptions of classroom activities. Schmidt et al. (1996) noted that there is a link between motivation and learning strategies in the language class. Depending on their goals, some students preferred communicatively oriented activities, others more traditional activities such as memorization. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) argued that motivation and language learning goals are among the factors that are related to choice of language learning strategies. If motivational factors such as employment and travel opportunities varied in Australia and Ukraine, then we argue that this shaped the learning process and the teaching methodologies accordingly. In Soviet times the discussion about students' motivation, needs and expectations would have been odd and, in the end, useless. It was not in general practice to take into account students' opinions. What ought to be taught, how and for how long were questions that were already answered for them by the state in form of unified language programs centrally distributed to schools and even to tertiary institutions (Chomenko 2001). Nowadays, Ukrainian school leavers and students tend to be more governed by practical considerations in the choice of language courses. Many of them are planning to study or work in German-speaking countries. Their goals and expectations, we argue, increasingly resemble those of students in Australia, or indeed any other open country maintaining contacts with German-speaking countries and creating favourable conditions for business, study and travel abroad.

3. Classroom activities

Learning and teaching activities are manifestations of an approach used in the language class (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 26). In the previous chapter we have established that

Australia and Ukraine have followed different paths in applying approaches and methods in foreign language learning. In Australia, formal approaches to language learning started to be reconsidered in the 1960s-1970s in order to meet the demand of students within the given socio-political situation. There was a growing need for more practical knowledge. Universities, in order to attract students, had to make their language programs more 'down to earth' with 'hands on' experience of language learning. Despite the fact that the term 'communicative' was sometimes misunderstood by many teachers and was often just a modern 'buzz-word' (Truckenbrodt & Kretzenbacher 2001: 1656), the general methodological paradigm was altering in response to the changing socio-political situation and needs of students.

In Ukraine, on the other hand, the necessity in a methodological overhaul was not that urgent. Although some innovative approaches were developed and used, as stated above, they could not shake the strong foundations of traditional approaches, nor was this shift particularly necessary in an isolated communist country. Out of the four basic language skills, reading and writing were considered the most important. A typical language class contained activities requiring little creativity and freedom, such as writing dictation, reading aloud from a textbook, retelling prose texts or poems by heart, completing exercises on an aspect of grammar and on translating and/or interpreting, and preparing monologues or dialogues on prescribed topics, e.g. "My family", "My country", "Kyiv – the capital of Ukraine", "My university", "My working day" (Gvozdenko & de Courcy).

The situation is changing now and the question of redirecting the language program towards the acquisition of more practical skills is in the centre of the methodological debate. Recent publications emphasise the need to turn the foreign language class into a mini-model of real-life communicative situations, whereby the rationale behind each activity is explained to students (Darijchuk 2000: 78). The most effective methods are those which, amongst other aspects, have clearly defined communicative goals (Kryuchkov 2002: 11).

In our study we wanted to turn directly to the foreign language class and find out whether differences in perceptions of grammar and communication-oriented activities exist between Australian and Ukrainian students. Ukraine's changing socio-political climate since 1991

and its openness to the processes of globalization and market economy makes the objectives in education similar to those in Western countries. With growing possibilities for travel, study and work abroad, Ukrainian students have started to reassess their goals in language learning and consequently the importance of classroom activities, thus probably revealing similar preferences to their Australian counterparts. In our research, intend to find out whether this is so.

4. The study

4.1. Settings

The study is based on qualitative and quantitative data obtained from tertiary students and teachers at three universities in Ukraine: National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv, Karazin Kharkiv National University, and Franko National University of Lviv, and two universities in Australia: the University of Melbourne and Monash University[4]. The rationale behind the choice of the Ukrainian universities is that they are three of the largest and most renowned state universities in Ukraine, situated in the central, Eastern and Western parts of the country. It is worthwhile noting that tertiary foreign language education is similar in many aspects throughout the country due to the formerly centralised system that unified and standardised many aspects of all levels of education, including tertiary. However, our assumption was that each of these regions would have its own distinctive features in tertiary German language education, due to various historical and economical factors.

Australian tertiary institutions are common in their differentness. Their relative independence from any central authority in terms of funding and administration makes

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[4] Henceforth referred to as Kyiv University, Kharkiv University, Lviv University, Melbourne University and Monash University, respectively. I would like to express my gratitude to all academic staff of the German departments at these institutions for granting permission for and facilitating the collection of the data. I would particularly like to thank my supervisors: Dr. Leo Kretzenbacher (Department of German, Russian and Swedish Studies), Dr. Michele de Courcy (Department of Language Literacy and Arts Education) both from The University of Melbourne, and Dr. Ivan Sojko (Department of German Philology, National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv) for helpful comments and advice.

them each unique (in Australian terms) in organizing the teaching/learning process. We based our Australian part of the study at the University of Melbourne and Monash University, as they have two of the largest and most renowned German departments in Australia.

4.1.1. Ukraine

The program for language study in the three Ukrainian universities normally consists of four to five years for a Bachelor's or Master's degree, respectively. The majority of students in Ukraine study full time in the German departments, i.e. students normally have 3-5 double periods a day. In addition to general language tutorials, where students normally work with their textbook, learn grammar, conduct discussions on various topics and do other activities, there are also linguistic, literary, and general humanity courses distributed throughout the whole course of study. Students are required to have completed courses such as Lexicology, History of German Language, Phonetics, Stylistics, Business German, Theoretical Grammar, Country Studies, Theory of Translation, Pedagogy, Sociology, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies and Literary Criticism, Ukrainian Constitutional Law and many others by the end of their four or five year degree. Our study was only concerned with German language tutorials, which are the essence of the course.

4.1.2. Australia

At the two Victorian universities, the full course takes three years (for the Bachelor's degree) or four years (for an Honours degree). The program in the German departments at Melbourne and Monash Universities is designed rather flexibly to allow students to choose a suitable timetable and level of difficulty. Language study can be undertaken by students from other major subjects, such as Economics, Law, Music etc. They can do a double degree, i.e. major in both fields, or simply do a Diploma in Modern Languages (which requires less points for completion, compared to the double degree). According to their level of language proficiency and particular interests, students can structure their curriculum individually. Some of the main distinctions between Ukrainian and Australian tertiary German education are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

		In Ukraine	In Australia
1	Number of contact hours in German per week depending on the year of study	6 - 12	3 – 6
2	Duration of the course	4 – 5 years	3 - 4 years (including an optional Language Study Abroad Unit for Honours students)
3	Curriculum	A wide range of compulsory subjects introduced in different years of study	6 hours per week comprising language classes only or language classes plus cultural component
4	Management	Ministry of Education and university policy	University policy
5	Funding	Mainly state	Tuition fees and state subsidies

4.2. Participants

The participants were chosen on the basis of their experience of language study at a given university – at least one semester. This criterion suited second- to fifth-year students in Ukraine and first- to third-year students in Australia. At the time the survey was undertaken first-year students in Ukraine had just begun their study at the university and therefore were not included in the project. On the other hand, Australian first-year students had already reached the middle of their second semester in the university and as such participated in the project. Students doing their Honours degree in the fourth year in Australian universities were not available. Some of them had an individual timetable and others were overseas for their "Study abroad" unit.

Due to the large number of students in German departments in the universities, the present study does not cover all of the students enrolled for the German course. Instead, the researcher randomly chose one of several parallel groups from each year as a representative sample (see Cohen et al. 2000: 99). Table 2 below shows the numbers of students from the two countries who took part in the survey:

Table 2

University/ Participants	Kyiv	Kharkiv	Lviv	Melbourne	Monash	Total
Students	48	21	33	72	48	**222**

The number of participants in the table does not reflect the actual staff-student ratio, and represents different percentages of the total number of students in the departments.

4.3. Methods of data collection

The intention of the study was not only to provide numerical data on the importance of classroom activities provided by Australian and Ukrainian participants, but also to account for the broader context in which German language learning and teaching is taking place. Therefore we were using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection, such as structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

4.3.1. Questionnaire

The subjects were asked the question "How important are the following activities for learning a language?" and given a list of nineteen activities (see Appendix). They were also given some extra space to add other items which they thought were worth mentioning. The participants had to mark one of four options next to each of the activities: 'not essential', 'rather important', 'very important' and 'unsure'[5]. The three point scale rather than a 5 point scale was chosen intentionally. The primary concern in this study was to find an index of importance, rather the degrees of importance. The idea was to allow respondents to make a more decisive judgment about the classroom activities.

4.3.2. Interviews

Six students from the Ukrainian universities and six from Australian universities were interviewed. Similarly to the questionnaires, the criterion for students to participate in the interviews was to have completed at least one semester of German at university. The

[5] A very small proportion of students were unsure of any particular item, and the data were treated as 'missing'.

interview pursued a similar task to the questionnaires in that it sought students' opinions on traditional and communicatively oriented classroom activities. The distinctive feature of the interview was that it allowed us to obtain more in-depth information from the respondents on the broader context surrounding the process of language learning. Thus, students shared their (often critical) thoughts on very important issues, such as teaching methodologies, the structure of and their expectations from the course, and their experience of using the German language overseas. All these issues deserve particular attention by teachers and course designers.

4.4. Results and discussion

Each questionnaire was given a code and the responses were transferred to the program Minitab for statistical analysis[6]. One limitation of the 3 point scale in our case was that the 'rather important' option did not lie precisely at the midpoint between the other two, but was closer to the 'very important' category. Therefore it was decided that these two categories would be amalgamated into one general concept of 'importance'.

Table 3 below shows the overall proportion of students in each country who thought that the given activity was important. The difference in the percentages is shown in the fifth column of the table. The table also gives the P-value for Fisher's test; this tests the association between students' response to an item and their country.

Table 3. Proportion of students in each country who thought that the given activity was important

Number in questionnaire / Activity		**Students**		**% difference**	***P*-value**
		Ukraine	**Australia**	**(Ukr – Aus)**	
14	Teacher explaining grammar	100	99	1.0	> 0.9
2	Making dialogues and discussions[7] …	99	98	1.0	> 0.9
13	Doing exercises after each grammar rule	99	97	2.0	0.4

[6] The statistical analysis of data was conducted with the assistance of the Statistical Consulting Centre of the University of Melbourne.

[7] The full version of the names of activities can be found in the Appendix.

17	Individual correction of mistakes	99	97	2.0	0.6
4	Reading a newspaper or a book …	99	95	4.2	0.1
7	Developing translation/interpreting skills	99	94	5.0	0.07
3	Listening to a tape or watching TV …	96	90	6.4	0.1
15	Teacher's explanations proceed in German	99	94	5.0	0.04
6	Doing grammar exercises from a textbook	94	94	0.0	> 0.9
5	Writing essay	93	87	5.2	0.3
9	Making sentences with new words	92	97	-4.7	0.1
18	Teacher summarising typical mistakes	91	99	-7.7	0.01
10	Listening to a native speaker …	91	71	19.6	< 0.001
1	Preparing talk on a given topic	86	83	3.3	0.5
19	Comparing German and students' L1 …	84	83	0.5	> 0.9
8	Learning poems/dialogues etc. by heart	81	24	56.1	< 0.001
11	Writing dictation	79	61	18.5	0.004
12	Listening to and learning songs in German	66	50	15.9	0.02
16	Teachers' explanations proceed in students' L1	55	74	-19.0	0.005

Table 3 shows the percentages of Ukrainian and Australian students who rated each item as important. The difference in the percentages is shown in the fifth column of the table. In cases where the P-value is relatively low there is some evidence to suggest that the importance ratings differ according to the country of origin for that particular activity. The results suggest some differences between the students from different countries in the following activities: 8, 10, 11, 12, 16 and 18.

Activity 8. Learning poems, dialogues, etc. by heart (Ukraine – 81%, Australian – 24%)

This significant difference is not surprising considering the fact that memorisation of vocabulary and grammar topics used to be one of the most commonly used teaching and learning strategies in the Soviet education system (see the discussion on classroom activities above). The author's own experience from her student years, overall impression from the fieldwork research and data from interviews provide some evidence that this activity is still used in the language class in Ukraine and has quite a few proponents. Those students who supported this activity in the interview said that it helped them learn phrases

and language structures better, as well as develop memory in general (M1-UU1[8]). Some students expressed a negative attitude towards this type of activity and suggested that if at all, it only has to be done in the initial stages of language learning (M2-UU1, I-UU2).

Activity 10. Listening to and repeating after a native speaker (Ukraine – 91%, Australia – 83%)

Nunan (2002) argued that listening was the Cinderella skill in second language learning. Very often, it had been overlooked in favour of its elder sister – speaking. Every so often, Nunan noted, listening comes into fashion. This was the case in the 1960s, when listening was brought on by the wave of infatuation with oral language skills. It came into fashion again within the context of Krashen's ideas about comprehensible input and later reinforced by the Total Physical Response in the late 1980s. Repeating words or utterances of native speakers, either recorded on a tape or produced live was and still is used (whenever the language laboratories are available) in the universities in Australia and Ukraine as a means of teaching and learning 'authentic' pronunciation. Such a relatively large difference in proportions between the student groups probably comes down to the fact that the opportunities for Ukrainian students to talk to a native speaker and to be exposed to the 'live' language either within or outside the university are rather limited. At the same time, students realize the importance of being exposed to the language spoken by native-speakers and greatly value the classes conducted by either DAAD lecturers or other invited teachers from German-speaking countries:

> "The classes [conducted by German teachers] are very valuable in that we discuss interesting topics or current affairs in Germany. Communication with these teachers has the closest connection with real life." (O-UU2, April, 2006):

German teachers normally come to Ukrainian universities as temporary staff members by means of the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst – DAAD), which has been active in Ukraine only since 1998. There are as

[8] For ethical reasons, we do not reveal either full names of interview participants or those of the universities. The first letter in brackets stands for the student's first name and the following two letters show whether the participant is from a Ukrainian University (UU#) or an Australian University (AU#).

few as seven DAAD teachers in Ukraine – one in each of the largest cities, i.e. Kyiv, Lviv, Odessa, Kharkiv, Donez'k, Dniporpetrovs'k and Tscherniwzi (*DAAD in der Ukraine* 2006). For many students these teachers are almost the only opportunity to communicate with German native speakers.

Activity 11. Writing dictation (Ukraine – 79%, Australia – 61%)

Similarly to '*learning poems, dialogues etc. by heart'*, this activity was widely used in Soviet pedagogy and is still used today. In the two Australian universities, this activity is a rare one. At the same time, students who were familiar with this activity from school or from their studies in Germany or at language courses had a positive attitude towards it:

> "We never did this activity at the university. I've done it once at Goethe institute and I found it quite beneficial." (M-AU2, April 2006)
>
> "I think this activity will be quite useful for developing the ear, but we never do it." (A-AU2, March 2006)
>
> "When I was studying in Germany, I found this activity really useful, but we've never done it here." (A-AU1 April 2006)

Indeed, some pedagogues have noted that dictation had been unduly discriminated against, when in fact it could be an engaging and beneficial activity. This simple exercise helps develop skills in at least four areas: phonetics, listening comprehension, grammar and orthography (see Häussermann and Piepho 1996).

Activity 12. Listening to and learning songs in German (Ukraine – 66%, Australia – 50%)

This item did not turn out to be amongst the most popular with either of the student groups. Still, as we already noted (with activity 8 discussed above) Ukrainian students are more accustomed to learning material by heart, including songs. However, the interview data provided mixed responses from both groups of students on the importance of this activity for language learning:

> "Songs can sometimes be incomprehensible; still I think it's a good way to learn new phrases and words." (I-UU2, March 2006)

> "Through songs you get exposed to 'live' language and learn new vocabulary, so I thing it is quite an important activity." (M-AU1)

Students who did not find this activity useful referred to the fact that songs take a lot of class time, can often be incomprehensible and therefore not worthwhile (A-AU1, M-AU2, April, 2006).

Item 16. Teacher uses students' L1 in his/her explanations (Ukraine – 55%, Australia – 74%)

Many students and teachers both in Ukraine and Australia noted that the language used for explanations or instructions ought to depend on the students' level of language proficiency and the difficulty of the material. However, Ukrainian students proved to have been very conscious of the fact that the German class is almost the only opportunity for them to speak and to be exposed to the German language, and therefore it often goes without saying that the teacher should conduct all of his/her talking, including explanations of the material, in German. A fifth-year student at a Ukrainian university noted:

> "Teachers stopped using Ukrainian after the first semester at the university and by the fifth year German has become almost like the first language." (I-UU2, April, 2006)

Activity 18. Teachers summarizing typical mistakes (Ukraine – 91%, Australia – 99%)

Traditional teaching methods, with their emphasis on form rather than meaning, presuppose scrupulous attention to mistakes in oral and written production. Communicative approaches, on the other hand, take a more relaxed view of mistakes, suggesting that mistakes should not be corrected unless they make the utterance incomprehensible. Some researchers have suggested that students and teachers should focus on major patterns of error rather than attempting to correct every single mistake (Bates et al. 1993; cited in Ferris 2002). The data from the questionnaires showed that for an overwhelming majority of students in both countries, these are not mutually exclusive things (almost all the students in both countries thought activity 17 '*individual correction of mistakes*' was also important). More Australian students, however, thought that the accent should be put on

typical mistakes. The data from interviews turned out to be more homogeneous. Opinions like this where not infrequent with the Australian students:

> "Both [types] are important, but I find it particularly useful to know what mistakes are made by other people." (M-AU2 April 2006)

Some of the Ukrainian students noted that although the correction of mistakes individually was important, the teacher should not interrupt their speaking but discuss their mistakes at the end (M1-UU1, M2-UU1, I-UU2, April 2006).

The rest of the activities were perceived as important by an almost equally high proportion of both Australian and Ukrainian students.

Similarities between the groups

The findings showed that students from both countries highly valued both grammar and communicative activities in the language class. Almost 100 per cent of students from both groups recognized the important role of the teacher in explaining grammar, creating dialogues and discussion on various topics, doing grammar exercises and correcting individual mistakes. Students more or less equally agreed that it is important to discuss the contents of a newspaper article, book or film, to do exercises which develop translation/ interpreting skills, to make sentences with new words and to write essays. Also, an equally high majority of students (94 per cent) indicated that teachers' explanations must be in German wherever possible. Such items as 'preparing a talk on a given topic' and 'comparing German and students' L1 when explaining language phenomena' were also perceived as important by an overwhelming majority of students in both Australia and Ukraine.

Our interview data were consistent overall with the findings from the questionnaires. Almost all the interviewees in both Australia and Ukraine believed that a combination of grammar and communicative activities in the classroom is an important factor for successful language learning. On the other hand, many students agreed that the former (grammar) activities very often unduly dominated in the class. A student at an Australian university expressed her concern that grammar was often taught at the expense of communication and that the opportunity to speak was barely available (A-AU2, March

2006). It should be noted, though, that responses like this were very characteristic of the university in which contact hours per week were limited to just two. At the university where the study program allowed more hours of German, including an hour specially designed for conversation, students were on the whole satisfied.

Another common concern among students was that the material taught in the class had little connection with 'real life' and was often boring and repetitive:

> "I always found my language classes boring. It felt like the same material was covered every year. For example, you'd learn Konjunktiv II every year without really refining it." (M-AU2, March 2006)

Another student from an Australian university noted:

> "The topics we get to talk in the class about are not exactly those applicable to everyday life. I can talk in German about hermeneutics, but I will struggle to talk about such simple things as cooking and shopping." (A-AU2, March 2006)

A student in a Ukrainian university was experiencing similar problems in her language study:

> "What you studied at uni with dictionaries and textbooks turned out to be a bit different from what people say in real life. This is what was lacking in my university study. I mean, I understand that university is simply not the right place for teaching/learning the language which Germans speak. They teach the 'correct' language at uni … And so, I think it is not a drawback, but just the reality that life and university are slightly different." (S-UU1, December 2005)

5. Implications and conclusion

5.1. General pedagogical implications

The findings of this study confirm to some extent those of earlier studies by Horwitz (1988), Kern (1995) and Rao (2002). Our study also showed that students studying a foreign language greatly valued traditional activities, such as *doing grammar exercises* and *having their errors corrected*. At the same time, they also favoured activities associated with the communicative approach such as *discussing various topics* and *taking part in dialogues*. Teachers and course designers need to be aware of the fact that it is the lack of balance of the two components that very often leads to students' frustration and dissatisfaction with the course and perhaps their withdrawal from the subject.

Secondly, if one is concerned about improving teaching methodologies and maintaining students' motivation for foreign language study, one should keep in mind that students value first and foremost an integrated approach towards language study, that a connection should exist between grammatical and lexical material; one should complement the other.

Thirdly, teachers need to be mindful of the applicability of the material offered at the university to real life. Although both groups of students generally appreciated the wide spectrum of grammatical and lexical material characteristic of a university-level course, they also admitted that more attention should be paid to colloquial usage, youth lexis and material which is appropriate for everyday situations.

5.2. German as a foreign language in Australia and Ukraine.

What did the comparative perspective give us? The cross-country comparison revealed some differences in perceptions of classroom activities, in particular with writing dictation and learning texts and poems by heart. These are typically associated with Soviet pedagogy and are still favoured by many teachers and learners in Ukrainian tertiary institutions. However, the main differences lie deeper in the realisation of the objectives of university education *per se*. In Australia, students tend to have a pragmatic view of language courses – the courses should provide them with practical knowledge and equip them with useful 'survival' skills. Therefore, many of them become frustrated if these objectives are not fulfilled immediately. Students generally complained about the lack of conversation classes, but at the same time realized that the university course is more a springboard towards a further mastering of the language, for example, by travelling to German-speaking countries.

In Ukraine, a reorientation of objectives is currently taking place at the universities. Despite the fact that traditional approaches are still widely used and cherished by many, communicatively-oriented activities are starting to take more significant role in the language class. Overall, Ukrainian students were less critical about their university study than their Australian counterparts. They welcomed the broad, all-inclusive approach towards tertiary language education which allowed them to reach a high standard, with some students reporting a near-native level of language proficiency. Although some students noted that the program could be more communicatively-oriented and more

prominence given to colloquial lexis, they generally were satisfied with the course. This is not surprising considering Ukraine's changing political and economical agenda. Whereas students and some academic staff reacted to this change straight away, in view of the wealth of new travel, employment and study opportunities some curricula and language programs still need to be updated. However this cannot happen without providing language departments with funding for new textbooks and electronic equipment. The situation where teachers purchase textbooks and make copies at their own expense, due to the lack of copying machines in the department, can hardly be called normal (N-UU2). Despite the fact that pedagogical practice differs from university to university, from department to department and from teacher to teacher, the evidence from our questionnaires and interviews gave grounds to suggest that a shift is being made towards the adoption of new teaching methods which will help students acquire skills applicable to real life. It supports the argument of other scholars who have studied the role of globalisation on education. Burbules (2002), for example, noted that tertiary institutions are largely affected by the 'twin imperatives of necessity and opportunity' and are redefining their work with an eye towards the larger world stage.

Knowledge of what students think about activities in their language class is very valuable. It helps teachers and course administrators decide whether and in what directions the teaching methodologies and/or content need to be improved. In practice, our findings will hopefully be useful to language teachers both in Ukraine and Australia, and aid them in their choice of classroom activities. The comparative approach allowed us to account for the broader context and shed some light on why students from different countries have different perceptions on the same classroom activities.

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Biodata

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Appendix

Questionnaire. Students' perceptions of use of classroom activities

Please tick an appropriate box for each of the activities.

Questions	**How important are the following activities for learning a language?**			
Types of activities	*Not essential*	*Rather important*	*Very important*	*Unsure*
1. Preparing a talk on a given topic				
2. Making dialogues and discussions on different topics				
3. Listening to a tape or watching TV and then discussing the contents				
4. Reading a newspaper or a book and discussing the contents				
5. Writing an essay				
6. Doing grammar exercises from a textbook				
7. Doing exercises to develop translation/interpreting skills				
8. Learning poems/dialogues etc. by heart				
9. Making sentences with new words				
10. Listening to a native speaker and repeating after him/her				
11. Writing dictation				
12. Listening to and learning songs in German				
13. Doing exercises after each grammar rule				
14. Teacher explaining grammar				
15. Teacher's explanations proceed in German				
16. Teacher's explanations proceed in students' L1				
17. Individual correction of mistakes				
18. Teacher summarizing typical mistakes				
19. Comparing German and students' L1 when explaining language phenomena				
Other activities (please specify)				
20.				
21.				
22.				