

"German can be easily learned and taught"

Anastassiya Semyonova, lecturer in German as a foreign language and research associate at Göttingen University's Intercultural German Studies Centre

Anastassiya Semyonova from Kazakhstan conducts research into the German language and how best to teach German as a foreign language. As a member of staff at the Intercultural German Studies Centre, cross-border perspectives and international cooperation are an integral part of her research work.

Intercultural approach to language learning

When Anastassiya Semyonova speaks, her language is clear, articulate, very distinct and grammatically perfect. Only the slightest hint of an accent betrays the fact that German is not her mother tongue. She has, however, made it her career. The German studies specialist from Kazakhstan is both a lecturer at the German as a Foreign Language Unit and a research associate at the Intercultural German Studies Centre founded in 2004 as part of Göttingen University's Department of German Philology. She knows the pitfalls and mysteries of the German language – and she is the best possible role model for the foreign students she prepares for the DSH examination, the German language test international students must pass in order to study at a German university.

Clear rules

Anastassiya Semyonova contradicts a frequently heard prejudice: "German isn't a difficult language," she says. It has very clear rules and there is a great deal you can consciously understand and learn. "Slavonic languages have far more exceptions, which learners find confusing. German can be easily learned and taught." The 36-year-old began learning German at school in her home town of Ridder, which was then known as Leninogorsk. Later she studied German, English and translation – initially for five years in Kazakhstan and then in Kassel, where she gained her Master's degree. After working as a lecturer in Russia and several German cities, she has spent the past eleven years living, working and doing research in the tradition-rich university town of Göttingen.

Language and integration

As a teacher of German as a foreign language, Anastassiya Semyonova uses the latest methods in her courses. As a researcher and PhD student, she explores the hidden depths of the German language. Her focus is not abstract linguistic theory, however, but highly concrete issues such as integration. Currently she is working on a research project in the field of intercultural interaction and integration led by Professor Hiltraud Casper-Hehne, head of the Intercultural German Studies Centre. The researchers are investigating the interrelationships between language acquisition, intercultural competence and integration among schoolchildren with migrant backgrounds. By 2011 the team hopes to draw up concrete recommendations for

the classroom that will improve these children's prospects of successful integration. Language acquisition and the motivation to integrate are mutually reinforcing, according to Anastassiya Semyonova.

"This has been shown by many integration research studies," she says, "which is why I find it positive that Germany is now responding to migrants' needs with a national integration plan and an appropriately structured system of language courses for a variety of learning levels."

She also believes it is important for educated migrants – people who come to Germany as employees of multinational corporations, as academics or students on English-language degree programmes – to learn German. For even if you can easily get by with English, she notes, especially in large cities and university towns,

"if you don't know the language, you're incapacitated, cut off from everyday life and you miss out on so much of Germany's rich cultural and regional heritage. There are all kinds of subtle things that can be appreciated only if you know the language."

Practice-oriented research

"That's how I slipped into research," says Anastassiya Semyonova. She had originally envisaged a teaching career. "What tipped the scales was the founding of the Intercultural German Studies Centre in Göttingen." She is fascinated by its interdisciplinary approach to linguistics, methodology and didactics. "It's all about very practical issues," she explains. This was also how Anastassiya Semyonova became closely involved with the EU-funded IDIAL (Intercultural Dialogue through Regionalized Textbooks) research project. This brings together experts from Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria, who are developing innovative teaching materials on the basis of an intercultural and regionalized approach that takes into account countries' particular teaching and learning traditions. Do people really learn German differently in different countries? "Socialization and country of origin play a major role," Anastassiya Semyonova explains. Teachers work differently with mixed international groups than with groups from the same cultural background, where they can focus on known areas of difficulty. This is confirmed by Annegret Middeke, head of the IDIAL project and director of the Professional Association for German as a Foreign Language (FaDaF).

The integration courses set up under the 2005 Immigration Act have given German as a foreign language a considerable boost, she points out. Its offshoot, German as a Second Language, is also becoming increasingly important, given the large number of children and young people from migrant backgrounds.

For society at large, German language skills are more crucial than ever, for the ability to speak the language is a key factor in integration. In recent years FaDaF has seen a trend towards fewer people learning German abroad, even if there are still some 17 million people outside Germany learning German and 120,000 teachers teaching the language.

Promoting the learning of German

Germany's cultural relations policy hopes to reverse this negative trend. A number of Federal Foreign Office initiatives in recent years have strengthened Goethe-Institutes and German schools around the world and its new Research and Academic Relations Initiative is

supporting global access to German language courses, for example, through the Internet platform Deutsch-Uni Online. "The Internet is a valuable tool for learning German, especially abroad," Anastassiya Semyonova believes. "But will it be able to completely replace natural communication?" She doesn't think so. "Teachers still play a very crucial role in language learning," she says. She herself feels direct contact with her language students is very important – not just from a research point of view: "I see my job also as service to society. I hope my teaching helps my students develop their potential."

Text: Janet Schayan

Internet reportage

Testimonial

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