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Difficulties Encountered in Teaching German Family Forms to Non-native Students

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Foreign language learning not only includes the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary but also the acquisition of a cultural competency related to the target language. However, acquiring cultural competency could be a challenge when the student's culture is distant from that of the target language. German as a foreign language is offered to the undergraduates in the University of Kelaniya and the cultural theme "family forms" ("Lebensformen in Deutschland") is introduced to them in their second year. Cultural differences between Sri Lanka and Germany make the above theme a culturally challenging subject to Sri Lankan learners. Thus, it has been observed that language teachers find it difficult to introduce these forms to their students. Further, the refusal of learning a culturally unfamiliar theme and the interference of students' personal attitudes in acquiring cultural competency have in fact been discussed in previous studies. The aim of the present study is to find methods through which such culturally controversial themes could be introduced to students in order to overcome refusal of learning culturally unfamiliar themes and interference of adverse personal attitudes. The study was conducted using a sample of 21 undergraduates from the second year (2015/2016). Before starting the lesson, a fun warm up activity linked to the selected theme was carried out in groups. The activity (a quiz at the end of which students would find their tolerance profiles) was aimed at measuring tolerance levels of students. This was followed by a plenary discussion where attitudes and stereotypes were brought to question. Texts about family forms in Germany were then given to the class and practical activities (role plays) related to the theme were also conducted. At the end of the session it was observed that students' participation at the proposed activities were higher than seen in the previous study. It could be concluded that culturally unfamiliar themes could be grasped by foreign language students when accompanied by carefully planned warm up activities questioning culturally formed stereotypes. The findings of this study will be useful for language teachers facing difficulties in developing cultural competency among their learners.

Key words: Cultural Competence, Family Forms, Language Teachers, Personal Attitudes, Tolerance