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fide – On the way to a coherent framework

Abstract: *fide* – the innovative conceptual framework for the linguistic integration of migrants in Switzerland – is characterised by a systemic approach to questions of language learning, teaching and assessment. First presented to the public in 2012, the development phase of *fide* is now in its final stages. This contribution, based on mainly qualitative data collected among teachers, focuses on issues related to the implementation of the *fide* approach to teaching.

Résumé : *fide* – le cadre de référence pour l’encouragement linguistique des migrants en Suisse – se caractérise par une approche systémique des questions liées à l’apprentissage, à l’enseignement et à l’évaluation linguistique. Présenté au public en 2012, *fide* est entré dans sa phase finale de développement. L’article, qui repose principalement sur les données qualitatives recueillies auprès des enseignants, se concentre sur les questions liées à la mise en œuvre de l’approche *fide* à l’enseignement.

1 Linguistic integration policy


Switzerland has a population of eight million people, 23% of them holding a foreign passport. The Swiss Federal Law on Foreigners states that it is imperative for all foreigners to become familiar with Swiss society and the Swiss way of life, and that this includes the learning of the national language spoken in the area of residence.

In 2007, the Swiss Federal Council ordered the development of a national framework for the linguistic integration of adult migrants, with the aim of ensuring the quality and efficacy of language courses throughout the country. At the same time, the framework was to provide reliable tools to evaluate and certify the linguistic skills of adult migrants.

Against the background of heterogeneous structures and greatly varying traditions in the teaching of languages to migrants, the first step towards a national framework consisted in getting an overview of the various models of practice,

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DOI 10.1515/9783110477498-022,  © 2017 Myriam Schleiss, Margrit Hagenow-Caprez, published by De Gruyter.

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Download Date | 6/24/18 7:21 PM

and in defining the features of “good practice”. The resulting guidelines for a national framework were published in 2009, in an Outline Curriculum (Lenz, Andrey, and Lindt-Bangerter 2009).

2 *fide* – the national framework for the linguistic integration of migrants

fide stands for *français, italiano, deutsch* – the languages migrants have to learn in the various parts of Switzerland.¹

In the Outline Curriculum, a close link to the learners’ real communicative needs was identified as one of the key factors for successful learning. Therefore, frequent contact situations between migrants and Swiss residents were identified and analysed, in the various domains of everyday life, work contexts, contacts with authorities etc. These formed the basis for an inventory of “scenarios”: descriptions of interactive situations, the interlocutors involved, their respective roles, the overall aim to be achieved by the interaction, the usual course of action, socio-cultural factors to be considered, and helpful linguistic resources to achieve the interaction aim.²

These scenarios, along with a set of pedagogical principles, constitute the “backbone” of the *fide* system. Numerous tools, guidelines and materials illustrating the system and the teaching approach have been added. As an overall system, *fide* now comprises:

- the aforementioned inventory of scenarios;
- videos and texts illustrating the performance of migrants at different levels of proficiency in L2 in various scenarios;
- a placement tool and recommendations to course organizers;
- guidelines for teachers and sample materials illustrating the teaching approach;
- a qualification profile for teachers as well as a training and qualification system;
- procedures for language competence assessment (both testing and portfolio-based approaches, operating as from 2017);
- a quality development system;
- a national secretariat as a reference point;

¹ All *fide*-publications are available at <http://www.fide-info.ch>.

² The contents and the structure of the scenario database are described in an article by Martin Müller and Lukas Wertenschlag (2013).

- a website (<http://www.fide-info.ch>) on which all products are freely available for download.

3 Implementing the *fide* system

The aim of the present study is to gain insights into the practical implementation of *fide* in the classroom: Has the *fide* system with its underlying didactic principles been successfully communicated? How are these principles interpreted by teachers, course organizers and decision makers? What elements of *fide* – both ideas and products – have been adopted with success? What elements of *fide* are “struggling” and need to be supported and promoted further?

The analysis is mainly based on a survey conducted among the users of the *fide* website in February 2016 (a short written questionnaire returned by 370 people, the large majority teachers, over 85% of them claiming to implement *fide* in their courses). The data obtained is also being compared to the written feedback received from nearly 600 teachers participating in the introduction events in 2013 as well as the feedback collected informally during meetings, information and training events.

4 Systemic coherence

The title of this contribution, “On the way to a coherent framework”, reflects the working hypothesis that the coherence of the *fide* system is a key factor for its successful implementation. To gain the support and collaboration of teachers and schools, it has been crucial to ensure that all elements of the system are consistent and that they convey the same underlying assumptions and attitudes towards teaching, learning and assessment.

Analysing the teachers’ feedback, however, it became evident, that the way *fide* is perceived and interpreted has even more importance in determining successful implementation, as these statements illustrate: “I really like the *fide* scenario approach, but my students need to pass the A2 exam”; “I have to work through the book in only 60 lessons, so I don’t have the time for the *fide* scenarios”.

A first conclusion, therefore, is that the coherence of the framework is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition. Consequently, the focus at this stage probably has to move from the “product” to the communication and the perception of the product.

5 Didactic principles of *fide*

The following principles constitute the core of the *fide* approach to teaching:

1. orienting teaching to the everyday Swiss context, applying an action-oriented and task-based approach to teaching: *scenario based teaching*;
2. developing learner autonomy by recording and evaluating the learning process: *portfolio approach*;
3. orienting teaching to the learners' needs: *co-construction of the learning curriculum*.

From the course entry procedures to the teaching methodology right through to the assessment procedures, all instruments and examples provided are largely coherent and in line with these underlying principles. But how successful have these elements been in the classroom? Which of these principles have actually been translated into teaching practice, and how? In the following sections, first findings will be summarized.

5.1 Scenario-based teaching

The aim of scenario-based teaching is the acquisition of action competence for everyday situations. These situations and the usually quite predictable course of events constitute the building blocks for the learning process: an initial discussion of the situation and the likely course of events allow the learners to build up knowledge about a specific aspect of everyday life in Switzerland on the one hand, and assess their own linguistic abilities with respect to the interactions to be expected and their learning needs on the other. These then form the basis for the definition of concrete and relevant learning targets, corresponding to the language competence level of the learners, and for the planning of the learning process.

For teachers, as well as for the non-language professionals concerned, e. g. decision makers at various levels, the scenario approach is intuitively appealing. It embodies the close link to the context in which second language learning takes place, and it also relates to what many teachers have done for years: taking up everyday situations their learners are confronted with, illustrating them with authentic materials, and practising them with role-plays and similar activities. In general, teachers are therefore open to adopt scenario-based teaching.

5.2 Portfolio approach

Collecting the products of lessons, such as sample texts or vocabulary lists on a specific topic, and regularly assessing learning outcomes form the basis for a continuing process of evaluation and planning. Creating records of learning promotes, especially with learners not used to formal education, the ability to self-assess their performance, to talk about their learning needs and thus become active partners in the co-construction of the learning process.

However, the structured documentation of learning is not popular with teachers and, as a consequence, with learners who feel that their teacher is not fully convinced of the usefulness of this practice. There are various reasons: portfolios are often perceived as “cumbersome”, and they “take away time from learning”. Another reason why teachers do not feel comfortable with portfolios might be that in the Swiss education system, group cohesion and moving forward as a group is highly valued, and this could appear to be contradicted by a practice that essentially promotes reflection on the individual learning process.

Although the portfolio approach has not been fully successful so far, one could say that it has been successful on a micro level: teachers put more emphasis on working towards “useful” learning outcomes and tend to include more formal and informal evaluation phases in the learning process.

5.3 Co-construction of the learning process

The principle of co-construction, in the *fide* system, not only includes negotiating meaning and constructing knowledge collaboratively but claims that the learning process as well, the content and learning aims, are continuously negotiated between teacher and learners. Co-construction in this sense is one of the key principles of *fide*, maybe the most characteristic – and at the same time it seems the most difficult one to implement.

Co-construction goes against the firm and fundamental convictions of many teachers. It contradicts what they believe to be their role and responsibility. It is also against the beliefs of many learners as regards the role of the teacher. Often, the teachers’ resistance is also, explicitly or implicitly, backed up by school administrators, who see their careful planning jeopardized when the learning content of courses becomes less predictable.

On the basis of the data obtained, it seems clear that the key element of co-construction will need to be reinforced both in teacher training and in communicating information about *fide*. The changing role it involves for teachers will have to be explained and illustrated, e.g. with experiences like the following:

“My learners are much more motivated since they know that the course is modelled on their expressed needs.”³

6 Conclusion: dialogue and negotiation

Most Swiss people would agree that in their country systems and frameworks cannot be introduced and implemented top down; they need to be negotiated and agreed upon by all partners involved – this is why innovative processes in Switzerland take time (but in general the results are accepted and not overruled the next day). Dialogue and negotiation, historically, can actually be seen as fundamental values of Swiss society.

In coherence with these values, the idea of partnership and dialogue is a key element of *fide*, and finds expression on all levels: from the Confederation and the Cantons agreeing on integration programmes, to teachers and learners negotiating learning content and aims in the spirit of co-construction.

Possibly in the course of developing products and introducing *fide*, the focus – also in communicating with teachers – has been, quite understandably, on the “material” side of *fide*. At the present stage, to ensure the successful implementation of the *fide* system, it might be appropriate to emphasize and promote the underlying principles and values, reinforcing partnership and dialogue between all stakeholders.

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³ The approach of sharing successful practice, rather than giving instructions on how to implement scenarios, is described in an article by Margrit Hagenow-Caprez (2013).